

**LEGAL SEGREGATION:  
RACIAL VIOLENCE AND THE LONG TERM IMPLICATIONS**

A Thesis

by

RUTH K. THOMPSON-MILLER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2006

Major Subject: Sociology

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## ABSTRACT

Legal Segregation:

Racial Violence and the Long Term Implications. (May 2006)

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This thesis explores the research questions: How did African Americans cope with the oppressive system of legal segregation? How did they survive and raise their families? What were African Americans' everyday interactions with whites like during legal segregation? What coping and resistance strategies did they utilize to survive? Using case studies from nearly 100 in-depth interviews with elderly African Americans between the ages of 50-90 in the Southeast and Southwest, I use qualitative methods to detail and analyze the experiences of elderly African Americans.

This thesis explores how the exploitation and oppression of African Americans during legal segregation were enshrined by means of racial violence and discrimination in every aspect of American society. Much of the racial violence was legitimized and essential to the routine operation of legal segregation in the United States. Building on the work of Jackman(2002), Blee(2005), and Feagin (2006) for this thesis, I conceptualize racial violence as physical violence, written violence, and/or spoken violence, including being called "nigger," "boy," and "uncle." The racial violence can be individual or collective which, intentionally or unintentionally, inflicts or threatens to inflict physical, psychological, social, or material injury on African Americans who often resist. In addition, the racial violence can occur in any public or private geographical

location including, the street, workplace, and home. Lastly, an individual does not have to witness or personally experience the racial violence to be psychologically injured or affected by it.

During legal segregation the respondents faced actual everyday racial violence or the threat of racial violence in the form of lynchings, sexual abuse, house burnings, imprisonment, rape, and being incessantly called “nigger.” I argue that the psychological traumatic experiences of fear, anxiety, stress, anguish, humiliation, stigmatization and shame can affect a person’s life for a very long time. Every one of these injuries is apparent in the interviews with elderly African Americans who survived legal segregation. Thus, I suggest the important idea of a “segregation stress syndrome,” for the chronic, enduring, extremely painful responses to official segregation that are indicated by the respondents.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, Carolyn Thompson and my beloved deceased father, Millard Thompson  
for all their continued love and support.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the research questions: How did African Americans cope with the oppressive system of legal segregation? How did they survive and raise their families? What were their interactions with whites like during the era of legal segregation? What coping strategies did they utilize to survive and be successful?

In order to understand some aspects of the communities in which I conducted my interviews, I will set the social and geographical stage. For the purpose of this thesis I use in-depth interviews with elderly African American women and men to document their everyday experiences, individual and collective losses, and countering reactions generated by the subordinating processes of official segregation. To address my research questions, I analyze the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of those who survived official segregation. How and why do they tell their stories now?

Their descriptions, the way they remember events, their interpretations and the reinterpretations of their lives--all these tell us different aspects of how they experienced the everyday harshness and oppression of legal segregation. The narratives of elderly African Americans are like delicate and fragile vessels that offer us a sense of continuity, courage, and pride. By sharing-- with those who will listen-- what occurred in the past, they help us to understand and make sense of who we are in the present day (see Mason-Schrock 1996).

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

This thesis examines legal segregation in two small southern cities. I will begin by describing one of the southern cities where the research was conducted. In this small southern city, the racially violent experiences of legal segregation profoundly affected and shaped the lives of the older African Americans who I interviewed, in collective and individualized ways. They coped and survived the experience of legal segregation, and they are sharing their narratives. The older African Americans still feel the need to pass on survival strategies, which date back 50 years, to the next generation of African Americans living in this small city. Thus, this demonstrates how they view the necessary importance of intergenerational transmission.

As you drive through the small southern city, similar in many ways to other small cities, you can see little signs of a time that resembles what the city may have looked like during legal segregation. In the African American community, there are many dirt roads and run-down houses with tin roofs among newly developed and modern houses. The large forest areas are intertwined with signs of development, and there are poor people walking the streets that are in need of employment. In the white community, there are million dollar homes, gated communities, mega malls, hospitals, technological industry, and country clubs.

Consequently, the racial makeup of the city dictates segregation, with the majority of white people living on one side of the city, and the large majority of African Americans living on the other side of the city; yet there are exceptions. In formerly historically African American communities of the city, a small number of whites, mostly

students, now live. At the same time, you have a small token populous of professional African Americans living on the white side of the city.

The largely African American side of the city is poor, underdeveloped, and struggling with issues of gentrification and school closings. Gentrification means involuntary displacement of low-income people. People of color are most often the victims of this displacement, as communities of color, are plagued by racism, violence, and a history of lack of investment in its viability. At the same time, the predominately white, side of the city is booming with industry, new schools, and thriving businesses. The small city is growing in accordance with the interest of its white citizens.

The majority of African Americans living in the small city work at career service type jobs such as janitors, bus drivers, and health and day care providers. The jobs usually pay minimum wage or slightly above. Many of the jobs are servicing the upkeep of facilities that the African Americans living in the city do not get to enjoy.

The university in the city employs a large number of African Americans, who live on the poor side of the city. On any given day, you can witness an exodus of groundskeepers, custodians, cooks, and maintenance workers--better known as domestic workers during legal segregation--descend from the university into their own communities, on the African American side of the city. The majority of students at the university are white and upper middle class--with a small minority student body that includes African Americans, Asians, and Latinos.

Many of the whites in the city work at the university as professors, administrators, and consultants. If the whites do not work at the university, they often work throughout the city in high level paying jobs such as bank administrators, doctors, lawyers, realtors,

and teachers, just to name a few positions. The political climate of this city is plagued with disenfranchisement of the African American voter, and neglects the needs of the African American community.

The contemporary life in this southern city resembles in many ways the social, political, and economic descriptions of legal segregation. This reality leaves the participants in this research project little room to believe that much has changed for them. Although the segregation era ended in the 1960s, the painful memories of the experience are now shaping the lives of the next generation of African Americans, as some feel in many ways things have not changed.

I conducted my research project in parts of the South that are not unique, in many aspects, to other areas of the country, in which African Americans live and thrive. However, the description of the small city and the economic layout is familiar and helps to put the narratives of the participants into context with where they are living. The contemporary scene is important to understanding why the participants may still feel the need to pass on their survival strategies. I can juxtapose this description and use it to describe the city in which I conducted the interviews in the Southwest; the similarities are undeniable.

Without hearing the voices of African Americans who lived through legal segregation, younger people find it at times difficult to understand the compelling experience of legal segregation. African Americans growing up in the era of legal segregation learned a bitter lesson, and it's important to understand and document the ways that they survived. There is an undeniable power in listening to the "voices" of old Southern blacks that share the narratives about their daily experiences. In the course of

this research project, I document the voices, perceptions, and experiences of elderly African Americans in small southern cities, similar to other small cities, who survived legal segregation.

### ***The Significance of the Work***

This work is significant because social sciences have neglected thorough analysis of the era of legal segregation. Secondly, this research is significant since it helps individuals to understand the development of legal segregation as an aspect of a 400-year history of oppression in the United States. Legal segregation reproduced many of the central features that were the foundation of slavery and then transmitted several of those features to the era of contemporary racism. Racial oppression has been systematic and foundational in American society (Feagin 2006). This research is significant for African Americans because it helps policymakers to understand some of the contemporary issues of inequality in the areas of health care, education, and housing. The stage has changed, but the story remains the same; African Americans have experienced extreme oppression and inequality in this country historically and today. This research will help to illuminate some of the aspects of legal segregation that are reproduced in society today.

### **THE HISTORY OF LEGAL SEGREGATION: JIM CROW**

European colonists with stolen land, taken from Native Americans, kidnapped and enslaved Africans from their homelands to create wealth. The wealth generating labor of enslaved Africans increased ordinary whites' prosperity, tenfold, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Legal Segregation "Jim Crow" was a social system that whites developed after the abolishment of slavery. Jim Crow's primary function was to continue the social system of

servitude, the racial caste hierarchy, and the economic control of African Americans.

In 1896 the Supreme Court case of *Homer Plessy*, an African American man, who refused to sit in the “colored” section on a train, was the landmark case that reinforced the local laws of legal segregation in the U.S. The laws of segregation stated that sections for black and white could be separate but equal. African Americans could not vote, testify against whites, or serve on juries, and could only attend segregated schools, orphanages, and hospitals. All aspects of public life such as transportation, hotels, and parks were legally segregated. The legal segregation laws included provisions for beating African Americans whom whites thought were vagrants. The laws also gave these same ordinary whites permission to force African Americans to work in their fields or go to jail (Litwack 1999).

The social system of Jim Crow began in the 1880’s and ended in the 1960’s. The legal and informal Jim Crow practices meant racial subordination and an imposed badge of degradation on all African Americans in many areas of the United States (Smythe 1948; Feagin 2006).

In southern states and some northern states legal segregation operated like the system of slavery that it replaced. The segregated agencies of the government exercised extreme control over every aspect of the lives of African Americans. Pressures from leaders and protestors in the Black civil rights movement resulted in the ending of official segregation. However, the seeds of slavery and legal segregation implanted roots in fertile soil and those trees continue to flourish today.

This exploitation and oppression of African Americans were enshrined by means of racial violence<sup>1</sup> and discrimination in foundational legal, economic, and social

institutions. The U.S. Constitution and federal court decisions created contemporary forms of the racist institutions we have functioning today.

### **THE CENTRALITY OF RACIAL VIOLENCE**

Legal segregation was centrally about racial violence and the threat of racial violence. Therefore, I examined the everyday ways in which whites used racial violence to enforce the written laws and customs of legal segregation. According to the narratives, whites utilized racial violence and other aggressive discrimination tactics to subordinate African American men, women, and children in most southern states. Racial terrorism, both by white individuals and organized Klu Klux Klan-type groups (which in most instances included the police and high government officials) induced a recurring state of fear in African American individuals and their communities.

The acts of racial violence against African Americans are directly connected with the exodus of African Americans out of the South. Tolnay and Beck (1992:103-106) dispel the notion that economics was the motivator that led African Americans to flee their homes, families, and property during the era of Jim Crow. Racial violence played a key role in establishing and maintaining a racial hierarchy in society.

Fundamentally, we need to ask, “What can sociologists do to develop a better theory of racial violence in terms of the people who suffer, i.e., the victims of the racial violence?” Racial violence impacts, changes, and can stifle the lives and identity of its victims. Most racial violence literature focuses on the intentions of the perpetrator, while Blee (2005:600) proposes a framework that considers the victims and audiences as well as the perpetrators. Who gets to decide whether an act is a harmful act of racial violence? Should the intent of the perpetrator outweigh and get more consideration than the



psychological, physical, and long-term harm to the victim? Does racial hostility need to be the motivation behind an act of racial violence?

Recent research on the subject of hate crimes, showed that an overwhelming number of perpetrators often lack racial animus. The purpose of the hate crime was a mere desire to seek thrills from the act of racial violence (Blee 2005:603). Some social scientists have noted pressure from peers rather than racial hostility as the motivation for racial violence (Blee 2005:604).

What circumstances define racial violence? Blee (2005:606) defines “acts of violence with violent consequences in which victims are racially fungible.” Jackman (2002:405) defines “violence as actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury. Actions may be corporal, written, or verbal. Injuries may be corporal, psychological, material, or social.” If the (white) perpetrators who committed the racial violence did not have negative intentions or if the violence is just a result of some other act, individuals tend to view it favorably. Often this type of violence escapes the attention of most individuals (Jackman 2002:388). During legal segregation, African Americans anticipated racial violence and whites socially accepted it. Today in most instances, sociologists associate violence with criminal and deviant behavior. (Jackman 2002:387).

## **THE FRAMEWORK**

However, for this thesis, I have conceptualized racial violence as physical violence, written violence, and/or verbal violence, including being called “nigger,” “boy,” and “uncle.” The racial violence can be intentional or unintentional and inflicts or threatens to inflict, physical, psychological, social, or material injury, such as the burning of crosses and churches, on African Americans. In addition, the racial violence can occur

in any public or private geographical location including, the streets, workplace, and/or home. Lastly, an individual does not have to witness or personally experience the racial violence to be psychologically injured by it. Merely, hearing second-hand about violent crimes that are racial motivated can cause stress symptoms such as denial, anger, fear, rage, and anxiety. Some of the physical symptoms can include crying, sweating, and difficulty sleeping. This conceptualization builds on the work of Feagin (2006), Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005), Blee (2005), and Jackman (2002).

### ***The Impact on Targets***

Another aspect of racial violence during legal segregation that I will analyze, in this thesis, lies in the impact on the human targets of the racial violence, who often suffered pain, distress, and trauma. Thus, the daily acts of racial violence faced by African American individuals, as well as their friends and relatives, frequently resulted in responses similar to those of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptomatology Christopoulos (2002) described for former soldiers. An assessment of the effects of childhood traumatic experiences, like the incidents that occurred during segregation, indicates that the present cohort of older African Americans experienced very stressful life events and trauma similar to that of soldiers after a war (Mills and Edwards 2002:273-304).

Psychological research shows that a common human response to a serious danger signal is the emotion of fear (Gray 1987:20). You will see the respondents exhibited fear throughout the research project. Fear is a powerful emotion that was and is felt by these older African American individuals. This induced state of fear is today affecting their minds, bodies, and health. One reason that the southern areas in which I interviewed will

remain anonymous is to protect the identity of African American participants who still fear the consequences of speaking out in their communities.

African Americans are fearful of whites based on the personal, collective, and historical experiences of racial violence with whites in this country. Whites use racial violence and fear as mechanisms to keep the majority of people situated the way they have been situated for centuries, as subordinates. The consequences of not fulfilling those expectations are painfully evident in the historical data from legal segregation.

African Americans have found themselves dealing with the extreme social, political, and economic constraints that have often shattered their hopes of a better tomorrow for themselves and, more importantly, their children. One traumatic racial experience can affect a person's life for a very long time. Even those socially or geographically distant from the immediate victim--are harmed which signals to the entire white community that such violence is acceptable (Blee 2005:605-608; see also May 2001).

An act of racial violence must go beyond the individual intentional inflictions of harm and expand to include, more importantly, the possible consequences to the victim (Blee 2005: 606). Blee poses the question, "How is it useful to probe the contextual aspect of racial violence?" Blee when looking at racial violence makes distinctions between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The murder and/or brutalization of someone are considered extraordinary. However, someone calling an individual "nigger," "boy," or "auntie" are considered ordinary. I propose that the racial violence African Americans experienced during legal segregation was, for the most part, everyday and extraordinary.

Blee (2005) emphasizes the consequences for victims as an important decisive factor for assessing white actions as racially violent. Racist graffiti, racist epithets, and everyday racist etiquette are all forms of racial terrorism because they communicate messages of (white) racial empowerment and (Black) vulnerability. All of which are examples of psychologically painful experiences for African Americans (Blee 2005:604-606; Thompson-Feagin 2006).

Jackman (2002:393) has underscored the array of injuries stemming from corporal and noncorporal violence: “psychological outcomes such as fear, anxiety, anguish, shame, or diminished self-esteem; material outcomes such as the destruction, confiscation, or defacement of property, or the loss of earnings; and social outcomes such as public humiliation, stigmatization, exclusion, imprisonment, banishment, or expulsion are all highly consequential and sometimes devastating for human welfare.” The injuries listed above are apparent in the interviews with African Americans who survived legal segregation.

