

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Sam's Cottonfield Blues

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Abstract

This History of Education Society Presidential Address primarily utilizes evocative autoethnography and narrative inquiry to convey its main points. It is written in the storytelling tradition of the African American past and analyzes the lives of three generations of Black Mississippians as they navigated life in Jim Crow Mississippi. It highlights the impact and legacy the cotton economy had on the life opportunities of these Black Mississippians, and how the cumulative stories they shared within the family directly shaped the educational pursuits and outcomes of a present-day descendant.

Keywords: African American history; storytelling; Mississippi; family history; slavery; segregation

Family recalled him being smart, troublesome, inquisitive, wily, and charismatic. Short, wiry thin, unusually strong, and handsome. He possessed a will and determination everyone admired. A child with an old soul and wit. Samuel (Sam) only attended school to about the third grade, and never really learned much beyond a little reading, writing, and arithmetic. He was barely literate. Throughout childhood and adolescence, he boisterously bragged about his limited formal schooling. Proudful ignorance, adults would say. By today's educational standards, Sam would be labeled an elementary school dropout. Truth be told, labels were unnecessary. He was. Aside from a few questioning elders, no one cared enough to monitor his school attendance or hold Sam accountable. Not even Sam. So, he ditched school all the time because he just didn't like it. Decades later, as life repeatedly tested him as an adult, Sam's limited learning served as a stinging reminder of lost opportunities and forced denials. It was one of his deepest regrets. Through it all,

however, he always seemed to value education, passing its importance onto his children and grandchildren.¹

Many factors pushed and pulled Sam out of school. Disinterest, poverty, and life circumstances were the biggest. He lived in a time and place where young Black boys and girls were still expected to labor in cottonfields rather than attend school during daylight hours. A requirement during slavery that endured, almost undisturbed, well beyond emancipation into the mid-twentieth century. They were expected to sharecrop and work as domestics as soon as they came of age, sometimes to help family make the ends almost meet. So, Sam helped out. He quit school and started picking cotton. He wasn't alone. Additional young hands plucking at white fiber and bolls from August to November meant heavier bales weighed each sundown. So, when it came time to "settle up" with White landowners at year's end, it meant the possibility of a little extra family income, some pocket money, a better Christmas, or the clearing of a debt. For young Black children in Sam's situation, schooling inconveniently coincided with the cotton harvest.²

¹This Presidential Address primarily utilizes evocative autoethnography and narrative inquiry to convey its main points. It analyzes the lives of three people in particular, and displays, as ethnographers Ellis and Bochner articulate the "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural." The address is also purposely written in the storytelling tradition of the people the author's written about. Accordingly, the address is specifically written as if the three lives explored, and their family, are the primary audience. The extensive referencing and academic discourse in the footnotes are written for the author's profession and discipline. To best appreciate the style and flow of each part of the manuscript, the author suggests reading the address in its entirety independent of the footnotes, and thereafter, reading the footnotes to understand how they complement the chronology and emphases herein. To better understand the uses of this methodological consideration, see: Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (London: Sage, 1996); Carolyn Ellis, "Creating Criteria: An Ethnographic Short Story," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6 (June 2000), 273–77; Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (London: Sage, 2000), 733–68; and Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autobiography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

²There are a number of excellent histories, autobiographies, and ethnographies on Black life and sharecropping in Mississippi. They reveal the multiple layers of consciousness of everyday folk in Mississippi and how cotton shaped their life decisions and outcomes. What follows is a short list of publications that, aside from the final cited reference, appear in chronological order. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945); Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi: The Classic Autobiography of Growing Up Poor and Black in the Rural South* (New York: Double Day, 1968); Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); David M. Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage, 1999); John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: The New Press, 2008); Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Random House, 2008); Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862–1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010); John O. Hodges, *Delta Fragments: The Recollections of a*

Generations of policies associated with slavery, segregation, and White expectations were other factors pulling Sam out of school and forcefully shoving him and his kind into cottonfields. Whites didn't have to know him personally to presume he'd pick cotton throughout his life. Everyone expected the young Sams of Mississippi to pick cotton. Everyone. Particularly someone of Sam's profile. He was young, truant, hardheaded, restless, and Black. Albeit his skin color was more than enough to qualify him for picking cotton. Century-long laws and customs in Mississippi determined Sam was perfect for cottonfields . . . or prison. Wasn't that why Black folk were brought to Mississippi? To pick cotton? History books said so. Generations of Mississippi schoolchildren learned through their textbooks that Blacks were perfectly suited for slave labor, particularly picking cotton.³

Fortunate for Sam, he missed these lessons. Playing hooky so much, he wasn't in school long enough to learn these historical "facts" and interpretations. Still, he intimately knew them; it wasn't something he needed to learn from a teacher or schoolbook. As far back as the stories went, every Black person Sam knew, or heard of, picked cotton. Everyone. Even the Black landowners, or Black escapees to the North he knew, at some point in their life picked cotton.

