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## The Problem of the Color Line: Segregation, Politics, and Historical Writing

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*Claire Bond Potter*

**T**he legal mechanisms of race hierarchy in the United States which would come to define twentieth-century segregationism were one aspect of what Ellis Hawley has described as “the search for a modern order” commonly associated with the Progressive state-making project (1). But if laws and Supreme Court rulings such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) permitted race separation to substitute for equality under the Constitution, it was newly transformed cultural and intellectual marketplaces that translated segregation into social practice. As African American poet Langston Hughes described the emergence of public segregation in Cleveland in 1918 in his autobiography, on Armistice Day,

everybody poured into the streets to celebrate. . . . Negroes, too, although Negroes were increasingly beginning to wonder where, for them, was that democracy they had fought to preserve. In Cleveland, a liberal city, the color line began to be drawn tighter and tighter. Theaters and restaurants in the downtown area began to refuse to accommodate colored

people. Landlords doubled and tripled the rent at the approach of a dark tenant. And when the white soldiers came back from the war, Negroes were often discharged from their jobs and white men hired in their places.

The end of the war! But many of the students at Central [High School] kept talking, not about the end of the war, but about Russia, where Lenin had taken power in the name of the workers, who made everything, and who would now own everything they made. "No more pogroms," the [Jewish students] said, "no more race hatred, no more landlords." (51-52)<sup>1</sup>

Such a passage immediately brings to mind Cornel West's observation that "the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather *constitutive elements of that life*" (*Race Matters* 6). Furthermore, it foregrounds intellectual marketplaces as locations for potential interrogations and resistance to racial oppression.

In addition, West recalls the intellectual generation just preceding Hughes and in particular, W. E. B Du Bois's argument that the national future of the United States would turn on "the problem of the color line" (Du Bois 3; also see Lewis). The result of a combination of spatial, ideological, and intellectual practices taking shape in law and society in the United States between 1877 and 1919, segregation made race a point of entry to all forms of political, intellectual, and economic activity. As Hughes's account suggests, segregationist ideology proved least effective when articulated as critique, in a public school, and most stable when "diffused and normalized" in the institutions serving the most basic needs of ordinary people. Since the shape and ambitions of nationalism shifted dramatically over time, segregation acquired different meanings at different political moments as it intersected with class formation processes and the rise of new consumer cultures (see Balibar and Wallerstein; Habermas; Marable; Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery"; Winant).

During the Progressive era, critical thought and intellectual production themselves were suffused with segregationist thought, as historians like Gail Bederman have argued. It is the diffusion and normalization of the color line within academic and popular histories that I interrogate here, by reading historical texts as one

form of cultural production through which segregationist intellectual practices, and resistances to them, transmitted the ideologies of citizenship undergirding twentieth-century nationhood.

To argue that the nation is discursively constructed, that nationhood itself is a cultural artifact, is not to deny that conferring racial status is, as Tomas Almaguer points out in his study of nineteenth-century California, a “political undertaking.”<sup>2</sup> This assertion does, however, suggest that historical literature—those texts which transmit the nation to imagined audiences in the present and future—provides a field for interrogation. Laws and political hierarchies always reference the historical artifacts which make them visible; for instance, Supreme Court decisions draw expressly on interpretations of history which support political discourses. Segregationist ideology was embedded in historical ideas which did cultural work on its behalf, particularly when it sought to define the nature of citizenship.

Put simply, segregation protected property and class status—the primary markers of citizenship during the Progressive era—when not only wealthy whites but a newly defined white middle class sought to exercise prerogatives of wealth and education in arenas of politics and national culture (see Hofstadter; Ohmann; Scanlon). With the important exceptions of internationalist or socialist movements—such as the Industrial Workers of the World—white workers, lacking wealth and losing status in an increasingly mechanized work place, seized on racialism to rearticulate and restore their own diminishing political influence. After experimenting with interracial agrarian organizing, the late-nineteenth-century People’s Party resorted to rabid segregationism while the larger political system shifted to accommodate a new nationalism characterized by cross-sectional class alliances and capital concentration. Thus, ideologies of race were not merely an inevitable effect of class interest, or in the case of workers, of false consciousness, as early revisions of the period maintained; nor can they be wholly explained in the language of property and status, as later accounts argued. Paradoxically, segregationist politics were produced in a cultural atmosphere characterized by the increasing political visibility of race, while a new language of citizenship grounded itself in historical explanations that obscured both class

and race as historians sought a usable “American” past (Arneson; Hahn; Hill; Kelley; Painter, “Black Workers” and “Social Equality”; Saxton; Wiener).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps due to these usable accounts of the past, history emerged in the Progressive era as a new academic practice and as a field for consumer pleasure (Hobsbawm and Ranger; Novick; Rydell). Through both elite and popular histories, native-born whites of all classes understood that they possessed rights to citizenship and nation-ness (further refined and redefined by gender); these rights represented the fruit of democratic Americanism, a political system that had evolved naturally over time. Political contests after 1877 are characterized by an attempt to reconstitute a mutual, national history among the native born, and white men in particular, which promoted a belief in a cross-sectional, cross-class, economic future. A polity thus defined by white supremacy articulated nonwhite citizenship as antithetical to national supremacy in a world system: by 1890, whites of all classes saw race mixing, or “race suicide,” as the certain path to social and political decline (Almaguer 207).<sup>4</sup>

