

Fighting the Southern Huns

“To hell with going to France,” Corporal Larmon Brown called to fellow members of the 24th Infantry, “let’s go clean up the god damn city.”¹ In furious revolt, part mutiny and part riot, over one hundred soldiers in the all-black infantry’s Third Battalion seized roughly 18,000 pounds of ammunition and arms from the supply tent in their camp, overpowered the white officers who tried to subdue them, and began what the *Houston Post* would luridly deem a “10-hour reign of terror.” Army Regulars, some of the mutineers had served along the Mexico border in the 1916 Punitive Expeditions against Pancho Villa. Some had records that dated back to the turn-of-the-century Philippine War and subsequent occupation. By dawn on Friday August 24, 1917, these soldiers had killed seventeen white people in Houston and wounded eleven others. Two of their own lay dying. Contrary to the *Post* report, the violence lasted about three hours, but its effect lingered through the duration of the war and after.²

The summer of 1917 saw its fair share of racial violence. On a stormy May evening in Memphis, Tennessee, for example, a white mob lynched a black man and tossed his severed head down in the middle of the Beale Street, the city’s “colored” business district. Six weeks later, further up the Mississippi,

white men and women viciously beat, stoned, and burned African Americans in East St. Louis, Illinois, launching the infamous “pogrom” that killed roughly thirty-nine African Americans. Other race riots occurred in Chester, Pennsylvania, and Newark, New Jersey, other lynchings in Louisiana and Kentucky. Shocking though it was, the Houston mutiny marked but one in a series of racial conflagrations that ignited during the opening months of the War.³

Yet in a season marked by grisly conflicts, Houston stands out. A revolt of black soldiers against the strictures of Jim Crow, the riot, and the national response to it vividly illuminate the struggles over manhood and citizenship that informed African American politics—and American politics as a whole—during the early years of the twentieth century. The Houston riot came as African Americans took advantage of mobilization to renew their assault on Jim Crow. Against this backdrop of upheaval, all racial conflicts took on heightened political import, but the inversion evident in the soldiers’ riot, as black men mercilessly shot down white men and women, made Houston a singular flashpoint.

Houston stood out, too, because of who the rioters were. The soldiers of the 24th Infantry held themselves up as ideals of African American manhood: masterful, courageous, and undeniably tied to the nation. By retaliating against the abuses heaped on them by white Houstonians, the soldiers saw themselves—and others saw them—as using manhood to claim their citizenship. Lamentable as other racial activists found the killing in Houston, they saw the soldiers’ action as part of an ongoing war at home against Jim Crow.

Black women, especially, viewed the Houston riot as a vindication of their men’s honor, and of their own. Doubly bound by a racial system that elevated man over woman as well as white over black, African American women understood events like those in Houston as attacks, first, on female bodies and security. For those women pushing at the confines, meaningful expressions of black manhood had to incorporate a mindfulness of women’s trials and concerns. They lauded the soldiers as their champions and their equals, articulating a cooperative notion of manhood that fused the aspirations of African American men and women. The riot in Houston illuminated how other African Americans saw black soldiers—those who rioted and those who did not—as fighting a true “war for democracy.”

Biggety Women and Colored Soldier Men

It all began with a woman. On Thursday August 23, Sara Travers stood ironing in her house in the predominantly black San Felipe district located in the fourth ward of Houston. She stepped outside, she would later recall, when she heard gunshots. As she stepped out, white city policeman Lee Sparks approached the African American mother of five to demand whether she had seen “a nigger jumping over that yard” by her house. When she responded, “No, Sir,” he ignored her and began searching inside her home.⁴

Travers called over her neighbor to find out what had happened. “I don’t know,” the neighbor replied. Explaining that Sparks and his partner were patrolling the streets in the fourth ward, she added, “I think they were shooting at crap-shooters.” Officer Sparks emerged from the house in time to hear the woman’s explanation. In a flash of temper he called her a “god damn liar” and claimed to have shot only at the ground. As the two women exchanged glances, he added, “You all God damn nigger bitches. Since these God damn sons of bitches of nigger soldiers come here, you are trying to take the town.”⁵

Sparks intended to demonstrate to the women of the fourth ward that the arrival of the 24th Infantry to guard Camp Logan had changed nothing for African American civilians in Houston. Accustomed to entering houses in the San Felipe district—“nigger dives” he later called them—at will, he returned to his search of Sara Travers’s bedroom and kitchen.⁶ When Mrs. Travers followed him inside to ask what he wanted, Sparks barked, “Don’t you ask an officer what he want in your house.” He informed her that in Fort Bend County where he came from, white men “don’t allow niggers to talk back to us.” Down there, he continued, “We generally whip them.” As if to punctuate his statement, he lifted his hand and slapped her.⁷

As a Houston policeman, Sparks could spiff up his Fort Bend roughhandedness with a thin coat of urban legal polish. Upon conferring with his partner Rufus Daniels about what to do with Travers, Sparks opted to “take and give her ninety days on the Pea Farm” as punishment for acting like what Daniels termed “one of these biggety nigger women.” To Sparks and Daniels, Sara Travers’s suggestion that access to her home was hers to control represented a gross insult to Jim Crow. As white men, particularly as officers of the law, their rights of access to spaces in the fourth ward, public and private, went without question. By commenting on the police officers’ behavior first in the streets in front of her house and then by questioning Sparks’s

right to search her house, Travers revealed herself to be a “biggety” woman, a troublemaker.⁸

Sparks and Daniels knew how to deal with such women. Just as they meant her arrest to send a message that their authority held sway over her domestic space, they manhandled Sara Travers to demonstrate that their power extended to her body itself. When she pleaded for time to put on something besides the “ol raggedy” slip and underwear that she later described herself as wearing, Sparks told her no. “We’ll take you just as you are,” he snarled at her, “If you was naked we’d take you.” In a second, grand gesture of contempt, spectators later claimed, Sparks took the child that Travers reached for on her way out the door and threw it to the sidewalk. Rufe Daniels, the bigger of the two men, pulled Mrs. Travers away from her children and down the street with her arms pinned behind her back, warning that he would break both her arms if she did not come easily. The two policemen had effectively denied Sara Travers her status as lady or mother and reaffirmed their prerogatives as white men in the process.⁹

Once the conflict between “biggety” black women and white authority spilled out of Sara Travers’s kitchen and into the neighborhood, however, the script changed. As the housewife and the two policemen waited at the call box for a paddy wagon to arrive, Travers recalled, “a crowd began a-coming”—a crowd led by “a colored soldier man.” Leaving Travers by the call box, Sparks walked forward to meet the soldier.¹⁰

Sparks would later claim that 24th Infantry private, Alonzo Edwards, looked a little drunk, that the soldier came swaggering towards him “walking kind of in the street” with a mixed crowd of about “20 civilian negroes and women.” Assessing the situation, the slender built Sparks quickly decided that he “was not going to wrestle with a big nigger” like Edwards. When the private boldly announced “that he wanted that woman,” Sarah Travers, turned over to him, Sparks raised his pistol and struck him repeatedly. Avoiding a fair fight he knew he would not win, Sparks, in his own words, “hit” Edwards “until he got his heart right.”¹¹

Stunned, bystanders watched the scene unfold. Where Sparks saw a puffed-up soldier working other African Americans into a lather, eye witnesses saw a uniformed race man speaking up for an African American woman. They saw Private Edwards approach Sparks and Daniels and ask them to let Mrs. Travers dress, and they heard him request that the officers turn her over to his custody. As she donned an apron and a bonnet, emblems of respectabil-

ity brought to her by “a lady friend,” Sara Travers heard Sparks demand to know what business the whole thing was of Edwards. Then, she recalled, “he raised his six-shooter and he beat him—beat him *good*.” Another witness saw both Sparks and Daniels knock Edwards to the ground. As one of the officers beat Edwards in the side with the muzzle of his gun, the witness heard Sparks reiterate the message that he and Rufe Daniels had given Sara Travers minutes earlier: that they were “running things, not the damned niggers.”¹²

The arrival of Corporal Charles Baltimore a few hours after they sent Edwards and Travers off in a patrol wagon served as an unwelcome reminder that, with the 24th Infantry in Houston, the two policemen did not run things alone. They shared their jurisdiction with military policemen who performed provost guard duty in the neighborhoods frequented by African American soldiers. Although the MPs went unarmed in deference to white Houstonians’ concerns about having armed black soldiers circulating in the city, their mere existence provoked white officers such as Sparks and Daniels. In a city with only two African Americans on the police force, the provost guard of the 24th Infantry signified unwelcome federal inversion of local racial mores.

Corporal Charles Baltimore had just climbed off a streetcar in the San Felipe district, he later testified, when he “met a boy of the 24th Battalion who told me a soldier had been beaten up by a policeman.” Members of the civilian populace confirmed the soldier’s story, saying that the police had taken Edwards and “beated him up pretty bad.”¹³ Trying to keep an open mind but determined to find out what had happened, he started down the street towards the call box where, hours earlier, the patrol wagon had come for Private Edwards and Mrs. Travers.

