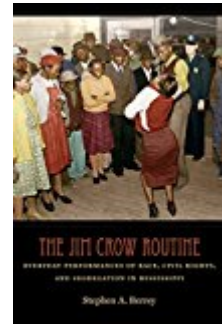


Stephen A. Berrey. *The Jim Crow Routine: Everyday Performances of Race, Civil Rights, and Segregation in Mississippi*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 331 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-2093-0.



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Stephen A. Berrey's brilliant new book dramatically enriches our understandings of the twentieth-century South, the postbellum history of Mississippi, and the evolution of the black freedom struggle.

Berrey defines the "Jim Crow routine" as the evolving performative and narrative practices that shaped how race was experienced and interpreted by blacks and whites in Mississippi and America at large. He masterfully documents the ingenuity and bravery with which African Americans challenged segregation from the 1930s into the early 1960s, even as they confronted "the localized, informal, and yet seemingly ever-present surveillance of a white audience," committed to maintaining Jim Crow (p. 103). Berrey's analysis of the battles of black Mississippians "to redefine racialized spaces and even to redraw boundaries" provides new insights into the transition from the relatively "accommodative [public] demeanor" that Neil R. McMillen has identified among black Mississippians during the 1920s to the more confrontational civil rights activism that emerged following World War II (p. 51).[1] Berrey makes a second major contribution to our understanding of the long civil rights movement by tracing the growing shift of Mississippi's white powerbrokers away from the blatant race-baiting and horrific acts of public violence that had allowed civil

rights protestors to claim the moral high ground. Increasingly during the 1950s, powerful white supremacists used statewide surveillance networks and the criminal justice system to replace less formal and less disciplined local mechanisms for racial control. At the same time, the proponents of Jim Crow recast their arguments against racial equality in a law and order discourse that played upon longstanding American fears of black criminality. The effectiveness of this Mississippi strategy anticipated the growing national role that the "criminalization and mass incarceration" of African Americans continues to play in perpetuating "racial violence and racial inequalities" (p. 18).

The Jim Crow Routine's breathtakingly original and engaging first chapter offers an unrivaled introduction for scholars and students on how segregation was experienced daily in the South. By the 1930s, Jim Crow laws and conventions had matured into a "routine," specifying "how blacks and whites were *expected* to interact" in a myriad of public spaces in which they were generally "close enough to see, hear, and touch each other" (pp. 2, 4). Meticulously mapping out the intricate social geographies of southern cities and towns, Berrey demonstrates that the strict separation of the races was limited primarily to schools and churches. Whites generally al-

lowed African Americans into their houses only as domestic workers and laborers and required those interlopers to follow elaborate rules and customs inscribing white dominance and black servility. Faced with practical considerations, such as expense and convenience, businesses and governmental entities established racial boundaries through a dizzying array of physical markers, including dual entrances, stools, ropes, curtains, and balconies. Other sites had shifting boundaries. Using moveable curtains or signs to divide passengers, bus drivers steered whites toward the front of public buses and African Americans toward the rear. Additional locations, such as sidewalks and stores, dispensed with visible racial barriers altogether.

Berrey's close attention to the complexities of Jim Crow sensitizes readers to the psychological pressures and physical threats that constantly confronted African Americans in the public spaces that they traversed and in the private homes where they labored. Underlying segregation was the expectation that African Americans visibly display a sense of submissiveness and avoid any gestures or actions that might suggest an air of equality or superiority in relation to whites. To avoid verbal and physical attacks by law enforcement officials and everyday white citizens, African Americans were constantly forced to think on their feet by searching out accommodative moves that might prevent confrontations and by often adopting, in the words of literature critic and scholar Hortense Spillers, "a powerful stillness" that allowed individuals and groups to adapt their behaviors after whites made the first move (p. 35). Longstanding customs gave whites the privilege of moving to the front of lines, racializing time itself. In white homes and isolated public spaces, black women often faced the threat of sexual harassment and violence. In the words and title of an old blues standard, to live Jim Crow as an African American was truly to suffer from "trouble in mind."^[2]

Despite the persistent threat of white retaliation and the omnipresence of networks of white surveillance, African Americans continuously uncovered opportunities for challenging and undermining the dominant racial routines that Jim Crow mandated. During the early 1900s, African Americans organized boycotts and demonstrations to protest the passage of new segregation laws. As white racial violence escalated and Jim Crow matured, African Americans developed more furtive strategies for dodging the indignities of segregation. Before escaping to Chicago, for example, Richard Wright forged letters, purportedly authored by whites, and acted as "unbookish as possible" to check out read-

ing materials from a "whites-only" library (p. 1). Other African Americans silently shunned businesses that notoriously mistreated blacks. And they avoided the shame of entering houses through back doors by conducting business affairs with whites only in outdoor areas. The influx of uniformed black soldiers into the state during World War II encouraged more direct racial confrontations in buses and a myriad of other segregated spaces. Bringing America's war against fascism to the South, servicemen repeatedly disrupted the Jim Crow routine by refusing to step aside on sidewalks, by openly talking back to whites, and by directly disobeying bus drivers. The interplay of black challenges to Jim Crow and white counteractions held the continual potential for revising, unmaking, or reinforcing local routines.

