

**ERA BELL THOMPSON: REFLECTIONS IN THE MIRROR  
OBSERVATIONS OF AN AMERICAN DAUGHTER ON  
THE AMERICAN SOUTH AND THE AFRICAN CONGO**

**BY**

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## Abstract

This dissertation asks how author and journalist Era Bell Thompson understood and constructed her racial identity against the historical context of the connections between the American South and the Congo. Thompson's unique childhood on the Great Plains of North Dakota and her long-time residence in Chicago offer a new perspective on race and history outside the American South or European colonialism. Using Thompson's autobiography, *American Daughter*, and her African travelogue, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, the dissertation uses her writing as both a lens and a mirror. African American newspapers and periodicals, particularly *The Chicago Defender*, are important to the project as many of Thompson's early ideas about the American South germinated from the paper's front page headlines. Throughout the dissertation poetry is utilized to convey the moment and the mood.

Historical connections between the American South and Congo beginning in the early 1800s provide important historical context. The outcry against the brutality of King Leopold II's Congo Free State at the beginning of the twentieth century is connected to outcries against the American Congo, featured headlines in 1919 and 1920.

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*For Kate, always fight for your dreams*

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## Introduction

For two hours on July 2, 1960 Era Bell Thompson sat in the reception area of a large house on Boulevard Albert in Leopoldville, Congo waiting to interview newly-elected Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba for *Ebony Magazine*. It was her third visit to Congo in seven years; this one to witness the moment of Congolese independence from 80 years of Belgian colonial rule. Her thoughts during her two-hour wait remained her own although the room must have been crowded and warm as she recorded sharing her time with “five foreign delegations and a number of journalists.” Her patience went unrewarded; she received only a perfunctory handshake from Lumumba as the mercurial, charismatic, and doomed Prime Minister “announced his regrets and departed.”<sup>1</sup>

Finding Leopoldville “so dull” with little to report by day three of independence, Thompson left for the Cameroons. Concluding her report the reader almost hears the brief intake of surreal, eerie quiet heralding the coming conflagration that swept across Congo consuming Lumumba, Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the United Nations, and countless

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<sup>1</sup> Era Bell Thompson, “Behind the African Explosion,” *The Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine*, (September 25, 1960), 32, 35.

millions in its wake across the subsequent fifty years. Thompson simply concluded her article with “by week’s end, the Congo was in chaos.”<sup>2</sup>

Seven years before in the early morning hours of April 16, 1953, Thompson stood on a wet, wind-swept airport tarmac in Chicago waiting to embark on a three-month journey to Africa. With \$3,000 in travelers checks, passport, and four entry visas in hand, she would travel thousands of miles and by her own calculation three centuries from her apartment in Chicago and her childhood roots on the Great Plains of North America to “The Land of Her Fathers.”<sup>3</sup> A petite African-American with no language skills save English, little knowledge of the countries

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<sup>2</sup> In 1960 Congo, along with fifteen other African nations, was to achieve independence from colonial control or United Nations trusteeship in what was termed “The Year of Africa.” The acceleration of the timetable for Congolese independence from Belgian colonial rule caused great concern within the United Nations, as out of 13.5 million native inhabitants, the country could boast of only seventeen university graduates; there were no Congolese doctors, engineers, lawyers, or military officers. On the June 30 1960 during ceremonies marking the transfer of power from Belgium to the Congolese state, the newly elected Prime Minister Lumumba gave a fiery speech in which he bitterly threw back any pretense of appreciation for Belgium’s “benevolent” care. Instead the attending audience, including the Belgian King Baudouin and Era Bell Thompson, heard Lumumba excoriate the colonial masters, “The wounds that are the evidence of the fate we endured for eighty years under a colonialist regime are still too fresh and painful for us to be able to erase them from our memory. Back-breaking work has been extracted from us, in return for wages that did not allow us to satisfy our hunger, or to decently clothe or house ourselves, or to raise our children as creatures very dear to us.” The Congo was in chaos within days of independence and became the gateway for the Cold War in Sub-Saharan Africa. Fear of Lumumba’s potential communist leanings and the protection of Belgian mining interests in the rich Katanga Province fueled a civil war that resulted in the murder of Lumumba in January 1961. The announcement of his murder on February 13, 1961 caused international outcries, protests at the United Nations and at Belgian embassies around the world. The controversial Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, played a starring role in the Congo Crisis in 1960-1961 until he was killed in a plane crash on the way to peace negotiations in Congo on the night of September 18, 1961. In 1975, the Church Commission investigated CIA complicity in the death of Lumumba, including attempts to poison him in fall 1960. In 2002 the Belgian government apologized for bearing “moral responsibility” for the assassination of Lumumba.

<sup>3</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers, The Story of the Return of a Native Three Hundred Years Later*, New York: Doubleday & Company (1954).

she would visit except travel brochures and pamphlets, armed with only a typewriter, camera, sun helmet, a hand-full of names of friends of friends and officials expecting her, and her own survival skills, Thompson set out to explore the connective tissue between Africans in the New World and the Old. On this, her first trip abroad, she would travel by plane, train, bus, car, and boat through sixteen countries, meet with heads of state and depend on the courtesy and good intentions of total strangers to return home affirming “Africans are my brothers, for we are of one race. But Africa, the land of my fathers, is not my home. I am an American.”<sup>4</sup>

The following is the story of the way one black woman observed and understood two places, both foreign to her, Congo and the American South, in the years between the end of the First World War and 1960. It is a small, simple story on balance against the weight of two histories that have been the subjects and symbols of the most grotesque crimes against humanity that one race has perpetrated against another over the past five hundred years. The story purports to have no great stretch beyond the travels and reporting of Era Bell Thompson other than to illuminate the way that race, place, and gender operated in the life of this one woman in relation to these two places. However the story does pose questions about how individuals understand their lives against the panoply of history. How does an individual observe, absorb, and interpret the weight of great movements and moments from within the experiences and cultural contexts of their own life? This dissertation is in part Era Bell Thompson’s story as told and interpreted by her through her writings. It is also more broadly an excavation of the relationship between two places, Congo and the American South, through the eyes of an “American Daughter.”

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* at 281.

## Why Era Bell Thompson?

Why use Thompson as a prism through which to think about the relationship between Congo and the American South for African Americans? Writing of her 1953 African travels in her second book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, and on the pages of *Ebony Magazine*, her employer for most of her adult life, Thompson's clipped, spare and at times wry manner rarely revealed any particular sentiment about Congo.<sup>5</sup> Even her travel diaries offer little more than is observed in her published accounts. Similarly, in Thompson's occasional visits to the American South her role was always as an observer of life in the South and not as a resident within its borders. The South's reputation for violence against blacks and its social and legal boundaries for blacks resonated in a more primal fear expressed by Thompson in her 1946 autobiography, *American Daughter*.<sup>6</sup> Within the borders of both lands Thompson was aware of her place as a black woman in relation to white male state power.

How then does Thompson's story carry forward a connectivity between the American South and Congo if she herself rarely made the connection? In what ways does Thompson provide a comparative window if she appeared to be outside these communities on either continent? Why not use the stories of someone like Thurgood Marshall, whose family history

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson's long employ with the Johnson Publishing Company gave her a distinctive if not uncritical view of the lives of blacks, whether within America or internationally. John J. Johnson began publishing *Ebony* in 1945, mirroring it after *Look Magazine* and targeting a growing black middle-class. Thompson was hired by the Chicago-based family-owned publishing company in 1946. It provided a permanent home and family for her from that point until the end of her life. From 1947-1951 she was associate editor of *Ebony*, from 1951-1964 she was co-managing editor, and from 1964 until virtually her death in 1986 she was international editor for Johnson Publishing. See, Kathie Ryckman Anderson, "Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter," *North Dakota History, Journal of the Northern Plains*, vol. 49, n. 4 (Fall, 1982), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press (2004).

included stories of slavery and freedom of a Congolese grandfather?<sup>7</sup> Or someone like Ralph Bunche, who worked so closely within the framework of the United Nations navigating Congolese independence at the moment of its possibilities and failure?<sup>8</sup> Certainly there were other black women who traveled to Congo and wrote about it within the same timeframe; Eslanda Goode Robeson, the wife of Paul Robeson, toured the Continent and visited Congo in 1936, as described in her *African Journal*.<sup>9</sup> The young prodigy, concert pianist, and journalist Philippa Schuyler visited Congo on several occasions in the 1950s while on concert tours, writing of her experiences in the 1960 *Adventures in Black and White*.<sup>10</sup> Schuyler too was on the ground at Congolese independence, writing *Who Killed the Congo?* in 1962.<sup>11</sup> Why then use Thompson as the prism through which to illuminate connections?

Thompson offers an unusual opportunity because of the unique slate upon which she writes, the imprint of her observations made by a woman whose experiences of race and gender were more closely aligned with a frontier American experience rather than the suffocating

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<sup>7</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Exporting American Dreams, Thurgood Marshall's African Journey*, London: Oxford University Press (2008), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche, An American Odyssey*, New York: W.W. Norton (1993), p. 299.

<sup>9</sup> Eslanda Goode Robeson, *African Journey*, London: Victor Gollancz (1946) (traveling in 1936 as part of her field work for a doctorate in anthropology, Goode Robeson published her book in 1946, after World War II).

<sup>10</sup> Schuyler, Philippa, *Adventures in Black and White*, New York: R. Speller (1960) (the daughter of George and Josephine Schuyler, a prominent black journalist and a white Texas heiress, raised “scientifically” on Sugar Hill in Harlem to be a shining example of how mixed race unions could create children of greatness, Philippa Schuyler had a complicated and demanding life of expectations. She died at age 35 in a helicopter crash while on assignment in Viet Nam in 1967). See, Kathryn Talalay, *Composition in Black and White, The Life of Philippa Schuyler*, New York: Oxford University Press (1995).

<sup>11</sup> Schuyler, Philippa, *Who Killed the Congo?*, New York: Devon-Adair Co. (1962).

experiences of racial difference associated with the American South or even the complex racial cacophony of New York City. While she traveled widely after her initial trip to Africa in 1953, Thompson lived most of her adult life in Chicago, Illinois and remained very much rooted in a community of writers and journalists closely associated with a strata of middle-class American Midwest, blossoming within the intellectual ferment of the Chicago Renaissance. Her reference points and contexts for understanding the world are distinctive and create a mirrored foreignness to both the American South and Africa. W.E.B. Du Bois' imagery of the double-consciousness of blacks in America is observed by Thompson but the weight of that burden seems to be external to Thompson, particularly in her formative years.<sup>12</sup> As critics and supporters noted, at times she seemed external to her race even while clearly bearing its racial markers within the wider world.

Thompson also frequently traveled alone, particularly in her travels in the 1930s and her first trip to Africa in 1953. She was not a celebrity and experienced the fear and vulnerability of traveling as a black female alone through geographies controlled predominately by white men. Riding in a train car from Congo to Victoria Falls, Thompson recounted a conversation among four young white men in the next compartment who were initially unaware of her.

“And if a white man rapes a black woman?” It was the Congo boy. “That is unfortunate.” Such an act was not wrong, they agreed amiably, but the results were unhappy. “It is bad to beget mulattoes.”

Thompson's response, “I eased my door shut and bolted it, but I could still hear their voices. I was alone with four white men who had no regard for black womanhood, riding a slow train through the heart of Africa, a million miles from nowhere. The thought was sobering.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, New York: Dover Publications (1994), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 3 at 153.

When the train stopped later in the day, Thompson took the opportunity of an open post office to write to her brother, “It would be good, I thought, to let somebody know where I had last been seen.”<sup>14</sup>

Thompson’s observations from the buses and planes that took her through the American South and along the West and Southern Coasts of Africa offer a sounding board against which the passions, violence, despair, anger, and hopes of blacks reflect. Describing her brief visits in Washington D.C. and Maryland during a 1930s bus trip, her fear of the South becomes palpable, “I spent a day in Washington, D.C., and thought I was deep in the heart of Dixie. While ascending the narrow stairs of the Capitol on my way to the dome, I was caught between two groups of Southern white people who out-accented Amos and Andy, and I thought my lynching time had come.” In Maryland, “high in the Cumberland Mountains” she was “introduced to Jim Crow, Southern style” during the same bus trip. Stopping at a diner in the middle of the night for coffee and food, she was turned away from the line for white travelers. Refusing the dirty back room reserved for blacks, she returned to the bus where “Alone in the empty bus, anger gave way to fear, and all the awful stories I had heard of the South loomed big and terrible. I had defied a white man: black men and women had been lynched for less. When the bus finally drove away, I breathed a prayer of relief.”<sup>15</sup> Thompson’s terrors were based within a lived reality for African Americans traveling in the 1930s and yet her fears also germinated as much from what she read on the pages of *The Chicago Defender* as personal experience.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* at 156.

<sup>15</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 6 at 279.

Remarkable to her were not the thousand cuts of prejudice in daily life, but the extraordinary encounters as she traveled abroad to foreign places, whether Maryland or Africa. Experiencing the fear of lynching because of her race and the fear of rape because of her gender, Thompson filtered experiences and pulled the reader through terrain both foreign and familiar with her. Alone on the train and alone on the bus, vulnerable to the excesses of white men and the histories of violence perpetrated by them, Thompson faced these moments alone.

In Africa in 1953, her cool and at times ironic observations of life in Congo contributed to an appreciation for similarities between America and Congo within the conversations on race that registered on both continents, “Our conversation by now had drifted from writing to race and the African’s capacity for assimilating European civilization- ‘evolving,’ they call it here. It was the old argument of the Negro’s ‘ain’t readiness’ versus ‘the time has come’; an argument which in America is discussed as heatedly over urban conference tables as over country-store cracker barrels; an argument with five sides and seven answers. And like so many others who argue the question, we got nothing out of the debate but respect for each other’s stubbornness.”<sup>16</sup> Yet within her reporting on this conversation about race there is a distance, a removal of herself from within the argument. Thompson was certainly aware of her own racial identity and experienced discrimination on both continents because of it. There is, however, a flatness about her prose, an almost detached sense of self at times. Ten years later she would co-edit a compilation of white views on “the Negro” previously published in *Ebony Magazine*, *White on Black, The Views of Twenty-two White Americans on the Negro*.<sup>17</sup> In her brief introduction to the works of such

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<sup>16</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 3 at 107.

<sup>17</sup> Era Bell Thompson and Herbert Nipson, eds., *White on Black, The Views of Twenty-Two White Americans on the Negro*, Chicago, IL: Johnson Publishing Company (1963).

diverse contributors as Eleanor Roosevelt, Bobby Darin, Pearl S. Buck, Sophie Tucker, Billy Graham, Jack Dempsey, and Tallulah Bankhead, Thompson expressed much the same evaluation of race relations as she did during her Congo trip of 1953, “there are expressions of innate and oftentimes unconscious prejudices against the Negro, as well as unconscious prejudices against the Negro, as well as caution to “go slow,” “get ready,” and “these things take time.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally, to answer “why Era Bell” is to resurrect a woman who was often under-valued and overshadowed by more creative voices of her generation. Thompson’s major contributions to African American arts were predominately editorial within the Johnson Publishing empire, mainly at *Ebony Magazine*. Her two major manuscripts were eclipsed by bolder writers, as the historian James Campbell pointed to in *Middle Passages*. Juxtaposing the unique symmetry and psychic polarity of the lives of Thompson and the great American writer Richard Wright, whose own autobiography *Black Boy* was published the year before *American Daughter*, Campbell writes of Thompson’s work “The book was as sunny as Wright’s book was dark, reading less like Dostoyevsky than an installment of *The Little House on the Prairie* series.”<sup>19</sup> Richard Wright’s childhood of Southern oppression began at his birth on a Mississippi plantation in 1908 and included abandonment by his father, the paralysis of his mother, and the death of his uncle. Migrating north in 1927, Wright’s searing novel *Native Son* set in “the fetid tenements of Chicago’s Black Belt” along with *Black Boy* stood in stark contrast to Thompson’s understanding

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* at ix.

<sup>19</sup> James Campbell, *Middle Passages, African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*, New York: Penguin Press (2006), 280 (covering 220 years of African American journeys to Africa, Campbell considers their relationships with Africa and counters their embrace of the “dim outline of the Continent” with the surprising revelations about Africa-Americans’ relationship to the United States.); Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger) A Record of Childhood and Youth*, New York: Harper Perennial (2006).

and experiences of race in America.<sup>20</sup> The story of Wright's own personal journey to Africa in May 1953, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, arrived in bookstores in 1954, the same week as Thompson's *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, a timing of which she was acutely aware.<sup>21</sup> Both Wright and Thompson were disillusioned by Africa yet took away different lessons from their time there. For Thompson, the trip reinforced her Americanness; for Wright, the trip accentuated his feelings of displacement on either continent.

Thompson's singular voice lived outside the American South and the African Congo, a traveler observing life in these two places, one as foreign as the other. Curious, courageous, wry, frustrated, often having to manage the world very much on her own, Era Bell Thompson was a modern woman, a pioneer whose world view was shaped by the plains of North Dakota and the skyline of Chicago.

### **The Road Not Taken**

In the beginning, this dissertation proposed to take two key questions broadly explored in James Campbell's *Middle Passages*: "What is Africa to Me?" and "What is America to me?" and apply them specifically to Congo and the American South by examining ways in which

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Wright, *Native Son*, New York: Harper Perennial (1996)

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, New York: Harper Perennial (1995); Eileen De Freece-Wilson, *Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer*, Dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2010. (Publication No. 3418420), 111 (in a letter from Thompson to a photojournalist friend, Thompson says "Understand the Wright book, *Black Gold*, will run almost neck and neck with mine. It is supposed to be a "brutal" and frank discussion of the Gold Coast. According to Ben Burns Wright did not like Africa. I had his "Native Son" to contend with last book...can think of a lot of competition I'd rather have." (112) *Black Gold* was the working title for Wright's *Black Power* book. Ben Burns was the white editor who hired Thompson at Johnson Publishing. It is interesting that Thompson refers to *Native Son* and not *Black Boy* as the competition to her *American Daughter* - even though the former was published six years before her autobiography. Whether this was a slip on Thompson's part is not clarified.)

Congo lived within African-American imagination as a mirror of their own slavery, southern peonage, lynching, and lives under Jim Crow through the use of public discourse, mainly African-American newspapers and periodicals.<sup>22</sup> The plan was to examine connections between Congo as an “imagined community” for African-Americans and America as a lived experience for them, exploring the dialogue between the imagined and the lived for evidence that it was one of the reasons that the Congo Crisis of 1960-1961 proved to be so explosive for African-Americans and the resonance of Patrice Lumumba’s death so enduring.<sup>23</sup> Initially two quotes influenced my approach, the first by Associate Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendall Holmes Jr., “A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanging, it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in colour and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used.”<sup>24</sup> Within Justice Holmes’ quote lies the idea that a word or idea can change across time, so “Congo” as an idea, place, and identity was something potentially amorphous for African Americans, a geographical place and yet something deeper, more personal. The second quote is by the great social commentator and writer James Baldwin, “History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we

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<sup>22</sup> James Campbell, *Middle Passages, African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*, *op. cit.* n. 19 at xxiii.

<sup>23</sup> The historian John Henrik Clarke spoke of the meaning of Lumumba in death as “the symbol of the black man’s humanity struggling for recognition,” John Henrik Clarke, “The New Afro-American Nationalism,” *Freedomways*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Fall 1961), 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Tyner v. Eisner*, 245 U.S. 418, 425 (1918) (Justice Holmes writing the majority opinion for the Court).

do.”<sup>25</sup> Baldwin challenges us to think about the ways that we understand history, the absorption of ideas, words, sounds, colors, rhythms. Music and poetry are two bonds that joined Congo within African American lives; slavery, violence, and brutality at the hands of whites create other connections. In the process of researching the connections between Congo and America, the travelogues of African American women opened up an under utilized opportunity to consider the way women processed and wrote about their experiences. One of those women was Era Bell Thompson.

As the dissertation developed, the voice that spoke most prominently for me belonged to Thompson. Her autobiography distinctly claiming an American spirit and her travels to Congo and through the American South from the 1930s through the 1950s offered a fresh perspective. I found myself drawn through Thompson’s stories to think about how she answered the questions “What does the American South mean to me?” and “What does Congo mean to me?” and in what ways her answers illuminated the way she saw herself. It is possible that spending time in the Congo provided Thompson with no clear insight to her own connection with Africa, although traveling from Congo towards Victoria Falls by train, the physical and emotional experience of vulnerability and state-sponsored segregation pervaded her narrative. After a brush with apartheid South Africa, denied a stay at Victoria Falls in Rhodesia because no hotel would accommodate her because she was black, Thompson rejoiced as she headed for “Portuguese East Africa.” The train excursion out of Elizabethville was, to Thompson, like “Eliza crossing the ice, like Harriet Tubman on the underground railroad, for the train I was riding was taking me out of

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<sup>25</sup> James Baldwin, “Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes: The White Man’s Guilt,” *Ebony*, (August, 1965), 47.

the land of *apartheid* to the free soil of Portugal.”<sup>26</sup> The framing of her experiences through references to American slavery draws on the duality of her perceptions of Africa and the American South and exposes the depths and limits of her understanding. Referencing the real and the literary, the fierce strength of Tubman and the desperation of the literary Eliza is interesting for what it says of Thompson’s perceptions of self. Does Thompson refer to Eliza because as a writer she wants to access a literary moment that may be familiar to a number of her readers? Eliza, a literary figure that Angela Davis will later call “a travesty of the Black woman, a naïve transposition of the mother-figure” and claiming of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “the enormous influence her book enjoyed cannot compensate for its utter distortion of slave life.”<sup>27</sup> Did Thompson draw on Tubman and Eliza because of their familiarity to the reader or do they represent her own limited familiarity with the experiences of black women in the South? Did she see in these women two ideals of black womanhood: strength and vulnerability, fierce determination and maternal love? Or is it possible that Thompson saw within Eliza something else? Davis says that “The Elizas, if they indeed existed, were certainly oddities among the great majority of Black women. They did not, in any event, represent the accumulated experiences of all those women who toiled under the lash for their masters.”<sup>28</sup> Did Thompson see herself as an oddity among black women?

It is Thompson the journalist that compels her stories here - Thompson as a consumer of journalism that helped shape her perceptions of the world, domestic and international. Thompson observed and formulated expectations through newspapers, literature, and poetry yet

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<sup>26</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 3 at 178.

<sup>27</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, New York: Vintage Books (1983), 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* at 29.

she processed that information through her own memories, contextualizing her questions and answers from within a unique set of personal experiences. It is within this frame that the historian Eric Hobsbawm provides guidance, speaking of the value of autobiography, “For all of us there is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one’s own life.”<sup>29</sup>

Utilizing Thompson’s life and published works against the backdrop of complex and at times ephemeral connections between Congo and the American South, the dissertation is guided by the contours of Thompson’s early life as she presented them in *American Daughter*. Thompson’s reflections of her life were not always straightforward, and she certainly edited her 1946 autobiography, yet the authenticity of her voice and experiences resonated throughout *American Daughter* and *Africa, Land of My Fathers*. Thompson’s plans for a later memoir covering her life post 1946 including her extensive foreign travel, *P.S. or The Rest of My Life*, were never completed. Her “Tentative Chapter Outline” does suggest a growing engagement with the global black experience, as chapter descriptions include: “Interviews with black leaders of emerging Caribbean nations” - “Island Hopping;” “Plight of war orphans fathered by black GIs,” - “Japan’s Rejected Children;” or “Latin America’ ‘whiteest’ country, and why.” “The day the government changed hands and six men died,” - “Argentina’s Vanishing Blacks.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1989), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, Series LP, Box 4, Miscellaneous (Many of the chapters outlined were previously published by *Ebony* and other periodicals, including “Independence Comes to the Congo” - describing the article previously published on September 25, 1960 in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine*.)

The dissertation is not written as a biography of Thompson's life, the brief outline of which includes her birth in 1905 and her death on December 30, 1986 in her Chicago home. She never married, had no children, and worked for most of the last forty years of her life for a single employer, the Johnson Publishing Co. Her published works are her most enduring legacy although toward the last years of her life she was honored with numerous awards, including the North Dakota Rough Rider Award, of which she was distinctly proud. The University of North Dakota named its multicultural center in her honor. Aspects of Thompson's adult life such as her sexual relationships, unpublished works, working relationship with John H. Johnson (her employer), and exploration of her friendships including the poet Gwendolyn Brooks are external to the dissertation.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Road Forward - Chapter and Verse**

The dissertation is written with two narrative streams, one using the life of Era Bell Thompson and the other accessing African American public discourse on the relationship between Congo and the American South. Multiple publications are used throughout the dissertation including *The Crisis*, *The New Amsterdam News*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *Ebony*, *Negro Digest*, and *Phylon*. The greatest emphasis, however, is placed on the reporting of *The Chicago Defender*. The importance of *The Chicago Defender* is evident in Thompson's autobiography. It was the first African America newspaper she encountered and its influence in her life and her connections to the paper were longstanding. In addition, the influence and circulation of *The Chicago Defender* within African American communities throughout the country are notable, particularly during the timeframe of the dissertation.

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<sup>31</sup> For discussion of Era Bell Thompson's adult relationships and unpublished works, see Eileen De Freece-Wilson, *Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer*, *op. cit.* n. 21 at 69-70.

The dissertation is broken into three chapters: “Rivers,” “Dark Princess,” and “From Bronzeville to Congo and Home.” The focus of “Rivers” is the early connections between Congo and the American South with twin narratives of uplift, Christianization, and civilization and violence and exploitation; an introduction to the conceptual application of the chapter is provided in “Shards of History” immediately preceding it. Thompson does not appear in the first chapter, much of which takes place in the hundred years prior to her birth. This was a conscious choice. It is the argument of the dissertation that in writing *American Daughter* and *Africa, Land of My Fathers* Thompson was struggling to find her place within her race and America; searching for her identity within an unfamiliar past. The first chapter presents the shards of that past. Chapter II - “Dark Princess” introduces Thompson’s earliest life and family connections in “Little Girl from the Great Plains.” Covering the timeframe from the First World War through the 1930s beginning with “World on Fire,” the chapter focuses on Thompson’s North Dakota years and early adulthood against the backdrop of the “American Congo” and the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, Chapter III - “From Bronzeville to Congo and Home” presents the adult Thompson’s life in Chicago, her own place within the “Chicago Renaissance” and her travels and impressions in the American South. Turning to focus on Thompson’s travels in Congo and Africa the chapter teases out her growing personal confrontations with race playing against increased international pressure for African independence. There is a widening of the narrative as the chapter mines Thompson’s reflections as she wrestles with the foreign and familiar across her African travels. The conclusion of the chapter returns Thompson home, examining the affirmation of her American identity within the intensifying domestic and international conflicts

on race. The Conclusion reunites the symmetry of the American South and the Congo and a reconsideration of Thompson's history.

Throughout the dissertation poems are used to infuse the text with the connections drawn between Congo and America and Thompson and her experiences of race.

There are three important and missing components from the dissertation. The first is music which deeply influenced the way that African Americans connected with Congo. The well-spring of jazz as originating from the music of Congo Square intimately tied the rhythms of Congo, Cuba, the Caribbean and America. Music and dancing embracing African-roots and a stylized dance experience came increasingly in-vogue in the 1930s in clubs and on movie screens. While the latter is referenced in "When Chicago Danced at the Congo Club" in Chapter III and the former is briefly referenced in "The Dance in Place Congo" in the first chapter, the dimensions and sounds of music are outside the scope of the dissertation.

The second is photography, the visualization of the lynching and burning of African Americans, the chopping of hands of young Congolese victims of King Leopold, and the smiling face of Thompson wearing a pith helmet and seated in an African "cooking pot" are all part of the story. Photographs spoke to young Thompson about the American South and made an imprint on millions about the cruelty of Leopold's Congo, binding two places with startling similar relationships between blacks and whites. Thompson smiling from within an African "cooking pot," wearing a *Jet* magazine t-shirt and pith helmet in Liberia in 1953 emphasizes the distance between her Americanness and the land of her Fathers. Photography is not customary within the dissertation, and while the referenced photographs are in my possession, permission for reproduction has not been granted. Finally, the third missing component is political cartoons.

Along with photographs, political cartoons had a critical role in informing the illiterate on important topics of the day - the snake-like body of King Leopold II wrapping around the twisting, heaving body of a black man in Lynley Sambourne's memorable "In the Rubber Coils" published in *Punch* on November 28, 1906. Cartoons and photographs were mute, stark testimony gauged to deeply impact the viewers. While discussed within the dissertation, their exclusion from the work removes the full impact of their message.

### **Black Autobiography**

Black female autobiography balances between the tensions of historical invisibility and voices demanding to be heard. JoAnne Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography, a Tradition within a Tradition* claims "For the black woman, there is a veil within a veil, a realm of shared knowledge communicated from generation to generation, both through literature and the oral tradition."<sup>32</sup> Out of this oral tradition came those women who fought to write down their stories, to claim the power of the pen from their male counterparts and white society in order to tell their stories. The juggernaut voice of Ida B. Wells refusing to be intimidated and understanding clearly the great power of the written word marked a break from slave narratives to heralding the active agency of female resistance. Autobiographies from Wells' *Crusade for Justice* to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* announced the power of black women to overcome even as their gendered vulnerabilities, compromises, and choices were distinct from those of black men.<sup>33</sup> Braxton's emphasis on a matriarchal sisterhood was

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<sup>32</sup> JoAnne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography, A Tradition Within a Tradition*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press (1989), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press (1974), 201.

complicated and included the “matrophobia” of female writers who feared becoming what their mothers had been.<sup>34</sup> Comparing Thompson’s *American Daughter* with Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust on the Tracks* (written in 1942), Braxton characterized their autobiographies as “the quest for a dignified and self-defining identity to include a search for personal fulfillment.” Braxton identified the source of Thompson and Hurst’s “displacement” as the deaths of their mothers in their early lives, associating Thompson’s vision of a united America as “central to the psychic wholeness of young women deprived of their connection with the primary source of their black and female identity.”<sup>35</sup>

How did Thompson enter the black female autobiographical tradition? Applying for a fellowship from the Newberry Library in 1944, she emphasized her search for identity within a culture that appeared to be distinctly alien to her. Noting her previous residence in Chicago had left her “hurt, bewildered, and a little bit afraid,” she then listed a set of stereotyped cultural markers that she lacked, “I couldn’t dance, couldn’t even snap my fingers or sing the blues. I was 22 before I ever heard of Paul Lawrence Dunbar.”<sup>36</sup> Thompson’s bait for the fellowship was not only that she had a new story to tell about being black in America but that she herself was learning how to be black in America. She was constructing blackness not because she intuitively felt black but because society viewed her to be black. The award allowed her the economic freedom to write *American Daughter*. Later, when Thompson went to Africa confronting the

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<sup>34</sup> JoAnne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography, A Tradition Within a Tradition*, *op. cit.* n. 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, Box 1, Folder 2.

roots of a history that she “learned,” she came away with renewed resolve that racial identity was constructed reifying her identity not as black but as American.

Ironically, Thompson’s own struggles to define herself made her an effective and leading voice within the Johnson Publishing empire. One of the hallmarks of John Johnson’s publishing genius was he sold middle class acceptability and values wrapped in promotion of the achievements of blacks with the underlying premise that race “was itself a construction- the product of disposition and habit rather than biological imperatives.”<sup>37</sup> While not shying away from the problems of race, he highlighted the outsized successes of blacks across the wide range of American life. Movie stars, musicians, athletes, doctors, lawyers, politicians, writers, and artists were all featured on the pages of *Negro Digest*, *Ebony*, and *Jet*, along with exposés of issues important to African Americans such as restrictive covenants and the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi in 1955. Johnson Publications also served up cooking tips, recipes, fashion and manners advice along with extensive advertisements targeting aspiring and upwardly mobile black families. Thompson served as managing and international editor of *Ebony* and later *Ebony-Africa* for most of her tenure at the magazine. Her personal story of upward mobility and American values melded well with Johnson’s underlying framing of his publications.

Thompson’s ambivalence about race did not preclude her active participation in institution building within Chicago’s black communities. Certainly when her own financial position stabilized by the late 1940s with her employment by Johnson Publishing, she increasingly contributed to projects aimed at promoting educational advancement for blacks

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<sup>37</sup> Adam Green, *Selling the Race, Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press (2007), 139.

within Chicago. She served along with Arna Bontemps and Vivian Harsh, among others, on the literary advisory committee of the “Hall Library” - established to serve Chicago’s Southside blacks. She also provided financial support for teen programs related to the South Parkway YWCA - an institution that had formerly housed her on multiple occasions.<sup>38</sup>

### **“StepChild Fantasies” and an American Daughter**

A childhood on the Dakota plains with its stretches of insularity and solitude infused Thompson’s view of herself and of other African Americans presented in *American Daughter*. In his 1946 review of her autobiography, Ralph Ellison saw her experiences as a black child to be in many ways outside the stream of black consciousness and devoid of any cognizance of the referential markers of race in American society. The Pygmalion-like attempt of Thompson to change her clothes and speech could not negate the fact of her color for Ellison, “We are reminded that writing too, like the ointments with which some Negroes attempt to bleach their dark skins to a ‘white’ esthetic standard, can be a form of ‘symbolic bleaching.’”<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, Ellison continued, Thompson resembled some Southern blacks, “hating her color; she indulges in ‘stepchild fantasies’ of transcending the Negro predicament by becoming the daughter of a white family; and her humor reminds us of the Southern Negro’s ‘laughing-just-to-keep-from-crying’

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<sup>38</sup> Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Black Chicago Renaissance and Women’s Activism*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press (2006), 62, 128 (advocating for a library to serve Chicago’s Southside blacks, Dr. George Cleveland Hall enlisted the financial aid of Julius Rosenwald in the 1930s. The founder of Sears Roebuck and a long-time resident of Chicago, Rosenwald supported similar endeavors for blacks across the American South. By 1935 the library housed some 35,000 books. Vivian Harsh was hired to run the library in Chicago and through her guidance it became a center of black literary endeavors. Today, the Vivian Harsh Collection houses the papers of a number of prominent black Chicagoans, including the papers of Era Bell Thompson.)

<sup>39</sup> Ralph Ellison, “StepChild Fantasy,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 29:3 (June 8, 1946), 25.

technique of survival.”<sup>40</sup> Thompson’s description of moving from North Dakota to Chicago in the early 1930s provided fresh fodder for Ellison’s attack, particularly as she revealed her discomfort with new migrants, fresh entrants into Chicago’s black belt from the South. Equating her discomfort with what he perceives as hatred of her own skin, Ellison focuses his criticism on Thompson’s statement that she evaluated the world by white standards.

How did Thompson relate to her own racial identity? Raised in North Dakota where she rarely interacted with blacks outside her own family, how did she express her connections with her African roots? Early clues may be found in her discussion of her parents’ racial backgrounds, her father the product of an unequal union between a black slave and a white master’s son and her mother, whom she described as the granddaughter of a Cherokee chief.<sup>41</sup> But Thompson addressed the issue of race early and directly in her description of herself - she stood out in her family as much for her distinctive racial coloring as for her birth order and gender. Thompson was the youngest child and only surviving daughter in her family, a little blond-haired white skinned baby girl born earlier died in infancy. “Tovey,” as Thompson was called by her brothers, with her dark-skin and kinked hair was the survivor. Once the Thompson family moved to North Dakota, Thompson described a Christmas visit with several of the prospering black families within the community. Mack and Ted Williams had prospering farms and solid homes, in marked contrast to Pop Thompson’s poor efforts and manure-reinforced farm house. Instead of the sad orange and apple in Thompson’s Christmas stocking, the Williamses offered tables “groaning with food...as an unending stream of food flowed from kitchen to table.” And more to the point, “Mack Williams was proud of his blackness...Look at my brood; fat as hogs every

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 6 at 13.

one of ‘em. Fat, black and sassy.’<sup>42</sup> Sitting there with “four percent of the state’s entire Negro population” on that cold Christmas of 1917, Thompson felt a shared hope.

Out there in the middle of nowhere, laughing and talking and thanking God for this new world of freedom and opportunity, there was a feeling of brotherhood, of race consciousness, and of family solidarity. For the last time in my life, I was part of a whole family, and my family was a large part of a little colored world, and for a while no one else existed.<sup>43</sup>

The spell was broken when two white families stopped by later, but it is telling that Thompson described this moment as the only time she felt “part of a little colored world.” This may be the most revealing statement Thompson makes of race in *American Daughter*; this place of shared happiness within the total confines of an extended family in which blackness is a point of pride. The brothers Williams were described as progressive farmers, looking towards the future; Ted trained at Tuskegee, reading farm journals, “his was the only library in the township.” While it was not clear, it was suggested the Williams moved to North Dakota from the South or at least mid-Atlantic states. But they embraced their color with pride, providing a space for Thompson to feel comfortable within her black skin for at least one moment of her childhood.

The description of the Williams brothers and their families, their pride, work-ethic, and connections to the soil, contrasted with the way Thompson later described newly arrived Southern blacks to Chicago. It was Thompson’s discomfort with the flashy excesses of Southern blacks that caused Ellison to challenge her. But one could question whether Thompson engaged in “symbolic bleaching” or rather reflected a class distinction separating her by education and background from new Southern migrants. Thompson also drew a distinction between urban and

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* at 73-74.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* at 74.

rural - the earthbound wholeness of rural farming as opposed to the flash and grit of Chicago's urban core. The Williamses made their own opportunity, working their land and striving to improve themselves through education. Their pride in their own blackness was portrayed as something wholesome and embracing. The Southern black migrant was portrayed as someone who was flashy, slick, ignorant and looking to make a quick buck with no pride in himself nor a pride to his race.

Later in *American Daughter*, Thompson described a summer stay in Minneapolis when she was twenty. A shy young woman confronting complex class relationships within the black community, relationships she was ill-prepared to understand and within which she felt like an outsider.

