

What Ordinary People Can Teach Us: Oral Histories of Employment Discrimination Against African Americans

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Scholars and educators can facilitate social policy change through the un-teaching of myths. In this article I attempt to challenge the myth that, across the world, racial exclusion is no longer an issue deserving of pronounced attention. More specifically, I challenge the assertion that unfair labour practices based upon race are no longer a serious threat to an egalitarian global society and thus equal employment rules and laws are no longer required. In doing so, I share a selection of oral histories of African Americans recorded in the city of Newark, New Jersey in the 1990s. These early-twentieth-century stories do not sound all that unfamiliar from those of many workers' laments today. Additionally, the activism exhibited in these interviews emphasises the agency of marginalised workers, countering a history of victimhood often taught in our classrooms. Ultimately, the subjects of these interviews model self-advocacy practices that can be implemented in the workforce today.

POSITIONED TO INTERVENE

For many of us, activism is an integral part of being an urban citizen. Sometimes our activism is voluntary, but other times it might be required simply to attain the opportunities seemingly available to everyone else. Regardless of our motivation, individuals quite often end up effecting broad social policy changes through

their activist efforts in the workplace; oral histories can provide illustrations of just such moments.

Notably, educators can also effect change, through among other things, the un-teaching of myths regularly perpetuated in classrooms, textbooks and the media. This is what I hope to do here, by addressing, through a collection of oral histories, the trope that contends that ‘things’ are so much better than they used to be. This trope continues on with the claim that these aforementioned ‘things’ will, through natural progression, continue to improve – without the constant harping of minoritised labourers and their allies in the case of workforce concerns. In terms of race, this argument rears its ugly head in discussions of employment equality worldwide. Ergo, it concludes, there is no longer a need to prioritise initiatives and programs geared towards racial equality in the workforce.

The oral history narratives referenced in this article are taken from a project completed in the mid-1990s, in Newark, New Jersey – the Krueger-Scott African American Oral History Project. More than 100 interviews were conducted with African Americans, most of whom came north during the Great Migration, but some who were Newark natives.¹ Newark, as with so many American cities, was not always a city of colour. But the Great Migration brought many African Americans out of the South looking for work and a better life. With this came a change in demographics and myriad accompanying issues that could no longer be brushed aside. I have relied on this particular oral history collection for a number of projects, including my upcoming book *Alien Soil: Oral Histories of Great Migration Newark*.²

The Krueger-Scott project provides multiple illustrations of the tribulations surrounding employment for African Americans in the midst of the twentieth century. These hardships, I will argue, are all too similar to those which so many marginalised groups experience even today. For this reason, fellow activists argue, it is imperative

1 The Great Migration refers to the movement of approximately 6 million African Americans who moved from the southern to northern, eastern and western states of America from the 1910s to the 1960s.

2 Katie Singer, *Alien Soil: Oral Histories of Great Migration Newark* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2024).

that we not take the foot off the gas in propelling countries across the globe toward fair and just labour practices.

BACKLASH, THE PROBLEM

In the United States, the axing of affirmative action is one example of policymakers displaying the opinion that we no longer need oversight when it comes to job equality. There has been major backlash to initiatives around racial equity in the workplace of late, especially once the energy of the global movement around George Floyd's murder dissipated. To many of us it seems that the proverbial 'things' may not actually be getting better, but instead backsliding.

In the summer of 2021, Rosalind M. Chow et al. published an article out of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology describing some of the reasoning behind the increasing criticism of equal employment initiatives. The authors began by pointing to the obvious yet often overlooked fact that when one is 'benefiting from the current system, you're likely to resist changing it'. As more and more changes have been proposed in this sphere, the heels of our history's longtime beneficiaries have most certainly been digging in.³

This is not, of course, a problem unique to the United States. Across the globe, resistance – or simple unwillingness altogether – exists when it comes to the equalising of job opportunities for citizens who have been historically marginalised within their prospective societies. In New Zealand, for example, while the latest election brought about its most diverse government, the Indigenous 'Maori unemployment rate is more than double the national rate, and they are more likely to be homeless'.⁴ Homelessness, of course, being its own cog in the vicious cycle of un- and underemployment. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, 'unemployment rates

3 Rosalind M. Chow, L. Taylor Phillips, Brian S. Lowery and Miguel M. Unzueta Jun, 'Fighting Backlash to Racial Equity Efforts', *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 8 June 2021. Available at <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/fighting-backlash-to-racial-equity-efforts/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

4 Amy Gunia, Ciara Nugent, Kat Moon, Simmone Shah and Suyin Haynes, 'The Racial Reckoning Went Global Last Year. Here's How Activists in 8 Countries Are Fighting for Justice', *Time*, 11 May 2021. Available at <https://time.com/6046299/fighting-injustice-world/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

are significantly higher among ethnic minorities than white people' according to the same study. Americans are not alone in this battle.

