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# Accommodation and Resistance in Lt. Henry Ossian Flipper's *The Colored Cadet at West Point* (1878)

> I expected all sorts of ill-treatment, and yet from the day I entered till the day I graduated I had not cause to utter so much as an angry word. -*The Colored Cadet*, 140

> . . . the constant endeavor to avoid me, as if I were "a stick or a stone, the veriest poke of creation," had no other effect than to make me feel as if I were really so, and to discourage and dishearten me. I hardly know how I endured it all so long. -*The Colored Cadet*, 146

Although Henry Ossian Flipper is now little known, this was not the case during the prior century. Flipper was born into slavery on March 21, 1856, in the southwest Georgia village of Thomasville. Despite slavery's stings, he came of age in what was by all accounts a loving, nurturing home. "Why, I never was away from my mother and father ten consecutive hours in my life," he proudly informs, "until I went to West Point" (271). In 1859, young Flipper moved with his parents, Isabella and Festus, and their "owners" north to Atlanta. There he and his four younger brothers spent their formative years, with the exception of a nine-month stay in Macon while Sherman marched victoriously through Atlanta.

Upon their return to the city, at the close of the Civil War, the newly freed Flipper boys, like countless others, began their formal education. As Flipper explains, "Under the training of a good Christian old lady,

too old for the work, but determined to give her mite of instruction, I learned to read and to cipher—this in 1866" (286). He continues:

> From her I was placed under the control of a younger person, a man. From him I passed to the control of another lady at the famous "Storr's School." I remained under her for two years more or less, when I passed to the control of another lady in what was called a Normal School. From here I went to the Atlanta University.[1]

During the spring semester of his freshman year at Atlanta University, Flipper received an appointment to the US Military Academy at West Point.[2] Three months later, on July 1, 1873, after passing the requisite examinations, he was admitted to the Corps of Cadets.

Five other men of color had preceded Flipper to West Point, all of whom, for various reasons, had been dismissed from the Academy.[3] Thus, on Thursday morning, 14 July 1877, as he joyfully grasped his sheepskin, Henry Flipper famously became West Point's first African American graduate. *The Colored Cadet at West Point* is a painfully conflicted, poignant first-person account of his four years at the school. By conflicted, I mean that despite his best efforts, Flipper was never allowed to move beyond the stifling, marginalized confines of otherness or racial difference. Naturally this unfortunate situation clouded his cadet days. It should also inform our reading of his autobiography.

Particularly instructive is Flipper's varying assessment of his early days at the Academy. Curiously, concerning his plebe or freshman year, he maintains that "while there were features in 'plebe life' which I disliked, I did nevertheless have a far easier and better time than

my own white classmates" (62). Elsewhere in the narrative, however, still commenting on his plebe year, he makes a virtual 180-degree turn, where he is, I suspect, more candid. "What a trial it is to be socially ostracized," he laments, "to live in the very midst of life and yet be lonely, to pass day after day without saying perhaps a single word other than those used in the section-room during a recitation. How hard it is to live month after month without even speaking to a woman, without feeling or knowing the refining influence of her presence! What a miserable existence!". (183)

What are we to make of this striking flip-flop? And what are we to make of the narrative's other contradictions? In situating Flipper within post-bellum America, I argue that he was repeatedly torn between two competing, contradictory demands. His physical and emotional survival both at West Point and later as a commissioned officer required accommodation. Self-respect and dignity, on the other hand, required resistance.

Flipper's celebratory 11 April 1873 appointment to West Point quickly thrust the 17-year-old from relative obscurity to national fame, or as his detractors would have us believe, from obscurity to infamy. Still sulking from their defeat eight years earlier in the Civil War, aristocratic white southerners were in no mood for what they viewed as black uppitiness. Not only did Flipper's appointment provide a black person entrance into the pristine halls of elite white society, but, perhaps more ominously, his success at the nation's premier military institute would call into question the white supremacist claims which had undergirded American slavery (and later Jim Crow). Reflecting on his various stints as a cadet commander, Flipper makes precisely this point: "Some of them [the cadets in his charge] were from the South, and educated to consider themselves far superior

to those of whom they once claimed the right of possession. I know it was to them most galling" (150).

