
Labor as Liberation: The Pullman Porters and the Black Intellectual Legacy Model

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As the United States celebrates the hundredth anniversary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (1925–2025), this article revisits the legacy of the Pullman Porters through the framework of the Black Intellectual Legacy Model (BILM)—a culturally relevant approach based on the educational philosophy of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, founder of Negro History Week and a key figure in culturally responsive/relevant teaching.

Under the prophetic leadership of A. Philip Randolph, who famously declared “fight or be slaves,” the Pullman Porters transformed Black labor into an act of resistance and enlightenment, organizing the first all-Black labor union to secure a collective bargaining agreement with a major American corporation. Their efforts set a model for Black labor organizing and laid a moral and structural foundation for the Civil Rights Movement.

Guided by self-discipline, collective unity, racial pride, dignity, and education, the porters used their work as a platform for liberation. They invested their wages and tips in their children’s and relatives’ education, many of whom attended historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and went on to become teachers, ministers, lawyers, professors, college presidents, doctors, and civic leaders. This intergenerational commitment to education fueled the growth of the Black middle class and fulfilled Woodson’s vision of learning as both empowerment and cultural preservation.

Through the Black Intellectual Legacy Model, this article presents the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as a case study of how knowledge, culture, and collective agency turn labor into liberation. Their story highlights the power of education, individual and collective action, organization, and self-determination in shaping a more just, self-aware, and empowered Black America.

KEYWORDS: Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph, Carter G. Woodson, Black labor history, Civil Rights Movement, Black intellectual tradition

METHODS/APPROACH

This article employs a conceptual-historical methodology, using BILM as an interpretive framework to analyze secondary sources on the Pullman Porters and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Rather than presenting new archival findings, the study synthesizes established labor history, Black educational theory, and Afrikan-centered scholarship to reinterpret the BSCP as an intellectual, cultural, and educational movement. BILM serves as an analytic lens through which Black labor is examined, not only as economic activity, but also as a site of knowledge production, intergenerational transmission, and collective resistance. This approach aligns with critical historical inquiry that centers Black epistemology, cultural memory, and community-based knowledge systems.

INTRODUCTION: LABOR AS LIBERATION: THE PULLMAN PORTERS AND THE BLACK INTELLECTUAL

The story of the Pullman Porters embodies BILM, linking the historical and philosophical foundations of Black history and culture with the Black radical intellectual tradition of education as liberation, psychological empowerment, cultural and intellectual self-determination, as well as individual and collective agency. Through the lens of the Pullman Porters, labor as liberation shows how the Black community's academic identity, racial self-efficacy, epistemic confidence, achievement motivation, and collective uplift developed. More importantly, it offers a Blackcentric approach to counter

epistemic dependency.¹ The 100th Anniversary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (1925-2025) honors these men not only as laborers, but also as educators, activists, and institutional change-makers. Studying the Pullman Porters through the BILM helps us see how community power can shape social change and affirm Black excellence.²

In the decades following Reconstruction, Black Americans confronted a rapidly industrializing nation that relied on Black labor while denying Black humanity, citizenship, and intellectual capacity. The transition from slavery to freedom did not yield meaningful economic or educational opportunities for most Black Americans. Instead, racial capitalism reorganized exploitation through new institutional forms that confined Black Americans to the lowest rungs of the labor market. Enslaved Black labor underpinned the Southern states' economies, particularly in cotton, tobacco, indigo, rice, and sugar. Profits from slavery fueled the growth of American capitalism, including the banking industry, insurance companies, prisons, railroads, institutions of higher education, and industries in the North, West, and Midwest, including boat construction, railroads, and textile mills. Post-emancipation, Black laborers worked in sharecropping and agricultural labor, domestic service, industrial jobs, and the seafaring industries, and low-paying industrial jobs often operated under exploitative conditions that enriched white industrialists and business owners. Respectable employment was scarce, and Black workers were overwhelmingly relegated to domestic service, agricultural labor, and low-wage industrial positions that reproduced the racial logics of slavery, Reconstruction backlash, and Jim Crow segregation. In this context, Black labor functioned less as a pathway to socioeconomic mobility and more as a mechanism of racial containment, marginalization, and continued exclusion from first-class citizenship.³

At first glance, the rise of the Pullman Company in the late nineteenth century appeared to offer newly emancipated Black men an economic alternative to the harsh conditions of agricultural work and the low wages of domestic service. In 1865, a pivotal year in Black history that marked the end of chattel slavery and the passage of the 13th Amendment, legally abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude in the United States, was also the year that

¹ W.D. Wright, *Crisis of the Black Intellectual*, Chicago: Third World Press (2007), 103.

² Patricia McKissack and Frederick McKissack, *A Long Hard Journey: The Story of the Pullman Porters* (New York: Walker and Company), 1989), 107-109).

³ James Ciment, *African American History* (Checkmark Books, 2001).