Had Sam skipped his early induction into sharecropping and decided to stay in school, going beyond the elementary grades was a long shot. In the late 1930s,

Sharecropper's Son (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013); Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso Books, 2017); Richelle Putnam, *Mississippi and the Great Depression* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2017); Charles Watkins III, *White Gold "Cotton": The Sharecroppers' Stories* (Bloomington, IN: LifeRich Publishing, 2018); Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press). While it is particular to Alabama and not Mississippi, a must read is Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

³The adopted textbook in Mississippi public schools as Sam was coming of age was Mabel B. Fant and John C. Fant, *History of Mississippi: A School Reader* (Jackson: Mississippi Publishing Company, 1922). The book was better known as Fants' *History of Mississippi*. During the second term of instruction for fourth graders, social studies teachers were instructed to only discuss slavery in the form of progress for the nation and Mississippi. Teachers were also instructed to omit any discussion of the Reconstruction era. The Fants argued that the "omission of [this era] will be better than having [children] try to learn [it] . . . [since] it is only a period of destruction." Teachers were therefore recommended to explain to children, after they studied the Civil War, that they would "take up very carefully" the study of the "New Mississippi," or the decades following the era of Reconstruction. For specific quotes in this note, see *Course of Study, Public Schools Mississippi, Grades I-VIII* (Jackson: Mississippi State Board of Education, 1923), 284. An electronic copy can be obtained at: https://www.google.com/books/edition/Course_of_Study_Public_Schools_Mississippi/pw1BAAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=fant%27s+mississippi+history+textbook&pg=PA282&printsec=frontcover. For a detailed overview of the long struggle to change the history textbooks used in Mississippi public schools, see Herbert Mitgang, "Mississippi Textbook Dispute Revived," *New York Times*, March 29, 1981. An electronic copy can be obtained at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/29/us/mississippi-textbook-dispute-revived.html>; Rebecca Miller Davis, "The Three R's—Reading, 'Riting, and Race: The Evolution of Race in Mississippi History Textbooks, 1900–1995," *Journal of Mississippi History* 72 (2010), 1–45; and Kenneth V. Anthony, "Pedagogy of Oppression: Reconstruction Narratives in Mississippi History Textbooks, 1887–1976," *Historical Encounters: A Journal of Historical Consciousness, Historical Cultures, and History Education* 3, no. 1 (2016), 43–59. The first textbook adopted in Mississippi that most accurately portrays the history of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and their century-long aftermath in Mississippi is James Loewen and Charles Sallis, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974). Notwithstanding, the Loewen and Sallis book would not be officially adopted for use in public schools in Mississippi until the early 1980s.

when Sam was coming of age in Mississippi, few schools beyond the elementary grades existed for Black children. Officials who revamped Mississippi's education system in the 1890s built it with the intent that Black children would replace their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents in cottonfields. Of the state's eighty-two counties, less than a dozen provided education up to or beyond eighth grade for "colored" children. Schools were expected to train people for their occupational stations in adult life, and for Mississippi Blacks virtually all stations led them back to cottonfields.⁴

This was a far cry from the educational expectations formerly enslaved Mississippians had of literacy and schools following emancipation that guided the language and drafting of the constitutional amendment and school laws establishing Mississippi's first real public education system in the late 1860s. They envisioned that the school system, built to include them and their children, would liberate the formerly enslaved from cotton, not educate them for it.

Sam and his people were from Bolton, Clinton, and Jackson. The ancient earth and winding, twisting roads in Bolton and Clinton symbolically told the story of Black progress in Mississippi. There wasn't much of it. A person could walk a mile, but because of all the twists and turns in the road, moving forward in an exhaustive sense felt more like they'd walked ten.

Sam knew of family and fellow Mississippians who'd walked these roads and escaped the cottonfields, exhaustion, and heat associated with them. They creatively carved out their own paths and lives in places like New York City and Chicago. They appeared to travel the nation, even the world, without restriction. A restless Sam wanted their life, and what they had. Otis, an uncle on his daddy's side, learned to use his hands to hard pluck at piano keys in juke joints rather than white fibers in

⁴Charles C. Bolton writes, "By the late 1930s, Mississippi had succeeded in significantly improving the state's white public education system. The dramatic transformations in white education, however, had only been possible because of the almost total neglect of black public education." For this specific quote, see Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870–1980* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 33. Peter Irons points out that "in Mississippi, where almost 90 percent of black farmers were tenants in 1930, the average black child spent just 74 days in school." He also illustrates that in 1932, only 14 percent of the African American children aged between fifteen and nineteen were enrolled in a public secondary school in all southern states. For quotes and statistics, see Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 35–36. The quote is on page 35. Similarly, Charles Spurgeon Johnson illustrates in his 1941 publication that in 1933 there were a total of sixteen high schools accredited for four-year study for African Americans in the combined states of Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Very little would change a decade later. See Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1941). For the changing of school laws in Mississippi in 1890, see *The Laws in Relation to Free Public Schools in the State of Mississippi, Being Chapter XVI of the Revised Code, 1880, as Amended by Acts of 1886, 1888, 1890, Together with the Constitutional Provisions Relating to Public Schools* (Jackson, MS: R. H. Henry, State Printer, 1890); Stuart Grayson Noble, "Forty Years of the Public Schools in Mississippi, with Special Reference to the Education of the Negro" (PhD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 1918); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse*, 117–52. Lastly, Charles C. Bolton provides an excellent history of Mississippi's last push to maintain this unequal dual education system in Bolton, "Mississippi's School Equalization Program, 1945–1954: 'A Last Gasp to Try to Maintain a Segregated Educational System,'" *Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 4 (Nov. 2000), 781–814.

