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## LONESOME REFUGEES

by Rebecca O. Johnson

January 1, 2006. The big red X is inscribed between the French window and the broken door. The big red X is everywhere. Well, almost everywhere. In the Lower Ninth ward, in the four or five blocks closest to the levee, there are no X's, no runic marks remembering the number of dead and missing. There are no house numbers, no porches, no shutters listing in weary memorial. There is only a pile of boards; a pick-up-sticks game left by that demon child, Hurricane Katrina. And there is the smell.

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A group of us went to New Orleans, and then south to Plaquemines Parish, to understand what had happened, and, in a way, why. Yes, there had been a hurricane, but in the aftermath only one question concerned me—how could my people be in this predicament again? And close on to that, what is to become of us? I was born when we were still colored, before *African American*, before *black*; but after slavery, near the end of the “nigra” period, the Jim Crow period of our history. I grew up black and entered productive adulthood African American, into the prosperity that the Civil Rights movement years had worked to attain. Since Katrina, though, embarrassment and shame had been wearing on me. I’m glad Virgil didn’t live to see this. I’m glad I don’t have to give him an accounting of what I have seen. I don’t quite know how to say this, how to communicate the hurt (and how much I never expected to feel a hurt like this) . . . not just from witnessing the damage to the central Gulf Coast and New Orleans but the injury to all African Americans, even those of us who didn’t think we cared, who, having attained the status of the talented, having climbed higher than earlier generations imagined possible began to believe there was no looking back (or more accurately down). So when the storm hit we wanted to do something, (expected we could fix things, I suppose) in concert with our people (how quickly that revelation asserted itself on us, that we were still, in tragedy, a people), but when we looked we found, to our great shame, that we were alone; we had climbed and climbed, forgetting to bring anyone along with us. They were sitting back there, old and young, straddling some roof or overpass; one decade piling on top of another, stranded on a levee waiting or in an improvised caged-in prison the Red Cross called a refugee camp, or unable to hold on any longer they lay covered by a piece of tarp weighted down with bricks, freed from waiting at last. And there we stood empty-handed.

I guess we didn’t believe it could be this bad. The lives of those who came before us testified to how bad it had been. It’s just that it was only recently, as they began to die, as

these old ones stood with their feet on the threshold of release, that they looked back at us and began to speak, in turns reluctant and rebellious, strident and proud; whole lives poured forth, secret longings, unspeakable atrocities. They told of their parents' pain and the pain of the ones who came before their parents, the ones who admonished, *Lift as you climb children, lift as you climb*. The ones we didn't listen to, the ones we didn't quite believe. But here we are: in Plaquemines standing on someone's empty foundation slab wondering where the house went (there are those who got away only with their lives, who are scattered about the country, hoping some day to go back home. In the New Year they had begun to commit suicide; the once contented elderly giving up and dying. Those who hang on do not want to be called refugees. *Aren't we citizens? Is this not our country too?*); in East New Orleans peering into a house where all the furniture is upended and the black mold line is six inches from the ceiling as the owners try to clean up; if they are lucky, swaddled in hooded, blue Tyvex suits, respirators, and double-thick elbow-length gloves; the unlucky put plastic bags on their hands and a piece of rag over their nose and mouth and get to work. *Ain't nothin' new here. We have seen this before*. Back in Plaquemines at a church cemetery, remains in bags are scattered near the places where burial crypts used to be. In the lower Ninth Ward, where you can smell the bodies rotting under the sticks and bricks of what used to be someone's home. I am embarrassed. I had forgotten for a moment (a decade, a lifetime) that I was colored.

There is a remedy for such forgetfulness. Part of being colored is knowing that every generation has had its sorrow, and we have created something useful from it—the spirituals, an anti-lynching campaign, a Great Migration, the blues—something to hold onto until sorrow and its songs can be replaced by freedom and its rights. Even if I wasn't good for much else, these hands were not totally empty; many in the Gulf were talking about the last great upheaval, the 1927 Flood. I could find out what had happened, where we had fled to, what useful thing had come from the 1927 sorrow, and what songs.

### **Tide is Rising, Water Everywhere**

The basic facts of the 1927 disaster are well-known, and indisputable: Fall 1926 brought unusually heavy rainfall to the Midwest and South. By January, the Mississippi River had reached flood stage and mostly stayed there all winter. Floods were common in the Delta; heavy rain, big snowmelt, hurricanes have always plagued those living near the Mississippi River, from where it flows out of Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota and along its over 2,300-mile course to the Gulf of Mexico. The Lower Mississippi, marked by the confluence of the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois, is massive and, in spots, treacherous.

