

THE FIRST HOME I remember was in “Little Africa.” Little Africa was in Louisville, Kentucky. It was a seemingly endless tangle of unpaved streets and makeshift houses isolated in the deep west end of the city. It was a bleak compound of blackness where white faces were as rare as unicorns. Everyone did some kind of work. But their jobs were usually under the radar of anything resembling a decent, living wage; jobs were part-time, nonunion, unregulated, one-shot seasonal, or domestic moneymakers. Paychecks and their nets were as unpredictable as English weather.

Little Africa was not cohesively working class in the manner of Allentown, Pennsylvania, during its boom years, or Brooklyn, New York, in its rags-to-riches American fantasy. There were not a lot of mythic success stories in our world. In Little Africa, “Give us, Lord, our daily bread” was not a summons for a heavenly hand-out, but an earnest, quotidian prayer for ten cents to purchase a loaf of Bond Bread from my family’s store, Baker’s Market.

Baker’s Market was a solidly framed and brightly painted place—my mother and father had secured its title through sheer moxie. The store’s previous (white) owner had grown tired of marginal profits and other downsides of conducting business in the ghetto. My father, with his solid business acumen and savvy ear to rounds of the black world, got an inside tip about the owner’s dissatisfaction and acted on it.

My mother and father were among the select number of African Americans of their generation privileged to earn not only bachelors but also advanced graduate degrees. They were blessed and aided by the generous backing of

INTRODUCTION

LITTLE AFRICA

my maternal grandparents in purchasing their first home and, I suspect, in their acquisition of Baker's Market. I did not know in my youth that we Bakers were differently gifted from the general population of Little Africa. To my young mind, my parents' bearing toward and relationship with their clientele offered no hint of class tension. Their avoidance of displays of assumed superiority made a great deal of sense. They knew that in segregated Louisville, Kentucky, there were few places where they could establish a successful black business. Little Africa was one such locale, and alienating customers through condescension would have been the most extreme folly. But in retrospect, I know my family's situation was markedly different from that of others in Little Africa. My parents, after all, *owned* the grocery store; they also had significant educational and business reserves to fall back on. Still, the fact that their ownership and business options in a segregated Louisville, Kentucky, were limited to the black ghetto made their advantages seem slightly more than window dressing in the defining economies of race and class in America—especially the American South.

We moved to Little Africa in 1951. I was eight years old. Our house (my first remembered home) was a one-story frame dwelling. It was only about seven hundred square feet, divided into four small bedrooms and one tiny bath. But it had electricity and ample insulation, and my older brother and I luxuriously shared one bedroom reserved for us. The house had been built by my maternal grandfather and a cousin. It was located just behind Baker's Market. Next door, my friend Dewy, who was a master of all things mechanical and thought up the best games, lived with his large family in a dilapidated structure lit by coal oil lamps and lacking indoor plumbing. To the rear, Mr. Johnson raised hogs in a small, grassy enclosure he referred to as his "stockyard." When breezes were mischievous, we shared more of Mr. Johnson's stockyard than we wished.

I knew the geography of Little Africa by scent and sense. I listened hour by hour and day by day to black people. I'm sure if someone dropped me off back in Little Africa today, I could still walk its geographies and share its storied textures with the bearing of a native. But we of Little Africa were "inside" a place that Louisville's ordinary white people knew was scarcely fit for dignified human habitation—not even close to an amply resourced American citizenship. Certainly any ordinary white citizen, after overcoming initial shock at the bleak mayhem of our lives, would have concluded we must have done something incomparably evil to deserve such a fate as to be

in Little Africa. After all, there are so many who believe that the poor, as a result solely of their own deviance, will always be a burden to society. This seems to remain a conservative American conviction with respect to places like Little Africa.

Louisville's daily, segregated life (in combination with its saturate air of bourbon and tobacco) was a frightening whirr of bullies (both black and white) and soul-killing violence. I shuddered with dark premonition that I might—in the blink of a southern segregationist eye—be run over by something, shot by somebody, stopped and searched at random, punched squarely in the face for no reason. Irrational as those fears now seem, I suspect there was something in my subconscious apprehension of Little Africa that reinforced such trepidation. Even at that young age I knew that fear and trembling are not abnormal responses to the terrors of white supremacy: Jim Crow, colonial malfeasance, apartheid brutality. Inside Little Africa—locked within the black vale and veil of desolation—we learned lessons not only in humility, resistance, and holiness, but also the rudiments of a justified terror before the worst offenses of “whiteness” in America. Perhaps pioneering American frontier dwellers might have felt something akin to that fearful caution known to the denizens of Little Africa. Every prairie occasion in the Old West was, after all, a challenge to bizarre notions of a violent manhood; the frontier was bloodily exclusionary in its definitions of national citizenship and human well-being (ask the few remaining American Indians). I want to clear up one semantic notion at this point. There is no such thing as second-class citizenship. The phrase is a nonsense utterance. Either one is a citizen, or one is not. Exclusion is a flagrant denial of citizenship.