CALLING ON ORAL HISTORIES

Oral historians Barbara Allen Bogart and William Montell write: 'local history serves as a microcosm of a nation's history. Trends in attitudes, thoughts, and economic concerns at the national level may first be discerned and documented at the local level'.⁵ Oral historians know that there are things we can learn through everyday stories. Yet there will be those, especially in the more data-driven arenas, who might discount the veracity or value of such stories.

Bogart and Montell reference a particular oral history project whose mission was to 'reconstruct the architecture' of a Kentucky community that had been all but abandoned. Lead researcher Charles Martin explains that by the time he was conducting the necessary interviews most of the buildings in the community existed 'only in memory'. Yet, Martin noted how 'visual impressions of them permeated the minds of the informants and their parents', much of that information having been passed down through family stories. And, with respect to veracity, the informants' memories 'proved accurate when [they] could be checked against legal documents and other written sources'.⁶ 'Orally communicated history', the authors contend, 'is a valid and valuable source of historical information, as oral tradition and formal history complement one another...Alone each one is incomplete'.⁷ The added perspective of oral histories to historical enquiry is invaluable, though it might be that oral historians will have to argue this throughout eternity.

5 Barbara Allen Bogart and William Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1981), 6.

6 Charles Martin, letter to Lynwood Montell, quoted in Bogart and Montell, *From Memory to History*, 16. Martin's study was a part of his dissertation, 'Hollybush: The Eclipse of the Traditional Building System in a Mountain Community. An Architectural and Oral Historical Study' (PhD thesis, Indiana University, 1980).

7 Bogart and Montell, *From Memory to History*, 3.

Notably, there are not as many collections of African American oral histories with a focus on labour as one might expect.⁸ These become even more difficult to find when seeking out specifically non-Southern stories. This may reflect, in part, the oral historian's notion that going in with a specific agenda or subject may do more to exclude stories than invite them in. This notion, however accurate, makes for more effort on the part of what I have called the 'third party listener', the person who comes upon an already extant collection, oftentimes seeking insights into one or more specific subjects. That said, one existing collection I will highlight, and which has been extremely useful in my own work, is Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940*.⁹

In a 2014 article in *Oral History*, Lu Ann Jones wrote about her interviews with workers at DuPont's polyester plant in rural North Carolina. She was engaging with a multiracial workforce, so there are few references to issues specific to the Black workers.¹⁰ However, one point made is that these oral histories were crucial because written company records were so scarce.¹¹ This is a common theme in terms of companies with historically marginalised employee communities; as with so much historiography, most attention in the past has been paid to more corporate style employers and their workers. In fact, until the mid-twentieth century this could even be said to be the case of the oral history field, wherein stories of 'business people' and their employers were the most recorded labour histories of the time.

In Michael Keith Honey's *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle*, the table of contents alone displays just what it takes to get and keep a job for Black workers in the twentieth century, paralleling so many of the topics brought up in the Krueger-Scott interviews. From stories of Black

8 See Rick Halpern, 'Oral History and Labor History: A Historiographic Assessment after Twenty- Five Years', *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998): 596–610.

9 Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

10 In the U.S., as opposed to in Australia, the term 'Black' is not typically seen as derogatory and is often (but not always) used interchangeably with terms such as 'African American'. This is the case for this article.

11 Lu Ann Jones, 'DuPont Comes to Tobacco Road: Oral History and Rural Industrialisation in the Post-Second World War American South', *Oral History* 42, no. 1 (2014): 35–46.

women factory workers to union activities, the narrators in Honey's book tell tales that support, in my mind, the argument that 'ordinary people' have a lot to contribute to the discourse around fair labour practices. Honey's leading research question is simply, 'What was the role of black workers in labour history?' As the author notes, he 'relied heavily on union leaders and organisers, who were much more informed than the histories or newspaper accounts I had read'.¹² Honey observes what so many other historians have as well: that poor and working-class people rarely get their stories told. In its essence, Honey's project is an affirmation of the need for a fuller understanding of African American labour history, one that seems to be most successfully attained through the oral histories of those who lived it.

Much can be learned through the Krueger-Scott oral histories – among others – about the working lives of African Americans past and present; these narratives contribute to the undoing of invisibility and mythology around the Black work experience, while verifying those 'discriminatory systems that go back decades'.

THE LENS OF BLACK HISTORY

Albert S. Broussard writes that due to the 'explosion' of social history in the 1970s and 1980s, 'Ordinary people, Americans from working-class, as well as the middle and upper classes, suddenly became of interest to historians, who asked a new set of questions about how these individuals organised their lives and functioned within their communities'.¹³ This 'converged' with the emergence of Black Studies programs and a heightened interest in African Americans and their role in America's history. Both museums of African American history and academic programs of African American culture were responses as well as catalysts to Black activism in America.

