



Cisco
Bradley

Universal Tonality

The Life
and Music
of William
Parker

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Universal

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and Music
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To my parents

SUSANNA LOUISE (REMPLE) BRADLEY (b. 1946), teacher, and
CHARLES CRANE BRADLEY JR. (b. 1944), pacifist and social worker,
who selected trombone for me to play in sixth grade,
which led me to jazz

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First and foremost, I must thank the subject of this book, William Parker, for opening up his life to me. I first encountered Parker's music in 2006 when I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I purchased a copy of his quartet record, *Sound Unity* (2004), at the Jazz Record Mart in Chicago. Upon first listening to it, I found that it opened up worlds of sound to me, and it sent me on a journey through his monumental work over the decade that followed. I never could have guessed upon first hearing his music that I would have the honor of later writing a book about his life and work. In 2011 I moved to Brooklyn to join the faculty at the Pratt Institute and began attending concerts around the city, first encountering Parker in a duo with tenor saxophonist Charles Gayle at the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center on January 2, 2012. Over the two years that followed, I saw him play in different formats many dozens of times, whenever the opportunity arose. Finally, on the day before Halloween in 2014, I approached Parker after a trio performance with Andrew Barker and Michael Foster at Iglesia de la Santa Cruz Church about an interview for my website, www.jazzrightnow.com. For that interview he talked about music as a healing force, while connecting it to an intricate cosmology of existence in such a way that left me transfixed. I realized then what a profound story Parker had to tell.

Just over a year later, on November 24, 2015, I sent Parker an email stating, "I find your work incredibly inspiring and I have been thinking about writing a longer piece on your life and work. What I was thinking is a biographical account that covers your evolution from your earliest years up to the present work you are doing, highlighting your major periods as an artist. Please let me know if you have any interest in this." Parker, who was on tour, replied later that same day: "This sounds interesting, I am in Europe. But let's stay in touch. I have some ideas." We finally found time to meet

in January 2016, and contrary to my assumption that it would take some time to get off of the ground, he made it clear that he wanted to move forward quickly and suggested weekly meetings “until we are finished.” Over the succeeding three years we conducted twenty-one interviews, and he handed off old boxes of family papers, photos, writings, magazines, press clippings, memorabilia, and other ephemera for me to dig through. Parker’s confidence and trust through this project have been one of the great honors of my life.

There are many people who have helped make this book happen. Parker’s wife, dancer and arts organizer Patricia Nicholson Parker, and their daughter, Miriam Parker, both did extensive interviews that helped me understand Parker as a person, a husband, and a father, and how he had changed over the decades they had known him. Interviews with pianist Matthew Shipp and multi-instrumentalist Cooper-Moore were also essential. Many other people from the community of musicians also took time to do interviews, often extensive, and everyone I spoke to did it not out of obligation but out of a genuine respect for Parker. These people include Steve Swell, Leena Conquest, Andrew Cyrille, Milford Graves, Hamid Drake, Dave Sewelson, Dave Burrell, Jackson Krall, Jason Kao Hwang, Rob Brown, Joshua Abrams, William Hooker, James Brandon Lewis, Luke Stewart, and Steven Joerg.

A number of scholars deserve mention. Foremost among these is Rick Lopez, whose sessionography of Parker’s work was invaluable to this book. It is no understatement to say that this book would have been nigh to impossible to write without him first blazing the trail. His tireless commitment to the intricate details of Parker’s sessions (and those of a number of other musicians) has been monumental and has moved the whole field of study forward. Lisa Y. Henderson is another scholar worthy of great praise for her groundbreaking study of free Black communities in North Carolina, which opened the entire story of Parker’s origins. After a phone call, she graciously sent me a copy of her hard-to-find master’s thesis. In a related matter, thanks are due to Malinda Maynor Lowery and Warren Milteer, who both helped me navigate sources and literature on histories of Native Americans and free people of color in North Carolina. I also wish to thank Jeff Schwartz for supplying me with some obscure Albert Ayler references. Additionally, thanks are due to Ras Moshe Burnett, whose collection of free jazz in the period 1965–75 may be the most extensive anywhere.

There are a number of scholars, writers, and thinkers who provided me feedback that was immeasurably helpful. The three anonymous referees with Duke University Press gave me deep insights and helped me improve the

manuscript, its organization, and many of my arguments. I also received feedback on early drafts from three of my colleagues at the Pratt Institute: Macarena Gomez-Barris, Ann Holder, and Zhivka Valiavicharska. I also wish to thank Pratt for providing me with a sabbatical leave for the 2018–19 academic year, during which time I completed the manuscript.

Three other writers also provided me with notable feedback: Luke Stewart, Jordannah Elizabeth, and John Morrison. Luke is a rare combination of presenter, musician, and scholar, one who has exhibited a strong commitment to the furtherance of the music in the next generation. Jordannah and John are two of the cutting-edge thinkers on this music currently writing today. Jordannah founded the “Feminist Jazz Review” column on www.jazzrightnow.com, the first of its kind, and has written a number of groundbreaking reviews and conducted some key interviews with emerging and established artists. John brings a broad perspective and expertise on hip hop, jazz, and other forms of music that always seem to peel back layer after layer of understanding.

I wish to thank my high school band teacher, Michael Tentis, for opening the world of jazz to me. It has never left my ears. I wish to make a special thanks to my wife, Jennie Romer, a passionate human being dedicated to justice and decency, whose strength and determination is a constant source of inspiration. Finally, I wish to thank our daughter, Juliette, for reminding me what we live for. The world would be a different shade of color without her laughter, creativity, and daring.

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“Flowers Grow in My Room”: Realizing a Vision

All I have is my sincerity.

If you don't believe me, I have failed.

— William Parker

On May 31, 1998, William Parker stepped onto the stage of an elegant Italian opera house at the Verona Jazz Festival for a highly anticipated performance. The Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra, his sixteen-piece big band, was with him, and this was their most high-profile performance to date. In fact, it was their first performance outside of New York City. Rumors of Parker's prowess had circulated around Europe since the 1980s, when he had visited regularly with the Cecil Taylor Unit, and Parker had also brought his own bands on tour when there were opportunities to do so. But at the Teatro Nuovo opera house in Verona on this day, Parker achieved what had seemed impossible: to bring his big band to a European festival.

For the performance in Verona, Parker had composed a suite of pieces titled *Mass for the Healing of the World*, a song for world peace. The opening part, “First Reading (Dawn Song),” began with low rumbling brass and bass that possessed a vocal quality of deep chant with sparse piano casting rays of light across the darkness of the other sounds. Tympani added an urgency to the music as the other members of the band began to coalesce and build toward a collective unity. Inside, Parker was bursting with ideas and mental

energy as the performance unfolded. His wife, dancer Patricia Nicholson, had choreographed the piece for the dancers who accompanied it, one of whom was their daughter Miriam. Parker later wrote that “all the players lifted up off of the bandstand and the dancers moved with grace and beauty throughout the space, what might be called clouds of sound filling with shape and deflating, bellowing and rocking, maintaining a sense of tension and release leading up to the Voice of dawn pushing and parting the river, how can it not sing. . . .”

