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In July 1892, miner and labor organizer Richard L. Davis returned to the site of what was becoming an increasingly chaotic mix of labor unrest and racial conflict. In the town of Rendville, in southeastern Ohio, sat several mines owned by the local, baron-like Rend family which pioneered the region's extraction of coal and creation from scratch of a local workforce to do so. The Rends, unlike some operators in the nation, recruited viable labor from wherever it could be found. As a result, Rendville's nascent working-class took on a highly multi-ethnic, multi-racial character, a trend which was repeating itself in similar conditions throughout the nation. The Rends, however, did not necessarily have an especially progressive view of race or ethnicity. Following another national trend, the Black miners in Rendville worked and lived separately from the white miners, which led to frequent outcry and unrest over the inequality produced by segregation.

Mine 3 in Ohio's Sunday Creek Valley, one of many in the area, had seen continuous unemployment for the better part of a year. The miners there claimed to be victim to a wide range of forms of wage theft, violations of their autonomy, and threats to their safety. As a result, the Rend family's operations were repeatedly shut down as the workforce went out on strike or was conversely shut out as a way of controlling the organization and intensity of these labor actions. Mine 3 was where Richard Davis made his living. He was the checkweighman, an elected position which gave him the responsibility of verifying that the company's measurements of each worker's coal, on which their pay was based, were not fraudulent. This was an all-Black mine, and Davis, a Black man, had gained broad trust to fight for what the workers were owed.

Davis, a long-time labor activist who had been in the now-defunct Knights of Labor before becoming a founding member of the United Mine Workers of America, was a leading figure in the regional organization and was a fervent believer in the need for firm solidarity

between laborers to achieve any improvements on their conditions in the workplace. In July 1892, writing to the *United Mine Workers Journal*, Davis described the scene at Mine 3 as the Black miners were entertaining the idea of breaking off and forming their own union, rather than counting on white union men helping them achieve equality of pay. Infuriated at the notion of splitting the organized resistance to the Rends, Davis wrote: "We are too far advanced a civilized nation to even entertain such foolish notions."[1] Rejecting the offer of steadier work for the Black miners in their already-segregated workplace, and provoking condemnations from many of his fellow Black miners in the process, Davis soon negotiated with the mine's superintendent a breaking of the "color-line." Since they refused to hand privileges to a Black mine by itself, in exchange for equality of the way by which the miners' pay was measured, nearly all of the mines would become racially "mixed up all through." Some Black miners, however, saw this as a betrayal. [2]

Following this seemingly monumental success for racial progress and the organized labor movement of the area, another Black UMW organizer by the name of William R. Riley, coming from a remarkably similar perspective and working and organizing out of the town of Jellico, Tennessee, some 300 miles away on the more-southern end of Appalachia, was provoked by parts of Davis's characterization of these events: "Did you not know that the worst enemies we have to contend with are among our own race? Did you not know that they will seek more undue advantages over you than anyone else? What? A n****r? He is the worst animal living against

[1] Richard L. Davis, "What a Pity: No. 3 Lost Over Twenty Days," *United Mine Workers Journal* 2, no. 16 (July 28, 1892): 4; Frans H. Doppen, *Richard L. Davis and the Color Line in Ohio Coal: A Hocking Valley Mine Labor Organizer, 1862-1900* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2016), 92.
[2] Davis, "What a Pity," 4; Doppen, *Davis and the Color Line* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2016): 92.

his race, and when I say n****r I mean n****r and not colored people."[3] He did not care for Davis's tendency to take up for Black miners who took advantage of labor unrest to get a foot in the door in employment that had predominately gone to white men.

The two men who seemed like natural allies, and in fact had been in close conversation, supporting one another in the *UMW Journal* several times in the past, still found themselves fighting among themselves at a time when unity would seem to have been of the utmost importance. The two men were committed, highly-invested activists for social progress and the rights of workers and racial minorities at a time when the national mood was anything but welcoming to such changes. And yet even then and there, as Black organizers fighting the same fight in the same union, they seem to have at times fallen into bitter disagreement.

This sort of tragic infighting is the topic of a lot of historical research, and the infighting of this time period spreads far beyond these two local figures. Historians have fixated on a dichotomy between the thinking and leadership of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois in most analyses of the civil rights and labor movements of the decades right around the turn of the twentieth century. The dichotomies that might be drawn between radical and conservative, elite and populist, and progressive and reactionary may be satisfying, but the story of these intellectuals and activists is not as cleanly cut as we might like. These figures were making their ways as best as was possible in circumstances that the historical record only gives us glimpses of. In order to do these sorts of historical actors justice, or credibly take away lessons for action in the present day, their ideas and circumstances need to be taken seriously. Bringing in a

[3] William Riley, "A Few Words From Riley: The Worse Enemies Are Among Our Own Race," in Part III: The United Mine Workers of American and the Black Worker, ed. by Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979): 63, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

narrower focus on someone like Riley or Davis helps to bring fresh ideas into these larger conversations and provides a reminder that a handful of famous men cannot stand in for an entire subject area.

Through the eyes of Riley and Davis, I analyze the possibilities represented by activists as they navigated class, race, and labor conflict in Southern Appalachia. These individuals' life experiences get to the heart of questions about race and class as the two clashed in the minds of so many people who were looking for answers in a time of extreme change and struggle. Because these figures have been used as a tool for broader commentary by historians, the particular historical stories that are written about their lives take on much broader meanings than they could have ever known. In researching these social activists, I have necessarily been researching the ways in which intellectuals many generations later have discussed them. By learning about their lives and presenting them as unique thinkers, with flaws and contributions that are all their own, these men's stories can be used to open up conversations about how to think about the time period in which they lived. A discussion of William R. Riley or Richard L. Davis is indirectly a discussion of the meaning of race. And by looking at the limits imposed on these men and how they responded to them, we are also highlighting the historical agency of people who may otherwise fail to be seen (or may be outright ignored) due to their race.

Historiography

The decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century were a time of immense upheaval as the United States went through an intensive process of industrialization, ensuing waves of economic instability, and large-scale human migration. Among all of this, activists and reformers necessarily emerged in response. A major source of this sort of activism at the time

emerged in the sector of racial justice, as resistance arose to the imposition of racialized treatment of a greater and greater range of social life in America. Following in a long tradition of social activism surrounding the "race question," a wide array of figures, many still well-known today such as Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington, advanced the cause of Black rights as they came under assault following a period of relative progress. Figures such as these were the key historical actors organizing resistance to the dictates of white-supremacy, and they are celebrated until this day for their work. Yet for each of these more well-known figures, there were hundreds of people doing similar work on the ground, with much less recognition.[4]

Relatedly, this was a period of intense labor activism and conflict between employers and the employed. The period saw an explosion of organized labor that was set on asserting itself through direct actions. Early on, the Knights of Labor appeared as a quite-radical force, attempting to organize across an incredibly broad swathe of demographics, including across racial lines, before breaking apart in the 1890s. One section of the Knights of Labor reconstituted itself along with other unions into the United Mine Workers of America, which purported to carry on this assertive legacy of trade unionism in the mining workforce. On the national level, The Knights were overtaken by the American Federation of Labor which pushed for the more conservative craft-union model that reinforced racial and ethnic exclusions and turned its focus away from unskilled workers. Around the same time arose a wide array of unions and leaders taking different strategies for labor activism. More radical figures, such as Eugene V. Debs, rose to national prominence around the same time as the AFL's iconic, and relatively conservative, leader Samuel Gompers.[5]

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[4] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).
[5] Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920," (International Labor and Working-Class History, no. 26. 1984): 14-17.

Like activists of any kind, Riley and Davis were operating in a particular social and political environment. These environments, along with the audiences and array of detractors who were interacting with them in their environment, constrained their messages and the ways in which they were able to wield influence. Just as they had to shape their words and behaviors in response to their opponents, they also had to attempt to shape their message to receptive audiences. In the past 100 to 150 years, scholars have revived some historical figures in order to make them into idols of modern progress based on their conformity with expectations for people in the present. Simultaneously, harsh judgments have been passed by activists, scholars, and commentators speaking from a more recent perspective on other figures from the past, most notably Booker T. Washington.[6] The well-known African-American leader of the turn of the twentieth century is, almost universally, used as a reference point for discussion of these obscure activists in the existing historiographical debates around race and class in American history.[7] To some smaller degree, this has also occurred with these two lesser-known figures. These types of judgments are fitted to the rhetorical demands of a different audience and often hold historical actors to the demands of the present, unfairly judging them based on what is achievable in an entirely different time and place. Taking their circumstances and conditions into account, and taking their ideas on their own terms, I aim to bring some clarity to these figures as serious historical agents.

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[6] Pero Gaglo Dagbovie. "Exploring a Century of Historical Scholarship on Booker T. Washington." The Journal of African American History 92, no. 2 (2007): 253–64.

