

# THE LIFE & TIMES OF LOUIS LOMAX

The Art of  
Deliberate  
Disunity



THOMAS  
AIELLO

THE LIFE & TIMES  
OF LOUIS LOMAX

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THE ART OF DELIBERATE DISUNITY

*Thomas Aiello*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham & London* 2021

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Printed in the United States of America on

acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro and Scala

Sans Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Aiello, Thomas, [dates] author.

Title: The life and times of Louis Lomax : the art of  
deliberate disunity / Thomas Aiello.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020021674 (print) |

LCCN 2020021675 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781478010685 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9781478011804 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781478013150 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Lomax, Louis E., 1922–1970. |

African American journalists—United States—

Biography. | African Americans in television

broadcasting—United States—Biography.

Classification: LCC PN4874.L5925 A934 2021 (print) |

LCC PN4874.L5925 (ebook) |

DDC 070.92 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov>

/2020021674

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov>

/2020021675

Cover art: Louis Lomax, ca. 1960. Courtesy

Special Collections and University Archives

of the University of Nevada, Reno. Item

82-30-6-10-1.

PRODUCED WITH A GRANT FROM  
FIGURE FOUNDATION  
PUBLICATION OF THE GLOBAL NATION

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Yes, my dear brethren, when I think of you which very often I do,  
and the poor despised miserable state you are in, when I think  
of your ignorance and stupidity and great wickedness of the  
most of you, I am pained to the heart.

.....

JUPITER HAMMON, 1786



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## Acknowledgments

As with any book, so many people have helped in its construction that I cannot name them all here. But I would particularly like to single out the staff of the Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Nevada, Reno. Jacquelyn Sundstrand went above and beyond to help me navigate a collection that was unprocessed when I began this project. It is, in some sense, a mystery as to why Lomax's widow chose UNR to house his papers. Lomax had no specific connection with the city or the university. But they are there, and they are now organized and available thanks to the hard work of Jacquelyn and her colleagues. She worked to process the collection even as I was sitting in the reading room reviewing the documents themselves. This book uses a variety of archival collections, of course, but it understandably relies most heavily on those from Lomax's personal papers. The book thus would not exist without Jacquelyn and the archivists at UNR. I hope that this book serves as a testament to their hard work and diligence.

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# Introduction

Louis Emanuel Lomax was an ex-con who served time in Illinois's Joliet Correctional Center for a confidence scheme of selling rented automobiles to used car dealers. He had uncontested domestic abuse claims on his record, two arrests for driving under the influence, and four divorces. He lied publicly about his collegiate education on a regular basis. Constantly in search of fame and media attention, he ingratiated himself to popular leaders on the fringes of both sides of the political spectrum and changed his position on key social issues when it suited his interest or audience. He criticized every major civil rights leader, engaged in hopeless assassination conspiracy theories, and took advantage of violent conflicts, both domestic and international, to draw attention to himself. In 1963, while giving the John B. Russworm Lecture at the California Negro Leadership Conference at Stanford, he told his audience that they needed to develop "the art of deliberate disunity," criticizing "the state of Negro euphoria, that seizure of silly happiness and emotional release that comes in the wake of a partial civil rights victory."<sup>1</sup>

No, wait.

Louis Emanuel Lomax rose from a childhood in the deepest of the Deep South, Valdosta, Georgia, to become one of the most successful Black journalists of the twentieth century. He introduced Malcolm X to the nation and remained a close ally of both Malcolm and Martin Luther King Jr. for the duration of their lives. He helped organize the 1968 Olympic boycott and was with Harry Edwards at the event's initial press

conference. He was in the nation's capital for the success of the March on Washington and the confusion of Resurrection City. He was the opening act for Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech and was on the telephone with Betty Shabazz the night he was killed. As the first Black man to host a syndicated television talk show and as the author of several best-selling and influential books, he was both a driver and a popularizer of virtually every element of the civil rights movement from the late 1950s to the late 1960s. In 1963, while giving the John B. Russworm Lecture at the California Negro Leadership Conference at Stanford, he told his audience that they needed to develop "the art of deliberate disunity," emphasizing that "only through diversity of opinion can we establish the basic prerequisite for the democratic process."<sup>2</sup>