Broussard also points out the ways in which labour historians have taken advantage of the resource that is oral history and how 'these studies have uncovered new community leaders and organisations that historians had overlooked'. These stories

12 Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

13 Albert S. Broussard, 'Race and Oral History', in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 191.

illustrate just how African Americans were adapting ‘to oppressive conditions in urban life’, he argues. Broussard goes on to provide examples of specific studies where Black workers’ interviews helped shed light on connections between seemingly disparate labour movements, the centrality of union organising for Black workers, and a general collective bent towards employment equality. One set of interviews especially, Broussard notes, showed that African Americans ‘took the lead to demand not only racial justice but also a strong, racially unified labor movement’.¹⁴

The Krueger-Scott interviews provide much the same, even as they are not a labour history collection per se. My experience in listening to so many already existing interviews in my work has me believing that there can be an advantage to the more general life story framework – as opposed to collections focused on particular subject matters. Many times in the Krueger-Scott interview sessions, for example, the narrators would demure about activist or political work when asked about it specifically (especially the women) and then provide robust stories of just such activity in some other part of the interview.

One case in point comes when Louise Epperson is asked in an additional oral history interview, outside the Krueger-Scott project, about her activist work – something she was well-known for and which will be addressed below. When answering preliminary interview questions around what kinds of jobs she held, she explained how, after working as a domestic and in factories, she finally secured a position as an aide at the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, a facility for the intellectually disabled. Soon after she was hired she set her sights on the occupational therapist position, a job no Black person had ever been hired for.

And I bidded on that job and I got the high score and I received it and I was the first Black to work on that. I was the first Black to work in occupational therapy. Everybody say when I saw that on the board, ‘Oh Mrs Epperson

14 Broussard, ‘Race and Oral History’, 191–192.

they don't hire no Blacks'. And I say, 'You don't know what they'll hire until you try'. And I went in and I got both jobs.¹⁵

The intention of the interviewer here had not been to dig into Epperson's employment experiences, and yet we become privy to one that illustrates the racial culture of at least one workplace circa 1960 – and what one worker did to disrupt it. It also foreshadows the activism that Mrs Epperson would be involved in for the rest of her life.

PRESENT-DAY ISSUES

One might surmise that between America's Long Civil Rights Movement, improved labour laws, and the alleged evolution of social attitudes towards race, that workplace equity gaps between whites and Blacks would be minor – if existent at all – at this point. But of course, even those who may have believed such a possibility a few years ago have had the benefit of a global pandemic to witness just how distinctly different the experiences of whites and African Americans can be in the United States, and how varied the experience of whites and non-whites across the world has been as well.

Yet, there are numerous people in positions of power these days – from university presidents to judges – demanding an end to affirmative action and other programs designed to even the proverbial playing field. While much of the recent outcry has focused on higher education admissions in the U.S., the ripple effect shows itself in challenges to fair hiring regulations that have been in place, for good reason, for many decades. The United States is at a crossroads when it comes to the subject of race writ large, a crossroads without any sort of universal guidance at the intersection. And this is how accidents happen.

In a 2007 decision, Supreme Court Chief Justice Roberts wrote, 'The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.'¹⁶

15 Louise Epperson, interviewed by Mark Krasovic, unidentified location, 7 July 2001, transcript held by author.

16 Nicholas Lemann, 'Can Affirmative Action Survive?' *The New Yorker*, 26 July 2021. Available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/02/can-affirmative-action-survive>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

This kind of circular thinking was recently echoed when American voting rights laws were rescinded in many southern American states, the argument being that they were no longer necessary because everyone was following the rules now. Unfortunately, we saw just how quickly this reasoning turned into some of the most egregious new voting legislation since the Reconstruction Era. We are, simply said, not there yet.

A 2020 report by the Center for American Progress (CAP) calls for, among other things, ‘the establishment of a national trust fund resourced through a small levy on large corporations’. As noted:

This report calls for a workforce redesign and proposes building a new future-proof Workforce Equity Trust Fund (WETF) that will enshrine fundamental workforce protections into law. The major tenant [*sic*] of the new WETF makes job quality – not upskilling for upskilling’s sake – the driving force in anticipating the inevitable future of work. For young people newly entering the world of work, this means supporting strong connections to pre-apprenticeship and work-based learning opportunities in their communities. Through the WETF, the strategy for raising wages and increasing work opportunities is central to serving incumbent workers. Additionally, the WETF will ensure that approaches for improving health and well-being are incorporated into rapid reemployment strategies for dislocated workers and temporary workers in contingent employment.¹⁷

This study found that between 1972 and 2019 Black unemployment was consistently twice as high as white unemployment, averaging 12-month periods, and argues that this consistent level of unemployment is the ‘result of discriminatory systems going back decades’. As ‘the Black-white unemployment gap [for men] is mostly due to high labour force exit rates for African Americans’, the idea behind the WETF is to address some of the reasons that African Americans leave their jobs. Seeking higher wages – often due to race discrimination at the present workplace – and adverse health issues are just two of the common reasons for Black Americans leaving the

17 Livia Lam, ‘A Design for Workforce Equity’, *Center for American Progress*, 16 October 2019. Available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/design-workforce-equity/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

workplace. With more resources going toward pay equity and health care, these workers would have a better chance of remaining at their current jobs and reaping the benefits of seniority.¹⁸

DOMESTIC WORK

During the time of the American Great Migration – from the first years of the twentieth century through to the 1960s – there was a defined and limited list of work available to most Black Americans. This is borne out by many sources, including the oral history interviews referenced here. Of course, there were certainly some doctors and beauty culture millionaires, but these were positions typically painstakingly forged by individuals, as opposed to opportunities available to the general Black public.

