

ONE

EVOLVING FAITH

Rev. Charles A. Hill and the Making of a Black Religious Radical

In the short story “Fire and Cloud,” published in the 1940 collection *Uncle Tom’s Children*, African American writer Richard Wright explores the conflicts among religion, politics, race, and class by focusing on the inner turmoil and external pressures besetting Reverend Taylor, the story’s protagonist. The tale commences with Reverend Taylor, a Black minister in a small southern town, returning from a discouraging meeting with the town’s white relief officer. Taylor had gone, hat in hand, to plead the case of the town’s nearly destitute and increasingly desperate Black population. He was rebuffed, told only that “Everybody’s hungry, and after all, it’s no harder on your people than it is on ours.”¹ The officer’s only suggestion is that Taylor tell his congregation “they’ll just have to wait.” Mulling over how best to convey the bad news, Taylor begins to think, “Lawd, mabe them Reds is right,” which is to say maybe the community should band together, stage a massive interracial march downtown, and “scare ’em inter doin’ something!”² At the same time, Taylor is worried that such a militant course of action would offend the mayor and the town’s white elite, endangering his flock and the entire Black community by stirring up the antagonism of local whites. It would also, he fears, place his own position as minister of his church in jeopardy, especially since Deacon Smith—“A black snake in the grass! A black Judas!”—is looking for any excuse to engineer Taylor’s ouster.

By the time Taylor arrives at his home, all of these pressures and wor-

ries and competing constituencies have been gathered under one roof, literally. The Reds, Hadley and Green, are in the Bible room; the chief of police, who has been sent by the mayor, is in the parlor; Deacon Smith, who has been using the rumor of a demonstration in his campaign to discredit Taylor and curry favor with the local white political bosses, is in the basement with the other deacons; and a distressed and agitated delegation from his congregation is crowded into the front hallway. The physical structure of the house, then, operates as a symbolic representation of Reverend Taylor's internal conflicts—conflicts that are resolved when Taylor is abducted and savagely beaten by a gang of white men, after which he agrees to support the interracial march. In preparation for that march Wright has Taylor preach an uncompromising sermon, urging his audience to take collective action on its own behalf.

Sistahs n Brothers, Ah *know* now! Ah done seen the *sign!* Wes gotta git together. Ah know whut yo life is! Ah done felt it! Its *fire!* Its like the fire that burned me last night! Its sufferin! Its hell! Ah can't bear this fire erlone! Ah know now wut t do! Wes gotta git close t one ernother! Gawds done spoke! Gawds done sent His sign. Now its time fer us t ack.³

Characteristically, Wright leaves the question of the march's success unanswered. We are not told whether the Black and white marchers, united at least for the moment around shared class interests, are able to force the hand of the town's elite. While he suggests that *all* of the participants, especially the African American ones, have been transformed by the experience of interracial collective struggle, Wright ends with Taylor's newfound conviction that "This is the way!" "Gawd ain no lie!" he tells himself, and the story concludes as he "mumbled out loud, exultingly: *Freedom belongs t the strong!*"⁴

This story of one religious man's, one minister's, conversion to the necessity of collective action is instructive for a number of reasons, not the least of which is Wright's ability to capture the complex relationship of faith to action. At the beginning of the tale the sympathetic Taylor is a man of God, whose authority as a minister anoints him a mediator between the Black community and the white power structure. Sustained by his faith, he accommodates himself to the racial and class status quo, viewing his passivity as the only viable option in a town (and a world) where "the white folks jus erbout owns" everything. At the story's end, Taylor's faith continues to shape his identity and his actions, but now

those actions are geared toward a nonaccommodationist and potentially progressive politics. What has changed is Taylor's interpretation of what God demands and his vision of how best to serve his congregation.

Reverend Taylor had many real life counterparts in the Depression era, ministers who, like Taylor, were driven by faith and circumstance to participate in mass demonstrations, strikes, and other political actions. Progressive activists and unionists in Detroit in the 1930s and early 1940s were blessed with the presence of three such men: the Rev. Horace A. White, Fr. Malcolm C. Dade, and the Rev. Charles A. Hill. All three played a key role in the city's early civil rights movement, and all three are intriguing in their own right. It was the Reverend Hill, however, who developed the most extensive and militant set of positions and alliances with the Left and whose story therefore seems the most compelling. His biography embodies the dynamic confluence of religion and politics during the formative years of Detroit's early civil rights community.

Charles Hill did not start as a radical in either a political or a theological sense. In fact, he was once described as "an old-fashion Bible thumping preacher whose only political concern was making things right in the sight of the Lord."⁵ This wonderfully descriptive statement from Hill's close friend and ally, Coleman A. Young (the labor radical who became Detroit's first Black mayor, in 1973), captures the intriguing admixture of conservative and progressive uses of religion that formed the beating heart of Hill's political theology and activism. Like the fictional Reverend Taylor, there was nothing particularly radical about Hill's understanding of evangelical Christianity. Unlike the radical theologians active in the 1930s—figures such as Claude Williams and Harry Ward, one of the founding members of the Methodist Federation for Social Action—Hill never articulated a direct connection between Christianity and Marxism; nor did he ever directly urge the overthrow of capitalism. And yet this Bible-thumping minister became one of the most militant religious leaders in the city.

Reverend Hill was not a practicing theologian, and unfortunately few of his writings and sermons survived his death in 1970. Yet Hill's early life and young adulthood offer a number of clues to the sources of his later political activism. Born in Detroit on April 28, 1893, Hill was the surviving twin born to Edward Hill, an African American dentist, and Mary Lantz Hill, a second-generation German American. There are two family stories, or legends, about this union. The first, told by Hill's eldest son, Charles A. Hill Jr., maintains that the union was little more than a one-night stand. Edward Hill had come to town "for a convention, you

know,” and Mary Lantz was “a waitress, I think, at a local place. They met and, well, one thing led to another.” The other version, told by Hill’s daughter, Bermecia Morrow McCoy, insists that Mary Lantz and Edward Hill were formally married, even though there is no trace of a marriage license or official record. She also points out that Mary Lantz went by the name Mrs. Hill until her death.⁶

In both heavily gendered versions, Edward and Mary defied the racial and sexual norms that structured social interactions in what was then still a small city teetering on the brink of industrial greatness. Although an 1838 statute prohibiting marriage between Blacks and whites had been repealed by the Michigan legislature in 1882, the social stigma attached to such a union at the time of Hill’s birth would have been substantial. And, while Blacks were scattered across the German east side, virtually no intermarriages were officially recorded before the early 1900s.⁷ The union between Mary and Edward may not have been prohibited by the state, but it was certainly not sanctioned by members of the Lantz family, who, like many other older German immigrants, had become relatively prosperous as skilled workers. As a result of the unpopular marriage/ elicit rendezvous, Mary was forced to sever her familial ties.

Whatever the truth about the nature of their relationship, it ended, but not before a child was conceived. There is no evidence as to whether Edward Hill ever saw his son or provided any type of emotional or financial support for his estranged wife and child. In fact, Hill’s birth certificate lists his father as “Unknown.”⁸ Apparently, Edward Hill returned to Chicago. According to both Hill children, Charles Hill rarely mentioned his father; both children also agree that the two men never met. For his mother, however, Charles Hill seemed to harbor only love and affection. Mary Hill’s life was not an easy one. She was left alone with a redheaded infant who in his third month began to “darken”—much to the consternation of her friends and neighbors in the German community near Jay Street and Gratiot on Detroit’s east side. His birth certificate lists him as “White,” but this did not stop gossip about Mary’s “colored baby” from spreading through the community and compounding the hardships faced by the young, ostensibly single mother. Eking out a living for herself and her child without a strong support network in turn of the century Detroit soon proved overwhelming. Shortly after Charles was baptized into the Catholic faith, Mary Hill took the drastic step of placing her son in the care of an orphanage, the German Protestant Home, where he would remain for the next eleven to twelve years.

That she was able to place her “colored” baby in the home was fairly remarkable in itself since nearly all of the city’s orphanages practiced a

policy of racial exclusivity.⁹ In fact, in a June 1916 exchange of letters between the Rev. John Webster, superintendent of the German Protestant Home, and Forrester B. Washington, the first director of the Detroit Urban League (DUL), Webster reported that “we have never had any colored children in our Home” and had none presently.¹⁰ Throughout her son’s tenure as a ward, Mary continued to work odd jobs—taking in laundry and hiring herself out as a maid—and visited Charles sporadically. Aware of his ambiguous status as both “son” and “orphan,” not to mention as both legally White and socially colored, his years at the German Protestant Home passed slowly.

