No escaping the state

The story of Lovett Fort-Whiteman

William C. Anderson

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To be free, to walk in dignity—for these precious privileges some men will go anywhere, sacrifice anything.

— Homer Smith

Black America is not guaranteed much, if anything, under the category of citizenship. It has never prevented us descendants of enslaved Africans from falling victim to repression, exclusion and constant infractions. Our supposed rights are rarely rights at all. They are bendable and disposable terms that are in constant need of defense. In the US court system, which is systematically structured against us, many have sought to strengthen — or at least maintain — protections which are supposed to be guaranteed to citizens. Rights around voting, food, housing and other necessities are always retractable because the white supremacist state has never completely legitimized Black citizenry.

This sort of alienation has been a radicalizing force for many Black people throughout the history of the US. It can inspire people to push for better conditions to varying degrees ranging from reformist to revolutionary. The life of Lovett Fort-Whiteman, an early Black communist who migrated to the Soviet Union, represents the latter and complicates the former in many ways. However, the underappreciated complexities of his life demand that we question much more than *just* the US state; it forces us to think more critically about race, place and statism more largely.

Black America is just one group of many displaced and uprooted people that show us that citizenship, reformism and the nation-state offer no liberatory promise. Black Americans experience a unique kind of statelessness in that we are not regarded as true citizens of the US, nor are we granted proper representation as non-citizens (undocumented) in immigrant rights struggles. Of course, the state cannot remedy the problems of stateless people because this is a predicament which it creates. Class divisions, violence, borders and capitalism are all contained in the history of its appearance. Lovett's life story is like that of many other Black radicals who fled their countries to seek refuge elsewhere; it is riddled with enough inconsistency and disaster to confirm the state is not the solution.

In search of a promised land

Lovett Fort-Whiteman is someone who calls out to us from the grave. He was born in Dallas, Texas in 1889, only a few decades after the 1856 Dred Scott Supreme Court case had found in a 7–2 ruling that: "The words 'people of the United States' and 'citizens' are synonymous terms." With regard to Black America, the ruling was explicit in issuing Black people a non-citizen status by stating: "We think they are not, and that they are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word 'citizens' in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States."

Black people have long been bounced between the labels of "quasi-citizen," "resident foreigner" and "denizen." Lovett's father Moses could have known as much, based on his everyday lived reality. He was born into slavery in South Carolina, and later migrated to Texas as a free man, where he worked as a janitor and a stockman. He married a teenage girl named Elizabeth and Lovett was the first of their two children.

In the book *Defying Dixie*, Yale historian Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore recounts much of Lovett's life. She describes Texas as a "promised land" for his father, adding that Lovett himself would

later come to “seek his own promised land,” just as his father had. In my book *The Nation on No Map,* I write about how a search for belonging and refuge from oppressive conditions pushes Black people — among plenty others — all around the globe. The life story of Lovett represents one of the early examples of a Black radical seeking asylum under the assumed safety of state-socialism, only to end up uncovering a tragic insight about the universality of state violence across the globe.

As a teenager, Lovett had enrolled at Booker T. Washington’s legendary Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he graduated as a machinist. He subsequently went to medical school for some time before dropping out. Eventually, he ended up in Harlem with his widower mother and sister Hazel. Then, as the US was engaging in World War I, he decided to travel to Mexico, where the revolution was in full swing.

Witnessing the Mexican Revolution had a profound impact on his politics. It was in Mexico — where he would continue to live for years — that he became a socialist. In 1917, he continued his travels and made his way to Havana, Cuba and as far north as Halifax, Nova Scotia, working as a sailor before quietly reentering the US.

Dedication to the Party

Back in the US, while the Russian Revolution was underway, Lovett joined the Socialist Party of New York’s Harlem branch in fall of 1917. There he crossed paths with the likes of people like A. Phillip Randolph, the legendary Black labor organizer who later founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and organized the March on Washington Movement. Harlem was bustling with Black radicalism at the time and Lovett grew increasingly taken with a desire to go to Russia. He eventually did, in 1924, only months after Vladimir Lenin died, as one of hundreds of delegates to the Fifth Congress of the Communist International. When the Congress was over, Lovett decided to stay in Moscow where he became the first Black American student to attend the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV).