While during the twentieth century the U.S. changed drastically, and African Americans were finally being compensated for their labour, what was available was still limited. Domestic and ‘personal service’ jobs were the preponderance of positions available for Black Americans until the U.S. entered the First World War in 1917. While keeping those sorts of occupations ongoing, the war temporarily created additional jobs in the defence industry for many of the Black migrants. But, as would happen again after World War Two, once the war ended and the white soldiers returned home, they also returned to their jobs. Suddenly the Black labourers were deemed no longer competent or capable enough to remain employed at the level at which they had been. This pattern of racial employment exploitation and discrimination still exists today. In the following narratives we see illustrations of these sorts of obstacles played out in previous decades.

Louise Epperson started her career the way so many African American women of the early twentieth century did, as a domestic worker.

18 Olugbenga Ajilore, ‘On the Persistence of the Black-White Unemployment Gap’, *Center for American Progress*, 24 February 2020. Available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/persistence-black-white-unemployment-gap/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

My first job in Newark [in 1932], my friend asked me if I would hold a job for her while she tried to get a better job. Because she didn't want to lose that job. It was a part-time job. I had never been in a white person's house to work, and I was very nervous and excited over it. And she said I could do it, and I did it. I did all the cleaning. I did the cooking. And I received five dollars a week...

Then I got a second domestic job working for Dr Swain on Roosevelt Avenue. And I thought I was really coming into something then because I started off with twenty-five dollars a week. I was his receptionist, and when the people would all leave the office, he would come into the house. Then I would take my uniform that I was a receptionist in and change into another uniform and cook dinner.¹⁹

Marzell Swain told her interviewer that although she graduated from high school in 1940, still the only work she was able to secure was that of a domestic.

That was the only job I could get. Until I was workin' for a lady and she said, 'How far did you go in school?' So I told her and she said, 'What are you doin' doin' domestic work?' She said, 'You got an education, you should not be doin' domestic work and you should not be takin' care of babies'. So then she tried to help me get into a store and she still couldn't help me. Some friends she knew. They wouldn't touch you.²⁰

Rev. Robert Woods told his interviewer, 'My wife was a domestic. And most of her friends were domestics. Even though she was a beautician. They felt that they could make out better by doing...'days' work'... 'cause they didn't have to pay any

19 Louise Epperson, interviewed by Glen Marie Brickus, Newark, NJ, 25 February 1997, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*, Rutgers University Libraries. Available at <https://kruegerscott.libraries.rutgers.edu/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

20 Marzell Swain, interviewed by Annemarie Dickey-Kemp, Newark, NJ, 14 May 1998, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

income taxes, social security at that time, which was wrong. They thought it was right because they didn't have to pay anything out of it'.²¹

Of course, this practice continues on even into the twenty-first century, benefiting employers much more than their employees. While, in this case, the workers may have felt they were getting away with something – although more likely they were simply in need of the cash – it was really the homeowner getting the break. It is only somewhat recently that regulations have been enacted against paying workers in the home 'under the table'. While a law was passed in the 1950s that required employers to include domestic labourers in their tax returns, it was not until the mid-1990s that the 'Nanny Tax' had its own section on the American 1040 tax form.²²

Willie Bradwell started working as a domestic when she first came to Newark in 1939 at the age of 18. But she did not like domestic work, neither the tasks nor some of the people for whom she worked. 'I hated it. I don't like housework, not even my own', she told her interviewer. At one point her employer insisted that Bradwell get all her work done each day before eating lunch. 'So when I had my lunch it was time to come home', remembered Bradwell. 'I didn't go back.'²³

It should be noted that while domestic work was the only option available for so many African American women during at least the first half of the twentieth century, it was not something that necessarily carried with it dishonour. It was about working, after all, about earning an income – all the while keeping an eye toward better things ahead. These women had found work and that meant food and shelter, for themselves and often for their families. While this form of servitude can be looked upon as an initial compliance with the caste structure of the time, soon many of these women decided to make changes to their situations. From negotiating wages and

21 Robert Woods, interviewed by Glen Marie Brickus, Newark, NJ, 17 February 1997, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

22 See Albert B. Crenshaw, 'Simplified Nanny Tax Rules Can Still Create Headaches', *Washington Post*, 10 December 1995.

23 Willie Bradwell, interviewed by Cleta Bradwell, Newark, NJ, 8 December 1997, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

schedules, to demanding the ability to attend Sunday church services, Black women domestics worked hard to challenge the restrictions of that particular vocation.

