

*Finding Otira:
On the Geopolitics of Black Celebrity*

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Mr. Frederick J. Loudin, who was manager of the first company of Fisk Jubilee Singers to visit Australia, died at his home at Ravenna, Ohio, U.S.A., on November 23. The company was organized in 1882 by Mr. Loudin, who was really the proprietor of the troupe, and realized a fortune. He built a splendid house at Ravenna, which he named Otira, after the famous gorge in New Zealand.

—*Auckland Star*, 6 January 1905

THE HOUSE THEY called Otira took eighteen months to build, many more to imagine. As much an idea as a physical structure, its meanings were always multiple. Built from global capital, it often served as a domestic refuge. Haunted by private pasts, it was simultaneously a mass promotion. Physically, it took shape in Ravenna, Ohio, the childhood home of one of its owners. But it also expressed freedom from local constraints, the transcendence of historical limits. As reporters often noted, New Zealand's Otira Gorge (the house's distant namesake) was just about as far from northern Ohio as one could possibly travel: the other side of the world.

It was mid-January 1889, when the house's future owners passed through Otira Gorge. In all likelihood, they were among the very first Americans to see this remarkable landscape, best known today as the high alpine setting for Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Writing back to their closest friends, they described the view from Arthur's Pass, one of the highest points in the South Pacific:

Here we see giant fuchsia trees growing in great profusion. The trunks and oftentimes the whole of a tree are coated with moss and hung with ferns. . . . The Saddle of Arthur's Pass is passed and down we plunge into the famous Otira Gorge. Nothing I could



1. The house they called “Otira,” Ravenna, Ohio, 2012.

tell you would give you even a faint idea of what the sight is. Would that I had the pen of a Ruskin and then you might get a faint idea of the grandeur of this drive.

Surviving traces of this encounter are mostly hidden now, a few short miles from the Ohio Turnpike. What you see from the curb can seem ordinary: a large, white house, in Queen Anne style, on a quiet, tree-lined street (fig. 1). Drive in any direction and you will find the stuff of rust-belt sprawl: Akron and Youngstown, fast-food chains and dollar stores. The house’s elegant gables hint at a very different past, yet there are no monuments to mark its significance, no tour guides



2. The Otira foyer, ca. 1890s.

to tell its story. Like many of the surrounding properties, this fin-de-siècle showpiece is now divided into apartments, part of a Section 8 housing program serving the county's poorest tenants.

Inch a bit closer, though, and you will notice additional details: the fancy glasswork in the vestibule, the lavish staircase inside the foyer, both of which still survive (fig. 2). What these details begin to conjure is a very different historical conjuncture, a moment when reporters could describe Otira as "one of the most famous homes in the United States." Part of what sparked their curiosity was the unusual building materials: the Australian kauri in the doors; the New Zealand honeysuckle in the wainscoting; the Burmese teak in some of the fixtures. Otira's creators collected these woods and shipped them back at great expense. And in 1890, following sixteen years of touring, they returned to fill their rising memory palace. Gracing the original



3 & 4. (left) Frederick J. Loudin and (right) Harriet Johnson Loudin, ca. 1880s.

foyer was a grandfather clock from Rangoon and elaborate tapestries from Calcutta. On a table inside the parlor was a Maori club of nephrite jade.

The couple behind these choices is mostly forgotten now: global celebrities from another time. Best known was Frederick Loudin, a virtuoso concert singer. In the decade preceding this portrait (fig. 3), he had given recitals for US presidents, dined with Kaiser Wilhelm, performed at the Taj Mahal. His wife, Harriet Johnson Loudin (fig. 4), possessed a remarkable story too. Before managing her husband's singing companies, she had collaborated with Frederick Douglass and taught at one of the first African American colleges. In 1869, she was the only woman of color at the National Convention of Colored Men.

By the time the Loudins retired here, they had covered more foreign territory than any other performers in US history. In Australia and New Zealand alone, they were profiled dozens of times, in

virtually every existing newspaper. Part of what made them so compelling was their seeming distance from US strictures. In an age of circumscribed black mobility, the Loudins appeared to be here, there, and everywhere. In an era of brutal segregation, they seemed the very antithesis of Jim Crow's victims: rich and genteel, world renowned and self-determining. To many contemporary observers, the vast scope of the Loudins' fame seemed almost mythic in proportion. An early press agent described them as a dazzling "Negro company" that had captured "the Golden Fleece."

Far less clear is how an African American couple from rural Ohio achieved such levels of global celebrity. Should we read their far-flung story as a curious exception to Jim Crow? Or was this, in fact, the culmination of something older, a much longer historical pattern we have somehow missed in its broader contours? Savvy impresarios that they were, the Loudins liked to frame their foreign triumphs with claims of singularity. They described themselves as the "first Negro company" to make a "six-year tour around the world," the "only jubilee singers" personally endorsed by Queen Victoria. Here, too, however, the claims cry out for additional context. How, one wants to know, did the very idea of global touring come to look like an effective politics—a means of circumventing Jim Crow? Were there other seminal figures who had followed a similar set of routes?



Frederick J. Loudin (1836–1904) was born just east of Ravenna, on a family farm in Charlestown Township. The son of first-generation free people, he grew up prosperous but isolated, precocious but frustrated. First incorporated during the 1790s, this section of northern Ohio (the old "Connecticut Western Reserve") was widely known as antislavery country, a refuge of higher principles with abundant parcels of open land. It was just these promises, in fact, that had drawn his parents westward: a six-week journey, by ox train, from their previous home in Hinesburg, Vermont.