George Mortimer Pullman, a wealthy American industrialist and engineer, launched the Pullman Palace Car Company (PPCC). In 1859, Pullman revolutionized rail travel by replacing uncomfortable accommodations with opulent sleeping cars featuring carpeting, chandeliers, drapes, fine dining, and 24-hour service. His luxury railcars mimicked the elegance of five-star hotels, but he initially employed only whites as porters before switching to employing formerly enslaved Black men after the Civil War. Starting around 1867, Pullman hired recently emancipated Black men at lower wages to replace the predominantly white workforce.⁴

Why did Pullman hire formerly enslaved Black men exclusively? After slavery ended, Black men were seeking work, and Pullman took advantage of the limited options available to them. He sought to hire what he believed to be the perfect servant to signify the luxury of the Pullman Palace Company.⁵ He believed hiring ex-slaves was expensive and held the era's stereotypical view that this population was accustomed to attending to the needs of whites. Pullman desired to re-enact slavery by hiring Black men perceived as subservient to cater to white passengers who expected quiet, dignified, deferential service. In addition, he believed Black workers were less expensive than white workers; in Pullman's eyes, Black workers were a cheap, invisible, subservient labor force. At the company's peak, the PPCC was the largest single employer of Black men in the United States, employing 20,000 in total. As Stanley G. Grizzle, a porter and organizer, explained, he became a porter because he had few other options for stable work and needed to survive.⁶

The golden era of the PPCC spanned the 1880s to the 1920s, when Pullman luxury railroad service reached its peak across America.⁷ Pullman provided Black men with stable work during an era of limited economic opportunities. As sleeping car porters, Black men held positions that outwardly appeared professional, dignified, and respectable while inwardly enduring harsh working conditions, low wages, and systemic racism. Beneath the image

⁴ Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

⁵ Tye, *Rising from the Rails*

⁶ Stanley G. Grizzle, with John Cooper, *My Name Is Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: Personal Reminiscences of Stanley G. Grizzle* (Umbrella Press, 1998).

⁷ J. Botterill, "George Mortimer Pullman, Nineteenth-Century Marketer," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 12, no. 3 (2020): 305-322, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHRM-10-2018-0052>.

of luxury rail travel lay a deeply racialized labor structure engineered to preserve white comfort and reinforce Black subordination.⁸ Porters worked 24-hour shifts, spending 10% of their time in unpaid setup and cleanup duties while traveling thousands of miles each month. Despite low wages, tips from wealthy passengers helped porters earn more than they could in most available Black employment options.⁹

Porters were expected to surrender their personal identities to the subservient identity of being called “George” (after George Pullman),¹⁰ regardless of their actual names. They were forced to accept racial discrimination and dehumanizing treatment, including punishing work schedules with minimal rest, which normalized the racial hierarchy in both symbolic and material ways. The sleeping car thus functioned not only as a workplace but also as a mobile “plantation on wheels” upon which racial domination was enacted and legitimized. Pullman’s luxury railcars were marketed to the elite, affluent, and those who nostalgically longed for the “good old days” when Blacks knew their place. Black porters helped create a luxurious, genteel, Old South atmosphere by reinforcing a racialized image of the quiet, deferent, congenial, albeit invisible servant.¹¹

Nevertheless, Black porters did not passively accept this imposed role and status. Throughout the early twentieth century, they transformed racially constrained labor into a platform for collective racial uplift, political education, the advocacy of racial dignity, and the building of Black America’s first middle class.¹² In 1925, Philip Randolph and porters organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), the first African American labor union to secure a collective bargaining agreement with a major US corporation. As Black porter Stanley G. Grizzle recalled, porters resisted the racism and segregation imposed on them and organized the Brotherhood

⁸ Robert L. Allen, *The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: C. L. Dellums and the Fight for Fair Treatment and Civil Rights* (South End Press, 1990).

⁹ Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925–1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995)

¹⁰ Bernard Mergen, “The Pullman Porter: From ‘George’ to Brotherhood,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1974): 224–235, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-73-2-224>

¹¹ Stephen Kercher, “Pullman Porters: From Service to Civil Rights,” *Journal of American History* 97, no. 1 (June 2010): 117–120, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jahist/97.1.117>

¹² Jack Santino, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters* (University of Illinois Press, 1989).

to defend their rights.¹³ Pullman hired Black men as porters because he believed they were too docile and subservient to protest or form unions. The formation of America's first successful all-Black union not only gave Black porters collective bargaining power by securing the first bargaining agreement between Black workers and a major company but also set a precedent for Black labor organizing and became a model for civil rights organizing strategies.¹⁴

The BSCP's centennial (1925–2025) invites renewed scholarly attention—not merely as a milestone in Black labor history, but as a transformative movement in Black intellectual, educational, and political life. The Black porter's twelve-year struggle for better pay and working conditions paved the way for civil rights activism, strengthened the Black labor movement, inspired the March on Washington, increased Black mobility by opening access to dignified professions, helped build the Black middle class and increase Black socioeconomic mobility, and opened opportunities for Black Americans beyond agricultural, menial wage jobs, and domestic service.¹⁵

This essay argues that the Pullman porters' legacy must be understood as a foundational case of Black labor-as-liberation, linking economic struggle to intellectual development and social solidarity, cultural and critical consciousness, communal responsibility and institution building, institutional transformation, and intergenerational educational advancement and knowledge transmission.¹⁶ Using BILM as an interpretive framework, this study repositions the BSCP as cultural architects whose practices of reading, organizing, disciplined self-presentation, and political education shaped twentieth-century Black freedom struggles. Two guiding questions frame the inquiry:

- (1) How did the BSCP transform Black labor into a platform for collective empowerment?
- (2) In what ways did education, historical literacy, and racial uplift serve as deliberate strategies for liberation?