Thus it was no surprise that once news of his appointment leaked, Flipper was quickly met with a steady barrage of negative attacks. Southern newspaper editorials, in particular, reflected the angst which gripped much of the South and later West Point itself. Predicting that Flipper would surely fail, one newspaperman writes: "No negro has passed out of the institution a graduate, and it is believed that Flipper will be eventually slaughtered in one way or another. The rule among the regulars is: No darkeys need apply" (167). A second, less insulting but just as revealing editorial, published in an Atlanta newspaper, said: "Flipper's pathway will not be strewn with roses, and we shall be surprised if the Radicals do not compel him, within a year, to seek refuge from a sea of troubles in his father's quiet shoe shop on Decatur street" (167). Flipper's own awareness of the potential threat he posed can be seen in his decision (shortly after his appointment to West Point) to decline a local newspaper interview. "After I had secured the appointment," he reveals,

> the editor of one of our local papers . . . desired to thus bring me into notoriety. I was duly consulted, and, objecting, the publication did not occur. My chief reason for objecting was merely this: I feared some evil might befall me while passing through Georgia *en route* for West Point, if too great a knowledge of me should precede me. (27)

The above passages give some sense of the hardships Flipper faced, even before he took his first steps onto the verdant fields of West Point. A careful reading of *The Colored Cadet at West Point*—one attentive to tensions and

contradictions—discloses that, unfortunately, his hardships were just beginning.

Chapter XIV chronicles a number of the painful incidents. The chapter's title, "INCIDENT, HUMOR, ETC.," signals Flipper's difficulty in arriving at a suitable response. Categorizing the various incidents as humorous would constitute a passive acceptance and an accommodation. This is essentially the response poet Paul Laurence Dunbar captures in his 1895 work, "We Wear the Mask." I quote the opening stanza:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.

In contrast, considering the incidents directly would demand, at a minimum, some modicum of protest or resistance. But any protest, however mild, Flipper certainly realized, could bring a premature exit (sans degree and commission), as had been the case with his five African American predecessors. Hence he found himself in something of a troubling double bind.

The double bind or tension at the heart of Flipper's Academy experience can be elucidated through W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "the veil." Writing in *The Souls of Black Folk* about his first experience with discrimination, Du Bois says: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (8). Flipper too, though longing to be an exemplary cadet, feels ultimately shut out. Although he can see through the vast veil constructed to separate "him" from "them," he is unable (despite his best efforts) to lift that veil so that he can par-

ticipate fully and equally in Academy life. He is then, in Du Bois's words, tragically unable to enjoy the "dazzling opportunities" beyond the veil (8).

Whereas Flipper is unable to move beyond the veil, a number of cadets, on occasion, choose to "cross over" and share the milk of human kindness with him. On one particularly cold and dreary night, Flipper was on guard duty while the other cadets were away at the evening meal. To his surprise, a cadet stopped by to converse with him. Their visit, however, ended abruptly: the young man was afraid of being "cut." I quote at length:

> He expressed . . . great regret that I should be so isolated, asked how I got along in my studies, and many other like questions. He spoke at great length of my general treatment. He assured me that he was wholly unprejudiced, and would ever be a friend. He even went far enough to say, to my great astonishment, that he cursed me and my race among the cadets to keep up appearances with them, and that I must think none the less well of him for so doing. It was a sort of necessity, he said, for he would not only be "cut," but would be treated a great deal worse than I was if he should fraternize with me. Upon leaving me he said, "I'm d—d sorry to see you come here to be treated so, but I am glad to see you stay." (142-43)

Naturally Flipper, by then long ostracized, appreciated small acts of kindness. He believed, moreover, that were it not for a fear of being cut, "a fearful lack of backbone," there would be "many who would associate, who would treat me as a brother cadet" (121).

Du Bois's much-celebrated concept of double consciousness offers a valuable metaphor for understanding Flipper's varying response to his ostracism, to life within the veil. Du Bois, after detailing the traumatic primary school experience in which he first encountered color prejudice, and thus the veil, famously writes:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts; two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8-9)

Viewed with amused contempt, Flipper too continued to feel his two-ness. He was prevented, then, from "merging" what Du Bois (speaking of all black Americans) terms "his double self into a better and truer self" (9). But were Cadet Flipper's choices for coping with institutionalized racism different or any more effective than those available today? He could have resisted or protested, and risked being booted out of school; he could have remained silent, teeming with pent-up anger, but outwardly seeming to accept the slings and arrows; or he could have tried some combination of both tactics.

