

Libraries and the Liberation of Black Folk*

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Once again the nation celebrates National Library Week. Once again the newspapers and the media turn their attention to the importance of libraries and reading. Once again all American citizens — both black and white — are reminded that libraries are in themselves educational institutions and that it is important that they make use of libraries. Once again black people begin to look at the annual celebration of National Library Week and ask themselves the question: Is the celebration of National Library Week relevant to black folk? My answer to this question is a resounding yes!

Why are black people questioning the value of education? Why are black people questioning the importance of participating in the political process, when it is now so easy to register and vote and there are so many blacks who say it won't make a difference who is in office and refuse to exercise the franchise? Why would black people question the usefulness of libraries in their daily lives?

As we pause to celebrate libraries at this convocation, let us think on these questions. As we look at the state of black America during National Library Week 1977, we are reminded that the situation continues to look grim and foreboding.

In the area of employment, Roy Wilkins reports that

Nineteen seventy-six was the sixth consecutive year of decline in the economic condition of black workers. . . . Furthermore, the number of white women employed but living below the poverty level dropped by 5,000 over the past year, but the number of black women in that category increased by 14,000.

Of the greatest significance is the crisis of unemployment among black youth. By the end of 1976 more than 50 percent of black youth were unemployed according to government statistics reporting national averages.

All the data indicate that job discrimination is structured into the economy, and that without affirmative action programs, black workers will have to wait until the millenium before achieving equality with whites. During 1976 a concerted nationwide campaign against affirmative action received support from many quarters and the effort to eliminate the present effects of past discrimination, to right the wrongs of many generations, was barely underway when it was aborted. And now, even the very modest gains made by black men and women through affirmative action are being erased. Those who attack the use of numerical goals often argue that affirmative action programs will penalize innocent whites who are not responsible for past discriminatory practices. This argument turns the notion of individual rights and sounds very moral and highminded, indeed. But it ignores basic social reality. For example, black workers have not been denied jobs as individuals but as a class — no matter what their personal merits and qualifications. Women have not been denied training and jobs as individuals, but as a class regardless of their individual talent or lack of it. Correspondingly, white males as a class have benefitted from this systematic discrimination. Wherever discriminatory employment patterns exist, hiring and promo-

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tion without affirmative action perpetuates injustice.

In the area of education, black people are cognizant of the fact that it was 23 years ago, 1954, that the United States Supreme Court outlawed segregated schools. Twenty-three years later, we find ourselves having more difficulty desegregating Northern schools. Who would have ever thought that Boston, the cradle of American democracy, would have been as difficult to desegregate as Birmingham?

The NAACP reports that

Black students and parents protested the heavy burden placed on black students in the desegregation process, i.e., black students were reassigned more; black students were bused more; a disproportionate number of schools were closed in black neighborhoods; a disproportionate number of black schools were downgraded in grade level in the desegregation process; black administrators were demoted; retiring black teachers and/or administrators were replaced by whites; and textbooks and curriculum materials rarely reflected the multi-ethnic composition of the school. There were disproportionate suspensions, expulsions and "push-outs" from Massachusetts to Washington State and Florida to California.

In the North and West, school districts played the same stalling game that Southern school districts played and lost ten to fifteen years ago. . . .

Gifted black children are not being identified and encouraged to reach their full potential. In many schools throughout the nation, black youth, regardless of aptitude, are placed together in the learning environment and are therefore denied the opportunity for diverse programming.

Black Americans still find it difficult to acquire housing in all parts of the country, and many blacks, who can afford to move to the suburbs, are denied access to good housing. The NAACP tells us that "The housing needs of blacks grew worse in 1976 as opportunities to acquire decent homes dwindled to new lows. The gains made in the last decade ground to an abrupt halt in January of 1973, when President Nixon cancelled housing funds for the poor."

From our survey of three aspects of black peoples lives — employment, housing, and education, we agree with Roy Wilkins' assessment that "1976 was a year of regression, deprivation, and hardship for the

majority of our nation's minorities." The harsh realities of the black experience can't be denied. The pervasive incidents of discrimination against black Americans continue to exist in America. On the other side of the coin, there have been some gains. From 1954, the year of the U. S. Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation, there has been unbelievable progress. In 1977, there are over 5,000 blacks as elected officials in this country. And Jimmy Carter, as all of you know, won the presidency because the black vote was decisive in several key states.

Because there appears to be so very little change in the life of black America, many black Americans, both young and old, question the efficacy of our pausing and considering the nature of books and libraries.