Lomax told his Stanford audience that he wanted civil rights leaders to begin emphasizing economic and educational concerns, the building of infrastructure within the community that would allow the Black population to take advantage of any future political gains. He worried aloud about infighting in the movement, wherein competing groups jockeyed for power in an effort to become the public face of civil rights. It was a call for unity even as it defended functionally radical positions within the movement, a seemingly contradictory argument made all the more palatable because it contained something that appealed to everyone. It was sound and fury, signifying both nothing and everything, and it was a case made by someone who actively sought the spotlight and the potential power that came with it. In that sense, Lomax's Stanford speech reflected the broader scope of his life. He was a publicity-seeking provocateur who did what he could both to report on the news and to keep himself in it. That effort made him one of the loudest and most influential voices of the 1960s civil rights movement and Black foreign policy journalism.

Domestically, Lomax tended to argue for integrationism as a viable civil rights goal, though that position vacillated throughout his career. Yet one of his closest friends and allies was Malcolm X. Their relationship was built on the reciprocal benefits they could provide, each the ideological foil for the other at various moments, but they were also real friends, and Lomax's classical southern understanding of integrationist civil rights evolved over the years because of his proximity to Malcolm, the Nation of Islam (NOI), and Black nationalist thinking. His thinking took a circular trajectory, beginning at the classical rights understanding of a Black southerner from Valdosta before finding a more nationalist position after his long association with Malcolm. Though he never abandoned his

admiration for the NOI's leader, Lomax's public thinking about race rights turned more pragmatic in the last five years of his life, following Malcolm's 1965 assassination, and his philosophical evolution ultimately took him back close to where he had begun. That play of Malcolm on Lomax also worked in reverse, with the journalist accompanying Malcolm at his most seminal and career-defining moments.

Lomax was a study in contradictions. "We need a revolution in this country," he declared in the late 1960s. Then he demurred by describing what he called a "revolution by education," emphasizing Black studies as a strong start that needed to filter down to primary and secondary education. He insisted that he was in favor of nonviolence but then explained, "The American white man—like all white men—only understands violence." The white man was "the epitome of violence." Whites in general were "a racist, violent people." Even with such an assessment, he supported integration, while at the same time calling for a total restructuring of the American economy. "Some will no longer be able to luxuriate with four automobiles and five garages while others have nothing," he said. "You can't tell a man work is virtue but there are no jobs so he goes to hell by default." Lomax predicted a new revolution in 1976, two hundred years after the first one. Although the revolution never occurred, and Lomax did not even live to see the bicentennial, it was not an unreasonable prediction. For all of his bravado, he possessed a pragmatic willingness to shift positions in response to changing situations and in pursuit of his own success, as well as a keen ability to diagnose the problems the country faced. "America is fundamentally a country of style rather than substance," he said. "I'll bet we could walk out of here, into the parking lot, and find that nine-tenths of the people flying the flag have no intention of doing what the flag stands for."<sup>3</sup> His dual mission, as he saw it, was to call out that nine-tenths while playing a game of style over and against one of substance. Lomax's life was an argument that you could not do the former without doing the latter.

His foreign policy thinking was much the same. If Pan-Africanism existed on one end of the ideological Black foreign policy spectrum and noninterventionist calls for peace in Vietnam existed on the other, Lomax found himself moving between those two poles. His most consistent message in this regard—and the one that seemed to bridge the ideological divide—was an opposition to colonialism that pushed back against resource extraction and economic hegemony in Africa and Asia. Lomax tended to avoid comparative models in favor of analyzing individual



regions and leaders in their specific cultural context. That said, Lomax was a popularizer of anticolonial movements, a freelance journalist with an ideological and financial interest in his presentations, but he was a layperson, and his accounts of conflicts in various parts of Africa, Thailand, and Vietnam often lacked the nuance of scholars steeped in the history of those regions and their relationships with the West. Continuing his general inconsistency, he advocated peace while defending indigenous military action as a salve against colonial intervention; continuing his bent for sensationalism, he often ignored detailed intricacy in favor of wide-scale conclusions to make his arguments. Such was the nature of a self-promoting novice with deep-felt concerns about the well-being of the people he covered.

Lomax's consistent efforts to find this ideological third way would be both a blessing and a curse. He was consistent in his contradictions but not in his analysis of events. By using a broad-brush approach to paint the symptoms of systemic racism rather than more nuanced but less interesting causes, Lomax kept himself in the public eye, thereby making himself an effective mainstream advocate for Black issues. But despite his central role in that advocacy—his position at the forefront of so many of the civil rights movement's pivot points—those contradictions left his legacy at the historical margins. They made his role in the movement harder to interpret and eventually harder for historians to see at all.