*"You'll like it here, after you get acquainted." We turned and started walking back. "But these Negroes ain't going to be very friendly to you at first. Unless you're dressed to death or got money to burn, they can't see you for dust." "Do you work?" I asked, changing the subject. I didn't want to think about their not liking me....Lee was right about a lot of things, especially the girls and boys in the neighborhood. There were few enough white-collar jobs for colored in St. Paul, and they resented my coming from out of town and taking a job that should be theirs.<sup>44</sup>*

As she left the Twin Cities, the discomfort with her first experiences within a larger black community was evident. She did not fit into the homes and lives of established and prosperous residents, and she rejected the new migrants from the South, associating them with smells and tastes that seemed rancid and raw.

*When September came I was glad to leave St. Paul, glad to get away from grocery stores and restaurants and rows of colored houses and colored people's gates-- gates where I was still a stranger--and colored boys and girls who did not want me; to get away from greasy food and the acrid smoke of barbeque stands,*

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* at 161.

*from strange seafoods and slimy okra dishes. I felt hemmed in, apart from the world.*<sup>45</sup>

It was in Chicago that Thompson ultimately learned to navigate the multi-layered color line, although not initially. Working as a live-in cleaning lady for the Burton family, she slowly realized that the Burtons were passing, part of a “society of borderline people, Negroes who pass for white on the job, for economic reasons, but remain colored socially.”<sup>46</sup> Originally from the South and using the influx of white Southerners to aid in their daily deception, the Burtons’ “borderline” status forced Thompson to reassess her own naiveté about her race, “I began to feel uneasy, to feel a color line within the color line, boundaries within black boundaries: the bigger the city, the smaller the world.”<sup>47</sup>

**the ballad of chocolate Mabbie**

It was Mabbie without the grammar school gates.  
And Mabbie was all of seven.  
And Mabbie was cut from a chocolate bar.  
And Mabbie thought life was heaven.

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It was Mabbie alone by the grammar school gates.  
Yet chocolate companions had she:  
Mabbie on Mabbie with hush in the heart.  
Mabbie on Mabbie to be.<sup>48</sup>

Did Thompson feel a distinction within her family because of her racial traits?

Throughout her description of life in North Dakota, Thompson referred to racial comments her

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* at 164.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* at 254.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, New York: Harper & Row (1971), 14 (first published in Brooks’ 1946 *A Street in Bronzeville*, “the ballad of chocolate mabbie” is referring to color distinctions within the African American community. Brooks herself experienced exclusion because of her dark-hue as a child. Color consciousness within the black community is something that she shared with her later friend, Era Bell Thompson.).

brothers made. Some of these comments may simply have been the natural give-and-take between siblings. However, Thompson's purpose in including them in her autobiography may have been vetting her own consciousness of her racial identity. For instance, when the Thompson family slaughtered a hog for the winter and Tom teased his little sister that it was her pet pig Jerry, her wailing resulted in his comment, "That's the cryingest little darky I've ever seen. When is she goin' to grow up-and shut up?"<sup>49</sup> Later, when Thompson asked Tom if it would be alright to have her face blackened like three white students for a school play, Tom replied "Blackened your face? You crazy? Ain't you black enough now?" The blackened faces were to portray slaves in a play about Lincoln, a part which Tom refused to allow her to act. Thompson felt uneasy about the blackface but tried to imagine what "Jewel" (her school friend) would look like as a slave, "I remembered Jewel's long, bond hair and blue eyes and wondered how she'd look in blackface."<sup>50</sup>

How Thompson evolved within her own self-identification with race is one of the questions considered within the dissertation. What do her responses and reactions to the American South and Congo reflect about how she saw herself? In both *American Daughter* and *Africa, Land of My Fathers* she claimed beyond color, gender, and class one singular constant, that she was American. Did the claiming of an American identity over all others signify an effort to transcend more complex and perplexing identities within Thompson herself? Perhaps the answer to that question resides in typed notes Thompson prepared on the early history of North Dakota. Under population she listed "Early Settlers: First Born: daughter of a Negro servant of Alexander Henry, of the Northwest Fur Company Henrys. Father Pierre Bonza. Mother not

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* at 90.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* at 108.

mentioned. 3-12-1802.” The first born white child listed as 12-29-07 (gender unlisted), “The child of the “Orkney Lad”, pioneer woman who disguised as a man until the birth of child.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, in Thompson’s history of North Dakota the first resident was a black baby girl, mother unknown and the first white child born of a woman who dressed in disguise as a man. A little more than a century later, “Tovey” Thompson arrived in North Dakota at age six, a child who would lose her mother early, define herself within her father’s love, and grow up to claim for herself the pioneer spirit of the Great Plains and the identity of an *American Daughter*.

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<sup>51</sup> Era Bell Thompson, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Series D1, Box 3 “N. Dakota.”

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*We were in sight of our destination when I realized how little I really knew about the Congo or its Belgian proprietors. An Accra clerk had warned me about its color bar. A Stateside columnist had said that the humidity would make paper money feel like a wet sock. Another writer had described the territory below me as an entymologist's [sic] paradise, adding giant beetles and flying cockroaches to the "wild tiger-hungry cannibal" portrait so dear to the hearts of cartoonists.*

*Then there was the ugly picture of the old Congo under cruel King Leo II, whose crimes of forced labor and mutilations were echoed by Vachel Lindsay's macabre poem "Congo."*

Era Bell Thompson  
*Africa, Land of My Fathers*<sup>1</sup>

### **"Shards" of History**

How do we know history, how do we claim for ourselves the past particularly if it does not seem to be our past? Where did Thompson say she gathered information about Congo? She gathered it from a clerk in Accra, a poem written in 1912, from racialized cartoons, and from old stories of cruel "King Leo." In other words, Thompson arrived in Congo in 1953 with little information about the history or connections between Congo and America and almost no personal connection to Congo. She was a reporter, she wanted to interview a "Watutsi King" she wanted to explore what was described as Belgium's policy of "enlightened colonialism."<sup>2</sup> Yet there was a rich history tying Congo and the American South, and brushing back the brambles to reveal the traces of that history is useful in considering not only what Thompson observed during her travels, but also what she failed to see. Thompson's observations of Congo in 1953 are set out in Chapter III, "From Bronzeville to Congo and Home Again." In Chapter I - Rivers, the

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<sup>1</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers, The Story of the Return of a Native Three Hundred Years later*, New York: Doubleday & Co., (1954), 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* at 105.

historical relationship between Congo and the American South is excavated, beginning with the connection between two great rivers, the Congo and the Mississippi.

The words “shards” and “excavation” are used purposefully throughout Chapter 1. The British historian Bernard Porter pointed the way here, quite by accident I am sure, in the introduction to his work on empire and domestic Britain, *The Absent-Minded Imperialist: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain*.<sup>3</sup> In researching the importance of empire to Britons at home from c. 1800-1940, Porter based his evaluation on four historical approaches. The third relating to social and cultural context is relevant here. Porter noted that “In the archeological site that is British society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there are, of course thousands of imperial shards to be found. Dug out and piled up at the side, they can be made to look overwhelming. Studied *in situ* however, one gets a different impression. They appear widely scattered, and concentrated in certain layers and at particular spots.”<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, Chapter 1 is a digging up and piling together of historical shards. It sets a grid that reveals places where connections exist and often places where others have deeply excavated. The placement of the shards is at times artificial, shining a spotlight on a particular conversation about Congo by African Americans. So, for instance T. McCants Stewart traveled widely in Liberia and Northern Africa, yet the reference here is to a single speech he gave tied to the potential for business opportunities in Congo in order to illustrate the black business community’s enterpreneurial interest in Congo even if the possibility was removed by the realities of Leopold’s aggressive and exclusionary policies.

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain*, Oxford University Press (2004).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* at 104-108.

This “piling” is purposeful - the chapter opens up the roots of conversations that Thompson could have accessed prior to her travels to Congo. It illuminates fields from which the historical shards of Congo were collected within African American lives. Yet, in Porter-speak, the shards have been removed from their placement *in situ* in order to demonstrate or consider their historical existence. Rarely in African American discourse did Congo capture the imagination of domestic lives in a way that superseded the immediate and intimate lives of black communities in America. Like Ethiopia in 1935 and South Africa in the 1940s, Congo came to symbolize the excesses of European imperialism and man’s inhumanity to man.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We can Be Africans, Black Americans and Africa, 1936-1961*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2002); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire, Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1997).

## The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I hear the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sun set.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes<sup>6</sup>

## Chapter I: Rivers

### Congo

In the summer of 1482 Diogo Cão captained a ship down the Western coast of Africa in the name of the Portuguese King John II. Discovering the wide, muddy mouth of a huge river sending fresh water tumbling with great force into the salty Atlantic Ocean, Cão claimed for his king the river and lands that would come to be called Congo.<sup>7</sup> In the centuries that followed

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<sup>6</sup> *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, ed., New York: Vintage Classics (1994), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Forbath, *The River Congo, The Discovery, Exploration and Exploitation of the World's Most Dramatic River*, New York: Harper & Row (1977), 71-73.

the thousand miles of the Congo River flowing through a vast river basin in the heart of Africa would serve to transport great wealth to foreign lands, and millions who inhabited the river's encircling reach would cross the Atlantic in chains, slaves on voyages of no return.

Some six thousand miles away from where the muddy waters of the Congo River tumble into the Atlantic Ocean sits the delta of the Mississippi River, another great river transporting immense wealth and black slaves as it transects the continent of North America. Built along the banks of the Mississippi, much as Kinshasa is built along the Congo, is the city of New Orleans with its French, Spanish and Catholic influences where Creoles of European, Indian, and African blood mixed with Caribbean transplants and African slaves to create an exotic otherness. The influence of African slaves transported from "Kongo" to Havana to work the sugar plantations and from there to New Orleans during the Spanish control of New Orleans tied "Kongo," Cuba, and New Orleans, connections recorded in history, poetry, dance, and particularly the great American amalgam, jazz.<sup>8</sup>

### **"The Dance in Place Congo"**

*Up at the other end of Orleans street, hid only by the old padre's garden and the cathedral, glistens the ancient Place d'Armes. In the early days it stood for all that was best; the place for political rallying the retail quarters of all fine goods and wares, and at sunset and by moonlight the promenade of good society and the haunt of true lovers; not only in the military, but also in the most unwarlike sense the place of arms, and of heartcs and hands and of words tender as well as words noble.*

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<sup>8</sup> For the relationships between "Kongo" and New Orleans and particularly the importance of Congo Square in the evolution of music, see, Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans, From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*, Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books (2008); see also, Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, "In Congo Square: Colonial New Orleans," *The Nation*, [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com) (December 10, 2008) and Ted Widmer, "The Invention of a Memory," *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines* (April 2003), 69-78; for a twentieth century connection between American jazz great Louis Armstrong, "Ambassador Satch," and Congo, see, Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World, Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2004).

*The Place Congo, at the opposite end of the street was at the opposite end of everything. One was on the highest ground; the other on the lowest. The one was the rendezvous of the rich man, the master; the military officer-of all that went to make up the ruling class; the other of the butcher and baker, the craftsman, the sailor, the quadroon, the painted girl, and the negro slave. The negro was the most despised of human creatures and the Congo the plebeian among negroes. The white man's plaza had the army and navy on its right and left, the court-house, the council-hall and the church at its back, and the world before it. The black man's was outside the rear gate, the poisonous wilderness on three sides and the proud man's contumely on its front.*<sup>9</sup>

The area of New Orleans that came to be known as “Congo Square” in the late nineteenth century spent earlier centuries as an area where Native Americans celebrated their annual corn feast and later housed open markets where slaves and freed blacks were allowed to sell their wares, *Place des Nègres*.<sup>10</sup> In 1816 a Cuban circus master, M. Cayetano, set up his “Congo Circus” for whites only in the flat open field. Visiting the city in 1819, architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe gave his impression of the area on Sunday, “Feb’y 21st, 1819.”

*In going up St. Peters Street & approaching the common I heard a most extraordinary noise, which I supposed to proceed from some horse mill, the horses trampling on a wooden floor. I found, however, on emerging from the houses onto the Common, that it proceeded from a crowd of 5 or 600 persons assembled in an open space or public square. I went to the spot & crowded near enough to see the performance. All those who were engaged in the business seemed to be blacks. I did not observe a dozen yellow faces. They were formed into circular groupes in the midst of four of which, which I examined (but there were more of them), was a ring, the largest not 10 feet in diameter...A man sung an uncouth song to the dancing which I suppose was in some African language, for it was not French, & the women screamed a detestable burten on one single note. The allowed amusements of Sunday have, it seems, perpetuated here those of Africa*

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<sup>9</sup> George W. Cable, “The Dance in Place Congo,” *Century Illustrated Magazine*, XXXI, 4 (Feb. 1886), 517.

<sup>10</sup> Jerah Johnson, “New Orlean’s Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Spring 1991), 127; Today Congo Square is part of Louis Armstrong Park in New Orleans.

*among its inhabitants. I have never seen anything more brutally savage, and at the same time dull & stupid, than this whole exhibition.*<sup>11</sup>

Latrobe's diary entry, while deeply resonate with the prejudices of the day, also expressed a fascination he had for the lives and experiences of blacks within the city. His diary entries revealed the mixture of French and African cultures and particularly the relationship between French Catholicism in New Orleans and the religious practices of the city's inhabitants. Describing the "Funeral of a Black Woman" on May 4th, 1819, Latrobe wrote of a crowd "of at least 200 negroes, men and women, who were following a corpse to the cemetery. Of the women, one half at least carried candles, & as the evening began to be dark, the effect was very striking, for all the women & many of the men were dressed in pure white." Following along the processional with priests and mourners, Latrobe inquired as to who the deceased was that garnered such a retinue, "I went out in the midst of the confusion, & asked one of the mourners in white, who was talking intelligible French to her companions, who the person was who seemed to be so much honored & lamented by her own color. She told me that she was a very old African (Congo) negress belonging to Madame Fitzgerald."<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that she is specifically defined as Congo. Why would that be important for Latrobe to clarify?

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<sup>11</sup> *Impressions Respecting New Orleans by Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, Diary & Sketches 1818-1820*, Samuel Wilson, Jr., ed., New York: Columbia University Press (1951), 49-51 (Latrobe was appointed by Thomas Jefferson in 1803 as Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States and requisitioned to complete the Capitol in Washington. His projects on the East Coast of the New Republic were extensive. However, his experiences with projects in New Orleans were less successful. Latrobe was in New Orleans in 1819 to complete a waterworks project that had already claimed his son, Henry, who died from yellow fever in 1817. Latrobe himself died in New Orleans of yellow fever on September 3, 1820.).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* at 137-138.

By the 1830s, the black community of New Orleans commonly referred to the area as “the Congo,” “Congo Plain(s)” or “Congo Square.” The names associating the land with “Congo” gained wider acceptance, “especially as the square’s African dances, including one called the Congo, became occasions for outings by local residents as well as tourists.”<sup>13</sup> In 1848, the pianist and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk, who lived near Congo Square in the 1830s, wrote “Bamboula,” a rendering of the African drum-beat attributed to the dances and music of the Square. It was introduced in Paris, where it became wildly popular.<sup>14</sup> In the 1850s, the music and dancing on the Square were silenced by city ordinances as the Know-Nothing Party and tensions of war bore down on the city and the nation. However, in the 1870s, Congo Square reawakened in the imagination of white visitors to New Orleans through the work of Lafcadio Hearn and George W. Cable. Resurrecting a romantic, primitive nostalgia of New Orleans, particularly associated with French and African-American cultures, Hearn and Cable drew a Congo Square throbbing and writhing to an exotic, primitive beat. Cable’s widely read articles and stories used the name Congo Square, a phrase picked up by travel and newspaper writers in New Orleans for the Cotton Exposition of 1884-1885. In describing its earlier history, Cable also marked the geography of the Square as sitting outside the place of the elites, specifically surrounded by the “poisonous wilderness,” a place for the lowest residents in New Orleans. He also noted that among the hierarchy of those who occupied the market stalls, dances, and festivals in the Square, that “the Congo was the plebian.” Here, Cable may have been using the word “Congo” to refer to Africans from Congo, or more possibly using “Congo” as a slang for

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* at 138.

<sup>14</sup> Ted Widmer, “The Invention of a Memory,” *Revue Française d’Etudes Américaines*, *op. cit.* n. 8.

slave. There are other instances, including in Frederick Douglass' *North Star*, where the term "Congo" stood for slave.

It is possible that Era Bell Thompson's father spent time in Congo Square, among its market stalls and mixture of cultures while serving as a chef at the "Bucket of Blood," a euphemism for one of the African-American neighborhoods in New Orleans.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Janus Twins**

Flowing along the rivers of the Congo and Mississippi and through the great continents they claimed, two narratives drew parallels between the American South and Congo; one associated with civilization, Christianization, and uplift, the other with violence and exploitation. By the beginning of the nineteenth century these narratives combined complex discourses of race, gender, class, and modernity as they gathered voices along the historic routes of the Triangle Trade. The Atlantic currents that delivered Congolese slaves to Cuba and onto the docks of New Orleans and Congo Square served to tie abolitionists and Protestant Christian constituencies in Britain and North America with Africa, while by the end of the century a cacophony of voices from America, the West Indies, Britain, and Africa challenged the servile position of blacks in the West. This chapter excavates the shards of African Americans' participation in and creation of their own Congo narratives, trans-Atlantic and domestic,

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<sup>15</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, (1986), 14.

beginning as Reconstruction failed in the American South and Europe carved “The Magnificent African Cake” at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885.<sup>16</sup>

In excavating ways African Americans came to identify the American South with Congo this chapter magnifies particular events because of their connections to Congo and the American South specifically and more broadly to issues of race and gender that African Americans struggled with in the decades between the failure of Reconstruction and the First World War. Situating the narratives and their constituencies into a transnational frame, it is the goal of the chapter to demonstrate ways African Americans actively participated within a multiplicity of international exchanges related to Congo. Placing black mission work in Congo as a central and enduring link between African Americans and Congo by illustrating the ties between African Americans church organizations and Congo beginning in the 1880s, the chapter includes not only the mission work of George Washington Williams and William Sheppard but also the work of women missionaries such as Louise “Lula” C. Fleming and Nora Gordon. The section “To Measure the Boundless Influence of an Educated Christian Woman” seeks to show continuity between the gendered ideals of the “civilizing mission” for African American missionaries in Congo and the ideals directed towards black women in the American South.<sup>17</sup> Directly tying testimony of the violence of Leopold’s Congo Free State with narratives of the American South, the chapter uses Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost* and James Campbell and William

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<sup>16</sup> During the Brussels Conference convened in 1876 by King Leopold II, he wrote to his ambassador in London of his desire for a slice of “that magnificent African cake.” See, Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876-1912*, New York: Avon (1992), 22.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvia M. Jacobs, “Their ‘Special Mission’: Afro-American Women As Missionaries to the Congo, 1894-1937,” in *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa*, Sylvia M. Jacobs, ed., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (1982), 155.

Philpps' discussions of William Sheppard's documentation and testimony about the internecine slaughter initiated by King Leopold's demands for rubber to consider African Americans' public responses to Leopold's "Red Rubber."<sup>18</sup> As international pressure against Leopold gathered steam in Britain, efforts were led in America by Booker T. Washington as hundreds of black ministers and citizens responded with outrage to the tales of brutality in newspapers across the country. Washington's 1904 "Cruelty in the Congo Country" along with Mark Twain's *King Leopold's Soliloquy* served as powerful tools in the propaganda war against Leopold's rule in Congo.<sup>19</sup> Examining how African Americans decried as inhuman the cutting bite of the *chicotte*, raping of women, and chopping of hands and feet in Leopold's Congo also exposes ways that race leaders begin to draw early and clear comparisons to the violence against blacks in America as Plessy v. Ferguson completed the federal retreat from legal protections for blacks against state and social exclusion, exploitation, and violence following Reconstruction.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the chapter considers "Congo" as a trope for otherness, setting ideas of "civilized" vs. "savage" within the nexus of discussions about the West and modernity by African Americans. Illustrative of the tension between scientific advancements supported by

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<sup>18</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1998); James Campbell, *Middle Passages, African American Journeys to Africa*, New York: Penguin Press (2006), 136; William E. Phipps, *William Sheppard: Congo's African American Livingstone*, Louisville, KY: Geneva Press (2002); Edmund Dene Morel, *Red Rubber, The Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace 1906*, Nassau Print (1906).

<sup>19</sup> Booker T. Washington, "Cruelty In the Congo Country," *Outlook*, 78 (October 8, 1904), p. 375, Booker T. Washington papers, Vol. 8, p. 90, The University of Illinois Press); Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy, A Defense of His Congo Rule*, Boston: P.R. Warren (1905) (Twain was a champion for Congo Reform and the pamphlet excoriates Leopold.).

<sup>20</sup> Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) (landmark Supreme Court decision establishing the constitutionality of "separate but equal" and by extension segregation in the United States.).

well-educated African Americans and the use of science to promote racialized theories of causal links between black and apes is the exhibit of Pygmies from Congo in the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904 and the ultimate caging of one, Ota Benga, in the Zoological Park in the Bronx. The double-consciousness of African Americans seeking to attain the civil and political rights of American citizenship created both outrage and unease when confronted with the "primitiveness" of the "Dark Continent" and the mistreatment of its inhabitants.

### **"The Sun Do Move": The Black Church and Africa<sup>21</sup>**

The "conversion" to Christianity of native inhabitants of all lands opened to Western Europe in the Age of Discovery is the history of violent, catastrophic bloodletting, forced cultural assimilation, enslavement, genocide, and crimes against humanity in the name of God.<sup>22</sup> Yet the relationship between Christianity and those of African descent in Africa and in the New World was not only the story of oppression but also arguably one of liberation. In America, Frederick Douglass raged against what he called the "*slaveholding religion* of this land, with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference--so wide, that it receive the one as good, pure,

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<sup>21</sup> "The Sun Do Move" is the title of one of the most famous African American sermons of the nineteenth century. In 1878 the Rev. John Jasper of the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia gave the original sermon in which he attempted to use Biblical verses to prove the sun rotated around the earth. For more on Rev. Jasper see, [www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/vbha/6th6.html](http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/vbha/6th6.html); see also, "'Sun Do Move' Jasper Dead," *The New York Times* (March 31, 1901). Later, "The Sun Do Move" became the title of the 1942 play about the meaning of black spirituals by Langston Hughes. Opening in Africa, the play closes as the protagonist goes to war with the Union army. For more on the play see, Leslie Catherine Sanders, "I've wrestled with them all my life": Langston Hughes's Tambourines to Glory," *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 64.

<sup>22</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: American and the Age of Genocide*, New York: Harper Perennial (2007).

and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”<sup>23</sup> (emphasis included.) The broad abolitionist movement (of which Frederick Douglass was one of its greatest spokesmen) was centered within Christianity, growing from its early Quaker roots in eighteenth century Britain.

In America, the relationship between blacks and Christianity was predominately Protestant, often evangelical, and black churches served as a location of power among people who for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often politically and legally powerless. The difficult ground crossed by blacks within Christianity was often the question of why - why if God loved all his children did it seem that he had singled out those of African descent for special testing; “why did God permit blacks to undergo the ordeal of slavery, which threatened familial ties, dignity, and self-respect?”<sup>24</sup> The answer, found in biblical passages such as Romans 8, counseled not only patience within suffering, but also redemption through spreading God’s message, “slavery had been part of providential design educating them with a pressing responsibility to redeem the race.”<sup>25</sup> This belief in God’s design to lift the race tied African Americans to those of African descent beyond the nation and particularly focused their attentions on Africa. However, the “redemption of the race” was firmly rooted in the adaption of

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<sup>23</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative Of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Appendix, Kindle-Loca. 1,428-39.

<sup>24</sup> Sandy D. Martin, *Black Baptists and African Missions, The Origins of a Movement, 1880-1915*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press (1998), 11.

<sup>25</sup> David Killingray, “The Black Atlantic Missionary Movement and Africa, 1780s-1920s,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 33, 1 (February 2003).

Christian values and Western concepts of civilization. These dynamics would be integral to the relationship between Christian missions and black missionaries in Congo and elsewhere in Africa as well as the American South.

Writing of the early efforts of Richard Allen, the former Delaware slave and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in the late eighteenth century, James Campbell said that the Free African Society, “black America’s first mutual aid society...welcomed all black men and women who lead ‘orderly and sober lives’...the basic insurance functions of the organization were laced with a strong dose of moral reformism.” The preamble to the Society’s mission, written by Allen and co-founder Absalom Jones, emphasized the importance of adhering to the moral path of Christian values, uplifting black Americans out of “their irreligious and uncivilized state.”<sup>26</sup>

Allen believed the Christian faith would free the soul and ultimately free the person, a view that appeared all the more possible in the 1780s before the invention of the cotton gin. At the core of African Americans faith in Christianity was not only personal salvation but the salvation of the nation from the sin of slavery. Freedom for one would ultimately be freedom for all, black or white, in the eyes of God. This redemptive power of Christ also required of blacks adherence to a strict set of moral guidelines in a world where white society set the cultural outlines of “civilized” behavior. Thus it was incumbent upon black Christians, their duty to all God’s children black and white, to fulfill their role “in an ongoing racial trial...this sense of

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<sup>26</sup> James Campbell, *Songs of Zion, The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press (1998), p. 9; describing the broader relationship between American Christian missions to Africa and African-Americans see, “The Historical Role of Afro-Americans in American Missionary Efforts in Africa,” *Black Americans and The Missionary Movement in Africa*,” Sylvia M. Jacobs, ed., *op. cit.* n. 17.

representativeness, and the almost palpable feelings of obligation that flowed from it, would become abiding features in elite black politics in America.”<sup>27</sup> Tying “civilised” behavior and Christian mission, black churches and their white counterparts sent missionaries out to spread God’s word in Africa.<sup>28</sup>

### **Redeemers and Explorers: The 1880s**

On October 15, 1883 the United States Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Acts of 1876 to be unconstitutional, removing the legal structures implemented by the federal government to protect black citizens and ensure their equal treatment under the law, namely that no one on the basis of his or her race, color, or previous condition of servitude may be denied “the full enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement.”<sup>29</sup> Speaking of the decision at Lincoln Hall in Washington, D.C. on 22 October, Frederick Douglass said, “In humiliating the colored people of this country, this decision has humbled the Nation...The lesson of all the ages on this point is, that a wrong done to one man, is a wrong done to all men. It may

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* at 7.

<sup>28</sup> For why white churches tended to send black missionaries to Africa, see, Sandy D. Martin, *Black Baptists and African Missions, The Origins of a Movement, 1880-1915*, *op. cit.* n. 24 at 19.

<sup>29</sup> *The Civil Rights Cases*, 109 U.S. 3 (1883) (dissenting, Justice J. Harlan addressed the majority opinion’s barb that black citizens had been given special treatment under the 1875 law, “It is, I submit, scarcely just to say that the colored race has been the special favorite of the laws. What the nation, through congress, has sought to accomplish in reference to that race is, what has already been done in every state in the Union for the white race, to secure and protect rights belonging to them as freemen and citizens; nothing more...At every step in this direction the nation has been confronted with class tyranny, which a contemporary English historian says is, of all tyrannies, the most intolerable...Today it is the colored race which is denied, by corporations and individuals wielding public authority, rights fundamental to their freedom and citizenship. At some future time it may be some other race that will fall under the ban.”)

not be felt at the moment, and the evil day may be long delayed, but so sure as there is a moral government of the universe, so sure will the harvest of evil come...”<sup>30</sup> Arguing that those who tried to equate civil equality with social equality are falsely claiming the Civil Rights Acts legislated class instead of deriving from the protections afforded all citizens by law, Douglass recalled his own experiences in England. Lionized by the Anti-Slavery Society, traveling and eating in the company of lords and dukes, visiting the Houses of the Commons and Lords, Douglass said “...but I never thought that those circumstances made me socially the equal of lords and dukes. I hardly think that some of our Democratic friends would be regarded among those lords as their equals...Equality, social equality, is a matter between individuals. It is a reciprocal understanding.”<sup>31</sup>

A complex national political landscape, economic priorities, and technological change contributed to the failures of Reconstruction, including the response of Northerners to the influx of blacks in their cities, competing for their jobs and and potentially seeking social as well as legal equality. In the South, the single unifying commitment was “dismantling the Reconstruction state, reducing the political power of blacks, and reshaping the South’s legal

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<sup>30</sup> Proceedings of the Civil Rights Mass-Meeting held at Lincoln Hall, October 22, 1883, Speeches of Hon. Frederick Douglass, and Robert G. Ingersoll, Washington, D.C.: C.P. Farrell (1883) (warning that the denial of rights did not just fall on people of color, Douglass stated “The wife of Chief Justice Waite--I speak of respectfully-- is protected today, not by law, but solely by the accident of her color. So far as the law of the land is concerned, she is in the same condition as that of the humblest colored woman in the Republic. The difference between colored and white, here, is, that the one, by reason of color, needs legal protection, and the other, by reason of color, does not need protection. It is nevertheless true, that manhood is insulted, in both cases. No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man, without at last finding the other end of it fastened about his own neck.”)

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

system in the interests of labor control and racial subordination.”<sup>32</sup> The 1883 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court aided in this cause by forcing citizens to turn to state governments for remedies at a time when white control of state and local governments was reasserted and solidified, particularly in the Deep South.<sup>33</sup>

With the noose tightening around black citizens of the American South, leaders of European nations were completing the carving up of the “African Cake.” On November 15, 1884 at the conference table of Otto von Bismarck in Berlin, Europe’s leaders met to complete a process that had proceeded apace once David Livingstone and Henry Morgan Stanley opened up the Heart of Africa. Congo lay on the table, a glittering mirage, as it had already been secured for King Leopold II by his agent Stanley and held under the shell banner of the International Association of the Congo, already recognized by the United States as the legitimate power in the territory.<sup>34</sup> Wooing America had been a master-stroke of Leopold. Little was known of Africa in America except for its greatest export, slaves, and the public relations campaign by Leopold’s agents was carefully planned over the course of several years - the International Association of the Congo would have philanthropic not political goals. Congress was pleased and one of its members, Senator John Tyler Morgan of Alabama, was particularly intrigued as he saw “Kongo” as a new home for the millions of former American slaves. Head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Morgan waxed poetic over the possibility, “In the Congo basin we find the best type

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<sup>32</sup> Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction*, Harper Collins e-book (Kindle), Loc. 4690.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* at Loc. 4710.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 84-85.

of the negro race, and the American negro...can find here the field for his efforts.”<sup>35</sup> Morgan later produced a long report on Congo, primarily authored by Leopold’s agent, that reasserted philanthropy as the goal of the Association, “that no barbarous people have ever so readily adopted the fostering care of benevolent enterprise as have the tribes of the Congo, and never was there a more honest and practical effort made to...secure their welfare.”<sup>36</sup> By 1907 Morgan would “arraign Leopold, King of the Belgians, ‘for the manner in which he has exploited the Congo lands in accumulating wealth to himself by imposing tasks of personal labor to the extreme of cruelty upon the native population.’”<sup>37</sup> Morgan was not alone in this pursuit of Congo as a place of return for African Americans. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner also saw opportunities in Congo as a place of return for American blacks although the primary focuses of his African travels were Liberia, Sierra Leone, and particularly South Africa. Turner, who was appointed as Bishop of Africa by the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1893, was a fierce proponent of emigration to Africa. While extolling the “manliness” of African men, he still saw them as “heathen” but “he argued that slavery had stripped African Americans of their ‘manhood,’ leaving them content to play the role of ‘scullion.’”<sup>38</sup> On April 22, 1884, six months

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* at 79.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* at 80

<sup>37</sup> “Congo For Our Negroes. Morgan Wants No Obstacles to their Repatriation Raised,” *The New York Times* (March 2, 1907).

<sup>38</sup> James Campbell, *Songs of Zion, The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, *op. cit* n. 26 at 82; see, also Melbourne S. Cummings, “The Rhetoric of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4 (June, 1982), 457.

before the Berlin Conference, the United States government recognized Leopold's claim to Congo.<sup>39</sup>

In December 1886 H.M. Stanley was on a lecture tour in New York City talking of his exploration "Through the Dark Continent."<sup>40</sup> Stanley's lectures garnered much interest in the African American press, *The New York Freeman* giving extensive coverage highlighting features of the explorer's talk of Africa, observing "It was gratifying to hear Mr. Stanley speak with such feeling of 'my boys' and 'my brothers,' in the many anecdotes and thrilling episodes concerning the black men of Africa. Everything pointed to them as true men; in war as brave as a lion, and in friendship true till death."<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, not all reporters took the same information from Stanley's lecture tour. The African American newspaper, *Weekly Pelican* in New Orleans, Louisiana reported in December 1886 that "The latest word is that the Free State of Congo, which owes its existence to him, is not panning out according to expectations." Apparently commercial opportunities were not developing as quickly as hoped in a country that "teems with undeveloped riches, and fabulous fortunes have already been made there." Describing the country as having a population of 43,000,000 people and touting the United States' role in securing the country for King Leopold, it sees the Belgian king as a way to place the country on a "firm foundation" to promote an end to "traffic in slaves within its borders." It is not quite

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<sup>39</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 81 (the text of the statement of recognition read "The Government of the United States announces its sympathy with and approval of the humane and benevolent purposes of the International Association of the Congo, administering, as it does, the interests of the Free States there established, and will order the officers of the United States, both land and sea, to recognize the flag of the International African Association as the flag of a friendly government.")

<sup>40</sup> "The Dark Continent, Ethiopia Stretches Forth Her Hand," *New York Freeman* (December 11, 1886), 2; see also, "Mr. Stanley on Africa," *New York Freeman* (December 18, 1886), 1.

<sup>41</sup> "The Dark Continent," *New York Freeman* (December 11, 1886), 2.

clear in what ways the Congo had failed to “go” except perhaps for African American businessmen. What is evident, however, is the belief in Leopold and Stanley’s benevolent purposes in Congo.<sup>42</sup>

It was not only Stanley’s lectures on Africa that piqued *New York Freeman’s* interest in the Continent in December 1886. A presentation by T. McCants Stewart (“Lawyer Stewart”) of the importance of Africa to a meeting of “merchants, manufacturers, bankers, brokers, insurance men, lawyers, and doctors” was also discussed. Stewart, an African American lawyer, minister, and author, who had spent some time in Liberia, “said substantially that the interest in Africa is increasing wonderfully throughout the civilized world. European and American explorers, chief among them stand Livingstone and Stanley, have shown the commercial opportunities of the Dark Continent and have urged their countrymen to aid Africa on the grounds of humanity and benevolence as well as because of the gain to be derived from the African trade.”<sup>43</sup> While the focus of the article and Stewart’s talk was the enormous commercial opportunities in Africa, the themes of benevolence and civilizing influence resonated in Leopold’s propaganda and Stanley’s lectures also shone through “In closing Mr. Stewart urged claims of Africa upon moral and religious grounds as well as because of the benefits which would grow out of the business of exchanging American commodities for the gold, ivory, rubber, palm oil and nuts, camwood, gum copal and coffee of Western Africa.”<sup>44</sup> African American businessmen saw the potential for

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<sup>42</sup> “Free State of Congo. Stanley’s African State Does Not Seem to “Go.,” *Weekly Pelican* (December 11, 1886), 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*; for more on T. McCants Stewart see, Charles E. Wynes, “T. McCants Stewart: Peripatetic Black South Carolinian,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, vol. 80, no. 4 (October 1979), 311; see also, Albert S. Broussard, *African American Odyssey: The Stewarts, 1853-1963*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas (1998).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

commercial growth in Congo and West Africa, the combination of commerce, Christianization, and civilization so much a part of the mission of the International Anti-Slavery Society as a way to save and uplift those in slavery was accepted as part of the Victorian values elite blacks embraced. That African Americans would be shut out of the Congo trade and ultimately any Christianizing or civilizing missions in Congo and across Africa was not yet apparent.

**“We Who Are Identified with the African Race...”<sup>45</sup>**

There were other voices, voices who saw the potentials in Congo but also the great dangers to Congolese and to all those of African descent. In the January 1886 issue of the *A.M.E. Church Review*, D. Augustus Straker presented a lengthy and prescient opinion piece on the Congo. Writing shortly after the Berlin Conference (referred to by Straker as the “International Conference”), Straker succinctly articulated the layered narratives defining the Congo for African Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. In Congo, as throughout Africa, the civilizing forces of Christianity and uplift balanced against the dissonant exercise of power and violence by white political and economic interests intent on robbing the “Fatherland” of its fertile riches while “keep[ing] servile the races thereon, to the end of making them ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water,’ so as to fill the already loaded coffers of cupidinous nations...” The similarities of social and economic repression for blacks in the Redeemer South of the 1880s were not drawn by Straker. The twin narratives of uplift and exploitation, however, were clear.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> D. Augustus Straker, “The Land of Our Fathers, Interest in the Congo Region, Why are the European Powers Grasping African Territory?” (in the *A.M.E. Church Review* for January) republished in *New York Freeman* (January 23, 1886), 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Representative of a transnational black elite, educated, urbane, familiar with the paternalism of Empire and the double-consciousness of black life in Post-Civil War America, Straker was born in Bridgetown, Barbados, schooled in philosophy, French, and Latin, moved to America to educate former slaves (he taught in a freedman's school), and in 1871 earned a law degree from Howard University. Unable to find work as a lawyer in Kentucky in the early 1870s, he worked as a postal clerk, gaining national recognition through his editorials in Frederick Douglass' newspaper, *New National Era*. Moving to South Carolina, Straker, a Republican, was elected multiple times to the state legislature although Redeemer Democrats blocked his efforts to be seated. A prolific writer, Straker wrote *The New South Investigated* in 1888 and *Reflections on the Life and Times of Toussant L'Overture, The Negro Haytien, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Ruler Under the Dominion of France, and Author of the Independence of Hayti, [sic]* published in 1886. Moving to Detroit, Michigan in 1887, Straker continued his civil rights work, establishing himself as one of the premiere jurists in the state.<sup>47</sup> In 1890 he successfully argued that the Michigan state constitution barred "separate but equal" in the landmark *Ferguson v. Gies* (outlawing segregation based on race in public places in Michigan).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> For more on David Augustus Straker see, Glenn O. Phillips, "The Response of a West Indian Activist: D.A. Straker, 1842-1908," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 66, 2 (Summer 1981), 128; for his legal contributions see, Kenneth W. Mack, "Rethinking Civil Rights Lawyering and Politics in the Era Before Brown," *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 115, no. 2, (November 2005); *D. Augustus Straker, The New South Investigated*, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger (2009); *Reflections on the Life and Times of Toussant L'Overture, The Negro Haytien, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Ruler Under the Dominion of France, and Author of the Independence of Hayti*, C.A. Calvo, Jr. Publishers (1886).