The second part, “Hallelujah,” unveiled the arc for the suite, in the form of an instrumental Black mass or shout service, which set up the subsequent parts.¹ As Parker wrote in his diary shortly after the event, chronicling his thoughts at the time,

Hallelujah consequences the shifting of sound, everyone is blowing. Cooper-Moore is climbing as the road is laid down, we try to accompany the leaps across the stage, but where are we? Listen to Kono, each trombone sound circling the lifting of the legs and the little dramas and subtle poems that mirror drunk rain drops tilted and spread—really no need for metered time. We are now gone, we are stretching, and we have included a large chunk of music history all in one step. Triplets uneven though transcending notes to sounds, colors, dancing above all the lost yesterdays, here now gone. Three, four things happening at the same time, homage and reflection. Verona, Verona we are here. Trumpeter Richard Rodriguez comes down to the lobby of our Hotel and asks the receptionist “Where is the ghetto?” We are here, sizzling Verona. Love with all your heart, Romeo has gone full circle, this is now the house of the blues if only for a minute.²

Parker’s performance in Verona catapulted him onto the world stage as one of the premier bassists, composers, and bandleaders of his generation. In the more than twenty years since, Parker has toured Europe multiple times each year and has performed in Africa, South America, the Middle East, and East Asia. Appearing on more than 150 records and having won prestigious awards, Parker is widely regarded as one of the most influential jazz artists of his generation.

Vision

Parker’s journey to many of the world’s premier jazz stages began from humble beginnings as a poor kid growing up in the South Bronx in the 1960s. In December 1967, when William Parker was fifteen, living with his parents

and older brother in the Claremont Housing Projects, he had a powerful vision that would define his life. He wrote about it in his diary:

One day flowers began to grow in my room. Beautiful flowers, their petals were made from the poetry of life. Flowers made from music, dance, painting. Made of happy children who live in a place where there has never been or will there ever be war. A place where every human being is encouraged to shine as bright as possible and not be penalized for it. These flowers are made of the absence of famine and human brutality. I did not ask for these flowers, nor to my knowledge do I water or care for them. They continue to grow and I continue to pick them, they are changing my life.³

To Parker, the flowers represented creative talents that he had been granted, and he felt called to bring them out into the world and to share them with others. It took him years to nurture his talents to full fruition, to overcome poverty, and to build a community of like-minded artists, but this vision has guided him through his career.

Parker's vision came at a critical moment for him, when he was beginning to engage with the upheaval of the late 1960s. He had a deep longing for something that would connect him to a bigger world and explain the world that he saw decaying all around him. He found an answer in newly formulated, cutting-edge Black television programming that connected him to everything from political and social movements of the time to influential figures of the Black Arts movement such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Nikki Giovanni, and James Baldwin. Radio programs also brought Parker into contact with the new cultural attitudes of the civil rights and Black Power eras. These discoveries opened his mind to himself and to reimagining the world and his place in it.

Parker then threw open the doors to all kinds of groundbreaking art that was taking place in the late 1960s. Film entranced young Parker, and he consumed French New Wave, Ingmar Bergman, and avant-garde figures such as Stan Brakhage who opened his mind to worlds very different from his own experience. A self-study of film soon followed to the point where Parker considered making films of his own. But ultimately it was the musicians of the free jazz era, especially John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and Cecil Taylor, who were an intense source of light for Parker and sent him on a trajectory toward being a musician himself. Jazz poets such as Baraka, Joseph Jarman, and Archie Shepp were also some of the most powerful voices of the time to Parker. The death of Ayler, on the eve of Parker's first public performances, compelled him to commit to the music and

to “carry on the work.”⁴ The music was more than just sound to him; it was a spiritual journey toward salvation, truth, and human compassion, and it would set him on a quest that would define his life.

Parker entered the music scene at the age of nineteen in 1971, just as the loft scene in downtown Manhattan was exploding with activity. He frequented many of the key venues of the time such as Studio We, Studio Rivbea, Ali’s Alley, and the Firehouse Theater. He quickly developed a reputation as one of the most talented young bassists on the scene and found gigs such that he was often playing five or more nights per week in his early years. Within a few years he established connections with Don Cherry, Billy Higgins, Sunny Murray, Milford Graves, Bill Dixon, and many others. Through early collaborations with dancer and choreographer Patricia Nicholson, he developed a growing body of compositions intended for groups ranging from solo projects to big band. In 1974 he got his first big break, playing with pianist Cecil Taylor at Carnegie Hall. Taylor had been left as the central free jazz figure in New York after the deaths of John Coltrane and Albert Ayler. Parker would go on to be Taylor’s bass player from 1980 to 1991, playing extensively throughout North America, touring in Europe, and appearing on numerous high-profile recordings. Parker was able to form new associations with European players through his work as Taylor’s sideperson, and these meetings fostered later collaborations and records. Parker’s work with Taylor constituted some of the most important moments in Taylor’s sixty-plus-year career and anointed Parker as one of the principal standard-bearers for the music in the next generation.

After leaving Taylor’s band, Parker began leading his own projects more prominently by 1994, founding two key ensembles: In Order to Survive and the Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra, both of which recorded a series of groundbreaking records. In Order to Survive was a regular working band where Parker finally was able to refine and record his compositions, some of which he had been working on for more than two decades. The band also was the site of Parker’s growing political consciousness through art that was intended to transform society around it. In Order to Survive’s four records came to define the sound of the 1990s and reinvigorated free jazz as an art form. Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra emerged as the definitive big band of the era, expanding far beyond the work of Duke Ellington and Cecil Taylor. The band’s seven records, released between 1994 and 2006, form a monumental body of work. Parker’s big band was also the closest thing the New York scene had to a community band, giving young and emerging musicians a chance to prove themselves while firmly establishing Parker as the

leader of the community. Both bands propelled Parker onto the world stage as a composer, bandleader, and performer and established him as one of the most prominent figures in the second generation of free jazz musicians.

Then, in 2001, Parker released *O'Neal's Porch*, with a quartet that included trumpeter Lewis Barnes, saxophonist Rob Brown, and percussionist Hamid Drake, which marked a drive toward a more universal sound in his music. Other bands followed, including the Raining on the Moon Quintet, where they were joined by vocalist Leena Conquest. This work, in particular, drove Parker to develop his theory of universal tonality, that master musicians from any part of the world can meet and, without any preparation, play and communicate with one another in their own musical languages on a profound level. Parker's understanding of improvisation as the method for tapping into this deep and barely explored universal musical cosmos is the crowning achievement thus far in his long career. His work over the past two decades has explored this limitless realm and has left an unparalleled body of work that places the free jazz tradition at the head of the table of world music.

Parker also developed tribute projects to Curtis Mayfield and Duke Ellington, two artists he admired as a young man. The tribute to Mayfield was particularly crucial as it provided a propitious encounter between Parker and Amiri Baraka, a poet who had had a profound effect upon him as a young man. Baraka joined the band's world tour and fused some of the work from the last years of his life to one of Parker's most visionary projects. Both tribute projects also allowed Parker to pay homage to figures who had affected him deeply, both as an artist and a thinker. Parker established himself as a significant solo bassist as well, and in recent years he has composed extensively for vocalists and other formations. Parker's full body of work makes him a major contemporary composer, with more than four thousand individual works to date. Despite the fact that Parker has been prolific in documenting his own work, the vast majority of his compositions have yet to be recorded.

