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Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains: 
Jim Crow’s Racial Symbolic

Elizabeth Abel

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In a wrenching scene of instruction that Tim Reid inserts into his recent film adaptation of Clifton L. Taulbert’s memoir Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored (1989), Poppa initiates his five-year-old grandson Cliff to the construction of race in the Mississippi Delta in the early 1950s.1 After Cliff, who has scampered to use the bathroom in a filling station on one

A novice to this field, I have been helped immeasurably by more people than I can name. I must, however, acknowledge my gratitude to my graduate student research assistants, Catherine Hollis, Kim-An Lieberman, Marja Mogk, and Andrea Zemguly, and to the participants in the Undergraduate Research Apprentice Program, especially Miruna Stanica; to my colleagues Michael Rogin and Anne Wagner; to my writing group, Janet Adelman, Marilyn Fabe, Gayle Greene, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether; to the participants in the Berkeley Diaspora Studies Colloquium and the American Cultures Center, especially its director Mitchell Breitwieser; to Barbara O. Natanson, reference specialist at the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress; and to the staff of Critical Inquiry, especially Jay Williams, for their expert assistance.

1. See Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored (dir. Tim Reid, Republic, 1996, video-cassette). Through scenes such as this, the film sharpens the critique of racialization that is at most implied in Taulbert’s pastoral recollection of life in the Jim Crow south, although in other ways Reid intensifies the memoir’s romantic evocation of a black communitarian past destroyed by integration. For a critique of this and other recent examples of black nostalgia for a bygone era, see Adolf Reed, Jr., “Dangerous Dreams: Black Boomers Wax Nostalgic for the Days of Jim Crow,” The Village Voice, 16 Apr. 1996, pp. 24–29. I am grateful to Endesha Ida Mae Holland for bringing Tim Reid’s film to my attention, to Barrie Thorne for introducing me to Endesha, and to Catherine Hollis for showing me Reed’s review.

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of their Saturday morning forays out of the “colored” section of Glen Allan, is stopped by a white attendant who points censoriously to the White Only sign on the bathroom door the child can’t read, Poppa takes upon himself the burden of teaching Cliff to decode the racial formation of the universe “uptown.” Reading and racialization are mutually constitutive: to comprehend racial difference Cliff must enter the symbolic register, but the price of entry is submission to the racial regime. Initials are the instrument of initiation: writing the first letters of the words white and colored on two halves of a piece of paper folded down the center, Poppa teaches Cliff how to position himself vis-à-vis the Jim Crow signs on the bathroom doors (fig. 1). That reading race is prerequisite to reading oneself is reiterated in the next scene, in which Poppa teaches his grandson how to recognize his name by writing Cliff (which begins with the same letter as colored) on the magic pad the boy selects as his weekend treat at the white-owned toy store. Although the disappearance of Cliff’s name when Poppa lifts the top sheet enacts the signature’s tenuous purchase on the body, the racial order remains absolute. Reid makes its disciplinary apparatus terrifyingly explicit in the culminating scene of this sequence—a police-escorted Ku Klux Klan march through town—but also reveals, by resignifying the initials W and C, how this order gains authority as a system of signs. By redefining the water closet, the classic site of sexual difference, as the site of racial difference, Reid brilliantly implies that race not sex is the dyad that founds the symbolic register.

In so doing, he reworks two other famous initiation scenes. In Their Eyes Were Watching God, six-year-old Janie discovers her “colored” identity as an alien but incontrovertible effect of visible difference documented by a photograph that reduces to a single bodily essence the linguistic possibilities of her nickname Alphabet. In contrast, Reid locates race firmly in the symbolic. By dramatizing how racial signs are interposed between the needs of the body and their cultural relief, Reid also rewrites another scene of instruction that similarly pivots on bathroom doors: Lacan’s famous anecdote of juxtaposed Ladies and Gentlemen signs viewed by two children on an imaginary train ride through rural France in 1957. In Lacan’s narrative, a brother and sister (there is no comparable symmetry

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for race) seated opposite each other as a train pulls into a station, misread the signs on the water closet doors as the name of the station stop: “‘Look,’ says the brother, ‘we’re at Ladies!’; ‘Idiot!’ replies his sister, ‘Can’t you see we’re at Gentlemen’” (fig. 2). Illustrated by a sketch of symmetrical doors, the narrative serves to mock a naively referential view of language, but the choice of signs to illustrate the barring of the signifier from the signified is also designed to assert the universality of sexual difference, severed from biology, as a transhistorical, nonnegotiable, cultural law: "the image of twin doors symbolizing, through the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home, the imperative that he seems to share with the great majority of primitive communities by which his public life is subjected to the laws of urinary segregation.” In some imaginary space of “home,” Lacan suggests, “natural needs” unmarked by culture might be generated and assuaged by polymorphously perverse bodies; but in the public world “away from home” sexual difference is enjoined as a penitential structure exacting strict compliance. We must all line up for “solitary confinement” according to the cultural “imperative” of gender.

Reid rewrites the Lacanian symbolic to assert the foundational status of race, but Lacan had already conscripted the language of racial division to underwrite the metaphor of sexual law. By invoking “the laws of uri-

nary segregation” (“les lois de la ségrégation urinaire”), Lacan imports into the hyperbole of gender legislation the racial meaning of the term ségrégation that had entered French usage a few years earlier. Yet Lacan’s

3. The use of ségrégation in French to refer to racial segregation was first noted in 1950, according to both the Dictionnaire Hachette and Le Grand Robert de la langue française. Hachette lists, as the word’s second meaning: “ségrégation raciale: 1. discrimination organisée, réglementée, entre les groupes raciaux (notam. entre Noirs et Blancs), dans certains pays. (V. apartheid). . . . ségrégationnisme n.m. Système de ceux qui sont favorables à la ségrégation raciale - V. 1950.” Robert similarly cites 1950 as the relevant date for the terms ségrégationniste and ségrégationnisme. As the current meaning of ségrégation under the subheading “Domaine human,” Robert offers: “séparation absolue, organisé et réglementée, de la population de couleur d’avec les blancs (dans les écoles, les transports, les magasins, etc.). La ségrégation qui était pratiquée par certains états du sud des États-Unis est interdite par les lois fédérales.” As an example, Robert cites a specific reference to Jim Crow in Simone de Beauvoir’s L’Amérique au jour le jour, p. 238: “L’idée de ségrégation telle qu’elle a été formulée en 1870 par la législation ‘Jim Crow’ n’est pas en flagrante contradiction avec le credo américain; elle s’appuie sur le slogan ‘Égaux, mais différents.’ On sait que l’idée ‘d’égalité dans la différence’ en fait manifeste toujours un refus de l’égalité. La ségrégation a amené aussi la discrimination.” There are several things to note here: the emphasis on the regulatory character of Jim Crow, consistent with Lacan’s insistence on urinary “law,” and the current social usage of ségrégation in explicit and exclusive reference to racial segregation. This usage was both evidenced and reinforced among left-wing intellectuals by Jean-Paul Sartre’s publication of Stetson Kennedy’s Jim Crow Guide in 1955. Unable to find a publisher in the United States, Kennedy’s detailed exposé of American racial segregation (translated simply as “ségrégation”) was originally published under the imprintur of Sartre’s Les Temps modernes as Introduction à l’Amérique raciste. Having entered French culture immediately before Lacan’s 1957 lecture, the racial overtones of “lois de ségrégation” were almost certainly intended by Lacan and audible to his listeners. (As an interesting sidelight on cultural translation, the English version of Lacan’s diagrams reverses the gender sequence of the doors, presumably in keeping with the English expression, “Ladies and Gentlemen,” as opposed to the French, “Messieurs/dames”; in the original the doors are marked “Hommes Dames”; in the English translation, “Ladies Gentlemen.”)
allusion has the opposite effect, for the evocation of a literal and brutal law of racial segregation undermines, rather than reinforces, the primacy of the sexual division; urinary segregation, U.S. style, prioritizes race over gender. The racial reference signals a return of the Lacanian repressed, not a putatively natural body behind the bathroom door, but the mutual constitution of diverse symbolic systems that disrupt as well as mimic one another.

This disruption is provocatively revealed in a photograph of bathroom doors at a rest stop on another journey through the segregated south. Esther Bubley's 1943 photograph of a Greyhound stop in Nashville, part of a 445-photograph series sponsored by the Office of War Information to document the transportation facilities available for soldiers, both recalls Lacan's diagram and throws its gender symmetry into crisis, for the Colored Men sign on the left-hand door is matched only by an unmarked space (fig. 3).4 Where are the rest rooms for African American women? On the other, unrepresented, side of this structure? (And why, if so, is it unrepresented by this woman photographer?) Indoors, adjacent to where the bathrooms for white women presumably are? Does race or

4. The Greyhound bus series reflects the Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information (FSA-OWI) commitment to representing in detail the spectrum of social experience, although Bubley's focus on segregation was not particularly encouraged by the sponsoring government agency. In addition to this photograph of segregated rest rooms, Bubley took eight shots of Jim Crow waiting room signs at the Greyhound terminal in Memphis, and one of the Colored Waiting Room signs at the Rome, Georgia, bus station. These ten photographs constitute one-third of those classified under the heading "Discrimination Signs in the U.S. Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information Collections" in the Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Division. In an interview with Nicholas Natanson, 26 February 1986, Bubley commented: "It was never put to me that I should look out for segregation signs. But I was free to take what impressed me as odd, interesting, horrifying. I was twenty-one years old at that time, I had grown up in an area where very few blacks lived. Those segregation signs were awful. I didn't know how anyone could overlook them" (quoted in Nicholas Natanson, The Black Image and the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography [Knoxville, Tenn., 1992], p. 259). For a descriptive and selective reproduction of the Greyhound bus assignment, see Bubley, "Cross-Country Bus Trips," in Documenting America, 1935–1943, ed. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 312–29. The photograph of rest room doors has achieved a certain status as an icon of Jim Crow; it is the first image under "The Origins of Jim Crow" in the published version of Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965 (New York, 1987), p. 13; and it is the culminating image of the four-photograph sequence that represents the "colored" past in Marlon Riggs's Black Is . . . Black Ain't (California Newsreel, 1995, videocassette). In the longer project from which this essay is drawn, I offer a detailed reading of the photograph's resistance to Riggs's progressive historical narrative from "colored" to "black." Although there is no extended analysis of Bubley's racial politics, her feminism is the focus of Andrea Fisher's study, Let Us Now Praise Famous Women: Women Photographers for the U.S. Government 1935–1944 (London, 1987) and of Sharon Ann Mushcr, "Herself Reflected: The Status and Self-Identity of Three Female Photographers and Their Representation of Gender" (history honors thesis, on file at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division).
gender play the more decisive role in assigning the place of African American women's bodies? In the visual and verbal rhetoric of this photo-

5. In the absence of clear photographic evidence, we can turn to literature for indications of local variation in the degree to which gender categories unsettled the priority of race in the construction of Jim Crow space. That sexual difference was acknowledged in the Jim Crow policies of Kentucky and Tennessee (where Bubley's photograph was taken), in contrast to those of the Deep South, is suggested by Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973; New York, 1975, p. 20), in which Helene's and Nel's train ride in 1920 from Ohio to New Orleans is marked by the shift in the presence of "colored women's" rooms at rest stops in these states to the absence of all "colored" toilets in Alabama, where the two women learn, with another African American woman passenger, to use the fields by the train tracks. Louisiana apparently resembled Alabama. In Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*
graph, the unmarked door on the right—presumably an exit—assumes the status of a question mark: what is the counterpart or other of “colored” men: “colored” women? white men? or, in that most intensively policed, yet insistently reiterated, conjunction, white women? (This is not as outrageous as it sounds: the full force of the state deployed in dividing these two groups was coupled with their strong discursive association. Representations of the signs for white “ladies” and “colored” men, both highly marked and regulated categories, greatly outnumber those for white men and “colored” women; ruthlessly divided in social space, the

([New York, 1971], pp. 228–29), Miss Jane remembers about the courthouse in Bayonne in the early 1960s:

up to a year ago they didn’t have a fountain there for colored at all. They didn’t have a bathroom inside, either. White, yes; but nothing for colored. Colored had to go outside, rain or shine and go down in the basement. Half the time the bathroom was so filthy you couldn’t get inside the door. The water on the floor come almost to the top of your shoes. You could smell the toilets soon as you started downstairs. Very seldom a lady would go down there because it was so filthy.