Baltimore encountered the two men near the scene of the morning’s incident. Lee Sparks looked up to see a man he described as a big “ginger cake, a mulatto” coming at them.¹⁴ He watched the uniformed soldier cross the street away from them as if reconsidering his approach. He then waited as Baltimore came back and started again in their direction. Witnesses could not hear what the men said once they got within speaking distance, but after a short exchange, one witness recalled, Sparks and Daniels raised their guns over Baltimore’s head and “beat him, too.”¹⁵

Sparks would later describe the encounter as a face-off. In his account, a confrontational Baltimore “came butting up . . . nearly rubbed his belly into mine” and addressed the two policemen in a “gross, grouchy way.” Baltimore

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the print version of this title.]

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Houston street map,
ca. 1913. Texas State
Library and Archives
Commission, Map
0435.

demanded to know “who whipped that soldier” earlier in the day. When Sparks claimed responsibility, the young corporal pressed to know “what the ‘hell’ he arrested a soldier for.”¹⁶

“Who wants to know?” Sparks challenged.

Baltimore mustered all the weight imbued in his posting and uniform in his reply. “I am supposed to know,” the soldier told the policeman.

Sparks brushed aside Baltimore’s claims to authority as readily as he had Sara Travers’s. Ignoring the agreement between the city and military police, he flatly told the corporal, “I don’t report to no niggers.”

Baltimore cursed him, Sparks later alleged, demanding to know, “Why the hell” the officers would not answer him. In the face of Sparks’s defiance, Baltimore vowed, “By God, I will know about it.” Riled by his tone, Sparks struck the soldier with his pistol.¹⁷

Baltimore recounted a different story. According to his version, he approached Sparks and Daniels with all the civility and decorum that their white officers had instructed the troopers to use when dealing with white Houstonians. He had prefaced his statement with “Sir” and respectfully asked Sparks whether he could “tell me what the trouble was.” Sparks had been the one to curse, responding that they had taken in Private Edwards because he had interfered with Sara Travers’s arrest and taunting, “By God, don’t you like it?”¹⁸

The corporal futilely tried to keep the encounter from escalating. When Sparks cursed him, he cited his responsibility as a soldier: “Officer,” he doggedly explained, “I am on duty on this street and when I return to camp I have to report.”¹⁹ Sparks supplied his characteristic response, knocking Baltimore on the head with the butt of his gun.

Baltimore “didn’t have a gun” he later stated and “didn’t care to get beat up.”²⁰ Rather than take on two policemen alone, the soldier turned on his heel and—in Sparks’s words—“ran like a greyhound.”²¹ As witnesses watched, Baltimore darted into a nearby house while Sparks “commenced firing at him—right at him.”²² After getting off a few shots, Sparks and Daniels followed Baltimore into the house, rustled him out from his hiding place under a bed and placed him under arrest.

Baltimore bled so much that witnesses in the crowd thought that Sparks had surely put a bullet in him. For his part, Sparks explained away the blood by saying that Baltimore “was so scared” coming out of the house that “he could not see the door” and cut himself “trying to make a hole through it.”²³

In contradiction, Baltimore claimed that he had taken another blow from the end of Sparks's pistol as the officer placed him under arrest. "He said he would kill me" the corporal recalled, "and I pleaded with him not to kill me."²⁴

Whatever the cause, Sparks noted that Corporal Baltimore came out of the house so subdued "he didn't seem like the same nigger he was when he first came up to me." Thinking back on the encounter, Officer Sparks would later tell a municipal board of inquiry that he did not mind black military policemen, "as long as they would stay in their place."²⁵

Place, Patriarchy, and Empire

During the age of Jim Crow, Lee Sparks's obsession with "place" was as southern as pecan pie. This central tenet of white supremacy did not simply draw a line between black and white; it structured relations across sex and class by assembling what one scholar has called "a stiff-sided box where southern whites expected African Americans to dwell."²⁶ Although poor white men could never aspire to the political influence of white male elites and poor white women would never truly stand on the pedestal reserved for the white ladies of the South, rigidity of place assured them a fixed position above even the most respectable African Americans. In turn, black men and women lived compressed lives, their public roles mortally constricted and their private spaces virtually unprotected. Place structured politics.

For African Americans, "place" allowed them to structure their world within that stiff-sided box as far removed from the hazards and indignities of Jim Crow as possible. During the war years and after, black people in Houston literally tried to "never get [themselves] in a place where" they would "have any trouble with" white people.²⁷ However, as Lee Sparks's rampage through the homes and streets of the fourth ward demonstrated, few such autonomous zones actually existed for African Americans. And as subsequent events would demonstrate, many African American men and women refused to remain within their stiff-sided box. Place always remained conceptual. In daily practice, the metaphor was continually undermined.

That logic of place rooted white patriarchy in black women's bodies. As an ideology and system of rule, white supremacy relied on the debasement of black women as much as it did the sanctification of white ones. White Southerners sought to teach African Americans that freedom had by no means brought self-possession, and they regularly abused black women's bodies to

drive this lesson home. During Reconstruction, white vigilantes had used rape as one form of extralegal terror, and in those years and after, *legal* authorities also used sexualized assaults to enforce and embed the authority of white men. Assault was “commonplace,” as South Carolina newspaperman John McCray recalled in the waning years of segregation. Many a community had its Lee Sparks and Rufe Daniels.²⁸

West of Houston in Waxahachie, Ely Green referred to such officers as “the law that lurks in the dark.” Green had long thought white lawmen “more enslaved to the propagandist word white supremacy” than the white elites he knew who sat atop the economic and social totem, and he suspected that lower-class whites found their “self-appeasement” over their own foreshortened circumstances by seizing opportunities to “kick the Negro around.” He had experienced his own run-ins with the local law, but in the fall of 1917, not long after Daniels and Sparks attacked Sarah Travers in Houston, Green discovered some sheriff’s deputies trying to find their self-appeasement by assaulting black women teachers.²⁹

Driving into the African American section of town one night in fall 1917, Green came across a gathering of “at least forty men,” assembled on a street corner. The group of black men had just watched some sheriff’s deputies arrest three black women schoolteachers on trumped up charges of prostitution. Calling the situation “a dam shame,” the men anticipated that the deputies would “take” the school teachers “to the park and rape them.” The deputies made no secret of their intentions—“they laugh about it in the barber shop,” the gathered men told Green. Moreover, this was not the first time the deputies had committed such assaults. As the crowd lamented, they had “been doing this to cotton picking women for over a month.”³⁰

Green wasted no time on lamentations. Instead, he ran into the middle of the street and urged the black men of Waxahachie to help him “rescue those girls” from the law. Rescuing “those girls” would do far more than place three black professionals out of danger: as with Private Edwards’s intercession on behalf of Sara Travers in Houston, rescue in Waxahachie offered the chance to challenge notions of place, to uphold black manhood, and to assert black male authority. For Green, fighting the rape was fighting the War. “You are going to fight for Democracy,” he appealed to a group of newly called draftees assembled with the rest of the men, “This is where you should start, at your own doorstep, to defend your women.” In moving to save the teachers, Green did not break out of the confines of patriarchy; he took his stance within them.

Invoking his grandfather's lessons from his childhood, he had held on to the tenets of a heroic paternalism, that a real man protected his own and that only a man deserved the rights of citizenship: "If you haven't got guts enough to fight," he excoriated the gathering, "You dont need no Democracy."³¹

As a defining identity and motivating ideal, manhood had its limits. Green tried to convey to the men before him that by branding respectable women as prostitutes, raping them, and bragging about it in African American public spaces, the white deputies meant to strike a blow at black men and black women alike. The men in the crowd may have known this, probably knew it, but they did not budge. For them, the obligations of paternalism only extended so far. As one draftee put it in absolving himself from any but the most local of responsibilities, the teachers—who hailed from rural districts outside of Waxahachie—were decidedly "not our women." Another draftee flatly spurned the assumption that he needed to prove himself to anyone. "If you want to get killed," he dismissed Green, "you be the hero."

The only one of the forty who opted to accompany Green was the man he "least expected" to do so, a "listless downtrodden human" named Boomer Hines. Hines had no reputation, no white patrons to shield him, and most likely no bed or home to return to, but he responded to Green's call to defend the kidnapped teachers' "virtue" and, by extension, his own honor. They drove off in Green's car with the lights off and Green's gun out, ready to die if they had to.³²

Like Green and Hines, the white deputies who abducted the three teachers saw the impending rape in terms of place and manhood. Pulling up behind the police car in the park, Green overheard the officers curse their struggling captives. "You high stepping bitches think what you got is for the nigger Doctors and the big rich," the deputy swore at the women, "but tonight we get it."³³ Lumping African American doctors with "the big rich" of indeterminate race, the deputy pointed to one of the many fissures in the metaphorical wall of white supremacy. Even moderate African American success gave the lie to assertions of inherent black inferiority and threatened to displace working class white men. By attacking teachers—symbols of black aspiration and achievement—the policemen attempted to reinforce the fixedness of place, combining a class resentment of elite white men's prerogatives with a race-based claim to those same privileges.