The biggest issues with domestic work were – and continue to be – around exploitation of the labourer. Because it is often an ‘under the table’ position, oversight, benefits, and just plain data can be rare. As a 2022 study by the Economic Policy Institute found, ‘Fewer than 1 in 10 [American] domestic workers are covered by an employer-provided retirement plan and fewer than 1 in 5 receives health insurance coverage through their job’.²⁴ This particularly vulnerable type of employment continues to predominate for women of colour. ‘The vast majority (90.2%) of domestic workers are women; just over half (51.3%) are Black, Hispanic, or Asian American and Pacific Islander women; and they tend to be older than other workers’. The study also found that the ‘typical (median) domestic worker is paid \$13.79 per hour, much less than other workers (who are paid \$21.76 per hour at the median). Even when compared with demographically similar workers, domestic workers on average are paid just 75 cents for every dollar that their peers make’.²⁵ Domestic work was an entrée into paid labour for many Black women, but for most it was not something they planned on continuing long term.

FACTORY, LAUNDRY, AND OFFICE WORK

Mrs Bradwell explained in her interview that she later found employment at a paper-cup factory in North Newark, at 55 cents an hour – minimum wage at the time. After a few months she secured a new factory job with H.A. Wilson, around 1946. The racial make-up at H.A. Wilson was about 25 per cent Black and 75 per cent white, Bradwell reported. Moreover, ‘they didn’t even hire Black people ’til after the war. So, when we went in there after the war, it wasn’t too much of a problem’.²⁶

24 Asha Banerjee, Katherine deCourcy, Kyle K. Moore and Julia Wolfe, ‘Domestic Workers Chartbook 2022: A Comprehensive Look at the Demographics, Wages, Benefits, and Poverty Rates of the Professionals Who Care for Our Family Members and Clean Our Homes’, Economic Policy Institute, 22 November 2022. Available at <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-2022/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

25 Banerjee, et al., ‘Domestic Workers Chartbook 2022’.

26 Willie Bradwell interview, 8 December 1997.

Bradwell ultimately joined the union and subsequently became a shop steward. Her interviewer asked about that experience:

Interviewer: Did you guys ever have a strike?

Bradwell: Yes.

Interviewer: What was that like?

That was rough 'cause we were out there about six weeks. And I don't even, now, I don't even remember why we struck. And don't know if we got what we struck for.

Interviewer: So you, well, I guess being the shop steward, you were out on the line.

Yes. But I just don't remember the details.

The interviewer pressed Bradwell, suggesting it was a risky position she had taken as shop leader. 'No', Bradwell answered, 'It wasn't dangerous. 'Cause there wasn't anybody attempting to cross the line, just the foreman. And they didn't attempt to bring in any strike breakers, anything like that. Our biggest problem was attempting to stop the trucks that was comin' in with materials and things'.²⁷ It sure sounds a bit riskier than Bradwell intimated.

Alvin Conyers's first job in Newark was as a laundry porter in 1946. (He would have several jobs thereafter, including as a minister). The employees at the laundry were 90 per cent Black, he explained. Conyers then answered another question as to whether positions were similar among races:

I swept the floor, uh, dusted the machines and, uh, took the clothin' that were washed from one area to another...I enjoyed it. That was my first employment. I remember vividly I was making thirty dollars a week...It

27 Willie Bradwell interview, 8 December 1997.

made me feel like I was becomin' a young man...whites were mostly truck drivers, check-out men.²⁸

Conyers's early experience with discrimination in his job at Columbia Laundry ended up spurring him into becoming an advocate for racial equality. One of many issues that he would later tackle, as a member of the Social Action Committee of the Ministerial Conference, was that of discrimination in the hiring of Black firefighters.

Jessie Johnson came to Newark in 1944 from Hampton, Virginia. But even with a college degree, African Americans were not necessarily securing employment commensurate with their level of education. Johnson explained that African Americans with college degrees became trainers at her civil service job with the Office of Dependent Benefits (ODB):

Johnson: I was a processor at the ODB and a trainer for new people coming in. Because they used the people with the degrees to help – after they trained us – to help train others while we remained in the same job. And after we trained other people from the Pennsylvania area, they would get to be the supervisors of whatever.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Are you saying then that the people you trained were basically white folk?

The people we trained were basically white folk.

Interviewer: And they moved up while you stayed where you were?