¹³ Grizzle, *My Name Is Not George*.

¹⁴ Martin, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics*.

¹⁵ Bruce Nelson, review of *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925–1945*, by Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 1 (2003): 110–112, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/43177>

¹⁶ Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Scribner, 1971).

PHILOSOPHICAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE BLACK INTELLECTUAL LEGACY MODEL

BILM is grounded in the Black radical intellectual tradition of DuBois,¹⁷ Woodson,¹⁸ Wilson,¹⁹ and in Black intellectual societies such as the American Negro Academy.²⁰ At the core of it is the assertion that intellect has historically served as collective resistance within Black communities. From clandestine schools during slavery to educational institutions founded by free Black communities, African Americans consistently understood knowledge as power—shared, protected, and mobilized for survival.²¹

The Black Intellectual Legacy Model treats Black institutions as living intellectual ecosystems rather than static historical artifacts. These include HBCUs; Black public, private, independent, and boarding schools; Black fraternities and sororities; the Black Church and other faith-based organizations; and literary and scholarly societies such as the American Negro Academy and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH/ASALH). These institutions did more than transmit academic content; they socialized Black youth into traditions of leadership, service, and collective responsibility.²²

BILM is a framework for understanding education and development in Black communities through a Black-centric, historically grounded, culturally sustaining, affirming, and psychologically emancipatory lens. It situates Black history and culture, not as a supplemental narrative or a celebratory unit, but as the epistemological foundation of practical education, Black-centered knowledge, and praxis—or the active application of Black-centered history, theory, and cultural understanding to real-world events,

¹⁷ Elvira Basevich, *Black Lives: W. E. B. Du Bois* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Carl A. Grant, Keffrelyn D. Brown, and Anthony L. Brown, *Black Intellectual Thought in Education: The Missing Traditions of Anna Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, and Alain LeRoy Locke* (Routledge, 2016).

¹⁹ Amos N. Wilson, *Blueprint for Black Power: A Moral, Political, and Economic Imperative for the Twenty-First Century* (Afrikan World Infosystems, 1998).

²⁰ Alfred A. Moss, *The American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth* (Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

²¹ Derrick P. Alridge, *The Educational Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* (Teachers College Press, 2008).

²² Pero Gaglio Dagbovie, *Carter G. Woodson in Washington, D.C.: The Father of Black History Month* (The History Press, 2014).

issues, and problems.²³ Within this framework, Black history and culture serve as an archive of intellectual strategies forged under conditions of racial domination. These strategies—or cultural capital—are designed to preserve Black humanity, cultivate individual and group agency, and ensure collective survival. According to Wilson, at the heart of socialization and education is racial survival.²⁴

Drawing on Black-centric intellectual traditions, Black educational philosophy and theory, Black-centric psychology, Woodson's fugitive pedagogy,²⁵ DuBoisian sociology²⁶ and culturally relevant pedagogy, the BILM advances the argument that education must intentionally cultivate academic identity, achievement motivation, institution building, historical literacy, racial self-efficacy, epistemic confidence, critical consciousness, collective learning, communal responsibility, psychological empowerment, self-determination, and a sustained commitment to both individual excellence and collective uplift. These outcomes are not contemporary innovations; they reflect the historical aims of Black education across generations. BILM represents Sankofa, oral history, griot tradition, collective learning, and communal responsibility for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

Within this framework, intelligence is not conceptualized as an individual possession. Knowledge, credentials, and expertise are understood as communal resources that bind the educated individual to the collective. Education, therefore, is inseparable from communal responsibility and social solidarity.

A defining feature of the BILM is its engagement with the psychological dimensions of domination. Drawing on Woodson's work, the model asserts that political, educational, and psychological pathology arises when people lack knowledge of reality—particularly the psychological strategies used to maintain dominance.²⁷ Wilson defines education as the systematic development of intelligence for collective survival and advancement, not merely credential accumulation. Woodson warned that education divorced from Black history produces dependency rather than empowerment. His

²³ Clayborne Carson, *The African American Struggle for Freedom: A Civil Rights Chronicle* (Sterling Publishing, 2004).

²⁴ Wilson, *Blueprint for Black Power*.

²⁵ Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

²⁶ Basevich, *Black Lives: W. E. B. Du Bois*.

²⁷ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Associated Publishers, 1933).

critique of “mis-education” exposes how schooling can inculcate self-doubt and intellectual inferiority when it fails to center Black critical consciousness, collective learning, communal responsibility, social solidarity, collective uplift, and individual and group agency.