Thus, while he is almost always featured in a tertiary role in accounts of the 1960s civil rights movement, he has never been given pride of place. The same can be said for accounts of American foreign policy in Africa and Asia during the decade. But Lomax was central to the era's civil rights movement, and while he was not central to American foreign policy in any way, he was decidedly influential in popularizing the situations in sub-Saharan Africa and southeast Asia. Lomax was also one of the most important journalists of the decade, helping to cement the career of Mike Wallace, setting precedents for Black journalism in radio and television, and maintaining a literary profile that included newspaper reporting, long-form magazine journalism, and the best-selling books *The Reluctant African* and *The Negro Revolt*.

This volume moves Lomax to the center of the civil rights narrative of the 1960s, describing his particular "art of deliberate disunity" and the influence it had on the decade's journalism, its civil rights activism, and its public thinking about foreign policy. He was in many ways both created by the national tumult of the 1960s and a creator of many of its seminal

moments. His thinking would always be pragmatic, willing to change with perceived necessity to remain influential or controversial or to support rights activism. The trajectory of that thought was riddled with inconsistencies, but it mirrored the inconsistencies of a country in the throes of dramatic change, as the hypocrisy of America and of Lomax worked in a reciprocal relationship to create a nation more open to Black journalism, more willing to provide racial equality, less tolerant of global colonialism, and ultimately (and ironically) less hypocritical.

His inconsistencies were his own, as were his lies and crimes. But they were also, in their way, America's inconsistencies. And they never stopped him from his consistent and beneficial advocacy for Black rights. Lomax's story is unique, but it is also representative—a contradiction that the controversial journalist would surely find fitting.

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# 1 From Privilege to Prison

Thomas A. Lomax was born to be a preacher. The North Carolina native heard the call early, and in 1880, at the age of twenty-one, he and his new bride, Rozena, traveled west to find a new mission field. Ultimately, Thomas took the pastorate at Macedonia First Baptist Church in Valdosta, Georgia, the seat of Lowndes County. A small city in southwest Georgia with a population of fewer than twenty thousand, it was the moderately urban hub of a decidedly rural region. Macedonia was the city's oldest Black church, founded by the Reverend Charles Anderson as Macedonia First African Baptist Church in 1865. At times, Thomas also preached at St. James Baptist Church. He and Rozena—who found her own calling as a successful religious playwright—became the parents of two children: James, born in 1899, and Sarah, born in 1901.<sup>1</sup>

Valdosta was founded one month after the election of Abraham Lincoln and four months before Georgia's secession. After the war, the town emerged as a cotton farming hub for southwest Georgia, as most former slaves in the region turned to sharecropping to survive. To help farming and industry develop and thrive, it also became the convict leasing capital of the area: Kinderlou Plantation, located just outside Valdosta's city limits, was a particularly brutal prison labor camp and staging ground for the leasing of thousands of victims of the white South's new version of slavery.<sup>2</sup>

It was a galling, overtly racist use of the criminal justice system, and it was a standard of the Deep South white supremacy that enveloped the

Lomax family. But in cases where race was ancillary to the outcome of a criminal decision, Valdosta demonstrated that it could be at least occasionally responsive to Black voices. Historian Bill Boyd describes a 1905 murder-for-hire trial where the prosecution hinged on the testimony of Alf Moore, a Black farmworker from Tennessee. Moore had been asked to commit the crime, refused, and then watched the machinations that ultimately led to the murder. Though he was not the only witness, Moore provided the sole eyewitness account, which proved to be convincing even after he was cross-examined by defense attorneys who tried to use his race to invalidate his testimony. The defendants—a white father and son—were convicted of capital murder and hanged in the prison across the street from the Lowndes County Courthouse, just blocks from the pulpit at Macedonia. “It may have been the first time in Georgia history,” Boyd explains, “that the testimony of a Black man put a white man on the gallows.”<sup>3</sup>