cottonfields. After gaining mastery of the instrument, he became the piano man for McKinley Morganfield, far better known to his listeners as the great Muddy Waters. His uncle Otis even formed his own blues band and thereafter became a solo artist.⁵

Sterling, a younger cousin on his momma's side, escaped the death spiral of sharecropping cotton because of an overzealous auntie who paid for him to stay in school longer than anyone else in the family's history. So the story goes: "A bootlegger aunt paid for him to attend Holy Ghost High School in Jackson." Holy Ghost was a small private Catholic school that prided itself on being an alternative to public education. It gave smart ambitious Black children a safe space to learn, gain confidence, and obtain a rare possession: a high school diploma. It shielded them from the harsh realities of cotton's viselike grip. Sterling didn't fail them. He couldn't. He became the first in the family to not only attend and graduate from high school, but college. He would go on to become a world-renowned poet and professor of English at a major university in Chicago.⁶

Sam knew alternatives to cotton picking existed, but he also knew he wasn't a musician or poet. He possessed neither artistic mastery nor educational persistence to transcend and outmaneuver the trappings and tripwires of Jim Crow Mississippi. But he did possess something his uncle Otis, cousin Sterling, and virtually all of his other family members had—tenacious grit. Alongside manhood, he had mastered this by the age of fifteen.

Sam epitomized the attributions ascribed in "I'm a Man" by Bo Diddley.⁷ It's as if the blues man and all the affirmations of manhood written in the song had Sam in mind. At least Sam thought so. He survived the loss of his father, immense childhood violence and hunger, and sharecropping all before the age of fifteen. That was a victory in itself. Like others, he trailblazed his own way out of Mississippi. Along the way, he found his life calling too. His passion and desire for something more than a life of cottonfield blues and denials led him to lead his people out of Mississippi and toward Chicago: Black America's mythic Promised Land.⁸ It led them to overpriced apartments and low-paying jobs, but it was better than cotton. Bo and

⁵For a brief biography and discography of Otis Spann, see <http://www.msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/otis-spann> and <https://www.wirz.de/music/spann.htm>.

⁶For the specific quote regarding Sterling's bootlegger aunt and a brief biography of Sterling D. Plump, see <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/sterling-plump-39>. Plump has written over twenty books of poetry on the African American experience. For his book of poems dedicated most directly to Mississippi blues, see Sterling D. Plump, *The Mojo Hands Call, I Must Go* (Chicago: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1982); Sterling D. Plump, *Black Rituals* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987); Sterling D. Plump, *Blues: The Story Always Untold* (Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1989); Sterling D. Plump, *Hornman* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1996); Sterling D. Plump, *Blues Narratives* (Chicago: Tia Chucha Press, 1999).

⁷Bo Diddley, "I'm a Man" (Chess Records, March 2, 1955).

⁸Chicago was repeatedly characterized as the biblical "Promised Land" for southern-born African American migrants to the North. For a fuller understanding of this concept and importance of this migration movement in American history, see James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Penguin Books,

Muddy's blues, blaring on Sam's car radio, had reinforced his conviction to leave his ancestral home because he saw no future for him and his children beyond cotton.

As if it was not already apparent, Sam loved the blues, especially recordings by Muddy Waters and B. B. King. His soul was stirred by lyrics sung with gravelly voices in a deep southern drawl, and the rhythmic sounds of harmonicas and acoustic guitars. Had he witnessed Ma Rainey conveying in an August Wilson production the blues as "life's way of talkin'," Sam would've instinctively nodded in agreement. The blues resonated with him. They provided succinct recorded soundbites of Sam's biography. They strummed together stories of his upbringings, experiences, aspirations, infatuations, and longings for kinfolk left down home.⁹

Sam loved the blues so much, it was sometimes hard to know which came first: Sam, the blues songs he loved, or Sam's imitation of them. Muddy and B. B. sang the story of his life. Just listen to the titles of some of their most famous songs strung together. How could they not be about Sam? A mannish boy, sometimes tom cat, hoochie coochie man, who just wanted to make love to every woman he met. A man-child in the Promise Land, rollin' and tumblin' because he can't be satisfied, who sometimes feels like going home when he got his mojo working, but it just won't work on the women he desired. A prodigal son and man who sometimes felt like nobody loved him but his momma, and she could be jiving too.¹⁰

Sam was the family's key to the highway, as Muddy would say. His motivations and actions led to his family's outmigration. It moved them away from cotton, sharecropping, and Jim Crow. It fulfilled his grandmother's dream.

