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New Negroes at the Beach: At Work and Play outside the Black Metropolis

ANDREW W. KAHRL

On May 10, 1921, a ship carrying bananas from Jamaica docked at the port of Baltimore. Among its passengers was Austine Scarlett, a young Jamaican man who had stowed away in the ship's hull. Liberated from his native island's colonial-ruled peonage economy and dropped onto the streets of this burgeoning black metropolis, Scarlett steadily—and ruthlessly—built his own underground empire on the profits of the city's "numbers" trade, rising to become, by the 1940s, one of the city's most powerful, feared, and despised urban kingpins and a major dealer in real estate in black Baltimore. Eight years after Scarlett arrived in the United States, William L. Adams, a fifteen-year-old sharecropper's son from the cotton fields of eastern North Carolina, boarded a train bound for Baltimore. Like Scarlett, Adams's journey from the fields to the streets began on the Baltimore waterfront, where, as a teenager, he worked various odd jobs on the docks, carefully saving what little earnings he could muster and plotting his entry into the city's thriving numbers trade. Within years, the kid from Carolina had become "Little Willie," the numbers bookie, nightclub owner, prolific buyer of slum real estate, and invisible ruler over a vast network of businesses in northwest Baltimore.

No sooner had Scarlett and Adams conquered the city streets than they cast their eyes toward the country, specifically, the rolling hills and quiet shores of rural Maryland. In 1944, Adams's syndicate began acquiring real estate on a small peninsula near Annapolis, Maryland, where they constructed rustic summer cabins for themselves and invested heavily in the commercial development of Carr's Beach, a small, family-owned beach resort that catered to African American groups and families denied access to other spots along the shore. Scarlett, meanwhile, purchased 123 acres of farmland near the sleepy village of Westminster, in Carroll County, Maryland, in 1947, where, along with tending to a working farm consisting of sixty-two milking cows and herds of pigs and hogs, he invested over one hundred thousand dollars toward the construction of a swanky country club for

the East Coast's select set, and where he began making plans to retire from the streets and become a "gentleman farmer." Both were confident of the lucrative potential of their enterprises and of their ability to attract urban black pleasure seekers to spend their weekends (and their leisure dollars) in rural Maryland.

And both numbers kings left behind a trail of paper slips that, until now, historians have neglected to follow. During the 1930s, operators of illegal lotteries made significant investments in black-owned businesses and fledgling institutions that were struggling to weather the Great Depression and circumvent the institutionalized discrimination of lending institutions. As they did, numbers kings became prominent businessmen and celebrated race leaders. By the early 1940s, Baltimore's major numbers kings had a financial stake in numerous black-owned businesses as well as residential and commercial properties in the city. Their increasingly diverse business portfolios spoke to numbers kings' dreams of transitioning into legal, and respectable, enterprises. But whereas they had carried these dreams with them on their journey from the country to the city decades earlier, it was not until the postwar years that the profits accumulated from illicit economies began to extend outside the city, as the changing tastes and outlooks of a critical mass of urban black consumers made large-scale investments in rural real estate and commercial enterprises seem profitable, and as federal, state, and local anticrime and anti-vice waves hastened urban kingpins' efforts to launder their earnings and transition (at least publicly) into "legitimate" trades.

The reintegration of "the countryside" (as both place and idea) into our understanding of "the city" in twentieth-century America is long overdue. As the historians Andrew Needham and Allen Dieterich-Ward note, "for most urban historians, even those interested in the development of the suburbs, rural areas remain undifferentiated 'green spaces' on the map that are of little importance until they are suddenly transformed into full-fledged members of the metropolis by the arrival of the first subdivision."¹ With rare exceptions, these rural landscapes barely register at all in scholarship on and popular culture representations of the twentieth-century African American experience.² Instead, the dusty, country roads of rural America usually figure (if at all) as merely a foil for the bustling streets of the city. For early-twentieth-century migrants, it was the site of their ancestors' literal and their own virtual enslavement, a place where generations of black Americans learned, as Eldridge Cleaver famously put it, "to hate the land" and from which they sought deliverance in the slums and ghettos of northern cities.³ Or, conversely, the rural South conjured a set of comforting images that assuaged, if only momentarily, feelings of dislocation, as when Ralph Ellison's invisible man is transported back to his homeland by the whiff of hot yams being sold by a New York City street vendor.⁴ For mid-twentieth-century white liberals searching for ways to alleviate the "urban crisis" that African Americans' mass

exodus from the rural South had supposedly wrought, the countryside was the land of “fresh air,” where the hardened souls of urban black youth could be rejuvenated for a few weeks each summer before being deposited back in dying cities. Today, if popular culture is any guide, rural America might as well be a foreign country to many urban black youths, a place many only come to know through the caged windows of a bus on their way to a state or federal penitentiary. Two scenes from the acclaimed series *The Wire* capture popular understandings of urban blacks’ relationship with the lands beyond the urban core well. In one episode, a character is assigned a job that requires him to drive from Baltimore to Philadelphia, during which he is surprised to learn that Baltimore radio signals fade as one leaves the city, himself having never left Baltimore in his life. In another episode, a police lieutenant relocates a teenager whose cooperation in a drug investigation makes him a target of gang members to his grandmother’s house in rural Prince George’s County. For the character, the prospect of being felled by an assassin’s bullet on the streets seems almost preferable to dying of boredom out in the country. “The air down here all sticky. Worse than Baltimore, yo. And these crickets, louder than a motherfuck. Can’t get no sleep. I don’t think I’m cut out to be no country-ass nigga, man.”⁵

Black Baltimoreans’ investment in and relationship with Maryland’s rural countryside, in the age of the New Negro, challenge such static, one-dimensional depictions of the country in the city—and the city in the country. It also forces a more fundamental reassessment of the cultural politics associated with the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro. The seeming incongruity of New Negroes of the black metropolis in the countryside (both then and now) has tended to be replicated in the historical record, where the term *New Negro* and the Harlem Renaissance phenomenon have become synonymous with urbane lifestyles, radical politics, and a more fundamental rejection of a culture of American capitalism that had locked persons of color in a vicious cycle of deprivation and ostracism for centuries. In this reading, persons such as Scarlett and Adams curiously figure as exemplars of resistance to that order, their lives held as examples to both contemporaries and future generations of the alternatives to wage labor awaiting those urban migrants with the pluck and guile to thumb their noses at both the law and self-proclaimed black cultural authorities and to stake out their own paths to liberation.