Valdosta’s version of Jim Crow, though oppressive and overarching, still left spaces for the testimony of a witness like Moore and the growth and development of a family like the Lomaxes. As a teenager, Sarah traveled to Macon to begin teaching at Central City College, an institution founded in 1899 by Georgia’s Missionary Baptist Convention, which provided high school and collegiate education, as well as religious instruction, to Black students from the central and southern parts of the state.<sup>4</sup> There Sarah met and fell in love with Emanuel Curtis Smith, a native of Warren County, Georgia. Although the Lomaxes disapproved, the two had a whirlwind romance and were married in Macon on 18 May 1920, when Sarah was nineteen and Emanuel was twenty-two. But two years later, when a pregnant Sarah returned to Valdosta, she was alone.<sup>5</sup>

The pregnancy was difficult for Sarah, in poor health and abandoned by her husband. She died on August 25, nine days after giving birth to a son. She named the child Louis Emanuel Lomax, combining a masculine version of her own middle name—Louise—with his father’s first name. Yet that father had already run away, back to his hometown, before moving to Abbeville, Georgia, where he worked in the Wilcox County school system. His firstborn son never mentioned him publicly or in correspondence, and there is no evidence that the two ever had any contact. Louis’s last name was that of his mother’s family, which took over the responsibility of raising him when he was just days old.<sup>6</sup>

Four years before Lomax’s birth, southwest Georgia had permanently earned a national reputation for white supremacist violence. After planta-

tion owner Hampton Smith was killed by one of his debt peonage workers for poor treatment, a manhunt instigated by civilians and law enforcement generated a ruthless race riot in both Lowndes and neighboring Brooks counties, with white mobs killing at least thirteen people and no one held accountable for the rampage. One of those murdered was the husband of Mary Turner, eight months pregnant, who threatened to swear out warrants against her husband's killers. The NAACP reported that in response, another mob captured her, took her to the county line, and hung her by her ankles. They poured gasoline on her and lit the flame. They cut open her abdomen, pulled out her fetus, and stomped it into oblivion, before riddling the body with bullets. Three days later, the police found and killed the murderer of Hampton Smith, leaving the body for another mob to remove its genitals and drag it to a neighboring town, where they held a public burning.<sup>7</sup>

The legacy of this violence hung heavily over the town and helped to make Valdosta a cloistered, racially restrictive place for a boy to grow up. Young Louis was raised in the Lomax home with his grandparents; his Uncle James, now Thomas and Rozena's only living child, also lived on the property while beginning a teaching career (figure 1.1).<sup>8</sup> "Humor and sorrow are allies, opposite sides of the same coin," Lomax wrote as an adult;

Three incidents of my early youth made me painfully aware of this ambivalence. There was a deacon in my grandfather's church who used to break into gales of laughter while shouting. I would watch his face as he shouted, "Hallelujah, ha, ha, ha," and saw in its contortions the betrayal of inner stress.

And there was also the day my Uncle James (who was a Baptist minister and principal of the Negro school) lectured us about the fact that Negroes "laughed at the wrong time." Uncle was irked because we had laughed during the film "Imitation of Life." What tickled us was Peola, the light-skinned Negro girl who passed for white and then confessed all at the funeral of her dark mother whom she had mistreated.

The third incident involved turnabout but the motivation was the same. I was delivering groceries; my bicycle turned over, threw me to the ground, and my hand was badly crushed by the loaded wooden box. The accident sent a white woman into hysterical laughter—perhaps not unlike that of the shouting Negro deacon. She called to her next door neighbor to come out and see the bleeding nigger!<sup>9</sup>



FIGURE 1.1 — Lomax's grandfather standing in front of the family home in Valdosta, Georgia. COURTESY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO. ITEM 82-30-8-4-1-1.

Such was the climate as Lomax grew up in Depression-era Valdosta. African American urban unemployment rose to 50 percent in the early 1930s. Black unemployment hovered at twice the full national average throughout the decade. Those who did have jobs were paid substantially less than their white counterparts for the same work. In the North, approximately half of all Black families received some form of Depression relief. Conditions were even worse in the South. Throughout the first decade of the Depression, one-fourth of all southerners were tenants or sharecroppers, as were half of all southern farmers, and by June 1932, farm prices had dropped to 52 percent of the 1909–1914 average. At the same time, farmers paid taxes that were 166 percent higher than in 1914. Southwest Georgia fell squarely along those statistical lines, exacerbating both the poverty and the racial animus that existed in the region. Lynching numbers declined in the 1930s, but only because white southerners used less noticeable methods of racial control.<sup>10</sup>