As an adult, Hill rarely mentioned these years. The one story that his eldest son was able to clearly recall had to do with Hill sneaking into the cellar of the orphanage to lick the sides of the maple syrup barrels. While humorous, Charles Hill Jr. remembers this as a story of deprivation. Although Charles Sr.’s love for, and loyalty to, Mary Hill was never questioned by friends or family, there is little doubt that he was deeply affected by his experience in both negative and positive ways. “I think that’s why Daddy was such a good father,” Bermecia recalled. “I mean not having a father, and the orphanage, made him value fatherhood that much more.”¹¹ But the implications of his years in the orphanage extend even further. On the one hand, his early and prolonged exposure to white children and administrators may have accounted in part for his later ease in interracial and majority-white settings. Perhaps it even formed the basis for his abiding faith in the possibility of integration and racial reconciliation. If a much later remark by his grandson, David Morrow, is accurate, then Hill found a certain amount of acceptance and support at the home. “During his early years,” Morrow said in a speech entitled “Charles Andrew Hill—the Family Man” delivered at his grandfather’s retirement celebration in 1968, “his teachers in the home recognized his strong character and depended on him to escort them to and from evening prayer service.”¹²

On the other hand, it is surely the case that his early experiences complicated Hill’s efforts to work out his own racial, or interracial, identity. By his eleventh or twelfth year, Hill had had enough. He returned to his mother’s house on Jay Street determined to assist her and continue his education. The character of the Jay Street neighborhood, like the city as a whole, had begun to change. Jay Street was still part of the area near Gratiot Avenue populated by less affluent Germans, but by 1905 the area also included “the better class of the colored people,” as well as Jewish families. Naturally, he would have explored his new surroundings as he traveled from home to school to whatever after-school jobs he could

secure to augment the relatively meager family income. West of Gratiot, near the heart of what had been known as “Little Berlin,” was Woodward Avenue, the broad main boulevard that bisected the city, stretching from the river outward past Detroit’s ever-expanding northern boundaries. To the far east lay DeQuindre Avenue, with an ethnic and racial patchwork in between.¹³

Detroit’s near east side, the center of Hill’s geographical existence, was the traditional point of entry for immigrant Detroit, first for the French, then for (relatively fewer) Irish, and later for innumerable Germans. In the 1880s and 1890s, it became the portal for immigrant Italians, who established a colony near the river called Paradise Valley, and for Greeks, Jews, and waves of Poles, who would quickly become the largest cultural minority group in the city. By the turn of the century, the deep east side was identified with Irish, Gratiot with Germans, Hastings Street with Poles and Russian Jews, and Paradise Valley with Italians. The narrow sector to the south of Jefferson, the major avenue following the contours of the Detroit River, was filled with dilapidated old warehouses, decaying housing stock, vice, crime, and the poor from all racial and ethnic groups. In a pattern that was replicated generation after generation, each group would establish a beachhead within the east side and gradually move out—and up, socioeconomically speaking—generally toward the city’s northern reaches. This is what the better-off, native-born white population managed to do as Detroit experienced its first major population boom, from 132,956 residents in 1884 to 205,876 in 1890. The last group to manage this transition in class and social space would be African Americans, who occupied more and more of the east side as others moved on.¹⁴

In the early 1900s, when Hill first encountered it, this African American enclave was still relatively small. Before the Civil War, the tiny Black population of roughly 580 souls had been clustered in the area between Randolph Street on the west, Hastings on the east, Gratiot on the north and the river to the south. By the 1870s, Blacks, who made up less than 3 percent of the population, began to settle in the old Kentucky district, twenty blocks north of Gratiot and St. Antoine, and throughout the east side. As the Black population increased (from 4,111 in 1900 to 5,741 in 1910), so did its concentration, creating the early outlines of what would soon become a city within a city, with a variety and breadth of institutions that could match those of Detroit itself.¹⁵

Mary Hill gradually withdrew from friends and neighbors in the years following her son’s return, but she never stood in the way of Charles’s desire for increased interaction with African Americans. Indeed, she

would periodically accompany him to the various Black churches that he attended—faithfully—every Sunday. Her own ties to Catholicism and the local parish had weakened over the years, and she did not prevent her son from exploring other religious options. Hence, Hill was free throughout his high school years to frequent no less than three churches: Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal (AME); Bethel AME at the corner of Napoleon and Hastings; and Second Baptist, the oldest of the city's Black churches, with a stately brick edifice on Monroe (originally called Croghan) Street. It was largely through these religious institutions that Hill came to identify with the struggles, hopes, successes, and indignities that were part of the day-to-day existence of Detroit's Black population. Indeed, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of Black churches in urban centers during this period. They were often the first institutions to provide social services, and they offered spaces for meetings and gatherings, both spiritual and secular. Moreover, they endowed their congregants with a sense of belonging, a source of stability in a chaotic world.¹⁶

These institutions also, arguably, augmented Hill's understanding of class stratification. In Detroit, as elsewhere, church membership was an excellent measure of class and social status within the Black community. Hence it is significant that Hill did not seem to have much contact with churches such as St. Matthew's Episcopal (at the intersection of St. Antoine and Elizabeth), which catered to the Black elite, particularly the city's small group of established Black families. The St. Matthew's congregation included doctors and lawyers and was always led by well-educated clergymen. There was widespread acknowledgment that the church's ornate chapel was the most popular site of worship for members of the "blue book of colored society in Detroit," and the parish actively cultivated its reputation among "those who fancy themselves to the intelligentsia and the better paid workmen and businessmen."¹⁷

This tendency shaped much of the church's history. In an internal document, "A Brief History of St. Matthew's Church," probably drafted in the early 1920s, the anonymous author makes repeated reference to the "upstanding, courageous, intelligent, high type class of men who played a role in the establishment and maintenance of the church in its early years." Among this group were men "who had been free since birth and whose ancestors before them had been free." These men are mentioned not only because of their accomplishments, the author relates, but also because "we believe it to be a just and Christian act to dissipate the impression of illiteracy of the men of that time."¹⁸

Along with the "high type" of the congregation and the impressive

education of the clergy, the typewritten history also notes, “Our splendid contacts with the best and most influential citizenry of the white race has always worked for the best interests of our group, as in the past this fact is still apparent.” This fact was also apparent throughout the first half of the twentieth century, especially as the church continued to enjoy contacts with Henry Ford and others. Thus, under the direction of Robert W. Bagnall from 1911 to 1921, when Bagnall left to become the NAACP’s director of branches in New York, and Fr. Everard Daniel until 1939, St. Matthew’s membership strove to be “a group conscious of their role as community leaders and separate from the ‘masses of the laboring classes.’”¹⁹ It was to those “laboring classes” that Hill, the son of a working-class mother, was drawn.

Eschewing the cachet of St. Matthew’s, Hill favored churches, such as Bethel AME, whose congregants were from the “middling classes”—factory workers, carpenters, tailors, janitors, laundresses, and cooks—and Second Baptist, which also had a predominantly working-class congregation. Bethel was a driving force behind Detroit’s Black institutional development in the late nineteenth century. It was particularly active in the field of education and was the first church to do extensive social work among the Black population.²⁰ It was in such institutions, moreover, that Hill found an edifying religious emotionalism to match the evangelical style that he would come to adopt in his own preaching decades later. But that is not all that he found. Members of all three congregations became his friends; their respective pastors became mentors and role models, perhaps becoming the extended family (and father figures) he had never had. Hill was particularly drawn to the children of these congregations. By the time he entered his final year of high school he had managed to have himself appointed superintendent of the Sunday schools at Bethel and Second Baptist while serving on the usher board at Ebenezer.

It was during these years of immersion in Black religious life that Hill began to struggle with the question of whether he truly felt “the call” of the ministry, that urge to preach, as a vocation, that is so central to African American (and Christian) religious expression. In narratives of the call experience, conflict, resistance, and uncertainty are tropes of the struggle to understand and answer. Those who are called to the ministry often have to come to terms with feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and doubt about their competence to fulfill a religious vocation.²¹ Hill’s experiences fit this arc. His devotion was strong, yet he remained uncertain. The idea of becoming a minister competed with dreams of pursuing a career in law or business. With high school graduation swiftly

approaching, Hill chose business. He was wary of leaving home, and the family finances were as precarious as ever, but, with his mother's blessing, he headed to Ypsilanti, Michigan, to attend Cleary Business College, where he earned a degree in business administration.

Cleary was a relatively good vocational school. It was predominantly white but not racially exclusive. Moreover, and perhaps more important, it was close enough to Detroit (about thirty miles) that Charles could return home nearly every weekend to continue his Sunday school and other church duties. The short bus ride home every Friday or Saturday also gave him the opportunity to visit with his mother. She never failed to prepare his favorite foods or to hand wash and press a stack of white shirts so that he would look "presentable" throughout the week.²² He did well in his courses. His transcripts reveal a very basic selection of classes top-heavy with arithmetic, bookkeeping, and office practices.²³

As Hill struggled to blend the secular world of weekday business studies with the spiritual world of the church, he also continued to wrestle with the question of whether he felt truly called to preach and minister. His chosen path reflects this doubt and struggle. Hill finished Cleary in 1912 and accepted an apprenticeship in the downtown offices of Black attorney William Patrick Sr. with the intent of pursuing a legal career. At the same time, he enrolled in a correspondence course offered by Moody Bible College in Chicago. This dichotomy is significant for at least two reasons. First, Hill's actions reveal the extent to which he was conflicted over the call and his future. Second, his choice of Moody tells us something about how Hill conceptualized the role of a minister.

Named in honor of Dwight L. Moody, a nineteenth-century evangelist who operated schools for "Bible work" in the slums of Chicago for sixteen years, Moody Bible College was not a traditional seminary. Rather, the institution was in many ways the perpetuation of Dwight Moody's desire to outfit laymen for the "practical work" of reaching the masses.²⁴ This appreciation for the practical side of the ministry would mark Hill's long career. He also adopted much of Moody's theological framework, which was conservative and evangelical. Hill was comfortable with fairly literal scriptural readings and interpretations—he was not a theologian in the scholarly sense—and, not surprisingly, he chose to take the "Bible Doctrine Course," ultimately receiving a degree in "The Doctrine of God, the Doctrine of Jesus Christ, the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Doctrine of Man, and the Doctrine of Angels and Satan." As a field of theological inquiry it seems to have emphasized the place of mankind after the Trinity and to have regarded Satan as a real presence in the world. This type of theological conservatism is not inconsistent with a

radical politics, and it had the potential, realized in Hill's later work, to fuel a forthright critique of capitalism, racism, and exploitation.

Hill's degree from Moody also gave him credentials sufficient to enroll in the seminary at Lincoln University in rural Chester, Pennsylvania. On the eve of World War I, he matriculated as a probationary student. Lincoln was an all-Black and all-male college funded by the Presbyterian Church and endowed with a reputation for producing outstanding graduates. "The Black Princeton," as it was known, was an ideal site for ambitious and upwardly mobile young Black men, many of whom would go on to become doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and, of course, ministers.