<sup>48</sup> *Ferguson v. Gies*, 82 Mich. 358, 46 NW 718.

Straker embodied the complex tensions the American South and Africa presented to elite blacks. In a speech at the Israel A.M.E. Church in Washington D.C. on April 12, 1874 “he stressed the fact that the country needed to accept the black man as an equal and as an American citizen, for he was ‘no longer an African but an American. No longer a slave, he is a component part of the Republic.’”<sup>49</sup> In fact, Straker did not see suffrage limited to men. He was an outspoken proponent for universal suffrage and the equality of men and women. His presentations to the Israel A.M.E. Church in April, 1874 resulted in the pamphlet of his address, “Citizenship, Its Rights and Duties - Women Suffrage” published by Frederick Douglass’ *New National Era*.<sup>50</sup> In 1900 during a speech before the Michigan Woman’s State Federation of Colored he encouraged the participants to “agitate, agitate, agitate for their rights.”<sup>51</sup> His decision to move to America to teach newly freed slaves and the language of uplift replete within his article on Congo suggested that Straker saw an imperative to teach values and rules of civilization to “uncivilized victims,” although in Congo he saw the lack of civilization tied to ignorance of Christian values rather than exposure to a brutal and dehumanizing slave system, as in the American South.<sup>52</sup> Within the article in *Review* he argued from the history of western

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<sup>49</sup> Glenn O. Phillips, “The Response of a West Indian Activist: D.A. Straker, 1842-1908,” *op. cit.* n. 47 at 131.

<sup>50</sup> D. Augustus Straker, “Citizenship, Its Rights and Duties - Women Suffrage,” *New National Era* (1874).

<sup>51</sup> Glenn O. Phillips, “The Response of a West Indian Activist: D.A. Straker, 1842-1908,” *op. cit.* n. 47 at 136.

<sup>52</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press (1988), (Kindle), loc. 128-133.

civilization and used an “evolutionary view of cultural assimilation” to counter “racist notions of fixed biological racial differences” between black and white.<sup>53</sup>

Despite his admonition to black Americans to claim their distinct Americanness, Straker did not shrink from Africa. Instead throughout his article on Congo his claim of African heritage resonated, “It is a matter of no small concern to the sons and daughters of Africa, wherever assembled upon the face of the globe, to perceive the deep interest which the civilized powers of the earth are taking in the development of the resources of the “Dark Continent,” and to observe the attention which said powers seem now ready to give to the civilization of its races.”<sup>54</sup> For historian James Campbell, Straker’s claim on the continent of his ancestors was not surprising, “Africa is and always has been the touchstone of black distinctiveness, the literal and figurative point of departure for the construction of African American identity, whatever one conceives it to be. And nowhere was the question of African Americans’ relationship with Africa more explicitly confronted than in the AME Church.”<sup>55</sup> While Straker neither advocated nor discussed Congo as a home of return for African Americans, others in the A.M.E. Church, namely Bishop Henry Turner did so in the coming decade. Straker spoke to a global audience of African descent while expressing skepticism as to the interest of the “civilized powers” in the resources of the “Dark Continent.” Playing on the definitional nuances of “civilization” Straker was both a skeptic of European “civilizing” power and a proponent of the importance of “civilization,”

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<sup>53</sup> Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race, Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press (1996), 3.

<sup>54</sup> D. Augustus Straker, “The Land of Our Fathers, Interest in the Congo Region, Why are the European Powers Grasping African Territory?” *op. cit.* n. 45.

<sup>55</sup> James Campbell, *Songs of Zion, The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, *op. cit.* n. 26 at 64.

claiming for the African continent histories of civilizations rich in “theatre of arts and sciences, and the mart of a great portion of the world’s commerce.” Educated in the classics, Straker reached back to Greece, Babylon, Nineveh, and Rome and travelers such as the French Volney and the Greek Herodotus to counter the dismissal of the continent by U.S. Commander Foote, “the loss of all Africa would offer no memorable deduction from anything but the earth’s black catalogue of crimes.”<sup>56</sup> Straker’s quoting A.H. Foote was interesting, as he referred to an address Foote made to the American Colonization Society on January 16, 1855. (Foote, a Union naval officer, died in 1863.) Considering Foote’s address, it seemed that many of Straker’s references to the economic and cultural richness of Africa were in direct response to Foote’s address of some three decades before. Outspoken about Africa and in fact the “negro race,” Foote said, “If all that negroes of all generations have ever done were to be obliterated from recollection forever, the world would lose no great truth, no profitable art, no exemplary form of life. The loss of all that is Africa, would offer no memorable deduction from any but the earth’s black catalogue of crimes. Africa is guilty of the slavery under which she has suffered, for her people made it as well as suffered it. The great experiment, therefore, is as to the effect of instruction given to such a race from a higher one.”<sup>57</sup> It was the “great experiment” to which Foote referred that was the focus of Straker’s concern, for Foote based his premise on a hierarchal theory of race not on the equality of men.

Straker defended the state of Africans with the argument that all nations, including most pointedly European nations, not just Africa, long languished as “uncivilized” until the civilizing

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> “Address of Commander A.H. Foote, U.S.N. at the 38th Anniversary, January 16, 1855,” *The African Repository*, “*American Colonization Society*, vol. XXXI, no. 3 (March 1855), 83, 86.

influence of Christianity. Arguing his case for Africa, Straker the lawyer, presented as his star witness and champion Charles Sumner, “that great and noble man, statesman, philanthropist, humanitarian and scholar.”<sup>58</sup> Sumner’s claim for the sovereignty of nations under international law proved integral to Straker’s case that European powers should tread lightly in Africa and specifically Congo. Quoting Sumner’s March 1871 speech in the U.S. Congress, “Foremost among admitted principles of International Law is the axiom that all nations are equal without distinction of population, size, or power..as a natural consequence whatever is the rule for one is the rule for all, nor can we do to a scattered, small, weak or black what we would not do to a populous, large strong white nation,” Straker cautioned recent participants in the Berlin Conference to treat the “inhabitants of the Congo Valley in particular, and Africa in general, [with] the spirits of equality of rights, as human beings...”<sup>59</sup> Straker, who successfully argued that the doctrine of “separate but equal” was unconstitutional under Michigan law in 1890, advocated throughout for a relationship between the inhabitants of Congo and Europeans that promoted a universalizing equality between men.

Even while Straker advanced his arguments on behalf of Congo and Africa, he wrestled with the complexities Africa presented. If there were uncivilized races that filled Africa, then was it not a Christian’s duty to civilize them? But to what purpose had that Christian duty arrived? Describing the Congo Valley and the “great highway for commerce...the Congo River” Straker characterized the inhabitants as “nearly all uncivilized, and though some of them are gentle and open-hearted, yet many are predatory, barbarous, and bloodthirsty....yet those who

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<sup>58</sup> D. Augustus Straker, “The Land of Our Fathers, Interest in the Congo Region, Why are the European Powers Grasping African Territory?” *op. cit.* n. 45.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

have been among the native say they show real inclination for receiving civilizing influences...In all these evidences of native talent we clearly observe a ready adaptation to civilizing influences by contact.”<sup>60</sup> Because the natives were open to being molded, then “only such contact with civilization as has for its purpose the uplifting of these people can benefit them.”<sup>61</sup> Suggesting that King Leopold II, who manipulated the international community in order to ensure Congo would be controlled by Belgium, used “civilization” as a shibboleth, Straker remained skeptical that Leopold or Europe was truly interested in uplift of the Congolese people, “Is it the material prosperity of the people of Africa which these civilized powers seek? or, is it the lust of dominion and territory?”<sup>62</sup> Even though skeptical of “civilizing power” when wielded by European nations, Straker evinced the Enlightenment beliefs in human progress and the perfectibility of man. He “concedes” that “should these powers plant their civilization in the Dark Continent, untold benefit will be derived as an inevitable result of the law of con-association...”<sup>63</sup> Seeing the flaws of this justification when used by the “Pilgrim Fathers in their warfare in America against the aborigines, or native Indians,” he still believed that removed from the emotion characterizing the conquest of Native Americans, benefits could accrue to the native inhabitants.<sup>64</sup> Reason and equality triumphed for Straker, “human progress arising from the light

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

of discovery and history, law, science and Christianity, which have given to the civilized world so much knowledge of Africa, its resources and development.”<sup>65</sup>

Straker’s belief in the civilizing mission of Christianity and the responsibility of those of African descent to discuss and respond to Europe’s interests in Congo had earlier roots related to his initial decision to move from Barbados to America. Responding to the request of the Rev. B.B. Smith, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Kentucky, for “any educated colored men in Barbados who are sufficiently interested in the American freedman (should) come over and assist him,” Straker with some reluctance made his way to Kentucky where he taught for one year in a freedman’s school.<sup>66</sup> It was this idea of Christian mission, of participating in educating and uplifting the newly freed slaves in America, that helped intimately and ideologically tie the American South and Congo.

**“To Measure the Boundless Influence of an Educated Christian Woman”<sup>67</sup>**

The opening of Congo’s interior and the emancipation of the slaves of the American South occurred within a decade of each other. While distinct events, they invoked many of the same racialized and gendered discourses that helped link them in imagery and imagination, particularly within African American churches, missions, and church affiliated schools. It was also the case that many African-Americans missionaries were sent to Congo, particularly before 1914, and their reports in white and black church newsletters and magazines helped link their work in Africa with home. The tensions of race and gender roiling within the national discourse

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Glenn O. Phillips, “The Response of a West Indian Activist: D.A. Straker, 1842-1908,” *op. cit.* n. 47 at 129.

<sup>67</sup> Nora A. Gordon, “Influence of Woman on National Character,” *Spelman Messenger* 5.1 (November 1888), 1.

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also were found within the development of African American churches. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's scholarship on the women's movement within the National Baptist Convention from 1880 through 1920 illuminated ways black women fought for gender equality within black churches even as the universalizing message of the congregations emphasized racial equality.<sup>68</sup> Higginbotham noted the ties between Christianity and education, "In the decades following Reconstruction, the movement expanded its ranks with growing numbers of educated men and women, the majority of whom had been trained in southern black schools and colleges. There was little doubt in their minds that education stood second only to religion in enabling their survival and salvation in America."<sup>69</sup> Education and uplift were tied together not just for black men; the inclusion and importance of women in the project of advancement was crucial. "Educators and religious leaders accentuated women's roles and, in quite explicit terms, deemed them essential, even paramount, to African American progress. Through public schools, hundreds of private schools, churches, and home visitation, the Female Talented Tenth served as a conduit of race pride and white middle-class culture."<sup>70</sup> Seeking support for the equality of women in the single most authoritative word within the Protestant faith, The Bible, "women challenged notions about their supposed inferiority and weakness, emphasizing the historical role of biblical women and the importance of black women's leadership in charitable philanthropic work for the advancement of the race as a

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<sup>68</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent, The Women's Movement n the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2003).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* at 19.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* at 20-21.

whole.”<sup>71</sup> Educational opportunities for African-American women in the American South were viewed as critical to inroads in raising the race from the degradation of slavery, and white religious organizations founded a number of schools to further opportunities for black women.<sup>72</sup> At the same time “white-denominated American churches began working in Africa...and women many times made up the core of workers in African missions.”<sup>73</sup> The “influence of an educated Christian woman” was integral in the narrative of uplift and civilization carried by missionaries into the Congo and the American South. Representative of this nexus was Nora Antonia Gordon, born in Columbus, Georgia on August 25, 1866 a year after the end of the Civil War.

Little is known of Gordon’s early years other than she was the daughter of former slaves and she had some public schooling prior to entering Spelman Seminary in 1882, the year after its founding in Atlanta, Georgia by the Woman’s American Baptist Home Missionary Society of Boston, Massachusetts. Matriculating through the various departments at Spelman, an all girls seminary, she graduated from the Higher Normal Course in 1888, writing a senior essay titled “Influence of Woman on National Character.”<sup>74</sup> The following year she became the first

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<sup>71</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice, African American Women and Religion*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf (2010), 60.

<sup>72</sup> For more on the founding of colleges for women see, Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925*, Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press (1989); for education generally see, James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press (1988).

<sup>73</sup> Sylvia M. Jacobs, “Their ‘Special Mission’: Afro-American Women As Missionaries to the Congo, 1894-1937,” *op. cit.* n. 17.

<sup>74</sup> By 1892 Spelman developed a Missionary Training Department to prepare “Missionary teachers, family missionaries, church and Sunday school workers..for the United States and foreign lands.” Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925*, *op. cit.* n. 72 at 50.

Spelman student to accept mission work in Africa. On her way to assist Louise Fleming at the mission station in Palabala, Congo, Gordon traveled to London, staying at the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Missions run by Dr. H. Grattan Guinness, arriving in Congo for a two year stay in May 1889.<sup>75</sup> Gordon's description of her mission in Africa, the mission that would consume the remainder of her short life (she would die in 1901 at age 34): "The Congo missionary's work is twofold. He must civilize, as well as Christianize, the people."<sup>76</sup> (It is worth noting that the gendered reference is masculine.)<sup>77</sup>

Gordon's understanding of the role of women in building a nation, at home and in Congo, was instructively presented in her senior essay at Spelman, "Influence of Woman on National Character." It was first "the boundless influence of an *educated* Christian woman" that was key for Gordon, and educated women were the key to a civilized home. (emphasis added) What were educated women to do? They influenced the "moral standard of humanity" as throughout history "woman, by her influence, has either led those about her to love high and good things or else to be content with low and mean things."<sup>78</sup> Gordon's emphasis on educated women, "an education as high and broad and varied as man's" was not to remove her from the home, but to

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<sup>75</sup> Dr. H. Grattan Guinness founded the East London Institute for Home and Foreign Missions, also known as the Harley House Bible Training Institute in 1872. Guinness was a co-founder of the Congo Reform Association and housed many missionaries as they traveled to and from Africa.

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin Brawley, "Women of Achievement Written for The Fireside Schools under the Auspices of the Woman's American Baptist Home Missionary," electronic edition, *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1999), 45.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon married Rev. S.C. Gordon of Jamaica in 1895, returning with him to Congo where they served at a mission in Stanley Pool. Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925*, *op. cit.* n. 72 at 50.

<sup>78</sup> Nora A. Gordon, "Influence of Woman on National Character," *op. cit.* n. 67 at 1.

allow her to serve her home and her community wisely.<sup>79</sup> Gordon advocated Christianity as the catalyst for knowledge and the equality of women, “Paganism held from woman education, which prevented her from exerting a refining influence in her home, community, and country. Where Christ is not known, woman is the drudge, and is looked upon as being inferior to man.” Citing women of science, the Bible, history (including Queens Elizabeth I and Victoria of England), and the workings of “Mrs. Browning, Mrs. Helen Hunt Jackson, and Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe,” Gordon lauded the accomplishments of women while continuing to emphasize that it was Christianity and education that allowed these achievements. In an interesting comment on politics she asked, “And now, my friends, I appeal to you for an answer to this question, - Does not woman influence even the votes? Thus we see that woman silently and imperceptibly molds the character of the nation.”<sup>80</sup>

Strongly influenced by the priorities of her own education. an education that trained Gordon to become a missionary and later the wife of a missionary, “Good mothers, teachers, missionaries, and physicians are needed...Our people are to be educated and Christianized, and the heathen brought home to God. Woman must take the lead in this great work; for all history verifies the fact, that woman is the pivot upon which the world turns.”<sup>81</sup>

Gordon’s mission to Congo was to assist the ongoing work of Louise “Lulu” Fleming. Writing of her life in Palabala, Congo in 1888, Fleming gave a “day in the life” description of the mission goals Gordon would travel to support, “Our family of children consists of nine girls and

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

eighteen boys. I have full charge of the girls, and enjoy them very much...”<sup>82</sup> The primary instruction for the girls involved training in household activities in a day that begin at 6:00 a.m., “At half-past six the second bell rings, for them to go to work. The boys go about the yard sweeping and house-cleaning and cooking, each knowing which is his part to do; while the girls are house-cleaning, cooking, attending the lady missionaries’ calls, and other things.”<sup>83</sup> Following the cleaning of the lady missionaries’ rooms, the children are allowed to eat their breakfast followed at 9:00 am. by a required prayer session. At three in the afternoon, following various chores including washing, “My girls and I retire to the schoolhouse again for sewing-school. Five o’clock sewing closes, and the girls are away to bring their next day’s water. The suppers are from six to eight under the same rules as above, ours coming first.”<sup>84</sup> A final prayer service of the day precedes the nine o’clock lights out, “I can assure you we are a happy family. The children seem to know the difference between heathenism and Christianization.”<sup>85</sup> Fleming described little in the way of education beyond the civilizing influence of work and prayer. In fact, reports from other missions reflected similar activities, although the development of written languages in the native dialects allowed for more formal schooling including the integration of arithmetic and reading. Still, reports from after school hours and even the focus during school continued to emphasize the value of work and Christian learning. “The repetition of scripture texts forms a prominent part of the daily routine. During the year they have committed to

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<sup>82</sup> L.C. Flemming, “A Day at Palabala, Congo,” *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 68, 5 (May 1888) (spelling her name “Flemming” in the *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, her name is spelled “Fleming” by other reliable sources. In the dissertation Fleming will be used.).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

memory about one hundred and thirty verses, and can repeat them when called upon to do so....Out of school hours the children who live on the station are kept busy. The small boys care for the garden and paths under Mrs. Clark's supervision. The girls are also at work...housework, washing and ironing, and gardening. They have sewing regularly three afternoons a week and gardening other two."<sup>86</sup>

Fleming was appointed by the Women's American Baptist Foreign Missionaries Society to serve as the first African-American woman appointed to serve in Congo. Born of a slave in Hibernia, Florida in 1862, she attended the Bethel Baptist Church along with her mother, other slaves, and their white owners during the American Civil War. Following the war, Bethel Baptist became predominately a black congregation, although it appeared Fleming received her education through the sponsorship of a white female patron. While teaching in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1880 Fleming came to the attention of Shaw University, where she graduated as valedictorian in May, 1885. An active member of her local Baptist church, Fleming sought her appointment to Africa. After serving in Congo, she realized the importance of medical training and became the first African-American woman to be trained at the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia. Returning to Congo as a doctor in October 1895, she served as a medical missionary for the Women's Missionary Foreign Mission Society. Fleming died from the effects of sleeping sickness in Philadelphia in 1899.

One of the principles of missionary work in Congo was to identify Congolese who could, with further education and training, return home to proselytize and uplift their fellow natives. Fleming referred to this exchange in her "A Day at Palabala, Congo." "At Three o'clock Mrs.

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<sup>86</sup> "Ikoko, Upper Congo, Miss Georgina Milne, *Women's Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, Twenty-Sixth Annual Report*, 178.

White's boys go to work, under one of the three native young men on the place who have been to England, and who act largely as head men at the station work."<sup>87</sup> Rev. Gordon brought Emma Youngeblood home from Congo in 1900 to enroll at Spelman, and other young Congolese women including Lena Clark were trained at Spelman to return to Congo as missionaries. Adopted by Joseph Clark, a Scottish missionary to Congo, Lena Clark returned after studying at Spelman to take up mission work alongside Joseph Clark and Georgina Milne at Ukoko, in Upper Congo, in 1895. Discussing attempts to convert her fellow Congolese, Lena Clark wrote "Many strange questions have been asked during these visits. Some of them are: ...Is there only one Nyambe (God) who made the white people and the black people? If we all belong to *one* Father, why do the "Bula Matadi" people (State people) kill us?" Later, discussing two young women she met there was the definite tension between the ideas of "heathen" and "civilized" behavior, "There are two young women who seem to be interested in the gospel, but they have everything against them, especially the prevailing sin of immorality. One of these two said to me one day, "Many times I feel hungry. My heart wants to steal, but I think of what you told us about being afraid of God because he sees even in the dark, so I have not taken anything." She seemed to be in earnest while saying this....May God richly bless you all in your noble cause of sending the light into heathen lands."<sup>88</sup>

The early presence and work of African-American missionaries in Congo, particularly women missionaries, were an influential and enduring link between Congo and America. African-American churches continued to support missionaries in Congo even after Belgium began to actively discourage black missionaries from serving in the territory. Religious

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<sup>87</sup> L.C. Flemming, "A Day at Palabala, Congo," *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, *op. cit.* n. 82.

<sup>88</sup> Ikoko, Upper Congo, Miss Georgina Milne, *op. cit.* n. 86.

organizations such as Lott Carey provided financial support for white missionaries to continue their religious and educational work.

**“The oppression of the colored race in any one part of the world means, sooner or later, the oppression of the same race elsewhere.”<sup>89</sup>**

The Redeemer South of the 1880s was dangerous country if you were black. The superordination of whites over blacks was not simply to reify social inequality between the races but to ensure the continuation of an exploitive labor relationship only temporarily disrupted by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.<sup>90</sup> The failures of Reconstruction to accommodate any real land re-distribution allowed white landowners to retain control of not just land but distribution systems and markets throughout the South. By the beginning of the new century the American Cotton Belt was an entire economic system designed to keep blacks in debt servitude, bound legally to the land. Peonage “involved a man in debt to an employer and forced, under pain of criminal punishment, to continue laboring for that employer” until the debt was paid off.<sup>91</sup> Outlawed by federal law under the Peonage Abolition Act of 1867, for blacks in the South

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<sup>89</sup> Booker T. Washington, “Cruelty In The Congo Country,” *op. cit.* n. 19 at 86.

<sup>90</sup> “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” U.S. Const., amend. XIII. §1.

<sup>91</sup> Aziz Z. Huq, “Peonage and Contractual Liberty,” *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 101, no. 2 (Mar., 2001), 354; Peonage was not associated solely with cotton. It was also associated with turpentine areas of northern Florida, southern Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. In addition, railroad constructions camps were periodically the sights of peonage as well as slave labor. In the borderlands of the United States and Mexico peonage was specifically associated with Indian and Mexican populations, with its own corrosive social impact, Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery, Peonage in the South 1901-1969*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press (1972), 21; For a contemporary discussion of race relations and the consequences of peonage in parts of the South see, Herbert J. Seligmann, *The Negro Faces America*, New York: Harper (1920), see specifically “The American Congo,” ch. VIII., 218.

the system was gamed so their “debt” was never satisfied, and a web of state and local laws and customs kept black labor working the land and tied to white employers. Ironically, the mechanism for the system of Southern peonage as it developed after the Civil War was in fact the freedom to contract, one of the fundamental rights of American citizenship newly granted to emancipated black slaves. The relationship between master/slave prior to the Civil War was wholly unequal in fact and law. However, despite generally viewing “antebellum slavery as absolute and literal domination, recent historical work has emphasized the surprising incidence of negotiation...While the practice of slavery varied immensely between different parts of the South, in a handful of instances slaves contested, occasionally successfully, the organization of labor, the hours and pace of work, the sexual division of labor, and the composition of the labor force.”<sup>92</sup> In the American North of the 1840s free trade rhetoric emphasized the rights of white workers to “the whole product of his labor,” and by the 1850s abolitionists and Northern politicians expanded this theme in their arguments against slavery. Abraham Lincoln “described slavery as a worker illegitimately denied the fruits of his or her labor. Slavery, in other words, was a form of theft.”<sup>93</sup>

Reconstruction opened avenues for blacks to contract their labor for a wage, but the pitfalls within the system resulted in blacks generally remaining economically disadvantaged and trapped in a coercive legal and social landscape. Blacks found “refusal to labor” criminalized, with state legislatures passing laws restricting mobility of black laborers, contract-enforcement systems, and vagrancy statutes. For those blacks who attempted to leave a contract in “debt” to

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<sup>92</sup> Aziz Z. Huq, “Peonage and Contractual Liberty,” *op. cit.* n. 91 at 359.

<sup>93</sup> Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial, Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, New York: WW Norton (2010), 113.

their white employers, there was always the “chain-gang” waiting.<sup>94</sup> In his 1911 autobiography, *The Heir of Slaves*, the Yale graduate and race leader William Pickens wrote of his own family’s journey from South Carolina to Arkansas to work as tenant farmers, “The planter had the contract binding us hard and fast. Just what we owed for transportation no one knew; besides we had been furnished with salt meat, meal and molasses for the first weeks of enforced idleness, and we were supplied with a little better food, including sugar, coffee and flour, when field work began. As in the case of any property on which one has a lease, our lessor could lay out more on our maintenance in the seasons when we were bringing returns. When the first year's settlement came around, and a half hundred bales of cotton had been produced by the family and sold by the planter, Father came home with sad, far-away eyes, having been told that we were deeper in debt.”<sup>95</sup> Pickens went on to provide a bitter ditty said to circulate among blacks in the Arkansas bottomland, crudely expressing the relationship between white owners and black farmers,

*A nought's a nought, and a figger's a figger -  
All fer de white man - none fer de nigger!*<sup>96</sup>

The exploitive and coercive nature of labor relations for white and black workers in the North and South created ongoing social unrest and legal challenges during the Progressive Era. While the United States Supreme Court in the era of Plessy was generally hostile to minority claims, two cases on peonage did find for black plaintiffs even if the opinions issued by the

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<sup>94</sup> Aziz Z. Huq, “Peonage and Contractual Liberty,” *op. cit.* n. 91 at 362.

<sup>95</sup> William Pickens, *The Heir of Slaves, an Autobiography*, Boston: The Pilgrim Press (1911), 25. (For more on Pickens and his association with “American-Congo” see Chapter II, Dark Princess, 121).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* at 26.

Court were tailored to have "limited impact on the quotidian reality of race relations."<sup>97</sup> The "Peonage cases," Bailey v. Alabama and United States v. Reynolds, heightened the tension between whites owners and black laborers at a time when labor relations between workers and employers throughout the country pitted union organizers against employers in often violent confrontations.<sup>98</sup> In the South, some emboldened black laborers, supported by a few federal prosecutors and judges, pressed their cases in an attempt to bring some of the most egregious violators to heel. In 1911, Judge Emory Speer of the U.S. District Court of Georgia gave an eloquent and poetic history lesson to the grand jury in a case charging four white citizens with peonage. The presentation by Judge Speer invoked Roman history, Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Richard the Lionhearted, Thomas Jefferson and the "Czar of Russia" in a sweeping grand narrative of the advances of Western Civilization in progressing beyond slavery and eschewing the vestiges of peonage.<sup>99</sup> Judge Speer stated that within the laws of the United States "There is no power in a private person, under guise of settling a criminal case, to imprison or otherwise

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. at 351; Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896) (reaffirming the rights of state legislatures to set up racial segregation under the doctrine of "separate but equal," the Plessy decision was seen as the final act of the Court's gutting of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1875. In a prior set of cases, referred generally as "the Civil Rights cases" and the "Slaughterhouse cases," the Court ruled the 14th Amendment did not apply to private individuals and corporations and thus removed protection for minorities claiming violation of their civil rights by private citizens or entities.

<sup>98</sup> Bailey v. Alabama, 219 U.S. 219 (1911) (finding an Alabama law making failure to perform a labor contract a criminal offense, violated the 13th Amendment); United States v. Reynolds, 235 U.S. 133 (1914) (finding an Alabama law allowing individuals to avoid the chain-gang by entering into a work contract with a third-party who paid their fine to be a violation of the 13th Amendment.). Bailey and Reynolds were not the only peonage cases to come before the U.S. Supreme Court, see, Aziz Z. Huq, "Peonage and Contractual Liberty," *op. cit.* n. 91 at 353, fn. 17.

<sup>99</sup> "A Recent Georgia Peonage Case, Throwing a Sidelight on Legal and Social Conditions in the South," *The Green Bag*, vol. 23 (1911), 526.

deprive any person of his liberty for the payment of a debt, whether that debt is for a fine imposed by a court, or for advances in the usual course of farming operations, or for any other debt of any other character.”<sup>100</sup> Despite his eloquence, Judge Speer sent the case to an all-white jury with little impact, as the defendants were acquitted.

Some five thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean in Congo Free State, much as D. Augustus Straker had warned in 1886, the exploitation of the native population was specifically designed to ensure a stream of raw materials, increasingly rubber and minerals, to enhance the coffers of King Leopold II of Belgium. The King ran the country as his own private plantation with H.M. Stanley as overseer. The methods imposed by the agents of the state, including using

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* at 527; Judge Speer is also notable for a lively and telling exchange with the defendants’ lawyer, one Mr. Felder, “The future-Attorney General of the state of Georgia.” Judge Speer ultimately threatened to disbar Felder for his use of inappropriate language in the court.

The Court: Mr. Felder, don’t you think the future Attorney-General of the state of Georgia can you spare us this “nigger, nigger, nigger”? It sounds so unworthy of a great court of justice, and so unworthy of your own position at the bar to be alluding to these poor unfortunate creatures constantly in the lowest terms of degradation.”

Mr. Felder: Your Honor, please. I think I know my duties and rights as a lawyer, an American lawyer practicing in an American court.

The Court: The Court thinks you are exceeding those rights, and if you continue on this line and insist upon using this language, which is nothing but an appeal to the lowest race prejudice, I am very much afraid I will have to sever your relations, not only in this case but in all cases in this court. I do not believe the American judiciary will tolerate the use of such language in the presence of a court of justice on the part of a gentleman who as a condition precedent to his admission to the bar has sworn to support the Constitution and the laws of the United States.

Now, I do not wish to do anything of the sort, but I do beg of you to use the language of which I know you are capable, the language of a cultivated gentleman, and save us that never ending “nigger, nigger, nigger.” I want you to act as becomes a lawyer in this court.

Mr. Felder, while never admitting to anything, did apparently finally curb his tongue sufficiently to earn acquittals for his clients. The exchange, however, is instructive in considering the relationship between the federal courts and state courts in the Deep South. It is also illustrative of the way black laborers were viewed, not as American citizens deprived of their rights, but as “poor unfortunate creatures,” relegated to terms that might have equally applied to abused farmyard animals. *Ibid.* at 528.

such native groups as the Zappo Zaps (reputed cannibals), were so brutal estimates of the number of Congolese who died between 1880 and 1920 ranged between eight and ten million.<sup>101</sup> However, Leopold's ability to maintain a brutal grip on the Congolese while professing a benevolent intent internationally began to erode by the late 1890s. The first to expose him was George Washington Williams in *An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians, and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo, by Colonel the Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America*. Williams, an African American minister, jurist, journalist, and politician spent six months in Congo in 1890, traveling by steam boat up the Congo River.<sup>102</sup> In 1884 Williams had offered a plan to Leopold and Stanley to use "Southern Negro labor in the Congo."<sup>103</sup> Prior to his travels in Congo in 1890 he suggested that "educated Negroes" be hired by Belgian commercial enterprises in the Congo. Arguing, "With proper preparation...the Southern Negroes will be the best agents which the European African trade organizations can employ," Washington was quoted as saying "I feel confident that they will improve the first opportunity afforded them of playing the role of civilizers."<sup>104</sup> However, following six months in Congo Williams offered his *Open Letter*. Published in pamphlet form and widely distributed in Europe and the United States, the *Open Letter*, along with Williams' written appeals to President Benjamin Harrison and the U.S. Secretary of State, created a

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<sup>101</sup> For a discussion of what these numbers mean and how they were arrived at, see, Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, op. cit. n. 18 at 225 - 233.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* at 102-108.

<sup>103</sup> "As A Civilizer. Efforts to Secure Educated Afro-Americans for the Congo," *Plaindealer* (March 3, 1890), 1.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

firestorm. In Belgium newspapers took up Williams' call for an investigation. Unfortunately, Williams' embellishments of his personal resume (he titled himself "Colonel," a rank he had not been awarded), along with accusations made by Leopold's propaganda machine, diluted the impact of Williams' charges and his sudden death at forty-one saved the Belgian king, for a time.

### **Dedicated to Dr. W.H. Sheppard**

On, on to the darkest continent,  
As the Adriatic sailed,  
In Eighteen Hundred and Ninety,  
Many sad good-byes were wailed.  
When two brave sons left their homes,  
Their kindred, yea their blood,  
To wade in Africa's unknown,  
And overwhelming flood.  
A caucasian and a negro,  
United heart and soul,  
Bound for Ethiopia's soil,  
Yea Africa's distant goal.

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For twenty years he struggled,  
In Africa's darkened land,  
Giving them the light  
As they heeded his command.  
Way off in Africa's land,  
Let us in fancy look,  
To see a heathen band,  
Who'd never seen a book, \_  
Now preaching Christ and teaching,  
With minds all free and bright,  
All Hail to thee, oh Sheppard,  
Who carried them the light.  
A great work thou has done,  
To thee we give great praise,  
Many laurels thou hast won  
For thy remaining days.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Maggie Pogue Johnson, *Virginia Dreams*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative (1997) (originally printed by John M. Leonard in 1910. Johnson was an African-American poet).

The Rev. William H. Sheppard, the first African American minister in Congo, arrived in May 1890 along with his white supervisor, Rev. Samuel Lapsley.<sup>106</sup> Born in the last year of the Civil War, trained at Hampton Institute and the Colored Theological Seminary in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Sheppard's dream of living and working in Africa was finally granted by the Southern Presbyterian Church with the encouragement of Alabama Senator John Tyler Morgan. Sheppard's ministry in Congo over the next twenty years would be integral in exposing the consequences of Leopold's consumption of Congo and its people. Sheppard's mission work took him deep within Congo, residing for months in the Central African state of Kuba. Strong, adventurous and conversant in the language, Sheppard's explorations in the interior garnered him opportunities to lecture in London, to become a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and to write about his experiences in Congo.<sup>107</sup> Sheppard's initial reports from Congo painted an idyllic picture, and his work was used "to illustrate the fitness of the Christian negro to evangelize Africa." The description of "The Wonderful Community" visited by Sheppard would draw sharp contrast to the experience he had just brief years later as the demand for rubber destroyed what had been described as "A fenced city, with broad, clean streets in which hundreds of happy children were at play with marbles or at leap-frog or trundling their hoops...He walked with them down a broad, beautiful avenue into a great central square of the city."<sup>108</sup> Sheppard was said to

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<sup>106</sup> Lapsley died of fever in early 1892 and while the Southern Presbyterian Church sent other white supervisors to oversee Sheppard, his experience and his ability to speak the Bakuba language gave him an almost unmatched advantage and leadership of the missions.

<sup>107</sup> For more on Sheppard see, William E. Phipps, *William Sheppard: Congo's African American Livingstone*, *op. cit.* n. 18; for Sheppard in Congo, see, James Campbell, *Middle Passages, African American Journeys to Africa*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 136.

<sup>108</sup> "Negro City in Africa. The Wonderful Community Recently Visited by a Missionary," *Afro-American Sentinel* (November 7, 1896), 3.

have witnessed “vast markets full of busy life, well supplied with fruits and vegetables and manufactured articles, he felt himself to be again in the midst of civilization. He found there a people with laws which were strictly enforced, with courts of justice and with prisons.”<sup>109</sup>

Sheppard’s reputation as an explorer in the heart of Congo, along with his Kodak camera photographs, more than his success in converting the Kuba to Christianity provided support and international audiences for his later claims of the brutality of Leopold’s *Force Publique*.<sup>110</sup> Not only Sheppard but other missionaries predominately from America, Britain, and Sweden served as witnesses to the growing violence against native populations as the demand for rubber in Europe and America accelerated the violence and horror in Congo.<sup>111</sup> In 1897 the *Cleveland Gazette* commented on the accounts from missionaries: “The American Baptist missionary, Mr. Joseph Clark, recently accused a lieutenant in the public service of murder committed on the upper Congo...it is gratifying that the missionaries are at last plucking up courage to report the facts of these crimes... It is high time that the Christian and humanitarian agencies at work in Africa should make these inexcusable outrages known.”<sup>112</sup>

By January 1, 1899, Leopold’s agents in Congo were instructed to produce four thousand kilos of rubber every month, exacting labor and costs from the locals in their territory. The

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Sheppard did not, however, remain unscathed by his claims against Leopold and the Congo Free State. Sheppard along with several others were charged by the Kasai Company under a 1906 decree for “any calumny against a Congo State official.” Sheppard was acquitted and the trial proved an international disaster for the company and Leopold, see William E. Phipps, *William Sheppard: Congo’s African American Livingstone*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 165.

<sup>111</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 172-173.

