

## Black Ethnographic Activists: Exploring Robert Park, Scientific Racism, The Chicago School, and FBI Files Through the Black Sociological Experience of Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier

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*Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier were successful Black sociologists from the 1920s to 1960s, working in an age of scientific racism and eugenics, who battled racial oppression, racist discrimination, and surveillance under the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Both struggled within and against the assimilationist paradigm, yet their ethnographic and critical insights speak out today with continuing relevance in the fight against practical and institutional racial injustice. This study selectively examines Johnson and Frazier's academic careers as forgotten ethnographer activists who have been largely excluded from the dominant narrative of the Chicago School of Sociology. This article argues Robert Park offered opportunities to these Black scholars although the white university system exclusively directed their work towards race studies. Furthermore, the white discipline of sociology failed to recognize Johnson and Frazier's critical ethnographic studies as part of interactionism.*

Keywords: Black sociology, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, interactionism, ethnography, scientific racism, Robert Park, Chicago School, FBI



Charles S. Johnson

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## INTRODUCTION

Black sociologists Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier learnt that their academic, political, and everyday lives were one and the same thing. They continually battled racial oppression and racist discrimination at a personal and institutional level. Both were trained at the University of Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s under Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, within the Chicago School of Sociology. Park was a pioneering American urban sociologist who established the discipline of sociology by legitimating the subject in the American University curriculum based on theory and fieldwork through the publication of research studies. Johnson and Frazier's academic careers reflected their opportunities and struggles as Black scholars within a university system where white hegemony invited them in but kept them at the margin (Clair Drake 1978). During the early twentieth century through their encounters with white teachers and the white discipline of sociology at the University of Chicago, Bryce Henson argues: "critical Black ethnographers do not enter and perform the category of ethnographer the same way that the Western white male anthropologist has historically been able to do" (2019:331).

Johnson and Frazier's studies examine aspects of Black communities including youth and family and detail how these experiences are socially constructed through human interpretation. In the symbolic interactionist tradition, their focus on self-society is through individuals' subjective meanings. Both were confronting racial ideology through social construction of actual and symbolic violence, prejudice, and discrimination, representing a focus on the political meaning of race as a social category. As interactionists they explored the everyday life of Black people to reveal their active, reflexive, creative modes of life where meaning is fashioned. Johnson and Frazier's Chicago School-inspired interactionism understands the play and fate of Black people's activities and cultural lives as an assault on their everyday lived experience. Both address this racial oppression by applying an ethnographic mosaic approach, developed at the Chicago School, using conversational interviews, participant observation, and human documents as the foundation of their interactionist approach (Blackman 2010).

I argue that the dominance of Robert Park's race relations theory, with its naturalistic shell hiding an inner core of biological determinism, held Johnson and Frazier back. This understanding of race being inherent in nature, linked with the theory of "disorganization" as a scientific and objective approach to tackle the so called "Black Problem," brought trouble for Johnson and Frazier when dealing with ethnographic data carrying the voices, lives, and experience of young Black people. This marginalization also impacted their theoretical, sociological, and political work and their academic careers within Black universities. This article applies Vincent Franklin's (2013) and Gaines' (2015) idea of "scholar activists" to Johnson and Frazier as Black ethnographers. Johnson and Frazier's work has been marginalized through its links with the political and cultural context of the assimilation paradigm in American sociology during the early twentieth century, defining and limiting their social research to

race studies only and thereby restricting their real contribution to the sociological imagination.

This article examines how Johnson and Frazier worked across disciplines and how their diverse contribution has remained largely unrecognized as part of the Chicago School tradition and Interactionism. Johnson and Frazier worked at national and international levels focused on collective liberation and presented “reflective awareness” in writing ethnographies. Each held an indebtedness to Robert Park at the Chicago School, which was both opportunistic and contradictory. I will provide a selective engagement with Johnson and Frazier’s integral Black ethnographic activism in research and writing, which brought them under the gaze of the FBI. They were subsequently defended by Robert Park, Herbert Blumer, and Everett Hughes.

### BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAITS OF JOHNSON AND FRAZIER

Charles Johnson was an African American Professor of Sociology who was born on 24th July 1893 at Bristol, Virginia and died in 1956. He was from the American South, on the Tennessee border. As the son of an esteemed Baptist minister, he married Marie Antoinette Burgette from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They had four children: Charles Jr., Robert, Patricia, and Jeh. During the First World War he served as a Regimental Sergeant Major in the 803rd Pioneer Infantry, with the American Expeditionary Force in France and participated in the battles and campaigns of Meuse-Argonne. His Serial No. was 3755536. He was awarded the World War 1 Victory Medal. It was one of the largest, most bloody, and deadly battles in American history. The FBI File (123-12551) states he was “honourably discharged as Sergeant Major by reason of demobilisation. No derogatory information.” Johnson was called upon to take part in several federal commissions and White House advisory boards and served on committees under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, serving for the League of Nations and UNESCO. He worked for the National Negro Urban League and was the editor of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*. Johnson’s promotion of arts as liberation was one catalyst for the emergence of the literary Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s and 1930s (Carter 1956; Pearson 1977). Johnson’s key works include, *The Negro in Chicago* (1922), editor of *The Negro in American Civilization: A Study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research* (1930), *Shadow of the Plantation* (1932) and *Growing up in the Black Belt* (1941). He was on the Editorial Board of the *American Sociological Review*, trustee of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, and was at Fisk University from 1928 to 1956 and became its first black president (1946 to 1956). Patricia Hill Collins (2016) identifies Johnson as a conservative figure set apart from W.E.B. Du Bois and Frazier. Mary Gasman states that Du Bois publicly opposed Johnson’s appointment as the first Black president of Fisk University, suggesting that “Johnson might be a pawn of philanthropy” (2002:505). Patrick Gilpin asserts, “Johnson did not have the

reputation of a radical” (1960/1980:302); his commitment was to integration which defined him more as a pragmatist.