Religion played a major role in the founding and running of the school. When Lincoln was founded in 1854, its primary mission was to oversee the Christian education of Black men and prepare them to evangelize in both the United States and Africa. By the time of Hill's arrival in 1914, this mission had become broader and much more secular overall. Simply put, the impetus to evangelize became wedded to and perhaps submerged within the drive to "uplift" socially, economically, and politically. Moreover, as one of the first institutions dedicated to higher learning for African Americans, Lincoln's administrators eschewed the Tuskegee-inspired trend toward industrial education. Instead, they chose a path that would make their university "a leading example of an institution devoted to the creation of W. E. B. DuBois's 'talented tenth.'"²⁵

The talented-tenth ideal is often derided (in some cases rightfully so) as mere elitism. As historian Kevin Gaines points out, "this emphasis on class differentiation as race progress," could produce distressing results. "Amid the legal and extralegal repression," he argues, "many black elites sought status, moral authority, and recognition of their humanity by distinguishing themselves, as bourgeois agents of civilization, from the presumably undeveloped black majority; hence the phrase, so purposeful and earnest, yet so often of ambiguous significance, 'uplifting the race.'"²⁶ This is not to suggest that racial uplift was completely devoid of positive features. Indeed, uplift was also rooted in a tradition of service and social responsibility—an "each one, teach one" understanding of collective struggle and social emancipation. When underpinned by religious faith, particularly the desire to see to it that others were right with God, uplift focused on both this world and the next. Such a call to service shaped Hill's life and career. It had been inculcated years ago in the churches he joined as an adolescent, cultivated during his years at Lin-

coln, and fully expressed in his ministry at Hartford, whose motto was “We gather to Worship, We depart to Serve.”

The Lincoln experience seemed to shape Hill in other ways as well. Its diverse student body afforded him the opportunity to interact with young men from different geographical regions; because of Lincoln’s continuing commitment to training African students, he also met students from different countries. The entering class of 1917, for example, was almost evenly divided between men from southern states, especially Georgia, and northern ones, especially Pennsylvania. The student body was also socioeconomically diverse. The administration kept tuition low and often allowed students to graduate with debt. While this policy would eventually prove disastrous from an administrative and financial standpoint, it gave financially insecure students such as Hill the chance to receive a first-rate, liberal-arts-based education.

Lincoln had an all-Black student body, but until 1930 its faculty was exclusively white. It was also a nonreformist institution that sought to “minimize militant attitudes and maintain a low profile in the region.”²⁷ Relatively conservative in outlook, the administration struggled to articulate the potentially nonconservative goal of educating a Black elite in neutral terms. Thus, the students relied on one another to collectively negotiate the ambiguities at the heart of the institution. The faculty, while charged with the responsibility of cultivating a group of exceptional Black men capable of “redeeming” their race, tended to remain aloof from students both socially and ideologically. By all accounts, racial equality and racial justice—national and international—were rarely discussed in the classrooms, where strict decorum was maintained at all times. This neglect of pressing racial issues, coupled with the social distance between students and faculty, surely helped to encourage the creation of an extracurricular culture of evening “bull sessions” and informal debates on such topics as national and international politics, the Black rights agenda, the war, and colonialism. Copies of Black publications such as the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine were circulated and discussed among students, and the need for heightened militancy in the struggle for equality was always a topic of conversation.²⁸

A religious sensibility was also pervasive at Lincoln, both inside and outside the seminary, where Hill was enrolled. In keeping with the school’s heritage, all students were required to take two academic semesters of religious studies, and attendance at weekly chapel services was mandatory. In this regard Lincoln was part of the mainstream of Black education, in which all education was to some degree religious. Accord-

ing to Horace Mann Bond, a Lincoln graduate who became the college's first Black president in 1945, the university was constructed on a set of well-defined religious principles. "Lincoln University," he wrote, "is a spiritual, intellectual and social institution."

Its basic theme derives from the idea that there is but one God. A monotheistic religion, principally the handiwork of the Jews, has the necessary corollary that God is the Father of all mankind: the children of God are Brothers.²⁹

The "Fatherhood of God" and the "Brotherhood of all Mankind" are concepts whose deeper meaning and significance exceed their *prima facie* simplicity. If, as the Bible insists, "God is no respecter of persons" and all men and women are equal in His eyes, then racial prejudice and social intolerance are necessarily sinful and immoral.

All the available evidence about Hill's style of preaching and ministering to his flock, not to mention his broader political theology, shows that this ethos infused his life and work. "He preached the Bible," as his son put it. He was also "holistic in his theological view," recalled the Rev. Charles G. Adams, who grew up in Hartford, was mentored by Hill, and assumed the pastorate of the church when Hill retired. "He was very cosmopolitan and universalistic."³⁰ This universalism, or religious ecumenicalism, is hardly surprising given that Hill was baptized Catholic, raised at a German Protestant orphanage, prayed at both AME and Baptist churches, and graduated from a Presbyterian seminary. This same ecumenical spirit extended to his later political associations.

Hill's seminary training was strict and traditional; basic requirements would have included course work in biblical archaeology, homiletics, systematic theology, apologetics, Old Testament exegesis, pastoral theology, and expression.³¹ Like many of his classmates, he no doubt came to Lincoln with his own ideas—many of which had been formed through his experiences, especially in Black churches, and in his correspondence course at Moody—about the Bible, Christianity, and their place in the world. In Hill's case these ideas translated into "a brand of Christianity [that] demanded activism in society on behalf of the oppressed, the underdog,"³² which is a classic expression of both the social gospel and the prophetic strain within African American Christianity. This is not to suggest that either the social gospel or prophetic Christianity was part of the Lincoln curriculum, but certainly students were free to work out their own understandings of the relationship between these traditions and the theology they studied in the classroom.

At the time of Hill's tenure at Lincoln most of the faculty were either Presbyterian clergymen or laymen, many of whom had trained at Princeton. The seminary's orientation was therefore toward a blend of Calvinism and religious humanism. If the humanist idea that all men and women are equal in the eyes of the Lord formed one pillar of religious education at Lincoln, then the Calvinist doctrine of election—the idea that God has chosen a particular group of people for a particular destiny and that salvation comes through grace not works—formed the other. This doctrine of election and salvation not only conformed to the university's missionary outlook; it also offered a religious justification for the notion of a talented tenth that would go forth and uplift the race.

Hill imbibed this spirit as he worked out his own political theology. At its heart, this theology can best be thought of in terms of the "evangelical liberalism" constructed by "serious Christians" searching for a theology that could be believed and embraced by "intelligent moderns." This evangelical liberalism was both Christ-centric and biblically based. It was Christ-centric to the degree that it expressed the essential features of Christianity—the person and work of Jesus Christ as savior—in terms suitable to a modern world plagued with the social sins of racism and exploitation. And it was biblically based insofar as the scriptural teachings were accepted because of their intrinsic worth and epistemological value.³³ Even during these years (roughly 1914 to 1918), glimmers of Hill's affinity for evangelical liberalism can be seen, whether in his volunteer service as secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association's (YMCA's) National War Work Council or in his pursuit of an advanced teaching certificate through the Pennsylvania Sunday School Association. The Sunday school movement has, after all, always been part of a broader evangelical mission.³⁴

After four years of wrestling with theological concepts inside the classroom and debating racial politics with his fellow students after hours, Hill was prepared to begin his career as a licensed minister. His mixture of Bible-thumping evangelism and social activism was already in evidence. Selected to give one of the commencement addresses for the graduation of the class of 1918, Hill chose the provocative title "Religion, a Man's Job" (sadly, the text of the speech has not survived). He and many of his classmates listening that afternoon had forgone military service—a major expression of Black manhood at the time. But perhaps they saw themselves as soldiers of a different kind, as young men able and willing to do the "man's job" of ministering to the faithful and pressing the cause of Black rights. Like their counterparts returning from the war, Hill and his classmates were no doubt inspired by what many took to

be a new and growing African American militancy. During the war, W. E. B. DuBois had echoed the sentiments of many when he advised Blacks to “close ranks” around the country and engage in patriotic, albeit segregated, service. Now, at war’s end and with segregation unabated, he proclaimed: “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.”³⁵

Hill would have surely seen himself as one of DuBois’s “soldiers of democracy.” He would have also seen himself as one of the “new” Negroes. The same generation that would discover “newness” all round itself—New Humanism, New Thought, New Woman, New Criticism—would also discover a New Negro. As Asa Philip Randolph, then editor of the *Messenger* (billed as the only “radical black socialist magazine in America”) put it at the time, “The New Negro arrived on the scene at the same time of all the other forward, progressive movements.”³⁶ A product of both war and migration, this New Negro was, or so many claimed, no longer willing to turn the other cheek while his political rights were ignored and trampled, his labor exploited, and his demands for social equality and social justice mocked. Black Americans, declared Alain Locke some years later, were no longer willing to be “something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be kept down or in his place or helped up, to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.” Although this New Negro was partially the product of artists, intellectuals, and middle-class activists, it was not without a material basis in the changing everyday lives of large segments of the African American population.³⁷

The beginning of the “Great Migration”—from rural to urban and South to North and West—was an important expression of agency and self-determination, as millions of African Americans struck out in search of better lives for themselves and their children. The scattered outbreaks of anti-Black violence that greeted the appearance of this New Negro—especially during the Red Summer of 1919—are one indication that white communities across the country felt the need to keep Blacks, new or not, in their (subordinate) places.³⁸ “When some of the soldiers came from World War I,” Hill recalled, “they had gotten used to larger privileges and so they were making a demand and being pushy.”³⁹ And Hill, who pledged to take up the man’s job of religion during this sickening wave of anti-Black violence, was in favor of pushiness.