I know my youth in segregated Louisville scarred me in permanent ways—ways that contradict any kind of glibly disingenuous assertion that oppression leaves no permanent mark upon the oppressed. The psychological effect of white supremacy in the United States is irreversible, and, in my view, unforgivable. No late apologetics can erase mental terror and tangible scars. If not the mind, the body always remembers. Much like the Afro-American writer Richard Wright during his Mississippi youth, I lived childhood in a haze of anxiety, confusion, and dread. My early days were spent in a state of constant emergency. My spirit and imagination were enduringly under assault by white power in its myriad dimensions.

The abject struggle for daily bread in Little Africa was like flame to a tinderbox. It spawned frustration and produced an impulsive need to strike out

at whatever was nearby, at hand. Everyone in the compound was, of course, black. Therefore, it was permanently the case that someone black seemed always ready in my youth to maim, cut, shoot, or mutilate some *other* black one, equally desperate, locked in the cell of Little Africa's labyrinth of misery. Frantz Fanon speaks of the "native" who tolerates from dawn to dusk white superiority and abuse, but then, in the shantytown black bar after dark reacts with unmeasured violence against a fellow black for the most trivial of offenses. Fanon is concerned with the psychology of such black violence. Economically, one might be compelled to ask: Where can the native vent his rage and hope to stay alive but in a place like Little Africa? White supremacy contains native violence in its own compounds by killing natives or locking them away—permanently.

Baker's Market was one of the few commercial establishments that broke the winding networks of unpaved roads and derelict houses in Little Africa. Lights were almost always on; windows shone with neon Pabst Blue Ribbon and Falls City signs casting deep blue and sharp red into the night. The store stayed open late on weekends (especially payday Fridays and "out to play" Saturdays) and it boasted one of the few pay phones within a mile radius.

Bloodied warriors of segregated life in America, with blood-dripping hands, heads, arms, and faces swathed in tattered towels and bundled rags often swept into the store, making a beeline to the pay phone. They dialed the police (infrequently), an ambulance (out of unequivocal necessity), or a loved one (most frequently) to come and help them out. I remember my cousin Raymond—the man who helped build our house in Little Africa—leaping over the counter on one occasion, tearing off his apron, tying it around the hemorrhaging arm of an improbably large brown man who seemed utterly astonished that someone had bested him in a brawl at Dixon's Tavern. Dixon's was a mile or so up the road from our store. Surely its owner's business world was as dramatically marked by violence as my family's.

Less bloody, but no less harrowing, were the stories of white violence that flew into the store on the lips of black men, women, and children who had journeyed outside into the white city. Being called "Nigger!" was common, as though such wounding hate speech was an acceptable way to treat human beings. Being bloodied by rocks and bottles hurled from the cars of whites, or roundly told to get their "nigger brats" out of the waiting rooms of General Hospital or Union Station were the tales blacks frequently recounted in Baker's Market. There were stories, as well, of deeply uncaring white absentee

violence. As I turned the labels of canned goods to the front of shelves in the market, I often heard: “They cut off my phone, my lights, *and* my water . . . just because I missed one damn bill!” The reply in support: “I know what you mean, man . . . ’cause my wages done been garnished.” And then with a sigh of weary resignation from another: “Just ’cause I couldn’t pay that no-good bloodsucker his rent for February, he put us out! Damn!” Little Africa was plagued by the violence of American white supremacist economic uncaring. And it was not spare in its tales of the resulting wounds to the black body and spirit. It resonantly told its stories to my youth. In black gospel lore, the return upon such economic uncaring rings melodiously forth: “I’m a’gonna tell about how you treat me one of these days!” And I shall.

Misery, bloodshed, poverty, despair, and violence were staples of the Little Africa residents who frequented Baker’s Market, and of the community as a whole. I did not learn to love black life under segregation in Louisville, Kentucky. No, I did not. I developed a bizarre and incurable form of black American agoraphobia, a deep and lasting anxiety and distrust of outside American spaces.

