

Bengali Harlem
and the
Lost Histories
of
South Asian America

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After men of color swept into Louisiana's state legislature over the period 1868–1872, the Anglo-Americans mounted an often violent campaign to reassert themselves and prevent the leadership of the free person of color community from establishing lasting political power.¹² By the 1880s, white Americans had regained control of the state government, and in 1890, around the time that the first Bengalis settled in New Orleans, Louisiana's legislature began to construct the legal edifice of Jim Crow. Their first step was a law that required railroad and streetcar companies to provide “separate accommodations for the white and colored races” and prohibited “colored” passengers from riding on cars or in sections designated for whites. Although members of New Orleans' free person of color community challenged the Separate Car Act, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, upheld the law's constitutionality. This cleared the way for Louisiana to enact a series of other segregation laws as well as a new state constitution that effectively disfranchised the state's citizens of African descent.¹³

Over the next several decades, Jim Crow changed the social and physical geography of New Orleans, and Tremé—the seat of Creole of Color power—was particularly affected. At the end of the nineteenth century, Tremé, was still a heterogeneous neighborhood. The neighborhood's Creole of Color community was broadly varied across lines of class and

skin color; it included *gens de couleur libre* who were dark skinned and others who, like Homer Plessy, were light enough to pass as white. Some engaged in manual work, while others owned businesses, practiced professions, or edited newspapers. Tremé was also home to some of the thousands of Americans of African descent who had migrated to New Orleans from other parts of the South in the years following Emancipation, and to a smaller number of working-class European and other immigrants—Irish, Italian, German, Syrian, and Chinese.

Anglo-American rule had already begun a process of flattening New Orleans' heterogeneity into “a rigid, two-tiered structure that drew a single, unyielding line between white and nonwhite.” This process accelerated from the post-Reconstruction era into the 1920s and 1930s as segregation and disfranchisement politically weakened and isolated Tremé's inhabitants. Tremé was made into a “negro district” in the image of others across the segregated South and the rest of the United States—its population excluded from power, its housing and infrastructure neglected, and its residents and borders policed. By the turn of the century, Tremé was one of two such areas near the center of New Orleans. The other was not far away; across Canal Street on the uptown side of the city, many of New Orleans' recent black American migrants were concentrated in a small area of low-grade housing referred to as “back of town” or “the Battlefield.” The lines dividing both these neighborhoods from “white” parts of New Orleans became more pronounced as the city passed residential segregation ordinances and as the expansion of streetcar lines and the drainage of swampland opened up new neighborhoods and spurred white flight out of the city's core.¹⁴

The stakes of the post-Reconstruction racial order were made clear by an event that occurred soon after the first group of Bengali peddlers established their footing in New Orleans. On July 23, 1900, a young African American man was questioned by New Orleans police. The man, Robert Charles, had recently made his way to New Orleans from rural Mississippi. He ended up working a range of odd jobs while becoming active in an association advocating African American migration to Liberia. Charles had, according to later accounts, been enraged by the recent killing of Sam Hose, a young black man roughly the same age and generation as Charles, who had been brutally lynched by a white mob in

Georgia. New Orleans police officers questioned Charles because he was seen sitting on the porch of a white family's house on a racially mixed block on the uptown side of the city. As the confrontation quickly escalated, Charles pulled out a pistol and fired, then ran to his apartment, and as the police and a crowd of thousands of white New Orleanians closed in on him, he opened fire with a rifle, killing seven men before being killed himself. New Orleans was now engulfed in antiblack violence: "For four days, mobs surged through New Orleans, seizing control of downtown sections, killing at least a dozen black people and injuring many more, and destroying black property," including the city's leading school for children of color, the Lafon School, which was burned to the ground.¹⁵

Six weeks before this incident, U.S. Census takers had recorded ten members of the Bengali peddler network residing on St. Louis Street, in downtown New Orleans. July was high season for the New Jersey seaside resorts, and it is possible that many of these men—Solomon Mondul, Abdul Subham, Bahadoor Ali, and others—had left to work the boardwalks of Atlantic City and Asbury Park not long before New Orleans erupted in racial violence. A smaller number, however, were almost certainly present to witness the rampage. Sofur Ally, for one, had just got married to a local Creole woman days before the riots broke out. And those who traveled to New Jersey for the season returned in the fall to a New Orleans still reverberating from the events of July.