<sup>112</sup> “The Congo Atrocities,” *Cleveland Gazette* (January 5, 1897), 1.

violence associated with rubber was already noted in the press, “The cause of this bloodshed has been the rubber tax imposed by the state. When a village failed to supply the amount of rubber required, the only punishment devised was indiscriminate shooting.”<sup>113</sup> Sheppard was asked by his fellow missionaries to fact-find and document the atrocities in villages as a result of the insatiable demand for rubber. Traveling with the feared Zappo Zaps who apparently believed Sheppard was a representative of the state, Sheppard recorded eighty-one hands drying in one hut, the gruesome tally of punishment to show Leopold’s agents as proof of the Zappo Zaps enforcement efforts for the state. Sheppard was allowed to take photographs, one of which showed three youth without their right hands. Sheppard’s initial report was so incendiary that additional documentation was collected and provided to Leopold’s representatives in Congo, resulting in firm denials and accusations against Sheppard and others by the Belgians. In the meantime, the publication of Sheppard’s report in a leading American Presbyterian magazine along with accusations that the Belgians were encouraging slave-raiding and worse alerted The Aborigines Protection Society of Britain to the allegations of the missionaries. Joseph Conrad’s 1899 publication of *Heart of Darkness*, along with accusations from Swedish missionaries such as E.V. Sjöblom, did little to assuage the criticism leveled at Leopold’s Congo state, particularly in Britain.<sup>114</sup> As Leopold claimed ignorance and his propaganda machine continued to counter charges made in Britain and America, a shipping clerk for Elder Dempster, a Liverpool-based shipping company, came to realize that while ships from the Congo were bringing riches in rubber and ivory from Africa, little worthy of trade was being shipped to Congo. The clerk, E.D. Morel, made three discoveries that, combined with the testimonies of others, including Sheppard,

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* at 173.

the Irishman Roger Casement, and American Edgar Canisius, exposed King Leopold II and his crimes against humanity. Morel's discoveries were first, that enormous quantities of armaments were being shipped to Congo. Second, the shipping accounts and reported profits did not match; someone was skimming huge profits from the rubber and ivory being shipped to Europe. And finally, materials shipped to Congo were not for trade purposes, "How, then, was this rubber and ivory acquired? Certainly not by commercial dealings. Nothing was going in to pay for what was coming out."<sup>115</sup>

E.D. Morel, the son of a poor, widowed English woman (his father was French), a lowly shipping clerk in his mid-twenties, became the unlikely spark and passion that moved the stories of the Congolese from missionary tales of severed hands, brutal deaths, rapes, and burned out villages to an international outcry on the "Congo Question" by 1903.

If Morel's initial audience and battleground was Britain with its history of anti-slavery crusades and a cadre of merchants who had been shut out of the Congo trade by the Belgian king, America was his next target audience. It was the United States that had first recognized Leopold's rule in Congo some six months or more prior to other European countries. By 1904 this recognition tied Congo's fate to America's action much as fifty-six years later America's actions following Congo's independence tied the two nations inextricably together during the long brutal years of Mubutu Sese Seko's rule.

Traveling to the United States in September 1904, Morel met with President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House and addressed a human rights conference in Boston resulting in the

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* at 179-180.

formation of the American Congo Reform Association.<sup>116</sup> On October 8, 1904 the influential weekly magazine *Outlook* published “Cruelty in the Congo Country” with a byline by Booker T. Washington.<sup>117</sup> Washington, the most prominent African-American in the world at the time, had not before remarked on the Congo in print but said “The oppression of the colored race in any one part of the world means, sooner or later, the oppression of the same race elsewhere.” Referring to the gathering evidence of the atrocities in Congo, Washington called on the international community to act against “a wrong so widespread that civilized nations cannot escape their duty nor evade their responsibility.”<sup>118</sup> He targeted as the “first false step” Leopold’s claim of all “vacant lands” in Congo for the state, thus “the social status of the native and his relation to the soil changed.” The second was taking “from the negro his right to trade.”

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<sup>116</sup> The Boston Peace Congress was not without controversy over the “Congo Question,” as Leopold had his defenders who spoke out against Morel and the Rev. W.M. Morrison, who had served for seven years as a missionary in Congo. See, “Row In Peace Congress Over Congo Question, Belgian Rule Denounced and Strenuously Defended. Reform Association Scored,” *The New York Times* (October 8, 1904).

<sup>117</sup> Booker T. Washington, “Cruelty In the Congo Country,” *Outlook*, 78 (October 8, 1904), 375 (Washington did not write the article, it was ghosted by Robert E. Park, one of the founders of the American Congo Reform Association and Washington’s long-time associate. Washington sent Park the \$30 honorarium *Outlook* paid him for the article writing, “I cannot feel I should accept this money since this article was so largely prepared by you.” See, Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 8, 90, The University of Illinois Press, <http://www.press.uillinois.edu>. Robert Park majored in philosophy at the University of Michigan, attended Harvard and studied in Berlin, Strasbourg, and Heidelberg, writing his dissertation “The Crowd and the Public” while teaching at Harvard. Park met Washington in spring 1904 and visited Tuskegee in early 1905 becoming its director of publicity in September of that year. Park’s relationship with Washington developed from there; he was significant in the writing of Washington’s published works from 1905 through 1912. Park moved to Chicago in 1913, asked to join William I. Thomas in the sociology department at the University of Chicago.); for a reconsideration of Booker T. Washington’s relationship with the Congo Reform Association and Africa see, Ira Dworkin and Pierre Lannoy, “American Congo, Booker T. Washington, l’Afrique et l’imaginaire politique noir américain,” *Civilisations*, vol. 55, no. 1/2 (2006), 165.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

Flowing from this was forced labor, slavery, and death and as a consequence a “heritage of misunderstanding, mutual distrust and race hatred.” Citing William Sheppard, “whom I knew slightly as a fellow-student at Hampton Institute,” Washington went on to quote extensively from Sheppard’s account of a “rubber raid,” and finally called on all nations “and especially that of our own country...to bring about such action as will in any manner modify or improve the present status of affairs.”<sup>119</sup> It was telling that Washington made no comparison to the American South at the time and, in fact claimed there was “never anything in American slavery that could be compared to the barbarous conditions existing to-day in the Congo Free State.”<sup>120</sup>

If Washington failed to draw parallels and criticisms between the violence in Congo and the violence and exploitation against blacks in America, others did not. The willingness of white Americans to support overseas missions in the Congo with more enthusiasm than the needs of blacks citizens at home did not go unnoticed. In 1904 Dr. John Little, a Presbyterian minister, the son of a former slave-owner, and a graduate of the University of Alabama, found it ironic that “his fellow Presbyterians were more interested in providing education, medicine, and salvation for blacks in the Congo than in supporting the less romantic work among the deprived blacks in the American South.”<sup>121</sup> Others drew parallels between the crimes perpetrated by whites in Congo and at home, “The mere statement of facts in respect to the white man in tropical climes is all that is required to show him in these roles. He goes to the Congo, and the stench of his

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> William E. Phipps, *William Sheppard, Congo’s African American Livingstone*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 183.

cruelties and bestial lusts fills the nostrils of the world.” [sic.]<sup>122</sup> Recounting an attack on a New York elevated train the week before by a group of white college students, the author said “Thank God those responsible for this lawlessness were all white...Had they been Colored they would have been hung from the Elevated R.R. in the heart of this great city.”<sup>123</sup> Another article discussing the difference between the treatment of women based on their color also referenced mob violence saying, “The old black father or mother who has survived the destructive flames of slavery’s lake of intensest fire, are compelled to leave humble but dear little homes by mob violence. Seldom, Danville-Illinois-like, is there any redress, any more than there would be on the Congo river.”<sup>124</sup> But blacks also pointed to other African Americans in questioning the focus on Congo as opposed to the difficulties at home, “According to the Memphis newspaper 8,000 Negro Baptists gathers in that city last week in a national (word illegible). This great convention of race leaders and fathers passed resolutions condemning the treatment of the black people in the Congo Free State but were as dumb as oysters on the outrages committed on their people in this (word illegible) by their white brethren in Christ (word illegible) some people wonder why these Americans despise the negro.”<sup>125</sup>

Calls for action in Congo grew louder. By 1906 *The Freeman* was publishing “Congo Appeal to the President” and front-page headlines such as “Congo Crime! Hideous Cruelties

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<sup>122</sup> Owen M. Waller, M.D., “The White Pharisee As Others See Him,” *Broad Axe* (May 13, 1905), 1.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> “A Newporter’s Views. A Man Who Believes that When a Woman is Good, Color Does not Count,” *St. Louis Palladium* (August 29, 1903), 1.

<sup>125</sup> “Why Do They? From the Chicago Conservator” *Washington Bee* vol. xxvi, issue 18 (September 29, 1906), 4.

Practiced on Natives by Belgians” were running in newspapers while Mark Twain’s 1905 “King Leopold’s Soliloquy” was circulated widely.<sup>126</sup> “King Leopold’s Soliloquy, A Defense of His Congo Rule” was a sly send-up of Leopold berating “These meddlesome American missionaries! these blabbing Belgian-born traitor officials! - those tiresome parrots are always talking, always telling.”<sup>127</sup> Quoting extensively from the reports of missionaries, including Sheppard and the investigation of Roger Casement, Twain’s “Leopold” said, “They remark that “if the innocent blood shed in the Congo State by King Leopold were put in buckets and the buckets placed side by side, the line would stretch 2,000 miles; if the skeletons of his ten millions of starved and butchered dead could rise up and march in single file, it would have taken them seven months and four days to pass a given point; if compacted together in a body, they would occupy more ground than St. Louis covers, World’s Fair and all; if they should all clap their bony hands at once, the grisly crash would be heard at a distance of \_\_\_\_\_” Damnation it makes me tired!”<sup>128</sup>

On December 18, 1906 Dr. Grattan Guinness, who had housed Nora Gordon in London as she first headed to Congo, spoke before a large crowd at Cooper Union in New York City to describe the atrocities in Congo. Calling on the United States to support Britain in investigating Leopold’s reign of violence in Congo, Guinness “described how the savages were being mutilated to force them to gather rubber and in their mutilated condition set a living example for

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<sup>126</sup> “Congo Crime! Hideous Cruelties Practiced on Natives by Belgians. Voices Plea for Help. Meeting Denounces King Leopold and Raises Fund for Relief of Victims-Mark Twain’s “King Leopold’s Soliloquy,” *Cleveland Gazette* (March 17, 1906), 1.

<sup>127</sup> Mark Twain, *King Leopold’s Soliloquy, A Defense of His Congo Rule*, Boston, MA: The P.R. Warren Co. (1905), 5.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* at 9-10.

their fellow-creatures.”<sup>129</sup> But the Cooper Union audience, like many audiences black or white, did not necessarily view the Congolese, or Africans in general, as more than “savages” or “heathens.” Guinness’ remarks included, “The white man teaches the black man how to shoot. Then he puts a rifle into his hands and says, ‘Shoot down the men who will not work!’ Well, you know how that acts on a savage. He uses his power, his rifle, often for the worst purposes.” He continues, “Three million of these savages have been killed in the last few years and the number which has been mutilated is beyond computation.”<sup>130</sup> For Guinness the African may have been a man, but he was a “savage” and “heathen” that deserved protection from slaughter. The question remained, what next? Christianity, commerce, and civilization tied to the primacy of European economic self-interest, and underpinned by social darwinism’s racialized theories offered a respite but little reform for the Congolese.

The pressure against Leopold’s actions continued. By 1907 Morel’s *Red Rubber* was in its third printing, and the trial of William Sheppard in Congo in 1909 did little to enhance the aging and dying Leopold’s reputation as Sheppard was acquitted to headlines heralding “American Negro Hero of Congo and First to Inform World of Congo Abuses.”<sup>131</sup> Even Leopold’s death did little to quell the outcry against Belgian rule in Congo as headlines touted reports of missionaries and famous authors, “Tells of Atrocities in Belgian Congo, Natives’ Hands Cut Off, Dr. Leslie Says, to Force Them to Bring in Rubber,” and “Seize Congo Stop

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<sup>129</sup> “3,000,000 Natives Slain to Get Congo Rubber, Dr. Guinness Tells Audience Belgian King Is Guilty. Congress Is Asked to Act,” *The New York Times* (December 19, 1906).

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 264.

Atrocities”, Only Intervention by Powers Can Remedy Conditions, Conan Doyle Declares.”<sup>132</sup> Even as late as 1912, reports of continued abuses in Congo appeared in African-American newspapers as Morel and the Congo Reform Association continued to press for change. The final meeting of the Congo Reform Association was held in 1913. By the late 1920s, all the major reformers including Morel were dead, and the global demand for rubber continued to drive the Belgian control of Congo. In the Second World War, “the legal maximum for forced labor in the Congo was increased to 120 days per man per year.”<sup>133</sup>

***“I believe I’ll go back home, Lordy, won’t you help me.”***<sup>134</sup>

The story of Ota Benga illustrated the complex relationship between science and race for African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century, a strange and uncomfortable confrontation for elite blacks. Benga was Congolese, a Pygmy brought over to America as an exhibit for the St. Louis World Fair in 1904 by Samuel Phillip Verner.<sup>135</sup> He died by his own hand in Lynchburg, Virginia on March 20, 1916. Within the contours of the tragedy of Benga’s

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<sup>132</sup> “Tells of Atrocities in Belgian Congo. Natives’ Hands Cut Off, Dr. Leslie Says, to Force Them to Bring in Rubber,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 1909; “Seize Congo Stop Atrocities. Only Intervention By Powers Can Remedy Conditions, Conan Doyle Declares,” *Cleveland Gazette* (October 16, 1909), 1.

<sup>133</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, *op. cit.* n. 18 at 279.

<sup>134</sup> Carrie Allen McCray, “Ota’s Epic Stories for My Brothers,” Presentation for the International Conference in Lynchburg, Virginia, October 2007. Interest in Benga continued and was reignited in the last decade, see, Mitch Keller, “The Scandal at the Zoo,” *The New York Times* (August 6, 2006).

<sup>135</sup> For more on Ota Benga see, Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, *An African’s Odyssey in Savage Turn-Of-The Century America, Ota Benga, The Pygmy In the Zoo*, New York: Delta Books (1992) (disputing representations made about the final years of his life in Lynchburg, Carrie Allen McCray claims that Bradford and Blume were purposely misled as to Benga’s living situation in Virginia.)

life in America was the confirmation of the great racial divide for African-Americans, a divide W.E.B. DuBois spoke of in *The Souls of Black Folks*: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt or pity.”<sup>136</sup> In the fall of 1906 while debates on Leopold’s Congo were raging internationally, Benga was housed as an exhibition at the Zoological Park in the Bronx. Described by *The New York Times* as a “Bushman,” but identified as Ota Benga, the man was housed in the primate house, wore “white trousers and a khaki coat, and had a “keeper” who watched over him while he was outside his shelter. Reporting that “Like his fellow-lodgers, the orang outangs [sic] and monkeys, Benga has a room inside the building. It opens, like the rest, into the public cage. A crowd that fluctuated between 300 and 500 persons watched the little black man amuse himself in his own way yesterday. He doesn’t like crowds, especially the children who tease him.”<sup>137</sup> The response by the African American community was swift and loud. By the evening the Rev. Dr. R. S. MacArthur of Calvary Baptist Church sent out a call to all black clergy in New York City. “The person responsible for this exhibit degrades himself as much as much as he does the African...Instead of make a beast of this little fellow, he should be put in school for the development of such powers as God gave him...We send our missionaries to Africa to Christianize the people, and then we bring one here to brutalize him.”<sup>138</sup> The message of uplift through education and Christian values in saving the “heathen” of Africa was still within

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<sup>136</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Dover Publications (1994), 2.

<sup>137</sup> “Bushman Shares A Cage With Bronx Park Apes, Some Laugh Over his Antics, but Many Are Not Pleased,” *The New York Times* (September 9, 1906).

<sup>138</sup> “Man and Monkey Show Disapproved By Clergy, The Rev. Dr. MacArthur Thinks the Exhibition Degrading,” *The New York Times* (September 10, 1906).

MacArthur's message even as he expressed outrage about the actions of William T. Hornaday, the director of the Bronx Zoo. By the following day, a committee of the Colored Baptist Ministers' Conference, including J. H. Gordon, Superintendent of the Howard Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn, visited the Zoo in an attempt to gain Benga's release. Offering to house him within the orphanage, Gordon was quoted as saying "We are frank enough to say we do not like this exhibition of one of our race with the monkeys. Our race, we think, is depressed enough without exhibiting one of us with the apes. We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls." As the tussle over Benga continued, Hornaday claimed, "I do not wish to offend my colored brothers' feelings or the feelings of any one, for that matter. I am giving the exhibition purely as an ethnological exhibit...I am a believer in the Darwinian theory but I hope my colored brethren will not take the absurd position that I am giving the exhibit to show the close analogy of the African savage to the apes. Benga is in the primate house because that was the most comfortable place we could find for him."<sup>139</sup> The statements by Hornaday, who had long expressed interest in an ethnological exhibit at the Zoo, although he had hoped to exhibit a Native American, were joined by others who feared what a "savage" would do if allowed to become part of the larger population. *The New York Times* reported that Superintendent Gordon of the Harlem Orphan Asylum was fielding calls. A black woman who had a child in the Brooklyn Asylum was recorded as calling in fear proclaiming, "For the land's sake, Mr. Gordon, I read in the papers this morning that you are going to take the wild man over to your place.

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<sup>139</sup> "Negro Ministers Act To free The Pygmy. Will Ask the Mayor to Have Him Taken from Monkey Cage," *The New York Times* (September 11, 1906).

Why, he'll eat my Matilda alive!"<sup>140</sup> Rejected by the mayor of New York City and receiving no redress from representatives of the Zoological Society, the clergy turned to the courts to free Benga from his cage within the primate house. Finally, on September 27, 1906 with Benga becoming increasingly difficult to handle and with the permission of S.P. Verner who had placed him with Hornaday originally, Benga was moved to the Harlem Orphanage. Some six weeks later, the "Our New York Letter" section of the Kansas City *Rising Son* reported on "Educating the African Pigmy." [sic] Touting the results of education and civilization, the report reflected the distance between the African American and Africa, "But Otto is a heathen pure and simple, and the superintendent says it is very hard to hold his attention long enough to teach him anything."

A decade later in the waning light of a March evening, Benga, who never returned to his homeland, took a revolver he had hidden, walked into the woods around Lynchburg, and shot himself through the heart. Since his death, his strange captured life has been depicted in dances, music, and poetry.<sup>141</sup>

### **An Evening Song for Ota**

If I could have gone into some quiet corner of your Forest,  
waited for the soft dulcet sound of wagtails,  
Would I have found your spirit there, the embers of a  
once bright fire still burning?  
Would I have sensed a gather of your ancestors  
surrounding you, welcoming you home?  
Would I have heard the trumpeting of elephants, or  
seen you dancing once again with your moon?  
How beloved you were to those who knew you here; to my

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<sup>140</sup> "The Mayor Won't Help To free Caged Pygmy. He Refers Negro Ministers to the Zoological Society," *The New York Times* (September 12, 1906).

<sup>141</sup> Mitch Keller, "The Scandal at the Zoo," *op. cit.* n. 134.

brothers you were the bearer of the wisdom of our ancestors.  
We know the pull of the ocean eastward was much stronger  
than any bond to the west. You gave us much more  
than we could ever give you.  
Good night beloved friend and teacher.  
Good night, kind leader of the hunt.  
Good night, gentle story teller.  
I pray your soul is at peace.  
Good night, Ota.  
Carrie Allen McCray<sup>142</sup>

In October, 1914 as the war in Europe began in earnest, an editorial in *The Chicago Defender* asked a question that continued to reverberate across the decades, “Reaping What is Sown?”<sup>143</sup> As the war in Europe exposed the Belgians and others to the ravages and deprivations of war, the question posed was whether this was some “divine retribution for her cruelties in Africa?” Reminding the reader of the cruelties of gathering rubber, the chopping off of hands and feet as punishment for failure to fulfill quotas set to engorge Leopold’s already swollen coffers, the article suggested war might be a “cog in the great universal scheme.” In the aftermath of the First World War, in Chicago and throughout America the suffering and violence against African Americans caused thousands to cry out and accelerated the comparisons between the America of 1920 and Leopold’s Congo.

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<sup>142</sup> Carrie Allen McCray, “Ota’s Epic Stories for My Brothers,” presentation for the International Conference in Lynchburg, Virginia (October, 2007). In her forward, McCray explains how Ota Benga came to live in her family home and says, “I have never understood why the persons of Lynchburg, Virginia could not find a way to send Ota to his beloved Forest in the Congo.”

<sup>143</sup> “Reaping What is Sown?” *The Chicago Defender*, (October 10, 1914), 8.

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## Chapter II: “Dark Princess”

*The Dark Princess impressed me, more than did any of the other books, for never before had I read of black people beautified, Negroes exalted.*

Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*<sup>1</sup>

*I loved the long, solitary ride through the golden autumn sunshine during the brief North Dakota fall, when the days stood still and the warm silence was unbearable in its poignant beauty.*

Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*<sup>2</sup>

### Little Girl from the Great Plains:

Era Bell Thompson was deeply rooted in a particular American spirit, a child of the Great American Plains her rural, parochial childhood antithetical to the lives of not just most African Americans but most Americans in general.<sup>3</sup> Born in Des Moines, Iowa on August 10, 1905, after 1914 she was raised mainly in North Dakota.<sup>4</sup> Thompson’s father, Stewart C. Thompson, known as “Tony” and referred to as “Pop” in *American Daughter*, was born of a “freed woman” servant and the son of a white Virginia plantation owner. There was some debate about the legal status of Pop Thompson and his mother, Margaret (Mina) Garrison. Thompson claimed in *American Daughter* that Pop was born of a “freed woman” saying specifically “Though not a slave, he was

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<sup>1</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society (1986) at 197-198.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* at 100.

<sup>3</sup> The “frontier” spirit of *American Daughter* was recognized by scholars, see, Glenda Riley, “American Daughters: Black Women in the West,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Spring 2008), 14. Thompson herself embraced the pioneer persona in 1925 and 1926 contributing to the “Lights and Shadows” section of *The Chicago Defender* under the nomenclature “Dakota Dick” of Mandan, ND.

<sup>4</sup> In 1920 the general population of North Dakota was 646,872, the black population was 467, see, Kevin L. Cole and Leah Weins, “Religion, Idealism, and African American Autobiography in The Northern Plains: Era Bell Thompson’s *American Daughter*,” *Great Plains Quarterly* (Fall 2003), 220.

still a Negro, with all of his blond hair, and, as such, could not attend school.”<sup>5</sup> In her 2010 dissertation, Eileen De Freece-Wilson claimed that Mina Garrison was in fact a slave when her son was born in Nelson County, Virginia on May 19, 1856 and by Virginia law he too would have been a slave. If so, Pop Thompson was just five at the start of the Civil War and nine at its conclusion, legally free since 1863. While De Freece-Wilson used the birth status of Pop Thompson in analyzing Thompson’s later literary work, her arguments were not wholly persuasive.<sup>6</sup> Born in 1856, Pop was almost fifty years old at Thompson’s birth and his childhood, whether born slave or free, did not appear to be integral to the life experiences he passed along to his children. What was central for Thompson, particularly in relation to her own racial reflection, was Pop’s mixed-race lineage resulting in the unique coloring of Thompson’s siblings in marked contrast with her own distinct racial markers.

Born with blond hair, Pop’s mulatto blood prevented him from attending school, but he was taught to read and write by his half sisters. Making his livelihood by traveling and cooking from New York to New Orleans, by the time he met Thompson’s mother, Mary Logan, Pop had already been married twice before. His third marriage produced three sons, one who had red-hair and freckles until he was eight years old, and a little white-skinned blond-haired baby girl who died soon after she was born. Thompson’s birth marked Pop and Mary’s final child and only surviving daughter. Writing of her own coloring, Thompson remarked she “began taking on

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<sup>5</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit* n.1 at 14.

<sup>6</sup> Eileen De Freece-Wilson, *Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer*, Dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2010. (Publication No. 3418420), 69-70.

racial traits so quickly that her Mother became alarmed.<sup>77</sup> An early example of her humor and perhaps a reference to the Dutch, French, Native American and Chinese blood she claimed as part of her heritage, Thompson commented, “Colored storks are notoriously inconsistent.”<sup>78</sup>

What was life on the Plains for an African-American female in the early twentieth century? Did her childhood really resemble *Little House on the Prairie*?<sup>9</sup> In some ways yes. Certainly open spaces, solitude, and self-reliance required of life in rural North Dakota very much shaped Thompson as an adult. However, the Thompson family did not start out on the prairie or on a farm. In fact at the time she was born the Thompson family owned their own

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<sup>7</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 15. Thompson obscured many personal details about her family in *American Daughter*. Her paternal grandmother, Mina Garrison, was born a slave in 1821. Garrison apparently moved to North Dakota in 1909 and died in 1911 so it is not clear how much time, if any, Thompson would have spent with her grandmother. Thompson did change the names of her brothers, in her autobiography she calls them the proverbial “Tom, Dick, and Harry.” In reality they were named Hobart, Carl, and Stewart C. and appear to have been eight, six, and two years older than Thompson respectively. Her “Uncle John” referred to throughout *American Daughter* was her father’s half-brother, James A. Garrison. He had a white, Irish wife named Ada (not Anne as used in *American Daughter*) with whom Thompson had a rather diffident relationship. Garrison and Ada’s move to a farm in Driscoll, North Dakota in 1907 was apparently the catalyst for Pop’s decision to move the family two years later. For purposes of the dissertation, I will use the names Thompson gave her brothers and other family members in *American Daughter*. For more on Thompson’s family background see, Anderson, Kathie Ryckman, “Era Bell Thompson: North Dakota Daughter,” *North Dakota History, Journal of the Northern Plains*, vol. 49, n. 4 (Fall, 1982); see also, Eileen De Freece-Wilson, *Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer*, *op. cit.* n. 5 at 65.

<sup>8</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 15.

<sup>9</sup> An alternative interpretation of Thompson’s relationship to North Dakota was presented by Michael Johnson, “This Strange White World,” Race and Place in Era Bell Thompson’s *American Daughter*,” *Great Plains Quarterly*, DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska-Lincoln (4-1-2004). ( Johnson’s interpretation of Thompson’s *American Daughter* represented North Dakota’s landscape as an alien white world for Thompson compared to urban settings she more readily associated with African American communities. Thompson’s pride in and love for North Dakota and her distinctive representation of her own discomfort within black communities would suggest Johnson misread Thompson’s representations of race and place.)

home and Pop Thompson was a “community leader and proprietor of a thriving restaurant” and trustee of the Colored Baptist Church in downtown Des Moines. Considering the spirited Thompson household in Des Moines replete with goats, music teachers, failing kindergarten, and the fighting Thompson brothers, the opportunities afforded by farming in North Dakota held out as a way to escape the growing dangers of city life. The decision to move to North Dakota, where Pop’s half-brother had already settled, arrived with resignation.

*“Yes,” Father answered wearily. “We’ll have to take them away from here; city’s no place for growing boys, specially colored boys. I’m tired of the city, too, Mary. We worked hard and got this home, but we can work for another one, a real home this time, out in God’s country.” \*\*\**

*He and Tom left in the cold gray of morning, left for far-off North Dakota to find a new home in the wide open spaces, where there was freedom and equal opportunity for a man with three sons. Three sons and a daughter.<sup>10</sup>*

If the plains for North Dakota forever shaped the adult Era Bell Thompson, she was also shaped by her place within the family, the youngest and the only girl. Her compliance as opposed to her brothers’ defiance, the frequent absences of her father for work once the family moved to North Dakota, and in particular the sudden death of her mother when Thompson was twelve all deeply resonated in the way she viewed the world and the choices that she later made. But that first trip to North Dakota as a young girl was filled with anticipation, “Harry and I were excited, for at last we were going to fight the Indians and ride the range in search of buffalo—we hoped.” As the Thompsons faced the realities of their new home, there was a mirroring in many ways of the sentiments of the Ingalls’ women as they headed from *The Little House in the Big Woods* to *The Little House on the Prairie*, “All day long we rode through the silent fields of snow, a cold depression spreading over us. I looked at Mother. She tried to smile, but there were

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<sup>10</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 22.

new tears in her eyes. She was thinking of the green hills of Virginia, thinking, too, of the lush valleys of Iowa. All these things, these friendly things that she knew and loved, were far behind her now.”<sup>11</sup>

The Thompsons did not choose North Dakota at random, Pop Thompson’s half-brother “Uncle John” Garrison and his white, Irish wife “Ann” lived there. It was at their urging that the Thompsons reluctantly decided to move north. The relationship between the two families was uneasy, and arriving in winter with few financial resources, the Thompsons felt angry and bitter at their treatment by the loud and quarrelsome Garrisons. While Mary Thompson did not live long in the harsh North Dakota climate, Pop Thompson, much like his daughter, came to love the bleak beauty of Dakota.

*It was a strange and beautiful country my father had come to, so big and boundless he could look for miles and miles out over the golden prairies and follow the unbroken horizon where the midday blue met the bare peaks of the distant hills. No tree or bush to break the view, miles and miles of grass, acre after acre of waving grain, and up above, God and that fiery chariot which beat remorsefully down upon a parching earth. \*\*\* This was God’s country. There was something in the vast stillness that spoke to Pop’s soul, and he loved it.*<sup>12</sup>

Pop may have loved the land, but the land did not always love him, as the start-up costs of farming caused the Thompsons to experience hunger and desperation, while the harsh summers destroyed their mortgaged seedlings and failed harvests left nothing to pay off the bank or local store. Thompson’s wry comment of an earlier gardening experiment in Des Moines foreshadowed later troubles, “It was probably that touch of gardening that put farming in Father’s blood; if so, it was later a touch of farming that took it out.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* at 27.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* at 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* at 18.

What changed the Thompsons' fortunes was that Pop Thompson was offered a job to be the private messenger to the newly elected Governor Frazier in Bismarck. Pop's earlier experience as a cloakroom attendant for the Iowa senate served him well in his new employ in Bismarck, and helped him build relationships with many of the newly elected state officials, including Frazier and his secretary, a young lawyer named Nelson A. Mason. Only a state for a little over twenty years, "most of the new officeholders, like Governor Frazier, had never held an office above township level, and some had never been inside a state capital."<sup>14</sup> Ill-at-ease with the new "fancy" dining and expectations of state politics, newly elected farmer-politicians looked to Pop for instruction in table manners and political etiquette.

In September 1919 Era Bell Thompson began the school year in a two-room school house in Sterling, North Dakota. Despite several boys calling her "nigger" the first couple of days of school, life for Thompson was filled with the family farm, lessons, and struggling to cope with the sudden loss of her mother two winters before. It was a complicated time; the loss of Mary Thompson changed the family dynamics. Thompson was more isolated as her brothers struggled to fill the gaps in her care left by their mother's death. Dick Thompson joined the Army in August 1918 to "git the Kaiser," never returning to the family home on the prairie, abandoning the lonely isolation for employment opportunities in Chicago after the war.<sup>15</sup> The family moved to a new farm in spring 1919 and continued to drift apart across the summer. Tom prepared to leave right after the fall harvest, optimistically believing in the spring there would be something to harvest on the family's new farm by autumn.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* at 99.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Thompson's description of the summer of 1919 is almost Old Testament, as if recalling the plagues that beset Egypt. First the world was filled with the whirring, chewing of grasshoppers, "Hordes of them came-big strong-legged fellows with yellow enameled bodies and powerful, lacquer-like wings, darting and zinging through the dry, hot air, leaping upon the growing grain, stripping each stock leaving it naked."<sup>16</sup> They destroyed the farm, the poison meant to kill them, killing the calves and chickens instead. Disappearing as suddenly as their cloud of destruction appeared, all that remained was their "mashed brown bodies" rotting in wagon ruts. Next came unremitting heat, drying up the world, "hot and devastating, drying up the little water that was in the big ravine down in the pasture, leaving it a spongy mire, crusted with alkaline."<sup>17</sup> Cows that ventured in, did not always come out. Worst of all, the chilled silence inside her family home offered no succor from the heat and death outside, as the death of her mother left brothers Tom and Harry distant and her father bitter, "I lived between two camps: the one guarded by self-pity and silence, the other by bitter restlessness."<sup>18</sup>

Yet on the cusp of adolescence, there were moments of laughter as Thompson wrote of her first basket social, making her "debut into rural society that summer clad in blue crepe de chine, riding a brown pony."<sup>19</sup>

### **World on Fire - Red Summer:**

The plagues of the summer of 1919 were not confined to the high plains of North Dakota. The graphic vision of brown bodies being mashed under wagon wheels held a broader meaning

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* at 112

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* at 113.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* at 112.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* at 114.

as riots between whites and blacks swept across many cities in America. Thompson's brother Dick, now a chauffeur for a wealthy family in Chicago, wrote home about the brutal wave of rioting that gripped that city beginning on 27 July.<sup>20</sup> He also sent home a copy of *The Chicago Defender*, the first "Negro newspaper" Thompson had ever seen.<sup>21</sup> Thompson's introduction to the national violence through the eyes of black Americans was as searing as it was frightening, reinforcing for her the protection of the isolated prairies from the chaos of the greater world. Remembering that first copy of *The Chicago Defender* twenty-five years later, Thompson wrote:

*On the front page was a large picture of a negro hanging from a tree. Followed an account of a Southern lynching in all its diabolical horror, of a man being dragged behind a speeding car through the streets of the Negro section, past his own home, of the mutilating of his body, of final death from a rope, to the jeers of the mob, of flames licking his nude body, and white men and*

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<sup>20</sup> The Chicago riots were sparked in the most innocent of activities, five black youths floating in Lake Michigan on an oppressively hot summer afternoon. John Harris (age 14), two brothers, Charles and Lawrence Williams, and two other boys with the same last name but unrelated, Paul Williams and Eugene Williams, went swimming on that hot Sunday afternoon of 27 July. At the same time, and defying local custom, several black men and women tried to enter Lake Michigan for a swim using the "whites-only" 29th Street beach resulting in an exchange of racial slurs and rocks. In a series of disjointedly unfolding circumstances, the youths floated into range of the 29th Street beach, close enough that a white man hurling rocks was able to hit Eugene Williams in the head. Eugene floundering, head bleeding, slipped under the water, and thirty minutes later his body was recovered. The ensuing mayhem at the beach quickly spread along with wild rumors as whites and blacks raced to arm themselves. After fourteen days of rioting requiring calling out the state militia to regain order, the totals were thirty-eight dead, twenty-three of them black men and boys, five hundred thirty-seven injured, three hundred forty-two of them black, and blacks arrested at virtually twice the rate as whites. See, William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, New York: Atheneum (1970); Walter White, "The Causes of the Chicago Race Riot," *The Crisis*, XVIII (October, 1919), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 113. For examples of the coverage of the riots by *The Chicago Defender*, see, "Riots Sweep Chicago," *The Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1919, 1; "Flay Hoyne as Riot Prosecutor" was announced on the front page of the September 6, 1919 paper along with reports of "Races Clash at Knoxville" and "Mob Burns Churches, Whites Apply Torches to Lodge Halls and Temples of Worship; Celebrate with Lynching" from Eastman, Georgia.

women cutting off burned black fingers, burned black ears to carry home in gory triumph, souvenirs for their young.<sup>22</sup>

The dangling body, the children's blackened grotesque souvenirs haunted Thompson, who years later alone on the bus in Maryland and on the Capitol steps in Washington D.C. wondered whether her own lynching time had come. The captured horror of the swinging body, illuminated by licking flames stayed with Thompson, "A symbol of the South, a place to hate and fear."<sup>23</sup> Of her brother Dick's laughing references in his letters to Chicago as a civilized alternative to North Dakota, Thompson responded, "Dick's civilization was a riot, where black and white Americans fought each other and died."<sup>24</sup> In the wake of such violence, Thompson plaintively asked "Where was God?"<sup>25</sup> Questioning the advances claimed by modernity and

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* It is interesting that this picture, this resonant symbol of the viral hate Thompson associated with the American South does not appear to have actually been published by *The Chicago Defender* in 1919 either before or after the July riots that rocked the city. The lynching Thompson is most likely referring to from the text was front page news on May 24, 1919. The large headline read "Vicksburg, Mississippi, Disgraces Civilization with Lynching." and in smaller type, "Fiends and Perverts Feed Lloyd Clay to Leaping Flames." Describing in horrific detail the May 11th murder of 23 year-old Lloyd Clay, by dragging, stabbing, shooting, burning, and lynching from the "gallow's tree," the article included the clamor of children, "Mother, get me a piece of the nigger's finger." Beyond the visualization of the pain of Clay and the frenzy of the crowd imprinted by the words in the reader's mind, there is no photograph accompanying the story. "Vicksburg, Mississippi, Disgraces Civilization With Lynching," *The Chicago Defender*, May 24, 1919, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 113.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson said her brother Dick wrote he "had a fine job chauffeuring...making good money, living a bright, colorful life." (113) Written in 1946, it is an interesting note that Dick Thompson shared the same job as "Bigger Thomas," Richard Wright's tragic anti-hero in *Native Son*. Contrasting her brother Dick's siren call of "civilization" against the "Godforsaken country" of North Dakota, was Thompson slyly contrasting the imagery of "civilization" with the fetid, destroying life of Chicago's Black Belt within Wright's novel? There is no direct indication that she was doing so however she would certainly have been aware of Wright's novel and its impact when writing *American Daughter*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* at 113.

civilization, Dick's urban modern city-life juxtaposed against the isolation of North Dakota, young teenage Thompson opted for the safety the frontier offered, "I wanted never to leave my prairies, with white clouds of peace and clean, blue heavens, for now I knew that beyond the purple hills prejudice rode hard on the heels of promise, and death was its overtaking."<sup>26</sup> The jarring disconnection between the burning bodies swaying on the gallows and "civilization" was a theme that would continue to resonate in the African American press.