Following the brutal killing of Emmett Till and the notoriously unjust exoneration of his murderers in 1955, Mississippi leaders increasingly sought new strategies for preserving Jim Crow, as both civil rights activists and the national media created a "narrative about the South as a violent, racist place, out of step with the nation and in need of federal intervention" (p. 105). In hopes of preserving white supremacy and shoring up their state's image, prominent Mississippians increasingly sought to replace the highly localized contrivances that had traditionally regulated African Americans with a statewide surveillance network of law enforcement officers, civic leaders, and public officials, whose efforts were coordinated by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and the Citizens' Council. At its height, the Citizens' Council alone attracted as many as eighty thousand members. This more formalized and centralized apparatus allowed state and local leaders to gather and share incriminating information on civil rights activists and African Americans in general that could lead to a number of reprisals, including their dismissal from work, their being beaten or lynched, and their prosecution in court.

Public officials also sought to centralize the authority of the state to shore up and discipline white supremacy. J. P. Coleman, as governor between 1956 and 1960, substantially increased the size and investigative scope of the state highway patrol and oversaw the passage of laws aimed at curbing the discretionary power of local law enforcement officials. By systemizing and disciplining the informal and scattershot racial policing efforts of local communities, state leaders hoped to establish more effective strategies for preventing civil rights progress while discouraging open conflict and "concealing images of violence from public view, including the kinds of vigilante violence" that mobilized national sympathy for civil

rights activists and encouraged the intervention of federal officials into local affairs (p. 106).

As the 1950s progressed, state lawmakers and public officeholders increasingly abandoned overt references to race and “segregation,” adopting instead a coded language, allowing government leaders and law enforcement officials to expand their abilities to police African Americans and preserve traditional racial boundaries in pursuit of the ostensibly race-neutral goal of promoting law and order. Throughout the 1960s, “breach of the peace,” the definition of which was repeatedly broadened as protests in the state accelerated, was the most common charge made against jailed civil rights workers, closely followed by disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. Law enforcement officials also jailed protestors on charges of “littering,” “trespassing,” “contributing to the delinquency of minors,” and “disturbing public worship” (p. 164). On rural roads, away from newspaper reporters and television cameras, law officers routinely arrested activists on almost every imaginable criminal charge. During a five-month period in 1964, for example, Peter Stoner, a student at the University of Chicago and a white volunteer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was arrested on four separate occasions, beaten three times in jail, and charged with at least thirteen crimes, including “using profanity,” “improper passing,” “parking illegally,” and “interfering with an officer” (pp. 169-170). Berrey notes, “for Stoner and for others in Mississippi during the movement, the reliance on arrests was part of a larger effort to move the processes of racial policing from local citizens and vigilantes to official agents of the state. Controlled and hidden from view, acts of racial violence could continue to serve as warnings to others, just as lynchings had done” (pp. 170-171). By obscuring their violent attacks against civil rights activists behind prison and jail walls, state officials generally evaded the censure that they might have faced had images of their violence been displayed on televisions or recounted in news articles. Arrests on trumped-up criminal charges also had the potential of discrediting civil rights workers. Finally, public officials and their segregationist allies repeatedly attempted to stigmatize activists as Communists or homosexuals.

Paralleling state officials’ growing reliance on the criminal justice system to police racial hierarchies was a shift in prominent segregationists’ rhetoric away from the openly racist terminology and excessively emotional rhetoric that had characterized Massive Resistance. Narratives of race had long played a central role in supporting Jim Crow in Mississippi and throughout the South.

Planters and wealthy whites had elevated themselves as “masters” over a population that they claimed was composed not only of a majority of “faithful” and “subservient” African Americans in need of white guidance but also of a smaller number of allegedly savage black criminals and rapists who could be controlled only by more violent means. Prior to the 1950s, prominent advocates of racial inequality had often marshaled a strident and highly racialized rhetoric to defend Jim Crow. As the 1950s progressed, local journalists and spokesmen increasingly defended their state’s racial traditions with statistical evidence and logical formulations that feigned impartiality, while warning that integration and racial equality would threaten the unique social harmony that set the South apart from the rest of the country. Citing allegedly unimpeachable data culled from the experiences of northern cities and African countries, Mississippi’s spokespeople warned that integration would inevitably encourage the spread of Communism across the South and trigger dramatic increases in the incidence of venereal disease, crime, interracial sex, and teenage pregnancy. As Berrey concludes, the strategies and rhetoric pioneered in Mississippi, emphasizing the seemingly racially neutral terminology of “law and order,” in turn “pointed to how racism and white privilege would survive Jim Crow and influence everyday racial performances, not only in the South but throughout the nation” as well (p. 217). Indeed, as the 1960s progressed, officials across America increasingly embraced the law enforcement and surveillance tactics pioneered by Mississippians to intimidate protestors and jail them on criminal and riot charges.

Clearly and engagingly written, the *Jim Crow Routine* deserves a broad audience and will prove an engaging and thought-provoking resource for scholars as well as undergraduate and graduate students. It offers new lenses through which to analyze the Jim Crow South and the broader national racial transformations that have taken place since the 1950s. As is the case with all highly original monographs, its historiographical significance lies as much in the new questions and approaches that it opens up for future scholars as in the definitive answers that it offers. In analyzing the racial routines that shaped Mississippi prior to the 1960s, Berrey expertly traces the innumerable ways in which African Americans negotiated, contested, and redrew the practices of segregation and the dominant narratives of race that whites constructed in its defense. We can only hope that Berrey himself—or a historical and cultural critic who shares his prodigious talents—will more fully examine the coun-

ternarratives and improvisational strategies marshaled by the opponents of the new order of racial control that ultimately replaced Jim Crow.

Notes

[1]. Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Missis-*

sippians in the Age of Jim Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 284.

[2]. Quoted in Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), vii.

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