Challenges

At a young age, Parker developed a profound sense of himself and the world he inhabited. Born into poverty in the housing projects of the South Bronx, the son of African American migrants from the U.S. South, he fought against social stigmas that from an early age spoke loud and clear: you have no

value. In the face of that, he not only came to value his own talents, but over the years he also established himself as a visionary and daring artist. Despite Parker's immense accomplishments, he has never received the full attention of the jazz establishment press, nor has his work been the focus of any book-length work. This book is the first in-depth study of Parker's life and work, drawn from extensive interviews conducted with the artist as well as with his collaborators, friends, and family.

The lives of figures such as William Parker are often left untold for a number of reasons. First of all, the majority of jazz critics through the years have disregarded free jazz as an art form, writ large. Free jazz emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a movement in the music that would push back against the limits imposed by regular rhythms and tempos, chord changes, and tones of the bebop era; it aimed, in particular, toward creating something new. The music took many forms and soon became a nationwide and, indeed, a global phenomenon while evolving rapidly and embracing new influences, theories, formations, and instruments.

From its earliest beginnings largely up to the present time, a majority of the journalists writing on jazz have attacked the very legitimacy of free jazz, despite the fact that abstract visual art in the same time period was often heralded as genius.⁵ Much of this hostility comes from a mischaracterization of free jazz as either outside of or adjunct to the "mainstream" jazz tradition. What is considered central and what is peripheral is, of course, a political decision, though one that has often had a catastrophic impact on the practitioners of free jazz. If one can imagine a large oak tree representing all of the different musics to emerge from or be inspired by jazz, many journalists and musicians have attempted to focus on only a few branches as legitimate while discounting others. Failing to see free jazz as an entity of its own or placing it outside of the historical trajectory of jazz cultural narratives has been a weapon that cultural conservatives have wielded against it since its inception.

The fact that free jazz was, especially in its early years, a revolutionary Black music also impacted how it was received. In its different forms, free jazz critiqued capitalism, racism, Western imperialism, Christian dogma, and consumerism. Many critics ignored its political affiliations or misconstrued them, and only a small number of Black critics, such as Amiri Baraka, praised the music and saw it as a key component in leading the community to a future society based upon revolutionary principles.⁶ Yet free jazz constituted the biggest innovation in jazz since bebop in the 1940s. The lack of receptive cultural commentary has been matched by a silence or even disdain

among scholars as well. Even for many of the most profound musical figures of the generation prior to Parker, such as Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, Muhal Richard Abrams, Bill Dixon, and Joseph Jarman, a pervasive silence still remains.

In the drive for inclusivity in the American cultural dialogue, antiestablishment, working-class Black artists calling for revolutionary change have often been cast out in favor of figures who integrated themselves into the cultural milieu less abrasively. Parker's body of work is a bold art of resistance, taking aim at many of the hallmarks of capitalism, modernism, pop culture, Eurocentrism, and materialism. But he has not stopped at critique; he has also contributed extensively to the process of memory making through his music and poems restoring, augmenting, or unearthing histories, biographies, and legacies of figures who range from world famous to unknown. Parker has striven to preserve the memories of members of the music community as well as build solidarity with oppressed peoples whose struggle he views as akin to his own.

Parker's success stands in direct challenge to the oft-repeated narrative of a working-class Black figure who "escaped the projects" to great success, allowing them to leave their old world behind. In contrast, Parker has been a community builder and a justice seeker throughout his life, believing his art and that of his collaborators to be imbued with transformative power to make the world a better place. Parker has never forgotten where he came from. His refusal to let others make a caricature of him and his fierce individuality that has stood in the way of commodifying his music have resulted in a dignified, monumental body of work. At an early age, Parker chose to stay true to his artistic vision and to shirk easy attention from critics or promoters. The years of struggle eventually paid off, but it was not an easy journey.

Parker is one of the most influential figures in the second generation of free jazz players. Born after World War II and entering the music scene in the 1970s, after some of the great figures such as Coltrane and Ayler were already dead, Parker picked up the mantle of the music and has carried it for nearly five decades. He has been a leader within this generation of musicians and has pushed far past the initial burst of free jazz in the 1960s. Parker's leading role in expanding and furthering the music has been monumental, even as music critics, record companies, and the jazz establishment worked to commercialize the music and place money and power behind increasingly conservative, less innovative artists and institutions.

Approaches

The context of Parker's music is embedded deep within his own identity and community, so this fact requires us to consider the historical roots of its formation to understand the work itself. Thus, this book tells Parker's story within the long arc of African American diaspora history, traced through his own ancestry. One major yet obvious obstacle in this endeavor is the silence that pervades the history of enslaved peoples and their descendants. Prior to emancipation, the paucity of perspectives from enslaved peoples and the lack of biographical details in the written record present a monumental challenge in telling that story without it being one that is merely seen through white eyes.⁷ Recent scholarly work on the ethnicity of enslaved peoples in the Americas, oral histories of enslaved and indigenous peoples, and DNA evidence from Parker together help us form the early phases of the narrative told here. Resistance and the fight for dignity and sovereignty against hostile and violent power structures are the threads that run through these histories.

After emancipation, the written record changed considerably, but it still left out Black perspectives in bureaucratic documents that simultaneously served as mechanisms to categorize, divide, and control people of color. Erasure continued through many emancipated lives, such as Parker's grandfather, William "Bill" Parker (b. ca. 1850), who disappears from the record in Goldsboro, North Carolina, abruptly in the late 1870s. Was he lynched while still in his twenties as so many were after the collapse of Reconstruction? Did he die young because of accident, disease, or neglect? By 1880, there is no further trace of him in any record, although his two young orphaned sons remain. The disappearances of lives and the records of them are what scholar Christina Sharpe observes as the normatization of Black death in the historical record.⁸ Sharpe argues that, in many ways, these "conditions of Black life as it is lived near death, as deathliness, in the wake of slavery," remain largely unchanged up to the present time.⁹

The strength of Parker's family, even after some migrated north in the 1930s, has preserved a greater visual and written record and is a testament to their efforts to tell their own stories. These records have survived only because the family maintained their own archives and passed them down through the generations, thus allowing us to illuminate lives that would have otherwise been obscured in the record. From that point forward, I weave the personal with the rich literary, artistic, and musical legacies of Harlem and the Bronx that gave birth to the subject of this book.

Parker's impeccable memory and storytelling ability, traits that everyone observes of him, make him the best source to speak of his own experience, and the twenty-one in-depth interviews that I conducted with him over the span of four years form the backbone of this book. Further interviews with Parker's family, close friends, associates, and students allow a multifaceted understanding of him as a person, thinker, artist, composer, performer, community leader, husband, father, and visionary.

Much of the second half of the book weaves together Parker's personal narratives with liner notes, previously published writings and interviews, and diaries to give a full picture of the artist. His liner notes, in particular, are revealing of his vision and motivations, although they have been almost entirely ignored by music critics over the years. The notes reveal a deep concern for history and memory, for the legacy of his elders and contemporaries, and for the political consciousness that has been the sustaining fuel for his long career. Parker's published writings open up lines for understanding his broader philosophy of music and art. And his diary entries unveil the intimate and enduring relationship he has had with the music and the community of practitioners.