The world Thompson read about on the pages of *The Chicago Defender* in the summer of 1919 offered new possibilities for African Americans and frightening new realities in waves of racial violence. Across the country, African Americans struggled against the legislation of Jim Crow laws and the harsh enforcement of social customs designed to perpetuate the double-headed hydra of racism: social inequality and labor exploitation. Much like the *Punch* cartoon depicting King Leopold II's snake-like body squeezing the life out of a struggling black man to support Leopold's rubber plantations in Congo Free State, the Cotton belt of the American South came to be associated with a violent peonage system binding black labor to the land.<sup>27</sup> By 1920 leading African Americans were drawing comparisons between the violence and exploitation of King Leopold II and King Cotton in their outcry against the "American Congo."<sup>28</sup> On the night of January 5, 1920, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, speaking at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) drew the direct comparison

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Linley Sambourne, "In Rubber Coils," *Punch*, 1906.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase "American Congo" may have first been used by John Bourke in a May 1894 article in *Scribner's Magazine* titled "The American Congo." Bourke was not speaking of incidents related to the traditional American South. He was referring to a region along the Texas/Mexico border comparing the Rio Grande to the Congo River in the main because of "the degraded, turbulent, ignorant, and superstitious character of its population." (594).

between the “veritable avalanche of filth and immorality [that] overwhelmed the Congo tribes” and the Mississippi Valley, “a region whose history is as foul a blot on American civilization as the Congo is a blot on Belgium and Europe.”<sup>29</sup>

This chapter will consider the “American Congo” and its consequences for those attempting to flee its coils, absorb its blows, or fight against its framing of black identity in America, through the eyes of an “American Daughter,” Era Bell Thompson. There is a temptation to move rapidly through the race riots and lynchings from the summer of 1919-1923 as ground previously covered in greater detail by historians such as Bill Tuttle, Nan Woodruff, Paula Giddings, and Robert Whitaker, among others, to leave to others the exploration and weight of the Chicago Riots, the Elaine Riots, and the burnings and lynchings that marched across the landscape of black lives in the years immediately following the First World War. But it is the argument of this chapter that the drum beat of violence, the weekly headlines, the terrible description of Henry Lowry trying to eat hot ash in an attempt to hasten his death as fire scorched his living flesh while a white mob watched, the lashes against the skin of black women in the terror filled days during the Elaine Riots, all of this became the “American Congo” for

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<sup>29</sup> “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Annual Meeting,” *The Crisis, A Record of the Darker Races*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1920), p. 195; for a current discussion of “American Congo” and the American South see, Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Struggle for Freedom in the Delta*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2003) (Woodruff’s detailed social and economic history of the rise of the “alluvial empire” of the Arkansas Delta tells the story of black deprivation and resistance during the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Focusing primarily on Arkansas, Woodruff’s account of the “Killing Fields” of Phillips County, Arkansas in October 1919 and the subsequent state and military cover-up of the violence against black American citizens provides valuable insights into the institutional layers suppressing black economic and political rights in the American South.)

black Americans, including young Thompson.<sup>30</sup> Along with introducing the ways Congo was transposed to the American South in *The Chicago Defender* and by leading race leaders following the First World War, the chapter follows Thompson from North Dakota to Chicago in the 1920s and the discovery of her own literary voice as she struggled to recognize her reflection within the city's black residents.

### **Returning Home from War: The Failures of the “Wilsonian Moment”**

By late spring of 1919, the failures at Versailles to deliver on the promises of Woodrow Wilson's new world order that had so captured the imaginations of large numbers of people created widening fissures between colonial governments and native populations. The Pan-African Conference, meeting in Paris in early February, proposed modest gains for Africans under colonial rule. W.E.B. DuBois, serving as secretary of the Pan-African Conference, found the official delegations at Versailles and in particular the Council of Four (Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States) to be wholly unresponsive. As the “Wilsonian Moment” slipped through the outstretched hands of so many who believed self-determination was a right denied by corrupt and exploitive European systems, anti-colonial organizations and anger accelerated in places such as Egypt, India, China, and Korea.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Black Americans were not alone in understanding and appreciating the similarities between the Congo and the American South. Both politically and socially a number of white Americans came to see the violence of the South to be unacceptable and damaging to the United States' status in the world. However, the extent to which whites advocated *social equality* as a remedy is the history of the long, painful road over which civil and human rights were contested in America for the next fifty years. See, for instance, Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize, The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955*, Cambridge University Press (2003).

<sup>31</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment, Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford University Press (2007), 7.

In America “the nation was in transit between the passions of war and “normalcy;” in the meantime it was also a battlefield for domestic conflict.”<sup>32</sup> Soldiers, particularly black soldiers, returning from war with changed visions of possibilities, faced new economic realities and old systems of racial hierarchy. In 1917 African Americans answered their nation’s call to arms. Almost 2.3 million registered for the draft and 368,000 were inducted into the military. Stepping up to service, black soldiers received an implicit promise from President Woodrow Wilson, “Out of this conflict you need expect nothing less than the enjoyment of full citizenship rights-the same as are enjoyed by every other citizen.”<sup>33</sup> Along with tens of thousands of other young African American men, Dick Thompson went to war in 1918, writing cheerful letters home of heading for France. He never made it past New Jersey; the war ended before his war really began. Dick may have joined to “git the Kaiser” but, as Thompson amusingly remarked, he spent Christmas 1918 “back in Camp Grant with measles, the German measles.”<sup>34</sup>

Other African American soldiers did make it to the trenches of Europe, returning home from war to find “the most highly susceptible objects of prejudice...were black men and women, not because they were radicals, but because they threatened the accommodative race system of white superordination and black subordination.”<sup>35</sup> The American South in particular did not want returning black soldiers to wear their uniforms, “In Blakely, Georgia Private William Little

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<sup>32</sup> William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, *op. cit.* n. 20 at 16.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods, The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation*, New York: Crown (2008), 41.

<sup>34</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 103.

<sup>35</sup> William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, *op. cit.* n. 20 at 21.

stepped down from a train station in his uniform and was immediately told to strip and walk home in his underwear; he refused and was found beaten to death a few days later.”<sup>36</sup>

Adding to the tensions: the migration of some 450,000 blacks from the South into crowded Northern cities where “they met bitter competition with whites over jobs, housing, political power, and facilities for education, transportation, and relaxation.”<sup>37</sup> Those whites on the lowest rungs of the socio/economic ladder, such as immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe and the Irish, felt the influx of skilled and unskilled black labor threatened their tenuous hold on jobs (such as in the Chicago stockyards) and status. For whites, the fear of losing status “revived the ancient Shibboleth that blacks were grasping not for material improvements but for social equality. White hostility to individual black people became generalized into a categorical hatred of an entire race.”<sup>38</sup>

When Thompson first moved to Chicago in the mid-1920s, she stayed at a YWCA. As Thompson described the other young female residents the changing face and international nature

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods, The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation*, *op. cit.* n. 33 at 45.

<sup>37</sup> William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, *op. cit.* n. 20 at 21 (Tuttle argues that fundamental to understanding the Chicago race riots (and the riots in Omaha, Nebraska later in the fall) was “the World War I migration - that influx of Southern black people which doubled the city’s black population in three years.” This created a different ecology of race than in cities where race riots started only after whites charged blacks “with such ‘sacred’ violations of white womanhood as rape.” *Ibid.* at 65-66.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* at 21; In 1935 W.E.B. Du Bois illuminated the reasons why a persistent emphasis on social status and reaffirmation of the inequality of blacks pervaded the white lower classes, “[T]he white group of laborers, while they receive a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools.” W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, New York: Russell & Russell (1935), 700.

of the African American population was evident. Thompson describes young women from Africa, the West Indies, and all over America seated at the breakfast table each morning, seeking new opportunities in the big city, “Many of the girls were pretty and expensively dressed, no two exactly alike. Some were dark with a black-brown velvetness, two were white-skinned with gray eyes and auburn hair...They were intelligent, well-mannered girls, with good schooling and from good homes.”<sup>39</sup> Outside, on the streets and through the Black Belt of Chicago was a much grittier world, “I saw city slums, black slums, black poverty, and black prosperity side by side, for the streets of the Black Belt were dotted with Negro business houses, from imposing banks to greasy lunch counters, and in between were the white-owned food stores, foul with the smell of rotting vegetables and live poultry; white owned clothing stores displaying cheap, gaudy merchandise, inviting credit.”<sup>40</sup> If blacks arrived in Chicago for opportunity, whites were there to take advantage, selling poor quality goods and foods to people who were hopeful of new opportunities.

The tensions were not simply between blacks and whites, however. Class divisions within Chicago’s black communities accelerated as raw, poorly educated Southern blacks made their way North, challenging the cultivated middle-class aspirations and values of established African American communities. There were multiple “Chicagos” in the 1920s, reflecting the expectations of constituencies of entrants into the booming northern city. The poet (and later Thompson friend) Gwendolyn Brooks was raised in Chicago in the 1920s, “among those Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake called the “respectables,” people not of self-conscious class, color,

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<sup>39</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 195.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

educational, or aristocratic distinctions but somewhere in the middle, the good-doing people determined to live within a firm moral ordering.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Lynching Time:**

In February 1920 *The Crisis* published an article titled “The Lynching Industry, 1919” tracking the increasing violence toward African Americans as the war in Europe wound down.<sup>42</sup> Sixty-four blacks were lynched in 1918 including five women; in 1919 seventy-seven blacks were lynched including one woman and significantly eleven soldiers. Additionally, four whites and three “Mexicans” were lynched for a total of eight-four for the year. While hardly record numbers (between 1890 and 1894 some five hundred fifty-four lynchings were recorded by *The Crisis*), the numbers were significant. For 1919 the NAACP recorded twenty-two lynchings in Georgia alone with twelve in Mississippi, eight each in Alabama and Louisiana, and seven in Arkansas. Another indicator of a rising tide of white angst directing violence towards black Americans, *The Crisis* stated “In methods of torture, burnings have increased from 2 in 1918 to 14 in 1919.”<sup>43</sup>

The horror of the lynchings, torture, and burning of black victims frightened not only the teenage Thompson, they were weekly fodder in newspapers across the country and more broadly in Europe. The graphic brutality and violence put a lie to President Wilson’s January 8, 1918

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<sup>41</sup> George E. Kent, *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*, Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky (1990), Loc. 76-80.

<sup>42</sup> “The Lynching Industry, 1919,” *The Crisis, A Record of the Darker Races*, vol. 19, no. 4 (February 1920), 183; For a discussion of lynching statistics using numbers from NAACP and the Tuskegee Institute see, Todd E. Lewis, “Mob Justice in the “American Congo:” “Judge Lynch” Arkansas during the Decade After World War I,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 160, fn. 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

“Fourteen Points” speech in which he spoke broadly of fighting a war to protect people’s rights for peace and justice.

In fact Southern mob violence directed against blacks was an almost weekly theme in black newspapers across the country in 1919. On May 10, just a week before the Vicksburg headline, *The Chicago Defender*’s headline declared “Georgia Burns Man at Stake.” Discussing how the accused, Danny Richards, was hunted down with gasoline and dynamite, ultimately killed by gunfire as he tried to surrender, the article went on to say: “Richard’s body was then placed in front of the courthouse...tied to an automobile and dragged around the public square...After his fingers were cut off and distributed as souvenirs his naked body was taken to the outskirts of the town and piled wood about it and in a few minutes Richards was burned to a crisp.”<sup>44</sup> Here was the resonance of Leopold’s Congo. Instead of the chopping of hands it was the cutting of fingers to save as souvenirs. The headlined brutalities from within America’s borders mirrored the atrocities brutalizing Congolese natives across the ocean. The parallels would be distinctively drawn as the waves of violence at home increased over the next few years.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Georgia Burns Man at Stake,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 10, 1919, 1(Reporting that Richards was accused of killing his wife and then shooting the sheriff who came to arrest him. Richards is not necessarily represented as an innocent victim, but the consequences of mob violence resulting in his death without trial or due process fit within the paradigm of white violence against blacks).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, “Congo Crime! Hideous Cruelties Practiced on Natives by Belgians,” *Cleveland Gazette*, March 17, 1906, 1; “Men Lashed to Death in Congo, Says Texan,” *Savannah Tribune*, December 4, 1920, p. 1 (discussing the account of Texan Hayes Perkins who left the Congo because Belgians were continuing to condone the flogging of natives in the interior for failing to supply labor for plantations).

On October 4, 1919 *The Chicago Defender* published a picture of the burned body of William Brown, an African American supposedly torched by a woman following his lynching.<sup>46</sup> The front page photograph showed a hideously burned body resting on a pile of wood while a number of whites surround Brown's charred remains. Not a swaying body from the gallows tree, but caught in the camera's flash the effect was equally poignant. Symbolizing the continuing violence and racial hatred consuming cities throughout the country, Brown did not die by the hands of a Southern mob. Brown died in Omaha, Nebraska, more closely associated with the frontier spirit of Thompson's own North Dakota than the Mississippi of Richard Wright's childhood.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Lynching**

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.  
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,  
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;  
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.  
All night a bright and solitary star  
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,  
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)  
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.  
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view  
The ghastly body swaying the sun  
The women thronged to look, but never a one  
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;  
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,

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<sup>46</sup> "Troops Wrest Omaha from Mob," *The Chicago Defender*, October 4, 1919, 1 (The headline over the photograph of smiling men mugging for the camera says simply, "Burning Body in Omaha Street").

<sup>47</sup> The race riots that convulsed Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921 were still in the future, They too, however, marked the explosion of racial tensions in growing Western cities.

Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.<sup>48</sup>

The summer riots appeared to portend a fully realized race war with blacks and whites arming for the coming apocalypse. Overseas the tension and violence in American cities were front page news. In the black press the tone changed from recording the victims to a new call to arms. “The time for cringing is over” declared *The Kansas City Call*.<sup>49</sup> Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born writer who immigrated to the United States in his mid-twenties, framed the battle as a noble martyrdom in his poem, “If We Must Die.”

**“If We Must Die”**

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men well face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows, The Poems of Claude McKay*, New York: Harcourt, Brace (1922), (McKay was one of the leading voices of the Harlem Renaissance. During Thompson’s first stay in Chicago in 1927, she read McKay along with Langston Hughes and Rudolph Fisher while earning \$10.00 a week working for a little magazine).

<sup>49</sup> Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods, The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation*, *op. cit.* n. 33 at 53.

<sup>50</sup> Claude McKay, “If We Must Die,” *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay*, *op. cit.* n. 48.

And then, a little after 11:00 p.m. on the night of September 30, 1919 it seemed, as so many feared, that War and Death, riding their Red and Pale horses arrived in Phillips County, Arkansas. The apocalypse had come.

### **Phillips County, Arkansas 1919**

Phillips County, Arkansas in 1919 had a population of 32,929 blacks and 11,601 whites. In Helena, the county seat, situated close to the Mississippi River, whites were nervous, and the rumors and exaggerated newspaper stories of the summer race riots coupled with the “Red Menace” of Bolsheviks made people jumpy. Over the past few years whites in Helena felt there was a fair amount to be jumpy about. In May, 1917 “The Birth of a Nation” played a two-night run at The Grand Opera House to packed white audiences. The film’s racist themes and brutish depiction of the “bestial black man” terrorizing the “virginal white woman” brought racism’s deepest fears flitting across the screen. By 1919 black laborers in Phillips and surrounding counties started organizing into a union in order to collectively address their grievances against white employers. Whites reacted violently. In Star City, just 110 miles from Helena, Clyde Ellison was lynched in June, 1919 for refusing to work for white farmer Dale Bennett. To drive the point home, a sign was placed on Ellison’s naked body left hanging as a warning. The sign read: “This is how we treat lazy niggers.”<sup>51</sup>

The county’s black population read its own share of news about the riots of the summer of 1919. *The Chicago Defender* boasted some of the highest subscriber numbers of anywhere in

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<sup>51</sup> “Lynch Man Who Refused Scant Wages,” *The Chicago Defender*, June 21, 1919, 1.

the South in the 90-mile radius of Philips County.<sup>52</sup> *The Chicago Defender* as well as *The Crisis* were eagerly awaited as they arrived monthly in black homes even as white residents and officials viewed the papers as “radical.” In fact, African American newspapers were blamed for advocating the violent uprisings across America in the summer of 1919. *The New York Times* reported in August that Southern congressmen urged the Attorney General of the United States to invoke the Espionage Act to silence black leadership. Referring to an editorial by W.E.B. DuBois published in *The Crisis*, Rep. James F. Byrnes of South Carolina stated “If this editorial, which refers to this as a ‘shameful land,’ charging the Government with lynching, disfranchising its citizens, encouraging ignorance, and stealing from its citizens, does not constitute a violation of the Espionage law it would be difficult to conceive language sufficiently abusive to constitute a violation.”<sup>53</sup>

Into the late summer of 1919, whites and blacks in Philips County lived side-by-side with growing unease when about 7:00 p.m. on September 30 a group of black farmers began to gather at a Baptist church in Hoop Spur, some twenty-three miles as the crow flies from Helena. The

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods, The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation*, *op. cit.* n. 33 at 71; An increase in black literacy coupled with black migration northward created a boom in circulation numbers for African-American newspapers and periodicals. *The Crisis* went from an annual circulation of 385,000 in 1915 to selling 560,000 copies in the first six months of 1919. *The Chicago Defender* went from a circulation of 10,000 annually to 93,000 annually during the war years. See, William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, *op. cit.* n. 20 at 212.

<sup>53</sup> “Blames Race Riots on Negro Leaders,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 1919; The black press was not blamed for inciting violence only at home in America. The Associated Negro Press reported from Paris on June 22, 1921 that a rebellion by African Americans working for an American firm in Congo was supposedly “incited” by a newspaper they had been receiving. While the article does not mention the origin or nature of the newspaper, the inference is the paper was a black newspaper from America. See, “Travelers Report Unrest Among American Negroes,” *The Savannah Tribune*, June 25, 1921, 1.

small wooden structure was serving as a meeting site for the Progressive Farmers and Household Union. The group had been working for several months to sign up sharecroppers in the area. Their secret password was “We’ve just begun.”<sup>54</sup> A little after 11:00 p.m., with the meeting still in session inside and guards keeping watch outside, Charles Pratt, deputy sheriff of Helena, along with W.A. Adkins, a security employee of the Missouri-Pacific Railroad, and somewhat inextricably a black prisoner/trustee named Kid Collins, stepped out of a Model T-Ford on a side road near the church. Who fired the first shots remained unclear and contested. However in the hail of gunfire that followed, Adkins was killed and Pratt wounded. Inside the chaos of the church, with several members down, the crowd scattered to their cabins. In the ensuing days, as rumors swirled that blacks were arming to massacre the white population of Philips County, some 300 whites were deputized and the governor called in 500 soldiers from the U.S. Army post at Camp Pike to put down the “full scale black insurrection.”<sup>55</sup> The results of armed and deputized bands of whites moving through eastern Arkansas hunting black farmers were the deaths of somewhere between twenty-five and two hundred blacks. In addition, several hundred blacks were rounded up and many tortured during subsequent interrogations. While seventy-five blacks were given prison sentences of up to twenty-one years related to the Elaine “riots,” twelve were sentenced to death. No white was ever charged for mob violence or black deaths. The

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods, The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation*, *op. cit.* n. 33 at 2.

<sup>55</sup> Benno C. Schmidt, Jr., “A Proscript for Charles Black: The Supreme Court and Race in the Progressive Era,” *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 95, n. 8 (July 1986), 1697.

only white man charged, Ocier Bratton, was the young attorney helping the black farmers organize against the white plantation owners.<sup>56</sup>

### **“The American Congo-Burning of Henry Lowry”<sup>57</sup>**

The violence of the mob and the “justice” demanded by the mob became central to arguments about “civilized” behavior in the press. Headlines in African American newspapers such as “Elaine, Ark. Butchery” identified white mob violence as the clarion call for the

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<sup>56</sup> Bratton, working on behalf of his father, Ulysses Bratton, a former U.S. attorney, barely escaped lynching and served 30 days in jail. His father was convicted of barratry for helping black farmers and was forced to move from Arkansas. In the summer of 1960, as Congo was claiming its independence from Belgium, Dr. Oscar Allan Rogers, the president of the historic black Arkansas Baptist College and a graduate student at the University of Arkansas, published his own research of the Elaine riots, see, O.A. Rogers, Jr., “The Elaine Riots of 1919,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1960), 142; The Elaine Riots, and particularly the fate of the “Elaine Twelve” would remain in the news for the next several years. Convicted by an all-white jury in less than forty-five minutes and sentenced to death in less than five minutes, Frank Moore, Frank Hicks, Ed Ware, J.E. Knox, Ed Hicks, Paul Hall, Alfred Banks, Joe Fox, Ed Coleman, John Martin, Will Wordlow, and Albert Giles would be the focus of ongoing legal appeals before the Arkansas Supreme Court and ultimately the Supreme Court of the United States. See, *Moore, et al. v. Dempsey*, 261 US 86 (1923) (writing for the majority, Justice Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr., in a landmark decision found that “if the case is that the whole proceeding is a mask—that counsel, jury and judge were swept to the fatal end by an irresistible wave of public passion, and that the State courts failed to correct the wrong, neither perfection in the machinery for correction nor the possibility that the trial court and counsel saw no other way of avoiding an immediate outbreak of the mob can prevent this Court from securing to the petitioners their constitutional rights.”).

<sup>57</sup> William Pickens, “The American Congo-Burning of Henry Lowry,” *The Nation*, March 23, 1921, 1.

“civilized” world to step forward and end the barbarity.<sup>58</sup> Announcing the January 1920 meeting at which W.E.B. Du Bois would speak on “The American Congo,” *The Chicago Defender* headline read “To Contrast Conditions in South with Congo, Treatment in South Said to Rival Horrors of Belgian Congo Under Leopold.”<sup>59</sup> Framing the Elaine Riots for African Americans in the North and more broadly within the broiling national debates over race was the focus of internecine struggles within the black community of Chicago, specifically between the indomitable Ida Wells-Barnett and Walter White, secretary of the NAACP.<sup>60</sup> Both White and Wells-Barnett traveled to Arkansas, breaking new ground in exposing the lives of black farmers, their wives and families, and the desperate situation of the Elaine Twelve. For black women, long vulnerable to rape and sexual violence, they shared equal exposure to lynchings and

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<sup>58</sup> “The Elaine Ark. Butchery!,” *Cleveland Gazette*, November 15, 1919, 1 (tying white mob violence in Arkansas to the Turks’ brutality against the Armenians, an international focus in 1919. The references to Turkey were well-timed and aimed at an international audience, specifically Britain. Early in 1919 the British pressured Turkey to arrest those leaders specifically identified as ordering the Armenian slaughter for violation of the “laws of humanity.” By 1923 all possibility of international tribunals disappeared and no Turkish leaders were punished. For more on the United States’ unwillingness to pursue action, see, Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell” America and the Age of Genocide*, New York: Harper Perennial (2002), Chapter 1).

<sup>59</sup> “To Contrast Conditions in South with Congo,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 27, 1919, 1.

<sup>60</sup> While African-American, Walter White was a blue-eyed blond who traveled as a “white” newspaper reporter for a week in Arkansas after the riots, interviewing Governor Brough, among others. He narrowly escaped detection and lynching through the timely warning of a black man after his identity was discovered. For more on the struggles between White and Wells-Barnett, see, Paula J. Giddings, *Ida, A Sword Among Lions, Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*, New York: Harper (2009).

whippings, often left homeless and penniless along with their children. Their plight too became associated with the newly framed “American Congo.”<sup>61</sup>

The stories of the Elaine riots and the “Elaine Twelve” were soon eclipsed by revelations even more sensational. The idea of the “American Congo” as a labor relationship keeping blacks in “the indebtedness of the peon to the master...the cord by which they seemed bound to their masters’ service,” was joined by a spiraling cycle of violence so vicious that even Southern politicians were shocked.<sup>62</sup> On March 23, 1921, William Pickens, a field representative for the NAACP, published an article in *The Nation*, republished in black newspapers throughout the country.<sup>63</sup> The article, “The American Congo-Burning of Henry Lowry,” opened with “The valley of the Mississippi river from Memphis to the great delta may properly be termed the “Congo” of America. It includes the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, western Tennessee and eastern Texas. The quest of this Congo is not for rubber or ivory, but for cotton

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<sup>61</sup> See, Ida B. Well-Barnett, *The Arkansas Race Riot*, Chicago: Ida B. Wells-Barnett, 1920; “Expose Arkansas Peonage System, Truth Comes to Light When Unprejudiced Report is Given: Facts Go to Washington,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 1, 1919, 1 (providing the statement of Walter White); “Expose New Facts in Ark. Riot Case, Report of Mrs. Barnett Sheds Light on Facts Heretofore Uncovered,” and “Mrs. Barnett in Ark., Visits Twelve Men Awaiting Death n Electric Chair,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 28, 1920, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Herbert J. Seligmann, *The Negro Faces America*, New York: Harper (1920), 221

<sup>63</sup> See, for instance, *The Negro Star*, Wichita, Kansas, April 1, 1921, reprint of Picken’s report with a “Worthwhile” announcement the week before alerting readers to watch for Picken’s report.

and sugar. Here labor is forced and the laborer is a slave.”<sup>64</sup> Pickens not only indicted the labor relationship of debt-slavery (peonage) as the cause of lynchings and burnings in the South, but described the burning death of Henry Lowry of Nadena, Arkansas.

Lowry worked on the plantation of O.T. Craig, and a few weeks before Christmas 1920 asked for a settlement of his accounts for the past two years. According to Pickens, Craig took exception to Lowry’s request for fear that “to concede these Negro tenants a reckoning might lead to other presumptions on their part. Who knows? If they can ask for a settlement once in two years and get it they might come to ask for monthly statements with bills and receipts.”<sup>65</sup> Pickens’ bitter reference to the reality of the exploitive power relationships between whites and blacks continued, revealing how Lowry and Craig moved inexorably to their intertwined fates. In a series of confrontations Lowry ended up shooting Craig and his married daughter to death and wounding two other men. Pickens claimed “all law was prostrate if nonexistent” to protect Lowry although there is evidence that the police tried to evade the mob justice that eventually caught up with Lowry. Captured by a great mob, his wife and daughter were delivered to the scene to witness him burn. While he was burning “several times he tried to eat hot ashes or fire

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<sup>64</sup> William Pickens, “The American Congo-Burning of Henry Lowry,” *The Nation*, March 23, 1921, 1 (Pickens was a leader in African American education and the NAACP in the early 1900s. Early in his career he was at odds with Booker T. Washington, who he saw as an apologist and accommodator to white power, a position that created problems for Pickens as he looked for teaching positions. By 1919 the NAACP hired Pickens to serve as a field secretary. Pickens was also a charter member of the ACLU. Believing that unrestricted capitalism created the incentives and legal structures that punished blacks for attempting economic justice Pickens pointed to the the slow, hideous roasting of Henry Lowry as a symbolic punishment by a white landed class to keep black workers in their place. Sheldon Avery, *Up From Washington, William Pickens and the Negro struggle for Equality, 1900-1954*, Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press (1989), 114).

<sup>65</sup> William Pickens, “The American Congo-Burning of Henry Lowry,” *The Nation*, (March 23, 1921) 1.

and die, but the kindly mob would kick the embers out of his hands and out of his reach.”<sup>66</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union published the story of Henry Lowry in pamphlet form in the summer of 1921.<sup>67</sup> At a talk in New York City at the end of March 1921, Pickens raised the theme of “civilized behavior,” graphically discussing the difference between “cannibals who cook people to eat but we cook people to give pain.” Lashing out against the burning of blacks, Pickens’ said, “We cook them not to eat the browned flesh, but to feast on the pain and torture of the living man...The cooking of human flesh and enjoying it with the eyes and perhaps with the nostrils is civilized cannibalism. The worst of savages is the savage of civilization.”<sup>68</sup>

Picken’s “American Congo” argued that all civilized people had a duty to stop the violence and dismantle the economic system that it sustained. Much as Americans and Europeans joined together to end Leopold’s reign of terror in Congo, so too should the civilized world join to stop the brutalizing in the South. Pickens claimed one of the reoccurring charges against black men and in support of lynching was the rape of white women. Calling the myth of the black rapist “One of the most successful illusion” the pamphlet interrogated the “extraordinary tendency of the men of that race to commit rape.”<sup>69</sup> Arguing the corruptness of these claims, the pamphlet acknowledged “The appeal has been wonderfully successful. It is an old ruse of the oppressor. He must find a motive that will justify him in the moral sentiments of

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Announcing the pamphlet’s publication and contents, see, for instance, “Lynching and Debt-Slavery Exposed in ‘American Congo,’” *The Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1921, 16; “Striking Statements by Wm. Pickens. Published in Pamphlet by Liberties Union,” *The Savannah Tribune*, July 2, 1921, 4.

<sup>68</sup> *The Negro Star*, Wichita, Kansas, April 1, 1921, 1.

<sup>69</sup> “Debt-Slavery,” *The Washington Bee*, July 16, 1921, 2.

his people.”<sup>70</sup> (Ironically, the Belgians would use this same claim to justify intervention in Congo within days of Congolese independence in 1960.)

From “The Burning of Henry Lowry” the floodgates of horror were open. Sensational stories moved from Arkansas to Georgia where John S. Williams, a prominent white farmer in Jasper County, became known as the “Leopold of Georgia” and the “World’s Cruellest Slayer.” The depiction of John Williams’ violent torturing included descriptions of him pouring acid down his living victims’ throats assisted by his black farm hand, Clyde Manning. Williams’ death toll of eleven made for sensational reading. The black press tied Williams’ access to his victims through peonage.<sup>71</sup> A week after the initial reports of Williams’ “murder farm,” it was Mississippi’s turn to be tied to the Belgian Congo by white violence. In Brandon, Mississippi a black man named Sandy Thompson who allegedly shot and killed a white farmer was lynched by members of the Klu Klux Klan. The lynching featured gouging out of the hapless victim’s eyes with hot pokers and severing his right hand. The headlines proclaimed, “Mississippi Whites Outdo Belgian Congo Horrors.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> “Kills 11, Buries 6 Alive,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 2, 1921, 1 (referring to Williams as the “Leopold of Georgia”); “World’s Cruellest Slayer” and His Georgia “Congo,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 28, 1922, A3.

<sup>72</sup> “Mississippi Whites Outdo Belgian Congo Horrors,” *The Chicago Defender*, April 9, 1921, 13.

## Defining “Civilization”

*I was told the other day how a school-boy, when asked before a notable foreign visitor what distinguished the United States from other countries, said that the United States was the only civilized country that burned people alive.*<sup>73</sup>

How much of the weekly headlines in *The Chicago Defender* decrying fresh horrors in the South did teenage Thompson absorb in North Dakota? It is difficult to say. Certainly she never directly referred to them in *American Daughter* although she did write of her discomfort with all things Southern. Her distrust of Arlee Davis, the hired man of her neighbors who drove the children to school, provided a glimpse of the basis of her fears. “I didn’t like Arlee-he was from the South. He never said anything directly to me, but he had a snide way of saying things that made me uncomfortable, like talking about coons as though they were animals, yet instinctively I knew he meant Negroes, and I was always glad when I got out of the rig.”<sup>74</sup>

## The Lynching Bee

### II

Honk! Honk! On to the fork! Honk! Honk!  
You hear? From hand-squeezed bulb and belching conch!  
Honk! Honk! Down in the hollow now, but near,  
How many there? - Honk! Honk!  
Topping the hill off there - Behind the foremost cone of glare -  
That, like the swift typhoon, Sweeps on along each length of rut  
And makes their ridges as clear cut as in Uganda at high noon  
Stand out the Mountains of the Moon. Honk,- for the brasses and cat-gut!  
Honk, Honk, - for cymbals and bassoon!  
New times, new music and new fun!  
Though Bottom’s gone and oberon, with Satyr, Dwarf, and pet Baboon,

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<sup>73</sup> Corrine Bacon, “The Organization of Life,” *Wisconsin Library Bulletin, A Magazine of Suggestions and Information*, Madison, WI: Wisconsin Free Library Commission, vol. 17 (1921), 109 (address delivered for May-Day celebrations of Wisconsin Library School, 30 April 1921).

<sup>74</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n.1 at 121.

Midsummer nights have still their rites.  
Honk, Honk: "We've caught the coon!"  
("Honk" means they've caught the coon.)<sup>75</sup>

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The presence of Arlee was so repugnant that Thompson later quit joining in community activities of Sterling or interacting with the neighborly Gundersons because of his presence. Did Thompson's fears of lynching climbing the steps of the Capitol in Washington D.C. and at the dingy food counter in Maryland take root from "brother Dick" providing her with *The Chicago Defender*, its front page stories of escalating violence against black Americans questioning the definition of "civilization?" Just as Thompson contrasted Dick's "civilization" with the expansive North Dakota plains, the editorial pages of black newspapers were clear about the cost of Southern "civilization."

To illustrate the disconnect between "civilization" and the American South, the Editorial Page of *The Chicago Defender* offered a cartoon graphic titled, "A Heathen's Visit to America," showing the "Heathen" Chief Zuzu arriving in America from Africa. Chief Zuzu is then introduced to "Mr. Redneck who owns a big peonage farm down in Georgia - He's got a bunch of darkies slaving for him." The Chief, wearing "civilized" clothing, was then introduced to Mr. Rowdy who was able to talk about the "sport...down in Tulsa, burning and shooting." From a distance, Chief Zuzu sees a man that holds the record down in Mississippi for lynching parties. Shedding his "civilized" clothes in the final frame, the Chief decides to "go back to the Jungles

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<sup>75</sup> William Ellery Leonard, *The Lynching Bee and Other Poems*, New York: B.W. Huebsch (1920), 11 (Leonard, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, wrote numerous poems. "The Lynching Bee" was a particularly brutal and graphic poem tying the terror of the lynching victim to the "Honk" as the cars round and circle him. In the Foreword to the book, Leonard expressed the purpose for his work. "This volume brings together chiefly poems that attempt, by some union of imagination and criticism, to phrase the ominous turmoil of the times.")

where there isn't any civilization."<sup>76</sup> The cartoon ran over an article discussing the ACLU pamphlet featuring Pickens' "American Congo."

The Pickens' pamphlet was not the only one circulating. *The Chicago Defender* heralded "Georgia's Courageous Governor" in announcing a publication offered by Governor Dorsey detailing the "maltreatment" of blacks in his state. Dorsey is quoted as saying "if such measures continue, the civilized world will condemn Georgia more severely than it condemned King Leopold's administration of the Congo."<sup>77</sup> The following year the newspaper provided details from Dorsey's investigation in a follow-up article under the sensational headline, "'The Black Book of Hell' - Made in Georgia" with a smaller caption, "Startling Facts to Indict White Civilization In South Comes to Light From Former Governor's Office in Official Pamphlet."<sup>78</sup> Highlighting attacks on "industrious" blacks, businessmen and hard-working farmers, the "Black Book of Hell" reinforced that whites sought to eradicate Africa Americans who challenged white racial and class hierarchy. The symbols of such targeted response were the Johnston brothers, shot to death by mob violence during the Elaine Riots. The sons of a Presbyterian minister and a schoolteacher, the four brothers included a prominent dentist and business owner in Helena,

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<sup>76</sup> "A Heathen's Visit to Civilized America," *The Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1921, 16.

<sup>77</sup> "Georgia' Courageous Governor," *The Chicago Defender*, May 14, 1921, 14.

<sup>78</sup> "The Black Book of Hell" - Made in Georgia, Startling Facts to Indict White Civilization In South Comes to Light From Former Governor's Office in Official Pamphlet," *The Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1922, 15.

Arkansas, a successful physician who lived in Oklahoma, and a third who was a veteran of the First World War.<sup>79</sup>

If aware of the targeting of successful black businessmen and farmers, how did this impact young Thompson? In *American Daughter* she identified the singular, shining feeling of being part of a whole family, experiencing a racial completeness at the table of Mac Williams, a successful African American farmer. He and his brother were progressive, educated, striving to take advantage of the opportunities that land and freedom offered them. They were industrious, hard-working blacks, like the Johnston Brothers targeted, tortured, and murdered in the aftermath of the Elaine Riots in Arkansas. What of her own father, working for the governor, always striving to succeed - would he too have been a target in the South? Not questions articulated by Thompson, but the drumbeat of violence at the point when her awareness of the world beyond the Plains increased helps deepen an understanding of her psychological responses to the American South.

In April, 1921 the NAACP sent telegrams to President Harding and Governor Dorsey claiming that peonage threatened the economic future of the United States. Citing the Williams' murders, the burning of Lowry, and the events in Philips County, Arkansas where "an unknown number of colored Americans were slaughtered and other sentenced to death and imprisonment

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<sup>79</sup> "The Real Causes of Two Race Riots," *The Crisis*, IXX (December 1919), 56; According to Richard Wright his Uncle Hoskins, a successful saloon owner in Elaine, Arkansas in the heart of Phillips County, met his death in about 1916 when a white man shot him, envious of Hoskin's lucrative liquor business. Wright, living with his mother and brother in the Uncle's home in Elaine, described the psychology of fear he felt at Hoskins' murder, "Uncle Hoskins had simply been plucked from our midst and we, figuratively, had fallen on our face to avoid looking into that white-hot face of terror that we knew loomed somewhere above us." Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger) A Record of Childhood and Youth*, New York: Harper Perennial (2006), 55; James Campbell, *Middle Passages, African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*, New York: Penguin Press (2006), 269.

for attempting to secure redress from exploitation through the courts of the State,” the President was urged to issue an order for a thorough investigation and imprisonment of those whites guilty. A similar telegram was sent to Governor Dorsey of Georgia urging the use of the power of the federal courts and Department of Justice in conjunction with the state courts to break the back of the system of exploitation in the South.<sup>80</sup>

### **“Congo” at the Circus**

While the “American Congo” became a euphemism for labor exploitation and barbarity in the American South among African Americans, “Congo” lived as a side-show for some white Americans, linking black men and apes. Echoing the sad saga of Ota Benga, “the Pygmy in the Zoo,” the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus featured a developmentally disabled black man billed as “Congo the Ape Man” living with a chimpanzee “Sally, the Ape Woman.”<sup>81</sup> In a May 22, 1920 Letter to the Editor Mr. N.E. Weatherless, Head of the Science Department of Dunbar High School, in Washington, DC, wrote of his outrage at the circus sideshow. The show featured “Congo, the lowest type of African; Sally, the highest type of Simian,” living in a conjugal arrangement as “husband and wife.”<sup>82</sup> Weatherless expressed his outrage. “Nothing I have ever read or heard of in the wildest dervishes of any primitive people in any land, age, or

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<sup>80</sup> “Peonage Is Menace to Nation’s Economic Future, Great Cause of Unrest Next to Lynching-The N.A.A.C.P. Telegraphs President Harding and Governor Dorsey on Georgia Cases,” *The Washington Bee*, April 2, 1921, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Bodan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1990), 142.