In the midst of the celebration of the New Negro and the concomitant racial violence, Hill returned home to Detroit and was ordained in the Baptist faith. Although Detroit escaped the outbreak of a full-fledged

race riot, there were a number of clashes between Blacks and whites, especially during the spring of 1919, as the postwar recession led to a more competitive job market. Periodic violence at the factory gates, particularly when Black workers were used as strikebreakers and scabs, also helped to keep racial tension high. Moreover, the bombing of homes as a means of forcing Blacks out of previously integrated neighborhoods and preventing new arrivals, which had begun as early as 1917, became frequent by 1920.⁴⁰ But Hill returned not only to a city of increasing racial tensions and violence. He also returned to his mother's Jay Street house and one of the churches, Second Baptist, that had provided him with a spiritual home. Accepting a position as assistant pastor, Hill benefited from a familiarity with the congregation's older members that came from his being a former member and Sunday school superintendent. Less familiar were the church's newcomers—the steady flow of Black southern migrants who had been arriving in the city since the beginning of World War I.

Detroit had become one of the leading destinations for Black workers migrating out of the South in search of work. Between twenty-five and thirty-five thousand African American migrants took up residence there in 1916 and 1917 alone, meaning, remarkably, that the majority of the city's Black population—which numbered over forty thousand in 1920—had arrived in that one year. A second wave of migration in 1924 and 1925 brought an additional forty thousand men, women, and children. By 1926, 85 percent of Detroit's Black population had arrived in just one decade. At the same time, the city's total population also doubled, making it the fourth-largest city in America by 1920.⁴¹

While astonishing in their own right, these numbers fail to reveal the energy and hope, as well as the misery and despair, that gripped the city's residents in the immediate post-World War I period. For some, there was a sense that the city was on the move. New industries, especially the automotive industry, were in a period of intense growth. But for others—especially the majority of the city's southern migrants, both Black and white—the “promised land” turned out to be a hell of poverty and social dislocation. Many Black migrants watched their dreams slowly die in the thirty-four crowded city blocks that comprised Paradise Valley, the old Italian east-side enclave where the vast majority of the Black population was confined from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Under the pastorate of Rev. Robert Bradby, Second Baptist had welcomed these troubled newcomers from the start. From 1915 to 1920 alone, over nine hundred new members were added to the church's rolls. Hill owed his position as assistant pastor in charge of charity and

educational programs to the influx. Given that so many Black southern migrants were Baptist, the church automatically benefited from the increase. But Bradby was also dedicated to outreach. In 1917 he set up a system of committees to meet the trains arriving at Michigan Central Station with offers of housing and employment assistance. As an assistant pastor, Hill was thrown into the thick of the Black community's social crisis, where housing and jobs were the most pressing concerns.

The district on the city's lower east side that young Charles had explored as a teenager was now bursting at the seams. In 1918, twelve to fifteen thousand African American residents were crowded into three square miles that had previously housed half that number. Although a number of other, smaller districts had been developed, the high-rent, poverty-ridden east side would remain the city's chief point of entry for migrants for decades. Excessive rents (as much as 50 to 60 percent higher than what whites and white ethnics were paying in other parts of the city), coupled with lower-paying, unskilled jobs, posed enormous difficulties for southern migrants.

One of Hill's duties was to assist new migrants in finding adequate housing and decent jobs. While the assistant pastor no doubt considered this part of the man's job of religion in action, it was actually a job in which women, most notably the church's Big Sister auxiliary, played the dominant role. In less than four years, this group of one hundred women had recruited hundreds of volunteers, raised over five thousand dollars, and founded a home for young women that was to stand "as a beacon-light for the protection of our girls."⁴² The women of Second Baptist, along with other churchwomen and club women in the city, expended thousands of hours in charity work, organizing groups and societies to tend to the needs of Black southern migrants.

Second Baptist was thus a prominent place for a young, newly ordained minister to begin his career. Founded in 1836 after the First Baptist congregation split over allowing its Black congregants to vote in church matters, Second Baptist is the oldest Black church not only in Detroit but in the entire state. Second Baptist has a long and proud history of going beyond the spiritual needs of the congregation and extending itself into politics and social life. The church was a stop on the Underground Railroad (one can still see the basement rooms used to hide fugitive slaves) and hosted Frederick Douglass and John Brown.

Reverend Bradby was a distinguished leader of this important institution. Born into poverty in a rural area outside Chatham, Ontario (a background that might explain his tremendous sympathy for southern migrants), Bradby was schooled at McMaster University, a Baptist Col-

lege and Seminary in Toronto. Before accepting the pastorate at Second Baptist in 1910, he had served congregations in Amherstburg and Windsor, Ontario, and Toledo, Ohio.⁴³ A self-made man and prominent religious leader, Bradby was a good role model for the young minister Hill.

Hill did not remain in the position for long, however. In 1920 he married Georgia Roberta Underwood, the daughter of a Seventh Day Adventist minister. Born in Longsport, Indiana, Georgia had lost both parents by the age of ten and was sent to live with an aunt in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she met Hill at a convention of Sunday school teachers and administrators. Georgia Underwood Hill was a deeply religious convert to the Baptist faith. As a young woman she had once vowed that she would never be a minister's wife and would never live in Detroit. Nevertheless, she married Hill and moved into his mother's Jay Street house during the early years of their marriage. She recalled these years as hard but happy. As a profile in the *Michigan Chronicle* reports, "There was a time when she baked cookies and cakes to supplement her husband's salary. They made it a family project, and everyone was happy doing it." The family—Georgia, Reverend Hill, and his mother—were also among the first to take an active interest in selling Black newspapers, especially the *Detroit Courier*. Mother Hill would continue to sell the paper well into old age.⁴⁴

Such measures were necessary because in 1920 Hill had also taken on the pastorate of his own congregation with a modest salary. His new church, Hartford Avenue Baptist (at the corner of Hartford and Milford Streets), was, in 1920, little more than a wooden shack. Organized in 1917 by Second Baptist, the church was an urban outpost located across Woodward Avenue—a neighborhood into which Blacks were slowly beginning to flow. These "west siders," who no longer wished to travel east of Woodward (the broad avenue that once served as the city's racial divider), solicited the aid of Reverend Bradby and Second Baptist—"the Mother of Hartford"—for help in establishing their own congregation. Originally known as the Institutional Baptist Church, Hartford's early membership was "made up of people of all faiths for this was the first church in the area" and was first pastored by Rev. E. W. Edwards, whose salary was paid in part by the Detroit Baptist Union and Second Baptist.⁴⁵ In many ways, Hartford was part of Bradby and Second Baptist's uplift effort, but it was Hill who made Hartford his own. He aspired, he once said, to make Hartford "a haven of spiritual resources for all the contingencies of life."⁴⁶

Sadly, less than a year after the Hills were married their first child, Lucia, died within a week of her birth. Some eleven months later, how-

ever, Charles Jr. was born, followed fifteen months later by Georgia Roberta. Within the next several years, Wesley, Lovica, Bermecia, Sylvia, Brent, and Lantz Hill were added to the clan. And as Hill's family continued to grow, so, too, did his church. From a membership of thirty-five in 1920, Hartford grew by 1926 to one of the ten largest Black churches in the city, with a membership of over twelve hundred. In part, this impressive growth can be linked to the influx of southern migrants into the neighborhood, as well as to relationship between Hartford and Second Baptist, but part of the explanation also lies in Hill's quiet charisma and his dedication to outreach and service.

Hill initiated an ambitious building project while Georgia came to relish her role as "first lady" of Hartford. She was a founding member of the Ladies Aid Society, served on the Women's Day Committee, and was a steady and dignified presence at most social functions. Once their children were a bit older, she extended her sphere of social involvement, serving on the board of the Lucy Thurman branch of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). She also became an avid "club woman." Indeed, her extensive range of memberships led her children to joke that if she did not have a club to join for a particular purpose then she would surely invent one. And she did help to invent them. Over the years of her marriage, Georgia Hill assisted in organizing the Abatenjwa Club (for Detroit ministers' wives), the Interdenominational Wives Organization, and the Baptist Ministers' Wives Association.⁴⁷ Throughout the 1920s, both husband and wife poured their energies into church and family. While forced to live with Hill's mother to make ends meet, the family was still better off than the majority of the church's members.

When the Ford Motor Company shut down its plants in 1927 because of a model change, thousands of African American men were suddenly cast out of work, increasing the hardships suffered by workers and their families—many of whom were still reeling from the economic recession of 1920–21. Hartford's resources for coping with this disaster were minuscule compared to Second Baptist's, but Hill strove to find ways to lessen the hardships faced by his congregants, not only through the word of God and weekly spiritual communion but also through various forms of cooperative economics. He urged his congregants not to stay away from the church just because they didn't have money. Operating under the belief that God helps those who help themselves, the church held coal drives and arranged for the distribution of day-old bread from Detroit's Awrey Bakery. Although Hill stolidly refused "favors" from powerful "outside sources," Hartford also had some success in running its own small employment agency.⁴⁸

But life was not all work and struggle. Reverend Hill saw to it that the church held dances and social forums, especially for young people, and he often organized the church's athletic programs himself. He had been an avid volleyball player while at Lincoln and even did some traveling on the Black volleyball circuit; he was always willing to get a game up. During these years and throughout the Depression, Hill would also make pancakes every Saturday for his children and their many friends. His eldest son remembers that the operation required at least two massive bags of flour and a good deal of coordination. Reverend Hill also made his own syrup—which calls to mind his late-night forays into the orphanage cellar.⁴⁹

Hill and family also valued more restful types of recreation. Every summer they spent at least two weeks at various lakefront spots, where they would slow down, commune with nature, and take stock of their lives. Initially these family vacations were based in Mackinac City, at the very northern tip of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, where other Black families were few and far between. While the Hill family escaped the hustle and bustle of city life during these outings, they did not escape racial prejudice and de facto segregation. Indeed, Hill's children still recount stories of their summer experiences with racism—not being allowed in certain hotels, restaurants, and, significantly, certain white churches. Still, church services were mandatory. When they could find nowhere else, the family held its own private services presided over by Reverend Hill.