Green maneuvered layers of place and patriarchy to refuse the white lawmen the stature they sought. After securing Hines out of sight so that he could

relay events to Green's employer, Judge Dunlap, if something went wrong, Green blinded the deputies with his headlights and ordered the men out of the car under threat of their lives. When they asked who he was, Green invoked the authority of his boss, replying, "Dunlap." Telling them that "this is one time a Negro will have the respect of the law," he instructed the deputies to take the teachers over to the jail in City Hall where they would be safe. Green followed behind them in his car, making sure to keep "out of pistol range." For further protection, he stopped on his way to the jail and asked two of his white supporters, both members of the Chamber of Commerce, to accompany him inside the building. Once in City Hall, his two patrons took over the work of getting the teachers safely home. Both courageous and tactical, Green had masterfully offset his fierce demonstration of his manhood with an ultimate deference to the racialized hierarchies that governed Waxahachie.³⁴

Manipulating the racial codes in Waxahachie could only do so much for Green. Using white elites to discipline the white lawmen, Green had managed to save the three women without any lives lost, but in doing so, he made things impossible for himself. The marshal showed up at the Dunlap household the morning after the attempted rape to instruct that judge to "get rid of" Green if he did not "want him killed." Complaining that Green "had too much nerve to be a nigger," the marshal warned that members of the African American population might get themselves hurt trying to emulate him and his deputies might get hurt trying to control them.³⁵ The marshal and his men would kill Green before they saw that happen; big men's favor might protect him some of the time, but it could not shield him forever. After two more serious run-ins, this time with white elites who proved themselves as vicious in the protection of white supremacy as any working man, Green told himself that "it would be better to die in France as a man than to die in America as a nigger at the hands of a despicable evil white man."³⁶ By February, he had joined the Army.

There were other ways to challenge place besides with the barrel of a gun. For Officer Sparks in Houston, place had a spatial as well as social component, and shifting spaces undermined place and politics in the rapidly growing region. The section of the fourth ward that Lee Sparks and Rufus Daniels patrolled, along with other African American settlements in the third and fifth wards, rooted the metaphor of place in urban living patterns. White Housto-

nians thought they knew African Americans by the space they occupied. Thus, when Lee Sparks recounted his run-ins with Travers, Edwards, and Baltimore in the weeks after the riot, he only needed to tell his white audience that they took place in the San Felipe district. Listeners understood Sparks's implication that he had to act rough because the neighborhood on his beat was "rotten." Alone on patrol, district attorney John Crooker concurred with Sparks, a white man could find himself surrounded by "several hundred" black people in less than five minutes. As a police officer "you at times [had to] do things that you know aren't absolutely legal in order to keep the vicious negro from running over you."³⁷ In a place like San Felipe, safeguarding white manhood took precedence over obeying the law.

African Americans resisted Jim Crow by leaving the country for the city and the South for the North. Between 1900 and 1910, Houston's total population grew from 44,633 to 78,800, while the African American population grew from 14,608 to 23,929. Over the next ten years, those numbers would increase to 138,276 and 33,960, respectively. The 10,000 African Americans who flocked to the city between 1910 and war's end followed family, friends, educational opportunities, and jobs out of rural areas and into the neighborhoods that circled downtown Houston. Although the percentage of the blacks in the total population declined in this period, from 30.4 percent in 1910 to 24.6 percent in 1920, more African Americans walked the Houston streets than ever before.³⁸

The net percentage declined because, as rural to urban migration swelled the numbers of African Americans in the city, the Great Migration to industrial centers in the North and West brought the numbers back down. While migrants from smaller towns and rural areas came to Houston to build themselves a life, other African American men and women "want[ed] to be direct about it and want[ed] to go" north as quickly as possible.³⁹ The influx of African Americans into Houston from more rural parts of Texas and Louisiana, along with a growing community of Mexican-born railroad workers recruited from San Antonio, made Houston's competitive job market even tighter. Because the World War had virtually cut off the supply of European-born laborers, Northern cities offered more jobs with higher wages than African Americans could find in the South.

More important to African Americans, the North seemed to promise an escape from the invasions and assaults of segregation. Migrants from Houston, grown tired of "this terrible state" in which Jim Crow held them, relocated by

the thousands.⁴⁰ In pursuit of better wages, better job security, and a chance “to better” their “standing,” they took their families and headed for their utopian North where, as one freight handler imagined it, “a man is a man.”⁴¹

The impulse to find some place where a man could be a man, and the waves of movement of African American men and women responding to that impulse, challenged the foundations of the Southern caste system. “Place” denied the reality of African American mobility, either physical or social. It required and reinforced a static sense of Southern history, emphasizing continuity over change. In so doing, place bestowed upon white supremacy the luster of permanence. Place naturalized white supremacy—made it seem inevitable—by embedding it in the ground. Black mobility, however, revealed how fluid that ground actually was. Through their determination to reject place and better their status, African Americans disrupted the cultural imagination of white supremacy and threatened its stability as a political program.

Few groups appeared harder to pin down, spatially or psychically, than black Army Regulars. The frequent movement of the roughly 10,000 troops belied the illusion of fixedness created by place, even as their daily work helped to spread white supremacy to new locales. Since their consolidation in 1869 into the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments, black Army Regulars had moved along the margins of the nation. In the decades between Reconstruction and the Spanish-Cuban and Philip-pines Wars, while North and South vied to define the national character, African American troops labored in the service of empire. Between 1869 and 1898, members of the 24th Infantry served in Texas, Indian Territory, the Dakotas, along the border in Arizona and New Mexico, and in Utah. They built roads, installed telegraph lines, conducted illegal raids across the Mexican border, and provided relief for the black cavalry troops battling to seize Native American lands in the Indian Wars.⁴² Outside but not exempt from the boundaries of a maturing Jim Crow, African American soldiers “made the West”—as one member of the 10th Cavalry put it—to secure an equal footing back east.⁴³

Unmoored from home and region, black troops espoused a vision of a broad civic nationalism that rested upon their own interpretation of manhood. As with Woodrow Wilson’s Anglo-Saxon manhood, black soldiers’ civic manhood drew on tropes of honor and valor, courage and skill. Membership in the Army proved they could serve without being servile. Fighting Native Americans and Mexicans showed they could harness violence in ser-

vice of the state rather than of savagery. Having made the West in the image of the nation, they wanted their due as men and as citizens.

In appropriating the Anglo-Saxon model of civic manhood, African American troops absorbed its limits and embodied its contradictions. To install “a new civilization on the American frontier,” African American soldiers had to perpetuate the very racial ideologies they sought to escape, even as they often had to impose civilization by barbaric means.⁴⁴ Like their white counterparts, many black troops saw the “pacification” of Native American tribes as a prerequisite to making “the land safe” for those they considered real Americans to settle.⁴⁵ Casting Native Americans as unruly or savage, African American soldiers set themselves in opposition: where Native Americans behaved as beasts, they acted as men; where Native Americans were obstacles to progress, they were part of the civilizing mission. By accepting conquest as the terms on which they had to prove their manhood, African American troops infused their *civic* nationalism with an *imperialist* nationalism grounded in racial hierarchies. Even as military service allowed black soldiers to evade or subvert the most virulent forms of white supremacy in the South, they carried the white man’s burden to the Pacific Ocean and beyond.⁴⁶

African American soldiers who served in the Philippines during and after the 1898 wars managed to sidestep the worst manifestations of Jim Crow even as their work seemed to ensure, as one soldier wrote back to Richmond, that “the future of the Filipino” would be “that of the Negro in the South.”⁴⁷ Soldiers grown weary of the abuses heaped on them by an increasingly inhospitable military made bitter note when white soldiers “cursed” both blacks and Filipinos “as damn niggers.”⁴⁸ By helping to pacify the Philippines, African American soldiers helped to put Filipinos in their place. They killed and died to subject the islands to what one soldier decried as white America’s “diabolical race hatred, in all its home rancor.”⁴⁹ And in extending white supremacy’s reach into the Pacific, African American troops helped to strengthen its grip at home in the South. Black soldiers, intent on demonstrating their right to full citizenship through their commitment to American imperialism, found themselves caught, in the words of one soldier, “between ‘the Devil and the Deep Blue.’”⁵⁰

In the years after the turn-of-the-century wars, African American Regulars both supported and subverted white supremacy by learning to negotiate the spaces between nation and empire. Stationed in the Philippines from 1906 to 1908, soldiers in the 24th Infantry helped to squelch Filipino nationalist uprisings and maintain U.S. dominion over the island. During a subsequent

posting, from 1911 to 1915, the infantry manned the institutions that propped up the U.S. occupation, even as many of them took Filipina girlfriends or wives and formed ties to Filipino families. Despite white officials' concerns that African American soldiers often appeared "in closer sympathy with the aims of the native population than they were with the white leaders and policy of the U.S.," most soldiers continued to align themselves with the American civilizing mission.⁵¹

Just as with the Indian Wars, service in the Philippines granted the men of the 24th an intermediate position below white soldiers and civilians but above other people of color. Ironically, despite ongoing disfranchisement campaigns at home and the Philippines' emerging position under U.S. occupation as "Jim Crow's Beach House," black troops posted on the island enjoyed a special status derived from their American citizenship.⁵² Even if most white soldiers might dismiss African Americans as inferiors, they were inferiors in military uniforms who drew Army salaries. Among Filipinos, who regarded black troops as more "kindly and manly" in their execution of duty than white troops, the soldiers' resources as well as their comportment did much to ingratiate them.⁵³ Still, the dynamics of black-Filipino relationships, as soldiers wooed young women with gifts and food, reiterated their position as members of an occupying army. In the colonies, blacks counted as men. African American soldiers resisted white supremacy, but they did not reject the patriarchalism that underlay it.