The water had broken through at Cairo on April 16, 1927. By the beginning of May, the levees in New Orleans were threatened. The ensuing disaster was caused as much by lack of attention to Cairo's sodden earthworks (that's all a levee is, a massive pile of dirt) as the endless winter and spring rains that brought on the flooding. The catastrophe had been no surprise: the wives and children of white planters had evacuated well before the levees broke.

That was in the history books. We had our own version of the story, and we found ways to make sure it got told. As soon as there were free black people, there were news-

papers to keep us informed. At the time of the 1927 Flood, one publication had attained great influence and an enormous circulation within communities North and South, the Chicago *Defender*.

Memphis, Tenn., April 22—Hundreds of our Race have perished in the floodwaters. The exact number may never be known . . .

With white citizens spending their time seeking safety, members of our Race have been ordered to work on the levees. Police, armed with sawed-off shotguns are invading their homes and forcing them away without even a chance to save their household goods.

Hundreds of our Race have perished in the flood and the lives of hundreds more are endangered as epidemics of measles, whooping cough, mumps, scarlet fever and chickenpox rage in the refugee camps . . . (Harrington "Many Die of Exposure" 1-01)

From the muffled images of old microfilmed text the story pours forth. The progress of the water carefully tracked, from Cairo to Memphis, Tennessee to Greenville, Mississippi, and finally New Orleans. But there is something else in the pages of the *Defender*: paid ads for the latest Delta blues. In 1927, Robert Abbott, the owner of the *Defender*, considered the blues a lowdown kind of music. He felt no respectable publication should cover it, but he was willing to take ads for Race Records in his paper. The blues was telling a flood story too.

*Dikes all washed away wires down  
Levee's busted goodbye town  
All I had went floating down the stream*

*You'll never know 'less you've been there  
Oh what a cross I had to bear  
Always I'll remember what the levee watchman said  
Tide is rising, water everywhere*

*Trouble in its wake and much despair  
Once a rosy lawn but now a muddy pond  
Floods the fields of cotton and the sugar cane. . .*

*I'm so weary heavy-laden and blue  
With no one to tell my troubles to  
I'm just a wandering homeless lonesome refugee*

(Smith, Lonesome Refugee)

I had thought of the Delta blues as Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. Theirs are the most prominent names among those who made the transition from an acoustic, lyric-

driven countrified music to the electrified guitar virtuosity that has come to characterize the Chicago blues. Before them, I was to find, at the dawn of commercial record sales, there were hundreds of bluesmen and an astonishing number of blueswomen working a circuit from the Gulf of Mexico to Chicago, Florida to New York City. Like all traveling minstrels, they lived nowhere but carried the news to their people everywhere.

Blues musicians gave some of the earliest firsthand accounts of the flood. Laura Smith and Charley Patton, along with Blind Lemon Jefferson, Memphis Minnie, and as many as thirty other musicians, sang about the flood and colored folks' attempts to escape it. The musicians' version of the story has been preserved for us by today's guardians of the blues tradition, those archivists of the old records and transcribers of those scratchy lyrics from the rare surviving seventy-eight r.p.m. record: the (increasingly) British and German specialty houses and websites with names like HarpTab, shout.net, and red hot jazz (this would be my universe the winter after Katrina—the Boston Public Library microfilm room, the otherworldly realms of the Internet).

Other artists were trapped alongside farmhands and sharecroppers—the fourteen-year-old Richard Wright was working his way north and had made it to Memphis. Langston Hughes was touring in the region—all were struggling to find a way out. Under the best conditions, getting out of the South was difficult. Jim Crow segregation laws meant few comfort facilities were available, and trains were expensive. The flood washed out roads and most train service throughout the region, including the Illinois Central's *City of New Orleans* day train, the preferred means of travel for migrants who could afford it. The disruption lasted weeks.

*It was cold and raining  
Some people didn't have no shoes on their feet  
It was cold and raining  
Some people didn't have no shoes on their feet  
Women and children cryin'  
Because they didn't have a thing to eat.*

(Weldon, High Water Blues)

The Great Flood was bad enough, but its aftermath was astonishing (or would be, if we had not just endured Katrina). Misery cascaded with the water all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. In response, another river picked up strength. There was nothing left for tens of thousands of poor African Americans to do but use every means available to get out of the Delta. Desperate people streamed north, making their escape from high water, privation, torture, and fear, arriving with stories to tell. The Chicago *Defender* reported their travails. The flood unleashed a wave of opportunistic lynchings, with such reports as Mrs. Berta Reed being tarred and feathered in Louisiana and John Carter burned at the stake in Little Rock. Seven major (and many minor) incidents of violence occurred between the onslaught of the flood and mid-June 1927.

