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Cover *David Battle*

# The Importance of Being Turbaned

PAUL A. KRAMER

It didn't occur to Rev. Jesse Wayman Routté until later that the best way for a colored man to dodge white harassment was to wear a turban.

In September 1943 Routté, the pastor of the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in the Jamaica section of Queens, New York City, boarded the train to Mobile, Alabama, to officiate at his brother Louis's wedding. In Mobile, Routté, a gifted singer and lecturer, sang spirituals before a "mixed audience," in the words of the *New York Amsterdam News*, and received "many congratulations from both races." He was also greeted with segregationist hospitality. "I was Jim Crowed here, Jim Crowed there, Jim Crowed all over the place," he later told a reporter. "And I didn't like being Jim Crowed." On his way South, Routté had ridden in a luxurious Pullman car and encountered "little if any segregation." But on his return trip, he chose to ride coach, "for educational purposes only." He was consigned to a dirty, airless car directly behind the steam engine; in the dining car, porters partitioned him off from other passengers with a screen. He fasted for the next two days in protest and contemplation. Back home, he told the *New York Amsterdam News* that such outrages called for a "great deal of prayer" and, he added, "an equal amount of planning."

Routté returned to Mobile at his brother's invitation in November 1947 and this time, he planned. Sisters in Mobile's Lutheran missionary societies had told him that when they expected a "visiting Negro of rank" they always suggested traveling in a turban and robes. "They say it makes things easier," Routté said later. A showman not given to halfway measures, he visited a costume shop in Manhattan and rented a towering, spangled, purple turban. On the train to Washington,

D.C.'s Union Station, segregation's northern railroad terminus, he kept it packed away and rode in his official clerical collar. But before the train pulled into the station, he slipped into the men's room, removed his collar, donned a velveteen robe that he wore during concerts, and arranged the turban on his head. "I was so scared I didn't know what I was doing," he recounted. "But I was doing it just the same."

Routté wasn't the first black person to trump Jim Crow by conjuring up the "foreign." Author James Weldon Johnson had spoken Spanish with a friend and been allowed to remain in a first-class railway car. Others had acted on what one black writer later called "the chapeau theory of interracial rapprochement." Turban-clad, Dicky Welles, who owned a Harlem nightclub, had traveled with white patrons on cruises to Nassau and Cuba as the "Maharajah of Hattan." Joseph Downing of Edwardsville, Illinois, had thrown on "exotic" headwear and a moniker and emerged as Prince Jovedah de Rajah; he had grown rich advising white bankers and, before going broke, had taken rooms at the most fashionable, otherwise white hotels in Miami and Palm Beach. By 1947, conning the multi-colored race of the gullible was nothing new.

What was it about the mysterious foreigner? Each of these discovered how little headgear or accented speech was required to turn a threat into a guest. Guests were not full social members—their incomplete rights and responsibilities hinged on the sense that they would leave—but if they attracted certain suspicions (they might be spies, subversives, or moral contaminants), they could also achieve the peculiar freedom of strangers. You expected them to try to conform to your rules, but you didn't necessarily expect them to succeed; you realized that compelling them to recognize your norms might be impossible, requiring incivility or even force. You might be titillated when they accidentally tweaked your conventions. You imagined powerful forces behind them—influential families, allied governments, sponsoring institutions—that made their presence in your midst possible. You thought of your society's reputation and the tales they might tell, for better or worse, back home. Your sense of hospitality, however thick or threadbare, was activated without your noticing. And then there were those turbans, still dusted with fading vaudeville magic in the 1940s: who knew what sorcery was coiled in them?

Still, Routté's game was different. Where other turban and language acts leveraged solitary exemptions for private gain, Routté chose to invite the world in. While he insisted on the innocence of his

plot (“I wasn’t trying to fool anybody,” he told reporters, trying to fool them), there was no mistaking its aggression. “I felt like a paratrooper behind enemy lines,” he said. And Mobile was no Palm Beach. In June 1946, during a campaign to register black voters, a white Mobile police officer had beaten a retired, seventy-two-year-old black hauling contractor named Napoleon Rivers Sr, who was vouching for black registrants. The officer had fractured Rivers’ skull and broken his jaw; five weeks later, Rivers was still recovering from his wounds and waiting to face charges of disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. The assault had happened inside the Mobile courthouse.