E. Franklin Frazier was born in Baltimore in 1894. He came from a working-class background, went to the Colored High and Training School in Baltimore founded in 1883, now called Frederick Douglass High School. In 1912, he won the school scholarship to Howard University, Washington, D.C., a primarily Black university. After graduating in 1916 he worked at the Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington, teaching vocational subjects to Black students. According to Platt (1991), Frazier placed a pile of bricks, some cotton, and a bale of hay in his classroom so as not to appear too radical. He also taught English and History at St. Paul’s Normal and Industrial School in Lawrenceville, Virginia (1917 to 1918), and French and Mathematics at Baltimore High School (1918 to 1919). Between 1919 and 1922, Frazier gained his Master of Arts in Sociology from Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts and received a fellowship from the New York School of Social Work, and in 1921 he accepted an American-Scandinavian Foundation grant to study folk high schools and the Cooperative Movement in Denmark (1921 to 1922).

Frazier was married to Marie Brown in 1922. From here he moved to Morehouse College, historically a Black men’s liberal arts college in Atlanta, Georgia. He was also head of the Atlanta University social work program until 1927. In that year Frazier gained a grant from the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial Fund and then the Social Science Research Council to do a PhD at the University of Chicago, which he completed in 1931. He taught at Fisk University from 1929 to 1934, and then returned to Howard University, until his death in 1962. He obtained a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1941 for a year-long study of family life in Bahia, Brazil.

Frazier was President of the Eastern Sociological Society in 1944 to 1945, then, in 1948, he became the first Black academic to serve as President of the American Sociological Society. Frazier’s key works include: *The Pathology of Race Prejudice* (1927), *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932), *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development* (1940), *The Negro Family in Bahia, Brazil* (1942), *Bourgeoisie noire/ Black Bourgeoisie* (1954/57) and *The Failure of the Negro Intellectual* (1962). Both Johnson’s *Growing up in the Black Belt* and Frazier’s *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, were prepared for *The American Youth Commission*, composed of an all-white group of overseers (Reeves 1940).

## RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

I came to the work of Johnson and Frazier from two directions; first through reading the fiction and non-fiction of Richard Wright, and second through my research into ethnography and the Chicago School and specifically their lack of coverage in the Chicago School story. On this topic I have consulted a small number of Black academics including Anoop Nayak, Anthony Gunter, and Earl Wright III. Their

reflections made me personally feel and think, as St. Clair Drake affirmed, that ethnography “appealed to our intellectual and aesthetic tastes” (1978:86).

### SCIENTIFIC RACISM, COLONIALISM, AND ROBERT PARK PRE-CHICAGO

The early twentieth century, when Johnson and Frazier began their academic careers, was a time of radical transformation and conflict for African Americans. Although freed from slavery, they were subject to increased forms of control. The specific social, political, and economic contexts included Jim Crow discrimination from the 1890s, which enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States, and which disenfranchised most Black people and many poor white people (Greenberg 2009). At institutional and university levels, scientific racism, or as Du Bois (1940) called it, “scientific race dogma,” was used to support or justify racism and discrimination where the races were defined according to a hierarchy where Black people were at the bottom (Bhambra 2014). It was a pseudoscientific belief, not based on empirical evidence, but scientific racism had intellectual support from the Eugenics movement (Dennis 1995). Intellectually, it was Sir Francis Galton (1869) who coined the term Eugenics, and in *Hereditary Genius* he advocated selective breeding for humans stating, “that the average intellectual standard of the negro race is some two grades below our own (the Anglo Saxon).” In talking about the African diaspora, Galton argues that “the negroes ... will fail ... to submit to the needs of a superior civilisation ... They will in course of time be supplanted and replaced by their betters” (1869:xxvi). The race hierarchy exacerbated anxieties through fears of “miscegenation” and the notion of the weakening of the white Race (Ladner 1973). During the 1920s and 1930s, scientific racism was not, according to Platt and Chandler, “simply the work of a few right-wing fanatics” (1988:294). Gossett argues it “was mainly the academic writers on racial differences who made racism respectable” (1963/1997:373). Thus, early Black activism was identified as a national threat to the cultural supremacy of the white population.

Robert Park studied the subject of racial control and oppression as a journalistic investigator between 1904 and 1907. Park wrote a series of articles for *Colored American Magazine*, *The World To-Day* and *Everybody's Magazine* focused on the atrocities of murder, amputations and rape inflicted on Congolese people sanctioned under Belgian colonialism (Lyman 1992). This work on African oppression and European imperialism came to the attention of Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute, and he and Park met through the Congo Reform Association, an arm of the Baptist Missionary society. Park became secretary, researcher, and ghost writer to African American community leader Booker T. Washington from 1905 to 1912, until his resignation.

The history of sociology usually suggests that Park arrived at the University of Chicago in 1914 as though it was his “natural home,” but Davarian Baldwin points out, Park was a “white ‘race expert’ on the Negro Problem ... the University of

Chicago needed an ‘expert’ on race” (2004:408–10). Robert Park, first as a lecturer and then professor in 1923 in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, became a major figure in American sociology. His priority was on empirical research and particularly the study of race, but this program of research and writing has caused controversy (Cox 1944).

Even though Park wrote about colonial brutality in the Congo, Zine Magubane suggests “Park consistently sought to underplay his history as a reformer” to promote an “objective sociology,” but at the same time this contributed to “sociology’s historical failure to deal with issues of colonialism and imperialism” (2014:570). Thus, Park’s involvement with the Congo Reform Association, and with Booker T. Washington, are suggestive of the contradictions of conservatism within Park as a “race relations broker.” But, according to Raushenbush (1979), he was also bonded to Black people. Whereas Fred Matthews maintains, there was a “naivete which infected Park’s” belief in the expansion of Western colonial civilisation (1977:59). During the early 1900s, British popular newspapers extensively covered stories on “Black horror” for example in *The Daily Herald* 10th April (1920) the front page reads: *Black Scourge in Europe*. Edmund Morel British politician and journalist, spoke on this “*Black Shame*”: of the rape of white women by Africans. Robert Reinders details how Edmund Morel led a moral campaign with the full support of the newspaper, quoting Morel’s obsession with Black male sexuality described as “primitive African barbarisms,” “bestiality,” and “tremendous sexual instincts” resulting in “dead bodies of young women” (1968:2–4).