At this point, he had grown into much more of a party-line communist in many regards. For him, the Party offered potential and vision for what could be done for Black America, which was suffering the burdens of the ongoing Great Migration and racist oppression. He spoke at the Fifth Congress stating as much. Lovett even argued that Black people were systematically discriminated against as a race and not simply on class grounds. In his 1960 work *American Communism and Soviet Russia,* historian Theodore Draper wrote it was Lovett’s “continued emphasis on ‘race’” that pushed the Communist International (Comintern) to stop “evading ‘the ticklish question of race antagonism.’” In communist circles, this was a controversial position on what was known at the time as “the Negro question.” To this day, the question of race versus class in relation to the broader struggle for liberation continues to be hotly contested issue.

The appeal of the Bolsheviks and their fledgling revolutionary state for Black people was not based on nothing: the emancipatory promises it advertised and the fighting and organizing it inspired around the world established a dynamic global movement. In his book *Hammer and Hoe* about Alabama communists in the 1930s and 1940s, Robin D. G. Kelley offers more context. He describes an outlook we can still see among certain factions of the left today, akin to the historic romanticism around President Lincoln’s Union Army or the perception of Ethiopia as an allegory for Black nobility which turns states into “liberators”:

> For many black radicals the Russians were the 'new Yankees,' Stalin was the 'new Lincoln,' and the Soviet Union was a 'new Ethiopia' stretching forth her arms in defense of black folk. Southern propaganda depicting Communists as 'Soviet agents' worked to the Party's advantage in black working-class communities. The idea of Soviet and/or Northern radical support provided a degree of psychological confidence for African-Americans hoping to wage the long-awaited revolution in the South.

Because of his tireless work for the Party in Moscow, corresponding with high-ranking state officials and speaking to audiences that included Joseph Stalin and Ho Chi Minh, Lovett caught the attention of the FBI. Prior to moving to Russia, he had been busted by anti-communist police at a St. Louis Communist Labor Party event in 1920 and charged with violating the Espionage Act for stirring anti-US sentiment. He spent several months in jail and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover personally assigned a special agent to his case. His prominence and visibility as a Black communist with close ties to the higher echelons of power in the newly-declared Soviet Union would earn him the infamous title of "the reddest of the Blacks" by *Time* magazine in 1925.

Lovett traveled back and forth between Moscow and the US, working alongside the likes of other noteworthy Black communists like Harry Haywood, the "Black Bolshevik," who aided Fort-Whiteman's efforts to establish the American Negro Labor Congress in Chicago. He wrote W.E.B. Du Bois praising the Soviet Union with an endearing viewpoint that he was now a part of a society free of racist discrimination where people were a big family. Du Bois would echo the same enchantment during his 1926 visit to the Soviet Union stating, "I may be partially deceived and half-informed … But if what I have seen with my eyes and heard with my ears is Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik."

The excitement of Bolshevism expressed by famous Black radicals like Paul Robeson, prominent thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and those with proximity to the party elite like Lovett did not necessarily reflect the whole picture of the Black experience of living in Moscow during this time. Frustrations about the direction of the Party and race eventually hit home with Lovett. His outspokeness regarding "the Negro question" and tensions with other communists eventually drew the attention of the Soviet authorities. This issue eventually brought him into conflict with some fellow Black communists and party officials in the US as well. Sectarian disputes and failed attempts to organize the Black masses back home drew the ire and suspicion of Soviet officials and the comrades around him. He eventually caught the attention of Stalin's secret police, who put him under surveillance — just as he had been with the FBI.

State terror purges, abuses and expulsions created plenty of discord among communists the world over. Black people had to confront the possibility of being labeled as "counterrevolutionary" for daring to emphasize the centrality of race in relation to revolutionary struggle. Some Black communists left the party or were expelled for being so vocal on the issue. Even Lovett's devotion as a fervent party-line state-communist was not considered good enough.

The Black American journalist Homer Smith recalled in his memoir that Lovett was "so steeped in party dogma that he had completely lost touch with America." Nonetheless, in 1933 Lovett eventually decided he wanted to come back to the US and sent a letter to the Party Secretary in New York. To his misfortune, the note was intercepted by Soviet state authorities who added it to his file, which was growing along with his own disillusionment. His loyalties and his potentially negative influence on other Black people came into question. He was denied permis-

sion to leave and in 1936 he was exiled from Moscow to Alma-Ata in what is now Kazakhstan. He would be rearrested and sentenced to hard labor from there.

Some people around him, like Homer, did not know what to make of his disappearance at first, suspecting he might have fallen victim to Stalin's Great Purge, as many of Lovett's former contacts had been. Smith recalled that "many disappeared without a trace." He dedicated a chapter to Lovett's disappearance in his memoir and said it was a case that "dramatized… as no other, the absoluteness of the purges." Eventually, word reached Smith that Lovett "had died in a concentration camp."

