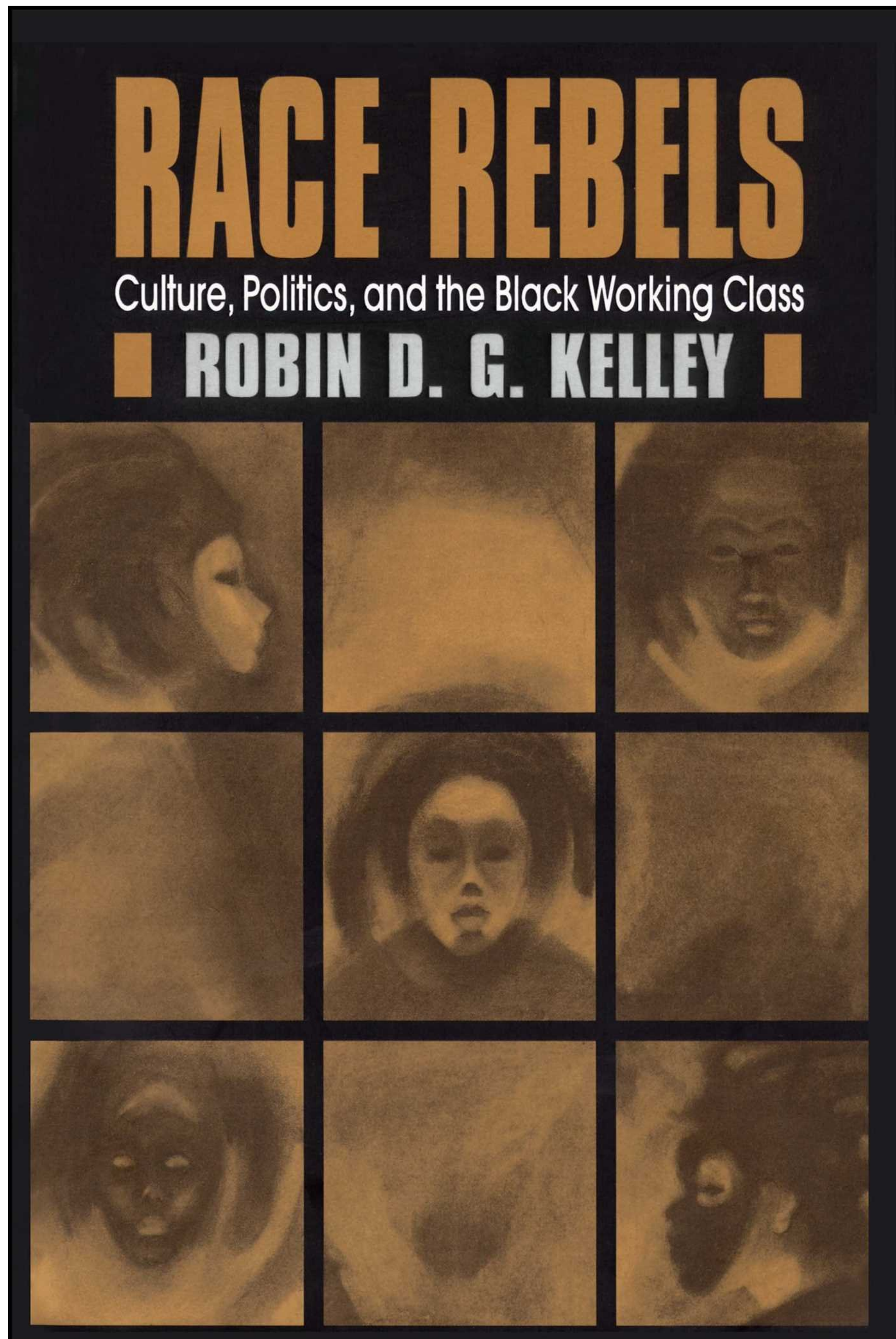


From

From Robin D G Kelley, *Race Rebels*



Chapter 1

Shiftless of the World Unite!

If “conspicuous consumption” was the badge of a rising middle class, “conspicuous loafing” is the hostile gesture of a tired working class.

—DANIEL BELL, *Work and Its Discontents*¹

All observers spoke of the fact that the slaves were slow and churlish; that they wasted material and malingered at their work. Of course they did. This was not racial but economic. It was the answer of any group of laborers forced down to the last ditch. They might be made to work continuously but no power could make them work well.

