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Making Whiteness

THE CULTURE OF SEGREGATION IN THE SOUTH, 1890–1940

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CHAPTER FOUR

Bounding Consumption

"FOR COLORED" AND "FOR WHITE"

Ours is a world of inexorable divisions . . . Segregation has made of our eating and drinking, our buying and selling, our labor and housing, our rents, our railroads . . . our recreations . . . a problem of race as well as of maintenance.

EDGAR GARDNER MURPHY[1]

As the advertising industry, which is dedicated to the creation of masks, makes clear, that which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask. Masking is a play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many . . . Said a very dark Southern friend of mine to a white businessman who complained of his recalcitrance in a bargaining situation, "I know, you thought I was colored, didn't you." . . . the "darky" act makes brothers of us all.

RALPH ELLISON[2]

"NOW A MAN DROVE two hundred miles from Jefferson before he found wilderness to hunt in," William Faulkner wrote in 1942. "Now the land lay open from the cradling hills on the East to the rampart of the levee on the West, standing horseman-tall with cotton for the world's looms . . . the land in which neon flashed past them from the little countless towns and countless shining this-year's automobiles sped past them on the broad plumb-ruled highways . . . the land across which there came now no scream of panther but instead the long hooting of locomotives . . ." The voices of animals and not machines, he implied, permeated the old geography of unity on which the annual bear hunt had occurred: "It was of men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters . . ." But the multicolored masculine spaces of the frontier where plantations were wrested from and yet coexisted with the wilderness were disappearing. The ceaseless "puny marks of man" had vanquished the dialectic of wildness and order. In *Go Down, Moses,*

Faulkner mourns the passing of a racially mixed space of often racially mixed men, the hunt's pungent and tangible racial utopia, the "best game of all."[3]

Although Faulkner dedicated his novel to his own "Mammy Caroline Barr," women and civilization complicate and make painful the racial ease of his wilderness. In *Go Down, Moses,* an archetypal white child, Carothers, finds a kind of innocent racial mixing in both his white and his "Mammy" Molly Beauchamp's homes. But the bear hunt, unlike childhood, does not have to be individually outgrown. Adult white men do not have to participate in mammy worship to revisit a space of idealized racial mixing that stories of the hunt continue to provide.

Posing his racial utopia within a romanticized remnant of the frontier myth instead of a fictionalized golden age of plantation glory, Faulkner writes a story with villains different from the standard Lost Cause antagonists. He replaces "damn Yankees," "black betrayal," and the "dark days of Reconstruction" with the swarming "men myriad and nameless" of literary modernism, figures armed not with black votes but with plows, axes, neon, automobiles, and trains. The victim this time is not the old plantation idyll but the "doomed wilderness," "the land where [even] the old bear had earned a name." A new kind of settlement meant that the region was collectively outgrowing what the hunt had allowed men to save. A new kind of settlement meant a new racial order. While the coincidence of Faulkner's domestic servant Caroline Barr's death with the completion of the novel probably prompted its dedication, Faulkner ironically crowned his nuanced exploration of one white southern fiction of racial mixing by dedicating it to another, even more influential one.[4]

Yet that was not the whole story. Against the powerful fictions of continuity—of the Lost Cause and the mammy—that grounded modern white racial identity, Faulkner asserted throughout his writings a persuasive counternarrative of geographic and cultural change. In *Go Down, Moses,* the "long hooting" of locomotives and the shine of new automobiles and neon herald the booming early twentieth-century growth of southern towns. Recent historical scholarship has revealed the extent of the movement of Faulkner's "men myriad and nameless" and women too of both races into the region's growing villages and towns. Ex-planters and ambitious farmers joined ex-sharecroppers, lawyers, ministers, merchants, and the operators of cotton, textile, and other mills to form a new white southern middle class.

By 1900, the historian Edward L. Ayers has determined, one in six southerners, by 1910 over seven million people, lived in the region's towns and cities. Faulkner also explored the less visible social changes dialectically linked to the rapid transformation of the region's geography. By 1909, the Compsons of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* had sold the last of their plantation lands, "the old Compson mile," to launch their children through education and marriage into this new southern world. Fittingly, the new owners made the old pasture into a golf course.