#### **Deny Food To Flood Victims in Mississippi**

Greenville, Miss., June 3.—Another proof that Race hatred is continuing in the flood area was offered here last week when white relief

organizations, headed by the Red Cross, southern division, issued a statement making each member of our Race responsible to some white man for the food and clothing he receives.

In other words, if the "boss" says you can eat, you can; and if he says "no" then you starve . . . (Harrington 1-01)

Folks were so terrified in Arkansas, according to the *Defender*, that a thousand people fled the state in the two-week period after John Carter's death. How did the *Defender* get such detailed information? How did they know, before the federal government<sup>1</sup> knew, about the behavior of the Red Cross? This kind of authoritative, firsthand information came from men and women well placed in their communities (jitney drivers, beauticians, barbers, the colored owner of the only general store), who, back in the day, knew everyone and everything; they were the *Defender's* regular network of reporters. They got the word out as the bodies piled up and rumors began circulating of people being imprisoned on levees, starved to death, and worse.

Greenville, Miss., June 10.—(Special) . . . the refuse (of the Flood) has been hauled into New Town, that part of the town inhabited by members of our Race. This filth is beginning to breed diseases among hundreds of our people . . .

Dr. A. J. Ware, health officer, gave a number of vaccinations against typhoid fever in his office in the city hall this week. They were for whites only . . . (Harrington "Work or Go Hungry" 1-02)

Where vaccinations were not given, people simply died, generally of dehydration, but also from debilitating fevers and rampant infections that diseases like measles made a flood-ravaged people vulnerable to.

Members of our Race are still suffering from measles, mumps and typhoid. They receive very little treatment, and those who die are cut open, filled with sand, and then tossed into the Mississippi River. (Harrington "Work or Go Hungry" 1-02)

Given these circumstances, one could understand why W.E.B. Du Bois declared,

We hope that every Negro that can escape from the slave camps guarded by the National Red Cross and the lynchers of Arkansas will leave this land of devilry . . . Let them ride, run and crawl out of this hell . . . It would be better for them to starve in Memphis and Chicago than to be slaves in Arkansas and Mississippi. (Du Bois 168)

**You Would Do Likewise**

The crisis generated when the levees gave way sharpened the already heightened concern of the African American community over the epidemic increase of lynchings in the South (and the bordering states as well), and the threatened spread of Jim Crow laws out of the South to Colorado, Indiana, and Washington, D.C. Lynching was just the most visible manifestation of the primitive backwater that Southern planters and Northern industrialists (who wanted to control the movements of black labor) sought to confine us in (as a child, it was always us and our people, even in history, perhaps especially in history). It seems fair to say that the white establishment didn't care what poor colored folks wanted or preferred it when the small black intellectual class spoke for them in terms conflicted, outraged, and judgmental, in turn; trapped, beaten down, freedom-dreaming, the largely rural residents of the Jim Crow South had their own vision for themselves. Their yearning would fuel the Great Migration. Most of our families participated—my maternal side left Kentucky (we think) near its beginning in the 1890s, the paternal side near the end in the late 1930s. The first to set out were the most urban residents, leaving the southern coalmines and iron and steel mills of Alabama for better pay in the same kinds of work up North. Early in the migration, companies actually gave train passes to attract healthy young men to their factories. In 1915, a boll weevil outbreak destroyed the cotton crops and turned the trickle of migrants into a flood. From the beginning, this going forth was difficult and politically contentious. White planters tried to disrupt it. Northern industrialists worried that the new workers would get a taste for labor organizing (by the time my father got to the steel mills in Harrisburg, the industrial unions were well established). Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington opposed it, but W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells Barnett encouraged it. The people and their musicians knew they didn't have much choice.

*Don't it make you feel bad  
When you're trying to find your way home  
You don't know which way to go?  
If you're goin' down south  
There ain't no work to do,  
If you're goin' North  
There's Chicago.*

(Memphis Minnie 1929)

No one was more ardent in encouraging the migration north than Robert Abbott, the founder of the *Chicago Defender*. He made the *Defender* into the national newspaper for "the Race." In 1919, when race riots (in this period, and up until the 1960s, a race riot is white people attacking and killing colored folk) over discrimination and substandard housing broke out, he reported it not only locally but also to the nation, because most of the paper's 230,000 readers were outside Chicago.

