

“In Black and White” (1992)¹

Edward Ayers

EVERY HUMAN EMOTION became entangled in Southern race relations. Booker T. Washington claimed to find “at least one white man who believed implicitly in one Negro, and one Negro who believed implicitly in one white man” wherever he traveled in the South. Yet even when human sympathy and friendship drew people together, the rituals of Southern race relations constrained and distorted the feelings. “There was a part of me in which it did not matter at all that they were black,” Harry Crews remembered of his childhood friends, “but there was another part of me in which it had to matter because it mattered to the world I lived in. “ When Crews referred to a respected black man as “Mr. Jones,” Crews’s aunt quickly corrected him. “No, son. Robert Jones is a nigger. You don’t say ‘mister’ when you speak of a nigger. You don’t say ‘Mr. Jones,’ you say ‘nigger Jones.’” Children soon learned the lesson.

White rituals of black naming conveyed various shades of deference, condescension, affection, and respect, tried to maintain the illusion of personal relationships where none existed. Blacks called white men they did not know “mister,” “cap’n,” or “boss.” Acquainted black men attached “Mr.” to a white man’s first name; the first name of white women was accompanied by “Miss.” Whites never addressed black men they did not know as “mister,” but rather as “boy,” “Jack,” or “George”; black women were never called “Mrs.,” but rather “aunt” or their first name. A black person, regardless of age or gender, was referred to in white newspaper accounts as simply a “negro,” as in “two men and two women were killed, and four Negroes.” According to custom, the two races did not shake hands, walk together, or fraternize in public. Black men removed their hats in public places reserved for whites, while whites did not remove their hats even in black homes. Whites “even segregated days of the week,” Mamie Garvin Fields recalled of growing up in South Carolina. White people stayed away from town on Saturday afternoons, setting aside that time for blacks from the countryside to shop and meet. “Those white folks didn’t want you to come to town in the weekday at all....Really, certain whites didn’t like to think you had leisure to do anything but pick cotton and work in the field.”

Some blacks, especially in towns and cities, refused to follow the etiquette. A Louisiana newspaper complained that “the younger generation of negro bucks and wenches have lost that wholesome respect for the white man, without which two races, the one inferior, cannot live in peace and harmony together. Is it not every day manifest when your house-girl informs you that Miss Johnson (your cook) says dinner is ready; that Mr. Jones (your butler) will hitch up the buggy in a minute as he is busy talking to a lady (your washerwoman) at the gate. If you address one of the younger generation with the ‘uncle’ or ‘auntie’ the older ones delighted in the chances you will hear ‘I aint yah uncle, doggone you.’” According to another white man’s diary, the older generation was learning from the young. “We have no servant yet—the colored race are getting most unreliable—freedom has ruined them in every way—only the old ones can be relied on and there is a great demand for them and it makes them uppish and they leave you now without a

¹ Edward Ayers, “In Black and White,” Ch. 6 from *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 132-159.

moment's warning—you never know whether your cook will [be] at your house next morning or not." One South Carolina white woman recorded a revealing line she overheard as a black group passed on the street: "Well, I has no boss; I is *my own darlin' boss!*"

On the other hand, many whites and blacks managed to create humane relationships even in the face of the general distrust and dislike. Kindness toward elderly or worthy blacks was taken as a symbol of good character among whites. At the Belk store in Monroe, North Carolina, one of the jobs of a young clerk named John Parker was to help women coming into the store. One day, William Henry Belk recalled, when "an old colored woman came along and stopped in front of the store, John went out and helped her out of her buggy and held the umbrella over her until she got out of the rain. It was a nice thing to do, and it was just like John to do a thing like that." Another clerk "made some remark about it—not bad, but in a sort of teasing way." Belk's brother, the boss, heard the comment "and he didn't like it. He spoke up right quick. He knew that John wanted to be a lawyer when he grew up. 'Don't let him tease you, John,'" the employer said. "'When he's still clerking you'll be on the Supreme Court, son, and I mean the United States Supreme Court.'"

Stories of white aid to blacks did not happen only in white folklore. Charley White recalled one white man with real affection. White's mother, left alone with three children when abandoned by her husband, supported the family through farm labor, midwifery, and washing. Moving from one farm to the next, they eventually settled on the farm of Prayter Windham. Charley was sick the day they arrived, and Windham brought his young daughter with him. "This is my daughter Tish," the landlord said. "We heard you had a sick boy, and Mrs. Windham sent him this chicken broth." When Charley recovered, Windham recognized that the boy was interested in learning about farming "and he took to teaching me the right way to do things....And seemed like he'd be as tickled as me when I could do it right." When Windham went out on circuit with the court, he put Charley, then about seventeen years old, in the room next to his wife and ten-year-old daughter. A gun rested under his bed. "Nothing ever happened," White recalled, "But if somebody had tried to come in there I'd a shot him, sure as I lived." Although White's mother soon died and the youngster went to live with relatives, when he first got married White returned to Windham's farm to start out.'

Rural race relations often seemed marked by such personal ties, patronizing as well as helpful. The diary of Clive Metcalfe, a young white planter surrounded almost entirely by black people in the Delta region of Mississippi in the 1890s, has about it much of the air of the antebellum plantation. "The negroes worry one's life out of them. It is the devil to be situated in the capacity of having anything to do with such people." Metcalfe took upon himself much of the authority of the planter under slavery. "Caught a negro girl stealing clothes from one of my darkeys, and I gave her a good whipping," he wrote in 1890. A few weeks later, he blandly noted that he went coon hunting, "Did not see a coon. Came home and whipped Harrison for feeding the dogs on the gallery." Like the planters of the Old South, Metcalfe mixed his violence with what he took to be paternalistic concern. Metcalfe intervened in a domestic fight. "Came home last night, found that Powell had given his wife a good whipping. Had to go over and settle it for them." On the Fourth of July the next year the planter and a friend "gave the darkies a dinner in the Cold Springs yard, which went off very nicely. There was quite four hundred darkies there."

Another holiday showed the continuity that marked some facets of race relations. For generations, black Southerners had celebrated Christmas as a time of white gift-giving and ritualized freedom. While the practice faded in the highly mobile New South, vestiges of the tradition remained on some plantations. Clive Metcalfe dreaded the season, partly because black sharecroppers moved from one farm to another then (“like a lot of sheep,” he spat), and partly because black folk on his place always seemed to be “begging a little something for Xmas. It is just awfull to be bothered to death by the black faces from morning until night.” The next year, in a softer mood, Metcalfe noted that “the darkies are shooting Xmas guns end having lots of fun.” Gifts flowed in the other direction as well: a white widow from Mississippi noted in her diary in 1890 that “our colored tenants Bob Rollins and Sam Houston each sent us this evening a nice piece of fresh pork.” William Pickens, who grew up in Pendleton, South Carolina, recalled that “the black folks used to say that ‘there is no law for Christmas.’ And so the young Negro men, in a good-natured spree, would catch the lone policeman, who was always more a joke than a terror, and lock him in the calaboose to stay a part of Christmas Day, while one of the black men with star and club would strut about the town and play officer.” Pickens, himself black, thought that this carnival-like inversion of the early 1890s would in 1911, when he wrote, “summon the militia from the four quarters of almost any state and be heralded an ugly insurrection.”

Black people turned to whites when they felt they had no other choice. Adelaide Brown, a black woman living in Savannah, wrote to Mary Camak asking for help as Christmas approached in 1896. “Miss Mary My Dear friend,” she began, “I am out on the waves of the world by my self no body to help me at all. Joe has quit me and took up with another woman compleat so I thought I would write you to let you know my troubles. Sometimes I field like I haven got a friend on earth.” Brown had been ill “for quite a while” and was still sick. “The white people who I am working with has been very kind to me, but I have got to the place wherein I can hardly go or come when I was throude out of doors by Joe these white people taken me in they help me to meet my Groses bill and I tryes to meet my house rent the best I can.” Brown wanted to borrow eight or ten dollars. “I make \$14 dolars a month if I live...I will...surely pay you back soon.” Brown was writing to Camak “because you is able if you only will. you all are the only people I have. My mother is dead and if she was living she woulden be able to do this favor.” Remember, Brown closed, “you are lendeding to the Lord.”