This essay traces African Americans’ attempts to develop rural black beaches, country clubs, and leisure-based enterprises in and around the Baltimore metropolitan area from the 1920s to post-World War II. In so doing, it offers a different reading of urban black Americans’ evolving relationship with American capitalism during a time when the nation’s economy was undergoing its own transformation—from one grounded in industrial production to one increasingly

geared toward facilitating and servicing pleasure and consumption. From this vantage, Scarlett and Adams can be understood to exemplify, without contradiction, the New Negro generations' new visions of blackness and efforts to claim a new place in a global community as well as the values, markers of success, and notions of the "good life" normally associated with upper-class white America at this time—among others, a spacious country estate, membership in a country club, and a summer cottage on the shore. Rather than the world of "make-believe" E. Franklin Frazier disparaged in his polemic *The Black Bourgeoisie*, these places and the people who made them were the product of a ruthless culture of acquisitive capitalism forged on the streets of the black metropolis and conducted via informal economies that operated on the margins of the law and "respectable," middle-class black society.⁶ By interrogating the origins of the enterprises and institutions that nourished the rise of a postwar black middle class—by, in other words, following the money—we can begin to see that the New Negro of the 1920s and 1930s did not succumb to the forces of a more consumption-oriented and "moderate" black politics in the postwar era but, in many respects, laid the groundwork and provided the institutional foundations for it to flourish.

In early-twentieth-century cities, one of the clearest indicators of class status in the black community was the ability to *leave* the city during the summer months. Although churches and social clubs arranged annual train and riverboat excursions that temporarily removed passengers from the city and briefly reunited some of them with family members back home, extended sojourns into the rural countryside were a pleasure enjoyed by a select few black Americans. Being able to spend time in quiet rustic retreats, and being there as vacationers and not as laborers, was often cited by leading race men and women as a telltale sign of a rising race. The acquisition and use of rural lands for the pleasure of black Americans were treated both as a racial imperative and, for rural black landowners, as a potentially profitable venture.⁷ A southern border city, Baltimore, Maryland, had one of the nation's largest urban black populations throughout the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries. As late as 1930, Baltimore had the fourth largest urban African American population in the nation, behind only New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. For many newcomers to Baltimore and other burgeoning black metropolises, the ability to travel outside of the city, and to venture into the country as a visitor and under one's own volition, was fundamental to their process of becoming free and, by extension, becoming urban. As a result, black-owned and operated summer boardinghouses and sea- and lakeside resorts grew during these years, especially in the mid-Atlantic and Chesapeake states, which had both a comparatively large number of urban African American communities and black rural landowners. Along with summer seaside villages founded by

Washington's and Baltimore's "aristocrats of color" along Maryland's western shore were African American owners of property in ideally situated spots in the mountains or by the Chesapeake, who turned their homes into makeshift hotels during the summer months. In a tucked-away section of Maryland's western shore known as Shadyside, for instance, lived a cluster of black landowners whose presence in the area dated back to the early days of freedom. By the early 1900s, this area had emerged as a popular destination for black travelers, in the process turning struggling, mostly subsistence farm families into part-time hoteliers and incorporating them, albeit slightly, into emergent leisure market economies.⁸

The acquisition and commercial development of rural leisure spaces came to occupy a prominent place in early-twentieth-century black capitalist ideology and an urban spatial imaginary.⁹ In Baltimore and other mid-Atlantic cities, scores of entrepreneurial black men acquired excursion steamboats and real estate hugging the shores of the Chesapeake and Potomac, where they worked to build business empires on the pennies of pleasure seekers who were segregated from white-owned commercial amusements.¹⁰ The extent of black investment in real estate and recreation and amusement enterprises offered a telling snapshot of the state of black business as a whole. Seeking to take advantage of the opportunities created by a Jim Crow marketplace, and lacking the capital, connections, or market to sustain large-scale commercial and industrial development, real estate speculation and amusement enterprises, as Abram Harris, in his 1936 study *The Negro as Capitalist*, found, served as two of the main arenas of black business activity. At the same time, real estate and recreational enterprises constituted much of the capital assets held by fledgling black-owned lending institutions such as Baltimore's Taylor and Jenkins Bank.¹¹

The sorry state of black-owned banks and the skewed, limited nature of black business activity were two related and reinforcing manifestations of African Americans' lack of capital and unequal access to credit. From this void, operators of illicit trades emerged to become prominent businessmen and increasingly exalted figures of the black metropolis. Though its name and the rules governing its operation varied by city (in Chicago it was called "policy," in Miami "bolita"), the core characteristics of the "numbers" was fairly consistent across urban America and differed only in degree from what Americans today call the "lottery."¹² Each morning, numbers runners passed through barbershops, beauty salons, groceries, and other storefronts in black neighborhoods, collecting nickels and quarters from bettors wagering on three-number combinations. To avoid charges of tampering, the more reputable books pegged winning numbers to the Federal Reserve daily closing number or another published figure.¹³

The popularity of lotteries in urban centers long predated African American urbanization. Lotteries were a common and popular feature of nineteenth-

century working-class and immigrant urban neighborhoods and, like today, offered struggling individuals hope of instant material gain at little cost, even as it steadily drained them of their earnings. More than a pastime, playing the numbers became, for many living paycheck to paycheck, an investment strategy. In their appropriation of numbers generated by stock exchanges and other formal outlets of economic activity, urban lotteries were similar to other contemporary forms of gambling, such as the ubiquitous “bucket shops” that were located in the shadows of the Chicago Board of Trade and New York Stock Exchange, where individuals who did not possess the capital to invest in stocks wagered on the price movements of stocks and commodities.¹⁴ Given the volatility and endemic corruption of stock exchanges during this era, the line separating real and fictitious investments was, for most, indistinct, which made, as Ann Fabian notes, the stigmatization of lotteries and off-the-books speculation an important aspect of the domestication of modern capitalism.¹⁵

