

The Bayou City in Black and White

HUDDIE LEDBETTER SPENT VERY LITTLE TIME in Houston during his years in Texas, but when he began his stint at Central State Prison Farm in Sugar Land in 1920, he quickly learned about the culture and politics of the Bayou City. The road between Sugar Land and Houston was not a long one. Many of Ledbetter's fellow inmates had made the twenty-mile trek from the city to the rural prison farm to serve their sentences. When prisoners chanted in call-and-response patterns as they toiled in the relentless heat of the Brazos River bottoms, or when they shared folk songs and stories at the end of an arduous day in the fields, the men swapped vernacular expressions and local knowledge from the places they called home. Ledbetter brought performance styles he had cultivated in the clubs along Fannin Street in Shreveport, in the Deep Ellum entertainment district in Dallas, and at country dances in the small towns and rural hamlets that dotted East Texas and western Louisiana. Meanwhile, references to nearby Houston populated the songs and stories shared by other inmates at Sugar Land.

It was through these Houstonians that the man who came to be known as "Leadbelly" heard firsthand accounts of the city located about twenty miles east of the prison, cautionary tales about the run-ins with police officers that had landed so many of them behind bars in the first place. When Ledbetter began singing his own version of the song "Midnight Special," he likely was alluding to the people and places his fellow inmates mentioned in their tales:

If you ever go to Houston
 Boy, you better walk right
 And you better not squabble

And you better not fight
Bason and Brock will just arrest you
Payton and Boone will carry you down
And you can bet your bottom dollar
Oh Lord, you're Sugar Land bound.¹

Ledbetter's take on "Midnight Special" points to a relationship between urban law enforcement in Houston and rural punishment in the surrounding countryside. He and the men he encountered in Sugar Land drew on a folk tradition that enabled them to impart knowledge about a region and its power structure through their cultural expressions. "Midnight Special" maps the nexus of power that flowed between country and city, revealing a history of place and displacement in eastern Texas.² Known ominously as the "Hell-Hole of the Brazos," the prison in Fort Bend County was a site of forced labor that had entrapped African Americans before and after the Civil War. Slaves once cultivated the sugarcane fields that gave the town and prison in Sugar Land their names. Following the war, local plantations leased convicts to work the land. The state of Texas later purchased land in the area and built the penitentiary there in 1908.³ By the time Ledbetter arrived at the onset of the '20s, the prison was an established part of the white power structure that relied on subjugated black labor. "Midnight Special" may even refer to some of the people who helped maintain that system—specifically, white police officers in the Bayou City. Superintendent Clarence Brock served as Houston's chief of police during World War I, while George Payton and Johnnie Boone worked as detectives in the city's black neighborhoods. Men who ran afoul of these police officers could easily land in the fields of Sugar Land. The violent confrontations that led to the Houston Riot of 1917, the vicious tactics of a reborn Ku Klux Klan that had police support, and continued brutality in the 1920s confirmed that urban law enforcement and rural prisons physically embodied white supremacy in the region.

Before twentieth-century migrations altered Houston's demographics, Houston was a town where Anglos and African Americans made up the majority of the population. Notions of race and power were rooted in the creation of a slave society in Houston and the surrounding countryside in the antebellum era and the establishment of a black/white binary. Black migrants further established a group subjectivity when they flooded into Houston from places like Fort Bend County following the Civil War and established a network of free black communities decades before the Great Migration. In the face of black cultural and economic growth, white

supremacists in the early twentieth century worked to maintain their dominance through legal maneuvers and the steady perpetuation of the type of violence Leadbelly describes in “Midnight Special.”

The black migrants who poured into Houston over the years worked to build an alternate geography over this landscape of violent white supremacy. Black Houstonians strove to create autonomous neighborhoods in order to forge a spatial—and psychological—distance between themselves and the white power structure. This project began when the first freed people arrived in Houston after the Civil War from places like Sugar Land, but it especially gained momentum during the New Negro era: a nationwide commitment to militant struggle against Jim Crow and racial violence during and after World War I. Writer Alain Locke described New Negroes as black people with “renewed self-respect and self-dependence.”²⁴ Militant Houstonians articulated this identity through their willingness to use armed self-reliance in response to white-led violence, their use of older vernacular traditions to critique authority, and their emphasis on creating black neighborhoods that lay outside of white control. These assertions were often motivated by concerns about race and gender. A history of violence between white men and women of color especially influenced black Houstonians’ push to claim space and power.

Cultural expressions buttressed New Negroes’ efforts to achieve those goals. The food they ate, the stories they told, the music that inspired them to dance, and the beauty products they sold became the basis for a consumer economy that supported the sociopolitical project of black autonomy. Musicians like Huddie Ledbetter, along with writers and urban entrepreneurs, did not just offer cultural responses to that agenda. Culture products often provided the foundation for their claims to space. In the process, black migrants articulated a racialized subjectivity that was informed not only by their legal status in a segregated society, but also by cultural practices that served as the building blocks for the establishment of black communities.

FROM THE SUGAR BOWL TO THE SAN FELIPE DISTRICT: RACE, POWER, AND THE ORIGINS OF HOUSTON

When newcomers moved to Houston in the late 1910s and 1920s, they entered a place shaped by nearly a century of black history and settlement. That

history shaped the meanings of blackness and whiteness that later groups of migrants would encounter and negotiate.

The connection between Houston and the nearby plantation belt developed in the nineteenth century, and the continued movement of black bodies between those places reinforced that link. Before moving to Houston and marrying Arthur Berry, the woman once called Leanna Edwards came of age in Wharton County, which was adjacent to Fort Bend County, where Huddie Ledbetter served his prison sentence. The Edwards family worked as sharecroppers on a cotton plantation in Wharton, and their enslaved ancestors had likely toiled in that area as well. Wharton and Fort Bend were part of a sugar- and cotton-producing region, dubbed the “Texas Sugar Bowl,” that also included Brazoria and Matagorda counties. (See [map 2.](#)) Located along the lower Brazos and Colorado rivers southwest of Houston, the region historically boasted a substantial black population. English-speaking white settlers realized they could grow cotton and sugarcane in the fertile river bottoms, and they rushed to amass land and slaves. The Sugar Bowl had a dense concentration of large-scale slave plantations between the 1830s and the Civil War, and in 1850, each Sugar Bowl county had a slave majority. By 1860, slaves made up 72 percent of Brazoria County’s population, and over 80 percent of Wharton County.⁵ Although confined to the eastern part of the state, the slaveholding area of Texas was as large as Alabama and Mississippi combined at the onset of the Civil War.⁶

Houston’s proximity to some of the most profitable plantations in Texas made the city the connective tissue that linked the countryside to the port on Galveston Island. City founders Augustus and John Allen saw the potential of a city located “in the heart of a very rich country” of pine and swamp. In 1836, they used black slaves and Mexican prisoners of war from the Battle of San Jacinto to clear the “marshy, mosquito-infested” bayou land that originally formed Houston, named for the Tennessee-born general who led the attack on the Mexican army that year. Human chattel and crops traveled between the city and the farms and plantations of the Sugar Bowl via the San Felipe Trail, a path that allowed the city to prosper on the productivity of the slave-filled countryside.⁷ Houston subsequently became central to Anglo economic interests in southeastern Texas. When he visited the city that locals called “Hewston” in the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted found a city full of churches, saloons, magnolia blossoms, and a thriving slave market. “There is a prominent slave-mart in town, which held a large lot of likely-looking negroes, waiting purchasers. In the windows of shops, and on the doors and



MAP 2. ~~Houston's wards.~~ Map by Bill Nelson.

Houston and the western South.

columns of the hotel, were many written advertisements headed, 'A likely negro girl for sale.' 'Two negroes for sale.' 'Twenty negro boys for sale,' etc."⁸ Most of those slaves wound up in the fields of places like the Sugar Bowl.

The notions of blackness and whiteness in this area were an outgrowth of the social-spatial construction of eastern Texas as a slave society with a plantation-based power structure in the antebellum era. When they moved west to Texas, slaveholders and slaves brought notions of race and power shaped by two centuries of plantation ideology forged in the Southeast.⁹ The

white and black people found in antebellum eastern Texas were typically English-speaking southerners who hailed from other slave states. Forty-three percent of the Anglos living in Texas in 1860 migrated there from one of the other ten states that would form the Confederate States of America one year later. The number of Anglos there who were born in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi nearly equaled the number of people born in the Lone Star State.¹⁰ The elite slaveholding class used their economic power in an agricultural, plantation-based society to impose their values and shore up power. The creation of this slave society in eastern Texas demanded the imposition of the white-over-black racial hierarchy and the implementation of a plantation regime.

Black East Texans' conception of racial blackness developed from the shared circumstances of enslavement, and the act of rebuilding a society and culture in a new place. In slave cabins, cotton fields, plantation kitchens, and brush harbors—secluded brush arbors where slaves practiced Christianity—they formed a group subjectivity. African Americans forced west strove to re-create the cultural practices that had sustained slave communities for centuries.¹¹ Ripped from family and the land they had once called home, slaves brought cultural practices cultivated in the Southeast to the counties of eastern Texas. The work songs heard for nearly two hundred years in Virginia's tobacco fields slaves now used to keep time while chopping cotton along the Brazos River. In places like Brazoria County, slaves built conjurers' cabins with bakongo cosmograms inside to help ward off evil spirits, and praised Jesus in their ring shouts at the end of the day.¹² They emerged from the Civil War with a sense of racial community based on their shared experiences in eastern Texas and the necessity of re-forming social networks and cultural practices in a new place.