What the Loudins soon discovered, however, was far more complicated. As their farm began to prosper, they sent young "Fred" to

school. But there he provoked a racial backlash by outperforming his white classmates. A few years later, he applied to a nearby college (what eventually became Hiram College) to which his father had given money. But there, too, he felt the limits of local tolerance. “Colored students,” he was “coolly informed,” would “not be received.” And so it went through much of the 1850s. After his apprenticeship with an abolitionist printer, no firm would take him on. Although he was gifted with an extraordinary singing voice, no local choir would accept his membership.

By the start of the Civil War, Loudin was plotting his escape. Step one was Pittsburgh, the closest major city with a large black population. This community opened up paying jobs beyond the farm, creative outlets for his music, and broader bonds of sociability. It was in Pittsburgh, for example, where he met Harriet Cassell Johnson (1847–1907), one of the era’s most accomplished women of color. During the early 1860s, “Hattie” (as her family called her) had graduated at the top of her class from Philadelphia’s Institute for Colored Youth. From there, it was on to full-time teaching and an offer from Henry Highland Garnett: would she be interested in running the Women’s Department at Pittsburgh’s Avery College (one of the first created for African Americans)? In Pittsburgh, as well, Frederick found his way into organized politics. Newspapers from these years place him in a variety of intriguing contexts: a member of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League; part of the black activist networks connected to Martin Delany and Octavius Catto; a diligent fundraiser for Southern freedmen.

It was in Europe, however, where Loudin first began to command a broader stage. The crucial moment came in 1874, when he was invited to join the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Founded three years earlier by the American Missionary Association (AMA), this all-black touring company was originally composed of former slaves. Today, they are often remembered as one of Reconstruction’s signal institutions. Aesthetically, they were the principal means by which black religious song moved from cotton fields into concert halls (a process often described as the birth of the modern spiritual). But they were

also a powerful engine for black philanthropy, the peripatetic enterprise that paid for much of Fisk University.

As star basso for the second company of Jubilee Singers (1874–78), Loudin was at once central to these developments and a force for further changes. Within months, he became the company's leading spokesman, often delivering lectures from the stage—first on their US tours and then across much of Europe. In the process, he also became their most radical political voice, a figure unafraid to use his burgeoning fame to decry US racism. In many instances, these commentaries took the form of searing editorials. In one report from Glasgow, he railed against the segregation of Philadelphia cemeteries. In another from Dublin, he wrote about discrimination on commercial steamships. In yet another from Manchester, he denounced the complacency of white reformers who had allowed Avery College to fail.

Loudin's goal was to exert pressure from afar, to use his foreign platform as an additional front in an expanding struggle. In so doing, he recapitulated an earlier process: namely, the strategic uses of British reform networks by the first waves of black abolitionists. In this case, however, the publics were considerably larger, extending across a much wider range of venues: concert halls as well as churches, mainstream theaters as well as missions. So, too, with the far-flung cycles of reprinting, which now reverberated between African American newspapers, British parlor magazines, and leading dailies across the British Empire. Intensely conscious of this circulation, the Loudins (and I use the plural here because Harriet typically coauthored Frederick's commentaries) sought to denaturalize Jim Crow, to lay bare the massive differences across local color lines. An early installment from Guilford, England provides a powerful example of their approach:

Let me tell you what this freedom of which I speak is. . . . Think what it would be to be able to go to any hotel, restaurant, or confectionary, or any place of amusement, and not simply to be able to make your way to the point of some law, but to be absolutely welcomed—no better, but just the same as any other

man who pays his money—and then not to be stuck away in some hole or corner, lest some of the other customers see you, and be indignant because a “nigger’s” money pays for just the same as his does....Just imagine what it is to be away from home at mealtime, and without the slightest hesitation, walk into any restaurant or eating house, and get what you want, without anyone to make you feel uncomfortable....Perhaps some will say that this is because we are “Jubilee Singers.” If so, to such I would reply, I was a Jubilee Singer in America before I was in England.

In 1878, growing tensions within the company led the AMA to curtail the entire enterprise. In certain respects, this conflict, which played out as a racially divided battle over salaries and working conditions, mirrored the central fault lines of Reconstruction. But with one crucial difference: in the case of the Jubilee Singers, the black workers at its center had the benefit of enormous foreign demand. Paradoxically, it was only *because* of the company’s foreign success that AMA officials concluded the project was “untenable,” that they had no choice but to abandon this “missionary enterprise.” In some cases, the singers refused to perform unless their schedules were eased. In another intriguing case, they hired English lawyers to contest the AMA contracts. When management threatened punishments, the singers came back with offers from foreign agents.