BLACK LABOR AS INTELLECTUAL TRADITION AND COLLECTIVE PRAXIS

Within dominant Eurocentric narratives, Black labor has often been framed as evidence of exploitation without agency. Black laborers are treated as both objects and subjects of these narratives. The BILM challenges this framing by situating Black labor within a longer Black-centric tradition of intellectual praxis. Historically, Black Americans were positioned as laboring bodies while being denied intellectual, political, economic, and social status.²⁸ This artificial separation between labor and intellect served racial capitalism by justifying political disenfranchisement and economic exploitation, and erasing Black intellectual knowledge and socioeconomic production. The Pullman Palace Car Company’s hiring and human practices reflected this separation, treating Black porters as invisible, low-wage servants unworthy of adequate compensation or humane working conditions.²⁹

However, Black American labor traditions reveal sustained practices of academic identity formation, achievement motivation that inspires persistence and excellence, cultural and racial pride, literacy and education, mutual aid and communal responsibility, institutional formation, and social activism and strategic organizing. Black porters transformed labor spaces into sites of clandestine learning, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and counter-narratives to Black deficit theories and racial group stereotypes. They supported schools, including HBCUs, churches, benevolent societies, and economic cooperatives. During the industrial era of white control and dominance, Black porters turned the Pullman Palace Car Company into an arena for political education, economic rights, and the civil rights movement.³⁰ Labor functioned not merely as work but as socioeconomic, political, and educational resistance, laying the groundwork for the growth of the Black

²⁸ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

²⁹ Martin, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics*.

³⁰ Kercher, “Pullman Porters: From Service to Civil Rights.”

middle class. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters stands as one of the most explicit historical expressions of the Black Intellectual Legacy Model.

THE PULLMAN PORTERS: LABOR AS SURVIVAL, RESISTANCE, AND INTELLECTUAL PRAXIS

The founding of the Pullman Palace Car Company by George Mortimer Pullman in Chicago in 1867 was driven by the socioeconomic and political upheavals associated with the Civil War: the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the Reconstruction Amendments, including the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery and led over 4 million Black Americans to transition from the chattel, free-labor system to the free-labor system, competing with native-born whites and a rising European immigrant population. In addition, the United States was undergoing rapid transformation, particularly in industrialization and transportation. As rail lines spread across the continental United States, long-distance travel increased, migration between regions of the US increased, and commerce and trade became heavily dependent on the expanding railroad systems. Early rail travel was primitive, unsanitary, poorly ventilated, uncomfortable, and physically painful, unsafe, and poorly regulated. With passenger cars more akin to stagecoach travel, middle- and upper-class whites were accustomed to private carriages, steamboats, and first-class stagecoaches, where privacy, refinement, social distance from undesirables, and status were protected and affirmed. Rail travel was initially perceived as beneath elite standards and respectability.³¹

Pullman understood competitive advantage and re-engineered rail travel to meet white elite standards of safety and comfort, refinement and luxury, respectability and class distinction, and, more importantly, to mirror the American racial hierarchy by using Black porters, already associated with service labor in elite spaces. The Pullman Palace and Car Company came to symbolize not only elite luxury travel, with its polished Black walnut interior, carpeting, linen bedding, chandeliers, marble washstands, and fine dining modeled after the elegance of the best hotels, but also 24-hour service from a well-trained, subservient, deferent Black staff that affluent whites were accustomed to interacting with. For white passengers, the Pullman car resembled a “hotel on wheels.” For Black porters, it was seen as a “plantation on wheels.”

³¹ Nelson, review of *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics*.

Pullman managers deliberately selected Black men as porters, grounded in racist beliefs that Black Americans were naturally suited to servility—beliefs rooted in slavery, reinforced during Reconstruction, and codified under Jim Crow segregation. From Pullman’s perspective, Black porters appealed to white passengers who identified elite luxury with a racialized, deferential service. Pullman associated Black porters with a cheap, invisible, subservient labor force unlikely to protest and more likely to accept harsh working conditions, which fueled the company’s popularity, growth, expansion, and profitability. Given the limited employment options available to Black men at the end of slavery and during Reconstruction, the Pullman Company, at its peak, was the largest single employer of Black men in the United States, employing over 20,000 Black workers.³²

Black porters were excluded from salaried wages and relied entirely on tips from white travelers which were the main source of income and reinforced a servile, dependent relationship among the Black porters, the Pullman Company, and the white passengers. Black porters were expected to work long hours, approximately 400 hours per month, often sleeping only a few hours, if at all, while remaining constantly available to white passengers. These high expectations offered neither job security nor opportunities for promotion. Black porters were expected to greet passengers with a smile and welcome them aboard with courtesy and professionalism.