Few laws circumscribed day-to-day rural race relations. Rural roads, country stores, and cotton gins were not segregated; hunters and fishermen respected rules of fair play, regardless of race. Corn shuckings saw black and white men working around the same fire and black and white women cooking over the same food, though members of the two races went to separate tables when it came time to eat. In the diary of Nannie Stillwell Jackson, a white Arkansas woman of moderate means, it is difficult to determine whether the people she describes are white or black. Jackson tells, with affection and gratitude, of the visits and gifts black friends brought her during an illness. She trades with her black neighbors, writes and receives letters for them, sews for them; a black midwife tends to her baby. The best of Southern race relations appeared in such scenes, where individuals developed personal respect for one another beyond the reach of hateful laws. The conditions of the New South, though, often worked against people of good will, whatever their race.

In a quest to channel the relations between the races, white Southerners enacted one law after another to proscribe contact among blacks and whites. Some things about the relations between the races had been established quickly after emancipation. Schools, poor houses, orphanages, and hospitals, founded to help people who had once been slaves, were usually separated by race at their inception. Cities segregated cemeteries and parks; counties segregated court houses. Churches quickly broke into different congregations for blacks and whites. Hotels served one race only; blacks could see plays only from the balcony or separate seats; restaurants served one race or served them in different rooms or from separate windows. In 1885, a Memphis newspaper described how thoroughly the races were separated: “The colored people make no effort to obtrude themselves upon the whites in the public schools, their churches, their fairs, their Sunday-schools, their picnics, their social parties, hotels or banquets. They prefer their own preachers, teachers, schools, picnics, hotels and social gatherings.” In the countryside as well as in town, blacks and whites associated with members of their own race except in those situations when interracial association could not be avoided: work, commerce, politics, travel.

Even if the general boundaries of race relations had been drawn early on, though, many decisions had yet to be made by the 1880s. The notion of a completely circumscribed world of white and black had not yet become entrenched; the use of the word “segregation” to describe systematic racial separation did not begin until the early twentieth century. Although most whites seem to have welcomed segregation in general, others saw no need to complicate the business of everyday life with additional distinctions between the races, no need to antagonize friendly and respectable blacks, no need to spend money on separate facilities, no need to risk bringing down Northern interference. Although many blacks fought against the new laws with boycotts, lawsuits, and formal complaints, others saw no use in fighting the whites who had all the power on their side, no use in antagonizing white benefactors or white enemies, no use in going places they were not welcome. The segregation begun in the decade following the end of the Civil War did not spread inexorably and evenly across the face of the South. The 1880s saw much uncertainty and much bargaining, many forays and retreats.

Most of the debates about race relations focused on the railroads of the New South. While some blacks resisted their exclusion from white-owned hotels and restaurants, they could usually find, and often preferred, accommodations in black-run businesses. Travel was a different story, for members of both races had no choice but to use the same railroads. As the number of railroads proliferated in the 1880s, as the number of stations quickly mounted, as dozens of counties got on a line for the first time, as previously isolated areas found themselves connected to towns and cities with different kinds of black people and different kinds of race relations, segregation became a matter of statewide attention. Prior to the eighties, localities could strike their own compromises in race relations, try their own experiments, tolerate their own ambiguities. Tough decisions forced themselves on the state legislatures of the South after the railroads came. The result was the first wave of segregation laws that affected virtually the entire South in anything like a uniform way, as nine Southern states enacted railroad segregation laws in the years between 1887 and 1891.

By all accounts, the railroads of the 1880s were contested terrain. Trains ran cars of two classes: in the first-class car rode women and men who did not use tobacco, while in the second-class car rode men who chewed or smoked, men unaccompanied by women, and people who

could not afford a first-class ticket. To travel in the second-class car was to travel with people, overwhelmingly men, who behaved very differently from those in the car ahead. The floors were thick with spit and tobacco juice, the air thick with smoke and vulgarities. The second-class car had hard seats, low ceilings, and no water; frequently, it was merely a part of the baggage car set off by a partition. The second-class car ran right behind the engine, and was often invaded by smoke and soot. The cars saw more crowding of strangers than in any other place in the New South. "The cars were jammed, all the way over here, with the dirtiest, nastiest set I ever rode with," a Louisiana man complained about a trip to Texas.

A first-class, or parlor, car contained a diverse group of travelers, but their behavior tended to be more genteel than those in the smoking car. "It was the ordinary car of a Southern railroad," Ellen Glasgow wrote, with "the usual examples of Southern passengers. Across the aisle a slender mother was holding a crying baby, two small children huddling beside her." "A mulatto of the new era" sat nearby, while "further off there were several men returning from business trips, and across from them sat a pretty, girl, asleep, her hand resting on a gilded cage containing a startled canary. At intervals she was aroused by the flitting figure of a small boy on the way to the cooler of iced water. From the rear of the car came the amiable drawl of the conductor as he discussed the affairs of the State with a local drummer, whose feet rested upon a square leather case." The seats were covered with soft plush fabric, the floor covered with carpet.

Strangely enough, the scenes of racial contention and conflict on the trains focused on the placid first-class cars rather than on the boisterous cars ahead. Sutton Griggs, a black Virginia novelist, gave a compelling account of the random violence that hovered around blacks who rode in the parlor cars. A young black man on his way to Louisiana to become president of a small black college had traveled all the way from Richmond without incident. Absorbed in a newspaper as the car crossed the line into Louisiana, he did not notice the car gradually filling at each stop. "A white lady entered, and not at once seeing a vacant seat, paused a few seconds to look about for one. She soon espied an unoccupied seat. She proceeded to it, but her slight difficulty had been noted by the white passengers." Before the black man knew what was happening, he found himself surrounded by a group of angry whites. "'Get out of this coach. We don't allow niggers in first-class coaches.'" The black passenger resisted moving, only to be thrown off the train altogether. "Covered from head to foot with red clay, the president-elect of Cadeville College walked down to the next station, two miles away."

This sort of clash was hardly confined to fiction. Andrew Springs, a young black man on the way from North Carolina to Fisk University in Nashville in 1891, told a friend back home about his experiences. "I came very near being locked up by the police at Chattanooga. I wanted some water. I went in to the White Waiting [room] and got it as they didn't have any for Cuffy to drink. Just time I got the water here come the police just like I were killing some one and said You get out of here you black rascal put that cup down. I got a notion to knock your head off." As so often happened, the black man refused to accept such treatment without protest. "I told him I were no rascal neither were I black. I were very near as white as he was. Great Scott he started for me....He didn't strike tho, but had me started to the lock up." Springs, like many blacks harassed on the railroad, used the law to stop his persecution. "I told him I had my ticket and it was the duty of the R.R. Co. to furnish water for both white [and] black." The officer let him go.

The young man then took the dangerous, and atypical, step of threatening the officer: “I told him if ever I catch him in North Carolina I would fix him.”

Aggressive single young men were not the only ones who threatened, intentionally and unintentionally, the tenuous racial situation on the railroad. In 1889, Emanuel Love, a leader of the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, was asked by an agent of the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railroad to travel over the road to a convention in Indianapolis, assuring Love that he and his entourage could have first-class accommodations the entire day. Love assumed the delegation would have a car to themselves so they would not antagonize white first-class passengers who might be on board. As the train pulled out and the pastor walked through the car greeting the other delegates, he soon noticed that there were indeed whites in the first-class car, and they began to whisper among themselves and to the white conductor. A black railway workman warned the delegation that trouble was ahead, but there was little they could do; someone had already telegraphed news of the black effrontery to the next stop. There, at least fifty white men, carrying pistols, clubs, and pieces of iron, pushed their way into the car and assaulted the “well dressed” delegates. Some sought to defend themselves, while most fled. One who could do neither was Mrs. Janie Garnet, a graduate of Atlanta University and a school teacher, who screamed in fear. One of the white men put a cocked pistol to her breast and said “You G-d d——d heffer, if you don’t hush your mouth and get out of here, I will blow your G-d d——d brains out.” The delegation was treated for their broken bones and bruises and made their way, presumably in a separate car, to Indianapolis. Accounts of the violence directed at blacks often spoke of well-dressed clergymen and well-dressed women as the objects of white anger.

Whites also experienced racial discomfiture that did not necessarily result in violence or even overt conflict. In 1889, a Tennessee newspaper related in a light tone a story that captured some of the risks of the “parlor car.” At Nashville, “a bright, good-looking colored girl (or rather an almost white colored girl)” boarded the train. A “flashily-dressed white gentleman, usually known as the ‘car masher,’” began an elaborate flirtation with the girl, whom he assumed to be white. She “very modestly” accepted his attentions, “slightly blushing probably out of compassion for the fellow’s mistake, but which he evidently took as an indication of a surrender to his charms.” He bought his “‘lady friend’ a lunch, and the two sat for half an hour enjoying their supper *tete-a tete*,...every passenger on the train enjoying the situation. The girl was entirely innocent of any intention to entrap or deceive the fellow, but he was the victim of his own inordinate conceit and folly.” He eventually found out his mistake after she had reached her destination. “He was probably the maddest man in the State when he found it all out. He was mad at the girl, mad at the passengers and doubtless wanted to kick himself all the way home.” The account ended, significantly, with the information that “none enjoyed the episode more than the ladies on the train.”

