Introduction

There is a dearth of traditional records for the thoughts and experiences of black poor and working-class folks and this has informed their presence, their absence, and their misrepresentation in the historical record. As historian Cheryl Hicks notes, ordinary people “rarely [leave] personal documents attesting to their lives and [are] often under-represented in organizations and the press.”¹ Centering young black people, too, has been difficult. Sources that allow for young people’s voices are scarce and contested.² This, of course, is even truer in the study of marginalized poor and working-class (urban) African American youth, who are simultaneously seen as at risk and prone to criminality and deviance because of the ghetto’s influences.

But this historical manifestation, or lack thereof, is not solely a result of the scarcity of sources. Even in the revisionist period of the late twentieth century, scholars generally avoided the daily lives, the consciousness, and the intellectual production of common folks in an effort to render a portrait of racial progress. Black intellectual histories have spotlighted the ideological framings of black elites, many of whom had very conflicted feelings and ideas about black folk.³ The histories produced in the period following the civil rights movement’s legislative victories, in what was the social history turn, focused on assertions of black human agency. This historiographical project to (re)/(pro)claim black humanity, as historian Walter Johnson argues, resulted in a continuum of accommodation and resistance on which black historical actions were positioned and judged to measure agency. While this may have been a necessary approach in the late twentieth century, to “writ[e] Black humanity as self-determination and resistance,” it also “delineated an optical field” that ultimately obscured “other things beyond the categories of the ‘agency’ debates.”⁴
Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC offers alternative, complicated narratives of black young people who lived in Washington, DC, during the interwar period. Some were native Washingtonians, some were recent newcomers from parts south and east. Most lived in tight, overcrowded, and generally impoverished conditions. All were coming of age in the segregated US capital. This project listens to black poor and working-class young people as thinkers, theorists, critics, and commentators as they reckoned with, reconciled, and even played with material and rhetorical lines of demarcation set about them both as young people controlled by their parents and other adults and as African Americans in the racially, spatially, economically, and politically restricted city that was also the United States’ emblem of equality.

The “racial protocol” for how black lives could be represented in scholarship “reduce[d] African American experiences to racial politics [and] racial struggle”; it paid little attention to private life, “individual subjectivity,” and interiority. It created a “two-dimensionality” and a homogeneity of black life. And as both historian Anastasia Curwood and literary scholar Kevin Quashie note, hiding black interiority from public view can lead to the “belief that Black people lack interior lives altogether.” Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC uses sociological investigations and community and individual interviews that were conducted in the late Progressive and interwar era to highlight the inner and everyday lives, the self-aware and self-reflective analytic frameworks cultured and articulated by poor and working-class black young people in an urban and social history of Jim Crow Washington, DC.

Social science literature of this era has generally portrayed marginalized black folks as socially and culturally homogeneous in the aggregate—whether represented as in need of rehabilitation or as proletarianized. These studies have rightfully been criticized for reinscribing conventional frameworks of racial and class identities and for reifying social formations steeped in middle-class norms and values. But because of their intrusiveness into communities and people’s personal lives, these materials also give us some access to inner life, to the life of the mind.
For example, seventeen-year-old Floretta Johnson’s mother, native Washingtonian Clara Winston Johnson, had a long work history as a laundress and childcare worker that started when she was nine years old. When Clara was interviewed for E. Franklin Frazier’s *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, she had clearly made many decisions—about her relationships, about delaying her first marriage, about divorcing her abusive and philandering husband, and about childrearing. She defied both contemporary conventions and her mother’s advice, insisting that she wasn’t someone “who didn’t know her own mind.”7 The meaning and force of Clara’s words inspire and animate this book.

