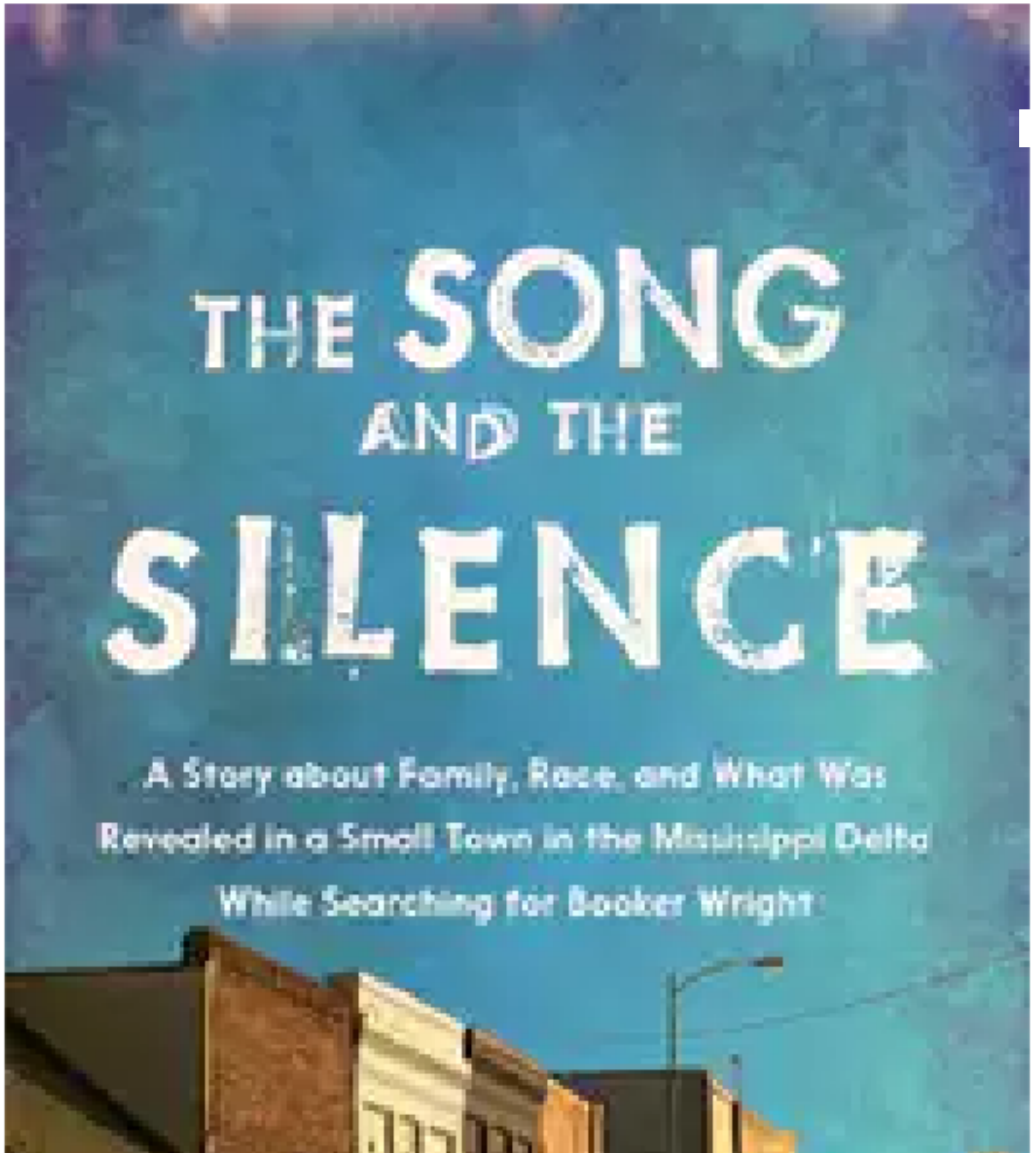


To uncover her grandfather's life story, this author must confront a dark legacy of racial violence and trauma.