Although the plural “toilets” in the singular “bathroom” may suggest some minimal concession to sexual difference, it offered African American women no protection from the degrading consequences of their racial location. Nevertheless, individuals at least occasionally reinstated the distinction of gender: Miss Jane also recalls that Madame Orsini (a “dago”) would allow black women, but not black men, to use the bathroom in her grocery (p. 229). That some Jim Crow boundaries may have been more permeable for women than for men is also suggested by Mary Fair Burks, organizer of the Women’s Political Council that laid the groundwork for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, who remembers going “into rest rooms with signs FOR WHITE LADIES ONLY” in situations in which “there were neither other facilities for Negroes nor nearby bushes” (Mary Fair Burks, “Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” in Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–65, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods [Brooklyn, N.Y., 1990], p. 76). Black men were accorded no such flexibility: Sammy Younge, Jr., the first black student to die in the civil rights movement, was murdered in 1966 by a white Standard Oil station attendant in Tuskegee for refusing to use the outdoor Jim Crow bathroom; Isaac Woodward, a World War II veteran, had his eyes gouged out for using a white men’s room in a Carolina bus station that provided no facilities for African Americans. See James Forman, Sammy Younge, Jr.: The First Black College Student to Die in the Black Liberation Movement (New York, 1968), and Stetson Kennedy, Jim Crow Guide: The Way It Was (Boca Raton, Fla., 1990), p. 71. The fact that, according to Joel Williamson in The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation (New York, 1984), bathroom segregation originated in the workplace, especially in factories in 1913–15, suggests that its initial purpose, at least, was to separate men rather than women. The prevailing Jim Crow policy seems to have been to disregard gender: Cecil Williams recalls doors marked “WHITE WOMEN” and “WHITE MEN” but only occasional doors marked “COLORED,” “meaning it was used by black men, women, and children” in Clarendon County, South Carolina, in the 1940s and 1950s (Cecil J. Williams, Freedom and Justice: Four Decades of the Civil Rights Struggle as Seen by a Black Photographer of the Deep South [Macon, S.C., 1995], p. 3); and William Edwards recalls that rest rooms simply labelled Colored were to be used by all African American patrons in Richmond, Virginia, in the 1940s and 1950s (William Edwards, telephone conversation with author, Nov. 1995). Nevertheless, public and private resistance to this policy suggests that the category of “woman” could not be mapped unambiguously either on or off the racial coordinates of Jim Crow.
positions of white "ladies" and "colored" men were frequently elided in imaginary space.) Not only the consistently obscured place of "colored" women but also the obsessively designated place of "colored" men unsettle the simple binaries of the dominant gender landscape. Other racial signs only compound the complexity. In the "rear" of what, for example, is the Colored Dining Room announced in the large sign between the bathroom doors? Of the "white" dining room (where it would already have been seen by clients walking behind the main structure to use these "separate accommodations")? Of the structure on which the sign is placed (where there appears to be no space for it—or is this an obscene joke about what, as well as where, African Americans were coerced to eat)? As if to compensate for this directional confusion, the sign overlays visual on verbal indicators, running a dark bar through the word "Dining" and depicting a dark oval in the lower left-hand corner, two standard icons of "colored" space. Yet these visual redundancies do nothing to redress the ambiguities of location. The more intensively marked this terrain, the less legible it becomes (at least to contemporary eyes). The photograph presents a disorienting, almost vertiginous, social field whose directional axes don't line up.

Jim Crow signs on bathroom doors and drinking fountains (which reinstate a simpler binary) constitute a racial symbolic that stabilized itself by appropriating, and thereby inadvertently destabilizing, the structure of sexual difference. Photographers, shooting from their own racial, gender, and historical locations, diversely reconfigured these race-gender relations in dense and cryptic images that have traditionally been viewed as simply windows on history. Interpreting these images compels me to turn from Reid's perspective on the signs' deformation of African American subjectivity to the meanings they carried within the dominant culture. For unlike the picture of Jim Crow that a significant number of African American writers and directors are currently attempting to recreate for a generation that had no direct experience of segregation, the visual record of the signs themselves was produced primarily by white photographers. For a multitude of reasons—ranging from fears for their personal safety to aversion to using the camera to record their degradation rather than to document their agency—black photographers rarely

represented Jim Crow signs. “We were just happy to see them come down,” notes Alex Rivera, southeastern correspondent for the Pittsburgh Courier from 1946–74; that Rivera’s oeuvre includes the only image I have found of a Colored Ladies sign (segregationists typically insisted that these terms were mutually exclusive) suggests that Jim Crow’s exceptional concessions and excesses were the primary spurs to a visual record for black photographers. Although he claims that he personally was “never beaten . . . just threatened,” Rivera joins the ranks of African American photographers who testify to the dangers incurred by documenting segregation; the kinds of threats that circulated are forcefully expressed by the remarks of the “head lady” (accompanied by men with rifles) in Choc-taw County, Alabama, to two Life magazine editors about their staff photographer Gordon Parks, who covered the Deep South for the magazine’s 1956 series, “Background of Segregation”: “If we’da got that nigger who took them pictures we’da tarred and feathered him and set him to fire.”

7. Alex Rivera, telephone conversation with author, 5 Mar. 1998; the photograph is included in the documentary film, Exposures of a Movement (dir. Steve Crump, Steve Crump Productions, 1996, videocassette). The film also presents an astonishing photograph by Cecil J. Williams of the following signs in front of a gas station in Sandy Run, South Carolina, 1959: No Nigger or Negro Allowed Inside Building; No Negro or Ape Allowed in Building; Negros Not Wanted in the North or South. Send Them Back to Africa Where God Almighty Put Them to Begin With. That Is Their Home. If the sheer level of verbal abuse compelled Williams, a stringer correspondent for Jet, the Afro-American, and Crisis, and the official photographer for the South Carolina NAACP, to risk documenting these signs, the risks are also indicated by the presence of the Closed Today signs that made it possible for Williams to take the photograph (which is also included in Williams, Freedom and Justice, p. 27). According to Williams, his “life would have been in jeopardy” if he had taken the photograph openly (Williams, telephone conversation with author, 25 Mar. 1998). These signs also suggest the extent to which the white/colored binary that I am calling the racial symbolic both masked and set some limit to the furor of the racist imagination. Excess was not the only trigger to African American documentation of Jim Crow signs; Rivera, Williams, and other black photographers occasionally photographed standard White and Colored signs, usually at night or in deserted settings. See, for example, Williams’s photograph of a “colored waiting room” sign in Freedom and Justice, p. 26; Ernest C. Withers’s photographs of a No White People Allowed in Zoo Today sign and a Colored Waiting Room sign in Let Us March On! Selected Civil Rights Photographs of Ernest C. Withers 1955–1968, ed. Ronald W. Bailey and Michele Furst (Boston, 1992); Milt Hinton’s photographs of Motel for Colored, For Colored Only, and Colored Entrance signs in Milt Hinton and David G. Berger, Bass Line: The Stories and Photographs of Milt Hinton (Philadelphia, 1988), pp. 87, 125, and 134; and Leonard D. West’s photograph of a Colored Entrance sign in Homespun Images: An Anthology of Black Memphis Writers and Artists, ed. Miriam DeCosta-Willis and Fannie Mitchell Delk (Memphis, 1989), p. 32. The scarcity of black images of Jim Crow signs must be understood in relation to the full and heroic black documentation of the protest movement.

8. Rivera makes these comments in Exposures of a Movement.

As part of this assignment, Parks produced the only African American photographs I have found of segregated drinking fountains; by throwing into relief the choices made by white photographers, these images will anchor my conclusion.

Viewing segregated bathrooms and fountains through the eyes of white photographers reveals neither the consequences of, nor the attitudes behind, the brutal system designed, after the failure of Reconstruction, to circumscribe every aspect of black experience. The photographs that call our attention to the Jim Crow signs, lifting them out of their habitual invisibility as natural features of the social field, were taken primarily by northern liberals shocked by the blatant inscription of race across the southern landscape. In contrast to photographs by southerners who took segregation for granted and whose photographs typically incorporate Jim Crow signs (if at all) in the background of the events, groups, or places whose documentation was the primary goal, northern photographers composed their images deliberately to foreground and to comment on these signs: compare, for example, the prominent location of the segregated outhouse in Bubley’s photograph with its adventitious appearance in a 1930s photograph of the Alabama state docks (fig. 4). From the myriads of signs defacing “public” facilities, northern photographers chose to document those—surprisingly few and in surprisingly consistent configurations—that exposed the infrastructure of a racial symbolic. And whereas the Jim Crow signs most often appear in photographs by southerners in either unpopulated or in crowded spaces, northern photographers tend to single out individuals from groups to stand beneath, and thereby to stand for, the signs of race. Unavoidably gendered, these bodies gave material form to often unacknowledged features of the northern photographers’ own racial ideologies. By doubling Bubley’s project, looking critically not only at the Jim Crow signs themselves, but also at the gaze that she and other northern photographers