If the situation had been reversed, if some “almost white” black man had been flirting with a white girl, deceiving her, eating with her, what then? Such a scene would have invoked the sense of pollution whites associated with blacks, no matter how clean, how well-dressed, how well-mannered they might be. As a New Orleans newspaper argued in 1890, when the state was considering the segregation of its railroad cars, “one is thrown in much closer communication in the car with one’s traveling companions than in the theatre or restaurant,” which were already

segregated. In the railroad car, the article related in suggestive language, whites and blacks would be “crowded together, squeezed close to each other in the same seats, using the same conveniences, and to all intents and purposes in social intercourse.” The lesson was clear: “A man that would be horrified at the idea of his wife or daughter seated by the side of a burly negro in the parlor of a hotel or at a restaurant cannot see her occupying a crowded seat in a car next to a negro without the same feeling of disgust.” Any man “who believes that the white race should be kept pure from African taint will vote against that commingling of the races inevitable in a ‘mixed car’ and which must have bad results.” A white woman or girl who let herself fall into easy and equal relations with a black man in such an anomalous place as the parlor car would risk her reputation.

The sexual charge that might be created among strangers temporarily placed in intimate surroundings, many whites worried, could not be tolerated in a racially integrated car. In the late nineteenth century, sexual relations did not have to end in intercourse or even physical contact to be considered intimate and dangerous to a woman’s reputation and self-respect. In fact, the history of segregation shows a clear connection to gender: the more closely linked to sexuality, the more likely was a place to be segregated. At one extreme was the private home, where the intimacies of the parlor, the dining table, and bedroom were never shared with blacks as equals; it was no accident that blacks were proscribed from entering a white home through its front door. Exclusive hotels, restaurants, and darkened theaters, which mimicked the quiet and privacy of the home, also saw virtually no racial mixing. Schools, where children of both genders associated in terms of intimacy and equality, saw early and consistent segregation. Places where people of only one gender associated with one another, though, tended to have relaxed racial barriers. The kitchen and nursery of a home, which “should” have been off-limits to blacks for white taboos to have remained consistent, in fact saw black women participating in the most private life of white families. Part of the lowered boundary, of course, grew out of the necessity whites perceived to use black labor, but blacks were permitted in the heart of the home because those rooms saw the interaction only of white women and black women. Male preserves, for their part, were often barely segregated at all: bars, race tracks, and boxing rings were notorious, and exciting, for the presence of blacks among whites. Some houses of prostitution profited directly from the sexual attraction black women held for some white men.

The railroad would not have been such a problem, then, had blacks not been seeking first-class accommodations where women as well as men traveled, where blacks appeared not as dirty workers but as well-dressed and attractive ladies and gentlemen. When the Arkansas legislature was debating the need for a separate car in 1891, some whites argued that whites should not be forced to sit next to dirty blacks; other whites argued instead that the worst blacks were those who were educated and relatively well-to-do and who insisted on imposing themselves on the white people. A young black legislator, John Gray Lucas, a recent graduate of Boston University, confronted the white lawmakers with their inconsistency: “Is it true, as charged, that we use less of soap and God’s pure water than other people....Or is it the constant growth of a more refined, intelligent, and I might say a more perfumed class, that grow more and more obnoxious as they more nearly approximate to our white friends’ habits and plane of life?”

With every year in the 1880s, more blacks fought their way to white standards of “respectability.” Black literacy, black wealth, black businesses, black higher education, and black

landowning all increased substantially. When whites discussed segregating the railroads, respectable blacks responded in fury and disbelief. “Is it not enough that the two races are hopelessly separated in nearly all the higher relations of life already?” an open letter from seven black clergymen and teachers from Orangeburg, South Carolina, asked in 1889. “Are you not content with separate places of public entertainment, separate places of public amusement, separate places of public instruction, and even separate places of public worship? Why, in the name of common sense, of common humanity, of the common high-bred sensitiveness of every decent person of color, should you wish to force further unnatural separation even upon the thoroughfares of daily travel?”

A Northern traveler in the South observed that “a few colored men are inclined to insist upon enjoying whatever right belongs to them under the law, because they believe that any concessions on the part of the black people, or surrender of their legal rights, would invite and produce new injuries and oppressions.” Educated and assertive blacks, especially those of the younger generation, chafed at every restriction against them and looked for opportunities to exercise their legal rights to attack the very assumptions and presumptions of segregation. A black Georgia newspaper reflected this aggressive mentality: “When a conductor orders a colored passenger from the first class car it’s a bluff, and if the passenger goes to the forward or smoking car, that ends it; should he refuse, it ends it also, for the trainman will reflect seriously before he lays on violent hands, for he knows that such a rash proceeding makes him amenable to the law.”

Mary Church, sixteen years old, boarded a train by herself only to be ushered to a Jim Crow car. She protested to the conductor that she had bought a first-class ticket. “‘This is first class enough for you,’ he replied sarcastically, ‘and you just stay where you are,’ with a look calculated to freeze the very marrow of my bones.” Having heard about “awful tragedies which had overtaken colored girls who had been obliged to travel alone on these cars at night,” Church decided to get off the train. The conductor refused to let her pass, wanting to know where she was going. “‘I am getting off here,’ I replied, ‘to wire my father that you are forcing me to ride all night in a Jim Crow car. He will sue the railroad for compelling his daughter who has a first class ticket to ride in a second class car.’” The conductor relented.

Blacks resorted to the law in increasing numbers in the 1880s, taking railroads and railroad employees to court to press for equal accommodations. Blacks actually won several of these cases, even in Southern courts. In 1885, for example, a black man named Murphy had bought a first-class ticket for a train from Georgia to Tennessee. His trip was uneventful until two white women boarded the train and their male companions told Murphy to go back to the smoking car. He refused, and the white men then threw Murphy into the other car. Murphy sued the railroad. The federal judge, a former United States senator, instructed the jury that precedent established in other, Northern, states had shown that under the common law railroads could segregate their cars by race, “so as to avoid complaint and friction.” The railroads forfeited that right “when the money of the white man purchases luxurious accommodations amid elegant company, and the same amount of money purchases for the black man inferior quarters in a smoking car.” The jury therefore awarded the black plaintiff damages-to be paid both by the assailants and by the railroad company whose employees “made no effort to prevent the mischief.” Another decision in the same year, this one occasioned by a suit brought by a black woman who had gotten off the train rather than be shunted into the smoking car with its

“swearing and smoking and whiskey drinking,” also ruled in favor of the black litigant. The court judged that if the railroad provided for white ladies “a car with special privileges of seclusion and other comforts, the same must be substantially furnished for colored ladies.”

These 1885 rulings reflected the growing consensus of the nation’s appellate and federal courts, Northern and Southern, that equal accommodations had to be provided for those who paid equal amounts for their tickets. Those rulings also stipulated that the railroads could provide separate accommodations for any groups of passengers, as long as the facilities were equal and as long as separation was consistently enforced and publicized before passengers boarded the train. The railroad’s case would be strengthened if it could show that separation encouraged “peace, order, convenience, and comfort,” by adjusting to dominant customs in the area through which the railroad passed. In the 1880s, black Southerners were able to use this body of law to win more equitable treatment on the railroads of the region, to force the railroads to provide them equal facilities. “There is a plain rule of justice, which ought to be recognized and enforced, viz: that every man is entitled to what he pays for,” a defender of the rights of black passengers in 1890 argued. “If there be on the part of the whites an unwillingness to occupy the same cars and to sit in the same seats with the blacks, let them be separate; only let equally good cars be provided for both, if both pay for them.” In 1887 and 1889, the new Interstate Commerce Commission ruled that trains crossing state lines had to “give one passenger as good accommodations as another for the same price, but they are not compelled to permit a passenger to take any car or any seat that may please his fancy.” The “equality of accommodations” must be “real and not delusive.” The federal government simultaneously stressed equality and sanctioned segregation, giving with one hand and taking away with the other.