The new and growing commercial and thus semi-public spaces that came with the towns—from that golf course to the stations that serviced those automobiles and the stores that neon named—provided places of racial mixing less romantic and more conflict-ridden than Faulkner's narrative of masculine adventure in the wilderness. And these places of consumption were, unlike the idealized images of Lost Cause, the mammy-graced white home, or the romance of the hunt, the spaces of the southern future. Far from a racial utopia and less often the subject of literary celebration, the multiplying spaces of consumption within the growing towns and cities of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South became key sites for the white southern middle class's creation of and African American resistance to the culture of segregation. And the first battlegrounds were the hooting cause of the bear hunt's destruction, the trains.[5]

The railroad lines invaded the region like kudzu, tangling the most rural southern reaches of piney woods and mountain coves into a strong and living web. From the end of Reconstruction through the dawning of the twentieth century, southerners built railroads more rapidly than Americans in any other region. As early as 1890, Ayers has written, "nine out of every ten southerners lived in a railroad county." But what this network connected also changed. In the black belts the plantation houses with their circling slave cabins were left to ruin or became the country quarters of the wealthy now living in towns. Instead of those old necklaces of quarters, the less uniform and often more ramshackle dwellings of black and white tenant farmers now dotted the far reaches of the farm lands. For both southern and nonsouthern whites, the physical deterioration of the old antebellum mansions signaled the transformation of the region's cultural geography. "Most of the ancestral homes have been abandoned by their owners for residence in the cities," a reporter for *Lippincott's* wrote in an article on "Life in the Cotton Belt" in 1897; "the white-columned porticos of the favorite colonial

architecture now moldering in decay, the wide and once hospitable front halls resounding only to the rough banter and quarrels of negro tenants and their children."[6]

Across the South, cities grew and towns took root where the steel vines crossed. A white southerner in 1901 recounted the attractions of town life to a national industrial commission investigating agriculture: "cheap coal, cheap lights, convenient water supply offer inducements; society and amusements draw the young: the chance to speculate, to make a sudden rise in fortunes, to get into the swim attracts others . . . All these things, and many more of the same sort have acted and reacted between the town and the country, and the country has become permeated with tendencies to town life and efforts to imitate." These new, increasingly less rural, more closely settled places, then, asserted an influence far beyond even the growing proportion of the southern population leaving the farms. Villages, towns, and cities became the hothouses of the new culture of segregation. Cross-race interactions there had not had time to groove paths that whites could use and blacks could stand. Families were not entangled. People were not known.[7]

Segregation grew, however, in a compost of the old racial order, the paradoxically personalized but state-backed racial power that grounded the slave regime. Surviving the near-fatal wounds of emancipation and Reconstruction, this racial culture became the foundation of rural southern life through the early twentieth century. The mammy myth proved crucial here, providing a way for white middle-class southerners to anchor a new cultural authority within the relationships between white men and women and African American domestic servants patterned in the old racial order. Yet in the late nineteenth century, the forms if not the fact of modern white supremacy remained unsettled. The debate about the temporal and geographic origins of segregation has missed a key dialectical point. The choice was between segregation and the greater fluidity and relative integration of the more personalized relations of white racial power of the 1870s and 1880s. But the choice was also between the conventions of separation already in place in many southern cities by the 1880s and African Americans' total exclusion. All three options—segregation, the continuation of personalized relations of racial power, and exclusion—were in varying degrees tried and to varying degrees survived in southern society until World War II. Segregation, however, became the foundation of southern society and the central metaphor of southern life because it balanced white demand for a racially

figured power, the spread of the new national ways of buying and selling that had originated in the Northeast, and African Americans' insistence that freedom yield tangible benefits over slavery. Segregation provided a way to order the more impersonal social relations and potentially more subversive consuming practices of the new southern town life. White southerners nurtured their new racist culture to contain the centrifugal forces of a much less isolated, less rural world.[8]

The expansion of consumer culture both drew the region into the nation and played an essential role in the re-creation of racial identities between 1890 and 1940. Advertising created an increasingly national market in part through the circulation of black imagery that figured the implied consumer as white. Yet consumer culture created spaces—from railroads to general stores and gas stations to the restaurants, movie theaters, and more specialized stores of the growing towns—in which African Americans could challenge segregation, both explicitly and implicitly. Whites first encountered the very visible disjuncture between the consumer as white and the consuming southern black in the image of the middle-class African American riding first class on the train. As whites broadened segregation, removing this troubling figure from sight, however, consumption also expanded, both in terms of class and in terms of space. Mass consumption both depended upon and created a new geography of shopping. In this complex layering of places, whites interacted with African Americans as consumers, as both indirect and direct violators of both localized and regional rituals of racial deference. The difficulty of racial control over the new spaces of consumption, in turn, provoked an even more formulaic insistence on "For Colored" and "For White."