Outline

Part I analyzes Parker's origins, early years, and key influences. Because Parker and his ancestors collectively survived the Middle Passage, slavery in the American South, the false promises of Reconstruction, and life in a northern ghetto, this book has as its starting point contemporary debates on what has been termed the "afterlife of slavery."¹⁰ The threads of resistance passed down to him through action and word form a backdrop to his work as an artist.

Chapter 1 traces his family's origins from West Africa across the Atlantic via the slave trade to North Carolina and South Carolina. Employing a combination of DNA evidence, oral history, public records, letters, and family ephemera, we follow the story of his ancestors: enslaved and free Black peoples in the Carolinas who formed families with displaced Native Americans and poor white settlers on the frontier. The collapse of Reconstruction and the renewal of white supremacy in the South eventually pushed Parker's parents to migrate north to witness the 1930s Harlem Renaissance, where jazz was the cultural vanguard of the time.

Chapter 2 takes an intimate look at Parker's childhood in the Morrisania neighborhood of the South Bronx in the 1950s and 1960s prior to and during the economic collapse of the area and the rise of mass poverty and urban blight that swept through African American communities and neighborhoods. His home was a sanctuary filled with jazz that sparked the early phases of his imagination and creativity. His father's dream, for Parker to grow up to play in the Duke Ellington Orchestra, though unfulfilled, served to chart a path for young Parker as he navigated an alienating educational system, a rapidly deteriorating urban landscape, and the resulting poverty. In this environment, Parker found beauty, community, and fleeting moments of solace that allowed him to rise above despair.

Chapter 3 turns to the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual forces that transformed young Parker into an artist. By examining his coming of age in the era of the Black Power and the Black Arts movements, we see how his particular articulation of resistance to social marginalization and alienation manifested in an interest in avant-garde music and film. Via television and radio, Parker found the radical voices of his time who were speaking of Black liberation, art, aesthetics, and a revolutionary future society that would be founded on those principles. In his teenage years, poets were the truth tellers to Parker, and we examine some of the specific works that made a deep impact on him. His self-study of film was also foundational as he eventually moved toward music.

Part II examines the process by which Parker got his bearings on the music scene and how he built a reputation for himself prior to emerging as a bandleader in the 1990s. Parker paid his dues as a sideperson, playing with some of the most prominent figures of the time. Through these years of work, he refined his musicianship so that once the opportunity arose, he was ready to lead his own bands.

Chapter 4 analyzes his earliest professional work, primarily situated in Manhattan's loft scene of the 1970s. As a young musician, Parker was self-taught and learned a great deal on the bandstand while finding opportunities to play with many of the luminaries such as Cecil Taylor and Don Cherry while still in his early twenties. Work with the Music Ensemble, Jemeel Moondoc's Ensemble Muntu, Daniel Carter, and others allowed him to build a community of like-minded artists.

Chapter 5 follows Parker's professional collaborations with and eventual marriage to dancer Patricia Nicholson, their mutual interest in socially aware art, and their mutual struggle against the impoverished conditions

of the 1980s. Their collaborations formed the first workshop-type space for Parker to present his own compositions. Parker and Nicholson's relationship and financial struggle became the sustaining force that propelled Parker along in his early years as a musician.

Chapter 6 then turns to examine Parker's biggest break: being hired by pianist Cecil Taylor, with whom Parker worked continuously from 1980 to 1991. This period witnessed Parker gaining recognition as a sideman, and he reached new audiences, especially in Europe. Forming associations with European players was key for the further development of Parker's music. Taylor was the closest thing Parker ever had to a consistent mentor, and he carried on much of the wisdom he gleaned from the experience into his own work that followed.

Part III focuses on Parker's work as a bandleader. Finally, from the 1990s onward, he found opportunities to lead and record his own bands with regularity. His compositions, some of which dated to the early 1970s, were finally brought to light, and he eventually formed ever-more-ambitious ensembles to showcase his work.

Chapter 7 examines Parker's most active band of the 1990s, *In Order to Survive*, and the social and artistic context from which it emerged. The band featured a shifting cast of musicians, including Cooper-Moore and Rob Brown, who faithfully assisted Parker in the realization of his work. Chapter 8 illustrates Parker's big-band work with the Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra and his theory of the Tone World. Little Huey has been, in many ways, his most personal and revealing work to date, and a springboard for his storytelling.

Chapter 9 then examines his work of the 2000s, the William Parker Quartet and the *Raining on the Moon* Quintet, which substantially built his global profile and his drive toward a universal sound. In particular, Parker's collaborations with Hamid Drake became the launching point for a whole range of music. His work with Leena Conquest constituted the first substantial work with a vocalist and set Parker on a new trajectory of composing lyrics in addition to the other aspects of the music.

Chapter 10 examines his tribute projects to Duke Ellington and Curtis Mayfield, his solo work, and a number of bands that are lesser known.

Chapter 11 discusses his most recent work. Having won awards and having played on so many great stages, Parker was finally able to release music in the 2010s that he had recorded as early as the 1970s. The final chapter also considers his legacy, drawn from interviews with his contemporaries,

collaborators, friends, and mentees, and his impact on the music and the community of artists who continue to play free jazz in New York City and beyond.

In articulating his own artistic vision, Parker wrote the following:

It is the role of the artist to dance, sing, shout and whisper about all that is wonderful, beautiful and majestic. To mirror and project the present and future, to tell us the stories inside little children's hearts (giving us a view beyond the horizon). Communicating by the language of stone, wood, soil, the language of happiness, sadness and joy. It is the role of the artist to incite political, social and spiritual revolution. To awaken us from our sleep and never let us forget our obligations as human beings. To light the fire of human compassion. When this inner flame is burning, people are uplifted to another state, their vision and senses are doubled, they see, hear and feel things they never did before. The heat of the earth, the cry of living beings. This fire is stoked by conviction, caring, communication with others. The idea is to live strongly within this vision without compromises even after being met by a cold grey world that could care less about vision, a world that makes insensitivity and murder of idealism and individualism a standard. It is the role of the artist to become a human being to see that the only art is the art of living, the artist must quickly make the transformation to human being and in the same breath come to realize he or she is a vehicle through which light passes. We can flow and sing with this reality.¹¹

I. Origins

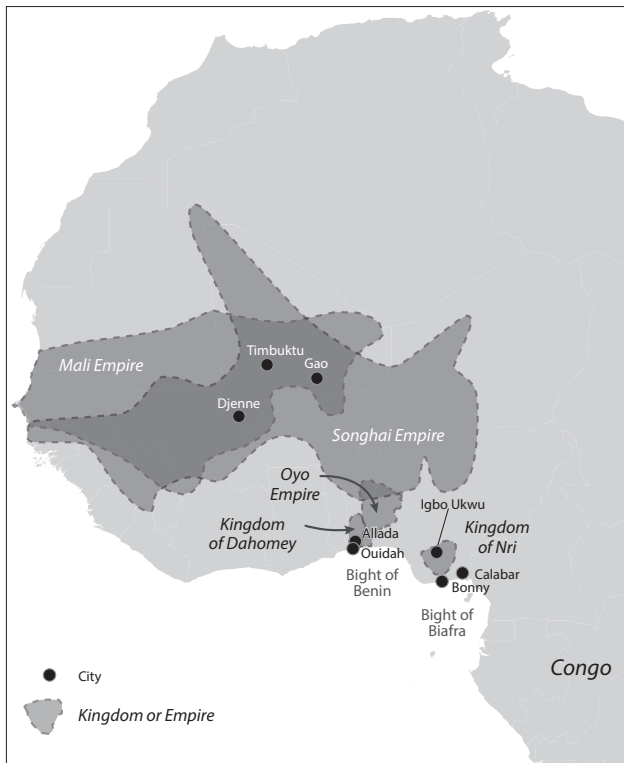
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Enslavement and Resistance: From West Africa to the Carolinas to Harlem

In the early days of my visitation,
Black hands tended me and cared for me . . .
Black minds, hearts and souls loved me . . .
And I loved them because of this.
In the early days of my visitation,
Black hands tended me and cared for me;
I can't forget these things.
For black hearts, minds and souls love me—
And even today the overtones from the fire
of that love are still burning.