In the 1880s, then, blacks confronted a dangerous and uncertain situation every time they bought a first-class ticket to ride on a Southern railroad. Each road had its own customs and policy, and the events on the train might depend on the proclivity of the conductor or, worse, the mood and make-up of the white passengers who happened to be on board. Although the courts upheld the rights of several blacks who had the means to take their cases to court, there was no telling how many blacks suffered discrimination, intimidation, and violence in the meantime. Some railroads sought to avoid the problems simply by refusing to sell blacks first-class tickets; the L & N resorted to this policy until blacks threatened to boycott, then it allowed black women to travel first class, then reversed itself again two months later when whites protested. At least one railroad in Alabama, operating in the piney woods along the coast, sought to avoid the potentially costly conflicts by running its own separate and identical car for blacks as early as 1882. “The rule is made for the protection of the blacks as much as for anything else in a part of the country in which they might be subjected to drunken men’s insults,” a Mobile paper argued.

If other railroads had followed the example of this Alabama company, rail segregation might have remained in the uncertain realm of custom and private business decisions that guided so much else in Southern race relations. Other railroads, however, especially those in parts of the South where blacks did not make up a large part of the clientele, were reluctant to go the considerable expense and trouble of running twice the number of cars. The railroads, unenthusiastic about passenger traffic in any case because, as the L and N’s president put it, “You can’t make a g—d— cent out of it,” neither wanted to police Southern race relations and then be sued for it nor to run extra cars. It was clear that white Southerners could not count

on the railroads to take matters in hand. Some whites came to blame the railroads for the problem, for it seemed to them that the corporations as usual were putting profits ahead of the welfare of the region.

The first legislative attempt at statewide segregation, in fact, began in an unlikely setting that combined black anger and white frustration at the railroads. Republicans held half the seats in Tennessee's lower house in 1881, and four of their representatives were black men determined to overturn an 1875 state law that prevented black passengers from suing discriminatory railroads. Their straightforward attempt to repeal the law failed by the narrowest of margins, however, and a bill that would have outlawed racial discrimination by the railroads never came to a vote. Another measure raced through both houses, however, and the only votes against it came from the blacks who had worked to prohibit any kind of racial distinction. The new law dictated that "All railroad companies shall furnish separate cars, or portions of cars cut off by partition walls, which all colored passengers who pay first-class rates of fare may have the privilege to enter and occupy." The separate cars or apartments had to be kept "in good repair, with the same conveniences, and subject to the same rules governing other first-class cars for preventing smoking and obscene language." If the railroad failed to enforce the law, "the company shall pay a forfeit of \$100, half to be paid to the person suing, the other half to be paid to the common school fund of the state." The next year, black legislators managed to make the punishment steeper, raising the penalty to \$300. In the next two sessions of the legislature, black representatives continued to work for the outright abolition of discrimination, not the half-hearted separate-but-equal law. Although whites may have considered the law a compromise, to militant blacks it was inadequate in theory and practice, full of danger.

Judged by what was to come, the language of this first separate-but-equal law stressed equality and put the burden on railroads who deprived passengers of services for which they had paid; most important, it did not actually require railroads to segregate their passengers, only to provide separate but equal accommodations that blacks had "the privilege to enter and occupy." Like the appellate decisions handed down in the nation's courts in these years, this law could have been construed as a victory of sorts for black passengers. "No white person shall be permitted to ride in a negro car or to insult or annoy any negro in such car," Florida's 1887 railroad segregation law announced.

The earliest railroad segregation laws, therefore, carried an ambiguous message. They took racial division and conflict for granted but placed the blame and the burden of dispelling that conflict on the railroads. Laws demanding separate cars seemed a compromise between white sensibilities and black rights, and, to whites, the only one who seemed to lose was the railroad who had to pay the cost. Mississippi's legislature of 1888 struck the same bargain, putting its first railroad segregation law in the context of an act that created a railroad commission. The focus of the language now shifted from the rights and comforts of blacks to the powers of railroad officials to make the law operate smoothly. Texas continued the trend away from an emphasis on black rights the next year in its law, when it blandly dictated that "Railroad companies shall maintain separate coaches for the white and the colored races. They shall be equal as to comfort. They shall be designated by words or letters, showing the race for whom intended." Not only could "comfort" be open to many interpretations, but the law neglected to stipulate the punishment a railroad or a conductor would suffer for failure to carry out the law.

Despite the shift in emphasis, matters still remained very much in doubt in 1890, as events in Louisiana show. When the Louisiana legislature began considering a separate car law, a New Orleans newspaper felt compelled to attack the railroads who opposed the bill. "In view of the extreme liberality in which the State has treated them, there should have been at least some concessions from the powerful corporations to the people." Blacks clearly did not see a separate car as an equitable solution to the violence they suffered on the trains, and they sought to use their considerable representation in the state legislature to stop passage of the law in Louisiana. The American Citizens' Equal Rights Association of Louisiana, a black organization, sent a memorial to the legislature protesting the law, a memorial that also bore the signatures of the state's eighteen black legislators. Working with white delegates friendly to the railroads, the black lawmakers were able to defeat the bill in the senate. As soon as their votes were no longer needed to override a veto on an unrelated bill, however, the black legislators found themselves betrayed: white delegates joined together to write a separate-car law after all.

Two blacks in New Orleans, furious at the turn of events, decided to make a test case of the Louisiana law. They sought the help of a white Northern lawyer long dedicated to black rights, Albion Tourg e, who responded enthusiastically. "Submission to such outrages," he wrote, tends "only to their multiplication and exaggeration. It is by constant resistance to oppression that the race must ultimately win equality of right." Accordingly, they enlisted a man named Homer Adolph Plessy, seven-eighths white, to board the East Louisiana Railroad and refuse to leave the white car even though officials had been notified earlier of his status as a black. He was arrested, and his case tried in Louisiana in late 1892. "The roads are not in favor of the separate car law, owing to the expense entailed," a lawyer looking into the matter reported, "but they fear to array themselves against it." It took four more years for the United States Supreme Court to hear the Plessy case, by which time segregation had been written into the laws of every Southern state except the Carolinas and Virginia. The years in between saw the political map of the South redrawn.

The timing of the first wave of segregation law is explained, then, by the growing ambition, attainments, and assertiveness of blacks, by the striking expansion and importance of the railroad system in the 1880s, by a widespread distrust and dislike for the railroad corporations, by the course of legal cases at the state and circuit level, and by the example each state set for others. Most white officials who held power in these years played their role in the creation of statewide segregation; it was the product of no particular class, of no wave of hysteria or displaced frustration, no rising tide of abstract racism, no new ideas about race. Like everything else in the New South, segregation grew out of concrete situations, out of technological, demographic, economic, and political changes that had unforeseen and often unintended social consequences.

Railroad segregation was not a throwback to old-fashioned racism; indeed, segregation became, to whites, a badge of sophisticated, modern, managed race relations. John Andrew Rice recalled an incident from his youth in South Carolina in 1892. He visited Columbia, then "an awkward overgrown village, like a country boy come to town all dressed up on a Saturday night." Despite the rawness of the state capital, "the main entrance to the town was the depot, and here was something new, something that marked the town as different from the country and the country depots at Lynchburg and Darlington and Varnville: two doors to two waiting rooms and

on these two doors arresting signs, ‘White’ and ‘Colored.’” Soon those signs would be in Lynchburg, Darlington, and Varnville as well, for state law would demand it. The railroads took a piece of the city with them wherever they went. The railroad cars and waiting rooms were marked by the same anonymity that was coming to characterize the towns and cities of the South, the same diversity within confined spaces, the same display of class by clothing and demeanor, the same crowding of men and women, the same crowding of different races. In fact, the railroads were even more “modern” than cities themselves, detached from their settings, transitory, volatile.”

Segregation laws, of course, could not contain all the conflicts generated by these new social relations. Blacks refused to be satisfied with the “compromise” of segregation, partly because its very existence was insulting and partly because of the way it was implemented. Two black men wrote a furious letter in the wake of Tennessee’s 1891 law, charging that the black “first-class” area was in fact merely separated by a partition from the smoking area of the second-class car. As a result, they and their families had to wade through the smoke, tobacco juice, and jeers of white men to get to their section. The black men boldly warned the white South that “the signs of the times unmistakably show that unless public sentiment will cry down such injustice, the future of the two races will be (let us put it mildly) anything but peaceful.” Jim Crow cars quickly became known as “universally filthy and uncomfortable,” a symbol of “indignity, disgrace, and shame.” Lawmakers and railroads merely clamped down more tightly. In Florida, for example, legislators empowered passengers to help conductors carry out their duties, codifying the sort of violence and bullying the segregation laws had been designed to stop in the first place. From Arkansas came word that municipalities, after the passage of the railroad law, began to implement racial restrictions far more than in the past.

