

The Myth of the Biracial South

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Charles L. Black, a born-and-bred white Southerner, was teaching at the Yale Law School in 1957 when he wrote an article for the *New Republic* in which he outlined the legal and moral appeals that might be made to sympathetic whites to promote desegregation of the South. At the end of the essay, he revealed a dream he had long had, formed from pondering “my relations with the many Negroes of Southern origin that I have known, both in the North and at home.” He noted “again and again how often we laugh at the same things, how often we pronounce the same words the same way to the amusement of our hearers, judge character in the same frame of reference, mist up at the same kinds of music. I have exchanged ‘good evening’ with a Negro stranger on a New Haven street, and then realized (from the way he said the words) that he and I derived this universal small-town custom from the same culture.” Despite such cultural affinities, whites and blacks in the South, though, had failed to acknowledge them, these affinities that reflected a kinship. “My dream is simply that sight will one day clear and that each of the participants will recognize the other.” If this happened, “if the two could join and look toward the future together—something would have happened uniquely beautiful in history. The South, which has always felt itself reserved for a high destiny, would have found it, and would come to flower at last.”¹

Black’s words in 1957, when the black freedom movement was well underway, expressed a mythic view of Southern culture that would become in the 1970s a major ideological underpinning of the contemporary American South. The myth of the biracial South is the idea that the South has the potential to achieve a truly integrated society, harmonious race relations with meaning for American culture and beyond. Like a good evangelist, Leslie Dunbar, executive director of the Southern Regional Council, expressed this faith even more directly in 1961, testifying to his belief “that the South will, out of its travail and sadness and requited passion, give the world its first grand example of two races of men living together in equality and with mutual respect.”² This essay will examine the historical origins of this myth of the biracial South, explore its full emergence in the 1970s, suggest its meanings for various Southerners, and briefly assess its development since the 1970s.

The South, of course, has long been the focus for myth making, both by Southerners themselves and by outsiders. Since George Tindall's seminal article "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History" (1964), scholars collectively have developed a framework for interpreting Southern history in terms of myth. The mythic perspective on Southern history would begin with the idea of a Colonial Eden, then portray the romantic Old South and the crusading Lost Cause, followed by the materialistic New South, and the twentieth century, with repeated expressions of a Savage South, but culminating seemingly in the idea of the Sun Belt, which mysteriously fused the South with the heart of darkness, southern California, in a prosperous world anchored by Disneyland and Disney World, before this summer's (1998) unlikely scenario of the Southern Baptists' symbolically casting those wholesome shrines into the nether regions. Racial myths have been prominent in this frame of mind, especially the myth of white supremacy, which became institutionally embodied in the Jim Crow laws from the 1890s to the 1960s. The South's distinctiveness in such myths was within a national context. Winthrop Jordan properly points out that "racial attitudes in the South have been peculiar not for their existence or their content but for their virulence, saliency, pervasiveness, and the predisposition of white people to overt action and of black people to fear, accommodation, resistance, and retaliation."³

One of the most enduring Southern myths has been that of the Savage South, which is the opposite of the myth of the biracial South. It traces back to the colonial era and flowered in full expression in the antebellum era of North-South conflict. The South appeared in the national culture as backward, sexually licentious, irreligious, alcohol drenched, and morally suspect. In an ironic reversal, the Menckenesque version of the Savage South in the 1920s saw the region as benighted for exactly the opposite reasons—it now seemed the prisoner of a Puritan worldview that made it too religious, too sexually inhibited, too morally uptight. In either event, race was central to the image of the Savage South—brutal public lynchings of African Americans, the sinister Ku Klux Klan, the legal outrages of cases like Scottsboro, the violent white resistance to desegregation in the 1960s at places like Birmingham, Oxford, Neshoba County, and Selma. All of these actual events take their place in a broader ideological view of the South as irredeemably evil. Fred Hobson, the historian of the myth of the Savage South, has traced its decline, noting that in the 1960s "the white South was taking its last racial stand." Since then, the nation's and the region's writers have continued to portray savagery in Southern places but it "appears, if not contrived, at least removed from the social base which gives rise to the fiction."⁴

Hobson speculated that "a powerful positive myth" of the racial interaction of blacks and whites, an example to the world of racial harmony, would

succeed the myth of the Savage South. George Tindall, writing several years after Hobson, in 1989, pointed out that scholars had not studied “that newer version of the old religious myths that reserved the South for a high destiny—the Integrated South, purged by suffering and prepared to redeem the nation from bias and injustice.”⁵ For Tindall and Hobson, the issue is not whether the South actually is savage or integrated, but the cultural constructions that project these representations. The myth of the biracial South is thus one of the most recent representations of the South. What were the origins of this myth of the biracial South? When did it appear as an identifiable construct? How widespread has it become since the 1960s?