By the 1890s, most states had outlawed lotteries. The suppression of nonsanctioned forms of gambling was one manifestation of a broader set of Progressive reforms sweeping across urban America. As other scholars have argued, early-twentieth-century urban Progressivism did not so much neglect the needs of black migrant communities as construct them as the contrast by which white ethnic immigrant assimilation would be gauged. What the historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad called the “condemnation of blackness” found its clearest expression in the spatial confinement of African Americans to racially defined sections of the city through public policy and private real estate industry practices and, moreover, the concentration and tacit acceptance of vice in these sections of the city.¹⁶ Progressive reforms set in motion self-perpetuating stigmas of ghettoized urban African Americans that would come to profoundly shape the struggle for equality in twentieth-century America. The convergence here between race and urban space also indelibly reshaped the structure of black urban economies—creating opportunities for ambitious and entrepreneurial black businessmen and businesswomen to amass profits from illicit trades, generating numerous jobs and facilitating the extension of credit to fledgling black-owned businesses—and the culture of black urban life. In their monumental study of black Chicago, the sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton noted that, in 1938, three of the city’s numerous black-run policy companies generated an average of \$3,023 in weekly profits, while dispensing \$25,885.25 in weekly wages to a vast army of employees that included clerks, pickup and delivery men, doormen, bookkeepers, and bouncers.¹⁷ The game’s popularity also spawned subsidiary industries in fortune-telling and dream books.¹⁸ And in times of official repression, operators of illegal lotteries fled into the countryside, beyond city limits, to conduct their trade. In Chicago, for instance, policy drawings were often conducted, as Drake

and Cayton found, "in the open fields and woods in the suburbs of the city."¹⁹

As the profits illegal urban lotteries generated grew alongside urban populations in the early twentieth century, their operators increasingly came out of the woods (both literally and figuratively). By the 1920s, the larger numbers books in many northern cities had become what Drake and Cayton described as "protected businesses." While illegal, the game operated "under the benevolent patronage of the city political machines." This was certainly the case in Baltimore, where the city's large Roman Catholic and immigrant population blunted the more repressive excesses of Progressivism (indeed, the state of Maryland openly flaunted Prohibition and established its own agency to regulate liquor sales) and contributed to a cozy relationship between public officials and vice peddlers.

One of Baltimore's first, and most powerful, African American numbers kings was Thomas R. Smith. Smith's entry into the business was facilitated by his work as a loyal operative for the state's Democratic Party. After serving a prison sentence for tampering with ballot boxes in the 1895 election, Smith was awarded control over a numbers book by his friends in City Hall, which he continued to operate with impunity in exchange for helping to depress African American turnout for Republican candidates each election season.²⁰ With his earnings and access to power, Smith invested in hospitality and real estate, opening, in 1913, a twenty-six-room hotel on Druid Hill Avenue and, in 1921, founding the Smith Realty Company.

Investment in slum properties had a metastasizing effect on Smith and future numbers kings' wealth. With the introduction of racial zoning and neighborhood covenants during the earliest waves of black migration into Baltimore, a "dual housing market" took shape, forcing African Americans to pay grossly inflated rents on inferior housing. The private and loosely coordinated actions of early-twentieth-century real estate markets were, in the New Deal era, incorporated into federal policy, leading to the formation of what Arnold Hirsch called the "second ghetto." In both the first and second ghettos, owners of slum properties amassed fortunes from these structural inequalities.²¹ The historian N. D. B. Connolly estimates that in Jim Crow Baltimore, an investor in slum real estate could expect between a 27 and 60 percent annual return on an investment.²² Numbers kings and black capitalists who accumulated profits from urban vice were among the earliest, and most extensive, African American owners of slum real estate. Their exploitation of the black working poor through slum real estate was less an indicator of lack of conscience and more a product of the nature of their business, which required the quick laundering of profits through investment in illiquid assets. Given that African American owners of real estate in slum districts were often buying property from whites and second-generation immigrants, their accumulation of property (and the largesse that flowed from it) were seen by many

as ironic, but nevertheless positive, developments in the struggle for economic empowerment and cultural self-determination.

While Smith built a part of his fortune from poor housing stock in the city, he gratified his achievements out in the country. In 1917, Smith purchased several acres and built a country home outside the city on Reisterstown Road.²³ There he and his wife, Jessie, hosted elaborate parties, in which guests came "attractively attired in picture hats and gaily colored afternoon frocks, [and] played Auction Bridge on the spacious lawn."²⁴ Upon his death in 1938, over fifteen hundred people flocked to the country estate for his funeral, which was held inside the mansion and broadcast over a loudspeaker to an overflow crowd situated on the front lawn. U.S. senator George Radcliffe, Democrat of Maryland, delivered Smith's eulogy. The spectacle of hundreds of automobiles parked alongside a rural country road to mourn one of the city's leading black figures overshadowed the fact that only on the outskirts of the racially zoned and covenanted city could Smith have hoped to live in such luxury.²⁵

Of more immediate significance than their symbolic stature as successful black businessmen was the financial support numbers bankers provided to others. As their profits mounted, numbers kings dispensed loans to black-owned businesses turned away by discriminatory lending institutions and made donations to fraternal orders, churches, and charitable institutions. "Access to black policy dollars," Juliet E. K. Walker, the foremost scholar on African American business history, notes, "provided black communities with a privately funded, informal cash subsidy, which was used as venture capital in the promotion and support of black business."²⁶ The most admired numbers kings earned a reputation for generosity and race loyalty that transcended cold economic calculations. In Baltimore, Smith was rumored to have owned mortgages on over 50 percent of the city's African American churches and kept deposits in unsteady black-owned banks long after others had withdrawn their savings. Indeed, the nickels and quarters bettors handed over to numbers runners recirculated back into local communities and touched every facet of urban social and institutional life.