10. The primary exception to this geographic rule is the substantial body of photographs produced by Kennedy, an outspoken southern critic of Jim Crow; tellingly, Kennedy did not photograph the segregated bathroom doors and drinking fountains that conferred the illusion of symmetry and permanence on the racial division. By foregrounding Jim Crow signs and isolating them from the more complex and varied range of economic and social interactions the signs succeeded only partially in regulating, northern photographers may have oversimplified and exaggerated their influence. In Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940 (New York, 1998), Grace Hale argues persuasively that the profit motive forced southern whites to engage with their prospective black clientele on terms of near equality. Hale bases her claims in part on FSA photographs of racially mixed southern scenes that show little evidence of segregation. Photographing the signs themselves, however, especially the signs on rest rooms and fountains that were typically removed from scenes of commercial transaction, gave northerners the opportunity to express their reaction to the explicit (if at times ineffective) racial markers they encountered.
directed at them, I hope to illuminate the strategies adopted by viewers who attempted to dissociate themselves from a perspective in which they were inevitably implicated. I mean perspective quite literally here: where in racialized space does the photographer place the camera, and how does gender inflect that position? To make point of view more richly legible, I recruit Jim Crow photographs from their marginal status in archives devised for other purposes and read them not as local and transparent illustrations of social practices but as diverse manipulations of a common visual rhetoric. I examine how this rhetoric evolves with changing racial ideologies by tracking images that span the middle decades of this century, from the late 1930s, when Jim Crow representation emerged in force as an artifact of the documentary movement fostered by New Deal government agencies, through the postwar period's relentless production of a discourse of racial damage that culminated, and terminated, in the mid-1960s, when it yielded to a more aggressive civil rights agenda that finally succeeded in dismantling Jim Crow.\footnote{The earliest representation of a Jim Crow sign I have found is dated 1908 and shows the horse-drawn truck of the Imperial Laundry of Birmingham, Alabama, with For White People Only painted on the side (Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts). Although there are quite a few examples of southern representations from the 1910s and 1920s, a new concentration of images was produced by the influx of northern photographers sponsored by the FSA in the late 1930s. For an extremely thorough discussion of Jim Crow and FSA work, see Erik Overbey, \textit{Erik Overbey Collection}, University of South Alabama Archives.} This trajectory,
however, gains its full meaning only within a broader narrative that returns to the origins of Jim Crow legislation.

2

On 7 June 1894, Homer A. Plessy, famously, boarded the whites-only coach on the East Louisiana Railway in violation of the recently passed Louisiana Separate Car Act. Less famous is the fact that approximately 80 percent of the legal antecedents to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that sanctioned Jim Crow nationally resulted from suits filed in state courts by African American women. Following the precedents of Mrs. Vera E. Miles's 1867 suit against the West Chester and Philadelphia Railroad Co. for forcing her to move to the back of the railway car, which produced the first reported and highly influential judicial sanction of the separate but equal doctrine on public transportation, and Mrs. Anna Williams's 1870 suit against the Chicago and North Western Railroad for denying her access to the first-class "ladies" car, the numerous suits filed by African American women (most notably Ida B. Wells), in the three decades prior to the Supreme Court *Plessy* ruling, suggest that women overshadowed men as the most visibly injured and combative early victims of Jim Crow regulations.12

12. I am inferring this percentage (by my count ten cases out of twelve) from Charles A. Lofgren's analysis of legal antecedents to *Plessy* in chapter six of *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York, 1987), pp. 116–47; hereafter abbreviated PC. Although he discusses in passing some of the gender implications of this material, Lofgren is more concerned with the development of the separate but equal argument. Further evidence of women's position as the primary victim of the separate car laws is provided by the 1891 letter from Louis A. Martinet to Plessy's leading counsel, Albion W. Tourgée, suggesting that Tourgée's original plan was to use a "nearly white" lady as a test case for these laws (Louis...
Middle-class black women on public transportation in the second half of the nineteenth century experienced segregation as a denial of (class-based) gender privilege. Refused seating on the first-class "ladies'" cars reserved for women and their male escorts, black women were forced to ride in dirty, smoke-filled, second-class cars, frequently only partitioned sections of the baggage cars located directly behind the engine, and crowded with rowdy white and black men (the cars allowing admission to black passengers were accessible to whites as well).13 Ironically, the system designed to insulate white ladies from black men made black women its unintended foremost victims. Hence Frederick Douglass's eloquent protest that a southern railway conductor "may order the wife of the Chief Justice of the United States into a smoking-car, full of hirsute men and compel her to go and listen to the coarse jests of a vulgar crowd" defends black femininity through recourse to the same (classed) gender ideology—minus the racism—as that of white segregationists who argued that "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."14 Denied the benefits of this gender


13. Sometimes the class division of railway cars was explicitly gendered, sometimes only implicitly. What was consistent was that white women rode in the nonsmoking first-class cars, where they were secluded from the unattached men required to ride in second class. According to Edward L. Ayers, mixing across race between men in the second-class cars was not perceived as a problem. See Edward L. Ayers, The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction (New York, 1992), esp. pp. 137–52. Although Charles W. Chesnutt's narrative of the forced separation of Dr. Miller from Dr. Burns on a train in Virginia suggests otherwise, his account of Captain McBane's insistence on smoking his cigar in the "colored" car reveals that theoretical prohibitions against whites in Jim Crow cars were readily violated by aggressive individuals. See Charles W. Chesnutt, "A Journey Southward," The Marrow of Tradition, ed. Robert M. Farnsworth (1901; Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969), pp. 48–62.

14. Frederick Douglass, "The Civil Rights Case," speech at Lincoln Hall, Washington, D.C., 22 Oct. 1883, The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, ed. Philip S. Foner, 5 vols. (New York, 1950–75), 4:396–97, quoted in PC, p. 147; editorial, New Orleans Times Democrat, 9 July 1890, in The Thin Disguise, p. 53. See also George Washington Cable's account of a "neatly and tastefully dressed" African American mother and child forced into the "most melancholy and revolting company" of convicts in "filthy rags, with vile odors and the clanking of shackles and chains" who rode with them for two hundred miles in a Jim Crow car that "stank insufferably" (George W. Cable, "The Freedman's Case in Equity" [1884], The Negro Question: A Selection of Writings on Civil Rights in the South, ed. Arlin Turner [Garden City, N.J., 1958], pp. 74–75). For a compelling first-person account of the sexual terror experienced by African American women forced to ride in Jim Crow cars, see Mary Church Terrell, A Colored Woman in a White World (1940; Salem, N.H., 1992). Terrell summarizes these experiences by declaring: "No pen can describe and no tongue portray the indignities, insults and assaults to which colored women and girls have been subjected in Jim Crow cars" (pp. 298–99). The gulf between Terrell's pain and the equanimity with which Ches-
ideology, black women had access to the publicly designated space of "lady" only if they did not claim that title for themselves. Under the so-called nurse's exemption excepting "nurses attending children of the other race" from the separate car law's coverage, black nursemaids of white children could ride in the "ladies'" cars to enable white women to enjoy their privileges as ladies.\footnote{15}

With cruel irony, the gender-segregated cars from which black women were expelled were in turn invoked to justify racially segregated cars. Court rulings endorsing separate car laws often cited gender separation as a model for racial segregation that denied gender distinction to one race. In overturning Mrs. Miles's lower-court victory, for example, the state Supreme Court of Pennsylvania cited the analogy of the "ladies' car," which is "known upon every well-regulated railroad" and whose "propriety is doubted by none." Since gender segregation, argued the court successfully, "implies no loss of equal right on the part of the excluded sex," couldn't a carrier "separate passengers by any other well-defined characteristic than that of sex?" (quoted in \textit{PC}, p. 119).\footnote{16} Whites in this analogy are equated, astonishingly, with the subordinate rather than the dominant gender; whites-only cars, like "ladies' cars," in this formulation, are required to defend a vulnerable group from unwanted racial or sexual intrusions. In one respect, the analogy works, for in both cases segregation is unidirectional: whites and ladies may enter mixed-race and mixed-gender cars at their discretion, but women of color and white men may undo their exclusion only in carefully regulated service capacities as nursemaids and escorts. But the logical incoherence is far more profound: whites effeminized as vulnerable excluders in the racial thrust of the analogy, albeit masculinized as the dangerous excluded in the analogy's sexual scenario, are portrayed as needing protection from the race they dominate. Nevertheless, gender offered a horizontal grid to mask, and thereby legitimate, racial hierarchy.

In its original version, this grid identified whites with ladies in order to confer special privileges on whites. In the following century, the terms of the analogy shifted to accommodate the long-term consequences of Jim Crow. As African Americans, humiliated for decades under Jim Crow

\footnote{15. This is the wording of the exemption in \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson}, quoted in \textit{PC}, p. 191. Plessy's defense unsuccessfully invoked the arbitrariness of the nurse's exemption as evidence of the separate car law's logical incoherence. Two-thirds of the nine states adopting Jim Crow legislation between 1887 and 1892 provided some kind of nurse's exemption. Although the law sometimes was worded such that it could apply to white nursemaids of black children or black male servants, its clear intention was to provide child care and other services for white women when they travelled.}

\footnote{16. According to Lofgren, state and federal courts were extensively citing the \textit{Miles} case by 1890.}
regulations, came to be characterized as “the lady among the races,” a designation that perpetuated, while purporting to acknowledge, the ruthless erosion of their civic status, black men displaced black women in the white imagination as representatives of discrimination.\textsuperscript{17} From the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, the denial of dominant gender privileges to black citizens that began with women ended with men assigned the symbolic place of “ladies” from which the women had been evicted. In the visual record of discrimination signs that emerged in the 1930s, the original victims of Jim Crow have literally dropped out of the picture.