### ***How Did African Americans Respond to Racial Violence?***

I examined the narratives and discovered how some of those who were the targets of racial violence responded. The coping and survival strategies include attempts to conceal feelings of anger, rage, and humiliation; furthermore, survival strategies included ideologies of obedience, deception, and resistance when appropriate.

Social scientist need to build a theory of racial violence that takes into consideration the understandings and the experiences of the victims. Researchers need to stop focusing only on the white perpetrators--some of whom take pleasure in the media

attention. Sociologists need a theory of racial violence that be applied to the era of slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary times.

***Possible Consequences for the Targets – “Segregation Stress Syndrome”***

As stated earlier, in addition to fear, the verbal and physical violence of segregation frequently generated in African Americans bodily and psychological responses similar to those of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptomatology Christopoulos (2002) reported for soldiers after a war. During the official segregation era, African Americans experienced very stressful life events and trauma similar to individuals recovering from a war (Mills and Edwards 2002: 273-304).

One traumatic racial experience can affect a person’s life for a very long time. Children, adults, and the elderly, who witness the killing of someone they know or some other trauma (the younger the higher the probability) are more likely to develop serious health problems throughout their lifetime. (Pizarro, Silver, and Prause 2006). Thus, I want to expand here on the importance of conceptualizing a “segregation stress syndrome” for the chronic and enduring stress, as well as, the extremely painful responses to official segregation that are indicated by numerous of respondents (on the use of “PTSD” for Black responses to current racism, see Williams and Williams-Morris 2000; Feagin 2006).

“Segregation stress syndrome” includes physical symptoms such as crying, sweating, and increased anxiety. The individual who suffer with the syndrome, in some cases, will tend to avoid the places, individuals, and or objects that remind him or her of the traumatic event. In addition, the syndrome includes some denial in associating the traumatic event with himself or herself, a loved one’ or a deceased loved one. Symptoms

can also include the possibility of reliving some of the traumatic emotions when recalling the memories.

The survivors of segregation stress syndrome may also exhibit difficulty concentrating on the event that caused the trauma due to a sense of self-blame. They may have problems feeling comfortable around individuals who physically and/or psychologically in some way remind them of their (white) perpetrators (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:488). The victims of violent crimes and survivors who suffer with segregation stress syndrome exhibit some of the same psychological symptoms such as depression, anger, anxiety, and fear.

The conceptualization of racial violence, as trauma can offer individuals in the field of medicine an opportunity to be the leaders in establishing ways to treat the psychological traumas that are associated with racially motivated violence (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:484). Research shows that the form of trauma created by a racially motivated assault is deep-rooted and long lasting. The trauma is more likely to increase the victim's risk of developing segregation stress syndrome, which is similar in many ways to the posttrauma symptoms (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:480).

“The segregation stress syndrome” may offer some explanations to why elderly African Americans are twice as likely as elderly whites to die from strokes, heart attacks, and other serious illnesses. The syndrome likely related to health problems that result in chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, lupus, diabetes, and sarcoidosis (National Stroke Association 2006).

Some social researchers think negative racial messages are received and countered depending on the victims' social networks and socioeconomic resources (Blee

2005: 604-605; Williams and Williams-Morris 2000: 248-250). These elderly African Americans, who survived legal segregation, had strong social networks in their communities, churches, families, and extended families.

In the interviews, those who are targets of racial oppression do resist in a variety of ways, depending on their resources. The countering and coping strategies vary from passive and individual forms such as personal withdrawal and deception to more active and collective forms of resistance such as group organization. The strategies African Americans employed to resist racial oppression were not only creative but also flexible.

The laws and customs of legal segregation changed daily based upon the geographical regions and everyday moods of (white) perpetrators. Acts of resistance could mean joining the civil rights movement or simply finding ways to insulate their families from white coercion (Chafe 2001: 268-269). Resisting was not a simple matter it took thought, preparation, and foresight.

Jackman (2002: 403) has suggested, "That gender relations are the only context for which scholars have insisted or shown that violence is normal and an integral part of social interaction." The data from the interviews show that violence, in many forms, has long been a normal part of slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary racism. The legitimized racial violence that occurred during legal segregation was essential to the everyday operation of it.

Mainstream racial violence was not deviant, but legal and/or customary, and seen as "normal." The racial violence of segregation often involved individual whites and African Americans, but it also took the form of white mob beatings, rapes, and lynchings. The foundational framework of racial oppression supported and mandated all the racial

violence that occurred. This foundation sanctioned the violent actions of whites throughout the South. Whites attacking African Americans did not need to be immediately motivated by racial prejudice, but could act because of group pressures to conform within an institutionally racist system with already-defined racial targets (Jackman 2002; Blee 2005; Feagin 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> “Violence” comes from the Latin word, “vis,” which means “strength,” thereby implying in its Latin origin/meaning the aggressive use of power, the coercion of others.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Legal Segregation (“Jim Crow”) was a social system that whites developed after the abolishment of slavery. Jim Crow’s primary function was to continue the social system of servitude, the racial caste hierarchy, and the economic control of African Americans. The social system of Jim Crow began in 1880’s and ended in the 1960s. The legal and informal Jim Crow practices meant racial subordination and an imposed badge of degradation on all African Americans in many areas of the United States (Smythe 1948; Feagin 2006). The reinforcement of the Jim Crow laws of the nineteenth century is connected with legal cases such as *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and *Morgan vs. Virginia* (Folmsbee 1949). Many African Americans fled their homes, families, and communities in record numbers to be free of the racial violence that ensued with the reinforcement of Jim Crow laws (Tolnay and Beck 1992).

### **RACIAL VIOLENCE**

Jackman (2002:388) and Blee (2005:602) have shown that previous research on violence has involved rather limiting assumptions—specifically, that violence is motivated by hostility or intent to harm and is deviant legally and socially from mainstream human actions. Previous research has also neglected written and spoken attacks. An emphasis on physical injury has meant a neglect of psychological, social, and material injuries. Also missing from most previous research--with its often-legalistic accent on individual violence--is a studied recognition of the collective and institutional contexts and imposition of violence (Thompson-Miller and Feagin 2006).

Bufacchi (2005) explores in his research the strengths and weaknesses of two common definitions of violence. The narrow way of thinking about violence is that it's an act of force with the intentions of causing bodily harm. This view is in direct opposition to the broader view that defines violence as a violation of human rights.

Some social scientists believe that violence is symbolic and isn't necessarily about the use of physical force. George Ritzer (2003) writes in his book about Pierre Bourdieu who viewed the power dynamics that occurred between the powerful and the powerless as a form of violence, which he called symbolic violence." Bourdieu defined symbolic violence as an act of imposing the cultural views of the dominate majority, through the educational system, upon the less powerful minority groups within the society. Bourdieu's research shows that this type of symbolic violence is detrimental to individuals. In his view, symbolic violence through the educational system recreates the structures of power, privilege, and class that exist in the society with the help of the individuals who are the most oppressed (Ritzer 2003:188-196).

African Americans during legal segregation believed whites enjoyed lynching, mutilating, and hurting African Americans. Billig (2001) research focuses on the relationship between the emotions of hate and the emotions of humor. During legal segregation, some whites were photographed smiling, rejoicing, and celebrating in front of the burned and mutilated bodies of African Americans as they hang from trees. The research on the relationship between joking and racist language is important to understand this historical view of whites (Billig 2001:267).

Dray (2003) gives a comprehensive analysis of racism and the thousands of African Americans lynched during slavery and legal segregation. His groundbreaking

work places lynching, the ultimate representation of racial violence, in the larger context of American society. We gain insight and understanding of the magnitude of racial violence and its hidden past when Ginzburg (1962) documents, in detail, 100 years of lynchings in America. He documents, with articles, account-after-account of lynchings, which provide a sobering view of American history during slavery and legal segregation.

### **THE IMPACT OF RACIAL VIOLENCE**

A critical aspect of legal segregation was, and still is, the impact on its human targets. African Americans found themselves dealing daily with extreme social, political, and economic constraints as well as psychological outcomes such as fear, anxiety, anguish, and shame. In addition, “social outcomes such as public humiliation, stigmatization, exclusion, imprisonment, banishment, or expulsion are all highly consequential and sometimes devastating for human welfare” (Jackman 2002). They are expressed in each of the respondents’ narratives, and are evident.

The impact of racial violence, during legal segregation, is unquestionable. Contemporary research has shown that there are valid reasons for African Americans young and old to be concerned about their exposure to violence, especially racial violence. Studies show that the exposure can lead to major health problems later on in life (Myers and Thompson 2000). Violence experienced and witnessed is also a significant predictor of posttraumatic stress symptoms. Myers and Thompson have developed a procedure that examines the long-term effects of violence, coupled with other environmental issues. The test includes several ethnic groups, not just African Americans (Myers and Thompson 2000:253-267).

Contemporary researchers are realizing that acts of racial violence may lead to increased physiological symptoms, such as segregation stress syndrome, in the racialized individuals who are its targets. However, Grier and Cobbs (1968) understood the effects of discrimination and slavery early on. They are African American psychiatrists who examined the silent anger and the silent rage that African Americans internalized. The racial violence and discrimination that African Americans experienced are jeopardizing their mental well-being.

The enormity of the problem of racial violence and racist incidents in the United States is hard to estimate; however, data from several sources indicate that the prevalence of racist incidents, particularly among African Americans, is high. Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005) research distinguishes traumatic stress from nontraumatic stress. They examine the similarities between experiences of racist incidents and experiences that are usually viewed as traumatic, such as rape or other forms of violence. Recognizing the symptoms of individuals who have survived the racial violence of legal segregation as a form of trauma, may help inform individuals in the field of medicine. In turn they might be better prepared to give individuals the proper treatment they need when they seek assistance (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:479-500). Proper medical treatment is an important component to helping survivors of racial violence but other adverse effects of racial violence also need to be thoroughly examined.

Kelly (2005) examines a form of structural violence and this type of violence places a stigma on those diagnosed with a mental illness. Kelly (2005) shows that the issues of inequality in employment, housing, health-care, and other areas of life can adversely effect a person access to mental health services. Issues of discrimination and

unfair treatment can influence the ability of individuals to seek out proper medical assistance (Kelly 2005:721-730).

Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) provide an overview of the ways in which racism and discrimination can affect the mental well-being of individuals who are its victims. They describe the various ways in which the language of race has changed over time. The overt racist epithets have become covert yet; the negative beliefs are still woven into the fabric of the policies and institutions that are the foundation of the U.S. “The scientific evidence shows that racism can adversely affect the mental well-being of African Americans in many ways and can lead to adverse changes in mental health” (Williams and Williams-Morris 2000:243-268).

Bennett, Merritt, Edwards, and Sollers (2004) examine in their research the coping strategies that are effective in dealing with the sometimes ambiguous and covert ways in which white society performs verbal acts of racial violence. They conclude that the perception of racial discrimination in ambiguous situations may have profound negative consequences for African Americans.

Researchers Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams (1999) have also concluded in their study that on a national level a lifetime of perceived racism over time can adversely affect the mental health of African Americans. They believe this type of discrimination deserves to be taken more seriously in the mental health field (Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams 1999:208-230).

Krieger, Smith, Naishadham, Hartman, and Barbeau (2005) evaluated the components of how different ethnic groups self-report their experiences with discrimination. The results provide substantial proof that the scale used for determining

discrimination is a valid and accurate measurement. They found experiences of racial discrimination and psychological stress are positively correlated (Krieger, Smith, Naishadham, Hartman, and Barbeau 2005:573-1596).

The research on African Americans and the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is not extensive. Yet, the preliminary findings indicate a positive correlation exist in the frequency and degree of PTSD and African Americans (Allen 1996:210). The relationship between discrimination and the negative effect it has on the physical health of African Americans is substantial.

Recently, Pizarro, Silver, and Prause (2006) conducted a study that focused on the health effects of traumatic war experiences across the lifetime. The results indicate that the younger a person is and the greater the exposure is to death of comrades during war. The greater the possibility that the veteran will have trauma and that trauma will cause a lifetime of health related problems. The health problems include an array of stomach, intestinal, heart, and nervous diseases. (Pizarro, Silver, and Prause 2006:193-200).

Unfortunately, race not class contributes to the levels of distress associated with discrimination. Cockerham (1990) shows in his research that the economic class in which you belong does not affect your psychological distress as much as your race does in the United States. African Americans who are lower class have a higher level of distress than lower class whites do.

Brown, Williams, Jackson, Neighbors, Torres, Sellers, and Brown (2000) collected data that clearly illustrates, “a positive correlation between the experiences of racial discrimination and the developing of depression. The research in the area of racial violence, mental health, and discrimination is overwhelming.”

However, the objective of this thesis is not to imply that all African Americans who lived during legal segregation have deep-rooted mental illnesses, because of the experience. However, the purpose of this project is to document the effects of a lifetime of racial violence; the psychological consequences of the racial violence; and the likelihood that the trauma and stress has and is adversely affecting the physical well-being of African Americans who lived during legal segregation.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

I embarked on this research project with a desire to understand how, in light of the collective and at times simultaneous experience of racism, elderly African Americans were able to cope with what seemed to be an overwhelming number of obstacles. I recognized that my own status as a nontraditional African American student would have some influence on my research. I felt confident that I would be able to tell the story of the experiences of elderly African Americans with some objectivity, but I must admit that I, like many people who feel passionate about their research, am subjective at times.

As a young child, my parents shared some stories of working in the cotton fields in the South. My father and his brother enlisted in the service at a young age; I was unaware of his reasons why until I listened to the narratives of elderly African American veterans. They shared narratives of joining the army to flee the violence in the South. After the sudden death of my father, my mother was more willing to share his story of growing up in the South. I believe many elderly African Americans conceal important historical aspects of the South to spare their children and in hope that society would change for the better. Unfortunately, the changes have been small and short-lived.

I am the first in my family to get an advanced degree, and I wanted to understand why. In this research project, others convey this similar story, throughout many areas of the African American communities in the South. Like many other African Americans, I understood the importance of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement, yet the narratives that the elderly African Americans have shared in this research project relay a different story, a story that only their words can convey.



## **THE DATA**

The data for this thesis is the result of two similarly structured research projects. One project was conducted in the Southeast and the other project was conducted in the Southwest. Elderly African Americans were interviewed in-depth about their experiences under legal segregation. I contacted key informants, such as ministers and teachers, in two black communities in the Southeast and Southwest. They provided me with names of older African American men and women who might be willing to participate, and I collected further names by making presentations at organizational meetings and from references by the initial respondents. After laborious efforts, I secured a list of 60 older people, in the Southeast, 52 of who could be reached and agreed to be interviewed in 2003-2004.<sup>1</sup>

In the Southwest, I contacted key informants, such as community leaders and ministers, in four African American communities and initially secured the names of 50 older African American men and women who were willing to participate. I collected other names from references by the initial respondents using a snowball sample. With the assistance of four undergraduate students, forty elderly African Americans were interviewed in-depth about their experiences during legal segregation.

## **THE PARTICIPANTS**

In the Southeast, 52 respondents include 37 women and 15 men, a disproportion dictated to a substantial degree by the lower life expectancy of African American men. A substantial majority (65 percent) of the respondents were over the age of 70, with the rest between 52 and 69. About 60 percent held relatively low-paying jobs (such as domestic

worker or hospital aide) during their work lives under segregation, and most of the rest held modest-paying jobs like school teacher in a racially segregated school.