This was never more true than as the nation slid into the Great Depression. As unemployment soared in the early 1930s, undercapitalized African American businesses and institutions desperately clung to life. In many urban black neighborhoods, only the depression-proof numbers game continued to generate healthy profits and provide jobs and hope for workers and players alike. Black capitalists and entrepreneurs turned to numbers kings for loans to keep their fledgling enterprises afloat. As baseball historian Adrian Burgos Jr. noted, numbers kings almost single-handedly kept Negro League baseball franchises in operation during the 1930s.²⁷ The Great Depression augmented numbers kings' power and stature within the black metropolis, provided them with the opportunity to

expand their business holdings into the licit economy, and furthered their quest to become respectable businessmen.²⁸ Indeed, persons who had once operated in the shadows, on the margins of society, were by the 1930s feted as local heroes and called on to officiate ceremonies, march in parades, and toss out the opening pitch at Negro League baseball games.²⁹

Shortly after Thomas R. Smith's death, his brother Wallace, who inherited his numbers book and other enterprises, was gunned down in front of one of his storefronts on Druid Hill Avenue. Wallace's short reign and violent end were indicative of the increased competition that accompanied the growth of the city's African American population and black commercial sector during these years. By the late 1930s, the growing number of storefronts, bars, nightclubs, and social institutions that lined black Baltimore's Main Street, Pennsylvania Avenue, were effectively funded by numbers dollars and operated by a host of competing syndicates. In Baltimore, the New Negro was coming into her and his own—culturally and economically—during a time that historians often label as the twilight of the Harlem Renaissance. The rise of William L. "Little Willie" Adams signaled their arrival. At the time of Smith's death, Adams had accumulated enough income running a small numbers book to open a tavern on Druid Hill Avenue. Following Smith's death, Adams worked to consolidate control over portions of Smith's former turf. He successfully repelled the incursion of white mobsters from Philadelphia, withstanding the bombing of his tavern in 1938 and apparently retaliating in kind. In the years that followed, he quickly expanded his gambling operations, putting several smaller books out of operation or bringing their operators under his control. At its height, Adams's syndicate handled daily receipts well in excess of five thousand dollars (Figure 14.1).³⁰

Adams dexterously used the power of his purse to consolidate his control over commerce in northwest Baltimore. A master of the Jim Crow marketplace, Adams dangled before black men and women denied loans from formal lending institutions the opportunity to access the capital necessary to start or grow their own businesses. In return, borrowers handed Adams a 51 percent stake in their companies.³¹ "He gave out lots of loans" to fledgling black-owned businesses, one person said of Adams. "But [before long] he owned the place."³² By the late 1940s, Adams's effective control over black-owned businesses in west Baltimore was extensive—and virtually untraceable. As one chronicler of black Baltimore wrote, while "hardly a black-owned tavern in west Baltimore was not part of [Adams's] empire . . . all his properties were listed in someone else's name."³³ By the postwar years, Adams's syndicate had an ownership stake in several nightclubs and saloons along Pennsylvania Avenue, most prominent among them the celebrated Club Casino.



FIGURE 14.1. William L. "Little Willie" Adams (third from right) and a group of associates leaving a Baltimore police station following the bombing of his tavern in 1938. Courtesy of the Afro-American Newspapers Archives and Research Center.

Adams was a cool, unassuming, and ruthlessly skillful black capitalist who embodied the more rural, southern inflection of Baltimore's urban culture. In contrast to popular depictions of urban gangsters, Adams exhibited little desire to take part in the high-rolling, big-timing lifestyle and instead conveyed a more gentlemanly, chivalrous manner. He dressed conservatively, drove a modest automobile, married a schoolteacher, and was rarely seen out on the town. Perhaps most importantly, while many of these new "barons blew their wealth bigtiming," the *Baltimore Afro-American* wrote, Adams "profited by others' experiences. [He] invest[ed] in property[.]"³⁴ Land records from the city of Baltimore during the 1940s indicate an almost direct relationship between Adams's ascendance to the top of the city's numbers business during these years and his investment in real estate in the predominantly black neighborhoods of the city's northwest.³⁵ For most black Baltimoreans, how Adams earned his money paled in comparison to what his success symbolized—and the tangible benefits it provided. Describing public attitudes toward Adams, *Afro-American* columnist Early Byrd wrote, "What we had in common is that we all wanted to be independent of a racist white society. That's why we admired men like 'Little Willie.'" ³⁶

Adams's business investments helped bring to Baltimore the styles, consumer

tastes, and cultural aesthetics that had characterized black life in Harlem and other northern cities over the previous decades. In 1948, Adams and his partners opened the Charm Center on Pennsylvania Avenue, the first high-end clothing store in the city where black women could try on the latest fashions and be treated with dignity and respect. Previously, black Baltimore women traveled as far north as Philadelphia and New York to shop in style. His wife, Victorine, managed the store and taught classes on social graces and etiquette to young black women. Some of Adams's other business investments contributed to the commercial commodification of black celebrities and entertainers, such as the Joe Louis Bottling Company, a line of soft drinks featuring the heavyweight champion and Adams's close friend and golfing partner.