Significantly, Loudin was the driving force behind this growing militancy. In February 1876, he led the company’s first major labor action, detailing the effects of relentless touring in a letter to E. M. Cravath, the Fisk University president:

Three years [of touring] killed Mr. Holmes and but for a miracle would have killed Mr. White. Three years broke down Dickerson, but *rest* restored his voice....Ella [Shepherd] is quite gone. Jennie Jackson is failing....Still you seem determined to drive ahead as if we were superhuman, and in fact, as we are killed you put in a new one. I know you will say this is a hard saying but I feel that the facts will verify what I have said....I owe a duty to myself which forbids that I should break myself down in two or

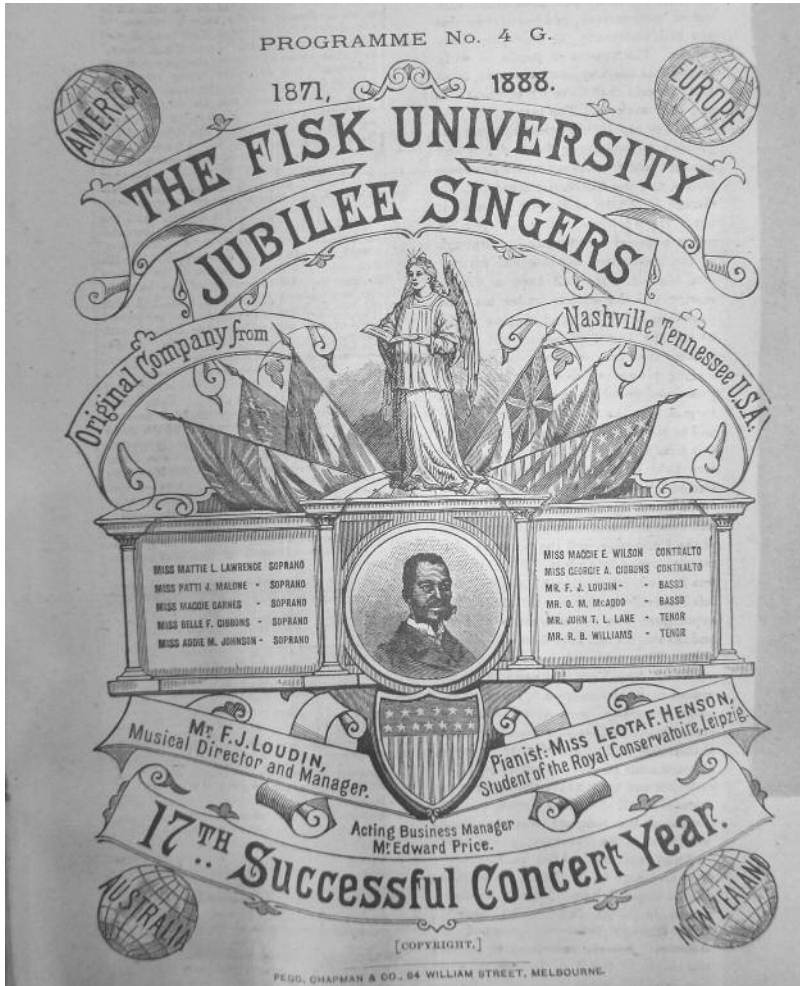
three years when with a *reasonable* amount of work I might last much longer.

In response, Cravath offered a two-month “sabbatical” in Switzerland. But the peace was short-lived. When new disputes surfaced a year later, the AMA concluded enough was enough and shut the company down.

For the Loudins, however, this escalating “crisis” became an opportunity to “re-organize” the entire project (as they put it in an 1892 “Supplement” to their widely circulated travelogue, *The Jubilee Singers and their Songs*). To do so, Frederick cut remaining ties with the AMA, took control of the company’s finances, and installed Harriet as the principal manager. Over the next twenty years, the Loudins operated the Jubilee Singers as a black-owned, joint stock company—still dedicated to civil rights, but now free from white control. They also reconceived the basic marketing plan. For much of the previous decade, the AMA had built this mass phenomenon as an evangelical crusade. Whenever possible, they focused on churches over concert halls, collection plates over ticket sales. At the center of the early campaign were very specific moral appeals: the education of Southern freedmen, new classrooms back at Fisk.

The larger point, in fact, was to reject the vulgar stuff of marketing in favor of Christian acts of charity. The AMA promotions were austere, colorless, and depersonalized. There were no faces on the programs; no hint of personal profits; no signs, really, of the larger apparatus of commercial celebrity. The Loudins, by contrast, developed a more recognizably capitalist grammar. The cover art on their programs, for instance, positioned Frederick at the center of four interconnected markets: the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand (fig. 5). The couple also began to frame Frederick’s public persona in explicitly Barnumesque terms—a figure garishly draped in patriotic symbols, an artist-cum-showman presiding over a burgeoning corporate enterprise.

This “re-organization” process, however, cut quite a bit deeper than words and images. In dozens of foreign markets they sold



5. Jubilee Singers program cover, 1888.

memoirs and talked up editors, signed autographs and sat for portraits. They also engaged in obvious publicity stunts. They gave a concert at the Taj Mahal after notifying press agents. They journeyed to Maori villages and performed with reporters in tow. They played tennis with an Australian governor and commissioned portraits to be

sold on tour. And to a remarkable extent, they succeeded. In Liverpool, they performed for seven thousand fans (part of a growing wave of “monster” concerts). In Yokohama, they provoked the need for special excursion trains to manage the crowds coming from Tokyo. In Melbourne and Sydney, they commanded the cities’ largest concert halls for more than one hundred and forty consecutive nights (a national record in Australia). By 1890, they had built one of the era’s most profitable black businesses, an enterprise to rival Barnum’s. Adjusting for currency exchanges (and more than a century of inflation), the total profits seem staggering in retrospect: close to a million US dollars.