Among them, 35 percent held domestic-work or similar service-work positions, 25 percent were hospital and other health-care workers, 25 percent were teachers, 10 percent were small businesspeople or held a managerial position, and 5 percent were medical professionals. Based on the interviewed narratives, all were strongly committed to education and managed to secure a high-school diplomas<sup>2</sup>, with a bit more than 25 percent having done some college work.

In the Southwest, 40 respondents include 25 women and 15 men; again, we see a disproportion dictated by the lower life expectancy of African American men. A substantial majority (75 percent) of the respondents were over the age of 70, with the rest between 58 and 69. About 65 percent held relatively low-paying jobs (such as domestic worker or hospital aide) during their work lives under segregation, and most of the rest held modest-paying jobs like school teacher in a racially segregated school.

Among them, 45 percent held domestic-work or similar service-work positions, 20 percent were hospital and other health-care workers, 20 percent were teachers, 15 percent were small businesspeople or held a managerial position, all were strongly committed to education and managed to secure a high-school diplomas<sup>3</sup>, with a bit more than 15 percent having done some college work.

## **INTERVIEW SETTING**

Most of the interviews took place in the respondent's home and lasted one-to-two hours. The participants were interviewed using an interview schedule with a series of open-ended questions about their social and economic lives under legal segregation. The

questions obtained from a review of the relevant, yet limited, historical literature available on the legal segregation era.

This sort of research is sensitive, and the respondents might have been less inclined to answering questions over the phone or answering questions to a mail survey. African Americans still fear white retaliation for speaking out in their communities would not have spoken to unfamiliar researchers.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, identifying and being able to randomly sample from the population I am studying might have been even more difficult.

## **FIELDWORK**

In addition to interviews, I selected a setting, in the Southeast, to conduct ethnographic participant observation. My field observation was conducted during a local organization meeting for elderly African American women. The objective was to understand how elderly African American women interacted with white women in their personal organizations. I attended several meetings in which I served food, facilitated bingo games, and passed out gifts. On two separate occasions, when a white woman guest spoke at the organization, I noticed a significant difference in the manner in which the African American women engaged each other and the white guest speaker.<sup>5</sup>

The African American women were less vocal and less cheerful. They were less willing to respond to interactions and were less forthcoming. They did not want to answer questions about their personal lives and questioned constantly why they needed to fill out a particular form. The white speaker needed the form only as proof, for her administrative documentation. The African American women, in most instances, refused to fill out the form. On another occasion, a white male speaker attended the meeting and the atmosphere was similar to that of the white female guest speaker. I analyzed the

observations as more evidence of the lasting effects of legal segregation. These African American women were still mistrustful of whites' intentions, even when they came to visit their organization to offer medical and economical guidance.

## **ANALYSIS**

Upon completion of the interviewing, I analyzed the data from the interviews using standard qualitative iterative techniques and the extended case method (Burawoy 1998). Consequently, some of the themes that emerged from the interviews I conducted were “racial etiquette” (social practices), the racial violence that ensued if the “racial etiquette” (social practices) was violated in the eyes of whites, the survival strategies that African Americans adopted during legal segregation, and the intergenerational transferring of the coping strategies.

I did not collect data from the respondents on what I thought the history of legal segregation was in the African American community. I collected data on what elderly African Americans actually lived through in their everyday lives. I collected accounts of painful encounters with whites, which took place in public and private spaces throughout the years of legal segregation. The elderly African Americans, who participated in this research project, cleared up numerous misconceptions and contradictions in the historical representation of the everyday practices of African Americans and their white oppressors during legal segregation (Burawoy 1998:5).

The power of oral history is undeniable. I went into this research project not fully appreciating personally the history of older African Americans. Because of the narrative aspect of this project, I realized the resilience and fortitude of elderly African Americans. What is often forgotten and difficult to grasp is the total picture, which must include the

voice of the survivors. The strength of the African American families can be realized when examined against the backdrop of a history of hopelessness, deprivation, and lack of opportunity, coupled with the racial violence. A powerful message is being shared in the personal narratives. The power of a person's voice coupled with written history gives a holistic perspective. To understand fully the experiences of a time that occurred over 50 years ago, this is necessary.

To situate the everyday lives of elderly African Americans in its historical context, I utilized the participant observation extended case method (Burawoy 1998: 4). This approach allowed me to go beyond the notion of legal segregation as just an era in which African Americans were restricted from eating at lunch counters, were limited to drinking out of separate water fountains, and were forced to go in the back door. I was able, through the narratives, to see the everyday events that occurred in the lives of African Americans. I connected the experiences with the larger contexts of racism and delved into it beyond the usual boundaries (Burawoy 1998:6).

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<sup>1</sup> Only three people refused to be interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> The requirements for a high-school diploma during legal segregation differ from present day high-school diploma requirements.

<sup>3</sup> The requirements for a high-school diploma during legal segregation differ from present day high-school diploma requirements.

<sup>4</sup> I am an African American female, with connections to the communities that assisted me in acquiring detailed narratives that other researchers might not have been able to acquire.

<sup>5</sup> The guest speaker was organized by a younger African American woman who was not from the community. She was a self-appointed leader who would buy food and gifts, and set up games, trips, and guest speakers for the seniors in the organization.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

#### **PUBLIC ACTS OF RACIAL VIOLENCE: SEGREGATED BUSES**

Jim Crow was a harshly enforced system of oppression, with an oppressive mode of control enforced by local and state governments throughout the South (Packard, 2002; Feagin 2006). The era of legal segregation (Jim Crow) mandated that all public and private establishments remain racially segregated. The “normative”<sup>1</sup> structure included the rallying of everyday whites, who upheld the customary practices of racial etiquette. The doctors, lawyers, executives, bus drivers, and congressional representatives, each participated in sustaining the oppressive system.

#### *Segregated Buses in the Southeast*

An African American woman in the Southeast shares several of the public and private discriminatory practices that occurred during legal segregation. She had a successful career as a nurse and is now working as a teacher. When asked, “Do you remember your first encounter with a white person?” She responds with several of the customary practices that were enforced during legal segregation:

Early on, we learned that you don’t talk back to white folks. You said, “Mr. and Mrs.” You accept it when they call you Auntie and Uncle. You stay in your place. You walk on a certain side of the street. If they’re in the way, you step off the sidewalk. You give them your seat on the bus. . . . I remember going to my grandma’s on the bus and my mom having to stand and hold one of us while she’s standing because all the seats were taken. We may have started out with a seat, but as we went along the pathway, if the front seats filled up, white people could

sit all the way to the back. I remember my mom telling us about the little brother that we, she lost, because she's pregnant and on one of her trips home she had to stand all the way from Georgia to here and therefore she miscarried the baby.

We see the range of racial violence in this narrative. The racial violence is spoken, written, and physical. The written laws and informal public customs imposed by whites are individual and collective. In addition, we observe, the stigma of inferiority, which inflicts psychological distress, when she states, "You accept being called auntie and uncle; you give up your seat; and you step off the sidewalk." The racialized and ritualized etiquette included customary racial violence that forced African Americans to step off the sidewalk when whites walked by, not talk back to whites, and accept derogatory naming.

The physical and psychological injuries are clear. In addition, the experiences of discrimination are a source of stress that can adversely affect the mental health of African Americans. Unfortunately, treating African Americans like second-class citizens, can lead them to an acceptance of this sort of treatment. This can impair the mental functioning of African Americans (Williams and Williams-Morris 2000:243). Note that the adverse psychological affects, the private humiliation, and the suppressed feelings of anger and helplessness are all symptoms of "segregation stress syndrome." The respondent's mother attributed her miscarriage to this extreme public, written law of segregation on buses.

African Americans like Rosa Parks were courageous for not giving up their bus seats, for they could have suffered much more than arrest. As another male respondent in his seventies put it, "You had to get on the back of the bus and sit at the very back. You didn't challenge that. If you did, you were drug off the bus and you were beaten and

arrested. You were called an uppity nigger.” Here we see how physical racial violence is sustaining the racially oppressive system of official segregation.

The police officers who were assigned to protect the rights of citizens--including African American citizens--were the key individuals enforcing the racial etiquette of legal segregation. White police officers, judges, and lawyers were agents of fear. For an oppressive social order to flourish, it had to be enforced. White officers were on call if ordinary white individuals such as bus drivers, storeowners, or everyday citizens needed backup to enforce the customs of legal segregation.

After waiting long hours, a discouraged African American soldier, in uniform, finally gets a seat on a bus headed home. This World War II veteran, now in his eighties, recalls the series of racially violent incidents that led to his hospitalization:

We [had] gone overseas to fight for this country. . . . I came home on leave I had to get in the back of the bus in Washington DC. . . . I couldn't get out for about 10 hours. I am in uniform. I only had about 4 or 5 days at home. I'm waiting in Washington . . . you lower than all the white people, you lower than all of them. I finally squeezed in on the bus and they had a revolution [on the bus] to get me off. . . . I said, "I wasn't getting off the bus." The bus left the station and after they were about 100 miles from [southern city] and a white Irish police officer came up to me and hit me with an object similar to a Blackjack of today. The police officer said, "There is that nigger." He hit me on the side of my head and that is all I remember. I was found on the railroad tracks miles outside of [names southern city]. I was severely beaten. I had 500 dollars on me and my leave papers and they were all taken. I was in uniform. My injuries were so severe that



four years later I had to have brain surgery because of the injuries sustained in the beating. Several men, who served and fought for the country, were beaten and lynched in their uniforms after they returned from the war.

This soldier expresses his memory of extreme, yet everyday victimization. Being African American automatically made him “lower than all the white people.” This account of inflicting physical racial violence described here is severe, so severe it jeopardized this African American veteran’s life. The trauma he suffers is physical and psychological. His material injuries are evident, and he is publicly humiliated. The shock of being a victim of racial violence on his homeland contrasted to his service for the country. This likely highlights his identity as soldier and contrasts that to the identity of the white police officer. African Americans’ status as soldiers did not protect them from public beatings or worse. In addition, we see the importance of the African American family, as this man heads home after serving years in a racially segregated army.

### ***Segregated Buses in the Southwest***

As in the previous narrative we see, white bus drivers have racist social networks such as police officers to assist in sustaining a racially oppressive system. This elderly male respondent in his seventies recalled an incident of individual racial violence on a public bus:

I remember when I was in high school. I think I was a junior, and during the summer I had a summer job, I was washing dishes at a cafeteria . . . I had to be there at 5:30 in the morning, and the buses started running at about 5 o’clock. There was nobody on the bus but the bus driver. . . . They had this thing (on the bus) that you had to go to the back, but wasn’t nobody on the bus but the driver.

I got on there; paid and just sat right there in the front. He wanted to raise hell about that and (he) made me go to the back. Nobody was on the bus.

So, I told him, “Man! Ain’t nobody else on this bus, and I’m just going about 5 blocks. Just 6 to 8 blocks.” He told me, “If I didn’t get to the back of the bus he was going to stop and call the police on me.” So, you see what we go through.

This wasn’t something that needed to even be talked about you know? He could of just went on and drove the bus and let me off. But no. (Sounds of disgust).

This respondent experienced spoken and written racial violence; the laws of segregation dictated by the bus driver and reinforced with backup from the police. Again, we see the customary public and private discrimination in this account that the experiences of discrimination are a source of stress that can adversely affect mental health and the acceptance of the stigma of racial inferiority. The perpetrators of discrimination feel the need to uphold the white sense of superiority, even when the bus is empty. The bus driver is inflicting, intentionally, a sense of racial inferiority on this respondent. “. . . These incidents can induce considerable distress, and some studies have found that exposure to discrimination, such as this incident, can lead to cardiovascular and psychological problems among African Americans” (Williams and Williams-Morris 2000:251).

A woman, now in her sixties, as a young teen, refused to give up her seat on a racially segregated public bus:

I was about 12 or 13 years old. We had to ride on the back of the bus. If a white person got on the bus, we had to move to the back of the bus and we had to stand up all the way. . . .Sometime a white person would get on there, every now and then, and when a white person would get on there, if it wasn’t no seats for them to

sit down, they'd ask you to move to the back, ask you to get up, I've been asked to get up and let them sit, sit down there. Well, I just, I just refused to get up, I say, "I'm a woman just like she's a woman," and the bus driver stopped.

He said, "If you don't, if you don't, let her sit down . . . When I move the bus, I'm going to call the police." I just still stayed there, they called the police, and they had me catch the next bus. Sure did, I had to get off the bus.

The consequences for this respondent were not as deadly as the soldier in the Southeast, when he resisted giving up his seat. However, the police did arrest her. She resisted stating, "I am a woman." White officers arrested African Americans if they resisted the written and customary laws of legal segregation. The psychological injury of anxiety and fear, as well as the public humiliation likely resulted in this woman enduring some psychological trauma.

The stress associated with trauma, unlike nontraumatic stress, can unravel the way we see the world around us, and more importantly the stress can unravel the way we see ourselves. The stress associated with trauma can generate feelings of instability and fear. (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:485). We see the contemporary manifestation of psychological trauma associated with years of the public humiliation of legal segregation as this male respondent, in his seventies, in the Southwest states, "I am not going to sit in the back of no bus! I hate buses! To this day, I hate buses because that was our place. To this day, I hate buses. You can hardly get me on a bus."

## **PHYSICAL RACIAL VIOLENCE: WHITE NIGHT RIDERS**

During legal segregation, whites acting under the cover of night collectively imposed a great deal of racial violence, on African Americans whom whites thought to have violated segregation laws or customs.

### ***Physical Racial Violence and Loss of Land in the Southeast***

When asked to recall his first memory of encounters with whites, a former professor describes the warnings of his mother and the everyday reality of physical racial violence:

My mother used to insist that I always be in the yard before the sun go down. I could not understand that. Until one day, they call them nightriders, they kidnapped a Black kid, and they sodomized him and castrated him. My mother said, "Now you see why I want you to stay in the house." . . . Nightriders would come; white guys would come to the Black community in trucks and cars and kidnap Black kids and stuff of that nature. . . . That happened in other communities. . . . I'm sure the adults knew who these people were. But who could they turn to. There was nobody. The NAACP would send people through as representatives but you had, that was a hush, hush thing and it was held at a church and people were very quiet about where they were going to have these meetings because the church could be burned to the ground. It happened in other communities. . . Black people just disappeared.

Reflecting on the brutality routinely supporting segregation, this man cautiously describes the severe physical and psychological injuries suffered by most racialized African American families. Historically, white men under the cover of night raped not only African American women but, according to this respondent, also raped and

sodomized African American boys and men--an aspect of legal segregation that rarely is discussed in the social science literature. In addition, African Americans citizens did resist, thereby risking more physical, spoken, and other violence, including the burning of churches, homes, and bodies.

A retired nurse recalls how her aunt was living in a home that whites deemed to be nice and how that leads to collective, physical violent actions:

My aunt came here to visit us and they set the house on fire and they burned him [cousin] up in the house, when he tried to get out the window, they pushed him back in the house. They just nasty and mean. . . . Black people, weren't suppose to live in no, really nice area like that. She was living on this lake, and they wanted it and, and they probably knew that, she was here in [names town], and, so they went there and he was, cause they left him home by himself. My cousin, he was a young man. . . .And they just burned. . .the house down and burnt him up in the house. She left that place. She didn't want nothing else to happen. . . .They know who did it, but wasn't nothing they can do about it. All the white people, they stuck together. . . .Back in the forties. Just like Rosewood. They burned him alive.