Here I borrow the concepts of “interiority” and “infra-ordinary” from poets and literary theorists. Interiority refers to “a consciousness of depth and space within; a sensibility”; “human inwardness”;8 self; self-hood; self-knowledge; self-cultivation; a place of “imagination, fantasy, affect, aesthetics, and sensation”; “an amorphous space located somewhere ‘inside’ the human body, generating conviction, satisfaction, and identity.” It assigns autonomous and authorial subjectivity; it emerges from a place of quiet—at once “irreverent, messy, complicated, representations that have human texture and specificity.”9 Like interiority, the infra-ordinary, “everyday practices we don’t always notice” are “essential to the possibility of black futurity,” and like interiority, they are already there, “if one is looking to understand it.”10 While always linked to the material world and its attendant realities, the interior, as Quashie notes, is not only a bulwark “against dominance of the social world,” but it “has its own sovereignty.”11 For so many of the young people, everyday life was filled with, in Tina Campt’s words, “practices of refusal. . . . a range of creative responses to sustained everyday encounters with the exigency and duress” of DC’s racialized spatial regime.12

By foregrounding interiority and the infra-ordinary, the narratives at the center of this book provide a different understanding of black urban life in the early twentieth century, a period most scholars identify as both the Great Migration and inclusive of the New Negro Movement and the origins of black “ghetto” formation. We have come to see urban-
ization as having had a mostly negative impact on rural black folks who flocked to cities, and cities as places where black families experienced the “breakdown” of “traditional” familial bonds, resulting in an increase in urban vice and crime. But what comes through in these narratives are the ways in which black young working-class and poor people were expertly aware of the economic, spatial, social, and political limitations imposed by the District of Columbia’s racially segregationist policies and customs, and their critiques of the juxtaposition of those limitations with the emblematic meanings of the nation’s capital.

Young people’s answers to social science questions make clear the cultivation and mobilization of their own analytic categories and frames, even for the youngest subject. Sometimes these conceptual frames were in tune with and sometimes they diverged from mainstream middle-class mores as promoted by black and white reformers alike. Individuals articulated spatial, racial, class, and gender identities, complex social relations, and a deep consciousness of selfhood with which they negotiated the contradictions of living in the urbanizing and racially segregated US capital. These musings map onto the history of Washington, DC, just as DC planners worked to create a landscape to establish the city on a global stage, and just as the federal government’s physical presence invaded historically black and poor spaces.

DC histories have addressed both its racial segregationist past and the origins of its black urban “ghettoes.” This includes the early Federal Writers’ Project 1937 DC guidebook and its 1942 edition. Since these early publications, scholarship on the history of black DC has centered mostly on black elite communities, focusing on intellectual advancements, cultural and institutional formations, the proliferation of black economic success in the Northwest, and civic/racial pride and participation in the face of structural deterrents, as well as the struggle against many of these obstacles, one of which resulted in the emergence of Howard University as the central site of New Negro intellectual activity and black knowledge production. This scholarship primarily examined the ways in which DC’s middle-class black community, its “leading men
and women,” fortified their social status, redefined themselves in the face of social discrimination, and mobilized around racial uplift among themselves and for the masses. But the “social breach” between black DC’s elite and what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “submerged tenth” was wide. Howard’s New Negro intellectual Kelly Miller called it, at the time, “more pronounced than in any other city in the country.”

Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC is indebted to three publications that take note of DC’s poor and working-class African Americans, and address the juxtaposition of DC’s “imagined” and “experienced” landscapes. While not specifically a history of black Washington, Howard Gillette Jr.’s Between Justice and Beauty examined the long arc of urban policy and planning that often did not reconcile the social welfare needs of marginalized, mostly African American folks and the capital city’s project for aesthetic improvement. Gillette highlighted moments in DC’s history—Reconstruction, the Progressive Era, the post–World War II era, and even Black Power—when city planning initiatives sought to address both the needs of the city’s “neglected neighbors” and make the capital “worthy of a nation.” Gillette foregrounded how DC’s urban housing, tax, and redevelopment plans—economic, political, and spatial policies that assigned legal meaning to physical spaces—generally failed. The failures reflected not only the relationship between the federal government’s dominance of the local capital city but also the ways in which DC’s urban policies and programs both mirrored and influenced national urban policy goals. Gillette makes very clear the geopolitical significance of Washington, DC, and the relationship between “racial control” and “spatial control.” DC is a national space, a celebrated and for some a sacred space of commemoration. And it was and continues to be a contested space, a space of confrontation and politics.

