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LYNCH LAW IN THE LAND OF LINCOLN: AFRICAN AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS
AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY RACE RIOTS

JOHN PLEMING

92 Pages

In the early twentieth century, more and more African Americans began to leave the American South in search of better jobs and more equal treatment in the North. These Black migrants found a less rigid racial hierarchy and employment in industrial and domestic settings. However, racism in the North was alive and well. As African American communities began to exert their economic and political power, they were often targeted by white mobs who would rampage through Black neighborhoods, killing and burning as they went. In response to race riots in Springfield (1908), East St. Louis (1917), and Chicago (1919), Black intellectuals would form large, national organizations with the intention of stopping further acts of violence. This era of civil rights was dominated by large intellectual personalities who brought a top-down approach to uplift. Embodied most clearly in W.E.B. Du Bois, groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League sought to cultivate a Black middle-class to represent the race, as a whole, positively. While these groups faced criticism from more extreme thinkers to their political right and left, they ultimately distinguished themselves as the dominant voices in civil rights during the time. Unfortunately, the creation of a Black middle-class did very little to stem the tide of racial violence or uplift African Americans as a whole. This paper examines the intellectual origins of prominent civil

rights leaders and organizations, their programs for racial uplift, and how they ultimately succeeded or failed to bring about positive change.

KEYWORDS: African American history; intellectual history; race riots.

LYNCH LAW IN THE LAND OF LINCOLN: AFRICAN AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS
AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY RACE RIOTS

JOHN PLEMING

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for the Degree of

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Department of History

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LYNCH LAW IN THE LAND OF LINCOLN: AFRICAN AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS
AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY RACE RIOTS

JOHN PLEMING

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INTRODUCTION: PEOPLE WHO AREN'T GOING TO LISTEN

In Plato's most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, Socrates and his companion Glaucon leave Athens and travel to the Piraeus, Athen's principle harbor, to pray and observe the preparations for a festival to be held that evening. Wanting to return to Athens, Socrates and Glaucon turn to leave when they are suddenly arrested by a slave who demands that they wait for his master, Polemarchus. When Polemarchus arrives he asks Socrates and Glaucon where they are going and says he would never allow them to leave before the festival began; furthermore, even if Socrates and Glaucon tried to leave, Polemarchus and his friends outnumber them. Seeing that he is outnumbered, Socrates asks "But isn't something still left...that we persuade you that you ought to let us go?" Polemarchus replies "And do you have the power to persuade people who won't listen?" Glaucon says they do not, to which Polemarchus replies "Then consider us people who aren't going to listen."¹

Despite centuries of separation, the tension at the beginning of Plato's exploration of justice and the ideal society parallels the struggle that African American intellectuals faced at the turn of the century. As racial violence in the North threatened the progress that had been made since the Civil War, Black thinkers thought, spoke, and wrote tirelessly on the subject of race relations. While African Americans and their allies had no illusions that racial violence and discrimination were no longer facts of life, the harsh treatment many Black migrants received upon arriving in the North raised new questions about how, and if, African Americans could truly attain equal treatment anywhere in the United States. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Black

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Joe Sachs (Indianapolis: Focus Philosophical Library, 2007), 18.

activists and intellectuals that had been fighting lynching and Jim Crow in the South were faced with the emergence of a new set of problems. Namely, the increasing number of African Americans leaving the South to seek better economic opportunity and relief from the oppressive racism of the postbellum South and how these migrants were received by both the white and established Black communities in these cities.

Through no fault of their own, the mass migration of Black Americans to the North suddenly changed the economic and social landscapes of cities like Springfield, St. Louis, Chicago, and others. Historian James R. Grossman describes the migration as an effort to enjoy the “perquisites of American citizenship.”² To some extent, Black Americans found these perquisites in the North. It was much easier and safer for African Americans to find work, receive an education, build communities, and exercise their right to vote and organize politically. However, many of these hopes “foundered on the shoals of northern racism...and class relations.”³ As African American communities in northern cities grew, new arrivals were often funneled into, or chose to enter, loosely defined Black neighborhoods. While these communities offered camaraderie and familiarity, they were also an embodiment of de facto segregation. In addition, growing numbers of Black workers and voters altered the political balance of northern cities. White unions that often excluded Black workers often found themselves being undercut by their bosses who hired African Americans at lower wages. Furthermore, African Americans used their growing numbers to become an important minority in city elections, further challenging (if incidentally) white domination of local politics.

² James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8.

³ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 8.

Frequently, and tragically, these migrants were held at arm's length, if not outright spurned, by the entrenched Black middle-class. Many more established African Americans feared that association with less acculturated African Americans from the South would threaten the uneasy peace that had been established between Black and white communities. In addition, the white populations of cities such as Springfield, St. Louis, Chicago, and others became agitated as the increasing African American populations began to organize politically viable voting blocs and compete with whites for factory jobs. As this paper will explore, this mix of rejection and racial tension often exploded into spasms of white mob violence that targeted Black communities with horrifying results as well as material and intellectual implications for African American thinkers.

This paper will consider three race riots that occurred in 1908 in Springfield, Illinois, 1917 in East St. Louis, and 1919 in Chicago. Through these three case studies, it will be possible to understand the challenges Black leaders faced, how they attempted to overcome them, to what extent they were successful or unsuccessful, and finally to understand how the civil rights movement of the early twentieth century fits into civil rights activism later in the century. The primary, though by no means only, organizations driving the Black intellectual and activist efforts during this period were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL). Formed in 1909 and 1910, respectively, these organizations adopted intellectually distinct but closely related programs of racial integration and uplift. By examining the prominent individuals behind these organizations and others, and tracking their response to three outbursts of racial violence, this paper will reveal both the intellectual origins and ramifications of the programs undertaken by these organizations. In brief,

the NAACP and the Urban League were organized and active in the intellectual shadow of Booker T. Washington. Washington's preeminence as a Black thinker, and his endorsement of a conservative, nonconfrontational approach to race relations, was perhaps the single most important factor in creating the political landscape these organizations encountered.

The NUL remained very close intellectual to Booker T. Washington in its approach to racial uplift. While the intellectuals that led the NUL through the early twentieth century were every bit as committed to ending racial violence as their counterparts in other organizations, they were not nearly as inventive in their solutions. Through much of the turbulence that the Great Migration brought for African Americans and northern cities, the NUL remained committed to a program of industrial education and accommodation with white society. In some ways, this made them very popular and effective as an organization helping African Americans find employment and housing. However, it ultimately limited the transformational capacity of their organization. This intellectual rigidity would begin to break somewhat in the 1920s, with the publication of the NUL's journal, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, though the organization still resisted any kind of dramatic institutional shift. Through the race riots considered in this paper, the NUL carried on the intellectual legacy of Booker T. Washington proudly and unwaveringly.

The NUL's primary partner through the rash of race riots in the early 20th-century was the NAACP. Much like the NUL, the NAACP was an organization comprised of Black and white elites with a top-down perspective on uplift. While the NAACP was animated by many influential thinkers, the organization was largely defined and represented by W.E.B. Du Bois. As editor of the institutional journal *The Crisis*, Du Bois's belief that a Black elite would champion the race as a whole and ultimately end discrimination permeated the whole organization during

this time. Despite its similarities to the NUL, the NAACP distinguished itself through a much more aggressive political and rhetorical stance that gained the organization a large following. Despite Du Bois's elitism, his rhetorical and editorial skills created the most recognizable, influential civil rights organization of the early 20th-century. As political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. has observed about Black intellectuals, it is plausible, perhaps even likely, that these organizations understood that "mainstream recognition as a Black voice requires dramatic and repeated endorsement of centrist or conservative orthodoxy."⁴

While civil rights discourse in the years examined in this paper was ultimately defined by the NAACP and NUL, they were far from the only noteworthy contributors. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who had a rocky relationship with the NAACP (though the organization still claims her as a founding member), brought the skills she had developed in her crusade against lynching in the South to the North. She skillfully weaved together critiques of white civilization and manhood and many other commenters would copy this line of attack. Through her involvement in the NAACP, the National Association of Colored Women, the National Equal Rights League, and various women's clubs in Chicago, Wells-Barnett was instrumental in bringing a more radical style, as well as a thorough examination of the roles of gender and masculinity in racial violence, to a discourse that lacked both prior to her arrival.

In addition, the NAACP and NUL faced critiques from activists who felt they were too moderate in their approach. First, the Jamaican-born Black separatist Marcus Garvey spoke constantly and charismatically on his belief that white and Black Americans could never

⁴ Adolph Reed Jr, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 160.

cohabitate. As racial violence plagued what many thought would be a safe haven, the concept of permanent segregation gained more acceptance. While Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), drew a sizable following, his influence ultimately dwindled and never matched the prominence of the NAACP or NUL.

Second, and more influentially, the NAACP and NUL often faced harsh criticism from *The Messenger*. This radical, socialist publication was written and managed by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. While *The Messenger* was always a distant third in popularity compared to the two major organizations, it provided a class-conscious, prescient perspective that prefigured later civil rights movements that drew more clear connections between the struggles for race and class equality. While the NAACP and NUL struggled over how African Americans should interact with unions and employers, Randolph and Owen wholeheartedly endorsed the Industrial Workers of the World. While Du Bois argued that Black soldiers fighting in World War One would help gain recognition for the race at home, *The Messenger* maintained a staunch anti-war stance. While *The Messenger's* reach was ultimately limited by its radical message and limited manpower, it exerted considerable influence and was one of the earliest civil rights publications to combine the struggles for race and class equality.

Finally, this paper will address why these organizations, founded and led by some of the brightest and most dedicated thinkers in the United States, were ultimately unable to prevent further race riots. To be sure, the intellectual and practical approach of these organizations bears some of the responsibility. However, the larger political context within which these activists were organizing must be considered. In *The Republic*, Socrates's masterful logic and rhetoric wins over Polemarchus and his supporters. In Springfield, St. Louis, and Chicago the efforts of civil

rights activists to think, write, and organize their way out of the grip of violence achieved only limited success.

In these and other cities, white mobs, often benefitting from local, state, and national authorities' implicit endorsement, rampaged through Black neighborhoods, killing and burning as they went. Despite the intellectual and rhetorical skill of figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and others, they often found themselves outnumbered and overwhelmed by forces who had access to levers of power in ways that Black Americans simply did not.

If African Americans remained in the South, they faced lynching and state-sponsored discrimination. Unsurprisingly, African Americans left the South by the tens of thousands and fundamentally reshaped Northern cities as they did. While many of these cities had sizable Black populations prior to the Great Migration, they were often too small to meaningfully challenge white political domination and of a middle or upper-class status that often required the accommodation of whites to maintain. As more and more working-class African Americans from rural backgrounds arrived in the North, they formed a political and economic entity that threatened the uneasy peace that Black elites had brokered.

These newly-arrive Black migrants often found themselves embroiled in struggles between white and Black Americans, between working and upper-class African Americans, and the ever-present struggle between labor and capital. This untenable position was what many migrants, unaccustomed to cities, industrial work, or the racial dynamics of the North had to navigate and what organizations such as the NAACP and NUL would try to mediate. While they struggled to relieve racial tension and violence, they forged new organizations that advanced civil rights activism and provided important aid to thousands.

Despite the hostile context they faced, the civil rights organizations and individuals that fought against race riots merit a close examination of their work. First, to understand the ways in which they were successful despite overwhelming difficulties. Second, because the fight against race riots represents a pivotal and formative moment for civil rights in the United States that helped to establish later contexts within which more successful, recognizable work could be done during the New Deal and again in the 1960s. Even as they came up against people who were not interested in listening, organizations such as the NAACP, NUL, and the intellectuals who organized them deployed all their combined energies and rhetorical ability to resolve an issue that still plagues the United States to this day.

To use a truism, civil rights activism during this period was a product of its time. The formation of large, national organizations and the reliance on experts and exhaustive research was a familiar hallmark of the Progressive Era. While this progressive approach certainly helped motivate the gathering of influential minds and motivate their work, it also came with intellectual and practical baggage. The most prominent civil rights organizations during the early twentieth century were constrained by an elitist approach to uplift. While the NAACP and NUL were not anti-union, they certainly did not see the struggles of unions and Black Americans to be as closely intertwined as Randolph and Owen did. To be clear, many unions failed to end racial discrimination and exclusion. However, the IWW, for example, did not and was not endorsed by the NAACP or NUL.

However, despite the ways in which they were constrained by their intellectual environment, these activists and organizations were fundamental to imagining and creating a new, better future. Many of the thinkers who responded to the crisis of race riots would go on to

contribute to later struggles. For example, A. Philip Randolph would ultimately conceive of and organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In addition, the critiques of writers like Du Bois and Wells-Barnett would help end the dominance of patronage politics and encourage African Americans to organize for their own interests. Finally, most of the thinkers and organizations examined in this paper changed their rhetorical approach in response to racial violence. The elitism of Du Bois never vanished, but it did dissipate as he began to advocate more strongly for participation in unions. While Wells-Barnett had long been more radical and rhetorically aggressive, she only grew more biting in her attacks as more African Americans were victimized by race riots.

In short, it can be difficult to weigh the legacy of early 20th-century civil rights activism. The NAACP and NUL were undeniably important, resourceful advocates for African Americans attempting to navigate unfamiliar environments and new, more subtle interactions between races. In particular, the NUL was often lauded by Black and white Americans for its work helping African American migrants secure gainful employment. However, these organizations' elitism often led them to focus on individual responsibility and thus failed to connect the struggle for racial equality with larger critiques of the political and economic system that produced the inequality they struggled against. In both their successes and their shortcomings, these organizations set the tone of early 20th-century civil rights activism.

While they did not win the decisive victory against racial violence they had hoped for, these organizations and activists were a crucial bridge from the purely accommodationist politics of Booker T. Washington to the new century and later, more radical challenges to white supremacy. As the political moment of Reconstruction ended, Black intellectuals were faced with

the unenviable task of forging a new answer to the “Negro question” during a time of economic and social change. In many ways, these activists admirably advanced the cause of racial equality despite the constraints of a conservative political context. However, Black intellectuals and their proposals were both consciously and unconsciously shaped by historical and contemporaneous politics. In both the ways they changed and reproduced the world around them, the response of Black intellectuals to northern race riots offers insights into the role of intellectuals in the struggle for a more equal America.

CHAPTER I: RACE WAR IN THE NORTH

This chant could be heard outside the jail of Springfield, Illinois on the evening of August 14th, 1908, as a crowd gathered to demand that Sheriff Charles Werner hand over two Black men being held inside. Until this moment, the city had been preparing to celebrate the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. The first man, Joe James, had been in jail for five weeks. On July 5th, James had been arrested for the murder of Clergy Ballard. Allegedly, Ballard had found James in the room of his sixteen year old daughter, Blanche, and was fatally wounded by James when he tried to intervene. The other man, a Black resident of Springfield, was George Richardson. Richardson had been accused by a white resident, Nellie Hallam, of breaking into her home and attempting to rape her on the night of August 13th. While Richardson and his wife fought the accusation, Mrs. Hallam identified him in a lineup and the jury was not convinced by his or his wife's testimonies.⁵ With both men sitting in jail, Springfield residents read headlines in the morning papers extolling the alleged crimes of the two men, and the fuse that would eventually spark a full-blown riot was formally lit.

While tensions quickly raced to a boiling point on August 14th, Springfield had been trending towards a violent outburst for years. According to James L. Crouthamel's "The Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908," written in 1960 for the *Journal of Negro History*, Springfield had a "reputation, partly justified, of being one of the most corrupt midwestern cities."⁶ The heart of Springfield's corruption, Crouthamel asserted, was Washington Street. This

⁵ Crouthamel, "The Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908," 14.

