

Introduction

To Lie, Steal, and Dissemble

The Cultural Work of the Literature of Segregation

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Segregation is a touchstone issue in African American history, and it profoundly shapes how we think about group identity and belonging in the United States. How have writers represented experiences of racial segregation in literary venues? Segregation comprises a diverse set of cultural practices, ethnic experiences, historical conditions, political ideologies, municipal planning schemes, and racialized social systems, although it is primarily associated with the Jim Crow South and the era between court cases *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), when segregation was no longer the law of the land but a persistent *de facto* condition. In 1896, when the Supreme Court decided in a seven to one decision to enter the fray of post-Reconstruction race relations, it upheld the infamous separate-but-equal doctrine. This decision also helped set the parameters of a literary predicament: How to represent race segregation without necessarily reinscribing it? More than an ideological question, this aesthetic challenge infuses the literature that follows as writers differently approach what W.E.B. Du Bois famously declared the twentieth-century's defining dilemma: the problem of the color line.

The collection's title is inspired by the work of perhaps the most key literary figure associated with Jim Crow segregation: Richard Wright. In his famous essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1937), Wright dramatizes his "Jim Crow education." As he matures into adulthood and takes on employment, Wright notes, "It was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel. Here I learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble. I learned to play that dual role which every Negro must

play if he wants to eat and live" (1418). In this moment, Wright gets at not only what it means to be a colored citizen under Jim Crow, but also the tactics, ingenuity, and acrobatics required by the aesthetic project of representing segregation. For Wright, this meant telling stories about what happens when exemplary figures like Bigger Thomas or Big Boy cross color lines, be they *de jure* or *de facto*. Other writers, too, developed narratives, characters, plots, and a plethora of fictional strategies to play Wright's dual role, from Charles Chesnutt's learned narrator relaying Uncle Remus tales, to W.E.B. Du Bois's invitation to join him on the Jim Crow car at the turn of the twentieth century, to Nella Larsen's African American women passing as white during the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, all the way to Lorraine Hansberry's cramped Chicago apartment at the tail end of *de jure* segregation in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) in which the white community association representative Karl Linder intrudes on the Younger family with a rather mundane message of racial intolerance. Perhaps Wright's dual role is most starkly illustrated by Chesnutt's often remarked tactics to foster ambiguity around his own racial identity in his early career. In any case, writers across political, racial, and social spectra develop narrative strategies to lie, steal, and dissemble to get at the truth of the experiences of race segregation, but also to tell us something about how and why race segregation works, often with the hopes of influencing a change of heart or mind.

Wright's essay works on both these levels, revealing how segregation operates at the same time that he joins a literary tradition that rises to the aesthetic challenge of representing segregation. In the first few sentences of his essay, Wright employs symbolic geographies to reveal how segregation shapes spaces in society: "My first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small. We were living in Arkansas. Our house stood behind the railroad tracks. Its skimpy yard was paved with black cinders. Nothing green ever grew in that yard. The only touch of *green* we could see was far away, beyond the tracks, over where the white folk lived" (1411). With this opening, Wright establishes the importance of the way space is organized in segregated spaces, even at the level of foliage within a color palette for a segregated landscape.

We should caution at the outset that this collection will not offer an exhaustive catalog or chronology of something we would call a segregation narrative tradition. Such a task would greatly exceed the confines of one book. Instead, we offer a series of illustrative approaches and studies of texts, periods, writers, and spaces that instigate conversations about reordering how we think about the periods and practices of race segregation. In his provocative study of what he calls "beautiful democracy," Russ Castronovo also asks aesthetic questions about traditionally political concerns and events, such as Du Bois's anti-lynching work at *The Crisis*, ultimately finding "a sort of political alchemy that tried to wring an activist methodology out of aesthetic formalism" (110). He cautions, "In rearticulating 'the beautiful,' the men and women at *The Crisis* walked

dangerous ground, trying to recuperate forms of representation that had done so much injury to black people. Worse still, they risked their own irrelevance, opening themselves up to the accusation that effeminate dabbling in art did little to abate black victimization" (110). Far beyond *The Crisis* and anti-lynching activities, such "dangerous ground" lies underneath the wide-ranging literary tradition associated with race segregation in its multiple forms.

A Segregation Narrative Tradition?