Peter Campbell (2014) points out how Morel’s racist ideas had an impact on the United States. Morel’s (1904) *The Treatment of Women and Children in the Congo State 1895–1904: An Appeal to the Women of the United States of America*, includes a comment by Robert E. Park. Morel in *The Black Man’s Burden*, states that one of the aims of the book “seeks to lay down the fundamental principles of humane and practical policy in the government of Africa by white men” (1920:vii). Dean Clay (2019) argues that Park and Morel had substantial correspondence and agreed on many issues but by 1905 Clay suggests that “Park felt Morel had misunderstood his attitude on the issue” (94). Robert Hall asserts in a letter, “Park admired Morel” (2002:50). In addition, he quotes Du Bois, who said that Morel was “no particular lover of Africans.” It is apparent that Park’s link with European colonialism had contradictory implications through his contact with Edmund Morel and Booker T. Washington.

### BLACK SOCIOLOGISTS AND THE CHICAGO SCHOOL: UNDERREPRESENTATION, BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM, AND OPPORTUNITIES

With reference to the title of this special issue, I wish to highlight the forgotten and underrepresented presence of both the Chicago School and Black sociologists in the discipline. Edward Shils states, Robert “Park has never been known in

Europe, and practically forgotten in the United States” (1996:88). More recently, Lonnie Athens affirms this picture of Robert Park as the “forgotten man of sociology” (2013:78). Both accounts of Park’s contribution point out his weaknesses and seek a re-evaluation of Park’s work. This focus on the reappraisal of Park has continued with collections, for example, Peter Kivisto’s *The Anthem Companion to Robert Park* (2017).

The underrepresentation of Black sociologists in the narrative the Chicago School is related to the wider position of the Chicago School and its marginalization within sociology during the hegemonic dominance of the structural functionalist paradigm (late 1930s/1970s) under Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. Morris Janowitz states, “Parsons did not make a place for the Chicago School in his account of the emergence of the type of sociology he was seeking to create” (1970:xi). During an interview, Earl Wright (2022) comments:

I do believe the Black sociologists produced by Chicago have been insufficiently recognized for their distinct contributions to the discipline. More importantly, their importance in helping build the “Chicago brand” has been insufficiently explored. It is disappointing that in the few studies where Black Chicago sociologists are mentioned their contributions are ghettoized into the realm of “race studies.”

Black sociology was pioneered by a series of African American women, according to Patricia Hill Collins (1989), including Sojourner Truth with her focus on women’s suffrage, Anna Julia Cooper’s development of Black feminism with *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (1892), Ida Wells’ pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), and later Fannie Lou Hamer’s civil rights activism. For Wilbur Watson (1976) the institutional emergence of Black sociology begins with W.E.B. Du Bois in 1897 when he became director of the Atlanta University sociology program and with W.E.B. Du Bois’ article, titled *The Study of the Negro Problems* (1898), in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, followed up in 1899 by *The Philadelphia Negro*, which was a statistical sociological case study of a Black community in the United States. Black sociology emerged according to Earl Smith because of the “fact that dominant social theories are inadequate for assessing the Black collective lifestyles in American society” (1982:393).

Roger Salerno (2013:55) asks “was there a Black Chicago School?” He lists a series of names including Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, Allison Davies, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Hyland Lewis, Horace Clayton, and St Clair Drake. From this initial listing there were Black sociologists at work in Chicago. Although Chicago welcomed Black graduate research students, it affirmed white privilege and white status. John Stanfield argues that Research Foundations, including the Social Science Research Council, the Julius Rosenwald Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation encouraged Black researchers “to develop ‘Negro scholars’ who could lead ‘their people’” (1982:197). Thus, these “foundations gradually created the black university

circuit.” Control over research funds and unsuccessful applications meant that after leaving the University of Chicago both Johnson and Frazier gained employment as sociologists only at Black Universities (Drake 1978). Baldwin points out that Robert Park opened the door for Black scholars “as producers of sociological knowledge” (2004:419), but Jim Crow racial segregation within universities deprived Black academics the opportunity to train doctoral “black students beyond the master’s degree level” (Stanfield 1982:199). St Clair Drake notes; Black scholars were “drastically limited by the difficulty of gaining access to graduate training and adequate financing... and none were offering any teaching positions to the few Afro-Americans they did train” (1978:86).

In the *Journal of Negro History*, Park’s paper, *The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro* (1919), then again in Park and Burgess’ reader *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), Park states:

The temperament of the Negro, as I conceive it, consists in a few elementary but distinctive characteristics, determined by physical organizations transmitted biologically. These characteristics manifest themselves in a genial, sunny, and social disposition, in an interest and attachment to external, physical things rather than to subjective states and objects of introspection, in a disposition for expression rather than enterprise and action . . . . The negro is, by natural disposition . . . . An artist, living life for its own sake. His metier is expressive rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races. (138–139)

Oliver C. Cox argues, “Park’s theory of race relations is weak, tentative, and misleading. His teleological approach has diverted him from an examination of specific causal events in the development of modern race antagonism; it has led him inevitably into a hopeless position about ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ a state of mind that must eventually drive the student into the open arms of the mystic” (1944:459). For Cox, Robert Park’s theories were “exceedingly depressing” (1944:452). Charles Jarmon (2012) affirms Frazier sought to divorce biological explanation from sociological theory, but even in Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s “scientific racism” remained apparent. Critically, Abd-l Hakimu ibn Alkalimat argues that:

Robert Park was the man most responsible in the social sciences for developing a liberal white game to run on black people. He and his colleagues at the University of Chicago were more responsible than any other graduate school for training black social scientists; perhaps their most important student was E. Franklin Frazier a brother who was strong enough to collect a lot of important data but who fell victim to theory based on racist, white liberal ideology. (Quoted by McWorter 1969:30)