In response to those who charged (as I did in my first reading of his book) that he too willingly accommodated, Flipper replies: "I am sorry to know that I have been charged, by some . . . with manifesting a lack of dignity in that I allowed myself to be insulted, imposed upon, and otherwise ill-treated" (160). Yet in asserting, a few pages before, that "One must endure these little tor-

tures—the sneer, the shrug of the shoulder, the epithet, the effort to avoid, to disdain," Flipper appears to state a preference for accommodation (135). Nonetheless, he did on occasion protest. He reports, for instance, that during his junior year he was assigned a seat in the mess hall commensurate with his rank. As had been the school's custom since its founding in 1802, seniors dined at the head of rectangular tables, followed by juniors, then sophomores, and then the freshmen, who sat at the end of the tables. Rather than sit next to Flipper, one of his classmates attempted to have him moved to the freshman end of the table. After Flipper, to his great credit, refused, another of his classmates refused to eat in the mess hall, taking his meals instead in his room (221-23). As Flipper recounts in great detail, similar incidents occurred in the barracks, at cavalry drill, on the parade field, and, of all places, in the chapel. He reports, moreover, that "during my first year I many times overheard myself spoken of as 'the nigger,' 'the moke,' or 'the thing'" (173).

In like manner, he holds up for scrutiny a number of unseemly incidents from his sophomore year. For example, when he was on guard duty with a number of other cadets, a photographer asked to take their picture. At the command, "Fall in the guard," Flipper, like the others, retrieved his rifle and readied for the picture, but his doing so was for naught, as a fellow cadet shouted, "Say, can't you get rid of that nigger? We don't want him in the picture" (219). In response, another cadet ordered Flipper to go and "fetch a pail of water," which he did. "As he had a perfect right to thus order me, being for the time my senior officer," explains Flipper, "I proceeded to obey" (219). Notice that here the narrative skillfully situates Flipper, the gentleman and model cadet, on the high moral ground. At the opposite end of the ethical spectrum are his tormentors. To emphasize

this very point, Flipper explains that the foregoing incidents "give some idea of the low, unprincipled manner in which some cadets have acted toward me" (223).

Flipper is similarly not shy in critiquing a number of civilians who visited West Point, whom he sarcastically dubs, "these models of mankind, these our superiors" (215). Reminiscent of the mess hall incident, he records a young woman who shudders at the thought of her cadet friend having to stand next to him: "Oh dear! It is hawid to have this cullud cadet—perfectly dre'fful. I should die to see my Geawge standing next to him" (214).

In this next critique, Flipper rejects, even more pointedly, definitions of him as exotic, different, and other. He is, instead, he insists, simply one of many "brother" cadets:

> It has always been a wonder to me why people visiting West Point should gaze at me so persistently. . . . What there was curious or uncommon about me I never knew. I was not better formed, nor more military in my bearing than all the other cadets. My uniform did not fit better, was not of better material, nor did it cost more than that of the others. Yet for four years, by each and every visitor at West Point who saw me, it was done. I know not why, unless it was because I was in it. (209)

Notice his impressive act of resistance. Flipper does not acknowledge; in fact, he evinces no cognizance of "race" or phenotype.

Yet however eloquent he is in exposing—and thus protesting—the bigotry of civilians and his fellow cadets, he is surprisingly mute about the commissioned officers

who ran West Point. In fact, to listen to him describe them, they were all beacons of integrity and fair play. For instance, in chapter X, "TREATMENT," he maintains that "The officers of the institution have never, so far as I can say, shown any prejudice at all. They have treated me with uniform courtesy and impartiality" (122). Chapter XV, the book's penultimate chapter, reiterates: "At the hands of the officers of the institution my treatment didn't differ from that of the other cadets at all" (255-56). Hence Flipper would have us believe, it appears, that at least one segment of West Point's population was not bigoted or unenlightened. In the book's introduction, Sara Dunlap Jackson, reading between the lines, arrives at a different conclusion. She notes, perceptively, that "Obviously the officials, who could not have been unaware of Flipper's situation, could have helped to create a pleasanter atmosphere for the black cadet, but they failed to do so" (iii-iv). Indeed it seems apparent, at least from where I stand, that despite Flipper's generous claims to the contrary, the school's officers turned (at a minimum) blind eye and deaf ear to his abuse. Why then, we now ask, did he go to such lengths to praise them?

