INTRODUCTION

Producing the Ground of Difference

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter indeed.

W. E. B. Du Bois

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To be American is to be both black and white. Yet to be a modern American has also meant to deny this mixing, our deep biracial genesis. Racial segregation colors even our language, and thinking beyond its construction is not easy. To trace the creation of whiteness as a modern racial identity, we must leave assumed, habitual ways of racial knowing behind.

The cultural history of the American South between 1890 and 1940 provides the chiaroscuro necessary to make the invisible visible, to give whiteness a color. The ways in which the South has served national imaginings have, after all, doubled the ways in which blackness has served American whiteness. The South has been, to use the language of our racial orderings, the darkness that has made the American nation lose its color. Replicating the contradictions of whiteness itself both everywhere present and nowhere visible, the region has been both founding family member and military foe, both too black and more white, both less fragmented and more segregated,
both a place apart, outside the flow of time, and an essential part of the national whole.

Long before they conceived of such regional differences, early Americans linked skin color to the origins of peoples, using it to distinguish various nationalities and ethnicities of Africans, Native Americans, and Europeans. Nevertheless, racial identity before the nineteenth century was not an overarching or absolute category. Europeans enslaved Africans and regarded them as inferior because they were pagans, without nationality or culture, and because, unlike those other “savages,” they could not readily escape to their own people. The existence of free blacks as well as black slaveholders made the antebellum dynamic of power one of slave versus citizen, dependent versus independent, rather than white versus black. Slaves could in principle become free, although their freedom was often circumscribed. Antebellum society grounded racialized difference in the law, in the legal status of a human being as a person or as chattel. Other categories like gender, ethnicity, class, locality, and religion also shaped citizenship status. Nonslave women as well as “free” male apprentices and landless agricultural laborers, for instance, possessed only limited rights.

Arguing that the link between antebellum slave status and the modern dominant social connotation of blackness in American culture is not straightforward or isomorphic should not diminish the horrific, nor mitigate the crime of slavery. It is to note that slaves occupied the brutally exploited bottom of a premodern social hierarchy. It is to make use for our present of the insights gained by an understanding of American social reality, in which, until the 1850s, slave status was a political difference enacted through the law rather than a naturalized, embodied identity existing outside it. Slavery, in other words, founded and fixed the meaning of blackness more than any transparent and transhistorical meaning of black skin founded the category of slavery.

Before the Civil War, however, Americans from both regions began transforming the meaning of race. Outside the South, the maturation of free black communities, the rise of abolitionism, the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, and the making of increasingly distinct middle and working classes increased consciousness of racial difference. Rising defensiveness about slavery and the regional identity undergirded by human bondage created a parallel development inside the region. Slaveholders searched for ways both to legitimate their system of unfree labor in a Western world in which revolutionary thinking denied the morality of such hierarchies of men, and to assert a unified regional identity—a collectivity across the class divides between slaveholders and nonslaveholders—against a mounting northern antagonism. Scientific explanations of the world, particularly natural scientists’ new biological theories of race and separate creationism, added weight to racialist thinking even as they contradicted older religious defenses of paternalistic stewardship over dependents.

The Civil War greatly magnified these trends, making whiteness a more important category, a way to assert a new collectivity, the Confederacy, across lines of class and gender that divided free southerners. The old antebellum category of inclusion and power, citizenship, although defined most centrally against the figure of the slave, proved a weak identity in a new “nation” and possessed class and gender hierarchies of its own. But the need for free southerners to secure some measure of slave loyalty mitigated the potential excesses of narrowly racial arguments. By 1865, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation had made the freeing of the slave, that opposite of the citizen, the symbolic goal of the northern armies. And Union victory delegitimized that nascent nationalist collectivity, the Confederacy. The Reconstruction amendments extended national citizenship to the freedpeople and specifically gave the freedmen its most fundamental expression, the right to vote. By the end of Reconstruction, all southern men possessed the same legal rights in the newly reunited nation. But what would citizenship mean in a world without slaves?

From Appomattox through the end of the nineteenth century, Americans of both regions shattered the old hierarchical structures of power, imagined as organic and divinely inspired, and used the fragments to erect more binary orderings, imagined as natural and physically grounded. Racial identity had never been completely submerged within the citizen-versus-slave dialectic, but Reconstruction severed these linkages completely. The ex-Confederates, the “Southerners,” called any people who did not support them politically “Black Republicans”—the freedpeople certainly but also transplanted white northerners and white southern unionists as well. Regional antagonisms—the northern conquerors versus the defeated South—retarded the development of an overarching conception of collective white identity even as biological theories of racial worth gained ground. For a brief time, at least, many northerners saw the freedpeople as both dependents and allies against their former enemies, the ex-Confederates. And the former enemies found themselves locked in yet another contest, over who would control the labor and the votes of the ex-slaves. The freed-
people sought pragmatic local alliances where they could find them and worked to retain and expand their freedom and citizenship, their control over themselves and their hope of belonging to what would become a new American whole. But by the 1880s these political conflicts, as well as the economic trends toward centralization, standardization, urbanization, and mechanization, accelerated and permanently institutionalized by the war, meant that American collective identity itself was now anything but clear.³

The overlapping of the aftermath of the Civil War and the fate of the exslaves with these economic changes destabilized the categories of power during the 1880s and 1890s. The question of what structure of social ordering would replace the familiar hierarchies of both North and South made this a period of volatility and uncertainty. Hierarchical structures founded in the personalized social relations of specific localities lost their authority in an increasingly mobile and rapidly changing society. How would people know who they were within this spinning abstraction, the newly economically integrated, industrialized nation-state?