[7] Robert J. Norrell*, Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2011): Conclusion; Provides an overview of the late-twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement's verdict on the legacy of Booker T. Washington and conversely of W.E.B. Du Bois. A historical moment of rapid change managing to be achieved from assertive but peaceful activism which garnering the sympathy of white liberals bred different perspectives on how aggressively activism should be pursued and led to different judgements on the actions of figures from the past.

From the 1880s to early 1900s, white supremacists redefined race in highly regressive ways, forcing Black Americans out of positions of political and economic power, rapidly rolling back Black economic advancement, racializing public spaces through "Jim Crow" legal policies, and legally disfranchising the Black voting populace. All the while, whites widely perpetuated violence against Black communities, which major figures in media and politics sanctioned as acceptable responses to Black expressions of power or resistance. Simultaneously, waves of people migrated towards urban working environments and away from long traditions of rural life, drastically altering class configurations around the country. This is the environment in which Riley and Davis, along with Washington on a more national level, operated. [8]

These massive changes in society make the period a crucial focus for research into the evolution of racial and class identities in the United States. These two conflicting sources of identity, both in a state of extreme flux, were in many ways at odds with one another in a competition for the hearts and minds of the American population. This was especially true in the highly contentious mining regions of Appalachia, where mine owners recruited immigrants and African Americans to prevent labor organizing. They called the blending of linguistic, ethnic, and racial identities a "judicious mixture."[9] By studying this competition between race and class as sources of identity, this thesis contributes to our understanding of the time period and the ways in which political consensuses and competitions for power seem to have very frequently revolved around questions of racial allegiance and competition between the races.[10]

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[8] Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[9] Kenneth R. Bailey and Nell Irvin Painter. "A Judicious Mixture: Negroes and Immigrants in the West Virginia Mines, 1880-1917." In *Blacks in Appalachia* (University Press of Kentucky, 1985 1st ed.) 117–32.

[10] This sort of talk about competition between races was incredibly common in media from the time. See discussion of Social Darwinism and White Supremacy in American media: Norrell, *Up From History*; Emily Hilliard, *Making Our*

The variety of positions on the race question within labor activism itself can be usefully separated into two categories: those centered on race, and those centered on class. Race-conscious perspectives are immersed in an identity around racial categories which consign individuals to social roles deemed appropriate by the "dominant race," and inhibit civic and social possibilities which break from those assigned roles. These perspectives include those of many white workers, labor organizers, and employers, people who not coincidentally were (and continue to be) dominant actors in shaping the public discourse. They may favor labor organizing, perhaps even labor militancy, yet all in their own way conclude that the spoils of citizenship, and the economy, are reserved primarily for whites, the population made out to be characteristically "Appalachian" and/or "Southern" more broadly.[11] Race-centered perspectives may also include Black workers who distrust organized labor, seeing it as a white institution which serves to restrict labor opportunities to white workers, and instead insist on separation, or complete secession, from the dominantly white culture as a means to Black advancement.[12] Also in this category fall Black employers and professionals who stress loyalty to the Black community as a means for advancement, favoring loyalty of workers and consumers to the more 'responsible' or 'better' (i.e. most financially successful) of their race.

Alternatively, class-conscious perspectives see race as an obstacle; a creation of elite society to keep down those who would otherwise be allies in the larger fight for progress and advancement as workers. Within this category fall many prominent white labor leaders, though

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Future: Visionary Folklore and Everyday Culture in Appalachia (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 30

[11] Nell Irvin Painter, *Blacks in Appalachia* (University Press of Kentucky 1985, 1st ed.). Edited by William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell.

[12] Marcus Garvey, *Selected Writings and speeches of Marcus Garvey* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2015); See for the writings of the most significant figure of such a viewpoint in the early twentieth century. His success as an orator and fundraiser eventually led to his persecution by the federal government, leaving no major successor. W.E.B Du Bois in many ways followed in a similar mode of thought.

almost certainly not a majority of white workers or white rank-and-file organizers themselves. A wide swathe of major figures ranging from Samuel Gompers of the AFL to prominent socialist organizer Eugene V. Debs, can be counted in this category, as they viewed the world and their strategies for activism through the lens of socio-economic class. Also included are many Black labor activists and Black workers, though this last group was often pushed by white hostility into pursuing advancement by whatever means were available, including strikebreaking, which created an extremely complicated and often tense relationship with organized labor. [13] This topic will be explored in some depth throughout this essay.[14]

The purpose of this research is to position the perspective and intellectual contributions of two unique and relatively obscure figures within the broader intellectual debates and movements for progress going on at this historical moment at the turn of the twentieth century.[15] These two figures represent radically egalitarian forces in the labor and civil rights movements, ones which rejected passivity and accommodation with their oppressors. Highly effective organizers and intellectuals in their own right, the failure of Riley's and Davis's views to become the dominant views of the movements around them reflect the fact that their influence was circumscribed by forces out of their control. In exploring the views of these men, I hope to help

[13] For a good summary of the history of Black strikebreaking during this key period, see: Warren C. Whatley, "African-American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal," *Social Science History* 17, no. 4 (1993): 525–58.

[14]Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-21* (University of Illinois Press, 2001); This work represents a scholarly challenge to the status quo of the portrayal of Southern history. His work put important emphasis on these opposing stances which I am defining as a class-conscious/race-conscious dichotomy, but was overly reductive in his search for an idealistic story of racial cooperation. An activist perspective such as his needs to be tempered by a nuanced analysis of the challenges undermining that ideal.

[15] This is not a project focused on the study of Whiteness or of Blackness per say, but is intended to positively contribute to conversations about the construction of race. For a highly influential work which sets an example for critical study of race, see: David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2022).

fill the gap of understanding which exists pertaining to the agency of Black labor within the confines placed on them by white America.[16]

Riley and Davis

William R. Riley was born into slavery shortly before the Civil War and would find himself immersed in the turbulent world of Appalachian coal mining in his young adulthood. Quickly becoming involved in the labor movement, he rose through the ranks of the United Mine Workers of America. At the height of his influence, Riley was the treasurer of the UMW district covering most of Tennessee and Kentucky, a profound achievement for a Black man in a white-majority labor union in the 1890s, and a statement to that union's rare level of commitment to interracial organizing. His worldview was one firmly committed to egalitarianism, strongly influenced by his Protestant beliefs and a life experience categorized throughout by close relations between Black and white members of his community. Together, these factors provided him with an almost religious level of faith that the divisions based on skin color which had become so enflamed in the world around him, could be overcome by the coordinated direct action of working people. His faith though, was weakened in his later years, and in his older age he transitioned to something more akin to a race-based view of activism and left his official position within the UMW to dedicate his time to preaching.[17]

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[16] Eric Arnesen, "Up from Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History 26*, no. 1 (1998): 150; Arnesen discusses the failure to extend to Black workers the recognition which is increasingly given to their White counterparts as active participants in the making of history. This research is aimed at bringing to light some of these overlooked Black historical actors, and their actual behaviors and perspectives, rather than leaving them only as passive objects on the receiving end of actions from White historical actors.

[17] Karin A. Shapiro, "William R. Riley: The Limits of Interracial Unionism in the Late-Nineteenth-Century South," In *The Human Tradition in American Labor History*, ed. by Eric Arnesen and Karin A Shapiro (Wilmington: SR Books, 2004): 69–87.

Richard Davis's remarkably similar life trajectory led him to even greater heights within the UMW. As a result, he has drawn even greater attention from modern historians, who in the late-twentieth century placed him at the heart of historiographical debates. When historian Herbert G. Gutman wrote a lengthy essay about Davis's role in the UMW and the implications which that held for the UMW's influence on racial relations, he immediately elevated Davis to the center of a heated controversy on the study of labor and race, a controversy which I will explore in depth at a later point.

Born in Virginia and working in a tobacco-processing factory as a child, Davis moved to West Virginia and then Ohio as a young man, looking for work and finding it in the burgeoning world of the coal mines. He was a man who spent almost the entirety of his life building his career first as a mine laborer and then as a labor organizer for the UMW. Though he faced significant setbacks, fierce discrimination, and even threats on his life, Davis became an even greater figure in the UMW than Riley, becoming first a state-wide leader in Ohio before being elected as a member of the UMW's National Executive Board. Though it's not yet entirely clear why, he later fell out of favor with the union's rank-and-file, dying in his early thirties having been abandoned and left to abject poverty by the union to which he had dedicated his life.

Riley and Davis lived and organized in a particular time and place full of influential figures who were shaping the conversations about race and activism that were occurring around them. Foremost in this discussion stands Booker T. Washington, the dominant Black intellectual of his day, who has since received a particularly harsh verdict from not only his contemporaries, like Du Bois, but also from more-recent activists and historians.

