

A BLACK WOMAN

Racism in the South (1902)

The era of Progressive reform (1890–1920) was fraught with contradictions. At the same time that social idealists were assaulting political corruption and promoting laws protecting women and children in the workplace, racial prejudice was flourishing. During the 1890s, state after state in the South passed “Jim Crow” laws mandating racial segregation of public facilities and schools. Efforts to use fraud and intimidation

to reduce black voting continued unabated. The following article, written by a black woman from Alabama who felt the need to withhold her name, describes the racial abuses suffered by blacks at the turn of the century.

From "The Negro Problem: How It Appears to a Southern Colored Woman," *The Independent* 54 (September 18, 1902): 2221–24. [Editorial insertions appear in brackets—Ed.]

I am a colored woman, wife and mother. I have lived all my life in the South, and have often thought what a peculiar fact it is that the more ignorant the Southern whites are of us, the more vehement they are in their denunciation of us. They boast that they have little intercourse with us, never see us in our homes, churches or places of amusement, but still they know us thoroughly.

They also admit that they know us in no capacity except as servants, yet they say we are at our best in that single capacity. What philosophers they are! The Southerners say we negroes are a happy, laughing set of people, with no thought of tomorrow. How mistaken they are! The educated, thinking Negro is just the opposite. There is a feeling of unrest, insecurity, almost panic among the best class of negroes in the South. In our homes, in our churches, wherever two or three are gathered together, there is a discussion of what is best to do. Must we remain in the South or go elsewhere? Where can we go to feel that security which other people feel? Is it best to go in great numbers or only in several families? These and many other things are discussed over and over.

People who have security in their homes, whose children can go on the street unmolested, whose wives and daughters are treated as women, cannot, perhaps, sympathize with the Southern negro's anxieties and complaints. I ask forbearance of such people.

It is asserted that we are dying more rapidly than other people in the South. It is not remarkable when the houses built for sale or rent to colored people are usually placed in the lowest and most unhealthy spots. I know of houses occupied by poor negroes in which a respectable farmer would not keep his cattle. It is impossible for them

to rent elsewhere. All Southern real estate agents have "white property" and "colored property." In one of the largest Southern cities there is a colored minister, a graduate of Harvard, whose wife is an educated, Christian woman, who lived for weeks in a tumble-down rookery because he could neither rent nor buy in a respectable locality.

Many colored women who wash, iron, scrub, cook or sew all the week to help pay the rent for these miserable hovels and help fill the many small mouths, would deny themselves some of the necessaries of life if they could take their little children and teething babies on the cars to the parks of a Sunday afternoon and sit under trees, enjoy the cool breezes and breathe God's pure air for only two or three hours; but this is denied them. Some of the parks have signs, "No negroes allowed on these grounds except as servants." Pitiful, pitiful customs and laws that make war on women and babes! There is no wonder that we die; the wonder is that we persist in living.

Fourteen years ago I had just married. My husband had saved sufficient money to buy a small home. On account of our limited means we went to the suburbs, on unpaved streets, to look for a home, only asking for a high, healthy locality. Some real estate agents were "sorry, but had nothing to suit," some had "just the thing," but we discovered on investigation that they had "just the thing" for an unhealthy pigsty. Others had no "colored property." One agent said that he had what we wanted, but we should have to go to see the lot after dark, or walk by and give the place a casual look; for, he said, "all the white people in the neighborhood would be down on me." Finally, we bought this lot. When the house was being built we went to see it. Consternation reigned. We had ruined this [all-white] neighborhood

of poor people; poor as we, poorer in manners at least. The people who lived next door received the sympathy of their friends. When we walked on the street (there were no sidewalks) we were embarrassed by the stare of many unfriendly eyes.

Two years passed before a single woman spoke to me, and only then because I helped one of them when a little sudden trouble came to her. Such was the reception, I a happy young woman, just married, received from people among whom I wanted to make a home. Fourteen years have now passed, four children have been born to us, and one has died in this same home, among these same neighbors. Although the neighbors speak to us, and occasionally one will send a child to borrow the morning's paper or ask the loan of a pattern, not one woman has ever been inside of my house, not even at the times when a woman would doubly appreciate the slightest attention of a neighbor. . . .

. . . A colored woman, however respectable, is lower [in status] than the white prostitute. The Southern white woman will declare that no Negro women are virtuous, yet she placed her innocent children in their care. . . .

White agents and other chance visitors who come into our homes ask questions that we must not dare ask their wives. They express surprise that our children have clean faces and that their hair is combed. . . .

. . . We were delighted to know that some of our Spanish-American [War] heroes were coming where we could get a glimpse of them. Had not black men helped in a small way to give them their honors? In the cities of the South, where these heroes went, the white school children were assembled, flags waved, flowers strewn, speeches made, and "My Country,

'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty," was sung. Our children, who need to be taught so much, were not assembled, their hands waved no flags, they threw no flowers, heard no thrilling speech, sang no song of their country. And this is the South's idea of justice. Is it surprising that [racist] feeling grows more bitter, when the white mother teaches her boy to hate my boy, not because he is mean, but because his skin is dark? I have seen very small white children hang their black dolls. It is not the child's fault, he is simply an apt pupil. . . .

Why does not the mistreatment of thousands of the [black] citizens of our country call forth a strong, influential champion? It seems to me that the very weakness of the negro should cause at least a few of our great men to come to the rescue. Is it because an espousal of our cause would make any white man unpopular, or do most of our great men think that we are worthless? Are there greater things to do than to "champion the rights of human beings and to mitigate human suffering?"

The way seems dark, and the future almost hopeless, but let us not despair, "For right is right, since God is God, and right the day must win." Some one will at last arise who will champion our cause and compel the world to see that we deserve justice, as other heroes compelled it to see that we deserved freedom.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. To what extent are racist prejudices the result of ignorance and stereotypes?
2. Are patterns of racial segregation still visible in American society? Explain.