To make order within the seeming fragmentation of their world, some Americans elaborated spatial mediations of modernity—ways of attaching identities to physical moorings, from bodies to buildings to larger geographies like region and nation. They produced new grounds of difference to mediate the ruptures of modernity. In effect, they translated the specific and individualized linkages between identity, place, and power that had reigned in an earlier, smaller world into connections between categories of people and imagined spaces that moved far beyond local boundaries.⁴

Serving as a catalyst for this growing sense of both a fragmented and an increasingly abstract society, the Civil War violently, convulsively produced the need to narrate new foundations. The war and Reconstruction had definitively shifted the location of citizenship from the individual states to the national level, a centralization of government power made readily visible by the circulation of the first national currency and the emancipation of the slaves. American nationalism—our modern sense of ourselves as a national community—as well as American imperialism, marked a newly narrowed and deepened opposition between Americans and non-Americans, manifest especially in the Spanish-American War. The defeat of the last independent Indian nations as well as the official closing of the frontier with the 1890 census gave this rising nationalism a contiguous and continental geography.

Spurred by the ongoing revolution in transportation, the economy boomed to fill in the continent, creating a marketplace both wide and deep, the first national mass market. The reconstitution of the southern economy—sharecropping organized more narrowly toward the market as opposed to the wider balancing of household and market production that characterized antebellum plantations and farms—eased the complete incorporation of the South into this increasingly national economy. These changes, in turn, operated dialectically with another spatial ordering of identity. The founding geography of the northern middle class was the split between work and home and the extension of the older gendering of the male public and the female private to these changing and more concretely embodied spheres. The conservation movement and the construction of national parks undergirded other geographical elaborations of power, ensuring that nature as embodied in wilderness would continue to exist in opposition to culture—what the people had made. Parks literally marked the ground as important, as the move to towns and cities detached many from the land as both a site of work and a more localized identity.⁵

Yet it was racial identity that became the paramount spatial mediation of modernity within the newly reunited nation. Not self-evidently more meaningful, not more real or natural than other markings, race nevertheless became the crucial means of ordering the newly enlarged meaning of America. This happened because former Confederates, a growing working class, embattled farmers, western settlers, a defensive northeastern elite, women’s rights advocates, an increasingly powerful scientific community, and others, simultaneously but for different reasons, found race useful in creating new collective identities to replace older, more individual, and local groundings of self. As important, these mass racial meanings were made and marked at a time when technological change made the cheap production of visual imagery possible and the development of a mass market provided a financial incentive—selling through advertising—to circulate the imagery.

Historians have called this convergence of economic and cultural change consumer culture, the creation of a mass market for everything from chewing tobacco to sporting events to movies. Consumer culture has become a way of designating not just the increasing importance of buying—including what and how a person eats and dresses and relaxes—but also consumption’s centrality to how she understands and locates her very self. The invention of photography and motion pictures and changes in lithography, engraving, and printing as well as the construction of muse-
ums, expositions, department stores, and amusement parks emphasized visibility, the act of looking and the authority of the eye—the spectacle. The desire to mark racial difference as a mass identity, as white versus “colored,” converged with the means to create and circulate the spectacle. And spectacle, the power of looking, was different from narrative, the power of telling. A picture, a representation, could convey contradictions and evoke oppositions like white racial supremacy, white racial innocence, and white racial dependency more easily and persuasively than a carefully plotted story.6

It is important to place southern segregation, then, within this contradictory historical context of representational fluidity and spatial grounding. Geographically separating peoples as a way of making and fixing absolute racial difference occurred across the nation. By the early twentieth century, segregation laws and more localized conventions affected Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans, and the separation has remained visible in our very language. But “the people who think of themselves as white”—a naming James Baldwin crafted to render visible this process of racial making—also produced their own mass cultural identity across divisions of class, gender, region, and religion and rendered its whiteness invisible at the same time. Focusing on the visible, they attempted to control both the geographical and representational mobility of nonwhites. African Americans were clearly inferior in the South because they occupied inferior spaces like Jim Crow cars, often literally marked as colored, and across the nation because they appeared at fairs, in advertisements, and in movies as visibly inferior characters. Yet whites made modern racial meaning not just by creating boundaries but also by crossing them. Containing the mobility of others allowed whites to put on blackface, to play with and project upon darkness, to let whiteness float free. These transgressions characterized and broadened modern whiteness, increasing its invisibility and its power.7

By the early twentieth century, whites were constructing modern racial identity: a mass cultural rather than a localized, socially embodied, particularized self, an absolute division that dissolved any range of racially mixed subjectivities, a natural and embodied but not strictly biological or legal category, a way to mediate the fragmentation of modernity and still enjoy its freedom. And racial separation, what W. E. B. Du Bois famously called “the problem of the color line,” became the founding metaphor as well as policy of modern American life. But the whiteness that some Americans made through segregation was always contingent, always fragile, always uncertain. Positing an absolute boundary and the freedom to cross only in one direction, segregation remained vulnerable at its muddled middle, where mixed-race people moved through mixed spaces, from railroad cars to movies to department stores, neither public nor private, neither black nor white.8