That a democratic political system might be fully inclusive, or a nation representative, was as radical a political idea to white (and many black) Progressives in the United States as was the notion that all peoples around the globe should be free from domination from the industrialized states. In fact, what is perhaps most remarkable about the development of segregation after the Civil War is its Americanness: by this, I mean not only its uniqueness among global systems of race oppression, but also its reliance on an evolving legal code that claimed to be a commonsense and accurate representation of the history of social relationships (Cell; Lamar and Thompson; Pascoe). Legal segregation formally disciplined personal interactions and commercial transactions; however, the “color line” proved powerful in its informality as well, in that it represented infinite personal exchanges and articulations of custom which then became common sense.

The challenge for contemporary historians of the United States, then, is to define not what race is, but rather how it works to organize knowledge over a period of time characterized by the redrawing of political and marketplace paradigms (Brown; Wald). One way to approach the problem of the color line is to look to,

and reinterpret, the production of history itself, not just as a project which has become infinitely more professional over time, but as one whose professionalization and diffusion into the national culture provided a site for imagining the logic of a segregated polity: how it would work, why it would work that way, and what kind of citizens it required?

Although a variety of historical texts from the Progressive era function, in the way I have described, as vehicles of mass culture—including film, the popular press, and theater; the building of monuments; and the creation of museums, to name but a few—written history stands out in its preoccupation with the twin nineteenth-century crises of race and nation, the Civil War and the emancipation of African Americans. Progressive thinkers imagined themselves as active subjects in an ongoing national narrative defined by these crises, as historical subjects who would themselves enact a national future. Newly professionalized university historians played a crucial role in the progressive imagination. Practices of methodical, scientific research, which became standard in the United States after 1880, provided the facts through which a (male) individual could understand his history in relation to a national past, envision his destiny, and, therefore, ascertain his worthiness for full civic responsibility (Anderson; Lears 98–139; Said; Stewart 3–36; Young, *White Mythologies*).

In addition, history—academic and popular—served as an arena for the contestation of white supremacy, a site where the meaning of and the individual potential for citizenship were challenged by African American scholars and writers as they documented an alternative national history peopled with black and brown, as well as white, subjects (Ayers 81–103; Dyson, “Racism” 146–54). Whereas these latter accounts produced an alternative past which argued for universal male suffrage, supremacist accounts argued for a progressive political reconciliation between sections which restricted citizenship to those deemed free and independent subjects by the law. Like their political contemporaries, white historians saw the enfranchisement of black and brown citizens as a historical rupture, because of their unfree past, and the recreation of a “lily white” polity as progressive and natural. Reconstruction, as historian and novelist Thomas Dixon, Jr. wrote in his hugely successful romance *The Clansman*, had been “the lowest

tide-mud of degradation to which the Republic could sink" (165).

This version of history became the grounds for a cultural consensus among whites which linked the progressive impulses directed toward state building and market expansion to the necessity of white supremacist politics. On a more popular level, the ground laid by academics became linked to a surge in the consumption of and desire for nostalgic memorials to the Civil War. The reproduction of war memories also enabled the rebuilding of cross-class electoral networks of white men; and black participation in the war was quickly forgotten by state and public. An association of white Union Army veterans, the Grand Army of the Republic, became the largest Republican club in the United States, cementing its members (some of whom had not served at all) to the party apparatus through annual pensions, chapter activities, and national conventions (Bensel; Skocpol; Skowronek).

As white veterans aged, they too became historians. Published memories, refashioned in part by new political imperatives, presented the war as a tragic moment of white disunity provoked by enslaved African Americans and half-mad abolitionists. Reunions of Grand Army chapters with the Sons of the Confederacy, thus, became exercises in political reaffirmation, as veterans walked the battlefields, rehabilitating their shared history through "charges" ending in handshakes and embraces rather than bloodshed. As former Union officer Willard Glazier recorded in 1885, this "good feeling between North and South" displayed by former enemies meant that every citizen "should be willing to bury the hatred and prejudice which has so embittered the past, and live only for a common country, made of many parts whose interests are identical" (105–6).

Scholarly books, magazines, advertising, and pulp fiction, sold to an increasingly literate middle class, drove and reflected the politics of reconciliation, as did the two-dimensional, comic portrayals of nonwhites that proliferated in print culture and on the stage (Turner). The forging of a common past between North and South required active suspension of rational thought and erasures of many kinds, but two points in particular undergirded this revised national history: first, that the evils of slavery had been greatly overdramatized; and second, that the "peculiar institution" was not part of the nation's heritage, but rather, was imposed by

foreigners—the Spanish conquistadors—who had exploited the natural inferiority of Africans and temporarily diverted the course of democracy in the Americas.