Black porters were expected to perform a wide range of roles, including carrying luggage, lifting and transporting heavy bags from the platform to the train, assisting small children or the elderly, turning seats into beds in sleeping cars, making them up at night with fresh linens, polishing passengers’ shoes overnight, brushing off coats and hats, maintaining rail car cleanliness through sweeping and dusting, keeping the cars spotless throughout the trip, answering bell calls and tending to drunk and sick passengers throughout the night, serving food and drinks, assisting the dining car staff, answering questions about train schedules, stops, and accommodations, monitoring passenger safety and responding to emergencies, handling complaints with diplomacy, restocking supplies, folding linens, running errands during train stops, playing with and entertaining children, and serving as a sounding board for talkative passengers—while tolerating low pay, racial abuse, humiliation,

³² Tye, *Rising from the Rails*.

and unrealistic requests. Additionally, they were required to use their meager income to purchase meals and uniforms.

Being addressed simply as “George” (a name derived from being referred to as George Pullman’s “boys”) symbolized the erasure of individual identity and reinforced racial subordination. When not called “George,” Black porters were called “boy” or “nigger,” a practice deeply rooted in white supremacy, racism, and white paternalism. In several cases, Black porters resisted being called “George,” telling white passengers to refer to them by their formal names. These acts of resistance could result in the loss of tips, reprimand by Pullman Co., and even firing.³³

Black porters transformed the harsh working conditions and the racially exploitative jobs at the Pullman Co. into individual opportunity, collective advancement, and long-term socioeconomic mobility for Black communities. One of the greatest, yet unintended, benefits of being a porter was travel and access to social capital and networks of elite whites, thus opening doors to opportunities that existed in a white-controlled social and economic space designed to facilitate powerlessness and invisibility. The intellectual exchange that resulted from porters traveling across regions, gaining access to political ideas, economic knowledge, books, and literature not readily available in Black communities, enabled the porters to transform Pullman’s “plantation on wheels” into mobile classrooms and clandestine schoolhouses where they gained access to knowledge of politics, business, and culture typically reserved for the white elite.³⁴

Geographic mobility, including visits to world-class cities, exposure to elite institutions of higher education, and the ideas and social etiquette of business leaders, politicians, journalists, writers, titans of industry, and university professors and college presidents, more than compensated for low wages, facilitating the porters’ mastery of elite service etiquette and diplomacy in a white-controlled environment where earning tips exceeded their wages. As a result of these unintended opportunities, many porters cultivated a deep commitment to self-discipline, economic independence (including saving and purchasing property and homes), self-improvement and racial advancement, education and literacy, family stability, and investment in education and

³³ Mergen, “The Pullman Porter: From ‘George’ to Brotherhood.”

³⁴ Nelson, review of *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics*.

Black institutions. Having interacted with the power elite of American society, the porters realized that freedom was tied to the intentional use of their income and social capital to invest in family and community stability, home ownership, education, churches, fraternal organizations, mutual aid societies, newspapers, hospitals, and other Black institutions to help sustain Black life in a parallel, segregated society during Jim Crow.³⁵

This duality—economic exploitation and racial subservency alongside geographic mobility and exposure to social capital—laid the foundation for organized economic resistance to Pullman Co.’s exploitative practices. The formation of America’s first successful all-Black union under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph directly challenged both corporate exploitation and the racial order of Jim Crow America. Through the BILM, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters emerges not simply as the first all-Black labor union, but as an intellectual, cultural, social, economic, and political movement that helped build the Black middle class and the modern Civil Rights Movement while simultaneously challenging deficit theories, racist stereotypes, and the invisibility of Black humanity.

EDUCATIONAL UPLIFT AND THE BUILDING OF A BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

At the end of the Civil War, Black Americans were transitioning from slave labor to free labor, with limited employment opportunities. Jobs as Pullman porters, while deeply exploitative and dehumanizing, were among the few stable jobs available to Black men at the end of slavery. Due to limited job opportunities, Pullman porters included not only formerly enslaved individuals but also, over time, a significant number of highly educated Black men, including those pursuing undergraduate and graduate studies and college graduates. For instance, there were Pullman porters with degrees in law and medicine.³⁶

One of the most transformative yet underexamined contributions of the Pullman porters was their deliberate conversion of degraded labor into social, educational, and cultural capital. Despite occupational subordination and the Pullman Co.’s (and its white passengers’) belief that Black people

³⁵ J. A. Rogers, *From “Superman” to Man* (Helga M. Rogers, 1968).

³⁶ Tye, *Rising from the Rails*.

were socially and biologically inferior to whites and meant to work in menial or subordinate jobs, porters used wages and tips, along with access to cultural capital, to lay the foundation for a Black middle class and to provide significant support for Black education, including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The Pullman porters were considered role models by those seeking upward socioeconomic mobility; their influence stretched from Midwestern cities such as Chicago and Detroit to southern cities such as Atlanta and Montgomery, and as far west as Los Angeles and Oakland.³⁷

Pullman porters used their wages and tips to fund the education of their children, relatives, and church members; they also contributed to church college funds and local education organizations that supported college-bound Black students. Many sent their own sons and daughters to HBCUs and to majority-white graduate schools, using their meager earnings, believing that racial uplift and the establishment of property-owning families were tied to education and college graduation. Over time, the children of Black porters became teachers, school principals, university professors, college presidents, lawyers, doctors, ministers, and business owners. In this way, the Pullman Porters helped lay the foundation for the Black middle class and the culture of valuing literacy, education, and books in Black communities.³⁸