*Blues on my brain, my tongue refused to talk  
Blues on my brain, my tongue refused to talk  
I was followin' my daddy but my feet refused to walk*

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## CALLALOO

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*Mean old fireman, cruel old engineer  
Lord, mean old fireman, cruel old engineer  
You took my man and left his mama standing here.  
Big red headline, tomorrow Defender news  
Big red headline, tomorrow Defender news  
"Woman dead down home, these old Chicago blues"*

(Austin, Chicago-Bound Blues)

The *Defender* printed train schedules and gave black sleeping-car porters free issues to distribute on their runs throughout "the Southland." Robert Abbott was calling forth the Race's most tormented brethren, encouraging them to leave for Chicago where there was relative safety and more opportunity. The photo page frequently carried pictures of rural life showing barefoot children driving teams of oxen, schools in deplorable conditions, or the burnt remains of lynch victims, with captions like, "Don't kick when they leave and come North because you would do likewise" (from the June 4, 1927 issue, which was full of stories from the flooded region). White southern planters and politicians so despised the paper, and the exodus of labor it was encouraging, that they banned its sale; and just for good measure, they employed "Uncle Tom preachers" to preach against their people leaving. Folks left anyway—one or two family members at a time—walking, pushing old wagons, stowed on freight trains, and, sometimes, finding a ride.

*Goin' somewhere it cut no figger, you get your due  
Even if you're a nigger, Oh my Kitty Co Co!  
Goin' far away, by my own master. Feet you're too slow, train take me faster,  
Oh, my Kitty Co Co!  
Goin' somewhere they ain't heard 'bout Jim Crow, and I can walk right  
through the front door, Oh, my Kitty Co Co!*

(Gellert 40–41)

Hundreds of thousands left the South during the second part of the Great Migration—between July 1921 and July 1927, the black population of Chicago grew, increasing by over 106,000—leading the *Defender* to proudly declare "thirteen of our babies were born in the County Hospital in 12 hours Tuesday. Attendants announced this a new birth record for the hospital" (Sept. 2, 1927). Still, at the time of the Flood, most black people lived in the South, and almost universally in the worst conditions. Some lived in the cities and a few owned land, but the majority were live-in help, field hands, or tenants farming parcels and "sharing" the proceeds of their labors with the former slave owner on whose plantation (indeed there are plantations still, some as big as northern counties) they lived and worked.

*It's good mornin' Captain, he said good mornin' Shine,<sup>2</sup>  
Said good mornin' Captain, said good mornin' Shine.  
T'ain't nuthin' the matter, Captain, but I just ain't gonna."*

*I don't mine workin', Captain, from sun to sun,  
 I don't mind workin', Captain, from sun to sun.  
 But I want my money, Captain, when pay-day come.*

(Dickson, Labor Blues)

Delta bluesmen and women wrote and sang their songs for these poor, frequently illiterate workers, those terrorized by a system that resented paying the children of slaves any wage at all. For them, everything was hard to come by—food, housing, medical care—even a decent burial.

*Well, there's one kind of favor I'll ask of you  
 Well, there's one kind of favor I'll ask of you  
 Well, there's one kind of favor I'll ask of you  
 You can see that my grave is kept clean*

*Did you ever hear that coffin' sound  
 Did you ever hear that coffin' sound  
 Have you ever heard that coffin' sound  
 Means another poor boy is under ground*

*Did you ever hear them church bells tone  
 Did you ever hear them church bells tone  
 Have you ever heard them church bells tone . . .  
 Means another poor boy is dead and gone.*

(Jefferson, See That My Grave Is Kept Clean)

These songs hadn't meant that much to me before Katrina. I didn't know them; their existence had been overwhelmed by the rock and roll-fueled popularity of the later Chicago blues. But this is what my relations must have listened to on radio stations like WSB out of Atlanta, or 78s played on their hand-crank Victrolas, saving their pennies to purchase, trade, and share.

The recording industry launched a subgenre, known as Race Records, with the issuance in 1920 of *The Crazy Blues* by Mamie Smith. Race Records were a mostly white-controlled medium featuring the latest blues, spirituals, and spoken-word hellfire and damnation preaching (*Death May Be Your Christmas* by Rev. A. W. Nix). Vaudeville, the older entertainment venue, preceded the Race Records, making those records possible by demonstrating the popularity of the blues. There were some premier black-owned theaters in big northern cities, but the more extensive TOBA (Theaters Owners Booking Association) Colored Vaudeville Circuit was owned by whites. Colored performers used to say its initials actually stood for Tough On Black Asses. In fact, its content was policed, just as the blues content would be policed, in order not to offend whites while appealing to colored audiences. So sometimes a blues song, whether about a flood or love or death, had to mean many things; it was frequently the public lyric for all the other ways a people could be overcome. In the privacy of the jook joints and rent parties, other kinds of blues were sung:

*How long, brethren, how long,  
Must my people weep and mourn?  
How long, how long, brethren, how long?  
So long my people been asleep  
White folks plowin' my soul down deep.  
How long, how long, brethren how long?*

