"Self-Determination at the Ballot-Box: the Fight for Atlanta's Booker T. Washington High School."

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Over the course of ten months in 1918 and 1919, black voters in Atlanta went to the polls three times to vote down three different municipal bond referenda. Their action plunged the city into a deep fiscal crisis and held up funding for schools, the fire department, a new waterworks and an ambitious expansion of the city's public school system.

The Atlanta branch of the NAACP organized this voting bloc in 1919 to force the city to build schools for black students. After years of being asked to vote for municipal bonds to build schools their children could never attend, black voters exploited a loophole in the state's disfranchisement laws to defeat three bond referenda over the course of ten months. By holding the entire city budget hostage, they compelled the city fathers to invest $1.5 million in black public education. This money built five black grammar schools as well as Booker T. Washington High School, the city's first publicly-funded high school for black students.

This was remarkably bold considering the historical context. Just thirteen years earlier, the city of Atlanta had erupted in a bloody race riot in which white mobs murdered more than two dozen African Americans. Mere weeks after the city's black voters defeated the third bond referendum, the nation would be shaken by a spasm of anti-black violence during the infamous Red Summer of 1919. In addition, Georgia's voters had amended the state constitution in 1908, adding a "grandfather clause" and other disfranchising measures to an already existing cumulative poll tax that dated from 1877. All of this made it even harder for black voters to register to vote.[1] Still, Atlanta's black voters were able to unite across the divides of class to

force the city to invest in black public education. My paper argues that they were only able to do so after rejecting the politics of respectability in order to adopt a more confrontational politics.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates has memorably put it, respectability politics is the art of "changing the subject."[2] And, in the face of overwhelming violence and the exclusions of Jim Crow, black elites tried to change the subject.

As a cultural politics, respectability has been defined by proper dress, language and comportment; civility and civilization; sexual purity; abstaining from strong drink and illicit drugs; hard work and the accumulation of personal wealth (though refraining from the gaudy display of that wealth); and frequently, political quietude. By adopting these cultural practices of respectability, black Atlantans hoped to deflect white assaults motivated by racist stereotypes that suggested black men and women were lazy or criminal.

The politicians of respectability also believed that they could rewrite the rules of Jim Crow. It became a way to try and remove race from politics and replace it instead with some other form of exclusion or hierarchy. Faced with the exclusion of all black people from the benefits of citizenship, the black politicians of respectability wanted to change the terms of that exclusion.[3] If they could shift the qualifications for citizenship from race to respectability, they could preserve *some* power for *some* African Americans. By embracing respectability, black elites deflected the violence of Jim Crow onto a black working class they defined as *unrespectable*. They blamed those whose poverty, moral choices, and sometimes their political agitation, sullied the reputation of the race. Essentially, black elites used respectability in the same ways that white supremacists used race – to draw a bright line between them and the unwashed black masses.

As a result, many accepted disfranchisement and segregation. Some even embraced it. As they did so, they had to willfully misinterpret what Jim Crow was really about. In 1906, a large cross-section of the state's black leadership assembled under the aegis of the Georgia Equal Rights Convention (GERC) to formulate a response to disfranchisement. While opposed to such disfranchising measures such as the grandfather clause, the GERC did not understand the poll tax as a device invented precisely to remove black people from politics. Instead, they described the poll tax as way to learn the habits of thrift, industry and self-restraint necessary to become civilized. The vote was not a right, but rather a reward for becoming a respectable member of society.

There was a logic to this. If access to the ballot were based on race alone, all black people would be disfranchised. But, if based on respectability, it leaves open the possibility of black survival in a hierarchical society in which exclusion was a given.

How then does this become a *politics*? To borrow a term from historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, respectability frequently served as a "bridge" discourse that mediated relations between black and white elites.[4] At one end of this bridge stood the city's African American elites; at the other, paternalistic white leaders, whose racialized noblesse oblige the African American politicians of respectability sought to convert into a genuine interracial politics. Upon this bridge, the black politicians of respectability proposed that in exchange for policing the morals of the black working class, black leaders would enjoy a modicum of power within Jim Crow. It was also a strategy that required black leaders to see these paternalistic white elites as their primary allies and not the black working class.

When Atlanta's voters united in 1919 to force the city to build Booker T. Washington High School, they could only do so by rejecting respectability and embracing a more confrontational – and more effective – politics rooted in racial solidarity.

