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Introduction

Barbara Lewis
University of Massachusetts Boston

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Introduction

A day or two after Barack Obama was elected president, a colleague with an international reputation for political savvy commented that George W. Bush had made it possible for Obama to be president.

“No,” I responded. “You can’t give that to Bush single-handedly. There is a whole history, a backlog of effort, not to mention Obama’s strategic genius, to explain the outcome of the election. Bush may have weakened the gate, but Obama pushed it open, and he had a whole group of folks, much bigger and more diverse than the Verizon network, behind him.”

The idea that white folks are the ones who make things happen, that they are the motive force fueling any black accomplishment, persists as a misconception. White folks have agency, black folks do not; white folks are doers, black folks are takers. Of course, not everyone thinks or feels that way, but some still do, and not necessarily through individual fault alone. The media often subscribe to the notion that accomplishment is an exception for blacks, not a given. Rather, criminality is their constant, and so too disadvantage.

The Niagara Movement, the historical focus that begins this issue, was conceived in the idea that blacks can work together in concerted fashion to better their circumstances on a broad slate, including education, law, suffrage, transportation, justice, economics, health, arts, and media. The year of its founding was 1905. At the time, blacks, who were then referred to as Negroes, were suffering hard times, having been relegated to legally-inequitable living and educational conditions and being routinely tortured and killed in public as a form of social sport. In a practice known as lynching, southerners and some northerners strung trees thick with black bodies, eyeing them as little more than expendable baubles, like Christmas trinkets garishly displayed.

The Niagara leadership, initially male but eventually male and female, came together to fight back, to attempt to set some limits to behavior that was wanton, egregious, and fatal. The idea that blacks were taking their fate into their own hands, removing it from white custodianship, did not meet with many supporters. In addition to a campaign of subterfuge, the Niagara Movement also succumbed to a lack of resources and internal feuding.

Severely crippled by 1909, the Niagara Movement was overtaken by a successor group that functioned as an interracial council, with scholar W. E. B. DuBois as the most prominent black member. The philanthropic backing came from deep-pocket whites, some of whom had connections back to the abolitionist movement. In the nineteenth century, abolitionism was headquartered in Boston, where William Monroe Trotter, a Niagara Movement cofounder and its most confrontational son, was also based. Almost invariably, DuBois is credited with being the brains behind the Niagara Movement. It is my contention that he shares that distinction with Trotter. DuBois has acknowledged that it was Trotter's 1903 protest in Boston against Booker T. Washington, the Tuskegee wizard who mastered a turn-the-other-cheek brand of politics, which galvanized him into taking a stand on racial matters. Further, together Trotter and DuBois drafted the Niagara Movement principles, which called for equal treatment between the races.

The name of the successor group is, of course, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which celebrates its centennial in 2009. The year before it was founded, a catalytic race riot erupted in Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, lived and was buried. The white men who rioted ran through the streets denouncing Lincoln, insisting that the Emancipation that he had promised was not available to blacks in the capital of Illinois, in the vaunted North. The unbridled mob of roughly a hundred white men descended on any black person they saw, and they murdered more than a few, including an older black gentleman of property named William Donagan who had been on friendly terms with the former president. The mob set fire to his house, slit his throat, and hoisted him up to the limb of a tree, ignoring his pleas that he had done nothing but lived peacefully with his neighbors and so deserved mercy. There was none to be had from this crowd. It made no difference to them that they knew him, that in his

role as a local cobbler, he had patched and soled their shoes. No doubt he had tipped his hat to them as they passed each other on the street. They had watched him age, turn gray and gnarled. Maybe, a week or so previously, one or two had put an arm under his elbow to help him across a puddle. But none of that mattered now. He was an enemy. His complexion made him so, and so did his white immigrant wife, to whom he had been married for over three decades. Donnegan was not the only one to die at the hands of the enraged group. Finally, the National Guard was called in, and the crisis was quelled, at least the outward signs of it.

Cooler heads were outraged. Something had to be done, they said. The home of our great leader had been desecrated. The NAACP, in the aftermath of the Springfield Riot, became the nation's major voice against racial discrimination and took up the cause of fighting public violence. In line with that agenda, Walter White, who was born in the South as the blue-eyed, blond-haired product of generations and generations of biracial mixing, became a spy in the house the Klan built. White, who is excerpted in this issue, was a novelist as well as an administrator and politician. Like his mentor, James Weldon Johnson, who was NAACP field secretary as well as an educator, lawyer, diplomat, lyricist, and novelist, White was a man of the Harlem Renaissance. So was DuBois, scholar and artist.

The domestic war was being waged on a number of fronts, including the arts. Pauline Hopkins, novelist and editor, is featured in the first article in this issue, and in *Contending Forces* (published in 1900) she demonstrates how some black women exerted themselves in the project of maintaining community against assaults that were internal as well as external. Mary Church Terrell, also represented in this issue, was an educator, journalist, linguist, and activist contemporary of Hopkins who dedicated her pen to racial betterment and lived long enough to participate in desegregation efforts, particularly in eating establishments, in the fifties. Terrell, who used the privilege into which she was born to go toe to toe with anyone, including presidents (a tendency and tactic that William Monroe Trotter also shared) passed in 1954 at the age of ninety, fighting for fairness and right to the end. In the Niagara years, she championed the black soldiers of Brownsville who were accused, perhaps wrongly, of rioting. Their punishment was severe. The white rioters in Springfield, on the other hand, were not convicted of their injurious acts of racial violence.

“What do you think of this election?” Ken Cooper asked me on November 5. “I think the image we chose that makes a composite of the faces of Lincoln and Obama was very right,” I said. “Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, but we were never fully emancipated. The nation as a whole didn’t see us that way. We were always inferior, unequal, less than. Now,” I added, “our emancipation can perhaps be more than provisional, here one day and snatched back the next.”

Maybe we’ll get the recipe for longevity right this time, I thought to myself. We’re finally standing tall enough to maybe make a difference, and we’re perched on so many shoulders: on Pauline Hopkins, on Mary Church Terrell, on William Monroe Trotter, on W. E. B. DuBois, on Booker T. Washington, on Abraham Lincoln, on Martin Luther King, on Malcolm X, on Mamie Till, the mother of Emmett, on Rosa Parks, on Crispus Attucks, on David Walker, on William Donnegan, on Walter White, on Thurgood Marshall, on Jesse Jackson, on too many to name. It is our responsibility now to prove that accomplishment is our middle name, and has been for a very long time.

—*Barbara Lewis, PhD*

Director, Trotter Institute



Detail from *Abraham Obama*

This portrait, created by Ron English, a self-styled painter of “popaganda,” combines the features of Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama. It was part of a mural installed on a wall in the South End section of Boston during the summer of 2008. The artist said his intention was to inspire dialogue about Obama’s candidacy; however, area residents and business owners complained that English’s supporters plastered posters of the image on private and public property without authorization.

Much has been written about Obama having read the Doris Kearns Goodwin book *A Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, and about his taking cues from the Emancipator.

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