I did not set out in search of a Lutheran minister in an odd hat. I had stumbled upon Routté while researching international students from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East who had lived and studied in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, that peculiar moment when the United States was both a global power and an iron-clad apartheid society. The students had circulated a practical tip among themselves: that they would not be mistaken for “negroes,” and could mess with the racial strangeness of their “host” society, by wearing a turban. In my world, the idea of a protective turban was counter-intuitive and worth delving into. After a keyword search on “turban” and “negro” in digitized newspaper archives, Routté’s grainy portrait—baubles dangling, eyes theatrically aloof—looked out at me from a 1947 issue of the *New York Times*.

What kind of person—what kind of Lutheran minister—pulled a stunt like this? Online archives yielded up the names of his family members, colleges, and churches. Google, and the reverend’s unusual last name (pronounced Root-ay), brought me to a sermon that quoted him and to the sermon’s author, a colleague and former classmate of his. It also led me to the inbox of Routté’s daughter Maud Enid, a retired journalist in Puerto Rico, who sent me an article she’d written about what came to be called “the turban trip,” based on her mother’s recollections. Energetic archivists at Routté’s college and seminary, and at his home town’s historical society, scoured and scanned micro-filmed newspapers for me.

By August 2009, a branch of the trail had carried me to a shady street in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. I sat in the living room of Jesse’s son Luther: black belt, ultra-marathoner, former athletic coach of troubled teenagers, health-food store owner, and Lutheran minister. We sat beside an upright piano topped with a row of family snapshots and beneath a gigantic poster of Barack Obama. Seventy-one years old,

Luther Routté is wiry, limber, and growls in a Queens accent. He describes the turban trip as a judo flip, and his arms curl in a slow, precise arc, ending with a muscular snap. His father, he tells me, had hoped to show that “when it came to segregation and the whole *meshugas* about who blacks were, these people did not know what they were doing.”

We meander to a nearby coffeeshop and it becomes clear that Jesse Routté’s tricks had not ended when he folded up his velveteen cape. Luther tells me his father was born in Canada, which is what Routté had told the *Times*: he was the son of “William Gehena Routté,” an economics professor at Yale. Yale archivists poked around and told me they could find no trace of such a person; “Gehenna” is Old Testament for Hell. I traced Routté’s path back from college and ministerial records, and online census reports, and found he was born in June 1906, in Macon, Missouri, the eldest of three sons of Lulu and Lewis Routté. Lulu was musical; Lewis had entered the African Methodist Episcopal Church ministry when Jesse was about six years old. The family was poor: Lewis had worked at a local iron and steel plant while serving the small black community of Kewanee, Illinois, and moved his family with him as he ministered to congregations there and in Iowa. Lewis’s death in the 1918 influenza epidemic had left Lulu and their children destitute. She’d moved the family to Rock Island, Illinois, and made ends meet by arranging for the boys to sing at public performances. Jesse’s brother, Frederick Douglass Routté, died on the road of “inflammatory rheumatism” in 1921. The concerts stopped for a year, then resumed, until Lulu herself fell ill. Jesse attended high school in Rock Island and worked before and after school for a cleaning and dyeing company. He recalled later that they sometimes went hungry. But his faith girded a sturdy optimism. Luther remembers his father speaking of “making ladders out of the crosses that life handed me.”

Routté’s discovery of Swedish Lutheranism and graduation from Rock Island’s Augustana College and Seminary were, by most measures, unlikely. The Augustana Lutheran Church was strongest in the Midwest, New York State, and New England, and while it had expanded beyond an ethnic self-definition by the late 1920s, nearly all of Routté’s classmates were of first- or second-generation Swedish descent, and most of his instructors spoke Swedish.