This politics of respectability proved to be incredibly unstable in the face of Atlanta's rapid urban development. In the two decades between 1900 and 1920, the city tripled in size and became home to nearly 200,000 people.[5] This astounding growth outstripped the city's meager infrastructure. Few streets were paved. There was no city-wide gas or electrical grid and no water system that extended much past the central business district. As late as 1910, the sanitary needs of 50,000 Atlantans – more than a quarter of the city –were met by outhouses.[6] The city government expanded city services only as far as necessary to keep their white constituents happy.[7] As people streamed into the city, they demanded parks and swimming pools; electricity and running water; paved streets and sidewalks; and most important of all, public schools. In order to make sure that black neighborhoods weren't excluded from these civic amenities, Atlanta's black leaders turned to the politics of respectability.

Among the most important black institutions that sought to ensure that black Atlantans were not relegated to nineteenth century ghettoes was the Neighborhood Union. The Union was founded in 1908 by a group of black women who had come together to establish kindergartens for black children. Their concern, as mothers, was how the city's rapid expansion was putting the health, safety and virtue of women and children at risk. At the beginning of the twentieth century, addressing these concerns was a central part of women's cultural role in defending the health and morals of the home. However, shut out from formal politics as black women in a

state that would not even ratify the Nineteenth Amendment until 1970, the members of the Neighborhood Union turned to the politics of respectability.

A good deal of the Union's early work revolved around making black Atlanta more respectable in order to divert negative attention from white authorities – especially police. The women who ran the Neighborhood Union promised to police black morals in exchange for resources. They spent considerable effort in driving out saloons, brothels and other sites of working-class entertainment. Not only would this keep unwanted police intrusions out of black neighborhoods, cracking down on these sorts of establishments would help "civilize" the black working class and keep white neighborhoods safe. Other efforts included expanding the number of kindergartens available for black children in order to keep kids off the street and avoid the perils of what they deemed "sidewalk education."[8] Raising money for kindergartens and grammar schools would help civilize black children – and also keep white neighborhoods safe. The Union positioned itself as a mediator between the financial and political power of the city's white elite and what it perceived as the needs of the black community. As "enforcer/mediators," they sought to transform white paternalism (and self-interest) into a genuine interracial politics.

There were limits to using respectability as a bridge to white political leaders. The chaps of Atlanta's rapid growth meant that these relationships could be abandoned at the very first budget shortfall. In order to preserve the quality of life and city services for white voters, politicians would readily take these things from black communities. This is exactly what happened when the Union conducted a survey of the city's black schools in 1913.
The Union's survey revealed critical shortages of classroom space, teaching materials and qualified teachers.[9] The school buildings themselves were in wretched physical condition with poor lighting, sanitation and playground facilities – a microcosm of conditions in black

neighborhoods more generally. Data in hand, the Union – following the carefully rehearsed rituals of respectability politics – approached the city seeking its assistance in improving school conditions for Atlanta's black schoolchildren. The text of their petition to the Board of Education to explicitly linked the desired improvements to the moral development of black children in order to make good citizens of them and reduce crime.

The Board of Education then conducted their own survey and realized what poor condition the *white* schools were in. In response to the resulting protests by *white* parents, the Atlanta Board of Ed offered a plan to expand and improve *white* schools. They paid for it by eliminating the eighth grade from the city's black schools.

The women of the Union were outraged. They began to turn away from the politics of respectability, since it had failed to mediate between the power of the city government and the needs of the black community. As the Union surveyed the entire school system, their understanding of respectability changed. It shifted from being a discourse that <u>stratified</u> black Atlanta along class lines to one that <u>unified</u> black Atlanta across class lines. In other words, rather than having to prove the potential for black respectability to get access to funding for public schools, these women came to assert a right to respectability through access to public education. At this stage – without the vote – these women did not yet have the power to assert this right and force the city to invest in black education.

In 1916, the city decided to eliminate the black seventh grade in order to fund another expansion to the white schools. In reaction, the city's black leaders established a branch of the NAACP to lead the fight to save the seventh grade. The NAACP established itself directly atop the foundation laid by the Union's previous work. This fight was about access to the means to

become respectable. Rather than simply policing the morality of the black working class, this struggle helped erect the framework for genuine cross-class solidarity within Atlanta's black community.

When the NAACP confronted the Board of Education and the city council, they were directly confrontational – so much so that the city did not think it worth their energy to fight this point – and the seventh grade was saved. The NAACP in this moment did not see paternalistic white elites as their primary allies. They did try to save the seventh grade by claiming how it would help civilize black people. Turning away from the politics of respectability, they instead drew on another identity to assert their equality with white Atlantans: taxpayer. Black taxes had paid for these schools and they asserted their right to their fair share. They had found a new bridge discourse to assert their equality with white elites.