Collective white jealousy made the hopes of attaining the American dream dangerous and in some cases impossible. With sadness in her voice and tears in her eyes, she describes how white jealousy turned her family's housing dream into a deadly sequence of events. This is not an isolated incident, several respondents shared similar stories of how, if whites wanted a property, they would assault or kill to get it. Rosewood is an African American town in Florida that was destroyed in the 1930s by a white mob that killed numerous residents. Note as with the case of Rosewood an undocumented number of

African Americans throughout the South, suffered physical and material injury. Unfortunately, it was a common occurrence during legal segregation for African Americans to lose their lives, their property, and their family members to racial violence at the hands of whites. The actual number of lost lives, property, and families remain undocumented and uncompensated, to the present day.

***Physical Racial Violence and Loss of Land in the Southwest***

In the Southwest, a man in his late fifties recalls stories of African Americans losing their land and lives to jealous whites:

My grandmother said, “At one time a lot of blacks owned the land that is now owned by whites and that they were forced to sell their land.” Those who did not sell lost their lives. Or the land was taken from them by means of taxation and indebtedness that they had incurred and they weren’t aware that they were incurring. . . . Some of them were killed to take the land; they [whites] killed some of them to take the land. . . .Some drowning[s] that were later said accidental but they didn’t kill them accidental. I wasn’t suppose to hear it because I wasn’t suppose to be around when adults were talking. . . . I overheard them talking about a lady who refused the advances of a white man and how they [whites] nearly destroyed her because she refused. I heard they mutilated her. [Long pause and look of disgust].

As in the Southeast, this respondent recalls the land of African Americans stolen by whites through an array of techniques. Whites, as in this narrative, would drown African Americans to steal their land. The mutilation of African American women for refusing the advances of white men was also a common occurrence during the era of legal

segregation. This respondent, due to racial violence, is unintentionally inflicted with psychological injuries. He shakes his head in disgust as he recalls how he heard the news of this vicious attack on an African American woman who resisted. Social scientists have proven that exposure to “second-hand information such as, hearing about rapes, killings, or racist crimes that victimize others via several methods including hearing may cause secondary traumatic stress, anger, sadness, and grief” (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:489-490). The incidents positively relate to the possibility of suffering with segregation stress syndrome.

### ***Physical Racial Violence – Lynchings in the Southeast***

Whites’ regular use of lynching as a brutal technique brought death to thousands of African American men, women, and children. Several thousand African Americans have been put to death by lynchings since the beginning of legal segregation. On average, an African American man, woman, or child was murdered nearly once a week between 1882 and 1930 (Tolnay and Beck 1992: ix). Not surprisingly, virtually all older African Americans have seen or heard about local whites collectively engaging in lynchings that targeted African Americans defined as breaking with white custom or law. Social science research has shown that African Americans can be psychologically affected by lynchings, without ever witnessing one. White mob lynchings of African American men, women, and children were common during legal segregation, as we see in this elderly respondent’s painful recollection:

The Klu Klux Klan. . . .If you had sons, you were just frightened . . . . People were hung right here. . . . It was a place called Lynch Hammock. They would take people out and lynch them. They would take those kids out and you would find a

Black body hanging any day. Any time. People were frightened. There was nothing they could do. If you talked too much then the younger Black would go and, you know, tell on the others. It was terrible. . . .In order to keep a lot of confusion down, sleep well at night, and try to protect their boys, and protect their girls, they just had to accept it and be quiet about it. That's the way it was. People were afraid. People were afraid. If you had a few who weren't, you had no backup. . . .It was bad, but it was something that you grew up with.

Such collective racial violence, often involving dozens (sometimes hundreds) of people, was done by “normal” ordinary whites in this era. Blee’s (2005: 600) research on white supremacists today shows that they differ little in psychological profiles from other whites. One need not have a high degree of prejudice to attack people who are defined by the surrounding racist system as targets for oppression (cf. Wang, 1999: 866; Feagin 2006). In addition, perpetrators (such as the whites who lynched and killed) of racial violence “who do not face criminal charges, do not serve jail time, or do not defend themselves in a court of law for their criminal activity are left with an unhealthy false sense, and delusion of white superiority” (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:490).

Note the multiple injuries of this collective violence, which was so common that the geographical area where the lynchings occurred was named “Lynch Hammock.”<sup>2</sup> Fear of whites and their racial violence is evident in most of the interview excerpts. The original creation of racialized fear occurred collectively for Africans at the point of their enslavement by whites in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The things, persons, events, and situations that Africans remembered as a group from the African continent were replaced by the fears instilled in them by whites as a means of social control, fears that persisted into the



segregation era. Thus, the fears of African Americans seen in most of the interviews do not represent isolated concerns, but were created purposely and effectively for comprehensive white domination (Scruton, 1986:41-42). For nearly four centuries, African Americans have been fearful of white Americans because of their personal and collective experiences with all forms of racial violence.

***Physical Racial Violence – Lynchings in the Southwest***

African Americans, young and old, in the Southwest were also familiar with the everyday acts of racial violence, in the form of lynchings. An elderly woman in her eighties painfully recalls a lynching:

There was a man, a black man. He was a janitor, he cleaned up the place, and he went and told this white man that was so mean to me. . . .That he didn't have to treat me the way he was treating me. He [the white man] took and pushed me over one of the tables. . . he [black man] got tired of him doing that, before I know it he leaned back and hit that white man and beat him up. It scared me so bad because I didn't know what he [the white man] was going to do to him. When the police come, he [the white man] had almost beat him [the black man] to death. You know. So anyways, my parents raised enough money to get him out of jail.

[Pauses, then starts to cry], somebody back then, you could go up and down the highway and see the Black boy hanging from the tree, and he was dead. They killed him on the tree. . . I didn't think that I could live to see somebody beat somebody like that man did and not [have anyone] do anything about it.

[Cries harder]. . . the white man, they took hot water, they boiled that water, and they put him in the water, and cooked him. How could somebody treat

somebody, a human being, and just threw them in the pot, they had a big ol' pot they use to make soap out of it. And they just throw them in there [the pot]. Whenever you use to do stuff, you were dead. You couldn't do anything, you had to just stand there and watch them do him like that, and every time his head would come up like that, they pushed him right down in the pot. God brought us through all of that, he sure did. He brought us, God made for that person down there to die that day. When we got down there we pray, and we ask God to forgive him, because they didn't know what they was doing. It didn't help his family to see him tortured down there. . .it was a black pot, a cast iron. . .they rejoiced. Can you believe that they [whites] rejoiced about what they did to him in the black pot, they [whites] rejoiced.

The vivid details of an African American man being boiled in a pot, while his family watched, epitomized the atrocities of racial violence during legal segregation. The racial violence is collective, physical, and inflicts psychological trauma on individuals who witnessed it and heard about it. Clearly, this respondent's frequent crying, during the interview, demonstrates extreme symptoms of "segregation stress syndrome." The family of this African American man, "prayed and asked God to forgive him [the white man], because they [the white men] didn't know what they were doing." The willingness of African Americans to forgive whites who committed such acts of racial violence during legal segregation is astounding

The respondent continues with her narrative and begins to exhibit another symptom of segregation stress syndrome:

When you walk back into your back yard and see your grandfather hanging from an oak tree. (Cries harder) He still should have stayed in jail. Those were some hard times. . . .Back in those days, you could be standing back there, in your back yard, and see your grandfather and grandmother, and anybody in your family, hanging on a tree. And when you saw one hanging on a tree, they would come to the church real soon and they would set the church on fire, and kill all of the Black people, that was in the church. That wasn't nothing! To white people that was fun. And all you could do was stand there and look.

The narrative appears to shift to her grandfather, when she states, "To walk in the backyard, and see your grandfather hanging from an oak tree." Many African Americans, who survived the racial violence of legal segregation, use denial as a means to protect themselves emotionally and psychologically. These survivors use denial to help protect them from totally acknowledging their victimization (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:488). The respondent is not totally denying the collective racial violence however; there is a sense that she is combining two events in which one event involved her grandfather. The inflicting of physical and psychological injury is clear as well as the symptoms of "segregation stress syndrome." This respondent passed away within a month of this in-depth interview. Thus, we see the importance and urgency of documenting the experiences of African Americans who survived legal segregation.

Another elderly woman, in her late sixties, in the Southwest, shares how she witnessed a lynching:

The guy that was down there wasn't with us, but spoke to, [he] just said "Good evening" to a white girl, and she all freaked out and things went from there. She

went screaming and yelling. . .like somebody killed her. Some other white guys came along and asked what was going on. . . and they took him right then and there, took him away, and hung him. Got the rope off the truck and just hung him right there in front of us and told us, “This is what happens to ninnies who get out of line and speak to people their not suppose to speak-be spoken to.” This happened a lot, throughout the south. . . It was something that was just the norm back in those days. I had brothers during that time that we always, *always*, ALWAYS begged them whatever you do; do *not* speak to white women.

The misconceptions about African American men and white women contributed to this man losing his life for saying, “Good evening.” The white perpetrators warn the onlookers, which included the respondent, “This is what happens to ninnies who get out of line and speak to people their not suppose to speak to.” The collective act of racial violence, physical, and spoken, threatens to inflict physical injury on the onlookers of this lynching. The psychological injury is clear as this respondent recalls emotionally that her brothers were “Always, ALWAYS begged not to speak to white women.” When white perpetrators commit acts of racial violence and don’t face criminal charges, they and their crime are officially sanctioned by the larger white society. Thus, white perpetrators believe that African Americans deserve to be raped, violated, and murdered. The failure of state, local, and federal judicial agencies to prosecute whites for racial violence helped to sustain the racist institutions that exist to this present day (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005; Feagin 2006).

The African American citizens in these southern communities regularly coped with lynchings in silence. The fear of having their house burned to the ground kept them

quiet in the privacy of their homes, only whispering their true feelings to their loved ones. They were always concerned with keeping their children safe. This woman is one of many who recall fearful events in relation to parents, events that often had a traumatic impact on children and adults much like traumatic experience associated with war. Many times, siblings and parents witnessed white violence against family members, but were unable to assist. The intensity of fear for the safety of loved ones often surpasses that of other fears (Scruton, 1986:8).

### **RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

During the era of legal segregation, the recurring sexual assaults against African American women were common knowledge in the white and African American communities. Historically, the research of social scientist fails to document thoroughly these frequent assaults on African American women by white men and focuses on the frequently alleged rape of white women by African American men. However, a more common problem historically lies in the fact that African American families, regularly, faced the raping and molesting of their young daughters, mothers, and sons by white men, including those with local power and influence (see Feagin 2006 pages ix – x, 74-81).

According to the United States constitution, its African American citizens living under segregation had the right to feel safe and protected in their homes. However, in reality, frequently African Americans endured home invasions by white men, interested only in inflicting some sort of racial violence. African Americans denied daily their constitutional rights to protect their families and communities have valid reasons to be angry.

***Rape and Sexual Violence – In the Southeast***

When asked, “Do you remember your first encounter with a white person?” A teacher’s aide in her eighties tearfully shares a story of how her family could not protect her:

I remember one Sunday afternoon. . . a white man came to our house. I must have been about 15 . . . This man knocked on the door. My mom was sleeping. . . My brother was in the next room sleeping. I answered the door. The man looked like he was spellbound. It frightened me, so I started backing up, and he started following me. He went straight through my mom’s bedroom and my brother’s bedroom. I ran . . . he was following me. My brother sat up in the bed, to see what was happening . . . he came behind him. I can remember . . . my sister saying, “Oh, no, no, Richard. No, no, no.” He was going to hurt him. . . I ran up under the house and hid. He walked in the yard looking for me and eventually he went on and got in the car. My dad wanted to know who he was. . . I was never able to tell him who he was. I couldn’t remember telling him what he looked like. It frightened me. I was young and it frightened me. I knew that these things happened and I didn’t want that to happen to me. . . It was terrible. . . it was very frightening. My brother wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it.

The raping of African American women was common knowledge during legal segregation. The young teenager, who fled for her safety knew about the raping of African American women. This teenager and her family also understood that any intervention by a male relative could have deadly consequences. In the narrative, the respondent talks about her sister warning her brother<sup>3</sup> not to intervene. The respondent states, “my brother wouldn’t have been able to do anything about it,” is a recognition of the

institutional support for the antebellum law and custom declared in many southern areas that a white man had “paramour rights” (Ellis and Ellis, 2003: xv), which generally meant that any white man could rape any African American woman without impunity. Family members were forced to watch in silence as whites inflicted sexual racial violence on the spouses, siblings, and parents of African Americans. A great deal of fear was generated in the African American communities. Moreover, the physical and psychological injury of the everyday rape of African American women has extended well beyond the era of legal segregation.

In this poignant excerpt, a custodian’s use of “dipping” signals how common such rape was. Hesitantly, he expresses how he realizes Black women had no choice:

My mamma was a maid. She used to work with a lot of white folks. . . .My mamma had gray eyes and red hair. . . So, when he [my brother] come out, with blonde hair, they ain’t no good will where he come from. . . . He come from a [white] man who’d . . . been dipping into my family a long time ago. . . . White folk, they love the [Black] women especially. . . . Bring them in and their wives couldn’t say nothing. . . . And so you know about these kids, coming up with the light skin, you know. They know where they come from.

Painfully, this respondent shared his understanding of how his two brothers were born with blonde hair. His statement, “they ain’t no good will where he come from.” This statement relays the everyday feeling that African Americans had about the raping of their women. His dark-skinned father left his mother when he was young. In many instances, the respondents did not realize what occurred until they were older and considered the different phenotypes in their family. The word “dipping” refers to the

customary violence by white men raping African American women since slavery. African American women had no choice, as you will see quoted in many of the narratives, and white wives usually could not and/or would not say anything to stop the rapes. This respondents, like most others, generally recalled these racialized events with great pain anguish, and shame. This painful recollection reveals the continuing injuries of white racial violence long ago, a reaction again supporting the argument in this regard.

A prominent business owner in local Black community describes the recurring violence that African American women and their families endured:

Influential white men would stay in the homes of Black women three days out of the week while their wives knew about it. Black women's husbands knew about it but there was nothing they could do. They [Black men] learned to live with it and they would argue about it but the women would say, 'He forced me to do it' and the husband could do nothing about it. Black teachers would be forced to have sex with principals and the superintendent. . . .If you didn't want to have sex with the superintendent then you would not be able to get a job in that county.<sup>4</sup>

This is a regular narrative for African American families. The selective forgetting of whites creates white amnesia thus white innocence and the savior complex plaques the accurate telling of history. The white amnesia is a mechanism used by whites to free themselves of responsibility and guilt (see Feagin 2006 155-190). White "perpetrators of rape seek to gain power by the perpetuation of myths about those whom they victimize. . .for example they are promiscuous, are liars, are untrustworthy, and enjoyed being raped" (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:487). African American women were coerced into



sexual relations with influential white men, including those running the school system, just to get or keep their jobs.

***Rape and Sexual Violence – In the Southwest***

In the Southwest, a respondent in her late sixties responds to, “Do you recall any experiences that your mother or grandmother shared with you that they had with whites?”