The rise of mass culture, communication, and transportation not only linked black Baltimore to national and increasingly global networks but quite literally facilitated its expansion outside the physical boundaries of the metropolis. By the 1940s, the ability of black urbanites to leave the city was matched only by the relative dearth of places to which they could freely travel. Indeed, over the previous decades, exclusive black vacation retreats, such as Highland Beach, located outside Annapolis, Maryland, had waged an annual war against a seemingly endless parade of trucks and automobiles packed with "common" black folks from the city attempting to sneak onto "their" private beaches and enjoy an afternoon in the sun.³⁷

As early as the 1930s, numbers of African Americans owning beachfront property in proximity to urban centers opened their property to visitors and hosted outings for various churches and civic groups from the city. For blacks living in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, the Carr family's coastal property, located on the Annapolis Neck peninsula in Anne Arundel County, offered such an outlet for pleasure and relief. After inheriting the family's farm following their father's death in 1928, sisters Elizabeth Carr and Florence Sparrow began advertising summer boarding accommodations at the family's farmhouse and scheduling outings on their beach. Events at Carrs and Sparrows Beaches were enormously popular. On summer weekends, crowds swarmed around the charter buses that transported groups to the rural resort; by noon, the neighborhood associated with a certain group's outing fell silent and took on the resemblance of a ghost town. The beach steadily transitioned from group events to general admission and booked local and touring jazz bands and musicians for Sunday afternoon shows on the beach's pavilion.³⁸

It would not take long before the property's commercial potential caught the attention of a major capital investor such as Adams. In 1944, Adams and business partners Chandler Wynn, Askew Gatewood, John Neal, and Littleton Gamby formed the Oak Grove Beach Company and acquired several acres of waterfront

property adjacent to the Carr family's tract, where each built his own summer cabin. Called Elktonia Beach, the exclusive summer community signaled the arrival of black Baltimore capital on Anne Arundel County's shore. Following the death of Elizabeth Carr in 1948, Adams convinced Carr's son Frederick and his wife, Grace, to partner with Adams's syndicate in expanding the beach's commercial operations. Adams and his business partners subsequently formed the Carrs Beach Amusement Company and embarked on massive capital investment in the grounds. By 1951, the Carrs Beach Amusement Company had spent over \$150,000 in improvements to the site, which included a covered, open-air concert pavilion, the Club Bengazi nightclub (named after a well-known club in Washington, D.C., and managed by Chandler Wynn Jr., the son of one of Adams's closest associates), and a midway.³⁹

Similar to the storefronts that lined Pennsylvania and Druid Hill avenues, Adams had a financial stake in virtually every company conducting business on the beach and profited from every aboveboard transaction—from the gate receipts to the slot machines to the concessions. Adams's syndicate owned the music and entertainment equipment company that provided the nightclub and midway with vending machines, jukeboxes, pinball machines, and nickelodeons. It was his liquor wholesale business that stocked the bars at the music pavilion and nightclub. The Southern Maryland Novelty Company, another Adams-controlled enterprise, provided the rows of slot machines that lined the grounds and drew crowds by the busload.⁴⁰

By the early 1950s, Carrs Beach attracted a steady stream of big-name and local jazz and R&B acts for Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon shows. As the dollars of Baltimore's informal economy were invested in this rural outpost, the seasonality and spatiality of black cultural production changed. A distinctly black and urban summer culture took shape here, its production, dissemination, and commercialization closely tied to the situation of audience and performer outside of the city. This distinct rural habitus reverberated back into the city. On Sunday afternoons in the summer, Annapolis deejay Hoppy Adams broadcast live on WANN-AM in Annapolis, whose fifty-thousand-watt tower carried as far west as Ohio. At three o'clock in the afternoon on Sundays, Adams stepped onto the stage at Carrs Beach's pavilion while reaching the front stoops of homes, row houses, and public housing in Washington, D.C., Annapolis, and Baltimore.

The beach became not only a place but a disposition. It served as both a site and a symbol of pleasure, pride, and community and as a visible rebuke, inscribed in sand, of the markers of inferiority that polluted the landscape of Jim Crow America. It not only provided a new outlet but also gave new meaning to the cultural aesthetics of the New Negro. Whereas a generation earlier, adventurous whites went slumming into urban black districts seeking a glimpse of "the

Negro" in his "natural" habitat (in the process reinforcing notions of race, space, and blacks' proper "place"), rural beaches attracted large crowds of urban blacks into settings (and, more specifically, burgeoning real estate markets) that white landowners and coastal developers were anxious to color as "white." In a narrow sense, Carrs Beach posed little challenge to segregation, narrowly defined. (And indeed, segregationists would later point to these venues as evidence of blacks' desire for "separation.") But in a broader sense, it subtly and indirectly struck at the very foundations of white supremacy (grounded in notions of privilege that were quite literally written onto the landscape). The earnings generated and dreams of freedom hatched on the streets of Baltimore in the interwar years became the infrastructure and inspiration for the post-World War II freedom struggle. At Carrs Beach, urban blacks came to understand themselves as a people through pleasure and consumerism, and through claiming space outside of the metropolis. Both culturally and financially, the New Negro renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s was a living presence in the postwar metropolis.

Violent suppression of economic competition and strategic exploitation of African Americans' consumer habits were as much a product of the race-conscious, leisure-based marketplaces of the New Negro metropolis as notions of political solidarity and economic cooperation. And in this respect, others were less subtle than Adams in their adherence to the "dog eat dog" maxim of the streets. After arriving as a stowaway from Jamaica, Austin Scarlett fought his way to the top of northwest Baltimore's numbers business, along the way earning a reputation as arrogant, impetuous, and violently unpredictable (Figure 14.2). Whereas Adams was small, quiet, and unassuming, Scarlett was large (weighing over 250 pounds), loud, and intimidating. One profile described him as "perhaps the most disliked gambler ever to rise to power in Northwest Baltimore."⁴¹ Scarlett came to "the land of the fast buck," as he called the United States, to satisfy a thirst for material gain denied in his native homeland. The collapse of the British colony's sugar industry due to increased global competition in the late nineteenth century led to a massive exodus of workers to the Panama Canal Zone and the United States, followed shortly by the island's economic reorientation around the cultivation and shipment of bananas to markets on the U.S. East Coast. As international fruit magnates consolidated control over the land and established large-scale plantations, the Jamaican peasantry became increasingly trapped in debt peonage, with few prospects to own land or become economically independent of the island's system of wage slavery.⁴² By the early 1920s, worker riots sporadically erupted, while desperate conditions led to a flood of refugees sneaking onto outbound ships. Scarlett was one of untold numbers of Jamaicans who arrived in the United States via the port of Baltimore as a stowaway about a cargo ship. By the 1920s,