Training the Ground of Difference

In the turn-of-the-century South, the small-town train station often sat apart. While the courthouse stood tall in the sky and central, fixing a town as an axle pierces a wheel, the train station hung low, attempting dignity while hugging the ground. As structures, southern train stations wore disguises: their physical presences yelled *stop* while their function whispered *go*.[9]

Once inside, the attempt to deny motion continued. If southerners had to travel, then state laws and local customs decreed that would-be passen-

gers would have to buy tickets, wait, use the restroom, and then depart in clearly racially marked spaces. Even southern children knew these codes, as white southerner Katharine Lumpkin, born in 1897, vividly remembered:

> As soon as I could read, I would carefully spell out the notices in public places. I wished to be certain we were where we ought to be. Our station waiting rooms— "For White." Our railroad coaches—"For White." There was no true occasion for a child's anxiety lest we make a mistake. It was all so plainly marked. (Said the law, it seems, ". . . in letters at least two inches high.")

Station doors, ticket windows, waiting rooms, and toilet facilities—white southerners determinedly labeled all of them "Colored" and "White." But much more than a "child's anxiety" was at stake. When as a young college student in the mid-1920s Lumpkin boarded a train with a southern co-worker in the YWCA movement—an African American co-worker—she felt for the first time the threat of that two-inch lettering, how it marked and labeled the racial worth of southern people and places, "how deadly serious the white South was in its signs and separations, . . . its single-mindedness of aim."[10]

A growing southern African American middle class seemed keenly aware of just what was at stake in the 1880s and 1890s as they made the rapidly expanding railroads and streetcars the battleground upon which whites enacted the forms of the new segregated culture. Train stations were not new even then—railroads had expanded into the region, albeit tentatively, before the Civil War. But by the end of nineteenth century, those long low buildings connected an exponentially greater number of spaces with both freight and passenger service. As importantly, a small but visible number of African Americans had acquired the money to get on those trains and ride.[11]

In 1884 at the age of twenty-two, the ex-slave Ida B. Wells boarded a train in Memphis to travel to the school in Shelby, Tennessee, where, as the oldest daughter, she taught to support her recently orphaned siblings. Sitting in the "ladies' coach" as usual, Wells was surprised when the white conductor announced he could not take her ticket there. When he later returned and demanded that she move to the other second-class car, Wells refused. The other car, she insisted, was a smoker. Annoyed at her refusal,

the conductor grabbed her arm and tried to drag her from her seat. Wells fought back, sinking her teeth into the back of his hand and bracing her feet firmly against the seat in front of her. Nursing his injury, the conductor fled, seeking reinforcements among the baggage handlers. Three white men then successfully forced Wells from her seat to the loud accompaniment of the white passengers who stood upon the cushions to gain a better view and shouted and applauded. As the train was just making its first stop, Wells announced to the white mob that she would get off the train rather than allow them to drag her into the dirty and crowded smoker. Though her linen duster hung in tatters, Wells had managed to hold onto her ticket. When she finally got back to Memphis, she engaged a lawyer. Ida B. Wells had decided to sue.[12]

Wells's struggle on the train was certainly not unusual in the 1880s. After the U.S. Supreme Court repealed the Civil Rights Act in 1883, whites across the South attempted to draw the color line on southern streetcars and railroads. The companies that owned these transportation routes often resisted, wary of the effort and expense involved in providing separate cars and policing racial separation. And like Wells, many southern African Americans resisted segregation in individual ways that sometimes ended in violence. From the 1880s through the 1900s, southern transportation routes were spaces of racial conflict.[13]

But Wells's persistence and her victory, however short-lived, were unique. After months of dissembling and delay, she discovered that the Chesapeake and Ohio and Southwestern Railroad Company had bought off her African American lawyer. Wells then hired a white lawyer—no other black lawyers practiced in Memphis—and won her case in the circuit court under Judge Pierce, an ex-Union soldier. The *Memphis Daily Appeal* headlined the victory on Christmas Day in 1884: "A Darkey Damsel Obtains a Verdict for Damages against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad—What It Cost to Put a Colored School Teacher in a Smoking Car—Verdict for $500." Wells had won the first case brought to a southern state court since the repeal in 1883 of the Civil Rights Act.

The railroad, of course, appealed. The Tennessee Supreme Court concluded in 1887, "We think it is evident that the purpose of the defendant in error was to harass with a view to this suit, and that her persistence was not in good faith to obtain a comfortable seat for a short ride." The white judges saw Wells as desiring "social equality," not clean and smoke-free travel.