Contrary to racial stereotypes depicting Black people as illiterate, disinterested in or incapable of learning, Black porters valued literacy, reading and literature, higher education, libraries, and cultural events. In many ways, their educational, literary, and social tastes mirrored those of the affluent, highly educated white elite. They were part of the broader American movement linking labor, status, social mobility, and political and economic freedom to intellectual empowerment and cultural capital. This strategy among Pullman porters aligned with Woodson's educational philosophy, which holds that education and cultural capital serve psychological empowerment and restore race pride, self-determination, and historical identity.³⁹ The BSCP normalized education as liberation, social capital as a tool of psychological empowerment, economic stability as the vehicle to economic autonomy and social mobility, and professional status as a way to challenge deficit theories and racist stereotypes.

³⁷ Tye, *Rising from the Rails*.

³⁸ Tye, *Rising from the Rails*.

³⁹ Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro*.

Despite the harsh working conditions they faced, including humiliating racism, the Pullman porters were respected as men of dignity and status in the Black community. They were considered refined, polished, educated, well-traveled, disciplined, gentlemanly, and cosmopolitan. They wore tailored uniforms, possessed the social graces and etiquette of the white elite, had a stable income, and modeled the upward mobility the Black community aspired to.

The Pullman porters were role models and mentors, community leaders who inspired young generations to pursue education not only as a means of individual advancement but also as an expression of communal responsibility, racial uplift, social solidarity, and ultimately institutional change and transformation. Education served not merely as a path to economic mobility but also as a mechanism for developing academic identity, achievement motivation, critical consciousness, and a desire to make a difference in society.

THE BROTHERHOOD AS A PRECURSOR TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The Pullman porters were granted a rare opportunity that most Black Americans never experienced: the ability to travel across the country. Travel helped the Pullman porters gain access to new ideas and information, including news about activism, politics, and economics, as well as about racial atrocities, such as race riots and lynching, and about schools, colleges, and universities. The porters would share this information with Black communities, facilitating collective learning. For example, because the Pullman porters traveled frequently to several states and cities, they delivered Black newspapers, information on colleges and universities, including HBCUs, school bulletins, books, and cultural events taking place across the country. The Pullman porters acted as key channels of communication and information for Black communities across the country.⁴⁰

The Pullman porters, along with the *Chicago Defender*, a Black newspaper founded by Robert S. Abbot, played a significant role in the Great Migration. The *Chicago Defender* intentionally encouraged Blacks to leave the South's

⁴⁰ Allissa V. Richardson, "The Platform: How Pullman Porters Used Railways to Engage in Networked Journalism," *Journalism Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 398–414, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1110498>.

racism and economic exploitation and migrate to Northern and Midwestern cities.⁴¹ The *Defender* published job listings, wages, housing options, and train schedules to encourage southern Black migration to midwestern and northern cities. Southern politicians, business leaders, and farmers who relied on cheap Black labor tried to ban the *Defender*. Pullman porters working on southbound trains smuggled the *Defender* into Southern towns, distributing copies hand-to-hand across Southern rail lines, at black-owned businesses, fraternal lodges, Black churches, barbershops, schools, and at picnics and social gatherings. In this instance, the Pullman porters demonstrated both communal responsibility and social solidarity. Because they traveled constantly and were respected in Black communities across the country, their word and recommendations carried credibility. As a result, the Pullman porters are rightly credited with contributing to the largest internal migration in American history, the migration of Black southerners seeking the promise of economic stability and social equality in the North.⁴²

The collaboration between the *Chicago Defender* and the Pullman porters served as a model for political organizing, social advocacy, and the intentional creation of political consciousness linked to collective action. As this mindset of communal responsibility and social solidarity developed, the Pullman porters applied it to organized resistance against the economic exploitation they experienced while working for Pullman Co. Through collective self-help, psychological empowerment, and critical consciousness, the porters began to see their exploitation through both economic and political lenses. They began to educate themselves on labor rights, wage disparities, and collective bargaining.

The porters recognized that the economic exploitation they witnessed against Black people working in menial, subservient jobs across every region of the United States mirrored the economic exploitation and social degradation they experienced at Pullman Co.—long hours, low wages, dependence on tips or charity from whites, no job security, no opportunities for promotion or advancement, no grievance process, threats and harassment, firing and retaliation for complaining or protesting, intimidation and surveillance, racial abuse and humiliation, and mandatory deference to whites. Post-

⁴¹ Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

⁴² Richardson, "The Platform."

slavery working conditions for Black Americans mirrored many aspects of slavery, except for wages, which Blacks referred to as slave wages.⁴³