Former slaves from the Sugar Bowl and other parts of East Texas were some of the first free black people to settle in Houston after the Civil War. The first influx of freedpeople arrived soon after June 19, 1865, the day remembered as "Juneteenth," when word of Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April finally reached enslaved Texans.¹³ Labor motivated some freedpeople to make the transition from rural to urban. Using labor contracts, Anglo landowners compelled former slaves in the county to pick cotton, chop sugarcane, or conduct other forms of agricultural labor that reminded them of the years they had spent in bondage. Freedpeople frequently signed labor contracts that bound them to white-owned land for a set amount of time. These sharecroppers earned a percentage of the crop they grew, but white

landowners typically found ways to pay them little to nothing for their labor.¹⁴ Thousands of freedpeople decided to abandon the country in favor of cities. Freedpeople from the Sugar Bowl trekked to Houston using the San Felipe Trail, which connected the city to the countryside. Only around one thousand African Americans were living in Houston in 1860, but that number tripled over the next decade. After the Civil War, generations of African Americans from the Sugar Bowl continued moving to Houston.¹⁵

When they first arrived in Houston from the country in the summer of 1865, the penniless former slaves moved into Fourth Ward, near downtown. Homeless migrants found shelter at a dilapidated warehouse that locals dubbed “Hotel d’Afrique.”¹⁶ The sight of newly freed people searching for labor and housing became common in those years following the war. Some Anglo Houstonians lamented the “crowds of idle negroes” in the downtown area: “We cannot help but pity the poor freedmen and women that have left comfortable and happy homes in the country and come to this city in search of what they call freedom,” wrote one Houstonian in the local *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*.¹⁷ But black Houston quickly took root. By 1870 the city was just under 40 percent black. Former slaves created a neighborhood called Freedman’s Town in 1865 at the place where the San Felipe Trail ended in Fourth Ward. A concentration of families, businesses, and institutions made the area south of the Buffalo Bayou and west of downtown a noticeable black neighborhood by 1870. Freedpeople handcrafted bricks to line the community’s streets, and they used cypress trees that grew nearby to construct houses that sat on cinder blocks in the flood-prone city.¹⁸

Freedman’s Town emerged as an early center of black political and cultural life. With the support of former abolitionists, a black school called the Gregory Institute opened in 1870 on San Felipe Street. That thoroughfare became the hub of Freedman’s Town. The neighborhood was home to politicians, pastors, draymen, domestic workers, and a diverse range of former slaves—and some white families—seeking to rebuild after the war. In 1870, a white Radical Republican named William H. Parsons—who supported the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote—lived in an area where most of his neighbors were former slaves.¹⁹ Antioch Baptist Church, which opened in 1872, aided freedpeople who wished to buy land and purchase homes, and served as the site of the city’s first black college. Antioch, under the leadership of a freedman named Jack Yates, also served as the meeting place for the biracial Harris County Republican Club, which solidified the church as a political and religious space.²⁰

The name “Freedman’s Town” spoke to the emergence of a racialized group subjectivity developed by diverse people from different states who forged social space. Because of the history of slavery and forced black migration to eastern Texas, Freedman’s Town looked like a map of the antebellum South, since residents hailed from every state of the former Confederacy. The majority of residents were most likely survivors of the “Second Middle Passage,” people sold to Texas via the interstate slave trade that had thrived before the Civil War.²¹ Fifty-eight percent of black Houstonians had been born outside of Texas in 1870. For most families, only children under the age of eighteen were born in Texas. The Yates family offers a typical story. The Yateses had been born into bondage in Gloucester County, Virginia. The enslaved married couple lived on different farms, but when Harriet’s owner decided to move to Matagorda County, in the Texas Sugar Bowl, in 1863, Jack convinced his owner to sell him so that he could move west with his wife and children. The Civil War ended when Jack was thirty-seven years old and Harriet was around twenty. Rather than remain in the Texas countryside, the Yates family relocated to Houston that year.²² In their Fourth Ward community, 12 percent of their black neighbors also hailed from Virginia. Most of the other adults in Freedman’s Town were born in Louisiana, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, or Mississippi. The Yates family lived next door to the Smith family from Mississippi, while another neighbor, Abram Chambers, was born in North Carolina. These demographics distinguished Houston from cities in the Southeast. While 90 percent of black Atlanta was born in Georgia, only around 40 percent of black Houstonians were Texas natives during Reconstruction.²³ The overwhelming majority of adults in Freedman’s Town shared a history of forced migration to Texas as enslaved people, and the more recent experience of relocating from the country to the city. Those commonalities gave the black community a collective sense of a shared history. They further acknowledged those ties by making claims to urban space. Their cultural institutions such as churches, and the communal land they purchased for parks, marked the neighborhood as their own.

In the years following the Civil War, former slaves also spread beyond Freedman’s Town to establish communities in other wards. Black Houston existed in several different places at once. The geographically dispersed population meant that people of African descent were not historically confined to one part of town like their peers in some northern industrializing cities. As in southern cities like Atlanta and Richmond, black Houstonians lived in communities scattered across Houston.²⁴ By necessity, black Houstonians had to

create and maintain businesses and institutions across the city. White people made up the majority of the city as a whole, but each ward had a black section. Black Third Ward first developed around Emancipation Park, a ten-acre area located at the corner of Dowling and Elgin streets. The congregations of Antioch Baptist Church and Trinity Methodist Episcopal raised eight hundred dollars to purchase the park in 1871. Black neighborhoods developed in other wards during Reconstruction, most notably in Fifth Ward, on the north side of the city, where the commercial and cultural hub of the black community was Lyons Avenue. More black residents lived in Fifth Ward than Anglos in 1870: 578 residents were black, while 561 were white.²⁵ Businesses and institutions in Third Ward, Fourth Ward, and Fifth Ward made those areas the major centers of African American life in the Bayou City.

The wards made Houston feel like a collection of small towns rather than one city. Thelma (Scott) Bryant, who was born in Third Ward in 1905, commented that her neighborhood felt “very much like the country” in the early twentieth century. Likewise, musician Arnett Cobb, who came of age in Fifth Ward, described the community of his youth as a “country town.” Indeed, many of the people who moved to his neighborhood from the country continued the same customs and agricultural practices they had brought with them from the countryside. Most families raised chickens and grew okra, greens, corn, and other subsistence crops in their backyards. The style of architecture reflected the style of black residences found across the post-emancipation South. Working-class families typically lived in white, one-room shotgun houses—structures so named because a person could shoot a gun through the front door and watch the lead travel straight through the house and exit the back door.²⁶

While free black neighborhoods developed, white supremacists adopted measures to disfranchise descendants of slaves and relegate them to inferior status in society. A series of laws targeted black Texans by segregating them from white people in public spaces, and by stripping black men of the right to vote. The state constitution segregated public schools in 1876. Texas Democrats enacted the state’s first Jim Crow law in 1891 by passing a bill that segregated state railroad travel, making Texas one of nine states to do so since 1887. To ensure their continued dominance in state politics, legislators established a poll tax in 1902. They further excluded black Texans from voting in primaries in 1923.²⁷

White lawmakers completed the Jim Crow-ing of Houston in the first two decades of the twentieth century through a series of city ordinances. The Democrat-ruled local government prohibited integration in every space

where black and white people made contact. A 1903 ordinance segregated streetcars. Four years later, the city council segregated theaters, hotels, restaurants, and public facilities. A different law segregated local parks that year. Legal segregation in public facilities—from streetcars to theaters to saloons—reminded African Americans of their place in society by forcing them into inferior spaces. They were either barred from entering certain establishments or relegated to specific areas. Black customers, when permitted to patronize white-owned restaurants, received their food from a back window or ate in the basement. Some laws targeted interracial sex. In 1908 a justice of the peace Jim Crow—ed houses of prostitution by issuing an order that made it illegal for white and black prostitutes to conduct business under the same roof. Another ordinance, in 1922, prohibited interracial cohabitation.²⁸ These laws marked racial difference and enforced a hierarchy of white over black.

While the number of segregation laws increasingly limited black mobility in Houston, the descendants of slaves who lived in the wards strove to create and nurture their own institutions within their neighborhoods. Their businesses, community celebrations, and athletic organizations allowed African Americans the opportunity to promote their own leaders and maintain their own cultural practices without feeling inferior to the white majority, especially as racial restrictions tightened in the age of Jim Crow. Banned from attending most city-sponsored Fourth of July festivities, black Houstonians celebrated Juneteenth at Emancipation Park, where they barbecued and danced to the sounds of local bands.²⁹ When white Houstonians barred black people from an autumn festival, created in 1899, called the No-Tsu-Oh (*Houston* spelled backward), black Houstonians established the De-Ro-Loc (*colored* spelled backward) for themselves. And since the white baseball team, the Houston Buffaloes, excluded black athletes, African Americans played for the Houston Black Buffaloes. A group that had included the Alabama-born educator Edward Ollington Smith also petitioned for a black library, and after six years of activism, the Colored Carnegie Library opened in 1913—complete with a black librarian.³⁰

The most dramatic example of local autonomy in the area occurred just outside the city. Black Houstonians took advantage of the availability of land on the far north side when they formed a township called Independence Heights. On January 16, 1915, with a population of about four hundred, residents voted twenty-two to two to officially break away from Houston. Local newspapers covered the vote, and the *Houston Chronicle* noted that Independence Heights was the first “all Negro city” in Texas. At the time, the

town covered about three square miles. During the first election, residents chose a Houston attorney, G. O. Burgess, as the mayor, and also elected a black sheriff to enforce the law. Land ownership was a point of pride for Independence Heights residents. Of the 183 households listed in the 1920 census, 145 families lived in homes they owned.³¹

In the World War I era, Independence Heights must've seemed especially appealing as black neighborhoods in the wards became sites of violent battles over space and power. Black Houstonians learned that their neighborhoods in the wards were contested terrain. Racial violence especially erupted in Fourth Ward. By the 1910s, the area once known as Freedman's Town had grown from its origins as a small settlement of former slaves into a thriving black community. As the memory of slavery grew more distant, the black residents of Fourth Ward changed the name of their first neighborhood from Freedman's Town to the San Felipe district, named for the major thoroughfare in the community. The district faced a constant white presence in the form of law-enforcement officials. Police officers buttressed the white power structure in Houston by enforcing Jim Crow authority and demanding submission from an expanding black population.