*Too long, too long, brethren, too long.  
We just miserin' along too long brethren too long.  
White folks ain't Jesus, he just a man,  
Grabbin' biscuit out of poor nigger's hand.  
Too long, too long, brethren too long.*

(Gellert 16)

Of course these songs were not recorded and never performed in public settings, black or white. In fact, there was a lively public debate in the African American community about what one could expect for and from the migrants. The *Defender* sought, in encouraging southern blacks to travel north, to introduce those considered unsophisticated to the more civilized aspects of polite colored urban life. Of equal importance to Abbott was for his paper to turn a profit. His editorial page could seek equality and redress and express outrage at the treatment of “the Race,” but his capitalist inclinations were more accurately revealed in his advertising policy, which until his death in 1940, allowed blacks to be represented (to my eye) in any way that would bring in money: as jigaboos by the record companies, in need of all manner of skin lightening cream and hair-straightening products (“What you are and hope to be depends upon your hair.”), and preoccupied with sexual vitality. His cultural journalism revealed his own ambivalence toward, and doubts about, the meaningfulness of the indigenous cultural expressions of his people. The *Defender* arts and music section focused on opera singers in training as well as orchestras and the superiority of their music, while also giving a regular column over to a group called *The Georgias*, who performed the still-popular blackface minstrel shows. There was a regular feature in the *Defender*, accompanied by instructive drawings, aimed perhaps at those who had obviously just gotten off the farm (or the levee) entitled:

### People We Can Get Along Without

*Park and boulevard loungers who spend the warm days sprawled disgracefully on the grass with shoes removed.*

This behavior, this “being country” (as an older cousin accuses me of being), was one of the many, sometimes ideological, conflicts raging within the African American community at the time of the flood. What should we be called in public? What kind of education should be fought for? Do we “deserve” higher education? Is that too mighty an aspiration for the

race? What's our relationship to Africa (especially after the disastrous decision by Marcus Garvey to recruit the KKK into his Back to Africa Campaign)? Since the Communist Party was one of the few groups doing cross-racial organizing, what political party had our best interest at heart? The popular black press took positions on all these issues. The *Defender* was maybe too accomodationist in its politics; in part, perhaps, because Abbott, a very dark-skinned man, was ambivalent about his own color—never referring to himself as colored, Negro, or black, but preferring references to his African heritage. In the paper he generally referred to black people as “members of the Race” and “Race men” and “Race women.” Abbott also could not have anticipated the political changes coming for his people. The *Defender* would change significantly after Abbott's death, when editorship passed to his nephew, John Sengstacke, but until then it represented in tabloid-style print Abbott's profit motive, his mixed feelings about the idea of blackness, and the hopes our people brought into the new (twentieth) century. *Defender* stories were a mix of lurid crimes, accounts of lynching nationwide, and announcements showcasing the small accomplishments of ordinary people. The recently acquired ability of the migrants to travel freely was a source of great interest, it seems, since five or six pages of each issue, organized with headlines for each state, were devoted to little announcements, like this:

Mr. Wilbur Finney of Columbus Ohio is visiting his aunt, Mrs. Susie Manley. A Home Beautifier Club has been organized by a number of our ladies. This club has entertained at the home of Mrs. Susan Manley Thursday afternoon. (Taylor 2-09)

Beginning in 1905, under a masthead declaring itself “The World's Greatest,” the *Defender* had publicized its economic agenda for Black America. Every week its editorial page declared a platform, demanding full trades and trade-union participation, African American appointments to the President's Cabinet, to all police departments in the United States, as engineers and firemen on all rail, trolley car and steamship lines, and in all government industries. Abbott insisted that “our Race” be given preference over new European migrants, frequently demanding strict limitations on immigration in his editorials.

Some things never change. African Americans and immigrants still find themselves in competition, sometimes just to see who can be treated the worst. In New Orleans, Mexican and Central American migrants were brought in to help with recovery. The migrants thought they were being given lucrative positions; displaced black residents, wondering why they were not being paid to clean up their own community, were outraged. We were being left out again. Only later did a concerned public—displaced Gulf Coast residents, those of us, puzzled and guilty, looking on from afar—discover that the migrants went weeks without pay and were sleeping under bridges.

Despite the efforts of Abbott, Du Bois, and others, much of the Negro intelligentsia in 1927 (and I suppose this is the situation for us, today, the Talented Tenth of the twenty-first century) seemed at cross purposes with the masses of black people, urban and rural. Zora, Langston, and the young lions of the Harlem Renaissance could refer to themselves as the “Niggerati,” but they would never be “poor niggers”; they could speculate on the task of the “New Negro” while most black folk suffered under the old Negro burdens of indentured servitude, Jim Crowism, and lynching “justice.” And while all sectors of black

society protested strenuously against the unbearable indignities of Negro life in America, these blues were the most heartfelt expression of the day-to-day reality of colored life.