⁶ Crouthamel, "The Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908," 8.

street, home to Springfield's saloons and brothels, also ran through the center of the Springfield's Black community.⁷ This Black community, comprised in large part of recent arrivals to the city, was largely representative of the situation many Black Americans moving north found themselves in. Because of racial discrimination and, generally dire economic circumstances, only the most undesirable parts of northern cities were available for African Americans looking for a place to live. These neighborhoods were often riddled with crime as local police departments ignored illegal enterprises so long as they confined themselves to the Black part of town. This created a vicious cycle that led African Americans to be associated with crime and vice versa, despite their limited role in this state of affairs.

In addition, the early 1900s saw a huge influx of African Americans to the North that did not just need homes, they also desperately needed work. This put Black workers, often hired at lower wages than their white counterparts and used as strikebreakers, in direct competition with established, unionized white workers who saw African American laborers as a threat to their livelihoods. In 1898 for example, African American strikebreakers were caught in the middle when a miners' strike in Virden, Illinois turned violent. In essence, the alleged crimes of James and Richardson were the tipping point for white resentment that had been building for years.

By 5:00 p.m. on August 14th, Sheriff Werner was monitoring a crowd of roughly 4,000 outside the city's jail. In an attempt to stop the situation from getting out of hand, Werner smuggled Richardson and James out of the prison, into a car, and ultimately onto a train headed to Bloomington, Illinois. After he completed this clandestine maneuver, Werner invited a small group from the crowd to search the prison to confirm that the prisoners were gone. While the

⁷ Crouthamel, "The Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908," 9.

group did confirm Werner's claim, it did not sate the mob as he had hoped. Instead, the mob turned against a local, white restaurateur named Harry Loper, who was believed to have supplied the car used to transport the men out of town. While it is unclear where this rumor started, the mob did move away from the jail and began to harass Loper and his staff at Loper's restaurant. After a skirmish there, in which Loper's car was turned over and set on fire, his restaurant was largely destroyed, and two employees were wounded by gunfire, a detachment of the mob was turned away from the prison once again after confirming that the prisoners were gone. At this point, the frustrated mob began to rampage in earnest through Springfield's Black neighborhoods.⁸

Starting fires and shooting their guns haphazardly, the mob made its way down Washington Street, where white handkerchiefs marked white-owned businesses that remained untouched. Excluding these, the mob torched many Black businesses and homes, only allowing the local firefighters to prevent white residences and stores from burning. Amidst this violence, two Black men were lynched. The first, Scott Burton, was flushed from his home by fire, shot, and dragged to a nearby tree where he was lynched. The mob was only forced away from Burton's body by the timely arrival of a group of state militiamen. The second lynching victim was 84 year old William Donegal who was targeted because he was married to a white woman. Again, Illinois militia ran off the mob after their work was done. The state militia, called in by Sheriff Werner, eventually restored order in the early morning hours of August 15th. Before the militia occupied the town and brought the rioters under control, eight Black residents were killed by the mob, a number of white attackers were killed by African Americans in self-defense and by

⁸ Crouthamel, "The Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908," 15-16.

stray bullets. The last casualty was a Black infant who died of exposure in the mass exodus of Black residents that followed, many of whom found that no town would take them in. A sign posted at the train station in nearby Buffalo, Illinois stated that all “niggers are warned out of town.”⁹

The irony of this riot occurring in Lincoln’s hometown, near a planned celebration of the man himself, was not lost on anyone, least of all Black activists and their allies. In *The Independent*, a white, socialist reporter named William E. Walling wrote that white residents of Springfield had sparked “permanent warfare with the Negro race.”¹⁰ Walling and other activists circulated a call for action and scheduled a meeting for February 12th, 1909. This meeting (actually held in May, 1909) and a second conference held in May, 1910 represented an impressive gathering of activists and thinkers. Ultimately, this second conference would produce the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Dedicated to preventing future violence, the NAACP, Crouthamel wrote, would “point the finger of scorn, and bring Negro discontent into the open.”¹¹ While the NAACP wanted no part of a race war, as Walling described it, they did intend to make sure that African Americans would not be practically or rhetorically defenseless.

The activists that gathered to form what would ultimately become the NAACP first had to decide what intellectual shape their organization would take. While many attendees of these early meetings were previously involved with the Niagara Movement, a previously-formed, all

⁹ Crouthamel, “The Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908,”18.

¹⁰ William English Walling, “The Race War in the North,” *The Independent* 65 (Sept. 3, 1908): 529.

¹¹ Crouthamel, “The Springfield, Illinois Race Riot of 1908,”19.

Black organization, many new Black and white activists attended these meetings and steered the group in one way or another. In her autobiography, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who had established herself as an intellectual force during her crusade against lynching in the South, wrote that Booker T. Washington and his ideas loomed over the group's early meetings.¹²

Washington, born into slavery in Virginia before rising to national prominence after emancipation, argued that African Americans should, at least temporarily, accept segregation and work to succeed in the South without directly challenging the racial hierarchy of American society. In his famous 1895 speech at an exposition in Atlanta (dubbed the Atlanta Compromise Speech by Du Bois), Washington argued that Black Americans should embrace the opportunities in front of them rather than fight for dramatic change or leave the South for something better. He said "It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities," and "It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges."¹³ In essence, Black Americans should accept the status quo and engage in a kind of racial self-improvement to become worthy of racial equality.

Washington's ideas had become very popular across the nation. Particularly for white Americans, he championed an approach to race relations that did not fundamentally challenge white supremacy. However, in the wake of a race riot in Abraham Lincoln's hometown, activists such as Wells-Barnett believed it was time to challenge white supremacy more directly. In the

¹² Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), , 275-276.

¹³ Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Compromise" Atlanta, Georgia, September 18, 1895. <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>

NAACP's early meetings, she lobbied for the group to adopt Du Bois's position instead of Washington's. Specifically, she agreed with Du Bois that segregation was inherently racist and that African Americans deserved the full rights of citizenship, not just emancipation, but true equality. Ultimately, Wells-Barnett won this early battle and when the group of activists agreed to form a permanent, national organization Du Bois was selected as a leading member and tasked with reading out the other names selected for the organization.

To everyone's surprise, Wells-Barnett's name had been left off the list. According to her, Du Bois told her he had taken the liberty of substituting her name with Dr. Charles E. Bentley, a dentist and longtime Black civil rights activist, but, seeing as Bentley had failed to attend, Du Bois would reinstate her if she wanted. Wells-Barnett turned him down. Despite her refusal, many members of the newly-formed organization thought it was a calamitous mistake to exclude her. Wells-Barnett wrote that John Milholland, an experienced white civil rights activist and a friend of hers, tried to stop the list of names from being accepted without her. When he found out he could not do so, he informed her that he had offered his resignation with the intention that she would take his place. Again, Wells-Barnett refused and prevented Milholland from resigning.

Ultimately, the lobbying of Milholland and others resulted in a tenuous relationship between Wells-Barnett and the NAACP. While she continued to attend meetings, and was instrumental in garnering early support to start *The Crisis*, most of her organizing energy was spent with groups separate from, but parallel to, the NAACP. Wells-Barnett worked with the National Association of Colored Women, the Chicago YMCA, and the Negro Fellowship League. While her exclusion from the NAACP was not complete, it was meaningful and illustrative. She and Du Bois both represented a new kind of Black activism that was notably

different from Washington's patronage politics and his tacit endorsement of segregation. Despite this, Du Bois worked personally to make sure she was not part of the group that officially became the NAACP. It does not seem that her gender was the issue, the NAACP had other Black and white women as founding members. It seems more likely that her exclusion was an attempt by Du Bois to set the intellectual boundaries of the new organization. While Du Bois was certainly more militant than Booker T. Washington, Wells-Barnett was more radical in her attacks on white supremacy than Du Bois. As editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois succeeded in controlling the intellectual narrative that the NAACP presented through the 1910s and 1920s; however, as more race riots engulfed northern cities, Wells-Barnett's more aggressive approach was vindicated.

Despite this early, narrowly avoided schism between two important contributors, the NAACP began meeting in 1909 and established its national office in New York in 1910. The organization quickly rose to prominence, but it would soon share New York with another high-profile civil rights organization. As the institutional drama over Wells-Barnett's exclusion played out, and the NAACP took shape, several important Progressive organizations were in the early stages of a merger.

In 1911, three New York-based reform groups met and ultimately coalesced into the National Urban League (NUL). The succinctly named Committee for Improving the Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York (CIICN) and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women (NLPCW) were formed in the early 1900s by an auspicious group of white and Black progressive reformers. As a whole, these organizations were closely aligned with the ideals of Booker T. Washington. The CIICN in particular was led almost exclusively by highly-

educated, upper-class African Americans who believed that gainful employment was the most important step to racial uplift. In her history of the early NUL, historian Nancy Weiss views the CIICN “as an instrument of a conservative philosophy of race as well as a vehicle for racial reform.”¹⁴ Crucially, both the CIICN and the NLCPW worked to discourage further migration to the North while they worked to find employment for newly arrived African Americans.¹⁵ In 1910, the Black scholar George Edmund Haynes and white social reformer Ruth Standish Baldwin would form the Committee on Urban Conditions, which would eventually join forces with the CIICN and NLCPW to form the Urban League in 1911.

As Weiss explains, Haynes and Baldwin reflected the “central ideological strains” that motivated the Urban League. Haynes, who had recently completed his doctoral dissertation examining Black migration at Columbia, believed in two things that would become foundational to the NUL and Black activism in the early 20th-century. First, his graduate studies, inspired by Du Bois’s own pioneering sociological efforts, had led him to conclude that African Americans were not inextricably attached to the rural south. Instead, they were coming to Northern cities in large, numbers, with good reason, and would become a permanent fixture of these communities. Second, he represented a Progressive belief in the power of rigorous, scientific research to craft effective policy.¹⁶ In trying to form an organization to help African Americans assimilate to white, northern cities, Haynes found a partner who was on the one hand, a perfect and unsurprising accomplice, but on the other, a very complicated intellectual figure.

¹⁴ Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League, 1910-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 26.

¹⁵ Weiss, *The National Urban League*, 27.

¹⁶ Weiss, *The National Urban League*, 29-34.

Ruth Standish Baldwin was an experienced social reformer. She graduated from Smith College in 1887 and became one of the college's first female trustees, she worked as chairwoman for the NLPCW, and served as vice president on the New York Probation and Protection Association. In addition to her Progressive reform efforts, Baldwin was a labor radical who joined the Socialist Party and supported the founding of the Highlander Folk School which would rise to prominence in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁷ Despite her radicalism, Baldwin's approach to racial reform aligned very closely with that of Booker T. Washington and, along with her close associate Frances Kellor, she joined her efforts with Haynes. Together, these activists began to gather New York's prominent racial uplift organizations under one banner.

After having their program to provide urban education rejected by the CIICN, Haynes and Baldwin officially formed the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes. The new committee drew on Haynes's academic connections and Baldwin's close association with both the CIICN and NLPCW. The three groups met in April of 1911 and the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes (soon to become the NUL) officially came into existence in October of 1911.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, the first several years of the organization were defined largely by experimentation; however, the NUL immediately focused on efforts to provide industrial education to newly-arrived African Americans in northern cities. Despite the group's more moderate approach to reform, the NUL was met not only with optimism but excitement. With the

¹⁷ Weiss, *The National Urban League*, 39-40.

¹⁸ Weiss, *The National Urban League*, 41-45

formation of the Committee on Urban conditions, the NAACP's journal, *The Crisis*, announced a "new era" in the response to the experience of Black Americans in northern cities.¹⁹

In the aftermath of Springfield, both of these groups grew rapidly and in just a few years easily became the two most prominent civil rights organizations. Part of this success can be attributed to the NAACP selecting Du Bois as the head of investigation and propaganda for the nascent organization. Du Bois excelled in his new position and as chief editor he turned *The Crisis* into a focal point of discourse on race in America. While Du Bois was far from the only individual working on *The Crisis*, the publication as a whole reflected his philosophy. In the years after Springfield, Du Bois was perhaps the single most influential Black intellectual. As such, to understand the Black intellectual response to the first major race riot of the 20th-century, it is crucial to understand W.E.B. Du Bois.

To be clear, Du Bois was from from the only important, accomplished intellectual who shaped the NAACP. The aforementioned Ida B. Wells-Barnett and William Walling were both accomplished activists and thinkers in their own right. Walling, a wealthy, white socialist who cut his teeth working in Chicago's Hull House, arrived in Springfield just as the riot was ending and published his call to action less than twenty-four hours later. The historically significant names that comprised both the early NAACP and NUL are too many to give them all the attention they require in a timely manner, and they all had a hand in creating the organization as it was and as it currently is. However, despite the impressive group of intellectuals that comprised the NAACP and NUL at their creation, no individual loomed as large as Du Bois in

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 8, no. 5 (1914): 243. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr519233/>.

the years after Springfield. The NAACP would reflect Du Bois's tirelessness, his genuine brilliance as a rhetorician and thinker, and his top-down, elitist approach to uplift.

While the work of organizing the NAACP began very shortly after the Springfield Riot, the organization would not have a fully formed, outward-facing program until 1910 when the first edition of *The Crisis* was published. In the earliest statements from prominent members and the very first issue of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's philosophy for racial uplift began to take clear shape. In volume one of *The Crisis*, a brief section describes the NAACP's purpose and the work that had already been done. This section relays that the organization first met in New York City on May 31 and June 1 of 1909 and officially formed in the same place at a second conference held May 12-14 the next year. Since that second meeting, among other things, the NAACP had held "four mass meetings," published a volume of speeches, was distributing "6,000 separate pieces of literature," was conducting two investigations into "educational conditions," and three cases to "secure legal redress of grievances" were ongoing.²⁰ Clearly, the NAACP had immediately gotten to work attempting to resolve, or at least lessen, the racial tension that had produced the outburst of violence in Springfield. While the sheer volume of labor on display is worth consideration, it is perhaps more important to examine where the NAACP was directing its efforts and why.

At the annual meeting in 1911, the NAACP's chairman of the executive committee, Oswald Garrison Villard, gave an overview of the organization's work and philosophy. Interestingly, in helping to found the NAACP, Villard had continued the family business. Villard

²⁰ "The N.A.A.C.P.," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 1, no. 1 (1910): 12. <https://modjournal.org/issue/bdr507789/>.

was the grandson of famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and his mother, Fanny Garrison Villard, was a dedicated suffragist, and, along with her son, a founding member of the NAACP. A brief *New York Times* piece on Villard's presentation quotes his comments on the struggles faced by African Americans.

There can be no doubt that a wave of color hysteria is sweeping over the country. The road of the aspiring colored man or woman becomes more and more difficult; he is abused for his low associations. Let him seek to rise above them, and what happens?...he is assailed as if his presence there meant the bringing in of a taint worse than leprosy.²¹

Villard's speech was certainly inspired by the recent spasms of violence targeting African Americans in the North. He argued that Black Americans could not find peace in "New York, Seattle, Baltimore, or Richmond," places where they might move to find "good associations, pure air, and clean streets."²² In essence, Villard correctly identified that African Americans were facing persecution for attempting to live up to the standards set by their white countrymen. However, the NAACP's approach to this problem reflected the elitism that ran through much of Du Bois's thinking.

While this approach acknowledged the detrimental impact of racial discrimination, it also placed the onus on African Americans to commit to a rigorous program of self-improvement for the good of the race as a whole. This means of combatting racial inequality placed special importance on a well-educated, gainfully employed, and politically active Black middle-class

²¹ "In Defense of the Negro," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1911. <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/97204317/pageviewPDF/251E9241D52045D4PQ/3?accountid=11578>.

²² "In Defense of the Negro," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1911. <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/97204317/F47FBDBDD3E54462PQ/1?accountid=11578>.

and intelligentsia and sought to cultivate such an elite group through education and, critically, by preventing the intermingling of African Americans who were perceived as a credit to their race with those who were not.