The family eventually saved enough money to secure the purchase of a piece of land in Harbor Beach, Michigan, in 1951, which they christened Cha-Hill-Gia, an odd amalgamation of their names. The actual purchase was accompanied by racial indignities—a white friend had to close the deal on Hill's behalf—but the lakefront site became a personal retreat for Hill, his family, and, on numerous occasions, friends and members of his congregation.

Harbor Beach was also the birthplace and hometown of Frank Murphy, whose famed career intersected with Hill's and many of those within the city's Left at numerous points. Murphy was rising during this period from a liberal Recorder's Court judge in Detroit to the city's mayor throughout the Depression, and then later to governor and Supreme Court justice.⁵⁰ The town of Harbor Beach, however, was not always as liberal and fair-minded as its favorite son. Georgia Hill recalled that when the family first arrived "we noticed that they seemed to resent us. Even when I would go to the drugstore, they always gave us what we wanted, but it seemed as if they didn't want to touch our hands."

Undaunted, the Hills continued to make friendly overtures, and the tensions gradually subsided or were at least pushed below the surface. Revealing her own class predispositions (attitudes that she shared with her husband), Georgia Hill continued: “We’d get a little odd feeling, but afterward they found out that we dressed as well as they dressed and we ate the same food, and our place looked as nice as theirs and better.”⁵¹

Owning their own home in Detroit and a lakefront summer cottage far outside the confines of the city were still years away for the Hill family. By the late 1920s, however, Hill’s life was good. He had his own church, a growing family, and a solid reputation within the Black community. Approaching his late twenties, he was in good health and well on his way to achieving middle-class standing. To all of these blessings he would add the harsh realities of political struggle.

WHAT KIND OF ACTIVISM?

The details of Charles Hill’s political development are a bit fuzzy, but some basic observations can be made from the evidence. It is clear, for example, that throughout the 1920s, as Hill worked to build his church and enlarge his congregation, he was still negotiating his class identity. On the one hand, his educational pursuits suggest aspirations to become a solid citizen and a member of the Black middle class like his absent father, Edward Hill. On the other, he must have retained some loyalties to the working-class life of his mother, Mary, who continued to work at the various odd jobs that had financed her son’s education until, in the early 1940s, a leg injury failed to heal properly.

Happily, the church provided a perfect opportunity for Hill to reconcile these two aspects of his identity. Hartford’s decidedly working-class character allowed the young pastor to satisfy his aspirations for middle-class respectability without betraying his loyalty and sense of belonging to the class of his birth and childhood. To this end, Hill infused every aspect of Hartford with an ethos of service. Moreover, the church provided him, as it had so many others, with a fast track into politics. As one close observer put it, “For answers—for salvation—people turned to the church and politics. In many cases, the two were symbiotic. Every pastor had a political position, and every address had multiple purposes.”⁵²

At this point in his career, Hill’s political outlook did not place him too far outside the mainstream of the Black middle class and the city’s Black clergy, most of whom seemed to accept the prevailing ideology of racial uplift. The idea of an educated elite responsible for “lifting as they climbed” and providing services to their less fortunate brothers and sis-

ters was, after all, entirely consistent with the tenor of his education at Lincoln and his prior experiences within Black religious communities such as Bethel and Second Baptist. Hill, who maintained the habit of wearing crisp white shirts, would most likely have approved of such initiatives as the “Dress Well Club,” which stressed the necessity of proper attire and deportment in public. Outside the church, but within this ideological framework, Hill worked with the local YMCA and maintained a membership in Detroit’s NAACP chapter. The former seemed to satisfy his continuing interests in Christian education, while the latter probably spoke to his interests in the law, social justice, and integration.

Hill was a mighty proponent of integration—so much so that he made a habit of welcoming whites into his church. This upset some of the Black congregants. There is an old joke that eleven o’clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. Some wanted to keep it that way. “I remember when I first took the church,” Hill remarked, “at any time when a white citizen came in, they’d [his congregants] ask what business they had here. Why didn’t they go to their own churches?” His characteristic response was to chastise his congregants for their “black chauvinism,” which was, according to Hill, was “as bad as its white counterpart.”⁵³ Given his long-standing commitment to integration on all levels of society, he began working with the local NAACP while he was still an apprentice to attorney William Patrick.

Working with Patrick, Hill had aided in the preparation of the fourteen lawsuits that the Detroit branch had brought against local movie houses and theaters, which confined Blacks to specific sections or barred them altogether. He also had the opportunity to participate in a vigorous NAACP campaign against a state bill outlawing interracial marriage.⁵⁴ The local NAACP attracted further national attention in the wake of its successful handling of the 1926 Ossian Sweet case. Sweet was an African American dentist indicted for murdering a member of a white mob that had threatened his family while it was moving into a previously all-white neighborhood. Clarence Darrow’s defense work on behalf of the NAACP and the Sweet family made this an especially high-profile trial.⁵⁵ For Hill, who had begun to contemplate moving his own family into a predominantly white neighborhood on the city’s west side in order to be closer to his church, the Sweet case must have touched not only a political nerve but personal one as well. His attention to the case is evident in the many updates and pleas for financial assistance that he inserted into his Sunday sermons. In 1945 he did purchase a home on the west side on West Grand Boulevard. As with the purchase of the lakefront property, a white friend closed the deal on his behalf.⁵⁶

Throughout the 1920s, Hill hovered on the periphery of both the NAACP and the YMCA leadership. Whether by choice or circumstance, he was not admitted into the upper echelon of common leadership that linked the NAACP and the Detroit Urban League with influential Black churches, newspapers, and other high-profile community organizations such as Dunbar Hospital. Reverend Bradby of Second Baptist and Rev. John Bagnall of St. Matthew's Episcopal, for instance, worked closely with the DUL, and were contributing editors of the Black-run *Detroit Tribune*; over the years both served as president of the Detroit NAACP, with Bagnall moving on to the national office as director of branches. Another former president of the Detroit NAACP, William Osby, was a member of the DUL Board, a trustee at Dunbar Hospital, and a trustee at Second Baptist. John Dancy, head of the Detroit Urban League, had ties to at least six different race-improvement agencies and organizations, including the state Negro Welfare Bureau, Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, the YMCA, and the Detroit Federation of Settlements. Along with Reverend Bradby, he also maintained a close connection with the Detroit Council of Churches (DCC). While Hill associated with these men—some of whom were, like Hill himself, members of the Masons—he was not yet their social or political equal.⁵⁷

Nor is there much evidence to suggest that Hill was willing, at least in the 1920s, to join those who challenged the power of these men and their organizations. J. H. Porter's Good Citizenship League (GCL), for example, which was incorporated in 1918, complained that the political elites associated with the DUL were "political bums" willing to sell their souls to the devil in their negotiations with the white establishment.⁵⁸ Moreover, they charged that the Urban League unduly limited the sphere of Black representation. "We are tired of picked leaders," the GCL stated in a 1921 pamphlet.

We haven't a man in Detroit that the masses of colored people can point to and really trust as a leader. Negro ministers and other worthy citizens can't reach the Civic Boards now on account of the Urban League, being the accepted channel through which all matters pertaining to Negro welfare must pass. As far as we have been able to learn, every application for aid of any kind, worthy or unworthy, that has been presented to the Board of Charity, during the last year or more, has died in the office of the Urban League, the application seldom receiving a reply.⁵⁹

For all of its outspokenness, the Good Citizenship League never achieved a mass base. Foreshadowing the anticommunist tirades that hampered the effectiveness of Black militant groups in the 1940s and 1950s, the DUL dismissed the GCL as a tiny group of “crabby, muddle-headed near reds.” The group was virtually destroyed when police raided a league member’s home office and arrested Porter and the group’s secretary, Mary E. Jones, for distributing “inflammatory materials” in 1927.⁶⁰

A much stronger challenge to the DUL-aligned Black elite came from Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, who urged the thousands of Detroit members of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) to cease their subservience to the “modern Uncle Toms seeking the shelter, leadership, protection and patronage of the ‘master’ in their organization and their so-called advancement work.”⁶¹ The Detroit Division of the UNIA was founded in 1920 by a minister, A. D. Williams, who attended a UNIA convention in New York and returned home “with a red, black, and green flag” and a passion for the principles and practices of the organization. With the guidance of F. Levi Lord, a native of Barbados, who accepted the assignment of creating the Detroit branch, the division grew rapidly. It purchased a building, Liberty Hall, at 1516 Russell Street, bought stock in the Black Star Line, established drugstores, shoeshine parlors, restaurants, theaters, and a gas station, while also developing a range of internal participatory groups—the Black Cross Nurses, the Motor Corps, and so forth—that were typical of the UNIA overall.⁶²

The interracial minded Reverend Hill would have found Garvey’s brand of “racial chauvinism” unappealing. Yet the local chapter of the UNIA gained a large following in the city, especially among women. Their meetings and marches attracted upward of fifteen thousand men and women during the early 1920s. Ruth Smith, who migrated with her parents from Gadsden, Alabama, has fond memories of growing up within the organization. “My mother carried all of the girls into the UNIA so I was a member at a very young age,” she recalls. “Instead of going to church on Sunday, we would get up early and go to the Detroit division of the UNIA, diligently every Sunday.” A member of the Women’s Motor Corps, she reminisced in a 1975 interview about large parades through the streets of the city and the extent to which “my life, my ideals” revolved around the local UNIA. She even met and married her husband through the organization.⁶³

Smith’s experiences are not unique. At its height the Detroit Division

had at least four thousand members, the majority of whom were employed in the plants, and a paid staff that included a president, two secretaries, and a janitor.⁶⁴ The division also attracted a number of Black middle-class businessmen and professionals, including attorney Alonzo Pettiford, who served as president in the early 1920s; J. Milton Van Lowe, legal counsel for the division and also a member of Bethel AME; and Charles Diggs, who served as the director of the board of trustees.⁶⁵ Years later, Diggs, an undertaker by profession, would go on to play a leading role in the city's civil rights community as a Democratic state senator. Along with fellow UNIA member Joseph A. Craigen, an immigrant from British Guiana who was appointed in 1937 to the Michigan Workmen's Compensation Commission by Governor Frank Murphy, Diggs helped to establish Democrat Clubs as an alternative to the power of the Republican Party in Black Detroit.