Even a photograph that clearly contests the gendered construction of racial difference by stressing that race is a vertical rather than a horizontal structure reveals how that construction operates. Russell Lee’s 1939 shot in a street car terminal is a locus classicus of Jim Crow representation, one of its most widely circulated images, and one of its most complex (fig. 5). The photograph shows a slender black man, well dressed in a white short-sleeved shirt, dark suit pants, and top hat, drinking from a “colored” water fountain at an interurban streetcar station in Oklahoma City at 7:50 a.m. as he waits for the streetcar that will presumably take him to work at what his clothing and physique suggest is a service rather than a manual job. Capturing a pause before the beginning of the work day, the image registers a moment of suspension encapsulated in the position of the man’s right hand, partially extended after releasing the water spigot, and in the two metal poles descending from a spot outside the water frame to an object also hidden from our view so that the poles seem to dangle in midair as an unhinged frame for the man’s tilted head. Suspen-

\textsuperscript{17} “Lady among the races” is the expression used in the authoritative \textit{Introduction to the Science of Sociology} by Robert E. Park, advisor to Booker T. Washington and cofounder of the prestigious University of Chicago school of sociology, and Ernest W. Burgess (1921; Chicago, 1924), p. 139. The context is the authors’ definition of the “Negro” racial temperament as “artistic” (p. 139). Although the authors don’t emphasize or explain their gender assumption here, they clearly drew from and helped to codify a prevailing cultural attitude. Ralph Ellison produced the most powerful account of this phrase’s influence: “Park’s descriptive metaphor is so pregnant with mixed motives as to birth a thousand compromises and indecisions. Imagine the effect such teachings have had upon Negro students alone! Thus what started as part of a democratic attitude, ends not only uncomfortably close to the preachings of Sumner, but to those of Dr. Goebbels as well” (Ralph Ellison, \textit{An American Dilemma: A Review}, \textit{Shadow and Act} [1953; New York, 1964], p. 308). The longevity of Park’s attitude is evidenced by Daniel P. Moynihan’s 1965 claim that “when Jim Crow made its appearance towards the end of the 19th century, it may be speculated that it was the Negro male who was most humiliated thereby” because men were more likely to use public facilities (a questionable claim) and because “segregation, and the submissiveness it exacts, is surely more destructive to the male than to the female personality. Keeping the Negro ‘in his place’ can be translated as keeping the Negro male in his place: the female was not a threat to anyone” (Daniel Patrick Moynihan, \textit{The Negro Family: The Case for National Action}, in \textit{The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy}, ed. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey [Cambridge, Mass., 1967], p. 62).
sion is what this photograph is about: between gender zones as well as between work and rest. Shown in three-quarters profile rather than squarely facing the camera, the man's youthful frame, smooth skin, delicate wrist bones, knuckles, and veins, and long eyelashes over a partially closed eye elude the visual codes of masculinity. Most centrally, his relaxed hand extending forward from below his belt signals a median position, iconographically as well as spatially, between the two directional signals on the rest room signs: the hand pointing to the men's rooms with its index finger fully extended, and the hand, cut off at the palm by the photographic frame, pointing to the women's rooms. Being positioned at the Colored sign means for a man (and it is almost always a man represented at the Colored fountain sign) being positioned somewhere between the signs of Men and Women.

These signs, in bold black letters against a white background framed squarely in black and attached firmly and symmetrically to the wall, in contrast to the faded, less authoritative Colored sign resembling a license plate tacked incongruously to the water fountain, establish a clear horizontal gender axis of a strongly coded photographic grid. But in the signs Lee chooses to represent, the lateral field of gender is itself split vertically by race, dispelling any easy analogy. Although it is possible that the bathrooms themselves are not segregated, since the signs may direct both races to the same doors, barred from our vision by a dividing wall, the
structure of the signifier, regardless of the signified, clearly asserts a vertical hierarchy of white over black.\textsuperscript{18} This vertical axis dominates the image visually. At the center, the lean male body, bisected by a white belt that establishes a color line dividing the white shirt on top from the dark pants below, reiterates the vertical racial hierarchy. Although inverted by the cup dispenser’s white cone cup below a long black cylinder, the normative hierarchy is reestablished when the man lifts the cup to his lips to drink; participating in the racial order, however unwillingly, puts one’s body at its signifying service, the slight forward tilt of the man’s neck signalling acquiescence. In this visual interplay between race and gender, the racial axis is dominant.

The image’s critical edge derives not from the trapped and emasculated object of the gaze but from the white male photographer’s act of self-positioning. Whether to avoid a physical obstacle or to achieve a camera angle that, unlike a view from behind, would reveal the man’s dignity as well as vulnerability, the photographer stands on the “women’s” side of this visual field, a perspective from which the man at the “colored” fountain, which is actually next to the “women’s” sign, appears closer to the sign for “men.” From this decentered camera angle, moreover, in contrast to Lacan’s neutral frontal stance, the symbolic register that orders race and gender is differentially (in)visible. The only entirely legible race-gender term is White Men; the $\text{M}$ in Colored Men is tellingly obscured. The words on the feminine side of the divide are even more dramatically amputated, transforming the bathroom sign into an anagram that reads as intelligibly vertically as horizontally, presenting for our consideration such plausible near-words as \textit{Holo, Imom, Teee, Endn} along the vertical axis, and the linguistic possibilities of \textit{Hite, Omen, and Lored} along the horizontal axis; the doubling of \textit{Omen} as the revised version of \textit{Women} crystalizes the potential residing in the feminine for a different symbolic system. These broken words call our attention to writing as a rebus. The relations of language, gender, and race—firmly established and asserted here—are suddenly scrambled and reopened at the very site of their inscription.

Lee’s freedom to play with the racial symbolic, so different from Reid’s more tragic Lacanian perspective, is clearly enabled by his own racial location. It is Lee, not his subject, who gets to play. Yet his optimistic sense of possibility is also the product of a certain historical location—belated in relation to the origins of Jim Crow but early in the northern

\textsuperscript{18} Sean Dennis Cashman states in his caption to this photograph in \textit{African-Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights, 1900–1990} (New York, 1991): “While lavatories and rest room facilities were separated simply according to gender, drinking fountains were separated by race according to the edicts of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in July 1939” (p. 151); yet his only evidence of these edicts appears to be the photograph itself. If the bathrooms were not segregated, it would make sense for the signs to read White and Colored Men, White and Colored Women, or simply to use the gender terms themselves. Since even phone booths were segregated in Oklahoma, it seems to me unlikely that the bathrooms were not.
photographer’s encounter with the system—and vanished even for whites as the century progressed. The emasculation that is here represented as a potentially mutable positionality came to be relocated more emphatically on the black male body, and the (albeit transient and unequal) visual alliance between the photographer and his subject shifts to a position of unthreatened, and hence unthreatening, white immunity. This white male relation to the black male body is not staged at the site of the gender signs themselves but at the site that occupies this photograph’s center: the drinking fountain that for the next few decades is the primary vehicle for configuring racial difference in terms of gender.

After his reading lesson at the water closet door, the five-year-old Cliff demonstrates his mastery of the linguistic code by matching the letter C to the appropriate sign above a demeaningly low and minimal water spigot next to a marble basin marked White Only. This shift in venue is both common and functional: adjacent and unequal “white” and “colored” fountains economically dramatize discrimination without the distraction of sexual difference—a project already visible in Reid’s somewhat unrealistic re-creation of a White Only bathroom sign (for if “colored” bathrooms—or their absence—were sometimes ungendered, “white” ones were always gender differentiated). Especially through the lenses of white male photographers, however, the sexual difference the fountains seem to purge reappears as the unstated meaning of their parallel alignment. Whereas Reid selects fountains whose differential height constructs race as an adult/child relation, reinforced by the image of a black child drinking from a “colored” fountain the appropriate size for him, white photographers typically represent fountains whose symmetry evokes the authority of gender rather than the affront of generation.

Drinking fountain photographs have a distinctive currency as illustrations of Jim Crow. Despite their relatively small numbers (they comprise, for example, only 10 percent of the FSA-OWI discrimination signs collection, which more intensively documents waiting rooms, movie theaters, and restaurants) and the relatively minor impact of the particular discrimination they document, these images, together with those of bathroom doors they distill and displace, have achieved an emblematic status as signifiers of Jim Crow.19 In contrast to other segregated settings whose

19. Thus, to cite only the most salient examples, Russell Lee’s photograph appears in multiple archives: not only in the original FSA-OWI collection, but also in the Black Star and Bettman-Corbis archives; it is also the image chosen to advertise posters by the Living Constitution Poster Series on key issues and events in the struggle to secure constitutional rights. The segregated fountains documented in a photograph by Elliott Erwitt are reproduced at the entry to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, while the photograph itself is
geography suggests more ambiguous social relations (such as the placement of the “colored” balcony above the “white” mezzanine), or which are spatially so divided they cannot be encompassed within a single photographic frame (such as segregated housing or schools), or which offer no obvious visual correlative to the inequality they impose (such as segregated pay lines), everything about the fountains’ visual setup conspires to expose the “mark of oppression” that constituted the governing liberal metaphor of race from the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Perhaps this is why the investment in this site appears an exclusively northern phenomenon; in the only southern photographs I have found of segregated fountains, the fountains are incidental to the images’ composition and function: documenting architectural design. A 1951 photograph of the third-floor hall of the Birmingham City Hall, for example, is clearly more concerned with the structure of the hall than with that of the fountains (the racial designation of the more distant one is not even legible in the photograph); and a series illustrating the architectural achievement of the TVA includes several photographs of “white” fountains (none of “colored” ones) whose captions note only the design features typifying the project’s aesthetic philosophy (figs. 6 and 7). No human shapes divert attention from the architecture in these photographs. Through their selective representation of both fountains and persons, by contrast, northern white male photographers articulate a distinctively gendered racial ideology. Not only do these photographers shift attention from the (relatively unmarked) “white” fountain to the (markedly inferior) “colored” counterpart they typically show adjacent to it, they also represent the stigma of race only on, or as, the bodies of black men, always vulnerably alone and usually in postures that reiterate the “colored” fountain’s abject shape. On the horizontal axis that mimics the organization of gender, “colored,” as the denigrated term, occupies the place of the feminine, but

reproduced at the beginning of the last installment of *Ebony* magazine’s coverage of “Negro History” (August 1962), as well as appearing in *Eyes on the Prize*. Photographs of fountains and bathrooms are reproduced more insistently than any other category of Jim Crow images and tend to be mentioned most frequently as icons of Jim Crow.


21. This photograph of the Birmingham City Hall was one of a series on municipal buildings taken by the Birmingham View Company in 1951. The TVA photographs are reproduced in a special issue of *Pencil Points* devoted to the TVA (“Tennessee Valley Authority Architecture,” *Pencil Points* 20 [Nov. 1939], p. 704). The photographs in the essay were obtained primarily from Charles Krutch, photographer and chief of the Graphic Arts Service of the TVA, although a few were taken privately by TVA employees. The lack of commentary on discrimination in a building produced by a federal agency is especially striking. I am grateful to Tim Culvahouse for this reference.
the feminine is translated iconographically into emasculation. The black women who also drank from these fountains are nowhere in this scenario. Excluding actual female bodies that might weaken the metaphorical relation between “colored” and “feminine,” a relation whose force (from their perspective) resides in the injury inflicted on black men, white male photographers construct, at the traditionally feminine site of the well, an exclusively masculine visual drama.²²

The representation of racial as gender injury is encapsulated in three drinking fountain photographs taken by Elliott Erwitt between 1950 and 1963. To frame his perspective historically, however, I want to backtrack briefly to a drinking fountain image from the late 1930s that clarifies the

²². The extent to which black emasculation is a white male fantasy is emphasized by bell hooks [Gloria Watkins], “Reconstructing Black Masculinity,” Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston, 1992), pp. 87–114. Robin D. G. Kelley’s insistence on the necessarily clandestine nature of black resistance is a powerful reminder not to take the appearance of compliance, to say nothing of white investments in that appearance, as representing black realities; see Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York, 1994).
Fig. 7.—“The clean, efficient-looking details that are used in all the TVA buildings are the result of careful study. Their elements are simplified and, where possible, standardized. The result is a feeling of extreme orderliness. Substantial materials—aluminum, terrazzo, marble—bespeak the permanent nature of the buildings” (original caption from “Tennessee Valley Authority Architecture,” p. 704).