In his book, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line*, political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. explores the intellectual origins of Du Bois and how these influences shaped Du Bois's work. Reed argues that the economic, political, and intellectual atmosphere that Du Bois was raised in irrevocably shaped his approach to academia and activism. Perhaps most importantly, Reed identifies the importance of Collectivism during the late 19th and early 20th-century. Specifically, Reed defines Collectivism as an "emphasis on expertise as a legitimate, decisive social force, notions of the impartiality and neutrality of the state and resonant assumptions of the neutral, guiding role of technology. In the collectivist outlook realization of social justice depends on neutrality and scientific impersonality as major weapons."²³ This approach that privileged scientific detachment was on full display in what is still Du Bois's most recognizable and influential work, *The Philadelphia Negro*.

In his groundbreaking 1899 study of Philadelphia's seventh ward, Du Bois examined the city's Black community and attempted to explain and propose a solution to the struggles of African Americans in Northern cities. *The Philadelphia Negro* was, and is, rightly recognized as an important, even foundational, work of early sociology. Du Bois's commitment to rigorous canvassing, documenting, and drawing conclusions based on the results of his studies still informs contemporary sociology and defied racist conceptions of the late 19th century that argued African Americans simply were not capable of living independently in a "civilized" way.

²³ Reed Jr, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 19.

Du Bois's study demonstrated that discrimination made it disproportionately difficult for African Americans to find gainful employment, buy or rent homes, secure quality education for themselves or their kids, and organize politically. However, Du Bois's study also rested on elitist, Victorian ideals about the proper way to conduct oneself and how the race could be uplifted.

While Du Bois believed that racism and past injustices greatly hindered the prospects of African Americans, he placed much of the responsibility for their present condition and advancement in the hands of Black Americans themselves. Du Bois wrote that the "Negro race has an appalling work of social reform before it" and that American "society has too many problems of its own...to shoulder all the burdens of a less advanced people."²⁴ Du Bois goes on to argue that African Americans in Philadelphia must stop crime in their communities by cultivating a culture of work, that was "continuous and intensive... [and] must be so impressed upon Negro children as the road to salvation, that a child would feel it a greater disgrace to be idle than to do the humblest labor."²⁵ He also argues that amusements such as dancing could be "rescued from its low and unhealthful associations," that the lodging of (primarily) single Black men must end, and the purchasing of homes be encouraged instead.²⁶ Du Bois concluded his examination of the "Duty of the Negroes," by saying that African Americans must remain patient and respectful towards their white countrymen and accept the slow, painful nature of social reform.²⁷

²⁴ W.E.B Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), 389.

²⁵ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 390.

²⁶ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 391-392.

²⁷ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 393.

While dismissing Du Bois's account as simply elitist would be to miss the genuinely revelatory aspects of his work within its historical context, it also does scholars no good to fall into what Adolph Reed Jr. calls radical vindicalism.²⁸ That is to say, rather than attempting to cleanse and blithely celebrate Du Bois's work, to understand Du Bois, the NAACP, and early twentieth century intellectual history, it is crucial to recognize and grapple with the elitism that permeated the work of thinkers like Washington, Du Bois, and the larger efforts for racial equality they helped create.

While Du Bois certainly encountered racism in his early life, he existed alongside and fraternized with white elites and, through a combination of intellect and hard work, achieved greater and greater academic accomplishments culminating in a Ph.D from Harvard. In his biography of Du Bois, historian David Levering Lewis makes careful note of the extent to which Du Bois sympathized with and wanted to uplift African Americans while simultaneously distancing himself from both a Black and working-class identity. Lewis concludes that Du Bois's "racial militancy would be at once driven and circumscribed by a marrow-deep elitism."²⁹ In short, for all the ways that the Du Bois and the NAACP challenged old conceptions of racial inferiority, they both inherited and often replicated racist and elitist ideals that informed their approach to addressing inequality. As the NAACP became more fully formed in the wake of the Springfield riot, they pursued racial programs largely along the lines laid out by Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro*. Armed with this intellectual framework, the NAACP and National Urban League attempted to address racial inequality through programs intended to help African

²⁸ Reed Jr, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 4.

²⁹ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 149.

Americans integrate and excel within white society. While the NAACP waged legal battles to protect African Americans' rights as citizens, its leading members believed that Black achievement would ultimately lead to racial equality. In their view, the world did not need to change so much as Black people needed to adapt to white society.

The NAACP's intellectual strengths and shortcomings, and their intimate connection to Du Bois's sociological work, were present from the first issue of *The Crisis*. In his first editorial, Du Bois excoriated some in northern states attempting to create racially segregated schools. Du Bois skillfully argued that division along any lines creates animosity and that if white Americans truly want African Americans to excel they would work to make sure children of all races had access to equal schooling. However, Du Bois couched his argument in a concern that, if Black children were not properly educated, the "deserving and rising class of colored people" would be unable to distinguish themselves.³⁰

Newspaper reporting revealed a similar tension in the early work of the NUL. In 1916, the *Cleveland Gazette* reported that in the wake of a destructive fire in Nashville, the NUL's Nashville branch worked quickly and energetically with white organizations to offer aid to Black and white families impacted by the fire. Along with the white Commercial Club, the NUL helped 361 Black families, 261 white families, and raised \$26,000 for relief efforts.³¹ This response was apparently so effective that Nashville's white and Black elites joined forces permanently to create the Public Welfare League which immediately formed committees to address delinquency,

³⁰ "The N.A.A.C.P.," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 1, no. 1 (1910): 10.

³¹ "Constructive Work Of The National Urban League," *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 12, 1916.

housing and health, and employment and relief.³² Finally, the article noted with excitement how the Public Welfare League was largely comprised of the “ablest white and colored business and professional men of Nashville.”³³ In both the NAACP and NUL’s early attempts to address racial inequality, the organizations displayed their capacity to aid Black communities and foster genuine progress as well as manifestations of the “marrow-deep elitism” that would inform all of their efforts.

It is important to note that most activists in the NAACP and NUL would not have seen their elitism and their commitment to racial equality as being at odds at all. While the two disagreed strongly, Washington and Du Bois, the two most prominent Black thinkers of the time, were steeped in the belief that a successful Black elite would uplift the whole race. This top-down approach to reform ultimately hindered both organizations’ effectiveness as they mostly failed to connect the struggles for class and racial equality. This failure was certainly exacerbated by the racism that pervaded many white labor unions, who also failed to see the importance in combining their strength with Black workers. Despite these issues, in the immediate aftermath of Springfield the NAACP and NUL enjoyed dramatic growth and generally positive reception. It seemed that they had achieved the Platonic ideal of Progressive reform. They had gathered experts who worked tirelessly and scientifically to understand and respond to social problems and it seemed that, despite the brutal violence of Springfield, there was reason to hope that future massacres could be averted.

³² “Constructive Work Of The National Urban League,” *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 12, 1916.

³³ “Constructive Work Of The National Urban League,” *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, OH), August 12, 1916.

The NAACP and NUL both grew rapidly to become the most prominent civil rights organizations of the early 20th-century. In 1916, the *Washington Bee*, covering the NAACP's annual meeting reported that the NAACP, only eight years old, had "sixty-three branches all over the country, and nearly 10,000 members, and has never been in a better position than it is now."³⁴ The NUL enjoyed similar success and became especially influential as a growing number of African Americans moved from the South to northern industrial centers seeking jobs and fleeing discrimination. The NUL's focus on urban conditions made it uniquely positioned to respond and benefit from the tensions this mass exodus created. The NUL gained recognition for its job training programs and its other various attempts to help migrating African Americans integrate to Northern society.³⁵ In a letter published in 1916, the NUL noted positively that many Black southerners were finding steady, good-paying jobs in the North; however, the "indolent, inefficient men...become a burden to the Northern communities and bring reproach and humiliation to thrifty colored citizens."³⁶ In short, both organizations sized up the landscape within which they were going to be operating and succeeded in creating organizations that addressed the concerns of African Americans, elite African Americans in particular.

While these groups were distinct, both of their programs for uplift reflected a step away from the patronage politics of Booker T. Washington, even as they unmistakably bore his intellectual legacy. While the NUL's step was much smaller and less dramatic than the NAACP's, they both identified racial discrimination as a fundamental aspect of African

³⁴ "New Direction," *The Washington Bee*, (Washington D.C.) Jan 22, 1916.

³⁵ "Helping the Unemployed," *Cleveland Gazette*, (Cleveland, OH) March 6, 1915.

³⁶ "The National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes Gives Advice Concerning the Exodus," *The Freeman*, (Indianapolis, IN): December 2, 1916.

Americans' continued, disproportionate suffering in a country committed to democracy and equality. However, neither organizations' proposed solutions could have fully addressed African Americans' concerns. In particular, working class African Americans were often seen as a means to an end rather than ends in themselves.

For example, the NUL's 1916 letter commenting on the Great Migration encouraged African Americans seeking employment to leverage their labor for better pay, working conditions, and living arrangements. However, this letter makes no mention of labor unions or collective bargaining, and argues for better working and living conditions so that their labor will be more valuable to "[their] employer and make for better feeling between the races."³⁷ Rather than education or gainful employment as a means to improve the fortunes of all African Americans, they were seen by these organizations predominantly as ways to make sure that the "indolent, inefficient" members of the race would not impede the "deserving and rising class of colored people" in their mission to uplift the race.

Though racial violence had certainly not disappeared in the years following the Springfield Race Riot (a similar massacre occurred in Slocum, Texas in 1910), the rapid growth of the NAACP and NUL seemed promising for race relations going forward. By 1916, both groups were well organized with branches all over the country and seemed to be addressing the primary causes of racial animosity to prevent further spasms of violence like what happened in Springfield. However, the underlying causes of racial tension continued to fester in the North and specifically in the Midwest. Despite the efforts of the NAACP and NUL to reduce friction, as

³⁷ "The National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes Gives Advice Concerning the Exodus," *The Freeman*, (Indianapolis, IN): December 2, 1916.

Black communities in cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit grew, white residents found their political and economic domination meaningfully challenged for the first time and resented the growing Black presence in their cities.

In the first volume of *The Crisis* published in 1916, Du Bois seemed to foreshadow an imminent eruption. In the editorial section, after his column critiquing Black audiences' conduct in theaters, he commented on the recent popularity of a certain argument that conduct, not color was what mattered. Du Bois answered: "We wish this were the truth; but it is not the truth and those who say it know that it is not the truth. Conduct counts, but color counts more. It is this that constitutes the Negro problem."³⁸ Whether Du Bois had begun to doubt the efficacy of the NAACP's program or not, he seemed to anticipate that Springfield was not the last outburst of racial violence in the North but only the opening chapter of a struggle that would require more than education reform and job training to resolve.

As the memory of Springfield receded, World War One occupied more and more space in the public consciousness, and millions of African Americans sought refuge and opportunity in the North. As more African Americans moved north, many found that, while their presence was tolerated, they were still not on equal footing with their white counterparts and newly-arrived African Americans were effectively forced into unsafe communities and low-paying employment. Many of these growing African American populations in the Midwest began to organize politically and started to challenge white hegemony. While no more major outbursts of violence had occurred, tension was growing between white northerners and the influx of

³⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Conduct not Color," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 12, no. 5 (1916): 217-218. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr510087/>.

primarily working-class African Americans from the South, and the Black middle and upper-class felt they were caught in the middle as their class and racial identities came into conflict.

While the work of the NAACP and NUL to mediate this growing tension helped create the early popularity they enjoyed as organizations, they were unable to resolve it. Their integrationist program for uplift had not anticipated, or perhaps underestimated, the hostility of white northerners to having their political and economic control threatened. As newly-arrived African Americans began to reach for levers of power, the uneasy peace that the NAACP and NUL had brokered would be shattered. In 1917, as Du Bois would write after the fact, hell would flame in East St. Louis.³⁹

³⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1920). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm>.

CHAPTER II: "THEIR OWN GLADIATORS, AND THEIR OWN WILD BEASTS"

In an article published in the July 3, 1917, edition of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, eyewitness Carlos Hurd described the violence a murderous, white mob inflicted on the African American population of East St. Louis the previous day. Hurd wrote, "It was like nothing so much as the holiday crowd, with thumbs turned down, in the Roman Coliseum, except that here the shouters were their own gladiators, and their own wild beasts."⁴⁰ Hurd's lurid descriptions aptly captured the brutal nature of the violence. In response to growing African American economic success and political power in the city, white residents of St. Louis burned and murdered their way through the Black neighborhoods of East St. Louis. To maintain white domination and "civilization," the mob's savagery handed out what they thought was justice.

On July 2, 1917, a race riot broke out in East St. Louis. As in Springfield, the riot was the culmination of political, economic, racial, and class tensions that had been simmering in St. Louis for years. However, East St. Louis had seen racially motivated violence as recently as May, and the days leading up to July 2 saw multiple acts of violence carried out against African American residents. Black residents had repeatedly been terrorized by "joyriders" who drove through Black neighborhoods shooting indiscriminately. However, the situation truly spiraled out of control in the early hours of July 2 when an armed group of Black men, enraged at the recent violence, met an unmarked police cruiser sent to investigate the reports of armed Black residents. The police claimed they were there to protect both the Black and white citizens of St. Louis;

⁴⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois and Martha Gruening, "The Massacre of East St. Louis," *The Crisis* 14, no.5, (1917): 221. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/0900-crisis-v14n05-w083.pdf>.

however, the impromptu Black militia believed the police to be “joyriders.” Enraged by the recent violence, and hoping to protect their homes and loved ones, the Black militia opened fire on the car when it began to drive towards them. One of the policemen in the car was killed and another two were wounded, but the news of whites being killed at the hands of armed, Black men would prove much more deadly.⁴¹

Historian Charles L. Lumpkins, in his book *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics*, writes, “Agitators, hearing that armed Black men had killed white police officers, had the excuse they needed to unleash a pogrom.”⁴² A white mob took to the streets and swept through the Black neighborhoods in East St. Louis, burning and killing as it went.

Attempting to describe the massacre in his 1920 book, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois wrote:

So hell flamed in East St. Louis!...when the Black men...flew to arms and shot back at the marauders, five thousand rioters arose and surged like a crested stormwave, from noonday until midnight; they killed and beat and murdered; they dashed out the brains of children and stripped off the clothes of women; they drove victims into the flames and hanged the helpless to the lighting poles.⁴³

The white mob looted, burned, and killed until July 3, when local and state police, along with the Illinois National Guard (all of whom had either participated in or done very little to stop the

⁴¹ Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 112.

⁴² Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 112.

⁴³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1920). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm>.

violence on July 2) finally acted to restore order to the city. Unsurprisingly, such a dramatic, tragic episode of violence prompted a response from local and national officials.

For example, Edward F. Mason, a white secretary of the local Central Trades and Labor Union, who wrote, “Since this influx of undesirable negroes has started no less than ten thousand have come into this locality... This is not a *protest* against the negro who has been a long resident of East St. Louis, and is a law-abiding citizen.”⁴⁴ Mason went on to say that Black citizens were being used as strikebreakers by local business owners to undercut the unions. Mason did not, however, suggest that Black workers should join the white labor unions. In their examination of the riot, Du Bois and suffragist Martha Gruening, replied that “The Central Trades and Labor Union of East St. Louis has perpetrated a grim jest. Its motto... Labor conquers everything... In East St. Louis it has conquered Liberty, Justice, Mercy, Law, and the Democracy which is a nation’s vaunt.”⁴⁵

The riot became a lightning rod for discussion beyond East St. Louis. In fact, Samuel Gompers (head of the American Federation of Labor) and Theodore Roosevelt almost came to blows over the violence. Both men were present at a ceremony at Carnegie Hall, on July 6, 1917, to welcome Russian envoys, and both denounced the riot. However, while Roosevelt called the killings “an appalling outbreak of savagery,” Gompers was less definitive in his condemnation. Gompers argued that the use of Black migrants as strikebreakers made the response from the

⁴⁴ Du Bois and Gruening, “The Massacre of East St. Louis,” 221.