If the myth of the biracial South expressed the belief that the South had the nation’s most harmonious race relations, one might trace its origins back to the region’s traditionally conservative ideology. The paternalism of the slave system embodied the ways a social system of owner and slave functioned in a biracial context—with the owner wielding power but the slave influencing the working relationship and the broader culture as well. The biracial myth could be traced back to the conservative idea of the South as a hierarchical society, with society working smoothly when everyone understood and accepted his or her place. The racial radicals, whose frenzied rhetoric and wild violence periodically came to the fore, typically questioned blacks’ having a place at all in Southern society, but conservatives understood the region’s economic need for African Americans, if nothing else. Besides, the popular traditionalist metaphor of Southern society as a family writ large would suggest an ideological awareness of the need to keep a place at the supper table for blacks, even if their table was separate and in the kitchen.⁶

A variant of this outlook was the New South creed of the 1880s, which promoted the ideal of racial harmony, as essential to the good business climate necessary to lure Northern investment South after the Civil War. This view has surely remained an enduring justification for seeing Southern society as embodying harmonious race relations. Proponents of the New South praised the end of slavery but looked back fondly on the nostalgic prewar plantation and its interracial relationships. As Henry W. Grady wrote, “The Northern man, dealing with casual servants can hardly comprehend the friendliness that existed between the master and slave.” Thomas Nelson Page sketched more fully this sentimental view of harmonious race relations in a biracial society. In his essay “Social Life in Old Virginia before the War,” he portrayed an unpretentious plantation life, with honorable planters, joyous children, happy darkies, and devoted ladies. Grady went further as a booster of his society, insisting that the friendly relations between the races had “survived the war, and strife, and political campaigns.” He concluded that “it is the glory of our past in the

South. It is the answer to abuse and slander. It is the hope of our future.” White Southerners in the twentieth century became a cliché in the national culture, claiming that the South’s race relations were better than elsewhere, and that racial harmony had been achieved, as long as outside agitators remained outside.⁷

The deeper source of the myth of the biracial South was not in the conservative ideology but in the South’s liberal reform ethos. Antecedents could be found in the nineteenth century among advocates of biracial coalitions in Reconstruction and in the era of agrarian reform in the 1890s. These attempts at interracial cooperation had been limited by racial assumptions of white reformers, economic rivalries, and the chicanery of their opponents. In the twentieth century, organizations emerged that were more direct influences on the biracial ideology that flowered in the post-1960s. Women’s groups like the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and the YWCA worked toward moderation on racial issues in the early twentieth century, fostering contacts between the races and promoting interracial ideals. More intentionally, organizers formed the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in 1919 and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1938, both seeing Southern regional problems through an interracial lens. The Southern Regional Council succeeded the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in 1944 and thereafter served as the most effective agency for exchange of information and advocacy of interracial goals. While the SRC in its early years did not call for the overthrow of Jim Crow segregation but worked for African American betterment within the separate-but-equal system, the organization was surely in the forefront of biracial efforts in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Small numbers of Southerners lived out their interracial ideals in places like Clarence Jordan’s Christian community, Koinonia, in South Georgia and the Providence Cooperative Farm in Tchula, Mississippi.⁸

Liberal reformers drew from democratic ideals in justifying racial moderation and eventually the end of Jim Crow, but they also reflected the South’s religious culture, its evangelical character and aspirations toward salvation in a sinful world. This source was especially significant for the minority of Southern liberals in the 1930 to 1950 period who championed not just racial moderation but the end of Jim Crow segregation altogether. Such reformers came to believe that the caste system violated basic Christian ideals of brotherhood. As historian Morton Sosna has observed, “the importance of evangelicalism to Southern liberalism can hardly be overemphasized.” Howard Kester, for example, who was a union organizer and antilynching crusader in the 1920s and 1930s, confessed his motivation was simply Christian love. “The kind of healing the region and the nation needed wouldn’t come through politics or

economic organization,” he said; “there had to be an ethical orientation, a moral confrontation based on the teachings of Jesus.” Another liberal reformer, Will Alexander, confessed in 1951, “I have never lost faith by what I seemed to glimpse in the New Testament. I have been influenced more by this than by anything I have ever known.” Atlanta newspaper editor Ralph McGill revealed in his autobiography that his “Calvinist conscience was stirred by some of the race prejudice [he] saw.” McGill, like other Southern liberals, used the language of evangelicalism, speaking of “shame” and “guilt,” to describe how his feelings were led to change on racial issues. The Southern faith is one that knows of the wickedness of human nature, but believes in the possibility of conversion and ultimate redemption. These Southern liberals working most actively before the *Brown* decision for the end of Jim Crow knew of the South’s sins but thought redemption possible. Racial healing could follow, resulting in the dream of racial harmony—the South then redeeming the nation.⁹

Southern blacks also advanced the idea of a redemptive South, especially the ministers of the civil rights movement. In a 1961 interview, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of “an intimacy of life” in the South that could become “beautiful if it is transformed in race relations from a sort of lord-servant relationship to a person-to-person relationship.” He argued that the nature of life in the region would “make it one of the finest sections of our country once we solve this problem of segregation.” King noted in 1963 that “when you find a white southerner who has been emancipated on the issue, the Negro can’t find a better friend.” King used the words “transformed” and “emancipated,” but he might have substituted “converted,” to catch the evangelical flavor of the personality change required in white Southerners to embrace the integrated society in his age. But it was possible. Even the state of Mississippi, he said in his “I Have a Dream” speech, “a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”¹⁰ The liberal dream, even in the 1950s and 1960s, was one of the racially converted South, washed in the blood of the civil rights martyrs, redeeming the nation.

But the nation saw the 1960s South, as the Savage South. Southern whites surely rejected King’s lyrical vision as they defended segregation. With the end of Jim Crow legal segregation in 1964 and of voting disfranchisement of African Americans in 1965, Southern culture had to face new realities. As a public ideology, white supremacy had been vanquished. The Ku Klux Klan and the citizens’ councils had been defeated, and rabble-rousing, old-time politicians had lost the battles and ultimately the massive-resistance war they had proclaimed in the 1950s. The hearts of Southern whites were not trans-

formed overnight on racial issues simply because of the changes the federal government mandated as a result of the pressures of their fellow black Southerners, but white Southerners would have to adapt their public culture. Beginning in the early 1970s, new ideologies came to the fore as emerging justifications for Southern public life and values.