Two other publications on the history of Washington, DC, specifically center the lives and experiences of black poor and working people. The first, James Borchert’s Alley Life in Washington, traced the survival and continuity of southern rural “folkways” within DC’s black and poor alley communities. Borchert used materials produced by social scien-
tists and reformers to examine family, religious, and work life. He argued that instead of a “breakdown” of values and organization, there was familial and cultural stability in black residential alley communities. While Borchert found that DC’s black alleys were part of the transition from “plantation to ghetto,” he asserted that migrants adjusted and adapted to the new urban environment, developed community institutions and broad kinship networks that supported their survival in these enclaves, and were not transient; many lived in alley communities for decades and would have stayed longer if urban renewal had not forced them to move.21

The second book, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis’s *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestics in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940*, narrated the movement and lives of black women domestic workers out of the South and into DC. Through the oral histories of over eighty women, Clark-Lewis outlined their reasons for migration and charted the social and economic life transformations wrought by the conditions of their new city.22 “Despite constraints of race, gender, and class,” stated Clark-Lewis, “these women were never passive, [or] powerless.”23 They took control of their work lives, and some women were even able to change their socioeconomic status through their domestic work. Migrating black women also brought with them a strong family and work ethic, demonstrating the abilities of black migrants to adapt to modern city lifestyles and circumstances.

Both Borchert and Clark-Lewis intervened in much of the scholarship on black urban ghettoization produced in the 1960s and 1970s, scholarship that privileged political and economic interruptions of community building, family life, traditions, and residents’ aspirations. They also feature black poor and working Washingtonian’s lived experiences.24 *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC* both builds on these foundational works and veers from the latter two books, which focus on rehabilitating disorganized black urban enclaves and restoring agency. Literature on poor black urban communities has, in the words of Craig Steven Wilder, stood “as a long story of protest against legal, political,
economic and social barriers to African American community building in the twentieth century city.” But “the search for agency always confesses constraints.”

This book is less concerned with the presumed constraints of inquiry imposed by sociologists, and I do not aim to add to the refutation of the reports that social scientists and others made from their studies. Rather, I interrogate these raw materials to gather the stories of poor and working-class African American young people, to emphasize the specificity of daily existence and ideologies of self-identification and consciousness that do not relegate the experiences of black youth solely to struggles against or accommodations to the “ghetto.” This specificity does not define experiences, actions, feelings, and thoughts simply as evidence of the agency or humanity of black poor and working-class young people. Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC attempts to challenge the limiting boundaries of intellectual history, examining the critical role of ideas in navigating structural impediments to full identity formation and expression, even for people deemed both too immature and racially inferior to engage fully in intellectual life. Intellectual history has generally been about scale, about the monumentalism of ideas. But, what do we miss when we employ only “traditional notions of significance?” If we linger in the archival materials, reading at a different register, we can see and hear what is already there. The voices within these pages stress the generative capacities of young black poor and working-class people’s interior lives and political will.

Scholarship on black women’s lives strongly influences the ways in which black young people’s narratives appear within these pages, providing valuable theoretical framings and methodologies for exploring inner and everyday life, and the relationship to the production of ideas. Scholars have not simply “deprivileged” white and male as uninspected categories of gender and racial analysis, or examined the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality have been formulated and articulated. They have foregrounded that these identities are both socially constructed and complex, “embrac[ing] a ‘kaleidoscopic’ angle of vision”: the inter-
sectional quality of identity formation and its relationship to the quotidi-an, and the instability of categories of race and gender. This framing is important as it reminds us that our identities, our always multiple identities, are not merely those structured around our relationships with the state—how we are either privileged or limited by it, how we are complicit with or are agents in resisting it. Rather, we interact with these structures just as they interact with us: we internalize them, externalize them, ignore them, form and reform sensibilities and notions of ourselves that, while they might always be within these structures, also take these structures for granted, use them as something constructive, and negotiate with them both actually and with their abstractions. In this way, our multiple identities are both performative and not solely public. Through our engagement and disengagement with the structures within which we live, we develop our identities, our perspectives, experiences, feelings, beliefs, desires, the analytic categories and conceptualizations by which we live. Specifically, this theoretical understanding does not limit black subjectivity to its social and political relevance, allowing it only to tell us something about race, racism, violence, struggle, or triumph. It allows for the range of capacities of subjectivity.