Sterling loved Sam like a big brother. They were kinfolk. He affectionately wrote of Sam's genius and generosity in his poetry. Despite their divergent paths and age difference, they remained close throughout life. Rarely did they call each other by their birth names. Sam was "Buster" to Sterling, and Sterling was "Little Bruh" (like a little brother) to Buster. Buster was like the family's Moses or Harriet Tubman to Little Bruh. Buster left Mississippi in the early 1950s, and repeatedly returned South to help family migrate north to places like Chicago, Little Bruh included. He brought Sterling to Chicago in 1962, and his momma and sisters soon thereafter. "Buster is vocabulary of strength," Sterling wrote in one of his poems. "He'd drain blood from his veins for his family." "Brought me north to Chicago first," he recalled, "from dawn to midnight, from Mississippi through Tennessee, Kentucky, and Illinois's lower parts."¹¹

Like a yo-yo master effortlessly orchestrating an orb up and down a string, Buster masterfully yo-yoed vehicles up and down the interstate highways of I-55 and I-57 to

2010); Dionne Danks, *Crossing Segregated Boundaries: Remembering Chicago School Desegregation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

⁹August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: A Play in Two Acts* (New York: Plume, 1985).

¹⁰Muddy Waters, "Mannish Boy" (Chess Records, May 24, 1955); Muddy Waters, "Tom Cat" (Ter Mar Records, October 5, 1968); Muddy Waters, "Hoochie Coochie Man" (Chess Records, January 7, 1954); Muddy Waters, "I Just Want to Make Love to You" (Chess Records, April 13, 1954); Chuck Berry, "Promised Land" (Chess Records, December 15, 1964); Muddy Waters, "Rollin' and Tumblin'" (Aristocrat Records, April 7, 1950); Muddy Waters, "Got My Mojo Workin'" (Chess Records, December 1, 1956); B. B. King, "Ask Me No Questions / Nobody Loves Me but My Mother" (ABC Records, February 20, 1971).

¹¹Sterling D. Plump, "Cousin," unpublished poem, 1999. The poem is in the author's possession.

move family north. It helped that he had secured work as a long-haul driver. It gave him a vehicle and reason to be in and around Mississippi. Slowly but surely, more and more family hitched a ride, and their dreams, to his eighteen-wheeler and followed him north. The twelve-plus hour rides allowed Buster time to catch up with family and friends. It also gave him an opportunity to ease the minds of family unsure about leaving Mississippi, and everything they knew, behind. Buster understood their concerns; they reminded him of his first trip north. Sensing discomfort, maybe even regret, he tried to pass the time and lessen anxieties by telling family stories or self-effacing jokes. Or he'd turn the dial on his truck's radio to find a good blues channel they could hum to or sing along with. He had an uncanny ability and gift to make people feel welcomed and heard.

The short, skinny, braggadocious, and charismatic child with very little schooling grew into a slightly taller, stout, even more charismatic and handsome man. Family barely recognized him when he first returned home. Sam had grown up. But once he spoke, and fired off a few jokes, they all knew Buster was home. He had a giant-size persona that never let his height, size, poverty, or skin color bother him. And his personality was infectious; it pulled on people like gravity and placed him at the center of all things happening. He was a family man, and a man of many families, and possessed all the acumen of a seasoned leader or head of state. He was a quick-tempered and sometimes violent man when things didn't go his way, especially when he felt disrespected or that his family was under assault. Rarely did he show deference to anyone besides the apron-clad matriarchs that raised and cared for him. He was well dressed and carried himself with dignity. He was a proud, loud-laughing hard drinker. He was confident, funny, charming, and loving (sometimes too much, and too often). Family said he was hopelessly optimistic, a people-first person, deeply empathic, and generous to a fault. And everyone loved him for it.

Sam knew people. He learned to read them far better than he ever learned to read books. Decades of studying and tinkering with human behavior helped him understand people and how to engage them. He knew the worth of a smile. It diffused nonsense and created opportunities. So, he always smiled and tried to make others smile. He knew the value of a well-timed joke or personal story, so he always tried to make people laugh when they felt like shouting or crying, or he'd tell a story to change a person's mood. Usually, the joke or story was so good, people struggled to forget it, and they'd laugh so hard that it brought them to tears. He was a great storyteller. "Had Buster lived in another era," Sterling wrote of his big play brother, "he is Homer or Chaucer, or Shakespeare." And man could that man lie. "Not in the untruth sense," Sterling warned, "but in the exaggerated or Tall Tale genre." Give Buster a grain of sand, he jested, and Cousin would tell you about the whole beach.¹²

Buster had a remarkable ability to translate all experiences through his voice. He learned this skill by listening to and mimicking his elders, particularly his grandmother Ms. Mattie. Ms. Mattie was his momma's momma, and she shared her stories of Mississippi the way she learned them: by word of mouth. Sometimes she told stories by night fires—like the olden days—or on family porch swings, or at dinner tables after a Sunday service. Part Chickasaw Indian, she spent her advanced years telling

¹²Plumpp, "Cousin."

and retelling family stories of her people and how they came to Mississippi. Most ignored Ms. Mattie or didn't care for what she had to say. Some even thought she might be a little senile because she talked about things few could understand. But Ms. Mattie knew Mississippi. It was her home and all she'd known since her birth in the 1880s.