The myth of the biracial South was another formative ideology in the post-segregation era. The L. Q. C. Lamar Society, organized in 1969, in Durham, North Carolina, was a good example of a new organization that actively promoted the new mythology. Named for a Mississippi secessionist who became a postwar advocate of regional reconciliation, the Lamar Society attracted a constituency of middle- and upper-middle-class professionals who advocated a vision of a still regionally distinctive South dedicated to transcending endemic problems of racial conflict, poverty, and environmental abuse. Like the Vanderbilt Agrarians four decades earlier, who championed a conservative vision of Southern traditionalism in the face of modernity, members of the Lamar Society worried about the survival of a distinctive regional culture in an industrialized modern world. Unlike the Agrarians, these Southern intellectuals and policy makers were reformers, wanting to use regional planning and government authority to preserve selective aspects from regional tradition. They pushed, in particular, for a new racial vision in the South. As writer Willie Morris said of the South in the introduction to the society's defining symposium volume *You Can't Eat Magnolias* (1972), "Racism was the primeval obsession. No longer is this so. It will hold out in places, but it will never again shape the white Southern consciousness." For generations, Morris wrote, racism had "misdirected the South from its other elemental problems of poverty and exploitation." The changes in the 1960s he foresaw having "a profoundly liberating effect" on the region.¹¹

Alabama newspaperman H. Brandt Ayers, a founder of the Lamar Society, openly dismissed the continued attachment of the South to its old Lost Cause symbols, writing of the "viral weed of mythology" that "has been allowed to grow like kudzu over the South." Ayers urged the South to embrace a different heritage, symbolized not by the White House of the Confederacy but by reverence for "the symbols of Monticello or the Hermitage—houses built by white Southerners who led the nation" and represented egalitarian ideals. Ayers saw contemporary Southerners within the long perspective of Southern history: "Southerners, black and white, locked together in yet another uniquely Southern experience, should be addressed with the humanity that teaches wise and just men to hate the sin, but love the sinner." Ayers also saw history overcoming the separation of the regions. "North and South," he wrote, "we have now been reduced to the same historical dimension." The frustrations of

the Vietnam War and the nation's recognition of racial problems extending beyond the South had "shattered the Yankees' innocent illusions that they have been ordained by God to trample out immorality and that His truth marches with them into every war."¹²

Just as the older racial myths of white supremacy were institutionally supported in a structure of the Democratic Party, the Ku Klux Klan, Protestant churches, state laws, and racial etiquette that virtually all whites enforced against all people of color, so now the myth of the biracial South was reinforced by institutions like the Lamar Society and its periodical *Southern Journal*, the Institute for Southern Studies in Durham and its *Southern Exposure*, the Southern Growth Policies Board, and academic regional studies centers such as the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture. Like other such institutes in the South, the Mississippi center, which the university set up in 1977, had a pronounced interracial theme. African American artist Romare Bearden's painting of black musicians adorned the cover of its first publication, *Southern Journal*, a glossy annual report issued in 1980. Inside, photographs of black blues singers and basket makers were interwoven with illustrations of white quilting ladies and people enjoying a dinner on the grounds after church. The center, located in the benighted state of Mississippi, symbolically embraced the new recognition of biracialism by picturing Alex Haley and Eudora Welty side by side in its annual report.¹³

Southern politics also reflected the impact of the myth of the biracial South in the early 1970s, just as African Americans were becoming a major force in Southern politics. The most racially obsessed states, those of the Deep South, dramatically changed from supporting prosegregation candidates in the pre-1970 era to supporting those who did not use racial rhetoric or campaign on the segregation issue. In 1976, African Americans represented between 17 and 26 percent of the electorate in the Deep South states, and by then politicians were openly courting black votes. This was not a sentimental gesture on the part of white politicians. The growing power of African American political strength led Southern white politicians to increasingly acknowledge black aspirations. As Congressman Andrew Young noted in 1976: "It used to be Southern politics was just 'nigger' politics—a question of which candidate could 'outnigger' the other. Then you registered 10% to 15% in the community, and folks would start saying 'Nigra.' Later you got 35% to 40% registered, and it was amazing how quick they learned how to say 'Nee-grow.' And now that we've got 50%, 60%, 70% of the black votes registered in the South, everybody's proud to be associated with their black brothers and sisters."¹⁴

Progressive young governors symbolized the change in Southern politics that would make it a prime carrier of the new racial mythology in the early

1970s. Dale Bumpers in Arkansas, Jimmy Carter in Georgia, John West in South Carolina, Reuben Askew in Florida, William Waller in Mississippi, and Edwin Edwards in Louisiana, followed by politicians like William Winter in Mississippi and Bill Clinton in Arkansas, all were committed to new interest-group politics that promoted biracial coalitions and a new rhetoric of the South as the chosen place. They did not appeal to traditional Southern defensiveness about the federal government or fears about outside agitators, nor did they throw around racial code words. They overtly repudiated traditional Southern mythology, distancing themselves from the past and expressing hope and optimism for the future. George Busbee, elected governor of Georgia in 1974 with black support, stated in his inaugural address that “the politics of race has gone with the wind,” using an especially evocative term in Margaret Mitchell’s home state to dismiss past racial ideology. Edwin Edwards spoke directly to blacks in his 1972 inaugural address, pledging that “the old imaginary barriers no longer exist. My election has destroyed the old myths, and a new spirit is with us.”¹⁵