To make sense of these numbers, it is helpful to read them against other sources. Consider, for example, the Loudin family scrapbooks. Collectively, these massive volumes encompass more than thirty years of touring. For the most part, they proceed chronologically, week by week and city by city. At first glance, the sheer volume can seem daunting, even redundant—an endless cycle of journalistic platitudes. Again and again, we hear of the company’s “tasteful demeanor;” their “fashionable audiences” and “sold-out shows;” the “strange and plaintive melodies” that win over city after city. Read on, however, and additional patterns begin to emerge.

Above all, one notices the enormous physical labor involved in touring. Indeed, what the volumes show most clearly is a series of daunting numbers: upwards of twenty different countries; five thousand separate tour stops; eight thousand discrete performances; and more than a million published words. From one of the clippings inside, we know the Loudins saw these numbers as both a point of managerial pride and a source of growing concern for the well-being of their workers. One of their first reforms, in fact, was to restrict the company’s schedule to no more than five concerts per week. Multiply this over thirty years, however, and the story becomes more complex. By its very nature, the Loudins’ way of working involved grueling forms of labor, enormous feats of international travel—feats

designed to shift the very terms by which they were seen and heard, publicized and paid.

But what were those terms exactly? To describe this work as little more than concerts is to miss many important details. More accurately the Loudins offered a multilayered triptych: one part history lesson; one part recital; one part political appeal. Performances typically began with a speech by Frederick on the history of US slavery—to explain the music’s vernacular origins. Next, the company offered up to a dozen “sacred songs” such as “Roll Jordan Roll,” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” and “Go Down, Moses,” but here re-presented, strategically, with elegant diction, fine clothing, and elaborate four-part harmonies. In so doing, they also re-presented themselves: virtuoso black artists as well as objects of foreign sympathy. Before turning to encores, Loudin thanked his audiences and explained the unfinished work of Reconstruction, often detailing specific points of domestic conflict (such as the 1875 Civil Rights Act). Finally, and most pointedly, he contrasted their foreign treatment with entrenched hostilities back at home.

What the Loudins performed, in other words, was something more than reconstructed folk songs. In many respects, they were performing Reconstruction itself: showcasing its broader stakes, framing its ongoing struggles. To do so, they routinely engaged in public flattery, positioning both their audiences and themselves on the forward edge of history. This, too, was strategic. From their own writings, we know the company’s experiences with foreign color lines were always complex and sometimes patronizing. In the streets of Great Britain, they were approached by curious bystanders who wondered if they were capable of speaking English. In private letters, they confided that many Australians were only marginally less bigoted than the white folks back in Ohio. Yet, in dozens of published interviews they made virtually the opposite point, suggesting that in more than a decade of foreign touring, they had “never” experienced anything comparable to the brutality of US racism; that it was “only in the boasted land of liberty” that “good Christians....skin men alive in sight of their wailing children.”

This strategy regularly opened additional doors. In many cases, local shows of admiration (an aristocratic invitation in England, a mayoral endorsement in Australia) became the stuff of future promotions. Most of their programs, in fact, explicitly chronicled the foreign publicity: each new endorsement pointed to the next major tour stop; each glowing review validated previous testimonials. These testimonials, moreover, typically followed certain routes. Launched from the centers of British Empire, they extended eastward, forming circuits of commercial cross-talk. Fame accrued in London led to offers across Europe. Performances for European royals produced demand across the Pacific. Even here, however, the Loudins were just warming up. After exhausting the South Pacific, they moved northward to Ceylon, India, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, and the major Asian treaty ports. Collectively, the routes suggest an intriguing pattern: a longer arc of African American mobility pursued (mostly) across the British Empire.

In many respects, this arc was the product of structural necessity. With limited access to domestic capital, the Loudins did what managers typically do. They followed demand to other markets. They looked to distant publics where the jubilee brand was a known commodity. They built their tours through foreign outposts that offered the key components of mass promotion: telegraphs, hotels, and railroads; theater syndicates and printing presses (and in the colonial contexts, this generally included English-language newspapers and assistance from local officials). It is hardly surprising, in other words, that the tours moved so frequently through British colonies. Nor was it coincidental that the Loudins became unabashed Anglophiles. Like many black writers and activists before them, the Loudins' global fame was mostly paid for with British pounds, publicized by British media, and circulated through British infrastructure. To admit as much is not to romanticize these contexts so much as to see them as the Loudins did: part of a larger geopolitical strategy in which there was no simple refuge from US racism.

But what did this strategy ultimately yield? On this score, it is useful to consider a series of remarkable photographs taken inside



6. The Otira library with writing desk, ca. 1890s.

Otira during the late 1890s. Most vividly, perhaps, these images of elegant furniture, fancy carpet, and extensive collections of bric-a-brac suggest the spoils of their foreign celebrity. They also help us to see the longer trajectories of global capital. In one shot, we can see the fine mahogany desk from which the Loudins corresponded with Frederick Douglass (fig. 6). It was here, as well, that they composed their 1892 travelogue; launched the first black-controlled US corporation (the F. J. Loudin Shoe Company); and sent out checks to dozens of causes, from the general operating funds at Fisk (to which they contributed for the rest of their lives) to more overtly political projects like a national press campaign to criticize Boer racial policies in South Africa.