And nowhere was this ambiguous middle, the contradictory, simultaneous need for race to be visible—blackness—and invisible—whiteness—more apparent than in the South. Southern whites constructed their racial identities on two interlocking planes: within a regional dynamic of ex-Confederates versus ex-slaves and within a national dynamic of the South, understood as white, versus the nation. The demands and desires of southern African Americans as well as the needs of America, as both a state and an identity, shaped the contours of modern southern whiteness. This doubled dynamic deepened the shadings of southern racial identities, making them more starkly apparent than, even as they were vitally important to, American whiteness in general. As culture, southern segregation made a new collective white identity across lines of gender and class and a new regional distinctiveness. Yet paradoxically, the southern whiteness that segregation created provided a cultural foundation for the very “natural” racial differences white southerners had hoped to protect and a route back into the nation. Grounding the modern whiteness that in turn grounded national reconciliation, the specifically southern culture of segregation became doubly important for the nation, as racial narratives and spectacles utilized southern settings and reworked southern history and as southern blacks in growing numbers began to migrate out of the region.

Like other Americans seeking social order, white southerners chose geographic anchors, whether the imagined spaces evoked by narratives or the physical spaces recaptured through spectacle, literally to ground their racial identity within the mobility of modernity. The particular narratives and spectacles they created and used, of course, grew out of the specific social history of the region. Under circumstances where the legal bifurcations of slave versus free status no longer operated, elite whites in the Reconstruction era remained dependent on their ex-slaves. But how would they control the labor of African Americans within the post–Civil War reality of an at least presumptive free labor and in which the state tools of law and punishment remained semi-hostile and partially outside of their political control? And this problem of how to ground a social order in a South without economic and political autonomy did not diminish with the end of Reconstruction. White southerners created their modern sense of them-
selves as different, externally, from the rest of Americans and different, internally, from African Americans, at the level of culture. This book tries to show how, in detail and in the actual event, they crafted their modern racial and regional identity and how that making served the rest of the nation.

I wish to avoid the mistakes of past white liberalisms that have reinscribed racist limits on the democratic imagination by painting African Americans as consigned by white exclusion to cultural pathology. Nor do I wish to present whites as victims of the very racial divisions in which they have continually invested. Toni Morrison in her novel *Jazz* inverts William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and rejects the tragedy of a founding racial flaw and the resulting impasse of history that figures the past as barricade—as dense, suffocating, and unbearable. Instead, she sings history’s possibility and the ways in which love, both intimate and otherwise, can heal wounds and propel us forward. By doing so, she exposes the greater and desperate rejection of American reality behind claims linking pathology to blackness. That whites have been unable within the culture of segregation to think about race without the blackfaced minstrel or the happy slave merely means that they have once again projected their own concoction of guilt and nostalgia, their own cultural damage, onto a dark ground. They are not racism’s victims. The disproportionate numbers of African Americans living in poverty amid the plenty of late twentieth-century American capitalism exposes the idiocy of any competing alienations. The cost of the investment in whiteness has been borne overwhelmingly by African Americans.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight the collective cost, the damage segregation has done to the collective ability to conjure our broadest cross-racial connectedness, and to acknowledge the resulting poverty of the attempts to imagine an inclusive America. That both whites and blacks, or more broadly all people of all colors, cannot truly embrace the range of North American humanity as their own, as their imagined community, is the collective cost. Making whiteness American culture, the nation has forsaken other possibilities. The hybridity that could have been our greatest strength has been made into a means of playing across the color line, with its rotting distance of voyeurism and partisanship, a confirmation of social and psychological division. 9

American history in its broadest sense—what has happened, how we have represented to ourselves what has happened, and how we will con-
American Whiteness

[The end is in the beginning and lies far ahead . . .
It is a question of who shall determine the direction of events.
RALPH ELLISON]

It is perhaps more than ironic to end a book about the American South with an attempt to crack open and probe the body, the mind, the very meaning of the region that has become such a central cultural category for the nation. But Lillian Smith, her uncanny sight surviving even as cancer attacked her own body in the early 1960s, again has managed to mark the her. "I am deeply disturbed," Smith wrote in the materials she was collecting for a biographer, "at the [white] South’s facility, sheer talent, for failing to see the South we all live in." In twentieth-century America, the South’s regional identity has been central not just to Smith’s local but to our national racial politics. If white Americans have created their color-blind conceptions of national identity through, in Toni Morrison’s phrase, “playing in the dark,” it is important here to highlight the most common place of the play. The American South has most often provided the metaphorical and actual settings, the playgrounds of the American racial drama, the loca-
tions of American racial meanings. The region has been central to the erasure of the whiteness of American identity precisely because its dramas have been so graphic, so violent, so pervasively pleasing. White Americans generally have failed to see the ways they imaginatively “live” in a metaphorical South, even as their relationship to the region has danced between the poles of attraction and revulsion.