“When I was eight years old,” Lomax recalled, “a white man ordered his bulldog to attack me simply because I was a Negro.” A wealthy white family came out of a nearby house and chased away the white man, demonstrating the class divisions in the town and the politics of respectability

that governed Deep South relationships. “Valdostans, like most people, are children of fixity; as individuals and as a tribe they find a crag, a limb, a spot of earth—physical or emotional or both—and they cling on for dear life,” Lomax explained. “They change without growing, and the more they change the more they remain the same. What frightens them, as with most people, is the sudden discovery that what they are—how they have lived all their lives—stands somehow in the path of history and of progress.”<sup>11</sup>

Valdosta did, however, have space for Black success. Rozena became a prominent figure in Valdosta, the wife of a well-known minister. Along with authoring religious plays, she had more political duties, as her grandson later explained:

On that day, almost thirty years ago, when my grandmother was placed in charge of issuing Federal relief to Negroes in our small South Georgia town, I began to understand our national purpose.

As an eight year old I watched that long line of black people snake its way across our front porch in search of food, clothing and comfort, and I did not need erudite scholars to spell out our national goals; after a day of passing out relief bundles I went to grandfather’s church and heard people sing, “I know God’s got the power because we’re eating government flour,” and I knew once and for all that God, whatever he is, and government, whatever that is, somehow fuse in the destiny of a people.

Then, ten years later, I covered my first major story: The funeral of a lynch victim. With that, my concept of our national purpose was complete.

Now that I look at a world pained by hunger and troubled by aggrieved black men it is as if the sorry scenes of my childhood and early manhood are set again—this time on a worldwide canvas.<sup>12</sup>

Lomax was shaped by the distinct nature of the racism of southwest Georgia, and that racism became the lens through which he viewed the national and international injustices upon which he would comment throughout his life.

Another time during his Valdosta youth, Lomax “attended the church of a Negro minister who had been cornered by a group of young white hoodlums and made to dance in the street” because the whites were offended that the minister was so well dressed. It was the common kind of incident that reinforced notions of inferiority and difference, both in the preacher and in the young man who witnessed the ordeal.<sup>13</sup>



In November 1933, just after Louis's eleventh birthday, after years of relief work and religion, the family matriarch and the woman who had raised him for his first decade, Rozena, died at the age of fifty-eight. Because her husband, Thomas, was already seventy, young Louis was left in the care of his Uncle James and James's wife, Fannie.<sup>14</sup>

Having previously worked as a Pullman car porter, James Leonidas Lomax began to follow his real passion, education, in the early 1920s, just before the birth of his nephew, when he became a teacher and principal at Magnolia Street School in Valdosta. Fannie was also a public schoolteacher. In 1929, the city opened Dasher High School, and Lomax became its principal. He was described as "a stern disciplinarian, yet a kind and gentle humanitarian." When he wore "a dark blue suit to school, teachers and students stayed out of his pathway." James brought that same combination of discipline and empathy to the job of raising his nephew.<sup>15</sup>

He and Fannie devoted themselves to Louis's education, privately tutoring him in addition to his regular schoolwork, instilling in him an interest in literature and writing and requiring him to memorize Bible passages and classical poetry. "The sin in the Lomax home," Louis remembered, "was to use bad English."<sup>16</sup>

Such sins were part of a politics of respectability that helped define educated middle- and upper-class Black families in Georgia. In Atlanta, for example, organizations developed such as Lugenia Burns Hope's Atlanta Neighborhood Union, a group of upper- and upper-middle-class Black female volunteers who provided social work services for those in need. At the same time, however, such groups demonstrated a clear separation between the social classes, an insulation of those in Black Atlanta who did not need monthly relief checks. Hope was the wife of Morehouse College president John Hope. Her Neighborhood Union performed necessary work to assist underprivileged people, but that aid provided its own version of paternalistic control. In teaching home care to working-class citizens, sponsoring health classes, and fighting against prostitution, the group set the terms by which they offered assistance and thus drew significant distinctions between the classes. The economic gap between classes was less stark in Valdosta than in Atlanta, but the politics of respectability nonetheless succeeded in creating separations. In the absence of money, education and manners served to draw such lines for families like the Lomaxes.<sup>17</sup>