By the black majority I intend to signal those populations of African, African American, Negro, and colored descent in the United States who inhabit the most wretched states, spaces, and places of our national geography. I mean those who live in census tracts where more than 40 percent of the population exists at or beneath the poverty line and unemployment is rampant. I call to mind and keep in the forefront of concern those black men, women, and children who have little hope of bettering their life chances through any simply (perhaps even “plausibly”) available means, from laboring at jobs with inhumanely low minimum wage pay or bare subsistence day-to-day combat with what vestiges remain of an American security net. The black majority is the almost inevitably exposed, severely policed, desperately underresourced contingent of the African American population currently resident in the United States. The black majority is indubitably *the* majority of Afro-America at the present time. For we must also bring to the forefront as part of that majority, those black families of four who are considered by the census middle class when their annual, pretax income is as modest as fifty thousand dollars. This modest-income-defined black middle class, in fact, draws the interests of the black majority squarely into accord with American constituencies that are not of color. Which is to say, middle-class whites who once endorsed and actually were able to live the American dream have found themselves nearly completely abandoned—if not literally dispossessed—by the policies of the conservative federal plutocracy that has ruled the United States for the past three decades. Hence, the black middle class is—to paraphrase an observation by Richard Wright—“America’s metaphor.” Wright averred that as the black majority goes, so goes the nation. There is, therefore, much at stake in attending to the interests and committing oneself to the enablement of the black majority. In a sense, one can surely say those who fail the black majority at the present time are unequivocally in league with the ruling white elites who have destroyed not only the middle class but also so much more that is fundamental to the founding ideals of our nation.

What “community” means against the backdrop of the physical, mental, spatial, and emotional deprivation that marks black life in America is, I think, stark necessity, brilliant ingenuity, compelling imagination, unimaginable fortitude, and stern commitment to ideals forged in the fire of chattel

slavery and Jim Crow's unforgivable inhumanity. My mother was my own first instructor in community. She was the model and exemplar. My father was but a hair's breadth behind.

As a businessman, my father naturally wanted to make a profit. The reason he thought he would fare better than the white owner from whom he purchased the store in Little Africa was that he was actually going to live (and persuade his wife and family to live) in the locale from which his profits derived. (A kind of *Lincoln Heights* precursor was he.) His first step was to have our family home built behind the store. No absenteeism would do for my father. Second, my father viewed Baker's Market as a critical resource for a black community blighted by neglect. He was an "uplift" disciple of Booker T. Washington's heroic Tuskegee dispensations, focused in his own way on black people farthest down. "Always speak to people," he instructed my older brother and me. "Everyone deserves your respect." And he was true to his teaching words. He brought some pretty bizarre and terribly inefficient black men and women into our family life in the name of race and respect. Like "Don," the self-styled down-on-his-luck black plumber who left Baker's Market flooded one cold weekend long ago. There were handymen who commenced repairs with less-than-substantial materials, disappeared for weeks on end, then miraculously reappeared to finish a job and collect their pay.

What I remember of my father's doctrines remains both practical and

In black American life and culture a race man or race woman is one who dedicates his or her life and work to countering the lies, ideological evasions, and pretensions to “innocence” and “equal justice for all” that prop up America’s deeply embedded, systemic, and institutionalized racism. Race men and race women (which I consolidate, and at the same time, I think, usefully expand to the term “race people”) seek remedy for harms to the black body caused by the gospel and practice of white supremacy. Race people contest an ideologically inspired and profit-hungry white power structure that still maintains and reaps scandalous billions of dollars from a traffic in and enslavement of black bodies in the Americas. (Today’s slavery is disguised as criminal justice in the form of a vast American private prison-industrial complex.) Race people model themselves as sharers of a culture, cause, and community held to be of African descent and labeled variously “African,” “colored,” “Negro,” “black,” “Afro-American,” “African American.” These are the selfsame people the precociously brilliant poet-essayist Amiri Baraka hailed as “blues people.” Often patterning their labors after biblical prophets, race people commit themselves to a mobile, resounding, fierce redefinition of the state of race and the race in a troubled American nation. They do this in the very face of race’s most brutal exclusions. When they are granted or when they secure public voice, they use their forum to advocate the interests of what they define as “their race” at its majority level.