—W.E.B. DUBOIS, *Black Reconstruction in America*²

Nearly a quarter century ago, a historian named George Rawick published an obscure article in a small left political journal that warned against treating the history of the working class as merely the history of trade unions or other formal labor organizations. If we are to locate working-class resistance, Rawick insisted, we need to know “how many man hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through the slowdown, the limiting of the speed-up of the productive apparatus through the working class’s own initiative.”³ Unfortunately, few historians have followed Rawick’s advice. Still missing from most examinations of workers are the ways in which unorganized working people resisted the conditions of work, tried to control the pace and amount of work, and carved out a modicum of dignity at the workplace.

Not surprisingly, studies that seriously consider the sloppy, undetermined, everyday nature of workplace resistance have focused on

workers who face considerable barriers to traditional trade union organization. Black domestic workers devised a whole array of creative strategies, including slowdowns, theft or "pan-toting" (bringing home leftovers and other foodstuffs), leaving work early, or quitting, in order to control the pace of work, increase wages, compensate for underpayment, reduce hours, and seize more personal autonomy. These individual acts often had a collective basis that remained hidden from their employers.

Black women household workers in the urban South generally abided by a "code of ethics" or established a sort of blacklist to collectively avoid working for employers who proved unscrupulous, abusive, or unfair. Quitting or threatening to quit just prior to an important social affair to be hosted by one's employer—commonly called an "incipient strike"—was another strategy whose success often depended on a collective refusal on the part of other household workers to fill in.⁴ Likewise, in the factories strategies such as feigning illness to get a day off, slowdowns, sometimes even sabotage, often required the collective support of co-workers.

Studies of black North Carolina tobacco workers reveal a wide range of clandestine, yet collective, strategies to control the pace of work or strike out against employers. When black female stemmers had trouble keeping up with the pace, black men responsible for supplying tobacco to the stemmers would pack the baskets more loosely than usual. When a worker was ill, particularly black women who operated stemmer machines, other women would take up the slack rather than call attention to her condition, which could result in lost wages or dismissal. On the factory floor, where stemmers were generally not allowed to sit or talk to one another, it was not uncommon for women to break out in song. Singing in unison not only reinforced a sense of collective identity but the songs themselves—religious hymns, for the most part—ranged from veiled protests against the daily indignities of the factory to utopian visions of a life free of difficult wage work.⁵

Theft at the workplace was among the more common forms of working-class resistance, and yet the relationship between pilfering—whether of commodities or time—and working-class opposition has escaped the attention of most historians of the African American

working class.⁶ Any attempt to understand the relationship between theft and working-class opposition must begin by interrogating the dominant view of “theft” as deviant, criminal behavior. First of all, what theft is must be placed in historical context. As E. P. Thompson and Peter Linebaugh point out in their studies of English workers, changes in the law in response to workers’ actions often turned accepted traditions—what Thompson calls “the moral economy”—into crime. At the center of class conflict in the eighteenth century were dock workers in London who suddenly lost the right to dip into tobacco cargoes for their personal use; farmers who were denied access to “common” lands for grazing and gathering wood; shipwrights, caulkers, and other laborers in the shipbuilding industry who discovered that they could be jailed for continuing the very old practice of taking “chips” of excess wood home with them. For years afterward, workers continued to take things from work, but now they were stealing. For some the consequences were unemployment, jail, deportation to the “New World,” or the gallows.⁷

The idea of the moral economy certainly operated in the Jim Crow South, as is evident in the actions of domestic workers. While “pan-toting” was regarded as theft by many employers, household workers believed they had a right to take home leftovers, excess food, and redundant or broken utensils for their home use. Not only was it the moral thing to do, given the excesses and wastefulness of wealthy families and the needs of the less privileged, but pan-toting also grew out of earlier negotiations over the rights and obligations of waged household labor. Insisting that pan-toting was not theft, one Southern domestic worker declared, “We don’t steal; we just ‘take’ things—they are a part of the oral contract, exprest [sic] or implied. We understand it, and most of the white folks understand it.” The “white folks” who tolerated pan-toting viewed it as either further proof of black women’s immorality or justification for low wages. In other words, because pan-toting entailed the loss of food and clothing, low wages were intended to compensate for the *employer’s* loss. Others simply treated pan-toting as a form of charity. As one employer put it, “When I give out my meals I bear these little blackberry pickaninnies in mind, and I never wound the feelings of any cook by asking her ‘what that is she has under her apron.’” Aside from the more familiar

instances of pan-toting, washerwomen throughout the South occasionally kept their patrons' clothes when they were not paid in a timely and adequate fashion.⁸

