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# Why were the Railroads the "Contested Terrain" of Race Relations in the Postwar South?

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### 3. Why were the railroads the “contested terrain” of race relations in the postwar South?

*Edward L. Ayers*

#### From *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*

Born in 1953, Edward L. Ayers attended Woodward's last graduate seminar at Yale, where he learned “in his [Woodward's] person and his work the potential of Southern history.” Now Hugh P. Kelly Professor of History at the University of Virginia, Ayers has authored, coauthored, or coedited several books, including *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (1984); *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (1991); *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (1996); and *The Oxford Book of the American South: Testimony, Memory, and Fiction* (1997). He has also developed the *Valley of the Shadow Project* (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2>), a World Wide Web site devoted to two Civil War communities, for which he has won national acclaim. *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (1992), Ayers's most important book, emphasizes the New South's heterogeneity and complexity. The New South was a contradictory land of new technology and progress, of old hatreds and reaction. No subject was more complicated than the region's race relations, that “constituted a complex environment of symbols over which no one person had much control and through which everyone had to navigate.” Segregation, Ayers insists, became entwined in the powerful historical forces of race, class, and gender that propelled it forward—most noticeably on the railroads that crisscrossed the New South.<sup>1</sup>

### Questions for a Closer Reading

1. Does Ayers agree with Woodward on the timing of segregation?
2. How did railroads reinforce white and black social roles in the late nineteenth century?
3. What were the travel conditions like on Jim Crow cars?
4. According to Ayers, did gender figure into the decision to segregate the railroads?
5. Why were railroad companies ambivalent over separate accommodations for black and white southerners?
6. In the 1880s, what position did the appellate federal courts assume on the question of Jim Crow?
7. What explanation does Ayers offer for the passage of railroad segregation laws?

#### Note

1. Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), vii; and *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 427.

### *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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."<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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?"<sup>12</sup>

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?"<sup>13</sup>

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."<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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."<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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 dis-

criminy 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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 Tourgée, 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 127-225, passim; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Jan. 6, 1885, quoted in Thomas H. Baker, *The Memphis "Commercial Appeal": The History of a Southern Newspaper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 140. The timing of segregation has been a topic of prolonged debate in Southern history ever since the publication of C. Vann Woodward's classic, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955). For a thorough overview of the debate, see Howard N. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis: Assessing *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*," *Journal of American History* 75 (Dec. 1988): 842-56.

2. Woodward stressed the flux of the eighties in *Strange Career*, and subsequent studies have proven him correct. For the most thorough and systematic portrayals of race relations in the decade, see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984); Joseph H. Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow: Tennessee Race Relations in the 1880s* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1976); George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 54; David Paul Bennetts, "Black and White Workers: New Orleans, 1880-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1972), 211; Rabinowitz, *Race Relations*.

Some historians, focusing on law, emphasize the instrumental uses of racial prejudice for whites. From such a perspective, ravings about the black menace appear mainly as campaign rhetoric, smokescreens thrown up to hide more tangible motives of greed and lust for power. Segregation laws look like campaign ploys, ways to win the votes of ignorant voters back home. Some have seen similar desires behind the chilling racial violence of the New South, portraying lynchings as political maneuvers orchestrated to cow black opposition. An instrumental view is usually associated with the tradition of progressive history best embodied in the work of C. Vann Woodward, especially *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Macmillan, 1938) and *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). Woodward, while painfully aware of the power of race, has seen class and economic divisions as more fundamental; indeed, a consid-

erable part of the power of his interpretations grows from his indignation at the uses of race by those who dominated the South. J. Morgan Kousser employs this perspective in a more insistent fashion in his *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974) and in "Progressivism—For Middle Class Whites Only: North Carolina Education, 1880-1910," *Journal of Southern History* 46 (May 1980): 169-94. For lynching, see James M. Inverarity, "Populism and Lynching in Louisiana, 1889-1896: A Test of Erikson's Theory of the Relationship Between Boundary Crises and Repressive Justice," *American Sociological Review* 41 (April 1976): 262-80.

Others have seen racial prejudice in general as false consciousness, an illusion bred by the powerful. John W. Cell argues that "unlike class relations, which have their ultimate origins in contradictions that emerge within and between a society's basic modes of production and exchange, race relations are essentially extrinsic. Their origins are not in production, but in power. They are not inevitable or natural. They must therefore be imposed. In the evolution of history, however, race can and has become so embedded in fundamental institutions that it is virtually inseparable except by means of decisive overthrow or wholesale reordering of the political and social system. Racism is indeed what Lenin called false consciousness. It is nonetheless real and powerful." See *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), 117.