Through a careful reading of the written work left behind by the lesser-known thinkers and activists for progress, the outlines of a crucial dialogue take shape. Though fragmentary,

these documents reveal a dynamic evolution of the responses made to changing political and economic conditions, as some influences became circumscribed while others were elevated. Much more in-depth work has been dedicated to these broader histories and the larger national figures involved in them, such as Du Bois and Washington, than has been devoted to smaller figures such as William Riley and Richard Davis; and while their lives have been documented and summarized, the details of their individual positions as intellectuals have not been given as much analysis as they deserve. This paper will first focus on these broader national thinkers, attempting to lay out a clear picture of where they stood before going into a more detailed discussion of Davis and Riley.

Booker T. Washington and the National Intellectual Landscape

Especially prominent in questions of racial activism in Riley's and Davis's time was Booker T. Washington.[18] Washington was quickly elevated to his position as "leader of his race" after the death of preeminent abolitionist Frederick Douglas. Washington's role as a national intellectual leader for the Black community came at a time when White Supremacy was being forcefully asserted across the country, rolling back the progress made between Emancipation and the Reconstruction Era.[19]

Washington's presentation of non-confrontational strategies for achieving greater power for the Black community meant that he came under attack from contemporary figures who presented themselves as radicals. Since he was an incredibly influential Black voice nationally, it also meant that the most common tactic used by institution-builders and other leaders in the

[18] Pero Gaglo Dagbovie. "Exploring a Century of Historical Scholarship on Booker T. Washington." *The Journal of African American History 92*, no. 2 (2007): 239–64.
[19] C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow.* 3rd revised ed. (Oxford University Press, 1974).

Black community who were under his influence was to focus on success in the labor market on terms compatible with the capitalistic development being imposed on them.[20] This is a contrast to the tactics advanced by figures like Riley, Davis, and others in the labor movement who demanded a fundamentally different distribution of power, to be achieved through direct action. Washington had no such platform for direct, organized activism that could change a fundamentally White Supremacist society, and he was in a state of nearly constant anxiety about drawing the attention of the white public which surrounded him and frequently broke into blood-thirsty spouts of violence such as the infamous insurrection and pogrom in Wilmington.[21] Washington stuck to negotiating favor from sources of funding, mainly from wealthy white philanthropists in the Northeast, and quietly building up Tuskegee Institute. As a result, the Institute, which was truly his life's work, would become one of the biggest universities, black or white, in the entire Southern United States and would give him the platform from which he became a national leader and, for a time, a personal advisor to the president of the United States.[22]

Washington has been predominately portrayed as a traitor to his race, or at the very least an extreme conservative, both by contemporary critics, W.E.B. Du Bois foremost among them,

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[20] Pero Gaglo Dagbovie. "Exploring a Century of Historical Scholarship on Booker T. Washington." *The Journal of African American History 92*, no. 2 (2007): 239–64.

[21] Melton McLaurin "Commemorating Wilmington's Racial Violence of 1898: From Individual to Collective Memory." *Southern Cultures 6*, no. 4 (2000): 35–57.

[22] Robert Norrell, "The Leader of the Race," Chapter in *Up from History*: As Norrell describes it, Washington had long been a quiet backer of the Republican Party, believing that it alone was capable of swaying the national culture away from anti-Black racism. By the time that Teddy Roosevelt was elected president, Washington was already a prominent figure nationally, and he effectively became one of the sole representatives of Black Republicans in the capital city. Washington's faith in Teddy would decline before being fully betrayed as the party became increasingly unresponsive to the Black electorate.

and by activists and radicals all the way into the present.[23] Washington, however, proved acutely in tune with the social and economic conditions in which he worked. His thinking was much more based on pragmatic negotiation with regressive white countrymen, during a time of extreme anti-Black propaganda and violence, than it was on any belief in some conservative, pro-business ideology. His primary contention that Black Americans should vigorously pursue education and practices which could promote practical success in a white society was not a dogmatic rejection of activism or of higher education for Black workers, but rather a practicable means of promoting Black advancement within the new industrial system into which they were brought.

Ida B. Wells, one of Washington's many contemporary critics, however, takes this as evidence that he sought to cater to the aims of white supremacists, essentially promoting the doctrine of Black people 'pulling themselves up by their bootstraps' rather than being critical of the society putting them down. She deemed him a servant for the white-run culture, who reinforced a picture of Black people as worthless and lowly, only fit for an education in how to work like a slave. In one critique, she wrote, "The world which listens to him and which largely supports his educational institution, has almost unanimously decided that college education is a mistake for the Negro."[24] In other words, her picture of Washington, which gained wide traction

[23] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, chapter 3 (1903); This is Du Bois's first unmistakable break with Washington's leadership in 1903. Having had largely identical views on issues of substance for many years, Du Bois began what would be a lifelong, intensely personal adversarial relationship with Washington; Pero Gaglo Dagbovie. "Exploring a Century of Historical Scholarship on Booker T. Washington." *The Journal of African American History 92,* no. 2 (2007): 239–53.

[24] Ida B. Wells, "Booker T. Washington and His Critics," *The World To-Day 6*, no. 4, April 4, 1904: 2. She added, "They hail with acclaim the man who has made popular the unspoken thought of that part of the North which believes in the inherent inferiority of the Negro, and the always outspoken southern view to the same effect. This gospel of work is no new one for the Negro. It is the South's old slavery practice in a new dress. It was the only education the South gave the Negro for two and a half centuries she had absolute control of his body and soul. The Negro knows that now, as then, the South is strongly opposed to his learning anything else but how to work."

with many other intellectuals and activists, is as an accomplice to the worst of white paternalism. Her evidence is that institutions of White Supremacy, such as the New Orleans Board of Education in one particular example, cite Washington's thinking as evidence supportive of their decisions to minimize Black education as unnecessary and otherwise assault the humanity of African Americans. Acknowledging that he denies ever asserting any such position, she still condemns him for providing a narrative easily coopted by white supremacists.[25] Her attacks on Washington's character and general influence were not an outlier.

Wells was just one among many of many seemingly like-minded people who became harsh critics following Washington's rise to national leadership. Around the same time, the duo of newspaper editor William Trotter and the intellectual and educator W.E.B. Du Bois paired up in an intensive propaganda campaign against Washington. They similarly asserted that Washington was a sellout to northern, white business-interests, and was concerned more with his own power as a "bourgeois leader" than as a representative of an oppressed social group.[26] This ultimately was aimed at displacing Washington as the effective leader of the civil rights movement, and came at a time when he was already being undermined by virulent public denunciations from Southern White Supremacists such as Tom Watson.[27] What the intended purpose of these attacks was, is a question that goes beyond this paper. The fact that such divisions arose despite how it must have weakened the opposition to White Supremacy, though, highlights just how pervasive these types of divisions are, and how important it is to look at these activists' actions with an open mind.

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[25] Ida B. Wells, "Washington."
[26] Norrell, *Up From History*, "Chapter 11: The Warring Ideals."
[27] Norrell, *Up From History*, "Chapter 13: The Assault by the Toms."

Just as Washington, Du Bois, Wells, and many, many others were attempting to influence the wider white society they lived in, whether through their role as an intellectual, a political leader, a community leader, or simply as a rank-and-file member of a community, Riley and Davis had to actively negotiate their presence in the spaces they existed in. Washington focused on a path which minimized antagonism toward white supremacists and helped Black Americans to navigate the industrial landscape. This meant, however, that his message could be taken to support the status quo of Black inferiority. This ambiguity of allegiances, though, was entirely the point. Washington gained a relatively secure place and platform for Black interests, yet it also meant his message became an easy message to be co-opted, and he became a character onto which others projected their interests. With this strategy, Washington managed to elevate himself into a place of prominence as an intellectual and as a respectable man, while simultaneously siphoning away some capital into institutions of education, such as Tuskegee.

Immersed in the struggle for racial equality for a population made into an under-class, Washington was able to gain insights that many could not, or simply did not want to see. This pragmatism led him to correctly identify a need to take survey of the actual perspective of the labor movement, a record which provides valuable insight into the state of the class-race debate going on at the time. His exchanges with a wide swathe of labor leaders and activists provides a valuable look into the ideological contest going on in the American working class over the question of race. The outcome of this contest was not a foregone conclusion during this time of upheaval and instability.

One of Washington's most illuminating works, this short essay titled "The Negro and the Labor Union" presents a very different picture of his motivations and goals for advancement.[28] In this piece and his other correspondences, Washington had a remarkably class-conscious and socially aware perspective. He approached the question of labor organization and class with an open, but skeptical, mind about the limits of white tolerance in their unions. What separated Washington from some of his more radical contemporaries was not necessarily a set of fundamentally antagonistic ideological convictions, though he did hold a suspicion of organized labor which was common among the Black political elite and intelligentsia of the time.[29] He came to occupy a position extremely different from some of the thinkers I will discuss below. Because he was effectively the so-called "race leader" of African-Americans, an unofficial and very fluid title which he inherited from Frederick Douglas, his story is of extreme importance to the story of every other social activist of his time.