From the vantage point of workers, as several criminologists have pointed out, theft at the workplace is also strategy to recover unpaid wages and/or compensate for low wages and mistreatment.⁹ In the tobacco factories of North Carolina, black workers not only stole cigarettes and chewing tobacco (which they usually sold or bartered at the farmer's market) but, in Durham at least, workers figured out a way to rig the clock in order to steal time. And in the coal mines of Birmingham and Appalachia, miners pilfered large chunks of coke and coal for their home ovens. Black workers sometimes turned to theft as a means of contesting the power public utilities had over their lives. During the Great Depression, for example, jobless and underemployed working people whose essential utilities had been turned off for nonpayment literally stole fuel, water, and electricity: people appropriated coal, drew free electricity by tapping power lines with copper wires, illegally turned on water mains, and destroyed vacant homes for firewood.¹⁰

Unfortunately, we know very little about black workplace theft in the twentieth-century South and even less about its relationship to working-class resistance. Historians might begin to explore, for example, what philosopher and literary critic Michel de Certeau calls "wiggling," a complicated form of workplace resistance in which employees use company time and materials for themselves (e.g., repairing or making a toy for one's child, writing love letters). By using part of the workday in this manner, workers not only take back precious hours from their employers but resist being totally subordinated to the needs of capital. The worker takes some of that labor power and spends it on herself or her family. One might imagine a domestic who seizes time from work to read books from her employer's library. A less creative though more likely scenario is washerwomen who wash and iron their own family's clothes along with their employers' laundry.¹¹

Judging from the existing histories, it seems that domestic workers adopted sabotage techniques more frequently than industrial workers. There is ample evidence of household workers scorching or spitting in food, damaging kitchen utensils, and breaking household

appliances, but these acts were generally dismissed by employers and white contemporaries as proof of black moral and intellectual inferiority. Testifying on the "servant problem" in the South, a frustrated employer remarked:

the washerwomen . . . badly damaged clothes they work on, iron-rusting them, tearing them, breaking off buttons, and burning them brown; and as for starch!—Colored cooks, too, generally abuse stoves, suffering them to get clogged with soot, and to "burn out" in half the time they ought to last.¹²

Although most of the literature is silent on industrial sabotage in the South, especially acts committed by black workers, there is no question that it existed. In his work on tobacco workers in Winston-Salem, Robert Korstad introduces us to black labor organizer Robert Black, who admitted to using sabotage as a strategy against speedups:

These machines were more delicate, and all I had to do was feed them a little faster and over load it and the belts would break. When it split you had to run the tobacco in reverse to get it out, clean the whole machine out and then the mechanics would have to come and take all the broken links out of the belt. The machine would be down for two or three hours and I would end up running less tobacco than the old machines. We had to use all kind of techniques to protect ourselves and the other workers.¹³

It is surprising to note how little has been written about workplace theft and sabotage in the urban South. Given what we know of the pervasiveness of these strategies in other parts of the world, and the fact that sabotage and theft were common practices among slaves as well as rural African Americans in the postbellum period, the almost universal absence of these sorts of clandestine activities among black industrial workers in historical accounts is surprising.¹⁴ Part of the reason, I think, lies in Southern labor historians' noble quest to redeem the black working class from racist stereotypes. The company personnel records, police reports, mainstream white newspaper accounts, and correspondence have left us with a somewhat serene portrait of folks who, only occasionally, deviate from what I like to call the "Cult of True Sambohood." Southern racist ideology defined pilfering, slowdowns, absenteeism, tool-breaking, and other such acts as ineptitude, laziness, shiftlessness, and immorality.¹⁵ But rather than

escape these categories altogether, sympathetic labor historians are often too quick to invert them, remaking the black proletariat into the hardest-working, thriftiest, most efficient labor force around. Part of the problem, I suspect, lies in the tendency of historians to either assume that all black workers lived by the Protestant work ethic or shared the same values usually associated with middle-class and prominent working-class blacks. But if we regard most work as alienating, especially work performed in a context of racist and sexist oppression, then we should expect black working people to minimize labor with as little economic loss as possible.

When we do so, we gain fresh insights into traditional, often very racist documents. Materials that describe "unreliable," "shiftless," or "ignorant" black workers should be read as more than vicious, racist commentary; in many instances these descriptions are the result of employers, foremen, and managers misconstruing the meaning of working-class activity which they were never supposed to understand. Fortunately, many Southern black workers understood the "Cult of True Sambohood" all too well, and at times used the contradictions embedded in racist ideology to their advantage. In certain circumstances, their inefficiency and penchant for not following directions created havoc and chaos for industrial production or the smooth running of a household. And all the while the appropriate grins, shuffles, and "yassums" mitigated potential punishment.¹⁶

The effectiveness and acceptability of this sort of "masking" is partly shaped by gender. Although both men and women were known to adopt these kinds of evasive tactics to protect themselves, they often countered racially defined notions of appropriate masculine and feminine behavior. Because black women—especially household workers—were often regarded as less violent than men, and were thought, by many employers at least, to be more closely integrated into the familial networks of the homes in which they worked, they might have had slightly more space to speak their minds to the people they worked for. But we have to be careful not to overstate the case: grievances and complaints by household workers had to be expressed in such a way as to minimize what might be interpreted as insubordination. Despite claims that domestics were "part of the family," household worker Dorothy Bolden remembers having "to walk a chalk line.