One of the most notorious white officers who patrolled the San Felipe district had roots in the Sugar Bowl. Named Lee Sparks, the police officer embodied the connection between rural and urban white supremacy. He had moved to Houston in the early 1900s, so by the summer of 1917, Sparks had lived in Houston "off and on" for over a decade and had served on the city's police force for four years.³² The area where he spent much of his workday was a hub of black life in Houston in the early twentieth century. White law-enforcement officials in the San Felipe district routinely clashed with black people who strove to govern their own affairs in their community. Sparks and his partner, Rufus Daniels, rode through the neighborhood on Clydesdale horses that allowed them to tower over residents. The officers expected a type of deference from San Felipe residents that defied their sense of freedom. Furthermore, Sparks and Daniels wielded the authority—and weapons—to use force when black Houstonians did not comply. They regularly used both physical violence and verbal degradation to dominate local people. San Felipe residents nicknamed Daniels "Daniel Boone" because of his large stature, and they considered Sparks a "brutal bully." The duo was not typically a welcome sight in the neighborhood.³³

Sparks and Boone were central figures in a bloody contest over race, gender, space, and power that erupted in the San Felipe district in August 1917,

shortly after the United States entered World War I. Racial tensions flared that summer when the military stationed the Third Battalion of the Twenty-fourth Infantry in Houston to guard Camp Logan, a training center being built near Fourth Ward. As one of the units once known as “Buffalo Soldiers,” the Twenty-fourth Infantry enjoyed hero status in Houston that summer.³⁴ The soldiers spent considerable time in the San Felipe, where residents appreciated the sight of black uniformed men during the early days of World War I. One soldier wrote in a letter to the *Crisis*, the official journal of the NAACP, about his experiences in Houston at the time: “[T]he people of color of Houston are proud of their brother soldiers and opened wide their homes and churches, and have welcomed us with a generous hospitality.”³⁵ White Houstonians were less impressed. Soon after the soldiers arrived, accounts of public confrontations between them and white civilians on streetcars and city streets filled local newspapers.³⁶

On the morning of August 23, Lee Sparks publicly beat a black woman named Sara Travers in the San Felipe district, and when a black soldier attempted to intervene, the situation escalated. Sparks entered Travers’s house while chasing a craps shooter, but when the woman questioned his actions, he slapped her. He then called Travers and another black woman who witnessed the scene “God damn nigger bitches.” During this scene of public violence, Private Alonzo Edwards of the Third Battalion approached Sparks and Daniels and asked them to release Travers, an act that Sparks considered impudent. The officer raised his six-shooter and whipped the soldier. Sparks later confessed that he hit Private Edwards four times. “I beat that nigger until his heart got right,” he boasted. “He was a good nigger when I got through with him.” An eyewitness claimed Sparks also said, “That’s the way we do things in the South. We’re running things not the d—— niggers.” Sparks and Daniels arrested both Travers and Edwards and sent them to jail.³⁷

Lee Sparks embodied the connection between rural and urban white supremacy. He reasserted his authority over the San Felipe district through violence, and a reminder of his roots in the Sugar Bowl. As Sparks had retorted on the morning of the riot, “I’m from Fort Ben(d) and we don’t allow niggers to talk back to us. We generally whip them down there.”³⁸ He intended to continue practicing that type of violence against black migrants in the city. Sparks stressed that Private Edwards was “as drunk as he could be” when he confronted him, though the soldier’s alleged inebriation was probably less of a concern than his audacious assumption of public authority

toward a white man in front of a black audience. Later that afternoon, another soldier, Corporal Charles Baltimore of the Third Battalion, confronted Sparks and Boone to inquire about the arrests. Sparks retorted, "I don't report to no niggers." Sparks then beat Corporal Baltimore to the ground. To avoid further blows, Baltimore escaped and ran into an empty house nearby, with Sparks chasing and firing from his six-shooter. The soldier hid underneath a bed, but Daniels and Sparks dragged him out, the latter striking him twice more with the barrel of his gun. A patrol wagon then carted Baltimore to jail. When asked why he felt the need to pistol-whip the unarmed Baltimore, Sparks later explained, "Why, I wasn't going to wrestle with a big nigger like that." The policeman was also cognizant of the crowd of spectators watching the exchange, many of them standing behind the soldier. Sparks would later note that "there was niggers all around there."³⁹ Any sign of compliance with a black man would have been an open acknowledgment of equal status in front of the very people he needed to dominate on a daily basis. Furthermore, Sparks may have also held some fears about the soldiers' influence on these black Houstonians. He purportedly told Travers, "Since these sons of bitches soldiers come here you are trying to take the town."⁴⁰ When Private Edwards questioned Sparks, the black soldier was asserting his authority in a black-majority community that the white officers tried to dominate on a daily basis.

For the black infantrymen stationed at the city's Camp Logan, the war to secure democracy began in Houston instead of on European soil. News of the events in the San Felipe district reached Camp Logan as early as 10:30 that morning, the approximate time of the Edwards beating. News of the assaults, along with rumors that a white mob would attack Camp Logan, circulated and motivated at least two groups of infantrymen to rebel. As the drizzly afternoon transformed into a night that one soldier described as "dark as a stack of black cats," the men collected rifles and ammunition and prepared for retribution. "Forget France," one soldier declared. "Let's go clean up the God damned city. Let's get to work!" That night, approximately one hundred armed black soldiers left camp and marched through the streets in military formation in search of white police officers.⁴¹ The soldiers' revolt began in the neighborhood surrounding Camp Logan, but the columns of men were bound for the San Felipe district, the scene of that morning's violence. As they marched in step down the main drag of the community, West Dallas Street, black Houstonians offered encouragement from open windows. According to one witness, the spectators "were just cheering them up

and hollering, ‘This is what we call a man!’⁴² Some of the black witnesses undoubtedly found the soldiers’ act of retaliation heartening. The soldiers’ actions reclaimed the historic area as black-controlled space, if only for a few hours. In total, twenty people died that night: fifteen white people (including five police officers), one ethnic Mexican man killed by stray gunfire, and four black soldiers. Rufus Daniels died that night in the streets of San Felipe, struck by soldiers’ bullets while Sparks sat at home. Chief Clarence Brock, the superintendent of police, had suspended Sparks for twenty-four hours due to his activities that morning.⁴³

In the Jim Crow era, the hierarchy of white over black was not marked just by disfranchisement laws or the exclusion of African Americans from certain spaces; the daily presence of white police officers in black neighborhoods, and the steady perpetuation of violence, shored up the privileged status of whiteness. By pistol-whipping and shooting the residents of neighborhoods like the San Felipe district, these policemen reminded black Houstonians of their inferior status in the Jim Crow society. Sparks and other officers continued to be a problem for black Houstonians that summer. Sparks killed a black man named Wallace “Snow” Williams just one week after the riot. According to a witness, Williams had fled from the scene of a craps game while Sparks fired shots after him. The blasts hit him in the neck and between his shoulders.⁴⁴ After he fell to the ground, Sparks kicked him in the head. An eyewitness to the scene later questioned whether the United States was actually “the Land of the Brave and the home of the Free” or if the law was only “for just one race . . . Lee Sparks and his kind of murderers?” Just days later, Detective Norfleet Hill shot a black man named Andrew Hewitt, claiming that he had rushed him with a pitchfork. Hewitt actually was carrying a table fork.⁴⁵

Huddie Ledbetter’s ominous warning about Houston rang true for the black migrants who entered the city during and after the war. Since Reconstruction, Houston had attracted migrants from the rural countryside who wanted to escape agricultural labor and live in urban communities with black institutions; however, Lee Sparks and other police officers reminded black Houstonians of their inferior status in the Jim Crow society. Ledbetter arrived at the prison farm just three years after the riot of 1917 and the shootings of Wallace Williams and Andrew Hewitt, so these stories likely influenced his depiction of Houston. As “Midnight Special” cautioned, people of African descent could certainly face death or imprisonment in Sugar Land if they did not “walk right” in the eyes of white-dominated law enforcement.

Despite the negative national attention caused by the riot and subsequent acts of racial violence, the Bayou City grew even blacker over the next decade. A new wave of migrants took part in a larger history of movement between the country and the city that had shaped Houston since Reconstruction. Thousands of people of African descent relocated to the city in the Jazz Age as black Houston grew at a faster rate than most other cities in the former Confederacy. The African American population surged from just under twenty-four thousand in 1920 to over sixty-three thousand in 1930.⁴⁶ Beginning in 1919, a Republican-backed organization called the Lincoln League of Texas placed full-length advertisements in black newspapers to promote migration to what they called “Heavenly Houston” (a boast that must have seemed ironic to anyone who remembered the summer of 1917). The headline described the city as “The Workshop of Texas, Where Seventeen Railroads Meet the Sea.” According to the ad, “Heavenly Houston” not only boasted “the finest drinking water in the South,” but was also home to sixteen black elementary schools, two black hospitals, and three black newspapers. The Lincoln League especially noted the availability of labor by assuring readers that the city “offers unexcelled industrial opportunities to the colored man,” a claim bolstered by economic growth during World War I. People who flocked to so-called Heavenly Houston would transform black Houston. They tried to break from patterns of white domination and black subjugation by abandoning field labor, through political organizing, by promoting armed self-reliance against racial violence, and through the use of cultural traditions from the country that they adapted to an urban context.