Mississippi, a land and place where the soil is as rich and fertile as the river—that gave the state its name—is long. A place where, if Ms. Mattie was commissioned to retell or rewrite the state's history, the chapters she'd produce would be penned in inks of sweat, tears, blood, and mud. Her study would begin by telling readers of the arrival of wealthy and poor White men from the Atlantic States—from Maine to Georgia—with ambitions of generating more wealth or striking it rich through the unfortunate dealings, ventures, and trades of cotton and slaves. It would tell of wars with Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Natchez, Shawnee, and Creek people, of their land negotiations with Spaniards, and of the conquest, extermination, and forced outmigration of Native Americans for the land redistribution and settlement of ambitious slaveholding White men.¹³

Her book would articulate the frustrations of generations of poor Whites who hated slavery almost as much as Black folk, and for strikingly similar reasons, except one. Slavery kept them landless, impoverished, and ignorant, and they wanted something more for their children than simply a badge of Whiteness. It would be replete with stories of how forced migrations, sales, and separations of enslaved people to and from Mississippi repeatedly destroyed families. Her volume would chronicle the birth of sorrow songs that evolved into the blues. It would tell of Africans still being imported and sold up the mouth of the Mississippi from enslaver markets in New Orleans to places like Natchez, Vicksburg, and Jackson—only for them to be smuggled and resold up other rivers like Yazoo, Big Black, and Little Tallahatchie, even as late as the start of the Civil War. Her book would share stories of emancipation and hope, Black Codes and violence, reconstruction and revenge, and freedpeople, bound in new ways to White people, White power, White land, and White cotton. Mississippi. A state full of troubled histories and troubled minds.¹⁴

¹³For histories related to early White settlement in Mississippi and the forced outmigration of Indigenous people in the territory and the state, see the following: Daniel H. Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013); Katherine M. B. Osburn, *Choctaw Resurgence in Mississippi: Race, Class, and Nation Building in the Jim Crow South, 1830–1977* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); Jacob F. Lee, *Masters of the Middle Waters: Indian Nations and Colonial Ambitions along the Mississippi* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019); Christian Pinnen, *Complexion of Empire in Natchez: Race and Slavery in the Mississippi Borderlands* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021).

¹⁴Charles C. Bolton, *Poor Whites of the Antebellum South: Tenants and Laborers in Central North Carolina and Northeast Mississippi* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery*; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007); Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*; David Brown, "A Vagabond's Tale: Poor Whites, Herrenvolk Democracy, and the Value of Whiteness in the Late Antebellum South," *Journal of*

With her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, Ms. Mattie recounted the stories of *her* and *their* Mississippi. Those who listened carefully could begin piecing together the story and chronology of their family's past. Her methodology was primeval. It was a mix of spoken word history with long pauses, emotions, and tangential recollections. Put together, it all haphazardly hummed and translated into stories of human suffering and misery. It is important to explain how she made meaning of her memories and words. She didn't tell chronological histories corroborated by source material evidence; she told her histories through testimonials, situations, past and immediate happenings, and inherited memories. Coherency was never her concern. She always left it to her listeners to decipher meaning or decode what she shared. It was the best she could do without any formal training in the discipline of history.

Ms. Mattie saw history as a form of currency or capital to be deposited in the minds of her grandbabies. Some could argue her stories were counternarratives to what a racist Mississippi wanted people to know about her, her people, and her kind. She wanted family to know something different than the idea that Black people's sole purpose in Mississippi was to pick cotton for another person's profit. In no way did she think Mississippi could treat Black folk right. She had never seen it. So, she further assumed its schools were never going to teach her children and grandchildren right. That being said, she unofficially became the family's history teacher.

To Buster, Little Bruh, and the others who sat and listened to her, Ms. Mattie's stories were powerful. She was one of their greatest teachers and she never attended school a day in her life. She spoke of the blues wailed by tired and swollen feet, broken hearts, and dispirited minds. She spoke of people who walked hundreds of miles from the Chesapeake and Carolinas in coffle gangs chained behind ox carts. People forced to walk and traverse valleys and mountains from Virginia to Georgia, who chopped through thickets and forests in Kentucky and Tennessee, who survived snakebites and dysentery in swamps and marshes in Florida and Louisiana, and who meandered manmade paths in South Carolina and Alabama, carved out by centuries of human activity. All to get to Mississippi, so they could pick cotton. Slavery's final frontier.