And if you talked back in those days, you was an uppity nigger, you was sassy, and you was fired and put out."¹⁷

On the other hand, while there might have been fewer opportunities for black men to jettison the mask of deference since public insubordination sometimes led to violence, they also had to contend with gender conventions that regarded deference and retreat from conflict as less-than-manly behavior. The racial politics of manhood has not only centered on publicly "standing up" to racism and other indignities, but the failure or inability to do so has been frequently described in terms of "feminizing" black men. When combined with a U.S. labor movement characterized by a long history of using masculine language and imagery to describe workers' struggles, the race-gender matrix can make for interesting expressions of labor politics. A powerful example is the Memphis sanitation workers' strike of 1968, in which hundreds of black picketers marched silently with placards bearing the slogan, "I Am a Man."¹⁸

As David Roediger has demonstrated in a penetrating essay on Covington Hall, a radical labor journalist and supporter of the interracial Brotherhood of Timber Workers in Louisiana (an affiliate of the Industrial Workers of the World or IWW), race and gender operated simultaneously in the rhetoric defending interracial working-class resistance. First, the BTW sought to use appeals to "manhood" as the foundation for building biracial unity. Hall, and before him BTW leader Ed Lehmann, insisted that there be no "Niggers," or "white trash" (i.e., scabs)—only MEN—(i.e., militant union activists). Second, because these timber workers were united by a universalizing notion of manhood, Hall made sure that strategies of resistance were sufficiently manly; in short, militant and directly confrontational. Yet, because sabotage was a popular tactic of the BTW's, it had to be recast not as clandestine but as openly rebellious. Roediger writes, "it is hard to believe the zeal with which [sabotage] was propagandized was not intensified by the tremendous emphasis on manhood, in part as a way to disarm race, in BTW thinking. And, of course, the fear of emasculation and the need to assert manhood applied with special force among white male workers because to be 'cringing' and 'servile' meant not only being unsexed, but less than white as well." Thus to be manly meant not only to be confrontational but to be as far away

from servile (read: "Negro") labor as possible. Hall even symbolized sabotage by invoking the image of a rattlesnake rather than the quieter image of the black cat, which was more common elsewhere. Roediger astutely observed, "A greater appreciation of African American patterns of resistance might have argued for using Brer Rabbit as the symbol for sustained, creative, gritty struggle. Instead, the BTW not only sought confrontation but, like the rattlesnake, made noise about doing so."¹⁹

Employers and probably most white workers viewed what black male workers were doing as less than manly; proof of their inferiority at the workplace and evidence that they should be denied upward mobility and higher wages. For some black male industrial workers, efficiency and the work ethic were sometimes more effective as signifiers of manliness than sabotage and footdragging. As Joe Trotter's powerful book on African Americans in southern West Virginia reminds us, theft, sabotage, and slowdowns were two-edged swords that, more often than not, reinforced the subordinate position of black coal miners in a racially determined occupational hierarchy. As he explains, "Job performance emerged as one of the black miners' most telling survival mechanisms. To secure their jobs, they resolved to provide cooperative, efficient, and productive labor." More than a few black workers apparently believed that a solid work record would eventually topple the racial ceiling on occupational mobility. Furthermore, black men and women workers were taught the virtues of hard, efficient work in church. The National Baptist Convention, for example, issued pamphlets and reports criticizing workers for laziness and idleness, suggesting that hard work—irrespective of wages or the nature of the work itself—would lead to success and respectability for the race as a whole.²⁰

Yet, efficiency did not always lead to improved work conditions, nor did sabotage and footdragging always go unnoticed or unpunished. Therefore, what we need to know is why certain occupations seemed more conducive to particular strategies. Was efficiency more prevalent in industries where active, interracial trade unions at least occasionally challenged racially determined occupational ceilings (i.e., coal mining)? Was the extent of workplace surveillance a deterrent to acts of sabotage and theft? Were black workers less inclined toward sabotage when disruptions made working conditions more

difficult or dangerous for fellow employees? Were evasive strategies more common in service occupations, particularly those that employed women? These questions need to be explored in greater detail. They suggest that to really understand strategies of resistance we need to explore with greater specificity the character of subordination at the workplace.²¹