I also draw my methodological approach from slavery and postcolonial studies, and from labor histories of women. Scholars in these fields interrogate sources not meant to illuminate certain voices, reading archival materials critically and “against [their] limits.” In so doing, distinctions between the everyday survival strategies of individuals and collective resistance are collapsed. Instead, changing understandings and definitions of freedom, of “working-class consciousness,” of the cultivation of leisure practices, and the ways in which identities were not solely centered on labor and work become foregrounded. This literature builds a social history of governing ideas and political frameworks: an intellectual history that considers the relationship between ideologies and the material, political, and social realities in which they are developed, between the everyday and the production of ideas. Similarly, the
emerging interdisciplinary field on black youth and girlhood provides important bolstering to *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC.*

Black childhood has been a mostly underexamined subfield in the history of young people in the United States. In the mid-1990s, significant scholarship filled this gap, highlighting the lost childhoods of enslaved young people subjected at an early age to “work, terror, injustice, and arbitrary power.” Wilma King’s collection of chronological essays in *African American Childhoods* brought to the fore voices of and about black children from the colonial period through to the civil rights movement, examining “how major events impacted or changed the lives of Black children.” King made an important argument for the variegation of African American childhood experiences, echoing scholar Steven Mintz’s assertion that there is no one “American” childhood and that “every aspect of childhood is shaped by class, ethnicity, gender, geography, religion, and historical era.” Childhood is a “life stage whose contours are shaped by a particular time and place. Childrearing practices, schooling, . . . all are products of particular social and cultural circumstances.” Childhood is and has been historically an evolving social construct, where few children were actually protected from social, political, or economic circumstances. For African American children in particular, the coupling of child development science about brain and intellect maturation and the racial limits of childhood “innocence” meant and continue to mean that young black people were perceived, and portrayed, as both “nonchildlike” and “invulnerable.” Still, historian Robin Bernstein reminds us that young people themselves were (and are) “agential experts” on their own cultures.

Recently, scholars like Bernstein have made valuable contributions to our understandings of black young people’s subjectivity and the ways in which young people who lived within racially segregated spaces of the early twentieth century contended with both the violence of white supremacy and black middle-class notions of suitable behavior. Their examination of archival materials, which bring into relief the thoughts and experiences, “passions and [semi] private thoughts” of black young
people, maintains not only that these exist but that childhood is “not a fixed category,” as the literature bears out: childhood is a “constructed . . . stage of life” and a “constantly shifting” category; and that race, space, gender, class, and age have all “served to undermine access” to the category of childhood.41

Black sociologist and Howard University professor E. Franklin Frazier saw and portrayed many of the young people interviewed for his study *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States* as in need of rehabilitation, relief, and release from the confines of Jim Crow racial segregation.42 But young people’s “interactions with institutions, social science research, media, and educational bodies created an alternative archive that provides a steady backbone for research [on black youth],” as Marcia Chatelain makes clear.43 In reading these archives and contemporary ethnographic research, girlhood studies’ scholars mobilize feminist theory to argue that, despite marginalization, girls “find strategies to play important roles in their respective communities and cultures”; “exercise their own will and personal choices”; and “serve important symbolic functions” in society.44 Fisk University’s black sociologist Charles S. Johnson interviewed African American young people for his book in the same American Youth Commission series for which Frazier conducted his DC research.45 Susan Cahn’s *Sexual Reckonings* used Johnson’s materials to focus on girls as historical actors, identifying childhood history as both political and social terrain and taking young people’s lives and voices seriously.46 Finally, Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives* pushes at the “limits of the case file.” Hartman narrates the lives of photographed and anonymous black girls and young women, “deemed unfit for history and destined to be minor figures,” identifying them instead as “social visionaries, radical thinkers, and innovators,” insistent on imagining future lives and future worlds.47

The above methodologies for reading and interpretation are central to this book. *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC* foregrounds how some young people acted against the maybe imposed and expected silences of “dissem-
Young people interviewed for Frazier’s adolescent personality development research project were “eager to talk” to their interviewers, partly because they might have had a history with their interviewers from participation in programs at DC’s Southwest Settlement House or, in some cases, they might have been “feeling,” as Cahn says, “that the very interview process itself bestowed them with some great importance.” Furthermore, they had little reason to fully lie, since young people often “found support for their beliefs and practices among friends, some family members, and at least a portion of the surrounding community.”