FIGURE 14.2. Austine Scarlett, one of the kingpins of black Baltimore's informal economy. Courtesy of the Afro-American Newspapers Archives and Research Center.

the capture and detainment of stowaways aboard ships bearing bananas and other produce from the West Indies had become so common that the *Baltimore Afro-American* commented, "All Jamaica seems to be trying to come to Baltimore[.]"⁴³

In Baltimore, Scarlett worked the streets but dreamed of the countryside. In 1947, he seemed to have turned the corner from gangster to businessman and from businessman to "gentleman farmer." After years of building wealth from investing in real estate in Baltimore's slums, Scarlett purchased a country estate near the small town of Westminster, in Carroll County, Maryland, located twenty-eight miles from Baltimore. The 123-acre property included a working dairy farm and came equipped with a swimming pool and horse stables. That fall and winter, Scarlett spent over one hundred thousand dollars on improvements to the house and grounds. The following spring, Scarlett's "lavish grounds . . . and swank country club" opened to the public.⁴⁴ In photographs of Scarlett's Country Club,



FIGURE 14.3. View of the grounds of Austine Scarlett's Country Club. Courtesy of the Afro-American Newspapers Archives and Research Center.

fashionably dressed young women dip their toes in the club's swimming pool (Figure 14.3). Groups of young black men lounged under the umbrella-covered tables or gathered on the back porch that looked out on the rolling countryside. Others played badminton on lawn tennis courts or rode bikes around the property. A couple from Camden, New Jersey, enjoyed their honeymoon there, decamping in one of the "finely-appointed guest houses" on the ground.⁴⁵ It quickly became a chief summer destination for high rollers on the East Coast. On weekends, one visitor later described, "the familiar rattle of the dice could be heard in the night. Shooting craps," the writer added, "was Scarlett's first love."⁴⁶ Scarlett seemed intent on making the estate multifunctional and appealing to both the Saturday night high rollers and Sunday afternoon picnic crowds. After opening, Scarlett announced plans to open a summer youth camp that would afford urban kids the chance to spend a few days playing in the countryside, learning to milk cows, and other wholesome activities. Eventually, he also hoped to open a retirement home facility on the grounds.⁴⁷ The extent to which Scarlett's Country Club was simply a front for his numbers business, affording him a means of laundering his earnings, is unclear, although the ties between his legitimate and illicit business activities were evidenced by the club's staff, which consisted of business associates who would later be arrested on racketeering charges.⁴⁸

Whether blacks were rolling dice or riding bikes there, small-town and rural white neighbors in Carroll County did not welcome their presence and were alarmed at Scarlett's grandiose plans for the country club's future growth and development. No sooner had the ink dried on the deed than neighbors and local officials began applying pressure on Scarlett to abandon the venture and sell the

land. Among them was reportedly a wealthy neighbor whose close relative was a Baltimore police commissioner.⁴⁹ First, it seemed, they applied gentle pressure to the brash sportsman. Almost daily, Scarlett later said, neighbors or persons in the town of Westminster approached him and asked, "Scarlett, why don't you sell your farm?" and "Scarlett, you want to sell your farm?"⁵⁰ He later described having been subject to constant harassment by "white interests" who were irritated by "the presence of colored residents in the tiny town, living in such sumptuous quarters[.]"⁵¹

After Scarlett roundly rejected their entreaties, more forceful measures ensued. The opening of Scarlett's Country Club coincided with a wave of investigations into organized crime and racketeering in Baltimore and on the federal level, culminating in the formation of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce (aka the Kefauver Committee) in 1950.⁵² In a city (and state) where official corruption was endemic and the influence of organized crime on elected officials ubiquitous, it should come as no surprise that Baltimore's early 1950s antiracketeering hysteria resulted in selective investigations and targeted operations, with Scarlett at the top of vice squads' hit lists. In 1950, he was arrested and charged with criminal racketeering after a raid on the home of small-time numbers runner Rodger Wilkes turned up slips of paper bearing Scarlett's name. (On the basis of this flimsy evidence, Scarlett was subsequently acquitted of the charges.)⁵³ In 1951, the state's attorney, Anselm Sodoro, launched a grand jury investigation into organized crime in Baltimore, with the predominantly African American northwest section of the city at the center of the probe. All but six of the thirty-three persons summoned before the jury that summer were African American. Along with Scarlett, Willie Adams and several of his associates were called to testify. The city's black newspaper, the *Afro-American*, was quick to note that the racially biased nature of the city's investigation into organized crime paralleled that of other cities, "where the only individuals indicted as a result of the Senate probes have been colored operators[.]"⁵⁴

In particular, the paper highlighted the real estate acquisitions by both Scarlett and Adams that preceded their arrests. In November 1949, Adams challenged the city's residential color lines with his purchase of a modest home in the all-white Forest Hill neighborhood. Shortly thereafter, he was arrested as he approached the house of associate Walter Rouse two hours after police had commenced a raid on the home. (Adams, like Scarlett, escaped conviction of this charge.)⁵⁵ "It is no secret that white residents in the Carlisle Ave. section resented the Adamses moving into their neighborhood," the *Afro-American* wrote. "Also it is no secret that the white citizens, both in the county and the city, resented the fact that Austin Scarlett purchased the rolling farm lands in Westminster where he operates his exclusive country club, the only one of its kind in Maryland for colored citizens."⁵⁶

In September 1951, both Adams and Scarlett were charged by a Baltimore grand jury for operating an illegal lottery. Before his trial got under way, Adams secured a deal with federal prosecutors to testify before the Kefauver Committee in exchange for immunity from prosecution. Before the Senate committee, Adams claimed to have retired from the numbers trade and entered solely into legitimate business enterprises. Along with his extensive real estate holdings, Adams informed the committee of his ownership stakes in several black-owned businesses, including the Carr's Beach Amusement Park. (Following Adams's testimony, he was reindicted and convicted by a Baltimore jury; the U.S. Supreme Court, however, overturned the decision.) The large profits and enormous popularity of Carrs Beach throughout the 1950s and early 1960s exemplified Adams's successful transition from gangster to legitimate and respected businessman, while underscoring the role of real estate and commercial enterprises located outside urban ghettos in facilitating the rise of urban black capitalists and, by extension, the making of black popular culture.