Stanford Lyman (1992) suggests that Park was caught within the false debate between hereditary and cultural influences. Living through social tension and race brutality in his pre-Chicago days, Park saw the opportunity to change his journalistic investigation into social research to get “real data” to begin the project of the “science of sociology” with the idea of Chicago being a “social laboratory.” Faris



argues that Park's emphasis on science and objectivity, impacted both Johnson and Frazier whereby it was acknowledged that you "would not know" if they were "a Negro from the 'cold-blooded presentation'" (1967:131). White sociology, according to Faris, "must be disinterested" (1967:131). The new scientific direction of Park's influence would enable "non-threatening" research to be undertaken with Black scholars at the University of Chicago as "the Negro Problem." Critically, the disconnect between Park's focus on the atrocities in the Congo gets translated into a focus on African Americans who sought Black sociologists to undertake research to confirm their role as "race leaders." This in turn restricted their intellectual focus, thereby affirming the racist and objective status quo but appearing to offer opportunities for research on Black people. During an interview, Kenneth O'Reilly (2022) builds on this idea of white institutions promoting "race leaders" stating that: "the FBI had a habit of cultivating what Bureau executives often called 'responsible Negroes.'"

For Baldwin (2004), Park's relations with Johnson and Frazier express real-life contradictions and struggles which are shown through the Black writers' dedications to Park. He had a major influence on the supervision of Johnson's *The Negro in Chicago* (1922) and Frazier's PhD *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932). Robert Park wrote the Introduction to Johnson's *Shadow of the Plantation* (1932) and Johnson took some of Park's classes when he was at Chicago. He regarded Park as a friend, mentor, and teacher (Gilpin and Gasman 2003; Raushenbush 1979). At Fisk University in 1954, the Social Science Building was named: *Park-Johnson Hall*. Two Black sociologists, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton dedicated *The Black Metropolis* (1945) to the "late professor Robert E. Park." Richard Wright's introduction to the *Black Metropolis*, (1945a) talks of "The Chicago School." He states:

I drew meanings for my documentary book, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941); for my novel, *Native Son* (1940); it was from their scientific facts that I absorbed some of that quota of inspiration necessary for me to write *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Black Boy*. (1945b:xviii-xix)

Wright affirms that Robert Park urged "students to trust their feelings for a situation" and Wright mentions the work of Louis Wirth, Fredrick Thrasher, Ernest Burgess, Harvey Zorbaugh, and Franklin Frazier alongside Drake and Clayton. In the Author's preface to *The Negro Family in Chicago*, Frazier states, "Especial acknowledgement of this indebtedness should be made to Dr. Robert Park, whose profound insight into the cultural aspects of the Negro life has been of indispensable aid in the preparation of this volume" (1932:xiii). In the author's preface of *The Negro Family in the United States*, Frazier states, "Acknowledgment here of the encouragement, interest, and valuable insights which Dr. Robert E. Park has given to this study is but a small indication of the author's deep gratitude to his former teacher" (1939:xx). In *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, Frazier offers "indebted" thanks to Ruth Shonle Cavan, who "formulated the outline for the interviews, for their counsel and advice" (1940:xxv). Cavan was at the Chicago School from the

1920s to 1947 under Park and Burgess. Power differentials play a key role in these dedications to Robert Park, although I'm sure this complex game of dedications was not lost on both Johnson and Frazier.

### CHARLES SPURGEON JOHNSON: "A GIFTED INTERPRETER"

John Hope Franklin describes Johnson as possessing "quiet dignity" (2002:17). Shils reflects on the fall of the Chicago School after Park left stating that, "Charles Johnson would have been the salvation of sociology and . . . would have enabled sociology in Chicago to reach heights beyond its achievements of the two previous decades" (1996:106). Sadly, the University of Chicago did not possess the "courage or imagination" to appoint Johnson at the white university.

Johnson's ethnographic activism was prolific and diverse as a sociologist, teacher, researcher, full time race reformer, public speaker, academic journal editor, and national and international commissioner, and as Fisk University President. At the University of Chicago, Johnson's key work was *The Negro in Chicago* (1922), produced by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, primarily written by Johnson "as executive secretary, to assume charge of the inquires and investigation under its direction" (1922:xvii). The work was a study on the race riot in Chicago in July 1919, and it includes photographs of the killing of Black people. The study details that "of the thirty-eight killed, fifteen were white and twenty-three Negroes; of 537 injured, 178 were white, 342 were Negroes and the race of seventeen was not record" (1922:1). The damage to property was extensive. In *The Negro in Chicago* (1922) we see direct accounts of violence, death, beatings, burnings, and the murder of Black young men attacked by gangs of white men. The ethnographic account is of real human struggle; it enables us to hear the voices of the oppressed and their everyday ordinariness. Through the description, they are calling to us for recognition. We are given the opportunity to listen to, reflect on and contextualize Black people's feelings when confronted with racial violence perpetrated by white people who understand their discriminatory actions as "normal" albeit in a racist society. As an ethnographic activist Johnson captured human subjectivity and the people's "own story" through "the life-history," brought together through what we now call reflexive ethnography (2019; Hunter 2018).