The city’s wartime economy appealed to rural migrants in search of industrial employment. Both economic boom and labor scarcity created an especially appealing situation for migrants. Buffalo Bayou, which connects Houston’s ship channel to Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, was key to the city’s economic growth. Before the war, the ship channel was primarily used to ship goods to Galveston Island, where they would then be sent to international ports; however, the island city on the Texas coast never fully recovered from the devastating storm of 1900. When workers dredged the Houston ship channel to make it wide enough to accommodate oceangoing vessels in 1914, Houston replaced Galveston as the export center of Texas. The high demand for cotton during the First World War allowed the city’s cotton firms to expand locally and internationally, and they used the ship

channel to export their goods. Allied forces in Europe used Texas-grown cotton for smokeless powder, military uniforms, and multiple other uses, and their demand for the product accelerated the local economy. By 1930, Houston was the “largest cotton market and export center in the world.” The war era also marked Houston’s transition into an oil town. The number of petroleum shipments from the Port of Houston jumped from 31, 584 short tons in 1915 to 293,400 one year later.⁴⁷

Urban labor at places like the ship channel allowed for a break from agricultural contract labor, and enabled black Texans to earn higher wages without leaving the state. Sharecroppers acquired everything from farm tools to food and personal items through credit; thus, they rarely purchased goods with cash. As credit tightened, the crop lien system became even more inescapable for tenant farmers and sharecroppers.⁴⁸ Furthermore, natural disasters like flooding, combined with the ravaging effects of the boll weevil, made agricultural work in the country increasingly undesirable. Rather than picking the cotton that would then be moved to the inland port city, thousands of rural migrants flocked to Houston to load cotton and other products onto vessels at the ship channel. By trading agricultural labor in the country for industrial or domestic labor in the city, many African Americans who had once worked on “quarters” or “thirds” as sharecroppers became wage laborers for the first time. The possibility of work at the ship channel attracted a steady stream of workers, and black men historically held the majority of the jobs. They were also the first to organize a chapter of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) at the Port of Houston in 1914.⁴⁹ The sounds of black longshoremen singing and chanting in time as they heaved products onto ships became part of the sonic landscape of the city as they adapted the work-song tradition they had brought from the fields of rural Texas to the urban docks of the Port of Houston.⁵⁰

Black women were excluded from the industrial labor opportunities afforded men, so most took jobs as domestic workers in white homes. Between 1920 and 1940, about 40 percent of all black workers in Houston were women, and they made up the overwhelming majority of female cooks, maids, and other domestic workers employed in the city.⁵¹ In the early twentieth century, white southerners expected black women to prepare their food, scrub their floors, and even nurse their babies. Classified advertisements in white-owned newspapers like the *Houston Chronicle* and *Post* described jobs specifically for “colored” nurses, cooks, and laundresses. The labor of black women was so important to white Houston that when Juneteenth landed on

a Friday in 1917, the swank Rice Hotel held a “rescue party” for families left without their black cooks.⁵² Some women came to Houston from the farms of East Texas because they could support themselves with their domestic jobs. Leanna Edwards cleaned homes in white neighborhoods when she moved to Houston as a single mother, and she continued long after she married her husband, Arthur Berry.⁵³ Similarly, a woman named Ella Larkin moved to Houston after her husband, Milton, died in around 1912, leaving her with four small children and no source of income in Grimes County. The widowed Ella Larkin moved her children to Houston. Since Ella had kept house in the country, she transferred those skills to domestic labor in the city. “My mother came along in an era when she was doing housework or the laundry or the cooking,” remembers her son, Milton, Jr., born in 1910. Young Milton supplemented his mother’s household income by cutting lawns and doing odd jobs, but she remained the primary provider.⁵⁴ Women’s wages were a necessary and crucial part of black Houston. Whether earned from lifting cargo onto ships or from scrubbing floors in white homes, migrants’ wages helped fortify expanding black communities.

Rural-to-urban migration spurred political as well as economic change as some black residents adopted a decidedly more confrontational tone in their efforts to fight white supremacy. Some of the city’s most influential black Houstonians—from postal employees to newspaper editors to educators—responded to the climate of racial terror by forming a new group, the Civic Betterment League (CBL), to focus on political and social issues in Houston and surrounding areas. In 1918, its membership having grown to about 230, the CBL decided to convert the local organization into a branch of the NAACP.⁵⁵

The leaders of the fledgling NAACP branch were among the most militant activists in the city. Some members, like E. O. Smith, thought cooperating with municipal and county authorities would ensure cordial relations between white political leaders and black activists. Yet another faction vowed to make the Houston NAACP an “aggressive, progressive, fighting organization.”⁵⁶ Clifton Frederick Richardson, a journalist who had worked as the CBL’s civil and social director, emerged as a one of the leaders of this second, more militant faction. Richardson was born in 1891 in the town of Marshall. A journalist by trade, he graduated from Bishop College in his hometown. After finishing his studies in 1909, he moved to Houston and eventually made a home in the San Felipe district with his wife, Ruby Leola, and their three sons. Richardson began writing for and managing a black-owned

newspaper called the *Houston Observer* in 1916. Three years later, Richardson and two partners formed the Informer Publishing Company, and he began editing the newspaper that would make him notorious, both locally and nationally. He was twenty-eight years old when the *Houston Informer* debuted in 1919.⁵⁷ A renaissance man who sang and played bass guitar, he frequently promoted black arts as an example of his race's postwar ascendancy. Richardson eventually served as president of the Houston NAACP and at least four other organizations: the Texas Association of Branches of the NAACP, the Real Building and Loan Association, the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Club, and the Houston Negro Business League. He cofounded the Houston Citizens Chamber of Commerce and served as director of the Texas Association of Negro Musicians for the South Texas District. Richardson was also a churchgoer who attended Bethel Baptist Church (and served as chairman of its board of trustees). Additionally, he participated in fraternal organizations such as the Ancient Order of Pilgrims, the United Brothers of Friendship, the Knights of Pythias, and the Odd Fellows, and he served on the governing bodies of many of those organizations.⁵⁸ From his arrival in Houston in the 1910s until his untimely death in 1939, he was one of the most visible black men in the city. (See [figure 1](#).)

Richardson, along with fellow journalist Henry L. Mims, was financially independent. This allowed both men to make politically volatile remarks without fear of economic reprisal from white bosses. Like Richardson, Mims published a newspaper. When they lobbied for an NAACP chapter, Richardson argued that his group was in a better position to aggressively push for civil rights because they had greater financial independence and better means to reach the black public than the Smith, who worked as an educator within a public school system governed by a white board. "The Negro down here to whom you must tie to is the Negro who is willing to fight for his rights," Mims wrote to John Shillady, secretary of the NAACP. "I mean fight in the courts, in the Press, in the pulpit, in vigorous protest and in every conceivable way to bring about results." Mims's group eventually won the battle. Mims became first president for the Houston and Harris County Branch of the NAACP, and Richardson served as its secretary.⁵⁹

Seeing police brutality as one of the most pressing issues for African Americans in the post-riot city, the new NAACP decided to take a legal approach and challenge the city head-on, a strategy that the more conservative Smith found "unduly hasty." In 1918, they sued the city of Houston after a white police officer beat a black man with a six-shooter. They also hired a



FIGURE 1. Clifton F. Richardson in 1923. C.F. Richardson Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

black lawyer to prosecute a white deputy and constable who killed another black man they had arrested. The officers shot the man as he retreated and then took him to a police station in Harrisburg, a town near Houston. He died from gunshot wounds within three hours. “We are going to endeavor to convict these murderers,” Richardson promised the national office.⁶⁰

In their letters to the national headquarters in New York, Richardson and Mims used language popular among “race men” of the war era. By describing themselves as “aggressive” men who would “fight” for citizenship rights, they rhetorically linked their activism to the New Negro movement, which the *Informer* frequently referenced in the years following the war. New Negroes saw themselves as part of a nationwide commitment to militant struggle

against Jim Crow and racial violence. Richardson's work with the *Informer* personified what one contemporary called the "growing consciousness of the race" after World War I.⁶¹ A story from the Associated Negro Press (ANP) in the summer of 1919, for example, heralded the arrival of "a new awakening for justice in behalf of the people of our racial group," because so much had been written about race relations in the black press that year.⁶² As the *Informer* asserted in 1920, "The 'new Negro' is demanding a 'new deck and a new deal.'"⁶³

Although he was a churchgoing man, Richardson raised hell in Houston. His motto was "Getting 'Em Told," and he used the *Informer* as a platform to tackle local race problems and people who impeded racial progress. He called the segregationists "Hellish Huns" and "Lynchocrats" for allowing lynching to run rampant, and he publicly chastised black Houstonians who they felt bowed to white supremacy. When a local black preacher refused to join his militant protest, Richardson called the minister a "pussy-footing pulpit pimp." He was not a man who minced words.

Richardson urged black Houstonians to rethink their relationship to white people who held political power in society. In 1927, for example, Richardson accused a local black high school principal of having "cold feet" when it came to race issues. Richardson felt that the man, William Leonard Davis, cowed to the white school board. According to Richardson, the school administrator had "joined the ranks of the pusillanimous, pussyfooting principals who betray and sell their race for a position of honor and preferment, and endeavor to stick their fingers in the white people's eyes in order to land certain 'plums' and be known and rated as 'good niggers' who know their place and 'stay in their place.'"⁶⁴ Davis sued. A judge found Richardson guilty of libel that year.

The insults hurled at W.L. Davis constituted more than a public spat; Richardson's choice of words indicated his vision of New Negro activism. He was one of many black urban dwellers who wished to create a separation between themselves and the old vestiges of plantation authority. *Informer* contributors reserved the epithets "darky" and "nigger" for African Americans who (in their estimation) behaved in a subservient manner around white people.⁶⁵ Their transforming relationship to white people was a key aspect of New Negro identity espoused by Houstonians in the 1920s. They lived at a time and place in which Anglos often used degrading images of black people to construct whiteness and negate black political, economic, and social aspirations.⁶⁶ The image of the plantation Negro, however, contrasted sharply with modern

Negroes who demanded the right to vote, built urban communities, and organized labor unions. For them, being a New Negro meant creating a spatial separation from East Texas plantation society through migration, and changing their relationship to white people once they arrived in the city.

New Negroes were often convinced that they took a more aggressive position on racial injustice, and they attributed the change to differences between the World War I generation and older African Americans. When a black Houstonian named Johnny Walls began a job as a postal worker in 1918, he immediately encountered problems with older employees. The “old-time Negroes,” he said, “were hat in hand.” According to Walls, the older men took abuse from white people and removed their hats before entering buildings, which the younger men interpreted as a sign of subservience. Walls organized the Postal Employees’ Alliance of Houston to counter the older generation, who were “merely holding their jobs through their obsequiousness and loss of manhood.”⁶⁷ Richardson was younger than thirty when he launched the *Houston Informer*, and he also saw generational differences between younger and older African Americans. In an address to the Houston Business Men’s Luncheon Club, he pointed out that younger men were taking part in business, whereas that had previously been the domain of older men. This change, he argued, was a result of World War I and the apparent “new vision on the part of younger men.”⁶⁸ These views may have fueled Richardson’s quest to wrestle control of the local NAACP chapter from older activists like E. O. Smith.