After 1891, only Virginia and the Carolinas did not have railroad segregation laws. The same forces working in the rest of the South worked in those states as well, of course, but having failed to put railroad segregation laws on the books in the late eighties and early nineties, they found that the political events of the next few years prevented them from joining their neighboring states. It was not until the late nineties that these states could implement their version of the law, just when the other Southern states began to enact even more kinds of segregation designed to enclose yet more of the machinery of the new age.

In the same years that statewide railroad segregation peaked, the South embarked on the constitutional disfranchisement of black voters. Southern disfranchisement, scattered and isolated in Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida, appeared to be moving into the current of the national mainstream with the adoption of secret ballots in Tennessee in 1888 and 1889. In the latter year, too, North Carolina’s legislature tightened registration laws by requiring greater accuracy and detail on age, place of birth, and occupation, requirements that could restrict the vote in ways that sympathetic reformers in the North might appreciate.

The course of Southern voting restriction suddenly veered off in a uniquely Southern direction in Mississippi in 1890. For over a decade, legislators from outside Mississippi’s Black Belt had attempted to organize support for a new constitution that would give their counties a more equitable role in state affairs. Rings composed of a few white Democrats in the heavily black counties exploited the inflated representation created by their large black populations,

manipulating the votes in their counties, controlling the state government, and ignoring the needs of the majority of Mississippi whites. These despicable politicians, an editor speaking for white hill-country farmers charged, “disregarded the rights of the blacks, incurred useless and extravagant expenditures, raised the taxes, plunged the State into debt, and actually dominated the will of the white people through the instrumentality of the stolen negro vote.”

The Black Belt delegates and the state leaders they elected resisted any change throughout the 1880s, but suddenly changed their position in 1889. United States Senator James Z. George, a prominent Redeemer and leading politician of the state, predicted that the 1890 census would “show that the black population of Mississippi will exceed that of the whites [by] nearly one-half million.” Moreover, the Republicans controlled not only the White House but also both houses of Congress. The Republican ascendancy in Washington had produced “an exciting of sectional passions and sectional prejudices.” With “all the departments of the government in unfriendly hands,” George warned, the “check on bad legislation” offered in the past by a Democratic-controlled House had disappeared. It seemed “almost certain” that the Republican majority would “pass a law taking the federal elections from the control of the state.”

Recent events at home showed just how volatile the situation had in fact become. In Mississippi in 1889 and 1890 the Republicans became emboldened by the state of affairs in Washington. With firm control of the federal government, the Republicans prepared to contest three of Mississippi’s seven recent congressional elections. Blacks in fusion arrangements demanded a greater share of the offices. Some blacks even refused to pay their taxes until guaranteed their right to vote. Moreover, the Republican party established a newspaper in Jackson and applauded as Mississippi Republicans who had kept the faith saw their loyalty rewarded by appointments to desirable federal posts. Forty Republicans, including thirty-two blacks, took federal civil service examinations for positions ranging from copyist to meteorological clerk. A convention of Mississippi blacks offered a state fusion ticket with the Democrats; when they were denied, they nominated candidates for all state offices, the first time the state Republican party had run a complete ticket since Redemption. Black leaders from forty counties met in 1889, in what some whites feared as the “largest colored convention” ever held in Mississippi, to denounce the “violent and criminal suppression of the black vote.” The convention called for federal intervention to “break up lawlessness and ballot-box stuffing.” Clearly, the political situation in Mississippi was anything but settled.

The prospect facing the Democrats was one of perpetual turmoil, violence, dispute, factionalism, and growing opposition if they could not find some way to purge the black vote without bringing down on themselves the Republican controlled power of the federal government. Many white Mississippians had grown weary of the constant fraud and violence they used to check black aspiration. “The old men of the present generation can’t afford to die and leave the election to their children and grandchildren, with shot guns in their hands, a lie in their mouths and perjury on their lips in order to defeat the negroes,” one Mississippian passionately argued. “There must be devised some legal defensible substitute for the abhorrent and evil methods on which white supremacy lies,” another paper agreed. A constitutional convention could break this cycle by doing away with the need for force altogether.

Despite widespread disgust with the current state of Mississippi politics, advocates of a convention barely won in the legislature of 1890. A third of the members of both houses were

opposed to the convention, and then only 15 percent of the eligible electorate bothered to show up to vote for delegates—the smallest turnout for a Mississippi statewide election since the Civil War. The object of overt threats, most local Republican organizations did not put candidates in the field; one man brave enough to canvass his district as a Republican candidate was assassinated. Of the 134 delegates, all but four were Democrats; the one Republican was the only black man at the convention. Despite the apparent Democratic unity, delegates from the Black Belt fought against delegates from the white districts on almost every issue.

It soon became clear that no one had a workable idea of how to disfranchise blacks without either disfranchising whites in the process or obviously violating the Fifteenth Amendment and losing federal representation. Delegates from white counties wanted no educational or property requirements, while black-county delegates favored such requirements. “Impose a property test, weigh true manhood against dirty dollars, and for the black problem you will have a white one which will revolutionize the state,” ran one warning. An educational or literacy test was no more acceptable to poorer whites. The Black Belt delegates, rich and educated, looked on the compromises they had to make with disgust. “To avoid the disfranchisement of a lot of white ingoramuses we can’t have an educational qualification,” one Black Belt judge moaned, “and to pander to the prejudices of those who have no property we cannot have a property qualification.”

Ironically, the property and educational requirements won the endorsement of the sole black delegate to the convention, Isaiah T. Montgomery. Montgomery, the former slave of Jefferson Davis’s brother, had become a well-to-do planter after the war and founded the all-black town of Mound Bayou. Montgomery sought to deflect the pain inflicted by the convention away from at least some blacks by calling for strict adherence to an educational or property qualification. Political conflict and bloodshed could be reduced, he hoped, even as some educated and propertied blacks—up to a third of all black voters—would be able to vote and exert some political influence. As black progress continued, Montgomery felt sure, an increasing percentage of Mississippi blacks would win the right to cast a ballot. “I have stood by, consenting and assisting to strike down the rights and liberties of 123,000 free men,” Montgomery told the convention. “It is a fearful sacrifice laid upon the burning altar of liberty. Many of these men I know personally; their hearts are true as steel.” Montgomery wanted to tell these men “that the sacrifice has been made to restore confidence, the great missing link between the races; to restore honesty and purity to the ballot box and to confer the boon of political liberty upon the Commonwealth of Mississippi.” Whites, Montgomery insisted, must repay black acquiescence by working to settle racial problems “upon the enduring basis of Truth, Justice and Equality.” The disfranchisement law promised safety if it promised nothing else: “It is the ship. All else is an open, raging, tempestuous sea.”

The bill was an unsound ship, however, its timbers rotten and its sails poorly patched. The thirty-five-member committee on the franchise listened to the ideas of each of its members and then spent weeks assembling those ideas into an acceptable plan. The white counties were granted a majority in the house while the black counties controlled the senate. As for the franchise itself, the convention decided to erect a series of supposedly color-blind obstacles designed to let white voters pass while stopping blacks. Voters had to be registered by state-appointed officers (so that blacks could not use local or federal power to appoint black or

Republican registrars), and only registered voters could hold any office. A potential voter had to prove he had lived in the state for at least two years and at least one year in his election district—a direct result of “the disposition of young negroes...to change their homes or precincts every year.” A man presenting himself to vote could not have been convicted of any of a certain range of stereotypically “negro” crimes; arson, bigamy, and petty theft precluded a man from voting, but not murder, rape, or grand larceny, for blacks were supposedly “given rather to furtive offenses than to the robust crimes of the whites.” He also had to be on record as having paid all taxes, including a poll tax of two dollars, for the last two years. Each of these provisions, Mississippians knew from the experience of other states, Southern and otherwise, would remove an appreciable number of black voters.

The convention was not satisfied, though, until it had tacked on one final and novel provision: the so-called understanding clause. An aspiring voter had either to be able to read any section of the state constitution or to understand that section when it was read to him “or give a reasonable interpretation thereof.” The idea, of course, was that illiterate whites could understand the constitution to the satisfaction of the white registrar while even a literate black man would find it difficult to persuade the official of his understanding. Even illiterate whites supposedly possessed “the aptitude of free government” as an automatic product of their racial heritage, while “if every negro in Mississippi was a graduate of Harvard, and had been elected as class orator...he would not be as well fitted to exercise the right of suffrage as the Anglo-Saxon farm laborer.”