Select black individuals may achieve fame—and a growing black middle class may work profitably at race-oriented and affirmative action-induced jobs. Elite blacks may even find themselves subjects for glossy, high-end magazines such as *Ebony*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Essence*. But to state the unequivocal once again, the race reaps virtually no benefit from the bling of a black celebrity “elite” that is often more damning in its condemnation of the black American majority than white America at large. Where the majority is concerned, any real (consumable) public gains or advancement in America must provide nourishment for all; there must be a collective harvest. The life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are rich in acknowledged commitment to the advance of the race as a whole, as well as to race as a valued and valuable category for the analysis of American life and history.

Little Africa and the incumbencies of my parents as race people thus open this book. This is autobiography, and I feel obliged to note that one advance reader of this manuscript asked, “What has Little Africa got to do with anything that follows in the book?” By way of answer I suggest that the most adept analytical traditions of black intellectual critique in America often privilege autobiography. Autobiography in black American intellectual traditions has always assumed a huge burden of evidence and carried a special explanatory power with respect to race and community. Autobiography has been a mainstay of black critical memory from time immemorial, manifesting a preservative reverence for verifiable historical facts as they have been filtered through the alembic of personal consciousness and conscience. In the black world, the self-story has served as self-defense against white supremacy’s claims to know, statistically regulate, and police who precisely we are, and where we must live. It is this autobiographical tradition of memory, self-defense, and critique that I invoke with word of Little Africa. When I use the phrase “black majority,” I refer to those globally ghettoized in Little Africas that are subservient always to interests of white power. Here is what the famous Kerner Commission, charged with investigating causes of urban rioting and black community disorder in the 1960s concluded: “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”¹ This statement of fact is a capsule account of what I have called an outside relentlessly pushing the black world into Little Africa. And I believe it is most effectively self-story—black autobiographical critique—that evidences and provides witness with respect to the subordinating effects of white supremacy in the creation, and condoning, of Little Africa. This is, in part, my answer to the query: What has Little Africa (by which I take my interlocutor to mean *autobiography*) got to do with anything that follows in the book?

Now certainly, autobiography in itself does not guarantee analytical adequacy. That is to say, it is always problematic to base one’s claims of critical accuracy exclusively on the evidence of one’s own life. Even the most intellectually astute partisans of the self-story have expressed reservations: “Autobiographies . . . assume too much or too little: too much in assuming that one’s own life has greatly influenced the world; too little in the reticences, repressions and distortions which come because men do not dare to be absolutely frank.” W.E.B. Du Bois wrote these words. In *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* he insists his life is not significant

in itself, but only insofar as it is part of a “problem”: the great global ignominy of the subordination of the “darker races of the world” by the lighter ones. Despite his autobiographical caveat, however, Du Bois resolutely situates his thoughts, speculations, analyses, reflections, and conclusions within a *personal* field of experience. In fairness, one must note that the sage of Great Barrington—as others were wont to label Du Bois—self-consciously refused to be reticent about men, events, ideas, theories, and crises that were decidedly outside his youthful ken. What most distinguishes Du Bois’s autobiographical scholarly labors in many instances is his candid admission that only time, scholarly labor, and fortune brought him an awareness of who precisely he was as a personal self. In a sense, then, Du Bois acknowledges that the personal-autobiographical is always after the fact and *avant la lettre*. The alchemy and attraction of autobiography as a platform for critique, that is to say, consists not so much in claims for a special knowing that accrues to the writer simply from his living in the welter of the world. The real gold standard and most useful autobiographical critique, Du Bois seems to hold, results from the catalytic combination of personal recall and scholarly endeavor. The personal really only becomes effectively political or critical through disinterested study. Therefore, it does not make much sense from a Du Boisian perspective for a writer to assert, “I know it because I lived it.” Living is not enough. We come fully to possess our rounded personal histories only through the play of the intellect and imagination over the wisdom and witness of the world.²

I summon Du Bois here because his analysis and demonstration of the virtues and liabilities of autobiographical critique are nonpareil. Hence, I take Du Bois’s cautions seriously. I do not commence the present project with memories of Little Africa to claim some special existential knowledge based on personal experience alone. Rather, I invoke the world of my first personal memory as a metonym for certain registers of majority life whose significance it has taken me years to understand. World forces did in fact condition the bleakness of black life in the quarter of the “Negro” in Louisville, Kentucky. And I have spent almost half a century brooding over the men, theories, ideas, and events that, in effect, created *all* the Little Africas of the globe. I have indisputably learned that the significance of my life does not lie in some mythological ideal of rugged individualism or stout fantasy of self-reliance. No, the personal in my case is clearly a function of parents who seized the temper of a collective black American consciousness and instilled in their children allegiance not to self but to the interests of the black majority.