Rarely has any fusion of spectacle and narrative so pleased the nation as David O. Selznick’s 1939 screen version of Margaret Mitchell’s novel Gone With the Wind. White America, despite the scandal of Rhett Butler’s bitter last line, gave much more than a damn. Selznick’s film stripped away Mitchell’s nuanced siting of her story within the local social history and geography of Clayton County, Georgia. Universalizing—expanding for all white Americans—her modern narration of southern history as the autobiogrophy of a middle-class and modern regional whiteness, Selznick crafted a panoramic and technicolored national romance, a story of nation making. Like Mitchell, he fetishized authenticity to ground the fantasy, and his production company publicized its struggles to document the details of dialect and custom and even to properly dye red the California dirt. Gone With the Wind was D. W. Griffith’s 1915 Birth of a Nation dressed and topped for the mid-century American ball.

But Gone With the Wind also narrated a bolder and bigger and more confident American dream, the creation of not just Griffith’s modern national collective but a modern individual American. The American archetype had been the self-made man, such as the obscure farmer who, in the implied background of Mitchell’s story, struggled out of poverty to build up his Clayton County plantation. But better than the self-made man was the twice-made man, the white southerner who, losing it all in the Civil War and Reconstruction, could again, despite the failings of the postbellum world, build yet another self and another fortune. Both old and new, he could ground his expansive authority in both personality and precedent, new world will and old world culture. Through the rise and fall of his finances, the twice-made man could embody all class lives and conflicts and absorb the individual economic identities of Americans and their resolution into a new middle-class self. And nurtured in an “integrated family,” in Ralph Ellison’s fine phrasing, “the curdled milk” of his black mammy’s breast forever on his lips as she was forever in his “home,” this new man could sanitize biracial origins and make them safe for the modern (white) American whole. Better than the self-made man was Gone With the Wind’s twice-made man, and Mitchell, joining yet another contradiction into a new modernist mélange, made him in the figure of Scarlett O’Hara, a woman.

Film, welding the power of both narrative and spectacle, animated and made “real” such magical transformations. But the festive pageant marking the premiere of Gone With the Wind in Atlanta in 1939, the translation of the romance back into life, ironically highlighted the nature of the performance that was both assumed and thus ignored on the screen. The city auditorium stage with its movie-copied facade was not the movie’s Tara, which was itself not a Piedmont plantation just south of Atlanta. The wealthy white deb chosen to play Scarlett was not Vivien Leigh, who was not herself a southern belle transformed by war and poverty into a new woman. Most important for the immediate future of America, however, little Martin Luther King, Jr., was a middle-class black boy growing up in the relatively secure black community of midcentury Atlanta, Georgia, not the contented and childlike “happy darky” he portrayed on the stage, who was in turn not a true southern slave. Margaret Mitchell saw and yet failed to see the possibilities embodied in a young black child like Martin King. Heaping praise on the problematic inclusion of both African American actors in the film and black Atlantans as both representational and real servants in the festivities, the local black middle-class paper the Daily World saw and yet failed to see the segregation signs in both the movie and the pageant. And at their local theaters across the country, white Americans, both southern and otherwise, saw and yet failed to see the South. Gone With the Wind was not “the South we all live in,” not in 1939, not in 1963 as an adult King marched on Washington, not now.

The 1939 Atlanta pageant of Gone With the Wind stood as the pinnacle of the process of race making I have called the culture of segregation. The spectacle embodied the contemporary universalization of southern segregation on the one hand and yet its national exposure on the other. For the pageant was a triple mediation: a very public staging of Gone With the Wind’s performance of “history” as a narration of the origins of modern southern whiteness. These excessive replications, in effect fantasies of fantasies, resulted in caricatures. But while these full-color, larger-than-life exaggerations played well as entertainment, they were seriously flawed as social order. And the seen and not-seen danger here threatened both the part and the whole. The culture of segregation created and staged racial difference for modern America as well as for the modern South. The history of
both the post–World War II region and the nation would be the story of the transformation of this increasingly untenable performance as its old persuasive power dissolved into caricature. The civil rights movement would force white southerners and other white Americans to see differently, at least for a moment, the South that white southerners lived in. Whether in return white Americans have or will ever fully understand the metaphoric South in which they “live,” that reservoir of many cherished American self-perceptions, remains, even at the end of the twentieth century, uncertain.

Between 1890 and 1940, I have argued here, the culture of segregation turned the entire South into a theater of racial difference, a minstrel show writ large upon the land. A black middle class was rising, with its unhinging of black race and class identities, and hierarchies of personalized power were being subverted in the move to a more urban, less locally grounded, mass society. These threats made the ritualistic enactment of racial difference vital to the maintenance of white supremacy in the twentieth century. And southern whites commanded this performance of segregation for both a local and a national audience, to maintain both white privilege at home and a sense of southern distinctiveness within the nation. Segregation, in turn, helped middle-class white southerners at least mediate the effects of the incorporation of the southern economy into America’s expansive and modernizing capitalism.