Southern African Americans, then, were not to enjoy comfortable seats on trains even when they could afford the higher first-class fare. The battle over the racial ordering of modern transportation was on.[14]

Railroads became the focus of late nineteenth-century racial conflict because their connecting lines broke down local southern racial settlements often violently pieced together in the years during and after Reconstruction. Trains moved beyond the reach of personalized local relations of class and racial authority. Most often, travelers found themselves in close proximity to people they did not know, from fellow passengers to line employees, moving through places with which they were not familiar. Visible cues became increasingly important as markers of identity, as ways to categorize others, as railroads spread traveling pockets of anonymous social relations, more akin to the nation's largest urban centers, across the most isolated areas of the region. The problem of black middle-class riders in first-class cars, then, was less that whites feared "racial pollution" than that the visible dress and deportment of these travelers belied any notion of southern blacks' racial inferiority. Railroads did not just regionalize transportation. For whites, they also made clear the need for a state- and region-wide racial order.[15]

Many African Americans followed Wells in filing suit against railroads for discrimination. A handful even won. Young middle-class blacks became increasingly assertive, and one Georgia newspaper rallied black resistance: "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." Ida B. Wells had not been so lucky, but other southern blacks testified to how they had called the trainmen's "bluff" and argued repeatedly that they simply wanted the first-class accommodations to which the tickets they had purchased entitled them. The marketplace, they asserted, would not join the polling place as a potential arena of racial exclusion. Southern middle-class African Americans were determined to have unmediated access to the increasing variety of products, from first-class train travel to ready-made clothes and moving pictures, that their money enabled them to buy.[16]

For southern whites, however, more was at stake than comfortable plushy cushions and clean-carpeted aisles. Whiteness itself was being defined in late nineteenth-century first-class train cars. When middle-class blacks entered the semi-public spaces of railroads, they placed their better

attire and manners in direct juxtaposition with whites' own class signifiers. Because many whites found it difficult to imagine African Americans as anything other than poor and uneducated, finely dressed blacks riding in first-class cars attracted their particular ire. A white conductor told the well-dressed sixteen-year-old Mary Church, "This is first class enough for you." And many whites looked considerably worse for the public comparison with better-off blacks. Greater mobility made the poorest whites more visible to the rising white middle class as well. Katharine Lumpkin, whose own nomadic white southern childhood resulted from her father's employment with the railroad, remembered her shock at her first sight of extremely impoverished whites in the South Carolina sand hills. Class and race, then, became more visibly unhinged as railroads disrupted local isolation. Confusion reigned.[17]

Beneath white concern about racial disorder in a changing southern society lay a fear of the increasing possibility of making a mistake in identifying strangers. The more varied ingredients of white racial anxiety simmered in a stock of white concerns about racial purity. Though the account would have easily ended in violence had the gender roles been reversed, a Tennessee newspaper in 1889 chose to dramatize humorously the dangers of racial uncertainty within first-class cars. When "a bright and good-looking colored girl (or rather an almost white colored girl)" got on board a train in Nashville, a "flashily dressed white gentleman," usually known as the "car masher," flirtatiously sought her company. Wooing his "lady friend" with lunch and witty conversation, he did not realize his mistake until after she got off. Much to the "masher's" dismay, "none enjoyed the episode more than the ladies on the train." White southerners might have laughed, but the story's joke served as a warning about the dangers inherent in the first-class train car's world of anonymous yet intimate social relations and confused appearances. Possessing the middle-class markers of proper clothing and speech and made mobile by the spread of modern transportation networks, the figure of the mulatto became much more threatening. Though white anxiety translated into humor in this case of an "almost white" woman, white "ladies" undoubtedly would not have found funny an "almost white" man. And in an increasingly anonymous world where class and race status depended upon appearances, racial disorder endangered the very meaning of white racial identity.[18]

White southerners devised what Katharine Lumpkin called those "deadly signs and separations" to reproduce a white supremacy that had

become detached from the personalized relations of local power. Segregation made racial identity visible in a rational and systematic way, despite the anonymity of social relations within train cars. Racialized spaces could counter the confusion of appearances created by the increased visibility of a well-dressed, well-spoken black middle class. An African American became, as W. E. B. Du Bois described, someone who "must ride Jim Crow in Georgia." The individual's appearance then little mattered. "Colored" inferior cars meant "colored" inferior people. Systemized spatial relations replaced the need to know others personally in order to categorize them. On a childhood visit to Columbia, South Carolina, in 1892, the white southerner John Andrew Rice recalled his first sighting of the new racial order: "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 . . . : two doors to two waiting rooms and on these two doors arresting signs, 'White' and 'Colored.' " By Katharine Lumpkin's childhood a decade later, as a result of state laws the "town" signs had spread across the countryside, and segregation became "all so plainly marked." The railroads, as the historian Edward Ayers has claimed, "took a piece of the city with them wherever they went." Segregation was modern.[19]

The white Georgia writer Flannery O'Connor explores the ways railroads bridged boundaries of urban and rural, white and black, in her short story "The Artificial Nigger." It describes an old white man from a rural all-white northeastern Georgia county taking his grandson to the city. "The thing to do with a boy," Mr. Head says "sagely" to another white passenger on the train, "is to show him all there is to show. Don't hold nothing back." Soon the boy, dressed in his first and only and ill-fitting suit on his first train ride, spies a "huge coffee-colored man . . . in a light suit and a yellow satin tie with a ruby pin." The man comes "slowly forward," punctuated by the deliberate stabbings of "a black walking stick" and adorned by refracted light from "a sapphire ring" on a "brown hand" and two "coffee-colored," yellow-and-green-dressed women companions. But the boy does not recognize the "true" identity of the wealthy passenger. As his grandfather derides him, the boy turns his brimming hatred toward "his first nigger," this finely dressed passenger who with a confusing color and wealth has made a fool of him.