While it may be worthwhile to criticize some of Washington's views and statements which imply a certain amount of compliance with racist and elitist views of the world, those criticisms have to be situated in an understanding that he was someone working within a political, media, and economic environment which sought the absolute exclusion of him and his community, and at times dabbled with considerations of their physical elimination.[3031]

Washington was a national figure of massive import and influence and because of this he has been a subject of controversy, deification, and debate ever since. But before he was a figure

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[28] Booker T. Washington, "The Negro and the Labor Unions," *Atlantic Monthly* 111:756-767 , June 1913.
[29] Norrell, Robert J. "Booker T. Washington: Understanding the Wizard of Tuskegee." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 42 (2003): 96–109.
[30] Robert Norrell, "The Assault by the Toms," Chapter in *Up from History*.
[31] It is worth mentioning here that American white supremacist movements and their paramilitaries of this time period have been reasonably labeled as some of the earliest expressions of fascist ideology in the world: Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

nationally, he was just someone with a mission for social change trying to make his way in the rural American South. Both in the context of the rural, white South and in the context of the national American political economy, Washington was not an activist who could afford to freely speak truth to power or assert the rights of his people. While we can draw moral conclusions on the positions he held and his actual effectiveness in negotiating his position, the moderation of his rhetoric and his compromises with White Supremacy can't be judged as if they were made in the world of the twenty-first century.

The two men discussed in the rest of this paper exemplify a starkly different strategy for social activism at the time. Riley and Davis were certainly subject to threats of extreme violence and intimidation; from the state, the white masses, and white media and business elite. Rather than being forced into a position of cautious negotiation, their role as worker-organizers provided a base of support and protection from white reaction, which was quite rare in other circumstances for Black activists of any kind.

Rather than existing on the terms and good graces of an incredibly hostile white elite, Davis and Riley, whose ideological nuances will be discussed in much more detail throughout this paper, were committed to agitating for direct-action which would unite Black and white workers' interests and directly assault the authority of dominant political and economic leaders. They were not quick to moderate their ideals or conceal their intentions, and they certainly did not shy away from direct confrontation with capital, or with one another for that matter. These men's life experiences shaped their unique perspectives on the world and the actions that they took as a result. In their often-uncompromising paths they presented an alternative to the dominate path which American history would follow in the ensuing decades of the 20th Century.

Leaving behind the "Washingtonian" consensus, these two men negotiated their place in white society with entirely different strategies.

William R. Riley

William R. Riley is an enigmatic historical figure who left very few details of his life behind on paper for us to study. The trajectory of Riley´s life has been compiled about as well as is possible by Karin A. Shapiro in her creatively-researched, short-essay biography in the collection, *The Human Tradition in American Labor History*. Drawing on limited materials including inconsistent census data and Riley's letters to the *UMW Journal*, scholars have managed to create a rough outline of the life of a man who has been largely lost to history, and whose remarkable role in the United Mine Workers of America has been under-evaluated.[32]

A chapter-length biographical piece written by Karin A. Shapiro does a lot in a short space, providing an outline of the man's life while leaving wide room for interpretation given the uncertainty of the particulars of much of Riley's life. Much of her analysis necessarily relies on reading between the lines of the area's history and its economic development. Going into the broader historical context, she makes familiar statements about a dichotomy between the leadership of Washington and Du Bois. She sums up Du Bois as advocating for educated elites to be leaders of the Black community and states that Washington, as a contrast to advocating for higher education, "maintained that southern blacks should not rail against discriminatory laws but rather should work hard, acquire an industrial education, and rely on the beneficence of the South's white elite."[33] Unfortunately, she makes the mistake here of repeating a narrative which misrepresents Washington's actions and viewpoints, as part of her implicit positioning of Riley

[32] Shapiro, "William R. Riley," 69–87.
[33] Shapiro, "William R. Riley," 78.

as an activist who was not such an elite as these two. She then goes into some discussion of aspects of Riley's letters, putting important emphasis on his strong belief in racial cooperation and in labor unionism.

In addition to this biographical piece are two sources which have compiled the letters written by Riley to the *United Mine Workers Journal* during his years in the union. The first, "Race and the United Mine Workers' Union in Tennessee: Selected Letters of William R. Riley, 1892-1895", was written in the late 1970s by Ronald L. Lewis. This piece dedicates about a paragraph to describing Riley's life before going into several pages of broader historiographical arguments about race and class activism during Riley's time. Lewis documents the hardening of policies of segregated trade unionism before lamenting the prominence of Washingtonian thinking on industrial relations and racial progress.[34] The article then simply pastes Riley's six letters in order, with no analysis being made on the thinking found therein.

Lewis, whose career was devoted to researching the intersections between class, race, and ethnicity, particularly in Appalachia, followed on the former article by co-editing along with Philip S. Foner a series entitled *The Black Worker*, which sought to chronicle the evolution of Black labor history in the United States all the way from the colonial period to the present (that is, the 1970's) through primary source documents containing the first-hand perspective of Black workers. Coming in several volumes, *The Black Worker Vol. 4* focuses on Black coal mining and strikebreaking, with one section of the volume dedicated to the role of Black workers in the early UMW. This section is made up almost entirely of the combined 68 written letters of Riley Davis and William R. Riley, and similarly contains a short descriptive essay before simply displaying

[34] Ronald L. Lewis, "Race and the United Mine Workers' Union in Tennessee: Selected Letters or William R. Riley, 1892-1895," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1977): 524–36.

the primary sources for what they are. This short introductory essay is much briefer, and yet more descriptive of the specific situation of Black labor within the early UMW, and of the lives and careers of both Riley and Davis.[35]

These two pieces are significant in that they document Riley's writings and disseminate them into a medium which makes them easily available to other scholars. They both, however, put minimal emphasis on the actual life or thinking of Riley. Both pieces of scholarship served their purposes at the height of the academy's faith in the project of social history. They revived these two men's stories but did not engage in the work of cultural history by thinking of them as intellectuals.

Notably, as is extremely common in this historiography, both of these sources completely misrepresent the national role of Booker T. Washington, and use him as a reference point against which to position Riley's ideological tendencies. Washington, taken as someone who so very unfortunately represented the majority-opinion of Black Americans in his time, is portrayed in "Selected Letters" as, "assert[ing] that the true friends of Black workers were the capitalists who supplied them with jobs, rather than the unions which excluded them."[36] Rather than being presented as a serious figure, negotiating in good faith what progress he could from the sources of funding available, Washington is made out to be an archconservative; an enemy of progress and of activists such as Riley who are implicitly held up as more pure. Directly echoing the kind of contemporary criticisms lobbed at him by the duo of William Trotter and W.E.B. Du Bois, this

[35] Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., *Part III: The United Mine Workers of American and the Black Worker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); Today, *The Black Worker* is fully digitized on its own website and is one of the most comprehensive and easily accessible sources for researchers looking into the intersection of race and class in American history.

[36] Lewis, "Race and the United Mine Workers' Union in Tennessee," 526.

kind of analysis lacks nuance and is more moralizing than it is descriptive of the reasons for these figures' distinct tactics.

This follows a long trend in which Du Bois is held up as the iconic, radical voice who spoke truth to power but went unheard.[37] Interestingly, unlike the common criticisms of Washington's contemporary opponents and the condemnations from later decades of social activists, these articles assert that Washington's failure to pursue justice is due to his advancement of Black racial consciousness in place of cooperation with white workers. Washington is made out to be someone pushing against racial intermixing and cooperation, and in favor of Black racial consciousness. This is a direct contradiction with Washington's actual commitment to striving for greater racial cooperation in American society, striving towards the eventual dissolution of the social distinctions produced by racial categorizations. The fact that Washington's end goal was such but was pursued with a strategy which emphasized taming the flames of White Supremacy rather than facing them head on, is ignored. With this picturesque villain painted out, smaller figures like Riley and Davis are positioned as heroes who were tragically silenced.

While these latter two sources contain some biographical information, and most importantly, some discussion of the importance of Riley's work and what it signified for the United Mine Workers, there has yet to be a comprehensive look at the thinking which went into his writing. While this means that Riley's life story has been brought into the historical canon of American labor, there has yet to be any work really integrating him into the histories of the United Mine Workers of America, the early twentieth century American labor and civil rights

[37] Pero Gaglo Dagbovie. "Exploring a Century of Historical Scholarship on Booker T. Washington." *The Journal of African American History 92*, no. 2 (2007): 239–53.

movements, or of Southern Appalachia. While the compilations of letters provided by *The Black Worker* and "Selected Letters" successfully provided access to Riley's thoughts and actions during his activist days, work has not yet been done to deal with his ideas in depth or, further, to contextualize the ways in which his ideas were influenced by the spaces he was negotiating within. Though there is no large body of work to look at here, I aim to fill some of this gap and correct the ways that Riley's thought has so far been contextualized.

