



Colored Memories: A Biographer's Quest for the Elusive Lester A. Walton

Susan Curtis

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Lester A. Walton was a well-known public figure in his day. An African American journalist, cultural critic, diplomat, and political activist, he was an adviser to presidents and industrialists in a career that spanned the first six decades of the twentieth century. He was a steadfast champion of democracy and lived to see the passage of major civil rights legislation. But one word best describes Walton today: forgotten.

Exploring the contours of this extraordinary life, Susan Curtis seeks to discover why our collective memory of Walton has failed. In a unique narrative of historical research, she recounts a fifteen-year journey, from the streets of Harlem and “The Ville” in St. Louis to scattered archives and obscure public records, as she uncovers the mysterious circumstances surrounding Walton’s disappearance from national consciousness. And despite numerous roadblocks and dead ends in her quest, she tells how she came to know this emblematic citizen of the American Century in surprising ways.

In this unconventional book—a postmodern ghost story, an unprecedented experiment in life-writing—Curtis shares her discoveries as a researcher. Relating her frustrating search through long-overlooked documents to discover this forgotten man, she offers insight into how America’s obsession with race has made Walton’s story unwelcome. She explores the treachery, duplicity, and archival accidents that transformed a man dedicated to the fulfillment of American democracy into a shadowy figure.

Combining anecdotal memories with the investigative instincts of the historian, Curtis embraces the subjectivity of her research to show that what a society forgets or suppresses is just as important as what it includes in its history. *Colored Memories* is a highly original work that not only introduces readers to a once-influential figure but also invites us to reconsider how we view, understand, and preserve the past.

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