

## MEMORANDA AND DOCUMENTS

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### JIM CROW AT HARVARD: 1923

NELL PAINTER

**I**N the decades preceding the "Black Revolution" of the nineteen-sixties, "Jim Crow" and "Harvard University" seemed unlikely to occur in the same phrase. Then, the "Negro Problem" was discussed only in terms of Southern red-necks and sharecroppers, and Harvard was proud of its long tradition of abolitionism and fair play. Yet in the early nineteen-twenties President Lowell's insistence upon the color bar in the freshman dormitories provoked some of the most serious criticism of his career. The case also bears striking similarities with the crises of our own time between black students and the administration of the University. Then, as now, there was black unity on the wider significance of segregation at Harvard. Then, as now, fundamental differences of opinion on whether or not any purely racial discrimination could be legitimate created tremendous interracial misunderstanding.

From the time of his inauguration in 1909, Abbott Lawrence Lowell had sought to reduce social class segregation in the Harvard College student body on the grounds that the "social relations of the undergraduates among themselves are quite as important as their academic lives."<sup>1</sup> One means towards this end was the establishment of freshman dormitories. After 1915 every freshman was required to reside there except for black freshmen, who were to be barred from the freshman halls. During the First World War and its accompanying confusion, however, two black freshmen named Jourdain and Ghee had been allowed to live in the freshman halls unintentionally and without incident. After the war, nevertheless, two other black freshmen were told to seek accommodations elsewhere. They made no issue of their exclusion, possibly because they feared being barred from the College altogether.

<sup>1</sup> In his inaugural address, Lowell had gone on to say that "the College itself falls short of its national mission of throwing together youths of promise of every kind, from every part of the country." A. Lawrence Lowell, quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 444.

By the second half of 1921, President Lowell began receiving letters inquiring about the freshman dormitory color bar and the possibility of total exclusion of black men from Harvard College, notably from an alumnus on the staff of the *New York Nation* and from Professor Albert Bushnell Hart at Harvard. By the middle of 1922 a committee of Harvard alumni were circulating a petition protesting the exclusion of black students from the freshman dormitories.<sup>2</sup> The petition was finally signed by 143 highly respected alumni and submitted to President Lowell and the Harvard Corporation in September, 1922. Although the story had been noted in the *New York World*, it did not reach the general public until January, 1923 with the Roscoe Conkling Bruce affair.

On December 7, 1922, Roscoe Conkling Bruce '02 wrote to the Registrar of Harvard College seeking accommodation in the freshman dormitories for his son, Roscoe Conkling Bruce, Jr., a student at Phillips Exeter Academy. Instead of being processed routinely, Bruce's letter was sent to President Lowell from the Registrar's office with this warning penciled in longhand: "Roscoe Conkling Bruce is a *colored man*." President Lowell replied to Bruce personally, regretting "that in the Freshman Halls, where residence is compulsory, we have felt from the beginning the necessity of not including colored men. . . . I am sure you will understand why, from the beginning, we have not thought it possible to compel men of different races to reside together."<sup>3</sup>

In his response, Bruce hit upon the essential difference of opinion that would develop between black and white: "Not race but culture, I had supposed, is the basis of sound nationality."<sup>4</sup>

Replying to Bruce's argument, President Lowell answered that all Harvard's *educational* facilities were open to black students; they were to be excluded only from *social* relationships:

<sup>2</sup> The committee included William Channing Gannet '60, Moorfield Storey '66, and Robert Benchley '12. Edward Waldo Emerson '66, Francis G. Peabody '69, Oswald Garrison Villard '93, Carl Russell Fish '98, Ernest H. Gruening '07, Samuel Eliot Morison '08, and Walter Lippman '10 were among the signers. Their petition is found in the Lowell Papers, folder 42, in the Harvard University Archives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Folder 981 is in the 1919-1922 section, folders 42 and 42-A in the 1922-1925 section of the Lowell Papers.

<sup>3</sup> A. Lawrence Lowell to Roscoe Conkling Bruce, Dec. 14, 1922, Lowell Papers, folder 42.