— Sun Ra

William Parker was a child of the Harlem Renaissance. His home was filled with the music of Duke Ellington and other jazz legends, and it was his father's dream for him to grow up to play in Ellington's orchestra. Parker's parents had both come from the rural American South and were part of the early phases of the Great Migration, which witnessed between one and two million African Americans migrating to northern cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago between 1910 and 1940.¹ Out of this movement



of people—the single largest internal migration in U.S. history—the Harlem Renaissance was born. Harlem became the unparalleled hub of African American culture, a center for musicians, artists, and writers, and it propelled jazz onto a national stage.

But before arriving in Harlem, Parker's ancestors had long histories that trace back through years of struggle in the Americas that together inform a history that made Parker who he is. His mother's people were sharecroppers and descendants of enslaved people in South Carolina.² His father's family mostly comprised enslaved and free Black people in North Carolina, who formed families with Native Americans of the Waccamaw tribe as well as a few poor white settlers living on the Appalachian frontier. Prior to setting foot in America, Parker's deep roots trace back to West and Central Africa.

African Origins

In the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, approximately 90 percent of Parker's ancestors, whose names were not recorded, were captured and sold into slavery along the coast of West and Central Africa stretching from what is now Senegal to the Congo. The region is marked by a series of rivers connecting the interior to the coastlines and sprawling deltas. Nearly half of his African ancestors came from what is now Nigeria, mostly of Igbo origin, and can be traced back to at least the seventh century in the Kingdom of Nri.³ Nri, which was located to the east of the Niger River, is famous for its bronze, clay, and terracotta sculptures depicting its priest-kings as well as natural fauna in the region.⁴ The archaeological record has also left us remnants of intricately designed Igbo pottery and colorful textiles, most notably preserved at the great palace ruins at Igbo-Ukwu.⁵ Surviving glass and carnelian beads indicate that Nri was part of long-distance trade networks that connected to places as distant as Venice and India.⁶

Nri rose to greater power around the ninth century with the rise of iron technology and reached its greatest influence between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.⁷ In that period, unbaked clay sculptures were often constructed to honor the sacred Earth—intentionally made to be ephemeral—while there was also a deep belief in water-related gods of the rivers, lakes, and seas. Music had a sacred and political function, and kings often had a retinue of musicians and other performers who accompanied them in all official activities of state, with a large, prestigious drum being the central feature, often with other smaller drums or other instruments also included in these ensembles of political ceremony.⁸ The Igbo phrase for musical instrumentalist, *oti egwuloku egwu*, translates as “one who beats music into life.” As one art theorist stated, for the Igbo, “The artistic meaning of life is a unity of earth (Ala), man and death: earth as the environment for life, man as society—the meaning of life—and death as the infiniteness of life.”⁹

Olaudah Equiano (ca. 1745–97) was an Igbo who was captured and enslaved, survived the Middle Passage, and later attained freedom and wrote of his life in one of the most famous slave narratives ever published. He was born in Isseke, in what is now southeastern Nigeria, and described the music of his people:

We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs

and music suited to the occasion. The assembly is separated into four divisions, which dance either apart or in succession, and each with a character peculiar to itself. The first division contains the married men, who in their dances frequently exhibit feats of arms, and the representation of a battle. To these succeed the married women, who dance in the second division. The young men occupy the third; and the maidens the fourth. Each represents some interesting scene of real life, such as a great achievement, domestic employment, a pathetic story, or some rural sport; and as the subject is generally founded on some recent event, it is therefore ever new. This gives our dances a spirit and variety which I have scarcely seen elsewhere. We have many musical instruments, particularly drums of different kinds, a piece of music which resembles a guitar, and another much like a stickado. These last are chiefly used by betrothed virgins, who play on them on all grand festivals.¹⁰

In describing food that was consumed at public festivals and at other times, Equiano notes that their principal dishes contained bullocks, goats, and poultry: “To make it savory, we sometimes use also pepper, and other spices, and we have salt made of wood ashes. Our vegetables are mostly plantains, eadas, yams, beans, and Indian corn.”¹¹ Equiano also mentions the consumption of pineapples, dried fish, palm wine, and tobacco, and the use of cotton cloth for richly dyed clothes, especially with bright-blue designs. Men and women adorned themselves with perfumes that they manufactured from aromatic wood.¹²

Nri culture was guided and maintained by ritual specialists who traveled throughout the region wielding staves of peace. These practitioners’ duty was to purify the Earth from human crimes and to teach others of their healing arts and practices.¹³ Nri kings were often selected, after an interregnum, from this body of ritual practitioners, based on the perceived manifestations of their supernatural power. This system of leadership also reflected a broader adherence to the idea that titles and positions of power were earned, not inherited. At the same time, much of the political power remained local and was administered through a system of republican democracy, where councils of village elders made decisions collectively, giving rise to the phrase *Ìgbò ènwē ézè*, best translated as “the Igbo abhor monarchical power.”¹⁴ Women often held positions of significant social prestige.

Nri’s power began a slow decline from the fifteenth century onward, and in the last quarter of the seventeenth century Nri collapsed under the pressures of militarism spurred on by the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁵ From that point through the early nineteenth century, many thousands of Igbo were cap-

tured and sold at ports such as Bonny or Calabar along the Bight of Biafra, which encompassed one-half of the Niger River delta.¹⁶ Enslaved Igbo were commonly taken across the Atlantic to places such as Trinidad, the Leeward Islands, Jamaica, and western New Granada (today Colombia), as well as to Virginia.¹⁷ Moved later to North Carolina, these Igbo-descended people likely constituted the majority of Parker's paternal relatives.