And they moved up while we stayed where we were.²⁹

Research bears out that it would not be difficult to find non-white employees with similar tales to tell all these years later. In a 2021 study by the consulting firm Grads

28 Alvin Conyers, interviewed by Glen Marie Brickus, Newark, NJ, 1997 (no day or month recorded), *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

29 Jessie Johnson, interviewed by Glen Marie Brickus, Newark, NJ, (no date recorded), *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

of Life, '36% of Black respondents received a promotion in 2021, while only 23% reported a raise in salary'. It was very different for white workers, as '47% of white respondents said they got a promotion in 2021, while 44% reported a raise'.³⁰

Pearl Beatty was born in 1935 and came to Newark from Pittsburgh with her family, as a baby. Her father had been injured in the Pennsylvania coal mines and left the area to find a different kind of work. Beatty's aunt lived in Newark and so the family moved in with her. Everyone had to pitch in, Beatty notes:

Well, my first job was in a factory two blocks from here. From the beginning we lived on Baldwin and Washington Streets. And one day I was walking down the street and I saw this sign, 'employment needed'. And I went in and applied. I was 16. And they hired me. And I was thrilled because my job was just two blocks from home. We're talking about, let's see now, we're talking about '52.

As with all the participants in this oral history collection, Beatty and her interviewer were familiar with each other. At one point the interviewer begins, 'I know you're multi-racial...' and Beatty responds, 'My mother was Italian and my father was Black'. This reminded her of another work story:

In fact, when I walked in [to the factory job], the white girls thought I was, uh, white. And this one white woman said to me, 'I want you to know that the Black girls that work here are very clean'.

And at my lunchtime I went over to the Black girls and introduced myself. And when I came back to my bench to work [pause] the white lady said to me, 'Now, just because I said that the Blacks were clean here, that didn't

30 Dexter Tilo, 'Black Employees Less Likely to Receive Promotions', *HRD Canada*, 12 October 2022. Available at <https://www.hcamag.com/ca/specialization/diversity-inclusion/black-employees-less-likely-to-receive-promotions/423679>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

mean that you have to go over there and eat with them'. And I politely let her know that I was Black. ... Now the Black women, they knew I was Black.³¹

Once again, these twentieth-century oral histories reflect many ongoing employment issues of the twenty-first century. A recent Gallup poll showed that '1 in 4 Black employees and 1 in 4 Hispanic employees in the U.S. report having been discriminated against at work in the past year'. The researchers note, 'Racism can be seen explicitly, such as through co-workers sharing hateful tropes, or implicitly, such as when people of color receive lower pay for doing equal work'.³²

Again, this is not a uniquely American problem. The twenty-first century is full of campaigns spurred on by Human Resource departments and unions across the globe to eradicate racism in the workplace. This means it is still very much alive. In 2007, the International Labour Organization collaborated with the French government in launching a widespread media campaign against discrimination in the workplace. Posters with awareness-raising messages were plastered throughout the city of Paris, as well as in other cities across France, in subways, commuter trains and ferries.³³

Sometimes just getting in the door was, and is, the first obstacle for many marginalised workers. Pauline Mathis tells a story in her Krueger-Scott interview that illustrates just how much American racism did not stop at the Mason-Dixon Line. It was often the case that the North just did it differently than the South. In 1952 Mrs Mathis started her first job in Newark, as an office clerk working for the Newark Newsdealers Supply Company on Halsey Street. She had gone to an employment agency and secured the job which she was told would pay \$38 a week. She headed straight to the office to begin her new career.

31 Pearl Beatty, interviewed by Geri Smith, Newark, NJ, 12 December 1997, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

32 Matt Gonzales, 'What Does Workplace Racism Look Like?', *SHRM*, 30 September 2022. Available at <https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/inclusion-diversity/workplace-racism-look-like>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

33 'Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems – ILO-OSH 2001', International Labour Office. Available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---safework/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_107727.pdf. Accessed 20 August 2024.

‘When I walk in I am surrounded by nothing but whites’, she recalled. “‘Uh oh”, that is the first thing you say to yourself. I don’t know if I’m gonna get this job or not’.³⁴ According to Mathis as soon as she handed over her employment papers, the general manager, the office manager and the owner quickly huddled together while Mathis waited nervously in her chair. The three men finally returned to Mathis, informing her that the employment agency had made a mistake and that actually the pay was \$35 a week and not \$38. (That would equal an approximate \$30 difference in weekly pay today). Mathis tells her interviewer: ‘Now I know what’s goin’ on here. I’m Black, they changed the salary on me. ‘Cause I heard about that kinda thing going on’. But Mathis decided at that moment that she would be the one to integrate that office – the only other African American there at the time was the man sweeping the floor. Assuming they were trying to dissuade her from working thereby offering the lower pay, she surprised the men and accepted the salary. ‘So I guess they had to hire me’, she said, with a lilt of satisfaction in her voice.³⁵ This is just one more example of everyday activism in the workplace, as African Americans were consistently forced to navigate a system of hurdles placed in front of them – even when accepting a job that was already theirs.