⁴⁵ Du Bois and Gruening, “The Massacre of East St. Louis,” 238.

white mob understandable. Gompers's response greatly upset Roosevelt, who rose angrily from his chair to yell and shake his fist in Gompers's face.⁴⁶

The disagreement between Mason and Dubois and Gruening as well as the narrowly avoided fight between Gompers and Roosevelt illustrate the difficult landscape that civil rights organizations had to manage. Individuals like Gompers and Mason argued that when African Americans acted as strikebreakers they made violence such as this unavoidable, but many labor unions discriminated against or would not accept Black members. At the same time, employers and the federal government were indifferent at best and openly hostile at worst to African Americans. The government and employers were happy to draft Black citizens as soldiers or hire them as cheap labor but balked at the idea of protecting them from racial violence or paying them fairly.

The violence in East St. Louis represented a fundamental challenge to the work done by the NAACP and NUL. While it is unlikely that anyone thought the groups could have ended racial animosity in only a few short years, such a cataclysmic, brutal outburst of violence called into question the efficacy of their programs. Many of the greatest Black thinkers and their allies had worked for years to help African Americans integrate into white society, only to have their efforts rewarded with such a dramatic spasm of violence and destruction. Unsurprisingly, prominent Black thinkers reexamined their approach to racial uplift.

In addition, African Americans in East St. Louis had not only armed, but organized themselves in defense of their communities. Obviously, Black citizens did not do this to defy

⁴⁶ "1917 East Saint Louis, Illinois, Race Riot," *Theodore Roosevelt Center, Dickinson State University*. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Encyclopedia/Race-Ethnicity-and-Gender/East-Saint-Louis-race-riot>.

prominent Black intellectuals. Instead, Black residents organizing for their armed self-defense was a response to the everyday experiences of African Americans and signaled that Black residents knew the dilemma they faced just as well as Du Bois or any other illustrious intellectual. That dilemma, as historian Malcolm McLaughlin describes it, was that African Americans found themselves the victims of “frequent outbursts of racist violence against which the law offered no protection, and in which those charged with enforcing the law were often complicit.”⁴⁷ In essence, while the NUL placed its faith in industrial education and the NAACP in a more assertive demand for equality that nonetheless privileged upper-class Blacks as champions of their race, many African Americans decided that part of life in Northern cities was an armed, informal militia. In the purely practical action of using force to defend themselves and their neighborhoods, African Americans outside of the prominent civil rights organizations proposed a course of action that the intelligentsia would have to wrestle with.

Unsurprisingly, there was no single, uniform change that all African American thinkers underwent in the wake of the horrific violence in East St. Louis. In general, their critiques and denouncements became much more biting and reflected their growing frustration. This frustration is not surprising. After Springfield, they had worked tirelessly to help African Americans succeed without disrupting white society, only to be rewarded with a more deadly, more barbaric round of violence. The general shift towards a more assertive stance was likely equal parts a calculated political move and genuine exasperation on the part of intellectuals.

⁴⁷ Malcolm McLaughlin, “Ghetto Formation and Armed Resistance in East St. Louis, Illinois” *Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 2 (2007): 435–67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27558001>.

Specifically, two rhetorical shifts in particular gained popularity, spoke to the frustration of Black leaders, and animated civil rights organizations after the violence in East St. Louis. Namely, African American intellectuals and their allies began to call into question the validity of white civilization. If white Americans resorted to senseless racial violence, how could they claim to be civilized? In addition, a greater effort was made to examine the importance of class identity in achieving racial equality. In particular, Du Bois attacked racist labor unions while encouraging African American workers to join and support unions wherever possible. While organizations such as the NAACP and NUL did not fundamentally change their tactics after East St. Louis, the change in rhetoric was marked and consequential. With increasing frequency and asperity, thinkers such as Du Bois, Wells-Barnett, and others began to question the legitimacy of American democracy and white civilization at large while also fighting for dominance of the intellectual narrative. East St. Louis forced the NAACP and NUL to formulate new ways to defend the rights of African Americans while simultaneously defending their legitimacy to do so.

In a speech given on July 8, 1917, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican born, influential Black separatist based in New York, spoke passionately to a lively audience about the centuries of injustices against African Americans and the impossibility that whites would ever accept them as equals. Garvey readily pointed out the injustice of the massacre within the context of Black history, saying that despite all the labor Black Americans had expended in the United States, “the negro” must still be hated “for if he were not to them despised, the 900,000,000 of whites of this country would never allow such outrages as the East St. Louis massacre to perpetuate themselves

without enforcing the law which provides justice for every man be he Black or white.”⁴⁸ Garvey went on to connect the killing to its approval from the white capitalists and politicians and ultimately saw the riot as an injustice that proved the necessity for Black unification and separation from white America. Garvey invoked the generational rejection of African American equality by white Americans and insisted that Black Americans should organize and empower themselves rather than attach their hopes to white institutions.

Additionally, Garvey called on his audience to act, saying “This is no time for fine words, but a time to lift one’s voice against the savagery of a people who claim to be the dispensers of democracy...I do not know what special meaning the people who slaughtered the Negroes of East St. Louis have for democracy of which they are the custodians, but I do know that it has no literal meaning for me as used and applied by these same lawless people.”⁴⁹ Garvey also correctly predicted that the American justice system would have “no satisfaction to give 12,000,000 of her own citizens except the satisfaction of a farcical inquiry that will end where it begun [*sic*].”⁵⁰ Garvey’s prediction ultimately came true for the most part. While over 140 white East St. Louisans were indicted for inciting “strife and ill feeling,” the charges against the most prominent members of this group were dropped and Lumpkins reports that no “eminent white businessmen, managers, or politicians even faced trial.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Marcus Garvey, “Speech by Marcus Garvey,” (Harlem, July 8, 1917). <https://www.siue.edu/artsandsciences/political-science/about/iur/projects/illinoistown/marcus-garvey.shtml>.

⁴⁹ Garvey, “Speech by Marcus Garvey,” (Harlem, July 8, 1917).

⁵⁰ Garvey, “Speech by Marcus Garvey,” (Harlem, July 8, 1917).

⁵¹ Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 136.

In her book, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927*, historian Mary G. Rollinson asserts that Garvey placed primary emphasis on the development of race consciousness because he saw Blacks identifying with nations and organizations that did not recognize or value their loyalty and sacrifice. This problem was especially apparent in the post–World War I era.⁵² Garvey’s rhetoric was especially resonant in the context of World War I as African Americans felt increasingly that the promises of freedom and American democracy were not being fulfilled despite all that was being asked of them. As African Americans worked in American factories and fought and died in Europe to “make the world safe for democracy,” they were still second class citizens and vulnerable to the whims of white Americans. Garvey legitimized and empowered this anger by saying, “For three hundred years the Negroes of America have given their life blood to make the Republic the first among the nations of the world, and all along this time there has never been even one year of justice but on the contrary a continuous round of oppression.”⁵³ Garvey spoke just days after the riot and either helped to inspire or presaged the growing aggravation of Black leaders.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, famous for her rhetorical dismantling of lynching also weighed in on the East St. Louis Race Riot. Wells-Barnett was in East St. Louis on July 4 and her writings on the violence would be published in the following months. When she first arrived she spoke to an Illinois National Guard soldier who told her “The Negroes won’t let the whites alone.”⁵⁴ While the guardsman probably believed what he was saying, few things could have been farther

⁵² Mary G. Rollinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2.

⁵³ Garvey, “Speech by Marcus Garvey,” (Harlem, July 8, 1917).

⁵⁴ Walter Johnson, *Broken Heart of America*, 218.

from the truth. The guardsman was falsely labeling white aggression as Black aggression. Historian Walter Johnson describes the guardsman's assertion as "an accurate reflection of the approach to the violence taken by the Illinois National Guard."⁵⁵ Wells-Barnett dismissed the guard and entered East St. Louis to assess the situation as the rioting began to subside. In her reporting and attempts to secure redress for the victims, Wells-Barnett's skill and passion was on full display.

As part of a committee in the aftermath of the riots, Wells-Barnett helped pen letters to Republican Governor Frank Lowden of Chicago as well as the United States Congress. In its letter to Congress, the committee wrote that "Because Germany put to death American citizens upon the high seas (a reference to the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915) - fewer in number than the *mob* killed in East St. Louis - the Nation entered into a world war... Shall not the Stars and Stripes protect American citizens at home as well as upon the high seas?⁵⁶" Not only did Wells-Barnett turn American nationalism against itself in defense of Black Americans, but she also utilized language that highlighted the violence and barbarism of the white mob while implicitly connecting them to the United States' German adversary in World War I. She forced the United States to reconcile its proclaimed willingness to go overseas to hand out justice with its apparent unwillingness or inability to do so at home. The strength of her argument was only amplified by the fact that the National Guard and local police did not only fail to help Black citizens during the chaos, but in some instances worked with the mob to disarm and kill Black residents.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *Broken Heart of America*, 218.

⁵⁶ Ida B. Wells, *The East St. Louis Massacre: The Greatest Outrage of the Century* (Chicago: The Negro Fellowship Herald Press, 1917), 20. <https://www.siue.edu/artsandsciences/political-science/about/iur/projects/illinoistown/wells-ida-b-History-part-2.shtml>.

This rhetoric of white mob violence led Wells-Barnett to argue that African Americans, in contrast to the violent, wild barbarism of white Americans, needed to cooperate with one another to make sure the perpetrators were brought to justice and to avoid future violence. While Wells-Barnett and Garvey were both outraged by the violence, they placed themselves on opposite sides of an intellectual divide in the wake of East St. Louis. Wells-Barnett's writing was not as clearly marked by the elitism that animated much of the NAACP's policies, she still ultimately aligned with Du Bois and his organization. Many influential members of the NAACP and NUL continued to try and mediate the divide between Black and white Americans. East St. Louis forced these organizations to contend not only with their failure to prevent further racial violence, but also with challenges from much more radical intellectuals like Garvey.

While Garvey's Black separatism and nationalism challenged the NAACP and NUL from the right, Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the NAACP, and NUL would face scathing critique from a new journal published by Black socialists. *The Messenger*, founded in 1917 by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, offered a radical examination of race in America from the left. In their editorials, Randolph and Owen excoriated not only white mob violence and politicians who protected white supremacy, but also prominent Black leaders. In their bitter, often cathartic editorials, the pair laid out a more transformative, complete diagnosis and prognosis for racial violence in America than the NAACP or NUL were able to formulate.

In the first two issues of *The Messenger*, published in November, 1913 and January, 1914, Randolph and Owen covered a riot in Houston in which Black soldiers had clashed with white citizens. Believing that a corporal had been killed by police (it was later revealed he had

merely been beaten), and incensed by a long series of racial abuse, the Black soldiers marched into town and exchanged gunfire with white residents. The actions of the Black soldiers were met with swift, brutal justice. Unlike the white rioters in East St. Louis, many Black soldiers were sentenced to life in prison and three were executed. Randolph and Owen found it incorrigible that Black Americans in Houston had been hastily tried and executed for the same crime that white citizens and soldiers in East St. Louis had committed without consequence.

While Randolph and Owen did not condone the actions of the Black soldiers, they felt that their situation was sympathetic and their treatment in the American justice system was illustrative. First, Randolph and Owen argued that Black Americans, and Black soldiers in particular, had put up with abuse from their white countrymen admirably, but that “Negro troops are just human. Provocations with them have a limit.”⁵⁷ This argument already illustrated a clear break from the NAACP and NUL. Rather than asking Black Americans to change their behavior to protect their safety, Randolph and Owen asked how much abuse African Americans could be expected to stomach before violence was inevitable.

In addition, *The Messenger* argued that the American political and economic system could not produce freedom or equality for African Americans. They recognized, along with the NAACP and NUL, that Black workers often found themselves rejected by unions and exploited by employers. However, they extended this critique much farther than the two most prominent organizations. First, Randolph and Owen argued that the only possible answer for the discrepancy in consequences between East St. Louis and Houston was that there was “one law

⁵⁷ A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, “The Rioting of Negro Soldiers,” *The Messenger* 1, no. 11 (1917). <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1917-11-nov-Messenger.pdf>.

for the white man in this country and another for the Black man.”⁵⁸ This legal system, the pair argued, was maintained in equal measure by both democrats and republicans, both of whom had the interest of large business owners in mind and neither of which truly cared for Black or working Americans. In their 1918 issues, Randolph and Owen denounced “discredited, venal, mercenary, and ignorant Negro leaders”⁵⁹ who encouraged Black Americans to support the republican party or the war effort, and wrote that both parties were “only wings of the same foul bird—capitalism.”⁶⁰ Sooner and much more directly than any of their counterparts, Randolph and Owen connected the struggle for racial equality to the struggle for class equality.

Meanwhile, Du Bois seemed to struggle to put the riot into words that satisfied him. In the fourth chapter of his book, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, as well as the September, 1917, issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois described unsettling, firsthand accounts of the riot one after the other while wrestling with the riot’s larger implications. In *Darkwater*, Du Bois first echoed Garvey’s frustration, arguing that the long history of oppression “festered to make men think and willing to think that the venting of their unbridled anger against 12,000,000 humble, upstriving workers was a way of settling the industrial tangle of the ages.”⁶¹ Du Bois continued, “It was the logic of the broken plate, which, seared of old across its pattern, cracks never again, save along

⁵⁸ Randolph and Owen, “The Hanging of the Negro Soldiers,” *The Messenger* 2, No. 1, (1918): 7. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1918-01-jan-Messenger.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Randolph and Owen, “The Hanging of the Negro Soldiers,” *The Messenger* 2, No. 1, (1918): 13. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1918-01-jan-Messenger.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Randolph and Owen, “The Passing of the Republican Party,” *The Messenger* 2, No. 7, (1918): 8.

⁶¹ Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm#Chapter_IV.

the old destruction.”⁶² However, Du Bois ultimately fell more in line with Wells-Barnett in his belief that there was a path to equality through the institutions already in place. Or, at the very least, that working within the current political system was African American’s best hope in a moment defined by nationalism.

To this point, Du Bois wrote on the vitality and importance of Black Americans: “Their services are indispensable, their temper and character are fine, and their souls have seen a vision more beautiful than any other mass of workers. They may win back culture to the world if their strength can be used with the forces of the world that make for justice and not against the hidden hates that fight for barbarism. For fight they must and fight they will!”⁶³ While Du Bois began to adopt a more aggressive rhetorical style after East St. Louis, he did not adopt a fundamentally different intellectual position. He remained adamant that Black success and acculturation to white society would ultimately relieve racial tension.

Despite the redoubled efforts of Du Bois and Wells-Barnett, it remained unclear how the violence in East St. Louis would change the landscape of Black activism. While the NAACP and NUL remained the most influential, they were no longer completely alone on the mountaintop. In light of renewed racial violence in the North, the NAACP and NUL had to contend with new hands reaching for the levers of power. This national struggle played out on a small scale in East St. Louis in the months and years after the riot.

⁶² Du Bois, *Darkwater*. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm#Chapter_IV.

⁶³ Du Bois, *Darkwater*. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm#Chapter_IV.

In his examination of East St. Louis after the riot, Lumpkins finds that organizations like the NAACP and NUL became incredibly influential in the city while radical factions such as Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association struggled (at least in part because of suppression from the NAACP and NUL).⁶⁴ The most successful organization in East St. Louis in the years after the riot was the NAACP (an East St. Louis chapter was reformed in 1924 after closing in 1918), which Lumpkins argues represented a middle path between separatism and other radical groups and the "program of accommodation" adopted by the NUL.⁶⁵ The post-riot order of Black politics in East St. Louis foreshadowed future Black politics. Radical organizations such as the UNIA struggled to attract large followings while more moderate organizations such as the NAACP and the NUL survived the challenge posed by these organizations and thrived. Lumpkins argues that the NAACP and NUL often offered more tangible results more quickly than radical organizations could. In addition, Lumpkins finds that Black East St. Louisans were tempered but not discouraged by the riot. That is to say, they sought to find a way forward that avoided further violence but did not forsake the political connections they had already forged. In the years after the riot, Black voters in East St. Louis quickly became a crucial demographic again and retained influential allies within local government.⁶⁶

Both before and after the riot, Black women's clubs and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) were crucial in organizing and mobilizing Black voters. The NACW,

⁶⁴ Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 154-156.