Indeed, doing their duty as soldiers enhanced their standing as men back home. As Kathryn Johnson stated in an essay decrying the East St. Louis massacre, civilian activists' strategies of uplift and standards of behavior rested upon the belief that someday "conduct, character and culture, and not color, shall be the measure of [man]hood and womanhood."⁵⁴ Johnson and other like-minded African Americans had invited white people to take their measure as clubwomen and moral reformers, churchgoers and educators, but even their most dignified self-assertions contained a plea for white folks' recognition. The Army Regulars, in contrast, pled for nothing.

Even among the ever-increasing ranks of African American soldiers, the 9th and 10th Cavalries and 24th and 25th Infantries regarded themselves as elite. As a stevedore in France, Ely Green would soon note that his fellow soldiers who had transferred from the Regular Army were harsh and tyrannical. On separate occasions, he saw two men shot down by former Regulars who had joined overseas labor battalions. After the second murder, Green

went to file charges against the shooter, a former member of the 24th, but found his word counted for little against a “regular Army man with years of seniority.”⁵⁵ Back in Houston, E. O. Smith, black principal of Booker T. Washington High School, found that “many” members of the 24th Infantry stationed in Houston to provide security during Cam Logan’s construction “had done service in the Philippines and Mexico” and “were proud of the records” of service to the nation.⁵⁶ They viewed their service as a rebuttal to white supremacists’ images of African Americans as cowardly, childlike, or undisciplined, and they had internalized the “self respect,” regard “for the uniform,” and the “respect for the authority of the government” that Army officials would soon find volatile.⁵⁷

Both the stature of the black Army Regulars and the tension with white Southerners increased with America’s entry into the War. Like previous conflicts, World War I provided a grand avenue of entry for African American men by emphasizing the connection between soldiering and citizenship. The editor of the Galveston *New Idea* pressed this point, celebrating ten million African Americans as “brave and fearless, ready and willing to fight to the last ditch.” He continued: “we are proud of our record as a soldier and law-abiding citizen. America should recognize us and accord us human rights.”⁵⁸ Having served with honor in America’s imperial adventures, African American men now demanded to be counted on the side of the civilizers. They refused to be seen as a “Negro problem”; rather, they had earned “human rights.”

Black soldiers knew full well what they had earned, and Army life had honed their sense of honor. Lest the war intensify their militancy, the Army shipped most of its black Regulars far from the field of battle. The 25th went to Hawaii and the 10th to the Philippines. The 24th, however, broke into battalions and headed for posts in New Mexico and Texas. Assigned to Houston to guard over the construction of a National Guard training camp, the 645 members of the 24th Infantry’s Third Battalion arrived in town on July 28, 1917, more seasoned, more traveled, and more entitled than any group of black folks that Houston had ever seen before.⁵⁹

Houston at War

White Houstonians turned a wary eye on the troopers camped west of town. Few had forgotten what happened eleven years before in Brownsville when members of the 25th Infantry allegedly shot up the Texas border town,

wounding one man and killing another. With no one admitting guilt, President Theodore Roosevelt had dishonorably discharged all 167 men stationed at Fort Brown and barred them from future military or civil service. Little matter that a Senate inquiry had concluded that the troopers in Brownsville had been framed by white residents who wanted them gone; reminding the white populace of the murderous potential of Negroes with guns gave moral reformers the ammunition they needed to crack down on Houston's black and mixed-race neighborhoods.⁶⁰ Anti-vice forces proved all too happy to resuscitate the memory in their temperance campaign, reminding readers of the *Houston Post* to "Remember Brownsville. Make Harris County Dry."⁶¹ With the 24th in town, the attorney general ordered "something like 100 saloons in Houston closed." When the U.S. District Attorney later relaxed the rules, he still left closed the bars closest to the soldiers' encampment on the city's west side.⁶²

To their frustration, white Houstonians' direct oversight of African Americans' body and behavior stopped at the gates of the military camps. White laborers who moved to restrict craps and card games on the grounds of Camp Logan found themselves stymied by federal law. Although illegal in Texas, the regiment's white commanders explained that nothing stopped U.S. soldiers from gambling on federal property.⁶³ Likewise, African American troops defied the Jim Crow labels on drinking troughs and clashed with racist white construction workers with little retribution from military authorities. Complaining that white men constructing the National Guard camp "couldn't resent insults without clashing with the armed authority of the United States," carpenter Tom Dixon revealed how black soldiers cloaked themselves in the mantle of the federal government.⁶⁴ When another white Texan complained that the 24th's white officers did "not have the proper comprehension and understanding of how to handle Negro soldiers," he meant that the regiment's commanders should have done more to strip them of the security of their federal citizenship.⁶⁵

For white Houstonians, the women in and around the soldiers' encampment provided the surest signal that the soldiers had gotten out of hand. Everyone noticed them. While black civilians and military authorities described the combination of wives, girlfriends, and visiting families as resembling an "orderly . . . big picnic," scandalized whites visitors saw something else altogether.⁶⁶ They watched women piling into cars with members of the 24th, clucked at them frolicking in the dance hall that the soldiers had cajoled a

local man into opening, gritted their teeth at them “laying around” the grounds with their male companions.⁶⁷ Some of the women might have been camp followers or women drawn by what black writer and reformer Alice Dunbar-Nelson gently called “the lure of the khaki,” but many were just young women stepping out with their boyfriends.⁶⁸ To the scandalized white deliverymen, construction workers, and small businessmen who eyed them for weeks, however, the girls were all drunks and “dope fiends,” denizens of the red light district who had set up satellite offices on army grounds.⁶⁹

For many white people in Houston, the seemingly steady traffic of African American women into and out of the 24th’s encampment signified all the things wrong with the regiment’s coming to town. Despite the camp’s welcome boost to the city’s economy, it “wasn’t fit for a white man, let alone a white woman” to breach the world where black soldiers courted black women with Jim Crow signs mockingly attached to their clothes.⁷⁰ After the riot finally came, many townspeople would point to the black women to show where things had gone awry.

“They sure have things their own way,” a white salesman noted with consternation after glimpsing the social world fashioned by the 24th and their civilian friends.⁷¹ To white Houstonians, it seemed that a bunch of “northern sons-of-bitches” had invaded their city and created a space on its outskirts where social order went flying out the window.⁷² Despite the soldiers’ largely Southern backgrounds and years of postings in the West, white Texans saw the men of the 24th as waging a War of Northern Aggression. With their self-assertion and unwillingness to keep in their place, the battalion gave white Houstonians little doubt that they “came South . . . looking for trouble” and that their girlfriends were helping them find it.⁷³ African American troops did more than deny Southern strictures of place: they turned place on its head by bringing their private affairs and foibles—their sexuality, their manhood and humanity—out into public view. Stationed on the edge of the cotton South, the soldiers sent to guard Camp Logan crossed the boundaries of Jim Crow in a manner that made white Houstonians “a little uneasy.”⁷⁴

The uneasiness, felt on both sides, festered during the first four weeks of the 24th’s stay, from the end of July to the end of August. “A lot of men” in the 24th’s Third Battalion reported verbal sallies with white workers who resented having to work near black servicemen, insults traded with local street-car drivers who were used to strictly enforcing Jim Crow on their trolleys, and run-ins with the police who resented the competing authority of black

men in uniform.⁷⁵ When soldiers challenged the rootedness of place and refuted the notion that “the customs of the South are as fixed as the laws of the land,” as one Houstonian emphasized, white men invoked violence to bolster their claims to white supremacy.⁷⁶ “Those niggers would look good with coils around their necks,” a workman said about soldiers working guard duty who seemed too big for their britches.⁷⁷ Harris County sheriff’s deputy Ed Stormer announced to a trolley full of people that he might “have to kill” a member of Company I who deliberately sat in the front row of a streetcar. He hit the soldier with his gun before he locked him in the county jail.⁷⁸ White men in Houston saw nothing wrong in this; sometimes policemen just had “to beat niggers” when they were “insolent.”⁷⁹ And the men of the Third Battalion were nothing if not insolent. Most galling to the local white police force was that the Army’s “Negro police” guarding Camp Logan “were usurping more power than they should be” by trying to assert jurisdiction over their black troops. Before long, they guessed, “there would be a big scrap.”⁸⁰ On August 23, after Lee Sparks and Rufus Daniels attacked their third African American, and second soldier, of the day, the big scrap finally began.