differences between prewar and postwar rhetorics of race. John Vachon’s 1938 photograph of an outdoor fountain in Halifax, North Carolina, exemplifies a strategy similar to that of his FSA colleague Russell Lee, although it works out through a different (yet related) set of terms (fig. 8). By representing a ten-year-old boy at a “colored” drinking fountain on a lawn in front of a courthouse whose imposing white-columned facade recalls the ethos of a plantation, Vachon’s photograph calls into play the dichotomies of house and field, culture and nature, rather than those of gender; yet his destabilizing project is similar to Lee’s the following year. In the foreground a prominently featured Colored sign tacked to a dark tree trunk visually enforces a color line dividing the photograph vertically in half; but the distance between the sign and the fountain to which it presumably refers undermines this division by directing our attention to the gap between the racial signifier and its referent. It is not only the segregation of “public” facilities that is defamiliarized but also the category of race itself: to what objects is the sign of race attached? The location of the sign initially demands that the tree itself be read as “colored,” a perspective reinforced by the parallel the photograph sug-
Fig. 8.—A drinking fountain on the county courthouse lawn, April 1938. Photo: John Vachon. LC-USZ62-100414, FSA-OWI Collection, Library of Congress.
gests between the dark, rough-barked, natural shape and its white cultural counterpart, the luminous column singled out by the play of light from the neoclassical facade diagonally to the left. The column's sleek white marble body, topped by the sculptured leaves of its corinthian capital, links the artful transformation of nature to culture to the social construction of whiteness. But the converse that is documented here, the projection of a devalued racial sign onto the world of nature, encounters certain difficulties. The sign on the tree that locates color in nature implies a biological source of racial difference, but the possibilities—whether the water in the fountain (as in the young Rosa Parks's belief, illustrated in one book by this photograph, that "colored" water literally looked and tasted different from "white") or the dominant racial figure of blood—resist that ascription of a difference in color.\(^23\) Nature, placed under the sign of race, denaturalizes it. This tacit resistance is echoed in the nearly erect stance and wary gaze of the boy at the fountain. A barefoot boy is thought to be closer to nature than an adult; as a consequence, however, this photograph (like Reid's film) suggests, he is less fully racialized rather than more. By representing the boy standing upright just before or (more likely, given the distribution of his weight) just after bending down to drink, not bowed under the sign of race, but standing to one side and looking back from it, Vachon captures not only the gap between the racial label and the child it designates, but also, through the intent but guarded stare the child directs at the camera, a mirror image of his own discomfort with the geography of Jim Crow. The boy's quizzical gaze—the white photographer's interest seems as much of a mystery to him as the Colored sign is to the photographer, who singled this scene out thirty-five years later as marking his "first immersion into the mysterious South"—relays the shock of an encounter with racial boundaries into the photograph itself.\(^24\) Interrogating from the vantage point of nature (the

\(^{23}\) Rosa Parks recalls that "the public water fountains in Montgomery had signs that said 'White' and 'Colored.' Like millions of black children, before me and after me, I wondered if 'White' water tasted different from 'Colored' water. I wanted to know if 'White' water was white and if 'Colored' water came in different colors" (Rosa Parks and Jim Haskins, \textit{Rosa Parks: My Story} [New York, 1992], p. 46). The same question is recalled by one of the women interviewed in \textit{In the Land of Jim Crow: Growing Up Segregated} (1991). In Jim Forman's biography of Sammy Younge, Jr., Sammy's childhood friend Laly Washington recalls a recurrent childhood scene in which she and Sammy, at around age ten, posed this question less innocently in order to embarrass their mothers during shopping trips to Montgomery by clambering loudly, "'What is colored water, Mama? What do they mean, colored water?' I want some colored water" (Forman, \textit{Sammy Younge, Jr.}, p. 55).

\(^{24}\) John Vachon, "Tribute to a Man, an Era, an Art," \textit{Harper's Magazine} 247 (Sept. 1973): 98. Although there is a certain fuzziness in Vachon's recollection of this photograph—he places the scene in Georgia rather than North Carolina, and recalls the sign as saying "Colored Water"—the fact that he remembers it at all despite (he tells us) not having looked at it for thirty years is testimony to the way this scene was etched in his memory. His precise reference to the boy as a "ten-year-old" suggests that there was some verbal ex-
counterpart of the feminine in Lee) designations that present themselves as natural, Vachon’s photograph shares Lee’s perspective toward Jim Crow as an arbitrary, ungrounded, aberrant, and consequently vulnerable structure that could wound its victims, but not irrepairably.  

Consider, by contrast, the fountains Elliott Erwitt chooses to record (out of the hundreds he must have seen) in his 1950 North Carolina photographs (fig. 9). No longer extruded to a cultural outside, racial difference here is firmly incorporated within an interior whose furnishings give body to the social realities beyling Plessy’s fiction of equality. Set off starkly against a bare white wall whose panelling constitutes three-quarters of a frame, these fountains, and the system they embody, do not seem readily susceptible to change. Their entrenchment is only reinforced by a point of view that faithfully reproduces the structure it exposes. Centered, spare, uncomplicated, the composition eliminates any information or vantage point that could offer leverage on this racial structure and endows these doubled fountains with the authority and permanence of other binaries, preeminently gender. The equipoise of the lateral alignment evokes the stability of gender. And the juxtaposition of the signs’ formal equality with the substantive inequality between the refrigerated “white” cooler and the ancillary “colored” basin, yoked by the extended arm of a drainage pipe that exposes the inferior fountain’s dependency, suggests the social compromise of gender. Lest we overlook the emasculatory meaning this parallel carried for the white photographer, his next photograph, for which he presumably waited at this site until an appropriate human subject appeared, represents a black man stooping over to drink at the “colored” fountain, his body caught in a posture of submission that gives human form and content to the fountain’s second-class status (fig. 10).

change between them. Vachon’s interest in the destabilizing potential of children’s ambiguous relation to racial boundaries is also suggested by another of his photographs, which shows a young white girl standing next to, and dwarfed by, a huge For Whites Only sign on a beach; although the sign dominates the child visually, she cannot be its stable representative, for it seems likely that she doesn’t recognize its claims and that her play will transgress the line it draws in the sand. Taken in October 1951, the photograph is part of the collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.  

25. By focussing on a few examples of explicit Jim Crow imagery, I am trying to develop an aspect of the FSA file that is relatively unexplored in Natanson’s important comprehensive study, The Black Image in the New Deal. Natanson both describes the constraints under which FSA photographers worked—they could represent blacks benefitting from government programs but not suggest that these programs promoted racial equality, and they could represent poverty but not racial conflict or terror—and reveals that several of these photographers were dissuaded by FSA director Roy Stryker from pursuing some of the more volatile political subjects they proposed. Close attention to representations of segregation that emerged from the political perspective of photographers, rather than from project guidelines, suggests an unofficial but perhaps characteristic mode of critique.
Fig. 9.—Elliott Erwitt. North Carolina, 1950. Photo courtesy of Magnum Photos, Inc.

Fig. 10.—Elliott Erwitt. North Carolina, 1950. From Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965.*
The photograph that concludes this sequence, after a thirteen-year delay, signals a movement both toward and away from equality (fig. 11). The fountains in this 1963 representation of the Williamson County Courthouse in Texas fulfill the political desire evoked by the first two photographs—less to revoke than to actualize the separate but equal formula of Plessy. In 1963, nine years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision that marked the legal (though far from the actual) termination of Plessy, the separate fountains that should have been abolished have now at least been equalized. If the fountains represented in the 1950 photographs demonstrate (like the segregation cases leading up to Brown) that separate facilities are in practice rarely equal, the equality of the segregated fountains in the third photograph raises the question of principle that the Supreme Court, for the first time since Plessy, deliberately addressed in Brown: does segregation intrinsically violate the equal protection of the law, even when (in the language of the Court) “the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal?” Through the human body he represents, Erwitt echoes the Court’s unequivocal conclusion that

26. This combination of legal victory with social decline characterized precisely the period between these photographs, marked by increasing black unemployment and domestic disarray. For Moynihan, these are critical years in the decline of the black standard of living, with almost 30 percent of black men unemployed during the prosperous year of 1963. See Moynihan, The Negro Family, p. 67.
separate facilities are “inherently unequal,” that segregation itself inflicts irreparable harm; this man can wheel himself away from the “colored” fountain, past the “white” one, and out of the photographic frame, but not out of the handicapped condition associated spatially, and by implication causally, with the sign of racial privilege. At the other end of the age spectrum from Vachon’s erect and questioning ten-year-old child, Erwitt’s adult man in a wheelchair offers graphic testimony to the Court’s assertion that the invisible but indelible scars inflicted on the “hearts and minds” of segregated schoolchildren are “unlikely ever to be undone,” indeed, that they metamorphose over time from psychological into physical wounds that write the long-term crippling effects of segregation on the body.  

By literalizing the metaphor of racial wounds, representing them as biological and unalterable, however, Erwitt also removes them from the social realm and offers as a racial representative an individual who appears incapable of actively pursuing his own redress. His face shrouded in shadow, his shoulders slightly stooped, his left arm resting limply on the side of the chair, this man is visually defined by his status as victim, a status the photograph perpetuates. Representing injury, however sympathetically, reinflicts it photographically; the man’s carefully averted eyes suggest that he does not voluntarily or comfortably submit his disability to photographic scrutiny.  

There is no visual alliance here, no mutual surprise at confronting Jim Crow space, no hint of collaborative agency;  


28. In The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery (New York, 1992), David Hevey forcefully analyzes the politics of photographing disability. His distinction between a medical model “in which the impairment and the disability are both contained within the body” and a social model that “separate[s] out the bodily impairment from the socially created disablement” is especially germane (pp. 16–17). The racialized counterpart to this distinction can be glimpsed by comparing the perspective of Erwitt’s photograph to that of the African American social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark, whose 1950 report to the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth is the first item the Supreme Court cites in its controversial footnote 11 of the Brown decision to the “modern authority” that supersedes “the extent of psychological knowledge available at the time of Plessy v. Ferguson” (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, pp. 782, 785). Not only does Clark insist that segregation harms all children, white as well as black; he also resists the discourse of crippling. In response to a legal expert’s criticism of the Brown decision’s reliance on social science data (primarily Clark’s own), he notes that the claim that segregation “shatter[ed] the spines” of black schoolchildren, a metaphoric equivalent of Erwitt’s man in the wheelchair, is in fact the expert’s own figure of speech, not that of the social scientists (Kenneth B. Clark, “The Desegregation Cases: Criticism of the Social Scientist’s Role,” Prejudice and Your Child, 2d ed. [Boston, 1963], p. 195). As the decade proceeded, Clark became increasingly insistent that psychologists needed to shift their focus from individual pathology to its systemic social etiology. I am grateful to Sue Schweik for bringing Hevey’s powerful study to my attention.
this image reproduces the race relations it critiques. It does present one whimsical, humanistic figure of mediation: the transparent globe of multicolored gumballs, reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston's multicolored miscellany inside the skins of racial difference, which offers a rainbow of possibilities that blur the distinction enforced by the "white" and "colored" fountains on either side. But the gap between the unmarked, incorporeal white photographer and the embodied, injured African American object of his gaze can't be mediated by a figure of internal heterogeneity. Framed by the vertical lines of two pillars, the erect stand of the gumball machine—in front of and a stand in for the invisible and invulnerable photographer—suggests the phallic stakes of this visual display of inequality. Erwitt maximizes damage to blacks in a way that safeguards a savior role for whites, pivoting the gendered connotations of the fountains to the interplay between the masculine photographer and the emasculated object of his gaze.