⁶⁵ Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 156.

⁶⁶ Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 143-144.

led in 1917 by President Mary Talbert, was an outspoken organization that encouraged African Americans to vote strategically to capitalize on their growing political power in Northern cities. While Talbert led the organization through the riots of East St. Louis and the Red Summer, the NACW was changing. Mary McLeod Bethune, who had been climbing the organization's hierarchy since 1912, was beginning to articulate a challenge the NACW's moderate, elite-driven approach. Bethune attempted to combine the NACW's efforts to evangelize for an upper-class morality with a more materialistic understanding of the effects of racism and discrimination.⁶⁷ While Bethune did succeed in setting a new course for the NACW, it ultimately followed the larger trend of continued moderation in the wake of East St. Louis and Chicago. In 1924, Bethune was elected leader of NACW over her opponent, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, because the voting membership believed Bethune was "less confrontational."⁶⁸

The exception to this trend was *The Messenger*. While it was not connected to any specific civil rights group, it remained well read and Randolph and Owen constantly championed radical organizations such as the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). While *The Messenger* never dethroned either the NAACP or NUL, it remained a force among Black intellectuals and readers in a way that Garvey's UNIA did not. Randolph and Owen's success despite the herculean effort of publishing a journal with only two people spoke to their skill and passion. Additionally, it revealed the existence of an intellectual niche. *The Messenger* offered a publication for writers and readers who rejected both Garvey's separatism and the moderate nature of the NAACP and NUL.

⁶⁷ Joyce A. Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune & Black Women's Political Activism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 105.

⁶⁸ Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune & Black Women's Political Activism*, 106.

Du Bois often found himself at odds with Randolph and Owen and both parties used their respective publications to exchange barbs. Ironically, the NUL's lack of a permanent journal or even a true political mission seems to have offered some insulation from the critiques of Randolph and Owen. While the NUL continued its purely pragmatic program of job trainings and assimilation, *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* fought for control of Black political discourse. The most contentious point of disagreement was the First World War and African Americans' role in it.

Throughout America's involvement in the war, Du Bois argued that activism at home should be, if not suspended, at least not detrimental to the war effort. In the May, 1917 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois responded to the U.S. officially entering World War One and endorsed the popular argument of "making the world safe for democracy." "Du Bois wrote that, while war is awful, "slavery is worse; German dominion is worse; the rape of Belgium and France is worse. We [African Americans] fight shoulder to shoulder with the world to gain a world where war shall be no more."⁶⁹ Du Bois concluded his discussion of the war by saying that behind the "German mask is the grinning skeleton of the Southern slave driver."⁷⁰ While Du Bois continued to be critical of rampant racism within the United States, he also accepted the importance of fighting the war and argued that Black soldiers fighting with distinction would help make the case for racial equality.

Du Bois's stance on American entry into the war closely resembled the opinion of the famous American philosopher John Dewey. As historian Alan Cywar described, John Dewey was

⁶⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The World Last Month," *The Crisis*, May 1917, Vol. 14, No. 1 (May, 1917), 8. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr510573/#>.

⁷⁰ Du Bois, "The World Last Month," *The Crisis*, 14, no. 1 (1917): 8.

generally antiwar but believed that if American involvement was “intelligently directed it could be used to achieve worthwhile ends beyond the defeat of Germany.”⁷¹ Dewey hoped that the Wilsonian dream of a world without war could be realized once imperial Germany had been defeated. While Du Bois and Dewey both denounced war, both agreed that The Great War was a necessary evil that could produce positive change. Dewey and Du Bois’s circumstantial pacifism reflected their progressivism and their elitism in equal measure. In particular, Dewey’s belief that “intelligent direction” could produce a positive outcome spoke to the radically optimistic nature of progressivism. Through careful, scientific management of global affairs, Dewey and other progressives hoped to bring about an end to war and conflict.

Dewey and the progressives’ elitism was revealed and challenged by socialists. In his famous anti-war speech given in Canton, Ohio on June 16, 1918. Debs spoke passionately and eloquently about the nature of war. Debs articulated that war was declared by politicians and influential members of the bourgeoisie to increase their land and capital. However, it was the working-class who “furnish the corpses.”⁷² Debs’s stance on war made his opinion of the masses who would actually prosecute the war clear; additionally, it revealed the hollowness of Du Bois and Dewey’s support for the war. Du Bois and Dewey ultimately both saw the killing and dying of war as a necessary step towards a better world, but neither would go fight themselves or saw the common soldier as more than a means to an end. While Du Bois’s elitism had certainly become more subtle, it still infused his understanding of the world and how African Americans

⁷¹ Alan Cywar. “John Dewey in World War I: Patriotism and International Progressivism, *American Quarterly* Vol. 21 No. 3, (Autumn, 1969), 579.

⁷² Eugene V. Debs, “Canton, Ohio Speech,” June 16, 1918. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1918/canton.htm>

could advance in it. In stark contrast to this, Debs told the crowd gathered around him in the sweltering heat that

You need at this time especially to know that you are fit for something better than slavery and cannon fodder. You need to know that you were not created to work and produce and impoverish yourself to enrich an idle exploiter. You need to know that you have a mind to improve, a soul to develop, and a manhood to sustain.⁷³

While Du Bois and Dewey were certainly genuine in their distaste for war, Debs's socialism allowed him to engage with the plight of the worker and soldier in a way that neither of his progressive contemporaries could.

Similarly, Randolph and Owen wrote often and passionately against the war in *The Messenger*. Like Debs, they opposed the war on the grounds that it was a bourgeois exercise the proletariat would kill and die for. In their first discussion of the war, Randolph and Owen railed against the conscription of young men against their will, while war profiteers made millions. The pair reported that, in 1917, there were 7,000 new millionaires in America, many of whom had made their fortune profiting off the war.⁷⁴ While Randolph and Owen's perspective on the war was a logical, unsurprising extension of their socialism, they also took an unprecedented step and attacked Du Bois directly for his endorsement of the war.

In the July 1919 issue of *The Messenger*, Randolph and Owen took Du Bois to task for his hawkish stance on World War One and his criticism of the Socialist Party's and the IWW's

⁷³ Canton, Ohio Speech, June 16, 1918. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1918/canton.htm>

⁷⁴ A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, "Conscription," *The Messenger* 2, no. 7 (1918): 12. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1919-07-v2n07-jul-Messenger.pdf>.

anti-war stance. While the editorial, titled “The Crisis of the Crisis,” began by simply defending the Socialist Party and IWW’s methods, Randolph and Owen’s critiques became more biting as they turned to Du Bois himself. They argued that Du Bois’s urgency to defeat the Germans was curious considering the great crisis facing the United States. The pair felt that Du Bois had betrayed his position as a civil rights advocate by privileging the war effort over the rights of Black Americans. The pair wrote that, it was “only due to a sort of Negro professor’s chronic short-sightedness and usual venality which could for one moment regard the danger from the alleged German Hun as greater than that from the American Hun.”⁷⁵ The scathing attack on Du Bois concluded by arguing that he lacked intelligence, lacked courage, and that he was controlled (to his detriment) by the “Capitalist Board” of the NAACP.⁷⁶ While Du Bois did not respond to this lengthy critique directly (at least not within *The Crisis*), a brief editorial in the September, 1918 issue offered a defense of his ideas on the war which he concluded by saying “The Crisis says, *first* your country, *then* your rights.”⁷⁷ While this defense lacked Du Bois’s usual rhetorical skill, it did reflect his continued belief that Black success in and on behalf of the United States could bring about equality.

Mixed among this ongoing struggle, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia became a surprising point of convergence. Du Bois, *The Messenger*, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett all used the overthrow of the Russian Czar to hold up a mirror to the United States. While the Russian

⁷⁵ A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, “The Crisis of the Crisis,” *The Messenger* 2, no. 7 (1919): 11. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1919-07-v2n07-jul-Messenger.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Randolph and Owen, “The Crisis of the Crisis,” *The Messenger* 2, no. 7 (1919): 12.

⁷⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Our Special Grievances,” *The Crisis* 16, no. 5 (1918): 217. <https://modjournal.org/issue/bdr511442/#>.

Revolution occurred on the other side of the world, it was front and center in the minds of many Americans. For Du Bois, Randolph, and Owen, it demonstrated the possibility of radical change. For Wells-Barnett, the revolution and the Red Scare presented another opportunity to expose the hypocrisy of American society.

Du Bois expressed outright enthusiasm regarding the Bolshevik Revolution. An editorial written by Du Bois in the May 1917 of *The Crisis*, entitled “The World Last Month,” captured the incredible pace of change, writing, “Three vast events stand out: the Russian freedom, suffrage for English women, and War.”⁷⁸ On the “Russian freedom,” he wrote “I envisage the rise of Russia in one picture. Catherine Breshovsky returning from Siberia...after all seemed lost. So some day a Black woman will ride down the world crying, Disenfranchisement is done! ‘Jim-Crow’ cars are gone! Segregation is past, I am an American.”⁷⁹ While Du Bois remained impressed and optimistic regarding the Russian Revolution, his optimism and radical tendencies would be tempered by racial violence and Red Scare politics at home.

In January, 1918, Randolph and Owen penned an article titled “The Bolsheviki” in which they summarized the events of the Bolshevik Revolution and endorsed Russia’s new leaders Lenin and Trotsky. The pair celebrated that the Russian people had been liberated by radicals and clarified what the two considered a radical to be. They wrote that the Russian revolutionaries were radical not because they were unreasonable, but because they were “unwilling to take a half loaf when they are entitled to a whole loaf.”⁸⁰ The article further argued that the Russians were

⁷⁸ Du Bois, “The World Last Month,” *The Crisis*, 14, no. 1 (1917): 8.

⁷⁹ Du Bois, “The World Last Month,” *The Crisis*, 14, no. 1 (1917): 8.

⁸⁰ Randolph and Owen, “The Bolsheviki,” *The Messenger* 2, no. 1 (1918): 7.

just the first of the world's working peoples to rise up. They felt hopeful that similarly radical change could be brought to the United States.

Finally, Wells-Barnett manipulated the political tension of the Red Scare and combined it with one of her favorite rhetorical moves. Namely, she used American's feverish paranoia about communism to amplify her critiques of white civilization and democracy in a country whose Black citizens were regularly terrorized and murdered. In her response to a brutal massacre in Elaine, Arkansas in 1919 (which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter) she asked "If this is democracy, what is bolshevism?"⁸¹ Wells-Barnett had already shamed the United States for fighting abroad while so many of its citizens could not live free of racial violence. By holding up what many perceived to be the country's greatest threat against what African Americans faced everyday, she created a convincing critique of American democracy and its failure to provide for Black Americans. Wells-Barnett, accompanied by Du Bois, Randolph, Owen, and Garvey, began to question the legitimacy of American democracy in a more critical way after East St. Louis.

While Wells-Barnett deployed her own rhetoric with the most skill and nuance, she and other activists were returning to a rhetorical and discursive formula that had worked for her in the past when she had taken on lynching in the South. In her book, published in 1995, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States*, Gail Bederman argues that Wells-Barnett "brilliantly and subversively manipulated dominant middle-class ideas about race, manhood, and civilization in order to force white Americans to address lynching."

⁸¹ Ida B. Wells, *The Arkansas Race Riot*, 55. <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-gildedage%3A24320>.

Bederman continues, saying “Wells-Barnett, in short, convinced nervous white Northerners that they needed to take lynch law seriously because it imperiled both American civilization and American manhood.”⁸² While the response of white politicians and activists still lacked the urgency that many activists would have liked, Black intellectuals mounted an effective rhetorical response to the violence in East St. Louis.

Despite the illustrious list of intellectuals and the energy and skill they displayed in the aftermath of East St. Louis, the violence and destruction cast doubt on the work done by organizations and activists after the riot in Springfield. Racial tension and violence had certainly not disappeared from the United States. The South remained openly hostile to its Black residents, any peace African Americans found in the North was liable to be broken by an armed white mob, and the federal government still offered little or no protection. While the NAACP and NUL worked feverishly to protect African Americans and help them join, or at least live alongside, white society without disrupting it, many white Northerners continued to chafe as Black communities became more economic and politically powerful. The end of patronage politics had left both white and Black Americans trying to strike a new political balance.

Despite all this, the NAACP and NUL seemed to be making progress. In general, African Americans moving North found an environment that, if nothing else, was far more hospitable than the South and economic advancement was possible. In addition, there were no large, racially motivated instances of mob violence in the North between Springfield in 1908 and East St. Louis in 1917. While the brutal riot in East St. Louis proved that civil rights activists had a long fight

⁸² Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 46.

ahead of them, it did very little to dampen their spirits. Instead, their critiques and rhetorical flourishes became more cutting. Wells-Barnett questioned not only white supremacy, but white civilization. Du Bois moved further away from accommodationism in his endorsement of the Bolshevik Revolution and belief that Black workers could “win back culture to the world.” Radical organizations and publications like the UNIA and *The Messenger* found audiences and contributed to a growing discourse and anger over continued racial violence. Finally, the NUL continued to gain a reputation for using its connections to white politicians and business owners to help African Americans succeed in the North.

In short, East St. Louis jolted but did not fundamentally change the approach of organizations such as the NAACP and NUL. While radicals like Randolph, Owen, and Garvey enjoyed increased popularity, they were not able to wrest power away from groups such as the NAACP or NUL. Prominent thinkers largely redoubled their commitment to continue to work for racial equality and integration on equal terms. However, some important changes did result from the violence in East St. Louis. Civil rights activists became more assertive and critical in their rhetoric. In addition to this, a radical strain became a permanent fixture of the discourse. Wells-Barnett had long been on the edge of what other activists considered acceptable and her dismantling of American civilization and chauvinism became more widely accepted (and imitated). The appearance of *The Messenger* certainly helped to solidify this radicalism. While *The Messenger's* radical program never became fully mainstream, it remained an influential voice and forced the NAACP in particular to respond to pressure from its left.

The exception to these changes is the NUL. While they were certainly not unaware of this violence or the intellectual discourse unfolding around them, they would not regularly publish a

journal until 1923 and there is little evidence to suggest a dramatic change in their approach to racial uplift. While it seems unlikely that a “pogrom,” as Lumpkins calls it, against African Americans would not elicit a major response from a prominent civil rights organization, the foundational principles of the NUL did not lend themselves to such a reaction. While the NUL had separated from Booker T. Washington in welcoming Black northern migration, they had retained much of his platform. Specifically, the NUL maintained that respectable work and behavior, racial self-improvement, and patience were the most important ingredients for achieving racial equality.

For better or worse, the Urban League was committed to accommodation and acculturation. By helping (particularly middle and upper-class) Black Americans succeed and meet white standards of respectability, the NUL received patronage from wealthy whites and hoped to uplift the race as a whole. Illustrating this point, Eugene Kinckle Jones, a Black social worker and executive secretary of the NUL, wrote a column for November 1917 issue of *The Messenger* evangelizing a new era of Black social work. As the violence of East St. Louis loomed large, Jones extolled the NUL’s work establishing industrial and housing bureaus, as well as boys and girls clubs.⁸³ Furthermore, in 1918 the NUL’s co-founder, George Edmund Haynes, was appointed Director of Negro Economics in the Department of Labor.⁸⁴ While Haynes was certainly qualified for the job, his selection indicated the moderate, non-confrontational nature of the NUL. President Woodrow Wilson’s administration did very little for African Americans and

⁸³ Eugene Kinckle Jones, “Social Work Among Negroes,” *The Messenger* 1, no. 11 (1917): 26. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1917-11-nov-Messenger.pdf>

⁸⁴ “Prof. George Haynes Made Special Adviser,” *Savannah Tribune* (Savannah, GA), May 11, 1918.

certainly did not want a radical voice in the room. The NUL's commitment to a more apolitical program of industrial education and labor as racial uplift made Haynes a politically expedient choice.