In many instances, these projects are better remembered than the tours that made them possible. It was the Loudins, for example, who provided the seed money for a landmark pamphlet to counter

black exclusion at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (and more typically associated today with the Loudins' principal collaborators, Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells), this project began with an open letter to the Detroit *Plaindealer*, a leading black newspaper of the 1890s. The letter is worth quoting at length because it captures both the Loudins' genius for mass promotion and the expanding scope of their politics, the ways they now imagined the "eyes of the world" as a means of addressing domestic wrongs:

We have been boycotted by the world's fair in that no Negro is permitted to fill any position of honor or profit...and now to add to the insult the management with that true hypocritical suavity so common with them...asks us to state when we apply for accommodation that we belong to the proscribed race, in order that, in accord with Jim Crow legislation of southern states, we may be confined to the "nigger quarters"...Is it not right that we take some steps to right these wrongs? With the recent barbarity of Paris, Texas [site of a notoriously gruesome lynching] fresh before us...if we are not stirred to action, then we show ourselves unworthy of the position we seek among the races of the earth....

Let us then compile the accounts of the lynchings, the shootings, the flogging alive, the burnings at the stake, and all the kindred barbarous acts and print them in book and pamphlet form for free distribution at the world's fair... and lay the whole question in all its hideousness bare before the world.

Yours for justice and right,
F. J. Loudin

It was around this time, as well, that the Loudins partnered with Albion Tourgée, the era's leading civil rights lawyer, to mount an antilynching campaign through black churches. And in 1900, they sat side by side with W. E. B. Du Bois, part of a small group of international delegates for the first Pan-African Conference in London. Few letters survive from these final years, so one can only speculate about



7. Portrait of Leota Henson Turner with Frederick J. Loudin, Belfast, Ireland, ca. late 1890s.

the Loudins' evolving politics. Still, the very fact of their presence in this seminal context for "black internationalism" (as well as Frederick's election to the six-man "executive committee") suggests a turn to new ideas. For much of the previous quarter century, the Loudins had conceived the world instrumentally—as a source of capital, publicity, and contacts—but always in the service of domestic causes. By 1900, however, they seem to have been moving toward a broader political vision, one which understood the color line pluralistically (or as Du Bois would put it, as the "relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America, and the islands of the sea") and sought to create new forms of collaboration with other black activists working the same imperial networks.

Dig deeper into the photographs and the stakes become more personal. In a shot from inside the library we can see a portrait of Frederick's mother, Sybil, on whose land Otira was built. In another upstairs, we find a portrait of Leota Henson, the Loudins' beloved niece. Born in Ravenna at the dawn of Reconstruction, Leota studied classical music in Leipzig (1882–84) and played piano for the Loudins' tours (fig. 7). A few years later, she married Alexander ("Bud") Turner, a teenage border at Otira who had journeyed north from rural Georgia. With the Loudins' support, Turner became the first African American to graduate from the University of Michigan Medical School (in 1912). Soon thereafter, he moved to Detroit and became the founding chief of surgery for Dunbar Memorial Hospital. Today, these interconnected milestones remain scattered across multiple local histories (most notably, the history of Black Detroit). Harder to see at this localized level are the thousands of global performances that made all of the milestones possible: Leota's training in Leipzig; Alexander's tuition at Michigan; the houses in Ravenna, Ann Arbor, and Detroit; the startup money for one of the first African American hospitals.



To see how the Loudins understood these interconnections, it is useful to consider what is arguably the most intriguing single passage

in the Loudins' massive archive. This passage emerges quite dramatically at the end of their published 1892 travelogue. Prior to this juncture, the story unfolds somewhat mechanically, as a record of global logistics. They detail routes, venues, and ticket sales. They note the exotic places where the company stayed, the famous people they met. They record the "power" of their "sacred music" on the foreign publics who "flocked" to hear it. And then, in the story's final paragraphs, they shift to a more explicitly political voice, arguing that in "such things" (songs, routes, tours, ticket sales) we might imagine novel ways of "solving" the "much-debated 'Negro Problem.'"

Run a few searches in Google Books, and you will find the phrase "Negro Problem" in hundreds of contemporary texts—in middle-class parlor magazines like *Harper's* and *Popular Science*; or in the journals, pamphlets, and conference proceedings of all manner of white reform groups. Push back to the 1850s, and one can trace its British roots, the ways it echoed (perhaps even emerged from) the famous "Negro Question" debates between Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill.

Over the next few decades, additional inflections surfaced, as well, in the works of numerous black leaders. One finds the phrase, for instance, in the fiery speech Douglass delivered at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Here it worked ironically, part of his larger argument about the glaring gaps between US ideals and actual practices: "Men talk of the Negro problem. There is no Negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their Constitution."

Other prominent writers invoked the phrase more pragmatically, part of a post-Reconstruction politics designed to solve the so-called problem. In Booker T. Washington's 1903 anthology, *The Negro Problem*, the phrase serves as a kind of framing device. The volume begins with Washington's "Industrial Education for the Negro" and its familiar arguments about the primacy of work: "It has been necessary for the Negro to learn the difference between being worked and working—to learn that being worked meant

degradation, while working means civilization; that all forms of labor are honorable, and all forms of idleness disgraceful. It has been necessary for him to learn that all races that have got upon their feet have done so largely by laying an economic foundation." Next came W. E. B. Du Bois's essay, "The Talented Tenth," in which he cast the "problem" rather differently. Du Bois's closing lines served as a direct rebuttal to Washington, arguing that "work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work—it must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people."