Looking at a 2023 two-year study out of Melbourne’s Monash University and King’s College London we witness the continued ‘ethnic imbalance’ of today’s workplace, specifically in corporate leadership in this case. This study offers two possible explanations for this imbalance. One has to do with embedded racist stereotypes (such as those illustrated in these oral histories). And another explanation suggested was that prospective employees with ‘non-English’ names could not get their foot in the door to begin with.³⁶ There are myriad studies done showing job applicants in the U.S. changing their names to more conventionally Eurocentric names only to receive

34 Pauline Mathis, interviewed by Glen Marie Brickus, Newark, NJ, 7 October 1997, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

35 Pauline Mathis interview, 7 October 1997.

36 Mladen Adamovic and Andreas Leibbrandt, ‘Is There a Glass Ceiling for Ethnic Minorities to Enter Leadership Positions? Evidence From a Field Experiment with Over 12,000 Job Applications’, *The Leadership Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2023). Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101655>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

interviews for jobs they had not previously been called back for. It seems racism in the workplace can take hold even before an employee lands the job.

In 1952 Robert Woods was hired as a manager at Allied Electric in Irvington, New Jersey. Woods had attended the Newark Academy of the Arts and had been promised a job as a commercial illustrator at the *Newark News* once he received his degree. 'Upon graduation, I guess they discovered that I was not Caucasian. I didn't get employment in the *Newark News*. They couldn't hire me because the rest of the artists would leave the studio. So that created a bad taste in my mouth'.³⁷

Unfortunately, Woods' ultimate job at Allied Electric was not without its racial complications either:

Woods: I was the manager of 40 women... [Laughter] You know how that was!

Interviewer: No I don't really know how that was.

Well they wasn't used to an Afro-American manager...boss...

Interviewer: Most of these are white women?

Yes. They wasn't used to that – wasn't used to taking orders from nobody like me. And sometimes it became difficult and we'd have to wind up in the president's office with a grievance.³⁸

Woods' initial remark could have been misconstrued as sexist, but we quickly learn that Woods is describing workplace racism. The fact that even as a manager he was regularly challenged by the white women working under him is an illuminating commentary on both race and gender in the mid-twentieth century. These women were unhappy at being told what to do by a man of colour. And they had access to the ear of the company's president in order to air their grievances.

37 Robert Woods interview, 17 February 1997.

38 Robert Woods interview, 17 February 1997.

Another narrator, Ed Crawford, was born in 1950, late enough so that he was actually able to secure a job at Bamberger's department store after graduating from high school. At one time, no non-whites could have worked for the upscale shopping institution. Crawford performed multiple jobs, all behind the scenes. His manager ultimately acknowledged his excellent work, so Crawford requested a raise:

So I remember having to sit with him and somewhat plead my case to get a nickel raise, a nickel an hour raise. However, when I transferred out of the section and went on to another section to work, and the next fur storage season started, they hired two guys to do the job I did by myself...Made me wonder why I had to work so hard to get that nickel out of them when they had to pay two salaries for the salary they paid me.

Interviewer: Were these white fellows that they hired to replace you, or were they Black guys?

White guys. Another irony of the situation.³⁹

In the late 1960s, the Black Youth Organization (BYO) convened African American community leaders to discuss the creation of a school for Newark's African American students. BYO wanted to provide students of colour with more resonant and relevant educational opportunities. Ed Crawford finally left his Bamberger's job to work as a janitor at what would become the Chad School. Perhaps he received more egalitarian treatment at that institution.

AFRICAN AMERICAN EMPLOYMENT AND RACISM

In the twentieth century, one cannot consider African American employment without considering racism alongside it. And as we review more recent studies, we see that this is a lens still relevant to employment research today. Almost every job that a Black person wanted, applied for, worked in, and was fired from included experiences linked to race. And they were typically of the negative persuasion. The

39 Ed Crawford, interviewed by Glen Marie Brickus, Newark, NJ, 23 February 1997, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

majority of employers and business owners during this time period, according to the interviews as well as several studies, were not especially concerned with racial issues and inequities, nor the possibility of being perceived as racist themselves. This does not in any way suggest that the discrimination was non-racist. It simply means that racial equity was not of great concern to the many employers of this time. And if it was not of great concern, then it follows that said employers were not particularly afraid that someone might consider their practices – or themselves individually – racist.

In a 1956 State of New Jersey report on employment practices in retail stores, shop owners and managers were interviewed about ‘employers’ attitudes towards minorities. The respondents claimed that either no ‘Negroes’ ever applied for the jobs in which they were conspicuously absent, or that they were sometimes turned away from employment because the white customers might not be comfortable if waited upon by a person of colour.⁴⁰ Mid-twentieth century, the idea of employment equality was a fairly new concept in the U.S., after all. It was not until 1941 that President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 banned discrimination in the workplace – but then only in ‘war-related work’. It took until 1959 for California to be the first state to enact the *Fair Employment Practice Act* prohibiting discrimination based upon, among other identifiers, race. For so many white employers, they had yet to be forced into interrogating their hiring practices and simply saw themselves as keeping up the status quo.