Some people manage white supremacy as best they can, until they cannot take it anymore. In the hours after Sparks beat up Baltimore, a woman, “presumably a colored woman on San Felipe Street,” called to inform the company’s white commander Major Kneeland Snow that trouble had occurred.⁸¹ Rumors circulated around the soldiers’ encampment and half a mile over at Camp Logan “that Corporal Baltimore had been shot through the head in the San Felipe district” and left to lie “in the middle of the street with no one to care for him.”⁸² The soldier and civilian who delivered the news to director of the military police and Provost Marshall Captain Haig Shekerjian “were sure” it had happened. They knew, they told him, “because they could see the blood.”⁸³ Although the white officers called down to the police station for a more accurate version of the story, word rapidly spread over to Camp Logan that “one of the damned policemen had shot up” one of their men. “And,” a trooper on guard duty defiantly told a sheriff’s deputy, he and his comrades were “not going to stand for it.”⁸⁴ By the time Shekerjian retrieved Baltimore from the jail wounded but alive, both the soldiers’ encampment and Camp Logan were, according to a private in I Company, “in hell.”⁸⁵

The attack on Baltimore stoked the soldiers’ growing fury over all of their treatment at the hands of the police. “Major, what are we going to do,” a

soldier asked Kneeland Snow, "when they . . . beat us up like this?"⁸⁶ Snow instructed his men to report all incidents to him, but enraged by the ongoing brutality in Houston and lacking "much confidence in Major Snow," some members of the Third Battalion had already voiced a desire to exact their own revenge.⁸⁷ Although the day's violence had begun in Sara Travers's kitchen, the soldiers would turn it into an affair between men. In the dance hall, a group of soldiers responded to the reports of the attack on Corporal Baltimore by telling their girlfriends that they had "better go home." If the girls "didn't go ahead" of the battalion, they "couldn't go behind them," troopers warned teenager Bessie Chaney and her younger sister Flossie, "because they were going to town to kill all these white policemen."⁸⁸

For hours it simply sounded like idle talk. In Company I especially, men whiled away the afternoon "bunched and talking," spewing a rage as constant as the rain that fell with varying intensity throughout the afternoon.⁸⁹ In the encampment, soldiers readied their guns and announced to their female visitors that they planned to head downtown and "raise hell."⁹⁰ A few vented their anger by scaring off two white newspaper deliverers with the barrel of their guns.⁹¹ For a few men, like Corporal James Wheatley, these half-hearted displays of aggression hardly seemed adequate. "If this was the 25th," Wheatley goaded his fellow soldiers with his mis-memory of Brownsville, "we would all be in town." He demanded they "run" all the women present "out of camp," so that the men could get down to business.⁹²

Wheatley viewed violence not merely as legitimate but as necessary. A four-year veteran and former member of the 25th Infantry, Wheatley invoked Brownsville as triumph rather than tragedy and held the troopers in Brownsville up as models of courage and force. After announcing that "something should be done" about the law's treatment of Baltimore, Wheatley urged the men of the Third Battalion to preserve their dignity and sense of worth by retaliating as he imagined the 25th would have.⁹³ Such sentiments and comparison were not limited to the soldiers; like Corporal Wheatley, the African American civilians who circulated rumors of coming trouble saw the day's events as a test of the soldiers' manhood. According to camp laborer Robert Fitzsimmons, the soldiers complained that white folks in Houston "didn't know how to treat a northern man right." He claimed to have heard the soldiers declare their intention "to do like the 9th and 10th [*sic*] did in Brownsville."⁹⁴ Having established their civic manhood by fighting enemies outside the nation's borders, they would defend it by attacking the enemy within.

By day's end, emotions had grown so taut that Company I's Acting First Sergeant Vida Henry worriedly informed Major Snow that there was "going to be some trouble" later that night.⁹⁵ In response, Snow called all four companies in the battalion together, restricted them to base for the evening, ordered them disarmed, and considered the matter settled. But Sergeant Henry knew better. As a disciplinary officer and "a man that the men of the Company seemed to respect," the black noncom gauged the temper of the troops much more accurately than did his white superior officers.⁹⁶ Henry had spent the afternoon in a valiant effort to stave off the tempest brewing in the soldiers' encampment. After discussing the run-in with Sparks with the battered Corporal Baltimore, Henry had attempted to reassure the corporal that Captain Shekerjian had done "the best thing" in resolving the matter with the police.⁹⁷ Calm, Henry attempted to persuade the rest of the company to stay calm, too. Despite his status as someone other soldiers tended to "obey without question," he had little luck. When the storm finally broke later that evening, Henry could do nothing to stop it.

No one would ever find the words to describe adequately what happened over the next few hours. When Major Snow gave the order for the Battalion to surrender their weapons and ammunition, Companies K and L obeyed immediately. The men of Company I took longer as they tried to convey to Snow the load they bore in being "treated like dogs" by white Houstonians.⁹⁸ In Company M, the men launched a more dramatic protest, "bucking" on the first two orders to hand over their weapons. The soldiers' gradual compliance met with mixed reactions by the few who continued to defy Snow's order. Some holdouts denounced the rest as "cowards," while other grown men broke down in tears, weary "of seeing soldiers come in there with their heads beat up" and feeling that they had could nothing to stop it.⁹⁹ Turning over their rifles meant betraying their manhood, betraying themselves, and betraying each other.

As the soldiers struggled to decide whether or not to head over to Houston, sometime after 8 p.m., Houston appeared to come to them. The small dramas of defiance that wracked Companies I and M flared into outright mutiny amidst cries that a mob of white Houstonians had marched on the camp and begun to fire. Afterwards, no one could testify to having seen the mob, and witnesses would later debate whether there had been one, but in the initial cry, self-defense won out over discipline. Soldiers in all four companies rushed their supply tents to reclaim their weapons. Dozens of men

scrambled out of camp—some in pursuit of, others in retreat from, shooters they could not see. Those who remained weathered a ten-minute volley as Companies I and M shot at one another through the rain, each mistaking the other for white mobbers. In Company K, the first sergeant watched his troops desert, “almost in a daze.” Half crying, he could only say over and over, “This is awful. This is awful.”¹⁰⁰ Career soldiers, black and white, watched as their battalion dissolved. “Hell,” Kneeland Snow announced in a panicked phone call to the Houston chief of police, had “broken loose.”¹⁰¹

In Company I, Sergeant Henry endeavored to regain order, but in the wake of the perceived attack he did so as mutineer rather than obedient soldier. Commanding in both stature and nature, Henry harshly ordered the men to fall in line and prepare to march on the Houston police station. To those who hesitated, he threatened, “I will kill.”¹⁰² With thirteen years in the 24th Infantry, the Kentucky native had served loyally while American forces spread Jim Crow through the Philippines, through the Army’s betrayal of the 25th Infantry at Brownsville, and on into the beginning of the War. Yet when the storm broke in the soldiers’ encampment, Henry broke with it. After an afternoon spent trying to preserve discipline, he now came down on the side of the rioters. “We are in it now,” he told Sergeant William Fox when the shooting commenced. After the night’s end, he predicted “there ain’t going to be no camp.”¹⁰³

The older men knew better than most what sacrifices mutiny entailed. Sergeant Fox, himself a twenty-five-year veteran of the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments, begged Henry to stay and protect the camp. Supply Sergeant Rhoden Bond, who had joined the regiment during the thick of the turn-of-the-century wars, echoed Fox. “I goes out after him,” Bond recalled, “and tells him, ‘I wouldn’t do that. It is wrong; don’t go away.’”¹⁰⁴ Bond considered himself an “old soldier” with primary responsibility to his wife, family, and the military. He refused to go “in for nothing like” revenge.¹⁰⁵ Many of those African Americans like Sergeants Fox and Bond who had built their lives around the Army—given over their lives to it—still saw duty as the ultimate mark of a man. The mutineers struck them, as they did Provost Sergeant Cecil Green, as “weak minded fellows” who “shattered” in a few short hours the “hard-earned reputation” that had taken the “older soldiers many years to build.”¹⁰⁶

Sergeant Henry, in contrast, behaved as though all his years of skills and training as a disciplinary officer were meant to carry him to the riot in Houston.

Marveling at how Henry “didn’t seem to take any advice from no one but his own self,” Sergeant Bond watched as the first sergeant arranged his men as deliberately as if he planned for them to march against the Kaiser.¹⁰⁷ Henry appointed Corporal Wheatley to the front of the line, Corporal Baltimore to the rear. He ordered them to kill any men who broke ranks, and he sent a former member of the 10th Cavalry, Corporal Larmon Brown, to recruit more soldiers from other companies. Henry reminded the men that they had “serious business” before them.¹⁰⁸ With the mutiny in full sway, they would not be able to turn back.