Additional testament to Lovett's tragic death was provided by another disillusioned Black man in the Soviet Union, the Jamaican-born Detroit engineer Robert Robinson who found out about Lovett's fate through a friend. In his autobiography he noted that news of Whiteman's tragic end came from "another Russian who had been banished to the same town as Whiteman." That man told a friend of Robinson that Lovett "died of starvation, or malnutrition, a broken man whose teeth had been knocked out." He was not able to keep up with his forced labor requirements in the harsh Siberian prison camp and he paid the ultimate price.

No escape from state violence

Lovett was an early member of an overlooked chorus of Black radicals and others who fled the West for state-socialist projects the world over, just to discover they still had not escaped oppression and violence. Before numerous revolutionaries of the Black Power era would make "skyjacking" planes to Cuba and African countries a trend, there were Black people like Lovett, Robert and Homer, who left the US seeking new freedom and belonging. For Joy Gleason Carew, author of *Blacks, Reds, and Russians,* the Black sojourners to Soviet Russia "represented an enormous investment in a faith that the society they were joining could accomplish at least some of its noble goals."

Recounting their stories is *not* an indictment of socialism, but it is certainly an indication of how the state apparatus perverts the potential for what it can be. Leftists who have affinities with, and romanticize state-socialist projects like that of the Soviet Union could disturbingly dismiss Lovett's death as justified. Stories like his often get lost in patriotic state loyalties as well as leftist historical nostalgia. That sort of rationale carries an ongoing predilection towards state authority that can lead into fantasy, where reformed "socialist" governance always means and always has meant liberation.

When we note that the Russian Revolution was followed by a notorious totalitarian despot like Joseph Stalin, the tragedy of Fort-Whiteman is not an aberration. Of course, to see the issues at hand, this requires us to observe the Russian Revolution as a historical event rather than to mythologize it. We can then see injustice, betrayals, mass killings, imprisonment and systemic inadequacy. History is not clean, it is full of disarray, and unless we want to carry its failures with us into the future, we have to tell the truth of what actually happened. Not what we *wanted* to happen.

As C.L.R. James and Grace Lee Boggs once wrote, when Stalin's "fantastic stupidities" were shielded from criticism, they became "common property." A history of mythmaking turned this into the inheritance of many Stalinist or Stalin-friendly factions of the US and Western left. With regard to the Bolsheviks, Rosa Luxemburg already argued: "It would be demanding something

superhuman from Lenin and his comrades if we should expect of them that under such circumstances they should conjure forth the finest democracy, the most exemplary dictatorship of the proletariat and a flourishing socialist economy." But perfunctory praise devoid of honest observation can make superhumans of another sort. Mythology creates the kind of people whose superpowers are to make stories like that of Fort-Whiteman vanish. To avoid giving evil history an invisibility cloak, we have to look for these stories beyond the fame of glorified leaders and convenient state narratives.

Maybe what is most deeply disturbing is that Fort-Whiteman left the US where he could have been imprisoned and forced to labor in bondage as his father had, only to die that way at the hands of the Soviet state. He did not escape state violence — he met it under a new name.

In his new "home," to make him more easily disposable, Fort-Whiteman had to be depicted as an alien, a counterrevolutionary or potentially seditious — just as he had been in the US. Robert Robinson said that despite becoming a Soviet citizen, he was always reminded that: "you may have Soviet citizenship, but you are still a foreigner." This confirms that the state is not our redeemer, it is our problem. The lengths it will go to in order to maintain its monopoly on violence and power are inherent.

This elitism of the ruling classes of the world and their administrations — whether in capitalist or nominally-socialist states — is why we have to excavate the stories of people like Lovett Fort-Whiteman. The overshadowing dominance of the ruling elites is wed to the state and its machinations. The state form will never grant Black people a safe escape from state violence because the state's destructive potential can always turn on us. Those rendered stateless in some form or another — whether they be refugees, non-citizens or migrants — do not have to *do* anything to be subjected to the violence of the state; they are always considered especially deserving of it.

Lovett's story is just one among many, and it represents a plethora of contradictions. The greater question is, do we want to uncover the others? The lessons we can learn from these inconvenient histories are often hidden behind a cloud of popular myths and fantasies. If we refuse to face these unsettling truths, we will never be able to achieve liberation.

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