The visions of aggression and militance influenced black Houstonians’ response to racial violence in the 1920s. The establishment of the Houston NAACP in 1919 occurred in the same year as the city’s Ku Klux Klan revival, and black Houstonians had to defend themselves from white men in robes and hoods as well as officers in police uniforms. The twentieth-century Klan marched into Houston on October 9, 1920, during a Houston’s Confederate Veterans parade. They carried banners that read, “We were here yesterday, 1866,” “We are here today, 1920,” and “We will be here forever.” After picking the name Sam Houston Klan no. 1, a moniker that linked them to a hero of the Texas revolution, this chapter became the first in Texas and the first located west of the Mississippi River. Texas eventually sent the first twentieth-century Klan senator to Washington, D.C., in 1923 after Democrats voted Earle B. Mayfield into office. Whereas the KKK that had first emerged during Reconstruction was most active during elections, the post-World War I Klan portrayed itself as a fraternal association that

protected “American interests.” Klansmen initially had the full support of white city leaders in Houston. For the Klan’s first-night parade, the city blacked out the lights, and the police force protected the marchers.⁶⁹

Black Houstonians targeted by the Houston Klan were typically middle-class professionals and business owners. The most widely known Klan attack on a black Houstonian occurred in 1925 when Klansmen kidnapped a dentist named Dr. R. H. Ward and tarred and feathered him before tying him to a post. Hearing rumors that African Americans would retaliate for Ward’s treatment, the Klan came out, “armed and badged,” to patrol the city streets.⁷⁰ According to one black Houstonian, the KKK also “emasculated” a black doctor, claiming that he had been having a sexual relationship with a white woman. Incendiary critiques of white supremacy in the *Informer* led the Klan and its supporters to vandalize the newspaper’s office several times. According to Richardson family lore, the Klan created several plots to kill the outspoken editor. On one occasion Richardson’s enemies allegedly planned to have a police officer arrest him, and when they walked him across the courtyard square a sniper would shoot him. A black waiter spoiled another alleged plan when he overheard his employers discussing their intention to lure Richardson into a building on Main Street and kill and dismember him, with each murderer taking a piece of his body away to hide the evidence and to have a souvenir. Because of his editorials on police brutality, Richardson had to defend himself from white men wearing city police uniforms and white robes. After he wrote an exposé on the Klan for the *Informer* in the 1920s, police officers stopped the newspaper editor for a defective headlight and then whipped him. Richardson survived the attack, but according to his son, he eventually “went to his grave” with scars from the beating that left him needing thirty-five stitches.⁷¹

In the decade following the war, newspaper reports and family recollections suggest that black Houstonians practiced armed self-reliance when they encountered violence from white police officers or Klansmen. Other cases of gun violence between black men and white police officers made front-page news in the 1920s. Pete Chester, a fifty-three-year-old African American man, killed a white police officer in Fourth Ward in 1927. A lawyer hired by the NAACP successfully argued that Chester killed the officer in self-defense, and Chester was acquitted a year later. Some white Houstonians seethed over Chester’s acquittal, and anger may have fueled a subsequent attack.⁷² Months after the not-guilty verdict, a black man named Robert Powell fatally wounded a white police officer during a shootout in Fourth

Ward. A white mob then abducted Powell from Jefferson Davis Hospital, where he was being treated for gunshot wounds, and lynched him over a bridge. The murder of Powell attracted national attention since it occurred just days before the Democratic National Convention, which would be held in Houston.⁷³ Both the Chester and Powell cases featured black armed self-reliance in Fourth Ward, which showed that black Houstonians would use weapons to protect themselves from violence.

Armed self-reliance could inspire community support in 1920s Houston. After writing a particularly scathing critique of the Klan, Richardson received a note bearing a drawing of a dagger and the words “Nigger, leave town. Don’t let the sun go down on you.” Rather than flee the city, the editor and a group of friends armed themselves and guarded his home overnight. The Klan never appeared. In this era of racial violence, their neighborhoods were perhaps their best defense against terror.⁷⁴ Richardson began carrying a pistol after repeated threats on his life. Hearing rumors that the editor had armed himself in response to these attacks, the chief of police reportedly visited him and said, “Richardson, I understand you carry at all times.” When Richardson confirmed that the rumor was true, the chief reportedly replied, “Well, I don’t blame you. As long as I’m chief, you don’t have to worry about it.”⁷⁵ The character of racial violence in Jazz Age Houston suggests that local New Negroes had exchanged “Passive Resistance” for the “terrible weapon of Self-Defense,” as W. E. B. Du Bois articulated in a 1919 issue of the *Crisis*.⁷⁶ Signs carried by Marcus Garvey’s supporters in Harlem at a Universal Negro Improvement Association parade in 1920 bore the words “The New Negro Has No Fear,” and the visible use of armed self-reliance from African Americans across the nation supported that claim.⁷⁷

Gender politics also fueled male New Negroes’ rhetoric on violence and activism in the Bayou City. Black women were quite visible in Houston’s public spaces; they traversed the city for work and school, and to find amusement. Male New Negroes often based their definition of manhood on their ability to shield the women in their families and communities from violence. “This age demands REAL HE-MEN,” asserted an Independence Heights resident in 1927, “men who love their families and guard with their lives the sanctity of home.”⁷⁸ Dr. Benjamin Covington, an affluent physician who lived in Third Ward with his wife and daughter, avoided riding public transportation because he could not “be a man” and protect the women from insults hurled at them by white people.⁷⁹ Some male New Negroes after World War I even referred to their activism as the “Manhood Movement.”⁸⁰ Editorials in the *Informer*

rooted the Houston Riot of 1917 in a black soldier's defense of a black woman from white policemen. A 1923 editorial reminded readers, "Two local police officers were taking advantage of a defenseless and helpless colored woman and were placing her under arrest attired only in her house garments—she was virtually nude and even not properly dressed to come out on her front porch." While the *Informer* staff did not condone the murders that occurred on August 23, 1917, they reminded readers, "Every truthful person knows that the beating up and shooting at one of the colored sergeants, who remonstrated with a local police officer for the brutal and barbaric manner in which he (the white officer) was treating a colored woman, was really the last straw that broke the camel's back."⁸¹ Examples of violence against black women in Houston, and the legacy of sexual exploitation of slaves and free black women in the South, left African Americans wary about potential assaults from white men. Rape, argues historian Danielle McGuire, "served as a tool of psychological and physical intimidation that expressed white male domination and buttressed white supremacy."⁸² Concerns for black women in the growing city fueled New Negro activism.

Even when black women used the *Informer* to expose indignities they faced in a Jim Crow society, male writers used their complaints to appeal to black manhood. In 1919, Libbie Boutte, principal of an elementary school, received a letter in the mail from the Union National Bank of Houston with the suffix "nig" after her name. Boutte sent the letter to the *Informer* offices, and it appeared on the front page. The newspaper showed indignation over the insult to Boutte and posited a solution: "We possess the remedy, the potential strength, within our race, if we will only get up sufficient manhood, backbone and business stamina and launch such businesses among our race."⁸³ To the *Informer*, black business would shelter the women of their community from indignity. Although Boutte was a community leader, the newspaper's emphasis on "manhood" positioned men as the saviors of the race, and women as figures who needed their protection.

Black women, however, asserted an image that countered the notion that they needed male protection. While domestic labor in white homes was quite common among African American women, the development of black institutions and neighborhoods gave them the opportunity to find white-collar employment and launch their own businesses that catered to members of their race and gender. In the dozens of black public schools, women worked as administrators and teachers. Women like Libbie Boutte assumed leadership positions in their community institutions. Boutte began her professional career

as a teacher, and by 1918, the Third Ward resident worked as principal of Eighth Avenue School.⁸⁴ Female black migrants also became vocal within the local chapter of the NAACP. Lula B. White and Christia Adair moved to Houston in the early 1920s, and both emerged as leaders within the organization. White eventually worked as the NAACP's executive secretary, with White serving as her administrative assistant. These women actively pushed for black rights, proving that the New Negro movement was not solely a man's game.⁸⁵

Some of most powerful New Negro articulations of the right to space and the rejection of white supremacy came from black vernacular traditions imported from the countryside. Houstonians who opened fresh issues of the *Informer* on Fridays may have been especially delighted to read about the exploits of a fellow named Cimbee, the protagonist of the weekly column "Cimbee's Ramblings." Cimbee hailed from the piney woods and red dirt roads of East Texas, but by the end of World War I, he lived in Houston. An observer of humankind, he spent much of his time wandering through the city and meeting new people. He was especially interested in race relations, and he devoted a significant amount of space in the column to criticizing how race and power functioned in Texas and the South. In 1919, for example, Cimbee embarked on a quest to understand the ways of white folks. He met a white doctor who explained the meaning of the phrase "the white man's burden." Cimbee was interested to learn that, according to the doctor, "the white folks were over here in America tending to their own business, and our fore parents stole some Dutchman's ship and brought ourselves over here and made the white man feed us and clothe us for 200 years. That's where the saying arose, 'The White Man's Burden.'"⁸⁶ The use of humor to subvert white supremacy and address interracial concerns became a hallmark of "Cimbee's Ramblings."

Although his *Informer* column depicted real people and places that readers would have recognized, Cimbee was not an actual person. A local writer and educator named Simeon B. Williams created the character, and Cimbee functioned as his alter ego. The name "Cimbee" played on Williams's first name and middle initial—Simeon B. The men also shared a common hometown and migration experience. Like Williams, Cimbee had arrived in Houston from Marshall. He roamed the streets of his new city, and then wrote letters to his friends "Gus" and "Lee" back home that described his adventures. At least twenty years before Langston Hughes's "Jesse B. Semple" character appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, Cimbee strolled through Houston, issuing humorous but biting observations on the people living in the Bayou City.