Despite this victory, the cultural power of the politics of respectability was still formidable. Additionally, the NAACP represented a tiny minority of the city's black population. They were well organized enough to react to cuts in city services, but how could they organize enough people to act collectively to *force* the city to finally invest in black public education? Black taxes had helped pay for thirty-eight grammar schools, two high schools and five night schools, none of which were open to black students.[10] Something had to change to help more people see their relationship to the city's white elite in oppositional terms. And that happens with WWI.

The social and cultural upheaval that followed in the wake of US entry into WWI upended the politics of respectability. By 1917, the government labored to recruit and field an army totaling 4 Million men – a monumental undertaking since the entire size of the US Army at the beginning of the war was only around 120,000. As part of this effort, 2.3 Million black men

register for the draft and 367,000 serve in uniform. During this mobilization for war, patriotic service and martial valor offer a new way for black people to assert equality with white people without resort to the rituals of respectability. Patriotism becomes yet another new bridge discourse allowing black Americans to assert equality with white Americans.

In Atlanta, thousands of young black men registered for the draft on the first day. Though nervous about the prospect of black men in uniform, the city's white newspapers praised "the youth of America, millions strong," who registered "to fight for civilization and humanity." These words described a cultural space for black political assertion that was unimaginable just a decade earlier. WWI transformed the terrain upon which black Atlantans fought for their place in the city's development. It established a new foundation for interracial politics now rooted in a shared, though contested, patriotism. As Wilson declared he would make the world "safe for democracy," black patriots linked this to democracy at home too.

These expanded notions of citizenship gave black Atlantans the cultural space to organize an oppositional politics. They did this by forging a powerful black voting bloc that they used to defeat municipal bond referenda ***three times in 10 months***. The proceeds of these bonds were meant to modernize the fire department, expand the schools and pay for a new waterworks. However, black voters were determined that no bonds would pass until their communities were also brought into the twentieth century.

The emergence of this powerful black voting bloc was only possible because the poll tax had ceased to be a signifier of respectability. As they rejected the idea that qualifying to vote made African Americans respectable, the Atlanta Branch of the NAACP helped forge a collective black political voice. Over the course of the campaign, organizers registered more than 3,000 black voters, enough to determine the election. Some of these voters paid fifteen or

twenty years in back poll taxes in order to be able to vote. To reach this many voters required a plain acknowledgment that the poll tax was not a vehicle for uplifting black people. Rather, it was simply a means of robbing them of the vote. This campaign helped change how black elites see the black working class as allies.

After black voters had defeated Atlanta's municipal bond referenda twice, some white commentators began to doubt that this level of organization and commitment was impossible for black people to achieve. They must be being manipulated by some designing white man. On the basis of this argument, the city attorney appealed to the state of Georgia to get all black votes thrown out. This effort prompted a response from the NAACP, who published a manifesto in April of 1919. Denying white influence over their decisions, the NAACP declared that "Colored men are responsible for their own actions, which resulted from decisions arrived at after full, frank and free discussions among themselves and with themselves." [11] This language defined an autonomous racial community capable of supporting a black voting bloc this size. Further, it signaled that they were willing and able to use its strength to compel its city to act on their behalf.

The NAACP concluded their manifesto regretting the "necessity that compels us to assume any other attitude than that of a satisfied part of our ***composite citizenship***."[12] This choice of words describes a new understanding of politics fragmented into a composite of competing racialized voting blocs that is dramatically different from the politics of respectability.

Recall that the goal of respectability politics was to convert white paternalism into concrete benefits for black community. Fundamentally, a politics of compromise, the black politicians of respectability borrowed their power from their relationship with white elites. By contrast, Atlanta's black voters made their own power in 1918 and 1919.

Recall also that the politics of respectability also sought to eliminate the question of race from politics entirely. By contrast, this new language of "composite citizenship" makes race visible in politics and defines what could be called "the black vote." In other words, the collapse of the politics of respectability allows a genuine interracial politics to emerge in which competing voting blocs grapple for access to city resources. Upon this new cultural foundation for urban black politics black Atlantans could finally contend – and not merely negotiate – for their rights.

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[1] Perman, *Struggle for Mastery*, 291-293.

[2] Coates, "Black People Are Not Ignoring 'Black on Black' Crime," *The Atlantic*, 15 August 2014. http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/black-people-are-not-ignoring-black-on-black-crime/378629/ Accessed 4 May 2015.

[3] Rabinowitz, Race, Ethnicity and Urbanization, 61-89, 137-163.