For Llewellyn Harris, Johnson was "a gifted interpreter," stating "the *Shadow of the Plantation* comes as a welcome letter from a long absent friend" (1936:157). At the same time, Johnson's ethnographic activism is also personal; he does not back away from the tragedy of death, personal deterioration, and the harshness of the landlord system that keeps Black people tied to the soil reliant on the white master. We see that Black young people do not have enough to eat, are poorly served by schooling, and their clothes hang like threads over their skin. It is an ethnography of startling clarity, on a culture of desperation and of survival, yet at the same time Johnson gives these people their humanity through young people's excitement focused on marriage, their ups and downs in family life, through separation and

their lonely search for work. Against a backdrop of structural and cultural racism as endured by Black young people, Johnson states:

Literacy is not an asset in the plantation economy, and it was not only discouraged but usually forbidden. The belief that education spoiled the slave carried over with but little modification for many years into the belief that education spoils a field hand.” (1934:129)

According to Naomi Farber (1995) in both *The Negro in Chicago* and the *Shadow of the Planation*, the theoretical influence of Robert Park is apparent. This can be identified through the conceptual framework of *The Negro in Chicago* in terms of subject headings and the large number of maps and photographs which were specific to Chicago School studies. Throughout *Growing up in the Black Belt* (1941), Johnson’s ethnographic activism brings out the voices of the young people through a series of ten biographical portraits. There is very little emphasis on Park’s theory of disorganization. Instead, we gain a sense of cramped living in patched leaky cabins with little to read, no shoes, few sanitary facilities, and a substantial fear of white people where “avoidance” is the most effective strategy (294–95). On the cover of the 1941 edition of *Growing up in the Black Belt*, there is a small photograph of a sad and forlorn Black youth. Evocatively a young Black girl, Frances, says: “There ain’t no colored doctors around here. If you get real sick, you have to call a white doctor or just die” (316). Seventeen-year-old George speaks of a lynching where:

Must have been 500 or 600 in that mob. They had guns and pistols, and even machines guns. It was just like they were hunting a bear. Some was walking, some in carts and some had hounds. They even had an airplane circling the bayou trying to spot him. . . . After he was dead, they tied him to a truck and drug him all through town. (1941:317)

A hostile scientific racism and a personal fear of lynching frames Johnson’s researcher positionality. As explained by Phillip James Johnson, he “never forgot the shock” “of menacing hostility” from “white citizens” (2004:11). In the *Tragedy of Lynching*, Arthur Raper states, “Three thousand seven hundred and twenty-four people were lynched in the United States from 1889 through to 1930 . . . practically all of the lynchings were native whites” (1933:13). Lynchings went largely unpunished and what is striking about Raper’s accounts of lynching is that they were a form of white entertainment, sometimes attracting between 2000 and 4000 people to witness a harsh, brutal, suffering, death (1933).

Johnson’s research activism can be interpreted as employing an ethnographic mosaic approach through observations, quantitative data with testing, analysis of documents, life histories, and maps guided by a “grounded” sense of data speaking (Blackman 2010). *Growing up in the Black Belt*, is an interactionist text, but the contemporaneous reviews by Mary Huff Diggs (1941), Stuart Henderson Britt (1942), Read Bain (1941), and Margret Mead (1942) only focus on “Negro youth” and the “race problem.” They did not see it as a study into a social world of contested

value where subjective meanings are created and re-created through challenging and disturbing actual and symbolic forms of racial violence and communication. Interactionism was unable to see through the white social construction of the race problem and failed to place Johnson's work in its wider sociological and ethnographic context (Guess 2006). In terms of Johnson's legacy, in 1971 the American Sociological Association (ASA) established the Du Bois-Johnson-Frazier Award, which changed in 2006 to become the Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award and in the same year the Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award was retitled to be the W.E.B. Du Bois Career Award for Distinguished Scholarship. Thus, separating Johnson and Du Bois. Furthermore, Johnson's Race Relations Institute founded in 1944 was changed in 2019 to become the John Lewis Center for Social Justice to continue Fisk University's legacy of promoting Black intellectuals, although on the Fisk front web page there is no mention of Charles S. Johnson.

### E. FRANKLIN FRAZIER: "EARTHY BRUSQUENESS!"

I will begin with a few personal reflections on Franklin Frazier. John H. Bracey, a friend and academic colleague of Frazier at Howard University recalls, "Frazier always seemed to get the last word or the best word or the most interesting word" (2002:85). Hylan A. Lewis, also at Howard, states, "people, particularly the Black ones, flocked around Frazier, almost as though he was a rock star" (2002:26). Whether, according to Horace Clayton, young Frazier was spitting on "the John Hopkins University building" (1964:137) or, as Mintz claims, Frazier was forced to "wear a woman's scarf and costume jewellery in order to eat - a self appointed rajah-with his white sociologist colleagues in a Washington D.C. restaurant" (1969:5). These dramatic short portraits capture John Hope Franklin's understanding of Frazier's "earthy brusqueness" (2002:17), separating him from Johnson as Park's favorite.

Two factors shaped Frazier's removal from Atlanta in the 1920s, both of which are associated with the political/racial contexts of the time. According to Jerome H. Schiele, Frazier came into conflict on race and genetic inferiority with a white female Professor, Helen Pendleton, who "used his ideas on race to subvert his leadership" (1999:118). According to Charles Jarmon, even though Frazier had backing from Du Bois he was dismissed from his post. He states, "Frazier challenged her position before authorities on the Atlanta University divisional board but was not supported" (Jarmon 2013:91). The subsequent outcome led to Frazier's challenging the institutional face of scientific racism through the publication of *The Pathology of Race Prejudice* (1927), in *Forum Magazine*. A further motivation for Frazier derived from his dislike of an article in *Crisis* in 1924, titled "Applied Eugenics," by Albert Sidney Beckham who thought eugenics could improve any race, stating, "Eugenics is invested in breeding for tomorrow a better negro" (177). In opposition to scientific racism and eugenics, Frazier states: "that the behavior motivated by race prejudice shows precisely the same characteristics as that to mental health" (1925:856). He

asserts racism is a “revolting form of cruelty towards Black people” (857) by the “Southern white man” (860) and their fears are a “Southerner’s delusion” (862). Platt and Chandler state, “Frazier was angry that Black people had been robbed systematically of opportunities to participate in community, social, political, economic and intellectual life” (1988:295). Gregory notes: “Frazier was literally run out of Atlanta . . . and provoked death threats from the Klu Klux Klan” (1994:1057). Thus, when Frazier arrived at the University of Chicago to undertake his PhD, he possessed a national reputation for engaging in issues of the day. He was an ethnographic activist for social justice.