The very same year, Du Bois used the phrase again (nine more times) in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In his opening paragraphs, it became a kind of leitmotif: the "problem of the color line;" "the problem of the twentieth century;" "the test of our spiritual strivings." Most powerfully, though, it served as a subtext for Du Bois's best-known formulation: the "problem of double consciousness." One might argue, in fact, that Du Bois's entire text was constructed in and around this rhetorical figure, the existential question powerfully posed at the outset: "how does it feel to *be* a problem?"

Thinking across these familiar contexts, one might describe the Loudins' solution as a distillation of the era's tactics. Like Douglass, they spent much of the period writing and speaking about the circumscribed boundaries of black freedom. Like Washington, they envisioned their work as fully consistent with a politics of self-determination (one predicated on the redistribution of capital). And like Du Bois, they imagined themselves as "missionaries of culture," self-defined race leaders transforming the black image.

To grasp the full complexity of the Loudins' approach, however, it is useful to return to their 1892 travelogue. Consider the opening paragraph, where they explained the broader stakes:

With this chapter begins a new epoch in the "Story of the Jubilee Singers." Hitherto, the triumphs and wonderful achievements [of the company] had been accomplished under the

direction and management of the so-called dominant race, but in September 1882, a Negro stepped to the helm and henceforth directs the now famous Jubilee Craft. He fully realized that it was no easy task to come out of the ranks, where he had been on equal terms with the rest of the company, that it would greatly damage the cause of the Negro, if, under the management of one of the race, there should be in any respect a failure, and how thousands, who have no confidence in the leadership of the Black Man, would say significantly, "I told you so," or "I knew it." Many were the predictions that came to our ears of the utter failure of the company under the new management.

Part of what makes this statement intriguing is its capacious sense of "Jubilee Craft," its insistence that commerce and culture, mobility and politics, were intertwined components of the "cause." Read on, however, and it quickly becomes clear the entire memoir was built this way. A powerful narrative of black accomplishment, it was simultaneously a piece of capital—a marketing tool sold in dozens of foreign cities. The title page made this explicit, framing the Loudins' story in relation to a much longer global commodity chain (a "new edition," compiled and "expanded" from "one hundred and thirty" previous printings). And yet, the larger point of such numbers was never simply to document foreign sales. More ambitiously, it was about showcasing foreign differences. The Loudins chronicled their "warm reception" by British aristocrats, but always in contrast with US policymakers. They detailed their "pleasant stays" in British homes, their freedom of movement through European streets, their many friendships across the Pacific—but always by way of juxtaposition, as a means of denaturalizing US color lines.

Both structurally and rhetorically, that is to say, the Loudins conceived their larger project as a global war of position. What they sought to achieve was not simply an escape from Jim Crow, but a means of circumventing its power. What they hoped to model was not just affluence and freedom of movement, but a means of exerting global pressure. And in this last respect, especially, it is easy to see the Loudins' solution as a kind of pathway to the twentieth century,

to the better-known black internationalism of figures like Marcus Garvey, Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, and Claude McKay.



Yet the core ideas behind *Otira* were, in fact, many decades old. Consider, for example, an earlier cast of characters who knew these strategies all too well: the poet Phillis Wheatley; the missionary John Marrant; the memoirist Olaudah Equiano; the novelist William Wells Brown. In current scholarship, these writers typically figure as starting points in African American cultural history: the first book of published poetry; the first widely circulated religious journal; the first commercial autobiography; the first novel between covers. Often they are grouped together, exemplars of a pivotal period (roughly 1770 to 1850) in which the modern traditions first took root. Less frequently detailed is the material history of this rooting. In all of these famous cases, the process of becoming a commercial writer required the presses of British publishers, the publicity of British newspapers, and the support of British patrons. In every case, they lived first in North America (as slaves or servants), but then traveled to Britain—some for a few months, others for the rest of their lives. And Britain was just the beginning, a launching point for multiple European editions and much broader visibility.

The patterns around abolitionism are strikingly similar. By one careful estimate (*Black Abolitionist Papers*, volume I, 1985), more than eighty African American activists spent time on British soil between 1830 and 1865. But even this probably misses the full extent. For one thing, there were dozens of undocumented cases in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. For another, this figure was tallied before the rise of electronic databases (and thus will almost certainly be revised upward). For our purposes, though, the more intriguing question is what this circulation enabled. In the well-known case of Frederick Douglass, the answers are clear. His transatlantic travels produced nine new editions of his famous memoir (first in Dublin and then across Europe)—as well as new allies, lucrative tours, additional portraits, and mountains of commercial

press. These multiple forms of capital, in turn, allowed Douglass to purchase his legal freedom, launch his own newspaper (*The North Star*), and establish greater autonomy from the Garrisonians.

In other instances, the stories of strategic exile unfolded with somewhat less fanfare, but along parallel tracks. For Samuel Ringold Ward, J. W. C. Pennington, and William and Ellen Craft, British publication and speaking tours introduced their narratives to the Anglophone world. For William Wells Brown, Frank Webb, Harriet Jacobs, and Martin Delany, European markets provided springboards to new editions, broader fame, and additional projects (such as travel writing or the exhibition of panorama paintings). In recent decades, the “transnational turn” in African American literary studies has made the fruits of this process familiar. It is well established now, for example, that landmark texts such as Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), and Delany’s *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (1861) were all written and/or published in Europe. For the most part, though, we have treated these stories within the career tracks of individual authors. And we have often framed the projects narrowly, as literary breakthroughs rather than a much broader black geopolitics that cut across multiple eras, locations, and media.