How had Routté made his way into the Augustana world? His parents had raised him in the A. M. E. Church; he had taken “Wayman,” the name of Rock Island’s A. M. E. church, as his middle name. But according to Luther, his father felt uneasy with the black church’s

“emotional denominations,” as he had called them, preferring more solemn worship. Jesse discovered Augustana—located only a short stroll from his home, on the south shore of the Mississippi River—but insiders opened the door. Conrad Bergendorff, a scholar and pioneer in the Lutheran ecumenical movement, had supported his admission, and Routté’s employer, admiring his work ethic and energy, had helped pay his room and board.

Routté was up to the challenge of being the first black person at a mostly Swedish college in 1926, the year after the Ku Klux Klan had taken over the state government of neighboring Indiana. According to a classmate, he was “well-received.” But in an interview with the student paper (“Jesse Routté, Colored Student at Augie, Has Life Story of Interest,” read the headline), the twenty-two-year-old freshman described the school as “chilly.” Routté said he’d feared he would “have a hard time of it and be friendless,” but with his professors’ backing, he eventually “learned to handle the situation.” Routté’s humor, music, and what a colleague called his “winsome” personality gathered into a quiet charisma. “The Swedes draw a tight circle around themselves with their *kaffe klatsches*,” he later told his children. “But I drew a larger circle around them, and drew them in.” By his final year of college, Routté was a “popular negro senior,” active in one-act plays, the oratorio society, and student government. Still, some viewed him with suspicion. Rumors swirled—toxic and typical of the age—that he had a transgressive affinity for white women.

Over his summer breaks, Routté restlessly journeyed, singing and lecturing on vast circuit-riding loops. The shows, arranged and sponsored by church officers in part to recruit for Augustana, were densest in the Midwest, but stretched as far as New England, New York State, and the Middle Atlantic. In the summer of 1931 alone, Routté apparently clocked 6,000 miles in transit between 110 appearances at Augustana churches, black churches, universities, summer schools, and charitable institutions. The concerts supported Routté and his mother and siblings, honed his craft, and lifted his standing and reputation. Anticipating a Fourth of July concert by “a colored friend” in 1930, the *Lafayette Ledger* of Lafayette, Minnesota, announced, “This will be a rare treat.”

That same summer, during a swing down the East Coast, Routté’s musical odyssey carried him, for the first time, to Harlem. He was fascinated by what he called the “thriving black city.” “Harlem is strange,” he told the Augustana newspaper, “a mad medley.” Routté had been

especially drawn to what he called the city’s “surprising types”: “colored people speaking Jewish, Danish, Swedish, German, Spanish, Italian, and French, as if each language were their native tongue.”

As he straddled distant, if neighboring, white and black worlds, Routté boldly equalized Western classical and religious music and what one article called “the best in Negro music and poetry” in his performances. He lectured on “the development of the Negro in America,” recited poetry by Paul Laurence Dunbar, sang “sacred songs, including Negro spirituals,” and played classical music on piano and violin. (One of Routté’s role models appears to have been Marian Anderson: I uncovered in her archived papers an exuberant fan letter he wrote in 1937, asking for her “philosophy of life.”)

Routté’s far-flung campaign for cultural recognition did not make the question of his placement in a congregation upon graduation in 1933 any less thorny. Here the church’s circle proved tight indeed. It may have been possible to admit a black student to the seminary; the idea of a black pastor for a white congregation was, one bishop emeritus recalled, seen as “repugnant.” Unlike other Lutherans, the Augustanans had not evangelized among African-Americans; the closest black Augustana churches were missions in Danish-colonial Tanganyika.

Church officials found a place for Routté: race trumped denomination, and in a highly unorthodox move, church officials transferred him to the United Lutheran Church, which in turn assigned him to the Church of the Transfiguration on 126<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. Theologically speaking, the new church was home to the closest thing to black Swedes: black Lutheran immigrants from St. Thomas and St. Croix, whose ancestors had been converted by Danish missionaries and whose religious practices were—via Scandinavia—recognizable to Routté and vice versa. (In the Midwest, Routté’s appointment had been inconceivable. It was a near thing among West Indians in Harlem. “They always called for somebody from Denmark to be pastor,” Luther tells me.)