The creation of a white electorate after Reconstruction was thus forged over broadly shared, and notably tautological, white beliefs that African Americans, and other groups regarded as servile such as Mexican and Asian immigrants and their children, had not evolved as democratic men in part because of their past as slaves to white men and to each other. In the case of African Americans, this historical theory projected itself backward most effectively in popular fictions that purported to tell the true story of Reconstruction. Prominent among these were two best-selling romances by Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1904), which became a hit play and a film directed by D. W. Griffith called *Birth of a Nation* (1914). Dixon, a college history teacher who developed a lucrative career as a melodramatic writer, recast postwar politics as an epic racial struggle, in which black citizenship resulted in social and political chaos.

Paradoxically, black citizenship also provided the means for a white race (nation), formerly divided against itself, to be reborn in struggle against it. In *The Clansman*, North and South are rejoined when two pairs of siblings intermarry, overcoming sectional difference in a mutual horror of black political power. The plot plays on the public significance of private morals, weaving sexual romance into the political drama of Andrew Johnson's impeachment crisis and delivering moments of racialized anguish as feminized white subjects—widows, elderly men, wounded veterans, and young girls—are menaced by freed slaves. The rape of a teenage virgin by a vengeful ex-slave and her subsequent suicide prompt Confederate and Union veterans to form the Ku Klux Klan.

History, in such novels, consisted of revealing spectacular political corruption through culturally familiar sexual parables (see also MacLean). In one subplot, a character, modeled on radical Republican Senator Thaddeus Stevens, has a mulatto mistress who is the real architect of Reconstruction. In one scene, the invalid politician is borne into the Senate by two black men who, the author implies, are probably his illegitimate sons:

No sculptor ever dreamed a more sinister emblem of the corruption of a race of empire-builders than this group. Its black

figures, wrapped in the night of four thousand years of barbarism, squatted there the “equal” of their master, grinning at his forms of justice, the evolution of forty centuries of Aryan genius. To their brute strength the white fanatic in the madness of his hate had appealed, and for their hire he had bartered the birthright of a mighty race of freemen. (Dixon 171)

Note how the passage extrapolates a story of private miscegenation into public corruption and, at the same time, writes the parallel history of two “races.” Griffith the filmmaker elaborated on this thesis by representing the former slaves as physically, as well as politically, unevolved. In one “comic” scene, African American politicians are re-figured as monkeys dressed as people. The film, distributed nationally in 1914 despite opposition from African American civil rights groups, was endorsed on screen by Woodrow Wilson, professional historian and president (who had recently ordered the segregation of federal work places), as “an accurate portrayal of the history of the period.”

From our contemporary viewpoint, Dixon’s books are ludicrous; when they were published, however, their popularity was partly contingent on their similarity to works produced by “scientifically trained” white professional historians. During this period, three major revisionist accounts of Reconstruction dominated the field of professional history, authored respectively by James W. Garner, Walter Lynwood Fleming, and William Dunning. Dunning, who taught a generation of political historians at Columbia University, linked black suffrage to incompetence and corruption in government and to “the hideous crime against white womanhood which has assumed new meaning in the annals of outrage” (213–14). As Peter Novick has argued, ideological effectiveness was cloaked in these historians’ claims to objectivity, and political effectiveness in their sympathy toward the good government programs of urban Progressive reformers (84–85).

Historians of the United States were preoccupied by the origins of what they imagined to be an exceptional national character. Overseas expansion beginning in the 1880s raised anew the relationship between a violent past and the subjection of peoples as well as claims to civilization and democracy by white elites. Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 address to the American Historical Association, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” of-

ferred one approach (originally pioneered by popular writers like Teddy Roosevelt), which reimagined native North Americans as part of the savage, natural landscape mastered by Europeans in their evolution toward American identity and democratic institutions. Ulrich B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery*, a preeminent example of the new professional history, offered a similar analysis of why slavery prospered in a democratic nation: the African destiny to become bondsmen and women "was determined in part at least by the nature of the typical negroes themselves. Impulsive and inconstant, sociable and amorous, voluble, dilatory and negligent, but robust, amiable, obedient and contented, they have been the world's premium slaves" (8; see also Edwards). Both Turner and Phillips articulated the institution of slavery as foreign, both literally and figuratively, to the evolution of democracy. Such accounts did not just naturalize segregation, they whitened U.S. history, and thus the possible future, of democratic citizenship itself.