William R. Riley: The Negotiator

For someone who was African-American and born to enslaved parents in the 1850s, just before the Civil War, Riley was raised in a community which presented itself as remarkably racially intermixed. Hoop Creek, where Riley grew up, was an independent African-American community in Claiborne County, Tennessee, formed willingly from the land of the smallholding slaveholders of the area following Emancipation.[38] This indicates a relatively amicable, if paternalistic, living situation wherein the two communities, though racially organized, were also unsegregated and deeply interdependent.[39] Hoop Creek as a result became the site of a land-owning population of Black farmers with its own community institutions including a church and a school. William Riley's family was remarkably well-educated for the time period. William and both of his parents could both read and write, and two of his younger siblings also attended school. The Riley family was thus highly successful at achieving what was at the time a common dream for advancement among Black families, post-slavery.[40]

[38] Shapiro, "William R. Riley," 72.
[39] Shapiro, "William R. Riley," 73-74.
[40] Shapiro, "William R. Riley," 71.

The census also shows a number of households containing families which defied the stigma against interracial family arrangements. Little can be said about the context in which these relationships were had based on this sparse information, but whatever power imbalances must certainly have remained would have been of a different character to that of the much more industrially-organized, intensive plantation-style agricultural system of the Deep South. In such a community, where daily work and life entailed exchange and communication between people in different racial categories, fierce separation of the two from one another would have made little sense. Someone such as Riley being raised in a community like this would not accept strict segregation and racial consciousness as a given.

From a young age, Riley apprenticed with his father as a blacksmith and labored on the family farm. In his twenties, he left the family home to find work in the burgeoning mining towns which were popping up throughout the region as it was gradually brought into connection with the wider world through new rail lines and networks of trade and resource-extraction. Riley jumped around the tri-state area at the intersection of Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky, looking for work and dabbling with labor in the mines among other things, and at some point beginning what would be a life-long passion of ministering. The oratory skills he developed while speaking on spiritual topics surely played a role in his later success at achieving elected office in the United Mine Workers and in organizing workers all around the region.

He finally settled down in Jellico, Tennessee, as a mine laborer, which would remain his home base for several years before his withdrawal from the United Mine Workers caused him to disappear from the historical record, outside of the census records every decade indicating his residency. In Jellico, he quickly became mixed up with the Knights of Labor, the young, highly

militant trade union which soon fractured but was revived in part through a merger which produced the United Mine Workers of America.[41]

So, from the UMW's start in Jellico, Riley was involved in its efforts. At some point, Riley became enough of a respected union man that he was elected to the position of checkweighman by the majority-white workforce. The role of checkweighman was one that required a high level of trust and respect from coworkers. A checkweighman was someone democratically elected by his fellow workers in a given mine to independently weigh and certify the amount of coal or ore which they had dug up.[42] Mine workers were typically paid by the amount they were able to dig, so many conflicts had arisen over the falsification of weights by the company in order to withhold the wages they owed them. The position was one created out of years of conflict and negotiation between mine workers and their employers, and in the state of Tennessee was finally enshrined in law in the 1887. When a biracial workforce entrusted this position to Riley, they were acknowledging their faith that a Black man could honor that hard-fought place which was crucial in their daily living standards.

From there, Riley was quickly recruited as a roaming organizer, a role in which he found immense success despite working with mostly white workers and often facing discrimination which got in the way of things like lodging and public speaking. In fact, it was not until well into this role that he finally faced major personal frustration when the mining town of the Glen Mary Company rejected the union and ostracized him due a combination of fear of their company's union-busting tactics and successful divide-and-conquer techniques based on racial divisions.[43]

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[41] John Laslett, *The United Mine Workers of America: A model of industrial solidarity?* (The Pennsylvania State University Press 1996).
[42] Shapiro, "William R. Riley," 74.
[43] Shapiro, "William R. Riley," 75.

As Riley continued roaming around the region aiding in the organization of new UMW locals, he occasionally wrote short letters to the UMW Journal to discuss issues being faced, to argue or converse with other writers, and to write to the Journal subscribers encouraging the dual principles of labor solidarity and racial cooperation.

Throughout these years, Riley was a first-hand observer of the many complicated dynamics at play in such an explosive environment as the company towns in these rugged, newly industrializing areas. He was directly involved in multiple occurrences of organized multi-racial activism, and present for multiple outbreaks of racial conflict, oftentimes violent ones.

This did not, however, lead him to a hostility to potential white allies. Despite lamenting white failures to live up to the UMW's official policy of racial equality, Riley's faith in the ability of working-class activism to unite through self-interest was near-religious in its totality. Over the course of his nearly fifteen years in the coal mines, striving towards this vision of a united front against industrialists' economic power, Riley consistently found his place to be as a negotiator between Black and white peers.

In many ways held up by his historians as a radically progressive gem in America's otherwise quite thoroughly conservative labor history, Riley's success in finding enough tolerance from his white comrades to win their favor and command some level of respect with them, was no doubt largely due to the fact that he so thoroughly believed in the possibility of reconciling the differences between Black and white workers. Like with any other form of activism or leadership, this was an exhibition of compromise with the audiences Riley was dealing with. As fierce an advocate for resistance to injustice as he was, he believed in his ability to negotiate around the racial exclusivity that dominated white ideology and culture at the time.

Just like the national figures of his time, he did not freely say everything he thought, all of the time, though he was far from timid.

As a consequence of his success as an organizer, Riley won the confidence of both the rank-and-file around him and the UMW officials above him, and rose higher in the ranks of the union, being elected in 1892 as Secretary Treasurer of District 19, which covered large swathes of Kentucky and Tennessee in the administration of the UMW's work. He served in the role for several years and continued agitating for the strength of the union and for union solidarity until he finally broke from the organization sometime after 1895, when he wrote his final letter to the UMW Journal when the national organization split into a northern organization and a southern organization. With the organization having irrevocably broken over the sectional issue, and thus having conceded on racial equality, Riley, still by all indications holding the same faith in working class-consciousness's possibilities for change, decided that his presence was no longer affecting the change he believed. The evidence suggests that he spent the rest of his life dedicated to his other passion: running a ministry. It seems that he never did leave behind the wandering lifestyle he had adopted so early-on, as in 1900 he had moved to Clinton, Tennessee, and by 1910 and moved again to Harriman, Tennessee.

In many ways, Riley was the exact type of person envisioned by Booker T. Washington when he theorized his strategies for Black uplift through industrial employment, education, and gradual racial interdependence, whether the two would have recognized each other as allies or not. Though their ideological tendencies diverged strongly over questions of confrontation with the powerful forces they were working against, in reality they were very much aligned in the same fights occurring in the tense racialized context of the early-twentieth-century American South. In fact, their youths were defined by several remarkable similarities. Both men were born

into slavery but became free at an early age and so experienced most of their lives outside of it. Washington became a laborer in a coal mine when he was a child, travelled long distances before finding his career, and would go into young adulthood navigating spaces which were either predominately white, or where he was in contact with influential white men. Education was a central aspect of uplift for both of these men, as it was for many African Americans from the South.

Nonetheless, as Riley moved about his career of organizing in the coal mines; ongoing, deeply-ingrained hostility between the races was almost certainly not a foregone conclusion for the future, and this showed in his strategic thinking as he developed into a committed labor activist. For the better part of his life, Riley would continue living under similar circumstances as he had in his youth, moving from place to place in environments in which white and Black Americans were in close contact and mutual dependency, and where he found himself to be negotiating between the two.

William R. Riley's Thinking

At the heart of Riley's ideological convictions was a belief in the promise of cooperation between Black and white workers to dissolve racial distinctions. To Riley, as to Washington, race was an ideology to be defeated and overcome.[44] As Washington strove to disempower the pseudo-science and propaganda which upheld white Supremacist beliefs, Riley was striving to undermine the racism which kept Black men disorganized and separated from white members of

[44] Norrell, Up From History, 71.

their same class. Much of his writing is in describing his frustrations towards that goal, and calling out the UMW for failing to live up to its promises of interracialism.