Nearly one-fifth of Parker's ancestors came from farther west along the West African coast in what is now Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Cote D'Ivoire. Most of the people from this region were either Aja or Yoruba speakers, captured during the rising periods of warfare that consumed the region from the mid-seventeenth century onward. As power shifted there, as elsewhere, from an interior agrarian state—in this case, Allada—to the coastal trading state of Whydah, spurred to power by its importation of increasingly deadly European guns, many people were captured during the resulting wars.¹⁸ Subsequently, the kingdom of Dahomey, armed with the latest European firearms, conquered Whydah in 1727.¹⁹ The interior reach of Whydah and the control it had been able to wield over its conquered populations led to many thousands of people from the area being sold into slavery along the coast.²⁰ European firearms then became the fuel cast upon the fire of warfare between Dahomey and the Yoruba-speaking Oyo Empire to the east. Through this process, Dahomey became one of the most prominent West African slave-exporting states.²¹ Taken to the Bight of Benin—one of the most exploited regions connected to the slave trade—people were then sold and taken to colonial America, likely constituting some of Parker's maternal ancestors in South Carolina.²²

Farther to the north and west along the African coast, nearly another one-fifth of Parker's ancestors may be traced to the great Empire of Mali, which had emerged as the most powerful state in West Africa in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.²³ Founded by Sunjata Keita (ca. 1217–1255), about whom a great literary epic was preserved by griots, most people there spoke Mandinka and practiced Islam.²⁴ The trade and learning centers of Gao, Djenné, and Timbuktu were Mali's greatest cities, the last of these annually drawing tens of thousands of students from across West Africa to its famous university at its peak in the fifteenth century.²⁵ In the latter part of that century Mali began to be challenged by its neighbors such as the Songhai Empire, and in the seventeenth century Mali splintered into a number of kingdoms that became engulfed in a similar rising tide of bloodshed spurred by the importation of European rifles and muskets.²⁶ Roughly one-third of Mandinka speakers were enslaved through this violent process and sold

downriver to the coast, where they were transported to the Americas. These Mandinka speakers were likely the first of Parker's African ancestors to arrive in the Americas.²⁷

In West Central Africa, approximately one-tenth of Parker's ancestors came from Cameroon or the Congo. Much less is known of their history, but that region was the origin of more enslaved people than any other part of the continent, including many people taken directly to South Carolina, thus forming the ancestry of some of Parker's maternal relations.²⁸

Only eight in ten enslaved people survived the horrors of the Middle Passage, where disease, shortages of food and water, and death at the hands of captors claimed millions of lives over the centuries.²⁹ Mortality was even higher after arrival, when enslaved people faced the conditions of a new diet, new diseases, and the extreme brutality of slavery. Upon arriving on the North American mainland, many of Parker's people first lived in Virginia before being moved to North and South Carolina. Igbo were among the largest ethnic groups there, joining earlier enslaved people who were primarily from the Gambia in West Africa. Most of these ancestors arrived in Virginia in 1700–60, during which time 59,000 Africans arrived via the Atlantic trade. It was also during that period that Virginia's system of enslaved labor was firmly established along the Chesapeake Bay, near the estuaries of the James and York rivers. By 1790, because of internal population growth, there were nearly 300,000 people of African descent living in Virginia.³⁰

Peoples of African Descent in Virginia and the Carolinas

Among all African peoples, the Igbo in particular gained a reputation as being resistant to enslavement: it was inimical to their spiritual beliefs, deeply set republican ideals, and intense sense of equality among adults. Disproportionately high numbers of enslaved Igbo attempted to escape, refused to work, or fomented revolts, with prominent involvement by women.³¹ Other enslaved Igbo, uprooted from their homeland, where physical and symbolic connection to the land and all it represented—family, ancestors, sustenance—was central to their identity, sometimes chose to commit suicide in defiance of enslavement.³² As one enslaved Igbo person who escaped and wrote about the phenomenon of suicide rationalized it, “They are universally of the opinion, and this opinion is founded in their

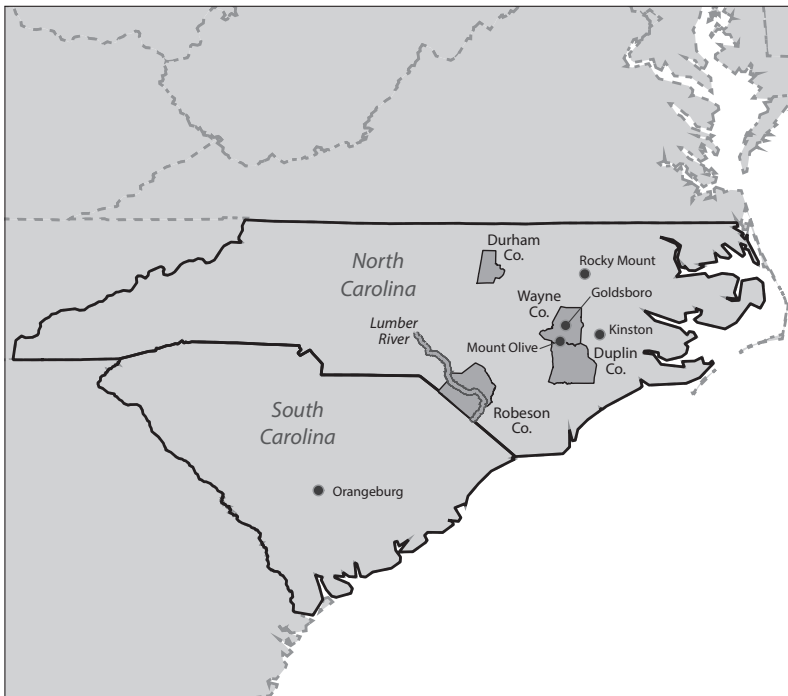
religion, that after death they shall return to their own country, and rejoin their former companions and friends, in some happy region, in which they will be provided with plenty of food. . . .”³³

Thus, death in this way bore the metaphysical meaning of regeneration and renewal. Enslaved Igbo also developed a reputation for building strong communal support systems in opposition to the violent and harsh conditions of slavery, such that an observer wrote, “The newly arrived find help, care, and example from those who have come before them.”³⁴ In a figurative sense, Sun Ra echoed this process in the poem extract that opens the chapter.

The Igbo also had a deep impact upon the culture of enslaved Africans that developed in Virginia and other North American colonies. In many cases in Virginia they were the first enslaved people to arrive in particular areas or plantations and thus set down “the basic patterns of material, social, and ideological culture of enslaved communities . . . people made do with what they had at hand to fashion what they needed to sustain themselves, to forge connections among and between each other, and to make sense of their new worlds.”³⁵ Many enslaved people bore the same names as their ancestors, and others were named after the towns and cities of their origins. Many of the vegetal parts of African American soul food may be traced back to the Igbo, especially dishes that include yams, black-eyed peas, and greens.³⁶

In Virginia, and later in North and South Carolina, Parker’s ancestors carried with them the culture of their origins, which they contributed to the making of an emerging African American culture. When rare opportunities arose for enslaved people to attend heavily regulated social gatherings between plantations, they would meet for music or dance, where instruments such as the banjo, an adaptation of the Malian xalam, were often used alongside drums of various types. Musicians also played other instruments based on African antecedents such as the kazoo, jug, panpipes, one-string fiddle, one-string bass, one-string gliss zither, mouth bow, and washboard, as well as a growing number of European instruments including the four-stringed fiddle.³⁷ These rare moments of music and community served as a refuge from the intense horrors of enslavement.³⁸ Out of this trauma of enslavement, displacement, and oppression, the blues were born and came to form the backbone of American music in the centuries since, especially gospel, jazz, soul, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and hip-hop.