Poor and working-class young people’s articulations of their epistemologies, their ways of knowing and seeing both themselves and the world around them, help us to reimagine black communities in early twentieth-century urban enclaves. *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC* offers an examination of black young people’s thoughts, speech, and movement in the racially segregated US capital, as, in Hartman’s words, “acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within [a] space of enclosure.” This helps us, in the contemporary moment, to see young urban black people as possessive of an inner life, an intellectual life, and interiority generally, in contrast to ways in which young people have been and continue to be portrayed by researchers, youth service professionals, policy makers, law enforcement, and the media.

The Sources

Middle-class race reform work, the revolutions in scientism, and the professionalization of the social sciences share a historical moment. Uplift ideology adopted a sociological component that was promoted by the University of Chicago and subsequently by Fisk, Atlanta University, and Howard University, all sites where black Chicago school graduates held prominent positions, and resulted in a “profusion of records.” (I’ll have more to say about this in the first chapter.) In Washington, DC, black sociologists William H. Jones and E. Franklin Frazier, each head of the Howard University Sociology Department, respectively, in the 1920s
Introduction

and 1930s, conducted and supervised several projects in DC’s black poor and working-class neighborhoods. Jones’s two research publications on housing and recreation in the wake of the 1919 riot in Washington, DC, and Frazier’s study on black families and adolescent personality development form the archives at the heart of *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC*. These are supplemented by reports, public policy papers, and master’s and dissertation theses produced by local white graduate students, mostly women, completing requirements for sociology degrees at Catholic and George Washington Universities, as well as census data and newspaper accounts.

Frazier’s adolescent research project yielded over 200 interviews with youth and their family and community members. Staff for the study were mostly “young colored men and women who had completed college and had some graduate training in addition to experience in interviewing.” These included Laura Lee, Ruth Bittler, Thomas E. Davis, Dennis D. Nelson, Laurreta Wallace, Isadore Miles, Jean P. Westmoreland, John C. Alston, and Bernice Reed, whose brief biographies are introduced in the next chapter. Many were not that much older than the young people they would interview and in some cases much younger than the parents and community members. Some hailed from local black middle-class families and had worked at local black social service and cultural institutions, so they often had preexisting relationships with some of the young people they interviewed.

Young people were selected through their membership in Frazier’s list of “Boy and Girl Scout troops, dramatic, social and recreational clubs connected with settlement houses, the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A.; groups of upper class youths in high schools; a group of delinquents, a group of domestic workers, and a club from a Baptist Sunday School. A small number of youth were picked up at random on the playgrounds and on the streets.”

Frazier’s methodological approach required his research assistants to “memorize the guided interview outline and to make trial interviews which were then discussed with [him] before they entered upon the
regular field work,” although it is unclear from the transcripts whether interviewers actually adhered to this protocol.\textsuperscript{58} Frazier’s instructions included the following directives:

We want to find out what these adolescents are feeling, are thinking, and are doing because of the fact that they are members of a minority group. . . . A personality document ought to be at least 30 typewritten pages when it is completed. [So] this may take three or four interviews. However, you will have a picture of the boy, that is how he looks, how he feels, how he thinks and how he acts. Of course, this would involve some information on his family, that is his relationship to his parents and brothers and sisters in the past and during the present time.\textsuperscript{59}

This design yielded, in some cases, long transcripts of interviews with different members of black DC’s poor and working-class communities.

