

PREFACE

The idea of writing an autobiographical account of my life—starting with my growing-up years and taking me all the way to where I find myself now, in a position to look back on it all—occurred to me quite soon after I retired from my teaching and research obligations at Harvard University in 2003. I quickly realized I didn't want to focus only on the strictly personal features of my background; I wanted to relate something much greater, in fact, than my own life. To achieve this, I decided to examine the societal agencies through which I evolved as a Black citizen in an oppressive, oligarchical, white-supremacist twentieth-century nation-state society; I endeavored to use the context of my memoir to relate the broader history that was unique to the small African American community in the Northeast that was my home during the 1930s and 1940s.

Thus, in the following pages, I have also written a biography, essentially, of the two Black communities nestled in eastern Pennsylvania most familiar to me: the factory town of Ambler in which I spent my childhood and the neighboring rural village town of Penllyn, both of which arose in the nineteenth century and progressed in special ways in the twentieth. While portraying facets of the social, civic, cultural, educational, and political patterns of these communities, I have simultaneously related my metamorphosis out of those patterns—which was largely dependent on my leaving them. In the pages spanning my childhood years in the 1930s until 1949, the year I entered college, the reader receives a twin portrait of the personal and institutional parameters of my memoir. The remainder of the book relates the tale of my professional maturation, from my undergraduate years at Lincoln University, a Black college, to my years at Harvard University, first as a graduate student and then as a professor.

As I write this preface, a basic observation comes to mind, one that defines the sort of African American community in which I grew up and which laid the groundwork for my outlook and my education: that African Americans such as my ancestors, who lived in the post-Civil War and Reconstruction-era American society outside the South, were fortunate

to have had access to some degree of “democratic space” during the first half of the twentieth century, space that their southern brethren were deprived of. For them and for me during my youth, this meant freedom from the cruelest, most pernicious features of American racism that restricted the social life of Black people in the South during the Jim Crow era, a deadly and devastating period that spanned nearly three-quarters of a century, from the late 1800s to the 1950s. For that 40 percent of Black folks who resided in the North and elsewhere across the country by 1950, racism was by no means absent, but they enjoyed—or, I should say, we enjoyed—a small measure of opportunity to participate in American society that was almost totally denied southern Blacks because of the systematic implementation and execution of racist practices and white-supremacist ideas. I was fortunate to be born into a family and in a place that allowed me to pursue a path on which so many other African Americans of my generation, and even of today’s generation, have sadly never set foot.

Call this memoir idiosyncratic, original, or what you will; my hope is that readers will find within these pages a useful tale of one African American intellectual’s odyssey from the racist margins of twentieth-century America to a rich and vital participatory presence in that same nation.