In her own words, Ms. Mattie shared stories of how these enslaved migrants settled along and around rivers that came to define and codify White supremacy and Black subjugation. She'd frighten young listeners with stories of how talk among Whites about needing extra money made enslaved folk hide their children, or run away in the stealth of night, in attempts to keep their families intact. She choked back tears as she shared how cotton ruined and killed Black bodies and minds—how the changing colors of fields forced Blacks to labor year-round their entire lives for another person's profit. Fields that start mud black in winter, but progressively turn green after seeding in early spring, then perfectly white mid-summer, dull brown in late autumn, and then black again. Slavery may have ended, she'd say, but Black folk's lifelong and lifewide bondage to cotton and its landowners carried on.

Ms. Mattie told these stories until her passing at the age of 103. Her summations of how vast white fields of cotton ruined millions of Black lives while simultaneously benefiting millions of lives worldwide always hit home to her two grandbabies, Buster

and Little Bruh. They were stories of people denied everything because of enslavement, who started their new life of freedom with nothing but personal ambition, and who persistently fought off the intergenerational ill effects and harms of slavery, racism, segregation, debt, hunger, and wrenching, unrelenting violence. If one had to compress Ms. Mattie's stories into a singular message, it would be: if you're Black, and the opportunity presented itself, leave Mississippi immediately.

No school in America could teach Buster and Little Bruh what they learned at Ms. Mattie's knee or on her front porch. And both proved to be good listeners and students. They took their grandmother's advice and left Mississippi first chance they could. But beyond the sorrow and pain she shared, the cousins heard other messages. Messages that kept families together despite powerful forces continually prying and tearing them apart.

Mississippi blues share stories of both sorrow and jubilee, pain and empowerment. Alongside the pains shared by Ma'Dear (grandma for those unfamiliar with the term), the cousins heard stories of family, love, strength, and determination. Stories of people who made a way out of no way. It was their people who walked behind those ox carts from the Carolinas. Who tussled with language, codes, and each other, in the hopes of fitting into an angry, segregated White world. Who had frequent private talks with Jesus, pleading with Him for a little more comfort, support, and guidance in this life, and requests for remembrances and rewards in the next.

Ms. Mattie taught them the importance of being kind and available to kinfolk. Family protected family, she'd say. Sometimes it was all that one had. Forced migration and forced labor because of slavery's expansion continuously created new worlds and new realities and new families in the Black community. Hell, slavery created Mississippi—at least its identity—and led to a civil war over its most coveted assets: cotton and slaves. The outgrowth of all this disruption and unpredictability was the establishment of an extensive kinship network throughout the slave South.¹⁵

¹⁵For more than a century, scholars—more specifically, African American scholars—have written on the expansion of slavery, its impact on the making of the African American family and culture, and the role kinfolk (family) played in African Americans surviving nearly 250 years of enslavement. W. E. B. Du Bois was among the first to combine history, autoethnography, and storytelling to explain the multiple layers of consciousness of the Black past, and how these layers of consciousness became strategies of survival in the present. Others would follow such as John Hope Franklin, James Baldwin, Sterling Stuckey, Alex Haley, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Virginia Hamilton, Jason R. Young, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. In the African American tradition, as Virginia Hamilton reminds us in her children's book, "storytelling was the first opportunity for black folk to represent themselves as anything other than property." To story-tell is to bear witness. For African Americans—then and now—it is their way of saying I am here, was here, and I matter(ed). For a short list of source considerations that speak to the origins of African American culture, the importance of storytelling within African American culture, and the concept of kinfolk, see W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1911); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920); Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1958); James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963); Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos of Slavery," *Massachusetts Review* 9, no. 3 (1968), 417–37; Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969); Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," *Oral History Review* 1 (1973), 1–25; Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black*

You do know what I mean when I say “kinship” or “kinfolk,” right? You know, people who are your people, but who sometimes really aren’t your people? You know what I mean? Kinfolk are people who are not always immediate family, but sometimes they’re your last family. Initially, a patchwork of people bonded by common experience, most often pain, that united those born, taken, and left behind because of slavery. Kinfolk labored together in cottonfields and picked up or slowed down the pace of hoeing or picking to protect loved ones from the lash. They shared stories of empowerment and family, old and new, by night fires after a hard day of slave labor. Kinfolk sometimes got on your last nerve, but you couldn’t stop loving them and their ways. They cared for one another’s children, parents, and grandparents as if they were their own. Kinfolk consoled the grieving when loved ones died or were sold away. They cried at burials, gave testimonials of affirmation about the dead when immediate family were too shook to speak, shared and contributed what little they had, and reminded enslaved loved ones, especially those fed up and bitter with bondage and the Creator, that God and His moral judgment were just and final.