With a story about the rape of her enslaved great grandmother:

Grandmother was talking about the time when she was on the plantation, how she worked for, back in them days they call ’em “Masta,” how *her* mother end up having babies from the master. . . I have some aunts, some great aunts, to look at them you would think they were pure white, because their mother was black, they were considered black. . . . There were many times when . . . the white men workers tried everything to get with her in a sexual way, but her master always blocked it. For some reason, he always blocked it. He couldn’t control all the men, how she always would say, she say, “He couldn’t control all the men, but whenever it came to me for some reason or another, I always got spared.” She grew up with one of his daughters. . . . [*In my community?*] There *were rapes*; the white man would rape girls. . . . If a white man see a half-way descent woman, if he wanted her, he went up and just grabbed her and start doing whatever he wanted to do to her. You know, she would fight, and say no, but he would beat her up, slap her, knock her down, and just, just take her. That was the norm back then for the white man to do

The respondent states, “the white men workers tried everything to get with her in a sexual way, but her master always blocked it. For some reason, he always blocked it.” She

states, “He couldn’t control all the men, but whenever it came to me for some reason or another, I always got spared.” Clearly, based on the accounts of the respondent, the grandmother was the master’s daughter and that is the reason why he blocked white men from sexually abusing her. Again, we see the difficulty some respondents have in connecting some aspects of their own narratives. The psychological injury is intergenerational and possibly diminishes the self-esteem of her grandmother’s mother who is the product of rape.

White society pushes slavery out into hundreds of years, however African Americans remember the times when their grandparents told stories about slavery. “Allowing perpetrators (whites) to maintain cognitive distortions (about history) perpetuates their own poor psychological health” (Bryant-Davis 2005:490; Sanchez-Hucles 1998:69-87).

Another respondent in her late seventies responds to the same question, “Can you recall any experiences your mother, father, or grandparents shared with you that they had with a white person?” The respondent recalls a similar story of rape:

In later years, my mother and her sisters would never tell us anything but I have. . . a cousin, I called her Aunt Bell, but she was really a cousin. . . . She told me, that this white prostitute across the street, Ms. Ann, my Auntie Celeste worked for her and she was over there working one day and this [white] man, that owned a store a block up the street, came to see Ms. Ann. . . .He was married. Ms. Ann wasn’t there, he raped my Aunt [pauses] and my Aunt got pregnant and when she got pregnant she told them [her family] what happened, she told them that he had raped her that day and they went to talk to him, and you know what they did?

They made *her* leave town. They said you have to send her out of town, and my Aunt said that is what they did to Blacks. The white men would rape the Black girls, and if the Black girls got pregnant the families would have to send them out of town to have the babies, and the like, so that's what happened in that situation in the family. . . She would tell me other families it happened to, in [names town]. . . . Our family wasn't one that told a lot of things. You see, they wanted to hide everything that's what they wanted to do. My mother or my aunt would never have told me about you know her situation they would have gone to their grave. Because I remember when Aunt Bell told me mama knew she was talking about something and then Aunt Bell told me, later on she told me [my mama said to her], "You shouldn't have been telling them all of that" So they didn't want you to know what happened.

The white perpetrator of the racialized sexual violence was not held responsible for his crime. The psychological injury, to the young woman is apparent and the female members of the family intended to take the violent rape to their graves. As in the previous narratives, there was unwarranted shame associated with these rapes. The rape, the resulting pregnancy, and the subsequent departure of this young woman from her hometown tell the entire sad story.

According to the respondent, the young woman apparently did not tell her family about the rape until she realized she was pregnant. Alternatively, if she did tell her family they did not seek out the man who committed the rape until the pregnancy was revealed. Her family, still today, wanted to keep the rape a secret. During legal segregation, African American women of rape often suffered alone and in silence. This respondent's

family was not alone, “white men would rape the Black girls, and if the Black girls got pregnant the families would have to send them out of town.” Unfortunately, for African American women the responses from white society to their sexual assaults aren’t outrage, concern, or criminal consequences for the perpetrators. The African American rape survivor, are assumed to be “valueless and sexualized, and their rape experiences are met with minimal intervention” (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:491). Studies show today that criminals who rape African American women don’t receive the same sentence as criminals who rape white women.

The respondent continues with another story of rape in the community. The raping of African American women was an everyday occurrence:

I remember this little boy [sighs] across the street named Charlie, he was one of my friends, we was the same age, and he was white, but his mother was lighter than I am, his mother looked white but she was Black and she married a Black man and they had a daughter who was about my complexion. Then Charlie came here with blonde hair and snow white just really, really, white. The daddy said, “I’m outta here” he left and he said, “That’s not my baby.” Charlie went to school with us through about the first or second grade and his mother got such flack, you know in the neighborhood they said, “He was the ice man’s baby.” They used to deliver ice to the house and come in and put it in your icebox wrapped in those burlap bags. . .you didn’t have refrigerators then, it was iceboxes, and they said, “That Charlie’s daddy was the ice man.” His mother finally after about a year or two she just packed him up and moved to [names place].

[She] reared him as a white boy and then when he got grown she moved back to [names place] and left him. . . .He never accepted the fact that he ever had any Black in him, but his mother reared him that way, and when his mother died that's the only time he ever came back to [names place], his sister was living there and the mother was there. He came for the funeral, his sister said, "He got there just in time for the funeral, went to the funeral, and when it was over he told her goodbye and that was it." . . .She never heard from him anymore. . . .He was a little boy and it wasn't his fault, but the kids teased him and everything.

The woman injured by the individual racial violence, suffers psychologically from the attack. Clearly, the child of this rape suffers subsequent feelings of shame and this is evident when the respondent states, "It was not his fault but the kids teased him." Acts of racial violence leave the survivors and their families with an array of emotions including humiliation, self-blame, anger, rage, helplessness, and fear (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:492). The psychological distress that is associated with the woman leaving her town, losing her husband, and eventually losing her son is obvious. Note the African American community wanted women who had children through these rapes to leave town and have their children elsewhere. The constant visual reminder, of the inability of African American men to protect their women during legal segregation is painfully overwhelming, and surely motivated the departure of these young African American rape victims.

The sexual violence that these respondents have witnessed and suffered was at the heart of slavery and segregation, and its often-concealed psychological and physical injuries have lasted for many generations. The child, of the rape, in this case, also feels

the shame. Continuing injuries are evident in the fact that most respondents recounted these events with great pain and/or anger, and several did not want this information connected to their interview, sometimes requesting the tape recorder be turned off.

### **WITNESSING PHYSICAL AND VERBAL VIOLENCE AGAINST PARENTS**

The system of legal segregation constantly reminded African Americans of their lack of citizenship and allowed whites of any age to inflict verbal, physical, and psychological violence on those of any age, class, or gender. In the narratives, we see early signs of how African American and white children learned their “place” in legal segregation, often by observing their parents behavior.

#### ***Verbal Violence - In the Southeast***

This older woman shares how she does not shop in a store today because of an experience long ago with her mother:

When I was a little girl, and [names store] people came to the house and talked to [my mother] real nasty, I remember that. Really nasty. I mean they called her nigger-this, nigger-that. . . She made us leave the house. And I would cry. I would think, “Why are they picking on her?” When they left, we, me and my brother, would take off and run in the house. . . . If she was in tears, she wouldn’t let us see. She protected us. And when she paid them, she told me, “Whatever y’all do when you grow up, do not buy anything from [names store] because they are very, very prejudiced.” . . . I don’t think it’s got no better really. It’s just hidden more.

In this narrative, African American children were taught to be invisible and submissive. The racial identities of children were socially constructed through racially violent social interactions and there were material consequences (Howard 2000:371). Note that the

continuous use of the word “nigger” by whites of all ages during segregation imposed a racial identity that harmed the souls of African American youth and generated great pain during the particular incidents of verbal and other violence.

Judging from the respondent’s comments about the present day and her fearful tone during the interview it is apparent that deep psychological scars remain; symptoms of “segregation stress syndrome.” Interestingly, the respondent’s counter today is not to shop at the source of the attacks. African American mothers protected their children as best they could, and children supported their mothers as best they could, even without a full understanding of white racial violence.

A childcare worker in her late seventies recalls with emotion how going to work with her mom one day turned into a frightening experience:

My mother would wash clothes for Mr. Smith, back when I was 16. I would help my mother by using an iron to press the clothes. He always wanted his shirts cleaned and pressed. Back then, you didn’t have bleach. You had to use lye. We used a washing board to scrub the clothes. . . .I remember one day I don’t know what happened, but there was one spot on the corner of his collar and he started cussing. . . . He just kept cussing and yelling at my mama. I was so scared for my mama. . . She just kept saying, “I’m sorry sir, I’m sorry sir, it won’t happen again. . . Yes sir, yes sir, sir I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” She was begging and pleading with him. I remember that being my first memory.

This experience occurred about sixty years ago, yet this woman recalls the verbal racial violence in detail and is still affected by it. She needed constant reassurance that her information would be kept anonymous. She lives in a house where the curtains are drawn,

to the point where it was difficult for me (the interviewer) to see her face even on a sunny day. Numerous respondents still live in darkened homes and exhibit physical signs associated with fear, such as breaking out in a sweat and crying while recalling experiences with whites. The woman, like other respondents, exhibits evidence of a “segregation stress syndrome” similar to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder seen in soldiers.

***Verbal Violence - In the Southwest***

In the Southwest, children also witnessed physical violence against their parents. A female respondent, in her eighties, recalls a visit to the doctor’s office:

My son got his leg broke and I had to go to the back [door] of the doctor’s office and I went to the back [door when] I cleaned the office and I couldn’t go to the front. I had to take him in there [because] he was playing. . . . I carried him out to the doctor. The secretary told me the doctor, my regular doctor, was out on vacation she said, “The doctor here, his name was Dr. John, he don’t doctor on Blacks. So he won’t see him, he should, but he won’t cause he’s Black.” I said, “Oh please please doctor on him, my child is in pain.” So she went and asked him. He said, “Since I cleaned his office,” I cleaned his office everyday, Everyday! Even Saturdays, everyday but Sundays. [He said] “Since she cleans the office, I will take care of him, until her doctor gets back he wasn’t my doctor he worked in there with him. He took care of him because I cleaned his office. [So if you hadn’t he wouldn’t.] If I hadn’t he wouldn’t have put his hands on him and he told me, and I said “Oh I’m so glad that you saw him cause he was in pain so much last night just hollering and yelling in pain.” He said, “So many Black



people after they come to visit him they don't even come back no more. So I never doctor on them, a Black person no more." I said I wasn't one of them I said my doctors out of town but I sure will pay you for doctoring on him. . . .The child was hollering and crying the whole time.

The respondent cleaned the doctor's office everyday and this is the only reason why the white doctor took care of her son. Her begging and pleading, and the child's hollering, and crying, did not ignite the white doctor's sense of humanity. The racial violence is individual, physical, and intentional. The racial incident inflicted physical injury on the child and inflicted psychological injury on them both. The respondent stating, "I am not one of them" is clearly distancing herself from other African Americans in the community. The practices of white doctors during legal segregation, sustained by a racist oppressive system allowed this unlawful practice. Today, the white doctor would be held accountable and responsible for overtly denying medical treatment to an injured child.

Another respondent in his seventies, in the Southwest, felt sad about the way his dad had internalized the practices of legal segregation and how he felt he had to deal with whites:

They didn't give me any advice. They just told me to watch myself. I remember though, back in 1955, I went home. My dad said, "Come on lets go look out there." He still had this acre and a half that he had brought from an old man. And it ended up being a real pricey piece of property because it was the only piece of property there that had water on it. So, we pull up in a service station...and this white boy that ran the service station came out, "Can I help you?" My daddy says, "Yessa." I said, "Dad, you are what 60 years old, you don't have to say "sir" and

“yessa” and stuff like that. . .just say “yes” or “no.” (With a look of disbelief on his face) You know he refused. Because it was so engrained in him, back then when you were dealing with white folks. He came here [names place] from Mississippi. It was just *in* him, you couldn’t get it out. I tell him, “you don't have to say “yes sir” or “no sir,” you can just simply say, “yes” or “no.”” Ain’t nothing going to happen to you. And then he said, “Boy you just don't know about this world.” I said, “Yeah you right daddy, maybe I don't know. . .but I do know the white man got the upper hand now.” But he’s going to slowly have to give it up. It’s coming to that point. Where we gonna really be even and not right here (makes one hand lower then the other). We gonna be even with him. So, what can I say? Maybe I won’t live to see it, cause with me being 73, I don't think I will because it’s taking too long.

The racial violence is collective and written. The injury is psychological. This respondent’s father had internalized aspects of legal segregation. His son states, “Dad, you don’t have to say yes sir no sir anymore.” The father believes that the son does not know white folks as he does and he continues to show deference to whites. One of the mental health effects of racism includes the “internalization” of (negative) stereotypes that can lower the individual’s positive self-evaluation and mental well-being (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:479-500). However, the deference is not only about low self-esteem, it is about survival. This respondent’s father still practices deference with whites, claiming his son is the one who does not know white folks. We also see, the intergenerational warning in his narrative, “boy you don’t know about the world.” I will discuss the aspects of intergenerational warnings later in the thesis.

The successful African American citizen, all too often, paid a heavy price if they expected to hold on to their material gains. African Americans during legal segregation, who had the most to lose financially, typically internalized the practices of racial etiquette even more. The more an African American acquired economically, the more he would defer to whites to stay in their good graces (Litwack 1998:321).

A respondent when asked if she remembers any experience her parents had with whites, recalls listening to her father:

My daddy, didn't have a mouth like I have, but my daddy was the type of person that did not like to be called out of his name and he was not a man to be called a boy. He didn't care who you were, you could be his boss, but if you didn't call him by his name he would stop you. Those are the things they wanted to do to him uncle, boy. He wasn't no boy; he was a man with five/six kids. Yeah, I've heard him talk about that and how he would tell them, they couldn't do that. . . .they [whites] wouldn't want to give him the respect of being a man.

Her father wanted respect, "He wasn't no boy, he was a man with five kids." African American men during legal segregation constantly fought for respect and to be treated like men. The racial violence is collective, intentional, and the injury is psychological. The damage done psychologically to African American men by the oppressive system of legal segregation still resonates in the present day. African American children watched as the adults in their lives endured verbal and physical racial violence. In some instances, their fathers didn't dare fight back. Undoubtedly, this has left a substantial unacknowledged psychological scar on the minds of African American men and their children.

## WHITE ADULTS: INFLECTING RACIAL VIOLENCE

### *Verbal Violence Against Children in the Southeast*

Direct attacks on children by whites of all ages were common during legal segregation. One man in his late seventies describes his first significant encounter with whites in the 1930s when his mother bought him a present. He remembers the incident as a turning point in life:

She had brought me a bicycle on time. . . I paid Ray fifteen dollars. . . I didn't get a receipt. . . When my mother went there to pay the next time, we were a month behind on the bicycle. . . He told mama that I didn't pay him. I said, "I paid you." . . He said, "Nigger don't you never call me a liar! I said you didn't pay me!" I said, "Oh yes sir Mr. Ray I paid you and I am not telling no lie." . .