But it is even more complicated than this. Where we find a relative absence of resistance at the “point of production,” it does not necessarily follow that workers acquiesced or accommodated to the conditions of work. On the contrary, the most pervasive form of black protest was simply to leave. Central to black working-class infrapolitics was mobility, for it afforded workers some freedom to escape oppressive living and working conditions, and power to negotiate better working conditions. Of course, one could argue that in the competitive context of industrial capitalism—North and South—companies did not necessarily suffer from this sort of migration since wages for blacks remained comparatively low no matter where black workers ended up. And employers depended on legal and extralegal measures to limit black mobility, including vagrancy laws, debt peonage, blacklisting of union activists, intimidation of Northern labor recruiters, and outright terror. Thus the very magnitude of working-class mobility challenges the idea that Southern black working people accommodated. Besides, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that a significant portion of black migrants, especially black emigrants to Africa and the Caribbean, were motivated by a desire to vote, provide a better education for their children, and/or live in a setting in which Africans or African Americans exercise power. One’s ability to move represented a crucial step toward empowerment and self-determination; employers and landlords understood this, which explains why so much energy was expended limiting labor mobility and redefining migration as “shiftlessness,” “indolence,” or a childlike penchant to wander.²²

Location plays a critical role in shaping workplace resistance, identity, and—broadly speaking—infrapolitics. By location I mean the social spaces of work and community, as well as black workers’ position vis-à-vis existing racial and class hierarchies. Southern labor historians and race relations scholars have established in no uncertain terms the degree to which occupations and, in some cases, work spaces were segregated by race.²³ But only recently has scholarship begun to move

beyond staid discussions of labor market segmentation and racial (and more recently, gender) inequality to an analysis of what these distinctions at work and home mean for black working-class politics and for collective action.²⁴

Earl Lewis offers a poignant example. During World War I, the all-black Transport Workers Association of Norfolk began organizing African American waterfront workers irrespective of skill. Soon thereafter, its leaders turned their attention to the ambitious task of organizing all black workers, most notably cigar stemmers, oyster shuckers, and domestics. The TWA resembled what might have happened if Garveyites took control of an IWW local: their ultimate goal seemed to be One Big Negro Union. What is important about the Norfolk story is the startling success of the TWA's efforts, particularly among workers who had been dismissed as unorganizable. Lewis is not satisfied with simplistic explanations like the power of charismatic leadership or the primacy of race over class to account for the mass support for the TWA; rather, he makes it quite clear that the labor process, work spaces, intraclass power relations, communities and neighborhoods—indeed, class struggle itself—are all racialized. The result, therefore, is a "racialized" class consciousness shaped by the social locations of work and home. Lewis writes,

In the world in which these workers lived nearly everyone was black, except for a supervisor or employer. Even white workers who may have shared a similar class position enjoyed a superior social position because of their race. Thus, although it appears that some black workers manifested a semblance of worker consciousness, that consciousness was so imbedded in the perspective of race that neither blacks nor whites saw themselves as equal partners in the same labor movement.²⁵

A racialized class consciousness shaped black workers' relations with interracial trade unions as well. Contrary to popular belief, black workers did not always resist segregated union locals. Indeed, in some instances African American workers preferred segregated locals—as long as they maintained control over their own finances and played a leading role in the larger decision-making process. To cite one example, black members of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers in Louisiana found the idea of separate locals quite acceptable. However, at its 1912 convention black delegates complained that they

could not “suppress a feeling of taxation without representation” since their dues were in the control of whites, and demanded a “coloured executive board, elected by black union members and designed to work ‘in harmony with its white counterpart.’”²⁶

Gender also undoubtedly shaped the work spaces and collective consciousness of Southern black workers. Recent work on black female tobacco workers, in particular, has opened up important lines of inquiry. Not only were the dirty and difficult tasks of sorting, stemming, and rehandling tobacco relegated to black women, but the spaces in which they worked were unbearably hot, dry, dark, and poorly ventilated. The coughing and wheezing, the tragically common cases of workers succumbing to tuberculosis, the endless speculation as to the cause of miscarriages among co-workers, were constant reminders that these black women spent more than a third of the day toiling in a health hazard. If some thought the physical space in which they worked was a prison or a dungeon, then they could not help but notice that all of the “inmates” were black women like themselves. And if that were not enough, foremen referred to them only by their first names, or changed their names to “girl” or something more profane, regarding their bodies as perpetual motion machines as well as sexual objects. Thus, in addition to race, gender bonds were reinforced by the common experience of sexual harassment.