At the other pole of interpretation are those who focus on racism as a set of motivations that enveloped, subsumed, others. From such a perspective, the manifestations of racial conflict in the New South, whether segregation, disfranchisement, or lynching, were driven by ideas and notions promulgated by influential whites. This racism, in turn, grew out of those whites' personal experiences and conflicts, often intellectual, psychological, or sexual. Events appear caught in tides of irrational fear and resentment. A perspective that explores "the development of intellectualized racist theory and ideology as it was applied directly and programmatically to the 'problem' posed in the white mind by the presence of millions of blacks in the United States" is given its most sophisticated statement in George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); a bold psychological interpretation has been put forward in Joel Williamson's *The Crucible of Race*. As with the historians discussed in the preceding paragraph, both Fredrickson and Williamson portray race and racism in complex ways that cannot be reduced to easy characterization. While many less skilled historians merely invoke racism, Fredrickson and Williamson have explored it.

The present account seeks to show that relations among blacks and whites were so volatile precisely because they were inseparable from class, political, psychological, generational, and gender relations. I have been influenced by Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 143-77, and Judith Stein, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others": The Political Economy of Racism in the United States," *Science and Society* 38 (Winter 1974-75): 422-53.

3. On the uniqueness of travel, see Stephen J. Riegel, "The Persistent Career of Jim Crow: Lower Federal Courts and the 'Separate but Equal' Doctrine,



1865–1896," *American Journal of Legal History* 28 (Jan. 1984): 25, and Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 17; Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis," 847.

4. "Papa" [J. C. Carpenter] to "My dear boy," Nov. 14, 1891, Carpenter Papers, LSU; Lofgren, *Plessy*, 9–17; also see Annie Perry [Jester] to "Dear Mother," Sept. 29, 1896, Annie Perry Jester Papers, SCA.

5. Ellen Glasgow, *The Voice of the People* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1900), 309.

6. Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899; rpt., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 142–44.

7. Andrew W. Springs to Charles N. Hunter, Sept. 26, 1891, Hunter Papers, Duke.

8. James Melvin Washington, "The Origins and Emergence of Black Baptist Separation, 1863–1897" (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 1979), 177–78.

9. Chattanooga *Times* in Nashville *American*, March 19, 1889, in John E. Buser, "After Half a Generation: The South of the 1880s" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Texas, 1968), 205–6.

10. New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, July 9, 1890, quoted in Otto Olsen, ed., *The Thin Disguise: Turning Point in Negro History—Plessy v. Ferguson: A Documentary Presentation (1864–1896)* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), 53.

11. Buser, "After Half a Generation," 67; for a fascinating account of Southern race relations in this period that puts sexuality at the heart of conflict, though in a way that focuses more on changes in white psychology and less on evolving kinds of social interaction, see Williamson, *Crucible of Race*.

12. Quoted in John William Graves, "Town and Country: Race Relations and Urban Development in Arkansas, 1874–1905" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Virginia, 1978), 285.

13. A newspaper from Columbia had already suggested part of the answer; when the railroad voluntarily offered to run segregated trains to the state fair, the paper had warmly noted "a very obliging spirit on the part of the railroad authorities, and no doubt many ladies will in consequence come to the Fair who would not otherwise have attended." The governor accepted the offer because race mixing in the cars was often "attended by unpleasant incidents." All quotes from James Hammond Moore, introduction to Isaac DuBose Seabrook, *Before and After: or, The Relations of the Races of the South* (1895; rpt., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 14–16.

14. "Studies in the South," *Atlantic Monthly* 50 (Nov. 1882): 627; Savannah *Tribune*, May 7, 1887, in Horace Calvin Wingo, "Race Relations in Georgia, 1872–1908" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Georgia, 1969), 130.

15. Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940; rpt., New York: Arno, 1980), 296–98.

16. Riegel, "Persistent Career of Jim Crow," 25–27.

17. Lofgren, *Plessy*, 145–47; Henry M. Field, *Bright Skies and Dark Shadows* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1890), 152; Buser, "After Half a Generation," 163–64, 203–4; Catherine A. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), 6–7.

18. Mobile *Register*, April 18, 1882, in Buser, "After Half a Generation," 56; Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 63–64. Also see John Hammond Moore, "Jim Crow in

Georgia," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 66 (Autumn 1967), 554–65; Henry C. Dethloff and Robert R. Jones, "Race Relations in Louisiana, 1877–1898," *Louisiana History* 9 (Fall 1968): 322; Wingo, "Race Relations in Georgia," 125–27.