### Chicago Bound

The blues taught the Southern newcomers about the North and at least as much about life in the city as the *Defender's* People We Can Do Without column. Bluesmen and women sang about bad landlords, bad pay at the steel mills, and bad meat at the packing plant. They sang about epidemics of tuberculosis and outbreaks of “the meningitis” in Midwest cities.

*Hmmmm, the meningitis killin' me  
 Hmmmm, the meningitis killin' me  
 I comin' home one Saturday night,  
 pull off my clothes and I lie down  
 And next morning just about day,  
 the meningitis began to creep around  
 My head and neck was painin' me,  
 feel like my back was break in two*

(Memphis Minnie, Memphis Minnie-Jitis Blues)

Along with the accurate description of the onset of meningitis, Memphis Minnie let her people know they were in a different place, one with doctors that would see African Americans and hospitals that would treat them.

*My companion take me to the doctor,  
 “Doctor please tell me my wife’s complaint”  
 The doctor looked down on me, shook his head,  
 “I wouldn’t mind telling you, son, but I can’t”  
 “You take her ‘round to the city hospital,  
 jus’ as quick, quick as you possibly can  
 Because the condition she’s in now,  
 you will never go home live again”*

(Memphis Minnie, Memphis Minnie-Jitis Blues)

Listening to the music of that era, it is as if the blues musicians know their people need some direction, a guide from the dirt farm to the factory floor; from disenfranchisement to passionate engagement in molding their own destinies.

A blues musician made her or his living on the road. The recording studios were in Chicago, but the audience was still largely in the South. It seemed only the biggest selling musicians like Bessie Smith made it to New York City. Blues musicians would finally settle in Chicago in the '40s and '50s, marking the end of the Great Migration. Until then, they were circuit riders, working their Delta venues—dusty house parties and dances, jook

joints, the TOBA circuit—and coming to Chicago to record their new songs. They could sing about anything, and did. Chinch Bug Blues, Labor Blues, Sissy Blues (yes, Ma Rainey loses her man to, well, a man who shook that jelly; his name was Miss Kate)—but the most well-known musicians of this period—Charley Patton, Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy (her husband), Blind Lemon Jefferson—frequently came back to the 1927 flood.

The flood, for all the suffering it caused, slowly drifted off the front page of the nation's papers, both white and black. Charley Patton was one of the biggest selling blues singers of the '20s. Known for songs about fighting, women, and drinking, his music exemplified how the genre would come to be perceived throughout the rest of the century when those themes and guitar licks were more important than other lyrics. Less well known is his *High Water Everywhere*, recorded in 1929. It was a lengthy (about 10 minutes, two sides of a 78) chronicle of his personal experience of the 1927 flood.

*Well, backwater done rose all around  
 Sumner now, drove me down the line  
 Backwater done rose at Sumner,  
 drove poor Charley down the line  
 Lord, I'll tell the world the water,  
 done crept through this town  
 Lord, the whole round country,  
 Lord, river has overflowed  
 Lord, the whole round country,  
 man, is overflowed  
 You know I can't stay here,  
 I'll go where it's high, boy  
 I would go to the hilly country,  
 but, they got me barred.*

(Patton, High Water Everywhere)

It was the beginning of the Great Depression. Deprivation was rampant, and nowhere in Chicago more than in the black community, where the full import of last-hired/first-fired rules was being felt. Memphis Minnie and her husband, Kansas Joe McCoy, recorded *When the Levee Breaks* the same year. In 1934, just weeks before his death, Patton made a new recording of *High Water*. Flood songs by Blind Lemon Jefferson, Bessie Smith, Lonnie Johnson, and Alice Pearson appear and reappear during the same period. They were enormously popular. As the Great Depression settled in for its extended stay, these songs and the stories of the migrants, rather than fading from memory, helped contribute to a profound change in how the Black community perceived itself.