Those lines could and did cause problems. Lomax related that a Black woman who attended Macedonia was once "slapped by a white chain-store

manager because she picked over some fruit and then refused to buy it.” There were discussions in the community about boycotting the store, “but there was never any suggestion that we take our trade to the Negro merchants, whose prices were a third higher than those in the chain store.”<sup>18</sup>

As a teenager at Dasher High School in the mid-1930s, Lomax entered a “contributors’ contest” in the *Valdosta Daily Times* that asked readers to submit interesting stories about south Georgia history. Lomax wrote a story about a group of “pranksters” who panicked the town by dousing a vulture in gasoline, setting it on fire, and freeing it to fly over town. It was his first byline.<sup>19</sup>

In his strict, disciplined household, however, bylines were not enough. Louis also had to work. “I shined shoes and mopped the floors in a barber shop where the white owner used to pat his feet, chanting, ‘Mop, Nigger, Mop,’ when I was fifteen years old,” Lomax recalled in 1965. “But I was earning money for college, and the barber’s sons were eighteen years old and couldn’t read or write. I made up my mind, then and there I would come back to Georgia one day. Last November I did, as the only man, black, blue, green, or yellow from that city to be listed in ‘Who’s Who in America.’ And the mayor was at the airport to meet me.”<sup>20</sup>

Among Lomax’s classmates at Dasher High School was Charlie Mae Knight, who attended Macedonia Church along with Louis and other future leaders, including Ossie Davis, five years older than Lomax, from nearby Clinch County. Knight credited Macedonia and Thomas Lomax with instilling in all three of them a strong social conscience that would play out in different ways through the course of their lives. “Many were the times white people would come to our church,” Lomax remembered. “We would give them the front seats and they enjoyed themselves as our ministers held forth about Moses using the rod to part the waters of the Red Sea. More than once the minister would go on to suggest that there were some ‘black Moseses’ in the making and I wondered even then if white people knew what we were really talking about.”<sup>21</sup>

Their environment required the kinds of performances that created actors and journalists. “During the summer between my freshman and sophomore years in college, I worked as an orderly at the Little-Griffin Hospital in Valdosta, Georgia,” Lomax later explained.

My first duty each morning was to put chairs in the hallway leading to Dr. Griffin’s office. By nine-thirty these chairs would be filled with white ladies seeking the services of the best known gynecologist in

south Georgia. For a Negro woman to be treated by Dr. Griffin, and in his office at that, was unthinkable.

I was out in the hospital yard raking leaves one morning when Sister Lucy—a woman of middle age and a stalwart member of my grandfather's church—came strolling up carrying a Jewel lard bucket filled with fresh eggs.

"Mornin,' Louis."

"Howdy, Sister Lucy."

"That Dr. Griffin," she said pointing to the hospital, "he there?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you, Jesus," Sister Lucy intoned, "cause I needs treatin'."

This I had to see. I followed Sister Lucy as she made her way through the back door of the hospital and into the corridor leading to Dr. Griffin's office.

"Mornin,' daughter," Sister Lucy beamed to the first white woman in line. "Why you here? You gonna have another baby?"

"Ain't three enough, Lucy?" the woman asked, beginning to laugh.

"Honey, I had two and that enough for me!"

The corridor rang with laughter and Sister Lucy walked past the next eight women in line.

"How's that husband of yours?" Sister Lucy asked, leaning over a woman at the head of the line.

"He's fine, Lucy. How you?"

"Praise God, I'm fine! You know, I brought that husband of yours into this world."

"I'm gonna tell him I saw you, Lucy."

"You do that and the Lord'll bless you." With this, Sister Lucy had made her way to Dr. Griffin's secretary-nurse.

"Is Dr. Griffin in there?" Lucy asked, widening her eyes with expectation.

"Yes, Lucy, he's there. How you?"

"With the help of Jesus, I'll make it."

Dr. Griffin's office door opened, a patient walked out, Sister Lucy walked in. Whatever was wrong with Sister Lucy, Dr. Griffin fixed it. He was paid with a Jewel lard bucket full of eggs. Sister Lucy made her way back down the hall laughing and joking with the waiting women.

"Give the preacher my prayers when you get home," she said to me, once we were again out in the back yard. Then she added, almost in an undertone, "Lord, honey, white folks sure are foolish!"<sup>22</sup>