<sup>4</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce to A. Lawrence Lowell, Jan. 4, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42.

it seems to me that for the colored man to claim that he is entitled to have the white man compelled to live with him is a very unfortunate innovation which, far from doing him good, would increase a prejudice that, as you and I will thoroughly agree, is most unfortunate, and probably growing. . . . To maintain that compulsory residence in the Freshman Dormitories—which has proved a great benefit in breaking up the social cliques, that did much injury to the College—should not be established for 99½ percent of the students because the remaining one half of one percent could not properly be included seems to me an untenable position.<sup>5</sup>

In other correspondence President Lowell noted his agreement with Booker T. Washington's fingers-and-hand analysis made in 1895, but he did not apply this doctrine of social separation and unity in mutual progress to the lives of white students. Rather, what was a positive argument for the separation of blacks and whites became a negative argument in terms of whites alone, of whom he wrote: "To throw students together in a community life is now regarded as valuable from an educational as well as from a social standpoint. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

The Bruce-Lowell correspondence ended in January, 1923 with Bruce's energetic rejection of Lowell's educational/social distinction—"Of course I protest."<sup>7</sup> During the last week of January, 1923, the story circulated widely in black and white newspapers across the United States, provoking a barrage of letters.

Black opinion expressed in letters to President Lowell or in race journals uniformly condemned Lowell's color bar and analyzed it as part of the broader backdrop of American racism. White opinion focused on Harvard's own good, whether condemning or commending Lowell's racial policies. To say that an anti-Lowell position shared by both blacks and whites existed would be inaccurate given the vast difference in their frames of reference. Rather, three separate arguments stood out, two of which opposed the freshman dormitory color bar. Blacks argued that there were no valid grounds for racial discrimination, and they identified President Lowell's policy with that of the Ku Klux Klan. White criticism

<sup>5</sup> A. Lawrence Lowell to Roscoe Conkling Bruce, Jan. 6, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42.

<sup>6</sup> President Lowell's *Report for 1926-27*, quoted in Henry Aaron Yeomans, *Abbott Lawrence Lowell* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), 186.

<sup>7</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce to A. Lawrence Lowell, Jan. 9, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42-A.

protested Lowell's institution of race discrimination as contrary to Harvard's traditions of liberalism and fair play. Finally, Lowell's supporters feared distasteful intimacy with blacks—or with other non-Anglo-Saxons, for instance, Jews—and possible miscegenation. In terms of the race issue, however, Lowell's white critics and supporters were in basic agreement that "social equality" must be avoided. The debate was over precisely where the dividing line between valid and unfair discrimination could be drawn, and it did not question the justice of the racial double standard which blacks have long considered a subterfuge for hypocrisy and exploitation.

Although responses from both races cut across class lines, blacks telescoped the social distance between President Lowell and lower-class racists, while denouncing white color prejudice which stigmatized all blacks, regardless of class or education. On the other hand, whites overlooked social differences between Negroes and wrote as though a black Harvard student were as undesirable as a street-corner tough, while at the same time finding nothing in common between white gentlemen and ordinary Klansmen or lynchers. Such racists were never mentioned in the white Harvard debate but were an integral part of the black response. James Weldon Johnson, poet, novelist and Executive Secretary of the N.A.A.C.P. wrote to Lowell on behalf of that body: "by capitulating to anti-Negro prejudices in the freshman dormitories or anywhere else, Harvard University affirms that prejudice and strengthens it and is but putting into effect the program proclaimed by the infamous Ku Klux Klan."<sup>8</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, outspoken editor of the N.A.A.C.P.'s *Crisis* had even written an article on extralegal violence in the South before Harvard's Jim Crow policy had become nationally known which linked Southern vigilante groups with Harvard's President: "and the South is finding allies. . . . President Lowell . . . who recently when asked by the N.A.A.C.P. to join leading Americans in denouncing lynching did not even acknowledge the letter."<sup>9</sup>

Black commentary was full of distrust, and perhaps rightly so,

<sup>8</sup> James Weldon Johnson to A. Lawrence Lowell, Jan. 11, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42.