Routté moved to New York, ministering to what he later called a “racial mosaic” of congregants. Black Lutheranism trailed West Indians in motion: when they streamed from Harlem to Jamaica, Queens, drawn to new industrial jobs, Routté opened the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church there in May 1933. Spreading Lutheranism beyond its Caribbean base was tough. Apart from West Indians, it was “foreign to a great extent among people of [Routté’s] race,” as the *News* put it. And

Luther told me his father's ministry was neglected by the larger Lutheran church. "It wasn't implacable hatred," he said, "but it felt like it."

Roulté reached out to a larger circle. He led Lutheran and inter-denominational associations. In 1947, he was made chaplain of the Army Air Force's Squadron C, an all-black unit, at Camp Santini, Mitchell Field; with the unit under his moral guidance, one report noted, "the AWOL rate has been reduced considerably." He pressed his church to provide social supports like daycare, adult education, and vocational guidance for its working-class congregants. He campaigned against juvenile delinquency and engaged in what Luther calls "intercessory" work between blacks and whites: finding summer jobs for kids, raising funds for camp, gathering Christmas gifts for the poor. Large consequences, he believed, could flow from small, "transformational" acts.

He called down fire from the pulpit. In a June 1941 sermon that I discovered reprinted in a Lutheran magazine, Roulté spoke of black peoples' "multitudinous contributions" despite their emancipation without capital, land, tools, or training. He called on Lutherans to catechize "this vast nation of dark Americans" to prepare them "to meet life's exacting demands." His metaphor for his effort—the sermon's opening salvo—was a woman's sacrificial rescue of a child under attack by a ferocious eagle, which then descends upon her with "terrific force." "Every day we come in contact with those who are torn and wounded by the cruel talons of intolerance," he told his congregation. "To go to their rescue, and bare our shoulders to their danger, and conquer their enemies in Christ's strength, is our blessed privilege." At parable's end the eagle, struggling to escape the woman's grasp, breaks its own neck.

Luther suspects that his father felt some resentment at assignment to New York. "But then he met his wife there, and he thinks, 'Well, there's the finger of God moving.'" Roulté found a formidable marriage partner in Harlem. Enid Gómez had been born in St. Thomas to a privileged family; her father was a doctor and her mother, with whom she had migrated to New York in her teens, was a teacher. Sharp, ambitious, and intense, attracted to business and politics, Enid studied social work at Fordham University and journalism at Columbia. She and Roulté met in the church and married in June 1938; they eventually had four children. She rose quickly in real estate; initially hired to attract prospective black homeowners to white-owned realty companies, she formed her own real estate company and became a

lawyer in order to arrange titles on her own.

Jesse's political style leaned toward uplift; Enid preferred confrontation. A founding member of the Jamaica branch of the NAACP, she combated restrictive real estate covenants in the courts even as she punctured all-white neighborhoods in the real-estate marketplace. As a broker, she sold homes to black families on previously all-white blocks, which triggered panic selling and rapid white-to-black turnover, and brought in brisk sales commissions. A German Lutheran prep school refused to admit Luther; Enid threatened to enroll him in a Catholic school and to take their racism to the newspapers. School authorities relented.

Jesse and Enid assembled a broad social circle. They lived eight blocks from the church in a middle-class black neighborhood known for its respectability—lawyers, teachers, railroad porters—and for its star power, especially in the music world. Jesse presided at the wedding of Pearl Bailey and big-band leader Louie Bellson; Enid socialized with Count Basie's wife, Catherine. "I delivered newspapers to Jackie Robinson and Lena Horne," Luther says. Their annual open-house drew hundreds of friends, parishioners, and notables.

As his ministry grew, Roulté prized his ability to connect to New York's riotous multitude of cultures, but he grew particularly close to Jews, brunching with a cluster of rabbis each Friday morning at the Horn and Hardart automat or Bickford's cafeteria on Jamaica Avenue. Norman Newhouse, the Jewish editor of the Long Island *Daily Press*, became a close friend and confidante, and the only person Roulté told of the "turban trip" beforehand. Roulté's working knowledge of Yiddish helped. He had learned Hebrew at the seminary and, like the Harlemites he had seen speaking "Jewish," he had acquired some Yiddish back in Rock Island while working part-time as a synagogue janitor. "The lingua franca of existence," Luther told me, "is being able to speak to people on their own level."

