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Rising Against Oppression to Reclaim Liberty: An African American Account of the Struggle for True Independence

"Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."
- Martin Luther King Jr.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said in his 1963 letter from Birmingham Jail, people who want freedom must act to secure it. This statement is relevant to the postwar South, a period and place when whites exploited race to enact unjust laws restricting the rights and liberties of millions of African Americans. Tera W. Hunter's novel "To 'Joy My Freedom" depicts the enslavement of these blacks after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

Although slavery was abolished officially during this time period, Hunter's art demonstrates the injustice that African Americans continued to face and their subsequent attempts to establish themselves as equals. This book demonstrates the value of resistance and retribution by recounting the experiences of many African American women who battled for their independence in the face of assaults on their gender, class, and, most significantly, race. "To 'Joy My Freedom" demonstrates how two primary factors shaped African American working-class politics: whites enacting restrictive laws against blacks in the workplace, residential development, and municipal institutions, and blacks resisting these restrictions through labor strikes, protests, and institution

building.

The race was critical to African American involvement in the workplace since it was the reason they were given limited employment options and poor pay, which resulted in retaliatory labor strikes. Prevented from obtaining more satisfying employment, African American women were forced to choose between domestic workers and laundresses, two professions that required tedious labor and offered poor pay, long hours, and an absurd amount of responsibility. As domestic workers, women were compelled to assume the responsibilities of former slaves who had left the family, resulting in an overload of chores for a single woman. For example, domestic employees were required to cook and care about the children in addition to their pre-existing duty to clean in return for modest pay. These women were critical in preserving the house's structure and "were regarded not just as domestic employees, but also as servants" (Hunter, 54). African American degradation in domestic occupations during a period when slavery had been abolished officially demonstrates that whites continued to treat blacks unfairly due to their perceived inferior race. As soon as black women felt mistreated and overworked, they left in an effort to undermine the influence white employers had over their labor freedoms (Hunter, 26-28). By rejecting whites' labor injustices, African American women sought to establish their independence in a culture that fought hard to put them behind everyone else.

As with domestic workers, black laundresses struggled against white workplace domination in order to regain their independence and establish their political positions. These ladies, in particular, protested their unjust wages of thirty cents per day, a low rate based on the belief that

African Americans were paid just what they were worth. Though this rate was advantageous for whites since it made black labor available to practically the whole community, it enraged the laundresses who were paid in an inequitable manner.

Compensatory recompense for their work (Hunter, 74-82). To protect their rights, the washerwomen of Atlanta staged a strike in 1881, claiming that "excessive rent costs" combined with "much-decreased earnings" rendered it "difficult [for them] to live uprightly and honestly" (Hunter, 75). The inability of washerwomen to live comfortably on their pay demonstrates whites' malice since they deliberately robbed African Americans of their capacity to live well as free people. While slavery was outlawed, whites stopped blacks from attaining equality by institutionally impoverishing them. However, by striking and resigning from their employment, African American women in Atlanta attempted to redefine the concept of freedom by rising up against white oppression and establishing a foundation for political and economic action.

Apart from the workplace, another disputed area for blacks was residential construction, a political arena that was also profoundly affected by race-based discrimination legislation. Beginning in the 1880s, Jim Crow robbed all blacks of fundamental freedoms, including the ability to choose where to reside. To maintain African Americans' inferior status and segregation from whites, blacks were forced to live in filth that was prone to flooding and illness (Hunter, 44-46). Their only housing options were the outskirts of shantytowns and alleyways, which were deemed "more unsanitary and filthy than a Peachtree street horse stable," and their only source of

water was wells and springs, both of which were prone to contamination due to insufficient drainage and sewage systems (Hunter, 103).

These deplorable conditions endured by African Americans demonstrate their unjust degradation relative to whites in yet another area, affecting not only their ability to live healthfully but also their right to choose, further impeding their ability to become active, politically respected members of society. Their physical isolation from whites, which was separated along racial lines to maintain black subjugation, spurred African Americans to seize control of their destiny and end the injustices that kept them inferior. They accomplished this by organizing large demonstrations, a form of resistance in which they actively opposed race-based legislation (Hunter, 98-104). When all-white police forces quelled demonstrations, African Americans turned to segregated neighborhoods to "bolster their autonomy and collective strength" in order to "avoid exploitation by whites" (Hunter, 100). By using these isolated locations, they established a diverse array of institutions that provided them with a feeling of community and physical space to coordinate political action.

While defining and demanding independence for themselves in a nation dedicated to denying their rights was difficult, blacks exploited their exclusion to create possibilities for themselves that they had previously been denied. Churches, secret clubs, and dancing halls were all examples of such entities. Churches, in particular, shaped how African Americans interacted with one another. They aided employees, promoted leadership, and "maintained the bonds that bind individuals as family, friends, and neighbors" (Hunter, 68). While churches provided spiritual

support for blacks, the establishment of secret organizations facilitated their education and political expression. These organizations, dubbed mutual assistance and benevolent associations, were sometimes formed as labor unions or political leagues to support people who were often marginalized, such as laborers, widows, and orphans. Household workers, for example, visited similar organizations, such as the 1870s and 1880s Washing Societies, to protest white employers' pay, hours, and working conditions. Additionally, these societies fostered a sense of connection across African American tribes by including rites that were distinctive to each other (Hunter, 70-73). Additionally, blacks established dance halls to express their social rights and actualize their liberation. For African Americans, dance was one of the few outlets for expressing their identity and "recovering their bodies from exploitation" (Hunter, 168). Reclaiming control of their bodies via dancing and establishing churches and secret organizations demonstrates how African Americans used places designed for exclusion to seek their social and political rights.

African Americans struggled for genuine independence against white restrictive laws that defined the reality and practice of their nineteenth-century working-class politics via institution building, demonstrating, and organizing labor strikes. Without the flexibility to choose their careers, domestic work became the sole employment choice for black women and a need for their existence. With too many duties and very little pay, women resorted to a strategy of resistance they thought would stop white mistreatment of blacks: they resigned and organized community-wide strikes. While unequal pay for labor was common in the workplace, the inequitable allocation of resources and substandard living circumstances were most pronounced

in African American neighborhoods. Blacks rebelled in defiance to fight pollution, illness, and flooding that wreaked havoc on their living quarters. While the concept of inferior race denied African Americans respectable employment and a healthy lifestyle, it also barred them from the benefits of public services, which they fought via the establishment of organizations. The creation of official and informal foundations and the utilization of demonstrations and labor strikes demonstrates how African Americans struggled to escape the terrible circumstances of the South and restructure their working-class politics according to their preferences. Hunter illuminates the struggle of African Americans who, according to them, battled "To 'Joy My Freedom" by showing their attempts to achieve free lives amid widespread prejudice.