Since southern black inferiority and white supremacy could not, despite whites’ desires, be assumed, southern whites created a modern social order in which this difference would instead be continually performed. For whites, this performance, in turn, made reality conform to the script. African Americans were inferior because they were excluded from the white spaces of the franchise, the jury, and political officeholding. They were inferior because they attended inferior schools and held inferior jobs. As the right to consume became central to changing conceptions of American citizenship and as some educated African Americans became professionals despite discrimination and oppression, African Americans were also and perhaps most publicly inferior because they sat in inferior waiting rooms, used inferior restrooms, sat in inferior cars or seats, or just stood. African Americans were inferior because they entered through inferior doors marked “Colored,” relieved their needs in inferior restrooms marked “Colored,” and watched movies from inferior balconies marked “Colored.”

ing, a particularly intimate yet increasingly public activity, was especially controlled. African Americans dined at blocked-off, racially marked, and inferior tables, or, as was often the case with department stores that otherwise welcomed their dollars, they did not eat at all.

But the growing interdependence of racial making and consumer buying, despite the seeming entrenchment of a racial ordering proclaimed in literal black and white in the segregation signs, proved by the late 1950s to be the most vulnerable point in the culture of segregation. Particularly in southern towns and smaller southern cities, African American consumers could play upon the contradictions between making race and making money and wring concessions from local white southern merchants and from the growing numbers of national chain stores. The difficulty lay in transforming these private, individualized concessions into publicly visible, collective recognition of the importance of African American consumption to white profits. Claiming a right rather than seeking a privilege meant challenging whites’ ability to command black performance. For southern African Americans visibly to violate the rituals, to refuse to play the role of blackness that white southerners continually assigned, was to invite the threat of violent retribution that the spectacle lynching periodically and very publicly staged.

By the 1930s, however, southern whites had lost a great deal of control over national interpretations of that spectacle. With the publication and circulation of its report on the lynching of Claude Neal, the NAACP had persuasively and broadly countered white southern narratives of the meaning of this violence. Lynching, in this changing national context, stood more readily as proof of white southern barbarity. And increasing numbers of more urban and suburban middle-class white southerners too had difficulty excusing such violent frenzy as a reluctant act in the maintenance of white supremacy. If southern whites were never more white and southern than when they were participating in a lynching mob, by the 1930s that same experience made them considerably less than modern white Americans. The violence against African Americans that had previously helped publicly fuse white unity now paradoxically pulled open buried fissures of class and gender. More nationally oriented, middle-class, town- and city-dwelling whites increasingly found themselves unable to condone, for reasons of both public relations and principle, the deadly entertainments that their more rural, more agricultural and working-class-oriented white brethren continued to support. Some white southern middle-class women, in particular, embold-
nced by suffrage and a thriving associational life, organized in the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching a regional network that forced white southern men to face their gendered justifications of white violence. Southern whites could still employ the lynching spectacle, but divided among themselves and resisted by a growing civil rights movement, they could no longer dominate the national interpretation of their violent acts.6

This loss of control only escalated as World War II remade the universe in which Americans conceived of themselves both regionally and racially. The fight against fascism cemented the growing unwillingness of many white Americans to accept some white southerners’ blatant acts of torture and murder. Migrating Americans encountered the diversity of both their nation and their world. African American movement north, the Great Migration, peaked as southern blacks sought the job opportunities created by the wartime economy. White and black northerners ventured south in large numbers for military training, and many carried home an unprecedented sense of the oppressive weight of the white southern racial order. African American men, both northern and southern, fought in large numbers on both fronts, and newsreels, newspapers, and national magazines circulated another black masculine spectacle, the Negro armed and in U.S. uniform, the Negro as soldier. The NAACP once again geared up its increasingly sophisticated public relations machine and promoted nationally “the Double V Campaign,” victory against racism both abroad and at home. Anything seemed possible as the organization’s stunning 1944 legal victory over the white political primary in Smith v. Allwright held out the promise of the first meaningful southern black franchise in the twentieth century.7

Progressive promise, then, saturated the changed landscape of post–World War II America. Militant leftists and communists, through the popular front coalitions of the 1930s, had made American and particularly southern racism the primary target of their propaganda. Positioning racial oppression as an integral part of American class inequality and a product of American capitalism, they successfully prodded more moderate liberals, for reasons of both expediency and concern, into bolder stances on civil rights. The United Nations institutionalized wartime idealism, at least at the level of rhetoric, and pushed its promise of human rights for all against the backdrop of Asian and African decolonization. This unprecedented global American commitment, in turn, linked for the first time the success of American foreign policy to the international progress of human rights. Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal published his Carnegie Corporation–supported and instantly classic An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy, which proclaimed American (understood as white) racism the last obstacle to the attainment of a democratic American utopia.8

In the political arena, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s successor, Harry Truman, attempted to reassert federal government control over the process and promise of liberal reform. FDR, aided by the nation’s preoccupation with waging a global war, had managed to walk a precarious electoral color line. Offering unprecedented presidential gestures that always fell short of decisive action, Roosevelt managed to wrest much of the rising black northern vote from its traditional Republican mooring even while retaining the support of the traditional Democratic white South. The election of 1948, however, both highlighted the contradictions inherent in this strategic attempt to build both a regionally and racially integrated party and put African American civil rights on the national political agenda for the first time since Reconstruction. The meaning of race in America had, as after emancipation, once again become a visibly and narrowly political as well as a broadly cultural problem.9

Acting on the advice of administrative assistant Clark Clifford, President Truman boldly announced in his 1948 State of the Union address a then-ambitious civil rights plan. Under the assumption that Congress would pass none of his proposals, Truman called for abolishing the poll tax, making lynching a federal crime, and limiting discrimination in employment. This strategy, Clifford had argued, would gain Truman the grateful swing votes of northern blacks without losing the traditional white southern Democratic vote. Southern whites, in a virtually one-party region, after all, had nowhere else to go. Truman’s aim was to seize the liberal reform banner from former New Dealer and Roosevelt vice president Henry Wallace, who had launched his own campaign under the leftist Progressive Party. Outraged, shocked, and betrayed, however, southern Democrats quickly organized the States’ Rights Democratic Party, branded the Dixiecrats, and nominated Strom Thurmond as their presidential candidate. With the strong Republican candidate Thomas Dewey, the campaign had become a hotly contested four-way race.

