

12 Million Black Voices

A FOLK HISTORY OF THE NEGRO

IN THE UNITED STATES

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A FOLK HISTORY OF THE NEGRO IN THE UNITED STATES

TEXT BY

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THE VIKING PRESS

NEW YORK · 1941



FIRST PUBLISHED IN OCTOBER 1941

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LIST OF ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, PAGE 149

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

PUBLISHED ON THE SAME DAY IN THE DOMINION OF CANADA
BY THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF CANADA LIMITED

Foreword

THIS TEXT, while purporting to render a broad picture of the processes of Negro life in the United States, intentionally does not include in its considerations those areas of Negro life which comprise the so-called "talented tenth," or the isolated islands of mulatto leadership which are still to be found in many parts of the South, or the growing and influential Negro middle-class professional and business men of the North who have, for the past thirty years or more, formed a sort of liaison corps between the whites and the blacks. Their exclusion from these pages does not imply any invidious judgment, nor does it stem from any desire to underestimate their progress and contributions; they are omitted in an effort to simplify a depiction of a complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization.

This text assumes that those few Negroes who have lifted themselves, through personal strength, talent, or luck, above the lives of their fellow-blacks—like single fishes that leap and flash for a split second above the surface of the sea—are but fleeting exceptions to that vast, tragic school that swims below in the depths, against the current, silently and heavily, struggling against the waves of vicissitudes that spell a common fate. It is not, however, to celebrate or exalt the plight of the humble folk who swim in the depths that I select the conditions of their lives as examples of normality, but rather to seize upon that which is qualitative and abiding in Negro experience, to place within full and constant view the collective

humanity whose triumphs and defeats are shared by the majority, whose gains in security mark an advance in the level of consciousness attained by the broad masses in their costly and tortuous upstream journey.

This text, therefore, accepts as basic and centrally historical those materials of Negro life identified with the countless black millions who made up the bulk of the slave population during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; those teeming black millions who endured the physical and spiritual ravages of serfdom; those legions of nameless blacks who felt the shock and hope of sudden emancipation; those terrified black folk who withstood the brutal wrath of the Ku Klux Klan, and who fled the cotton and tobacco plantations to seek refuge in northern and southern cities coincident with the decline of the cotton culture of the Old South.

The majority of the concepts and interpretations upon which I have relied most heavily in the assembling and writing of this text came from *The Negro Family in the United States* by E. Franklin Frazier; *Rum, Romance and Rebellion* by Charles W. Taussig; *Sharecroppers All* by Arthur Raper and Ira De A. Reid; *History of the American Negro People, 1619-1918* by Elizabeth Lawson; "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (from the *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume XLIV, Number 1, July 1938) by Louis Wirth; and *Black Workers and the New Unions* by Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell.

I take this opportunity to extend my thanks and appreciation to Mr. Horace R. Cayton, director of the Good Shepherd Community Center of Chicago, for his making available his immense files of materials on urban life among Negroes and, above all, for the advice and guidance which made sections of this book possible.

RICHARD WRIGHT

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1.



Our Strange Birth



EACH DAY when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem.

Our outward guise still carries the old familiar aspect which three hundred years of oppression in America have given us, but beneath the garb of the black laborer, the black cook, and the black elevator operator lies an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space.



We millions of black folk who live in this land were born into Western civilization of a weird and paradoxical birth. The lean, tall, blond men of England, Holland, and Denmark, the dark, short, nervous men of France, Spain, and Portugal, men whose blue and gray and brown eyes glinted with the light of the future, denied our human personalities, tore us from our native soil, weighted our legs with chains, stacked us like cord-wood in the foul holes of clipper ships, dragged us across thousands of miles of ocean, and hurled us into another land, strange and hostile, where for a second time we felt the slow, painful process of a new birth amid conditions harsh and raw.