Clearly, history and fiction reflected their own as well as each other's supremacist preoccupations. In this way, by 1900, segregation became re-figured in national politics as the "Negro problem," a supremacist idea that provoked Du Bois's famous essay on "the Veil," the metaphorical failure of conversation between blacks and whites of the educated classes. As a lesson in reading African American culture, Du Bois invites his white audience to look within but, in a reversal of segregationist hierarchy, does not permit them to cross their own color line. "Leaving, then, the world of the white man," he writes, "I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses." Noting that his thoughts had "seen the light before in other guise," he concludes by asking whether his educated voice reveals his identity: "need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?" (Du Bois 2; also see Harper).

If, as Toni Morrison has suggested, literature "implies a shareable world and endlessly flexible language," Du Bois's essay highlights the violation of that convention by segregationist practices (xii). Like the white writers I have discussed, for Du Bois the color line was not a barrier to be overcome, but an interruption of dialogue which constituted and defined social relations. The literary community which he imagines in this essay, then, mirrors a racialized and legally unshareable civic order in which the acts of his

imagination can appear before whites “in other guise.” Significantly, Du Bois not only marks the reader as white but, by suggesting that his literary production is sold as if it were produced by a white man, he codes segregationist practices as inherently linked to the marketplace (Fields 152–56).

For a contemporary African American reader of Du Bois, racial commodification would resonate to the 1893 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which the plaintiff argued that he was white, and that by forcing blackness on him, the railroad officers had deprived him of property. African American literature of the period also reverberated with a social fact: that light skin had commercial value, allowing certain “Negroes” to pass as white in order to acquire jobs and status. In James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (a novel masquerading as historical memoir), passing gives the protagonist (who has no name, only race) social capital, a precondition to accumulating money and property.

Because the right to compete fairly in the market was one important connection between Progressive thinkers and the state, Booker T. Washington’s 1901 memoir *Up From Slavery* had a broad audience, not only in the United States but among colonized peoples around the globe. A progress narrative and historical memoir, it advocated a gradualist approach to race uplift, one based not on political inclusion but rather on industrial education, service, and capital accumulation within the racial categories prescribed by segregationist ideology. It also contained Washington’s famous 1895 “Atlanta Compromise” speech in which he assured whites that African Americans did not want social equality—only economic opportunity. The book was attacked by a less powerful but equally vocal coalition of African Americans who, as W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in a contemporary review, read Washington’s tale as a cynical, accommodationist document designed “to gain the sympathy and cooperation of the white South,” and a book which resonated with “the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism” (7–8; also see Harlan).<sup>5</sup>

Washington’s philosophy of equality through difference contrasted greatly with the philosophy of political empowerment for which Du Bois stood. In essence, it conceded that which was formally political—voting and elective office—to whites and sought to achieve immediate gains that might eventually lead to power

and influence in the market: skills, wages, property ownership, and character development, all of which Washington believed would ultimately provide the material basis for citizenship. As Washington explained to his readers, his skill as a speaker had caused many to urge him “to enter political life.” But he refused, “believing that I could find other service which would prove of more permanent value to my race. Even then I had a strong feeling that what our people most needed was to get a foundation in education, industry, and property, and for this I felt they could better afford to strive than for political preferment” (92–93). In other words, he preferred to make history, rather than make claims on a history defined by others.

If we do not read *Up From Slavery* as a text with double, and often triple, meanings, we see only its humility and miss its critique of a political realm dominated by whites. Party politics, characterized by “preferment,” referenced the patronage and cronyism that undergirded electoral contests and a growing state bureaucracy at the dawn of the twentieth century. While professional historians characterized black votes as undermining the integrity of the political sphere, in Washington’s autobiographical history, suffrage and office threatened to corrupt the black citizen. Washington’s personal history turned on this redefinition of citizenship, committing thinly veiled cultural thefts along the way that undermined segregationists’ claim to white uniqueness. An often ponderous and improbable story of his rise from ignorance to education, poverty to comfort, invisibility to status, *Up from Slavery* borrowed its narrative trajectory from a popular model marked as distinctively “American” and white. Thus, Washington, an ex-slave, claimed the same nationalist stage as Horatio Alger’s “luck and pluck” hero, Ragged Dick, or the rags-to-riches autobiography of Washington’s philanthropist (and immigrant) friend, Andrew Carnegie.

Like Carnegie, Washington was obsessed with capital accumulation, and the lists of improvements made at Tuskegee represented evidence of history in the making: physical monuments which would show African American achievement to future generations. The many chapters which describe the founding of the school recount money raised, buildings built, food harvested, and bricks kilned and sold. From the first page of the memoir, Washington reiterates that his work—like history—is infinite, stretching

out into time and space to utilize every ounce of his energy. "Much of what I have said has been written on board trains," he confides, "or at hotels and railroad stations while I have been waiting for trains, or during moments that I could spare from my work at Tuskegee" (unpaginated preface).