Up to this point, Roulté had chosen dignified, resolute, quiet approaches to the problem of race: why did he suddenly decide to count coup, to reveal the enemy's weakness not by slaying him, but by drawing close enough to touch him, then escaping unharmed to tell the tale? There was, of course, the purely tactical hope that, on a journey he was taking for other reasons, a turban might "make things easier," confusing and temporarily disarming potentially hostile white people

uncertain of his "place." And there was personal precedent. In Harlem, Routté had been enthralled by black people who spoke in unanticipated tongues; at Augustana, he had always reliably gotten a rise out of fellow students by uttering Swedish expressions no one expected him to have on hand.

But by his own accounting, Routté had at least two other fish to fry. The first was social-scientific: a desire to determine what exactly it was that white people feared and hated in people of color. "One reason why it is so hard to solve the interracial problem," asserted Theophilus Lewis in an *Interracial Review* editorial, "is because it is so hard to discover the basis of race prejudice and nail it down." Routté wanted to nail it down.

His second goal was pedagogical, the propaganda of the mischievous deed. If Routté's goal had been purely experimental, he could, after all, have conducted it far more safely in private. Instead, prior to the turban trip, he had enlisted Newhouse and the *Daily Press* to publicize the story, and to intervene if something went wrong. In line with one of his favorite calls-to-arms—"We are fighting an empire of ignorance!"—the trip would hold potent lessons.

There is also, ultimately, something that eludes explanation here. Routté had been attracted to Lutheran restraint. He had been praised by Augustanans for his optimism and lack of bitterness. He had traveled thousands of miles gently persuading white audiences to respect black artistry. He had spent long hours telling teenagers not to misbehave, and soldiers not to desert the Jim Crow Army. One is tempted to read into this strange exploit the satisfying release of a person no longer trying to civilize himself or anyone else. In this respect, the turban trip was the opposite of his oft-performed musical evenings. Rather than easing open the circle—lifting spirituals onto a plane of equality with the classical canon, for example—this was a guerrilla assault on the circle's exclusionary edge.

The news arrived first by radio. Enid later recalled having heard an announcement over WOR that her husband "had just found freedom from Jim Crow by way of the turban." She feared for his safety and prayed for strength and courage. But she also recalled feeling proud, explaining to her children that their father "had just made an important discovery in human relations." Luther remembers it differently. Do you think she approved? I asked him. "No," he says. "I don't think

so." He's sure they had a quarrel about it, one he didn't hear. "But she was supportive. She always thought he was a great man. Crazy, but—" He chuckles.

The story spilled out onto a full spread on the front page of Newhouse's *Long Island Sunday Press* on November 16—"Jamaica Negro Minister Dons a Turban and 'Jim Crow' Dixie Rolls Out a Carpet"—but Routté also interviewed with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, local radio, and the *New York Times*, which placed the story on its front page the following day (and, in turn, introduced me to Routté some sixty years later).

Routté's tale migrated a bit between tellings, but its overall outlines held. Stepping out turbaned onto the platform at Union Station, he had walked among the throngs, returning nervous looks. "The Negroes were more pop-eyed than the whites," he said. When the Southern Railway train for Mobile pulled in, he bypassed the Jim Crow car located behind the engine "that was meant for the likes of me." He entered a coach reserved for whites and sat down and when passengers stared, he stared back, "because Negroes in the South always look down." The conductor took his ticket without comment; he fended off a glower from a suspicious porter.

No one spoke with Routté until the train reached Greenville, North Carolina, around lunchtime. Hungry, Routté walked back four cars to the diner, only to find it packed, the only vacant seat at a table occupied by two white couples. Routté went over and joined them, "my robes flowing, my turban still perched jauntily on my head." One of the men grinned. "Well, what have we got here?"

Routté smiled pleasantly and, in his best Swedish accent, answered, "We have here an Apostle of Good Will and Love."