[Mother said] "Come on son let's go." . . He didn't too much like what I had said, and the police come up to my house after this was all over with. The police ask, "Where is this boy they call Bobbie?" I told him, "My name is Johnnie Monroe but they call me Bobbie." "Nigger, you being smart with me!" I said, "No I'm not being smart." . . He said, "Pull your hat off your head." I said, "For what." He said, "Don't no nigger stand up, and talk to me face to face with no hat on his head. You get that hat off your head!" My mama said, "Take your cap off your head son. Take it off! Take it off!" . . He told mama he didn't want to have no more trouble with me. Because if he do he was going to send me off for a long time. So that night my mama and my daddy talked to me and told me the way the white man think, and the way the white man do and the best way to get along with him. . . Say "yes sir," and "no sir." . . White man was something else when I was

coming up. He would hit you. He would kick you. He would beat you. He would kill you and there was nothing your parents could do about it.

This youngster garnered his first realization that he had violated rules of the racist etiquette. As he retells the degradation ritual years later, he was verbally attacked and threatened by powerful white adults and learned there were repressive practices he must counter to survive. Again, we see the use of the country's harshest epithet, "nigger," by the white adult, who thereby imposed a negative racial identity on the youngster. Even after the respondent says, "My name is . . . Bobbie," he is forcibly identified as a "nigger." The respondent noted subsequently in his interview that his parents soon sat him down and explained that, "The white man rules this world." In his interview, he had a look of deep seriousness and sometimes spoke with sarcasm, such as in reference to saying constantly "yes sir," which he seemed to view as an act of both survival and resistance.

### ***Verbal Violence Against Children in the Southwest***

A respondent shares how white adults treated him when he was a youngster:

The parents were people who . . .taught them, anything outside of white...was disgusting, nasty, we were spit at, we would have something thrown at us, and they were just as poor as we were, just as poor. . . .They didn't want their kids to play with us. . . .They would, they use to call us "guineas," the parents would call us guineas, stuff like that. . . .If we were playing in the street, they would speed up and try their best to try and like run over us and stuff like that but, that never happened. We had stuff thrown up against our house, eggs, tomatoes, rotten tomatoes, and such.

The respondent shares how white parents taught their children that, “anything outside of white was seen as disgusting and nasty.” Whites spit on African American children and adults. They threw rocks, rotten fruit, and other things at them. The racial violence is collective, social, psychological, and physical. The white children were poor; however, white privilege, sustained by a racist institution allowed poor whites the privilege of ignoring their economic status. Poor whites were active participants in humiliating African Americans based on race and not class. African American doctors, lawyers, professionals, and principals, just to name a few examples, had to show deference to poor whites and children. African Americans understood that white children, still today, learn to hate them and learn a false sense of superiority, from their parents and society. Whites constantly referred to and treated African American like animals.

## **WHITE CHILDREN: INFLICTING RACIAL VIOLENCE**

### ***Child- On- Child Physical and Verbal Racial Violence in the Southeast***

Reviewing the interviews, one sees how deeply institutionalized the racial hierarchy was during the long era of official segregation. At young ages, white and African American youth learned appropriate “places” in this hierarchy. A retired service worker recalls how she learned the hierarchy from listening to parents who told her to do what “whites say do.” Then she adds how her experience with violent white children reinforced this:

Them children would jump us and hit us, and we [were] scared to hit them back. . . . We [would be] passing by in different places where they live and work. . . . Boy, they threw rocks at my brother. He was afraid. My brothers, they were scared. . . . Some of them got it in them now, but they try to keep it hid but if you round them

long, enough you can tell. . . . They were mean to Black people. They were mean. I don't know what made them mean to Black people but they were. . . . I know who was scared, we were! They didn't care for us. . . . I used to be so scared. I'd tell my children, I said, "yes ma'am, no ma'am." . . . I told them in a way where they wouldn't be holding it against them now. They [parents] told us how to treat them. They were scared of them themselves. . . . I was little but I could tell.

This woman describes how she noticed that, even as a child, her parents were afraid of whites, which helped generate her enduring fear. The "normative" structure of segregation encouraged young whites to learn their white attitudes of supremacy by attacking African American children and putting them in "place." Social psychological research suggests, "Those who see themselves as being socially dominant tend to act in even more dominant ways if they receive feedback that they are seen as too submissive" (Burke, 1991: 839). Note too those whites who threw rocks were not necessarily, in some cases, doing it solely based on racial matters (Blee 2005:603). In contrast, African American children had to cope in their own defensive ways, yet dared not actively defend themselves. Like numerous other respondents, this respondent is painfully aware that her parents could not help their children fight back.

During the official segregation era, one never knew from whom or where the next racial attack would come. An older domestic worker describes a similar memory of white children during her early years:

I was growing up. I remember that I went to town one Saturday, a little white girl was on the street, just start picking, starting picking at me. Me and my Aunt she was teasing: "Hey, nigger, nigger, nigger." Just kept calling us that. I told her,

“you better go on home and leave us alone because we are not bothering you.” So she just kept on right behind us. . . . “Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger.” . . . I told her, “Come on, come on, I’m going to show you what a nigger is!” She . . . stopped and went round. . . . I was probably about . . . nine or ten, eleven something like that. [Did your Aunt say anything?] No. She just didn’t. No, no. She said, “Just don’t bother, don’t say nothing to the others.”

Here a little white child uses the hostile racist epithet many times, reinforces legal segregation, and inflicts humiliation on a racially targeted child and her aunt. Probably not yet fully aware of the danger, the African American child defends herself assertively, even though her aunt counsels silence as the proper response to whites. This child’s self-esteem was surely injured.

White children imposed racial violence on African Americans of all ages. Similarly, an eighty-year-old woman describes walking to school with her sister, when racial violence presented itself at an unexpected moment:

As a little girl, I used to go to Williams School and we used to come down Wilcox Avenue. There was a white family living upstairs over a store and that little boy come down stairs and he spit in my face [lowers voice]. He spit in my face. . . . I cried all the way to school. . . . That thing hurt me so bad. I just cried, cried, cried. Because I understood, he was doing it because he was white and I was Black. We understood segregation. We knew white people would take advantage of us. Oh yeah, you knew that. [Your mom and dad . . . ?] Yeah, they knew it. But what could they do? They couldn’t go back up there and fight about something that had happened.



At a young age, she too encountered a white child expressing an attitude of white superiority, violently enforcing the imbedded racial hierarchy. The psychological injuries of this experience are evident in her narrative. She recalled the experiences as if she was reliving it; she clearly exhibited symptoms of “segregation stress syndrome.” She understood legal segregation early on. During Jim Crow, parents wrestled with protecting their children, suppressing their anger, and hiding their fears of a violent white reaction to any countering response. The public humiliation of having someone spit in your face, as your older sister stood watching helplessly, is apparent in the respondent’s uncontrollable tears, as a youngster.

From all the respondents’ vivid accounts, we can see the damage that likely occurred in the psyches of African American children, during legal segregation. They now often reveal themselves as angry, fearful, and hurting adults. There is long term effects of enforcing segregation on the white children who are today’s white adults, often those whites in control of contemporary institutions. These accounts reinforce the view that the “true self” of whites and African American are constrained by societal forces outside the individual (Mason-Schrock 1996: 181).

### ***Child-on-Child Physical and Verbal Racial Violence in the Southwest***

A respondent in her sixties remembers violent interactions with white children:

. . . Some guys would go on what we considered the wrong side of town and of course we run into other little young white boys our age, and we would fight with rocks. . . . We would fight, right there on that track, cause they didn’t want us over here, and we didn’t really care what, about them coming here, we didn’t have anything anyway, they wanted to play with, but they had things to play with over

there, they had swings, you know, they had little parks, we didn't have parks over on our side, so we be over there on those swings on those slides and they would try to run us out of there, and that's how the fights would start. . . .I'd go home sometimes bloody from getting hit with rocks and my mother would say, "I told you to stay away from over there." I left there when I was about eleven and it was still about that same way, it didn't really bother me because I was used to it, I mean, I saw this everyday.

This respondent, as a child, remembers coming home bloody. He says, "It didn't really bother him and he was used to it." The normalization of racial violence on African American children during legal segregation has surely manifested in psychological and physical injuries yet unacknowledged by society.

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<sup>1</sup> I put normative in quotes because there is this question about the normality of a structure that humiliates, punishes, murders, rapes, and terrorizes a group of people based on race. Is this normal?

<sup>2</sup> I have interviewed respondents in several southern towns. All have what is known as a "lynching tree," a place still revered by some whites there who long for the racial past.

<sup>3</sup> This respondent's brother was very active in eliminating legal segregation. Thus, it was very difficult for him to not interfere with the actions of the white man. Later, some think his outspoken views later led to his being murdered.

<sup>4</sup> This comment is a paraphrase of what this respondent said, because he asked to have the tape recorder turned off, again out of racial fear.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **FURTHER ANALYSIS**

#### **AFRICAN AMERICANS COPING WITH RACIAL VIOLENCE**

A final area of legal segregation that I explore in this thesis is how the African American targets of daily racial violence responded to it. The coping strategies African Americans used to resist racial oppression had to be imaginative. The laws of legal segregation and the racial etiquette that was its foundation varied from place to place. African American resisted legal segregation with full awareness that whites might retaliate with even more violence. This possibility of retaliatory violence highlights the courageousness and personal agency of those who did resist.

Throughout this thesis, I have illuminated briefly some of the coping strategies used by the respondents. Thus, I focus at this time on specific strategies and tactics used to survive everyday racial violence and discrimination. The coping strategies of African Americans ranged from obedience and deceptive servility; to finding everyday ways to protect themselves and their families from white coercion; to active confrontation, including joining a local civil rights movement (see also Chafe, 2001: 268-269).

#### **INTERGENERATIONAL WORDS OF WARNING**

These narratives assist us in our contemporary understanding of how legal segregation operated as an oppressive system of everyday racial violence that affected the bodies, minds, and souls of its African American victims.

In everyday life, African Americans responded to the racial violence committed by whites with individual and collective acts of resistance. They also used extreme caution in their daily interactions with whites. Their parents and grandparents taught

them to distrust whites and keep their distance from whites. Throughout the interviews, the impacts of the experiences of legal segregation continuously shared as intergenerational words of caution given to children by their parents and grandparents.

***Words of Warning in the Southeast***

An older childcare worker, who earlier in her interview speaks about being scared for her mother, adds this comment:

My mama told me, “To always keep my distance from white folks.” . . . She said, “You can’t trust them. They will grin and smile in your face but they are not your friend.” This is what I tell my children.

Raising African American children during legal segregation required spending an enormous amount of energy and time in teaching them how to deal with oppressive whites and racial violence. African American parents had to teach their young children how to protect themselves from injury in their interactions with whites. The narratives speak to the effects of racial violence and the psychological trauma that follows.

This woman still holds profound memories of racial violence. Many of her experiences occurred fifty years earlier, yet she still instructs her children to distrust whites and to keep their distance from whites.

Reflecting on working conditions in the fields where she used to work in North Carolina, another elderly respondent develops this view in more detail:

I just don’t have any trust. . . . They had like strawberry season to pick strawberries. . . .I can remember . . . when you’re going through those working conditions, they kind of treated you like cattle. . . .I can remember that but it was like one of those things that you never let it bother you cause you know you had

to work, you had to bring the money in, so you did what you had to do to survive. But it never got to a point where we just said, “We hate white people.” I can’t stand them, but I didn’t hate them. And to this day I just don’t have any trust, I don’t trust them and I really don’t like them. . . . As I get older I come to realize how hateful they were and that’s when I started to tell my grandkids how things was as far as getting educated and you know, they always consider you second class no matter how educated you are. And you have to work twice as hard as them to get where you want to get.

Similar to most African Americans in other research studies (see Feagin and Sikes 1994); this woman connects her mistrust for whites with her childhood experiences under the system of legal segregation. Clearly, she understood how important it was for her protection to agree with the hostility and animal like treatment she received under legal segregation. As we saw in an earlier narrative, there is this reference to African Americans being animals and non-human. Reportedly, this experience affected this woman so deeply that she shares the experience with her grandchildren. However, in spite of the pain it caused her, it did not lead to her hatred of whites but she is cautious and does not trust whites, even today. Similarly, a female respondent in the Southwest said, “My grandparents were slaves, and they may have talked about things that happened, but they never talked hatred, they didn’t teach us to hate.” Although some white parents did teach their children to hate African Americans.

African Americans learned when they were just youngsters to temper and suppress their feelings of anger and rage toward whites. The cultural mistrust that African Americans have for white Americans has a long-standing foundation that will take years

to overcome, if ever. The mistrust has been a coping strategy for survival. According to bell hooks, “To perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, white folks have colonized black Americans, and part of the colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them the targets of any anger we feel about racism.” “...Similarly, the cultural mistrust that many African Americans have for white Americans involves a reasonable suspicion of whites, which is adopted by African Americans for survival” (Feagin and McKinney, 2003).

Emphasizing her intergenerational words of caution, another elderly respondent reports how significant adults taught her similar childhood lessons about whites:

I was always told, “don’t trust the white man.” To tell you the truth I don’t trust him today, not too much. . . .My dad and in school they would tell you. . . .The teachers. . . .Yeah, they would tell you. They would just say “don’t trust them because you might get hurt,” or they said, “Don’t trust them because you don’t know whether they would turn on you or not.” Don’t befriend them too much. It is alright to befriend them, but not too much. Don’t put too much confidence in them. Because they will laugh in your face today and go home and tell their parents something, and then you are subject to wake up with your house on fire. . . . Because the Black man was just, he was just a tool for nothing but working.

Once more, we see how white exploitation worked during legal segregation. The probability of physical violence generated a rational distrust of whites, across the generations. In these accounts, we constantly observe the importance of social networking in African American families and communities. The social networking assisted these individuals in coping with the oppressive system of Jim Crow. Research

has shown, “intergenerational/transgenerational trauma has also been identified in survivors of the Holocaust, internment camps, reservations, and slavery” (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:490). Some researchers have shown that survivors who develop PTSD in response to Holocaust experiences may pass on their specific areas of vulnerabilities to their children.

Parents and grandparents teach lessons of caution and distancing to children and grandchildren. These respondents feel a pressing need to share the realities of their experiences, and they seem to have lost hope that things will soon get better.

Terrell and Terrel (1981) “who constructed the Cultural Mistrust Inventory, proposed that African Americans develop cultural mistrust of European Americans in response to racism. This dispels the notion that African Americans are being unreasonable or paranoid when they have instinctive mistrust for whites. Jones (1997) noted, “Cultural mistrust of whites by African Americans works to distance the latter physically, socially, and emotionally from whites” (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:488).

### ***Words of Warning About White Women in the Southeast***

This man in his sixties remembers a warning about white women from his grandmother that he did not understand until he got much older:

I was a little boy about 7 or 8 years old and they would send me to the store to pick up stuff and I would run over to the store and pick up stuff. There was a young white girl working behind the counter. We got kinda to be friends. So, one Saturday I went to the grocery store, with my grandmother, and the little girl behind, kinda older girl, behind the counter smiled at me and I smiled back at her

and we kinda we exchanged a few things. I ain't walked back in that store from that day since then. When I got home, [pauses] she told me, "Don't you ever go in that store again!" I said, "What?" She said, "Don't you ever go in that store again!" "I will not send you there and don't you go in there!" I did not understand that at that point and time but I did what she told me to do. Later on, I think I understood why she did what she did. This was prior to Emmett Till.

