The Black Towns

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FROM APPOMATTOX TO WORLD WAR I, blacks continued their quest for a secure position in the American system. The problem was how to be both black and American. That is, how could people with dark skin find acceptance, or even toleration, in a society in which the boundaries of normative behavior, the values, and the very definition of what it meant to be an American were determined and enforced by whites? At every turn, white and American seemed to be synonymous. Blacks learned, as immigrants discovered soon after their arrival on American shores, that the melting pot only melted those individuals with light complexions who were willing to renounce their cultural or ethnic identity. Dark-skinned people, and those immigrants who refused to forsake their heritage, quickly felt the full force of white American prejudice and violence. Yet, whether they were the products of slavery and the plantation system or of the discrimination and segregation of a northern city, most blacks during the immediate postbellum years considered the United States as their home. Their cultural identity as a people, although at times vague, was clearly rooted in the American past.
Reducing the strategies to their simplest terms, black leaders followed four basic approaches in attempting to solve the black-American dichotomy: political action inside the framework of the Republican party; concentration on economic self-help, moral uplift, and racial solidarity; direct and open confrontation with all forms of social injustice; and exodus to Canada, Africa, or some other country. Some black spokesmen shifted from one position to another, while the philosophy of any individual might contain a combination of several proposals. Nothing worked. As blacks groped for the correct formula, or a combination of formulas, violence against them increased while social practice and legislative statute drove the race deeper and deeper into segregation and poverty.

A few black leaders proposed a fifth approach—self-segregation inside the United States within the protective confines of an all-black community. Precedent existed for such an idea. Several black settlements formed during the post-Revolutionary era, and by the late antebellum years a number of such towns dotted the East and the Middle West. Since most of the residents of these early communities isolated themselves, sought only to be left alone, and farmed small plots of marginal land, whites usually ignored them. Many of the people moving to such settlements were uneducated former slaves who lacked the ability or inclination to articulate the practical or ideological reasons underlying their migration to a separate community.

The black-town idea reached its peak in the fifty years after the Civil War. The dearth of extant records prohibits an exact enumeration of them, but at least sixty black communities were settled between 1865 and 1915. With more than twenty, Oklahoma led all other states. Unfortunately, little is known about many of the black towns. We know little of the aspirations, fears, and everyday lives of people living in such places as Blackdom, New Mexico; Hobson City, Alabama; Allensworth, California; and Rentiesville, Oklahoma, because residents failed to record their experi-
ences and whites were not interested in preserving and collecting material on the black towns.

This study concentrates on the formation, growth, and failure of five such communities. Comparison with fragmentary records available on other black towns indicates that these five represent a typical picture of black-town life in other communities of a similar size and type during the same time period. The towns and the date of their settlement are: Nicodemus, Kansas (1879), established at the time of the black exodus from the South; Mound Bayou, Mississippi (1887), perhaps the most prominent black town because of its close ties to Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute; Langston, Oklahoma (1891), plotted after the run into the Unassigned Lands and visualized by one of its promoters as the nucleus for the creation of an all-black state in the West; and Clearview (1903) and Boley (1904), in Oklahoma, twin communities in the Creek Nation which offer the opportunity to observe certain aspects of Indian-black relations in one area. As used here, the term “black town” refers to a separate community containing a population at least 90 percent black in which the residents attempted to determine their own political destiny.

The rhetoric and behavior of blacks—isolated from the domination of whites and freed from the daily reinforcement of their subordinate rank in the larger society—inside the limits of their own community provide the chance to observe in microcosm black attitudes about many aspects of American life. The role of blacks in town promotion and settlement, long a neglected area in western and urban history, can also be examined. Moreover, the black-town experiment clearly indicates the ambiguities in black thought between integration and separation, and perception and reality, and also illustrates the impact of isolation on individuals and groups. The black-town ideology, in large part formulated and expounded by promoters, sought to combine economic self-help and moral uplift with an intense pride in race, while at the same time encouraging an active role in county and state
politics. Unlike those who migrated thousands of miles to Africa, some people who entered the towns as settlers saw the community as a temporary expedient. Integration into the mainstream of American life constituted their ultimate goal.

The dream of the black town as an agricultural service center, growing in population and filling with small stores and manufacturing plants hiring local labor, ran counter to the economic realities of the time. Such a vision, consistent with the appeal of the Republican party in the North during the late 1850's, disregarded the development of large-scale enterprise and the drive for industrial concentration around the turn of the century. Although discrimination and the lack of capital played a part in their demise, the black towns' failure must also be attributed to the many forces at work in the local, regional, and national economies. The onslaught of modernization destroyed thousands of small towns, unhampered by racial prejudice, during the same period. Yet, lacking money and education, and unaccustomed to guiding their own political affairs, poor blacks from the rural South responded to the call of promoters to join them in a racial and town-building experiment.

Most scholars in the social and genetic sciences have discarded the use of race as a meaningful category in attempting to understand human differences. In the pages that follow, the terms "race" and "racial" are employed only in the context in which they were used by white and black alike around the turn of the century.

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