Dramatic new images came along with the rhetoric. Eugene “Bull” Connor could be seen singing “We Shall Overcome” in a black church while campaigning unsuccessfully. George Wallace crowned a black homecoming queen at the University of Alabama. The governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, dedicated a portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr., in a prominent spot in the Georgia state capitol building. When Forrest “Fob” James was inaugurated governor of Alabama in 1979, he boldly linked two central symbols of a newly emerging rhetoric of biracialism: “I believe if Robert E. Lee and Martin Luther King, Jr., were here today, their cry to us—their prayer to God—would call for ‘The Politics of Unselfishness’—a people together—determined to climb the highest plateau of greatness.”¹⁶ The imagery of Lee and King praying together to God projected explicitly an image of civil religion, both Southern heroes blessing the region. Their photos would soon be linked in a new iconography within Southern public institutions.

The revealing gestures of even segregationists like Connor and Wallace to seek black political support reflected the political aspects of a broader redefinition of the symbolic Southern community in the 1970s. Whites had shaped the imagery and meaning of previous outcroppings of the Southern instinct for mythology, and white-dominated organizations had institutionalized and promoted traditional myths. Just as blacks in the older South had been politically disfranchised, racially segregated, and economically exploited, so they had been virtually powerless in influencing the South’s public culture. They did not have a vote on the symbols the South’s culture projected or on the civic rituals its people acted out. The process underway in the 1970s represented the

beginnings of a redefinition of a new Southern community, reflecting black influence. While the changed political rhetoric of a George Wallace could be attributable simply to his craven instinct for political success, he was part of a broader society grappling with the need for a new ideological foundation to give a sense of purpose and direction. Myths last only if they unify and can evoke feelings of a broad range of citizens, who may identify with the myths for differing reasons. The myth of the biracial South filled the void represented by the decline of older Southern myths at a time when the racial basis of Southern society had shifted dramatically.¹⁷

At the heart of the myth of the biracial South stood a moral earnestness that enabled the South to make claims upon national idealism that were far removed from the region's civil rights disgraces of the 1960s. Reuben Askew stated the idea of Southern moral superiority in 1972: "For many years now, the rest of the nation has been saying to the South that it is morally wrong to deprive any citizen of an equal opportunity in life because of his color. I think most of us have come to agree with that. But now the time has come for the rest of the nation to live up to its own stated principles. Only now are the other regions themselves beginning to feel the effects of the movement to eliminate segregation." He insisted that "the rest of the nation should not abandon its principles when the going gets tough." Just as the nation had "sought to bring justice to the South by mandate and court order" so now "perhaps it is time for the South to teach the same thing to other regions in a more effective way—by example."¹⁸

New England, the moral center of antebellum abolitionism and other reform movements, became the counterpoint of the new Southern racial mythology, lending weight to new Southern moral claims in the 1970s. Violence and disorder accompanied efforts to desegregate Boston schools from 1973 to 1975, bringing national condemnation. At the same time, schools desegregated with far less turmoil in Charlotte and countless smaller communities. Of course, this desegregation was not voluntary but the result of federal court orders. Southern schools, nonetheless, became the nation's most desegregated schools in the 1970–71 academic year. In any event, these developments led Texas writer Larry L. King to chastize Northerners for their hypocrisies: "Do you good Boston folk—who once sold slaves on Boston Common—wanna step over here in the pea patch and talk to me about Louise Day Hicks and the violence heaped on your kids while they were being bussed to school? Naw, I expect you'd rather talk about George Wallace or busing violence in South Carolina a decade ago."¹⁹ King linked present New England woes to its past sins, reversing the usual Yankee saint, Southern sinner expectation.

Southerners were, nonetheless, not the only Americans proclaiming the myth of the biracial South. The national culture rediscovered the South during the Jimmy Carter presidential campaign in 1976, and one of its fascinations was with race relations in what seemed a new South indeed, compared to the national news media's last barometric reading of the region, in the South of massive resistance to desegregation in the 1960s. The nation no longer saw the South as the Savage South but in favorable terms as a storehouse of valuable qualities seemingly threatened in the rest of the nation. *Time* magazine's special edition on Carter in September of 1976 was typical in its representation of the South in the post-civil rights era. "The Spirit of the South" was the lead article, portraying the South as "a place apart," "the last American arena with a special, nurtured identity, its own sometimes unfashionable regard for the soil, for family ties, for the authority of God and country." The South was a place apart, not the cloud-cuckoo-land of W. J. Cash but rather "a redoubt of old American tenets, enshrined for centuries by the citizenry."²⁰

The *Time* magazine article portrayed a progressive South, vitalized by the coming of industry, thanks to air-conditioning. "Tyrannical heat," the article surmised, "delirious summers, dog days that breed flies and sloth, squabbles and morbid introspection are gone with the vent." The writer of the piece stressed the continuities between the New South and the older, in religion, patriotism, attachment to family, and respect for the law. "Could it be that in many ways it can now teach the nation something about how to live?" it asked, reflecting recognition now of a superior South. Recognizing that "the idea can easily be exaggerated," it saw hope in a redemptive South because of race relations, reflecting that "the harshly segregated South showed the rest of the nation that it was possible to change despite deeply held prejudices—and to achieve at least the beginnings of racial amity." A national culture that had discovered its own racism now began looking hopefully to the South as embodying perhaps a way out. The myth of the biracial South is here anchored in broader Southern virtues: "Other parts of the U.S., without consciously turning to the South, began to long for some of its values: family, community, roots."²¹