This interplay emerged in force in the aftermath of the massive trauma World War II inflicted on masculinity. Erwitt's sequence enacts a strategy that recurred throughout the two decades after the war: displacing physical and psychological wounds onto the bodies of others, especially onto black male bodies, already perceived as unmanned by prejudice. Black men became the carriers of the culture's survivor guilt, and of the gender angst produced both by the wounds of war itself and by the return of veterans to a civilian society that had shown them to be expendible. The discourse on black male crippling, especially the most physicalizing tendencies of what was subsequently termed the "damage hypothesis," peaked in 1965 in the Moynihan Report and in President Johnson's address at Howard University, which Moynihan coauthored, both of which are rife with such metaphors as the "scars of centuries," "open wounds," and "crippled by hatred." Erwitt's 1963 photograph

29. See Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1979), p. 155. I am indebted to Claire Kahane for this insight.

30. Erwitt's third photograph specifically recalls the 1949 Hollywood version of the Broadway play Home of the Brave, which transforms the play's Jewish protagonist into a black soldier who is literally paralyzed by guilt over the relief he feels when his white (and at times racially abusive) friend is killed in battle. For a brilliant reading of how this film works first to evoke black anger at racism in the "land of the free" and then to dissolve it into the universalized problem of survivor guilt, see Michael Rogin, Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 228–50. For a reading of Hollywood's rendition of the postwar crisis in masculinity that does not focus on race in particular, see chap. 4 of Kaja Silverman, Male Subjectivity at the Margins (New York, 1992).

31. Stanley M. Elkins coined the phrase "the damage hypothesis" in the third edition of Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago, 1976), pp. 267–70; the quotes are from "The Howard University Address," given by Lyndon B. Johnson, 4 June 1965, drafted by Richard N. Goodwin and Moynihan, in The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy, pp. 126, 130, 125. Although the language of damage was sometimes invoked by black intellectuals such as E. Franklin Frazier and Howard University President
constitutes this moment’s ultimate visual form. By the middle of the decade, growing black resistance put an end to the rhetoric of damage. That the culmination of this rhetoric would also be its termination can be glimpsed in an almost contemporary photograph that presents a different picture of racial injury.

Although produced a year before Erwitt’s courthouse photograph, Danny Lyon’s 1962 photo inside the county courthouse in Albany, Georgia, anticipates a more militant strategy (fig. 12). Whereas Erwitt consistently chooses subjects and objects that evoke both pathos and irrevocability, Lyon documents a manifestation of Jim Crow whose juxtaposition of flagrantly displayed (and illegal) white privilege with a deliberate and gratuitous assault on African American dignity provokes outrage rather than resigned disapproval or sympathy. In this courthouse scene, at the very seat of justice—the corner of the bench and chair to the right of the “white” fountain echoing and amplifying its massive authority—a travesty of the separate but equal formula is entrenched as a piece of legal furniture, a structural component of a system so corrupt it will have to be dismantled to enable change. The racial order pictured here literally leaves no place for a politics of reform; this diminutized “colored” fountain has not been given the space to achieve even a semblance of equality. If Erwitt’s photographs conform to the liberal documentary mode, in which, according to Martha Rosler, “causality is vague, blame is not assigned, fate cannot be overcome,” Lyon’s image, with its explicit assignation of blame and implicit call to action, constitutes a radical visual practice.32 A key component of this practice is the dissociation of the segregated fountains from the gender paradigm’s aura of stability and inevitability; by documenting instead (as does Reid) fountains whose discrepancy in height implies an adult-child analogy that lacks any pretense of foundation in biology, and whose conspicuous imbalance invites

Mordecai Johnson, who at a 1936 dedication of a new building requested President Roosevelt to allow the students to see he was crippled in order to provide an inspiration for their struggle to transcend their own form of crippling, the exceptionally graphic and insistent version of this discourse that crested in the 1960s was produced almost exclusively by white men, and applied almost exclusively to black men. Doris Kearns Goodwin discusses Howard’s invitation to Roosevelt in No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II (New York, 1994), pp. 532–33. For a fuller study of the postwar damage hypothesis, see Rogin, Blackface, White Noise, chap. 7.

32. Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography),” in The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 307. This is, of course, the standard critique of mainstream documentary practice, as exemplified by the FSA, in which natural disaster, rather than social oppression, is shown to be the cause of human misery. Lyon, by contrast, quite consistently chose to document the source, rather than the consequences, of oppression, evoking anger rather than compassion. In a photograph taken the same year as the Albany courthouse fountains, for example, Lyon zeroes in on a gleaming “white” marble drinking fountain in Birmingham, Alabama.
FIG. 12.—Segregated drinking fountains in the county courthouse in Albany, Georgia. 1962. Photo: Danny Lyon. From Danny Lyon, Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement.
insurgency, Lyon denies Jim Crow one of its legitimating strategies. It is thus not entirely paradoxical that this image of black infantilization was triggered by an emergent black authority. James (Jim) Forman, executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that on the other side of town was converting Albany into a center of social revolution, deputized Lyon to take this photograph, which consolidated Lyon's career as a political photographer. The image's afterlife continues to bear witness to its radical edge. A recent poster protesting the University of California Regents' decision to ban affirmative action in university admissions and hiring procedures inserts Lyon's photograph not only as a reminder of the past into which the present threatens to devolve, but also, provocatively tilted at an angle, as a reinforcement of the poster's rhetoric of outrage rather than pity (fig. 13).33

4

Through the intervention of Jim Forman, Lyon's photograph anticipates and calls for the dismantling of Jim Crow. But even during the Jim Crow era, the configurings of race and gender at the drinking fountain were more various than the photographs men took at civic sites reveal. Photographs taken by women in 1946–47 at the peak of postwar masculine anxieties display no investment in images of black abjection. Instead, they tend to pressure the image of white masculinity by giving bodies, and consequently boundaries, to its transcendent, behind-the-scenes authority. Unlike their male colleagues, who shield themselves from scrutiny by never representing white bodies bent to drink in postures that might imply either responsibility for or common ground with the victims of Jim Crow, women photographers bring into focus the sexual, age, and class vulnerabilities of white masculinity.

We might start by considering a pair of photographs taken by Marion Palfi for a newspaper story on the conviction of two leading members of the Columbians, a white supremacist group in Georgia, on charges of

33. Lyon, the only white photographer in this study who was actively involved in the civil rights movement, describes his relationship with Forman, and with SNCC, in Danny Lyon, Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992):

Forman treated me like he treated most newcomers. He put me to work. "You got a camera? Go inside the courthouse. Down at the back they have a big water cooler for whites and next to it a little bowl for Negroes. Go in there and take a picture of that." With Forman's blessing, I had found a place in the civil rights movement that I would occupy for the next two years. James Forman would direct me, protect me, and at times fight for a place for me in the movement. He is directly responsible for my pictures existing at all. [P 30]

I am very grateful to Catherine Hollis for showing me the affirmative action poster.
FIG. 13.
inciting to riot. Palfi photographed these leaders with the group’s large thunderbolt insignia, derived from Hitler’s elite guard, but in the only photograph that circulated beyond the immediate context of this story she depicted the older and frailer body of charter member Ira Jett (who merely carried the dynamite for the group) with a more indigenous and ambiguous icon of white supremacy: the Ice Water White People sign that hung above the drinking fountain outside the Atlanta courtroom (fig. 14). The structure of this sign, whose first line both parallels and modifies the second, links white people to ice water. Racializing ice water has produced a metaphor of whiteness. Jett’s stern profile above the white basin reinforces this metaphorical equivalence, but the coldness that produces and is reproduced by segregation appears to derive from insufficiency rather than invulnerability. Jett’s stooped position and brittle angularity; the left hand clutching his stomach, presumably to keep his tie from getting wet but suggesting the need to hold himself together; the rumpled jacket; the age spot on his right hand; the prominent veins and jawbone; and the glint of oil in his thinning hair: all contribute to the image of a fragile body struggling for, rather than assuming, mastery. The impression of inadequate masculinity is intensified by a companion photo (the two are juxtaposed at the end of the photo essay) of Betty Penland, the sister of one Columbian leader and the future bride of another, who unlike Jett is dressed in the group’s paramilitary outfit and who poses next to the fountain rather than bending to drink from it (fig. 15). Raising her arm in a gesture that suggests a clenched fist salute, she displays the Columbian thunderbolt logo tattooed on its inner side. The Nazi sympathies of the Columbians, whose leaders spoke only in German and distributed copies of Mein Kampf, are incarnated in this phallic, blond, Germanic-looking female self. By contrast, the domestic masculine version of Jim Crow seems susceptible to change.

In another example, which shifts our focus from the courthouse to the workplace, the image of phallic white femininity props up, rather than diminishes, a vulnerable masculinity. Esther Bubley’s 1946 photo in a tobacco warehouse in Lumberton North Carolina, produced after she had followed FSA-OWI director Roy Stryker’s move to the public relations department of Standard Oil of New Jersey, introduces class into the

34. See “Loomis and Burke Doing Business Again,” in the liberal newspaper PM, 23 Feb. 1947, p. 5, with photos by Palfi and text by Stetson Kennedy. These are among the many photographs of racial violence and discrimination that Palfi took during (and after) her three-year tenure of the prestigious Rosenwald fellowship (1946–49). Palfi’s photographs and papers are at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona. I am very grateful to Miruna Stanica and to the center’s archivist, Amy Rule, for their assistance in locating these photographs. A selection of Palfi’s photographs may be seen in Marion Palfi, Invisible in America: An Exhibition of Photographs by Marion Palfi (exhibition catalogue, University of Kansas Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kans., 1973) and in the 1990 edition of Kennedy’s Jim Crow Guide.
FIG. 14.—Marion Palfi, untitled. [Ira Jett at drinking fountain]. From the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. © Martin Magner. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona.
FIG. 15.—Marion Palfi, untitled. [Columbian Thunderbolt tattooed on arm of Betty Penland]. From the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. © Martin Magner. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona.
race and gender matrix (fig. 16). To disentangle the issues intertwined in this image, we need read it against another representation of Jim Crow fountains in the workplace, an undated, unsigned (but almost certainly male-produced) UPI photograph (fig. 17).