This man refers to Emmett Till, a teenager from the North, who came to the South in the summer of 1955 for a few weeks to visit his family. His mutilated and lifeless body was discovered days after he was tortured by a mob of white men who claimed he whistled at a white woman. The pictures of his mutilated body are still riveting to view, even today. This respondent alerts us to his understanding--an understanding he reached after becoming an adult--of the significance of why his grandmother banned him from the store and warned him at an early age about the dangers of white women.

***Words of Warning About White Women in the Southwest***

A man in his eighties recalls the only warning that he was given by his family growing up in the segregated South:

The only thing you would get a fear about dealing with whites was with dealing with a white woman. That was a no-no . . . So you didn't want to have this affinity for a white woman you know? (mumbles) She was a no-no if you didn't want to get hurt. . . . We were in a black neighborhood, went to black schools, or whatever, the only time when we went out in town we didn't have any problems cause we knew the score. You just didn't fool with those white women.



He remembers the constant warnings he was given about white women. Thousands of African American men have been killed by white mobs that were under the misguided notion that they were protecting the purity of white women. He states, “You didn’t want to have this affinity for a white woman.” White women were off limits to African American men if they wanted to stay alive. As in the previous narrative, African Americans knew they had to warn their sons or they might end up hanging from a tree somewhere.

A respondent in her seventies was asked, “If her parents, or any family members warned her about anything in reference to being safe when dealing with whites.” She remembers the warnings her brother received from their father:

My father would always warn my brothers never look directly at a white woman or white girl. Or whistle, or make . . . gestures to them because they would go back and say that you were trying to flirt with them. And they would . . . come and kill you or lynch you, you just don’t even try those kinds of things and if you are with other boys that’s doing this you separate yourself and you get back towards home. Never! . . . They had this thing that if a white girl or white lady was walking on the same sidewalk that you were walking on or road that you were walking on you were supposed to step aside and let the white girl or white boy, white lady pass. My father always says “if you see one coming just turn and go another direction. So you won’t have to meet these ladies or young women.” . . . You don’t want to get caught up in anything like this. You want to keep yourself always safe from things like this. [What would whites do?] . . . If they felt that you were

trying to whip the law, haze them or something they would jump on you! Fight you! Do everything they can to kill you, harm you!

Repeatedly we see African Americans families warning their sons about white women. Ironically, societies white male citizens inflicted physical violence on African American males, yet white men have yet to bare responsibility for the 400 years of raping and molesting African American women and children.

## **I HAVE BEEN OBEDIENT**

### *Message of Obedience in the Southeast*

Coupled with caution was the obedience required in oppressive systems like that of official segregation. Numerous respondents accented family teachings about obedience for everyday survival. A retired domestic worker answered several questions with ease before I presented her with, “Do you remember your first encounter with a white person?” At that moment, she became tense, as sweat formed on her forehead. She could not recall her first encounter in the 1930s, but does remember the way in which she framed her responses to whites:

During the time that I was coming up we were always taught to always especially to a white person they would tell us always be obedient to them. “Yes sir, no sir, yes madam and no madam.” . . . That is the way I tried to bring my children up too. Always be obedient. Be obedient to them. Never be sassy. I tried to tell them, “I have been obedient and I have listened to a lot of instruction that I got from my fore parents. I don’t know how I would have brought you all up if I had not been obedient.” My dad and my step mom would always have us together and he

would talk to us about different things and how to be obedient. . . White people during that time they may find you dead somewhere.

The intergenerational African American tradition of being obedient to whites is highlighted in this woman's narrative. While hugging her grandsons, who listen attentively when she says, "That is why I tell my grandbabies to always be obedient. That is what I tell them." We see the internalization of the customs of racial etiquette. She shares this precautionary warning to her grandsons (both under the age of ten), a warning indicated by numerous respondents. The importance of family teachings for survival is again indisputable and the continuing concern about the dangers of whites. This is one reason why several participants worried openly about their anonymity in reference to this research project.

This respondent continues her interview by sharing information that her family had to move shortly after her white employer attempted to rape her. Merely mentioning white people triggered a physical and psychological response. While sitting at her kitchen table, more than a half century after her first injurious encounters with whites, she still became very fearful. She never used the word "fear," but her demeanor signaled the underlying fear that she, like numerous other respondents, harbored even today. She exhibits symptoms of "segregation stress syndrome."

White racial violence sustained the forced custom of the racial etiquette of obedience. Another elderly respondent examines the circumstances that led her mother and grandmother to focus on the tradition of obedience in their everyday lives:

I remember when I was little, the white kids for some reason used to come down the track going in [our] part of town. And we would fight them. We threw rocks at

them, and they threw rocks back at us. We were small and it was never anything. . . . but my grandmamma would always have a fit if she saw you doing something, you know. She'd tell you, "Oh, don't do that." She was just deathly afraid of [whites]. . . . And so was, so was my mother. She was afraid of whites. And I know why now. She was, she was an obedient [person] . . . I wouldn't say an Uncle Tom . . . because she had a lot of respect from whites in this city.

In numerous interviews, the words "obedient" and "obedience" suggest an informal practice of compliance and non-resistance. Under the racially oppressive system of legal segregation, African Americans often had to do what whites (young and old) told them to do and not question it. African American children might have initially fought back against the racial violence of white children, but were soon warned by the adults in their life, not to respond to it. We see the white children in this narrative inflicting, intentionally, physical and psychological injuries on the African American children. During legal segregation, being obedient was not the same as being an Uncle Tom; obedience was a necessary and successful strategy for survival.

Children had to learn the racial norms at an early age, while some white kids were focusing on being children and creating "healthy" identities unsuppressed by racial inequality. Other white children learned from their parents, to spit on African American children and throw rocks. Some white children watched as the important adults in their lives vocalized racial slurs and embraced an attitude of white superiority. Research has shown that allowing white children to "maintain cognitive distortions perpetuates their own poor psychological health" (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:490; see Sanchez-Hucles 1998).

African American children were being taught with verbal and nonverbal language, how to survive their daily interactions with whites. In school, at home, and in their communities adult taught them to be silent, look down, give up their seat, step off the sidewalk, keep their distance, and submit physically in encounters with whites.

***Similar Message of Obedience in the Southwest***

The parallels in the narratives between respondents in the Southeast and Southwest are uncanny. This female respondent, in her eighties, talks about being obedient in language similar to the female in the Southeast:

I didn't mind telling you things that it takes to make up life and you would live longer and someone tell you how you will live longer, if you obey. . . . Sometimes you live to reach three score and ten but you can live longer than that, by being obedient; I have reach more than three score and ten. I have obeyed instruction. I have obeyed by someone telling me.

During the interview, this respondent offers to teach me (the interviewer) how to be obedient. "She didn't mind telling me how to live a long life." We see again, "I have obeyed instruction." The phrase is the same as the respondent in the Southeast used to describe her experiences with being obedient. The resemblance is uncanny.

***You Didn't Have No Voice in the Southeast***

As a group, older African Americans have yet to articulate publicly and privately the degree of psychological and physical pain and anguish that was generated by official segregation. The psychological damage and pain that the experience of legal segregation created upon the lives of African Americans has been seriously underestimated by social scientists.

Another older respondent, who speaks in his interview about “how the white man rules the world,” is excited to finally be free to speak his mind:

Now it is wonderful to be able to speak my opinion and say what I have to say. You see everything was bottled up for so many years that I could not say what I wanted to say. “Yes sir, no sir, yes sir, no sir, Mr. White folks.” You see I don’t have to do that no more. . . .Back then I didn’t have no voice. Back then you had to be humble . . . very humble. Because you didn’t want them to come along and try to burn the house down and your family on account of you. . . .A whole lot of them. You couldn’t prove it. You just couldn’t prove it. If you try to live big, they would destroy you. . . .You better not live too high. [Why didn’t the community come together?] Scared! Scared. You want to know the truth. Scared. They could get hurt. Definitely, get hurt.

This man expresses how fear permeated throughout the African American community. Numerous participants expressed fear of their houses being burned or some other type of physical violence being inflicted on their families if they were not submissive. During legal segregation African Americans often felt as if they had no where to turn but to their own families for assistance. This man’s psychological injuries are apparent, in his own home he felt compelled to lean into the tape recorder and whisper at different points in the interview, when he mentioned whites.

***You Didn’t Have No Voice in the Southwest***

We see the almost identical phrasing of having no voice from an elderly woman in her sixties, in the Southwest:

We grew up to where the white people would come to churches and put crosses out in the yard and burn the crosses out in the church yard or put a cross in your yard and just do stuff just for the devilishment of it. . . . You just try to live to survive. [*What was the community reaction to all of this?*] During that time. . . . You didn't, speak it out too loud because then, you probably get your house burned down, you get burned out. Voicing your opinions amongst blacks and to where it could get heard by somebody else, that's something you just didn't do. You could not voice your opinions. During that time, Blacks did not have an opinion. . . . We were told, "A steel tongue makes a wise person," which means, you keep your mouth shut unless you know for sure what you're saying, and you don't repeat anything, not in that era, because otherwise it would get you truly in trouble.

Yet again, we see a reference to having "no voice" and the possibility of having your house burned down. The racial violence intentionally inflicted by whites is collective, physical, and psychological. The victims could suffer physical, social, and material injuries if they resist. The psychological injuries range from living with fear, walking around in silence, and believing that there was nothing you could do about it.

This respondent, an elderly woman in her sixties, remembers in her community that African American women regularly turned up dead:

One year, they found [names woman], they never did know who killed that girl. . . . They say she was going with a white man, I don't know. . . . They found her on the beach dead. . . . I went to school with [names woman]. And they never, they just said a white man killed her and left her on the beach. . . they never did pursue

it or nothing. . . And I remember a long time ago, they say it was a white man going with a black girl . . . . And I think they left her in the car and they dumped her. . . . They say a white man did that and wasn't nothing done about that. . . . You see, you got to be careful where you go. . . . [*How did this affect the community?*] I mean, it made them mad, but what could they do? At the time, if you was a Black person and you told on a white person, you better be for sure, and if they [Blacks] do it, [speak out] they didn't know if they [whites] were going to come back and kill you and blow your house up at that time or what, so you had to be really careful.

Again, we see the intergenerational warning of being careful and keeping quiet. The community was upset about African American women turning up dead, with white men presumably the attacker. However, they had to keep quiet, even if they were sure because if they voiced their opinion they might end up dead or their houses burned out. We see this collective threat of racial violence. In addition, parents still warning their children to be careful of whites.

This elderly respondent when asked, "If she shared any advice with her children and grandchildren." She recalls how whites treated her:

Well sometime if they ask me questions, I will share it with them. . . it's tough and it hasn't been easy on a lot of people. . . people will tell you things that happened to them. . . some things that they [whites] did you know it was wrong. . . . But you couldn't say anything about it . . . that's when you got in trouble when you tried to speak up for something that you thought was right . . . your voice is not being heard. . . . You can start some violence by expressing too much, when you don't



got no voice. That's how I feel about it. . . . Making it harder on yourself because you know you don't have no voice and if you tried to take it to court, or whatever, or go see a lawyer, well you still going to their color so you still, you. . . you can't win the battle. . . . You raise some kids that is quick tempered . . . they say "I just ain't going to do this, today" and "I ain't going to do that." But you can't say what you ain't going to do, you can't do that. [She begins to cry]. I know that we have the black race people and you know they had a hard time. . . . [Cries harder]. I've been around them [whites] all my life. . . . I know that they still didn't care for me. . . . You see things you don't like; you know you can't do nothing about it. . . . You can't just tell them, let them know that you, you are a human too. I would like to have respect too because you are Black does not mean, you need to be treated like your not nobody. [Pauses] And you find some and they just as good as gold, I mean they just as good as a black is towards you. Just like you another one, just a human being. That's all you want, that's all I would want. I don't care about them, they don't have to hug and kiss me. Just treat me nice, that's all I ask, you know. Some people have a short temper and if things don't go just like they want to well they flies all off the handle and a bunch of cussing and stuff like that.

Continuously, we see this linking of African Americans to animals and being non-human. African Americans were citizens and desired the same treatment as other American citizens. She states, "They don't have to hug and kiss me. Just treat me nice, that's all I ask." This elderly woman is expressing signs of "segregation stress syndrome." The

psychological injury is clear, she recalls wondering while crying, why whites were so mean to Blacks.

### **SURVIVAL BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY**

The diversity of countering techniques for official racism that utilized by African Americans speaks to their brilliance and ability to resist in a seemingly powerless situation. Thus, regularly concealing information from whites was essential to survival for children and parents.

#### ***Survival in the Southeast***

Expressing some anger over racism and discrimination, one female respondent shares how it was important, even as a small child, to keep things to yourself:

Don't tell them you're going to school now because school is a no-no as far as Black people were concerned. Because the Black kids at that time, they had, they would get out of their school year would end before the white children school year because they had to help on the farms. . . .[Would white people get angry back then when they found out Black children were going to school?] Yes. If they were in school and they needed them to work on the farm. . . . For the most part that was part of staying out of trouble. If you were a sharecropper and if you had to borrow money for fertilizer and borrow equipment, in order to farm, in order to cultivate your land from a white farmer, then automatically you're indebted to that person. So, if the fields needed to be fertilized or crops needed to be planted because you're indebted and you have a child in school that could be helping to do that then that child has to help.

Frequently, in the backwoods of the South, the majority of African Americans lived during the Jim Crow era, working as sharecroppers on the land of white folks. The white owner (overseer) often expected slave like labor from the African American families. Parents often taught their children to conceal their fragmented schooling from the white owner. As people under the oppressive system soon learned, coping strategies of everyday deception are essential to survival during legal segregation. The act of keeping a child from an education is a criminal act of racial violence.

A health care worker in his fifties reports that silence in the face of provocations was an important coping strategy, one he learned by watching his mother in public:

If someone pushed you off the sidewalk and that was a white person that did that. . . What were you going to do? Who were you going to fuss at about having been pushed off the sidewalk? Who were you going to fuss at about someone jumping in front of you in the line in the grocery store? We didn't have a recourse then, other than to speak up for yourself, and if you spoke up for yourself, then you didn't know what kind of retribution that you might face. You didn't know whether or not rocks were going to get thrown in your window, or you might come out, and your tires are slashed, or whether or not there was going to be a cross burned in your yard.

He too learned how to cope with oppression by remaining silent and submissive. In the confrontational situations, he describes a person would likely avoid a violation of the rules of segregation because it could mean a physical attack.

The required rituals of racial etiquette were often, but not always, lost on whites. This male respondent in his sixties reports that in the 1940s he learned certain deferential practices that frequently framed his interactions with whites:

When whites were walking down the street, you had to get off the sidewalk . . . whites basically demanded it. . . .That was the whole process of racism. You had to get off the sidewalk and you never addressed whites as nothing more than “yes sir, or yes ma’am” and you never look whites in the eye because that was a sign . . . that you were being belligerent. . . .An uppity nigger and you get challenged for that in a minute. . . .You were the powerless so you just said, “Yes sir and no sir.” There were some Blacks who used to voice their discontent but whites didn’t know it. “Yes sir,” you know [in a sarcastic tone] . . . allowing them to say it, but not because you’ve earned it, because I don’t want no problems from you.