Yet even as the train highlights the boy's rural confusion, it also creates for him a new form of racial order. Visiting the dining car, "the most elegant car in the train," he draws assurance from the busy waiters, their "very black" skins accentuated by their white suits, their work serving whites overriding their somewhat saucy manner. Most clearly, however, in the dining car the boy encounters segregation. The large, almost-black man encountered earlier now sits eating with the two women behind a "saffron-colored curtain." As his grandfather explains, "they rope them off." Though Mr. Head and his grandson cannot even afford to eat on the train, the thin yellow fabric upholds their superiority, their belonging, their whiteness against the black man's roped-off wealth. The boy arrives in the city knowing "niggers" as people who serve whites or inhabit spaces whose separateness and difference are clearly, visibly marked. He, like the nonfictional Katharine Lumpkin, has learned the code.[20]

Segregation, then, could never reattach racial and class identities, could not make middle-class blacks poorly clothed, poorly educated, and poorly spoken and thus more easily identified by whites of all classes as inferior. Instead, systemized racial separation on railroads and streetcars worked to create and extend white supremacy in other ways. Most obviously, segregation reduced cross-racial contact. But segregated transportation facilities offered another marker of racial identity as well. People who moved within spaces marked "colored" were African American, and the difference—the inferiority of the black spaces—marked the difference—the inferiority of the black and even "almost white" people. John Vachon captured this interaction of built environment and racial identity in a 1939 photograph of African American men waiting behind the railroad station at Manchester, Georgia. The "colored men's" toilet as well as the "colored waiting room" faces outside the station, consigning congregating blacks to the muddy and inferior back of the building. Whites' determined racial labeling of railroad, streetcar, and later bus station waiting rooms, dining facilities, and toilets, then, served notice to black passengers of the limits of travel. The stationary points that bounded such journeys would remind everyone that the color bar, unlike town limits and county lines, could never be crossed. From the perspective of southern whites, racial order had been restored.[21]

Thus by the early twentieth century, transportation systems provided both cultural movement and cultural order. Trains and streetcars gave passage to urban commercial and social relations but not alternative racial identities. Boundaries between town and country faded even as the color bar grew, adding the tight adolescent muscles of law to the baby fat of

convention. W. E. B. Du Bois emphasizes this contradictory nature of southern transportation in his 1921 exploration of black life in America, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil.* Taking the uninitiated on a literary trip through the intricacies of southern segregated travel, Du Bois describes in great detail how inferior facilities and service worked to ease white anxiety about better-off blacks' contradictory race and class status. Middle-class African Americans, when possible, simply stayed at home.[22]

"Did you ever see a Jim Crow waiting room?" Du Bois begins. "Usually there is no heat in winter and no air in summer; with undisturbed loafers and train hands and broken disreputable settees." And then the traveler must endure the "torture" of buying a ticket. At an unattended window marked "colored" in quality and with a sign, an African American has to "stand and stand and wait and wait until every white person at the 'other window' is waited on." When the agent finally decides to serve the black passenger, he harasses and contradicts, "hurries and confuses the ignorant, gives many persons the wrong change, compels some to purchase their tickets on the train at a higher price, and sends you and me out onto the platform, burning with indignation and hatred!"[23]

Once on the train, in Du Bois's description, the accommodations for black travelers only get worse. The Jim Crow car always joins the train next to the baggage car and the engine, always stops "beyond the platform covering in the rain or sun or dust," and never includes a step to help passengers on board. Often the car is "a smoker cut in two," and black passengers have to face the discomfort of having white smokers pass through the "colored" section, "with swagger and noise and stares." The compartment always encompasses "a half or a quarter or an eighth of the oldest car in service on the road," its plush "caked with dirt," its floor "grimy," its windows muddy. While the conductor lounges across two "colored seats," his services are for whites only. Often "an impertinent white newsboy" also occupies two more of the limited seats, from which he nags black passengers "to the point of rage to buy cheap candy, Coca-Cola, and worthless, if not vulgar books." Dining cars either do not serve African Americans or provide them with meals in some "dirty and ill-attended hole in the wall." As for restroom facilities, Du Bois can only scream "don't!" Finally he admonishes those still brave enough to travel about the ultimate risk, changing trains. In unforeseeable places local welcoming committees often include sheriffs and quarrelsome white persons who hate a " 'darky dressed up.' " Still, writing from a