The man looked baffled. Routté suspected he was being sized up as "an Oriental potentate, probably a delegate to the United Nations." A black porter eyed him fiercely upon taking their order ("He knew what I was," Routté said later) but Routté just glared back. Lunch with the white passengers, featuring courteous, Swedish-accented chitchat about the weather, went smoothly. "It shows what courtesy and politeness can do in human relationships," he told the *Daily Press*. Luther explained his father's strategy to me differently. "He could see and identify a racist, and he knew how to disarm that person by small-talking him," establishing innocent-seeming common ground in order to "find out what the other person will fight for." You "find something that you both like, and then attack."

Roulté got off the train in Mobile turbaned and, throughout his week-long stay, wore it whenever he appeared in public (apart from recitals and devotions at his brother's church). The turban took him far. Traveling alone as the "Oriental nabob," he dropped in on police officials, the Chamber of Commerce, merchants, and factory owners, introducing himself as "an apostle of human relations, seeing how other men lived and doing what I could to help all men live in peace and harmony." An officer in the Mobile Police Department took him on a tour of headquarters. Roulté asked a desk sergeant about juvenile delinquents, especially black ones, and was told that they gave little trouble, that they knew their place. He asked a captain how police handled the "Negro problem." There was no such problem: "If we have any trouble with a nigger we just knock him down."

Officials treated Roulté to a tour of segregated city public schools and told him they were unready for mixed classes; Roulté urged teachers and pupils to be more "tolerant." He bluffed his way into meals at Mobile's finest restaurants, staring down any skeptical staff. "What happens if a Negro gentleman comes in here and sits down to eat?" he asked a headwaiter. He would not be served, the man replied, but the question was irrelevant, as "no Negro would dare come in here to eat." Roulté "stroked his chin gravely and ordered dessert."

Within days of its initial circulation in New York, the story seized headlines across the country. One columnist observed wryly that the turban trip had managed to elbow itself onto the front pages despite a royal wedding and a special congressional session, a testament to the way it captured "the elements of drama dear to a city editor's heart." (James Thurber sent the clipping to H. L. Mencken.)

The black press was jubilant. For *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Roulté had turned the "No. 1 headgear of the Far Eastern countries" into "the big gun in a one-man blitz of jim crow." "Because this whole question of race relations is so full of contradictions," B. F. Phillipps of *The Baltimore Afro-American* wrote, "it always amuses me to hear of incidents where 'we put one over on them.'" Lucius Harper of *The Chicago Defender* imagined Roulté, having revealed "What the Power of a Rag Does in a Democracy," "enjoying a hearty laugh—and we join him."

While not downplaying danger (the police captain's off-handed threat of brutality had frightened him), Roulté played the story for laughs. His flamboyantly scrambled otherness—where else in the known universe did turbans and Swedishness mingle?—the earnest-

ness with which white Mobilians had fielded his questions about the everyday workings of white supremacy, the resting of social membership on the question of a hat—all this cast Jim Crow in a glaring, absurdist light. "Race prejudice has been denounced for its injustice, cruelty, and stupidity," wrote the editorialist Lewis. "Rev. Roulté has proved that it is also silly."

Not everyone was amused. Eleanor Roosevelt expressed her sadness, citing the trip during a lecture to advertising executives on the need to "sell" the United Nations to Americans. Because "every time we allow something to happen that is not democratic it hurts the cause of democracy," she had "grieved" over the turban story. She seemed less concerned about the racism it exposed than the bad impressions it might give off. If the country was appropriately ashamed, she said, stories about it had been "worth writing." If not, "I wish we hadn't written it, because the rest of the world won't be impressed that it could happen."

The Augustana College newspaper congratulated Roulté; his superiors in the United Lutheran Church did not. "They thought the trip obfuscated his work and his effectiveness," Luther tells me. Shortly after the trip, a producer offered him the lead in *Lost in the Stars*, a Broadway adaptation of Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and Roulté asked church officials for permission; he was told he would have to withdraw from the ministry if he wished to participate. Particularly in Mobile, black Southerners expressed their apprehensions about Roulté's ostentatious feat; he had prodded, and then left, the hornets' nest in which they lived. "A lot of folks down there thought it was going to hurt," Luther explains, "that there were going to be repercussions." Enid recalled that her husband had been told by an "old-time preacher" that it would "take one hundred years to see the good you've done, but you'll see the evil soon."