By the middle 1970s, not only had the South rejoined the nation, it was beginning to dominate it. A generation after Confederates lost their crusade against the nation (a century before Carter's election), the nation's culture enthusiastically embraced the Lost Cause, as Southern writers became popular in American magazines, theatrical plays with Southern heroes and heroines dominated Northern theater, and American popular music projected appealing romantic lyrics of the lazy, hazy South. Similarly, having lost their massive-resistance Lost Cause, Southern whites now found themselves influencing the national culture more profoundly than at any time since the late nineteenth

century. Country music, evangelical Protestantism, films and television shows about Southerners, Southern literature—all were in vogue. Even in politics, the nation turned south, electing the first Deep South politician since the Civil War as president.²²

If Southern politicians endorsed the myth of the biracial South and the national culture was fascinated with it, black Southerners were, if anything, even more enthusiastic promoters of the myth in the 1970s. The new ideology reflected real, dramatic changes in the region that began in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the epochal event in the new mythology equivalent to the Civil War in the myth of the Lost Cause a century before. In 1975 the Reverend Frederick Reese, a veteran black leader, concluded that “we’ve come a long way.” His evidence was largely the change in white behavior toward blacks. “Whites who wouldn’t tip their hats have learned to do it. People who wouldn’t say ‘Mister’ or ‘Miss’ to a black have learned to say it mighty fine. We’ve got black policemen, black secretaries, and we can use the public restrooms. The word ‘nigger’ is almost out of existence.” His words evoked the older South of racial etiquette that the region’s public culture had indeed finally rejected. Jessie Campbell, a black store manager on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, insisted that race was “almost nonexistent now.” He saw a “new generation of people, black and white, here,” again suggesting behavioral changes associated with the end of old racial ways. Campbell also pointed to economic developments, noting that “there’s been a pretty big rise in the standard of living of the black people.” Andrew Young told a meeting of Southern black mayors that “we can’t help but be people who believe in doing the impossible, because we’ve already done so much of it.” Young in 1974 overtly summoned the image of the redemptive South: “I strangely think we’re going to be able to deliver in the South. . . . I think the direction of this nation is going to be determined by the direction that comes from the southern part of the United States.”²³

Migration patterns suggested the demographic basis to rhetoric. In the 1970s, for the first time, more blacks moved from the North to the South than were leaving the South for other parts of the United States. In the first three years of the 1970s, 80,000 more blacks came to the South than left it, and in the last five years of the decade 500,000 African Americans moved to the region, reversing the historic outward migration. Writing in 1972, North Carolinian Mary E. Mebane remembered that “the names Alabama and Mississippi aroused something akin to terror.” She had always viewed blacks from there “with awe” and wondered “how they could possibly have survived.” The North, on the other hand “seemed the Promised Land.” When blacks from New York City came home to visit, “the men drove big cars and

the women dressed in fine clothes and wore false eyelashes." New York was "where everybody wanted to go." But in the previous few years, she had begun noting that "blacks in the Northern cities were coming home, down South." Mebane admitted that "disenchantment caused by the disorder in Northern cities" was one reason that some African Americans left the North for the South, as were new job opportunities, but she concluded that "the primary reason for the influx of blacks into the South is the Civil Rights Acts of 1964–65." The key to the North's losing "much of its allure" was the removal of "the overt signs of racial discrimination" in the South and the discontinuance of "some of the most vicious racist practices."²⁴ To Mebane, blacks seemed waiting for the South to welcome them home.

The South in the 1970s and 1980s became home to more black elected officials than any other part of the United States, also contributing to Southern blacks' affirming the ideology of the biracial South, because of its potential in terms of the exercise of power in the region they shared with Southern whites. The South represented about 50 percent of the nation's African Americans in 1987, but it had 62 percent of elected black officeholders, as compared to the next largest region, the North Central census states that had 19.2 percent. Mississippi led all states with 548 officials in 1987, and four of the five states with the most black officeholders were in the South. Curtis M. Graves, a black representative in the Texas Legislature and a vice president of the Lamar Society, pointed out that many of these electoral successes were because of black numerical strength, not attraction of white votes. But he looked to the biracial South for the future of black political success in the South. "Our real strength lies in coalition politics," he wrote. He himself had been elected as a result of such a coalition. "For the first time, whites and blacks in the South are working together in mutual trust. Realizing that things in the South are not as they should be for either blacks or whites, the two groups are beginning to talk over their common problems; they are joining forces to see that a better South is created." He suggested in his optimistic scenario that the South's "biggest problem today, our mutual problem" was replacing "the centuries of hatred and suspicion with a new era of respect and trust." Graves went beyond the then-present realities of Southern coalition politics in the early 1970s to project a hopeful scenario for the future.²⁵

Black endorsement of the biracial South became part of a process of African Americans' redefining what "the South" means. As Thadious M. Davis has argued, the recent return of African Americans to the South, both physically and spiritually, represents "a laying of a claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity." She goes further, speculating "that this return to the South is a new form of

subversion—a preconscious political activity or a subconscious counteraction to the racially and culturally homogeneous ‘sunbelt.’” Rather than a “nostalgic turning back to a time when there were ‘good old days,’” this embrace of the South “is gut-wrenching revisioning of specifics long obscured by synoptic cultural patterning.” As part of the redefinition of “the South,” black writers tried to evoke the texture of black culture and to understand the nature of black history in the South—its distinct character apart from issues of white supremacy. Alex Haley, Ernest Gaines, Margaret Walker, Clifton Taulbert, and Alice Walker are only a few of the best-known figures exploring the Southern black community from within. “No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage,” writes Alice Walker, “than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice.” Walker evoked the spirit of the biracial South in insisting that black Southerners had to “give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love.” Davis evoked that nurturing spirit of the myth of the biracial South as well in arguing that African American contemporary creative works illustrate “the creative power of telling about the South and the healing power of uniting with another story in order to weave a necessary future.”²⁶