Women, unlike their black male co-workers had to devise a whole range of strategies to resist or mitigate the daily physical and verbal abuse of their bodies, ranging from putting forth a sort of “asexual” persona, to posturing as a “crazy” person, to simply quitting. Although these acts might seem individual and isolated, they were not. In the tobacco factories, these confrontations usually took place in a collective setting, the advances of lecherous foremen were discussed among the women, and strategies to deal with sexual assault were observed, passed down, or learned in other workplaces. (Some women who had previously worked as domestics, for example, had experience staving off the sexual advances of male employers.)²⁷

Yet, in the eyes of most male union leaders, these sorts of battles were private affairs that had no place among “important” collective bargaining issues. Unfortunately, most labor historians have accepted this view, unable to see resistance to sexual harassment as a primary struggle to transform everyday conditions at the workplace.²⁸ Out of

the common social space and experience of racism and sexual exploitation, black female tobacco workers constructed "networks of solidarity." They referred to each other as "sisters," shared the same neighborhoods and institutions, attended the same churches, and displayed a deep sense of community by collecting money for co-workers during sickness and death and by celebrating each other's birthdays. These "networks of solidarity" were indispensable for organizing tobacco plants in Winston-Salem and elsewhere.²⁹

In rethinking workplace struggles, black women's work culture, and the politics of location, we must be careful not to overemphasize the distinct character of home and work. Recent studies of paid homework remind us that working women's homes were often extensions of the factory. For African American women, in particular, as some scholars have shown, the decision to do piece work or take in laundry grew out of a struggle for greater control over the labor process, a conscious effort to avoid workplace environments in which black women have historically confronted sexual harassment, and "the patriarchal desires of men to care for their women even when they barely could meet economic needs of their families or from women's own desires to care for their children under circumstances that demanded that they contribute to the family economy."³⁰

The study of homework opens up numerous possibilities for rethinking black working-class opposition in the twentieth century. How do homeworkers resist unsatisfactory working conditions? How do they organize? Do community and neighborhood-based organizations protect their interests as laborers? How does the extension of capital-labor relations into the home affect the use and meaning of household space, labor patterns, and the physical and psychological well-being of the worker and her family? How does the presumably isolated character of work shape their consciousness? How critical is female homework as a survival strategy for households in which male wage earners are involved in strikes or other industrial conflicts?

For many African American women, homework was indeed a way to avoid the indignities of household service, for as the experience of black tobacco workers suggests, much workplace resistance centered around issues of dignity, respect, and autonomy. Sexual harassment was part of the job. "It was always attempts made on black women from white men," one domestic worker remembers. "Sometimes he

had a knack for patting you on the back, not on your back but on your behind, and telling you that you was a nice-looking black gal and this type of thing. And I resented that.”³¹

Less dramatic but of immense importance was the practice of requiring black domestics to don uniforms, which had the effect of reducing their identities to that of “employee” and ultimately signified ownership—black workers became the property of whoever owned the uniform. Household workers in Washington, D.C., for example, resisted wearing uniforms because they were symbols of live-in service. Their insistence on wearing their own clothes was linked to a broader struggle to change the terms of employment from a “servant” (i.e., a live-in maid) to a day worker. “As servants in uniform,” historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis writes, “the women felt, they took on the identity of the job—and the uniform seemed to assume a life of its own, separate from the person wearing it, beyond her control. As day workers, wearing their own clothes symbolized their new view of life as a series of personal choices rather than predetermined imperatives.”³²

But struggles for dignity and autonomy often took on an *intra*class character. Black workers endured some of the most obnoxious verbal and physical insults from white workers, their supposed “natural allies.” We are well aware of dramatic moments of white working-class violence—the armed attacks on Georgia’s black railroad firemen in 1909, the lynching of a black strikebreaker in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1921, the racial pogroms in Mobile’s shipyards during the Second World War³³—but these were merely explosive, large-scale manifestations of the verbal and physical violence black workers experienced on a daily basis. Without compunction, racist whites in many of the South’s mines, mills, factories, and docks referred to their darker co-workers as “boy,” “girl,” “uncle,” “aunt,” and more commonly, just plain “nigger.” Memphis UAW organizer Clarence Coe recalls, “I have seen the time when a young white boy came in and maybe I had been working at the plant longer than he had been living, but if he was white I had to tell him ‘yes sir’ or ‘no sir.’ That was degrading as hell [but] I had to live with it.” Occasionally white workers kicked and slapped black workers just for fun or out of frustration. Black workers took whatever opportunity available to them to contest white insults and reaffirm their dignity, which, more often than we might imagine, exploded into fisticuffs after work or at the workplace. Black tobacco