I have painted a grim picture of the state of black America, but my friends, it is my position this morning that libraries represent the collected memory found between the covers of books, or stored on magnetic tapes in computers or stored on films and videotapes. Someone has said that "a great library contains the diary of the human race" and that the great consulting room of a wise man is a library.

As we pause to pay homage to libraries this week, I submit this morning that because of the precarious position that black people find themselves, as I outlined in the areas of employment, housing, education, that we as a people should make more use of libraries.

White Americans also need to make use of libraries and read more. On the other hand, black people need to get back into the habit of reading. We can understand the past thoroughly and in depth only through reading. My message to our young brothers and sisters is that the present is not the immediate source of all things. We are not only what we are and where we are, but we are also our past as well as our present. Sometimes I think that our people have the insidious notion that only the present matters. It is my belief that the American advertising on

television has lulled us into thinking that instant gratification for the present is so very important. Yes, the present is important, but our past we must never forget. Alex Haley's 587-page book, *Roots*, is partially the answer to understanding our past.

One of the best things that could have happened to black and white Americans was the epic dramatization of *Roots* in January of this year. *Time* magazine in an essay "Why *Roots* Hit Home" (February 14, 1977), observed that

For eight consecutive nights, tens of millions of Americans were riveted by Haley's story of his family's passage from an ancestral home in Africa to slavery in America and, finally, to freedom. Along the way, Americans of both races discovered that they share a common heritage, however brutal; that the ties that link them to their ancestors also bind them to each other. Thus, with the final episode, *Roots* was no longer just a bestselling book and a boffo TV production but a social phenomenon, a potentially important bench mark in U.S. race relations.

From a black perspective on the dramatization of *Roots* on national television:

We were real people. The stereotypes were gone and we were beautiful. Our men were strong loving, gentle and courageous. Our women were sensitive, tender, loving and supportive. Our children were obedient.

All the lies about the happy darkie, disoriented family, emasculating bitch, irresponsible stud were washed away. And for the first time in our lives, we saw Black people portrayed on national television as real human beings.

Haley's tracing his origin back to Africa was not just the history of Kunta Kinte and black people; it was the history of our white brothers and sisters in America as well. While I would be the first to congratulate all of our people who viewed *Roots* for the eight consecutive nights, and while I characterize the television production as being superb, I must hasten to remind you that the television production only gave us a smattering of an introduction to the subject and that we cannot get the full history of blacks in America from the TV spectacle. No we will not get all of our education from television. You must now read Haley's electrifying book, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*,

as well as classics such as John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom*, as well as Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s *Before the Mayflower, A History of Black People in America*; and especially W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which Du Bois reminds us that "before the Pilgrims landed, we were here."

Yes, we must read more. What we find in books is in large part our collected memory of historical civilizations and historic peoples and their accomplishments. While all people, both black and white, need to engage in more reading, it is my feeling that black people should read more, because there seems to be emerging among our people a forgetfulness of the

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past. We must not forget what our forebears did to accomplish what measure of liberation that black people have achieved. Although it has been only nine years since the dreadful assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., you would be surprised to know that there are young blacks who do not know who he was. In spite of the greatness of Malcolm X, he has also been forgotten. These are men who had a profound impact on American civilization in the 1960s only a decade ago. So many of the young people take their small measure of freedom and liberation for granted. They don't know about the heroic act of the four young black men, who were students at this university, who in February 1960, started a revolution in America, when they started a peaceful protest at a lunch counter here in Greensboro.

There may be those of you who may say why does E. J. Josey want us to remember those things which are painful. Why can't we forgive and forget?

I contend this morning that it is necessary for our people to remember our past, although we must forgive those who have oppressed us. Black people must emulate our Jewish brothers and sisters, as they remember the Nazi concentration camps and say Never Again. We too must chant Never Again! It is in our interest not to forget. In recent years there is also forgetfulness on the part of our white brothers and sisters. The reaction to *Roots* by young whites was "you can't hold us responsible; we didn't do this to your people; our great-grandparents did this to you." Some blacks have responded to this kind of reasoning that this is a cop out, for we are not only responsible for what we do, but we are responsible for what we inherit and what we pass on as our legacy.

Reading and libraries have always played a significant role in the liberation of the minds of black people in America. W. W. Law, a distinguished Civil Rights leader and member of the national board of directors of the NAACP, recently related to me the heroic story of Lucius E.