<sup>82</sup> “Slander on the Race. A Most Revolting Circus Scene,” *The Washington Bee*, June 5, 1920, 3 (N.E. Weatherless is probably Nelson E. Weatherless, a graduate of Howard University and a long-time resident, teacher, and civil rights activist in the Washington D.C. area. Dunbar High School was the first high school for black students in Washington D.C. Named for the African-American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, its faculty included such notables as Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Carter G. Woodson.)

clime, exceeds this infamy in vileness of conception, baseness of execution, brazen effrontery, and debasement of our cherished Christian ideals of human life.” Here again, as a sideshow for white America’s entertainment, was evidence of the depravities of civilization. “In permitting a show like this to make the rounds of our faire land, sowing wherever it goes the blighting seeds of discord and hate and kindling anew the first of race prejudice, is it to be conceded that we have reached a stage in our civilized life where justice has fled to brutish beats and the nation has lost its reason? The echo answers “Have we?” I pause for reply.”<sup>83</sup> Weatherless, like the young Era Bell Thompson asked, “Where was God?” Where and what was civilization in a supposedly Christian land?

By the early 1920s the symbol of “Congo” served two masters, one a place of terrorizing violence and peonage whether in Africa or the American South; the other a circus side-show appealing to “the lowest race prejudice.”<sup>84</sup> For many white Americans “Congo” reinforced social darwinism’s worst theories of racial hierarchy and the supremacy of white civilization even as the black press and race leaders were attempting to emphasize Congo as the dislocation between the rhetoric and reality of civilization for so many of America’s citizens of color.

### **Dreams Lost and Found:**

Within her broadening awareness of the outside world, Thompson matured from the hopeful fourteen year old belle of a basket social into a young lady of Bismarck, North Dakota from 1919 to 1923. Small in stature and with the limiting education of “agriculture certificates from Sterling,” she found life in the growing capital city to be more challenging. The boom

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> “A Recent Georgia Peonage Case, Throwing a Sidelight on Legal and Social Conditions in the South,” *The Green Bag*, vol. 23 (1911), 526.

town of Bismarck introduced Thompson to a wider cross-section of Americans coming north for new opportunities. In *American Daughter* Thompson framed her late teens and early twenties as a time of discovery and loss. Discovering her passion for sports and writing, she also explored her racial identity as she traveled from the shelter of North Dakota to Minnesota and Chicago. Exposed to the vicissitudes of the color bar she also confronted the prejudices associated with gradations of blackness within the African American community, her dark-hue and textured-hair distinctly marking her as it did “chocolate Mabbie” (and Thompson’s later friend, Gwendolyn Brooks.) Balanced against her expanding world was the temporary loss of athletics, opportunities for an education, and most significantly the loss of her father.

#### **“Dakota Dick” and...**

Arriving with her father in Bismarck in her final years in high school, Thompson found joy and success in running. Increasingly competitive, Thompson revealed the pride that running and winning gave her but also ways in which competition exposed her to greater prejudice. In her senior year in high school, following winning gold and bronze medals in various categories, Thompson reflected “I came up against a new opponent called prejudice, and lost, hands down.”<sup>85</sup> While in Fargo with her track team, Thompson was refused seating on the main floor of a theater. Confronted with segregation for almost the first time in her life, she was told “it’s a rule of the house.”<sup>86</sup> Forging ahead following her high school graduation, Pop Thompson opened a secondhand store in Mandan, North Dakota, and father and daughter settled into life at “the beginning of the real West.”<sup>87</sup> Taking business classes at the local high school and pursuing

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<sup>85</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 142.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* at 143.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* at 145.

athletics, Thompson also pursued another interest, writing, starting as correspondent for *The Chicago Defender*.

After failing as a social commentator for the paper, “My first feature, an attack upon Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement for Negroes, brought my first fan mail, a letter from one of his followers who even scorched the outside of the letter,” Thompson turned to the personal; “Dakota Dick” was born as her pseudonym, “a bad, bad cowboy from the wild and wooly West.”<sup>88</sup> Published in the “Lights and Shadows” section of the newspaper, Thompson’s rather tongue-in-cheek observations included advice about mother-in-laws, “The mother-in-law, my dear friends, is the forerunner of love and happiness: a visit from a mother-in-law is just another way of saying “Christmas!...If you must run over her, forwards or backwards, please do it with a sedan instead of a noisy truck. At least be considerate of her nerves.”<sup>89</sup>

Considering Thompson’s early correspondence with *The Chicago Defender* it appeared Thompson felt confident enough in her views that her first writing was as a “social reformer” and she was willing to take on Marcus Garvey. Some of it may have been the boldness of youth, but it also suggests that Thompson was paying attention to national and international conversations within black communities. It is also remarkable that Thompson adopted the moniker of “Dakota Dick” a “bad, bad cowboy.” Thompson assumed a masculine identity, a persona that may have been just in fun or may suggest the struggles of being the only female in a highly masculinized house for a number of years. When Thompson temporarily lived in Minnesota in 1925, Thompson’s “Dakota Dick” wrote a love letter to “Nevada Ester” in the column, “...but let the

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* at 152.

<sup>89</sup> “Mother-in-Law Will Kindly Form in Line to the Left and Pick Out Your Weapons,” *The Chicago Defender*, November 15, 1924, 12.

sparks of devotion and obedience ignite thy soul and illuminate thy countenance until your crimson love and rouged mug make thee my rosy red hot mama, and the theme of our devotion forever.” Thompson signed her “Puppy Love,” - “Dakota Dick” (Temporarily Minnesota Dickens.) P.S.: land of 10,000 lakes and ‘ah done cried’ em all full.’<sup>90</sup> Despite the moniker, there is no evidence that Thompson adopted a male guise either in her future writing or daily life - in fact, Thompson submitted a poem “Power of the Press” to Lights and Shadows under her own name. A rhyming-ditty that played off the foibles of the powerful within the black press community in Chicago again demonstrated Thompson’s cheeky wit and familiarity with the public personalities within the urban black press.<sup>91</sup> Thompson ends her poem with

“But Dewey R. is the man that won’t believe,  
That ignorance is bliss.  
When it comes to these would-be poets -  
Say, wonder if he’ll publish this?”

Thompson’s connection with “Lights and Shadows” and her poke at “Dewey R.” placed her within the growing Chicago writing community at an early age. “Dewey R.” was Dewey Roscoe Jones, the editor of “Lights and Shadows,” “A Little Bit of Everything” who offered aspiring black writers a forum to publish their work, particularly their poetry. Writers who appeared in the “Lights and Shadows” column included the teenage Gwendolyn Brooks,

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<sup>90</sup> “Stop It! We Won’t Have You Making Puppy Love Through our Colyum!” [sic] *The Chicago Defender*, September 5, 1925, A8 (in her entry, Thompson makes a possible passing reference to her father’s store, “When I read with aching heart and second-hand love...” Thompson spent a summer and early fall of 1925 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her brother Tom lived there and was so unnerved by his little sister’s perceived vulnerability and close proximity, he offered to help pay for Thompson’s first year at the University of North Dakota).

<sup>91</sup> Era Bell Thompson, “Power of the Press,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1925, A10.

Langston Hughes, and Frank Marshall Davis.<sup>92</sup> Those who served as correspondents were called “Lasers,” wearing the name with pride, including Thompson. In the November 27, 1926 column, “Dakota Dick” is listed by “Dewey R.” as one of the Lasers eligible to receive one of the newly designed LAS pins. (In a later column, “Dakota Dick” is one of a group nominated to receive a free pin, instead of having to pay \$5.00).<sup>93</sup>

### ...“Secondhand Girl”

On a rainy Friday, September 13, 1925, Thompson stepped off the train in Grand Forks, North Dakota, preparing to enroll in the University of North Dakota. Twenty years old, with \$60 in her pocket for tuition, books, and living expenses until she could find work, Thompson had no sure place to stay and faced a new town completely alone. The courage and risk inherent in facing the unknown with little money or support would be a hallmark of Thompson’s travels and perhaps a metaphor for her adult life. The solitary moment of dejection as she stood dripping wet in her cheap Sears Roebuck coat “giving off muddy orange rivulets” while searching for someplace that would take in a single-female black border subsumed her in humiliation and failure. “I was ashamed to go home to Pop defeated, not even able to find a room in a strange town.”<sup>94</sup> Reprieve came in the form of the Walker family, one of the few African American families remaining in Grand Forks, who temporarily took her in and found her housing and work

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<sup>92</sup> Delaney Hall, “Lights and Shadows” Dewey Roscoe Jones and the *Chicago Defender’s* Poetic Legacy,” Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/article/243478](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/243478) (Jones was an important advocate for young writers in Chicago, offering opportunities for publication to a wide array of African American writers. He was one of the early supporters of Langston Hughes, providing a positive review of “The Weary Blues.” “The Bookshelf,” *The Chicago Defender* (January 30, 1926), A1).

<sup>93</sup> “Lights and Shadows - At Last!” *The Chicago Defender* (November 27, 1926), A2.

<sup>94</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 167.

with their next-door-neighbor, the profane but kindly Opal, part of a small Jewish community in Grand Forks.

From her ignominious beginning Thompson found her footing, reveling in her new college life. She played basketball and volleyball, ran track, and with the encouragement and challenge of her rhetoric teacher (Mr. Lewis) she continued to develop her literary skills. After she produced an essay on “Evolution” claiming women were “fine people, but all men were monkeys,” Mr. Lewis was firm, “It’s about time, Miss Thompson, that you remember to forget that you’re clever and get down to the brass tacks of learning to put your cleverness into civilized art.”<sup>95</sup> Interesting turn of phrase, “civilized art,” although Thompson seemed to suggest that Lewis used “civilized” to mean serious or scholarly as opposed to flip and frivolous. She continued to produce humorous works for the university paper, *Student*, submitting so many she was appointed humor editor her freshman semester. She wrote jokes, poems, and a column on advice to the lovelorn, creating fictional letters from the love-sick in order to provide funny answers.

How did Thompson use humor in her writing? Threading throughout *American Daughter* humor appeared to distill moments of tension but most directly to allow Thompson to find a niche, a place of her own in overwhelmingly white settings. Humor gained her entree and voice within literary circles where she might have been shunned otherwise. Her early foray as a social commentator may have stung, leaving her more comfortable using humor as a mask of identity. Perhaps it explained the transgendered “Dakota Dick” - he allowed Thompson distance from her own reflection. By adopting Dakota’s “bad, bad persona” she was able to have fun in a

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

way that she was unable to as a female, and particularly as a black female. Ralph Ellison remarked on her humor, attributing it to her alienation caused by her color, "To deal with this alienation she developed her hair-trigger sense of humor and an insistent friendliness." But Ellison argued Thompson could not escape herself or the internal struggles hidden by her outwardly cheerful mask. "Her humor reminds us of the Southern Negro's "laughing-just-to-keep-from-crying" technique of survival. And when we think of the incongruity of the chatty, superficial style with which she relates her life, along with the false ring of some of her reactions...we are reminded of Eliza in "Pygmalion" adopting the style of the upper class in order to win her way into its acceptance."<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, Arthur Davis found Thompson's cheerfulness as depicted in *American Daughter* to be an important balance, "She sets out to give a picture not of humiliation and oppression but of the essential goodness which can be found in American living."<sup>97</sup> Rejecting Ellison's critique, Davis said "she does not become a hat-in-hand apologist. Perhaps it is her Northern background that has made it possible, but she has written a 'good will' book that does not make the reader sick of the stomach. And that is no mean achievement."<sup>98</sup> Ellison argued Thompson's use of humor was more "Amos and Andy" than a tone of American universality - the theme Davis identified within *American Daughter*. It may be that both reviewers were right, as Thompson's later work demonstrated both a maturing sense of racial self and a deeper, less optimistic tone even while continuing to advocate for "Americanness." Writing for *Phylon* in 1950 on "Negro Publications and the Writer" Thompson

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<sup>96</sup> Ralph Ellison, "StepChild Fantasy," *Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 29:3 (June 8, 1946), 25.

<sup>97</sup> Arthur P. Davis, "American Daughter," *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 15, no. 4 (Autumn, 1946), 647.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* at 648.

emphasized humor several times as she remarked on the growing power of black writers in mainstream white publications as well as the black press. “Even humor is finding its rightful place in the pages of the Negro press.”<sup>99</sup> Later, bemoaning the dearth of literate black writers generally, Thompson again returned to the importance of humor. “Judging from the unsolicited manuscripts that pass over the desk of the Negro editor, the rate of illiteracy is nearly as high as the number of would-be lions of literature. Second to inability to write correct and effective English is an unwillingness to think in terms other than The Problem. And high on the list are a lack of literary imagination and a sense of humor.”<sup>100</sup>

For Thompson, humor always appeared to be part of her literary style. At times it could be quite piercing, but it also had the effect of universalizing the human condition beyond black and white. In her early years humor may have served another purpose. As a young black woman Thompson appeared non-threatening in her humorous ditties even as they accentuated her ability to observe to turn the tables on a world in which as a singular black figure in a predominately white landscape she was often the one being observed.

A curious reflection of Thompson’s relationship to identity, whether her own or others, was the way she wrote about people from the American South, black or white. In contrast to the richness of her descriptions of the natural world of the Great Plains and those who inhabited the great open expanse of her childhood, throughout *American Daughter* there is a flat, two-dimensional aspect to her characterization of those Southern born. Describing Professor Hart, her freshmen year college professor in sociology, Thompson said, “another one who made

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<sup>99</sup> Era Bell Thompson, “Negro Publications and the Writer,” *Phylon, The Atlanta University Review of Race & Culture*, vol. 11, no. 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1950), 305.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* at 306.

learning pleasant. When I found out he was from Tennessee, it was too late. I already liked him.”<sup>101</sup> Later, still referring to Hart, she wrote “Mr. Hart, not knowing what to make of the sudden rapt attention, gave me 90 on conscientious endeavor. The South wasn’t half bad.”<sup>102</sup> Was she commenting on the way that race restricted the opportunity to know someone before making judgments? Was she acknowledging that the racial divide cut both ways? Or was it that Thompson really had an almost cartoonish comprehension of the South, as if it was the sketch of a picture for her with few of the colors and dimensions filled in? While Thompson searched for answers to her own racial connections in Africa and the world throughout the 1950s, the South retained little resonance for her, in many ways a place and a people more foreign than Africa and Congo would be for her in 1953.

Thompson’s success at school was cut short by the development of pleurisy in April 1927 that prevented her from participating in sports and returned her home again to Pop, for almost the last time. After a year at home, Thompson headed to Chicago only to return one more time to the dry, parched fields of North Dakota in July 1928 to stand by the bedside of her dying father. As she buried him in the dust and heat, Thompson realized the full weight and possibilities of her aloneness. She also accepted the obligations of his medical bills and funeral expenses and reopened Pop’s secondhand store to sell off his goods and close out the final chapter of his life with dignity and respect. Describing a town cheering her on and helping her through the long winter, Thompson recorded “by the end of May the last bill was paid. My job was done.”<sup>103</sup> But the nights following her father’s death were often difficult for Thompson. She suffered from

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<sup>101</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 173.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* at 177.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* at 207.

nightmares and depression, and soon was watched over by friends at church and within the town. The outside world continued to intrude, and “rumrunners” driving liquor across from Canada arrived in Mandan, often drunk on their own product by the time they arrived in town. In particular she described one night when eight drunk men sang and talked sitting outside the second-hand store while Thompson cowered in her bed listening to “profane” talk and their increasingly aggressive demands for women and liquor. Holding tightly to Pop’s old pistol, and with her dog Satan by her side, the specter of “Dakota Dick” rose, and at a critical moment a shot rang out. The “rumrunners” scattered, never congregating by the store or bothering Thompson again.

Clinging a bit longer to the protection of North Dakota, Thompson ultimately realized that it was education that would provide her with the greatest freedom and arm her with the best chance to succeed. “Dakota Dick” and “Secondhand Girl” became “The President’s Daughter,” finding opportunity and a future in the home of Dr. Richard Riley.<sup>104</sup> Thompson lived with Dr. Riley, the young, white pastor of the First Methodist Church in Grand Forks, North Dakota and his family while attending North Dakota State. Riley, “a forceful, dynamic man with a shock of curly red hair that bobbed up and down as he preached,” was described by one of Thompson’s

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<sup>104</sup> Typical of Thompson’s autobiography, she changed the name of Dr. Robert E. O’Brian, his wife Mabel, and son Edward to Richard, Susan, and Jan Riley, respectively. O’Brian became the president of Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa in 1931, choosing Morningside over a school in Kansas because Morningside would accept Thompson as a student and the Kansas school would not. Thompson remained part of the O’Brians’ family for the remainder of her life despite the fact that her presence in their home created a permanent rift between O’Brian, his mother, and other family members who were staunch supporters of the Klu Klux Klan in Indiana. The dissertation will continue to use the name Riley, as Thompson did in *American Daughter*. For more see, Eileen De Freece-Wilson, *Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer*, *op. cit.* n. 5 at 59; Kathie Ryckman Anderson, “Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter,” *North Dakota History Journal of the Northern Plains*, *op. cit.* n. 7 at 15.

friends as “all hepped up about Negroes and education.”<sup>105</sup> Riley served as Thompson’s employer, mentor, and benefactor as she completed her education. In 1931 she moved with the Rileys to their new home in Sioux City, Iowa as Dr. Riley began his tenure as the president of Morningside College. Spending part of her senior year “taking a survey of the local colored people” for her own purposes, Thompson’s goal was to learn more about “her people.”<sup>106</sup>

While Thompson was deeply affected by the death of her mother, it was Pop, for all his flaws, who was central to her story. She was Pop Thompson’s “American Daughter” and when she went to Africa, it was in search of the land of her father (even if that father included a white grandfather). Describing the changeability of this man who meant so much to her, she said “On the farm he was lost, confused, dependent upon the Lord; at the capital he was suave, genteel, dignified; but here in a hot kitchen, he was again Tony the cook, quick, sure, skillful.”<sup>107</sup> A resourceful survivor who had gone a long way around the country from his birth in Virginia to build a life in North Dakota, Pop’s death in 1928 was a crucible for Thompson. The deaths of both of Thompson’s parents marked stark points of solitude along the tracks that finally and permanently took her out of the cold stark winters and bleak, dry heat of summer in the Great Plains and on to the skyscrapers and possibilities of the big city. As Thompson wrote in *American Daughter* of her move from the shelter of North Dakota and the last vestiges of familial protection, she left behind the lyrical cleansing natural world of freedom and land for a gritty, darker world of urban solitude and anonymity. With shoulders set and chin up, alone

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<sup>105</sup> Thompson, Era Bell, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 1 at 210.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* at 241.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* at 85.

again, Thompson returned finally and permanently to Chicago, “city of splendor and squalor, excitement and disappointment.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* at 195.

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**Chicago's Congo  
(Sonata for an Orchestra)**

Chicago is an overgrown woman  
wearing her skyscrapers  
like a necklace. . .

Chicago's blood is kaleidoscopic  
Chicago's heart has a hundred auricles

From the Congo  
to Chicago  
is a long trek  
-as the crow flies

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State Street is a wide gray band across Chicago's forehead  
At night a white faced mother moon clothes Skyscrapers in gray silk  
At night when clocks yawn and hours get lazy  
At night when the jungle's a symphony in grays ...  
Oh mother moon, mother of earth, bringer of silver gifts  
Bring a veil of stardust to wrap this Congo in  
Bring a shawl of moon mist to clothe Chicago's body<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

### **Chapter III: From Bronzeville to Congo and Home Again**

Graduating from Morningside College in May of 1933 and armed with the names of contacts from Dr. Riley, Era Bell Thompson headed for her permanent home in Chicago looking for work just as tens of thousands of people crowded into Chicago for the 1933 World's Fair and thousands of African-Americans headed northward from the collapsing agricultural economy of

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Marshall Davis, "Chicago's Congo," *Black Man's Verse*, Chicago, IL: The Black Cat Press (1935).

the American South.<sup>2</sup> While Thompson completed her education in Grand Forks and Sioux Falls, the outside world proved no more secure for African Americans than in the tenuous days of crisis during the Red Summer of 1919 and its brutal aftermath in the early 1920s. The Congo remained a symbol of savagery in the lexicon of African Americans, a plaintive wail across the decade of the Twenties associating “Darkest Africa” and the darkest recesses of man’s savagery to man. On May 24, 1930 the front page of *The Chicago Defender* cried out “Godless America” over the searing photograph of the horrific silhouette of the “Charred remains of George Hughes...hanging from a tree opposite the Goodson drug store in Sherman, Texas. Another sample of civilization in America.” Invoking the Congo once again as a comparison between the supposedly civilized and barbaric castes, the caption demanded, “Where were the decent people, the churchgoers, those who belonged to civic clubs and the Y.M.C.A. of Sherman?” Only to reveal, “They too helped make up the mob which resorted to cannibalism unknown even in the most remote part of Congo. Suddenly they became beasts, worse than any savage...”<sup>3</sup> Reviewing John L. Spivak’s 1932 *Georgia Nigger* documenting the violence of the Georgia prison system towards blacks, the comparison to Congo was drawn again; “Read Spivak’s latest book and you will see just how the civilization of Georgia compares with the civilization of Belgian Congo....if the conditions indicated by these charges should continue, both God and man would justly condemn Georgia more severely than man and God condemned Belgium and

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<sup>2</sup> See, Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land, The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America*, New York: Vintage Books (1991) (studying the migrations of residents of Clarksdale, Mississippi to Chicago beginning in the 1930s. Lemann’s study is an examination of hope, opportunity, failure, and return across thirty years).

<sup>3</sup> “Godless America,” *The Chicago Defender* (May 24, 1930), 1.

Leopold for the Congo atrocities.”<sup>4</sup> Congo and its former ruler King Leopold remained in the news in African American newspapers. The *Pittsburgh Courier* commented that thirteen years after “Poor Little Belgium” was violated by the “Unspeakable Hun” they were back to their “same old rollicking way” in Belgium-controlled Congo. Where previously “poor, little Belgium..decimated the Negro population and cut off the arms and feet of countless thousands of its black wards in order to expedite the production of rubber” it now appeared that they were using forced labor again to achieve their business goals. The article pointedly continued, “The League of Nations must be aware of conditions in the Congo, but it has never seen fit to send any commission down there to investigate. Of course, it has sent a commission to Liberia to investigate slavery and forced labor there, but then Liberia is only a Negro republic while Belgium is a white country that suffered much to make the world safe for democracy.”<sup>5</sup> In a later editorial decrying the United States’ occupation in the Philippines, *The Pittsburgh Courier* tied America’s treatment of “people of color,” at home and abroad, with the treatment by Leopold of the Congolese, “It is strange but true that nearly every place dominated by Uncle Sam is the home of a darker race of people. It appears that Uncle Sam has the habit of dominating darker peoples. In order to convince the world that he does not have any special design on darker peoples, Uncle Sam ought to give the Philippines their long-promised independence. It might have a salutary effect on the people of the South Seas and on various states in South America.

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<sup>4</sup> “Pictures Show How Georgia Tortures Poor Convicts,” *The Chicago Defender* (October 8, 1932), 3.

<sup>5</sup> “Poor Little Belgium” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (April 5, 193), 12.

The heavy hand of Leopold rested too long upon the Congo and our hand in the Philippine Islands seems to be getting heavier and heavier.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet while Congo and Leopold retained their associations with “Darkest Africa,” the connection between black Americans and Africa changed in the 1930s, redrawing the relationship between life as a black American and life as an “African” American.<sup>7</sup> In this renewed embrace of Africa, Congo came to be imaginatively reborn in the arts as part of the *lingua franca* increasingly tying black struggles at home with the global struggles of those held under the thumb of white imperialism abroad. Leading African Americans traveled to Africa, returning to discuss the conditions they observed.<sup>8</sup> As tensions in Europe increased throughout the 1930s, eyes turned toward Africa where native labor was pressured to produce increasing amounts of food and raw materials. Explaining Belgium’s policies in Congo in 1937, the Governor-General of Congo proclaimed “The natives are now producing not only to be able to pay their taxes, but also to earn money for themselves....not to transform our Congo natives into good Europeans...but to make them good Congolese, faithful to Belgium, and educated to live better and to work better in their own country, so that they may become more helpful, not only to

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<sup>6</sup> “Our Hand In The Philippines,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (August 22, 1931), 10.

<sup>7</sup> James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans, Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press (2002).

<sup>8</sup> “Dr. Haynes Sails for Africa on ‘Mauretania,’” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, (April 12, 1930), 2; “Africa Looks to U.S. for Help, Dr. George Haynes, in Dinner Speech, Tells of Trip There,” *The Chicago Defender*, (November 29, 1930), 13; “News from Abroad,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, (September 14, 1932), 7 (announcing in a brief notation that Dr. Carter G. Woodson traveled to Brussels to meet missionaries from the Belgium Congo).

us Belgians, but also and chiefly to themselves and their own community.”<sup>9</sup> Emphasizing the use of Congo in artistic and cultural expressions of African American life, Congo represented layers of complex and at times discordant restlessness and impatience with racial and ethnic stereotypes as black Americans joined global struggles against imperialism, labor exploitation, and oppression.<sup>10</sup>

### **Renaissance and Identity**

Thompson arrived in Chicago in 1933 as the centrifugal force of African American intellectual and literary life shifted from Harlem to Chicago and the Great Depression collapsed the agricultural economy of the American South accelerating the migration of southern blacks northward. The influx of the South’s marginalized blacks into Chicago in turn put pressure on the city’s Black Belt, changing the nature and culture of the city and its existing black residents striving for upward mobility within its boundaries. Chicago introduced Thompson to two “Renaissances” of black intellectual and literary life. Her first residence in the 1920s exposed her to the Harlem Renaissance writers and her permanent return in 1933 introduced her to and incorporated her within the Black Chicago Renaissance.<sup>11</sup> To both movements she ascribed clarifying moments of her own racial identity. She associated Harlem with the idea of the beauty

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<sup>9</sup> “Belgian Governor In Congo Explains Policy,” *The Chicago Defender*, (September 4, 1937), 24; for other headlines, see for example, “Belgium King Moves to Keep the Congo,” *The Chicago Defender*, (January 30, 1937), 28; “Belgium to Grab More African Land, Plans to Send More Settlers to the Congo,” *The Chicago Defender*, (March 26, 1938), 24;

<sup>10</sup> Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire, Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1997).

<sup>11</sup> The term “Renaissance” was debated by later scholars, Steven C. Tracy claimed many critics “regretted the “Renaissance” label for both Harlem and Chicago, because neither was an actual rebirth or resurgence.” Steven C. Tyler, ed., *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press (2011), 2.

of blackness and within Chicago's "cultural flowering" she embraced her own active participation in a black intellectual and social community. This chapter explores the ways these two expressions of "Renaissance" helped inform Thompson's racial identity within the context of her travels South and in particular her travels to Africa in 1953. The Harlem Renaissance writers influenced Thompson's views of blackness, although it was a white poet associated with the Harlem movement who appeared to have provided her with a "history lesson" in Congo.<sup>12</sup> By far the more influential immersion, one she herself strove to identify with in *American Daughter*, was the Black Chicago Renaissance. It refined the dimensions of her racial identity while still exposing areas of blunted nuance. As she traveled in Africa, she responded to the question, "What Africans Think about Us," with a mirrored response of what of Africa did Thompson see within herself.<sup>13</sup>

#### **"When the Negro was in Vogue"<sup>14</sup>**

*Then there was the ugly picture of the old Congo under cruel King Leo II, whose crimes of forced labor and mutilations were echoed by Vachel Lindsay's macabre poem "Congo."<sup>15</sup>*

In 1925 a young and struggling Langston Hughes was a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington D.C. Learning that the poet Vachel Lindsay would be reading his poems at the hotel one evening, Hughes seized the opportunity to express his admiration for Lindsay and

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<sup>12</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers, The Story of the Return of a Native Three Hundred Years Later*, New York: Doubleday & Company (1954), 104.

<sup>13</sup> Era Bell Thompson, "What Africans Think About Us," *Ebony* (February 1954), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, New York: Hill and Wang (1940), 228.

<sup>15</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers, op cit.* n. 12.

share his own poems.<sup>16</sup> Lindsay, by then a middle-aged author past his early promise, was a decade removed from his racially problematic works of “singing” American poetry such as “The Congo A Study of the Negro Race” and “Booker T. Washington Trilogy.”<sup>17</sup> While a fading star, Lindsay was still associated with the white glitterati of writers and artists who played a role in the Harlem Renaissance. Serving Lindsay his dinner, Hughes provided him with three poems, “Jazzonia,” “Negro Dancers,” and “The Weary Blues.”<sup>18</sup> Crediting Lindsay with his “first publicity break,” Hughes became celebrated in the local paper as “a Negro bus boy poet.” He

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<sup>16</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, *op. cit.* n. 14 at 210.

<sup>17</sup> Vachel Lindsay, “The Congo Study of the Negro Race,” in *The Congo and Other Poems*, New York: Dover Publicans (1992), 3-4 (lauded and controversial from its publication in 1914 along with the poem “Booker T. Washington Trilogy” published in the June 1916 issue of *Poetry*, the poems sparked comments from W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Crisis* as well as an exchange between Joel Spingarn and Lindsay. Commenting specifically about the “Trilogy” Du Bois said, “Mr. Vachel Lindsay knows two things, and two things only, about Negroes: The beautiful rhythm of their music and the ugly side of their drunkards and outcasts. From this poverty of materials he tries now and then to make a contribution to Negro literature....Mr. Lindsay knows little of the Negro, and that little is dangerous.” W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Looking Class” *The Crisis*, vol. 12, 4 (August 1916), 182. Responding, belatedly, to an invitation by Joel Springarn, the white chairman of the board of directors of the NAACP, to attend a conference in August 1916, Lindsay wrote “My “Congo” and “Booker T. Washington Trilogy” have both been denounced by the Colored people for reasons that I cannot fathom. The third section of “The Congo” is certainly as hopeful as any human being dare to be in the poem [The section is titled “The Hope of Their Religion]...Yet *The Crisis* took the trouble to skin me not long ago...” To which Springarn replied, “No colored man doubts your good intentions, but many of them doubt your understanding of their hopes. You look about you and see a black world full of strange beauty different from that of the white world; they look around them and see other men with the exactly the same feelings and desires who refuse to recognize the resemblance....Your poetry is beautiful, and the poems on black men and women are no less beautiful than the rest...somehow we feel that you do not write about colored humanity as you write about white humanity...” Nicholas Vachel Lindsay and J.E. Spingarn, “Editorial: A Letter and an Answer,” *The Crisis*, vol. 13, 3 (January 1917), 113).

<sup>18</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, *op. cit.* n. 14 at 212 (*Opportunity*, the National Urban League’s official magazine awarded “The Weary Blues” first prize in its first literary contest in May 1925. Writing of the poem, Hughes said, “it included the first blues verse I’d ever heard way back in Lawrence, Kansas, when I was a kid.” 215).

received Amy Lowell's *John Keats* and a note from Lindsay with a warning, "Do not let any lionizers stampede you...I know what factions do. Beware of them. I know what flatterers do. Beware of them..."<sup>19</sup> A later meeting with Lindsay and his wife resulted in further words of encouragement for the young poet, who said of Lindsay "he is one of the people I remember with pleasure and gratitude out of my bewildered days in Washington."<sup>20</sup> This storied encounter framed an interesting connection between the white poet from Springfield, Illinois and the black writer raised in Lawrence, Kansas who became one of the towering figures of American literature and one of the Harlem Renaissance's most famous.

In Lindsay's 1914 poem "The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race" ("Intended to be Read Aloud, or Chanted") the Congo River wrapped through stanzas, giving continuity to the ritual beat of the words in a far different way than Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." In Lindsay's refrain the Congo River seemed to represent the River Styx, separating the mortal world from Hell while bearing witness to the punishments of King Leopold II by the Gods of the Congo:

**The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race  
(Intended to be Read Aloud, or Chanted)**

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Then I saw the Congo, creeping through the Black,  
Cutting through the Forest with a Golden track...

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Listen to the yell of Leopold's ghost  
Burning in Hell for his hand-maimed host.  
Hear how the demons chuckle and yell  
Cutting his hands off down in Hell.  
Listen to the creepy proclamation,  
Blown through the lairs of the forest-nation,

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* at 213.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Blown past the white-ants' hill of clay,  
Blown past the marsh where the butterflies play: -  
    "Be careful what you do,  
Or Mumbo-Jumbo, God of the Congo,  
    And all of the other  
    Gods of the Congo,  
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you..."<sup>21</sup>

Hughes' poem also used the Congo River as an evocation of death but in a wholly different way. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" the flowing waters of Africa and the receiving waters of America marked both death and the transcendence of death, the timelessness of the soul and the earth that soothed and sheltered the African spirit. The Congo River flowed past huts and lulled the spirit to sleep as it made its way to the sea, even if it carried slaves downstream toward another great river - the Mississippi. The Mississippi too cradled the souls of blacks tying them to their African roots through the flow of rivers.<sup>22</sup> The tension between the two poems written a mere six years apart represented the dissonance of the experiences of black and white. And yet within the flow of the thousand miles of Congo River, both Lindsay and Hughes asked "What is Africa to Me?" - a question resounding during the Harlem Renaissance to increasingly differing answers for artists of the era within the black community and between black and white artists.

The historian David Lewis Levering suggested three phases of the Harlem Renaissance: the first phase ending in 1923 "deeply influenced by white artists and writers - Bohemians and Revolutionaries-fascinated for a variety of reasons with the life of black people." The second phase, "from early 1924 to mid-1926...a period of interracial collaboration between Zora Neale

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<sup>21</sup> Lindsay, Vachel, "The Congo Study of the Negro Race," in *The Congo and Other Poems*, New York: Dover Publicans (1992), 3.

<sup>22</sup> See, Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. I: 1902-1941*, Oxford University Press (2002); Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Gender, Races, & Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry*, Cambridge University Press (2001).

Hurston's Negrotarian whites and the African American Talented Tenth." The third phase, most influential to and influenced by the 1930s, encompassing the period from "mid-1926 to the Harlem Riot of March 1935, was increasingly dominated by the African American artists themselves- the Niggerati, in Hurston's pungent phrase."<sup>23</sup> With the notable exception of Hughes, who visited multiple ports of call in West Africa in 1923 including along the Congo River, most black American writers of the Harlem Renaissance were more conceptual in their renderings of Africa.<sup>24</sup> Countee Cullen's refrain "What is Africa to Me" intertwining with DuBois' "double consciousness" of a veiled reflection of "otherness" modeled the black experience in America as a search for identity uncomfortably bound to a heritage long obscured in the wrenching taking of distant ancestors to new and less hospitable shores.<sup>25</sup>

One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?...<sup>26</sup>

In the early 1920s writer Jean Toomer, whose complex relationship with his own racial identity remained elusive to later biographers, represented an idyllic Africa "drenched in the

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<sup>23</sup> *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, David Levering Lewis, ed., New York: Penguin Press (1995), pp. xv-xvi; for the Harlem Renaissance see also, David Levering Lewis, "When Harlem Was in Vogue," New York: Penguin (1997); Nathan Irving Huggins with Arnold Rampersad, *Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Oxford Press (2007).

<sup>24</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, *op. cit.* n. 14 at 106, 121 (writing "Wreck of the Monkey Cage" Hughes says he purchased his pet monkey Jocko at a port in Congo.); Norma Ray Jones, "Africa, as Imaged by Cullen & Co.," *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Winter, 1974), 263.

<sup>25</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Dover Publications (1994), 2.

<sup>26</sup> *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, David Levering Lewis, ed., *op. cit.* n. 23 at 244 (It may be that Thompson was directly responding to Cullen's poem in titling her 1953 book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers, the story of the return of a native 300 years later*).

romanticism... a fount of gorgeous images whose meaning was secondary to their sensory appeal.”<sup>27</sup> In his character “Carma” he took a strong woman working the fields, transforming her into an earthy Egyptian queen in the heat and grit of the Jim Crow south, “Nigger woman driving a Georgia chariot down an old dust road,” the Dixie Pike dirt road “grown from a goat path in Africa.” Africa rendered by Toomer was in the dirt, the sun, and the warrior strength of Carma.<sup>28</sup>

From Toomer’s *Cane* and Cullen’s “Heritage” African American artists and writers expressed a perplexed, idealized, or distant Africa to black lives in America in the mid-1920s. Asked about the “Negro Renaissance” in a 1950 interview in *Phylon*, Langston Hughes reflected, “My feeling would be that the “Renaissance” represented a positive value mainly. It certainly helped a great deal by focusing attention on Negro writers and on literature about Negroes for some six or eight years...Now there may have been certain false values which tended at the time to be over-stressed-perhaps the primitivism and that business of the “color” of Negro life was overdone.”<sup>29</sup> The complex relationship of African Americans to the “primitivism” connected to depictions of blacks in art and literature persisted in an uncomfortable space through the mid-1950s when Africa came back in vogue. But in the 1920s, despite white writers and artists having “discovered” Africa, “Black Americans, particularly members of the middle class and elites who believed themselves to be on a plane separate from and higher than that of Africans,

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<sup>27</sup> Jones, Norma Ray, “Africa, as Imaged by Cullen & Co.,” *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Winter, 1974).

<sup>28</sup> Jean Toomer, *Cane*, New York: Harper and Row (1969), 17.

<sup>29</sup> “Some Practical Observations: A Colloquy,” Langston Hughes and the Editors, *Phylon, The Atlanta University Review of Race & Culture*, VOL. 11, 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1950), 307.

built their identities apart from any sense of connection to their African heritage.”<sup>30</sup> As the decade of the Twenties ended the “dim outline of the Continent” came into focus alongside the gritty experiences of black lives fighting to survive out of the primordial stew of their increasingly urbanized lives in American cities.