To their credit, many white Mississippians rejected such rationalizations as the nonsense they were. Only one newspaper in the entire state endorsed the understanding clause before its passage, and that was the newspaper that enjoyed the printing patronage of the convention. More common was this sort of denunciation: “It is evident that the clamor of demagogueism is riding the convention with whip and spur,” the *Raymond Gazette* fumed. “The people of Mississippi who are sick and tired of ballot box frauds, perjury and all their attendant demoralization, and the people of the entire nation, are looking on and expecting something higher and more manly than this from a Convention of Mississippi’s picked statesmen.” Senator George, who entered the convention with the reputation of a bold statesman, left it with his reputation tarnished. The widespread sense was, as a Jackson paper put it, that “time and experience are likely to prove that the opponents of the calling of a Constitutional Convention were wiser than its advocates believed.” “Every State suffers more or less from corrupt practices at elections,” one paper bitterly observed, “but it was reserved for the State of Mississippi to make its very Constitution the instrument and shield of fraud.”

But it was too late to turn back. The convention decided it would be “unnecessary and inexpedient” to allow Mississippi’s voters to decide whether they wanted to live under such a constitution. Delegates dared not risk a vote once they saw what kind of popular reception greeted the new document. Mississippi’s Democratic papers, full of ridicule and disgust during the convention, fell into line as soon as the work had been done. It was too early to tell if the constitution’s provisions would be adequate to control the opposition vote, so it was better to be quiet until the 1890 elections had passed, until the state and federal courts had ruled on the legality of the convention’s work, until other Southern states had run the same gauntlet. Too much remained unsettled for whites to admit they disagreed.

A leading black North Carolina politician, George Henry White, thought the “best way to solve what is now regarded as the race problem” was to be attained through “a gradual thinning out” of the black population “to relieve the overcrowded agricultural communities, where the supply is far in advance of the demand for labor.” A far more vehement statement of the same general principle came from the pen of David Schenck, who confided to his diary that “Negro immigration somewhere, is the absorbing topic of the day. How to get rid of this lazy, thieving, detestable race is the problem every thinking man in the South is endeavoring to solve.” Nine out of ten white North Carolinians, he thought, “rejoice at the movement and look upon it as the work of Divine Providence who is putting it in the heart of Negroes to leave and thus solve the great race problem in the States.” Schenck was convinced that most black emigrants would find their way to Mexico.

A townsman such as Schenck might be able to enjoy such fantasies, but the planters and other employers of black labor watched the black exodus with considerable misgivings. They did not mind too much when a few isolated families left, but the planters became worried when hundreds and even thousands of able bodied and strong-willed workers abandoned their counties. Some planters might try persuasion or trickery. “The general and George both much exercised about the darkies leaving this section,” John B. MacRae of Jackson, North Carolina, observed in his diary in 1890, “and think they can prevent it by using the nigger preacher Anderson Boone, or rather George is inclined to think so.” We do not know whether Boone was able to exert much influence on his fellow blacks, but it does appear that black ministers, politicians, and businessmen—for their own reasons—did often try to talk their parishioners, constituents, and customers out of leaving.

Black leaders who attempted such persuasion worked not only against the ambition and hopefulness of rural blacks but also against the efforts of labor agents. A North Carolina newspaper complained in 1892 that hundreds of these agents combed the South Atlantic states, persuading thousands of workers to leave for jobs elsewhere. Some of these recruiters worked for railroads, large planters, or labor agencies that specialized in moving workers long distances. The letterhead of J. P. Justis’s Employment and Labor Agency of Richmond, for example, advertised “House Servants, Coal Miners, Farm Hands, etc. forwarded to any part of the United States.” Southern states levied prohibitive taxes on such agents and Southern localities did all they could to hinder their actions. They were unable to stanch the flow for long.

One white labor agent, R. A. “Peg-Leg” Williams, recruited for the Illinois Central Railroad. In 1890 Williams claimed that he had helped 80,000 blacks move from the South Atlantic states to Mississippi and Texas; in 1899 he arrived in Greene County, Georgia, to do the same there. Greene was an old plantation county that had seen its best days before the Civil War, and its abundant black population seemed a likely source for a labor agent. At first, Williams worked in harmony with local “leading men”; they agreed not to require him to purchase the usual license, and he promised to unburden the county of a thousand impoverished blacks who had no contracts with white landlords. For several weeks the arrangement worked well, and the local newspaper even applauded his efforts.

Planters eventually decided that things had gone far enough, that enough black residents had left Greene County. Some planters tried to have Williams arrested, but the county prosecutor,

pleased with the agent's effect on the community, refused to press the case. Williams simply posted bond and intensified his efforts. Now that whites were resisting, blacks became even more responsive to Williams's message. Some of the best tenants left, while several of those who remained went to their landlords to demand lower rents and higher wages. Violent outbreaks often resulted from these demands, and planters saw to it that Williams was arrested again. Rumors of lynching began to circulate. Seeing that the time had come to leave Greene County, Williams issued statements "To All Colored Farm Hands," informing them that he would be taking no more of them to Mississippi that year. The planters then allowed Williams to depart unharmed.

Once black workers began to leave, however, whites found it almost impossible to stop them for long. "The great trouble," one North Carolina landowner explained, "is the factories, railroads, saw-mills and public works, paying more for hands than farmers can, and will give them short jobs, allow them to be in and out at their pleasure—no system—any hand can quit his job and get another the same day in any neighborhood." The poverty of rural black Southerners led to risky moving as well as resigned stagnation.

Since planters had the power of the law and the law enforcers on their side, any tenant who sought to flee a debt did so at considerable risk—risk of imprisonment, a beating, or formal debt peonage. Yet a family desperate enough might take the risks, and desperation flourished in the New South. William Pickens's family moved from South Carolina to Arkansas, their way paid by a planter eager to get the labor of such hardworking people. Their first two years of labor, however, produced good crops but deepening debt; "if the debt could not be paid in fat years, there was the constant danger that lean years would come and make it bigger." From their perspective, "there was but one recourse—the way of escape." Pickens's father set out on some pretext to visit Little Rock and managed to find a landowner willing to advance fares for the family. "And so one night the young children and some goods were piled into a wagon and the adults went afoot," Pickens remembered years later. "By morning we were in the town of Augusta, twelve or fifteen miles away, where we caught the first train."

From the immediate postwar years on, in growing numbers as the years passed, restless blacks moved short distances and long, to the North as well as to other places in the South, alone and in groups, with and without the aid of agents. As a result, in the 1890s and 1900s every Southern state except Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida registered rates of black outmigration almost as great as in the famed "Great Migration" of the World War I years.

Black mobility came at a cost to black families. For young black men, the best chances to make a decent living appeared where lumber camps, sawmill towns, large Delta plantations, and steel mills used large numbers of wage laborers. Black women found the best jobs in the domestic work available in the small towns of the South, where most white families employed a cook or washerwoman. As a result, the heavily black parts of the South from Virginia to Mississippi contained by far the largest proportion of women relative to men in the entire country. The gender imbalance among blacks throughout the South, furthermore, was far greater than among whites; black men and women were often pulled in strongly divergent directions by the hope of a decent living. When blacks felt secure enough to move as families, whites noted the fact: "there was a considerable exodus of colored men from the eastern part of the state to the

newly opened turpentine fields of Georgia and Alabama,” a Raleigh newspaper observed, and “these men are doing what they have never done before—taking their women with them—which course seems to indicate their purpose to remain.”

Once a young black person got old enough to set out on his or her own, virtually any place was better than staying on a sharecropping farm. As a result of the mobility of the young, W. E. B. DuBois wrote of Dougherty County, Georgia, in the late 1890s, “you will find many families with hosts of babies, and many young couples, but few families with half-grown boys and girls. The whole tendency of the labor system is to separate the family group—the house is too small for them, the young people go to town or hire out on a neighboring farm.” Not only were relatively young families thus prematurely divided, but older people sometimes found themselves without nearby kin to care for them. “Away down at the edge of the woods will live some grizzle-haired black man, digging wearily in the earth for this last crust; or a swarthy fat auntie, supported by an absent daughter, or an old couple living half by charity and half by odd jobs.”