In addition to this testament to achievement intended for future generations, Washington comments on the current state of black citizenship. The invocation of travel throughout the memoir is and is not what it appears to be, using both a familiar narrative and a silence to signal the black critical reader. It was the act of traveling which caused African Americans of an emergent middle class to feel keenly the failure of status and citizenship as they passed through segregated public accommodations. They stood in the rear of streetcars while seats in the "white" section were empty; undertook long train rides in Jim Crow cars filled with smoke, laborers, and drunken white trash; and suffered the exposure of female family members to male humor and abuse and journeys which could not be broken because of a lack of "colored" hotels.

The theme of race mixing and racial violence packs the text with crucial information about segregation; as bell hooks has argued, African Americans have historically understood the everyday gleaning of data about white people as a basic survival strategy. In one instance, having written flatly that "in all my contact with the white people of the South I have never received a single personal insult" (something a white—but not a black—reader might fall for), he leads his audience through an excruciating encounter with two white women from Boston, who insisted naively that he eat with them on a train, "perfectly ignorant, it seems, of the customs of the South." Juxtaposed with the women's failure to acquire appropriate social knowledge is Washington's choice between ungentlemanly behavior and the personal danger of acquiescing to their wishes: "The car," he informs us, "was full of Southern white men, most of whom had their eyes on our party." After a short conversation, revealing every facet of his discomfort to the reader, Washington excuses himself, discovering to his relief that in the meantime the potential lynching party has, by observing his cultured behavior, realized his "true" identity and chosen to congratulate him on his good works (169–71).

Reversals of segregationist logic structure these exchanges,

culminating in an encounter which foreshadows future political exchanges where white men accept black men as equals. The white ladies—not the black man—are ignorant of the most basic social rules. Washington knowingly commits at least three breaches of racial etiquette in this passage, whereas the white women are comically unaware of his predicament or their error. The anguish and fear which accompanies such a moment would only be fully understood by the bourgeois African American reader who both longed for the moment when segregation might dissolve and feared the lethal consequences of the white supremacist gaze which Washington describes. The scenario also demonstrates his refinement and courage, qualities which prove him to be the social equal of the white travelers. The threat of ungentlemanly behavior or violence is, in this reversal, lodged in the bodies of white men, as Washington risks his life to preserve the “civilized” space inhabited by white women.<sup>6</sup>

Washington’s claims to citizenship are thus made by refusing it as it is defined by racialized political categories. Nowhere is this paradoxical maneuver more important than at the beginning of the book, where he reveals his history. Introducing himself as partly white and of aristocratic heritage, he writes about his father:

I have heard reports to the effect that he was a white man that lived on one of the near-by plantations. Whoever he was, I never heard of his taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing. But I do not find especial fault with him. He was simply another unfortunate victim of the institution which the Nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time. (2)

Initially, Washington’s vagueness about the identity of his father and indeed, the date of his birth, makes his mixed heritage seem neither remarkable nor interesting, only a result of the slave system which he consigns to the status of historical artifact. And yet, by revealing his whiteness, he makes a claim on the history of the nation. In articulating the circumstances of his birth and of others, Washington links the history of former slaves to that of the nation as a whole: he is partly white, and his first wife “was so very light in color, she might find it more comfortable not to be known as a

colored woman . . . [but] under no circumstances would she consent to deceive any one in regard to her racial identity" (100, 125).

Washington's literary technique seems all the more complex when juxtaposed with a frankly supremacist text, *The Rough Riders*, Theodore Roosevelt's memoir of the Spanish-American War, published the same year as *Up From Slavery*. A crucial moment in the book occurs after the first battle, near Las Guasimas, Cuba, in June 1898, when Roosevelt's Rough Riders paused to regroup and bury seven of their party who had been killed. Roosevelt had been satisfied with the regiment's performance: his troops brave to the last man. Those gravely wounded lay in an open-air hospital humming "My Country 'Tis of Thee"; the ambulatory attended an Episcopalian funeral service which, like many other moments throughout the book, became an arena for democratic nationalism. "There could be no more honorable burial," Roosevelt writes, "than that of these men in a common grave—Indian and cow-boy, miner, packer and college athlete—the man of unknown ancestry from the lonely Western plains, and the man who carried on his watch the crest of the Hamiltons and the Fishes, one in the way they had met death, just as during life they had been one in their daring and loyalty" (108–9).

This image of death as an ideal democratic moment recalls the cross-class language of Civil War narratives, corpses standing in for the plural identities which, in turn, make up a national body politic. However, *The Rough Riders* was written for, and consumed by, an audience whose lived politics were shaped by increasingly narrowed political and social segregation. In the burial scene I have just described—which is only a paragraph long, sandwiched between a passage in which the Rough Riders pick up all the bodies the sand crabs haven't eaten and one in which the boys are marched off to the next battle—Roosevelt pauses to comment on the nature of citizenship in a nation increasingly defined by its cultural and class differences. In this conception of citizenship, Roosevelt levels what are otherwise irreconcilable divisions between men and proposes an equality across social lines based on one's sacrifices to the nation and sense of historical destiny.