### **All Roads Lead to Chicago**

Era Bell Thompson read Hughes, McKay, Du Bois and other writers of the “Negro Renaissance” when she first encountered Chicago in her early twenties. In her initiation to black authors she was enthralled with the romantic lyricism of Du Bois’ words, “a haunting cadence, a mystic something that set him on a separate hill.”<sup>31</sup> When she returned to Chicago in 1933 it was to a grittier, angrier Chicago. The city’s new “Renaissance” was dominated by a group of South Side writers and artists led by Richard Wright, their experiences deeply tied to Southern roots bound by Jim Crow and Northern failures tied to segregation in housing and employment.<sup>32</sup> Thompson participated in aspects of the Chicago Renaissance, fashioning the final chapters of *American Daughter* to claim membership among its elites. However she uncomfortably negotiated a landscape that privileged the physical and psychological scars of childhoods spent

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<sup>30</sup> James H. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans, Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, *op. cit.* n. 7 at 24.

<sup>31</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press (2004), 198.

<sup>32</sup> Members of the South Side Writers Group founded by Richard Wright and Margaret Walker included Frank Marshall Davis, Fern Gayden, Theodore Ward, Arna Bontemps, Edward Bland, Alden Bland, and Gwendolyn Brooks among its twenty-some writers. See, Steven C. Tracy, *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press (2011), 9. 70.

within the American Congo.<sup>33</sup> Margaret Walker, one of the leading lights of the Black Chicago Renaissance lent poetic voice to the kind of childhood that contrasted so dramatically with Thompson's own. From within the rich love of the natural world, a hallmark of Chicago's Black Renaissance and a common note shared with Thompson's own love of the North Dakota plains, stood Walker's bowed acknowledgement of the uncertainties of a childhood spent in the South. Yet in contrast to Thompson's singular fear of the South gained from newspaper headlines and a certain revulsion and derision of the ignorance and indignities of Southern blacks, Walker's love for the South was part of the pathos of her poetry. Her connection to southern beauty was part of the painful loss of freedom within Jim Crow's shadow and mirrored in Chicago's dank cold streets.

### **Southern Song**

I want my body bathed again by southern suns, my soul  
reclaimed again from southern land. I want to rest  
again in southern fields, in grass and hay and clover  
bloom; to lay my hand again up the clay baked by a  
southern sun, to touch the rain-soaked earth and smell  
the smell of soil.

I want my rest unbroken in the fields of southern earth;  
freedom to watch the corn wave silver in the sun and  
mark the splashing of a brook, a pond with ducks and  
frogs and count the clouds.

I want no mobs to wrench me from my southern rest; no  
forms to take me in the night and burn my shack and  
make for me a nightmare full of oil and flame.

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<sup>33</sup> While Thompson may have claimed membership in the Black Chicago Renaissance, modern scholars have been slow to recognize her contributions. The 2010 dissertation of Eileen De Freece-Wilson was an attempt to elevate Thompson's contributions. Eileen De Freece-Wilson, *Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer*, Dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2010. (Publication No. 3418420).

I want my careless song to strike no minor key; no fiend to  
stand between my body's southern song- the fusion of  
the South, my body's song and me.<sup>34</sup>

The history of the Black Chicago Renaissance, a moniker applied by Robert Bone and inspired by a 1950 essay by Arna Bontemps, was steeped in the history of the city itself.<sup>35</sup> Built on the shores of Lake Michigan, Chicago offered opportunities to immigrants from Old Europe and refuge and a new start for African Americans migrating from the South. From its first settler, the black Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, the city served as home to multitudes of the famous at some point in their lives. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Mahalia Jackson, Oscar Micheaux, Katherine Dunham, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, Claude Barnett, Frank Marshall Davis, and Gordon Parks; Chicago hosted and inspired writers, poets, artists, musicians, and photographers even as it proved a fickle and at times cruel patron. The biases, constrictions, struggles for middle class ideals, and the grinding disappointment and tragedy of lost dreams all became part of the interconnected stories of the great and the anonymous within black communities of Chicago. The intellectual center of the Black Chicago Renaissance, the University of Chicago School of Sociology, developed under the guidance and theories of Robert Park. Park's students included such future scholars as Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, Horace Cayton, St. Clair Drake, and Horace Mann Bond. Chicago with its

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<sup>34</sup> Margaret Walker, "Southern Song," *This is My Century, New and Collected Poems*, Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press (1989), 11 (originally published in Walker's prize-winning 1942 collection *For My People*).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage, *The Muse In Bronzeville, African American Creative Expression in Chicago 1932-1950*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (2011).

immigrant neighborhoods and growing black communities offered a prime landscape to document and study the social and cultural interactions of the city's ethnic populations. The city's black population grew from 44,000 in 1910 to over 250,000 by the mid 1930s, and along with changing demographics came changing ideas about black consciousness and identity. The axis upon which the complex layers of the Black Chicago Renaissance revolved was The Great Migration bringing rural blacks northward with their folk tales and folks ways and the counterweight of returning to the south in a series of "serial migrations." This had the effect of "replenishment" and "hybridization" in cultural and political exchanges creating a new consciousness of race and oppression at both ends of the migration. Integral to actively promoting the Black Chicago Renaissance, *The Chicago Defender* provided a forum for national and international news and debate.<sup>36</sup> The cultural shift of mood from Harlem to Chicago included a shift in the artistic focus from an exploration of the interior consciousness of blacks, "What does Africa Mean to Me?," to an exploration and commentary on the social and particularly the economic lives of African Americans. From Richard Wright's *Native Son* to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the tensions between the intimate lives of African American families and the legal and economic structures of a racially divided society: dreams and reality, desperation and freedom played out against the unique social fabric of Chicago's South Side.

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<sup>36</sup> Darlene Clark Hine and Johnson McCluskey Jr., eds., *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press (2012), xxiii; for more on The Black Chicago Renaissance see, Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage, *The Muse in Bronzeville, African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932-1950*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (2011); Steven C. Tracy, ed., *Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance*, Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press (2011).

In *American Daughter* Thompson introduced her permanent return to Chicago by emphasizing two points. First, how quickly she was dependent on her own resources and second, that her earliest encouragement was from the aged and ill Mary McDowell, the head of the University of Chicago's Settlement House, compatriot of Jane Addams, and white. Thompson claimed McDowell gave her something more valuable than a job, "She restored my self-confidence, confirmed my ideals, told me no obstacle was too great, nothing came easy."<sup>37</sup> This was an interesting juxtaposition. She moved from the home and security of the white Riley family to Chicago where once on her own and discouraged, she turned to a white woman who renewed her self-confidence and established "nothing came easy." Thompson also quickly aligned herself with the University of Chicago turning to McDowell after realizing she could not get a job at social service agencies because she lacked the necessary "Chicago training, field casework experience, nor political affiliation."<sup>38</sup> Thompson's reference to McDowell contrasted to her comments on meeting Robert S. Abbott, the founder of *The Chicago Defender*. In Thompson's account of her meeting with the visibly frail Abbott she said he expressed remorse that he no longer carried weight at the great paper he founded. But what was also interesting about her reported exchange was not the description of Abbott's powerlessness, but Thompson's comments about his marital preferences, "...A man who was known on two continents, who fought the prejudices and hates of the white man, glorified the heritage and color of the black man, yet married two women so fair that even Negroes questioned their racial origins."<sup>39</sup> Was

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<sup>37</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 31 at 250.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* at 249.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

this an illustration of Thompson's flip writing style, a bookend to her poetry entry "Power of the Press" printed in *The Chicago Defender* in 1925?

...Mr. Abbott, proprietor and editor,  
Needs not an explanation.  
With the "World's Great" broadcasting  
From *Chicago*, his radio station.<sup>40</sup>

Was the breezy comment about Abbot's marital preferences a demonstration of Thompson's increasing awareness of the tensions about skin tones within the African American community, as articulated with poignancy by her friend Gwendolyn Brooks? Was it an acknowledgement of the curious "passing" of not only black for white but also white women who passed for black? Thompson referred to both in *American Daughter*. Did it reveal her own need to say she belonged within a particular Chicago class, encouraged by McDowell, meeting with Abbott, demonstrating her ability to access multiple worlds?

The importance of transcending race was a key theme for Thompson even as her growth and maturity increasingly engaged her to speak out about the discrimination and violence against blacks. Yet her clarion call in both *American Daughter* and *Africa, Land of My Fathers* was for a wholeness that united black and white, an Americanness that was integral to all citizens eclipsing race. Thompson was well aware, fearful even, of the palpable potential for violence against blacks throughout America and especially in the South. At the same time, she was demonstrably open to those whites who reached beyond color to embrace the person, and her childhood was full of examples of people who did just that. When the Rileys visited Thompson in Chicago, she found "doors and tables" open to her that were previously closed due to discrimination. In

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<sup>40</sup> Era Bell Thompson, "Power of the Press," *The Chicago Defender*, March 7, 1925, A10.

deciding to stay in Chicago instead of going north she again returned to the theme of *American Daughter*, “I chose to stay in my new black world, feeling that somewhere I could find a happy side, that between the white and the black there must be a common ground.”<sup>41</sup> As Thompson searched for her own sense of “belonging” within Chicago’s African American community, she firmly maintained her individualism, her independent spirit reflective of the West, and the importance of her education in helping her succeed. Not too proud or impractical to refuse domestic service when necessity required, Thompson struggled throughout the 1930s to have enough money to stay off relief and yet somehow move beyond the mundane to achieve opportunity and success in her chosen field of writing. Arriving in Bronzeville in 1933, she would remain on the knife’s edge economically for almost a decade.

### **A Home in Bronzeville**

Christened “Bronzeville,” the demarcation of a set of streets in Chicago filled with tenements, kitchenettes, small store-fronts, and a teeming crowd of black humanity surging up from the South to challenge established rituals and class structures within the African American communities it served. Referred to by different groups as the South Side or Chicago’s “Black Belt” residents claimed “Bronzeville” for their own, electing a “mayor of Bronzeville” in 1930. Within its borders they established social, political, and cultural institutions that were the beating heart of Chicago’s black communities.<sup>42</sup> In May 1947 St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, long observers of the black condition in Chicago, contributed an article for *Holiday* magazine headlined “Bronzeville, Chicago’s Huge Negro Community Is Various Intent Upon Staying

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<sup>41</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 31 at 255.

<sup>42</sup> Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women’s Activism*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press (2006), 3.

Alive, Getting Ahead, Praising the Lord, Having a Good Time, and Advancing the Race.”<sup>43</sup> The article provided a revealing description of the social and economic centerpiece of the streets and institutions that Thompson called home, opening with “Forty-Seventh and South Parkway is the center of Bronzeville, Chicago’s “Black Belt.” Around you swirls an eddy of black, brown, olive and some white faces.”<sup>44</sup> Accompanying photographs depicted the sharp contrasts between African Americans achieving measures of success in business, including a photo of the young new publisher John H. Johnson (along with “Ben Burns, his white executive editor”), and those failing, reduced to the wretched crowded tenements holding many of Bronzeville’s burgeoning population. Pointedly referring to the redlining and restrictive covenants preventing many upwardly mobile blacks from moving into white neighborhoods (the legal struggles over restrictive covenants and the violence against blacks in housing would continue well into the 1960s) the article also exposed fissures within the black community in an abbreviated form of Drake and Clayton’s earlier *Black Metropolis*.<sup>45</sup> The grim economic realities for Bronzeville’s population, limited opportunities for jobs outside of assembly line work or the slaughter houses for men also included insight into the small store-front businesses and service work many blacks competed for with other ethnic minorities such as the Irish and Poles. Before World War II one-fourth of the domestic servants in Chicago were black females, including for brief periods of time Era Bell Thompson.

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<sup>43</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, “Bronzeville, Chicago’s Huge Negro Community Is Variously Intent Upon Staying Alive, Getting Ahead, Praising the Lord, Having a Good Time, and Advancing the Race,” *Holiday* (May 1947), 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis, A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1st ed. (August 1993).

### **kitchenette building**

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,  
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong  
Like “rent, “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

But could a dream send up through onion fumes  
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,  
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,  
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,  
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We done. But not well! not for a minute!  
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,  
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.<sup>46</sup>

Thompson lived intermittently at the YWCA, rented rooms in homes, and small, dreary kitchenettes all within the circle of Bronzeville. When times were particularly hard and unemployment sharply reduced her pocketbook, she found herself moving to a “cheaper room, closer inside the Black Belt topographically-and racially.”<sup>47</sup> Hired briefly as an interviewer for the Illinois Occupational Survey, Thompson got a first hand look at the tenements Drake and Cayton spoke of, the living conditions of many “A few homes I entered were neat and clean, giving evidence of better days, but the majority of them were less than dungeons: bare, dirty, rat-infested rooms, crowded to overflowing, breeding grounds for crime and disease.”<sup>48</sup> She came face-to-face with those who were broken by the South before they were crushed by the North,

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<sup>46</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, New York: Harper & Row (1971), 4 (first published in Brooks’ 1946 *A Street in Bronzeville*).

<sup>47</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 31 at 261.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid* at 260.

“There were those whose meekness and humbleness angered me, for I did not know then that this was a thing they learned in the South, and, more recently, from some of the sharp-tongued Northern caseworkers, so exalted by their power to give or deny that they assumed a position equal to God.”<sup>49</sup> As Thompson’s anger against the discrimination and assumptions of Northerners built in *American Daughter*, she continued to stay true to her theme of unity. Her all-white female work group at the Illinois Occupation Survey initially proved reluctant to embrace her not because she was black but because she had a college education. Later, she claimed “all the rancor and animosity were gone” because she didn’t talk about college or brag about her work efficiency. What remained unresolved were her connections with the many blacks she encountered as she searched for work and tried to find herself within the eddy of faces on the streets of Bronzeville. She questioned how to lessen the alienation she felt within her own skin and certainly within the desperation and degradation she felt all around her. As she accentuated her “can do” spirit, distinguishing herself from many of the people she saw in tenements and on the streets of Bronzeville, Thompson expressed the double-consciousness of the options afforded when in the company of whites as opposed to standing as a single black woman. At the same time she seemed as if an outsider within the black community, always asking “Who am I?” Always wondering, “Who are they?”

### **Visitors to the Black Belt**

You can talk about  
*Across* the railroad tracks-  
To me, its *here*  
On this side of the tracks.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* at 260.

You can talk about  
*Up* in Harlem -  
To me it's *here*  
In Harlem.

You can say  
Jazz on the South Side -  
To me it's hell  
On the South Side  
Kitchenettes  
With no heat  
And garbagae  
In the halls.

Who're you, outsider?  
Ask me who am I.<sup>50</sup>

### **When Chicago Danced at Club Congo**

Drake and Cayton's article did not simply expose the grit of Bronzeville but also the grin - the "Good Times" - the way that African Americans moved beyond the stereotypes of "carefree and happy-go-lucky" while embracing a night life of music, dancing, bowling alleys, pool halls, baseball and social clubs. In 1947 the night clubs were named the Rhumboogie, DeLisa, and El Grotto, but in the 1930s black Chicago danced the Congo, listening to the Congo Boys at places like Club Congo at 35th and State Street on the 5th floor of the Binga Arcade.<sup>51</sup> In 1930, the serial "King of the Congo" was featured in movie theaters and in 1935 "I Go Congo" written and performed by Clarence Muse was featured in "East of Java." Later Muse performed the song in the 1938 musical "High Hat" as the character "Congo MacRosenbloom." The song was

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<sup>50</sup> *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, ed., New York: Vintage Classics (1994), 215.

<sup>51</sup> See for instance, "Hittin' High Notes with Walter Barnes, Jr.," *The Chicago Defender*, (September 12, 1931), 5; "Congo Club Offers Hot Floor Show," *The Chicago Defender*, (November 14, 1931), 5.

described as “a primitive rhythmic, stirring jungle beat that is very likely to take the fancy of music lovers everywhere.”<sup>52</sup> It seemed that the Congo was everywhere in Chicago and surrounding towns, in 1934. Erskine Tate sang his popular “Congo Lament” at the Sunset Cafe on Thirty-fifth street in Bronzeville and in 1937 Milwaukee enjoyed “two bronze beauties who are the singing sensation of the show” at The Club Congo.<sup>53</sup> In 1936 “The Congo Pleasure Club met with Mrs. Margie Taylor” of East 46th in Chicago for bridge and dancing while “The Congo Girls were graciously entertained by Mrs. Juanita Short of South Parkway, Chicago in December. In 1938 “Princess Orelia” performed along with her Cuban Congo dancers at the Grand Terrace Cafe in Chicago <sup>54</sup>

Congo fired the imagination of Americans even if many of the associations were problematic and at times clearly fed into racialized stereotypes. In June 1936 Chicago’s Brookfield Zoo welcomed its two newest residents: baby gorillas from the Belgian Congo named “Suzette” and “Miss Congo.”<sup>55</sup> “The Love Life of a Gorilla” arrived on movie screens in 1937, sparking outrage reminiscent of the caging of Ota Benga in 1906 and N.E. Weatherless’ disgust at the circus side-show of “Congo and Sally” in 1920. The film repacked an older 1930 movie titled “Ingagi” - originally causing protest “when Congo film company of Hollywood hired

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<sup>52</sup> “Movie Chatter, Direct from Hollywood,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, (November 12, 1932), A6.

<sup>53</sup> Chas. Isaac Bowen (A.N.P.), “On the Air and Otherwise,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, (November 24, 1934), A8; “Congo Club, Wisconsin’s Hot Nitery,” *The Chicago Defender*, (Marcy 20, 1937), 21.

<sup>54</sup> “Congo,” *The Chicago Defender*, (October 31, 1936), 6; “Congo Girls Entertained,” *The Chicago Defender*, (December 26, 1936), 8; “Princess Orelia and Congo Dancers,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, (June 25, 1938), 21.

<sup>55</sup> Douglas Deuchler and Carla W. Owens, *Images of America, Brookfield Zoo and the Chicago Zoological Society*, Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing (2009), 42.

Hilton A. Phillips, actor and author, to do the gorilla scenes, which were alleged to have been made in the heart of the savage Congo.” The retitled film’s advertisements featured suggestions of “love plots between African women and gorillas.”<sup>56</sup>

On April 5, 1930 the Renaissance Theater in Harlem premiered Oscar Micheaux’s film “A Daughter of the Congo.” Billed as an “All-Colored, Talking, Singing, and Dancing production,” the film was based loosely on Henry Francis Downing’s novel, *The American Calvaryman: A Liberian Romance*, telling the story of “a beautiful mulatto girl who has been stolen as a baby and brought up among savages of the jungle.”<sup>57</sup> Although lost to modern viewers, a contemporary review of the film by the drama critic Theophilus Lewis excoriated Micheaux’s efforts on multiple fronts. Lewis claimed “The first offense of this new film is its persistent vaunting of interracial color fetichism... Half the characters wear European clothes and are supposed to be civilized, while the other half wear their birthday suits and some feathers and are supposed to be savages. All the noble characters are high yellows; all the ignoble ones are black....Even if the pictures possessed no other defects this artificial association of nobility with

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<sup>56</sup> “Revive Fake Gorilla Play Once Banned from Screen,” *The Chicago Defender*, (November 6, 1936), 4.

<sup>57</sup> “Daughter of the Congo All-Colored Picture at the Lando Next Week,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (August 30, 1930), A7 (interestingly one of the stars of “Daughter of the Congo,” Roland C. Irving, and his musical writing partner Earl B. Westfield actually traveled for 13-months on the coast of West Africa including stops along the Congo river at Port Harcourt, Boma, and Matadi in 1919 and early 1920. Geraldyn Dismond, “Micheaux Produces Another,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, (April 12, 1930), A7).

lightness and villainy with blackness would be enough to ruin it.”<sup>58</sup> The second “unpardonable offense” of the movie, “...it makes native Africans act like half-wits. All credible ethnologists have abandoned the belief that there is any fundamental difference in the mind quality of so-called civilized and so-called savage peoples. The sole difference between races can be boiled down to the opportunities for development offered by their respective environments. The primitive man of the Congo fills his head with one kind of knowledge, while the primitive man of Kansas stuffs his with another kind.”<sup>59</sup> Critiquing the “color fetichism” within the black community and mirrored by Micheaux’s film, Lewis pushed against the reinforcement of racialized stereotypes. Challenging the binary presumptions that white or light were noble and virtuous and black or dark were savage and ignoble, Lewis called Micheaux to task for reifying

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<sup>58</sup> Theophilus Lewis, “The Harlem Sketch Book,” *The New York Amsterdam News* (April 16, 1930), 10 (his work as author and filmmaker recently generating a growing body of scholarship, Oscar Micheaux was one of the finest American directors of the first-half of the twentieth century despite the abject failure of “A Daughter of the Congo.” The son of a former slave, Micheaux was born in 1884 in Murphysboro, Illinois and at age sixteen worked as a Pullman Porter out of Chicago. From 1905 through 1918 he homesteaded in South Dakota, influenced by Booker T. Washington’s ideas of social uplift. This period of his life generated his first three novels including *The Conquest* and *The Forged Note*. His early films, particularly “Within Our Gates” and “The Symbol of the Unconquered” are considered direct responses to D. W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation.” See, J. Ronald Green, *Straight Lick, The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (2000); see also, Bell Hooks, “Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness,” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, n. 2, Black Film Issue (Summer 1991), 351; Charlene Regester, “The Misreading and Rereading of African American Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, A Critical Review of Micheaux Scholarship,” *Film History*, vol. 7 (1995), 426.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

the worst race stereotypes. He also articulated the outlines of ongoing intellectual conversations about “primitive,” “savage” and “civilized” occurring within the social sciences.<sup>60</sup>

Did Thompson dance at Club Congo, hear Erskine Tate sing “Congo Lament,” play bridge and dance at The Congo Pleasure Club? By her own admission Thompson lacked connections to black rhythms, dance, or leisure activities even if afforded the opportunities to participate during the economically challenging decade of the 1930s. Attending a social club with one friend, she found “their easy talk and happy, careless fun drove me into a self-conscious silence.”<sup>61</sup> It was only when the club headed for a day’s fun in the country side that Thompson felt she had something in common with the group. The skills gained from her North Dakota childhood of running and riding allowed her to compete and join in the fun. To rectify her self-described “ignorance of Negroes,” Thompson turned not to the company of other blacks but to the Kerners, “a little Jewish stenographer...broad-minded enough to marry a Scotchman.” The Kerners opened their library to her and attended concerts, lectures, and dance recitals with her, providing her with the tools to educate herself on her race. Struggling with feeling alone, “standing in a broad chasm between the two races, belonging to neither one,” Thompson continued to struggle with where she fit in.<sup>62</sup> Juxtaposing the pathos of loneliness with sly wit,

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<sup>60</sup> Micheux was not the only black American embarrassed by the filming of a movie related to the Congo. In 1934 Paul Robeson acted as a Congo king in a movie version of Edgar Wallace’s story “Sanders of the River.” While lauded by *The New York Amsterdam News*, the British film presented highly stereotyped Africans and was criticized by most black press in America. Robeson was very embarrassed by his own participation in the film despite containing extensive original footage shot in Congo. See, Jerry Holt, “A Dream Betrayed: Paul Robeson and the British Film Industry,” in *Paul Robeson, Essays on His Life and Legacy*, Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak, eds., Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company (2002), 145; “Sanders of the River has Harlem Showing, *The New York Amsterdam News* (July 20, 1935), 11;

<sup>61</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 31 at 268.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

she suggested that she won a \$1.50 in the office pool by betting against Joe Louis in his defeat to Max Schmeling in 1936, her “new-found racism” suffering a blow.<sup>63</sup>

### **Riding the Jim Crow Train**

Thompson’s *American Daughter* told not only the story of how she constructed a racial identity, it also told the story of how she claimed her American identity. In the late 1930s, a job with the Chicago Relief Administration allowed Thompson to gain some economic stability, giving her the opportunity to save enough money to travel. Traveling by bus with \$50 in her pocket, Thompson headed East, visiting Detroit, Niagara Falls, Harlem, and her “Jim Crow” experiences in the nation’s Capitol and the Cumberland Mountains. Later her bus and train travels took her to the West Coast; Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Albuquerque and Kansas City where she arrived along with Wendell Wilkie.<sup>64</sup> Thompson traveled alone on her trips although she did visit her brother Harry in Detroit and Tom in San Francisco, reconnecting with siblings to whom she was almost a stranger. Traveling throughout America, the Land of Dixie remained a stranger to her until she accepted a temporary assignment as a publicity writer for the Methodist Church. Thompson headed south to cover the spring exercises of Philander Smith, a black Methodist college in Little Rock, Arkansas. Thompson was headed for the heart of the American Congo.<sup>65</sup>

The spring rains poured down as Thompson changed trains in St. Louis, entering her first Jim Crow car. The car was clean but segregated and shared with the black trainmen and a few questionable male passengers. Thompson’s arrival at Philander was unremarkable but for the

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* at 69.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* at 291.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* at 280.

continuing rain. A generally segregated society, Thompson rarely encountered whites in her initial five days on campus except for the few white faculty members. Commenting on the “atrocious” Southern food of “grits and grease” - the rays of sunshine did not break through the dismal clouds until the end of her week-long visit. It was then that Thompson finally encountered Little Rock when she ventured out in need of a formal and shoes. In the Little Rock stores she found a reception more gracious than the average store clerk on Chicago’s State Street. Extending her stay to visit Hot Springs with several faculty members, Thompson again was struck by the friendliness of a gas station attendant in the Ozarks. However, a stark reminder of daily life for many blacks in America greeted her at the Little Rock railroad station, “For Colored” and “For White” signage marked waiting rooms and entrance areas - the Jim Crow car carrying her home “a dirty, full-sized coach, close to the engine, close to the smoke and the noise.”<sup>66</sup> Resonant with the type of flat, emotionless comments she would later make about the Congo falling into chaos in 1960, Thompson concluded recounting of her trip south with, “And that’s all I know about the South.”<sup>67</sup>

A bold statement challenging the dominance of the black Southern experience among her literary peers? A nod to Jim Crow but a rejection of the privileging of slave roots and black migration stories from the South over other journeys for African Americans? Certainly Thompson’s visit to Little Rock presented a very different picture than her travels to Washington D.C., where climbing the Capitol steps she thought “her lynching time had come.” The interactions with helpful store clerks in Little Rock or the pleasant gas station attendant in Hot Springs, Arkansas in marked contrast to the segregated accommodations she rejected at the diner

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* at 283.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

in the Cumberland Mountains. Then her fear on the bus for rejecting the rules of Jim Crow left her trembling, terrified of the retribution to come. The breezy, cheerful commentary on Little Rock provided wholly different pictures and flatly closed the *American Daughter* to any further exploration of the South. Actually visiting Arkansas evoked less emotion than the descriptions of reading of lynchings and violence in the summer of 1919, the teen-aged Thompson more passionately responding to the front-page horrors. Lynchings in Arkansas were not out of the news. The Tuskegee Institute reported nine lynchings in 1936 and two floggings of whites investigating the disappearance and presumed lynching of a black sharecropper named Frank Weems.<sup>68</sup>

Thompson did travel South again. In 1947 she traveled to New Orleans for *Ebony* to write an article on a “Lepersorium.” In 1949 she recorded traveling to Greenville, Mississippi, Memphis, and Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>69</sup> Her later editorials for *Ebony* included commentary on the American South, although usually written from the safety and vantage point of the Johnson Publishing’s offices in Chicago.<sup>70</sup> However, the South remained beyond Thompson’s reflection of self and external to the story that she wanted to tell in *American Daughter*. Her story of constructing black identity started and ended with being an American, an educated American with the frontier spirit of the American West. She shut the door on the South because she rejected the psychological destruction wrought on blacks within its suffocating bonds. She

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<sup>68</sup> “Claim Only One Lynching Due Arkansas,” *The Chicago Defender*, (June 5, 1937), 5.

<sup>69</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, LP 46, Box 7, Folder 19.

<sup>70</sup> Thompson was appointed co-managing editor of *Ebony* in October 1951 after serving as managing editor of *Negro Digest* beginning in December 1949. In the tenth anniversary edition of *Ebony*, she is listed as “writing all editorials.” See, “The Story of Ebony, World’s Top Negro Magazine Celebrates Tenth Anniversary,” *Ebony*, (November, 1955), 122.

denied any relationship between many of the Southern blacks she encountered in the Chicago tenements and her own black reflection. If the Black Chicago Renaissance was formed in part by the Great Migration's ebb and flow of north-and-south bound bodies, Thompson's refusal to engage with the South left her cut-off from an intimate understanding of the richness, contributions, histories, and legacies of her race. For Thompson beauty in blackness was embodied by Mac and Ted Williams, proud, hardworking, plowing the land on the frontier, physically and psychologically free. For Thompson the wellspring of the Williams brothers' pride in their race was pride and dignity in themselves, demonstrated through their labor and their striving to improve. They were free because they saw themselves to be worthy of freedom, and Thompson embraced their ideal.

#### **“My Great, Wide, Beautiful World”<sup>71</sup>**

Thompson's wonderlust mapped in the final chapter of *American Daughter* set the groundwork for her extensive travel throughout the remainder of her life. Inspired by Juanita Harrison's *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*, Thompson collected travel brochures and catalogues fueled by Harrison's embrace of the world with little but her wits and a willingness to risk for the adventure.<sup>72</sup> Despite widely dissimilar backgrounds, Thompson may have also felt

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<sup>71</sup> Juanita Harrison, *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*, New York:G.K. Hall & Co., (1996)(part of a series of African American Women Writers, 1910-1940 edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Juanita Harrison's travelogue was first serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Little is known of Harrison's childhood although she was born in Mississippi in 1890 having little education before the age of ten and extensive work as a domestic afterwards. Out of the Delta by age sixteen, Harrison traveled extensively in America, Canada, and Cuba working in domestic service. In June 1927 with a small savings she left to travel the world working her way through twenty-two countries including Egypt. Settling in Hawaii in 1936, Harrison concluded her travelogue and her life slipped into obscurity. Her last known address was the “Villa Petit Peep” a tent she raised on Waikiki Beach).

<sup>72</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter*, *op. cit.* n. 31 at 284.

she found a kindred spirit in Harrison, another black woman facing the world alone with her head held high, wind at her face. In Harrison's opening diary entry, describing her departure on the S.S. Serra Ventana, she recorded "When I got up on deck it was crowded passengers and friends a German band were playing and all were singing sweet sounding German songs. And the money was flying like rice at a wedding then the Kissing and the goodbyes and the raining of tears. and I was happy that I had no one to cry for me." [sic] While Harrison's travelogue exhibited a disregard for spelling or punctuation, its central beauty was her *joie de vivre* as she discovered the world. Thompson too euphemistically set sail, traveling America, Canada, to Mexico in 1951 and to Cuba in 1952 before embarking in the early morning hours of April 16, 1953 for Africa, a "return of a native three hundred years later."

Why did Thompson travel to Africa, what did she hope to find there? Did she travel as a journalist, did she travel to find a part of herself? Two questions seemed paramount for Thompson, "What of Africa is in Me?" and "What Do Africans Think of Us?" Connecting these two questions was a third, "Is there a universal connection between peoples based solely on race?" Fundamentally, Thompson searched her own reflection asking "How and where do I fit in?" Contrasting with the childhood portrayed in *American Daughter*, Thompson staged a radically different set of ethnic associations and memories in her introduction to *Africa, Land of My Fathers*.<sup>73</sup> Her childhood in North Dakota was no longer associated with the pride and industry of the Williams Brothers or Pop Thompson. Suddenly it was her mother, Mary Thompson, the granddaughter of a Cherokee chief, that dominated, "I was proud only of my red and white blood, ashamed of the black, for I grew up believing that black was bad, that black

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<sup>73</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa Land of My Fathers, The Story of the Return of a Native Three Hundred Year Later*; *op. cit.* n. 12.

was dirty and poor and wrong.”<sup>74</sup> Why this complete recasting of her childhood? Why the rejection of a paternal lineage she so carefully constructed in *American Daughter* less than ten years before? Did the gyroscope of Chicago’s black migrations create such destruction of identity she subconsciously revealed her own self-loathing? “As a child I began denying my forefathers, despising my motherland.”<sup>75</sup> Was she using sociological arguments of such writers as W.E.B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier, identifying African Americans’ feelings of worthlessness and failure to overcome economic servitude with the overt or unconscious prejudices of whites?<sup>76</sup> Was she acknowledging the authenticity of Ralph Ellison’s critique by revealing her own dreams of being white, of her own “step-child fantasy”? Thompson turned to the theme of the ubiquity of mixed parentage for most African Americans several times in *Africa, Land of My Fathers*. Her careful construction of a black identity and its meaning within the larger context of an American life seemed swept away by Africa. Was she grappling with a new and perhaps more honest reflection of her life, one more inclusive of her mother? Traveling in Nyanza (in Rwanda), Thompson’s white guide suddenly asked her, “You aren’t all Negro, are you?” Thompson responded, “I admitted that, like most Negroes in America, I am a mixture of

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* at 16.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* at 17.

<sup>76</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro, A Social Study*, Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press (1996) (originally published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1899, based on studies by Du Bois in Philadelphia during 1896-1897, arguing while blacks perceived color prejudice as the cause of their economic condition and whites maintained separation from the moral failings of blacks was the way to protect civilization, reality lay somewhere in between.); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press (1939) (preceded by Frazier’s study *The Negro Family in Chicago* published in 1932).

three races-black, white, and red.”<sup>77</sup> She did have a mixed-race heritage; however, the extent of Cherokee blood in her veins remained vague. There was no evidence to support a family identification with a Native American heritage. Thompson’s mother, born in 1871 in Halifax, Virginia, was raised by her black father to be a well-mannered and educated black woman.<sup>78</sup>

Was something else at play in this new identity? Thompson knew well how to craft a good story, tapping into changing attitudes about Africa by black Americans. Expressing a growing interest in reclaiming an African heritage since the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, quickening following World War II and the growing calls for independence from the heavy weight of European imperialism, African Americans traveled to, wrote about, and reengaged the continent.<sup>79</sup> Thompson carried her readers briefly through this history of baptizing in African waters by confessing her own prejudices and consequent reawakening, “The word “black” became less repulsive as knowledge of my forebears increased, the word “African” became less embarrassing as I became aware of the true story of Africa’s rich constructions to mankind; yet the world clung tenaciously to its picture of Congo swamps and voodoo incantations.”<sup>80</sup> It was a curious beginning to her story of Africa, no longer the proud *American Daughter* of Pop Thompson, instead part of a groundswell of re-born Africans anxiously returning “home.”

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<sup>77</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 136.

<sup>78</sup> Eileen De Freece-Wilson, *Era Bell Thompson: Chicago Renaissance Writer*, *op. cit.* n. 33 at 68.

<sup>79</sup> See, James J. Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans, Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, *op. cit.* n. 7.

<sup>80</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa Land of My Fathers, The Story of the Return of a Native Three Hundred Year Later*, *op. cit.* n. 12.

## Lift Off

In a small, zippered, blue leather diary with “Travel Abroad” gold embossed across the front, Thompson kept her notes from her first trip to Africa.<sup>81</sup> Funded by Doubleday Publishing and the Johnson Publishing Company, (she dedicated her book “To My Boss, John H. Johnson”), Thompson sallied forth with a series of magazine articles to write and material to collect for her book. Her “Travel Chart to Trace Your Trip” showed dots on Boston, New York City, London, Paris, Rome, Athens, Cairo, and Addis Ababa. Thompson’s African itinerary included Liberia, Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria, Belgian Congo (Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo), Ruanda-Urandi (Rwanda and Burundi), British Rhodesias (Zambia and Zimbabwe), the Union of South Africa, Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Egypt. Limited to sixty-six pounds of luggage including her typewriter and camera, Thompson made her three month tour with a single suit case. On her diary page titled “Highlights of the Trip” she recorded in pen “Met Pres. Tubman of Liberia, 4-18-53; Luncheon for me by leading ladies of Monrovia, 4-30; Met Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah of Gold Coast, 5-3; Met Oni Kife (?) rich nigerian chief (pix with), 5-5; Met with Ashastehen of Ashanti in Kumori (?), 5-6.” She added in pencil, under the others the notations, “Mayor of Native Village, Leopoldville, 5-26.” Thompson’s diary recorded the highlights and the mundane. In Monrovia she noted the cost of produce, “Limes 1 cent, ice cream 65 cents - OK.”<sup>82</sup> First setting foot on African soil on April 17, Thompson traveled down the West Coast of Africa having tea with the head of the Baptist Lott Carey Mission and watching a palm nut demonstration. Liberia, Nigeria, Gold Coast, these

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<sup>81</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Box 6, Folder 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

were the lands where Thompson sought kinship, lands her ancestors may have been carried away from chained in cargo ships heading for slavery in a New World. In Lagos, Nigeria Thompson observed Africans participating in their political system in marked contrast to America. Visiting the new House of Representatives and walking past the construction for the new supreme court, Thompson observed “For a people with an estimated 95 per cent illiteracy they were doing all right. With all our education, our Cadillacs, and store-bought clothes, we Negroes in America have but two Congressmen to our names and no senators.”<sup>83</sup> She was conflicted by her status as an “American,” - resentful when Europeans demeaned “My People” at the same time she enjoyed the status an American passport and identity provided. “I had been leaning heavily on my nationality, lightly upon my race. But I was coming “home” to Africa. I was coming back to re-establish ties of kinship...Liberia and Nigeria had removed many of my inherent prejudices against Africans, but years of propaganda and ridicule built up against a people is not dissolved in three weeks.” The irony of the last comment was obvious as Thompson referred to the assigned seating on a flight from Lagos to Accra: Africans rode up front, whites in the back, and in between sat Thompson, all by herself.<sup>84</sup>

Thompson left Chicago with only four of the fourteen visas she required for travel across Africa, particularly problematic for a black woman journalist traveling alone through a tense and contested colonial Africa. By May 8 she recorded “Accra - Trouble. Pompous ass at desk (in the airport) says he has orders I cannot stay. Giddings boy met me at gate. She waiting inside. Given 24 hrs. to get out of country. No reason. Just to get out. ...Ass returned.” While her commentary and frustrations were amusing in retrospect, the situation was serious and

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<sup>83</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 61.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* at 64.

apparently generated in part from an anonymous suggestion that Thompson was a woman of “bad character.”<sup>85</sup>

Eventually allowed to stay in Accra, Thompson met with the “Gold Coast Glamour Boy” Kwame Nkrumah. Asked to ghost-write an autobiography for Nkrumah, she agreed only to help organize his papers.<sup>86</sup> While *Africa, Land of My Fathers* associated the “ruthlessness” lying just beneath Nkrumah’s “boyish charm” as an outgrowth of the violence of colonial oppression, her travel diary was less muted.<sup>87</sup> Writing bluntly she said “PM’s imperialistic prose screamed ruthlessness, cold calculating calmness. Hope he stays on my side. Yet talking to him, seems boyish...”<sup>88</sup> While Thompson was in Gold Coast, fighting broke out in Kano in clashes between the Islamic north preferring British rule and Africans in the south, eager for home rule. Realizing a wary Nkrumah would be too preoccupied for further meetings, Thompson prepared to head for Congo.