Holsey, a former black slave, who was responsible for the founding of Payne College. As a slave, Holsey was denied an education, while he was a slave. Although it was forbidden that the slaves be given an opportunity to learn to read, Holsey, through his ingenuity, got himself a book and taught himself to read. While chopping in the fields, he would tear a page from his book, and periodically, sneak a peep at the page and memorize each word — learning to know its meaning and to spell it. Those of you who would like to know more about this great man, I recommend that you read John B. Cade's *Holsey the Incomparable*, published by Pageant Press in 1964.

Turning to another former slave, one of the greatest black men of all times, Frederick Douglass, who became not only an articulate abolitionist lecturer, but also became a member of the District of Columbia territorial legislature, police commissioner of the District of Columbia and diplomat, tells of his quest for knowledge and his desire to know how to read. Listen to Douglass as he tells us in his own words in his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

Seized with a determination to learn to read, at any cost, I hit upon many expedients to accomplish the desired end. The plea which I mainly adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of using my young white playmates, with whom I met in the street, as teachers. I used to carry, almost constantly, a copy of Webster's spelling book in my pocket; and, when sent on errands, or when play time was allowed me, I would step, with my young friends, aside, and take a lesson in spelling. I generally paid my tuition fee to the boys, with bread, which I also carried in my pocket. For a single biscuit, any of my hungry little comrades would give me a lesson more valuable to me than bread.

Josiah Hensen, who served as a model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "carried a scar to his grave, because his master caught him with a spelling book."

Reading as a means of liberating our minds and freeing us has been a tool of black folk since slavery. In view of the unusual price that Holsey, Douglass, and

Hensen paid just to have the knowledge to read mandates that every black person of our time use books and libraries that are freely available to us. The thirst to know is the legacy that our slave forebearers left us.

Turning the pages of history to the 20th century, let me share with you information about a black man's desire to read and to use libraries. Richard Wright, who was born in Natchez, Mississippi in 1908, sixty-nine years ago and who died in France in 1960 and who will be long remembered for his autobiography *Black Boy*, and his great novel *Native Son*, as well as many other books tells us in *Black Boy* how he was spurred on at the age of 19, in 1927, to assault the bastion of a segregated library in Memphis, Tennessee.

One of the Memphis newspapers, the *Commercial Appeal*, in an editorial, denounced H. L. Mencken. Richard Wright was curious to ascertain what this white man, Mencken, had done to merit this denunciation, since in the past, the paper had only blasted black people. Listen to Wright recall this incident:

Now, how could I find out about this Mencken? There was a huge library near the riverfront, but I knew that Negroes were not allowed to patronize its shelves any more than they were the parks and playgrounds. I had gone into the library several times to get books for the white men on the job. Which of them would now help me to get books? . . .

I weighed the personalities of the men on the job. . . . There remained only one man whose attitude did not fit into an anti-Negro category. . . . He was an Irish Catholic and was hated by the white Southerners. I knew that he read books, because I had got him volumes from the library several times. . . .

One morning I paused before the Catholic fellow's desk.

"I want to ask you a favor," I whispered to him.

"What is it?"

"I want to read. I can't get books from the library. I wonder if you'd let me use your card." . . .

A few days later he called me to him.

"I've got a card in my wife's name," he said. "Here's mine."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you think you can manage it?"

"I'll manage fine," I said.

"If they suspect you, you'll get in trouble," he said.

"I'll write the same kind of notes to the library that you wrote when you sent me for books," I told him. "I'll sign your name."

That afternoon I addressed myself to forging a note. Now, what were the names of books by H. L. Mencken? I did not know any of them. I finally wrote what I thought would be a foolproof note: Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy — I used the word "nigger" to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note — have some books by H. L. Mencken? I forged the white man's name.

I entered the library as I had always done when on errands for white, but I felt that I would somehow slip up and betray myself. I doffed my hat, stood a respectful distance from the desk, looked as unbookish as possible, and waited for the white patrons to be taken care of. When the desk was clear of people, I still waited. The white librarian looked at me.

"What do you want, boy?"

As though I did not possess the power of speech, I stepped forward and simply handed her the forged note, not parting my lips.

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"What books by Mencken does he want?" she asked.

"I don't know, ma'am," I said, avoiding her eyes.

"Who gave you this card?"

"Mr. Falk," I said. . . . "He's at work at the M- Optical Company," I said. "I've been in for him before."

Oh, God, she's suspicious. Perhaps she would not let me have the books? If she had turned her back at the moment, I would have ducked out the door and never gone back. Then I thought of a bold idea.

"You can call him up, ma'am," I said, my heart pounding.

"You're not using these books, are you?" she asked pointedly.

"Oh no, ma'am, I can't read."

"I don't know what he wants by Mencken," she said under her breath.