Georgia home surrounded by the many colors of spring and humanity, Du Bois turns to his host with thoughts of the liberating possibilities of tourism: " 'No,' said the little lady in the corner (she looked like an ivory cameo and her dress flowed on her like a caress), 'we don't travel much.' "[24]

White southerners wanted railroad lines in the South to perform like those long low train stations, to both provide and deny movement. And for Du Bois, southern whites succeeded: "There is not in the world a more disgraceful denial of human brotherhood than the 'Jim Crow' car of the southern United States." Whites and blacks might set out for the same destination, but en route their difference would be continually reenacted and confirmed.[25]

While many white southerners demanded that the new racial order of the railroad enforce an old white supremacy, the white owners of southern railroad and streetcar lines sought profits. This contradiction between market incentives and the desire to encode white racial supremacy within the changing features of the region permeated the emerging culture of segregation. Whites could never achieve the tight and absolute racial ordering of these expanding spaces of transportation despite their efforts. As a white midwestern journalist following the newly erected color line through the spaces of southern transportation in 1906 and 1907, Ray Stannard Baker neither felt the indignity of the African American Du Bois's journeys nor the certainty of the white Lumpkin's childhood. The streetcar, Baker found, was "an excellent place for observing the points of human contact between the races": "In almost no other relationship do the races come together, physically, on anything like a common footing. In their homes and in ordinary employment, they meet as master and servant; but in the street cars they touch as free citizens, each paying for the right to ride, the white not in a place of command, the Negro without an obligation of servitude." Streetcar relationships were, for Baker, symbolic of the new conditions. But Baker found there an uncertainty that surprised him. The sign in the Atlanta cars read "white people will seat from the front of the car toward the back and colored people from the rear toward the front." Yet no boundary existed, and the cars marked no imaginary race line with colored curtains or signs. Baker found "this very absence of a clear demarcation" in many cross-racial interactions within the region: "The color line is drawn, but neither race knows just where it is. Indeed, it can hardly be definitely drawn in many relationships, because it is constantly changing. This uncertainty is a fertile source

of friction and bitterness." Baker found the streetcars, and, he implied, most southern spaces, places of racial uncertainty despite the new laws and the new signs.[26]

Though as a child she had noticed the racial "twilight zone between" on southern streetcars, Katharine Lumpkin still had faith in the strength of segregation's racial order. The white conductor, after all, held the power to sharpen the blurred boundary, to use his office and his stick to draw that temporary line. But by the 1920s the adult Lumpkin too understood the contradictions within the seemingly absolute racial order of segregated southern transportation. A train trip with a black YWCA co-worker began without incident: "We entered the railroad station—but through different doors: hers, 'For Colored,' mine, 'For White.' Presumably I was used to this. I had done it all my life." And the two women's physical separation continued as they bought tickets and rested in waiting rooms. But Lumpkin's epiphany occurred as they both left the station: "Only on the platform was there no physical separation . . . So we paced the platform side by side." This coming back together, both understood, was "unacceptable"; but for Lumpkin the arbitrariness and oppressiveness of the separation, which she sensed her co-worker had long known, became clear for the first time. The railroad platform, then, seemed to "baffle" southern white "ingenuity." Only there was any concession made to the necessity of movement. The African American sociologist Bertram Doyle did find evidence of one small-town Georgia train station in the 1930s in which "a fence to separate the races extended from the station almost to the tracks." But in most places no structure had been devised to separate white and black as they crossed the distance between the building and the train. And the disorder of this racial order persisted.[27]

The Farm Security Administration photographer Marion Post Wolcott portrayed the ambiguity of this walk from the main building to the passenger cars in a series of 1940 photographs of a railroad station in northwestern Florida. The series was a part of the FSA's project to document 1930s America in general and the southern United States in particular. Director Roy Stryker had decided to shift coverage from general rural poverty and specific New Deal programs to southern small-town life. Wolcott and other FSA photographers built an extensive visual record of the geography of segregated transportation across the region, documenting black and white waiting rooms, station entrances, and toilets. But in this series, Wolcott emphasized that movement, both metaphoric and material, could never be

completely contained. A white woman might have to stop in that no-race's land, that distance unordered by segregation, to let an African American woman cuddling a child make her way. State laws could never account completely for the minutiae of individual cross-racial contacts. Train stations and their younger cousins, bus terminals, remained places of uncomfortable unpredictability within the culture of segregation's attempts at racial fixity, places of movement despite, in the period between 1890 and 1940, the signs.[28]