For the men who followed Vida Henry, self-defense pulled harder than duty. Although a few troopers returned to order after Rhoden Bond “commenced to holler at them to get back,” most of the mutineers stuck to their guns.¹⁰⁹ The appeals “to their manhood,” voiced by the older black noncommissioned officers and again by Major Kneeland Snow, were drowned beneath the din of “We have a job to do; let’s do it.”¹¹⁰ The mutineers’ manhood was not the same stuff as Rhoden Bond’s; to them, forbearance and self-control, doing well and making good, all seemed inadequate for the situation in Houston. Their notion of manhood involved a different sort of control—disciplined rebellion, skilled aggression, and readiness to kill and die in the name of themselves, each other, and the race. Manhood as duty and self-defense long had existed in African American political tradition and likely had coexisted, competed, and connected within men like Vida Henry. Which impulse soldiers followed on the night of August 23 depended on how they measured character and conduct, and on what they felt they could bear.

As he pulled men into the ranks of mutineers, a solemn Corporal Larmon Brown tried to explain himself to his captain, Haig Shekerjian. Brown had recently written a letter to his mother in Atlanta expressing his heartfelt desire to head to the French front, but events in Houston had brought his war back home. “Captain,” he quietly asked Shekerjian to understand his calibration of manhood, “We ain’t going to be mistreated.” Tears streaming down his cheeks, Brown rejoined Henry’s column.¹¹¹ With members of the Battalion shouting “Stick by your race,” the mutineers started down the road to Houston for the largest—and last—battle of their lives.¹¹²

The air, a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* would write the next day, “was turgid.” Black and thick as pitch, “the night was the kind that made one physically and mentally nervous and unstrung.”¹¹³ Soldiers who had broken camp after the initial panic entered Houston from the west, firing erratically

as they charged through the all-white Brunner addition located in the sixth ward. From Camp Logan, a smaller group of guards abandoned their posts after the firing started. Cursing "god damn white people," they made their way north on Washington Avenue before heading east toward San Felipe.¹¹⁴ In the shadows, soldiers who had been pulled into the riot at gunpoint slipped out of the column and took refuge in ditches, at Camp Logan, or in the woods that separated the soldiers' camp from the rest of town.¹¹⁵ Some by choice, some coerced, Sergeant Henry's remaining men continued their march toward the police station.

To white Houston, it looked like war. As the men marched along, witness George Butcher could discern the outline of them coming four abreast, "marching all in line, marching, kinder trotting along." The soldiers mowed him down in the street.¹¹⁶ Sitting on his porch, seventeen-year-old Willie Drucks watched them approach "as orderly as they could be." He assumed they were going on a hike until one soldier turned and shot off his arm.¹¹⁷ Victim Fred Schofield recalled hearing the soldiers yell "On to victory!" after they drove a bayonet into his leg and fired three bullets into his friend's head.¹¹⁸ O. H. Reichert heard them resolve to "show the white folks what we're made of." His daughter, Alma, heard nothing before a shot pierced the walls of the family grocery store and hit her in the stomach.¹¹⁹

As rioters of the Third Battalion wended their way east toward the fourth ward, they left a bloody trail behind them. Sergeant Henry's column killed Rufe Daniels, the mounted policemen who had roughed up Sara Travers for acting "biggety" earlier in the day. Daniels went down in a shootout near the corner of San Felipe and Wilson, not far from where the morning's events had transpired. Henry's men killed a second policeman in the same confrontation. A third died two weeks later from his wounds.

Few of the remaining victims ever had a chance to fight back. Some of the victims, the soldiers shot indiscriminately. Others simply got in the way. Willie Drucks lost his arm because a soldier tried to shoot out his porch light. He was lucky; a second bullet took the life of his half brother standing beside him. Stray bullets pierced the woodshed of a boarding house two blocks from camp and killed a Mexican laborer sleeping inside. Talking on the phone in her house one block from the soldier's camp, Madora Miller heard "one shot, then several," before a bullet struck her left hand.¹²⁰ Farther north on Washington, one soldier turned his gun on a white woman's dog, snarling "What are you barking at," as he shot it dead.¹²¹

"As I heard those shots," Brunner addition resident Fred Schneider recalled, "I said to my wife that the niggers and the whites were having at it." Schneider decided to sit at the window with his six shooter in hand. The first soldier that fired on his house, he planned "to kill."¹²² All down Washington Avenue, clusters of white townspeople had the same idea. "Youthful, irresponsible crowds of eight or ten citizens," as the newspaper dubbed them, went running by with guns.¹²³ An Italian American immigrant and former member of the Italian cavalry recalled a white soldier appealing to him on the common ground of race: "Brother give me some gun because all the nigger soldiers are going to shoot up the white people."¹²⁴ Nearby, a crowd of 250 to 350 civilians and fifteen to twenty white soldiers tried to break into a hardware store and loot its stock of arms.¹²⁵ The prospect of race war brought together white Houstonians in a frenzy of "excitement such as had never before been experienced in Houston or any other Texas city."¹²⁶ Only intervention by an Illinois National Guard unit stationed in Houston kept the mob from invading the soldiers' encampment and attacking the men remaining inside.

Downtown, the riot continued. Stepping out on the street holding his .22 rifle, white civilian F. W. Sanker heard African American civilians applauding the rioting soldiers. One of them asked Sanker about his gun, "[W]hat could you do with that if those soldiers could see you?" The black man advised Sanker to go on home before he got killed.¹²⁷ Farther down San Felipe, Private Joseph Alexander recalled hearing a few onlookers in their yards cheering him on with a "'All right boys, go ahead'" and "such things as that" as he passed with Sergeant Henry's column. When some asked to join the march, Alexander told them "that there was nothing they could do" for the soldiers, "unless they could pray for us." Voicing an acceptance of the column's coming fate, the private assured the people on San Felipe that, "we was going on."¹²⁸ Walking with him, soldier Henry Peacock concurred. "If we die," he saluted the spectators, "we die like men." The soldiers marched on, into another gun battle with policemen.¹²⁹

Despite the continued determination of men like Private Alexander, Corporal Baltimore, and Sergeant Henry, the resolve of the rioters began to ebb. In the less organized columns, troopers simply fell out of ranks and started making their way back to camp. In Sergeant Henry's column, some soldiers stole away while the leaders fought with white civilians. Others begged to leave when the column veered off its course to rest and attend to the wounded. Ultimately, with the National Guard gathering and Henry nursing wounds

in the hand and arm, even the most hardened leaders balked. Over Henry's protests, Corporals Baltimore and Wheatley sided with a contingent of rioters who opted to turn back.

In the end, only Vida Henry remained. Having found himself "in it" when the riot flared in camp, he had reconciled himself to staying in it for the duration. Bearing the weight of the mutiny he helped to lead, he accepted that there existed no camp, no army, no life to which he could return. Henry gave away his watch, saying "it wouldn't do him any good."¹³⁰ He shook hands with the men who had joined his rebellion, and he waited for them to depart. The following morning, two children found the first sergeant under a chinaberry tree near the turnaround of the Southern Pacific railroad. The whole top of his head "was blown off."¹³¹ Some people speculated that white men had come across Henry and killed him, but most people thought it more likely that he had chosen to take his own life in his own way, rather than submit to a lynching at the hands of white Houstonians or the military that was sure to punish him.

Despotic Devil Democracy

Ten men probably "could not begin to tell the complete story of what took place that night," Army prosecutor Colonel John Hull would claim at the close of a long court martial.¹³² Even if they could settle on the facts, they probably could not agree on their meaning. Hull painted a picture of a group of men beneath contempt. Sworn to "protect the life and property" of the United States, the soldiers of the 24th had betrayed their uniform.¹³³ In contrast, the rioters saw themselves as staying true to themselves as soldiers and men. Letting their rage burst through the barrel of their guns, they had forced white Houstonians to face the consequences of dishonoring the uniform and treating them as less than men. Even if they had not "straightened up the town" as they intended, the mutineers of the Third Battalion had followed through on their promise to "raise the devil."¹³⁴ In their two-hour riot, they had matched the terror of white supremacy with the terror of armed revolt.

In the wake of the riot, white men in Houston read the incident through a sexualized lens. Although the day's events had begun with white policemen roughhousing a black woman, white commentators quickly equated the soldiers' resistance with the threat of Negro domination. "These 24th infantry

niggers and their white livered officers,” white Houstonian W. R. Sinclair railed in a letter to his congressman, wanted “social equality à la Jack Johnson and his white Chicago wife.”¹³⁵ Equating the soldiers of the 24th with Texas-born black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, Sinclair made them the same type of men: masterful in their violence but anathema to Jim Crow.¹³⁶ By placing both Mrs. Johnson and the 24th’s “white livered” officers outside Southern norms of gendered behavior, Sinclair also emphasized their alien-ness. Threats to white supremacy by white women who might cross the color line, or by military personnel who placed the Army before it, would gain no traction in the Bayou City.