What does it mean to propose the existence of a segregation narrative? And are we ready for that? We now universally recognize "the slave narrative." Of course, that, too, required similar intellectual work to create a category that we can so easily use to describe a coherent tradition. After Reconstruction hopes faded when federal troops left the South in 1877, Jim Crow segregation became the nation's wallpaper and eventually the last citizens with direct experiences of being slaves passed away. In that wake, literary critics synthesized the archive of texts, tracts, and testimonials and identified something called a "slave narrative." More so than the institution of slavery, complex and changing as it was, race segregation comprises an even more disparate set of laws, practices, beliefs, and policies, even if we start from Jim Crow segregation and work outward. So, the literary archive is also much more varied and the task of identifying something called a "segregation narrative" is challenging, one whose merits are in question. We think it is useful to use "segregation" as a literary category that holds the promise of creating coherence across different regions, historical experiences, and genres associated with segregation. The special issue of *African American Review* on which this collection builds asked more questions than it answered while beginning the project of identifying some of the writers, approaches, and locations that should probably inform conversations about a segregation narrative tradition. This collection goes a bit further in some of those directions, including identifying foundational figures, such as a section on Chesnut (a potential bookend to the tradition, with Wright and Lorraine Hansberry on the other), providing a framework on the place of Jim Crow within a larger segregation narrative tradition, and taking comparative ethnic and transnational approaches a bit further. The essays in the collection also attend to how segregation narratives involve formal innovation in response to the social and political institutions of compulsory race segregation. Pushing the question of aesthetics, conceived broadly, the collection focuses on the very nature of literary and theoretical representations of segregation. Moreover, in this introduction, we also offer a few generalizations that we think might withstand scrutiny when other scholars think about what other literary figures, experiences, and texts could fall under the umbrella of segregation literature.

I. Racial Cartographies

The first generalization concerns the spatialization of race. In segregation narratives, race infuses the landscape. In this way, writers dramatize the process of how Jim Crow and other kinds of segregation are naturalized. Each text must invent a geography of race to denote where certain bodies belong and the various sociolegal codes that attend such geographic inscriptions. Drawing from the same palette as Richard Wright's spatial aesthetic of segregation, for instance, Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), represents segregated spaces with visual metaphors closely akin to Wright's colored spaces. In Morrison's novel, we experience a symbolic geography through a child's perspective when Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola walk to Pauline Breedlove's place of employment, where she is a domestic for a white family:

We walked down tree-lined streets of soft gray houses leaning like tired ladies. . . . The streets changed; houses looked more sturdy, their paint newer, porch posts straighter, yards deeper. Then came brick houses set well back from the street, fronted by yards edged in shrubbery clipped into smooth cones and balls of velvet green. . . .

The orange-patched sky of the steel mill section never reached this part of town. This sky was always blue.

We reached Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, and picnic tables. It was empty now, but sweetly expectant of clean, white well behaved children and parents who would play there. . . . Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams. (105)

Morrison's signature voice and deceptively simple words are a particularly insightful take on segregation and echo Wright in a manner that begins to reveal a discrete aesthetic practice in representing segregation. Likewise, Morrison lays out how, if people are colored (white and black), so, too, are the spaces in which they live. Blacks live in "gray" and "black" places; in these passages the spaces are also hard, worn down, and seemingly inferior. Whites in contrast live in "green," lush, and open spaces, obviously superior. For these children it is not a far leap: inferior gray and black spaces become synonymous with the people that live within. Although Wright highlights the absence of anything green where he resides, focusing instead on the "black cinders" and "skimpy yard," Morrison spends time revealing the reverse in white spaces. Here everything is better: "newer," "sturdier," "straighter," and yards "deeper." Morrison's passage also articulates the deep longings of children not yet conditioned in the ways of segregation; they desire equality, figured here in terms of access to the "city" (read: "public") park to which blacks are denied entrance. Other literary

and political figures take up this aestheticization of racial geographies, such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) in which he talks about what segregation must seem like to his young daughter who is denied access to "Funtown," another "public" amusement park.

Wright and Morrison exemplify the way symbolic geographies, especially as understood by children, work well to represent segregation. Before either the young Wright or Morrison's children may know the concrete laws of segregation, *de jure* or *de facto*, they know the discrepancies informing the spaces in which they live. Whether it is Arkansas or Lorraine, Ohio, these differences are deeply encoded in the geography, in contrast to the difference between North and South that shapes traditional understandings of American spaces. "The Ethics of Jim Crow" and *The Bluest Eye* together challenge this conventional wisdom, which somehow suggests that guilt and innocence, access and denial of such, opportunity and disadvantage can be mapped using the Mason-Dixon Line. Rather, as Morrison's insightful narrator understands, the phenomenon of difference embedded in segregated societies transcends physical ground and instead encapsulates the entire world within which these children live. To repeat: "The orange-patched sky of the steel mill section never reached this part of town. This sky was always blue."