In her oral history, Katheryn Bethea recalls one Christmas season, in 1942, when she sought to supplement her income by working at Bamberger’s department store. She was hired as a ‘floor girl’, carrying up clothing from the basement. Because of her diligence as an employee, she was asked to stay on after the season was over. Bethea agreed to do so but only if she could work in the position of clerk. ‘They weren’t hiring any Black women – girls...to be clerks. We could go down there and lug all that stuff...’. Bethea’s manager told her that while she was personally ready for an

40 Marion L. Courtney, *Employment Practices in Selected Retail Stores* (New Jersey: Dept. of Education, 1956), 7.

African American on the floor, Bamberger's was not quite there yet. The status quo was still in effect and Bethea declined the store's offer of continued employment.⁴¹

As far as that manager was concerned, she made it clear that she believed herself non-racist. It was, to her, simply a matter of (white) people as a whole not yet being ready for the change in optics. Bethea knew it was racism and said so in her interview. Yet a number of the Krueger-Scott interviewees demurred when asked questions about racism and discrimination. Some were concerned that they might come off as pessimistic or critical. 'I hope I didn't say anything negative – did I? Too negative?' asked Elma Bateman. 'No, it was simply a beautiful interview', responded the interviewer. Bateman added, 'I want to express my opinion. If you ask me I'm gonna tell you. But...'. The interviewer reassured her subject, 'You were not negative at all'.⁴² This exchange came after Elma Bateman had finished describing the pushback she received after securing her promotion within the Air Force.

Even earlier in her interview, Bateman was answering questions about race relations in her school experience, explaining that there was little in the way of trouble as she made her way through Robert Treat High School in the early 1940s. Yet she also mentions asking her school counsellor for permission to register for a 'commercial' course that taught typing and stenography, as opposed to one of the 'basic' courses to which Black students were most often steered. 'The counsellor wanted to know why, when Black people aren't hired as secretaries', said Bateman. Taking the basic classes, Bateman explained to her interviewer, 'all you could do when you came out was work in a factory'. So she took it upon herself to further her job possibilities despite the obstacle. 'I took a secretarial class and I'm so glad I did...I came out and was able to get a job at the VA (Veteran's Administration)'.⁴³ Persistent in large ways and small, from subverting the rules, to demanding raises, to refusing jobs, the

41 Kathryn Bethea, interviewed by Glen Marie Brickus, Newark, NJ, 7 August 1997, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

42 Elma Bateman, interviewed by Pauline Blount, Newark, NJ, 29 April 1999, *Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection*.

43 Elma Bateman interview, 29 April 1999.

Krueger-Scott narrators continually disrupted the labour caste system within which they were mired.

CONCLUSION

These oral histories help us gain greater understanding of just what it took for African Americans to earn an income in cities built by the Great Migration. They provide illustrations of the deeply entrenched ‘discriminatory systems’ referenced in the Center for American Progress (CAP) report mentioned earlier in this article, and all that it entailed to work within – and to challenge – those systems. These narratives also highlight just how similar some of the obstacles faced decades ago are to those that African American, and other minoritised workers, face today. Indeed, a 2019 report by the Economic Policy Institute echoes the CAP report, naming Black American workers as twice as likely as white workers to be unemployed. The Institute’s study also addresses issues of underemployment for Black workers, wherein even after attaining a given position, their skills are not always utilised to the same extent as white employees. The study is extensive, incorporating a litany of markers of racial labour inequity in the twenty-first century.⁴⁴

Robin D.G. Kelley’s 2019 *Journal of American History* article notes just how long Black scholars, especially, have seen the connection between what was happening in the labour circles of the United States and that which was happening in the rest of the world in terms of racial attitudes and policies:

Black historians during the 1930s faced the past through the prism of an unstable and uncertain future. The economic crisis, unemployment, and the growth of working-class militancy inspired several scholars to undertake historical and sociological studies of black labor. Although, as Francille Rusan Wilson points out, black labor studies date back at least to the 1890s, the context of the Great Depression inspired a more radical critique

44 Jhacova Williams and Valerie Wilson, ‘Black Workers Endure Persistent Racial Disparities in Employment Outcomes’, *Economic Policy Institute*, 27 August 2019. Available at <https://www.epi.org/publication/labor-day-2019-racial-disparities-in-employment/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

of capitalism. Equally important was the international context. The whole world was in upheaval.⁴⁵

The fact is that all these many decades later not as much has changed as one might hope. Our global society urgently needs to continue supporting and creating systems that mandate and undergird fair employment practices across the board. Oral histories from the past – and present – can help amplify this need, as well as suggest approaches towards progress. Notably, all this effort is simply in order to reach some general form of racial equality; racial *equity* in the workplace is still much further off on the transnational horizon.

45 Robin D.G. Kelley, “But a local phase of a world problem”: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883–1950’, *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 1045–1077.