Scarlett was not as fortunate as Adams. In August 1951, police arrested one of Scarlett's underlings, Horace Cann, on charges of operating an illegal lottery in an attempt to compel him to testify against his boss. Cann refused and was sentenced to six months in prison. In exchange for his silence, Scarlett promised to pay Cann's wife forty dollars a week during his imprisonment. When Scarlett failed to keep his promise, Cann contacted the state's attorney's office and said he was ready to "talk."⁵⁷ On the basis of Cann's testimony, Scarlett was convicted of numbers conspiracy in December 1951.⁵⁸ In June 1952, Scarlett was sentenced to seven years in the state penitentiary, a decision Judge E. Paul Mason said aimed to convey to the city's criminal syndicates that "big fish are beginning to fall into the net."⁵⁹ (The decision came two days after Adams's conviction.)

Following his conviction, the federal government seized Scarlett's assets, including the country club, for back taxes totaling more than sixty-five thousand dollars and quickly moved to sell the estate at public auction.⁶⁰ In response, Scarlett, according to a U.S. Treasury official, began "moving heaven and earth to keep the place[.]" calling on "a group of East Coast sportsmen" to round up the cash necessary to successfully bid on the property at public auction. The extensive coverage Scarlett's feverish attempts to save the country club received in the local black press suggests the extent to which this rural retreat was seen as intimately tied to a broader struggle for spatial self-determination and, as a place of pleasure and business (and the business of pleasure), was part of a larger web of social and economic relations.⁶¹ At auction, Scarlett's attorney, R. Palmer Ingram, purchased the sixteen acres that comprised the main buildings and swimming pool for thirty-four thousand dollars. Joseph Starner, described as a "prominent white Westminster cattleman," bought the eighty-two-acre farm for

twelve thousand dollars.⁶² The following week, over fifty bidders flocked to the auctioning of Scarlett's personal effects. On the front lawn of the former country club, cases of expensive whiskeys, high-end furniture, refrigerators, and electrical appliances were "sold for a song." A piano that Count Basie and Mary Lou Williams, among others, had played for summer crowds at the estate sold for two dollars. An "ultra-modern bedroom suite" that included a bed, vanity chest, bureau, and night table received the day's highest bid: \$154. The auctioneer even sold the house's kitchen sink—for ten cents. Several African American nightclub and tavern owners were in attendance; all walked away with new furnishings for their establishments at deep discounts.⁶³

After exhausting his appeals, on May 20, 1953, Scarlett surrendered to Baltimore County sheriffs and began serving his seven-year sentence. Months later, he was given the option of serving his entire sentence or being deported to his native Jamaica. Scarlett chose the latter. An account of the former kingpin's swift fall from grace said of its sad conclusion, "Scarlett, with dreams of his country club . . . yearned for the wide open spaces without bars or guards. He's going to get his wish, but he has got to go home to get it."⁶⁴

The determined effort to drive Scarlett and his well-heeled black clientele from Carroll County resembled countless numbers of cases over the previous decades of rural whites applying intimidation and brute force to drive out "uppity" Negroes and expropriate their property holdings. Black-owned commercial beaches and resorts, in particular, had been a specific target over the years. On one hand, the seizure of Scarlett's property and liquidation of his assets by the federal government reflected the evolution of land-based racism from crude acts of terrorism conducted by torch-bearing night riders to dispossession through the courts via tax law enforcement and selective criminal investigations. On the other hand, the concerted effort to keep New Negroes and the profits of urban informal economies out of Carroll County reflected more recent changes in the political economy of race and rural real estate. Such practices also foreshadowed the emergence of new rationales for black exclusion in a suburbanizing nation. Indeed, the exponential growth of suburbia in post-World War II America not only turned farmlands into planned subdivisions but introduced legal and institutional mechanisms of racial exclusion into rural areas that had once offered prospective African American landowners freedom from the restrictions and physical confinement of the city. The closure of Scarlett's Country Club, in this respect, was not so much a product of the landscape of Jim Crow in rural America as it was a sign of a new culture of whiteness taking shape outside America's cities.

The New Negro embodied a broader set of aspirations rooted in a desire for cultural and economic self-determination. Much of this struggle took shape in the

interwar years and took place in the city. It would be a mistake, though, to assume that those dreams extended only to the city's edge or that the cultural production associated with the New Negro renaissance was primarily an urban phenomenon grounded in the urban experience of the pre-World War II metropolis. As this essay demonstrates, the urban experience itself is inseparable from ideas about and interactions with the rural.

That the rich and revealing history of African Americans from the city who sought pleasure and pursued opportunities in the country throughout the first half of the twentieth century has been virtually unexamined by scholars is a testament to the insidious and far-reaching effects of the state-sanctioned real estate practices that worked to spatialize race in the second half of the twentieth century. The relocation of black populations to spatially confined urban ghettos has tended to be replicated in the histories of black people more generally. Just as African American landowners in Maryland's suburbanizing countryside found themselves subject to removal and their lands targeted for expropriation in the decades following World War II, so, too, have the dreams and dollars this generation of enterprising, newly urbanized black Americans carried with them to bucolic, rolling hills and undeveloped shores outside the city been written out of the history of the long black freedom struggle. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find in the literature on race and civil rights in the twentieth century any mention of African Americans and country clubs that did not center on struggles to integrate these all-white citadels. This reflects a broader tendency among both scholars and the public to treat the twentieth-century black experience as a journey from the rural, plantation South to the industrial North. Despite the proliferation of important, revelatory scholarship on the hard work that went into making suburbs white, and the urban core black, we still know little about the social construction of those lands that lie far beyond the outer belt, where divided highways become single-lane roads and where the history of race in America generally ends. We must look anew at the quiet streets of Westminster, Maryland (whose African American population remains as miniscule today as it was when Scarlett arrived on the scene), or within the wealthy gated community that stands on the site of the former Carr's Beach, with an eye also cast on the devastated streets of black Baltimore, where figures like Adams and Scarlett once amassed wealth from the rent checks and spare pennies of working persons and families. Here we will find a new genealogy of the New Negro and gain a new perspective on the constitutive role of land (as physical space) and landscapes (as imagined space) in shaping understandings of race and determining categories of power—then and now.