Out of this effort to understand the black community has come an insistence on whites’ acknowledging the black role in the region as part of formal public culture in the South. This imperative among black Southerners to revision the South has figured in the recent conflict over Southern public symbols. The traditional symbols and images that public institutions projected often had associations with the Old South and the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. Beginning in the 1970s, black Southerners have pressured to remove symbols they regard as offensive. “To appreciate the differences in feelings about the South by white southerners and black southerners,” wrote Paul Delaney, the deputy national editor of the *New York Times* in 1983, “one need only play ‘Dixie’ or wave a Confederate flag. Whites, many of them, respond with rebel yells; blacks, almost unanimously, flinch, finding the old symbols detestable.” Black protests in the 1970s did lead to the removal of Confederate battle flags from many Southern universities and public schools, which had once flown them as symbols of school spirit that tied contemporary sporting events to white regional tradition. The observance of Confederate Memorial Day, a once vibrant ritual that brought out white celebrants each spring, has continued its decline, which began well before the civil rights movement, to where it is a marginal activity in most Southern communities, if it is held at all.²⁷

As the commemoration of the Old South and the Lost Cause declined, the memory of the civil rights movement has been freshened. Maya Lin’s dramat-

ic memorial to the martyrs of the movement is at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama. Jackson, Mississippi, has its monument to Medgar Evers; a University of Mississippi student group is raising funds for a monument to civil rights efforts on the campus where one of the most violent confrontations of the 1960s took place; and Arthur Ashe now stands in statue on Richmond's resonant Monument Boulevard, near the images of Lee, Jackson, and Davis. The celebration of the Martin Luther King, Jr., federal holiday is the most obvious example, however, of the commemoration of the people and events of the civil rights movement, which is no longer honored simply in the black community but by the broader Southern public as well, making these occasions into rituals of the myth of the biracial South. King is often honored in the South, for example, in schools, universities, community centers, and at church services for blacks and whites; but often the commemoration of his memory is at the same time as that for Robert E. Lee, whose birth date is close to King's.²⁸

This joint celebration of a King-Lee holiday is surely a ritual triumph of the myth of the biracial South—one holiday that blacks and whites can celebrate for differing reasons. Arkansas newspaper editor Paul Greenberg argues that the South will never achieve racial peace until "Southerners, black and white, accept the same symbols." He rejects the idea of "hauling down the Confederate battle flag at Montgomery," when the better solution is to "erect a statue of Martin Luther King, Jr., on the Capitol grounds, and celebrate both." Writing in 1988, Greenberg showed the continuing power of the biracial ideal. "The South will rise again," he said, "when it rises as one—when we rise together, not against each other." Looking into the future, he predicted that "the South will be one when a march celebrating King's birthday is led by some brave and discerning soul carrying the Confederate battle flag."²⁹

African Americans might admire the grandness of Greenberg's millennial vision, but their skepticism about its plausibility would be understandable given the worsening of American race relations in the 1980s, which suggested the millennium was not at hand and challenges were questioning the myth of the biracial South. The economic and civil rights policies of the Ronald Reagan administration worsened race relations. "I am not the optimist I was twenty years ago as a young reporter in Atlanta," wrote black editor Paul Delaney in 1983. "I see the future of race relations in the South, and the nation, as bleak," with Reagan policies suggesting that "white racism still lies just beneath a thin veneer of racial civility." Despite this pessimistic view, even Delaney allowed himself to grasp the hope of the redemptive South at the heart of the biracial ideology: "If the South can counter that psychology, it will have made an everlasting contribution to racial understanding. Perhaps the

South can solve the problem, for its heritage of person-to-person relationships, its aversion to abstractions, and its commitment to good manners suggest that people should be respected as individuals.” In 1984, the year after Delaney’s words, Republican candidates in several Southern states earned the condemnation of black leaders for their use of racial code words in campaigning, and by the late 1980s David Duke’s prominence as a Southern politician drawing on a white racial constituency symbolized the opposition to the biracial myth from at least a sizeable number of Southern whites.³⁰

The last five years have witnessed a surprising development in terms of regional mythology, which has further undermined the myth of the biracial South. In the two decades since the rise of the biracial myth, African Americans have steadily escalated their demands for the removal of public symbols they regard as offensive. White Southerners, in turn, increasingly have rebelled against these demands. Despite black protests, the Confederate battle flag still flies above the South Carolina capitol in Columbia. The state flags of Mississippi and Georgia still project the Confederate flag as part of their designs. The University of Mississippi band still plays “Dixie” at football and basketball games while many of its fans still wave the Confederate battle flag. The frustrations of black efforts have been a cultural setback to the goal of redefining the Southern identity in order to make it feasible for black Southerners to fully embrace the region and the myth of the biracial South.³¹