Black people came north not only to escape that “land of devilry”; they came because they heard those cities up there were brimming with opportunities they could not even begin to imagine as sharecroppers and live-in help in the Delta (steady work as domestics in homes and hotels at triple the pay they had been getting, with maybe a chance at a factory job). They came, at times only a few but eventually a deluge, descending on the great industrial cities of the East and Midwest, but to no city in larger numbers than Chicago, “the Midwest Metropolis.” The part of town where black people lived (the South Side)

was called many things, the Black Belt, the Black Ghetto (as opposed to the foreign-born slums); African American intellectuals called it the Black Metropolis. By 1930, ordinary people called it Bronzeville. This great movement of people—driven in equal measures by aspiration, ambition, and desperation—would need to change their ways in Chicago, but Chicago, its music, poetry, politics, would be changed more still. Literature, art, and scholarship would flow out of Bronzeville, beginning with Margaret Walker’s “For My People,” in 1942. The lives of the newcomers, like the fertile silt left behind after a Mississippi River flood, would be the soil for what would become known as the Chicago Black Renaissance.<sup>3</sup>

The black migrants, including some who had been community organizers in the South, brought their activism and songs to the North. This was the period that saw an increase in African American participation in labor unions (one of the industrialists’ great fears), but, more importantly, Depression era conditions heralded the growing strength of African American organizations such as the reformist (and increasingly re-formed) Chicago chapter of the NAACP and the more radical Urban League, as well as participation in an increasingly influential American Communist Party (ACP).

In the meetings of the South Side’s Communist John Reed Club, recent migrants from the Delta were sharing their accounts of the 1927 flood with Richard Wright. These would inspire three stories, including “Down By The Riverside,” which appeared in his first book of short stories.

### Uncle Tom’s Children

The local NAACP branch, of which Gwendolyn Brooks was Youth Council secretary, was seeking its membership among the migrants who had become industrial workers (a larger number in Bronzeville than in any other American city), rather than the middle and upper class as in other cities. I imagine young people everywhere were sharing blues songs. Blind Lemon Jefferson might recognize a bit of his own lyricism as inspiration for such poems as Brooks’s “of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery.”

### *Seven Poor Children Moan Death House Blues*

The groundbreaking sociological study *Black Metropolis* reminds us that most migrants arrived during a “fat time” in the North, but Bronzeville came into its own during the lean times. The unemployment rate in black neighborhoods at the height of the Depression would reach 50%, twice as high as the rest of the city. Worker strife and racial conflict, the arrest of the Scottsboro Boys, and the Communist Party organizing around their defense would create opportunities for creative protest and access to political power, which had not been available to most Bronzeville residents when they lived in the South.

*Paper come out, done spread the news that  
Seven poor childrin moan death house blues.  
Seven poor childrin moanin' death house blues.*

*Seven nappy heads with big shiny eyes  
All bound in jail and framed to die  
All bound in jail and framed to die (Gellert 44)*

The Scottsboro Boys were nine teenagers—ages thirteen to twenty years old—riding the rails looking for work during the worst of the Depression (March 1931). They had an altercation with some white boys riding the same freight train, and one of the white women associating with the white boys accused them of raping her. The black boys were pulled off the train in Scottsboro, Alabama. Two of the boys were turned over to juvenile authorities after a confession implicating the older of the young men was beaten out of them. Throughout the country, north and south, black people started organizing. After the 1919 race riots, Chicago's South Side had continued to experience widespread labor unrest resulting in the formation of the American Negro Labor League by the Communist Party. Historians tell us that the Chicago NAACP (unlike branches of the association in other cities) and the Urban League, were protesting evictions and high rents, job discrimination, and stingy public relief, among other issues. All this knowledge, experience, and power came to focus on this one case when the national Communist Party provided the lawyer for the Scottsboro Boys' defense.

*Judge and jury all in the stand  
Lawd, biggety name for same lynchin band  
Lawd biggety name for same lynchin band (Gellert 44)*

Needless to say, Southern justice did not go easy on the Scottsboro Boys, but none of them were lynched and all but one would eventually be released. The fact that the almost immediate death sentences they received were not carried out is in no small part, I believe, the result of the vigorous organizing of the African American community and their white allies. Despite the years it took to settle their cases, and the frustration the community felt, black people, through their participation in such political and civil-rights activities, were learning they could protect each other's lives.

### Joy Somewhere

*Up above my head music in the air  
above my head music in the air*

*All in my home music everywhere  
singing right there  
up above my music in the air*

*I really do believe really do believe there must be joy somewhere*  
(Tharpe, Up Above My Head)