Partly in response to the powerful centrifugal forces pulling against the family, blacks adopted flexible domestic arrangements. As young adults left the household, family heads invited in other people to take their place. Almost a quarter of the black households in one study included blood relations other than children, and about a third of all families lived near other relatives. Black families also relied heavily on remarriage to keep households complete, as a life expectancy of only 33 years repeatedly undermined the deepest of commitments.

Sexual relations between the races changed along with other kinds of relationships. In general, interracial sex and marriage came to be far more opposed by both blacks and whites as the decades passed. Whites thought black people were widely infected with venereal disease; that fear discouraged white men who might otherwise have pursued black women. For their part, black women and men strengthened their resistance to the callous abuse of black women by white men as soon as slavery ended. By moving into their own homes and out of the quarters, black families reduced the access white men had to black women. One white man testified before a national commission that there was less intercourse between white men and black women than before the war, not only because of syphilis “but because the negro will not let them have it. The negro buck will go down and will stay right around them.” This retired planter from Mississippi told the investigators that “if a woman comes into a store, and there is a white man standing around, there will be a half a dozen colored men in front of the store waiting for her.”

Interracial sex by no means ended, though the sexual contact between the races seems to have shifted from plantations to the less well-defined terrain of stores and towns where white men felt freer to proposition black women. “In the towns, where the white population, unlike that of the country, is so largely a floating one, and where the opportunities for a single act of intimacy between white men and negro women, entirely unacquainted with each other and passing at once out of each other’s knowledge, are so numerous,” Virginian Philip A. Bruce wrote in a London periodical in 1900, “the intercourse is more frequent, as the danger of exposure is very small.” In such places, white men harassed black women. “The way in which many respectable, intelligent colored girls are hounded by white men of the baser sort does much to create bitterness among the negroes,” a Hampton Institute professor said. Indeed, a black

pastor wrote from Alabama, “if one of our men look at a white woman very hard and she complains he is lynched for it; white men on the high ways and in their stores and on the trains will insult our women and we are powerless to resent it as it would only be an invitation for our lives to be taken. The South is a pretty good organized mob and will remain so until bursted by the Federal Government.”

For their part, Southern whites were convinced that it was blacks who were dangerous, who bred the violence that hung over the South. Virtually every issue of every Southern newspaper contained an account of black wrongdoing; if no episode from nearby could be found, episodes were imported from as far away as necessary; black crimes perpetrated in the North were especially attractive. Black men were thought to be inclined toward certain kinds of crimes, crimes of passion rather than crimes of cunning. “The longer I am here, the more I dread and fear the nigger,” a white woman from Massachusetts wrote to a relative from her new home in Louisiana. “They have no regard for their own lives, and seem to have no feeling. Consequently if they have some fancied wrong to avenge, the first thing they think of is to kill. You rarely hear of them fighting fist fights. It is always a razor or knife or revolver.” A white lumberman recalled how bold a black man might be even to an armed white. The quarterboss of a lumber camp was told that “a bad nigger” had just come in on a boxcar, and it was the boss’s job to move him on. The boss overtook the black man, took a .45 pistol from him, and told him to “hit the road.” The black man turned and left. “But before the quarterboss got back to town, that black man snuck around and met him and he said, ‘Well, we’re even now—I let you look good. But you’d rather live than keep that gun, wouldn’t you? And the quarterboss gave up that gun. Then the black man said, ‘Now you go back to the quarters and tend to them, and I’ll tend to the road.’”

Whites believed that such men were responsible for a rising tide of crime in the South in the late 1880s and early 1890s. “Up to fifteen years ago, tramps of any sort were unknown,” an article in the *Nation* observed in 1893. “Now, whites go by, at some seasons, daily, and gangs of colored wandering beggars have also begun. Usually such negroes are willing to work on odd jobs only. It is probable that these vagrant bands furnish the wretched victims for the horrible lynchings described in so much detail in the local papers.” J. Pope Brown told the federal commission on agriculture in 1901 that a neighbor of his had been killed with an ax. “I said right then and there: ‘There is one thing you can set down....this crime was not committed by a negro that owned a mule or a foot of land or any other piece of property.’” And, “sure enough, we traced this thing to a couple of negro tramps that followed up and down the railroads and gambled and drank whisky with the negroes after they had been paid off. They are the class that commit the crimes.”

Economic change did in fact feed higher rates of black arrests and prison terms. One state after another passed laws in the early 1890s and again in the early 1900s to check black mobility; they piled on restrictions against vagrancy, contract evasion, and labor agents. Black men moving from one place to another, with no white boss to speak up for them or pay their bail, found themselves at the mercy of local police and courts. Planters, railroads, or other employers facing labor shortages were all too happy to purchase, merely by paying a small fine and court costs, the labor of black men convicted of petty crimes. County officials were eager to arrest black men moving through a county, whether for vagrancy or some other trumped up charge, when they knew they could make money for the county and themselves by farming the prisoners out. The

white men who hired convict labor had no incentive to treat the convicts with anything other than enough care to keep them alive and working. County officials looked the other way when mistreatment and even death resulted.

In the decades after emancipation the prison populations of the Southern states had burgeoned with black men convicted of property crimes; the hard times of the 1870s had seen the numbers surge as desperate men resorted to theft and as landowners prosecuted mercilessly, even when guilt was in doubt or the object of the theft low in value. From 1866 on, every Southern government had struggled to find a way to deal with this new prison population, for spending money on black criminals was at the bottom of every white taxpayers' list of priorities. As a result, one state after another turned to the leasing of convicts to private businesses. For a small fee, a railroad builder, a planter, or a mine owner could use the labor of state convicts with little financial risk and with no labor troubles.

Not surprisingly, such a system bred inhumane travesties. In some of the most forbidding landscapes of the New South terrible scenes of inhumanity were played out: mass sickness, brutal whippings, discarded bodies, near starvation, rape. Time after time, word leaked out about what was happening in the camps in the swamps or the piney woods; time after time, investigations lamely concluded that something would have to be done; time after time, the deaths and exploitation went on. Some of the wealthiest capitalists in the South became convict lessees, and some men with little capital but good political connections became rich off the franchise in the state's felons. The convict camps became places not only of profit but also of political patronage, places where party workers with little ability could be posted with a shotgun, a ledgerbook, or even a doctor's bag. Critics repeatedly raised their voices against this crime committed by the state, but it went on for decades, while thousands died.

Southern whites tolerated such barbarities partly because they were persuaded that black crime was out of control. White papers began to speak of "bad niggers" who held white law in contempt, who feared no white man, who longed for revenge against all whites, who held it as a matter of pride that no white boss qualified their freedom. These black men, considering the courts the "white man's law," accorded sheriffs and judges no respect. Whites heard rumors that black criminals were held up as heroes by the black community, championed for their bravery against persistent white injustice. Whites in the cities and the countryside were certain that black crime was rapidly spinning out of control. In the late 1880s, arrests and prison terms for black men began to mount, along with white rhetoric, anxiety, and violence.

The newspapers did more than their share to publicize and exaggerate black crime and white retaliation. A Louisiana paper noted several incidents indicating that "the negroes are becoming overbearing and need toning down. We warn them to be careful, or they will be taught a lesson that they will never forget." The newspapers, taking every opportunity to trumpet such challenges, increased racial tension in the late 1880s and early 1890s. "The negroes are evidently in an excited state—loud talking and gruff looks the order of the day....I feel truly heavy-hearted. This neighborhood is getting more and more disagreeable," Anne Simons Deas of South Carolina wrote in her diary in 1893. "Last night the noise was horrible, for two nights we have not slept much. Friday night we had some ground for suspecting that the house was entered, though nothing was missing. The negroes are in a very excited state. I fear trouble is pending.

The newspapers with their intolerable gabble, will be responsible. They seem trying to precipitate trouble.”

The New South was a notoriously violent place. Homicide rates among both blacks and whites were the highest in the country, among the highest in the world. Lethal weapons seemed everywhere. Guns as well as life were cheap: two or three dollars would buy a pistol known in the trade as a “nigger killer,” or one of its major competitors, the “owl-head” or the “American Bulldog.” In a memoir about a Presbyterian picnic, one man recalled that “each young gentleman desired to have a pistol, a jack knife, and a pair of brass knucks,” all of which were considered “the proper accoutrements of the young blades of the day.” One young man working at a cotton compress on the border between the Carolinas wrote a friend for a favor. “I want you to get me a gun if you know where you can get a good one, and send it to me. This is a tough place up here. I am simply afraid to go out at night without one. They shoot about one hundred times every night.”