This unpredictability was the contradictory heart of a system that promoted both travel and stasis; it made the spaces of southern transportation places of racial conflict throughout the history of segregation. The historian Robin D. G. Kelley has demonstrated that southern streetcars continued to be arenas of racial struggle over semi-public space long after Baker's 1908 observations about the particularity and the relative freedom of the contact there. In Birmingham, Alabama, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, African Americans, in this case a more working-class-oriented group than those more middle-class pioneers of the transportation struggle, continued to push at the shifting racial boundaries within the city's buses. Continuing individual and collective protests included moving the detachable race signs inside buses, deliberately sitting in the front seats reserved for whites, and talking explicitly and loudly about racial equality within earshot of whites. African Americans dramatized the contradictions at the intersection of segregation's racialized spaces and the market, moving, muddling, and vocally crossing the color line. Kelley has suggested that the metaphor of the "theater" illuminates the doubled character of buses as sites of both performance and conflict, as theaters of art and of war. Yet common carriers were not the only "theaters" in town.[29]

As the sociologist Bertram Doyle had suggested as early as 1937, "What you see on the railroad is characteristic of the whole structure of the southern states. The Negro occupies a position of inferiority and servility, of which he is constantly reminded when traveling, by restriction, by discriminating laws, and by the attitude of his white neighbors." Between the old southern racial order and the new order of segregation, then, a key shift occurred in the location of white supremacy. African Americans, as Doyle realized, might or might not appear inferior and servile. Instead, in places where cross-racial contact had a tendency to be both anonymous and visible, whites forced blacks to "occupy a position of inferiority and servility." Segregation attempted to counter a world in which people increasingly

moved beyond the local and thus the known by creating racial identity anonymously as well, through spatially grounded signifiers of black difference and white belonging. With the color line, whites literalized the metaphor of keeping blacks "in their place." Whether an individual white was superior to an individual black did not matter so much in a world in which the qualities of the spaces within which cross-race contact occurred materially spelled out the racial hierarchy. That yellow curtain alone, a visual marker of black spatial difference, was enough to assert a poor white man's racial superiority.[30]

Lillian Smith sensed these spatial struggles, the way in the first four decades of the twentieth century the entire small-town South served as a theater of racial representation:

> Every little southern town is a fine stage-set for Southern tradition to use as it teaches its children the twisting turning dance of segregation. Few words are needed for there are signs everywhere. *White . . . colored . . . white . . . colored . . .* over doors of railroad and bus stations, over doors of public toilets, over doors of theaters, over drinking fountains . . . And there are the invisible lines that turn and bend and cut the town into segments. Invisible, but electrically charged with taboo. Places you go, places you don't go. White town, colored town; white streets, colored streets; front door, back door. Places you sit. Places you cannot sit . . . These ceremonials in honor of white supremacy.[31]

Segregation materially and metaphorically grounded the South's new racial order. This geography seemed fixed to Smith, a white southerner born in 1897 who grew up with the culture of segregation. Yet the signs "For Colored" and "For White" proclaimed an order they could never command. "Invisible" yet electric lines twisted and snapped and sprang like live wires in the rain of black resistance and whites' contradictory desires for cultural stasis and economic change.

And the movement of those color lines, like the motion of the train, echoed an equally dangerous movement of cultural meanings down those tracks from the North. Trains did not just transport pockets of anonymous social relations. They also carried an expanding culture of consumption that multiplied the sites in which racial difference could break down, adding the potentially transgressive spaces of movie theaters and chain stores. Such standardized products as national network radio programs and automobiles made racial containment and regional distinction even more problematic. The problem for the white southern elite, planters-turned-store owners and other members of a growing white middle class, was how to reconstruct a powerful and collective definition of whiteness within this new semi-public commercial sphere, which depended for its products upon northern manufacturers and marketers and for its profitability upon both white and black buyers.[32]

Transportation facilities revealed the racial fluidity of southern spaces of consumption. While the Farm Security Administration photographs in their absolute numbers provide evidence that a national consumer culture had penetrated even the smallest dirt crossroads by the late 1930s, white southerners in the 1890s began making segregation their culture in large part because they felt threatened by the convergence of a small and yet growing African American middle class and the new northern ways of buying, selling, and living within the growing southern cities. Consumer culture made the disjuncture of race and class in the figure of the middle-class black more visible at a time when southern whites already felt threatened. Reconciliation with the North, the Populist movement, the depth of the 1893 financial panic in the already impoverished region, and the growing indigenous white campaign for woman suffrage shifted other categories of white identity, making a seeming racial stability that much more essential to southern whites. While the Lost Cause and the mammy functioned for the white middle class as fictions of continuity that laid the groundwork for the new racial order, these narratives contributed only the fading memory of wartime valor to the whiteness of poor white southerners and did nothing to counter the spectacle of the well-dressed black consumer.[33]