Like the members of the Good Citizenship League, local Garveyites, and in some cases Garvey himself, directly attacked the common leadership provided by the Black elite but not because it blocked access to white philanthropy. For Garvey, the problem with groups such as the NAACP and the Urban League—whether in New York or Detroit—was not only that they were dominated by integrationists and light-skinned Blacks but also that they were not sufficiently self-reliant and dedicated to the promotion of economic nationalism. He claimed, for instance, that Reverend Bagnall, the pastor of St. Matthew's, refused to allow dark-skinned Blacks to join his church. In an exchange of insults typical of Garvey's interactions with the Black elite in the United States, Bagnall, who was still new to his position in the national office of the NAACP, denounced Garvey as a "Jamaican Negro of unmixed stock, squat, stocky . . . with protruding jaws . . . and rather bull-dog-like face. . . . Boastful, egotistical, tyrannical, intolerant, cunning, shifty, smooth and suave . . . gifted at self-advertisement, without shame in self-laudation . . . a lover of pomp and tawdry finery and garish display, a bully with his own folk but servile in the presence of the Klan, a sheer opportunist and a demagogic charlatan."⁶⁶

Even though the local UNIA lost much of its momentum after Garvey's deportation in the late 1920s, the organization's influence continued to shape later developments in the city, from the establishment of the Nation of Islam during the Depression (Elijah Mohammad, né Elijah Poole, was a member of the Detroit UNIA) to, arguably, the Rev. Albert B. Cleage's Shrine of the Black Madonna and the Black Christian nationalism movement.⁶⁷ Some, such as John Charles Zampty, a loyal member of the Detroit Division from the 1920s through the 1970s, became living

links between these two eras of Black religious nationalism. In fact, the similarities between Garveyism with its African Orthodox Church (AOC) and Cleage's Black Christian nationalism are striking, especially their common belief in a Black God. Why, Garvey asked in a 1924 UNIA convention speech, is God white? "If God be our Father, and we bear His image and likeness, why should we not teach our children that their Father in Heaven resembles them even as they do Him?" Linking the question to racism and power, he continued: "Why should we permit the Caucasians to constantly and indelibly impress upon their youthful minds that God is white?" "No longer," he concluded, "must we permit white religious 'pastors and asters' to hold us in spiritual serfdom and tutelage."⁶⁸

While Garvey himself was often critical of ministers who regarded themselves as "so-called leaders of the race" and reserved special scorn for those who preached a delayed and otherworldly belief in divine justice, he nonetheless understood and built on the indigenous faith of Black folk. His own expression of faith tended toward the ethical and the pragmatic. "I would rather stand alone," Garvey once wrote, "and be framed for the prison a thousand times than deny the [Black] religion of my mother—mark you, not the [white] religion—the religion that taught me to be honest and fair to all my fellowmen."⁶⁹ Under the banner of "One God, One Aim, One Destiny," Garveyism encouraged its followers to see the One God, in whose image we are created, as Black. Further, members of the African Orthodox Church, the movement's official religious institution, were urged to "erase the white gods from your hearts . . . [and] go back to the native church, to our own true God." At a session of the fourth international convention, AOC bishop George A. McGuire also advised the audience to "name the day when all members of the race would tear down and burn all the pictures of the white Madonna and Child, and replace them with a black Madonna and Child." Thus, although careful not to offend Muslims and non-Christians, Garveyites effectively placed Christianity within a Black nationalist framework that advocated separatism from the United States and the redemption of Africa—as "Ethiopia shall arise and stretch forth her hands onto God"—from European colonial domination.⁷⁰

None of this would have resonated with Reverend Hill, especially the idea that God could be Black or any other color. Hill's scattered statements on Black nationalism, made in the 1960s, were always derogatory, and his staunch commitment to interracialism suggests that he would have been uncomfortable with aspects of the nationalists' Afrocentric theology. Or perhaps he would have agreed with the assessment of Ruth

Smith, who observed that “years ago you had to join the UNIA or the NAACP.”⁷¹ At this point in his political career, Hill chose the latter.

Hill’s own challenge to the Black political elite would come later, as his activism began to focus on the working class. His movement from a mainstream thinker on the margins of the elite to a militant religious activist aligned with workers had as much to do with his identity as a minister and the Black son of a white working-class mother as it did with Depression era changes in Detroit’s political geography. The power of the Black elite, that is to say, was weakened not by the admonishments of Carveyites and groups such as the Good Citizenship League; instead, it was weakened by social forces arising out of the Depression, which opened up new opportunities for members of the working classes and middle-class supporters such as Hill.

THE DEPRESSION YEARS

The Great Depression plunged Detroit and its Black community into a pit of despair; but it also, ironically, allowed the emergence of a working-class politics. The city as a whole suffered the highest jobless rate in the country, and many of the businesses that did not fold were forced to implement massive layoffs. The Ford Motor Company, which had employed 128,000 people in March 1929, had only 37,000 left on its payroll in August 1931. By then 210,000 people were on city relief. And they were the “lucky” ones, the “deserving poor,” able to take advantage of the city’s limited relief programs. With 46 percent of the workforce in Michigan unemployed by 1933, conditions were becoming increasingly desperate, particularly in African American communities, where unemployment reached as high as 80 percent.⁷² One result was that established race improvement organizations such as the NAACP and DUL and churches such as Second Baptist were severely constrained by financial difficulties precisely when their help was most needed.

Back in 1918 the Detroit Urban League had placed over ten thousand Blacks in jobs. By June of 1931, when the Employers’ Association of Detroit, the league’s primary source of funding, withdrew its support, John Dancy noted that the group’s effectiveness had been severely curtailed. By 1933 the DUL only maintained two full-time employees. The NAACP suffered a similar fate. Between 1930 and 1934 the national office’s operating budget dropped from sixty to thirty-eight thousand dollars. Many Black Detroiters were simply unable to pay dues and support NAACP activities; as early as 1930 the Detroit branch had ceased all regular meetings. Finally, as one author notes, “the black churches, in

the main, were either financially unable, or philosophically unwilling to assert any meaningful leadership in the black community to deal with mass unemployment.”⁷³ In fact, as a poll conducted by the *Baltimore Afro-American* bears out, most Black ministers refused to call on their churches to confront pressing economic struggles. Seventy-five percent of their sermons dealt with “the other world and the rewards of heaven” while only twenty-five percent focused on “how Christianity could be applied to the economic problems of everyday life.”⁷⁴

New groups began to fill the gap left by these churches and traditional race improvement organizations, all of which had depended to some degree on white philanthropy. In Black Detroit the new organizations spanned the ideological spectrum. Hill worked with three in particular: the Booker T. Washington Trade Association (BTWTA) and the affiliated Housewives’ League, the Civic Rights Committee, and the loose collective of groups and councils associated with the Communist Party. They are therefore useful for tracing the evolution of his interest in social, political, and economic issues during the 1930s. More important, they are also representative of the different ways in which various segments of the city’s African American community attempted to make a better life.

The Booker T. Washington Trade Association was organized in 1930 by the Rev. William Peck. A graduate of the Oberlin College seminary, Peck came to Detroit in 1930 to take over the pastorate of Bethel AME, one of the churches that Hill had frequented in his youth. Soon after his arrival, Reverend Peck called together a group of Black businessmen and professionals, including Hill, in order to discuss the situation in Detroit and to seek ways of addressing the community’s hardships. As a result of these initial meetings, the BTWTA was formed to encourage the patronage of existing Black businesses and support the development of new ones. This was also the mission of the Housewives’ League, which was founded as a sister organization by Reverend Peck’s wife, Fannie.⁷⁵

In keeping with the social philosophy of its namesake (not to mention—and few did—the mission of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA as well), the BTWTA and the Housewives’ League were rooted in the premise that “only through the development of black business and industry will the race gain its economic freedom.” Although ministers and their wives played a role in the groups’ founding, the BTWTA and the Housewives’ League were not religiously oriented, nor were they particularly involved in organized political activism. Indeed, the BTWTA was quick to point out that it was “not an organization which seeks to right the many injustices we have forced upon us or as a result of discrimination within the

field of civil and property rights.”⁷⁶ But within their self-proscribed sphere both groups were relatively successful. The BTWTA organized two Black merchant clubs that met twice weekly to discuss the state of Black business in the city and offer mutual support. It also organized several well-attended trade exhibits and established a trade school. By the end of the Depression, the Housewives’ League, which canvassed Black neighborhoods on behalf of Black establishments, was widely credited with aiding Black merchants.

Other groups took a more confrontational approach to the problems confronting the city’s African American community in the early 1930s. The Civic Rights Committee, founded in 1933 by Snow Grigsby, was more vocal and militant in its efforts to secure economic justice. Instead of focusing on the development of Black business, the committee attacked discriminatory hiring practices in the public sector. Grigsby, a Black postal worker who moved to Detroit from Chatsville, South Carolina, in 1920, considered the local NAACP leaders “dilatory in their activity,” and set out to form a political association that was able and willing to adopt a more forceful position on employment discrimination.⁷⁷ Like the BTWTA and the Housewives’ League, the Civic Rights Committee was not a religious organization, but it was intimately tied to the Black church. A number of ministers supported Grigsby’s work and allowed him to use their facilities for meetings, and Grigsby himself was a deeply spiritual man who wrote and lectured on religious themes, insisting that churches become a more responsible and forthright agent for social change. As historian Victoria Walcott notes, however, Grigsby adopted a condescending attitude toward the hundreds of small storefront churches dotting the streets of the city’s Black neighborhoods, whose preachers Grigsby, like many within the Black elite, regarded as “parasites” and practitioners of a “bootleggers religion.”⁷⁸

The reasons for Grigsby’s dismissive attitude toward these small, often charismatic and Pentecostal churches stemmed as much from his activist vision of Christianity as from his unwillingness to see the spiritual beauty or social security and solace provided in the storefronts. In “Christianity and Race Relations,” a speech originally delivered at the People’s Church in East Lansing, Michigan, and reprinted in Grigsby’s 1937 volume *White Hypocrisy and Black Lethargy*, he surveyed a range of people on how they defined Christianity. Most respondents he found wanting. “I believe that Christianity should be defined as an inward inclination which compels one, of his own initiative, to give equal opportunity to all men,” he wrote, noting that the way the religion was practiced at the time was often “a joke and hypocritical in the superlative degree.”