II: Fear

The second generalization we offer follows from the first: the spatialization of fear. Wright's essay reveals this common aspect of segregation literature, now telling us something about how and why race segregation works: fear becomes part and parcel of segregated lives. After fighting with some white boys, young Richard returns to his home and his mother beats him, imparting yet another "gem of Jim Crow wisdom" (1411). She wants him to realize how dangerous it is for him to fight with whites, telling him he "ought to be thankful to God as long as (he) lived that they didn't kill (him)" (1412). For the younger Wright, another truism of segregated living comes into full focus: fear is essential to survival. "All that night I was delirious and could not sleep," Wright reports. "Each time I closed my eyes I saw monstrous white faces from the ceiling, leering at me" (1412).

Once a text portrays geographies of race, including across public and private or domestic spaces, the narrative must enforce such demarcations, often through an atmosphere of fear. Much as lynching and other practices enforced Jim Crow boundaries, literary texts dramatize the fear and consequences related to marking, crossing, or not crossing lines of segregation, including characters on both sides of such lines, from modernist narratives of passing to socialist polemics against lynching. Just as Morrison draws from a similar color palette as Wright, other key writers pick up this aesthetic of fear when representing

segregation. For instance, in his long polemic essay *The Fire Next Time* (1963), James Baldwin excoriates:

This world is white and they are black. . . . Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. Every effort made by the child's elders to prepare him for a fate from which they cannot protect him causes him secretly, in terror, to begin to await, without knowing he is doing so, his mysterious and inexorable punishment. (26)

Wright and Baldwin begin to define the shape of representing fear in the way segregation works, and it would not be difficult to further trace this line through lynchings, mob violence, and the psychological terror of passing that infuse African American literary representations of segregation. Taken together, the passages exemplify the utter control necessary to maintain a segregated society; here black parents must become part of the project of maintaining segregation, tragically in the effort to keep their children "safe."

III: Cross-Racial Contact

The third and final generalization we offer concerns how narratives set in motion the geography of race and the climate of fear: key scenes of cross-racial contact. The foundational passages from Wright and Baldwin discussed earlier point to a key device common to nearly all segregation literatures: representative scenes of cross-racial contact that underscore the effects and basic injustices—from petty to fatal—of segregated societies. These scenes might be stark and violent, such as the lynching Big Boy witnesses before "leaving home" to go North in Wright's early short story or the murder of the Emmett Till figure in Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964). They might be subtle psychological wrestling matches such as the drawing room scene in Larsen's *Passing* when a white husband unknowingly bullies three passing African American women into colluding in his habit of teasing his wife about her nig-ness, or they might be almost off-scene or segmented into flashbacks such as Janie's humorous account of recognizing herself as the sole black girl in a school photo at age six in Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). But these necessary scenes of cross-racial contact also signal other kinds of crossings for which the stark color line is an inadequate formulation. For instance, Chesnutt's learned narrator's contact with Uncle Remus also represents meetings of North and South, Reconstruction and slavery, cosmopolitan and rooted, voyeuristic and experiential knowledge, among others. Or another good example is how the meeting between Karl Lindner and the Younger Family in *A Raisin in the Sun*

allows a solidarity among heretofore-divergent positions of Beneath's youthful revolutionary stances, Walter Lee's small capitalist dreams, Mama's migration narrative and generational hopes, and Ruth's conflicted motherhood.