19. Milton Smith, quoted in Maury Klein, *History of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 331.

20. Cartwright, *Triumph of Jim Crow*, 104–7; Roger L. Hart, *Redeemers, Bourbons, and Populists: Tennessee, 1870–1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 28–55; Franklin Johnson, *The Development of State Legislation Concerning the Free Negro* (1918; rpt., Westport: Greenwood, 1979), 184. Stanley Folmsbee, in a 1949 article, argued that this law was "a concession to Negroes," but Cartwright sees the law instead as "an effort by the legislature to sanction racial discrimination on the state's railroads in a more systematic basis than before." The law, it seems, was both an attempt to forestall further black agitation on the issue and an attempt to force the railroads to make more of an effort to appease blacks. See Folmsbee, "The Origins of the First 'Jim Crow' Law," *Journal of Southern History* 15 (May 1949): 235–47, and Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow*, 107.

21. Grady quoted in Dana White, "The Old South Under New Conditions," in Dana F. White and Victor A. Kramer, eds., *Olmsted South: Old South Critic/New South Planner* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 162; Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), 148–49; Cell, *Highest Stage of White Supremacy*, 181–83; Buser, "After Half a Generation," 204–5; Lofgren, *Plessy*, 24–25; Florida law in Johnson, *State Legislation*, 86.

22. Johnson, *State Legislation*, 133, 189.

23. Lofgren, *Plessy*, 24–25; Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 10–21.

24. Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 10–21; Lofgren, *Plessy*, 32.

25. Two very useful works that argue along similar lines are Riegel, "Persistent Career of Jim Crow," and Lofgren, *Plessy*. Rabinowitz's *Race Relations in the Urban South* has played an important role by calling attention to the generational differences among blacks and the growing militancy of the younger blacks. See pp. 334–35. For the role of example, a letter to the governor of South Carolina from a salesman who regularly traveled from Baltimore to Texas pointed out that "I cannot but see the great comfort and advantage to the White people of a state overcrowded with darkies in passing a Law of this Kind. . . . The passage of such a law during your administration would be greatly appreciated by all South Carolinians except Railroad Lawyers and would be double valued by ladies." George F. Pringle to John Gary Evans, Aug. 21, 1894, Evans Papers, SCA.

26. John Andrew Rice, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, London: Harper & Bros., 1942), 41–42. An exciting and innovative work on this topic is Cell's *Highest Stage of White Supremacy*. While I find his critique of extant scholarship and his emphasis on the "modernity" of segregation well taken, it seems to me that Cell does not take the context in which power was exercised—the state legislatures—as seriously as he should. Cell emphasizes the capitalist nature of the New South, only to turn to a rather mechanical reliance on a "power elite" in which planters play a large role to explain segregation. Of course men with power wrote the laws, but they possessed a temporary and quite circumscribed kind of power, thoroughly caught in the contingencies of electoral politics. Jeffrey Richards and John M. MacKenzie, *The Railway Station: A Social History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 137, point out that throughout the world the railroad station "was an

extraordinary agent of social mixing. . . . But the stations were in many respects designed to avoid these encounters across class and racial boundaries as much as possible."

27. Nashville *Banner*, June 12, 1891, quoted in Hart, *Redeemers, Bourbons, and Populists*, 164–65; "Jim Crow on Wheels," Chicago *Defender*, Nov. 3, 1917, quoted in Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1989), 293; Wali Rashash Kharif, "Refinement of Racial Segregation in Florida" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State Univ., 1983), 146–47; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "Arkansas Negroes in the 1890s: Documents," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 33 (1974): 296–97.

28. Virginia's railroad commissioner did propose a segregation law in 1891, but no action was taken. Charles Wynes argues that "by the end of the nineteenth century it was customary for the races to ride together on most of the railroads in Virginia without confinement to either a Jim Crow or the smoking car." This would mean that Virginia was quite different from the surrounding Southern states. See Wynes, *Race Relations in Virginia, 1870–1902* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1961), 73–74. A law was suggested in 1893 in North Carolina, but a black delegation won assurances from the speaker of the house that he would never allow such a law to pass while he held his office. Frenise Logan documents conflicts and black assertion in North Carolina that resembled those of states that did implement Jim Crow. See Frenise A. Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876–1894* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1964), 176–80. South Carolina saw railroad segregation laws "introduced and defeated by every legislature in the early 1890s. . . . Economic motives lay behind the opposition, which came largely from businessmen and pro-railroad men." Linda M. Matthews, "Keeping Down Jim Crow: The Railroads and the Separate Coach Bills in South Carolina," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 73 (1974): 121. The forthcoming dissertation by Patricia Minter of the University of Virginia promises to shed new light on the evolution of transportation and segregation law.