worker Charlie Decoda recalled working "with a cracker and they loved to put their foot in your tail and laugh. I told him once, 'You put your foot in my tail again ever and I'll break your leg.'" Even sabotage, a strategy usually employed against capital, was occasionally used in the most gruesome and reactionary intraclass conflicts. In Michael Honey's work on the Memphis working class, he tells us about a black UAW leader named George Holloway whose attempts to desegregate his local and make it more responsive to black workers' needs prompted racist white union members to tamper with his punch press. According to Honey, this unfortunate act of sabotage "would have killed or maimed him had he turned it on." But as Honey also points out, personal indignities and individual acts of racist violence prompted black workers to take collective action, sometimes with the support of antiracist white workers. Black auto workers in Memphis, for example, waged a wildcat strike after a plant guard punched a black woman in the mouth.³⁴

This sort of intraclass conflict was not merely a manifestation of "false consciousness" or a case of companies' fostering an unwritten policy of "divide and rule." Rather, white working-class consciousness was also racialized. The construction of a white working-class racial identity was a dynamic process emerging from the peculiar nature of class conflict in a society where wage labor and chattel slavery existed side by side. Studies by Roediger, Eric Lott, and others are especially important for explaining how European workers came to see themselves as white and as part of a white working-class racial identity.³⁵ While racism was not always in the interests of Southern white workers, it was nonetheless very "real."

Racist attacks by white workers did not need instigation from wily employers. Because they ultimately defined their own class interests in racial terms, white workers employed racist terror and intimidation to help secure both a comparatively privileged job and what W.E.B. DuBois and David Roediger call a "psychological wage." A sense of superiority and security was gained by being white and *not* being black. And in some cases white workers obtained very real material benefits by institutionalizing their strength through white-controlled unions which used their power to enforce ceilings on black mobility and wages. Black workers had to perform "nigger work." Without the

existence of “nigger work” and “nigger labor,” to white workers whiteness would be meaningless.³⁶

Determining the social and political character of “nigger work” remains essential for an understanding of black working-class infrapolitics. First, by racializing the division of labor, it has the effect of turning dirty, physically difficult, and potentially dangerous work into *humiliating* work. To illustrate this point, we might examine how the meaning of tasks once relegated to black workers changed when industrial settings became predominantly, if not exclusively, white. For example, as sociologist Michael Yarrow points out in his study of coal miners in Appalachia, where not only are there fewer black workers but racial ceilings have been largely (though not entirely) removed, difficult and dangerous tasks that used to be humiliating “nigger work” are now engendered with masculinist meaning. The miners believed that “being able to do hard work, to endure discomfort, and to brave danger” is an achievement of “manliness.” While undeniably an important component of the miner’s work culture, it has the ultimate effect of “obscuring its reality as class exploitation.” On the other hand, the black miners in Trotter’s study were far more judicious, choosing to leave a job rather than place themselves in undue danger. This is not at all to suggest that black miners did not take pride in their work. On the contrary, they often challenged dominant categories of skill and performed what had been designated as menial labor with the pride of a skilled craftsman. But once derogatory social meaning is inscribed upon the work itself (let alone the black bodies that perform the work), it has the effect of undermining its potential dignity and worth—which frequently means rendering “nigger work” less manly. In order to retain the socially constructed categories in which work designated as masculine is valorized, the racialization of the same work can, in effect, change the gendered meaning of certain jobs. Ethnographer Paul Willis found this to have been the case in his own study of British working-class youth. Racism, as Willis observed,

marks the bottom limit of the scope of masculinity and delivers it not as a vulgar assertion of everything physical and menial, but as a more carefully judged cultural category. But elsewhere, where immigrant racial groups are still likely to take the worst and roughest jobs, they are not considered

“harder” and “more masculine.” It is untenable that such social groups should take the mantle of masculine assertiveness, so such jobs are reclassified to fall off the cultural scale of masculinity into the “dirty,” “messy,” and “unsocial” category.³⁷