Other white supremacists made more explicit the link between access and dominance. Writing in his diary the day after the riot, owner of the *Raleigh News & Observer* and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels reduced the cause of the riot to a petty battle over public space—to a struggle over place in the most literal sense. Houston happened, he wrote, because the “Negro in uniform wants the whole sidewalk.”¹³⁷ Daniels was no stranger to sidewalk stories; on the eve of the 1898 elections in North Carolina, he had broadcast stories of “impudent” Negro “wenches” attacking white women on sidewalks and in doing so helped to spark the Wilmington race riot.¹³⁸ Twenty years later, he was still using the same shorthand to describe African Americans’ assertions of power.

Daniels was not alone in using sidewalk tussles as shorthand for assaults on Jim Crow. The Macon, Georgia, *Telegraph* claimed that “the Negro’s way of asserting his conception of equality and equal rights is to jostle white people off the sidewalk” and “to force white women to take the mud puddles while he stands on dry ground.”¹³⁹ “Sidewalk” had become a racial code word to imply that all the Negro wanted was to gain power over white women.

Power over white women implied a concomitant power over white men. Explicitly linking the riot to politics, the *Telegraph* underscored the incompatibility between Jim Crow and African American manhood. Mistaking the rioters for members of the Eighth Illinois National Guard, the paper used their supposed origins to observe that residence in the North made black men “unfit” to venture back into Dixie where white men would concede “neither political nor social recognition.” The *Telegraph* argued that the combination of political power available to the African American man in the North “and the demeanor he absorbs” while up there could only lead to disaster when mixed with “the uniform of the American government” and “access to

firearms.” Echoing James Vardaman’s Senate floor rant against conscription, the paper held that African Americans who bore themselves as men would bring a racial holocaust as more and more black soldiers came to bases in the South. “Surely,” the paper appealed, “with a Southern man in the White House, a Southern man at the head of the navy and a Georgian guiding the treasury department,” they could shore up white supremacy enough to forestall this outcome.¹⁴⁰

All that white supremacy required, the *Nashville Banner* argued in counterpoint, was someone man enough to enforce it properly. Citing “pacity [sic]” as “one of the distinguishing features” of the African American race, the *Banner* placed the onus on white men to rise to their responsibility. The paper reassured its readers that “Negroes kept under due control are tractable.” Houston occurred because the 24th was not “kept under an authority” it could “fear and respect.” In recounting the riot’s cause, the *Banner* erased Sara Travers from its narrative and reasserted white men’s place at the top of Southern hierarchy. According to the Nashville daily, the soldiers, who held “an undue estimation of their importance,” ran amuck because they “had an idea” that “they were privileged to riot and that the government would protect them in what they did.”¹⁴¹

The *Houston Chronicle* roundly concurred with the *Banner*’s assessment of “the Negro temperament” and the problems of black military service. Although the United States was engaged in a war to rid Europe from authoritarianism, the *Chronicle* saw no irony in arguing that African American troops required “absolutism” on the part of their command. After all, leniency had “led negro soldiers to believe that the government is in sympathy with their arrogance and impudence.” If the South were going to survive the war intact, white men across the nation had to hold the line against African Americans in uniform. Repeating the call of the newspapers in Georgia and Tennessee, the *Houston Chronicle* urged the federal government to disabuse African American soldiers of the notion that government stood behind them.¹⁴²

In the aftermath of the Houston riot, it looked as though the government was heeding the *Chronicle*’s advice. Military authorities quickly removed the Third Battalion from Houston, sending the accused to Fort Bliss in El Paso and the rest back to Columbus, New Mexico. They charged 63 members of the battalion with mutiny and moved them to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to await their November 1917 trial. The Army exerted its jurisdiction

First court
martial, San
Antonio, Texas,
November 1917.
National
Archives and
Records
Administration.

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

over the accused men in spite of white Houstonians desire to try them in civilian courts, but it offered locals the comfort that the military could mete out "justice" more swiftly than civil courts.

On December 8, 1917, under a blanket of silence, the Army sentenced Charles Baltimore, James Wheatley, Larmon Brown, and ten other men to death. Separated from the other fifty accused mutineers, the thirteen condemned men greeted the news with silence. William Nesbit wrote home to say, "Goodbye. I'm gone" and to tell his family he died "with a clean heart."¹⁴³ In his final letter, Charles Baltimore called the execution "God's will" and quoted John 3:16. He assured his brother that, although he had marched downtown, he was "innocent of shedding any blood."¹⁴⁴ At dawn on December 11, "in a wild grove of mesquite trees," the Army secretly hanged the thirteen soldiers.¹⁴⁵ A witness described their stance as "erect and unflinching" as they bade one another farewell. They wore their army khakis.¹⁴⁶

In addition to those executed, forty-one men received life in prison. Another nine received shorter sentences, and five were acquitted altogether. In more rounds of courts martial early the next year, the Army tried another ninety-three men. They issued eleven more death sentences and eighteen more jail terms.

African Americans would go on fighting for the living. At the suggestion of Secretary of War Newton Baker, and under intense pressure from African American religious and civic groups including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the more aggressive National Equal Rights League (NERL), President Woodrow Wilson eventually commuted ten of the death sentences to life imprisonment and made all subsequent military executions during the war subject to his review. Though some left through pardons and parole, most of the surviving mutineers languished in jail through the rest of the 1920s and into the 1930s.¹⁴⁷

Many of those confined steadfastly maintained their innocence. Writing to the assistant to the Judge Advocate General, former private Douglass Lumpkins insisted that he "didn't take no part" in the Houston riot. Before the riot occurred, the twenty-year-old Kentucky native felt "eager to go to France and aid the country." He had desired only "to show the world at large" that he was "a useful and law abiding citizen." Wasting away from tuberculosis in Leavenworth, Lumpkins regretted his lost chance.¹⁴⁸ Also declaring himself innocent, Isaac Deyo demanded more than had Lumpkins. Quite certain that he had demonstrated himself a useful citizen during his eighteen years of military

service, Deyo wanted the fair trial that the Constitution guaranteed him. "Humanely speaking," he wrote in protest of his incarceration, "it isn't a whole lot to ask in return for the many years of faithful service that have been rendered by the ex-members of the 24th Infantry." Put the "treasonable" Texans who incited the riot on trial, Deyo suggested, let him go home.¹⁴⁹

The government's failure to punish treasonable Texans and its harsh punishments of the Houston mutineers broke black Americans' hearts. The condemned soldiers' fates seemed to presage the coming heartbreak of black servicemen in the overseas war. A grieving W. E. B. Du Bois emphasized the tragedy of the men who had "fought for a country which never was wholly theirs; men born to suffer ridicule, injustice, and, at last, death itself."¹⁵⁰ Alongside Du Bois, other "Men, strong men, bowed in grief" when they heard the news, claimed writers at the *Cleveland Advocate*. Gathered in "little assemblages" on city streets, they spoke of the hangings in hushed tones, like the sort that would characterize "a conversation in a friend's death chamber."¹⁵¹ Their well of mourning sprang from the conviction that the federal government had "resolutely refused to protect" the 24th in the "rights and privileges which clearly belonged to men who were tendering their blood and lives to this country."¹⁵² In the midst of wartime mobilization, the War Department had chosen racial nationalism over civic nationalism. It had carried forth what felt to the editors of one paper like a government-sponsored lynching.¹⁵³

The government had also shown its contempt for African American manhood in doing so. If the troopers had "stood meekly by" and let Sparks "slap a Colored woman," the *Advocate* bitterly speculated, they could have passed their stay in Houston with no trouble from the Army. Expecting the regiment to function normally even as white Texans abused them, the government abandoned the 24th—and all black Houstonians—to the tender ministrations of the Houston police department. Worse, by executing the soldiers before anyone had time to review their sentence, the War Department betrayed the regiment and all African Americans who believed in the rule of law in order to slake white Texans' blood thirst.¹⁵⁴ With nothing to buffer them from the ritual abuses of Jim Crow, the *Savannah Tribune* grieved, the rioters of the 24th "were more sinned against than sinned."¹⁵⁵

In countering the hostility evinced by Southern papers and the Wilson administration to African American manhood, their black defenders strove to portray the rioters of the 24th as "martyrs to the cause of liberty and self-preservation."¹⁵⁶ The *Cleveland Gazette* went so far as to kill off Baltimore in

the initial confrontation with Lee Sparks. Like other papers, the *Gazette* saw the assault of Sara Travers “by a prejudiced white Southerner” as the initial affront to the soldiers’ manhood. In their recounting of the ensuing fight, “a sergeant of the 24th regiment” grabbed the offending policeman, “knocked him down and beat him badly.” As near as the *Gazette* could remember, after Baltimore gave the policeman “what he deserved for his unmanly act,” a mob set upon him and killed him.¹⁵⁷