I knew now that I had won; she was thinking of other things and the race question had gone out of her mind. She went over to the shelves. Once or twice she looked over her shoulder at me, as though she was still doubtful. Finally, she came forward with the books in her hand.

"I'm sending him two books," she said.

"But tell Mr. Falk to come in next time, or send me the names of the books he wants. I don't know what he wants to read."

I said nothing. She stamped the card and handed me the books. Not daring to glance at them, I went out of the library, fearing that the woman would call me back for further questioning. A block away from the library I opened one of the books and read a title. . . .

I submit this morning that black people who have made a significant impact on American society have been blacks who have been liberated through the use of books and libraries.

Public libraries, as Richard Wright reminds us, were closed to black people in the South until recently. It was just 17 years ago in 1960 that in my own home state of Virginia that the citizens of Danville voted to close its public library because black citizens had won a desegregation suit from the federal court.

Libraries in America have been citadels of learning and a source of inspiration and motivation for black people. Even during the days of segregation, the Library of Congress and the District of Columbia Public Library were two of the few places that were not segregated in the nation's capi-

tal. The Library of Congress became an immensely liberating force and a cathedral of learning for young black scholars. Rayford W. Logan, Professor of History Emeritus, Howard University, in his *The Negro in American Life and Thought, The Nadir 1877-1901* tells us that

The penumbra of compromise and reconciliation that prevailed at the turn of the century obscured also the intangible effects of equal treatment accorded to Negroes studying in the Library of Congress and the Washington Public Library. The author of this book who began using these libraries early in the century realizes now that this mingling on equal terms with other Americans probably kept the minds of young Washington Negroes from being warped and seared. As boys and girls we must have learned, though not fully appreciated, the privileged position enjoyed by students and scholars using these libraries. Schools, hotels, many restaurants and theaters, even churches were segregated. But men and women, boys and girls of both races sat side by side at desks in these treasuries of the accumulated knowledge of the ages. The colored students who went to New England colleges had this joint experience to help relieve the strain of our first association with our white classmates. Native white Washingtonians who have contributed to the peaceful revolution of social change in the capital have been encouraged by their recollection that there was no friction in these two libraries.

Related to the point that blacks, who have made a mark in American society were avid readers and grew to love books and libraries, let us hear the testimony of Malcolm X who tells of his introduction to books and libraries in prison. Malcolm was aware of the fact that his education was inadequate. He began to study the dictionary. He copied every word in the dictionary and learned its meaning. Listen to Malcolm's words:

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence . . . and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life. . . .

Continuing, Malcolm indicates

I read more in my room than in the library itself. An inmate who was known to read a lot could check out more than the permitted maximum of books. I preferred reading in the total isolation of my own room.

When I had progressed to really serious reading, every night at about ten p.m. I would be outraged with the "lights out." It always seemed to catch me right in the middle of something engrossing.

Fortunately, right outside my door was a corridor light that cast a glow into my room. The glow was enough to read by, once my eyes adjusted to it. So when "lights out" came, I would sit on the floor where I could continue reading in that glow.

Candidly, I must truthfully say that I have been able to only note in passing, through the pages of history, a few of the black leaders whose love of reading and libraries are worthy of emulation.

It is with great pride this morning that I have been able to cite Frederick Douglass, Lucius Holsey, Josiah Henson, Richard Wright, Malcolm X and Rayford Logan, as persons whose lives were enriched by books and libraries, but at the same time, I am sorry to report that so many people have forgotten their rich heritage. As we mull over the true significance of libraries, during this National Library Week, I recommend that we heed the message of Afro-American athlete Arthur Ashe, who wrote an open letter to black parents in the February 6, 1977 *New York Times* in which he admonished them to send their children to the libraries. Arthur Ashe points out that most young blacks aspire to be star athletes and it indicates that a young black has less than one chance in 1,000 of becoming a pro.

Arthur Ashe writes in his provocative and penetrating open letter to black parents

Our greatest heroes of the century have been athletes — Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammed Ali. Racial and economic discrimination forced us to channel our energies into athletics and entertainment. These were the ways out of the ghetto, the ways to get that Cadillac, those alligator shoes, that cashmere sport coat.

Somehow, parents must instill a desire for learning alongside the desire to be Walt

Frazier. Why not start by sending black professional athletes into high schools to explain the facts of life. . . . For every hour you spend on the athletic field, spend two in the library. Even if you make it as a pro athlete, your career will be over by the time you are 35. So you will need that diploma. . . .