The assertion of black identity has been met with a resurgence in the 1990s of an older Southern myth among contemporary whites—the myth of the Lost Cause. White working-class culture probably never affirmed the myth of the biracial South, but that culture lost much of its influence on Southern public culture as a result of the changes of the 1960s, leading to the white populist rage that politicians from George Wallace to David Duke have exploited. But it has been intellectuals and middle-class Southerners who have reasserted the Lost Cause, beginning at the end of the decade that gave birth to the biracial myth. In 1979, the magazine *Southern Partisan* appeared, steadily expanding to its present circulation of 15,000. Peter Applebome has pointed out that “even most Southerners are not familiar with its somewhat schizoid mix of Old South gun-and-musket lore, scholarly Burkean-Calhounian political philosophy, and contemporary hard-right politics.” Articles explore many facets of Southern white culture, but stress the centrality of the Confederacy to the Southern identity. As one recent cover story concluded, “This storm-cradled nation has much to teach us—as does the terrible war by which it lived and died.” Southerners interested in the neo-Confederate identity can now also subscribe to *Southern Heritage*, *Confederate Underground*, the *Journal of Confederate History*, the *Confederate Sentry*, and *Counterattack*. They can join organizations

such as the Confederate Society of America, the Culture of the South Association, the Southern Heritage Association, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, one of whose chapters publishes a newsletter called the *Rebel Yell*, whose motto is “If at first you don’t secede, try, try again.” The neo-Confederacy received a boost in June 1994 when organizers formed the Southern League as “an activist organization of unreconstructed Southerners pursuing cultural, social, economic and political independence for Dixie.” None of these organizations is large in itself and none of these publications has an impressive subscription list, but together they represent a new organizational structure pushing for an older ideological perspective on the South. Their significance comes from their active role in Republican politics in the South and their tapping into the frustrations of white Southerners who do not see a need to redefine the Southern identity from its historic meanings associated with a white-dominated South.³²

The Southern psyche is thus deeply divided, again, judging by its mythological outcroppings as the millennium nears. As long as the South’s population remains biracial, as long as its people have to struggle to live together and to make a common culture and society that both blacks and whites can acknowledge, rooted in the bitter realities and soaring hopes of the past, the myth of the biracial South will likely remain a relevant one—especially for a world that in the twenty-first century faces increasing interaction between differing ethnic and cultural traditions, as the Western World faces the Third World. This Southern myth tells about what happened in one isolated area of the world when such people met and continued to struggle with each other for centuries. As Charles Joyner, Mechal Sobel, and others have shown, Southerners do indeed have a biracial heritage, seen in the music, language, foodways, religion, and many other cultural features of the traditional South.³³ The ideology of the biracial South says this should be acknowledged, the kinship between blacks and whites—as Charles Black long ago dreamed—should be embraced.

The religious aspect of the contemporary myth of the biracial South is crucial because it suggests that the Southern story still has moral meanings, that the struggle in the end will signify more than just sound and fury. The moral meanings projected in this contemporary myth are not the same that the antebellum proslavery advocates thought, believing the South was the last noncapitalist hope against a materialistic wave that had conquered Europe and the Northern United States. The myth of the biracial South does not embody the same moral meaning that the Lost Cause did for its true believers, nurturing its supposed wisdom from wartime defeat and purification. It does not embody the same redemptive meanings that Southern evangelicals have long cherished—the South as the last enclave of spirit-filled religion that must send missionaries to the world to con-

vert it. Common to all of these expressions of what Lewis Simpson calls the Southern spiritual community is the belief that Southern experience has spiritual-moral meaning. The myth of the biracial South embodies the same aspiration, although no longer with conservative content. Oscar Carr, Jr., a white Mississippian who headed the national Office of Development for the Episcopal Church in New York City in the 1970s, argued that “once Southerners can jump into the economic mainstream they will be more liberal than people in Connecticut,” but in doing that “the greatest thing the South can offer the nation is its religious and moral sense.”³⁴ It was the same contribution that earlier generations of Southerners had claimed as a potential for the region’s people within the nation.

Today, despite recent challenges, the myth of the biracial South still abides. *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry, a native of Okolona, Mississippi, wrote in 1991 of his home state, once the epitome of the Savage South, as now the embodiment of the biracial South. He praised “the infectious friendliness of the bigger towns” in Mississippi, whose racial practices had earlier driven him out as a young man. He gloried now in the friendly folk of his hometown and the “laid back sophistication” of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, marveling “at how seldom this pervasive graciousness is spoiled by racial rudeness.” Raspberry was clear-eyed about Mississippi failures, noting the segregation academies that were white racial islands, the “places where a black stranger in town walks with care,” and the state’s governor, Kirk Fordice, “who had shown a willingness to play the race game.” Still, he lauded the “easiness to relationships, a mutual respect and a willingness to move beyond race that,” as he concluded, “quite frankly didn’t exist during my years in the state.”³⁵ His words indeed reflected real changes that fifty years ago represented a revolution in the Southern way of life. The danger of Raspberry’s viewpoint, however, is Southerners’ concluding that the myth has been achieved. We may be at the same point as New South advocates after the 1880s. Having proclaimed their ideology, they soon came to believe it had become reality, though the South remained provincial, economically underdeveloped, and racially divided. The myth of the biracial South in the 1970s had especially rested on the idea of behavioral changes in the aftermath of the epochal civil rights movement, and Raspberry framed his vision of his reformed home state in that same image, suggesting that this behavioral change was the myth’s compelling insight. If human behavior could be so dramatically changed in what had seemed a morally evil society, in Mississippi, the most savage of the South, perhaps the myth’s redeeming hopes still could be achieved.