Despite this idyllic social vision, Jim Crow haunts this nationalist romance and the book as a whole. Although readers may be pleased to see workers and Indians in the common grave, none of

the corpses is African American and, as the text soon demonstrates, rightly so. Although many of Roosevelt's volunteers were men of Spanish, Native American, and Mexican American descent, the African American (or "colored") troops in Cuba were segregated in separate military units, most notably in the Ninth Cavalry, formed during the Civil War. Roosevelt's encounters with these men came under close scrutiny. In a series of articles in *Scribners Magazine* preceding the publication of *The Rough Riders*, his charge that the Ninth had run away from battle threatened carefully nurtured Republican loyalties in the primarily northern districts where African American men voted, and thus his charge had to be publicly retracted (Dyer 101).

But it is the inconsistent operation of segregationist ideologies—in other words, the failure to exclude all nonwhite soldiers from the common grave—which provokes important questions about the cultural work performed by this historical narrative. What was the relationship between politics and culture which tailored this memoir to specific nationalist purposes? Under what circumstances could men defy unequal political and social status in such historical texts, therein gaining access to citizenship? What made the acquisition of citizenship impossible for African Americans in this text?

Recent scholarship on Theodore Roosevelt has focused on the interdependence of his racial and nationalist philosophies, displacing earlier emphases on his role as a Progressive politician whose pragmatic uses of state power reshaped the relationship between capitalist and consumer. Historical artifacts memorializing the Roosevelt presidencies suggest that the political/commercial and the social/intellectual were hardly separable categories, either for Roosevelt himself or for his admirers. As Donna Haraway has pointed out, the entrance to Roosevelt's memorial wing at New York's Museum of Natural History is marked by a statue of an equestrian Teddy sandwiched between an American Indian and an African, both depicted as "savages." A visitor then passes under an arch stamped with the words "TRUTH, KNOWLEDGE, VISION" and topped by "statues of the great explorers Boone, Audubon, Lewis and Clark" (Haraway 239; Kaplan, "Black and Blue on San Juan Hill"). Such accounts of Roosevelt's strategic appeal to middle-class, white audiences argue for the discursive interde-

pendence of race, gender, and an idea about human history that was labeled “civilization.” As the passages from *Up From Slavery* suggest, these were performative categories which, in the years before women’s suffrage, acquired political resonance as they were generated and consumed by male political actors.<sup>7</sup>

While writing *The Rough Riders* for a popular audience, Roosevelt also thought of himself as a modern, scientific historian; his earlier work, for instance, addressed the birth of democracy and the struggle to wrest the continent from European colonizers and “savage” native inhabitants. His style bridged two distinct periods in the disciplinary evolution of academic history. Educated middle-class audiences could identify with his thrilling narrative descriptions of naval battles and frontier violence, while scholarly techniques such as precise footnoting to archival collections, which distinguished the new generation of university-trained historians, gave authority to all aspects of his accounts. Volume 2 of *Winning the West*, for example, is littered with scalping, massacres of unarmed innocents, exchanges of bloody souvenirs, and “tales of the most heroic courage and of the vilest poltroonery,” all of which serve primarily to engage the reading audience in an epic struggle between civilized and savage peoples (131). Each page, dripping with the blood of settlers and Native Americans, is also neatly footnoted to one of many manuscript collections around New England and the South.

Such claims to objectivity permitted the epic and romantic dimensions of Roosevelt’s work to make huge claims on political necessity while posing as historical truth. As former abolitionist Frederick Douglass understood, historical documents which deployed segregationist “truths” were powerful ideological weapons, causing the true history of slavery and the emancipation struggle to disappear “in memory . . . like a half-forgotten dream” (qtd. in Blight 43). Thus, a new class of university-educated African American intellectuals in this generation understood the re-writing of white supremacist histories as critical to counterhegemonic articulations of the nation and to a black political future. This generation of “Afro-Saxons,” as David Levering Lewis has called them, some of whom had been born into but had not known slavery beyond their first few years, pioneered the field of African American history with empirical standards which were identical to those of their

white counterparts and yet which sought to deny the natural historical evolution of a segregated nation.<sup>8</sup>

A crucial struggle during these years was the effort to establish African Americans as historical subjects in their own right rather than as the backdrop to white accomplishments. The *Journal of Negro History*, founded in 1916 by Carter Woodson, gives us some notion of the contours of this struggle as it was shaped by the argument for African American historical destiny and demands for political equality. Every issue reprinted primary documents which uncovered the “facts” of African American participation in national expansion and political development. Articles in the journal’s first few years included rebuttals of white scholarship, such as Norman P. Andrews’s answer to William Dunning’s history of Reconstruction, “The Negro in Politics,” and Woodson’s own “Fifty Years of Negro Citizenship.” By claiming historical subjectivity for African Americans, these articles effectively rejected the scientific grounds for white supremacy and related concepts—such as the one maintaining that “politics” and “citizenship” were inherently negated by the word “Negro.” Such articles necessarily pushed at the limits of Progressive scientific truths about race itself. In an article on miscegenation law which precedes the emergence of discourse analysis in the historical profession by over fifty years, Woodson argued that the purpose of such statutes was not to prevent race mixing—this they had failed to do—but to support the fiction that there was a “white” race at all.<sup>9</sup>