In a final exchange before leaving Accra, Thompson recorded her conversation with a white English housekeeper, originally from South Africa. Appalled when Thompson said she planned to travel to South Africa, the housekeeper warned of the severity of the color bar in her apartheid homeland. Thompson replied to the stunned woman, “There are places in my own country where I could ride only in certain sections of a bus or train. There were restaurants in my own Chicago that would not serve me, and hotels where I would not be welcome...It was

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<sup>85</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Box 6, Folder 1.

<sup>86</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 44.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* at 76.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

hard for her to believe that there were racial barriers in America. It was hard for me to tell her.”<sup>89</sup> Thompson’s later experiences in South Africa (she was barred during her 1953 trip and arrested during her 1957 tour) suggested that she was ill-prepared for the severity and power of the apartheid state.

Departing from Accra, the plane lifting off in the dark towards Congo, Thompson poignantly wrote, “The Gold Coast had objected to my entrance. It had rejected me as a friend or distant relative...I was leaving Accra a stranger.”<sup>90</sup>

## **Congo**

*One of the Belgians’ biggest problems was explaining to the African that he, alone, should work.*<sup>91</sup>

Langston Hughes eulogized the Congo River as part of the agelessness of the African soul. For Vachel Lindsay the Congo was a “golden track” slicing through the darkness of the jungle. Thompson’s description of her first view of the mighty river was considerably less poetic, “we emerged on the banks of the Congo, a dirty, sprawling river that stank with age and decay.”<sup>92</sup> Arriving in the Belgian Congo with only limited knowledge of the country or its history, Thompson’s arrival on 23 May in Leopoldville brought her not to the *Heart of Darkness* but supposedly into “enlightened colonialism.”<sup>93</sup> By 1953 the Belgian colonial jewel was markedly different for the Congolese from the overwhelmingly brutal violence of King Leopold

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* at 101.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* at 102.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* at 111.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* at 107.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* at 105; Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, London: Penguin Books (1995).

II's Congo Free State and the decades prior to World War II.<sup>94</sup> In the 1950s, African Americans' international attention focused on South Africa's Defiance Campaign and Kenya's Mau Mau Rebellions as well as a succession of independence movements across Africa.<sup>95</sup> In contrast, Belgium's Congo seemed a placid sea of nearly content African workers. Thompson reported Congo's literacy and economic rates for Africans were the highest on the continent; however, its color bar was no less stringently enforced.<sup>96</sup> As Thompson traveled in Leopoldville she fleshed out what "enlightened colonialism" meant: fifty percent of African children were in school, incentives to work were tied to good wages as opposed to chopping of hands, Congolese men dominated the colonial clerical force, and they were the transportation drivers. Yet however "enlightened" Belgian colonialism appeared, "there was not one professional African in the whole country, nor was there a college graduate. They were given land to farm but forbidden to mine for gold, copper, or any of the other valuable minerals that are the wealth of the colony."<sup>97</sup> Writing in 1955, Horace Cayton critiqued Belgium's "enlightened colonialism" calling it "parentalism." He described how 75,000 Europeans controlled twelve million Congolese using a

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<sup>94</sup> T.R. Poston, "Congo Conquests, Will the New King Leopold Atone the Sins of the Old?," *The New York Amsterdam News*, (February 2, 1935), 9 (reporting on the experiences and views of 23-year-old Francis Hammond, recently returned from spending fourteen months studying in Belgium, the story presented Hammond's belief that the new King Leopold III would mean a new era for the Congolese. After covering the past atrocities, the article does point out that a 1930 missionary report documented continuing deprivations of natives, including the starvation of some 40,000 due to famine. The article estimated the native population at 10,000,000; white residents at 23,276 - the majority Belgian settlers with some 1,773 missionaries included within the white population.)

<sup>95</sup> James H. Meriweather, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, *op. cit.* n. 7 at 90.

<sup>96</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 105.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* at 109.

velvet glove rather than an iron fist.<sup>98</sup> The Belgians “provided” for the Africans, “One writer reported that the Belgians had a maternity center where the young African mothers had sheets on their beds, an almost unheard-of thing for the colonies.” Intent on creating a healthy and content labor force, the Belgians paid well for African skills, paying with the Congo’s vast resources and mineral wealth that only the Belgians controlled. Cayton’s conclusion, “the Belgians have exacted a price. That price is the African’s freedom which so far he has had to forego in exchange for parentalism.”<sup>99</sup>

Congo brought Thompson into direct contact with a social and political system wholly controlled by whites for the benefit of whites. Her travel itinerary in Belgian colonial territory started in Leopoldville, followed by a plane trip to Usumbura in Urundi then across 150 miles of rough road via motor car to Nyanza in Ruanda, and finally flying to Elisabethville, deep in Katanga Province. Thompson had ample opportunity to observe “enlightened colonialism” from a multiplicity of views although she spoke no French and thus was totally dependent on translators or the occasional English-speaker.<sup>100</sup> While neither whites nor blacks were permitted to vote, and the state was ruled completely from Belgium, white settlers, corporations, and administrators owned and controlled the riches of Congo. “In the Congo the white man was always boss. He made the rules and issued the orders.”<sup>101</sup> In 1952 the government passed a law

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<sup>98</sup> Horace R. Cayton, “Around the World, Parentalism for Freedom,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (February 5, 1955), 15.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> In 1962 Usumbura was renamed Bujumbura, the capital of the newly independent Burundi. Nyanza is located in the southern province of Rwanda. Elisabethville, located in the mineral rich Katanga Province of Congo near the Zambian border, is now called Lubumbashi.

<sup>101</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 111.

opening the way for Africans to achieve the status of a European. To receive a red “Card of Civil Merit” entitling them to be considered European, Africans had to have at least four years of schooling, only one wife, live, dress, and speak as Europeans, and be recommended by two white men. In Belgium controlled African territory, four hundred Congolese men had qualified out of more than eleven million Africans.<sup>102</sup> However aware she was of discrimination at home, the “whiteness” of Leopoldville struck Thompson as she purchased goods from silent white clerks and wondered at the lives of some 250,000 mostly invisible black inhabitants.

Three narratives opened in Thompson’s travel through Congo and the contiguous Belgium possession of Ruanda-Urundi. The first illuminated the power disparity between white and black and the accommodation made by native *evolués* for the appearance of equality. The second exposed the surprising disconnect between African expectations and interest in the “American Negro” and the inward focus in America of blacks fighting for their own civil rights. And the third revealed Thompson’s personal expectations and reactions to the spectrum of responses to her by whites and Africans. On May 26 Thompson was a guest of the Congolese Cultural Group with a membership of sixty Africans from across Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, and forty Europeans. Thompson described it as a “kind of equatorial NAACP,” skeptically referring to the organization’s motto “No discrimination and a respect of human personality.”<sup>103</sup> Already introduced to “native reserves,” the explanation for why there was such a glaring whiteness to Leopoldville, Thompson’s wry observations of the “hail-fellow-well-met” participants as well as remarks about the comely, Western-clothed female attendees made clear she rejected the assertion of one African newspaperman, “Tell them in America there is no color bar in

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* at 141.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* at 110.

Congo.”<sup>104</sup> Commenting on the color bar in 1955, Belgian author and ethnologist Joseph Esser warned of the Congo “A deadly poison can be scented, seen, and even touched: the color bar.”<sup>105</sup> The pervasive segregation appeared evident to Thompson, steered from staying at the Palace Hotel to a room at the Union Mission with the prosaic white lie, “the Palace was filled.”<sup>106</sup>

Requesting to meet with Africans outside the thrall of interracial unity, Thompson found herself the following evening seated in front of a semi-circle of ten Congolese clerks. Prepared to question the clerks, she found herself considerably less prepared for the questions the clerks had for her. Where were the black missionaries, teachers, and businessmen to teach them, to help them? Why didn’t African Americans invest in farming equipment and machinery to assist the Congolese to grow more crops and become independent? The need for technical and business expertise and investment from America was a theme taken up by P.L. Prattis of *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Positively reviewing Thompson’s book, Prattis seized upon her reported exchange with the Congolese clerks, “What meant most to this writer [Prattis], in this report from the land of our fathers, is that our fathers don’t know anything about operating businesses...This failure of the African to do business beyond the market-place or barter stage concerns me. I can’t help but tie up this lack of business ingenuity, as observed among the Africans in their homelands, with the lack of business skills shown by Negroes in the United

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* at 112.

<sup>105</sup> Joseph Esser, “The Poison of the Belgian Congo Color Bar,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (February 19, 1955), A3 (the Belgian author of several books written in French, including *Legende Africaine*, *Iyanza*, *Heros National Nkundo*, in 1957 and *Matuli, Fille d’Afrique*, in 1960).

<sup>106</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection. Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Box 6, Folder 1.

States.”<sup>107</sup> In Congo, struggling to respond to the semi-circle of complaining clerks, Thompson claimed she tried to avoid informing the Congolese that blacks in America were too busy trying to fight for their own civil rights to worry about the Congolese. “American Negroes were too absorbed in fighting their own freedom wars to be concerned about ancestors thousands of miles and hundreds of years removed. Neither did I tell them that many of their brothers across the sea claimed no kinship with their tribal past.”<sup>108</sup> Underlining Thompson’s point, Prattis admonished African Americans, urging them to recalibrate their markets from ethnic-centric to American-centric, scolding “Some reasons have been given this writer to account for the African’s lack of interest in business. But there is no reason for the American Negro in a society where MONEY counts. We must get in on the main stream.”<sup>109</sup> [sic]. Investing in Africa was all very well but first Prattis insisted African Americans needed to invest in their own economic growth. They should not invest in businesses that were convenient for whites or those allocated to blacks because of segregation, but competing with whites for the larger American market.

As Thompson’s exchange with the clerks continued, the myth of a color-blind and equal society imploded, replaced by the portrait of a completely segregated society, “We have no voice to say how things with us should be.”<sup>110</sup> Thompson’s private response to this exchange was

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<sup>107</sup> P.L. Prattis, “Horizon - Black People and Business,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (January 8, 1955), 6 (Percival L. Prattis was a columnist for *The Pittsburgh Courier* in 1955, promoted to executive editor in 1956. His storied journalistic career included writing for *The Chicago Defender*, Chicago editor for the Associated Negro Press, and a foreign and war correspondent for *The Pittsburgh Courier*. In 1947 he became the first African American journalist granted membership in the U.S. Senate and House press galleries. See, University of Pittsburgh, Percival L. Prattis papers, 1916-1980.)

<sup>108</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 114.

<sup>109</sup> P.L. Prattis, “Horizon - Black People and Business,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, *op. cit.* n.107.

<sup>110</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 116.

muted, her travel diary providing fewer details than her published account, of the clerks she wrote “Gave me a rough time.”<sup>111</sup> The poignancy of the clerks’ questions, their almost desperate expectations of help coming from their richer “brothers and sisters” in America appeared to both move and repulse Thompson. When asked “Have our brothers in America forgotten us too?” Thompson responded “I told them that we cannot forget those we do not know.”<sup>112</sup>

What did Africans think of and expect of black Americans? Recounting responses to these questions in *Ebony*, Thompson claimed that most Africans believed that blacks in America were still held in bondage but then contradicted this presumption by claiming “yet to them we are at once the poor new country cousin and the rich American uncle.” She reported a clerk in the Gold Coast said “Our American brothers must come to our country to help us, for they are rich.”<sup>113</sup> Continuing to seek common bonds to relations linked by race but distanced by space and time, Thompson raised an issue ubiquitous to black Americans and personal to her, “So to some Africans so weak are the ties that bind us to them, enslavement by and co-mingling with the white man has made us their inferiors.” Quoting an African student attending a black college in the American South she expanded upon the theme, “You cannot call yourselves African. We do not consider a people who are no particular race our brothers. I have not met one person on this campus who could have me believe he is pure Negro. You are merely a conglomeration of

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<sup>111</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Box 6, Folder 1.

<sup>112</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 116.

<sup>113</sup> Era Bell Thompson, “What Africans Think About Us, Most Africans know little about the American Negro, think he still lives in slavery,” *Ebony* (February , 1954), 36.

nothing. You might well think of France, England, even Germany as your Mother country because it is evident that you have as many ancestors there as you have in Africa.”<sup>114</sup>

### **Across the River**

Heading to interview a “Watutsi” king, Thompson realized she would not have the opportunity to visit French controlled Congo-Brazzaville unless she made a short stop before traveling inland. Housed in the Swedish Mission in Brazzaville, she reconnected with a new friend and fellow American, the Southern writer “Mrs. Baker.” Reluctantly visiting Baker’s room for an afternoon nap from the glaring sun, Thompson was acutely sensitive to the potential for embarrassment to the Dixie author. Thompson commented, “I was interested in exploring racial attitudes in Africa, not in exposing the social mores of those from home. Mrs. Baker’s prejudices were not on trial...” Apparently unconcerned with having a black woman in her room, Baker’s afternoon reflections of life in the South seemed designed to reassure Thompson of her advocacy for black equality. Reminiscing about a car trip from Kansas to New York “with a friend’s maid,” she recounted difficulties in accommodations beginning in Tennessee but was quick to point out that it wasn’t only the South that raised the color bar. “My colored traveling companion was refused in a New York hotel too.”<sup>115</sup> With declarations of a color-blind society again echoing in her ears, this time from her French hosts, Thompson observed the disconnect between claim and reality and the unique position her American status gave her. While both African and European students attended the university, “From a high hill we viewed one of the African mud villages, then drove through the dreary, narrow streets of another. Here the school

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 120.

was attended only by African children and here the Salvation Army saved only African souls.”<sup>116</sup> Departing from the Swedish Mission Thompson inquired of the African caretaker why her room had been downstairs when there were more pleasant and airy rooms upstairs. The answer, not unexpected, “The missionaries,” he answered quietly, “told me to.”<sup>117</sup>

While Thompson seemed sanguine about the level of discrimination she encountered in Congo, she appeared much less comfortable with the accusation by Africans that American blacks wanted to be white. Ralph Ellison made similar accusations of Thompson in his review of *American Daughter*. Thompson herself claimed as much in the introduction to her African travelogue. When she met with the ten Congolese clerks they asked, “Do you think you are the same as the white man?” Thompson replied, “I told them that we felt that we were as good as the white man but had no wish to be white.”<sup>118</sup> Traveling back across the river from the French to the Belgian side of the Congo, Thompson sat in the front of the ferry with the Europeans, Africans sat in the rear section. Again leaning on her nationality rather than her race and remembering the clerks’ question about blacks wanting to be white she said, “I wondered what kinds of names my brothers back there were calling me.”<sup>119</sup>

### **The Land of the Watutsi Kings**

Thompson traveled to Ruanda to interview Charles Leon Pierre Mutara III, Rudahigwa, Mwami (king) of Ruanda. The catalyst for the trip to the interior may have been the 1950 MGM production of “King Solomon’s Mines” filmed in Nyanza and starring the Mwami and his court

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* at 121.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* at 114.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* at 121.

dancers. The flight across Congo from Leopoldville to Usumbura transported Thompson to a dramatically different landscape and climate. Crisp cool air, beautiful mountains and lakes reminded her more of Switzerland than Africa, the village of Usumbura “as new and wholesome as the North American frontier.” Only the Africans parading by in front of her hotel reminded her that she was in Africa.<sup>120</sup> But traveling across miles of highway from Usumbura to Nyanza with her guide, a young Belgian named Carl Rupelt, the mirage of a wholesome frontier gave way to the the ugly realities of colonialism. Riding along with Rupelt, she was regaled with his stories of farming in Africa, preferring the ignorant peasant to the uppity clerk whose little knowledge made him think he was somebody. A local clerk acknowledged them as they passed by, Rupelt explaining, “He is a clerk in the village. I speak to him in Swahili and he answers me in French. It is perhaps the only French he knows, but he prefers it to his own language. It makes him feel big. Yes, give me the peasant anytime!” As scenery flashed by, Rupelt waxed on about how when he first arrived he was too kind to his workers and they tried to take advantage of him by refusing to work so he beat one. Affirming that it was common practice to beat Africans, Rupelt continued “Some men are very cruel to them, but all of us must be firm. We must also be right.”<sup>121</sup> Passing African road workers wearing ragged clothes, Rupelt declared, “It takes forty natives to do the work of one European.” Later, as Rupelt and Thompson conversed in the deepening African night, he said of her “You are hundreds of years ahead of our Africans...Look at the next African you see and notice his stupid expression!” Thompson’s response was just to laugh. Thompson’s narrative and travel diary made no connection between the attitudes of young Rupelt and the plantation and Jim Crow history of the American South nor

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* at 123.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* at 126.

did she draw any comparisons between “enlightened colonialism” and the attitudes and treatment of Africans under “old King Leo.” She was more sensitive of the crisis in Kenya, inquiring about fears of a Mau Mau rebellion starting up in Ruanda-Urundi, fears Rupelt dismissed.<sup>122</sup> Apparently he had a bit more to fear than it appeared. Thompson along with colleagues at *Ebony* issued an inter-office memo declaring themselves the “Chicago branch” of the Mau Mau in 1954.<sup>123</sup>

Detailing the history of the Watutsi in her *Africa, Land of My Fathers* Thompson reported the ethnological “facts” of her generation, giving an unknowing preview of the ethnic violence in the future independent Burundi and Rwanda. Describing the Bahutu servant population of Ruanda-Urundi, she remarked on the physical differences between the “elongated” Watutsi and the short, squat Bahutu. The minority population in the territory, the Watutsis’ claim to a Hamitic lineage from the Nile Valley was wrapped within stories of their legendary height and thin aquiline noses. In an interesting side note, Thompson added, “The Watutsi had once been almost red in color but either a Congo sun or the wiles of Bahutu women had changed their complexions from rose to almost black.”<sup>124</sup> Given the reinvention of Thompson’s own ethnic history, was she possibly equating the Watutsis’ story with her own imaginative rendering of the

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<sup>122</sup> The Lari Massacre in which the Mau Mau attacked and killed loyalist African families occurred in March 1953 just prior to Thompson’s departure for Africa. For a discussion of African Americans responses to Kenya and the Mau Mau rebellions see, James H. Meriweather, *Proudly We Can Be Africans*, *op. cit.* n. 7 at 124; for a history of Mau Mau see, Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning, The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*, New York: Henry Holt (2004).

<sup>123</sup> Adam Green, *Selling the Race, Culture, Community and Black Chicago, 1940-1955*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press (2007), 167.

<sup>124</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 130.

noble Cherokee chief beguiled by an African woman on New World shores resulting in a distinctly black great-grandchild?

Meeting the Mwami of Ruanda and his counter-part, the Mwami Mwambutsa of Urundi, created conflicting emotions for Thompson. The Mwami, whom she referred to as “Charles,” was weary and wary of journalists, having been poorly represented by more than one. His wariness Thompson understood, it was his tribalism and elitism that she found troubling. In contrast to Charles, his Urundi counterpart reminded Thompson of a slick Harlem businessman in his “natty brown suit.” Both kings were multimillionaires; however, Mwambutsa appeared only a ceremonial African living in a ranch home, sending his children to European schools, driving a pick-up truck and a Cadillac. This was not the first time Thompson referred to a Cadillac. Walking past the new House of Representatives in Lagos, Thompson remarked on the contrast to African Americans who had Cadillacs and store-bought clothes but little political power. Referring to Mwambutsa’s Cadillac, Thompson may have been more broadly asserting the car was a hollow symbol of power. Mwambutsa had comfort and the illusion of European respectability wrapped up in his Cadillac and Western-clothes, but he was co-opted by the Belgians. Later, the Mwambutsa cemented Thompson’s disdain when he off-handedly confirmed his feeling of superiority over “the American Negro.”

Thompson’s exit from Congo was delayed out of Elisabethville when she missed her flight to Victoria Falls. Not wanting to wait a week for the next flight to Rhodesia, Thompson decided to take a train across country. Built forty-three years before and named to honor the wife of King Albert I of Belgium, by 1953 Elisabethville housed 10,000 Europeans. Outside the city approximately 100,000 Africans lived in three native villages. Thompson dryly commented,

“Elisabethville was a liberal city, as African cities go. Each white home was allowed to keep two servants on the premises, whereas in Leo, none was permitted to remain in the white city after dark.”<sup>125</sup> The transport delay allowed her to visit Union Minère, the world’s largest copper mine. The mine tour provided another glaring example of the “parentalism” of the Belgian colonial scheme. Miners and their families were “housed” at the mine, a totally self-contained process including medical facilities, food, clothing, and education. The miners signed three year contracts. However, education for their children was directed so they could grow and participate in mining operations suggesting that the mine owners’ expectations of the labor force was more long-term. Given a tour by the mine’s public relationships director, Mr. de Linden, Thompson was enlightened as to the largest problem at the mine, the wives of miners. In “the bush” wives farmed but at the mines, this was not possible. De Linden explained to Thompson that miners liked their wives “dumb, insisting that stupid wives make good wives.” But those Africans trained as clerks and the small but growing educated class sought wives who were intelligent, thus a “finishing school” had been started where wives could be properly trained in the skills of homemaking and child care. Thompson did not register a shudder at the assumptions, but the chill in her description was evident.<sup>126</sup>

### **Jim Crow African Style**

When Thompson boarded the train in Elisabethville her goal was to reach Victoria Falls, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. A trip of a few hours by plane took her two days by train. The closest she got to the Falls was to hear their roar and feel their cold mist from her open window as the train rolled slowly by. Boarding the train, Thompson entered a kind of

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* at 147.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* at 146.

moving jail where her American passport did not always override the color of her skin. If the color bar in Congo was enforced, the color bars in Rhodesia and South Africa were iron clad. Thompson was not allowed off the train at Victoria Falls because there was no hotel that would accommodate her. Scolded for failing to plan ahead, she was told “If natives see you go into a white hotel, they will want to go in too. If you had only written us, we would have had officials to escort you. Seeing you enter a white hotel with recognized officials would let the natives know that this was a special person, an exception to our laws.”<sup>127</sup> Refused the opportunity to disembark from the train in Livingstone, Thompson found herself re-routed to Southern Rhodesia and threatened with imprisonment if she did not arrange for transport out of that country within the three-day limit of her temporary visa. Titling the chapter “Railroaded,” Thompson’s description of her train travel across southern Africa shaped her realization that for many of the whites she encountered, she was just another black woman on a continent that did not treat black women well. Still, Thompson’s train compartment rapidly mirrored a salon visited by European men for the opportunity to talk to the “exotic” black American woman. Asked whether Richard Wright’s *Native Son* represented the black experience in America, Thompson responded with a rather unenthusiastic “Like most novels, I surmised, the story of Bigger Thomas was probably a composite picture of a number of Negro experiences. Each experience could happen, and had.”<sup>128</sup>

Why was Thompson so poorly prepared for the problems she encountered across Rhodesia and in South Africa? Whether arriving by plane or train, the color bar denied her accommodations in Livingstone and at Victoria Falls without prior arrangement. Was Thompson

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* at 159.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* at 162.

naive, assuming her American passport would carry her where she wanted to go despite her race, or was challenging the color bar part of her agenda? She seemed genuinely surprised by the difficulties she encountered on the train, her bravado when speaking to the English housekeeper in Accra all but gone. Explaining to an immigration officer, a friendly young Irishman, that she planned to travel from Victoria Falls to Johannesburg he was horrified, “It’s bad down there...They are horrible to colored women there.”<sup>129</sup> Thompson produced letters from the Chicago Police Department attesting to her good character and a letter from her publisher to no avail. If Thompson’s attempt to challenge the color bar was intentional, she appeared poorly equipped to manage her failure. At one point she admitted how ignorant she was of the situation in South Africa despite warnings from friends before leaving America. She ruefully admitted reading the *Cry, the Beloved Country* and watching the movie seemed a poor substitute for real knowledge.<sup>130</sup> Traveling into South Africa, Thompson reminded herself to “be careful, be polite, and for heaven’s sake, *read signs!*” This was the same mantra she used on her first trip riding the Jim Crow train to Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>131</sup> Once in Johannesburg it was clear that, American or not, her race would override all other factors, and the only option available to her was a rapid departure on the first available transportation out of the country. Boarding a train for Lourenço Marques, Portuguese East Africa, Thompson refused to accept the third-class accommodation typically allotted to Africans. She achieved a small but hard-won victory when she was seated in a first-class accommodation. Shutting and locking the door to her compartment, Thompson watched Johannesburg fade in the distance.

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* at 162.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* at 172.

## Home

*Africans are my brothers, for we are of one race. But Africa, the land of my fathers, is not my home. I am an American-an American by nationality, a citizen of the United States by birth. I owe my loyalty and my allegiance to but one flag. I have but one country.*<sup>132</sup>

Flying out of Africa on a Middle East Airline bound for Beirut two months later, Thompson encountered a fellow American. She used her exchange with him to reflect on her experiences in Africa and at home. Intrigued that Thompson had covered so much ground over the preceding three months, the native New Englander admitted he knew little about African Americans. “Only one Negro student attended my school. He was a smart kid and well liked, but after school he went his way and we went ours. I often wondered how he felt about being excluded from our social life.” Thompson’s reply “I grew up in the West an only Negro student. I think I know.”<sup>133</sup> Was Thompson creatively borrowing from W.E.B. Du Bois’ New England childhood? Reconfiguring the opening to Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folks* to pose his essential question, “What does it mean to be a problem?”<sup>134</sup> She had been moved by his haunting lyricism in reading *Dark Princess*. Did she turn to him again? Did she find in his journey through the American South a way to comprehend her own journey as a black woman? Was Thompson acknowledging that she had seen herself through the eyes of others, in Du Bois’ words, “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt or pity?” Did

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* at 281.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* at 280.

<sup>134</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Dover Publications (1994), 1.

visiting Africa allow her to admit the weight of her “two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body?”<sup>135</sup> If so, did Africa help her lift the veil, confronting and competing with whites as an equal in her own mind? Thompson seemed to answer that question in her exchange with the New Englander. “If I felt that I should not be allowed to live in the same block with people of other races, and if I thought that I was not good enough to marry a member of another race, then I would be admitting inferiority. As a Negro, I feel inferior to no one.”<sup>136</sup>

Appreciating and honoring her African heritage, Thompson claimed a global connection to all Africans but then she stepped beyond the blood of a single race. Her struggle to construct a black identity was also her struggle to reconcile a multiplicity of identities. Her struggle to accept the complex meaning of the unequal power relationship that produced her father was also the struggle of so many African Americans who were the produce of unequal power relationships across centuries of slavery. The mixed-race lineage of both her parents caused Thompson to seek wholeness in something beyond race and yet remain true to her own racial history. This was why America made her distinct. Traveling home from Africa, she realized the wholeness of her identity, the completeness of her reflection was as an *American Daughter*.

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* at 2.

<sup>136</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 12 at 277.

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## Conclusion

Oh What Sorrow!  
Oh What Pity!  
Oh, What Pain  
That Tears and Blood  
Should Mix Like Rain  
And Terror Come Again  
To Mississippi

Came again  
Where has terror been?  
In some other section  
of the nation,  
Lying low, publicized?  
Jaundiced eyes  
Showing through the mask

Oh, What sorrow,  
Pity, Pain,  
That Tears and Blood  
And Terror, Fetid Hot  
Yet Clammy Cold,  
Remain...<sup>1</sup>

## Train to Money, Mississippi

The flow of black bodies along the north-south axis from Chicago to the American South sent a chubby-faced Chicago teenager down to Money, Mississippi to visit his uncle, Mose Wright, in late August 1955. Warned by his mother that the South was different,

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, "Langston Hughes Wonders Why No Lynching Probes," *The Chicago Defender*, (October 1, 1955), 4 (Hughes' untitled poem on the death of Emmett Till was modified and titled "Mississippi." See, "Mississippi," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, ed., New York: Vintage Classics (1994), 452. For more on Langston Hughes and the death of Emmett Till see, Myisha Priest, "Flesh that Needs to be Loved," Langston Hughes Writing the Body of Emmett Till," *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*, Harriet Pollack and Christopher Metress, eds., Louisiana State University (2008); for more on Emmett Till see, Christopher Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till, a Documentary Narrative*, University of Virginia Press (2002).

like many teenagers he did not realize that different could mean deadly. In the pre-dawn hours of August 28, 1955 Emmett Till was taken from his uncle's home at gunpoint by a group of white men. His offense, whistling at a white woman, the wife of a local store owner. Three days later searchers found his body, beaten and shot, tied to a ginning fan in the Tallahatchie River.<sup>2</sup> On September 2 a grief-stricken Maimie Till arrived at the train station in Chicago, surrounded by family and friends, to meet her son's casket. Following a massive turnout for his funeral at Chicago's Roberts Temple Church of God, young Till was laid to rest at Burr Oak Cemetery on September 6. *Jet Magazine* covered Till's death and burial, including photographs of his brutally battered and deformed face.<sup>3</sup> A front page editorial in *The Chicago Defender* decried the "lynching" of Till by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam under the banner "Blood on Their Hands..."<sup>4</sup> National and international coverage of Till's murder and the fate of his murders continued throughout the fall. Bryant and Milam were tried over the course of several days and acquitted in sixty-seven minutes by an all white jury convened in Sumner, Mississippi.

### **Congo, Again**

Five years later, Era Bell Thompson sat in the warm, crowded reception area of Patrice Lumumba's home on Boulevard Albert, Leopoldville, Congo waiting for an opportunity to interview the Prime Minister. Thompson was probably not thinking about young Emmett Till on

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<sup>2</sup> On 12 October, 1942 two fourteen-year old boys, Charlie Lang and Ernest Green, were found hanging from a bridge over the Chicasawhay River. Langston Hughes' poem "The Bitter River" eulogized Lang and Green in death while indicting those who murdered them and those who looked away. "The Bitter River," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, ed., New York: Vintage Classics, (1994), 242.

<sup>3</sup> "Nation Horrified by Murder of Kidnapped Chicago Youth," *Jet Magazine*, (September 15, 1955), 6.

<sup>4</sup> "Blood On Their Hands..." *The Chicago Defender* (September 10, 1955), 1.

that morning. The connections between Till and Lumumba were yet to play out on the international stage, their deaths inextricably linking the American South and Congo together for a new generation. Thompson may have been replaying the previous day's events, meeting Mrs. Lumumba, sitting in the new King Baudouin stadium watching the spectacular sports show with 76,000 other spectators. Perhaps she was recalling the exchange between Congolese reporters and a Belgian school teacher, another glaring illustration of the costs of colonialism. The school teacher produced a picture of her six sons attending university in Brussels, "In 20 years a lone white woman could make enough money teaching black children to put six boys thru college. Fourteen million Africans working for 80 years had only graduated 16."<sup>5</sup> Her patience at Lumumba's residence went unrewarded, her readership left to wonder what types of questions she might have asked him. Thompson was in the audience to hear Lumumba's speech at the independence day ceremonies on the night of June 30. Perhaps a follow-up to his ultimatum to the Belgians still in Congo, "Obey the law or get out!" Certainly she appreciated the grotesqueries of the farce played out during the independence ceremonies when King Baudouin of Belgium and President Joseph Kasavubu of Congo led a long line of dignitaries out to lay flowers at the foot of the statute of King Leopold II. "A ceremony meant to commemorate a hero, turned out to be the reburial of a tyrant, a man whose cruelty has no parallel in Africa, under whose rule more than five million Congolese died from forced labor, mutilation, and brutality."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Era Bell Thompson, "Behind the African Explosion," *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine*, (September 25, 1960), 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

There were many rumors rife within the Congolese and particularly the European populations crowding into Leopoldville. Adding to an already tense situation were the rumors of a take over by the Soviet Union. When Ralph Bunche, the United Nation's senior representative on the ground, was asked by the wife of an American official, "Mr. Bunche, are the *Reds* really coming?" his semi-serious response was "My dear lady, they are already here."<sup>7</sup> Thompson interviewed Europeans living in Congo who were willing to "waiting and see" - claiming they were Congolese too. She interviewed Europeans still clinging to a world quickly fading. "The wife of an airline mechanic was afraid to drive on the African City road since angry Congolese burned the car of a white man who had run down a bicyclist. "My husband can't understand these blacks," she sighed. "Be kind to them today and they want more kindness tomorrow."<sup>8</sup>

Departing Congo for the Cameroons, Thompson closed her report with "By week's end, the Congo was in chaos."<sup>9</sup>

Thompson may have departed from Congo but she continued to follow the unfolding crisis. Her typed notes titled "Congo" referred to the "Unlucky 13th Indep. state in Africa." Listing "Interpretations of freedom, Congolese style," Thompson included the wholesale evacuation of Europeans prior to independence, the transfer of \$430 million out of the country before controls were imposed, and the images of Congolese as "leopard men and cannibals."

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche, An American Odyssey*, New York: W.W. Norton (1993), 307.

<sup>8</sup> Era Bell Thompson, "Behind the African Explosion," *op. cit.* n. 5 at 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Under the heading “Press Weaknesses” she included “Field day over rapes, atrocities, brutality of Africans.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Cry of an African Woman: Usumbura Square**

Thompson’s reporting on Congo included multiple reports of the rape of European women. In the *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine*, Thompson said “A Canadian technician believed that all the talk about rapes and other atrocities had caused the settlers to panic.”<sup>11</sup> Two pages of her travel notes on Congo included press reports of rape. Referencing a *Time* piece on the rape of a white woman Thompson wrote “Never happened.”<sup>12</sup> In a follow-up to a headlined story of the rape of a nurse, “latest case, rape of Ill. nurse. Few days later, Stevenson phoned mother. Girl unharmed.” Again referring to a *Time* article from August 1960 she quoted and underlined, “the actual casualties are far fewer than the headlines would suggest. Killed: 12 white, 79 black soliders. Belgians published case histories of 291 rapes, 230 acts of violence (assorted.)”<sup>13</sup> *Time* quoted the Belgium Foreign Minister as he cried out for the victims, “Madame P. had a baby only a few months old in her arms whom the soldiers struck and threatened to kill if she did not allow herself to be violated. She was violated 20 times. Madame Q., several days after having given birth, still had an open tear in her abdomen held with clips. She was raped by several soldiers.” Later the *Time* article aired claims of Congolese *Force Publique* troops raping their Belgian officers’ wives and then being puzzled when the officers

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<sup>10</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Series D1, Box 6, Folder 22.

<sup>11</sup> Era Bell Thompson, “Behind the African Explosion,” *op. cit.* n. 5 at 32.

<sup>12</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Series D1, Box 6, Folder 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

refused to resume command.”<sup>14</sup> The focus on rape was not particularly surprising, it was part of the sensationalization of the crisis and an all too familiar reason for whites to commit violence against blacks.<sup>15</sup> D. W. Griffith brought the vision to life in 1915, the beautiful white virgin fleeing from the dark lust of a black man in the racist *Birth of a Nation*. William Pickens called the myth of the black rapist “One of the most successful illusion...the extraordinary tendency of the men of that race to commit rape.”<sup>16</sup>

Thompson wrote about her own fear of rape in *American Daughter*; holding an old pistol, huddled with her dog Satan in her father’s old house while drunken rumrunners talked of their need for women outside her window. In 1953, during her stay in Usumbura, Thompson’s sleep was disturbed by a piercing scream followed by a commotion and the apparent cries of an African woman. Watching from her window Thompson observed a couple leading away a drunken European man. The African woman was not visible, only her fading whimpers revealed what had happened. Shutting the window, Thompson carefully bolted herself in from the outside world.<sup>17</sup> Documenting the discussion of rapes during 1960 Congo crisis, Thompson returned to the Usumbura incident writing, “Of every day rape of black women by white men. (screams in

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<sup>14</sup> “Back from the Precipice,” *Time*, (1 August 1960), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Jock McCulloch, *Black Peril, White Virtue, Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902-1935*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (2000).

<sup>16</sup> “Debt-Slavery,” *The Washington Bee*, July 16, 1921, 2; see, Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, & the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press (2004).

<sup>17</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Father, The Story of the Return of a Native Three Hundred Years Later*, NYL Doubleday (1954), 140.

Usumbura square).”<sup>18</sup> In *Africa, Land of My Fathers* she wrote of how of riding on the train towards Victoria Falls she sat in fright as four white men in the next compartment casually discussed what should happen if a white man raped a black woman. “Such an act was not wrong, they agreed amiably, but the results were unhappy. “It is bad to beget mulattoes.”<sup>19</sup>

When Thompson looked at her reflection in the mirror, it reflected different colors of light. Like almost all black Americans, she was of mixed races. The moment in Usumbura Square stayed with her, the broken cries in the dark, the drunken white man stumbling away. Thompson’s grandmother, Mina Garrison, was a slave on a plantation in Virginia when her son was born with his blue-eyes and blond hair. What choices did Garrison have? Had she cried out in the night? This was the history of black womanhood. This was the history of American slavery. This was Era Bell Thompson’s history.

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<sup>18</sup> Era Bell Thompson Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, IL, Series D1, Box 6, Folder 22.

<sup>19</sup> Era Bell Thompson, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, *op. cit.* n. 17 at 153.

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