The experience of Pullman porters working with the *Chicago Defender* during the Great Migration laid the foundation for the most important labor victory in American history—the founding of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters on August 25, 1925, in New York City, under the leadership of Asa Philip Randolph. Randolph, a socialist labor organizer, fiery orator, and publisher of *The Messenger*, held a mass meeting in the auditorium of the Imperial Lodge of the Elks at 160 West 129th St. Randolph was selected as the union’s president for his experience in the labor movement and because he was not a Pullman Co. employee, which protected him from firing, intimidation, threats, and retaliation. Randolph organized the Brotherhood under the rallying cry to resist being treated like slaves.⁴⁴ Given the history of enslavement experienced directly or indirectly by most of the Black porters and the slave-like conditions they were forced to work under at the Pullman Co., this rallying cry resonated with them. Former Pullman porter C. L. Dellums emphasized Randolph’s vision and courage and credited his leadership with helping porters believe they could confront Pullman and national power brokers.⁴⁵

As the Pullman porters built a national membership network, including a dues system and labor rights education, the union crafted a platform for better wages, including ending the demeaning tipping system; improving working conditions, such as limiting work hours, paying for overtime, and providing rest between runs; ensuring dignity and respect on the job, including discontinuing degrading racist practices, such as porters being called uniformly “George,” “boy,” or “nigger”; legal protection and job security based on labor contracts, grievance procedures, and an end to arbitrary firings; and, most significantly, securing official union recognition as a Black-led union with bargaining representation.

The Pullman Co. refused to recognize the union and retaliated against the organizers by implementing a more intense surveillance system and escalating intimidation and retaliation against union members and union sympathizers. The Pullman Co. enforced a culture of silence, suspending

⁴³ Carson, *African American Struggle for Freedom*.

⁴⁴ Tye, *Rising from the Rails*.

⁴⁵ Allen, *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*.

or firing porters for discussing wages or union activities. Spies and agents were hired or recruited, often from among the Back porters, to keep files on porters suspected of union activity. Porters were even watched when off duty, and their mail was regularly intercepted and read. Brotherhood meetings were infiltrated by spies and paid informants. Porters suspected of engaging in union activities were issued verbal warnings and threatened with firing. Porters caught attending meetings, discussing union activities, or distributing union materials were fired or demoted without cause. Blacklisting was a common tactic to prevent fired porters from obtaining employment with other railroad companies. From Pullman Co.'s perspective, the risks were profits derived from a cheap, compliant, and easily replaceable Black labor force; managerial control based on fear, intimidation, and retaliation; and the maintenance of the racial hierarchy that made economic exploitation and racial humiliation the norm.

The *Chicago Defender* highlighted the Pullman porters' struggles by publishing updates on union activity, stories about the harsh conditions of their labor, and the retaliatory actions of the Pullman Co. The aim was to build public sympathy and support for the Brotherhood⁴⁶. Despite Pullman Co.'s stratagems, including an attempt to start a company-run union to undermine the Brotherhood's legitimacy, the porters continued to organize under Randolph's leadership, and membership grew steadily, even amid opposition from some white unions. By 1934, to the angst of the Pullman Co., the Brotherhood gained charter membership in the American Federation of Labor (AF).

The following year, in 1935, the Wagner Act, also known as the National Labor Relations Act, was passed, guaranteeing workers the right to organize and bargain collectively. Randolph and the Brotherhood used the Wagner Act to advocate for official recognition from Pullman Co. The following year, in 1936, the Brotherhood became the first Black union to receive a charter from the AFL. On August 25, 1937, after a twelve-year struggle, the Pullman Co. finally relented and signed a contract recognizing the Brotherhood as an official union with collective bargaining and representation rights.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Michaeli, *The Defender*.

⁴⁷ Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (University of California Press, 1986).

The first contract between Pullman Co. and the Brotherhood formally recognized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as the exclusive bargaining representative for the porters. This recognition dismantled over a decade of Pullman Co. nonrecognition and destroyed the racist stereotype that Black porters were cheap, servile, and too subservient to protest, let alone to establish a union. The Brotherhood secured a significant raise in base pay, reducing, but not eliminating, porters' dependence on tips from white passengers. Monthly work hours were reduced to address the harsh, extreme schedules porters were forced to endure without rest or overtime compensation. Overtime pay was protected.⁴⁸ For the first time, porters had a formal grievance process, and discipline and firings could no longer occur without cause. Promotions and job security were tied to seniority, not to supervisors' discretion.

The Brotherhood proved that education as liberation, when tied to communal responsibility and social solidarity, could lead to Black empowerment and institutional change. The success of winning concessions from one of the largest, most politically influential, and wealthiest corporations in American history established a template for how economic self-determination, tied to collective racial uplift, could be used as political leverage for larger social change.⁴⁹

The Brotherhood must be seen as an early blueprint for modern civil rights organizing, in which national organization, internal funding rather than white philanthropy, cooperation among Black organizations and institutions, the strategic use of the law, and courage and fearlessness can be leveraged to force negotiations and win concessions from more politically and economically powerful organizations. Under Randolph's leadership, the Brotherhood influenced the civil rights movement, linking labor to human and civil rights. Black Americans had another blueprint for confronting power. Instead of relying on moral suasion and protest, Black Americans now had an example of organized economic and political resistance.