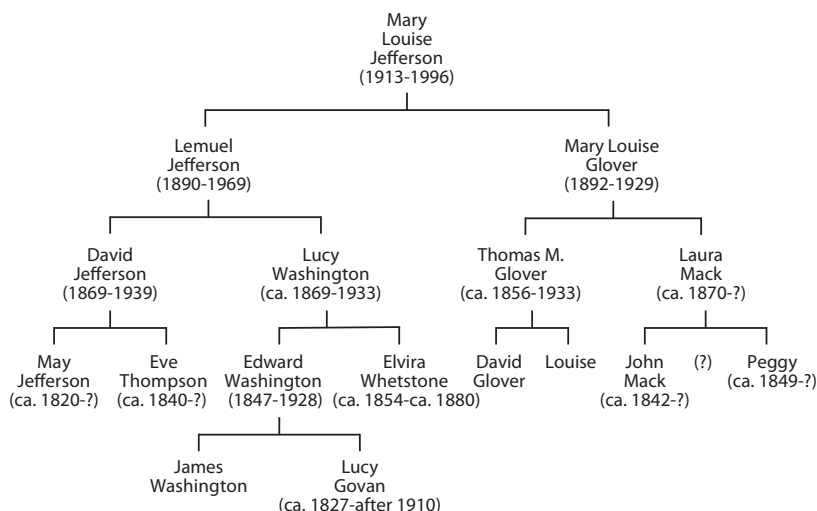
At some point between 1775 and 1810, if Parker’s ancestors were not already in the Carolinas, they were forcibly relocated there.³⁹ His mother’s family was concentrated around Orangeburg, South Carolina, while his father’s side lived in the counties of Wayne, Duplin, Durham, and Robeson in North Carolina.



Also around that time, they converted to Christianity—his mother’s ancestors becoming Methodists and his father’s people becoming Baptists, although his father’s progenitors were less religious.⁴⁰ In the nineteenth century, Parker’s forebears emerge with greater visibility into the historical record.

Parker’s mother, Mary Louise Jefferson (1913–1996), came from Orangeburg, South Carolina. Orangeburg was established in 1704 as a fur trading post and remained a small settlement until after the American Revolution. With the invention of the cotton gin, Orangeburg rapidly opened large stretches of land for cultivation, and enslaved Africans, brought from coastal South Carolina or down from Virginia, were forced to work the land. Enslaved people soon came to form the majority of the population of Orangeburg and in 1860 made up two-thirds of the population of the county.⁴¹ It seems likely that Parker’s ancestors first set foot in the area around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Mary Louise’s paternal relations—the Jeffersons and Washingtons—are difficult to trace prior to the Civil War because they adopted those surnames after emancipation. Her mother’s side of the family, however—the Glovers—were enslaved on the plantation of Thomas W. Glover, one of



the wealthiest planters in Orangeburg. Of the earliest figures in the family, David and Louise Glover, little is known. Their son, Thomas M. Glover (1856–1933), lived to see emancipation but tasted the bitterness of the false promise of Reconstruction.⁴² He lived out his days as a sharecropper with a life not terribly different from that of the old days. He married Laura Mack, possibly the daughter of John and Peggy Mack, sharecroppers in Amelia Township in Orangeburg County.⁴³ Thomas and Laura had eight children. The eldest, Mary Louise Glover (1892–1929), married Lemuel Jefferson (1890–1969), and the couple and their offspring also worked as sharecroppers. It was backbreaking work, and even by age fifty, it appears that Lemuel was in failing health; as one of his children wrote in a letter, “We should be able to take care of our father because he ain’t able to do much work.”⁴⁴ Lemuel was the only grandparent who lived to meet Parker when, as a boy, his mother would bring him back down to Orangeburg nearly every summer. Parker remembered Grandfather “Lem” often talking of the buckra, the white bosses, as he would sit on his porch with his shotgun.⁴⁵

Lemuel Jefferson and Mary Louise Glover’s daughter Mary Louise Jefferson (1913–1996) was the eldest surviving child, and because of her mother’s early death, she filled the role of mother to her younger siblings from her mid-teens onward. She later worked as a domestic servant for a while in the South and had a short-lived marriage. But in the 1930s she and two of her sisters moved north to New York and settled in Harlem. Some family letters



Figure 1.1 Lemuel Jefferson (1890–1969), Parker’s maternal grandfather, in Orangeburg, South Carolina, 1967.

survive that their father and siblings wrote to them from Orangeburg, often urging them to return.⁴⁶

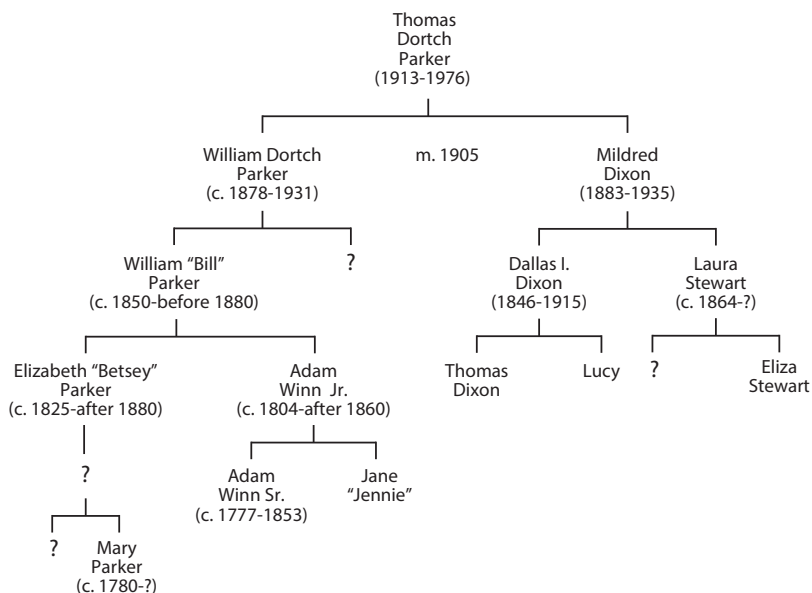
Much more is known about Parker’s paternal side of the family. Parker’s father, Thomas Dortch Parker (1913–1976), came from Goldsboro, North Carolina. Goldsboro was the seat of Wayne County, where the Parker family had dwelled for several generations, after moving there from neighboring Duplin County. Up until the building of the railroads in the 1830s and 1840s, the economy of Wayne County was driven primarily by hog and cattle farmers, many of whom relied upon enslaved people for labor and production.⁴⁷ Still, most farmers could not engage in a cash-crop economy because of high transportation costs. Railroads definitively transformed local markets and linked the region to the coast, the interior, and regional cities, where local goods could be sold at greater profit.

The railroad between Wilmington and Raleigh cut through Wayne at Weldon and was completed in 1840.⁴⁸ By 1856, the North Carolina Railroad, moving out from Charlotte, intersected the Wilmington-Weldon line at Goldsboro. Although slave labor was used in Wayne County from early in its history,

Figure 1.2 Mary Louise Glover (1892–1929), Parker’s maternal grandmother, in Orangeburg, South Carolina, ca. 1920.



Figure 1.3 Lemuel Jefferson (1890–1969) with Parker’s aunt and cousin, led by the family mule “Hattie,” in Orangeburg, South Carolina, early 1950s.



the terrain did not allow for large-scale plantations. By the time that cotton production became a major industry in the 1850s, rice cultivation was in decline and tobacco was grown for home or local consumption only. As Lisa Y. Henderson notes, "Wayne County was located southeast of the best tobacco land, southwest of good cotton-growing soil, and due north of the swampy expanses that rice required."⁴⁹ That left most Wayne County farmers to primarily cultivate beans, corn, peas, and sweet potatoes. Once railroads began crisscrossing the county, farmers found new and distant markets for their goods.