“Cimbee’s Ramblings” served as a community-building tool in a migration city, but also indicates how *Informer* writers conceptualized racial blackness. The column frequently reminded readers of a shared ancestry as descendants of slaves and a common struggle against black degradation. When Cimbee referred to a Dutchman’s ship that brought his ancestors into contact with white people, he reminded readers of their history as descendants of Africans who had arrived in Virginia two centuries earlier, in 1619. Williams used humor to remind readers that they had common roots and a longer history of combating white supremacy. Weekly columns mocked the social customs that reinforced the racial hierarchy of the Jim Crow society. In one of his first issues in 1919, a white Houstonian refers to Cimbee as “Uncle”—a derisive term for adult black men. Cimbee retorts, “I ain’t got no nephews that I remembers that belongs to that particular race . . . but I must have been his uncle cause he said so, and I don’t like to argue with kin-folks.”⁸⁷ By feigning ignorance, Cimbee poked fun at white paternalism while simultaneously protesting social norms that marked black inferiority in a Jim Crow society. White southerners had the power to verbally degrade African Americans by calling them names like “Auntie” and “Uncle.” Meanwhile, they expected black people to address them as “ma’am” and “sir.” When an adult African American had to call a white child “sir” but could only expect to be called “boy” in return, it left no question as to who was the dominant race.⁸⁸

The column further addressed a shared racial heritage by drawing on older forms of black American folk culture to voice the concerns of a community transitioning to urban life. Williams paid close attention to working-class, rural expression. Cimbee obviously strove to evoke laughs from his readers; the illustration above the column even featured a clownish-looking figure bopping happily along, snapping his fingers. But Cimbee was no simple fool. His column contained humor, but the comedy took the form of a “laughing to keep from crying” sensibility that drew on a rich folkloric tradition of using trickster figures to critique power and subvert authority. Like the popular African Americans tricksters derived from African forebears, Cimbee celebrated the cunning wisdom of black folk culture while exposing the ignorance of the powerful. In African American folklore, tricksters are not typically the strongest, fastest, or wealthiest characters in the tales, yet they outwit stronger opponents who have access to more resources. The popular Br’er Rabbit routinely dupes quicker foxes that would like to eat him for dinner. He defeats adversaries with his cleverness. Cimbee perhaps most closely resembles the human trickster named John, a fictional slave living in the

antebellum South. In countless tales that survived into the twentieth century, John outmatched his master and proved that he was not intellectually inferior.⁸⁹ African Americans had used these cultural and intellectual traditions for generations to combat notions of black inferiority. Williams reinterpreted these trickster figures in the twentieth century during an era of migration, while highlighting the subversive nature of black working-class expression.⁹⁰

The community-building aspect of “Cimbee’s Ramblings” extended to the style of the prose. After the first few issues, Williams wrote “Cimbee’s Ramblings” in a dialect that reflected the cadences and rhythms of rural, southern black speech. The character’s dialect was a source of humor in the column, but it also served as a sonic indicator of group membership and history. At a time when some educated African Americans would have cringed at the idea of placing rural black dialect on the front page of a “race paper,” Williams celebrated that aspect of rural heritage while also using the column to discuss racial problems. Cimbee issued a satire on race relations in 1923, for example, by remarking, “I luvs my w’ite fokes, an’ has bin wurkin’ hard ever since 1619 ter try ter maik civilized nashun outen ’em.” The *Informer* staff heralded his work as a prime example of the vibrancy of African American culture. Editor C. F. Richardson praised Williams as “a delineator of Negro dialect” and “the best writer of his type in American journalism.”⁹¹

When Cimbee reported on Houston in his letters to East Texas, Williams used cultural expression to transmit knowledge about this specific place and its power structure to the droves of migrants entering the city. For example, he discussed black migrants’ relationship to the white-dominated legal system in Houston.⁹² After W. L. Davis sued Richardson for libel in 1927, Cimbee supported his editor by calling the whole affair “Nigger Mess.” Cimbee opined that Davis’s insistence upon taking the issue to a city courthouse to be decided upon by a white judge impeded racial progress. Cimbee reminded readers of their roots in rural areas like the Brazos River valley to further ridicule Davis’s decision to sue. For Cimbee, the case illustrated that “whut we lurnt down in Brazzus bottom er sum uther bottom ’bout tuckin’ awl our lil sturbmints ter de w’ite fokes fer settlement ain’t got outen us.”⁹³ By specifically naming the Brazos River valley—an area within the eastern Texas plantation belt—Cimbee used a spatial indicator of group membership. Readers had moved to Houston from similar places, and they had a similar history with white supremacy. The old pattern of dominance and subjugation that had existed in the country, he opined, should not order race

relations in the city. Like Huddie Ledbetter, Cimbee used this folk tradition to transmit information and impart wisdom about the realities of Houston in the decade after World War I.

NAACP campaigns and Richardson's editorials in the *Informer* were not, then, the only ways that African Americans voiced their concerns about life in the city or made claims to space. Folk traditions made up what scholar Clyde Woods calls the "blues bloc," an epistemology developed in rural working-class black communities that spread as a result of rural-to-urban migration. As an art form, the blues had allowed rural black southerners to articulate a "collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks by the plantation bloc and its allies."⁹⁴ "Cimbee's Ramblings" adapted the blues impulse that permeated black artistic expression. As writer Ralph Ellison noted, the blues impulse is a three-step process found in diverse art forms that involves identifying the source of pain, expressing that painful experience in a "near-tragic, near-comic" voice, and then finding affirmation of one's existence in the process. The blues often sounded mournful, but embedded in the often-melancholy lyrics was a message of self-affirmation. By singing about travails, blues singers express their humanity.⁹⁵

Thematically, the blues offered an individual's response to a specific or general condition. Just as Cimbee commented on white authority through satire, musicians often conveyed their ideas about status and rank in their songs. In songs by Alger "Texas" Alexander, the singer describes an unjust white power structure that threatens his personal freedom. An itinerant musician, Alexander traveled in and out of Houston in the 1920s and 1930s. He laments in "Levee Camp Moan Blues":

They accused me of murder
And I haven't harmed a man . . .
They have accused me of forgery
And I can't write my name.⁹⁶

The unnamed "they" of Alexander's song is a criminal justice system that often targeted black men in eastern Texas. Being black increased one's odds of facing a life sentence at a prison farm or even the death penalty. Eighty-four percent of the Texans sentenced to the electric chair between 1924 and 1928 were African American. Of the forty-five Texans who died in the electric chair, seven were white, four were of Mexican descent, and thirty-four were African American. As one black Houstonian noted, the death penalty "was nothing more than legalized lynch law . . . instead of legal prosecution

it was racial persecution.”⁹⁷ Songs like “Levee Camp Moan Blues” and “Midnight Special” provided a cultural response to the hardening of Jim Crow and continued violence against African Americans.

Cimbee did not sing or play guitar, but his antics were steeped in a blues tradition. As Simeon Williams understood, blues-impulse art could also make people laugh. “Sad as the blues may be,” writes Langston Hughes, “there’s almost always something humorous about them—even if it’s the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying.”⁹⁸ Cimbee embodied blues-impulse humor. Like generations of singers, poets, novelists, and playwrights, Cimbee acknowledged black struggle, but he articulated this pain in a humorous voice that gave audiences a collective sense of shared struggle and resilience.

Houston’s New Negro era was shaped by migrants who drew on their shared history in the rural plantation belt as they established an urban black community. Perplexed by violence, but also emboldened by community-building efforts, wage labor, militant activism, and shared cultural expressions, they strove to redefine themselves in a new place. The *Houston Informer*, led by Richardson and his fiery editorials, became a place where migrants negotiated the transition from rural to urban. Through “Cimbee’s Ramblings,” Simeon Williams adapted older traditions for a people who were reestablishing a collective racial sensibility in a new place. The character allowed *Informer* readers to feel more urban through the act of reminiscing about a shared past. That collective nostalgia helped them form an identity as urban people.⁹⁹ Cimbee reminded readers that they were a community, people who came from the same region and who rebuilt homes in a new place. This idea of a shared past—and a shared racial future—affected how black Houstonians responded collectively to the segregation and racial violence they encountered in the city.

BLACK CULTURE AND BLACK SPACE

The vernacular traditions that singers and writers brought into the city did not just provide commentary on the racial politics of Houston; these cultural expressions became the foundation for political and economic projects for black autonomy.¹⁰⁰ This vision for independent black space within the city was made possible by the economic shift that accompanied rural-to-urban migration and the surge in black political activism, but it was largely

sustained by the proliferation of cultural forms that bolstered the consumer economy that flourished during the Jazz Age. An urbanizing form of blues music, as well as numerous businesses that catered to women, especially provided the backbone for the consumer economy that aided efforts for black autonomy.

As a growing city with a substantial black population, Houston attracted blues musicians looking for paying audiences. The first generations of blues artists in Houston likely found audiences in vice quarters. When Sammy Price visited Houston for the first time, in the late twenties, the piano player from rural northeastern Texas came in search of the “bordellos and good-time houses” that he heard populated the Houston–Galveston area. Born in the small town of Honey Grove, he had long rejected his family’s strict Protestant values by the time he came to the Bayou City. Aside from earning money as a pianist, Price was also a hustler who enjoyed “fast women and nightclubs and gamblers and confidence men.” He found his element in Houston. Dubbed “Vinegar Hill” by locals, the oldest entertainment district in Houston originated soon after the Civil War. One Houstonian declared that “Tin Can Alley,” the street that led to Vinegar Hill, was “the toughest place in the South.” Notoriously short-tempered and quick on the draw, Vinegar Hill habitués acquired a reputation for lawlessness among Houstonians. Down on Tin Can Alley, a three-hundred-pound woman called “Auntie” reportedly dealt cocaine, and “brawls were as common as mongrel cats.”¹⁰¹ In 1908 the city council established a ten-block red-light district called the Reservation in Fourth Ward, and the area reportedly housed over four hundred prostitutes before the local government closed the district after World War I.¹⁰² Both Vinegar Hill and the Reservation served as entertainment districts where earlier generations of musicians could find work.

Urban wages helped build a viable music scene for aspiring artists after the war. More recreational sites emerged within black communities and outside of vice quarters in the 1920s. A growing professional class of musicians could earn a living in one place instead of relying on an itinerant, nomadic existence. Houston had an infrastructure for black entertainment by the end of the 1920s. The city attracted black migrants who did not necessarily want to make money working at the ship channel or cleaning white homes. Musicians from small towns and farms in East Texas made their way to the Bayou City in search of audiences eager to dance after putting in long hours at work.