Grigsby, who was a member and later an elder and trustee of St. John's United Presbyterian, focused almost exclusively on the ethical dimensions of faith and creed. Chiding Christianity as "the only religion that draws the color line" and arguing that Blacks had become increasingly disillusioned by the "differences between our creeds and our deeds," he urged that a more authentic practice be brought to Detroit.⁷⁹

"Our articles of religion speak of the original sin of Adam," Grigsby continues, in a language reminiscent of Walter Rauschenbusch's, "but very little is said of the modern sins of Adam's white offspring.

They say nothing of the high rentals built up by white Christian landlords, dilapidated houses; nothing of the unsanitary conditions of our city where the black brother is forced to live. . . . It is a sin to deprive men of an opportunity for their own growth and development, a sin to hold them down by force, a sin to impede their advancement, as well as to hinder them in educating their children and securing work to care for their dependents. All racial discrimination is sinful as well as wicked.⁸⁰

By focusing on the sins of economic injustice, the committee functioned as a counterpart to the urban boycott campaigns—the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" movement—that emerged around the same time in Black communities throughout the nation.

While the BTWTA and the Housewives' League occasionally stepped beyond their limited role as booster organizations to picket stores in Black neighborhoods that did not hire African Americans, the committee went on the offensive more often. Emphasizing the importance of researching his targets, Grigsby spearheaded attacks on the racist hiring practices of the Detroit Board of Education, the Postal Service, the Fire Department, and, most impressively, the electric company, Detroit Edison.⁸¹ When he and the committee discovered that Detroit Edison employed only forty African Americans out of a workforce of eight thousand, the group paid high school students to go door-to-door collecting light bills. The committee, joined by groups that included the BTWTA and NAACP, confronted Detroit Edison with evidence of the level of Black energy consumption. After a series of negotiations they were successful in convincing the company to hire more African Americans.

The group used such tactics repeatedly, adopting a two-pronged approach. First, it generally focused on public employment: hence, the use of *Civic* as opposed to *Civil* in the organization's name. Second, it targeted the silence of three broad groups within the community, each of

which was represented by one of the three monkeys who see, hear, and speak no evil, as depicted on the cover of the committee's 1933 booklet *An X-Ray Picture of Detroit*. The monkeys are labeled "Negro Politician, Urban League, Medical Society"; "Local branch NAACP"; and "Civic and Christian Leadership."⁸²

The Reverend Hill participated in the activities of the Civic Rights Committee almost from the beginning, although he does not seem to have been among its founding members. When the newly instituted Hatch Act, which prohibited federal employees (including postal workers) from engaging in "pernicious political activity," forced Grigsby to leave his position as the group's chairman, Hill became the new chair.⁸³ Overall, Hill participated more actively in the committee, which tended to stage public, community-based forms of protest, than in the BTWTA. His membership in both groups, which was hardly uncommon, suggests a holistic approach toward Black social advancement—one that incorporated the concerns of both the emerging middle classes and at least some segments of the working classes.

Hill's activism on behalf of African American industrial workers, who were well represented in his congregation, took more time to manifest itself in a public way. This was partly a consequence of timing, since there had been very little organizing among industrial workers before 1935 and even less that embraced Black workers. Still, at the same time that Reverend Peck was organizing the BTWTA and Snow Grigsby was forming the Civic Rights Committee, Black industrial workers were beginning to organize their own associations. That many of these groups were founded by African American members of the Communist Party is important not only for the political biography of Reverend Hill and the development of Black radicalism in Detroit but also for the emergence of the city's early civil rights community in general.

A LABOR-CIVIL RIGHTS COMMUNITY TAKES SHAPE

The long, hard years of the Depression gave the Communist Party an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence, and it was during the early 1930s that Hill and hundreds of other Black Detroiters would have first become aware of the party and its activities. There is little evidence regarding the precise nature of Hill's involvement with CP-inspired groups during this period. But it is fair to say that he was aware of the events and organizations that gradually drew segments of the Black community and the CP closer together in the early 1930s. These years were, in effect, foundational ones for the groups and individuals who would

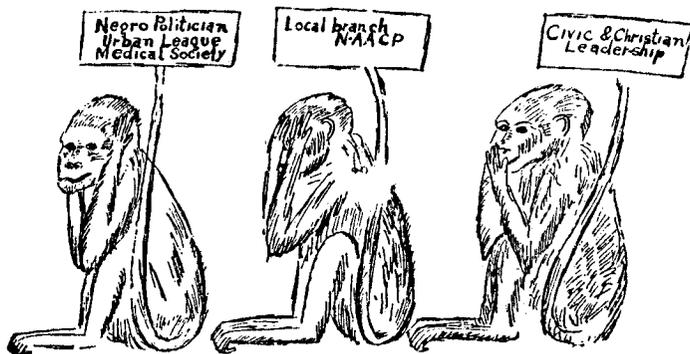
An X-Ray Picture of Detroit

December, 1933

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“IS THIS SILENCE PERPETUAL?”

By

SNOW F. GRIGSBY

3762 Seyburn Avenue

Detroit, Mich.

Cover from Snow F. Grigsby's *An X-Ray Picture of Detroit*, 1933. (Michigan Historical Collections. Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.)

come to align themselves with the city's civil rights community after 1935. A few such groups—the Auto Workers Union (AWU), the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, the Unemployed Councils, and the International Labor Defense (ILD)—were particularly important.

In spite of its small numbers, the CP, having wrested control of the Auto Workers Union from the Socialist Party, did make significant attempts between 1924 and 1930 to spread the gospel of interracial unionism. Along with appeals to the foreign born, women, and young workers, the AWU also made a special appeal to Black workers, advocating “equal pay for equal work” regardless of race and insisting that “All workers must get together—men, women, young workers, all nationalities, all races, for their own protection.”⁸⁴ Throughout the 1920s the CP and the AWU achieved their greatest success in recruiting white ethnics, especially Slavs. A few African Americans joined as well, most notably Joseph Billups, the son of a Mississippi preacher, and Walter Hardin—both of whom had earlier been members of the defunct (but not forgotten) Industrial Workers of the World or Wobblies—as well as Alabama-born Paul Kirk, another minister's son, and William Nowell, who ran for Congress in 1930 on the Communist Party ticket. The activities of these men within and for the CP were shaped, to some extent, by a change in policy on the “Negro question” in 1928. Instead of working (or “bor-ing”) within preexisting organizations such as the NAACP, the new policy called for the creation of parallel revolutionary groups. The party, like Garvey's UNIA, now viewed Blacks as an oppressed nation and adopted a program of “Self-Determination for Negroes in the Black Belt.”⁸⁵

This so-called Third-Period (1928–34) policy coincided with a change in the local CP leadership following the election of Phil Raymond as general secretary of the Detroit branch and, by extension, as head of the AWU. Under Raymond's direction the AWU evolved from “an independent and apolitical union into the nucleus of a self-proclaimed ‘revolutionary union’” affiliated with the Communist Trade Union Unity League.⁸⁶ In the early 1930s, the member organizations in this union participated in strikes in area plants, including the Fisher Body plant in Flint and the Detroit strike wave of 1933. Following the CP line, and in an attempt to unite organizing on the shop floor with organizing in the community, Black Communists in Detroit worked within both the AWU and the League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR), the organization that succeeded the American Negro Labor Congress in 1930. The LSNR was charged with bringing revolutionary and proto-nationalist ideas to urban centers of Black discontent such as Detroit.

When the CP adopted its Popular Front policy in 1935 and replaced its dual revolutionary strategy with one that called for working in broad coalitions with liberals, the league disbanded and most of its members joined the National Negro Congress.⁸⁷

Despite these changes in policy and approach, the CP's visibility increased exponentially in the early 1930s in large part because of the opportunities afforded by worsening economic conditions. Indeed, Detroit was an important center of CP activity during these years, and there is ample evidence that the party was stronger there than in most other U.S. cities.⁸⁸ African Americans and others became aware of the party not so much through its organizing efforts within the plants but as a result of its community organizing efforts among unemployed workers and, most especially, because of its practice of "unevicting" families. "When people were evicted," recalled Joseph Billups, "we would place them back in their houses, and I've seen times when we would have four or five evictions in one block."⁸⁹ This practice was evidently widespread; since landlords would have to return to court for a new eviction order each time it happened, evictions quickly ceased to be cost effective.