The immemorial stars must have gazed down in amazement at the lowly of England and Europe, who, with hearts full of hope, pushed out to sea to urge rebellion against tyranny and then straightway became engaged in the slave trade, in the buying and selling of our human bodies. And those same stars must have smiled when, following the War of Independence, the Lords of the Land in the South relaxed their rigid slave code ever so little to square their guilty conscience with the lofty ideals of the rights of man for which they had fought and died; but never did they relax their code so much as to jeopardize their claim of ownership of us.

Our captors were hard men, brutal men; yet they held locked somewhere within their hearts the fertile seeds that were to sprout into a new world culture, that were to blossom into a higher human consciousness. Escaping from the fetid medieval dens, angrily doffing the burial sheets of feudal religion, and flushed with a new and noble concept of life, of its inherent dignity, of its unlimited possibilities, of its natural worth, these men leaped upon the road of progress; and their leap was the windfall of our tragedy. Their excessive love of life wove a deadly web of slavery that snared our naked feet. Their sense of the possibility of building a more humane world brought devastation and despair to our pointed huts on the long, tan shores of Africa. We were an unlucky people; the very contours and harbors of our native land conspired against our freedom. The coastline of our Africa

was long and flat and easy to invade; we had no mountains to serve as natural forts from behind which we could fight and stave off the slave traders.

We had our own civilization in Africa before we were captured and carried off to this land. You may smile when we call the way of life we lived in Africa "civilization," but in numerous respects the culture of many of our tribes was equal to that of the lands from which the slave captors came. We smelted iron, danced, made music, and recited folk poems; we sculptured, worked in glass, spun cotton and wool, wove baskets and cloth; we invented a medium of exchange, mined silver and gold, made pottery and cutlery; we fashioned tools and utensils of brass, bronze, ivory, quartz, and granite; we had our own literature, our own systems of law, religion, medicine, science, and education; we painted in color upon rocks; we raised cattle, sheep, and goats; we planted and harvested grain—in short, centuries before the Romans ruled, we lived as men.

Our humanity, however, did not save us; the New England Puritans and the imperialists of Europe erected the traffic in our bodies into the "big business" of the eighteenth century, and but few industries the world has ever known have yielded higher profits. There were "tricks of the trade" then as now; the slave traders, operators of fleets of stench-ridden sailing vessels, were comparable to our contemporary "captains of industry" and "tycoons of finance," and the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes fluttered from the masts of men-of-war as the ensign of protection for "free trade" in our bodies. It was mainly the kings of vast rum distilleries who owned the ships that scoured the seven seas in search of our bodies. Jew as well as Gentile took part in these voyages of plunder. Nation waged war against nation for the right to buy and sell us, just as today they fight for "markets and raw materials." To Africa the traders brought rum and swapped it to corrupt chiefs for our bodies; we were then taken to the colonies, the West Indies, Cuba, and Brazil and used as currency to buy molasses; the molasses in turn was taken to the distilleries of New England and bartered for rum, which formed the basis for another slave voyage.

The slave ships, equipped for long voyages, were floating brothels for the slave traders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bound by heavy chains, we gazed impassively upon the lecherous crew members as they vented the pent-up bestiality of their starved sex lives upon our sisters and wives. This was a peculiar practice which, as the years flowed past, grew into a clandestine but well-established institution which the owners of cotton and tobacco plantations upheld, and which today, in large measure, accounts for the widespread mulatto population in the United States. Indeed, there were slave-breeding farms. Slaves were valuable; cotton meant cash, and each able-bodied slave could be depended upon to produce at least 5000 pounds of cotton each year.

The *Mayflower's* nameless sister ship, presumably a Dutch vessel, which stole into the harbor of Jamestown in 1619 and unloaded her human cargo of 20 of us, was but the first such ship to touch the shores of this New World, and her arrival signaled what was to be our trial for centuries to come. More than 14,000,000 of us were brought to America alone. For every 100 of us who survived the terrible journey across the Atlantic, the so-called "middle passage" of these voyages, 400 of us perished. During three hundred years—the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries—more than 100,000,000 of us were torn from our African homes. Until the dawn of the nineteenth century, slavery was legal the world over.