A related problem for Frazier was his participation in the ongoing Herskovits controversy focused on the African Black diaspora and the origin of the “so-called” Black family. Between 1941 and 1943 this battle between a sociological and an anthropological approach was captured in the *American Sociological Review*. Frazier’s nemesis was a white Jewish Anthropologist, Melville J. Herskovits who wrote *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), which sought to reclaim an African American culture lost because of slavery. Herskovits and Frazier’s dispute centered on research undertaken in Salvador Bahia, Brazil. Frazier’s year-long study of family life was supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship. Also, Bahia became a major location for an important UNESCO sponsored project on the study of race relations in Brazil. At the heart of this debate is whether Brazil did not have a problem with racism due the nature of how slavery and plantations were organized, in contrast to the US, and the (then) contemporary politics of the South African Daniël François Malan, of the National Party who implemented the system of apartheid and imposed segregation in 1948. St. Clair Drake states, Herskovits was not one of “my intellectual heroes” — he “never attempted to recruit and train Afro-Americans” (1978:91).

Frazier did not deny the existence of African cultural traits, but according to Johnnetta Cole, Frazier saw “the way of life of Black folks is no more than an imitation, and a poorer one at that, of the mainstream values and actions of white Americans” (1970/2014:52). Livio Sansone suggests that Frazier “seemed to bestow relatively little importance to African things” (2011:54). However, Frazier’s intensive fieldwork in Brazil was preoccupied with how Black people selected, fashioned, and transformed parts of their African heritage in a hostile, racist environment of “popular” stereotypes, Eugenics, and scientific racism (Winston 2020). Frazier (1957) argues there is a break with the African tradition under servitude. Black people “lost their original meaning” of experience (1957:100–102). He acknowledges that isolated areas retained African languages, but the plantation system shaped a culture of adaptation through poverty and “social isolation in the rural South, the Negro developed a way of life which was essentially a folk culture” (1957:100–102).

Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoise* (1957), received the coveted MacIver Award from the American Sociological Association, although it is often regarded as his most controversial study. James Teele (2002) details a long list of negative book reviews which argued that Frazier had promoted the stereotype of Black inferiority. The study was

not based on data, and it revealed Robert Park's shadow over Frazier. Brewer concluded that, "The bourgeoisie noire is a disservice to Negroes who may be discouraged by the repeated emphasis on dismal failures" (1956:275). Frazier based his critique of the Black middle class on his assertion of their unrealised marginality and failure to see culture as political through white "mis-education" (Meagher 2021; Woodson 1933). Sarah Bufkin (2021) argues that Fanon also saw the Black middle-class as too focused on co-optation into white society. The hollow imitation of the Black middle class under assimilation links Frazier and Fanon together through their ambition to overturn the stereotype of Black inferiority promoted by the white oppressor and colonizer; both theorists are mobilized to oppose biological determinism. Gregory Thomas (1999) suggest that Frazier is writing the *Black Bourgeoisie* as a "participant observer." The challenge Frazier faced as a Black ethnographer is realized by Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks*, through the statement: "Look, a negro!" (1952/1968:77). For Henson, Fanon saw himself as "an object of fear, derision and terror" (2019:329). Methodologically, the Black ethnographer is thus unable to present themselves as a white ethnographer (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

The negative impact of Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie* should be contextualized as part of Frazier's ethnographic activism and critique of white hegemony, which did not stop after his death in 1962 (Anderson 2015). At the center of many controversies, for Frazier, was the "seductive dream" of white-American assimilation. He returned to this critique in his last article, *The Failure of the Negro Intellectual*, stating, "American society has stamped the Negro as subhuman, as a member of an inferior race that had not achieved even the first steps in civilisation . . . assimilation means the annihilation of the Negro physically, culturally, and spiritually" (1962:35). Andrea G. Hunter suggests we should see Frazier's work as a "deeply personal text . . ." which can "evoke a deep sense of pain and loss and for others guilt" (2006:91). Frazier struggled to set himself free of Park's assimilationist ambition and the theory of disorganization which is tied up with pathology. It was a theoretical framework that trapped Black people within a problem not created by themselves. The white expectation was that assimilation will bring about not only harmonious race relations, but it is shorthand for the white ideological notion of progress. Frazier argued we must "rid" ourselves of the "obsession with assimilation" (1962:36). It was Ladner's *The Death of White Sociology* (1973), which effectively rejected the assimilationist paradigm, demonstrating that white academics had made careers out of enhancing state control of the Black community (Brewer 1989). Yet we can see that Frazier, through his ethnographic activism, was trying to understand the different social organizations and cultures at an ideological and symbolic level, through the social structure, to promote change.

The study by Daniel Patrick Moynihan *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), often referred to as the Moynihan Report (1965), sought to base its outcomes on Frazier's work. The report identified Black single-mother families as the cause of Black poverty, unemployment, and welfare dependency which could be traced back to slavery. Platt argues that Frazier's link with the Moynihan Report is

“essentially wrong” (1991:2) in its promotion of the myth of Black mothers as dysfunctional and retarding the Black community. Clovis Semmes argues Frazier has not only been misunderstood but also asserts that “Moynihan claimed that Frazier’s work on Black families supported these views” (2001:6). This confusion may stem from Frazier’s PhD (1932) study which describes the “demoralization” of Black people within previous studies who are labeled “filthy,” “careless,” possessing “indecent morals,” and unrestrained “sexual gratification,” leading to “illegitimacy.” Frazier argues this literature promotes a “revulsion toward the disorganised Negroes of the South” (1932:7) and for white America this represents the “moral menace of the Negro” (1932:5).

The political act by Moynihan was an inversion, to confuse cause and effect, and had a massive impact on US social policy in the 1960s. For Frazier the Black female-headed household did not cause the cycle of poverty or deprivation. What Moynihan took from Frazier was the ambiguous concept of “disorganization.” Moynihan saw the structural opportunity of this theory to define Black family instability as derived from slavery which was heavily dependent on a misreading of Frazier. This is supported by Dean Robinson who argues that Frazier did not accept “the effect of slavery as permanently deforming to the African-American family” (2004:1172); it was a contributing factor, not the cause. The problem is that the theory of “disorganization,” which sought to remove pathology from analysis of social life, brought Moynihan and Frazier together. However, it resulted in creating a new pathology developed by right-wing studies, including Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and Murray (1999) who promoted a pseudoscientific notion of a “new rabble” or “underclass” of the Black welfare mother who is defined as lacking intelligence and held up for vilification.