In one letter to the Journal, he speaks in depth on a situation in which a body of white miners went back on years of promises to their black coworkers and denied them the opportunity to elect a black miner to any of the elected positions in the local. When confronted by Riley, the miners supposedly just flatly refused to make any sort of deal which would result in a Black man being in a position of authority over them. He wondered, "how under heaven do the white miners expect for the colored people to ever feel free and welcome in the order of Knights of Labor or United Mine Workers of America, when their so-called brothers don't want them to get not one step higher than the pick and shovel… how can you ever expect the colored people of the South to become an organized body as long as such work is carried on[?]"[45] Following more than one similar occurrence, Riley carried this issue to the national convention in Columbus, Ohio, in 1892, putting forward a motion to enforce the UMW's official policy of interracialism and commit to entirely eliminating the "color line" and reacting to "any place or places that made any difference in persons because of their color." To his great irritation, the convention simply tabled his motion, and he was effectively silenced by the rest of the (mostly white) convention delegates. He recognized the difficulty in winning over Black workers to labor unionism when white racism dominated the institution, saying, "The colored people need to be organized in the South. But how can this be done by the people whom they regard as their enemies?"[46]

[45] William Riley, "Serious Mistake: Secretary Riley Complains of Treatment of Colored Miners," in *The Black Worker*, #62, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.
[46] Riley, "Serious Mistake: Secretary Riley Complains of Treatment of Colored Miners," in *The Black Worker*, #62.

Where Riley differed from Washington was on questions of strategy to oppose racial hierarchies. Washington's mindset, tempered by the threat of white violence and aggression, was always fixated on negotiating Black advancement gradually without upsetting the overtly hostile white culture which was so closely monitoring people like him. He didn't often support public protests and he was no strong proponent of organized labor actions as a path to progress. Riley, on the other hand, was in a position to be backed up by a very large popular organization of working people who were accustomed to pushing back against established authority, and was ready to face force. The multiracial nature of the UMW also meant that, whatever the white membership's failings, it would not have seemed within the realm of possibility to Riley that if he pushed the race question too forcefully there might break out a pogrom as was widely discussed in the broader South (which in fact did break out in roughly the same time period in Wilmington, North Carolina and in smaller bursts in dozens of instances across the country).[47] Riley in fact welcomed opposition, stating in August 1892 that anyone who didn't provoke such condemnations from foolish people was untrustworthy: "But when I hear of some good sister or brother that everybody likes and praises, an old Scripture passage presents itself to me: "Woe unto the person whom the world speaks well of… Do away with the man that everybody is well pleased with."[48]

The faith he had in the power of labor organizing as a principle for human cooperation led him to see the hesitance with which many Black workers viewed the predominately white unions in an incredibly negative light, speaking at ways that would on their face seem to

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[47] For more information on what was a significant event in the country's race relations, see: Melton A. McLaurin, "Commemorating Wilmington's Racial Violence of 1898: From Individual to Collective Memory," *Southern Cultures 6*, no. 4 (2000): 35–57.

[48] Riley, "A Few Words From Riley: The Worse Enemies Are Among Our Own Race," in *The Black Worker*, #63, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

contradict his anti-racial viewpoint. Responding to criticism from another Black labor organizer in the Journal, he 'denies' allegations that in a previous letter he had insulted Black people, saying, "I never wrote any harm about the negro at all, for I have no fight to make against them. But I wrote, and will continue to write, against the n****rs and dogs."[49] He continued, "Now, what I want the colored people to know, is simply this, that the negro is the worse (sic) enemy to one another that they have on top of dirt; there is a class of them that are so begrudging and jealous of their own race that they will do anything regardless of principle or anything else to keep one another rising one step above them." Continuing on this line, Riley seems to assign self-blame for racist white perceptions of Black workers, saying, "If whites say that the negro is not worthy of any office or don't deserve any, are they not paying you off with your own money? Have you not set this example for them to go by? Have you not said by your own ways and actions that your own race is not entitled to anything?... continue to battle on for the right, seek wisdom and be wise, act honest men and by so doing both white and colored men will love to respect you, and God himself will bless you and our children."[50]

Riley certainly framed himself as a radical throughout his writings, but in these instances his comments on other African-Americans sounded like something out of a white segregationist's mouth. It is remarkably similar to some of the controversial statements which came out of Washington's mouth when he was appealing to paternalistic white sentiments and simultaneously trying to pressure African-Americans to set an exceptional example in American society. There are two possibilities for Riley's tone here: either he truly had such frustrations with people from

[49] Riley, "Negro Versus Nigger: Similar in Sound but Different in Action," in *The Black Worker*, #65, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

[50] Riley, " Riley Indignant: He Scores His Race—The Negro His Own Enemy," in The Black Worker, #62, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

his own racial background that he accepted, on some level, racist tropes; or he was following the almost identical rhetorical strategy that was often utilized by B. T. Washington, and was making himself more amenable to white audiences who accepted these tropes and at the same time shaming other black workers into behaving in ways that would not provoke the anger of their white counterparts, thus stoking racial divisions. Riley may have felt free to speak radically on the question of conducting activism in the open or in secret, thanks to the union men who could back him up against outside threats, but on questions of race he obviously did not have absolute flexibility to speak. Riley seems to fit the mold of someone who would reject Washington as "leader of the race", and yet in his position he was employing many of the same forms of negotiation with white audiences which drew his more infamous national counterpart so much condemnation over the years.

Also, as was extremely common with his contemporaries, activists or not, Riley's views of the world were set on a foundation of evangelical Protestantism.[51] Riley shared many of the views regarding the social ills of the Gilded Age which other activists. This complicated the dichotomy set up by many historians against Booker Washington as the iconic conservative. Washington was certainly a proponent of the stereotypical Protestant Work Ethic, which was instilled in him repeatedly in his early life by multiple white mentors who set him on a path to later success in life. And yet his intimate involvement in politics and Black institution-building was almost entirely secular. Riley on the other hand, infused nearly everything with religious language and references. His commitment to labor unionism, in fact, seems to have been predicated on a moral imperative which he felt called to due to his religious convictions.

[51] Herbert G. Gutman, "The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis," in Julius Jacobson (ed.), The Negro and the American Labor Movement (Garden City: Anchor Books Doubleday and Company, 1968): 58.

Tellingly in one letter, talking about attention-seeking among activists and he stated: "I am by this class like I am by my church people… Over yonder is the light of Christianity in this place, and here sets the hounds of h— howling on their tracks, barking at their good name."[52]

It is important to note that much of these writings are decrying the UMW's failures. Its de jure policy was interracialism, but on the ground as Riley saw it, the white rank-and-file was less than eager to cast aside its racial viewpoints and hatreds. For all of the alleged differences between a 'radical' such as Riley and a 'conservative' such as Washington, the former provides powerful evidence of how hostile white Americans could be, even in an environment which should yield the most optimism. Riley's faith in racial cooperation while working with the UMW was always tempered by the constant racism which surrounded him. On one occasion, while on a trip with his long-time friend and fellow organizer William Webb, Riley was turned away by a white union man. The district vice president in Coal Creek, Tennessee, refused to acknowledge him, pretending as if he didn't know him; "I called him aside and asked him if he thought we could get the men together for a meeting. He said no… his assembly had a committee… and if they could not succeed in organizing [the colored people], they would send for me. With this kind treatment from one of our officers, I left Coal Creek." Lamenting this situation which so defined his work in the UMW, Riley wrote, "These colored men have always shown by their ways and actions they wanted to be organized men, but are treated so bad by their so-called white brothers that they don't feel like they are recognized in the order as knights."[53] He would

[52] Riley, "A Few Words From Riley: The Worse Enemies Are Among Our Own Race," in *The Black Worker*, #63, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

[53] Riley, " Rileys Report: Of Organizing Tour In Tennessee—Colored Men Try Again," in *The Black Worker*, #66, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

go on to launch another organizing drive with these men despite the obstacles, but the intransigence of people who were supposedly his comrades would continue to wear on him.

Despite several years of his life fully dedicated to organizing for the UMW, Riley ended his work for the union in 1894. Writing as "Rev. William R. Riley" many months later, his views on the hard-headedness and ignorance of white workers had intensified. Stating that he now worked as a minister in another mining town, he wrote in to the UMW Journal to give an update on his district. His tone had decisively shifted to one lacking hope and seeming disillusioned with the ability to break through the racism of white workers. "they want the negroes' money; they want his support in time of trouble, but as for offices they don't want Mr. Negro to have not one. The negroes in the South are opening their eyes on this as well as other things. They want more recognition. And if the Southern negroes are ever thoroughly organized or anything like it, it must be done by men of their own race. Such is the case here in the South and no mistake. As you shall hear from me soon on the standing of our district in general, I will close, wishing you success, I am yours for the cause of labor."

His commitment to the labor cause was no doubt still alive as he signed off on that letter, but this move towards independent Black organizing was a sharp departure from his past stances which could've only resulted from his giving up on whites' ability to change. He had lost faith that his place was in butting heads with people whose ignorance did not seem to waver. It is impossible to know how close he remained to his former world of labor organizing. It is clear from his last letter that just because he was no longer a miner or an active member does not mean he had given up labor organizing entirely, and it seems unlikely that he would, given the intensity of his statements on the subject over many years. By 1910, he ended up in Harriman, Tennessee, a model temperance town set up by prominent prohibitionists. Riley seems to have bought into

that movement and moved away from the world of the coal mines. Continuing the family tradition, he had sent his three children to school. Whatever became of Riley's ideology, his intellectual developments were certainly passed down in the same way that economic progress was passed down in his family. Memory of Riley was quickly suppressed in the UMW ranks, as his role would go unmentioned in remembrances until it was revived by historians some six decades later.