In 1966, Booker Wright, an African-American waiter from Greenwood, Miss., appeared in the NBC documentary *Mississippi: A Self-Portrait*. He described how he performed affably for his white customers, smiling in the face of humiliation so he could provide for his children.





The Song and the Silence, by Yvette Johnson (Simon & Schuster)

In *The Song and the Silence*, Yvette Johnson describes what Wright did on film as "deftly stepping from behind a carefully constructed veil." In three minutes, Wright delivered a "devastating, leveling blow" that left his customers "defrauded. ... The one Black man they trusted ... had built relationships with them out of a kind of counterfeit affection."

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The moment of honesty cost him his job, and he was also beaten by police.

Johnson discovered this footage while researching her family; Wright was her grandfather. Her research resulted in the 2012 documentary, *Booker's Place: A Mississippi Story*.



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The Song and the Silence is Johnson's memoir describing her experience conducting that research. An urgent and powerful memoir, the book poignantly explores how America's legacy of racial violence shapes black lives in the present.



The book centers on Greenwood, a focal point for racial unrest and violence during the 1960s.

Johnson writes about how her family survived that time as "the world stood on the sidelines throwing social and economic obstacles in their paths again and again, and then ridiculing them for not achieving more, for not going farther."

While her parents "made it," moving their family from Mississippi to California, Johnson grew up haunted by their racial trauma. As a child, she thought "being White meant having a story, or at least the hope of one," while black Americans were "beings in a post-apocalyptic world." As an adult, she decided to research her family's past to understand where that sense of shame came from.

She quickly discovered the speciousness of the timeline version of African-American history she learned in school: "Those dates didn't necessarily indicate the end of anything."

In much of the South, slavery didn't really end with the 13th Amendment. Instead it was replaced by sharecropping, a system just as destructive to the black family. In one of the book's most tragic chapters, Johnson tells the story of Wright's mother. A single, teenage mom, she'd left her son in the care of a couple on a sharecropping plantation to look for work. When she returned for her son, the plantation owner said she would have to buy him back. Miraculously, she returned with the money, only to be forced to flee under the threat of violence — without her son.



Yvette Johnson (right), one of four grandchildren of Booker Wright, with her mother, Katherine Jones (left), and aunt Vera Douglas. (Photo used by permission of the author)

Just as slavery didn't end in 1865, segregation persists long after *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Greenwood has remained segregated for six decades since the Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional. Some Greenwood schools are 95 percent black. This reflects national trends of increasing segregation in public schools.

The town of Greenwood maintained its strict racial caste system because of the triumvirate of the White Citizens Council, Klu Klux Klan and the local police force. These organizations used violence and humiliation to keep black Americans from voting, integrating, or gaining economic footing. Almost nightly, the KKK shot up or firebombed homes and businesses to terrorize people of color.

Despite these odds, Wright managed to carve out "a space that felt set apart and untouched by terror." He used his earnings as a waiter to open and maintain his own restaurant, Booker's Place. During his commute between establishments, he transformed himself "in a way not unlike a seasoned actor in the precious moments before stepping from behind the curtain."

Wright wasn't involved in the civil rights movement, but, for whatever reason, in that documentary he decided to speak clearly and truthfully about the psychological costs of performing affection for people who saw him as inferior. Johnson was never able to ask her grandfather his reasoning. He was killed the year before she was born.

For Johnson — and for many black Americans — learning about race in America isn't just about discovering disturbing discrepancies between America's rhetoric and its reality. It's about encountering the extreme trauma experienced by family. As Johnson writes: "This wasn't a story from a history book or something I read in a headline and then forgot by lunch. For me, at least, Greenwood's story was personal."

Elizabeth Hoover is a poet and journalist. She lives in Pittsburgh.

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The Song and the Silence

Yvette Johnson

(Atria, \$26)

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