As an ethnographic activist, Frazier gained real life experience of diversity within Black communities through an ethnographic mosaic of interviews, “letters,” autobiographies, sympathetic interviews, social case records, and life history documents (Blackman 2010). Frazier is deep within the experimental qualitative research paradigm of the Chicago School. At the same time, he is influenced by an emergent interactionism stating, “in studying persons in interaction and the subjective aspects of culture” participants “afford us an insight into the meaning of the world” (1932:258). Frazier argues that white studies on Black people’s sexual behavior promote “the belief that the Negro possesses uncontrollable passions and a strong sex impulse” (1932:14). Using Malinowski, Frazier points out that the devaluing of Black people and their culture occurs through “a false perspective in sexual morality” (1932:21). While Frazier certainly accepts that the “middle passage” and subsequent slavery had a huge impact on Black people, this “could not be responsible” for their “demoralization” as defined by delinquency, illegitimacy, and vice. Black people’s values and behavior in America derive from “the economic organization” (1932:248), and the restricted housing of Black people in “the most deteriorated areas” of “crime and vice” (1932:249–250). Thus, it is not biology, hereditary, race, or morality that is the cause of Black immorality, but social and

economic poverty alongside inadequate spatial resources in terms of poor housing stock and inadequate environmental opportunities.

### FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (FBI)

During the period of the 1920s to 1960s, when Johnson and Frazier were being investigated by the FBI, the major accusation against them was that they supported the so called “Red Menace” of communism. Mark Ellis states that the aim of the FBI was “to establish a link between racial violence and left-wing agitation” (1994:40). Johnson and Frazier, as ethnographic activists, sought justice for Black people in the United States related to democracy, as core “American” values; they did not see their ambitions as “Un-American.” However, it would be wrong to suggest that the FBI present wholly negative representation of Johnson and Frazier and their apparent subversive activities because the reports are also “jam packed” with statements of commendation and praise for each Black sociologist. The hundreds of pages of files are also full of contradictions, accusations, and “gossip.” John Noakes suggests, on using FBI Files, “Despite the popular vision of the Bureau as a master of surveillance organisation, the record keeping during the Hoover era was quirky and sometimes haphazard” (1995:275). The files can be described as a mess where we “find crossing out” and frequent “handwritten scrawl” on documents. In presenting this FBI data, I have followed Mike Forrest Keen’s (1999) practice of referring to the FBI File followed by its number.

#### Charles Johnson: “A Little to the Left”

It is ironic that the FBI were preoccupied with labelling Johnson a “communist” when, as Marybeth Gasman (2002) reveals, Johnson’s less confrontational approach worked with the white establishment, including Civic Clubs, publishers, and philanthropists within the white community such as Edwin Embree (Pearson 1977), which further set Johnson apart from both Du Bois and Frazier (Gasman 2002).

The FBI Files list every school, university, every book, or article Johnson had written, and conference he attended for example FBI File 123-12551 states, “Information obtained that Johnson was active in the Southern conference for Human Welfare and the Southern Negro Youth congress, which have been cited by the House committee on Un-American activities and the Attorney general respectively as subversive organizations.” Johnson was under constant surveillance. FBI File 100-233741 suggests Dr. Johnson has the reputation of being a liberal educator, but at the same time extremely loyal to the United States. In a letter from J. Edgar Hoover December 5th, 1951, he asserts that Johnson is “active in several organisations advocating racial equality.” Hoover points out that at the fourth annual conference of the American youth congress in 1940, Johnson’s name was listed as a member of the executive board of the national council of American Soviet Friendship, and again in 1944, and a conference on Indian American Relations in 1949. All these actions



brought him to the attention of the FBI for what was defined as “Un-American activities.”

The FBI rigorously pursued Johnson. FBI File 123-12551 33 maintains Johnson was linked to “the Commonwealth college which received extensive donations from communist supporting activities ... the Garland fund is properly known as the American Fund for Public service and has contributed more than \$1,500,000 to furtherance and support of left wing and Marxist projects.” FBI File 123-12551 states Johnson has been considered a, “communist suspect;” he has been “convicted of perjury in Lancaster.” The FBI File 1383218-22 also notes Charles S. Johnson’s son, JR, “was issued a traffic ticket on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1955, for failure to stop at a stop sign!”

The FBI File 123-12551 showed great interest in a so-called “delinquent” case related to Johnson in 1951, but no further details are available concerning what is “delinquent” “because of unavailability of informants.” Although the FBI found little or no information on Johnson’s so called subversive activities FBI File 121-37059-1, in 1951, states, “No further investigation is being made by the FBI concerning Johnson unless a specific request is received. This is not to be considered as a clearance or disapproval of the applicant.” The FBI files display a lack of clarity and rumor-mongering is apparent; the FBI File 123-12551-37 states, “Johnson’s activities at Fisk university were to some degree communist infiltrated” but that agent stated he had “no knowledge of such communist affiliations.” When under interrogation himself, FBI File 123-11651 records that Johnson stated, “I am not now and have never been a member of the communist party.” Johnson goes on to argue that “I would find great difficulty in believing that Dr Du Bois is a foreign agent. His history has been one of protest, but loyalty.” In giving evidence at an FBI investigation into Johnson, Professor Robert Park, Head of the Chicago School of Sociology Park stated:

Johnson has always been moderate in his policies and was obviously interested in political and other aspects of human relations but at all times acted and spoke as a statesman.” Park continued that “he personally could not be suspicious of any disloyalty on the part of Johnson, and he believed Johnson to be unquestionably loyal to the United States. (FBI File 123-12551-42)

An FBI document described Johnson as “not a communist” but that he was “a little to the left of the middle of the road trend” (123-12551). FBI File 138-3218-19 states Johnson “has no subversive sympathies” ... “He has expressed himself as opposed to communism.” Johnson experienced the full and life-long struggle against surveillance from the FBI for his commitment to racial justice.