Haynes would soon unveil a National Reconstruction Plan to help African Americans. His plan, steeped in the NUL's and Washington's approach to uplift, was thoroughly critiqued and mocked by Randolph and Owen in the issue May-June 1919 issue of *The Messenger*. In his plan, Haynes called for bettering conditions for Black sharecroppers, increased union cooperation with Black workers, better education, and spoke against the awful housing many African Americans endured. However, as Randolph and Owen pointed out, Haynes failed to understand or vocalize many of the underlying problems or possible solutions. In particular, Randolph and Owen excoriate Haynes for failing to call for an end to the crop-lien system which kept many sharecroppers hopelessly in debt, to endorse the IWW (for which they also mocked Du Bois), to recognize the role of landlords in controlling city politics and housing conditions, and his failure to present any meaningful plan to educate Black Americans.⁸⁵ While Randolph and Owen were often very harsh in their critiques of more moderate Black intellectuals, their examination of Haynes and the NUL as a whole was quite prescient. In closing, the pair wrote that "Haynes, like the government which he represents, has no reconstruction program which will really reconstruct."⁸⁶ While the various projects undertaken by the NUL doubtlessly helped ease the transition of many Black migrants into Northern cities, their program was fundamentally unable to deliver radical change in race or class inequality.

⁸⁵ A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, "George E. Haynes," *The Messenger*, (1919): 13. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1919-05-06-may-jun-Messenger.pdf>

⁸⁶ Randolph and Owen, "George E. Haynes," *The Messenger*, (1919): 13.

Unfortunately, the brutal, shocking violence of the East St. Louis riot was only the first in what would be a series of violent race riots. Through 1917 to 1919, there would be no less than ten major race riots, five of which occurred in northern cities.⁸⁷ 1919 would be the worst year of racial violence in the new century. In what would come to be known as the Red Summer, several American cities were plagued by violent attacks by white mobs against Black communities. The climax of this grotesque conflict would occur in Chicago. Mob violence overtook Chicago on July 27, 1919, and no real sense of order could be restored for a week. The Red Summer proved definitively that the NAACP and NUL had, thus far, failed in their mission. The extreme violence of 1919 forced the nation as a whole to look once more at the “Negro problem.” Once again, prominent Black thinkers were exasperated, eloquent, and ultimately ineffectual. Despite their success in ending the domination of Booker T. Washington’s conservative, patronage politics, organizations such as the NAACP and NUL were confronted once again by a brutal bout of violence. That violence, perpetrated by the white Northerners they had tried to placate and allowed by the government whose war Black Americans had just helped fight, would once again question the efficacy of these organizations and their plans for racial uplift.

⁸⁷ “Racial Violence in the United States Since 1526,” *BlackPast*. <https://www.Blackpast.org/special-features/racial-violence-united-states-1660/>.

CHAPTER III: ON THE GREAT DEEP

On July 27, 1919, 17 year-old Eugene Williams was struck with a stone while swimming in Lake Michigan. Williams, a Black child had drifted or swam across the unofficial, invisible color line that separated Black and white beachgoers. Ultimately, Williams would drown in Lake Michigan, but his murder would only be the first in an explosion of violence that was only moments away from enveloping Chicago. The stone had been thrown by a white man, George Stauber. After Williams began to drown, a nearby police officer, Daniel Callahan, not only refused to arrest Stauber, but actively prevented “expert swimmers from reaching Williams.”⁸⁸ Enraged, a mob of Black residents beat and chased Officer Callahan while a group of white beachgoers attempted to defend him. The clash began on the beaches of Lake Michigan but quickly spread through most of Chicago.

As in Springfield and East St. Louis, the Chicago Police Department proved to be at best, incapable of stopping the violence and, at worst, worked to help the white rioters. In some neighborhoods, Black Chicagoans organized in self-defense and fought back against marauding mobs. Unfortunately, many Black workers had to pass through white neighborhoods to reach their jobs in factories or domestic service. These Black citizens were the most vulnerable and most often targeted by whites hoping to mete out a perverse form of justice. The luckiest of these victims were able to escape or were only badly beaten. However, many African Americans were

⁸⁸ “Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets Keep the City in an Uproar,” *Chicago Defender*, Aug. 02, 1919. <https://www.proquest.com/hnpchicago defender1/docview/493562238/8B19CA31F6114CE8PQ/2?accountid=11578>

killed and lynched on the streets of Chicago in the hours and days after the initial brawl at the beach.

After several days of rioting, the local police and the Illinois National Guard were able to restore peace. Roughly 23 African American and 15 white Chicagoans were killed.⁸⁹ Of 520 wounded, 342 were Black and 178 were white.⁹⁰ As in East St. Louis, African Americans struggled to find any justice in the legal system. The case was almost taken on by Illinois Attorney General Edward Brundage. As Attorney General, Brundage had also been the prosecutor after the massacre in East St. Louis, where he ultimately secured convictions of fifteen African Americans and only five white men.⁹¹ Ida B. Wells-Barnett worked simultaneously to give witnesses an opportunity to come to her with their stories if they did not feel safe speaking publicly and to prevent Brundage's involvement.

While she temporarily succeeded in blocking Brundage's involvement, a grand jury mutinied after Maclay Hoyne, Cook County's attorney, only brought Black defendants before the court; ultimately, only two white Chicagoans were convicted for participation in the riot.⁹² Local leaders of the Equal Rights League (ERL), Ida B. Wells-Barnett among them, met to discuss the ongoing difficulties. Despite her protests and eventual resignation, the League adopted a motion to invite Brundage to take over the investigation. The ERL believed that, as a Republican,

⁸⁹ Carl Sandburg, "The Chicago Race Riots, July 1919," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/11045.html>

⁹⁰ Graham Romeyn Taylor and Charles Spurgeon Johnson, The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (University of Chicago Press, 1922), 35.

⁹¹ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 350.

⁹² The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 48.

Brundage would be better for Black Chicagoans than the Democrat Hoyne.⁹³ Despite their invitation, Brundage never took over the prosecution. While it is unlikely he could have been more unfair than Hoyne, Brundage's record as Attorney General suggests that African Americans could never have found full justice within the legal system after the violence in Chicago.

In the first editorial published in *The Crisis* after the violence in Chicago, Du Bois wrote, with characteristic panache,

Brothers we are on the Great Deep. We have cast off on the vast voyage which will lead to Freedom or Death...Today we raise the terrible weapon of Self-Defense. When the murderer comes, he shall not longer strike us in the back. When the armed lynchers gather, we too must gather armed. When the mob moves, we propose to meet it with bricks and clubs and guns.

While Du Bois maintained that Black Americans should not simply lash out against their white countrymen, the violence in Chicago prompted him to adopt a much more hardline stance regarding self-defense than he previously had. In East St. Louis and other similar outbursts of violence, Du Bois had looked sympathetically on Black residents who defended themselves, but he only began to advocate for formal, organized self-defense in the wake of Chicago. In addition, his rhetoric as a whole became more inflammatory and more clearly displayed his growing frustration. Du Bois concluded his discussion on Chicago by writing that if “America is to be a Land of Law, we would live humbly and peaceable in it...if it is to be a Land of Mobs and Lynchers, we might as well die today as tomorrow.”⁹⁴

⁹³ Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, 351.

⁹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Labor Omnia Vincit,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* Vol 18, no. 5 (1919), 231. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr512492/>.

While the first section of Du Bois's editorial revealed the radicalism that had begun to grow after East St. Louis, the next section revealed his growing belief in the labor movement as a means to uplift the race. In this section, titled *Labor Omnia Vincit*, Du Bois endorsed the labor theory of value and argued that African American workers needed unions. He posited that, despite work ethic and efficiency on par with every other race, African Americans were the most poorly remunerated of all laborers. Du Bois saw collective bargaining through interracial unions as a way for African American laborers to receive the full value of their labor. In addition, he wrote that American unions needed to overcome their racism and welcome their fellow Black laborers into their organizations as equals. Without racial cooperation, neither white nor Black workers would ever be able to stand up to the capital-owning class who profited off their labor.⁹⁵

While Du Bois was preparing the labor issue of *The Crisis* and writing his editorial, another Black social scientist had just accepted an important role in a prestigious, interracial committee. Created by Illinois Governor Frank Lowden the Chicago Commission on Race Relations was tasked with studying the Chicago riot and suggesting ways to avoid future violence. Once the Chicago Commission on Race Relations was formed, it selected Graham Romeyn Taylor and Charles Spurgeon Johnson as executive secretary and associate executive secretary, respectively. They were to "assume charge of the inquiries and investigations under its direction."⁹⁶ Taylor was an accomplished pastor turned social reformer and researcher who founded a settlement house in Chicago's 17th ward in 1894.⁹⁷ For his part, Johnson earned a

⁹⁵ Du Bois, "Labor Omnia Vincit," 231-232. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr512492/>.

⁹⁶ The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, XVII.

⁹⁷ "Taylor, Graham," *VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project*. <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/people/Taylor-Graham/>.

Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago in 1917. As a graduate student, Johnson was the director of research for the NUL's Chicago branch. After graduation, Johnson enlisted in the military and served in France until his return to Chicago in 1919. Barely one week after his return, the Chicago race riot began.⁹⁸

Johnson's approach to sociology reflected both his high degree of education and just how large Du Bois's *Philadelphia Negro* loomed in the world of Black social science. From 1919 to the report's publication in 1922, Taylor and Johnson worked to interview and survey Black and white residents of Chicago to understand their communities and the state of Chicago race relations. The result was an exhaustive study that attempted to parse the roles of politics, labor, capital, migration, and other factors in leading to the riot and how racial tension in the city might be relieved.

The findings of the Chicago Commission supported Du Bois's thoughts on the place of African Americans in the fight between unions and employers. Black workers in Chicago found themselves in a dangerous position. On the one hand, they were often used by "employers to undermine wage standards or break strikes." On the other, unions often refused to accept them as members and even worked to keep them out of certain jobs."⁹⁹ Despite this, the committee felt confident that greater cooperation between Black workers and unions could only benefit both parties. African American workers would no longer be caught in the middle of the fight between labor and capital and the unions would not have to worry about Black workers being used as strikebreakers.

⁹⁸ "Charles Spurgeon Johnson: 1893-1956," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* no. 47 (Spring, 2005), 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073140>.

⁹⁹ The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 647.

Furthermore, Du Bois's commendation of Black workers for their industriousness was borne out in the commission's findings. The committee found that it was disproportionately Black workers who helped meet the demands of World War One before and after America's formal entry into the war (not to mention the role of Black soldiers). In 1920, the committee found that out of 110,000 Black Chicagoans, 70,000 were "gainfully employed."¹⁰⁰ Rather bluntly, researchers working for this committee asked 137 establishments with Black workers if their "Negro labor proved satisfactory." 118 establishments, employing 21,640 African Americans, answered yes. Meanwhile, only nineteen businesses, employing only 697 Black workers, said no.¹⁰¹

With these findings in mind, it is not hard to sympathize with the growing frustration of leaders in the NAACP and NUL. In many respects, they had achieved their stated goals. The NAACP already had thousands of members nationwide, and its founding members were some of the most influential individuals in the country. Meanwhile, the National Urban League had gained renown for its work helping Black Americans find jobs in the industrial North. The committee's investigation on Chicago's Black community mentions the Chicago chapter of the NUL specifically as a "clearing-house for social work among Negroes." Through its work in "social investigations, an industrial bureau, and child welfare" the committee claimed that the Chicago Urban League had helped more than 25,000 Black Chicagoans in 1920 alone.¹⁰² In short, the NAACP and NUL had proven to be not only industrious, but by almost all metrics they

¹⁰⁰ The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 623.

¹⁰¹ The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 373.

¹⁰² The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 613.

should have been successful. The NAACP had fought against discrimination directly by organizing a nationwide association to protect African Americans and the NUL, despite its more accomadational stance, had proven effective at helping African Americans find steady employment. In these groups' perception, Black Americans had proven definitively that they were politically and economically capable and would be an asset rather than a liability to American society at large. However, the violence in the Red Summer of 1919 and continuing through 1921 proved they had overestimated their own success or the willingness of white Americans to listen.

In a section entitle "Beliefs of Whites Concerning Negroes" the Chicago committee reported that it had found a set of common, prevailing beliefs among whites in the North regarding African Americans. Specifically, they found that many white Americans believed

That the mind of the Negro is distinctly and distinctively inferior to that of the white race...That Negroes are not yet capable of exercising social restraints common to white persons; that they are unmoral as well as immoral...That Negroes possess a constitutional character weakness...That physical laws prompt whites to avoid contact with Negroes...That Negroes are highly emotional and for that reason are given to quick, uncalculated crimes of violence.¹⁰³

The irony of the last belief was probably lost on the white Chicagoans who professed such an opinion; however, it most certainly was not lost on intellectuals like Du Bois, Wells-Barnett, and Johnson. After the violence in Chicago finally ended, and Du Bois declared that African

¹⁰³ The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 631.

Americans were in the middle of a journey which would lead to freedom or death, the NAACP and NUL continued to operate with characteristic steadfastness.

However, it seemed to become increasingly clear that Black Americans were not only caught in the lurch between labor and capital. Instead, they were also the focal point of a struggle over American identity. The democratic rhetoric of the United States had come into conflict with the material reality of the country itself. Though slavery had ended, African Americans demanded not only de jure equality but also de facto. While the Jim Crow South that succeeded Reconstruction was a clear attempt to retain the class and racial hierarchy of the region's antebellum glory days, the North had seemingly offered a place where African Americans could live relatively free and find economic opportunity. Tragically, many migrating Black Americans found that racial boundaries in the North were, if less formal, just as jealously guarded as those in the South. As African Americans attempted to establish new communities, find work, and become politically active, they found themselves repeatedly, violently rejected by white Americans of all classes. Middle- and upper-class whites exploited the cheap, desperate labor that many newly-arrived African Americans offered. Meanwhile working-class whites resented having their wages undercut and their strikes broken, but racial animus often prohibited the logical step of enthusiastically accepting Black workers into their unions. It was this dilemma that prompted Du Bois, Wells-Barnett, and thinkers like them to endorse armed, organized self-defense for African Americans and continue to question the legitimacy of American society and democracy.

The more aggressive stance that the NAACP adopted after the violence in Chicago was evident from the very first page of *The Crisis* that addressed the riot. Preceding Du Bois's

editorial was the call for new members. While this page always used current events in an attempt to convert outrage or enthusiasm into new members, this issue of *The Crisis* declared that readers could help “end the farce masquerading as democracy by joining the association which is fighting to end discrimination because of race—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.”¹⁰⁴ In their coverage of later racial violence, Du Bois continued to become more radical and Wells-Barnett (working primarily with the NACW) displayed the rhetorical skill and radicalism that got her branded as a “race agitator” by the government during the First World War.

In 1919, the Irish-American John Shillady, executive secretary of the NAACP, was beaten by a small mob that included members of local law enforcement while attempting to recruit new members in Austin, Texas. In response to this, Du Bois began an essay in *The Crisis* with a joke. He wrote about a man once said “if he owned Hell and Texas, he would prefer to rent out Texas and live in Hell. He may have exaggerated, but he had some supporting facts.”¹⁰⁵ While Du Bois made light of the situation, his response was biting and encapsulated the ideological thrust of the NAACP and the politics of Black equality after East St. Louis.

In reference to Shillady’s mission, Du Bois wrote “Is this revolution? Is this ‘stirring up trouble?’ It is—in Texas.”¹⁰⁶ Du Bois, went on to mention the pride that the attackers took in their “lawlessness” before concluding “This is the answer of the Coward and the Brute to Reason

¹⁰⁴ *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 18, no. 5 (1919): 1.