<sup>9</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois in the *Crisis*, vol. xxiv, no. 4 (Aug., 1922), 153.

for many white arguments betrayed hypocrisy and lying, and sometimes were studded with phrases now recognized as hallmarks of racism. Certainly the articles and letters show that black distrust grew out of divergent connotations for such terms as "friend of the Negro," "fair and just discrimination," or "social equality." President Lowell, for instance, rejected a suggestion from a Wisconsin minister to segregate black freshmen within the freshman halls "voluntarily" because it "seems to me to be something like the Jim Crow car, an enforced seclusion which is, to me, very repulsive."<sup>10</sup> His biographer commented that "the poor, hardworking students, native-born or immigrant, gentile or Jew, white or black, never had a warmer friend, although many excellent persons criticized at times his way of showing friendship."<sup>11</sup> Yet when he spoke of himself as a "friend of the Negro" in a speech at Old South Church, a black auditor commented—like the proverbial old slave—that Lowell had a "mighty poor way of showing it."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, black opinion rejected the "fair and just discrimination"<sup>13</sup> supported by Henry S. Drinker, President of Lehigh University, and James Ford Rhodes, American historian and Lowell's confrere in the British Academy. For this policy was rooted in prejudices like Rhodes's that "The negro can never be elevated to a level with whites; he is a million years behind in civilization."<sup>14</sup> Blacks also could not accept the "social equality" avoidance arguments like the following which equated inclusion of black Harvard freshmen in the Harvard College freshman halls with the mongrelization of the College:

Every member of Harvard's governing body must know that the negro is and must necessarily remain a separate race in this country. If you do not know, let the doubter ask himself if he would

<sup>10</sup> A. Lawrence Lowell to Rev. H. E. Peabody, Jan. 17, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42-A.

<sup>11</sup> Yeomans, 68. Lowell does not seem to have drawn distinctions between the lazy or hardworking black students, and he never wrote of Roscoe Conkling Bruce, Jr., as an individual student.

<sup>12</sup> James William Henderson to A. Lawrence Lowell, Jan. 16, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42-A.

<sup>13</sup> Henry S. Drinker to A. Lawrence Lowell, Feb. 16, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42.

<sup>14</sup> James F. Rhodes to A. Lawrence Lowell, Feb. 6, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42-A.

willingly permit his daughter or son to marry a son or daughter of the Bruce who wishes a room reserved for his son.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the best example of the white wellsprings of black distrust is a letter written by Albert Bushnell Hart just a month after the 1921 Congressional hearings on the Ku Klux Klan had exposed several cases of vicious and illegal violence against blacks. A trustee of Howard University and a Harvard professor, he was, "by inheritance, training and lifelong practice . . . a friend of the negro race."<sup>16</sup> Yet in a letter to Lowell which opposed official University segregation he could nevertheless support some form of color bar:

I have been convinced for years . . . that the negro race, as a race, is inferior to the white, and that a mixture of the races in the South or elsewhere would mean a decline in civilization. Furthermore, I have felt and said in my book [*The Southern South*], that I felt the South was justified in using whatever means were necessary to prevent a union of the races.<sup>17</sup>

The Lowell papers themselves contain instances of what seem to have been deliberate fabrications,<sup>18</sup> and also a betrayal of trust. When Robert Abbott, the black publisher of the *Chicago Defender* asked a white lawyer to write to Lowell protesting the color bar at Harvard, the attorney wrote to Lowell praising his discriminatory policy, adding that "Recent disclosures of vice conditions in this city [Chicago] are so revolting as to make plain the necessity to establish a public policy of keeping whites and blacks, especially black men and white girls, socially apart."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> W. Banks Meacham to A. Lawrence Lowell, Feb. 2, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42-A.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Bushnell Hart to A. Lawrence Lowell, Nov. 29, 1921, Lowell Papers, folder 981.

<sup>17</sup> Lowell Papers, folder 981.

<sup>18</sup> Lowell said that he had not received the Trotter petition from the National Equal Rights League of Afro-Americans (mailed from Boston) although the petition is in its proper order in the Lowell Papers. Again, of the letters duplicated for the March 26, 1923 corporation meeting, only those favorable to Lowell's position were reprinted (J. F. Rhodes, Drinker, Rev. Lay), although their arguments were effectively countered by other noted educators such as G. F. Peabody, Professor Hart.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew R. Sheriff to A. Lawrence Lowell, Jan. 23, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42-A. Sheriff wrote to Lowell: "I have always been benevolently and genuinely interested in the welfare and progress of the negroes. . . ." Yet he complained of the impertinence of Abbott's letter to him, which he had enclosed to Lowell: "Its air of assurance is characteristic of his race since the close of the war."