Ignoring the Dixiecrats and defying any action on civil rights, Truman strategically turned his attack leftward. Wallace took a much bolder civil rights stance. His refusal to speak before segregated audiences, even in south-
ern localities where integrated meetings were illegal, generated tremendous publicity for his campaign. The president hammered Wallace not for his integrationism, however, but with a vicious red-baiting that prefigured the McCarthy era to come. As the campaign continued and northern African American voters demanded not mere proposals but concrete federal action, Truman signed executive orders preventing racial discrimination in the federal bureaucracy and the armed forces. In the end, Truman squeaked to victory over Dewey by claiming the northern black vote while holding enough support from white southerners. However reluctantly, Harry Truman had become the first civil rights president by “integrating” the Democratic Party.

But African American expectations, he and his presidential successors would discover, had a way in the postwar era of moving far beyond and outside of the narrow confines of national party control. Truman’s strategic maneuvering empowered a growing black electorate that wanted not individual political patronage but the complete recognition of all African Americans’ civil rights, and African American activism in organizations like the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund kept up the pressure on the federal government. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation continued to list the mere participation in integrated meetings as proof of communist subversion. House Un-American Activities Committee investigations as well as the general climate of anti-communist hysteria destroyed leftist initiatives in the South like “Operation Dixie,” the southern organizing campaign of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Yet black voters in the North had made the civil rights of all African Americans the primary focus of mainstream liberal efforts at reform.

As conceptions of American identity acquired increasingly global significance, cold war liberalism evolved within a context of an often too superficial federal government support for African American civil rights at home and for colonized peoples abroad. But in the early 1950s, the forced consensus of the McCarthy era temporarily suppressed the contradictions between black demands for remedial action and the explosive tensions that even limited federal gestures in the direction of expanding civil rights generated in southern whites. The uneasy peace ended abruptly in 1954 as the NAACP’s quiet legal strategy, aimed at dismantling the legal foundations of segregation, achieved its most important victory. White southerners fittingly called it Black Monday, the day the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its Brown v. Board of Education decision, which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. “We conclude,” the Court stated in clear and simple language, “that in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal . . . Any language in Plessy v. Ferguson contrary to this finding is rejected.”

But Brown, despite the 1955 Brown II decision detailing strategies for implementation, did not outline concretely how and when this desegregation of America’s public schools would be accomplished. The decision did focus national attention on the distinctive outlines of segregation in the South. The NAACP filed desegregation briefs with many school districts across the region in the year after the decision, and courageous black families prepared their children to cross the deeply material as well as psychological segregation line. Yet Brown’s uncompromisingly radical rhetoric galvanized not just civil rights supporters but also civil rights opponents, ironically reuniting many white southerners increasingly divided by class and by the growing differences between rural and suburban white southern life.

Southern whites banded together in White Citizens’ Councils and launched an organized segregationist opposition that became known as “massive resistance.” Southern state legislators threatened to shut down public school systems altogether and in some cases did. Many white parents faced with the integration of public schools formed the organizations that eventually created “white flight” schools, the segregated academies where racial separation, whatever the educational offerings, could still stand. And when federal courts, in the late 1960s, finally began to apply their remedies to segregated school systems outside the South, northern whites often resisted, minus the reconstituted “Confederate patriotism,” as massively as had white southerners. Pairing opposition to busing with accelerating rounds of urban and then suburban flight and resettlement, white Americans have succeeded in maintaining segregation in public education even as class sizes rise, physical plants crumble, and the skill levels of graduating students fall. Today, over four decades after Brown, American public schools stand more segregated by race and divided by class than at any time in our history.

White Americans, however, proved much less ambivalent about protecting black lives than about providing equal education. Events surrounding the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till were more important than Brown in
prefiguring what would be the successes of the growing civil rights movement and the not very distant destruction of the peculiarly southern culture of segregation. With the Till case, African Americans did not just write a counternarrative. Building what activists had learned in cases like the lynching of Claude Neal and making use of the new technology of television, they staged a counter-spectacle in a new, national, real time.

A fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago, Emmett Till had been sent to LeFlore County, Mississippi, by his mother, Mamie Bradley, to spend a summer vacation with his southern relatives. With adolescent bragging and bravado, he often told his Mississippi cousins and friends that a young white woman in a photograph he carried was his girlfriend. On August 24, less than two weeks after he had arrived, Till and his cousins drove from his uncle’s house in the country the three miles into the tiny town of Money. Not to be outdone by his boasts that evening, the local boys bet Till would not pursue a southern white woman. Accepting the challenge, Till entered that muddled middle, a small white-owned store that catered mostly to the local black grocery trade. He then made some move—whether a comment or a whistle or just a look witnesses disagree—in the direction of twenty-one-year-old Carolyn Bryant, who with her sister-in-law Juanita Milam was minding the store for her husband Roy Bryant. The northern boy and his southern friends, a cousin later decided, were speaking in different tongues, and Till obviously took realistically a verbal jousting that for them was a language game. The Chicago boy never understood the line he had crossed or the danger he was in, a point that was confirmed by as unlikely a source as Till’s murderers, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, who confessed to a reporter for four thousand dollars long after they had been acquitted at their local trial.12

But what made Till more than just another black man murdered was the way his mother made the lynching into a different kind of spectacle through her choreography of the Chicago funeral. By publicly naming the white men who had come to his home and taken the boy, Mose Wright, Till’s great-uncle, bravely opened the possibility of bringing the boy’s murderers to court. But the national publicity began with Till’s funeral, which was held outside the South and before the trial. Reporters not just from the newspapers but from the increasingly important national television networks poured into Chicago. And in a black northern neighborhood, in a black church, a black mother wrote her own ritual in answer to the white southern lynching story. Mamie Bradley insisted on an open-casket funeral.

“so the world can see what they did to my boy.” Television cameras captured the mass of black mourners who filed with the deliberate slowness of a dirge past Till’s corpse to emerge hysterical or grimly determined on the other side. To make sure that no one missed the spectacle, Mamie Bradley allowed Jet magazine to publish a closeup of her boy’s face. The image depicted a misshapen head all the more horrible for the coroner’s efforts to make the mangled corpse back into the boy.13

The Till spectacle, then, demonstrated that white southern violence had not just a black and white southern but a black and white national audience as well. Television crossed the lines of region as well as race much more immediately than did publications like the NAACP’s 1934 Neal report. The local trial took place in a national context colored by that public counter-performance of Till’s funeral. Bradley had drawn and enacted her own line across both space and time, suggesting that to view the tortured head that marked this boundary and to remain unchanged was to leave morality behind.

Americans across the nation thus watched the trial haunted by the horror of the dead boy’s face. They saw the bragging and confident defendants, the segregated courtroom, and the all-white male jury. They heard U.S. Representative Charles Diggs of Michigan describe his humiliating treatment at the courthouse as a local judge called him “boy” and roped him off with the black reporters, and they watched this scene repeat itself as white officials also mistreated Till’s mother. Americans with television witnessed reporters at the scene describe how the defense attorney in closing had admonished the jury: “every last Anglo-Saxon one of you has the courage to free these men.” And this national audience also watched the acquitted murderers kiss their wives surrounded by the joyous celebration of other whites attending the trial. Americans saw a local white southern performance, naked and stripped of the niceties of New South boosterism, bare of the inflections so often spun by southern politicians and businessmen for that larger national audience.14

For television not only crossed but also marked that regional divide. Fusing graphically brutal spectacle and story in a much more instantaneous and much less mediated way than film, television made visible civil rights activists’ sense of the difference between the South and the rest of the nation. As a result, television shaped a new collective out of many of its viewers. “Nonsouthern” whites were Americans who would not tolerate such violence, who understood the deadly irony that such barbarity could
never protect "civilization." Unlike the Brown decision, the Till lynching divided rather than united southern whites, splitting apart those who were invested morally and practically in national opinion from those who were not.

To move inside the South and still direct the drama, however, African Americans would have to find a way besides waiting for a lynching to initiate their counter-performance. They needed a less deadly method of refusing to play the blackface roles assigned to them but a strategy that would still make visible the threat that lurked for those who refused. In Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 and 1956, when the tired Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat and local African Americans started the bus boycott that the then twenty-six-year-old Martin Luther King would come to lead, southern blacks would learn these lessons too.

The outlines of the movement African Americans created to win their civil rights in the South have become familiar, even legendary, to many Americans now. But we have too often ignored the deep ways in which southern blacks matched their strategies to the publicly and performative nature of the southern culture of segregation. Fusing nonviolence and mass action, civil rights activists in the South rewrote the drama of racial meaning. In marches, boycotts, and sit-ins, on picket lines, freedom rides, and voter registration lines, southern blacks和平地, lovingly refused to play their parts as scripted in the play of segregation. And they made this stand in defiance of the white violence that always, whether visibly or not, compelled the performance. Adept at wearing masks, African Americans picked up that of the stoic and performed their control in an act of willed passivity that paradoxically belied whites' assumptions of their "natural" deference. Blending Gandhian philosophy with an indigenous black tradition rooted in earlier protests like the 1917 Silent Protest Parade, this nonviolence in turn pushed the system of segregation to its inevitably brutal conclusion. As the Till murder demonstrated, making white racial violence graphically visible tended to redivide southern whites even as civil rights activism united them. And television and newspapers publicized the brutality nationally, circulating white violence representationally in a way that limited white southerners' ability to employ the violence physically. Media coverage, immediate and moving, galvanized both the attention and the support from outside the region that offered civil rights workers some small measure of protection.