¹⁰⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Shillady and Texas,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 18, no. 6 (1919), 283. <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr512545/>. This joke supposedly originated with Union General Philip Sheridan; however, if Du Bois knew this he did not mention it.

¹⁰⁶ Du Bois, “Shillady and Texas,” 284.

and Prayer. This is the thing that America must conquer before it is civilized, and as long as Texas is this kind of Hell, civilization in America is impossible.”¹⁰⁷ Du Bois’s and White’s articles reveal the new modus operandi of the NAACP, as well as the rhetorical tools being used, White identified the failure of white and Black workers to cooperate (based on a healthy distrust on the part of Black laborers), which the NAACP was attempting to rectify, and Du Bois connected the barbarism of the white attackers to a lack of civilization. Wells-Barnett’s arguments against lynching and her writings on the East St. Louis Race Riot were very clearly informing Du Bois, who replicated her attacks on lynching by arguing that no civilized people would act in this violent manner.

In fact, Wells-Barnett employed similar language again in response to a racially-motivated massacre in Arkansas in 1919. In this instance, Wells-Barnett centered her argument around contrasting the response to a white-led strike and a Black-led strike. She pointed out that in response to the nationwide United Mine Workers Coal Strike in 1919, the government ultimately relented and the strikers walked away victorious. However, in the case of Black farmers organizing in Arkansas under the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, the response was not only deadly, but made use of the legal system to punish the Black workers.¹⁰⁸ Wells-Barnett wrote that the African American farmers’ attempt to organize was thwarted by a scheme created by white landowners that “put to death by lynch law scores of colored farmers and then prostituted the process of courts to their purpose, sent seventy-five working men to the

¹⁰⁷ Du Bois, “Shillady and Texas,” 284.

¹⁰⁸ Ida B. Wells, *The Elaine Riot*, <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-gildedage%3A24320>.

penitentiary for long terms of imprisonment, and doomed twelve to die in the electric chair.”¹⁰⁹

Wells-Barnett went on to say that “to contrast the result of the plea of the miners for better wages, with the results of the plea of the Arkansas colored farmers for identically the same thing, is to disclose to thinking people a phase of democracy not safe for the world or any part of it.”¹¹⁰ Much in the same way that Wells-Barnett condemned not only the savagery of the white rioters, but also the perversion of the American legal system to insulate them from consequences in the East St. Louis Riots, she demonstrated the hypocrisy of the American claims of civilization and “making the world safe for democracy” when American democracy actively protected citizens who participated in extra-judicial violence.

Finally, Wells-Barnett further lambasted an American democracy in the grip of the first red scare, writing “More than a hundred were killed by white mobs, for which not one white man has been arrested; seventy-five men are serving life sentences in the penitentiary, and twelve men are sentenced to die. If this is democracy, what is bolshevism?”¹¹¹ She employed a familiar rhetorical style by exposing the hypocrisy of a whiteness that extolled the virtues of Victorian manhood while simultaneously participating in fits of brutal racial violence that displayed an ignorance to the class origins of shared exploitation with African Americans. Furthermore, she extended that critique into an attack on the civilization created by white supremacy that claimed it was bringing peace and democracy while failing to keep its own citizens safe if they were not white.

¹⁰⁹ Wells, *Elaine Riot*, 55.

¹¹⁰ Wells, *Elaine Riot*, 52.

¹¹¹ Wells, *Elaine Riot*, 55.

In fact, the massacre in Elaine, Arkansas would prove to be an informative vignette of how the NAACP had changed in light of racial violence since Springfield in 1908 and how it remained intellectually married to its founding principles. One of the leaders of the farmers' union, Robert Lee Hill, had managed to escape the violence in Arkansas and ultimately flee to Kansas. However, on his arrival in Topeka he was arrested by the local police, who had been tipped off, and spent months in jail, expecting to be extradited back to Arkansas. If not for the involvement of the NAACP, Hill almost certainly would have been extradited to Arkansas and faced a wholly unfair trial. However, lawyers working for the NAACP were able to prevent Hill's extradition and local members found him employment in Topeka, where Hill lived the rest of his life in peace.¹¹²

While Du Bois and other members of the NAACP likely would have always sympathized with Hill and the union he helped to organize, it's unlikely that the organization would have taken on a lengthy, expensive court case to protect an Arkansas sharecropper had this incident occurred in 1909. More concretely, the organization now boasted 90,000 dues-paying members and 325 different branches.¹¹³ The NAACP had more reach, influence, and funds than the founding members could have imagined when they first met in 1909. Along with the NUL, who had remained more conservative, the NAACP was the most visible and capable mechanism that African Americans could turn to for defense.

¹¹² "The Hill Extradition Case," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 20, no. 4 (1920), 179-180. <https://modjournal.org/issue/bdr513155/#>. and "Robert Lee Hill (1892?-1963)," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/robert-lee-hill-3026/>.

¹¹³ "Why a Branch of the N.A.A.C.P. in Your Community," *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 20, no. 4 (1920). <https://modjournal.org/issue/bdr513155/#>.

Bearing all of these changes in mind, the response to the Hill extradition case also highlights how the NAACP had remained quite close to its founding principles. While the group's rhetoric had certainly grown more assertive over the years and its elitism had begun to be replaced by a combination of class and race solidarity, the organization was still fundamentally committed to using the legal and electoral system to promote change. In later years and decades, the NAACP would become famous for its legal efforts to represent and defend African Americans who were often on trial simply for defending themselves. In addition, Du Bois grew more radical throughout his life and work, and this change is evident in his work with the NAACP. However, he never fully gave up on the elitism that motivated so much of his work. While the NAACP's moderate approach, which Du Bois helped champion, undeniably helped many African Americans in the early twentieth century, it remained mired in elitism.

This elitism was reflected even more in the intellectual development of the NUL. After he completed his work with the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Charles Johnson renewed his work with the NUL. He moved to New York and, in 1923 helped start the NUL's equivalent to *The Crisis*. The NUL's publication, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, gained renown not only for its coverage of events of special interest to African Americans but also for Johnson's efforts to recognize talented African American artists and intellectuals with annual awards.¹¹⁴

Johnson's work on the Chicago Commission had doubtlessly taken cues from Du Bois's work as a sociologist in *The Philadelphia Negro* and his work as editor of *Opportunity* was no different. The NUL's journal closely mirrored *The Crisis* in its material and presentation. Johnson and other prominent members penned editorials and articles explaining the NUL's

¹¹⁴ "Charles Spurgeon Johnson: 1893-1956," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 1.

mission and responding to recent events. Additionally, the NUL's journal put the organization's elitist, top-down approach to uplift on full display.

In the first edition of *Opportunity*, the NUL's executive secretary, Eugene Kinckle Jones, wrote an article called "Co-Operation and Opportunity" in which he explained the NUL's modus operandi and the organization's importance. In this article, Jones wrote that the Urban League intended to aid African Americans' transition to industrial society so that "more Negroes of capacity and talent" could emerge from the mass of their fellows of less promise."¹¹⁵ Jones and the Urban League as a whole felt that African Americans must undergo a racialized program of self-improvement so that an exceptional upper-class could champion the race. This position is difficult to differentiate from the NUL's early efforts or the early writings of Du Bois. While this lack of evolution helped to illustrate the elitism that abounded in both the NAACP and NUL, it also highlighted the extent to which Du Bois and the NAACP adapted and responded to racial violence in Springfield, East St. Louis, and Chicago in a way the NUL had not. If the NAACP had adapted without fundamentally changing, the NUL had not adapted in any major way.

The Messenger remained similarly unflinching. As Randolph and Owen had advocated for a fair trial for the Black soldiers involved in the Houston Mutiny, they urged the NAACP and NUL to ensure that Black Chicagoans who had defended themselves, or even participated in the rioting, received a fair trial.¹¹⁶ The pair continued to harangue Du Bois and the Republican and Democratic parties while wholeheartedly endorsing the Socialist Party. While they continued to

¹¹⁵ Eugene Kinckle Jones, "Co-Operation and Opportunity," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* 1, no. 1 (1923): 4.

¹¹⁶ A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, "If We Must Die," *The Messenger* 2, no. 9 (1919), 4. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/1919-09-v2n09-sep-Messenger.pdf>.

lead the field in recognizing the importance of working-class solidarity between white and Black workers, this was not a new development for *The Messenger*.

The most striking change in the immediate aftermath of Chicago, with regards to Randolph and Owen, was their adoption and interpretation of the term “New Negro.” In the September, 1919 issue of *The Messenger*, Randolph and Owen began with an editorial entitled “If We Must Die.” In this piece, the two eagerly endorsed armed self-defense, writing that Black Americans were no longer defenseless but would instead fight back against racial violence. According to Randolph and Owen, the “New Negroes” were willing to fight and if “they must die they are determined that they shall not travel through the valley of the shadow of death alone, but that some of their oppressors shall be their companions.”¹¹⁷ As usual, Randolph and Owen provided a unique rhetorical flourish; however, their articulation of the term “New Negro” was part of an ongoing intellectual shift that went beyond the confines of the old guard of the Black intelligentsia.

While the term and idea of a “New Negro” predated the Harlem Renaissance, the term was popularized and best embodied by the explosion of Black art and culture that occurred in the 1920s. Centered in the village of Harlem and facilitated by the Northern migration of tens of thousands of Black Americans, the Harlem Renaissance was the culmination of many distinct strands of intellectual discourse and the everyday reality of racism African Americans faced. According to Randolph and Owen, the “New Negro” was a reaction to the futility of the First World War. As they saw it, Black soldiers who had gone overseas to fight and die for their country were no longer going to so easily accept Jim Crow rule in the South or the race riots that

¹¹⁷ Randolph and Owen, “If We Must Die,” *The Messenger*, 4.

plagued the North. On the other hand, the Harlem Renaissance seemed to embody much of what the NAACP and NUL had been building towards. Nestled in Harlem, representatives of a new Black middle-class could think, create, and “win back culture for the world” as Du Bois had said.

In *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, published in 1925 the Black philosopher Alain Locke gathered the works of many Black intellectuals and artists into a collection that sought to demonstrate the marked change that had occurred in Black Americans over the early part of the century. Locke believed that this group of exemplary African Americans showed that there had been a “Coming of Age” among the race.¹¹⁸ In the foreword he wrote for the collection, Locke celebrated the explosion of Black art and thought and argued that African Americans had progressed from a “cultural adolescence” and that no one could deny their intellectual capacity in the face of these achievements. The collection that Locke assembled featured contributions from Du Bois and Charles Johnson as well as newer figures such as E. Franklin Frazier, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. Despite the injection of new writers, Locke’s collection primarily served as a victory lap for Black intellectual elites.

In many ways, Locke and others were right to be excited about the cultural, intellectual, and artistic community in Harlem. Pieces of academic thought, music, poetry, and fiction that came out of the Harlem Renaissance found recognition in their time and continue to be culturally and historically relevant. The Harlem Renaissance represented one of the earliest and most successful attempts to highlight and celebrate the achievement of Black thinkers and artists. It was surely reaffirming for many to see the work of the NAACP and NUL culminate in a

¹¹⁸ Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, inc., 1925), 16.

flourishing of Black art and the formation of an elite, successful Black middle class. In his contribution to the collection, E. Franklin Frazier argued as much. He wrote that “No longer can men say that the Negro is lazy and shiftless and a consumer. He has gone to work. He is a producer. He is respectable. He has a middle class.”¹¹⁹

For all intents and purposes, it seemed that the NAACP and NUL had successfully navigated the turbulent 1910s, helped integrate African Americans into Northern cities, and establish a Black elite that could represent the race positively on the national level. Racial violence had dissipated greatly from the disastrous Red Summer that centered around Chicago. Combined with years of work by prominent civil rights leaders and organizations, the horrible violence in Chicago sparked renewed attention in resolving racial tension. The NAACP and NUL enjoyed large, engaged memberships and national recognition. In Congress, Progressive Republican Leonidas C. Dyer introduced the country’s first anti-lynching legislation in 1918.

On the other hand, these victories were tempered at every step. While the Red Summer remained a catastrophic low for race relations, African American communities continued to suffer from lynching and mob violence through the 1920s. Most famously, the neighborhood known as “Black wall street” was torched by a white mob in Tulsa in 1921. Dyer’s anti-lynching bill was struck down repeatedly by southern democrats despite broad support.¹²⁰ While lynching and mob violence declined precipitously through the 1920s, it is unlikely that the Harlem Renaissance produced such a change.

¹¹⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, “Durham: The Capital of the Black Middle Class,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, inc., 1925), 333.

¹²⁰ “Political Effect of the Dyer Bill,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1922. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1922/07/09/107065716.pdf>

In a short article in the October, 1924 *Messenger*, Jamaican-American writer J.A. Rogers wrote in response to Dr. Robert Moton of Tuskegee University, who argued that the decline in lynchings was the result of a stronger public sentiment against lynching and an increase in positive contact between the races. Rogers wrote that this conclusion was typical of a “type of Negro leader, who is always willing to say the polite, rather than the true, thing order that thrift may follow fawning.”¹²¹ Rogers argued instead that the flight of many Black workers from the South had shifted race relations in both the South and the North. In addition, Rogers thought it was also crucial that Black residents, often led by Black veterans, had grown increasingly likely to shoot back at roving mobs.¹²²

Rogers’s account was based in a more grounded, materialistic approach to change than Moton’s appeal to a nebulous feeling of racial amicability engendered by Black success. As Rogers astutely observed, the “migration is hitting the South in its pocketbook, and when you hit anyone there you go further toward humanizing him and making him a likable fellow than all the sermons preached since creation.”¹²³ In his response to Moton, Rogers rearticulated one of *The Messenger’s* most salient points: that relief from racism and poverty for Black workers was tied inextricably to their economic fortunes. As such, the way to equality did not lie in an elitist vision of an exceptional Black upper-class, but in a vision of inter-racial working-class solidarity.

¹²¹ J.A. Rogers, “Critical Excursions and Reflections,” *The Messenger* 6, no. 10 (1924), 329. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/messenger/v6n10-oct-1924-Messenger-riaz-toon-pgs-added.pdf>.

¹²² Rogers, “Critical Excursions and Reflections,” 329.

¹²³ Rogers, “Critical Excursions and Reflections,” 329.

While *The Messenger* often proved convincing in their critiques of the NAACP and the NUL, it was not Randolph and Owen's vision for uplift that ultimately dominated the intellectual landscape after the Red Summer. Instead, the NAACP and NUL's top-down approach had the largest hand in shaping American race relations as the country entered the new century's second decade. Frazier's declaration that the Black American had a middle-class was, and is, undeniably true. However, the extent to which that middle-class has, or desires to, represent and identify with working-class African Americans is a different matter entirely. While activists such as Wells-Barnett, Randolph, and Owen tried to imagine a radically different future for Black Americans, figures such as Du Bois, Charles Johnson, George Haynes, and the organizations they represented were the most successful in shaping the future. Chicago, as Springfield and East St. Louis had, forced African American thinkers to try and navigate an impossible political and social context. In many ways, Black intellectuals succeeded at moving racial uplift beyond the overbearing influence of Booker T. Washington. In other ways, the most prominent and influential thinkers of the time were products and prisoners of their time and place.

CONCLUSION: “A WORLD OF MAKE BELIEVE”

In 1957, E. Franklin Frazier, now a well-respected and accomplished sociologist, would again examine the Black middle-class. In *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class*, Frazier looked back on the emergence of a Black elite. Frazier first argued that Booker T. Washington’s politics of accommodation and segregation had been challenged and ultimately supplanted by the group of Black intellectuals led by Du Bois. This group of intellectuals and the mass migration of Black workers to the North created the conditions for a large, Black middle-class to form. The North, though not perfect, and the civil rights organizations established there offered a real chance for African Americans to escape the crushing economic and social discrimination they faced in the South.¹²⁴

Franklin’s later view of the Black bourgeoisie contrasted sharply with his writings during the Harlem Renaissance. Rather than a group that proved the respectability and capability of Black Americans, Frazier found that the Black bourgeoisie rejected the mass of working-class African Americans they were intended to represent and were scorned by the white elites they had attempted to imitate. In addition, Frazier argued that this Black middle-class, to justify its existence, lived in a “world of make-believe.”¹²⁵ This world of make-believe was centered around the myth that Black business offered a solution to the economic and social troubles of African Americans.