It is difficult to say exactly what the peddlers experienced in the ensuing years, how they were regarded and treated as men of color operating within a volatile racial order. Even the most exoticizing descriptions of Bengali peddlers in turn-of-the-century U.S. newspapers—and of the Bengali, Punjabi, and other Indian seamen who were now beginning to appear with frequency in U.S. ports—focused in on the men's complexion and tried to place them according to the United States' binary racial logic. One 1900 story about Indians in the sailors' quarter of New York City stated that these men were "all so dark as to be taken easily for Negroes, but their features are Caucasian and their hair is straight, stiff, and wiry." It described their character in terms that drew on notions of both Asian "inscrutability" and African American "criminality," saying that they "are peaceable and orderly up to a certain point and then they

lose all self-control and generally resort to the knife." Another story, focusing on a group of Bengali peddlers who were working on the streets of Atlanta, Georgia, declared that these Indian men were "not like American Indians, of course, but look like Mexicans, only three shades darker." In this case, the peddlers were represented, as African Americans often were in the white press, simultaneously as wily and dim-witted.¹⁶ Government documents from the same period reflect a certain confusion about the "color" and "race" of the Bengali peddlers. In 1900 and 1910, federal census takers marked most of the men "Black," others "Mulatto," and a few "White," before a supervisor often scratched "Hin" for Hindu over the top of the original classification. During the First World War, draft registrars described the peddlers' "race" variously as "Black," "White," "Oriental," "Turkish," and "Malaysian." The officials who processed a handful of the Bengalis' passport applications in the 1910s mostly described their "complexion" as "dark" but in one case wrote "copper," in another "ruddy," and in another "light."¹⁷

There was clearly a difference between these official classifications and the lived experiences of segregation the peddlers faced. While the Bengalis may have benefited from the kind of ambiguity that is apparent in official attempts to classify them, their position within the racial order ultimately appears to have been provisional and uncertain. Like the distinctions between "Creole," "free person of color," and "negro," the various ways of describing, categorizing, and distinguishing these Indian peddlers meant little when it came to the most basic aspects of Jim Crow. The Bengalis' darkness, no matter what shade or category, made them vulnerable to individual acts of violence and was a deciding factor when they sought out family homes, boardinghouses, neighborhoods, and communities in which to live.

Two of the only records we have of the Bengalis' direct confrontation with Jim Crow make clear the contingency of their position in the segregated South. In the opening years of the twentieth century, a small number of Bengali traders began naturalization proceedings in various southern cities. These included Alef Ally, Sofur Ally, Abdul Hamid, and Abdul Jobber Mondul in New Orleans and Mohamed Kauser, Abdul Aziz, Elahi Baksh Mondul, Abdul Rohim Mondul, Abdul Haq Mondul, Mohammed Idris, and Syed Abdul Ganny in Charleston.¹⁸ The

most well-known naturalization case from this group is that of “Abba Dolla,” a trader of Afghan descent who became a member of the Hooghly network in Calcutta, worked the New Jersey summer resorts in the 1890s, and then settled in Savannah around the turn of the century. There, Dolla became a local supplier, receiving shipments of embroidered silks and cottons through the Savannah customhouse, and then distributing these goods to other members of the peddler network to sell throughout the city and its vicinity. It is difficult to locate Abba Dolla in shipping, census, and other records because his name was either changed or mis-transliterated in the process of applying for citizenship, but it appears that Dolla was the same member of the network who traveled through New York to New Jersey several times in the 1890s under names recorded as “Obidullah” and “Abad Ally.” Dolla filed a Petition of Intention to Naturalize in Savannah in 1907, and then in 1910 submitted his application to naturalize, along with supporting statements from two witnesses. At the time he went up before a judge in the Federal District Court in Savannah in 1910, people of only two “races” were allowed to become U.S. citizens—“white persons” and “persons of African ancestry”—and like a handful of other East Indians in the years immediately before and after him, Dolla applied for and was granted citizenship as a “white person.”¹⁹

Immigration historians have described Abba Dolla’s case in this context; it is understood as one of a number of instances in the early twentieth century in which immigrants from India successfully “claimed whiteness.” The details of both his case and his daily life in segregated Georgia, however, present a less clear picture. Having determined that Abba Dolla had followed the correct procedures in his application for citizenship, the judge examining Dolla held that the only issue to determine at his hearing was “whether or not he was a white person within the meaning of [the] naturalization laws.” To this end, Dolla presented an argument in several parts: he described his ancestry—he stated that he was born and raised in Calcutta and was of Afghan descent; he cited the case of Abdul Hamid, another Calcutta silk peddler with whom he had entered the country in 1894, and who had been naturalized as a “white person” in 1908; he testified that he was the owner of a plot in Savannah’s white-only cemetery; he offered to produce a series of (presumably white)

leading citizens to attest to his good character—“the deputy collector of the Port at Savannah, certain merchants of the city, one of the attaches of the United States court”; and he offered to produce “a leading white physician” who had once operated on him for appendicitis and who would confirm that he was “of pure Caucasian blood.” The judge heard all this and first seemed concerned to determine that Dolla had not developed any social affiliations with the black community. Ultimately, however, the judge called no witnesses; instead he relied on a close examination of Dolla’s skin, asking the silk trader to roll up his sleeve and noting that while his face and hands had been darkened by the sun, his unexposed skin was “several shades lighter . . . and was sufficiently transparent for the blue color of the veins to show very clearly.”²⁰