Kinfolk were like patches of loose, discarded cloth gathered, assembled, and sewn together to make a quilt of stability in a very unstable world. Unconditional bonds that provided comfort, shelter, resources, protection, and love. A uniquely American tapestry, stitched together with threads and needles of pain, but interwoven and padded with love, and displayed with affection. Black America’s comfort blanket. Kinfolk were the primary reason Black people survived twenty-five decades of enslavement. Like the blues, it’s another gift Blacks pioneered in America.

Kinfolk paid for Little Bruh’s high school education and paved the way to his professorship and world travels. They mustered up the money for Buster to buy a one-way train ticket to Chicago in the hopes of saving his restless soul from cottonfields, prison, or worse. Kinfolk like Buster took family and friends north to escape Mississippi and their own cottonfield blues. Ms. Mattie incorporated these stories into her narrations and told them as stories of inspiration to the next generation of grandbabies who visited and sat by her side. I know, because I was one of them.

Community (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); James D. Anderson, “Aunt Jemima in Dialectics: Genovese on Slave Culture,” *Journal of Negro History* 61, no. 1 (1976), 99–114; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Virginia Hamilton, *The People Who Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015); Sergio Lussana, “Reassessing Brer Rabbit: Friendship, Altruism, and Community in the Folklore of Enslaved African-Americans,” *Slavery and Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2017), 123–46.

When Ms. Mattie spoke, I saw the grace and power Buster, my daddy, witnessed and told me about. She was a beautiful woman, with a beautiful mind, speaking beautifully about her people. I only came to know and learn from her in the last half decade of her life. At this point, Ms. Mattie could barely move and was confined to her bedroom. On visits, I tried not to stare too much at the woman my daddy bragged so much to me about on our long car rides to Hinds County. I didn't want to be rude. Her daughter, Ms. Carrie, my great-aunt, sat with Ms. Mattie all day. She never left her side. Ms. Carrie would scratch her momma's head with a thick black comb as she braided her long white hair. Ms. Mattie loved to have her head scratched as she talked to her grandbabies. When she couldn't quite articulate what she had to say, Ms. Carrie would whisper a few questions to her momma, and then help her finish her thoughts.

Whereas other grandchildren exhausted themselves with games of tag and sprint races outside, I sat with Ms. Mattie until I was forced outside to play with kinfolk. Even as a preteen child, I preferred her stories over being grabbed, pulled, and wrestled to the ground by sweaty country cousins I barely knew. Her stories spurred my curiosity and passion for history and desire to know how the past affects the present.

Studying Ms. Mattie's history, and the history of her histories, in the academy has proven difficult. How does one tell or write the history of stories never written down, or only heard as a child? How does one corroborate the reliability, accuracy of events, or competing claims of truth, of the memories of both the teller and listener of these stories? The academy, in general, dismisses her stories as folktales. But if you've studied the specifics of American history, more specifically the African American past, you know they are something more than family myths or legends.

Making meaning of Ms. Mattie's stories is kind of like studying, and attempting to prove, the existence of black holes. All kinds of evidence around the periphery or edges of black holes support claims of their existence, but nothing specific that unquestionably proves they're real. Until, of course, a photograph was recently taken of a black hole that finally captures what a century of theories and scientific evidence had already proven. Humanity, at least outside of scientific communities, needed a photograph to believe not only that black holes are real, but that they reside at the center of virtually every galaxy. The photograph not only confirms their presence, but also validates century-long research charting their immense gravitational force, and how black holes define the character and movement of all things, known and unknown, in the visible universe.

The same is true of Black folk in the history of the United States, especially in Mississippi. Their people, lived experiences, and stories are at the center of everything that made America—and by default, Mississippi—great. Everything. Centuries of theories, histories, and evidence show their existence, contributions, and gifts, but they have not been captured in a way acceptable to the general public, even though countless photographs exist as proof. Society has yet to accept the centeredness and immense gravitational impact African Americans have had on the making of America and its people. At the center of all things known and unknown in this country are Black people. Everything. Considerations of how to treat and include people of African descent since their arrival in 1619, four-hundred-plus years ago, have been at the center of how American society came to define its norms, values, beliefs, policies,

people, institutions, economics, and innovations. Even the very definition of freedom stems from the treatment of Black people at the time of the drafting of two of this nation's most important documents: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.¹⁶

Ms. Mattie knew the realities of this centeredness theory all too well. She was essentially the family's Stephen Hawking: someone who'd developed years of deep thought, knowledge, and evidence to support her claims, but without possession of a definitive photograph to prove them.¹⁷ Her evidence was a century of stories and experiences. Stories that started with her daddy, and her daddy's people and kinfolk, formerly enslaved people and their children, who shared their life experiences, *their histories*, with and around her when she was a child. Ms. Mattie sat and listened and absorbed and made meaning of the knowledge they shared. She methodically and meticulously tried to pass it on to others, in the hopes they too would listen, and pass it on further. She was the culmination of intergenerational knowledge, amassed, processed, and passed on for future generations of listeners and storytellers to absorb, build upon, and share. Thank God, a few listened and shared. And I am here today, presenting in this venue and on this platform, to pass on the knowledge and wisdom she shared. Her stories shape the histories I write. They guide my weary mind and pen when I feel like giving up or researching and writing a different kind of history.