Native Americans, Maroons, and the Free Black Community

Wayne County had a significant pre-Civil War free Black community of which the Parkers were a part. The community experienced significant growth in the 1830s (230 percent) and by 1840 comprised 464 individuals split among 77 separate households headed by men and women.⁵⁰ By 1860, Wayne had the ninth highest free Black population of North Carolina's

eighty-six counties and accounted for about 5 percent of the state's overall free Black population.⁵¹ Many free Black people in the area had been longtime residents and had accumulated enough wealth to rent or buy their own land, first appearing in significant numbers in real estate deals in the 1830s.⁵² Some of the most notable families also moved there around the same time or just prior, such as the Winn family, who soon formed families with the Parkers, coming north from Duplin County.⁵³

The position of free Black people in North Carolina before the Civil War was a precarious one. Free Black people could own property and move from place to place, but they could not attend public schools like white residents. The rising prominence of free Black people in the 1830s began to draw hostility from the white population. After several free Black people were implicated in an aborted slave revolt in neighboring Duplin and Sampson counties in 1831, having been inspired by Nat Turner's recent uprising in Virginia, white petitioners began calling for the exile of all free Black people from the state.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the free Black population lost its right to vote across the state in 1835, again as a reaction to Turner and the fear of additional uprisings. In Wayne County in the 1830s there was the collusion of prominent landowners in the area kidnapping free Black people—especially children—and enslaving or selling them, while other free Black residents were regularly “harassed by challenges to their freedom.”⁵⁵

The earliest figure in the family who can be identified in the record is Parker's great-great-grandmother Elizabeth “Betsey” Parker (b. ca. 1825), a woman of English and possibly Irish ancestry.⁵⁶ She had been orphaned at an early age, grew up in poverty, and was raised primarily by her paternal grandmother, Mary Parker (b. ca. 1780). Betsey Parker's parents' names are not known, and nothing more is known of her origins or that of her grandmother. Once she reached adulthood, Betsey headed her own household for the rest of her life, having a long relationship with Adam Winn Jr. (b. ca. 1804), who, together with his father, Adam Winn Sr. (ca. 1777–ca. 1853), were among the most prominent free Black people in eastern North Carolina prior to the Civil War.⁵⁷ Adam Winn Sr.'s exact origins are unknown, but oral history and DNA evidence make clear that at least a portion of his ancestors or those of his wife Jane (“Jennie”) could be traced back to the Native American Waccamaw tribe, although African ancestry made up the greater part of their heritage.⁵⁸

The Waccamaw were Siouan speakers who had been pushed inland from the South Carolina coast by European incursions and conflicts with other tribes in the seventeenth century, and then were displaced again into what

is now the southeastern part of North Carolina in the century following.⁵⁹ Through this process, the Waccamaw came into closer contact with other Siouan-speaking Native Americans such as the Cheraw, Pedee, and Saponi, as well as other indigenous groups such as the Tuscarora (Iroquois speakers from the eastern piedmont), Hatteras (Algonkian speakers from the North Carolina coast), and a number of other small groups from the North Carolina–Virginia border region. These groups, diverse and eclectic in origin, came together in 1735–87 in the area of Drowning Creek (also known as the Lumber River) in what would later become Robeson County, North Carolina.⁶⁰ They chose the area because it was firmly removed from the reach of colonial governments, and as one historian illustrated it, they “could live outside of English control and nurture their community.”⁶¹ Oral tradition indicates that there was a fusion of certain numbers of diverse peoples who eventually coalesced to form the Lumbee Indians, a tribe that has never received official recognition by the United States government despite being the largest U.S. tribe east of the Mississippi River. English became the *lingua franca* of these communities.⁶²

Adam Winn Jr.’s free status, his Waccamaw blood, and the family’s close ties to the Native Americans of Robeson County suggest that his ancestors escaped slavery somewhere farther east and found refuge in a maroon community either directly affiliated with or near the indigenous settlements there. It is likely that his grandparents were the first to arrive in the region, around the 1750s or 1760s, when the community of refugees, displaced Native Americans, and Africans who had escaped slavery converged to form settlements in the region that were, at least at that time, beyond the control or infringement of the American colonial government and its military detachments. The “low-lying swamps of lazy, rippling black water” of Robeson, especially Burnt Swamp Township to the west of Lumberton, seem to be the most likely place where the family first settled in the region.⁶³

Maroon communities like the one that the Winn family was a part of were consciously set well apart from white communities, such that “once the scouts had selected a site that provided concealment, inapproachability, invisibility, and sustainability, the community could settle down.” Such communities were often made up of people “who had come together at different times, from different places, with different stories. Some joined alone; others were couples, families, or friends.”⁶⁴ Often after maturing their crops, the initial surveyors and settlers would then return to retrieve other family still enslaved on plantations and farms. For the Winn maroons, they found asylum within or near the Native American groups of the area with whom

they built family, community, and solidarity outside of or against white society, for a time.⁶⁵

Although no description of the Winns' maroon community exists, there are surviving accounts that bring such communities to life in other parts of North Carolina, namely the Great Dismal Swamp of the eastern part of the state, and these communities persisted until well after emancipation.⁶⁶ Abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass noted that the community there comprised "uncounted numbers of fugitives," although more recent historians have estimated their total numbers to be around 2,500 people. The numbers no doubt fluctuated in the nearly two centuries that maroons inhabited those areas.⁶⁷ Eighteenth-century observers noted that many maroon communities lasted for generations, with children and grandchildren of those who formed maroon communities there being born free of white society.⁶⁸ Some maroon communities grew substantial enough to have their own preachers who led worship in the communities or traveled between settlements through the waterways of the swamp.⁶⁹

In places like the Burnt Swamp, people would construct houses or even temporary settlements on stilts. When axes were not available for fashioning timber into home-construction materials, they built homes out of mud, sticks, and bark.⁷⁰ Over time, the maroon communities grew and strengthened in numbers and came with knowledge of house building and agriculture that they used to sustain themselves. Within the swamp, maroons moved around freely in bark canoes, hunting wild game, especially during the summer, when many animals migrated deeper into the wettest parts of the swamp.⁷¹ Fashioning their own bows and arrows, log traps, and deadfalls, they hunted bears, beavers, deer, ducks, frogs, muskrats, opossums, otters, partridges, quail, snakes, squirrels, turtles, and wild hogs and cattle. In the winter, maroons often grew corn and sweet potatoes, and raised hogs and a variety of fowl.⁷²

Wetlands in the Drowning Creek area were home to hardwood trees, with lower densities of pond pine and Atlantic white cedar, all of which were obtained for local use and valuable in trade.⁷³ The waters, streams, and certain portions of the swamp were inhabited by redbfin pickerel, which were harvested and eaten by the inhabitants.⁷⁴ The landscape in the Burnt Swamp was filled with pocosins, which were wide, shallow basins constantly rejuvenated from water sources underneath and were particularly fertile and rich in resources ranging from plants and rare medicinal herbs to peat for fuel.⁷⁵ Maroons and Native American inhabitants of the area manufactured bark, herbs, and roots they found there into medicines, such as the sweet-smelling Carolina jessamine, which could be used to cure jaundice, reduce