Because black men and women toiled in work spaces in which both bosses and white workers demanded deference, freely hurled insults and epithets at them, and occasionally brutalized their bodies, it becomes even clearer why issues of dignity informed much of black infrapolitics in the urban South. Interracial conflicts between workers were not simply diversions from some idealized definition of class struggle; white working-class racism was sometimes as much a barrier to African American’s struggle for dignity and autonomy at the workplace as the corporate-defined racial division of labor.³⁸ Thus episodes of interracial solidarity among working people, and the fairly consistent opposition by most black labor leaders to Jim Crow locals, are all the more remarkable.³⁹ More importantly, for our purposes at least, the normative character of interracial conflict opens up another way to think about the function of public and hidden transcripts for white workers. For Southern white workers to openly express solidarity with African Americans was a direct challenge to the public transcript of racial difference and domination. Indeed, throughout this period Southern biracial union leaders, with the exception of certain left-wing organizers, tended to apologize for their actions, insisting that the union was driven by economic necessity and/or assuring the public of their opposition to “social equality” or “intermixing.” Thus, even the hint of intimate, close relations between workers across the color line had consequences that cut both ways. Except for radicals and other bold individuals willing to accept ostracism, ridicule, and even violence, expressions of friendship and respect for African Americans had to remain part of the “hidden transcript” of white workers. This is an important observation, for it means that acts and gestures of *antiracism* on the part of white workers had to be disguised and choked back; when white workers were exposed as “nigger lovers” or when they took public stands on behalf of African Americans, the consequences could be fatal.⁴⁰

This chapter, and some of the work on which it draws, just begins to explore the realm of workplace infrapolitics. It aims to recover daily

acts of resistance by African Americans who, until recently, have been presumed to be silent or inarticulate. Given the incredibly violent and repressive forms of domination in the South, workers' dependence on wages, the benefits white workers derived from Jim Crow, the limited influence black working people exercised over white dominated trade unions, and the complex and contradictory nature of human agency, clandestine forms of resistance should be expected.

Whether or not battles were won or lost, the mere threat of resistance elicited responses from the powerful which, in turn, shaped the nature of struggle. Repression and resistance are inextricably linked and African American resistance did make a difference. We know, for example, that Southern rulers during this era devoted an enormous amount of financial and ideological resources to maintaining order; police departments, vagrancy laws, extralegal terrorist organizations (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan and the White Legion), and the spectacle of mutilated black bodies were part of the landscape of domination surrounding African Americans. Widely publicized accounts of police homicides, beatings, and lynchings, as well as black protest against acts of racist violence, abound in the literature on the Jim Crow South.⁴¹ Yet, while dramatic acts of racial violence and resistance are usually well documented and make good stories, they represent only the tip of a gigantic iceberg.

We need to recognize that infrapolitics and organized resistance are not two distinct realms of opposition to be studied separately and then compared; they are two sides of the same coin that make up the history of working-class resistance. As I have tried to illustrate, the historical relationships between the hidden transcript and organized political movements during the Age of Jim Crow suggest that trade unions and political organizations able to mobilize segments of the black working class were successful because they at least partially articulated the grievances, aspirations, and dreams that remained hidden from public view. On the other hand, we must be careful not to assume that organized movements are merely articulating a full-blown hidden agenda that had been percolating until the proper moment. Such a view underestimates the impact that social movements themselves have on working-class consciousness. Involvement in a movement often radicalizes workers who might have otherwise expressed their grievances silently.⁴² Hence, efforts on the part of grass-roots

unions to mobilize Southern black workers, from the Knights of Labor and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to the Communist Party and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), clearly played a role in shaping or even transforming the hidden transcript. Successful struggles that depended on mutual support among working people and a clear knowledge of the "enemy," not only strengthen bonds of solidarity but also reveal to workers the vulnerability of the powerful and the potential strength of the weak. Furthermore, at the workplace as in public space, the daily humiliations of racism, sexism, and waged work, combined with the presence of a labor movement, embolden workers to take risks when opportunities arise. And their failures are as important as their victories, for they drive home the point that even the smallest act of resistance has its price. The very power relations that force them to resist covertly also make clear the terrible consequences of failed struggles.

African American workers' actions, thoughts, conversations, and reflections were not always, or even primarily, concerned with work, nor did they fit well with formal working-class institutions, no matter how well these institutions might have articulated *aspects* of the "hidden transcript." In other words, we cannot presume that trade unions and similar labor institutions were the "real" harbingers of black working-class politics; rather, even for organized black workers they were probably a small part of an ensemble of formal and informal avenues through which people struggled to improve or transform daily life. For a worker to accept reformist trade union strategies while stealing from work, to fight streetcar conductors while voting down strike action in one's local, to leave work early in order to participate in religious revival meetings or rendezvous with one's lover, or to choose to attend a dance rather than a CIO mass meeting is not necessarily a sign of an "immature" class consciousness, but reflects the multiple ways working people live, experience, and interpret the world around them. It is to this larger world, the places where the African American working class spend at least one-third of their day, that we now turn.