As I suggest above, throughout his four years Flipper was repeatedly torn between competing, contradictory demands. Consider his anguish at the many trials and tribulations he faced as a cadet, the above mess hall and picture-taking indignities, for example, and consider his genuine affection for West Point, the institution. In trying to smooth out these competing conflicts, he produces a text which, like Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, shivers with unrelieved tension and largely deconstructs.

To cite two brief examples, shortly after heaping praise on West Point's "courteous" and "impartial" officers, Flipper turns, in the book's final chapter, to the

matter of his former roommate's dismissal from the Academy. South Carolina native James Webster Smith, West Point's first African American appointee, remained at the Academy from May 1870 to June 1874. He was finally dismissed, after four long years of study, when faculty examiners ruled him deficient in philosophy. Not surprisingly, then, his assessment of the school's officers—from the commandant of cadets, to the superintendent, to the faculty—is strikingly at odds with Flipper's. Letting Smith speak for himself (289), Flipper includes, in its entirety, Smith's open letter alleging gross improprieties. First, Smith points out that "There has always been a system of re-examinations . . . [to give] a second chance to those cadets who failed at the regular examination. . . . This year the re-examinations were abolished." He adds that the final examinations have always been open to the public, yet his was held in private (307). Fourteen pages later, Flipper reprints a New Jersey newspaper editorial which also calls into question the probity of West Point's faculty:

> this year, in the graduating class from West Point, steps a young man . . . who has stood utterly alone, ignored and forsaken among his fellows; who has had not one helping hand from professors or students to aid him in fighting his hard battle. . . . We do not think the faculty at West Point have done their duty in this matter. One word, one example from them, would have stopped the persecution, and it is to their disgrace that no such word was spoken and no such example set. (321)

In the very next sentence (which opens the book's concluding paragraph), Flipper rebuts: "I have not a

word to say against any of the professors or instructors who were at West Point during the period of my cadetship. . . . All I could say of the professors and officers at the Academy," he adds, "would be unqualifiedly in their favor" (321-22). But does he wish us to take his laudatory comments at face value? If so, why does he include the New Jersey newspaper's critique? Why does he include Smith's open letter?

In answering the above questions, shouldn't we realize that *The Colored Cadet at West Point* was published in New York City in 1878, the year following Flipper's graduation? Accordingly, as the book began rolling off the printing press, Flipper was a newly commissioned lieutenant, one year removed from the Military Academy. Hence, could he realistically have presented a forthright account of his highs and his lows at the Academy—which he tellingly terms his "bittersweet experience . . . at West Point" (238)—without undermining his military career just as it was beginning? Surely a candid critique would have prompted a negative response from his superiors. Mindful of this, on at least some level, Flipper offers a conflicted account, one reflective of his own internal torment, one which praises and simultaneously undercuts that praise. Viewed on yet another level, given his emotional investment in the Point, he clearly would have preferred to ignore the bitter and instead to highlight the sweet.

After his graduation, a few lows but many more striking accomplishments marked the remaining sixty years of Henry Flipper's life. He was initially assigned to Fort Sill, Indian Territory (in the present-day Oklahoma). There he fought in various Indian wars of the Southwest, where he won acclaim with the predominantly black Tenth Cavalry as one of the early Buffalo Soldiers.[4] In 1881, Lt. Flipper was reassigned to Fort Davis, Texas, where his military career came to an abrupt end. He was

dismissed from the Army on June 30, 1882, after being court-martialed for embezzling public funds. Even though acquitted of the embezzling charge, he was found guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer.[5]

During the remainder of his life, Flipper tried repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, to clear his name. "I have worked hard at all times to have my Army record cleared but I have never had any illusions and have none now. It is uphill work" (*Black Frontiersman* 58). Thus wrote a determined but obviously tiring Flipper in 1916, at age sixty. He died two decades later, on April 26, 1940, at his brother's home in Atlanta.[6] Yet the battle to clear his name did not end with his death. Thanks to the efforts of his relatives and civil rights activist Ray MacColl, in 1976 the Army Board of Correction of Military Records converted Flipper's separation record to a certificate of honorable discharge (Harris 14-15). Flipper had long speculated that the real reason for his dismissal was, as Sara Jackson notes, "the fact that he had been friendly and gone riding with a young white woman" (vi). He discusses the young white woman (Miss Mollie Dwyer) and his court martial and subsequent dismissal at length in his *Black Frontiersman, The Memoirs of Henry O. Flipper,* a mature, riveting account of his experiences along the untamed US-Mexican border. In this book he declares, "As to myself, I was railroaded out of the army in 1882" (103).