To structure these and other activities, Detroit area Communists created at least fifteen Unemployed Councils. The councils' main goal was "to convince the jobless they had to overcome ethnic and racial divisions and unite, and [to] convince people that it was the government's responsibility to provide relief."⁹⁰ To this end, the CP organized a number of councils along neighborhood lines: one for the Hastings–Ferry Street area; one along Woodward Avenue north of Grand Circus Park; and a large one for the east side, where Italian, Jewish, and Eastern European families still lived and the African American enclaves were located. At their peak, Detroit's Unemployed Councils—which were among the first in the nation—were estimated to possess a combined membership of almost thirty thousand. The CP may not have been very successful in encouraging people to overcome their racial and ethnic divisions, but it did manage, on a number of occasions, to bring diverse groups of people together for mass rallies and demonstrations. Grand Circus Park, in the middle of the downtown business district, became the prime site for protests, and Left organizations used it to keep up a running dialogue on the faults and failures of capitalism. Joseph Billups recalled:

Well, the Unemployed Councils we had used to hold meetings down there, day and night, in Grand Circus Park. And that's where the idea of unemployment insurance was raised, in Grand Circus Park. "Work or bread" was the slogan. . . . Grand Circus Park was full, day and

night, and always there was someone up speaking and it didn't make any difference at the time, for those fellows, because they didn't have any place to stay, and they were sleeping in the park.⁹¹

Not everyone who joined the Unemployed Councils or participated in the CP-sponsored rallies was entirely sympathetic to the party's ideology, but a large number of residents were willing to give the CP a fair hearing on the basis of its practical work. When a Ford "goon squad" and Dearborn police attacked a 1932 hunger march at Ford's Dearborn, Michigan, plant, killing three marchers (a fourth died later from injuries sustained during the assault), an estimated sixty thousand Detroiters joined the funeral march to protest what the radical press labeled the "Ford Massacre." Josephine Gomon, the mayor's secretary, remembered it as "a very dramatic scene. . . . The paraders marched down Woodward Avenue behind the four flag-draped caskets; and as they came, they sang the *Internationale*. It was said that 60,000 people marched and the volume of singing could be heard all over the city. It reverberated."⁹² The event itself reverberated throughout the city and the nation.⁹³

Roger Baldwin, head of the American Civil Liberties Union, denounced Ford and the Dearborn police. The situation, according to the ACLU, was not so much about communism—"or any other 'ism'"—but about the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, peaceful demonstration and political thought.⁹⁴ Baldwin and the ACLU did not agree with local Communists, however, in assigning some of the blame to Frank Murphy, Detroit's liberal mayor. For the party it was crucial, under the logic of the Third Period strategy, that workers and the unemployed see Murphy, the liberal, as a threat as great as Ford, the capitalist. Hence the banners unfurled along the parade route read "Smash the Ford-Murphy Police Terror."⁹⁵

For some, such as David Moore, a Black auto worker who was just a teenager at the time of what came to be called the Ford Hunger March and its aftermath, the protest was "a turning point in my life. . . . The more I'd gotten involved in the Councils, the more I learned about the system . . . [and] when I saw the blood flowing there on Miller Road [near the plant], that was the point I became a radical. From that day on."⁹⁶ Young Christopher Alston, whose family had moved from Florida to Detroit in 1916, was similarly affected—even more so since the eighteen year old had attended the march with a high school friend, Joe Busell, one of the men killed later that day. Alston joined the party soon after. From 1933 to 1935 he worked in Harlem, organizing the Young People's Progressive League, and in 1936 he went south to organize the

All Southern Negro Youth Congress. In 1938, after helping to found what became the Tobacco Stemmers' and Laborers' Industrial Union in Richmond, Alston traveled through Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, organizing Black workers for the CIO. He returned to Detroit just in time to get a job at Ford's River Rouge complex and to begin the long, hard campaign to organize workers in that massive facility.⁹⁷

The funeral/mass march was not the end of the hunger march tragedy. Four days after the massacre, a fourth marcher, Curtis William, a thirty-seven-year-old Black worker, died from injuries sustained during the melee. A group of Black organizers led by Joseph Billups requested that Williams's body be interred alongside those of the other three casualties in the (segregated) Woodlawn Cemetery overlooking Ford's River Rouge plant. When that request was denied because of the cemetery's all-white policy, Billups threatened to bury the body in Grand Circus Park. A group of disgruntled mourners actually gathered with picks and shovels to dig up the pavement in the middle of the city's business district, only to be turned away by city officials—all of whom, including Mayor Murphy and other noncommunists, were denounced as "social fascists." In the end, Billups opted for the equally dramatic solution of having the body cremated, renting an airplane, and scattering the ashes over the River Rouge plant.⁹⁸

As the Depression wore on and the incidents of racial injustice mounted, a number of African American activists, like Alston and Moore, were pulled into the orbit of the city's Left and the Communist Party. Shelton Tappes, a Black worker and future union official, recalled that all the Communist organizers had to do was "run off handbills and go up and down the main streets in the Negro community, and whatever the site of the demonstration was to be, at the time it was to take place, there was usually a considerable crowd there." To increase its presence in the Black community, the party encouraged its African American members to organize their own councils, known as Nat Turner Clubs. These groups often held rallies "right in the Negro community," on and around Hastings Street.⁹⁹

The opinions of Black Detroiters tended to reflect national trends. When the NAACP conducted a poll of the major Black newspapers in 1933, it found that most editors agreed with the idea that, while the CP was far from perfect, the party's stance on racial equality put it far in advance of other predominantly white organizations. As a result, the CP was making headway among African Americans. "How, under such circumstances, can we go to war with the Communist Party?" asked the *Chicago Defender*, a Black weekly avidly read in Detroit.

Is there any other political, religious, or civic organization in the country that would go to such lengths to prove itself not unfriendly to us? We may not agree with the entire program of the Communist Party, but there is one item with which we do agree wholeheartedly and that is the zealotry with which it guards the rights of the Race.

This was quite an endorsement. Even the NAACP had to admit a grudging respect for the party's race work.¹⁰⁰

The CP's reputation among African Americans was also greatly enhanced by the work of International Labor Defense, the legal arm of the party, and its involvement in the Scottsboro case. "It aroused the interest of all Negroes," remembered Rose Billups. "There wasn't any question of left, right, or middle. It was a question of save the boys."¹⁰¹ On March 25, 1931, nine young Black men and two white women who had been traveling on a southbound freight train were arrested. The men were subsequently charged with rape. With indecent speed, they were indicted by an all-white jury, assigned an all-white defense team by a white judge, and convicted and sentenced to death by another all-white jury. In Alabama, the Scottsboro case was nothing more than another legal lynching; but it was rescued from obscurity by the activism of Communists and the ILD. Thanks to their efforts, the U.S. Supreme Court remanded the case to the state on due process grounds. In 1934, as the ILD was preparing for a new trial, the CP called for "a solid front in the fight for the unconditional freedom of the Scottsboro Boys," and by 1935 other organizations, including the NAACP, church groups, and civic associations had gotten involved.¹⁰²

As the case dragged on throughout the decade, moving from the state courts to higher courts and back again, it came to symbolize the faults of the American legal system and the collective struggle of African Americans. Clubs were organized in Detroit, as elsewhere, to support the boys and their defense. The families of the nine young men, along with Communists such as William Patterson, the Black Central Committee member in charge of the Scottsboro Defense Fund, came to the city to speak at large rallies and church forums. Reverend Hill, along with Fr. Malcolm Dade of St. Cyprian's, were among those who formed the committee that coordinated the defense fund's activities in Detroit. The protest around the case is the first direct mention of Hill's interaction with the CP that I have been able to locate. It may also have been one of his first public steps toward a radical politics, introducing him to the expanding ranks of the city's Left.¹⁰³

The ILD retained the services of Maurice Sugar, a radical lawyer who had defended most of those indicted for their supposed role in the Ford Hunger March. Born in 1891 in the Upper Peninsula lumber town of Brimley, Michigan, where his Lithuanian Jewish parents ran the general store, Sugar was a Marxist who believed in struggle “within the existing law and culture of capitalism while working for socialist change.” He also believed in relating legal work to the overall class struggle and was a prominent supporter of Black rights.¹⁰⁴ Through Sugar, the ILD became involved in a number of local cases in which African Americans were wrongfully charged. As a result, Sugar and the ILD were widely recognized as leading defenders of persecuted Blacks in the city. In fact, when Sugar ran for a position on the Detroit Recorder’s Court in 1935 he was warmly received in Black churches and at civic functions. He even won the unanimous endorsement of the fifty-nine-member Detroit Metro Baptist Alliance and the conservative *Tribune Independent*. Reverend Hill was a firm supporter of Sugar—a fact much noted in Sugar’s Black-directed campaign literature—and over the years the two men and their families developed a close friendship. Reverend and Mrs. Hill, for instance, were annual attendees at Sugar’s Buck Dinner, a fund-raising event for radical causes begun in 1929 for which Sugar supplied the main course from his hunting trips.¹⁰⁵

In the years to come, Sugar would become a central figure in Detroit’s Left community, which was always seeking to increase its ranks. “Overall,” as one student of political radicalism in Detroit has noted, “it can be argued that Sugar’s Recorder’s Court campaign served as the catalyst in the emergence of the black community’s acceptance of unions and in opening a window to the left.”¹⁰⁶ There was indeed a window created in the early 1930s and not only by Sugar’s campaign. The organization of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, the work of the Unemployed Councils, the hunger marches and protest rallies, and the fight to free the Scottsboro boys, as well as the work of groups such as the Civic Rights Committee, the Booker T. Washington Trade Association, and the Housewives’ League, all contributed to the civil rights struggles of Depression era Detroit. By weakening traditional race improvement associations that depended on white philanthropy, the social and economic hardships of the Depression had opened up new spaces for working-class activism. Reverend Hill and others like him began to appreciate the working classes, the Communist Party, and the need for militant (and interracial and interethnic) collective action as central to their struggle for social justice. For (barely) middle-class activists such as Hill,

the ideology of racial uplift and service did not entirely dissipate. Instead, *service* was redefined—away from “service to” the working classes and toward a position of “struggle with” them.

Hill’s transformation into a religious radical was occasioned by nothing as dramatic as the savage beating at the hands of angry whites endured by Reverend Taylor in Richard Wright’s “Fire and Cloud,” but the spirit of the transformation was similar. Neither Hill nor the fictional Taylor faltered in his faith. Neither developed, that is to say, a particularly radical political theology. Both did, however, develop new ideas about what it means to do the Lord’s work. Thus, by the mid-1930s, when the city’s civil rights community was taking on a definite shape, the Reverend Hill found even greater opportunities to do the “man’s job” of working for faith and social change.