Often played by migrants acclimating to the Bayou City, the sounds of the blues filled Houston’s swampy air. East Texas blues emphasized guitar licks

and moans, a method of vocalization that did not use words. Described by Cornel West as a “guttural cry,” the moan illustrates how African Americans tackled “black sadness and sorrow, black agony and anguish, black heartache and heartbreak without fully succumbing to the numbing effects of such misery—to never allow such misery to have the last word.”¹⁰³ Musicians like Sam “Lightnin’” Hopkins brought these sounds into Houston from the countryside. Hopkins, “a cocky, loping figure with a guitar slung across his back,” first wandered into Houston as an itinerant musician in the late 1920s, before permanently settling in the 1930s. Since they could be made by hand, guitars tended to be popular in rural working-class communities in the twentieth century. Country blues musicians often roamed the countryside, stopping in various burgs to play for weekend parties and picnics, so guitars also suited the itinerant lifestyle. Hopkins spent years traveling the red dirt roads of East Texas in search of his next gig as a young man, but the lure of paying audiences convinced him to settle permanently in Houston, where he helped shape the city’s blues sound. As music historian Alan Govenar asserts, he “embodied the music’s transition from rural East Texas to Houston.” He became a fixture at the intersection of Dowling and Holman streets in Third Ward, a place that locals came to know as “Lightnin’s Corner.”¹⁰⁴

Musicians’ incorporation of new instruments into their repertoire offered sonic representations of the material changes that resulted from migration and wage labor. While Hopkins and other blues artists often came to city with guitars, the popularity of new instruments offered one a sign of black urbanization. Ella Larkin’s sixteen-year-old son, Milton, bought himself a trumpet that he called a “pea shooter” for forty-nine dollars with savings from working odd jobs that helped support him and his widowed mother. From then on, he used the instrument to make more money, earning between fifty cents and a dollar a day by blowing the blues at bus stops.¹⁰⁵ Pianos also gained popularity in the city. “Pianos were not accessible to black musicians,” explained Sammy Price. “If you don’t have a piano, how the hell you gonna be a piano player?”¹⁰⁶ Urban churches gave some musicians access to pianos. Sippie Wallace first stroked the black and white keys of a piano in church. Wallace was born Beulah Thomas in Houston in 1898. (She acquired the nickname “Sippie” because of a childhood lisp, and later married a man named Matt Wallace.) She began singing at Shiloh Baptist Church in Fifth Ward, where her father served as deacon, when she was still a young girl. After church elders caught her skipping Sunday school to tinker on the organ, the congregation decided to give her music lessons. Similarly, I.H. “Ike” Smalley learned to master

several different instruments while playing in the church orchestra at Antioch Baptist, which eventually led to paying gigs in secular spaces.¹⁰⁷ These instruments allowed musicians to experiment with new ways of playing the blues. By adding new instruments to a style associated with guitars in the country, these musicians created a style of blues increasingly associated with urban life.

Piano blues especially flourished in Houston due to the Thomas family and a Fourth Ward–based collective of piano players called the Santa Fe Group, named for the railroad line that ran through the neighborhood. Musicians like Robert Shaw, Black Boy Shine, Buster Pickens, Rob Cooper, and Pinetop Burks played in roadhouses near the Santa Fe Railroad. There, they developed a style that combined blues and ragtime. Ragtime pianists improvised melodies with their right hand, while their left hand played repeating bass patterns. Meanwhile, both Sippie and her brother Hersal Thomas played piano in a style that emphasized rich bass patterns, and both wrote blues lyrics to accompany the music they composed. The blues-tinged ragtime of the Santa Fe Group, as well as the Thomas family's piano blues, were some of the first popular styles produced by African Americans in Jazz Age Houston. As these musicians adapted to the city, life in an urban environment affected which instruments they played, and the way they played them. Some artists incorporated the sound of the city into their songs. The Santa Fe Group became known for pounding piano melodies that mimicked the sound of the nearby trains.¹⁰⁸

Some race leaders responded enthusiastically to the emergence of the music scene. C. F. Richardson praised the musical accomplishment of black artists, perhaps because he was also a performer. When he was not editing the *Informer*, Richardson sang with the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Club, played bass guitar, and served as director of the Texas Association of Negro Musicians for the South Texas District. He cited music as proof of the race's achievement: "A music renaissance or revival is taking place in America, and the so-called Negro music is rapidly coming into its rightful place as the music of the classes and masses."¹⁰⁹

Other prominent black Houstonians did not celebrate the popularity of music emerging from the wards, though. The principal of the city's Booker T. Washington High School, for example, despised the popular music that flourished during the Jazz Age. "My school principal didn't like music," remembered Milton Larkin, who entered Washington High in the 1920s. "He said it was going to hell."¹¹⁰ The spaces where musicians of color performed in the early days linked the music to lowbrow culture. When he first began blowing

his trumpet around the city in the 1920s, Larkin entertained audiences at bus stops: “That was the life of the band—to play at bus stops,” he recalled.¹¹¹ When these musicians did move indoors, they often played in places associated with the copious consumption of liquor and/or prostitution, like Vinegar Hill and the Reservation. Some critics considered blues, as well as early jazz, to be lowbrow forms, then, since the music did not originate in the physical structures that people of European descent typically associated with high art. Europeans and elite white Americans deemed a form of music respectable only when it was performed in concert halls. These concert halls, in turn, mimicked the structure of churches in Western society. Listeners celebrated music produced in these venues because it reminded them of the experience of religious worship. Indoor music performed in a concert hall was prestigious; music played in the streets or in saloons was not.¹¹²

Nevertheless, the proliferation of blues helped bolster a black consumer economy in Houston. Musicians and business owners profited from the growing number of wage-earning music lovers who would pay for entertainment. Music also provided alternatives for black women in a city where so many worked in domestic service. Sippie Wallace and Victoria Spivey parlayed their talent into national acclaim with recordings in the 1920s.¹¹³ Wallace eventually worked with New Orleans-born musicians Louis Armstrong and King Oliver after she left Houston. By 1923 “The Texas Nightingale” was in Chicago recording lyrics like “When I get full of my moonshine, I’m a take your man for mine” and other songs written by her or with her brother Hersal.¹¹⁴ I. H. Smalley’s musical prowess attracted attention from other musicians, which enabled Smalley to book gigs before he finished high school. “I’d have to leave the church orchestra on Sunday nights to go make the little gig,” he said.¹¹⁵

By the late 1920s, more venues emerged that offered more opportunities for performers to play for wage-earning audiences. These establishments joined other businesses that sold culture products to African Americans and formed the backbone of the consumer economy. West Dallas Street emerged as the center of the black commercial world of Jazz Age Houston. (See figure 2.) That thoroughfare housed 95 percent of the city’s black-owned businesses as early as 1920.¹¹⁶ The most popular music venue in the decade following World War I was a dance hall in the Pilgrim Building, where the owners of a music club booked local acts and touring bands. The black-owned Pilgrim Building boasted gold-colored bricks, marble and granite walls, elevators, and a garden roof. The four-story structure at 221 West Dallas Street,

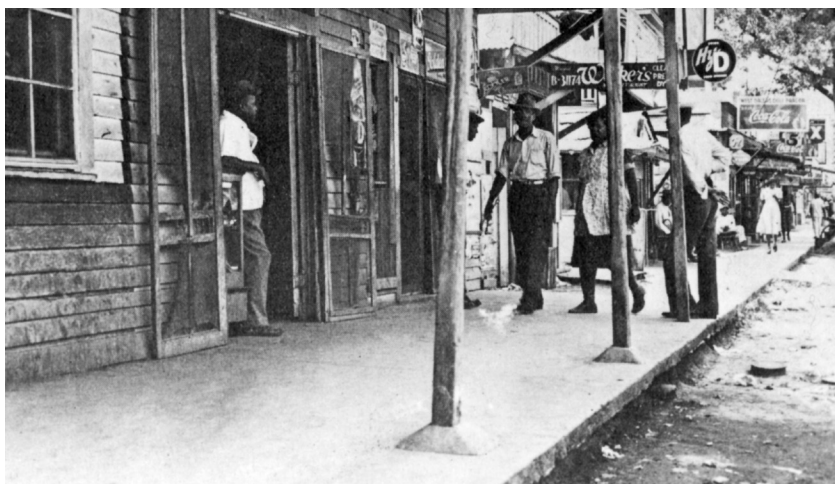


FIGURE 2. Black business district on West Dallas Street in the San Felipe District (Fourth Ward). Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

in the heart of the San Felipe district, was the first major shopping and entertainment area to offer services black people could not obtain in white-owned stores. Other black-owned businesses made the San Felipe district a center of black culture and enterprise. Just a few blocks away from the Pilgrim Building, fraternal societies and other local groups and businesses could meet at the Odd Fellows Hall on Louisiana Street.¹¹⁷ “Old Freedman’s [T]own was such a wonderful place to grow up in because we were so sheltered,” remembered Houstonian Paulette Williams Grant. “We had everything right in the neighborhood, you know, there were stores, your beautician, your school, your music teacher—everybody was right there and it was like just a big, happy family.”¹¹⁸

Visitors paid particular attention to black economic growth in Houston. By the 1930s, observers noted the products of previous decades of community-building efforts. “More businesses are owned and operated by Negroes here than in any other Southern city,” commented a writer with the Work Projects Administration.¹¹⁹ When Howard University–educated scholar Lorenzo Greene visited Houston in 1930 to sell black history books, he was impressed by the “young and democratic” character of the African American population and its successful businesses. Greene worked for black historian Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and the *Journal of Negro History*. Woodson paid for