Working with these materials presented a methodological challenge. How does one produce a historical narrative that focuses on the lived experiences and inner lives of poor and working-class African Americans without falling into the “pitfalls” of pathology, as W. E. B. Du Bois did in his examination of Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward, and as Frazier did in his studies of black family formation?\textsuperscript{60} How can subjectivity and personal ideologies, then, be discerned from this archival material? Thinking about Zora Neale Hurston’s experiences with resistance in her ethnographic research, and Darlene Clark Hine’s culture of dissemblance, black women’s intentional practice of hiding private feelings from public exposure, my challenge was to look at young people’s answers as possible gaming or performance, or both, while also analyzing the ways that the construction of those answers gestured toward ideology and self-knowledge.\textsuperscript{61} No doubt individuals did not share indiscriminately or arbitrarily, and their answers were certainly constrained by the questions they were asked.

These interviews were produced at the same moment that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was conducting interviews with for-
merly enslaved people, but they differ significantly in both process and content from the WPA narratives. While the WPA narratives have been a source of contention for historians, in terms of accuracy and ethics, for Frazier’s interview subjects less time had passed between the experiences about which individuals were being asked, and, maybe more importantly, researchers who conducted many of the interviews with young people were mostly young African Americans themselves, albeit from a different socioeconomic background than their subjects. Their age and racial identities may have allowed for the development of some level of trust or comfort in the process. Furthermore, interviews generally were conducted over the course of one or two years and many interviewers had previous relationships with some of the young people, so that time and familiarity may also help to make the sources more reliable for accessing interviewees’ interiority.

While interviewers asked questions that often sought to reinscribe tropes about black working-class communities—ones that classified particular cultural productions as raced, gendered, and classed—sometimes subjects provided answers that reinforced these and other times they did not. Sometimes they answered a question they had not even been asked and took the opportunity to tell stories of themselves and their histories. Other times, they discussed ideas that interviewers were not expecting and which were not ultimately used in the official publications or reports. My eye became trained on these moments of thoughtfulness and introspection, of engagement, of inflection, and of tangents, obfuscation, and deflection.

While the interviews of family and community members were left in transcript form, Frazier and his research assistants literally cut up youth interviews and retyped sections onto large notecards into thematic subject areas, such as “recreation,” “gangs,” “religious participation,” “ interracial interactions.” These notecards were detached from an individual’s other answers, from descriptions of neighborhood and family, detached even from a person’s name, coded so they were anonymous. Some no-
tecards and some transcripts of interviews included the questions asked and responses or reactions by interviewers, while others included merely the answers with a hint of what the questions might have been. I began with this pile and a master list of young people, separated by sex, their addresses, and their “socio economic class,” as determined by Frazier.

In an effort to not reinscribe the artificial categories Frazier created, I pieced together the coded notecards to get a sense of both the fuller interview and the fullness of the person interviewed: the ways in which their answers flowed one to the other; what information they shared unsolicited; questions they may have had for the interviewer; and ways in which trends in their answers tell us something: give us a hint of their ideological frameworks, their core beliefs at that moment. The process included a reassembling of interviews, finding the community and family member interviews with which they matched, and reading them as a collection of a particular family and community. Using census data,
Frazier’s collected data, contemporary maps, and DC newspapers, I crafted narratives that place young people socially, temporally, and spatially within their city, drawing out ideas, philosophies, reactions to Jim Crow, and articulated visions of the future.

A few young people stand out in the archival materials. It is unclear why so much of their interviews remain. But the following chapters are centered around these larger interview sources: Southwest’s seventeen-year-old Myron Ross Jr. and fourteen-year-old Susie Morgan. These young people’s extensive interviews bring into relief the realities of their dynamic inner lives. Specifically, Myron and Susie ably, eloquently at times, articulate complex notions of burgeoning sexuality, gender, and racial identities; political consciousness; and internal contradictions about violence, crime, leisure, and education. All of this stands in stark contrast to the idea that young black urban people were/are not capable developmentally and otherwise of being engaged in cultivating intellectual theorizations about the worlds in which they live, and that specifically black urban youth were politically apathetic to the worlds around them.

*Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC* begins with a look at the politics of black adolescent personality development and focuses on how the archival materials that form the basis for this study came to be. Chapter 1, “A Chronic Patient for the Sociological Clinic,” centers on Howard University’s Sociology Department, the axis out of which came a number of research projects on African Americans in Washington, DC, during the New Negro era. Sponsored by the American Youth Commission (AYC) and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, black sociologists William Henry Jones and E. Franklin Frazier took an interdisciplinary social scientific approach to their research in an effort to understand inter-racial relations and prevent racially motivated violence. They examined poverty, juvenile delinquency, and race relations—issues they saw as the result of black migration to and the growth of the black population in Washington, DC. The chapter situates their research within larger ideological and methodological movements for professionalization in the
burgeoning social sciences of sociology, anthropology, and psychology and psychiatry. The reader may choose to come back to this chapter out of order so as to dive into the rich narratives in the following chapters.

Chapter 2, “Course We Know We Ain't Got No Business There, but That's Why We Go In,” examines the racialized space and spatialized race of the small urban capital as the growing federal presence expanded into predominantly and historically black and poor areas of the city. The turn-of-the-century City Beautiful movement intended to make Washington, DC, both a new imperial capital and an attractive place for tourists and government workers alike. As the Federal Triangle expanded, imposing itself on the historically black and predominantly poor Southwest neighborhood, city planners, over the course of the next forty years, threatened to redevelop these communities, so that displacement was always imminent for many black poor and working families. This chapter examines how African American young people perceived and negotiated the capital city’s multiple geographies of race, class, and gender, reshaping the spatial conditions of their lives. Young people articulated racial identities based in the social and “spatial meanings of power” inherent in the contrast of the symbolism of Washington, DC, and its Jim Crowed realities.62

The second section of the book follows these mostly first-generation urban teens as they grapple with the new economic, social, and political realities of the District. Because of the roles that young people have been assigned in the so-called pathological urban black family, the third chapter, “I Would Carry a Sign,” spotlights young people’s complicated political ideas and identities, specifically how they understood and negotiated Jim Crow’s political manifestations in their daily lives, as well as their positions on local and national social justice campaigns. Next, chapter 4, “Right Tight, Right Unruly,” amplifies young people's voices as they articulate imaginings for their futures and experiences with their sexual, racial, and gender identities in formation. It brings into relief their complex notions of leisure, recreation, and “fun.” For some, their free time included individual, sexual, and gang violence, even as these
same young people were alternately involved in supervised and sanctioned recreational sports and hobbies.

Taken together, *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC*’s sources, methodology, and narratives speak out beyond W. E. B. Du Bois’s “veil,” the barrier to full engagement, with the structures of white supremacy at its heart. Poor and working-class young black people frequently show up in social science as statistics: nameless, faceless, and voiceless, rendered only in the aggregate as an urban monolith. *Coming of Age in Jim Crow DC* removes often-invisible ordinary black young people from their sociological frames, a lens through which they were (and continue to be) viewed as pathological and deviant, and places them instead within their own contexts. This project begins at the mundane, the sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, always complex and messy quotidian experiences and thoughts, centering the articulations of average black young people who were migrants to or long-term residents of the physically and symbolically changing nation’s capital during hard economic times.

The young people within these pages were not members of DC’s black aristocracy. Yet they too were DC New Negroes, part of a movement of artists, activists, and intellectuals. They cultivated and mobilized analytic philosophies, and articulated experiences with urban modernity that become audible through the very discourse of social science. Young people spoke critically and with mastery about the incongruent juxtapositions of Washington, DC, invoking history and practicing a politics of mobility, claiming their right to the city and reterritorializing spaces. In contrast to the ways they were portrayed, we come to understand that young black poor and working-class people had complex social and intellectual lives in which they conceptualized for themselves and made sense of family, work, play, desire and sexuality, racial segregation, violence and criminality, respectable behavior, community responsibilities, and the possibilities for the future, especially important in the contested spaces of Washington, DC. For many of these young people, the larger racial and cultural renaissance and early political and civil rights cam-
paige campaigns were sometimes mere backdrops to their already sufficiently full and necessarily dynamic inner, everyday lives.

Finally, I have kept all the names of the young people interviewed intact. I hope that descendants of the folks that appear in these narratives will find pride in their ancestors and be as inspired hearing these voices as I was when I happened upon them in the belly of Howard’s Founders Library.