Henry Flipper's military career was cut short, but just as he had done at West Point, he refused to let adversity defeat him. Disciplined, trained as an engineer, and fluent in Spanish, he held his head high, maintained his dignity, and went on to hold a wide array of jobs, many in the service of his country. Between his dismissal in 1882 and his retirement to Atlanta in 1931, at age seventy-five, Flipper was employed as mining engineer; civil engineer; cartographer; surveyor; newspaper editor;

Spanish translator and interpreter for the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, Special Agent to the town of Nogales in the Arizona Territory, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, and Special Agent for the US Department of Justice, Court of Private Claims. On Saturday morning, 11 February 1978, his remains were brought home to a hero's welcome and re-interred in the red clay of his native Thomasville.

Lt. Henry Ossian Flipper's writings offer no easy answers, yet they enrich and reward. They also provide a riveting portrait of a distinguished American's triumph in the face of adversity.

❑

Let me acknowledge, in brief, and in closing, that my interest in Lt. Flipper is more than a passing one. While still a boy, passing time blissfully at Susie H. Dunlap elementary school, I often heard the name "Lt. Flipper." Many of the older townspeople, including my beloved godmother, Mrs. Nellie B. James, had actually known Flipper. And they still had fond memories of him, and of his family.

Yes, like Lt. Flipper, I was born in Thomasville, Georgia. He in 1856. I in 1957. He into slavery. I into segregation and Jim Crow (for my mother, like the town's other "colored" women, had to brave, among other indignities, the hospital's bottom floor, its basement).

Eighteen years later, as had Lt. Flipper, in fact inspired by his example, I left home for the first time, traveling over two thousand miles to enroll in a service academy. He to the US Military Academy at West Point, I to the US Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. He from 1873 to 1877. I, nearly one hundred years later, from 1975

to 1979. So I have long felt a kind of symmetry, indeed a special bond with Lt. Flipper.

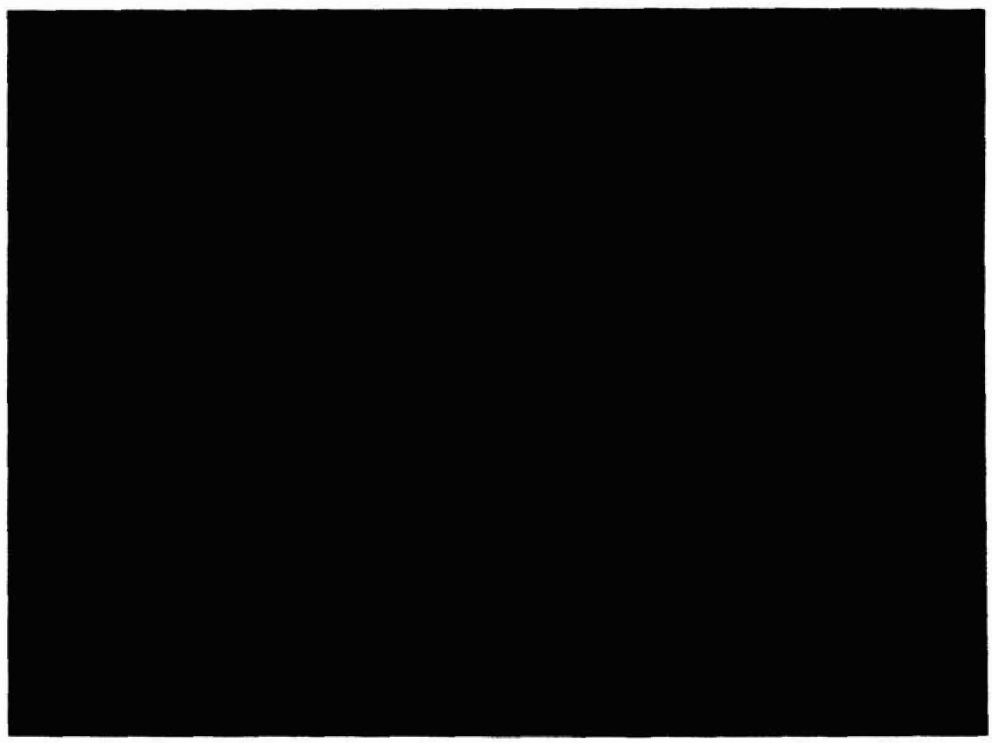
He was virtually alone at West Point, despite graduating with 76 others. I was one of nine hundred, including 35 others of darker hue (having lost 23 during the four years). But if Lt. Flipper were somehow to visit my institution (or West Point) today and see its senior officers, would he see any changes (any women and / or persons of color in the number)? Or would there be a striking sameness? If he were to inquire about that sameness, would he be met with the same old "comforting" excuses? "Too green." "Too inexperienced." "There just aren't enough black Ph.D's." "Unseasoned." "Just have a little patience, and things will change." "Insufficiently qualified."