African Americans joined in protest by too few white liberals completed the task of making a spectacle of not just lynching but the general, pervasively violent context of segregation. They created a different unity, a liberal, cross-racial coalition of Americans outraged by such acts. Coloring in the nightmares that underlay southern white fantasies, activists moved in a way that both paralleled in its use of representations of violence and yet opposed in its peacefulness the spectacle white southerners had once made of lynching. Civil rights workers filled the romanticized landscapes of postwar America's small towns and small cities with the bodies of black adults and children, exposing the absurdity of a white superiority that used billy clubs, bats, dogs, and firehoses to enforce a supposedly natural racial order. The civil rights movement transformed the blackface performance of black inferiority into a ritualized enactment of black subjectivity and moral supremacy.

African Americans had finally found a way to counter the black mammy and the black whore, the Uncle Remus and the rapist, with more modern and more persuasive images: white customers pouring ketchup and abuse on black college students at lunch counters, police dogs biting black children in public parks, and firehose torrents rolling black bodies down city sidewalks. At times, the price was beyond measure—perhaps most horrifyingly when Sunday school students in Birmingham, Alabama, were blown to bits in their church instead of being saved. But the violence, the loss of life, had always been there. In the fight against lynching, civil rights activists had simply learned to make the deaths count for their integrationist politics. In Montgomery, Birmingham, Albany, and Selma, white southerners, the new play insisted, were responsible for this barbarity and mayhem. And for once, in a televised, cold war American context, southern blacks found a sizable, integrated, and concerned national and international audience.

Between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s, then, the civil rights movement destroyed the southern culture of segregation by staging mass actions that compelled federal government enforcement of the Reconstruction amendments at last. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in all arenas of southern public and commercial life, and across the region the signs "For Colored" and "For White" came down. The Voting Rights Act of
peoples of color complicated conceptions of blackness. Less starkly oppressive, less grounded in a public performance of positioning, and less violent, the American racial order operated for the most part outside legal groundings and direct government backing, dividing and segregating people in much more subtle ways. In the North, the movement's performative tactics found no clear drama to subvert, no transparently white spaces to seize, and no embodiments of evil like Bull Connor to attack.

Economic inequality, not a more starkly material violence, now grounds racial meaning in both the North and the South. Within that southern culture of segregation, activists had attacked that vulnerable muddled middle, that space of consumption where making race could and sometimes did contradict making money. But outside the region, the dynamic of economic development, late twentieth-century capitalism, produced racial inequality in a complex relation to class inequality. To challenge the American racial problem would require more than Myrdal's change of white heart. Activists would have to attack a much more powerful narrative than even the white southern drama of segregation. The violence that they would have to stage would not be the violence of segregation that grounded southern whiteness but the violence of expropriated labor and class inequality that grounded American capitalism.

Before white Americans can even begin to uncover the deep links between class exploitation, disempowerment, and racial privilege, however, they would have to face the reality of "the South" they have all lived in. All of us, white and black, northern and southern, would have to think of "the South," the "race problem," and the "burden of history," not as the weight of some other, of a dark and distant place and time, but as a burden that we still carry and as a history that we have not agreed to face or acknowledge as a source of our subjectivities. We would have to remember that "the South," the romance, the place of not now, the space of safety and mooring for whatever we imagine we have lost, lies not south of anywhere but inside us. We would have to look clear-eyed and straight at "the South" we all live in, that space of "safety" and also always of horror. We would have to pull apart the interwoven ways in which "the South" as metaphor founds much of late twentieth-century "knowing," from nonsouthern white self-righteousness to the "morality" of the American state to even a growing black middle class's nostalgia for segregation. We would have to see "the South" we all live in.
We would have to place the region back within instead of against history. We would have to see ourselves.16

This book revisits segregation, then, not to spin the common fantasy of safety in “purity” but to reimagine integration. I want to recapture the civil rights movement’s fervor and commitment and faith in humanity’s ability to effect progressive change. I want to replace that old and facile liberal lie, that integration will be easy once the “southern problem” is fixed because only they—ironically African Americans are once again paired here with white southerners—will have to change. Assuming African Americans want to or will easily become (white) Americans is not what I mean by integration. As Ralph Ellison reminds us, it is always “a question of who shall determine the direction of events.” A newly imagined integration would incorporate black autonomy, authority, and subjectivity, even as it enlarges the spaces and possibilities of both American and African American identities. A newly imagined integration would not tolerate economic, gender, or sexual inequality. But now is the time to act because “the South we all live in,” like everything else in this postmodern age, has begun to fragment. A newly imagined integration might even halt this transformation of “the South” into “the City” and the related new cycle of race baiting, demonization, and dehumanization of the poor African Americans who live there. The space of racial excess, of racial knowing, will not just disappear, and in our time we are reconstituting this “South” all over America as our urban core becomes a new space of longing and blackface and horror.

In their culture of segregation, white southerners, despite their best and most violent efforts to separate and to contain southern blacks, recognized at some unconscious level and deeply feared an interdependence, a grayness, an area of “racial” sameness. And these commonalities between black and white southerners grew out of, were forged within, their common history. We need to remember that difference is created within, not before, our communities; that difference is created within, and not before, our histories; that difference is created within, and not before, ourselves. To borrow—that perhaps quintessential American cultural move—a phrase from James Baldwin, “there isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness.”17

Would America be American without its white people? No. It would be something better, the fulfillment of what we postpone by calling a dream.

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