The best judgment about what will happen with the myth of the biracial South may be found in the tentative words of one of the wisest of Southerners,

black critic Albert Murray. Back in 1976, at the peak of the Carteresque embodiment of the biracial South, Murray wrote, "I hope the changes are permanent," but he foresaw that "there could be a counterthrust." He added, "As a Southerner, my main response is through the blues. The nature of the blues is improvisation . . . you must be ready for all eventualities."³⁶

Notes

1. Charles L. Black, Jr., "Paths to Desegregation," *New Republic*, October 21, 1957, p. 15.

2. Leslie W. Dunbar, "The Annealing of the South," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 37 (Autumn 1961): 507.

3. George B. Tindall, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History," in *The Idea of the South: Pursuit of a Central Theme*, ed. Frank E. Vandiver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 1–15. The "Mythic South" section of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 1093–145, provides an overview of the South's mythic history. The Jordan quote is on p. 1119. See also Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, *Myth and Southern History*, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

4. Fred C. Hobson, "The Savage South: An Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and Presumed Demise of an Image," in *Myth and Southern History*, eds. Gerster and Cords, pp. 133–40 (quotes vol. II, pp. 145, 146).

5. *Ibid.*; George B. Tindall, "Mythic South," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Wilson and Ferris, p. 1098.

6. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 6, 82–86, 507–10.

7. Thomas Nelson Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia before the War* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, [1897] 1970). The Grady quote is in Henry W. Grady, *The New South* (New York, 1890), pp. 146–52.

8. John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Knopf, 1994); Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

9. Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, pp. 173–74; Ralph McGill, *The South and the Southerner* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp. 58, 217.

10. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Wisdom of Martin Luther King in His Own Words* (New York: Meridian, 1968), pp. 23, 64, 75; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 80; *New York Times*, August 28, 1983, p. 16.

11. Willie Morris, introduction, *You Can't Eat Magnolias*, ed. H. Brandt Ayers and Thomas H. Naylor (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), p. xi. See also Karen McDearman, "L. Q. C. Lamar Society," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Wilson and Ferris, pp. 694–95.

12. Ayers and Naylor, *You Can't Eat Magnolias*, pp. 5, 19.
13. Stephen A. Smith, *Myth Media, and the Southern Mind* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1985), pp. 74–78; *Southern Journal* (Oxford, Miss., 1980).
14. “Out of a Cocoon,” *Time*, September 27, 1976, p. 40.
15. Busbee and Edwards quoted in Waldo W. Braden, “The Speaking of the Deep South Governors, 1970–1980,” in *A New Diversity in Contemporary Southern Rhetoric*, ed. Calvin M. Logue and Howard Dorgan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), pp. 198. See also Smith, *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind*, chap. 4, pp. 62–93.
16. Braden, “The Speaking of the Deep South Governors, 1970–1980,” p. 200; David R. Goldfield, *Promised Land: The South since 1945* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: H. Davidson, Inc., 1987), pp. 173–74.
17. James C. Cobb, “Community and Identity: Redefining Southern Culture,” *Georgia Review* (Spring 1996): 9–24.
18. Reuben Askew quoted in Smith, *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind*, p. 89.
19. Larry King quoted in *ibid.*, 89–90.
20. “The Spirit of the South,” *Time*, September 26, 1976, pp. 30–31.
21. “The Spirit of the South,” pp. 30–31.
22. Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination*, rev. ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), chaps. 8 and 9.
23. Quoted material from David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 220, 225–26.
24. Mary E. Mebane, “And Blacks Go South Again,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1972, p. 17. See also for the black migration southward, Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern*, p. 221; and “Race and the South,” *U.S. News and World Report*, July 23, 1990, p. 22.
25. Curtis M. Graves, “Beyond the Briar Patch,” in Ayers and Naylor, *You Can't Eat Magnolias*, pp. 41–42.
26. Thadious M. Davis, “Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region,” *Southern Literary Journal* 20 (Spring 1988): 6–7; Alice Walker, “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Doanovich, 1983), p. 21.
27. Paul Delaney, “A New South for Blacks?” in *Dixie Dateline: A Journalistic Portrait of the Contemporary South*, ed. John B. Boles (Houston: Rice University Studies, 1983), pp. 37–47. See also Charles Reagan Wilson, “Unifying the Symbols of Southern Culture,” in *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 159–63; and Kevin Thornton, “The Confederate Flag and the Meaning of Southern History,” *Southern Cultures* 2 (Winter 1996): 233–45.
28. Wilson, “Unifying the Symbols of Southern Culture,” pp. 159–63; “In Virginia, King Shares His Day of Honor with Confederate Heroes,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 15, 1989, sec. A, p. 14.
29. Paul Greenberg, “Blacks, Whites Must Accept Common Past, Symbols,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, February 17, 1988, p. 7A.

Charles Reagan Wilson

30. Delaney, "A New South for Blacks?" pp. 44–46.

31. Nadine Cohodas, *The Band Played Dixie: Race and the Liberal Conscience at Old Miss* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

32. Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Times Books, 1997), chap. 5, especially pp. 118–19, 131.

33. See Ted Ownby, ed., *Black and White: Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), for a consideration of the South's biracial cultural history.

34. Oscar Carr, Jr., quoted in "The Spirit of the South," p. 30.

35. William Raspberry, "Return Home Proves State of Mississippi Is, Finally, a Good Place to Be," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 21, 1991, p. 21A.

36. "Other Voices," *Time*, September 26, 1976, p. 99.