If, for this new class of black intellectuals, history proved that segregation and its technologies lacked scientific and factual legitimacy, for white supremacists like Roosevelt (or professional historians Dunning and Phillips), it proved just the opposite. Historical subjectivity was not the same as having a documentable past. Rather, it was won through manly acts of citizenship which promoted national vigor and, most importantly, through one’s perception of critical moments of historical change. Race was the physical sign of a history which one either did or did not possess: racial inferiority could thus be deduced by the failure of a people to recognize a critical historical moment in the life of the nation and insert themselves in it. Thus, African Americans were physically marked in this literature, not by color, but by their original conquest and enslavement.

To return to Roosevelt's account of the imperialist project in Cuba, then, what is most striking about *The Rough Riders* is the future president's anxiety that his political and class status will prevent him from carrying out his obligations, as a citizen, to history and the nation. "Now that my party had come to power," he wrote, "I felt it incumbent on me, by word and deed, to do all I could to secure the carrying out of the policy in which I so heartily believed." Even as he fulfilled his obligations as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in the first months of the crisis, he had "determined that, if a war came, somehow or other, I would go to the front" (1). When the Rough Riders finally embarked for Cuba, having overcome massive inefficiencies and delays thanks to Roosevelt's tireless energy and deep pocketbook, he weighed possible historical outcomes. "If we failed, we would share the fate of all who failed," he wrote; "but we were sure that we would win, that we should score the first great triumph in a mighty world-movement" (65).

The "world-movement" in which Roosevelt claimed a place was the inexorable historical project of civilizing a savage globe; this oblique reference to the "fate of those who fail" can be understood through a close look at the composition of his corps of volunteers. Among his recruits are a number of "Indians" and "half-breeds"; the volunteers are also accompanied by several representatives from European monarchies. Both Native Americans and Europeans represent the history of military defeat. These groups, as he noted earlier in *The Winning of the West*, exhibited their savage tendencies through the murder of women and children and their practice of trading human scalps. In contrast, in their defense of women and children and their horrified response to the scalp trade, the "backwoodsmen" whose determination to conquer other "claimants" to the continent emerge from their own history as "characteristically American" (390). Thus, unlike enslaved Africans, Europeans and Indians are articulated as inferior but necessary to the historical engine producing a national identity. "The chain of events by which the winning was achieved is perfect," Roosevelt wrote, "had any link therein snapped it is likely that the final result would have been failure" (371).

Failure, in this sense, represents the inability to seize and dominate the historical moment, the lack of power to retain one's hold on the production of history, and thus to become a follower

rather than a player in a continuing conquest narrative dominated by another race. In other words, when citizens fail, the nation that they represent comes to the end of its history, a fact of civilization most clearly understood by the men of the Western Territories. It is not surprising to learn in the first pages of *The Rough Riders* that “the feeling for War was strongest” among Congressmen from the western states, or that Roosevelt’s partner in raising volunteers was a doctor who had held “the actual command of more than one expedition against the bands of renegade Indians. . . . though an excellent doctor, what he really desired was the chance to lead men in some kind of hazard” (3–4). The “bit players” in this national drama are a scattering of sons of Confederate veterans; soldiers of fortune from a variety of declining colonial powers; and a variety of men of Indian descent, one of whom explains to Roosevelt that “his people had always fought when there was a war, and he could not feel happy to stay at home when the flag was going into battle” (23). While the sentiment is appropriately manly, it lacks a sense of the specific historical project at hand. Similarly, another Indian volunteer has his hair cut to suppress his history: “Don’t want to wear my hair long like a wild Indian when I’m in civilized warfare,” he explains to Roosevelt (21).

Thus, the disorderly retreat of African American soldiers or “smoked Yankees” of whom Roosevelt claimed to have taken command had a political significance beyond its implications for the electorate. In contrast to these representatives of failed nations and peoples, who nevertheless are capable of citizenship because of their agreement to participate in the project of conquest, “colored troops” have no sense of historical destiny. Most of the soldiers Roosevelt encounters are characterized by their desire to act, hiding wounds and remaining clear-headed despite the disorganization and terror of battle. However, “colored troops” drift aimlessly away from that place of terror and destiny where history is made.

“None of the white regulars or Rough Riders showed the slightest signs of weakening,” Roosevelt recalled; “but under the strain the colored infantrymen (who had none of their officers) began to get a little uneasy and drift to the rear, either helping the wounded men, or saying that they wished to find their own regiments.” Roosevelt draws his gun and promises to begin shooting them, despite their contributions to the battle, if they don’t go

back to the line. “Now, I shall be very sorry to hurt you,” Roosevelt explains to them, “and you don’t know whether or not I will keep my word, but my men can tell you that I always do.” As the white soldiers around him affirm this, the black troops “broke into broad grins, and I had no more trouble with them, they seeming to accept me as one of their own officers” (144–45).