Laid out spoon-fashion on the narrow decks of sailing ships, we were transported to this New World so closely packed that the back of the head of one of us nestled between the legs of another. Sometimes 720 of us were jammed into a space 20 feet wide, 120 feet long, and 5 feet high. Week after week we would lie there, tortured and gasping, as the ship heaved and tossed over the waves. In the summer, down in the suffocating depths of those ships, on an eight- or ten-week voyage, we would go crazed for lack of air and water, and in the morning the crew of the ship would discover many of us dead, clutching in rigor mortis at the throats of our friends, wives, or children.

During the seventeenth century, to protect themselves against the overwhelming influx of us, some governments launched numerous men-of-war to track down and seize the slave ships. We captives did not know whether to feel dread or joy when a man-of-war was sighted, for the captain would command that a few of us be pitched alive into the sea as moral bait to compel the captain of the pursuing ship to desist from his duty. Every mile or so one of us would be bound fast to a cask or spar and tossed overboard with the hope that the sight of our forlorn struggle against the sea would stir such compassion in the heart of the captain of the man-of-war that he would abandon pursuit, thereby enabling the slave ships to escape.

At other times, when we were sick, we were thrown alive into the sea and the captain, pilgrim of progress, would studiously enter into the ship's log two words that would balance all earthly accounts: "jettisoned cargo."

At still other times we went on hunger strikes; but the time allotted us to starve to death was often too short, and the ship would arrive in port before we had outwitted the slave traders. The more ambitious slavers possessed instruments with which to pry our teeth apart and feed us forcibly. Whenever we could we leaped into the sea.

To quench all desire for mutiny in us, they would sometimes decapitate a few of us and impale our black heads upon the tips of the spars, just as years later they impaled our heads upon the tips of pine trees for miles along the dusty highways of Dixie to frighten us into obedience.

Captivity under Christendom blasted our lives, disrupted our families, reached down into the personalities of each one of us and destroyed the very images and symbols which had guided our minds and feelings in the effort to live. Our folkways and folk tales, which had once given meaning and sanction to our actions, faded from consciousness. Our gods were dead and answered us no more. The trauma of leaving our African home, the suffering of the long middle passage, the thirst, the hunger, the horrors of the slave ship—all these hollowed us out, numbed us, stripped us, and left only physiological urges, the feelings of fear and fatigue.

Against the feudal background of denials of love and happiness, the trade in our bodies bred god-like men who exalted honor, enthroned impulse, glorified aspiration, celebrated individuality, and fortified the human heart to strive against the tyrannical forms of nature and to bend obstreperous materials closer to a mold that would slake human desire. As time elapsed, these new men seized upon the unfolding discoveries of science and invention, and, figuratively, their fingers became hot as fire and hard as steel. Literature, art, music, and philosophy set their souls aflame with a desire for the new mode of living that had come into the world. Exploration opened wide the entire surface of the earth as a domain of adventure.

Window glass, drugs to dull pain, printing presses, larger ships, bigger and more powerful guns—these and a thousand other commodities began to spread across the area of man's living and give it a new quality. Never before had human life on earth felt more confident; human feelings grew sensitive and complex, and human sentiment, pouring from the newly released human organism, wrapped itself about the whole world, each man and object in it, creating an all-powerful atmosphere of ambition and passion in which we black slaves were the main objects of exploitation.

Sustained by an incredible hope such as the world had never felt before, the slavers continued to snatch us by the millions from our native African soil to be used as tools to till the tobacco, rice, sugar-cane, and cotton plantations; they built powerful empires, replete with authority and comfort, and, as a protecting superstructure, they spun tight ideological webs of their right to domination. Daily these eager men slashed off the rotting trappings of feudal life, a life which for centuries had endowed man with a metaphysical worth, rank, use, and order; and, in its stead, they launched the foundations of a new dispensation to prove that man could step beyond the boundaries of ignorance and superstition and live by reason. And they shackled millions of us to labor for them, to give them the instrumentalities.

But as we blacks toiled, millions of poor free whites, against whom our slave labor was pitted, were rendered indigent and helpless. The gold of