By identifying a literary tradition associated with U.S. practices of race segregation, this collection sees Jim Crow as more than historical backdrop. That way, we attend to conscious strategies of representing compulsory race segregation. Historians have identified the cultural and political practices of Jim Crow.¹ Lynching in particular has captured their attention² and literary and visual critics have begun to bring aesthetic considerations to this practice of segregation,³ especially the notorious history of spectacle lynching photographs brought back into popular circulation in James Allen's 2000 collection *Without Sanctuary*. Now is the time to follow the lead of scholars who are thinking about a segregation aesthetic writ large.⁴ African American and Southern literature scholars have long shown great interest in how collective experiences such as slavery, migration, and diaspora, impact the literary imagination. But scholars have rarely and only recently used segregation as a term to describe the literature of the Jim Crow period. This is surprising given segregation's looming presence in the lives and institutions of postbellum America to the present. We offer this edited collection to trace the outlines of this absence. The collection brings together writers, locations, concerns, and movements to prompt a conversation about what happens when we think about race segregation as giving rise to a distinct literary tradition. What does that tradition look like? Is it primarily associated with a specific practice or location, such as the Jim Crow South, or does it reach to the urban North and the American West or further? Do writings about racial division or segregation practices share aesthetic properties, as well as political concerns? What happens when other ethnic groups compare their experiences to African Americans living under Jim Crow? The articles in this collection begin to answer these questions so that we can propose a multiregional and multi-era understanding of literatures of U.S. racial segregation, with African American literature and the Jim Crow South at the center. Future work will be able to pursue further questions. For instance, what happens when Jim Crow enters transnational projects? Do the aesthetics of segregation shift when the project is designed to inscribe racial separation, rather than reject such practices? In this vein, what is the aesthetic difference between antiracist texts like Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and white supremacist texts like Thomas Dixon's clan trilogy?

Because twentieth-century concerns so often frame our understanding of segregation in the U.S. context, Joycelyn Moody, a scholar of nineteenth-century African American literature and culture, opens the collection by considering the rise of Jim Crow segregation from longstanding racial ideologies that both buttressed slavery and preceded the nation's founding. By tracing the practices and ideologies of segregation through the long centuries of slavery, Moody shows us,

we can better understand the ever-shifting manifestations of segregation practices in the United States. Moreover, Trudier Harris reminds us, in a “sound-off,” that attempted desegregation is an unfinished, and perhaps failed, project, so a study of segregation narratives is both urgent and tricky. Indeed, a wide-ranging scholarly conversation about literary representation of Jim Crow and other forms of race segregation is necessarily ambitious. So, we have taken care to balance our desire for a specific focus on Jim Crow at the center of U.S. race segregation with the need to facilitate a scholarly conversation that is open to the many directions, times, locations, and political sensibilities that emerge from the moment race segregation became the law of the land in 1896.

The first section of the collection, “The Aesthetic Challenge of Jim Crow Politics,” considers the legacy of Jim Crow segregation and its lessons for a *de facto* era. Along with Harris’s sound-off, Elizabeth Abel’s provocative study of Jim Crow signage and their post-civil rights legacy delineates some of the aesthetic challenges raised by curiously stylized artifacts of some of the most notorious—and mundane—practices of policing race segregation. The second section, “Imagining and Subverting Jim Crow in Charles Chesnutt’s Segregation Fiction,” places Chesnutt as a key figure in accepting the challenge of representing newly forming and contested ideas about the bright line of race segregation and the institutionalization of Jim Crow practices in the wake of the failures of Reconstruction. The third section, “Inside Jim Crow and His Doubles,” comprises analyses of representative writers, eras, and texts that in some way tell the story of Jim Crow and related practices of racial division with an eye toward not only representing racial segregation, but also protesting it and imaging alternative systems of racial interaction. The following section, “Exporting Jim Crow,” approaches Jim Crow in other contexts: transnational, pan-African and cross-ethnic. In this way, the section illustrates how Jim Crow participates in a cross-cultural imaginary of race relations. The final section, “Jim Crow’s Legacy,” provides suggestive models for how to approach the ambitious project of talking about segregation’s legacy in a *de facto*, post-civil rights era, moving from visual studies of civil rights representation of segregation to a comparative ethnic literary studies meditation on what it means to talk about a practice that is officially dead but persists in memory and social institutions. We also included some suggestive images that further reflect on Jim Crow’s legacy and challenge with pieces from Shawn Michelle Smith’s visual art series heading each section.

This collection is necessarily speculative; it could not possibly cover all eras, locations, practices, and aesthetic sensibilities that we could usefully group under the rubric of representing segregation. Cheryl Wall’s afterword meditates on what we gain when we think about representations of Jim Crow and other forms of race segregation as a distinct literary tradition. Wall extends the work of the final section to underscore how Jim Crow’s legacy continues to haunt U.S. race relations and literature. Wall also challenges future scholars to carry

further some of the questions raised by this collection, including perhaps some of the inevitable omissions and threadbare spots. Let the conversation begin.

Notes

1. See for example Dailey, Gilmore, Simon; Gilmore; Hale.
2. See for example Dray, Gonzales-Day, Markovitz, Pfeifer, Waldrep.
3. See for example Apel, Goldsby, Gunning, Rice, Smith and Apel.
4. See for example Duck, McCaskill and Gebhard.

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