Here I am reminded of the current situation at Harvard Law School, of its longstanding inability to locate and hire a "qualified" black woman lawyer. Harvard Law School graduate and Columbia University Professor of Law Patricia J. Williams remarks:

> Then I see it. A concise, modular, yet totally engaging item on the "MacNeil / Lehrer News Hour": Harvard Law School cannot find one black woman on the entire planet who is good enough to teach there, because we're all too stupid. (Well, that's not precisely what was said. It was more like they couldn't find anyone smart enough. To be fair, what Associate Dean Louis Kaplow actually said was that Harvard would have to "lower its standards," which of course Harvard simply cannot do.) (5)[7]

As I write this essay, secluded in my sixth-floor office at the Air Force Academy, nineteen years have passed since

I first left the school, a newly commissioned second lieutenant. Now I am one year short of military retirement, and thus tempted to go quietly into that dark night. But to do so, to remain quiet, hunkering in seclusion, invisible and with muted voice, would surely be a disservice to those who come after me. Would they then not find themselves choosing, as I do now, and Flipper long before, between accommodation and resistance? ❐



Lt. Henry O. Flipper and Family. At top are his father, Festus, and mother, Isabella. Below from left to right, are brothers, Carl, Joseph, Emory, and Festus, Jr.

## Notes

1. Both the Storr's School and Atlanta University were run by the American Missionary Society.
2. Flipper was nominated by US Representative J.C. Freeman, the Republican Congressman from Georgia's 5th Congressional District (Flipper, *The Colored Cadet* 13, 19-20).
3. James Webster Smith of South Carolina remained at the Academy from May 1870 to June 1874. Next came Michael Howard of Mississippi, Henry Alonzo Napier of Tennessee, James Elias Rector of Arkansas, and Thomas Van Rensselear Gibbs of Florida (Flipper 35; Jackson xi).
4. Explanations for the term "Buffalo Soldiers" vary. Some hold that the black soldiers' fighting prowess reminded the Native Americans of the buffalo's fierceness; others claim that the soldiers' hair texture brought to mind the curly hair of the buffalo. Historian Theodore Harris writes: "As the Regular Army's first and only black commissioned officer, Henry Flipper was posted to the Tenth Cavalry, a regiment of black enlisted men with, except for Flipper, white officers. The Tenth Cavalry compiled an excellent combat record on the Southwest frontier. Out of respect for their fighting qualities, the Plains Indians dubbed the black troopers the 'Buffalo Soldiers' " (4).
5. Theodore Harris provides one of the fullest accounts of Flipper's court martial. He writes: "In the summer of 1881, a shortage of almost $3,800 was discovered in Flipper's commissary accounts. He was arrested by the Fort Davis commanding officer . . . [and] charged with the embezzlement of federal funds and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. In a lengthy trial, no evidence was presented that supported the allegations of theft on Flipper's part, although he was shown to have been negligent in the handling of government funds [he had left the trunk containing commissary funds unlocked]. . . . The court acquitted Flipper of embezzlement but convicted him of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. He was sentenced to dismissal from the service" (6).
6. Flipper spent his final years in the Atlanta household of his school-teacher sister-in-law, Mrs. S. L. Flipper, and his

younger brother, Joseph Simeon Flipper, an African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop. He died at age eighty-four of cardiac arrest (Harris 14).

7. See also Derrick Bell, *Confronting Authority: Reflections of an Ardent Protester* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), describing his decision to "take an unpaid leave from my position on the Harvard Law School faculty until at least one woman of color was appointed to the faculty on a permanent basis" (3). Two years later, on June 30, 1992, still with no women of color on the faculty, Harvard Law School fired Professor Bell. In the fall of 1998, Professor Lani Guinier, formerly of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, was granted tenure at Harvard.

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