Some observers took away from the turban trip a serious, novel, and durable point: that racial prejudice was, as Marjorie McKenzie put it in a column in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, "a problem of semantics." Whites did not react to black people as such—Roulté had never ceased to be black—but to "the Negro" as what McKenzie called "a Word Symbol." "A man in a jeweled turban is not a Negro," she wrote, and so he failed to "evoke the response that is called up in the southern white mind when the word Negro is mentioned or thought to apply to a person or a group."

In this way, Roulté's journey represented the inverse of passing:

where passing for white involved rigid conformity to a behavioral script in order to render blackness invisible, Routté had projected and confounded blackness by rendering it illegible. The fact that, in the guise of a foreigner, he had been so “well-received” in the South, suggested that conventional wisdom on the root of racism was wrong. It was not that black people were mistreated because they were seen as alien, but because they were American; not because they were unknowable, but because they were presumed to be known. Stripped of meaningful citizenship, they had fewer rights than real—or imaginary—guests. “In such situations,” James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1933 of his own, Spanish-purchased ticket to ride, “any kind of Negro will do; provided he is not one who is an American citizen.”

Among those on whom this distinction was lost was the Ku Klux Klan. According to Luther, shortly after news of the trip broke, Routté received a phone call at his home from Klan leaders, who threatened to kill him. The Klan burned a cross on the family’s front lawn; Jesse and Enid sent the children to live with church members for several months. Luther relates that Enid worked connections with the Truman White House and somehow managed to secure Secret Service protection for her husband. But Jesse found the bodyguards burdensome and frequently slipped away.

Predictably, white Mobile newspapers sent a reporter out to investigate—and debunk—Routté’s story. “Eastern Colored Man Claims He Crashed ‘Color Line,’ Here” read *The Mobile Press* headline on November 17, the day after the story broke in Long Island. Two captains in Mobile’s police force “denied having talked with such a turbaned individual.” City commissioners and the Chamber of Commerce’s general manager similarly “did not recall a visit by such an individual.” While the managers of most “leading” restaurants also denied seeing anyone like Routté, the owner of Joe Jefferson House told the reporter that “a dark-skinned person, wearing a turban-like hat” had come in about two weeks earlier and placed an order, but had been told that “he could not be served unless he removed his hat.” The man had refused to comply and walked out.

Had he or hadn’t he? Under the circumstances, there is no particular reason to trust *The Mobile Press* on this. And in the end, the turban trip’s most telling feature may be that, apart from a few angry editors in Mobile, no one seems to have thought to ask. The reason for this, I

suspect, is that Routté’s story, whether true or not, arrived at precisely the moment when the surrounding culture was willing to help invent it. By late 1947, the NAACP had launched unprecedented campaigns to integrate wartime housing, industry, and the military. Thousands of black veterans had returned to the United States frustrated with the strong resemblance between Nazi Aryanism and the segregated American army sent against it. In December 1946, Truman had appointed a Committee on Civil Rights to investigate American racial politics and to propose reforms; by coincidence, its report was issued within weeks of Routté’s train trip South. In March 1948, civil rights activists in Alabama filed a lawsuit against, and succeeded in striking down, the literacy test that disenfranchised most black voters; when white supremacists resurrected it, it was filibustered to defeat.

The electricity of the turban trip, in other words, rushed from a society poised to believe that people engaged each other—for better and for worse—through the “word symbols” they had at hand; that for all its austere trappings of science, law, and religion, race was capricious and arbitrary; that far from commanding terrorized deference from both blacks and whites, Jim Crow could and should be poked in the eye. Routté continued to be known for the episode: civil rights leaders enlisted him to tell the tale in the 1960s. And Luther says that when he traveled to Mobile to officiate at his uncle’s funeral, older folks recalled the incident. “You know,” they told him, “your daddy changed the whole thing up.” Jesse Routté himself didn’t place much emphasis on it in the years that followed. He had larger circles to draw.