[4] Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 197. The argument of *Schooling Jim Crow* significantly expands the scope of the literature on the politics of respectability. Among the historians of respectability, Tera Hunter and Kevin Gaines argue that it has been crucial in combating racial stereotypes, while Glenda Gilmore and Evelyn Higginbotham emphasize how it has defined the terms of interracial politics. However, each of these scholars examines respectability as a more or less fixed set of ideas and practices. By contrast, *Schooling Jim Crow* relates this discursive strategy to specific struggles over access to public resources. Thus keyed to the dynamics of urbanization, the politics of respectability is much more clearly a *politics* and not a rigid ideology.

Historians of respectability such as Victoria Wolcott, Tera Hunter and Kevin Gaines demonstrate the ways in which respectability was a crucial discursive strategy that black men and women employed to combat racialized sexual and moral stereotypes. These understandings of respectability do play a role in this book, but my focus here is on how respectability is used to negotiate racial and interracial solidarity. This is similar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's argument in Righteous Discontent, which shows how black women in the Baptist Church employed the politics of respectability to define and advance an ambitious reform agenda. Similarly, Glenda Gilmore's Gender and Jim Crow demonstrates how black women used the language of respectability to build alliances with white progressives in order to deliver crucial social services to the black community.

The definition of respectability used in this book is historically specific to the South before the northward migration of black southerners beginning in World War One. As the discourse of respectability moved north throughout the 1920s and 30s, it changed dramatically. The best discussion of this is in Davarian Baldwin's Chicago's New Negroes. As Baldwin uses the term, "respectability" is a measure of social acceptance, a yardstick of status – akin to Bourdieu's concepts of social or cultural capital, social statuses that can be exchanged like currency for political power. The denominations in which this currency comes – the terms of respectability – change radically between Atlanta in the 1890s-1910s and the milieu of 1920s Chicago that Baldwin focuses on. Whereas the protagonists of First-Class Citizens contend with Victorian standards of moral behavior in the Jim Crow South, Baldwin's New Negroes recast respectability in response to migration to Chicago and the spread of 1920s black consumer culture.

For more on respectability, see Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 185-211; Hunter, To 'Joy My Freedom, 130-186; Gaines, Uplifting the Race; White, Too Heavy Load, 21-109; Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black

Women"; and Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow, 147-202. For respectability during and after the Great Migration, see Wolcott, Remaking Respectability, and Baldwin, Chicago's New Negroes.

[5] Michael R. Haines, "Population of cities with at least 100,000 population in 1990: 1790–1990." Table Aa832-1033 in Historical Statistics of the United States: Millennial Edition, edited by Susan B. Carter, et. al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[6] Garrett and Martin. Atlanta and Environs, 426, 507, 559.

[7] Bayor, Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta, 9.

[8] Shivery, "The History of Organized Social Work Among Negroes," 44.

[9] Lerner, "Early Community Work," 163-164; Dittmer, Black Georgia, 146-147. The investigation determined that while there were 6,163 black children enrolled in Atlanta's public schools, there were only 4,102 desks available. In order to accommodate all the students, about two-thirds of the black student population attended "double sessions," in which the same teacher daily taught two full classes – one in the morning and one in the evening. Shivery "The History of Organized Social Work," 97-98.

[10] Dittmer, Black Georgia, 147. In 1907, the state education budget for Georgia was a little over $3 Million. If allocated strictly on the basis of race, the 46.7% of Georgians who were African American would have received $1.4 Million in school funds. However, they only received $500,000 – despite the $650,000 African Americans contributed to the school fund that year. Black taxpayers in Georgia paid $150,000 annually to subsidize a public school system from which their children were excluded. See Coon, Public Taxation and Negro Schools.

African Americans had responded to these exclusions from the public education system through self-reliance. The city's four black colleges assumed the burden of educating the city's black children, providing the instruction that the white city fathers wouldn't. By 1910, they collectively enrolled 1,715 grammar and high school students – a student body that dwarfed the city's entire black college cohort of 147 students. Between 1898 and 1907, the tuition paid to these four institutions totaled more than $210,000, a significant sum from a population whose financial security was so tenuous. However reasonable they may have been, these tuition payments made education inaccessible to most working-class African Americans. As Atlanta grew, it became less and less tenable for the city's black colleges to provide the desks that the city would not. *The College Bred Negro*, 14-15; *Economic Cooperation Among Negro Americans*, 86-87.

[11] The Crisis, (June, 1919) Vol. 18, No. 2, 90-91.

[12] Ibid.