We have been on the same roads — sports and entertainment — too long. We need to pull over, fill up at the library and speed away to Congress and the Supreme Court, the unions and the business world. We need more Barbara Jordans, Andrew Youngs, union cardholders, Nikki Giovannis and Earl Graveses. . . .

Concluding his open letter, Ashe declares

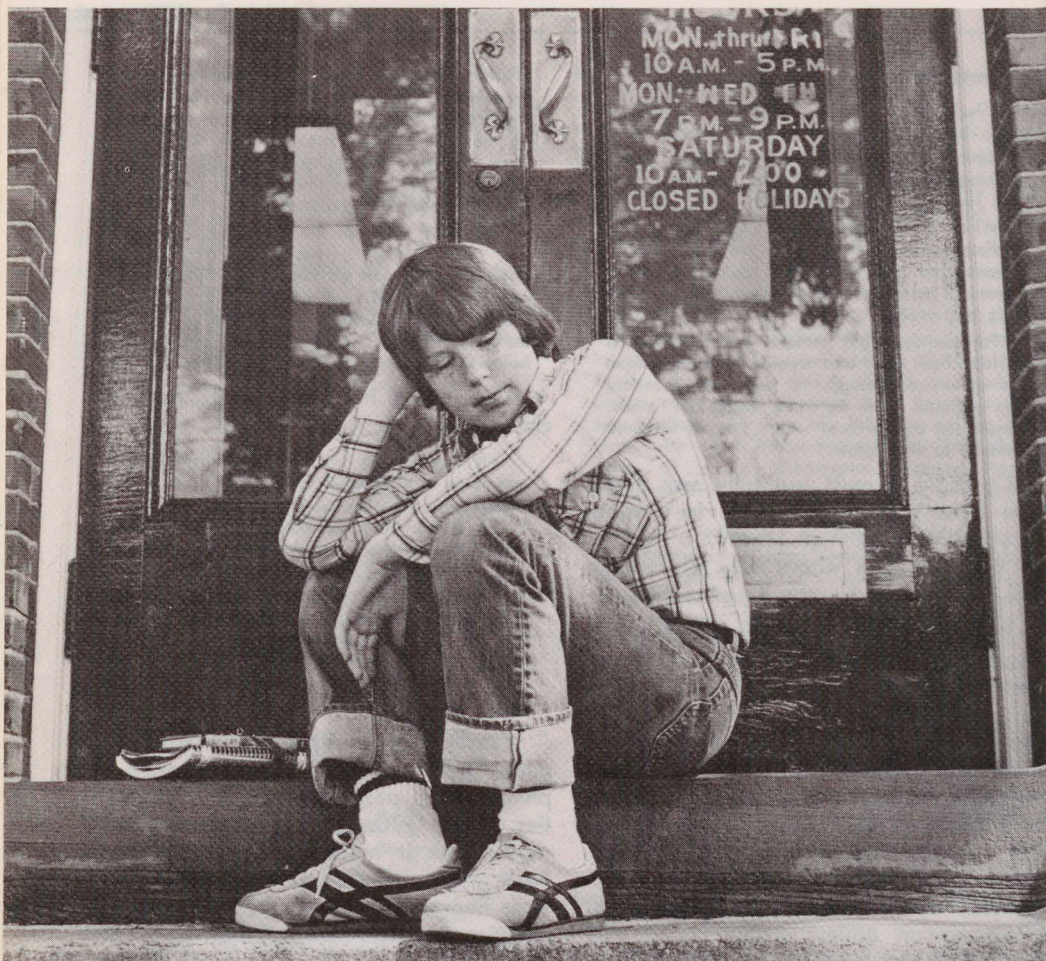
I'll never forget how proud my grandmother was when I graduated from U.C.L.A. in 1966. Never mind the Davis Cup in 1968, 1969 and 1970. Never mind the Wimbledon title, Forest Hills, etc. To this day, she still doesn't know what those names mean.

What mattered to her was that of her more than 30 children and grandchildren, I was the first to be graduated from college, and a famous college at that. Somehow, that made up for all those floors she scrubbed all those years.

Finally, I have uttered many words this morning desperately trying to convey my philosophical position that the harsh realities of the 1970s tell us that black people don't have it made in America. Yet, I have given examples of black heroes, who were liberated by the power of books and libraries. In addition, I have given you the plea of one of America's great athletes, who speaks movingly and convincingly of the need for young blacks to use libraries. My final tribute in honor of National Library Week is from W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Completing his discussion of the function of the Negro college and its enhancement of knowledge and culture through study and reading, Du Bois gives us a powerful and moving statement

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil.



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