Here, African Americans demonstrate no sense of destiny, or even an awareness that they are engaged in a serious nationalist enterprise. Unlike the nonwhite or mixed-race westerners in Roosevelt’s regiment, they are clearly not capable of citizenship: they are slaves and minstrels, distinguishable only by their good humor from the degraded Cubans they are there to liberate, and eager to please whoever is willing to give them direction. As Ulrich Phillips explained in *American Negro Slavery*, published in 1918, the destiny of Africans to become bondsmen and women “was determined in part at least by the nature of the typical negroes themselves. Impulsive and inconstant, sociable and amorous, voluble, dilatory and negligent, but robust, amiable, obedient and contented, they have been the world’s premium slaves” (8).<sup>10</sup> Unlike Roosevelt’s manly volunteers, they exist outside of history altogether.

Roosevelt’s historical and popular writing argues for the complicity of historical theories and practices to the production of racial categories and the ideologies of nation-building which undergirded an imperialist vision. History did not simply produce a set of agreed-upon facts which rationalized the exclusion of racial others from full citizenship. As I argue here, a racialized identity did not necessarily exclude men from the nationalist project; and scholarly work which recuperated a counterhegemonic African American past failed effectively to reverse segregationist exclusions. The relationship between “those internal categories of gender, race and ethnicity to the global dynamics of empire-building,” which Amy Kaplan has urged historians to explore, suggests that the practice of history was in itself a segregationist project, producing commodified pasts which could link or exclude the individual subject to the national body politic (“Left Alone in America” 16).

To ignore the questions raised by historical writing is to ignore political power itself and the ways that it is linked to nationalist cultural production. Paradoxically, in the United States, segregation—which proposed to negate the social effects of perceived

racial differences—was the technology that made race central to political culture during the Progressive era. A new political history which addresses race must, therefore, blend the question of political origins and effects with analyses of the texts that diffuse and normalize political knowledge. Such a history must also refuse the white supremacy it interrogates by addressing racial ideology not in terms of the shifts in its dominant discourses, but in terms of the exchanges and encounters which constituted the color line (Jehlen).

### Notes

1. For black migration and white resistance to social equality in this period, see Grossman, Rudwick, and Tuttle.

2. Alex Lichtenstein has argued that institutionalized race oppression provided the foundation for southern modernity. Michael O'Malley, on the other hand, has asserted that the uncertainty of free market liberalism drove the certainty of cultural desires in other ideas, and "the belief in an essential difference between white and black was one of those ideas."

3. Useful critical approaches to racialism and political theory include Fredrickson and Hall.

4. Clarence Walker has argued the opposite, that "race is an autonomous historical phenomenon" and that "a class analysis . . . makes invisible the unique struggle of black people for freedom and equality" (17); also see Michaels.

5. Michael Dyson has argued in *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* that in their many divisions was the "common intellectual ground to make disagreement plausible . . . and that varying degrees of white support were crucial to the attainment of concrete freedom for black Americans" (42).

6. In his essay "Look! A Negro," Robert Gooding-Williams has pointed to "white Americans' general failure to regard black people . . . as fellow citizens; what they cannot admit, in other words, is that the speech and/or action of a black person might be thoughtfully entertained as making a statement about issues which concern us all as members of the same political community" (170).

7. In his study of blackface minstrelsy, Eric Lott has also argued that ideologies of race were performed through gender, and that these political performances of maleness were explicitly intended for other men: "What appears in fact to have been appropriated were certain kinds of masculinity," he writes. "To put on the cultural forms of 'blackness' was to engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry" (52). See also Butler.

8. As Paul Gilroy argues in *Black Atlantic*, the production and rewriting of historical narratives played powerful roles in the attainment of modernity for African Americans. Political engagement demanded "first, an active pursuit of self-emancipation from slavery and its attendant horrors; second, toward the acquisition of substantive citizenship denied by slavery; and finally, in pursuit of an autonomous space in the system of formal political relationships that distinguishes occidental modernity" (2, 48, 112). Kimberle Crenshaw and Gary Peller

have also argued that “the realm of interpretation, ideology, and narrative is a critical site in the production of American racial domination,” and is therefore a critical site for counterhegemonic activity (57).

9. Paul Gilroy has argued that for Du Bois, the fundamental black struggle was “above all a quest for citizenship, whether conducted in the context of state-managed migrant labor systems or in less formal and less centralized structures of racial subordination” (122); see also Young 142–58.

10. In “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” Cornel West has argued that “the modern black diaspora problematic of invisibility and namelessness can be understood as the condition of relative lack of black people’s power to represent themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings” (28).

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