The life story of Riley is one which has been treated to very little analysis over the years, unlike that of Richard Davis, who lived a remarkably similar life. In the combined stories of these two men who have been rediscovered by recent historians, can be found two responses to remarkably similar circumstances, and the conflicts which can arise among two men who are otherwise steadfast allies.

Richard L. Davis

Richard L. Davis's remarkable role in a powerful institution of organized labor at a time when the "color line" was being harshly and rigidly defined makes it unsurprising that he became a subject of significant attention when the historical field turned intensively towards the interconnected issues of race and class in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, when Gutman published his essay, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1890-1900," Davis's story played a foundational role in what came to be called the New Labor History, a highly influential branch which shaped years of research as scholars searched for a mode of researching the American working-class as a broader, more ill-defined cultural entity which existed distinctly

from the individual histories of the labor movement and its organized unions.[54]As a result, when Gutman's historiographical role came under attack, with allegations of sweeping the importance of race under the rug in order to create an idyllic image of the American working class, the telling of Davis's story was dead center in the debate.[55]

A search for a more socially progressive past in American Labor led Gutman, as well as David Montgomery among others, to place a high level of importance on figures like Davis as they tried to identify contradictions within traditional narratives of American history.[56] Gutman's prominent article told Richard Davis's story through this lens, attempting to use him as evidence of the United Mine Workers essentially anti-racist nature at a time of, "smoldering racial antagonisms and the heat generated by job competition."[57] While this is certainly an understatement of the extent to which "racial antagonism" was exploding as America moved into the twentieth century, Gutman made a highly useful analysis of Davis writings without overstepping his ability to tell truth from speculation. His work was a large step forward in the field in acknowledging the role of non-white figures in the American working-class and its organizing history.

Davis's more than sixty letters to the *United Mine Workers Journal* provided the vast majority of material for his analysis. This is predictable, given the scarce amount of material available to study Davis's life. Gutman acknowledges this scarcity up front, mentioning that it is

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[54] Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle, "The New Labor History at the Cultural Crossroads," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 151.
[55] Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 2*, no. 2 (1988): 132–200.
[56] Claude D. Montgomery, "David Montgomery: A Biography," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 82 (2012): 28–29; David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860-1920," *Le Mouvement Social*, no. 111 (1980): 201–15.
[57] Herbert G. Gutman, "The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis," in Julius Jacobson (ed.), *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (Garden City: Anchor Books Doubleday and Company, 1968): 83.

dangerous to take too many broad conclusions from the body of evidence. This was after all a very early treatment of this topic, with very little work having come before it, as Gutman makes clear.[58] All-in-all, the essay brought Davis's life-story into the public record after it was lost for many decades and was highly influential in inspiring the mode of research of a generation of historians.[59]

In 1988, Herbert Hill, a former NAACP lawyer-turned historian of race and civil rights activism, wrote his scathing piece on what he claimed was Gutman's complete ignorance of the importance of race as an alternative form of identity to class. Built through generations of lived-experience, he asserted that race, and white racism in America labor unionism, was being swept under the rug by the many historians and social scientists following in Gutman's footsteps. They were supposedly engaging in "mythmaking," searching for an ever-more-obscure past with which to build fantasy worlds where class-consciousness and the disappearance of race was a living possibility, rather than acknowledging the racist history of the white American working class.[60]

Hill accurately assessed the reality that historians who follow Gutman's influence, and more broadly all of those of neo-Marxist tendencies who search the past for evidence of working-class consciousness, do so even when that tendency is not particularly powerful. But to dismiss their work entirely as he did is unfair. These analyses are much more complicated than simply seeing racial identities as impermanent obstacles to a 'true' consciousness based on class. While this claim has a certain degree of truth to it, as the search for class-consciousness can lead

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[58] Herbert G. Gutman, "The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis," in Julius Jacobson (ed.), *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (Garden City: Anchor Books Doubleday and Company, 1968): 52, 110.
[59] Roediger, David. "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History." International Review of Social History 38 (1993): 127–129.
[60] Hill, "Myth-Making," 132-140.

to some over exaggeration, Hill makes it out to seem that race is explicitly rejected as a real driver of history, when the reality of these assessments is much more complicated, if at times flawed. His more hostile attack on Gutman and others, along with claims that they are driven by ideological fervor above all else, is unconvincing given the room for interpretation explicitly left open by Gutman.[61]

In all of this debate of course, the actual figure of Richard L. Davis gets lost; a real man who existed in real circumstances, and had real beliefs. Like with other more famous figures, historians polarized around one view or another and got wrapped up in debates surrounding the importance of race and the viability of class-based activism in American history. Here again, the life of an activist being judged by the circumstances of the present can cause the lessons to be learned from Davis to be lost.

Davis's Thinking

Richard L. Davis is a uniquely vocal presence in the historical record, making him a sharp contrast to Riley. Writing his letters to the *United Mine Workers Journal* from Rendville, Ohio, a small mining company town just across the border from West Virginia, Davis was a prolific commentator on the conditions of mine laborers in his region and a sort of tactician for the UMW. [62] His was a very unique position: an African-American man who was also a founding leader of his labor union, and a crucial steady hand throughout its most-unstable early years.[63] The majority-white rank-and-file of the UMW elected Davis to the Executive Board of the district covering the state of Ohio at the UMW's founding convention, holding his spot for six

[61] Hill, "Myth-Making," 190.
[62] Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, *Part III: The United Mine Workers of American and the Black Worker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979).
[63] Gutman, "The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis," 56.

years from 1890-1896 before rising to an overwhelming electoral victory to the UMW's six-person National Executive Board in 1896, a position to which he was reelected in 1897. Over the course of that decade, he left behind a legacy of work devoted to erasing "the color line" in every sector of the economy, a goal which he believed was only achievable through the medium of industrial labor unionism, which he adamantly asserted could find success by uniting "workingmen" along their interests as a class rather than, "by fighting among ourselves on account of race, creed, color or nationality."[64]

Davis, in contrast to Riley left behind a trove of written documents ranging from long statements on key strategic issues in the UMW and the labor movement in general to updates on local labor actions transpiring in Rendville, Ohio. It is known that many of these letters made up an active dialogue between Riley, Davis, and several other Black organizers in the UMW, but unfortunately access to the full archive of the *Journal* is limited. Taken all together, what letters are available provide a wide range of insights into Davis's unique position as a local labor organizer, a national labor leader, and also as a Black labor activist, as well as how he fit into these roles in relation to his peers. It is for this reason that he has become a central figure in this historiography.

The writings left behind by Davis, though certainly only giving a limited view, give us many glimpses into his thinking and circumstances, which have already been dealt with in some depth by historians.[6566] The two major contrasts in his thinking with that of Riley, lie, first and

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[64] Richard L. Davis, "Still Unsettled: At Rendville—Trouble Over A Boss At No. 8—Discusses The Question Of Race And Creed Prejudice—Says Spence Will Have To Hustle To Organize West Virginia," in *The Black Worker*, ed. by Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), #10, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

[65] Gutman, "The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis."

[66] Doppen, *Richard L. Davis and the Color Line*.

most importantly, in Davis's more steadfast opposition to white paternalism. Though a labor organizer who would appear to be more of a "radical" figure against the background of Booker T. Washington's national leadership, Riley's writings convey, if anything, a more aggressive condemnation of the economic failings of Black Americans and a more willing acceptance of racist tropes about his fellow Black workers. Davis similarly developed a critique of the Black aversion to organized labor unionism, but does so in a way that is unwavering in its commitment to asserting Black civil rights and social acceptance.

One of his most insightful analyses on the racial situation comes from a description of a mining town called "Congo." "Not the Congo that we have so much read of in Stanley's works, but Congo, O., situated about one and one-half miles across the hills from this place. This is intended to be one of the most extensive workings in the state…"[67] Davis described Congo as a prison-like town where all of the corporate control and lack of worker autonomy found in other mines seemed at its most intense. In this letter, he very intelligently analyses the way by which this town was made to be segregated in housing and work-spaces by an intentional playing up of hostilities between white and black workers following the importation of Black laborers as strikebreakers and then the enforced segregation of workers' housing. He describes how that division is used to undermine worker cohesion while conditions instituted by the company are allowed to remain abysmal and highly authoritarian.

