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Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights

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Introduction

I jump jis'so, An' ev'y time I turn about I jump Jim Crow
—Thomas “Daddy” Rice

IN 1955, on the very eve of the modern Civil Rights Movement, African American novelist James Baldwin remarked that “the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met.” Assuming an ironic tone of grudging admiration, Baldwin highlighted the contested nature of southern race relations. Far from being static, the South’s “Negro problem” was instead lively, slippery, a “perpetual challenge” that had to be repeatedly “met.”¹

The ways in which white southerners “met” the race “problem” have intrigued historians writing about post-Civil War southern politics since at least 1928, when Ulrich B. Phillips pronounced race relations the “central theme” of southern history. What contemporaries referred to as “the race question” may be phrased more bluntly today as the struggle for white domination. Establishing and maintaining this domination—creating the system of racial segregation and African American disfranchisement known as Jim Crow—has remained a preoccupation of southern historians. From our vantage point on the far side of the Civil Rights Movement, it is easy to understand why: just as the questions we ask about German state formation in the nineteenth century are grounded by events in the twentieth, so too was it difficult to comprehend the dissolution of the Jim Crow South without looking back to its foundations. Southern political history’s best narratives focus on the frenzied efforts of the champions of white supremacy—whether the button-down booster, the “feather-legged” demagogue, or the good ol’ boy populist—to erect and defend an institutional and ideological edifice capable of repelling challenges from within as well as from without.

In recognizing white supremacy as the “central theme” of southern history, however, historians have sometimes minimized variations on that theme in ways that impoverish our appreciation of the complexities of racism and power. Stunned by the sheer magnitude and obscenity of the

¹ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 175.

Jim Crow South, historians often emphasize the power of white supremacists and their tools—violence, economic oppression, electoral fraud, and manipulation of the social structure—and minimize the contingent nature of white supremacist ideas and regimes. In this collection, the “central theme” of southern history remains central, but white supremacy is not seen as an overwhelming force. Rather, it is a precarious balancing act, pulled in all directions by class, gender, and racial tensions. As the epigraph from Daddy Rice suggests, Jim Crow was at bottom a social relationship, a dance in which the wary partners matched their steps, bent, and whirled in an unending series of deadly serious improvisations.

To point to the dynamism of white supremacy is not to underestimate either its thoroughness or its potency. Jim Crow looked anything but precarious to those who tried to fight it in 1880 or 1930 or 1955. But stressing the contingent nature of Jim Crow by seeing it as dependent on individual actions through time helps to denaturalize white supremacy. Jim Crow was not the logical and inevitable culmination of civil war and emancipation, but rather the result of a calculated campaign by white elites to circumscribe all possibility of African American political, economic, and social power.

These essays explore white supremacy’s balancing act from a number of analytical and narrative perspectives. All turn on politics. Many investigate the broad spectrum of African American resistance to white supremacist ideas and regimes. Some emphasize the agency of white and black women in crafting or resisting (as the case may be) a coherent system of white racial domination. To complicate white electoral politics and to uncover sites of resistance, these essays often turn away from the polling place and voter returns toward a broader definition of the political. Some find contestation in the creation and interpretation of law, in the rhetoric and structure of political parties, and in governmental agencies and the courts. Borrowing from cultural studies, anthropology, and feminist theory, others find the political in more unlikely spaces: in the household; in the overflowing aisles of a dime store; on the street. The notion of politics that informs this collection extends from the polling station to the front porch, and bridges the distance between public and private contests for power and dignity.

The expanded definition of politics and the attention paid to African American actions in these essays suggest a conclusion to one of the most drawn-out debates of southern historiography: the “continuity/change” argument. For forty years, southern historians have argued over to what degree, and in what ways, the Civil War and emancipation represented a rupture in the history of the South. Traditionally, this debate has analyzed white electoral politics, landownership, and patterns of economic change to determine exactly which white men got on top and how they stayed

there. Continuarians insist that despite changes in personnel, traditional values—particularly the value of elite white social, political, and economic domination—persevered through Reconstruction and the turn of the twentieth century. Those who emphasize change argue that the New South of factories, white tenant farmers, and cities called for a new white supremacy in a revolutionary context.

Shifting the focus from white to black southerners reveals a new definition of continuity and change. Black resistance, not white supremacy, was continuous, while white supremacy remodeled itself to meet any challenge. In every decade from emancipation through the 1960s, black people in the South resisted white elite domination. Despite the fact that fighting for civil rights could spark civil war, African Americans in the South looked continuously for room to jump Jim Crow. Sometimes they found it in alliances with whites disenchanted with parts of their region's "traditions." Other times they resisted white definitions of black rights and prerogatives through the courts, or on the streets, or in the dressing room of a department store. In this way, the actions of black southerners and their white allies both molded the articulation of white supremacy and suggested strategies of resistance to it. The essays in this collection trace channels that began at emancipation to cut paths through the dam of white supremacy. While these individual streams often ran dry for decades, taken as a whole these essays demonstrate the continuous contest between southern blacks determined to assert their civil rights and whites determined to deny blacks that power.

Uncovering resistance to segregation undermines the traditional periodization of postwar southern history at the same time that it strips Jim Crow of the sense of inevitability and invulnerability traditionally ascribed to it. In viewing the "Age of Segregation" as constantly beleaguered, the essays in this book collectively make the point that the grid lines of power were never drawn neatly on the ground, and no single event marked either the birth or the death of Jim Crow. At the same time, by placing black southerners, white dissidents, and women of both races at the center of southern history, we begin to rewrite the history of the "backward" South—that miasma of reactionary politics, poverty, and violence—and focus instead on those portions of the South that served as an incubator for one of the most extraordinary social justice movements in the history of the United States. Strom Thurmond was not simply a reincarnation of Ben Tillman. Rosa Parks was not the first black woman to challenge segregation. Martin Luther King, Jr., did not emerge *sui generis* to advocate political equality from the pulpit. Just as white supremacy made and remade itself over a century, Parks and King continued a long tradition of African American activism. By revealing the history of racism and resistance

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central to the southern experience, this collection, we hope, will enable students to understand not just the Second Reconstruction but how racism continues to thrive and be thwarted today. It is our hope that the gathering together of these essays in *Jumpin' Jim Crow* will spotlight the many turnabouts in what remains the central dance of southern history.