### FBI Frazier “Red-Ucator”

Frazier was under investigation by the FBI for a long time, with over 400 pages compiled on him. Frazier first came to the attention of the emergent FBI during World War 1 when he took part in writing anti-war pamphlets, and his name was

linked to African American radicalism and so-called “subversive” organizations. He was also interrogated on his link with Du Bois, novelist Richard Wright, and singer Paul Robeson.

Mike Forrest Keen details how Frazier was subject to a scathing denunciation, misleadingly characterized and suffering constant harassment, “he was not to be left alone . . . was caught up in the ‘crossfire of Hoover’s war on Black America’ which ‘was a smokescreen to hide efforts to maintain the racist status quo of segregation’” (1999: 89, 96, 97). Frazier’s files detail each job he had, his apparent support for supposed communist groups, every conference he attended, every trip he made, article he wrote and his arrest for demonstrating against the racist film *Birth of a Nation*, previously called *The Clansman* (1915), in New York, 1921 where white actors had blackfaces. Under McCarthyism, fearmongering spread and was apparent in the FBI documents labelling Frazier a possible “spy” and as a “Red-Ucator” (FBI File 138-825). Frazier’s name was connected to the *Daily Worker*, an East Coast communist newspaper, and he was a contributing editor to the journal *Science and Society*, a Marxist quarterly magazine established in 1936. Frazier’s name was also linked with the World Peace Congress, which was seen as a communist front organization. FBI File 138-825-29 states:

Frazier being a crazy racist, would follow any movement or organization with a strong racial interest.

FBI File 138-825-39 asserts Frazier was “a leading negro communist.” FBI File 138-825-46 states, Frazier was “present at a meeting of the communist fraction at the 1935 conference at Howard University.” However, the FBI File 138-1583 informant said, “He had no information that Frazier had been a member of the communist party.” FBI File 138-825-52 affirms it “found no communist sympathies on his part.” Frazier’s ethnographic activism was subject to internal security investigations due to his affiliations with innumerable organizations, but under oath, his priority was always focused on full citizenship rights for Black people in the US to gain civil rights.

At the same time, the FBI files are full of positive comments on Frazier’s character, from J. Alvin Russell, J. L. Whitehead, F. A. Patterson, J. J. Flood, Mr. L.R. Bywater, Mrs. V.J. Woodward, and Dr. George Redd; the list is endless. Professor Herbert Blumer, at the University of California, previously from the Chicago School of Sociology, where Frazier did his PhD, states:

Dr Frazier, on the employees’ character and reputation, he is recognized as honest, forthright, cooperative, honorable and a man of good sober judgment, bordering on the limits of great caution . . . he has a disciplined mind and the disciplined character that goes with it. (FBI File 138-825-7)

In fact, FBI File 138-127 spelt Herbert Blumer’s name incorrectly, calling him “Hubert Bloomer.” Everett Hughes, also at the Chicago School of Sociology, was called to

give evidence on Frazier in 1961. In FBI File 138-363, Everett Hughes stated, “Frazier as a true gentlemen and scholar who is completely loyal to the United States.”

FBI File 138-25-17 records that Frazier was of:

good character and reputation ... had no credit or criminal record, always found him to be a man of excellent character and reputation and a person whose associates were above reproach. Frazier is entirely loyal to the US and is opposed to communism.

Further the File notes “Had Frazier even gone on record as being in defense of the communist party, he would do so not because he had an interest in communism but that he would take a position of defending the right to have a communist party in order to preserve the American democratic ideal of having free speech” (FBI File 138-25-17).

But still accusations abounded; FBI File 138-125-13 posits, “Dr. Frazier is an ardent student of political science who is in the habit of making argumentative and antagonistic statements with respect to political theories... Frazier might easily be misunderstood or suspected of possessing un-American sympathies due to ill-advised remarks.” However, the FBI File 138-825-10 notes, “Frazier manifests no sign of disloyalty to the United States” concluding Frazier was a “liberal thinker as regards racial relations, but not the type of person who would embrace Communism ... he was “a good American citizen.” However, the evidence from the FBI Files reveals that he was under surveillance all his life.

## CONCLUSION

This article described Johnson and Frazier as ethnographic activists who have not been recognized as part of the interactionist tradition and are marginal to the Chicago School narrative (Faris 1967; Rock 1979). The work of both Johnson and Frazier stands out for the way it places participant observation and an autoethnographic standpoint at the center of the research process. But while Park gave them the opportunity to do research on racism, sociology at the time demanded an “objective” perspective (Burgess 1956). Both remained “loyal” to Park, but as Platt states, “Park used to tell Frazier, ‘Whenever I want a damn good fight, I know right where to come’” (1989:189). In contrast, Johnson’s Southern liberalism meant not disturbing the status quo and his cooperation with the white power structure brought rewards for his Race Relations Institute at Fisk University, including funding (Dunne 1998). Johnson’s *The Negro in Chicago, Shadow of the Plantation* and *Growing up in the Black Belt* carry the personal voices and social struggle of young Black people. The ethnographic data speaks of everyday racism and demands social justice. Both sociologists wrestled with science and detachment while allowing the space for subjectivity and emotion to seep into their narratives.

Frazier's critical ethnography sought to disturb racist discrimination, orthodoxy, and complacency within white and Black communities. From *The Pathology of Race Prejudice* to *The Failure of the Negro Intellectual*, Frazier's stance was that of integral and restless engagement with racist ideas, cultures and institutions which brought him and Johnson to the attention of the FBI. Frazier also supported other young Black sociologists. Adelaide M. Cromwell reveals in 1942 that Frazier "recommended me, a junior scholar" for a post at Hunter College describing me "as an embryonic sociologist" (2002:42). Johnson and Frazier saw through the ideologies of scientific racism and racial hatred working effectively to promote Black cultural transformation and social change at national and international levels (Cromwell 1982).

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