Train stations, those often-disguised buildings, then, sat at another crucial borderland as well. With their function as nodes of transport for both goods and people and as nodes of connection between northern cities and southern small towns, railroad stations also bridged the transition between the older agrarian-dominated economy and the growing influence of industrial production and mass consumption in the region. As southerners, including farmers, increasingly purchased rather than produced even food items, changes in the nature, variety, and marketing of goods became a very visible marker of the region's encounter with modernity. Consumer culture spread a new world of goods, a revolution in representation, and an associated proliferation of identities across the nation. With transportation facilities—railroads, streetcars, and eventually buses—southern whites found an early

solution to the problem of fixing racial identity in the modern world by marking spaces as racially superior or inferior instead of people. The solutions for the racial ordering of other emerging spaces of consumption would be more complicated. At the intersection of regions, races, and world views, railroad stations needed to hang solid and low to reinforce the boundaries.[34]

Dixie Brand

Seeking to reinforce the regional divide against the impact of this economic and cultural change, in 1930 twelve self-identified southern intellectuals cast themselves as twentieth-century apostles and the South as Christ and proclaimed their region the last moral place in America. The most famous of the twelve white men—Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom—came together at Vanderbilt University around the poetry magazine *The Fugitive*, published in Nashville between 1922 and 1925. In their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, the Agrarians denounced the hollowness of a land where the end justified the means and where that end in turn was a consumption that they believed had become as "brutal and hurried" as had the machine-paced labor that helped produce it. "Turning to consumption, as the grand end which justifies the evil of modern labor, we find we have been deceived," John Crowe Ransom proclaimed in his unsigned introduction to the collection. "We have more time in which to consume, and many more products to be consumed. But the tempo of our labors communicates itself to our satisfactions." Under "industrialism," leisure had become work, art instrumentalist, the self the creation of experts, and life a scrambling attempt to cope with incessant change.

And consumption, they claimed, was forced upon white southerners as a result of industrialism's inevitable overproduction. "The producers," and the Agrarians always implied they were white northerners, "disguised as the pure idealists of progress, must coerce and wheedle the public into being loyal and steady consumers, in order to keep the machine running." "The most significant development of [American] industrialism," these white southerners insisted, was "the use of modern advertising—along with its twin, personal salesmanship." Advertising persuaded "the consumer to want exactly what the applied sciences . . . furnish[ed]." It was "the great effort of a false economy of life to approve itself." More a metaphor than a coherent

plan for economic and social reorganization, Agrarianism stressed individual and localized control of both production and consumption. The South would provide the counterweight to the "eternal flux," the "infinite series," of "our urbanized, antiprovincial, progressive, and mobile American life." "The culture of the soil," these white intellectuals insisted, was "the best."[35]

Their Adam and Eve, the Agrarians grudgingly admitted, had already been tempted. Their garden of ethics in the modern world, the rural and small-town South, they cried, was itself being seduced, was beginning to trade the unified lives of its "humanistic agrarianism" for the glittering baubles of industrialism, its potential to save the nation for the twentieth century's thieves, those gaudy beads of "Progress." "It would be childish and dangerous," claimed the Agrarian Stark Young, "for the South to be stampeded and betrayed out of its own character by the noise, force, and glittering narrowness of the industrialism and progress spreading everywhere . . ." And the Agrarian John Donald Wade provided a parable of the fall. His "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius" tells the story of the child of planters who came of age after the Civil War.

Following his father's postwar efforts to rebuild their Georgia town, Cousin Lucius attempted to chart a "compromise between farming and industrialism," between the ways of the Old South and the new North, which he embodied in his work as a farmer and a banker. By the first two decades of the twentieth century, the town was prospering. But Lucius felt something had been lost: "the [white] people were going too fast . . . villagers, they were trying to keep the pace of people they considered, but whom he could not consider, the best people in the great cities." "Shooting fiercely about in automobiles," the white townspeople "would swim with him, they would set up a golf club, but they would not read . . . because they were too busy going to the movies." When in 1919 their peach crop failed—at Lucius's urging they had learned to practice diversified farming—"the new god who was so mobile that he had lost his stability" had won. But Lucius could not blame them because "they had wanted too much." He had seen them toil "to feed and clothe a boisterous nation which had become rankly rich," but in return had offered only the false promise of consumer goods, a shine that hid the rottenness at the apple's core.[36]

Agrarian stalwarts published a second manifesto, *Who Owns America?*, in 1936; it incorporated the contributions of like-minded white nonsoutherners who called themselves distributists and wanted to reverse the movement of the American economy toward larger units of production and greater