Both photographs reveal the class boundaries of a racial discourse structured around the terms of phallus/lack. The white middle-class body invisible in the scene of (in)justice enters into the scene of labor, and the black body’s emasculated civic status is displaced by a hypermasculine physical stature; these photographs engage mythologies of a masculine working-class culture in which the common discipline of labor levels racial differences. In marked contrast to the courthouse scenes, both photographs bring a black man and a white man together to the fountain and depict them both bowing down to drink in a gesture that signals the common subjection of workers to a system they did not invent. In both, the fountains and the postures are racially indistinguishable (in Bubley’s case two spigots share a common basin—they are equal and not entirely separate); extreme contrasts in authority have yielded to a rhetoric of shared enclosure in a system of constraint.

Bubley’s photograph actually reverses the adult-child relation between the “white” and “colored” fountains in the Albany courthouse. The mature African American man neatly dressed in slacks, long-sleeved shirt, and hat has a more dignified and authoritative presence than the white youth whose shortness is exaggerated by his too long overalls, rolled up to reveal boyish white socks and scuffy shoes. No social or physical signs other than the faded word Colored over one fountain identify one man as African American (the slightly darker tone of the left forearm would otherwise appear the effects of working in the sun). The long-handled

35. For a full account of the Standard Oil of New Jersey (SONJ) documentary project and its political intentions and effects, see Steven W. Plattner, Roy Stryker: U.S.A., 1943–1950: The Standard Oil (New Jersey) Photographic Project (Austin, Tx., 1983). In Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950 (Cambridge, 1989), Maren Stange analyzes the continuity between Stryker’s policies as director of the FSA-OWI project and as a corporate employee. Stryker did not control what could be photographed but communicated an attitude about the function of the project. That Bubley documented the segregated fountain in this context is itself evidence of her autonomy. Of the 135 photographs in Plattner’s book, which was also the catalogue for the exhibit Roy Stryker: U.S.A., 1943–50 at the International Center of Photography, Bubley’s is the only representation of segregated facilities. Needless to say, the SONJ publication The Lamp, which uses Bubley’s photos to illustrate an essay on tobacco, does not include this one; see “Tobacco: Heat from Oil Cures Tons of This Great North Carolina Crop,” The Lamp 29 (Jan. 1947): 20–23.

36. Just how mythological they were is well documented by historical studies. For an account of the racial dynamics that produced the nineteenth-century white working class, see David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London, 1991). In The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement (1931; New York, 1968), Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris claim that as black migration after World War I intensified labor competition between blacks and whites, the black worker “was no less antagonistic to the white worker than the latter was to him” (p. 385).
rake on his side of the photograph and the small black object, perhaps a dart, in his left hand reinforce the image of mature virility, as do the adult men in the background on his left, in contrast to the faded, white, youthful image of what appears to be a sailor on the wall above the "white" fountain. In the UPI photograph, authority is distributed somewhat differently. The light glinting on the top and side of the black worker's head in the foreground calls attention to its physical textures and size rather than its cognitive capacities; cut off just below his broad shoulders, crossed in overall straps, with his face turned downward away from the camera, he appears the incarnation of sheer physical strength, in contrast to the white worker, clad in light street clothes and represented in profile, his square jaw and right-angled arm suggesting greater purposefulness, dynamism, agency. This photographer gives greater authority to the white man than the female photographer does (and it seems noteworthy
FIG. 17.—Segregated drinking fountain in use in the American South. Photo: UPI.
that Bubley and Palfi represent white men who are either a little too old or a little too young to embody authority persuasively); but the visual frame that severs the black worker at the shoulders also seems to impose the white worker's stooped posture, calling attention to capitalism’s disciplinary effects on all (male) bodies. The UPI photographer, moreover, compacts greater racial tension into the image. Whereas the side-by-side position of the two workers in Bubley’s photograph evokes the impression of fraternity, as does the partitioning of the segregated fountains from a scene of potentially more integrated activity, the UPI photograph’s close-up of two powerful upper torsos prevented from head-on collision only by the fountains’ separation conveys a sense of race at loggerheads. These segregated fountains as plausibly avert racial conflict fueled by centuries of inequality as they subvert or (one reading of Bubley’s paired bodies) foster racial harmony. If we credit Bubley’s gender position for her more radical reenvisioning of racial authority, we might attribute to her institutional position at Standard Oil of New Jersey her more conservative implication of a racial solidarity enabled by submission, rather than opposition, to the racial and economic status quo. But if the politics of these two images ultimately balance out, there is one irreducible gender-related difference. Both photographs undo the gender frame that aligns the “colored” position with the “feminine,” but Bubley overtly reconfigures it. Instead of a metaphor for racial difference, sexual difference here forges racial commonalities.

Diagonally above the “colored” fountain, a pinup girl seems to walk off the partition. With a radiant smile, she offers us her gleaming white body in a white bathing suit along with the Camel cigarettes she advertises. More discreetly in the background two severed female heads urge us to buy Raleigh cigarettes. Bubley constructs a photographic space divided between two gendered visual registers; all the men, fully clad, face inward toward the scene of commercial transaction, and undressed or fragmented female bodies face outward toward the viewer. The partition on which the segregated fountains are installed also marks a gender boundary; tobacco products exchanged and manufactured in a masculine interior emerge as feminized commodities. Constructed to eroticize the cigarettes they market, female bodies also become the product advertised.37 The very white, forward tilting, almost naked body of the woman in the Camel ad is designed to appear three-dimensional, to burst out of the advertisement’s visual frame and walk into our social universe. Her cut-out body shape looms above a dark rectangular cigarette box, which

37. For an analysis of the interplay between the eroticization of the product and the commodification of the female body, see Simone Davis, “Shrinking from Scrutiny, Seeking the Light: Advertising the Self in American Commodity Culture, 1920–32” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1996). Davis’s comments, in the dissertation and in person, have been instrumental in the development of my reading.
reaches only to her crotch; but this box also sets off by contrast and seems to contain the two long white legs peeping over its top like two slightly squiggly cigarettes. This leggy female creature could not only walk a mile for a Camel; she is the camel pictured in two-legged profile on the cut-out cigarette box; indeed, she is the Camels themselves. Her slender white legs are not the only cigarettes she offers; in her right hand, just below her firmly outlined right breast, she extends an open box of Camels toward us; her similarly positioned left hand holds a single cigarette, like an extended finger, pointing at us; we are invited to take a puff off her hands as well as her legs. And of course we are solicited as well to take a toke from those protruding breasts.

When a white woman finally enters the scene of drinking, then, it is through the eyes of a woman who positions her not as a consumer (drinker), but as the consumed—and as one who mediates the scene of racial difference. The commodified white female body is constructed entirely in twos, its frontal symmetry emphasized through the vertical pairing of hands, breasts, and legs. Re-viewed by a white female photographer, it considerately offers one cigarette-leg to each of the two men at the fountain underneath her. Bubley transforms the image of femininity whose defense was believed to justify Jim Crow into the sign under which white and black men are united. Racial difference pales through the associative chain that turns drinking water into smoking cigarettes and then (back) into suckling breasts; these two men at the segregated spigots become like children beneath the towering image of the white sex goddess/mother offering succor across racial boundaries. Cigarettes—and Camels in particular—were marketed in the 1930s and 1940s as modern forms of succor, as oral gratification with the “pleasant effect” of “promoting digestion” and soothing the “jangled nerves” produced by the fast tempo of urban life. Reassuring its viewers that its “slower-burning costlier tobaccos” would “never jangle the nerves,” Camel ads proposed not a refuge from modernity but a homeopathic cure for cosmopolitan ailments through a product that symbolized modernity.38 The cut-out pinup girl is a similar symbol of modernity. Feeding the charges bent beneath her tobacco instead of milk—the cigarettes protruding just below her breasts rather than the fluid inside them—she displaces the mammy who actu-

38. The “slower-burning costlier tobaccos” are advertised in this image. Other quotes are from ads discussed by Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940 (Berkeley, 1985), p. 341; the “never jangle the nerves” quote is from a 1954 Camel ad whose text begins, “Watch out for the signs of jangled nerves” and concludes that Camels “never jangle the nerves.” Camel ads were distinctive in their emphasis on soothing nerves; whereas brands such as Murad, Chesterfield, Fatima, and Lucky Strike emphasized taste, pleasure, and smoothness, Camel ads emphasized their cigarettes’ therapeutic value. I am grateful to Don McQuade for collecting the cigarette advertisements and to Simone Davis for sharing them with me.
ally nurtured children of both races. Excising the memory of the plantation culture featured in ads for cigars, pipes, and plug tobacco, the modern girl markets the modern tobacco product promoted as a cure for modernity. But by depicting her above the black and white men drinking, the photograph evokes the plantation past and the black maternal figure the cigarette girl displaces, making us wonder exactly what kind of hunger this construction of modern white femininity assuages.

For cigarettes are not in fact nurturing, and the female body designed to advertise them feeds a need that is not primarily oral. This cigarette-wielding, cigarette-legged creature proffers a different kind of reassurance. Her phallically invested, glossy white body is the perfect fetish object, and her appearance in a Camel ad in 1946 is far from coincidental. It was during World War II that the American pinup girl was created and disseminated to U.S. soldiers around the globe, consolidating both national and sexual identity in a time of trouble for both. She was, in André Bazin’s words, “a wartime product, a weapon of war,” produced to inspire and animate the troops; her lean, streamlined, phallic shape, quite different from its European precursors and clearly not intended for

39. In chapter 6 of Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society (New York, 1984), Michael Schudson claims that women began smoking cigarettes in significant numbers in the 1920s and became a target of advertising by the late 1920s. Cigarettes themselves, connoting refinement rather than rugged masculinity, were perceived as feminine in comparison to pipes and cigars. Moreover, he claims: “In the 1920s, cigarettes came to be a personal and social marker for ‘the new woman,’ a sign of divorce from the past and inclusion in the group of the new, young, and liberated” (p. 196). Cigarettes became the ‘preferred smoke for people aiming for a streamlined, cultural modernity . . . and feeling free to experiment with a product that departed from conventional norms of masculinity” (p. 199). In White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture (New Haven, Conn., 1992), Jan Nederveen Pieterse discusses the disappearance of plantation culture in advertising, pointing out that blacks vanished from tobacco ads in World War II and that ads for cigars featured black dandies, demonstrating the metamorphosis of savage to gentlemen. On the ways the figure of the mammy empowers the white new woman, see Lauren Berlant, “National Brands/National Body: Imitation of Life,” in Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York, 1991), pp. 110–40. In Bubley’s photograph, by contrast, the new woman is the update of the mammy in the service of male desire.