Stage performers such as the musician Francis Johnson, the actor Ira Aldridge, the dancer William Henry Lane, and the concert singer Elizabeth Greenfield swell the ranks of black celebrities in exile still further. For Johnson, this process involved publishing more than three hundred original compositions and leading transatlantic tours as early as 1837–38. Aldridge became the world’s most widely seen actor between 1824 and 1867, covering hundreds of European cities. Lane was the highest paid dancer in British black-face, a position that allowed him to fire his white handlers in 1850. Greenfield gave standing room concerts across Britain in 1853–54, a moment when few women (white or black) had access to commercial stages. Much like the Loudins’ tours, these stories have typically been remembered as exceptional: a series of seminal black artists, breaking barriers across the nineteenth century.

The key point, however, may be collective: namely, that all of these seminal figures moved strategically through foreign markets. In every case, they carefully plotted their circulation; traded on their racial novelty; sought to transform the very terms by which they were seen, heard, and compensated. Most important, perhaps, they conceived these early culture industries as multisectoral (and interconnected). When US gatekeepers blocked their access to domestic markets, they turned to more welcoming foreign publics. And when they achieved celebrity abroad, they used it as fungible capital (in many cases, with the specific goal of moving it across borders). What the larger patterns suggest, in fact, is a peripatetic response to US racial strictures that was about as old as emancipation. From the African American boxers Bill Richmond and Tom Molineaux, who competed for bare-knuckle titles in Regency-era Britain, to the late Victorian singers Sissieretta Jones and Orpheus McAdoo, who moved through South America, the Caribbean, and South Africa, virtually every black celebrity of the nineteenth century was global by necessity. Include athletes such as the cyclist Major Taylor and jockey Jimmy Winkfield; or activists and writers such as Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and W. E. B. Du Bois; or artists such as Robert Douglass, Jr., Edmonia Lewis, and Henry Ossawa Tanner and the patterns look much the same.

The sheer numbers here suggest the need for new creation stories: a way to see the global forest for the seminal trees. By my own count, more than five hundred black artists, writers, and activists pursued some version of this transnational strategy between 1770 and 1920. The broader implications are intriguing. For some time now, we have described the turn to the global export of African American culture as the culmination of longer struggles, as something that only became possible in the wake of Reconstruction (or if the focus is on black modernism, only after World War I). But what if we had the story backward? What if the first waves of global celebrity actually preceded domestic acceptance? What if strategic black mobility was in fact *foundational* to the struggle?

One implication would be the need to think more like the

Loudins, to imagine a war of position that was always looking outward. My point here is not simply that artists such as Wheatley, Aldridge, and the Fisk Singers traveled much the same Black Atlantic as activists such as Equiano, Douglass, and Wells. Or that the context of their seminal projects addressed shared concerns such as the slave trade, the Haitian Revolution, and antilynching campaigns. Or that the public discourses surrounding one figure routinely impacted the demand and reception for others. It is also that these careers were increasingly built upon the same global infrastructures, the same strategic questions about how to hail foreign publics, move messages across borders, and leverage markets that were no longer controllable by any single regime.

The contours of this global process shifted significantly over time. For Wheatley, still enslaved at the moment of her publishing breakthrough in 1773, the “world” meant, above all, London printers. For Aldridge, performing Shakespeare through the 1860s, the world extended about as far as Constantinople and the port cities of the Black Sea. By 1900, the circulation of African American art and ideas extended across six continents, but even then there were notable limits. For the Loudins, the routes defined by their “round-the-world” tours were above all maps of British Empire: Egypt, India, Burma, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand.

These maps provoke related questions. Why was Britain the crucial launching point? Why not France (for example), which by the 1920s was the epicenter of a whole range of black internationalist projects? The key reason was Britain’s reputation as the freest Western market (at least for people of African descent), which derived from the landmark *Somerset* case of 1772. *Somerset* stated that no person could be forcibly removed from British soil and sent back to slavery in the colonies, a decision subsequently bolstered by a series of major precedents: Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation of 1775, which promised freedom in exchange for black military service during the Revolutionary War; the British government’s refusal to extradite runaways from Canada in the wake of the US Fugitive Slave Act of 1793; and, above all, Britain’s Abolition Act of 1833, which made slavery

illegal across most of the wider empire. These developments, in turn, contrasted with Napoleon's reassertion of slavery in the French colonies. For the first waves of African American sojourners abroad, the lessons were all too clear. Through the US Civil War (and arguably longer), the geography of Atlantic freedom pointed decisively toward Britain.

In logistical terms, as well, Britain offered a number of major advantages. For those who traded in words and images (and promotions and contracts), the advantages of Anglophone markets were often decisive. To become visible and raise capital, one needed first to be read, seen, and appreciated. Such considerations, in turn, carried over to the work of touring. Each new booking required letters to distant managers. Each new production required fresh assortments of seductive ads. And then there were the challenges of reaching the desired targets. Paradoxically, for much of this period, it was far easier to gain access to Britain (a context in which US passports were rarely required) than it was to tour within the United States (a process that, for African Americans, often required a dizzying array of passes and free papers to move across state lines).