In the turbulent South of the 1880s and early 1890s, when politics and economic turmoil constantly threw people into conflict, such weaponry and violence could easily spark interracial bloodshed. Most of that violence was directed by whites against blacks, whether in barroom shootings, political assassinations, labor disputes, or because of some real or imaginary breach of the racial code. When blacks did turn against whites, they risked terrible retribution from other whites. That, in itself, was nothing new: black men, in both the antebellum and postbellum years, had been taken from jail and hanged, tortured, and burned by mobs of white men because a legal execution seemed too good for such criminals. Events of this sort had happened throughout Reconstruction, in high numbers.

The visibility and ferocity of lynching seemed to assume new proportions in the 1880s and 1890s. One peak of lynching appears to have occurred in the early 1880s and another in the years around 1890. Newspaper and magazine articles proliferated both in defense and in denunciation of lynching; a steady stream of more thoughtful articles and books emerged throughout the first decades of the twentieth century which tried to discover the origins and solutions to lynching.

Lynchings were far more likely to occur in some regions of the South than in others, and those patterns call into question easy assumptions about the forces behind lynching. No simple political argument will work. Although North Carolina witnessed the greatest amount of racial conflict in the political realm of any Southern state, including the brutal white supremacy campaign and Wilmington riot of 1898, the heavily black part of the state registered a remarkably low rate of lynching. Although white South Carolina under race-baiting Governor Ben Tillman was given every permission to hate, his state fell far below the regional average in the number of black men lynched. Although white Virginia felt compelled to hold a disfranchisement convention, it recorded one of the lowest lynching rates in the South. Kentucky, on the other hand, largely outside the maelstrom of Populism and disfranchisement, near the border of the North, and with a relatively diversified economy, saw a remarkably high rate of lynching. Even West Virginia, dominated by Republicans, reached the regional average in black lynching. Clearly, something other than the political environment triggered the bloodshed.

Two subregions witnessed especially high rates of lynchings: the Gulf Plain stretching from Florida to Texas, and the cotton uplands of Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas.

While both of these subregions had a high proportion of blacks in their populations, they were by no means the regions with the highest black proportion. Neither did they register a particularly high level of voting against the Democratic regime.

What they did share was a particular demography. These subregions had an extremely low rural population density, often only half that of states in the east. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century they experienced tremendous rates of black population increase. While the average county in the South saw its black population grow by 48 percent between 1880 and 1910, counties in Florida's Gulf Plain grew by 131 percent, Alabama's grew by 119 percent, Mississippi's by 91 percent, and Texas's by 71 percent. The only state whose Gulf Plain area had a relatively low lynching rate, close to that of the region as a whole, was Louisiana's, which did not see great black population change. The subregions with the second and third highest rates of lynching—the cotton uplands and, surprisingly, the mountains of Appalachia—also combined a relatively low population density and high rates of black population growth.

The counties most likely to witness lynchings had scattered farms where many black newcomers and strangers lived and worked. Those counties were also likely to have few towns, weak law enforcement, poor communication with the outside, and high levels of transiency among both races. Such a setting fostered the fear and insecurity that fed lynching at the same time it removed the few checks that helped dissuade would-be lynchers elsewhere. Lynching served as a method of law enforcement in sparsely populated places where white people felt especially insecure. Whites dreaded the idea that black criminals could get away with harming a white person without being punished, worried that the lack of retribution would encourage others to raise their hand against isolated whites on remote plantations, farms, or roads.

The sporadic violence of lynching was a way for white people to reconcile weak governments with a demand for an impossibly high level of racial mastery, a way to terrorize blacks into acquiescence by brutally killing those who intentionally or accidentally stepped over some invisible and shifting line of permissible behavior. The brutality was not generated by crowding and friction; places such as the Black Belt and the Piedmont, with high population densities, saw relatively low rates of lynching. In such places, black people were more likely to know at least a few whites as neighbors or employers. They were also able to turn to black friends and allies should they be pursued by a lynch mob.

Lynchings tended to flourish where whites were surrounded by what they called “strange niggers,” blacks with no white to vouch for them, blacks with no reputation in the neighborhood, blacks without even other blacks to aid them. Lynching seemed both more necessary and more feasible in places such as the Gulf Plain, the cotton uplands, and the mountains. In those places most blacks and whites did not know one another, much less share ties of several generations. The black population often moved from one year to the next in search of jobs at lumber camps and large plantations. “The salvation of the negro in this country depends upon drawing the social lines tighter, tighter all the while, North and South,” the president of a black college in Alabama warned an Emancipation Day audience in 1901. “The moment they become slack the white man becomes brutal—the negro goes down forever.”

Local black leaders, for their own purposes, readily joined whites in blaming vagrant blacks for any crime in the neighborhood. “There never was a respectable colored man lynched in the south, except in a case of murder,” a black minister from Montgomery wrote even as he

denounced lynching. “I speak from my own experience when I say that in the lynchings I have known about, the victims were always men in the community no one could say a good word for. They came out from the slums at night, like the raccoon, and stole back again.” Local blacks had every reason for displacing white anger, for finding some stranger who could bear the brunt of white men determined to wreak vengeance.

Although most lynchings were inflicted in response to alleged murder, most of the rhetoric and justification focused intently on the so-called “one crime” or “usual crime”: the sexual assault of white women by blacks. That assault sometimes involved rape, while at other times a mere look or word was enough to justify death. Black reformers such as Ida B. Wells argued repeatedly that even the accusation of rape made up only a fraction of the reasons giving for lynching. Just as repeatedly, whites argued that violations of white womanhood were the crimes that unleashed the lynching beast. Whites opposed to lynching, Northern and Southern, apparently felt compelled to acquiesce to this argument.

Whites assumed that black men lusted after white women, but there was a widespread suspicion that it was more than lust that drove black men into the alleged assaults. “I think there can be no doubt that a considerable amount of crime on the part of colored men against white men and women is due to a spirit of getting even,” a white Southerner observed. “Not getting even with any particular individual, but just an indefinite getting even with white race.” Whites could not help but realize that black people chafed under their many injustices. It did not seem far-fetched to whites that furious black men would attack the most vulnerable among the more privileged race. One woman who had grown up in the countryside of middle Tennessee recalled that girls were taught to sew, but not cook, “because we were never allowed to enter the kitchen. There was a prohibition because the Negro men on the place that didn’t have families were fed in the kitchen.” This woman told the younger white woman interviewing her in 1952 that “you can’t remember and maybe can’t understand the horror that had grown up of any contact with a Negro man.”

Just as white girls and women were raised to fear strange black men, so were black boys and men taught to avoid any situation where they might be falsely accused. For generations, young black men learned early in their lives that they could at any time be grabbed by a white mob—whether for murder, looking at a white woman the wrong way, or merely being “smart”—and dragged into the woods or a public street to be tortured, burned, mutilated. It was a poisoned atmosphere, one that permeated life far beyond those counties where a lynching had actually taken place, one that pervaded all the dealings each race had with the other.

Juxtapositions of the modern and the archaic constantly jarred the New South, as Mell Barrett, a young white boy, discovered when he spent a nickel to hear his first Edison talking machine at a country picnic in 1896. “With the tubes in my ears, the Pitchman was now adjusting the needle on the machine....My excitement increased, my heart was pounding so I could hardly hold the tubes in my ears with my shaking hands.” At first, he thought he was listening to a recording of a convention of some sort. “‘All Right Men. Bring Them Out. Let’s Hear What They Have to Say,’ were the first words I understood coming from a talking machine.” The young boy listened to two men confess to a rape, then beg for mercy. “The sounds of shuffling feet, swearing men, rattle of chains, falling wood, brush, and fagots, then a voice—shrill,

strident, angry, called out ‘Who will apply the torch?’ ‘I will,’ came a chorus of high-pitched, angry voices.” Barrett could hear “the crackle of flames as it ate its way into the dry tender,” and the victims asking God to forgive their tormentors. The crowd fell quiet; only the sound of the flames remained.

“My eyes and mouth were dry. I tried to wet my lips, but my tongue, too, was parched. Perspiration dripped from my hands. I stood immobile, unable to move. Now the voice of the Pitchman saying, ‘That’s all gentlemen—who’s next?’” As Barrett took the tubes from his ears, the next man asked, “‘What’s the matter, Son—sick?’” The Pitchman, “sensing what my trouble was, said, ‘Too much cake, too much lemonade. You know how boys are at a picnic.’”