NOTES

- 1 Needham and Dieterich-Ward, "Beyond the Metropolis," 947.
- 2 See Wiese, *Places of Their Own*.
- 3 Cleaver, "Land Question and Black Liberation," 57.
- 4 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 261–95.
- 5 "Ebb Tide," *The Wire*, season 2, episode 1, directed by Steve Shill, aired June 1, 2003 (New York: Home Box Office, 2003); "The Hunt," *The Wire*, season 1, episode 11, directed by Steve Shill, aired August 18, 2002 (New York: Home Box Office, 2002).
- 6 Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*.
- 7 See Kahrl, "Political Work of Leisure," and Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*.
- 8 See "Annapolis," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 21, 1926; "Camp Bay Breeze Now Open at Shadyside, Md.," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 9, 1932; on black coastal landownership and rural real estate development, see Kahrl, *Land Was Ours*.
- 9 Use of the term *spatial imaginary* comes from Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*.
- 10 See Kahrl, "Slightest Semblance of Unruliness."
- 11 Harris, *Negro as Capitalist*.
- 12 See Wolcott, "Culture of the Informal Economy"; Connolly, "Games of Chance"; White et al., *Playing the Numbers*; and Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*.
- 13 See Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 470.
- 14 Hochfelder, "Where the Common People Could Speculate."
- 15 See Fabian, *Card Sharps, Dream Books, and Bucket Shops*, 2–3.
- 16 See Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*.
- 17 Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 479–82.
- 18 See Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*.
- 19 Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 472.
- 20 See Pietela, *Not in My Neighborhood*, 116–18.
- 21 For an introduction, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; Freund, *Colored Property*; Satter, *Family Properties*.
- 22 See Connolly, "We Are Exactly What We Seem."
- 23 Lillie M. Young to Thomas R. Smith, mortgage, June 2, 1917, Baltimore County Land Records, book 510, page 536. Accessed at <http://mdlandrec.net/>.
- 24 "Mrs. T. R. Smith Entertains at Lawn Party," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 23, 1927.
- 25 "1500 Persons at Smith Funeral," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 20, 1938.
- 26 Walker, *History of Black Business in America*, 238.
- 27 See Burgos, *Cuban Star*. See also Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*.
- 28 Wolcott, "Culture of the Informal Economy," 56.
- 29 In Chicago, Drake and Cayton found, the Great Depression "weakened the legitimate Negro business institutions, the symbols of financial control and stability in Bronzeville. The policy kings emerged as one group who could point to the thousands of workers still employed by The Race. They were thus able to assume

the role of Race Leaders, patrons of charity, and pioneers in the establishment of legitimate business." See Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 486.

- 30 In 1951, Adams told members of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce (aka the Kefauver Committee) that his numbers lottery generated one thousand dollars in daily revenue. Given rampant discrepancies between Adams's reported and actual income, this figure was likely far less than his actual daily intake.
- 31 See Pietela, *Not in My Neighborhood*, 118.
- 32 Zastrow Simms, interview with Andrew Kahrl, November 23, 2010.
- 33 Pietela, *Not in My Neighborhood*, 118.
- 34 Louis Lautier, "Capital Spotlight," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 2, 1944.
- 35 See <http://mdlandrec.net/>.
- 36 Quoted in Luke, *Baltimore Elite Giants*, 78.
- 37 See Kahrl, *Land Was Ours*, 86–113.
- 38 See *ibid.*, 178–209.
- 39 "The New Carr's: Playground of the East," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 9, 1951.
- 40 "Thrown from 'Caterpillar,'" *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 8, 1950.
- 41 "Downfall: Owned Half Million, Digits Banker Broke," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 19, 1955.
- 42 See James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 9–49.
- 43 See *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 5, 1925.
- 44 *Ibid.*, April 12, 1952.
- 45 *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 5, 1949.
- 46 *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 19, 1955.
- 47 *Ibid.*, July 31, 1948.
- 48 *Ibid.*, January 5, 1952.
- 49 *Ibid.*, June 14, 1952.
- 50 *Ibid.*, April 12, 1952.
- 51 "Scarlett, Resort Owner, Gets 7 Years for Numbers," *ibid.*, June 7, 1952. See also "Scarlett Cites Persecution for Lavish Country Club," *ibid.*, April 12, 1952.
- 52 On the Kefauver Committee hearings, see Bernstein, *Greatest Menace*, 61–83.
- 53 *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 6, 1951.
- 54 *Ibid.*, August 11, 1951.
- 55 "Club Operator Is Object of Probe," *ibid.*, September 1, 1951.
- 56 "Gambling Crackdown Followed Expansion of Adams, Scarlett," *ibid.*, September 1, 1951.
- 57 *Ibid.*, January 5, 1952.
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*, June 7, 1952.
- 60 "Seize Resort for Back Taxes," *ibid.*, September 20, 1952.
- 61 "May Not Sell Swank Country Club After All," *ibid.*, November 1, 1952; "Sportsman May Save This Resort from the Auction Block," *ibid.*, November 1, 1952.
- 62 "Scarlett's Sold for \$34,000," *ibid.*, November 15, 1952.

63 "Sportsman's Expensive Effects 'Sold for a Song,'" *ibid.*, November 22, 1952.

64 *Ibid.*, March 19, 1955.

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