My father used to make me debate him. There was no one else in the house who would engage his Socratic leanings or endure his perverse sense of humor. He would call me in and hand me a newspaper story to read. Our discussions ranged from the ridiculous to the sublime. One day, after a spate of UFO sightings, it was whether or not there was life on other planets. As Negro History Week approached, it was who was right: Booker T. or W.E.B.? This was the intellectual tension of my father's life—the "Cast down your buckets where you are" philosophy of Booker T. Washington versus the "Talented Tenth" thinking of W.E.B. Du Bois. At nine years old I was becoming radicalized. Booker T. seemed like an Uncle Tom to me. Of course I didn't really know what my father was asking and in the process picked up a tendency to want things to be clearly right and wrong, no gray area. That's why I became a community organizer and why, after decades of struggle, organizing had begun to wear on me. I needed ambiguity in my life. With the onslaught of Katrina, I am in hand-to-hand combat with my old self, with the acquiescence to powerlessness that follows from letting a little gray into one's life. I want to blame Booker T. for our troubles. I want to shame W.E.B. for enticing us with an intellectual life. I'm mad at Langston and Zora and all those overbearing New Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance. I rail at H. Rap and Stokely, "Take your Black Power back where you found it." Accommodationists and separatists, cultural integrationists and Third World internationalists . . . this is how much things haven't changed. These are positions we still take and shout passionately about. And why the Scottsboro organizing is so encouraging right now.

Until Scottsboro, African Americans were popularly perceived as a problem for the nation. Intellectuals set out to manage a "perfectly stupid race" (see David Levering Lewis's *Du Bois: Biography of a Race* for a stunning depiction of African American life in the early twentieth century) through studies commissioned by the new and growing world of philanthropy and informed by the budding field of sociology. This was occasionally to the communities' benefit, such as Du Bois's *Philadelphia Negro*, but more often to its profound detriment, such as *The Mystery Solved: The Negro A Beast*. Regardless of the source, the voices of purposefully disenfranchised and economically indentured laborers had rarely been solicited or heard. Scottsboro made for previously unimaginable alliances. With the boys' mothers playing unprecedented public roles, traveling the country speaking, leading marches, and appearing at rallies, the campaign represented an opening of connections across class, color, race, and neighborhood; a movement that joined the light-skinned elite with their darker, poorer brothers and sisters (which was significant in itself) and a gathering in the streets side by side and hand in hand of white intellectuals and black workers, white laborers, and black radicals singing songs of Scottsboro to the rhythm of the blues, old work songs, the Industrial Workers of the World's *Little Red Songbook*, and the handbook *Negro Songs of Protest*.

By this time the Great Flood was six years gone. As I read accounts of their outrage and their organizing, I had an inkling of what Katrina might mean for us. In the "Black Metropolis," those who took to the streets would have been considered the least sophisticated of Chicago's colored residents. How many were the frightened, impoverished sharecroppers who had escaped the flood? Maybe no one knows for sure, but the national NAACP was

caught off guard by the effectiveness of the bold action of those whose voices were rarely heard. A new music, perhaps best exemplified by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, reflected this new voice. Singing the emerging gospel music on Sundays but picking a guitar (like Memphis Minnie they say) and playing blues and jazz at other times, Sister Rosetta, who came to Chicago as a child in the early 1920s, sang a spiritual music embracing the possibility of secular prosperity and joy. Her music hints at the possibility of regaining the promises that freedom offered her grandparents sixty years before, and as her savvy management of her own career suggests, there would be no turning back. From the outside, little seemed to have changed. There was still much suffering—lynchings continued unabated, at a rate of at least one a month, black workers were dying North and South, Jim Crow was spreading—but the migrants, their children and grandchildren, those whose only voice had been the blues, now saw the possibilities in words, organization, and defiance. Scottsboro declared to the world, much to the consternation and amazement of the national NAACP leadership (including Du Bois who would be a fast learner), *The Chicago Defender*, and Abbott, that mass action had its own rhythm and its own utility, and that it would be, in this instance, effective in unprecedented ways. The Scottsboro boys were not lynched: a southern judge reversed the death penalty imposed by a white jury, the boys' appeals made it to the Supreme Court and prevailed, and all of them were eventually released. In their example is our hope, after Katrina, and for our future, that in our past, a voiceless people accustomed to the circumspect expressions of their "sorrow songs" would embrace this new kind of protest—not the pleadings of the people's elite or a prayer service or a silent march, not a race riot or proletariat insurrection—but the gathering of those thought to be too poor, too uneducated to influence anything, and through it create the only tool that could make the NAACP's necessary but rarified legal work of the coming Civil Rights era truly effective: dark bodies flowing in the streets, perhaps unlettered and worn down by city life, but confident enough now in their own worth to make and sing new songs for everyone to hear.

#### NOTES

1. W.E.B. Du Bois knew through the NAACP president Walter White that President Calvin Coolidge was reading the *Defender* to find out what was really happening. David Levering Lewis, *Du Bois*, vol. 2, (New York: Harry Holt and Co., 2000) 244
2. The boss was called Captain. Shine is a derogatory term for a black man, as in bootblack shoe-polish shine.
3. There had been another Chicago Renaissance, a literary one, which historians date from 1890 to 1920.

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