That description is emblematic of the way in which he describes racial divisions as more of a tragedy born of ignorance and deceit than as a personal failing. Davis's "A Frank Letter",

[67] Davis, "A Contract: Analyzed and Criticized by Our Rendville Correspondent The Congo Coal Company Makes Provision for Strikes Houses Must be Given Up in Five Days After Trouble," in *The Black Worker*, #13, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

published on December fourteenth, 1891, feels like a culmination of a wide range of his writings.[68] In it, not only does he articulate his view of the *UMW Journal* as an important outlet for discussion and propagandizing on these key issues, but also asserts a pretty comprehensive assessment of his views on the intersection of race and class activism. For Davis, the tendency of Black workers to be recruited as strikebreakers, thus undermining the labor actions of the typically white strikers who exclude them, is an understandable but shortsighted behavior. He fully understands the hostility and exclusion experienced by these workers, having seen it all before in his many years working and then organizing in the mines. And yet, he sees the possibilities which existed if those divisions could be put aside well enough to lift both of the two groups at the expense of their common enemy. Where with Riley, we can only see a brief handful of comments on events and responses to criticisms, Davis fully articulated his thinking in the *Journal*, providing added context to his own life and that of the other organizers he was conversing with. This idea about solidarity being paramount is almost identical to Riley's words, and yet it is articulated differently.

However, where Riley would condemn strikebreaking Black workers and use "n****r" as a broad insult, apparently only coincidentally applied to Black people, rather than as a specific racial slur. In doing so he was reinforcing white acceptance of the dehumanizing term and the connotations it bestowed on the entire Black populace, whereas Davis refrained from any such usage. Additionally, he actively made the case for understanding towards strikebreakers, and pleaded repeatedly with white union men to guard the rights owed to their Black counterparts. In reply to one of Davis's exchanges, Riley argues, "Did you not know that the worst enemies we

[68] Davis, "Brazil, Indiana: An Appeal to Act Impartially Toward Colored Miners." in *The Black Worker*, #8, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

have to contend with are among our own race? Did you not know that they will seek more undue advantages over you than anyone else? What? A n****r? He is the worst animal living against his race, and when I say n****r I mean n****r and not colored people… So Brother D., continue to press forward, make all the colored and white friends that you possibly can, and don't worry over the n****rs and dogs."[69] Riley is using an interesting form of rhetoric here. He is validating white-supremacist ways of speaking in a way, but at the same time is using that vocabulary to validate Black people, such as himself and Davis, who are attempting to be fully-accepted allies of white-dominated organized labor.

As discussed previously, Riley made similar efforts as Davis to advance Black rights and respect, in particular his effort at passing a resolution to reassert the anti-racist prerogative written into the UMW's founding bylaws. And yet when it came to this public outlet for discussion within the UMW, he took a much more compromising stance on these workers who were intensely hated by union men. Given the level of hostility towards strikebreakers throughout the labor movement, it seems likely that it would be quite risky to defend the behavior of Black workers who were on the opposing side. By condemning them so aggressively, he very likely was disassociating those who were legitimately union men, such as himself, and winning some level of loyalty over a shared opposition to strikebreaking Black workers.

It is impossible to know with the information available what circumstances caused the two to respond with such different rhetoric to this major issue. Davis's already-acquired position of high authority, in which he held the respect and backing of major union leaders, no doubt

[69] William Riley, "A Few Words From Riley: The Worse Enemies Are Among Our Own Race," in *The Black Worker*, #63, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

provided him more autonomy and freedom of thought.[70] It is entirely possible that the racial composition of their areas differed in ways which provided Riley less of a basis from which to build up acceptance of the Black presence in the mines. Unfortunately, there are too many gaps in the record to make guesses on that with any real accuracy.

The second major contrast with Riley is over the aspect of each figure's religiosity. Riley, a fervent Christian who would eventually leave his mining career to spend the rest of his life working as a minister, infused practically all his writings with an overtly religious language that is mostly absent from Davis's writings. This in fact led his aggressive, highly critical language to come off in an even more controversial way, exposing him to the criticism from another Black organizer who frequently wrote under the pseudonym of "Willing Hands," and who is known to have respected and agreed with Riley already, that Riley was not speaking in the way that an understanding man of God should.[71]

It was practically a given at this time in history that activists and reformers carried a protestant ethic along with their critic of the status quo. Contrary to the prominent assessment given in Gutman's 1969 essay though, Davis's Protestant use of language was rather subdued. He even went so far as to write that the workers needed a "little less religion," and more substantive gains in *this* world rather than fixation on what they might get in the afterlife.[72]

This is significant in that it provides some insight into the dominant motivations in each man's ideological rationalizations. For Davis, religion was a secondary, more personal form of

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[70] Doppen, *Richard L. Davis and the Color Line*, 10.
[71] Davis, "Brazil, Indiana."
[72] Davis, "Very Plain Talk," in *The Black Worker*, #12, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

belief which would not solve the immediate issues which he saw as impermanent in the material world. He treated the labor movement as his true faith. Riley on the other hand, while deeply committed to the cause of labor organizing, saw that cause as a subsidiary of the more import religious faith which he held. He saw organized labor as a means to achieve god's will by doing good with one's time on Earth. Thus it is unsurprising that it was Davis who stayed committed to the union cause all the way until the end of his, relatively short, life.

In addition to these positions, Davis makes a significantly more complex critique of the role of ethnicity and race in the labor force, which is not shocking given the relative scarcity of theoretical writing coming from Riley. If Davis's implicit statements on the flexibility of the construct of race weren't enough, his understanding of race becomes clear when he, consciously or not, makes a distinction in one mining town's organizing drive between "white" workers and various eastern Europeans.[73] The recently arrived immigrant miners were being eagerly recruited into the UMW and Davis arrived in order to collaborate and aid in the organizing process. He described the committee formed to organize the workforce as made up of, "one Hungarian, one negro, one Polander, one Slav, and one white." Clearly, to Davis, the perception which he picked up on was that these immigrants were not welcomed into the "white race," but were rather distinct social groupings in a very similar condition to that of Black Americans, though lacking in English fluency. Too much shouldn't be read into this brief statement, but it is safe to say that firstly this description contradicts the commonly asserted view that race was an inert, biological fact which defined social relations; and secondly, that such a viewpoint is consistent with the

[73] Davis, "Encouraging: Successful Campaign of Miller and Davis Foreign Speaking Miners Join the Organization in a Body Colored Miners Also Join Hands With the Rest Many Thanks Due to Energetic Local Men," in *The Black Worker*, #7, https://temple.manifoldapp.org/read/the-black-worker-a-documentary-history-from-colonial-times-to-the-present-volume-4/section/d89a9315-6511-443a-bc96-93886e4e9cf3.

way which Davis spoke about racial relations and progress within the UMW and American society at large. Without access to greater amounts of these men's conversations, it is much more difficult to say where Riley was positioned on this topic. As has already been said, it seems likely that Riley's compromises with racist rhetoric cannot be taken purely at face value. Given his commitment to the advancement of "his race," it is very hard to believe that he would uncritically internalize the backward perception of people like him when he was so able and willing to recognize the failings of other forms of exploitation in the face of powerful opposition.

Riley, though he was a smaller figure in the UMW's story, has gotten disproportionately little historical analysis applied to him. So, in Davis's better analyzed life-story we can find points with which to gain insight into the times and circumstances the two were working with. Effectively a founder and prominent leader of the early-UMW, Davis's role has gained a significant amount of attention as a result of the field's increasing interest in recent decades in evaluating the long-ignored role of race in shaping the American working-class.

Conclusion

A lot is to be gained by taking the time to study figures such as Riley, Davis, and Washington on their own terms as historical actors, reacting in good faith to the world they found themselves in. All of them were activists for positive social change at a time in American history when this was incredibly difficult to see a path towards achieving. As a result, they developed complex strategies and ideas about activism and progress in order to move towards their goals. As is often the case, these men could not always be up front about their intentions or the rationale for the strategies they were undertaking. In order to get a clear idea of why they behaved the way they did, and thus how successful they were at achieving their goals, we have to look past the presumptions place on them by present-minded intellectuals and activists who came

after them, and attempt to understand the place and circumstances which they were attempting to negotiate with.

Analyzing in-depth the systems of thought which these activists developed and attempted to put into practice is a start in reviving their place in American labor and civil rights history which they deserve to hold. This is just a start though, as there is also an immense amount of details about these figures' lives which are left unknown due to a lack of documentation, or at least wide access. Additionally, there remain many, many more contemporary figures, of greater or lesser influence who are similarly clouded in a lack of documentation and a lack of attention by today's historians. In order to understand the evolution of race and class in America, and by extension to better understand its role and evolution to today, the historical place of these figures in the early American labor and civil rights movements has to be expanded on. Given the large amount of energy which has been dedicated to these topics in recent decades, there is a lot of hope to be had that this will be achieved, and thinkers and activists will be able to gain valuable lessons from these stories from the past.

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