Finally, Frazier bemoaned the fixation on society and socialites. He found that the Black elites and Black newspapers perpetuated a focus on the lives of socialites that only served to

¹²⁴ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class*, (New York: The Free Press, 1957), 18-19.

¹²⁵ Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 25.

distract from the material concerns of Black people. In Frazier's view, this fixation was a "phase of the world of make-believe which represents in an acute form the Negro's long preoccupation with 'social life' as an escape from his subordinate status in America."¹²⁶ Without mentioning the organizations specifically, Frazier's stance on the Black elite revealed his dissatisfaction with the results of the approach to uplift championed by the NAACP and NUL. Perhaps most damning, Frazier found that the Black middle-class did almost nothing for the working masses of Black Americans. He found that the Black bourgeoisie was only interested in justifying their own position of class privilege and were just as ruthless in their exploitation of Black workers as any white employer.¹²⁷

In short, Frazier's optimism regarding the Black middle-class had completely faded in the decades since the Harlem Renaissance. For the Black working-class, the Black bourgeoisie was functionally no different from their white counterparts. Meanwhile, the Black bourgeoisie still found themselves being held at arm's length by upper-class whites. While the intellectual vanguard led by Du Bois had succeeded in establishing a Black middle-class, the following decades had revealed the inherent limitations of such a vision of racial uplift.

In the years and decades after the Red Summer, the Black middle-class found themselves at the crossroads of race and class in American society. Intellectuals like Du Bois had hoped that it could bridge the social and economic disparity faced by African Americans; in reality, the Black middle-class was left completely adrift and ineffectual. Rejected by both upper-class whites and working-class African Americans, the Black middle-class remained fruitlessly

¹²⁶ Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 25.

¹²⁷ Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 236.

obsessed with status and appearance. While Frazier was correct that Du Bois and others had helped to progress civil rights activism away from Washington, the fate of the Black elite demonstrated the influence of Washington's politics on the NAACP and NUL. Despite the many ways in which they helped African Americans and advanced racial equality, the programs for uplift that enjoyed popularity during the early 20th-century were still strongly rooted in the politics of respectability that Booker T. Washington championed after the Civil War.

Though the time of Washington, Du Bois, and the organizations they inspired and led is gone, the overbearing influence of their ideas remains. In a 2014 article for *Dissent Magazine*, political scientist Frederick C. Harris argues that respectability politics had found new life during Barack Obama's presidency. During Obama's administration, a particular kind of uplift that focused on "transforming individuals rather than transforming communities" enjoyed increasing popularity.¹²⁸ This rise was illustrated by a MSNBC special called "Advancing the Dream." This special was intended to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The special featured prominent Black businesspeople and athletes sharing "up-from-the-ghetto stories" in which they stressed the positive choices they had made as individuals and demonized the disreputable behavior of many African Americans who did not enjoy their level of success.¹²⁹ In these stories of success, it was almost always the individual's determination and exceptionality that was privileged rather than the economic and social realities that had enabled or hindered their efforts.

¹²⁸ Frederick C. Harris, "The Rise of Respectability Politics," *Dissent*, Winter 2014, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-rise-of-respectability-politics>.

¹²⁹ Harris, "The Rise of Respectability Politics."

In a similar vein, sociologist Zine Magubane has been critical of recent intellectual attempts to understand the persistence of inequality in the United States. In an article for *NonSite*, Magubane examines how contemporary intellectuals have understood race and, in her estimation, how they have failed to understand class. In more recent scholarly attempts to explain race inequality (such as Critical Race Theory), Magubane finds that a “class blindness” permeates many scholars’ efforts to explain and address racism in American history.¹³⁰ This criticism is typified in intellectuals such as Ibram X. Kendi. Kendi’s view of history as the contest between “the undeniable history of antiracist progress” and “the undeniable history of racist progress.”¹³¹ In historical frames posed by scholars like Kendi, Magubane correctly identifies an almost universal failure to employ any kind of class analysis or understanding of political economy through American history. Instead, historical actors and movements are seen as simply racist or antiracist, very little care is given to the multiple racial, ethnic, and gender identities found within class-based movements, and racial groups are often treated as hiveminds of opinions and interests.

The persistence of this approach to uplift is troubling. The limitations of this kind of racial politics were recognized by Randolph and Owen in the 1910s, Frazier retracted his endorsement for this top-down approach in the 1950s, and scholars today continue to carefully and accurately demonstrate the limitations of this approach. However, American class and racial politics are still in the shadow of Booker T. Washington. While Du Bois and company ended the

¹³⁰ Zine Magubane, “Contemporary Race Theory and the Problem of History: A Critique, May 11, 2022, <https://nonsite.org/contemporary-race-theory-and-the-problem-of-history-a-critique/#>.

¹³¹ Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be an Anti-Racist* (New York: One World Press, 2019), 33.

total deference that Washington extended to white society, they largely failed to see the inherent limitations of organizing primarily along racial lines and privileging the creation of a Black elite.

To be clear, the racial uplift that was popular during the early 20th-century was a product of the larger political environment and Black thinkers were certainly not a monolith. First, as evidenced by the race riots examined in this study, African Americans occupied a tenuous and lethally dangerous economic and social position. Many of the labor unions that should have been critical vehicles for class solidarity rejected Black workers in an expression of racial solidarity. In addition, many white employers were, at worst, racist and, at best, more than willing to use Black workers as strikebreakers and foment racial strife to keep wages low. Second, thinkers such as Randolph and Owen saw very early on the importance of class struggle to ending racism. The pair was unyielding in their criticism of Du Bois and their assertion that capitalism was the ultimate source of many of the problems facing African Americans. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was another individual who saw, more clearly than most, the connection between race, class, and gender as well as how these connections impacted African Americans. Throughout her lifelong fight against racial violence, Wells-Barnett exposed the hypocrisy of white supremacy and recognized that respectability would not protect, working-class African Americans in Chicago or poor Black farmers in Arkansas.

Despite the presence and importance of alternative voices, it is impossible to avoid the influence of the NAACP and NUL during the early 20th-century or now. While these organizations deserve recognition and analysis for ushering in a new era of civil rights action and discourse, it is crucial that scholars and activists recognize the limited scope of their efforts for racial uplift. The NUL's influence and importance were simultaneously more obvious and less

apparent than the NAACP's. While the group was not nearly as central to the development of a racial discourse as Du Bois and *The Crisis*, its program for relief and uplift was unambiguously pragmatic, elitist, and inspired by Booker T. Washington.

Industrial education and assimilation into majority-white cities certainly helped ease the transition of many Black migrants into unfamiliar and often unfriendly urban environments. However, the early NUL never saw Black workers as much more than a means to an end. The Black middle-class that the NUL hoped to create needed to be nurtured and insulated from the negative influence of the "less capable" members of their race. In hindsight, it is perhaps obvious that creating a small, insulated group that does not share material interests with the group they are supposed to represent may not be an effective plan for dramatic change. However, the NUL did not have the power of hindsight and was in fact highly illustrative of the context of its creation. The NUL was formed by an interracial group of elite intellectuals who largely accepted the arguments of Booker T. Washington. In addition, the Progressive Era was defined in large part by the formation of associations of elite intellectuals dedicated to researching and solving problems. The founders of the NUL were limited in their ambitions by their experiences and the larger political context they had to navigate.

Much the same can be said for the NAACP. While Du Bois and *The Crisis* were at the head of a much more aggressive rhetoric, the organization was heavily influenced by Du Bois's articulation of the talented tenth and its role in representing the race positively. While the NAACP as a whole cannot be reduced down to Du Bois, or vice versa, the two are inextricably linked and Du Bois's position as editor gave him final control over the organization's public statements. While Du Bois would continue to evolve as a thinker and would ultimately leave the

NAACP, his influence on its early years is difficult to overstate. While historians often put him in contention with Booker T. Washington, Du Bois's work with the NAACP revealed the close ideological relationship between the two and just how deeply elitism and accommodation permeated the struggle for equality during the early 1900s.

In his examination of "Advancing the Dream," Harris writes that "The problem is not that the stories told by Black elites are a source of inspiration, but the political handiwork these narratives do for neoliberalism."¹³² As Harris points out, methods of uplift that place the onus on the individual rather than the larger economic and political systems at play discourage those who have been disadvantaged from demanding change. Individual excellence and achievement is not and cannot be a viable program for dramatic change. As Frazier realized after his disillusionment with the Black middle-class, a rising tide does not lift all boats. The creation of a Black middle-class did little to prevent racial violence in the North or the South and it likely did even less to meaningfully change the fate of working-class African Americans. As these Black elites gained entrance to a new class identity, they overwhelmingly aligned themselves with their class interests and any efforts to help less fortunate Black Americans were highly paternalistic. On that hot day in Canton, Ohio in 1917, Eugene Debs also spoke about the role of intellectuals in a revolution. While Debs was not speaking to or about the contemporary civil rights movement, his criticisms apply to it almost seamlessly. Specifically, Debs spoke at length about his mistrust of so-called intellectuals who wanted to steer the masses in one way or another. Debs said that he was "always amused in the discussion of the 'intellectual' ... What would become of the sheep if they had no shepherd to lead them out of the wilderness into the land of milk and honey? Oh,

¹³² Harris, "The Rise of Respectability Politics."

yes, ‘I am your shepherd and ye are my mutton.’”¹³³ In another unintentional but poetic moment, Debs decried leaders and politicians who claimed that they had “risen from the ranks.” Instead, Debs declared proudly, “When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks.”¹³⁴ Much like Randolph and Owen, Debs was prescient in his call for a more radical, bottom-up movement for equality, but ultimately failed to unseat the conventional wisdom of the day.

As wealth inequality and racial tensions continue to grow in the United States, it is crucial that scholars understand prior movements for racial equality. How those movements changed the course of history and how they were limited by their historical context. The work of imagining a new world is difficult and slippery. Earlier movements and the leaders who defined them offer crucial insight into our contemporary moment, where we may be going, and how positive change can be created. The movement for racial uplift during the early 20th-century is one such movement that is simultaneously foundational to American racial politics and yet not fully understood by scholars of American history.

By examining prominent intellectuals and the organizations they participated in as well as their response to crises such as the three race riots examined in this study, an almost paradoxical reality becomes apparent. On the one hand, the NAACP and NUL were seemingly successful in creating a Black elite. While Black economic fortunes did generally improve, especially in the North, the cultural and artistic creation of the Harlem Renaissance was the culmination of their efforts to create class of elites who could positively represent the race as a whole. The Black middle-class became a real group that jealously guarded what they saw as a place of honor

¹³³ Debs, “Canton, Ohio Speech,” June 16, 1918.

¹³⁴ Debs, “Canton, Ohio Speech,” June 16, 1918.

among African Americans. Additionally, the Harlem Renaissance was and is a historically meaningful growth of art and thought produced by Black creators. As Frazier wrote at the time, despite everything, Black Americans had their middle-class.

On the other hand, the role of that middle-class in preventing further racial violence is questionable and its hand in improving the economic and social status of African Americans is negligible. It is undeniable that the Red Summer was a low point for America after the Civil War. While racial violence has certainly not disappeared, only a few moments in the country's history compare with the years between East St. Louis in 1917 and the Red Summer in 1919. The timing of this decline in violence suggests a charitable interpretation of events in which the emergence of a Black middle-class eases racial tension. However, such an interpretation is incongruous with what caused the explosions of mob violence examined in these case studies. While racism was *certainly* a factor in causing racial violence, racism alone was normally insufficient to cause mobs to rampage through Northern cities. Instead, racism was often paired with what white Americans perceived as a threat either to their economic dominance or their manhood. As more and more African Americans moved North, the economic and political balance of Northern cities necessarily changed. In addition, the often-invented stories of Black men sexually harassing white women challenged the manhood of white men and, as Wells-Barnett pointed out, this often motivated them sufficiently to lash out against Black communities.

Leaving aside their role, or lack thereof, in lessening racial violence, it is more easily demonstrated that the Black middle-class has not offered transformative aid to working-class African Americans. A number of moments in American history reveal this reality but two particularly stark examples would be the Great Depression and deindustrialization. While few

Americans survived the Great Depression unaffected, working-class African Americans were hit disproportionately hard. As the job market constricted, the industrial jobs that African American men had found in Northern cities paid less or were no longer available. Additionally, when President Franklin Roosevelt began the New Deal, it was African Americans who stood to benefit most from government intervention on behalf of workers.

Decades later, the deindustrialization of American urban centers has negatively impacted African Americans disproportionately. As manufacturing jobs disappeared from the United States, many Black Americans have found themselves essentially trapped in economically destitute inner-cities. In the inverse of the New Deal, continued economic deregulation and destruction of social safety nets by neoliberal policy makers have further destroyed the financial viability of working-class Americans of all races and ethnicities, with African Americans suffering the most. In neither of these cases did the existence of a Black middle-class do much, if anything for working-class African Americans. While working-class African Americans struggled to hold on to the economic progress they had made in the 20th-century, the Black elite was in a “world of make believe.”

That world of make believe and its politics of respectability still persist today and have coupled with contemporary theories on race to create an environment within which it is difficult to discuss race or class productively. Scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Derrick Bell (and the frameworks they propose for understanding race) suggest that racism is a permanent fixture of American life with a trans-historical ability to survive efforts to address it and racial inequality. While scholars like Bonilla-Silva, Bell, and others tend to identify themselves as being on the left, as Zine Magubane points out, their analysis of race is almost always bereft of

an analysis of the importance of class or the material realities that coincide with racial inequality and violence. As evidenced by the struggles of early twentieth century black intellectuals, any attempt to address inequality without a rigorous class analysis will be limited in scope and efficacy.

As economic and racial divisions in the United States continue to grow, it is unsurprising that many scholars are proposing and debating ways to understand race and racism. What is more surprising is that many of these “new” frameworks repeat the mistakes of past intellectuals. As America progresses into what seems to be a second Gilded Age it is paramount that scholars be in the vanguard for proposing new ways to address the issues of race and class inequality.¹³⁵ In particular, it is important, now more than ever, that historians look back on organizations and intellectuals such as those discussed in this paper to understand where they helped to create positive, radical change and where they failed. Particularly, in radical thinkers like Randolph, Owen, and Wells-Barnett we can find examples of thinkers who understood the connections between race, class, and gender and sought to intertwine these movements rather than cordon them off from one another.

As the United States approaches what may be another turning point in its history, it is of grave importance that historians critically examine thinkers who tried to imagine a new, better world. The thinkers examined here and the organizations they formed were of central importance as the United States exited one era and entered another. Even the relatively conservative organizations such as the NUL helped to ensure that the America of the 1920s looked dramatically different than it had in the 1890s. However, even as they lived through and ushered

¹³⁵ Magubane, “Contemporary Race Theory and the Problem of History.”

in an era of great change, these thinkers were limited by the political and intellectual context they encountered. This limitation manifested itself most clearly in the failure of major organizations to meaningfully connect class and racial equality.

While the point of this study is not to simply denounce these organizations, it is crucial to recognize where they fell short and why, especially as a similar kind of racial discourse has gained popularity in recent years. Just as these thinkers had at the beginning of the 20th-century, academics and intellectuals today have a chance to be central to the creation of a more egalitarian, materially equal society. On the one hand, there is much to admire in the tirelessness and rhetorical skill many of these activists displayed, and it is important that scholars recognize their place in American history. On the other, it is perhaps more important that we succeed in the places they failed. Rather than a top-down approach, intellectuals should see the importance of rising with, not from the masses.

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