40. In The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), Mary Ann Doane links the fetishization of the female body in advertising during and (especially) after the immediate war years to the effort to preserve an image of femininity apart from female participation in the workforce (see pp. 28–29). This shift is crystallized in the contrast between this Camel ad and one, produced during the war, that featured a woman defense worker smoking a cigarette and announcing: “In my new defense job, less nicotine in the smoke is important to me. I stick to Camels.” The classic work on the fetishization of the female body in film remains Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Screen 16 (Autumn 1975): 6–18. More recent studies include Doane, Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis (New York, 1991); Emily Apter, Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991); and the essays included in Fetishism as Cultural Discourse, ed. Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993).
motherhood, was a weapon not only against foreign threats but also against the more internal assaults that war inflicts on masculinity. Rapidly assimilated to the postwar industrial economy, she suddenly appears in advertisements capitalizing on her capacity to persuade potential (primarily male) buyers that purchasing her product would compensate for or conceal their most anxiety-producing lacks. Her resemblance to the cigarette made for a perfect fit; after her appearance in postwar Camel ads, very different from their wartime predecessors, which were marketed to the different psychological imperatives of the home front, she became a staple of cigarette advertising. What Bubley captures in her photograph, then, is the white female counterpart, in its mass cultural form, to black emasculation. Complementary strategies of disavowal, equally intensified by war, produce the white female fetish and the castrated black male. All legs, the white pinup girl who can walk a mile for a Camel is the antithesis of the black man in a wheelchair; yet they serve the same needs in the white male economy. In the drinking fountain space configured by this woman photographer, in which the men are aligned and the woman is above, it is not the black man but the female fetish who occupies the place of the feminine. Sexual difference overrides racial difference that has no visible content in the turned backs of the two men. It is not that the "Negro is half a man" but that both men are halves incorporated into fetishistic wholeness in the body of the woman.

5

The woman's body is white, of course, in this symbolic economy. But even in less overdetermined situations, white female photographers who resisted the association of "colored" with the feminine did not find a way either to associate black women with the sign of femininity (they took no photographs of Colored Women signs, for example), or (in what we will see can be another route to the same goal) to associate the "colored" drinking fountain sign with the bodies of black women. Black women become visible in the scene of drinking only when it is envisioned by black men.

Of the many photographs Gordon Parks took on his 1956 assignment for Life, two (at least) showed segregated fountains. Life included one in its "Background of Segregation" pictorial essay (fig. 18); Parks included the other in his catalogue for his 1997 retrospective show, Half Past Autumn (fig. 19). The photographs depict the same site at different


42. Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York is the title of a 1911 book by Mary White Ovington, who two years earlier had cofounded the NAACP.
FIG. 18.—At segregated drinking fountain, a little girl gets some help from a passing adult. Photo: Gordon Parks. From Life, 24 Sept. 1956.

times, and in this and other ways suggest comparison to the sequence produced by Erwitt. In both instances, the scenes selected are telling: whereas Erwitt chooses an empty interior in which the segregated fountains stand out against a bare background as a determinative and decontextualized articulation of social space, Parks chooses (from the “plenty” of “signs of bigotry and discrimination” he encountered on his trip) a street scene in an African American urban neighborhood in which the structure of segregation competes and is in dialogue with other social messages and relations (S, p. 107). Most vividly in the photograph that Life selected and captioned “at segregated drinking fountain, a little girl gets some help from a passing adult,” segregation occupies a middle ground, visually and conceptually; it neither determines nor is it determined by the richer texture of social life. The foreground presents a variety of interactions. On the right, a close female relationship, nuanced by differences of posture and facial expression, is suggested by the two women walking side by side and dressed almost identically in black sleeveless tops, full print skirts, dark sunglasses, white sandals, and white button earrings. The threesome on the left complements this pairing through the range of relations unfolding at the “colored” fountain. (The “white” fountain stands in splendid self-imposed isolation.) In contrast to the adult women, the two little girls assume a relation of seniority, as the younger child patiently awaits her turn at the fountain. The impression of a benevolent hierarchy is extended through the diagonal that is formed by the passing adult who helps the older child reach the fountain. This array of generational and gender relations, captured in the variously angled and sized bodies in the foreground, receives a different expression in the ice cream ads on the window in the background. It is as if the globe of multicolored gumballs in Erwitt’s third photograph had exploded to mediate and comment on the space between the exclusionary racial signifiers that dominate the middle ground. Assisted by the prominence of intermediate flavors—butter pecan, butterscotch, banana split (but no chocolate or vanilla!)—the ice cream ads both call attention to the reductive binary of the drinking fountains and dissolve it into a fuller spectrum of color relations.

Within this spectrum, sexual difference is not a central theme; the supportive interactions at the “colored” fountain, so different from the abject isolation emphasized by white photographers, are more important than the gender of the drinkers. In the photograph Parks selected for the catalogue of his own exhibit, however, gender moves center stage, presenting a forceful contrast to Erwitt’s second photograph of a man

43. Two of the other photographs in the Life story include Jim Crow signs, and there were no doubt countless others that he photographed. There is no way of knowing if drinking fountains were included in these photos, but it is surely significant that it was images of these fountains that both Life and Parks himself chose to publish.
stooped to drink from the “colored” fountain. Seemingly taken from a car window on the left, as if Parks had waited with his camera for just the right shot, this image moves closer to its subject and exchanges the variety of street life for a pared-down focus on a single woman, fountain, and child. In this carefully composed, perhaps staged, image, photojournalism modulates into Parks’s other signature mode: fashion photography.  

In contrast to the casual multicolored clothing of the Life photograph, the woman and girl are here dressed meticulously in white. The woman’s high-heeled pumps, shiny purse, earrings, and dress are a rhapsody in white; even the awkward appearance of a slip strap on her arm highlights by contrast how well-composed her outfit is and offers a glimpse of the various layers of white that constitute it; the girl’s dress is similarly layered with a fluffy white pinafore. By standing to one side of the fountain, the woman allows the freshly painted white Colored Only lettering to be fully visible (in contrast to its dingy, partially obscured White Only counterpart) and to echo and reinforce the whiteness of her clothing. Through his visual insistence on the brightness of color, associated with a woman who is very much a lady, Parks revalues racial difference and its gendering. The “colored” position is still gendered feminine, but it is not feminized; if humiliated masculinity serves Erwitt as a figure of racial disempowerment, respectable femininity serves Parks as a figure of racial entitlement. By affiliating the deferential posture at the “colored” fountain with the (white-denied) decorum of African American femininity rather than with the (white-alleged) deficiency of African American masculinity, Parks (in a gesture reminiscent of Alex Rivera’s photograph of a Colored Ladies sign) simultaneously restores black women to the category of “lady” from which they were expelled at the beginning of Jim Crow and uses this conjunction to stake a claim to higher racial status. Femininity does iconic labor for men who cannot accomplish the same symbolic function within this visual scenario, but it is a service from which women also stood to benefit.

On his way back from Alabama to New York, Parks and his coworker Sam Yette, a young black journalist, completed their final assignment—with a hidden camera. Whereas they could document segregation openly within the black community, they had to photograph the Jim Crow facil-

44. The half decade prior to this southern trip Parks spent primarily on assignments in Paris and New York doing fashion photography. Half Past Autumn offers compelling examples of this genre and of Parks’s descriptions of the pleasure that he took in it. In “Black Photography: Contexts for Evolution,” Deborah J. Johnson suggests that Park’s photographs often exhibit a mutual pleasure in his subjects’ appearance: “His subjects are usually aware of the artist’s presence, and there is a certain charm of the early studio photographer’s ‘Sunday best’ about these works” (Deborah J. Johnson, “Black Photography: Contexts for Evolution,” in A Century of Black Photographers: 1840–1960, ed. Valencia Hollins Coar [Providence, R.I., 1983], p. 19). At least one of the other images for the Life series, a photograph of a Fisk University professor standing with his family under a Colored Waiting Room sign in a Nashville, Tennessee, bus station, was carefully staged.
ities in the Birmingham train station covertly. Nevertheless, they barely managed to rescue their equipment from an attempted robbery. Documenting segregation was sufficient transgression; documenting transgression was impossible. Although the “young and brash” Sam Yette had the temerity to drink from the “white only” fountain in the waiting room to which, as interstate travellers, he and Parks had recently gained access under federal law, he did so under the hostile surveillance of an entire roomful of white passengers, including “about ten big, rough-looking toughs” who appeared instantaneously; photographing Yette’s action would have courted the camera’s (and perhaps their own) destruction (S, p. 107). What could not be documented photographically, however, could be staged under the more controlled circumstances of the cinematic medium with which this essay began.

A scene of transgressive drinking—which is also historically my final drinking fountain scene—concludes John Korty’s 1973 film of Ernest J. Gaines’s The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971). Bringing together the drinking fountain scenes that Parks could and could not document, the film transforms an act of defiance that is only adumbrated in Gaines’s text into the climactic and symbolic image of an era’s end. Set at the beginnings of the black protest movement in rural Louisiana in the early 1960s, the cinematic autobiography also provides a fitting frame to Reid’s film of Taulbert’s memoir of the quiescent 1950s. Both films give powerful visual form to scenes that are submerged within the written texts, and both are constructed as initiation narratives, but the initiate evolves across the two decades from a young black boy who must be inducted into the culture of white racism to a white male journalist who must be instructed in African American history and politics. Not coincidentally, the instructor has also changed: from Poppa to his female counterpart, the 110-year-old Miss Jane. Her position as narrator and protagonist, we are told, reflects black women’s privileged gender experience as survivors, but her position as the object of the camera’s gaze obeys a different visual logic. For when a black woman enters this final scene of drinking, it is from the “white,” not the “colored,” fountain that she drinks in a gesture of resistance that emblematizes the black community’s political awakening (fig. 20). Repudiating rather than (as in Parks) revaluing the category “colored,” Miss Jane Pittman is diversely and dramatically out of place. Within the visual rhetoric of Jim Crow, it is not gender immunity but gender—along with racial—dissonance that are put together on display. A wrongly gendered body converges with a wrongly raced fountain.

45. Evidence of the risks incurred by black photographers is provided by the experience of Preston E. Stewart, Jr., dean of men at Lane College, who was arrested on charges of disorderly conduct for photographing a Jim Crow Coke machine in Jackson, Tennessee. The story is covered by The Southern Patriot 19 (Feb. 1961). Another unidentified black photographer who attempted to cover the integration of Little Rock’s Central High School was jumped and beaten by white onlookers. See U.S. News and World Report, 4 Oct. 1957, p. 43.
so that both axes of exclusion are made visible simultaneously. Barred by race from the category "lady" and by gender from the category "colored" as both were constructed by the white imagination, the African American female body at the "white" drinking fountain challenges at once the racist practices and the racial iconography of Jim Crow. A decade after Cliff learned to read his place in the white symbolic, Miss Jane stages a new initiation: to black culture rather than to white, and to the efficacy of African American women as figures in and of the dismantling of Jim Crow's representational politics.