Greene to travel to black communities across the South and Southwest to sell history books, and the traveling salesman kept a journal detailing his exploits. While in Houston, Greene spent a day selling books in the San Felipe district. In the pages of his journal, he marveled at the Odd Fellows Hall, the Franklin Beauty School, the Houston Negro Chamber of Commerce, the Harris County Young Negro Civic Club, and the Pilgrim Life Insurance Company building on West Dallas, which he described as “the most beautiful [building] owned by Negroes I have seen.” During his time in the city, Greene noted that local African Americans had “about eight colored gasoline filling stations, one finance company, several chain drug stores and independent drug stores, several insurance companies, beauty shops, two hat shops, one dry goods store, ten or more groceries, one soda water manufacturer, several ice men, several fruit dealers, and a theater.” He added that about eighty black physicians and fifteen black dentists worked in the city, and that Houston’s three black high schools made it unique among southern cities. After his journey through the city, Greene concluded that African Americans in Houston were “the most enterprising and most appreciative group of race people in the South.”¹²⁰

Black Houstonians found more opportunities to open businesses in the 1920s, which provided an alternative to working for white employers. Enough wage-earning African Americans lived in Houston neighborhoods to support enterprises launched by members of their race. A study produced by Fisk University in 1930 estimated that 890,000 African Americans living in seventeen of the largest southern cities, Houston included, had \$308 million in purchasing power.¹²¹ Some African American business owners used their race as a selling point. The James Green Grocery and Meat Market placed ads that urged readers to “[g]ive your race man a trial, and be convinced that he will treat you right.” A dentist named W.J. Howard placed a picture of himself alongside an advertisement for his office, alerting readers that he was a member of their race.¹²²

The high number of businesses and institutions was an outgrowth of the city’s size. Houston’s boundaries grew alongside its population. “The city occupies an incredibly large area,” commented Greene during his visit in 1930. “It seemed as if we would never be able to get out of Houston.”¹²³ A decade later, when the city was the twenty-first largest in the nation, Houston occupied approximately seventy-three square miles. Boston’s population, by contrast, was nearly twice as large Houston’s at the time, but at forty-six square miles, Beantown was nearly half the physical size of the Bayou City.¹²⁴

The spatial dynamics of Houston influenced black community-building efforts. Since they lived in several different neighborhoods, by necessity black migrants had to create and maintain businesses and institutions across the geographically dispersed city. The wards had their own black business and entertainment centers, most notably West Dallas Street in the San Felipe district, Lyons Avenue in Fifth Ward, and Dowling Street in Third Ward. The geographically dispersed population meant that black Houstonians were not historically confined to one part of town like their peers in some northern industrializing cities.

The existence of these venues also allowed black entertainers to take part in an economy that was not completely dominated by white people. In this era of Jim Crow laws, police violence, and threats from the Klan, black Houstonians strove to distinguish their neighborhoods from a larger Jim Crow city. In fact, they called the act of leaving the wards and visiting downtown Houston “going into town.” Houston proper was physically and psychologically distant from their neighborhoods. When black Houstonians went into town, though, they sat at the back of a streetcar. They could not try on hats in the stores that lined Main Street. If they could gain access to these shops at all, they entered through a back door and waited until all white customers had been helped. But in their neighborhoods, which dotted each of the wards, black Houstonians felt some sense of control of their own space.

As black communities swelled and violence continued, activists campaigned for more businesses in an effort to establish autonomous spaces where African Americans could conduct their daily business without coming into contact with white people, and protect themselves if a white mob tried to attack. When black women complained that white salesclerks and retail workers insulted them while they shopped downtown, the *Informer* pushed readers to create and support black businesses: “Our women have been assaulted, cursed, insulted and generally maltreated in several local stores owned and operated by other races for their own benefit, and yet they are compelled to continue to patronize these stores and thereby make it possible for additional impositions and cruelties to be heaped upon them with impunity.” By the 1920s mass-produced and mass-marketed goods had created a culture of mass consumption in which women were central actors. The responsibility of purchasing household goods and clothing for the family largely fell to women, especially in cities where fewer food goods could be grown or raised at home.¹²⁵ This meant that black women faced segregated stores on a regular basis. The *Informer*’s solution to this problem was to create

and support black-owned businesses. Writers campaigned for a black department store in the downtown shopping district. Not only would women be shielded from disrespect from white store workers; the store would also economically benefit black communities because young African Americans could work there. Throughout the year 1921 editorials stressed the need for a black-run department store, arguing that people who did not support the efforts were “content to forever serve in the ‘Sambo,’ ‘Uncle Ned,’ ‘Aunt Dinah’ and Sally Ann role from both a political, commercial and civic viewpoint.”¹²⁶

Black activists recognized that economic autonomy and self-government undermined white supremacy. Cliff Richardson, Jr. always asserted that his father’s struggles with the Ku Klux Klan and city police officers were due to their anger over his economic autonomy. If white Houstonians met an African American who was self-employed, Richardson recalled, “the stuff was in the fan.”¹²⁷ After all, what did white supremacy mean if black people were running their own affairs and did not submit to white authority? Billie Mayfield, editor of Houston’s Ku Klux Klan newspaper in the 1920s, once asserted, “[T]he negro must realize, and does realize that this is a white man’s country. [It is] to be owned by the white race, to be run by the white race, and that to divide its control between two races will only in the end bring on bloody conflicts and fiery prejudices that will finally result in a war of extermination.”¹²⁸ Through the construction and management of businesses and institutions in Houston’s black neighborhoods, African Americans strove for autonomy, and they understood that this independence was tantamount to their ability to live outside of white supremacy. Houstonian Dr. “Teddy” Bryant made this message clear when he wrote to the white Americans who felt the need to dominate his economic, political, and personal affairs: “Simply loose me and let me go.”¹²⁹

Black business aided this effort for autonomy. The black sections of the wards were, as Houstonian Thelma Scott Bryant described, “self-contained.” Bryant came of age on Live Oak Street in Third Ward in a house her parents purchased for fifteen hundred dollars. When she rode the streetcar to school in Fourth Ward, she passed through a neighborhood where black business flourished: “Well, there were many thriving businesses around the high school. I remember we had an ice cream factory right next door where we liked to go and buy ice cream cones. There was a dry goods store, restaurants, barbecue stands, funeral parlor—every kind of business that the Negro had, it was more or less contained in that area.” Black enclaves in the wards offered

a sense of place that former slaves could not find in Houston proper. The wards had schools, churches, shops, and restaurants, so African Americans left only for economic reasons. “We had everything we needed for our entertainment,” asserted Bryant.¹³⁰

Businesses that sold culture products to black women especially thrived in the 1920s. Some local women profited from an emerging beauty and fashion industry. Since African Americans were not allowed to try on hats in the white-owned stores on Main Street, O’Neta “Pink” Cavitt opened a hat shop of her own in the Pilgrim Building.¹³¹ When assessing the state of the race for the year 1927, the *Informer* cited these businesses as examples of how black women contributed to the race’s achievements: “In the land of progress, colored women of America, in organization and economic attainment, are setting a marvelous pace.”¹³² When Cimbee made his way through Houston, he noted businesses owned by black women. In 1924, for example, the rambler stopped into Madame Nobia Franklin’s beauty parlor in the Pilgrim Building. Franklin created an empire around beauty culture, capitalizing upon wage-earning African Americans, who by World War I had more “expendable income and access” to mass-produced consumer goods.¹³³ Born in the small town of Cuero, Texas, Nobia A. Franklin began selling and creating products when she moved to San Antonio as a young woman. She operated a business in Fort Worth before settling in Houston, where she established a school and salon sometime between 1915 and 1917. By 1919 Franklin was a local celebrity. The *Informer* entertained readers with stories of her lavish parties, even announcing the menu and guest list of a dinner party she threw in 1921. They printed her travel plans when she took an extended out-of-state trip, and when Franklin renovated her downtown Houston parlor in 1924, the paper provided a detailed description of the new décor.¹³⁴ Because the black literacy rate passed 50 percent in the first decades of the twentieth century, print ads could reach more people, and local businesses acknowledged the importance of that market by advertising in newspapers. Women like Franklin used black newspapers to further their enterprise.¹³⁵ Few issues of the *Informer* reached black Houston without an advertisement from Franklin’s company. Although she also opened a school and business in Chicago, Franklin retained her iconic status in Houston.¹³⁶

In fact, the most lucrative black enterprises in the country were part of the beauty business geared toward women. Historian Tiffany Gill argues that beauty culturists “were among the most economically autonomous members of the black community in the twentieth century.”¹³⁷ Nationally, Franklin’s

business ranked third behind Annie M. Turnbo-Malone's company, Poro, and Madame C.J. Walker's New York-based beauty empire. And, judging from the number of advertisements in the *Informer*, several other women in Houston alone gave Madame Franklin competition. Madame Janie C. Smith's Hair Preparations advertised a six-week hair treatment for \$1.10, while Mrs. J.D. Collins sold the Collins Hair Grower from O'Neil Street.¹³⁸ In 1925, the Madame Rose C. Wiley-Williams School of Beauty Culture opened at 1301 Meador Street in Houston, and Wiley-Williams used the location as a salon, school for beauticians, and store that sold her pressing oils (products that aided the hair-straightening process), shampoo, and "Hair Grower."¹³⁹ Obviously, these products were popular. Every young woman in the 1928 yearbook for Houston's Booker T. Washington High School, for example, wore her hair in a straightened style.¹⁴⁰

Built around an emerging black urban culture, these businesses contributed to a consumer economy that fueled anti-Jim Crow activism and provided a strategy for subverting white authority. Black-owned businesses meant that blacks could receive services from members of their own race without bowing to the spatial notions of race and hierarchy they encountered "in town." Furthermore, the existence of a consumer economy allowed black Houstonians to distance themselves economically and psychologically from the plantation power they sought to escape via migration. Black Houstonians used these to articulate an alternate sense of place in a Jim Crow city. Activism centered on the establishment of autonomous neighborhoods that gave African Americans a sense of ownership and authority over black-majority spaces. Their popular culture also contributed to African Americans' efforts to establish an alternate geography in a Jim Crow society. Urban wages allowed for the establishment of physical structures for the dissemination of musical styles, and the new sounds that emanated from those spaces provided aural evidence of urbanization. In the process, activists, writers, musicians, and other actors of the New Negro era established a black urban subjectivity. And when people from diverse backgrounds began to settle in the wards, the history of black settlement, community building, and activism in these neighborhoods informed black residents' reactions to newcomers.