This association of vice conditions in Chicago with the son of a Harvard graduate and grandson of a United States Senator provides a clear example of white inability to see Negroes as individuals, and black writers sensed this. The United Negro Improvement Association, led by Marcus Garvey, argued in its journal, the *Negro World*, that "regardless of whatever transcendent ability or character a Negro possesses, they [students of Harvard] do not regard him as a man. They regard him as part ape and part man, as a vertebrate animal of the *genus homo*, but not the *genus vir*."<sup>20</sup> William Monroe Trotter, writing as Secretary of the National Equal Rights League of Afro-Americans, petitioned against Lowell's policy because "exclusion from any compulsory regulations as to studies or student living, for race, necessarily constitutes inequality for race and therefore degradation for race. . . . Some sort of unfitness is at least inferred."<sup>21</sup>

While the Garveyite movement was strongly pan-black and racially exclusive, and William Monroe Trotter and his group stressed self-reliance, the syndicalist *Messenger*, edited by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, emphasized working-class unity across racial and national lines. Yet Randolph and Owen shared the black identification of Lowell and the Ku Klux Klan, with economic criticism added as well:

The Ku Klux Klan spirit has captured fair Harvard. Doubtless, if an examination of Harvard's investments was made, it would be found that millions of her enormous endowment are reaping large and "unfair" dividends from Southern cotton, lumber, city bonds, etc., that rest upon the backs of Negro labor.<sup>22</sup>

Even the antediluvian Bookerite,<sup>23</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce, discredited Lowell's argument of acting in Negroes' own best interests:

Impress, if you will, upon the Irishman . . . or Jew or the Negro the idea that the oldest and noblest of our Universities shares the conviction of the Ku Klux Klan that, no matter what his charm and

<sup>20</sup> Editorial by William Ferris in the *Negro World*, xii, 4 (Jan. 20, 1923).

<sup>21</sup> William Monroe Trotter to A. Lawrence Lowell, Jan. 20, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42.

<sup>22</sup> The *Messenger*, v, 690 (May, 1923).

<sup>23</sup> "Bookerite" refers to an adherent of the accommodating racial philosophies of Booker T. Washington. Even before his death in 1915, his apparent acceptance of segregation and disfranchisement and his faith in the "best [white] people" had been repudiated by educated blacks.

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gift and serviceability as an individual, he can be no full-fledged American because of the very blood in his veins. And you manufacture griefs in the present and prepare for the future—strifes.<sup>24</sup>

This unanimity in black understanding of the controversy effectively denied Lowell's stance as a friend of the Negro. Blacks identified the freshman dormitory color bar with the unequivocal antiblack philosophies of the Ku Klux Klan. Lowell's vocabulary was interpreted in this light, and the conclusion was drawn that Jim Crow in the Harvard freshman halls was a means of perpetuating the exclusion of black students upon racial grounds, rather than of helping them.

The resolution of the freshman dormitory crisis indicated the correctness of black fears. Officially, the issue was settled in March, 1923 with an ambiguous compromise which, at the time, was widely interpreted as a victory for Negroes and liberal whites, when the Harvard Corporation voted:

that as to the capacity of the Freshman Halls all members of the Freshman Class shall reside and board in the Freshman Halls, except those who are permitted by the Assistant Dean of Harvard College to live elsewhere. In the application of this rule men of the white and colored races shall not be compelled to live and eat together, nor shall any man be excluded by reason of his color.<sup>25</sup>

But black former Harvard students testify that in fact the segregationist policies instituted by President Lowell continued to be enforced until the nineteen-fifties,<sup>26</sup> providing yet another example of the sources of recent black student distrust of northern white universities.

<sup>24</sup> Roscoe Conkling Bruce to A. Lawrence Lowell, Jan. 9, 1923, Lowell Papers, folder 42-A.

<sup>25</sup> Lowell Papers, folder 42. On April 3 of the same year the word "Assistant" was omitted.

<sup>26</sup> In 1926 a black freshman, Ewart Guinier, was given permission to reside outside the freshman halls, although he had not requested it. And a black alumnus of the Class of 1957, Dr. Richard Allen Williams, cites him as the first Harvard class in which black students were allowed to live in the freshman dormitories. All earlier black freshmen had to live in Dana Palmer House or Warren House, or in other accommodations outside the freshman dormitories. This information was relayed to me in personal interviews with Professor Ewart Guinier on March 23, 1970 and with Dr. Richard Allen Williams on April 17, 1970.