Pulling their manhood back to the fore, African American commentators refused to let white Southerners control the narrative of the Houston riot. In an open letter published in the *Baltimore Afro American*, Bishop A. C. Smith of the African Methodist Episcopal Church described the soldiers as “too manly to submit to extreme brutal treatment.”¹⁵⁸ His fellow pastor, the socialist Episcopalian George Frazier Miller, offered the men up to his congregation as sacrifices “on the infamous altar of Southern race prejudice.” Unwilling to condemn the rioters, he urged his congregation to “copy their example of courage and fortitude.”¹⁵⁹ Du Bois, like Miller, found it difficult to condemn the rioters. Indeed, he thought it “difficult for one of Negro blood to write of Houston” at all. In other accounts of racial violence, “it’s SO MANY NEGROES killed, so many NEGROES wounded. But here, at last, at Houston is a change.” In Houston, “white folk died. Innocent adventurous white folks, perhaps as innocent as the thousands of Negroes done to death in the last two centuries.” Du Bois might regret the aftermath, but he could not find it in his heart to be sad about what the soldiers had done.¹⁶⁰

As white and black men competed to shape the discourse of race, nation, and entitlement that grew out of the Houston riot, African American women worked to make their voices heard as well. For them, the riot’s origins lay in Lee Sparks’s and Rufe Daniels’s assaults on Sara Travers, an assault they viewed as part of a larger attack on black women as well as black men. While they passionately joined in denunciations of the Army’s “inhuman” treatment of the rioters, many black women hailed the soldiers specifically as “martyrs for the cause of colored womanhood.”¹⁶¹ Some of the fiercest champions of black manhood, female commentators on the riot emphasized the ties that bound together black womanhood and manhood.

Afro-Iowan Lillian Smith exalted the men of the 24th in response to a denunciation of them in the *Pueblo Chieftain*. The paper had conceded that the troopers’ service in Cuba and “on the hot sands of the Mexico desert” gave them “a peculiar history in American national life.” However, despite

their contributions, the Colorado paper went on to argue, Americans could not overlook the regiments' crimes committed "under the influence of liquor" and "petty passions."¹⁶² Lillian Smith thought otherwise. "It is hard for one of the negro extraction to write of Houston or any other Southern hell-hole," she wrote in echo and extension of W. E. B. Du Bois's editorial on Houston. She persevered because she felt it necessary to remind the *Chieftain* that "these men were not young recruits." Rather, "they were disciplined men" who "had stood the insults of these ruffian police and other Southern huns until they said 'That is enough'" and stood them no more. Smith refuted the paper's allegations that the soldiers had acted under the influence of liquor. "They fought," she informed the paper, "because underneath that black skin flowed a wealth of good, red blood."¹⁶³

Convinced that "what the American white man has sown, that he shall reap," Lillian Smith did not shy away from the riot's violence. She matter-of-factly noted that Officer Daniels "was dead and in hell, Thank God." Condemning Lee Sparks for entering "colored women's homes when they have been in their bath" and attacking African Americans with impunity, she lamented only that he had not joined his partner in the great beyond. To Smith, the Houston riot served as retribution for East St. Louis, for lynching, for all the violence endemic to white supremacy that put black men and women in peril. Smith predicted more bloodshed to come—"many Houstons"—until Southern "despotic, devil democracy" came to an end.¹⁶⁴

Texas teacher Clara Threadgill-Dennis published an even more inflammatory response to the Houston riot. Writing in direct address to the soldiers, she told them, "Every woman in all this land of ours, who dares feel proud of the Negro blood that courses through her veins, reveres you." Although she regretted that the soldiers mutinied and "spilt innocent blood," the soldiers' actions were redeemed because they came in defense of black women. Writing in the midst of the court martial at Fort Sam Houston, in the pages of the San Antonio black newspaper the *Inquirer*, Threadgill-Dennis told them that African American women "would rather see you shot by the highest tribunal" of the Army "because you dared protect a Negro woman from the insult of a southern brute . . . than to have you forced to go to Europe to fight for a liberty you cannot enjoy."¹⁶⁵ As African American women would do throughout the war, and activists would learn to do in subsequent wars, Threadgill-Dennis collapsed the lines between front and homefront.

In her paean, Threadgill-Dennis used “the immortal 24th” to symbolize resistance to all the absurdities of Jim Crow. “I needed you in Austin this week,” she wrote to them. If they had been with her in her home town, she “would not have been insulted by a street car conductor” when she requested a transfer. She and other African American teachers “would not have been insulted” by the Texas governor who could order them to buy Liberty Bonds to support the war while still under-funding their schools. With the 24th at her side, Threadgill-Dennis could have displayed her contempt for the notion of “fighting to make the world safe for a democracy” that the average African American “can’t enjoy.”¹⁶⁶

A graduate of the Presbyterian Tillotson College, a homeowner and principal’s wife, Clara Threadgill-Dennis was no radical.¹⁶⁷ Jim Crow, however, had made her militant. Wasting no sorrow on the fact that “southern policemen’s bones now bleach [*sic*] in the graves of Houston,” she infused the soldiers’ action with almost spiritual import. For a man to die protecting his daughter, his wife, his mother, or his sister, she told them, was “the most sacred thing on earth.” Through the language of sacrifice, Threadgill-Dennis washed the blood away. What truly mattered, by her reckoning, was the nobility of the mutineers’ cause and the majesty of their deaths. She urged them to go with manly stoicism. “Be brave,” she wrote in closing, “face death fearlessly.”¹⁶⁸

By joining the soldiers’ humiliations to her own and their honor to her defense, Clara Threadgill-Dennis articulated a notion of black manhood that incorporated black womanhood in its core. Although she did not directly challenge the paternalism embedded in both white and black men’s conceptions of civic manhood, Threadgill-Dennis refused to hide her own sense of entitled citizenship beneath manhood’s cover. She broadened the discursive terrain through a move akin to Lee Sparks’s associating biggety women and insolent Negroes—making the progress of black men connected to and contingent upon the protection and elevation of their female compatriots. Although the soldier offered a potent symbol of an entitled, empowered man, African Americans would have to use both their identities for mutual support to wage the war for democracy on American soil.

To many white Americans these women looked more than biggety; they looked incendiary. Just as white Houstonians quietly speculated that bad women helped encourage the soldiers to riot, federal authorities believed that militant women might spur further trouble. Both Clara Threadgill-Dennis and Lillian Smith ran afoul of federal agents who sensed danger in their

discontent. Rather than publish Lillian Smith's letter, the editor of the *Pueblo Chieftain* passed it on to the U.S. attorney in Des Moines.¹⁶⁹ In San Antonio, agents from the Bureau of Investigation alerted Military Intelligence to Clara Threadgill-Dennis. Authorities arrested her, along with the *San Antonio Inquirer's* editor G. W. Bouldin and its contributing editor William Hegwood, and charged them all with violating the Espionage Act by inciting insubordination in military forces. Using the courts, federal authorities attempted to limit the ways African Americans conceptualized and asserted themselves—and each other—as citizens.

With G. W. Bouldin, it seemed to work. Although authorities did not pursue Clara Threadgill-Dennis for writing the letter, they eventually convicted the editor of the *Inquirer* for publishing it. During the trial Bouldin's attorney introduced evidence indicating that Threadgill-Dennis had spent time in the Texas state mental hospital, and he endeavored to distance his client from her letter by saying that Bouldin would not have printed it if he had read it first. Both the defense and the prosecution referred to Threadgill-Dennis as a "lunatic" and raving "maniac" over the course of the trial, alternately dismissing the validity of her lunatic article and, by using it as the basis of the espionage charge, taking it very seriously. Convicted of trying to incite soldiers to mutiny or insubordination, Bouldin spent a year total in Texas prisons and in Leavenworth.¹⁷⁰ Crazy or not, the government had expected African Americans to respond to the grievances and sentiment that Clara Threadgill-Dennis put forth. Even when it seemed a bit crazed, black rage and disillusion did not bode well for Jim Crow. Like their male counterparts, angry black women were dangerous.

Houston had laid bare the menace and promise of African American military service. African American soldiers were indeed dangerous, especially when they proved willing to fight for democracy at home. Houston revealed, too, the high costs of such a stance. African American men and women opened up new fronts in the fight for democracy and against white supremacy in the months after Houston and in the "many Houstons" that followed. Throughout the next few years, as black soldiers clashed with white civilians and soldiers in locales as far flung as Newport News, Virginia, and St. Nazaire, France, black civilians worked out new strategies to discuss and defend them, to make their violence something more than the act. In both offensive and defensive maneuvers, they deployed the language of manhood to press their case for full citizenship.

What both soldiers and civilians meant when they invoked manhood and citizenship would change, too, as black soldiers began sailing abroad. The Houston riot had demonstrated what happened when black agents of empire returned to claim their place in the nation; it had brought the 24th to the intersection of their domestic life and imperial dreams, with heartbreaking results. For soldiers in the American Expeditionary Forces, service in Europe would create a space between domestic realities and their international imaginations where they could forge new identities, new nationalisms, and new pictures of themselves of as men.