For those looking to the European continent, there were still more logistical challenges, above all the US government's long-running policy of denying African Americans passports. Domestically, this was part of the emerging, post-emancipation logic of racial caste, another means of casting a putatively free people outside the boundaries of full citizenship. Within Europe, however, the process played out differently. To move from Britain to France (or France to Prussia, or Prussia to Sweden), European travelers of all sorts increasingly required state-sponsored documentation of national identity. This too had effects on black mobility. In a number of famous cases—such as William Wells Brown's 1849 trip from England to France to attend an international peace conference—European allies made special arrangements to secure the necessary documents. More typically, though, and especially after the global expansion of commercial steamship lines, the same structural pressures encouraged black Americans to travel within the British Empire. The Loudins' tours of

the 1880s were a direct response to such pressures: an attempt to combine ease of marketing with ease of travel.

Over the past two decades (and especially in the wake of Paul Gilroy's landmark 1993 book, *The Black Atlantic*), historians have become much more adept at tracking these far-flung stories. Even today, however, we have little sense of the larger whole. Apart from Wheatley, Douglass, and Robeson, many of this history's central figures remain largely forgotten or reduced to caricature—heroic firsts of black history about whom relatively little is actually known. One reason, perhaps, lies in the sheer scale of the geographic circulation. Before electronic search engines, scholars could point to a few playbills in London, a program or two in Moscow, some scrapbooks in Sydney. But to reconstruct the larger story was the work of many lifetimes. The other lingering problem involves our tendency to describe these early maneuvers as one-dimensional forms of exile or refuge, decisive escapes from US racism. Often missing in such formulations are the strategic choices that drove the circulation, managed the commercial fame, and transformed it (as far as possible) into novel forms of black capital.

Consider, for example, one of Wheatley's most important letters from 1773, in which we find her thinking quite self-consciously about problems of transatlantic distribution (and the implications of such problems for her newly won freedom):

I expect my books which are published in London...will be here I believe in 8 to 10 days. I beg the favour that you would honour the enclos'd Proposals, & use your interest with Gentleman & Ladies of your acquaintance to subscribe also, for the more subscribers there are, the more it will be for my advantage as I am to have half the Sale of the Books. This I am the more solicitous for, as I am now on my own footing and whatever I get by this is entirely mine....I must also request that you would desire the Printers in New Haven, not to reprint that Book, as it will be a great hurt to me, preventing any further Benefit that I might receive from the sale of my copies from England.

A similar set of calculations can be found in a November 1858 letter from Aldridge to the editor of the London *Athenaeum*, one of the era's most prominent theatrical journals. In this case, though, the starting point was Russia, the capital was theatrical, and the circuits of production looped back and forth across Europe:

Sir,

The encouraging manner in which you were pleased to notice my late efforts in London enables me to take the liberty of acquainting you with my progress in Russia. After leaving Bohemia I came late to Riga and am now on my way to St. Petersburg where I am engaged to give 12 representations at the Imperial Theatre, receiving for each representation 400 Silver Rubles...with free quarters at the Governmental expense and an Equipage at my disposal during my sojourn in the Imperial city. At the termination of my engagement in Riga, His Excellency the General...made me a magnificent present in silver, the produce of the Ural Mountains, which I hope to have the pleasure of showing you on my return to England.

A slight notice of the foregoing if space will permit, will materially serve and much oblige.

Sir, your obedient servant,
Ira Aldridge

What I believe we can see in these transpositions—first editions into unauthorized reprints, Ural silver into British publicity—are the front lines of an expanding struggle that traversed the nineteenth century. It was a struggle neither restricted to an individual medium, nor limited by gender or genre (although it certainly varied in both respects). It was there in Wheatley's targeting of London printers—as well as her unfulfilled efforts to produce a second volume. It was part of Douglass's efforts to transform his European celebrity into fungible capital—and repurpose it back at home. It drove Lane's attempts to transform commercial blackface by working British markets—but also in his tragic death in a Liverpool workhouse (when his body gave out and he could no longer perform). And it was there in virtually every decision the Loudins made after they left Pittsburgh,

from the specific routes of their far-flung tours to their late involvement in Pan-Africanism.

Above all, though, it was the guiding logic behind the house the Loudins called Otira, a materialization of their global fame now forgotten in the Ohio rustbelt. Part of the reason Otira exists in its current condition as Section 8 housing is that the Loudins' bold strategy had very clear historical limits. Commercial fame around the world could do many things. It could change the lives of those on stage. It could pay for classrooms in Nashville, a hospital in Detroit. It could help to forge new political institutions at a meeting hall in London. But it could not control the intractable power of US color lines.

At the time of their deaths (Frederick in 1904, Harriet in 1907), the racial boundaries were beginning to loosen in certain corners of the US market, giving way to national fads for blues and jazz—the rising tide of black modernism. Yet these developments came too late to save Otira. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, living memory of the Loudins was fading—so much so that they were rarely even mentioned in the new anthologies of “Negro Art.” Little wonder, then, that Otira no longer functions as it was first intended. Neglected and forlorn, it now exists as a distant echo of older achievements, something closer to a ruin.

But it is a ruin that places important demands upon our thinking. What Otira conjures through its very presence is both a link to our global present and a better sense of how we got here. Indeed, if we are to understand the longer historical threads that connect Wheatley's elegies and Aldridge's *Othello*, the rise of modern spirituals and the origins of Pan Africanism—if we are to understand any of this in its proper complexity, we will need to revisit bold solutions once imagined in an Ohio study. We will need to find our way back to Otira.