It pains me to share as a tenured professor of education and history at a major university—the second in the family to become a professor, the first on the side of my daddy's daddy—that my memories of Ms. Mattie's memories are just as fragmented as the stories she told. At best, I share stories of her stories as told to me by my late father, Samuel Spann (Buster), our cousin, Sterling Plumpp (Little Bruh), and the last living family—kinfolk—of their generation. I was a teenager when Ms. Mattie died. I was less than two months shy of being seventeen years old when my daddy died. He beat cotton, but he couldn't beat cancer. He was fifty-eight years old when Jesus, as the blues singer Mississippi Fred McDowell wailed and moaned, “made up his dying bed.”¹⁸

I entered adulthood and the academy determined to find a way to tell their stories and lived experiences the way they expressed them to me: unapologetically. I haven't

¹⁶W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* (Boston: The Stratford Co., Publishers, 1924); 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: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1935); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America*, 3rd ed., with an introduction by V. P. Franklin (New York: Touchstone, 1996); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2021).

¹⁷Stephen Hawking is one of the most celebrated physicists to study the origin, existence, and evolution of black holes. To understand his theories on black holes and their centrality in the making of the universe, see Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 10th ed. (New York: Bantam, 1998); Stephen Hawking, *Black Holes: The Reith Lectures* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

¹⁸Mississippi Fred McDowell, “Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dying Bed” (Chicago: Testament Records, February 6, 1966).

yet found a way. I have written a number of histories on the African American experience, most specifically of the educational experiences of formerly enslaved Mississippians, but I have yet to tell and write the history of *my* Mississippi people. This is the first step in a long struggle to do so.

The structures of the academy, the rules of evidence and academic research and writing, and my own personal hesitations have simply kept me from writing this narrative. But the more I research this aspect of my past, the more I realize the attention, structure, and voice it needs, and more importantly, deserves. Sam's cottonfield blues were uniquely his, but a million more Sams await discovery, research, and articulation. Together, they tell the story of how cotton impacted and defined people's lives. How it led to their outmigrations. How it kept mothers and grandmothers attentive to the ways their babies and grandbabies were being taught and treated. How it made them truthsayers and family teachers like Ms. Mattie.

Still, my personal hesitations beyond the academy come with a strange and uncomfortable acknowledgment. Ironically, the pressures cotton put on my dad to leave Mississippi created the conditions for me to come into this world. It made me. Without cotton, there is no restlessness, outmigration, courting of a White Indiana girl, or birth of their biracial child who'd be the first in his family to earn a doctorate and write a history about Mississippi cottonfields and schoolhouses. It's hard to concede, but without cotton, and all the strife and challenges associated with it, there's no me.

It's taken me twenty-five years to draft the beginnings of a history that family has asked me to write. I promise it won't take me twenty-five years to finish it. I will no longer fight with my academic mind over questions of what constitutes objectivity or whether the inclusion of the personal is appropriate in historical research and writing. Just as I have used the tools I've learned and honed as a historian to write the educational histories of African Americans in general, I will do the same for the lived experiences of the people who made me, me.¹⁹

I will fulfill a kinfolk request and do as Cousin Sterling asked of me at a party celebrating the completion and earning of my doctorate. He gifted me a three-page poem he wrote about my father and our people, affectionately entitled "Cousin," in which he beseeched upon me a call of action. As I glanced deeply at the poem

¹⁹One of the most important books I have read on including the personal in historical research and writing is edited by Kathleen deMarras and Stephen D. Lapan, entitled, *Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and Social Sciences* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004). The book can be found as an open source at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.453.8428&rep=rep1&type=pdf#page=48>. For other sources on the subject, see Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Bridging the Historical Divide: Family History and 'Academic' History," unpublished paper presented at the Midwestern Roots Conference, sponsored by the Indiana Historical Society, August 2004; Angel Adams Parham, "Race, Memory and Family History," *Social Identities* 14, no. 1 (2008), 13–32; Christine Sleeter, "Critical Family History, Identity, and Historical Memory," *Educational Studies* 43, no. 2 (2008), 114–24; Arlene Stein, "Trauma and Origins: Post-Holocaust Genealogists and the Work of Memory," *Qualitative Sociology* 32 (2009), 293–309; Anne Marie Kramer, "Kinship, Affinity and Connectedness: Exploring the Role of Genealogy in Personal Lives," *Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2011), 379–95; Duncan Koerber, "Truth, Memory, Selectivity: Understanding Historical Work by Writing Personal Histories," *Composition Studies* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 51–69.

that sketched together meaning, attributions, and names of our family's past, Sterling cleared his throat loud enough to break my focus and shift my attention towards him. When we made eye contact, he spoke firmly but softly a few words I don't think I will ever forget. He said, "Chronicler, chronicle our history."

I will, Cousin . . . kinfolk promise, I will.

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