For example, Randolph used the Brotherhood's organizational structure and methods to launch the March on Washington Movement in 1941, which threatened economic disruption in the war industries during World War II

⁴⁸ Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander, eds., *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

⁴⁹ Nelson, review of *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics*.

and national embarrassment for the US by highlighting racial discrimination at a time when the US promoted itself as the “arsenal of democracy” fighting fascism abroad. By linking labor rights to human rights and threatening economic and social disruptions, Randolph leveraged the prospect of a national crisis to demand fair employment. To prevent the March on Washington, which threatened to bring 100,000 Black protestors to the nation’s capital, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941, which banned racial discrimination in defense industries and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). This was the first federal civil rights action since Reconstruction, prompted by the threat of organized Black labor to disrupt wartime production and international priorities. Randolph’s success is rooted in the communal epistemology practiced by the Brotherhood, which emphasizes collective learning, collective action, communal responsibility, and social solidarity.

Randolph later played a central role in organizing the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—one of the most visible examples of the success of collective learning, communal responsibility, and social solidarity in the fight for human rights, civil rights, and economic justice. The 1963 March also serves as an example of intergenerational knowledge transmission and the past-present-future continuity of Black thought and collective response to the harsh racial conditions characterizing Black life in the United States. Randolph was one of the chief architects of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Unfortunately, Randolph’s role, including his economic theory and practices that centralized jobs, labor, and economic power, is downplayed. Randolph’s contributions to organizing workers, threatening economic disruption, and demanding federal intervention in employment were comparable to the Pullman porters’ demands for economic justice. Randolph’s message of organizing economically, building institutions such as unions, and forcing concessions and negotiations from the powerful laid bare the real aim of freedom struggles; they are economic at root. The Brotherhood’s political consciousness was derived from its economic aims.

According to Randolph, civil rights were empty without economic rights. He argued that freedom without jobs or a living wage was slavery by another name. He believed that symbolic inclusion was not the same as institutional or material change. Randolph, like the Brotherhood, challenged corporate

power and showed that even if granted legal access, official recognition and representation, and formal pronouncements of equality, these gains were empty without changes to economic arrangements. The example of the Brotherhood underscores the importance of studying Black labor organizing as a vehicle for understanding education as liberation, cultural and intellectual self-determination, and the power of individual and collective agency.

CONCLUSIONS

The centennial of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters invites both commemoration and reexamination of how Black labor functioned as a site of ancestral knowledge, cultural memory, intellectual production, social resistance, communalism, collective learning, social solidarity, and political transformation. Through the Black Intellectual Legacy Model (BILM), the Pullman Porters emerged not as passive participants in Black labor history, but as architects of a liberatory tradition that fused labor, activism, education, communal responsibility, and collective agency into a coherent strategy for Black advancement in a racially hostile socioeconomic and political environment.

What this study makes clear is that the Pullman porters' struggle was never confined to poor wages or oppressive working conditions alone. Their labor became a vehicle for epistemic resistance—a means of challenging dominant narratives that sought to render Black people intellectually inferior, socially disposable, and a permanent low-wage racial caste. In transforming the Pullman cars into mobile classrooms, the porters cultivated social solidarity and forms of communal knowledge that were both practical and visionary: political literacy, economic awareness, historical consciousness, intellectual self-determination, psychological liberation, collective uplift and an ethic of communal responsibility grounded in the lived Black experience.

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters also demonstrates that Black freedom struggles have always been fundamentally collective economics, even when expressed in cultural or political terms. Under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, the union's success affirmed that collective bargaining was not merely a labor strategy, but a form of democratic practice rooted in self-determination, collective learning, social solidarity, communal responsibility, and institutional power-building and change. Their victories exposed the limits of symbolic access, integration, and equality while advancing a more

substantive vision of justice grounded in institutional access that facilitated better material conditions, racial dignity, and control over labor.

Equally significant is the intellectual lineage and legacy that frames this history. The philosophical grounding of the BILM in the work of Carter G. Woodson underscores a consistent theme and truth: education is most powerful when it is anchored in ancestral knowledge, cultural memory, anti-deficit thinking, institution building, and directed toward collective empowerment. The porters embodied this principle by investing their earnings into HBCUs, segregated all-Black schools, Black churches, Black communities and institutions that sustained Black life across generations. In doing so, they helped construct not only a Black middle class, but also a durable infrastructure of Black intellectual life, sustainability for HBCUs, and the foundation for future Black professors and scholars.

Ultimately, the legacy of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters extends far beyond its historical moment in Black history. It offers a blueprint for understanding labor as pedagogy, organizing as education, and economic struggle as a pathway to intellectual, psychological, and political freedom. The porters remind us that liberation is not an abstract ideal but a disciplined collective practice in communal responsibility; it is built through collective work and responsibility, unity and self-determination, cooperative economics, and sustained through purposeful education, and realized through the intentional creativity and transformation of oppressive structures into sites of possibility. In essence, the porters' legacy embodies the principles of Kwanzaa, Black institution building and self-help, and critical agency and consciousness.

In this sense, the Pullman porters do more than illuminate the past. They challenge the present to reconsider how ancestral knowledge is produced, who it serves, and how it might once again be harnessed as a tool of liberation through the practice of cultural memory, anti-deficit thinking, and institution building.

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