The collective practice of stepping aside or “yes sir, yes ma’am” submission was a survival strategy required of virtually all African American young and old during legal segregation. Most had to hide their feelings of anger behind a veil.

In some of the historical literature, “shuffling” is often seen as something that African Americans developed as part of their deeper personalities because of legal segregation. Yet, this was usually not the case. A teacher in his sixties reflects in more detail on the “shuffle” strategies adopted consciously by African Americans to stay alive during official segregation:

The rule of thumb was you never tell white folks what you thinking. Because they are going to use it against you, no questions about it. There was this whole coping skills that Black men had. They call it, “Shuffling, shuffling around, scratching

their heads, white folks got, lord have mercy, white folks, I don't know." I saw them doing it, "I don't know, yes sir, I don't know, I don't know sir." You know, but the white would come to you because they thought you had something to tell them. So the first thing you do was to deny it . . . You had to take on the role of a buffoon to get this guy off of you because he could make life difficult for you. So, that's what you did and it worked. Once the white person left you laughed. You know, it happened all the time. "Do you boys know so and so, and so and so?"

"No sir, never heard of him."

This passage demonstrates several key aspects of this segregation system. The techniques of deception were intentionally honed to reduce attacks by whites. As youngsters, African Americans learned that whites could not be trusted and they needed to hide their true feelings. These highly deceptive performances show how African Americans intelligently resisted oppression without being detected. This respondent and his fellow workers had to perform the way whites expected just to protect themselves. This man highlights several countering strategies, which he labels "yes sir" shuffling round, "don't know" scratching heads, and playing the buffoon—everyday Black behavior that whites usually mistook for ingrained servility and a lack of intelligence. In fact, playing the buffoon is here considered a brilliant avenue for survival, as the private laughter strongly signals (Thompson and Feagin 2006).

There can be a critical discrepancy between our human selves and our socialized selves. "The tension results from the divergence between what we may want to do instinctively and what people expect us to do. We are confronted with demands to do what is expected of us; additionally we are not supposed to waver. In order to cope with

this tension and to maintain a stable self-image, people perform for their social audiences” (Ritzer 2003:147). African Americans performed for whites for their survival.

### *Survival in the Southwest*

Some African Americans chose not to shuffle and defer and it cost them jobs and promotions. This respondent used a type of shuffling to inform a college-educated man:

I know a black man, only black man out there at that time. Mr. [names man]. This man had a college education, and the only time he got his promotion [was] when he retired and he had lawyers on the case that made them pay for the time he should have been promoted . . . He asked me to act as somebody to recommend him and he [the lawyer] just asked me “Why isn’t this man getting his due justice?” And I said, “Because, he’s not giving them [whites] what they want.” I acted crazy and said, “You know ask me what they [whites] want.” [Laughs] I said “Well they want him to joke and act as like colored folk, Uncle Tom, hug them some women and that stuff.” .He is not doing it, so they are trying to ask me, “Well where do you fall in?” “I fall in the same category, and that is one of the reasons I never got promoted.”

This respondent knew of an African American man who refused to “shuffle” for whites. He cleverly states, “I fall in the same category, and that is one of the reasons I never got promoted.” African Americans knew what whites wanted and consciously decided, as a form of resistance, whether to perform for whites or not.

## **ORGANIZE AND RESIST**

### *Organize in the Southeast*

Even though active resistance usually sparked further violent attacks, some African American men, women, and children, as we have already seen, did periodically engage in confrontational resistance. A prominent religious leader, now in his eighties, speaks to the importance of constant and confrontational resistance, especially after World War II:

You had to do that! You had to do that! In order to change the system you had to do that! You had to test it. You had to make them show their real color. . . . If you didn't keep protesting the system, [change] never would have happened and some of us just decided that, we were going to test the system. It was dangerous to do it but we did it. Yeah. We did it. . . . Schools were segregated. We wrote the school board and told them to consider integrating the schools. If they didn't integrate the schools we were gonna file a suit. As time went on, we decided to file a suit. I went to several parents and told them we had to file a suit. I told them we had to have a particular child. All of them said, "NO!" My younger daughter was at [names school] at that time. I said to her, "We got to use a name on the lawsuit to file the suit. Don't tell your mother about it but would you agree to do this?" She said, "Yes."

Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans like this respondent and his child actively resisted legal segregation and pressed the larger African American community to resist collectively. Like their predecessors, they showed that they were

fighters, demonstrating great courage and agency in resisting segregation in spite of the threat of violence.

***Resistance in the Southwest***

A respondent in his seventies understands how individual acts of resistance can empower African Americans:

I got a summer job working. . .She [my employer] say, “Boy, [pause]if you have to go to the bathroom, you can’t go to that bathroom back there, what we use, you have to get out and go to the cafeteria down the street.” . . . So I say, “Well I may work here one week and get me a paycheck and I’ll fix her. . . And so, I left, [quit] and I looked in there and I saw she was sitting up there by the cash register, wasn’t nobody there but me and her. . . I went back there, and I flush the bathroom, she thought I had went in it and used the bathroom. (Starts laughing) She jumped up! And she come running back that way! And she ran passed me, I was hiding in the little hallway door, and she missed me! (Imitates woman) “Didn’t I tell you” And I was out the door, gone. (Laughing) So I don’t know what happened after that but, she was an old lady, they just hated black folks and I couldn’t understand why they hated us so much. We don’t do nothing to them and they act like, what can I say, “They act like we was dogs!” That’s just the way they treated us.

As in earlier narratives, in the thesis, we see respondents state, “They [whites] act like we was dogs!” We see this constant reference that African Americans deserved to be treated like animals. This aspect of legal segregation directly relates back to slavery; the slave



master counted and included human beings, African American, in the same category as his cattle. This man in his narrative is relaying a powerful demonstration of resistance.

Another female respondent in her sixties resisted against public segregation laws:

I know one time; my grandmother took me to go to (names a park). That was a park for whites. My grandmother decided she was going to take me to the park that day. There they had a little wadding pool, I got in, she told me to get in the pool, and there sure enough I did. Finally the warden came over and told me, “You gone have to go.” She said, “Why?” He said, “See because, this pool is for whites.” She said, (raises voice) “well I don't care what it's for, my grandchild is in it now and we not leaving and you not gon bother us!” She said, “The best thing for you to do, you gone on and do what your suppose to do.” “This pool is for children, and she's a child.” By then she had stood up and put her hands on her hips like this (demonstrates). She said, “Did you hear what I said?” He said “Yes'em.” and he left. I can say I was the first Black child to go in the pool in (Names Park) back in that time. . . .We were kinda raise though not to, you don't be afraid of anybody. And we weren't afraid, and that was that.

This woman demonstrates to her granddaughter how to resist the laws of segregation without being afraid. The racial violence was individual yet sustained by social networks and a racially oppressive institution. In all these white-dominated communities, African Americans confronted insurmountable odds in trying to avoid racial violence in their daily rounds, and certainly when engaging in acts of aggressive resistance. Yet they often resisted openly and collectively, and thereby expanded the freedom for all Americans over the course of this country's long history.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have shown that during legal segregation, white-generated fear through racial violence and terror was used to keep African Americans under social, economic, and political control. I also examined how that fear motivated survival strategies. To alleviate the affects on the minds and health of African Americans, the racial traumas must first be fully acknowledged by the African American communities and the larger society, and I attempt to do that by sharing the narratives of elderly African American communities in the Southeast and Southwest.

In this thesis, I have conceptualized racial violence as physical violence, written violence, and/or verbal violence, including being called “nigger,” “boy,” and “uncle.” The racial violence can be intentional or unintentional and inflicts or threatens to inflict, physical, psychological, social, or material injury, such as burning crosses and churches, on African Americans. In addition, the racial violence can occur in any public or private geographical location including, the streets, workplace, and/or home. Lastly, you don’t have to witness or personally experience the racial violence to be psychologically injured by it. Research has proven that hearing about a racial crime as a second-hand experience can still cause stress symptoms such as anger, fear, and denial, crying, and sweating.

Legal segregation ended over 50 years ago and the African Americans in the small cities are no longer worried about individual and organized acts of random racial violence such as rape, lynching, parades by the Klu Klux Klan, and crosses being burned on their front lawns. However, this research project probed the deeper reality that the racially violent experience of legal segregation did profoundly affect and shape the lives

of older African Americans in collective and individualized ways. How much the participants were affected was evident in the poignant and emotional ways in which they shared their narratives.

Thus, in the thesis I have shown the impact on the victims who suffered the pain and long-term consequences of the racial violence that occurred during legal segregation. Many of the respondents who participated in the research project exhibited bodily and psychological responses similar to those of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptomatology Christopoulos (2002) reported for soldiers after a war. During the official segregation era, elderly African Americans suffered through stressful events and “warlike trauma” (Mills and Edwards 2002: 273-304).

One traumatic racial experience can affect a person’s life for a very long time. Children, adults, and the elderly, who witness the killing of someone they know or some other trauma (the younger the higher the probability) are more likely to develop heart, nerve, intestinal, and other health problems throughout their lifetime. (Pizarro, Silver, and Prause 2006).

Thus, I examined in this thesis an important idea of conceptualizing a “segregation stress syndrome.” The syndrome represents the chronic and enduring stress, as well as, the extremely painful responses to official segregation that are indicated by the elderly African Americans that participated in this research project (on the use of “PTSD” for Black responses to current racism, see Williams and Williams-Morris 2000; Feagin 2006).

Some of the symptoms of “segregation stress syndrome” are physical such as crying, sweating, and increased anxiety. The syndrome also has some psychological

components such as the sufferer avoiding the situations, individuals, and or objects that remind him or her of the traumatic event. In addition, the syndrome includes some denial in associating the traumatic event with himself or herself, a loved one' or a deceased loved one. The symptoms can also include re-experiencing the trauma through feeling as if you are actually in the traumatic situation again.

I have shown in the thesis how some of the survivors of legal segregation may also exhibit difficulty concentrating and may feel a sense of self-blame indicating symptoms of “segregation stress syndrome.” Survivors of traumatic experiences sometimes have problems feeling comfortable and trusting individuals who remind them of their perpetrators (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005:488). The victims of rape and assault may experience depression, anger, anxiety, and fear which are some of the symptoms of “segregation stress syndrome.”

A final area that I examined in the thesis is how African Americans countered, coped, and resisted during legal segregation. African Americans found creative ways to counter the everyday customs and laws of legal segregation. They developed strategies such as deference, obedience, and avoidance. Presently, elderly African Americans are passing the strategies that they learned from their parents onto their children and grandchildren. However, in spite of everything African Americans endured during legal segregation their narratives show that they were not taught to hate whites and they pass that message onto their children and grandchildren.

There is still extreme social, economic, and political control over the lives of African Americans in the contemporary reality of the cities, in the Southeast and Southwest. One only need take a ride through the cities to see how the physical and racial division represents a time of legal segregation in profound and obvious ways. The inequality is apparent by looking at the run-down homes, schools, and businesses in the African American communities.

Are African Americans nostalgic for aspects of a time in the past? Are they recalling their memories in ways that are damaging to the future generations of African Americans living in these small cities? Are older African Americans in the cities doing their children a disservice by passing on survival strategies that are no longer applicable? The physical racial violence that the community lived through during legal segregation is no longer an issue in the cities; yet we still see problems with racial violence in the form of verbal and physical attacks.

During many of the interviews, the participants through their narratives indicated that they longed for the sense of community that they had during legal segregation when African Americans worked together and supported each other. They long for the committed African American teachers of legal segregation. They felt that integration had taken all of that away from them because prosperous African Americans moved away from their neighborhoods when given the opportunity to move. The participants shared that their fight for integration was about economic equality, it was not about the destruction of their communities. Consequently, what these older African Americans are witnessing is that economic equity is not a reality. There are a few African Americans that have done well, but the majority of African Americans in this community are not

better off economically than they were over 50 years ago. The majority of these older African Americans are witnessing their grandchildren struggling with teachers who are not as concerned as teachers were in the past.

### **DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

I think the ways in which these older African Americans are recalling their stories and passing on survival strategies are based on the reality that the racial violence has changed, but not much else. These older African Americans feel that the extreme economic control of legal segregation is as much a reality for them today as it was 50 years ago. I would based upon this research be inclined to agree. I think further research needs to be done in reference to their concerns.

I think more social science research needs to be done to build a theory of racial violence that takes into consideration the physiological injuries that are sustained by the victim. A theory that can be applied to legal segregation and contemporary times.

Researchers in the fields of medical and social science need to do more research around the issues of racial trauma and “segregation stress syndrome.” This syndrome may offer some explanations as to why elderly African Americans are twice as likely to die from strokes, heart attacks, and other serious illnesses as elderly whites are. The syndrome may offer some explanations as to why elderly African Americans have high blood pressure, diabetes, and sickle cell disease (National Stroke Association 2006). These are all areas that need further research in a time where historically African Americans “appear” to be in a “better position” to reap the benefits of their citizenship.

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## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLING PLAN

1. Where did you grow up?
2. Do/Did you live close to your family? [i.e. grandparents, aunts, uncles]
3. Do you remember what type of work your mother/father did?
4. Do you remember what type of work your grandmother/grandfather did?
5. What type of work have you done? [Occupation]
6. Do you remember your first encounter with a white person?
7. Was it a good experience? If so why, if not why not?
8. Can you recall any experience your mother, father, or grandparents shared with you that they had with a white person?
9. Can you recall a memorable story that you had or heard about living under segregation, possibly a story about someone in the community?
10. Do you remember hearing any stories about unpleasant things happening to young women or young men in your family or community?
11. Did your parents or any family member warn you about anything in reference to being safe in dealing with whites?
12. What did they warn you about in reference to whites?
13. Do you recall any experiences that you had when you were young where you thought you or your family were being treated differently because you are black?
14. Can you recall at what age you were when you began to notice as a black person that you were treated differently than white people?
15. Did you share any experiences with discrimination/racism that you may have had with any family members?
16. How often during the course of the day, did you interact with whites growing up?
17. Where was the interaction? Street, store, at work, school etc.

18. Do you remember any advice given to you by your parents or anyone else about handling racism or white people?
19. Did you pass the advice on to your children?
20. How did you and your family cope and survive during legal segregation?
21. Which coping strategies do you find most effective / least effective
22. Where did you learn the coping strategies that you use to confront racism/discrimination?
23. Were the coping strategies that you use taught to you by someone? If so, Who?
24. Thinking back to when you were a young person and the things that you experienced would you say that you were a victim? If so, why? If not, why not?
25. Do you or any of your family members experience anything today that is similar to what you experienced when you were young?
26. Do you or any of your family members experience any type of unfair treatment and discrimination that some blacks report today in housing?
27. Do you or any of your family members experience any type of unfair treatment and discrimination that some blacks report today in restaurants?
28. Do you or any of your family members experience any type of unfair treatment and discrimination that some blacks report today in stores?
29. Do you or any of your family members experience any type of unfair treatment and discrimination that some blacks report today by the police?
30. Do you or any of your family members experience any type of unfair treatment and discrimination that some blacks report today by employers or at work?
31. Do you know of any other way that you or your family members have felt they were treated unfairly because they are black?
32. How do you respond to racism or discrimination from whites today?
33. What coping strategies do you use to handle discrimination from whites today?
34. Do you think things are better for black people now than they were 30 years ago?  
If so, How? If not, Why?

## VITA

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