Although Dolla was granted citizenship, this was not a larger indication that “East Indians” were widely considered or treated as “white.” The U.S. government in fact vigorously opposed Dolla’s naturalization, as it had in other similar cases, sending an assistant U.S. attorney, Alexander Ackerman, to challenge its own federal district court judge at Dolla’s hearing. Ackerman presented an argument that failed to sway the judge, that Dolla, as an Asian, was not a “white person” and was therefore racially ineligible to become a U.S. citizen. The method that the regional district court judge used to determine that Dolla *was* “a white person” was unorthodox even for 1910—more in line with the daily practices of southern segregation than with any legal precedent. His judgment also belied the subjectivities and inconsistencies of an early-twentieth-century naturalization system that put decision-making powers in the hands of a range of lower federal court judges. There were opportunities but no guarantees for members of the Bengali network seeking citizenship in southern courts. While a few of Abba Dolla’s fellow peddlers may have also had skin “sufficiently transparent for the blue color of the veins to show,” any number of them could have failed the visual inspection to which he, a presumably lighter-skinned man of Afghan descent, had been subjected by this particular district court judge. Many would have also failed to convince this judge that they had not developed affiliations with the local “colored” population.²¹

In truth, Dolla’s own relationship to Savannah’s black community was less clear-cut than he presented and than the judge chose to see. For

all the white citizens he offered to present at his hearing, Dolla's two official witnesses, who had, in sworn written affidavits submitted with his application, confirmed his presence in Savannah over the previous three years and attested to his good character, were both African American men. This suggests that Abba Dolla had been in closer proximity and developed greater familiarity—if not also closer ties—with members of Savannah's black community than with its white citizens. And although the judge at Dolla's hearing determined to his own satisfaction that Dolla pursued his trade “among whites and blacks indifferently” and that he lived together with “several of his countrymen” and only maintained “relations of a social nature” with “those of his own nationality,” federal census records show that the Bengali peddlers operating in Savannah all lived within black neighborhoods or on predominantly black city blocks. In 1900, the single member of the Hooghly network who appeared in the census in Savannah was Abdul Barrick, who was renting a room from a widowed African American laundress and living with her three children and niece. The 1910 census recorded one Bengali group household in Savannah, and it was located in the same working-class African American area on the east side of the city.²²

Abdul Hamid, whose successful naturalization Dolla cited as a precedent, also appears to have lived a more complex relation to blackness and to the black community than his naturalization as a “white person” would suggest. By the time he applied for naturalization in New Orleans in 1908, Hamid had already been married to a local Creole of Color woman for eight years, and in the years that followed he lived and worked within the “negro” community in the heart of Tremé.²³ It is of course impossible to know how individual members of the Hooghly peddler network saw themselves in relation to color, “race,” and the racial order that surrounded them in the South, but there is enough evidence to suggest that for many, naturalization was a strategic move to give greater stability to their business pursuits rather than an identification with white supremacy and a disavowal of African American and Creole neighbors, acquaintances, and extended families. And they would have clearly understood after even a short time in the Jim Crow South that legal citizenship was not equivalent to full citizenship, that racial determinations were made not only in the courts where

they sought to naturalize but also on the streets where they plied their trade.

If, in the courts, the subjectivity of racial judgments could work in the peddlers' favor, in this other arena of their daily lives, the subjective execution of segregation could just as easily turn against them. This is brought home in another incident involving a Bengali on the streets of New Orleans in 1922. The case of Abdul Fara is recorded in *The Negro in Louisiana*, an unpublished manuscript authored by the African American poet and historian Marcus Christian, based on research he directed as head of the Works Progress Administration's Louisiana Negro Writers Project in the 1930s.²⁴ In a chapter describing the evolution of Jim Crow laws in post-Reconstruction Louisiana, Christian wrote that by the 1920s, a variety of New Orleans residents, including “persons of colored races such as Japanese, Chinese, American Indian, Puerto Rican, Philipinos [*sic*],” as well as persons whom he described as “dark whites . . . Turks, Indians, and Spaniards,” and some number of “light-skinned Negroes,” were all regularly seating themselves in the “white” section of the city's segregated streetcars. The conductors of these streetcars, he continued, normally let these riders be, “having been warned of the costly consequences of mistaken racial identity.”