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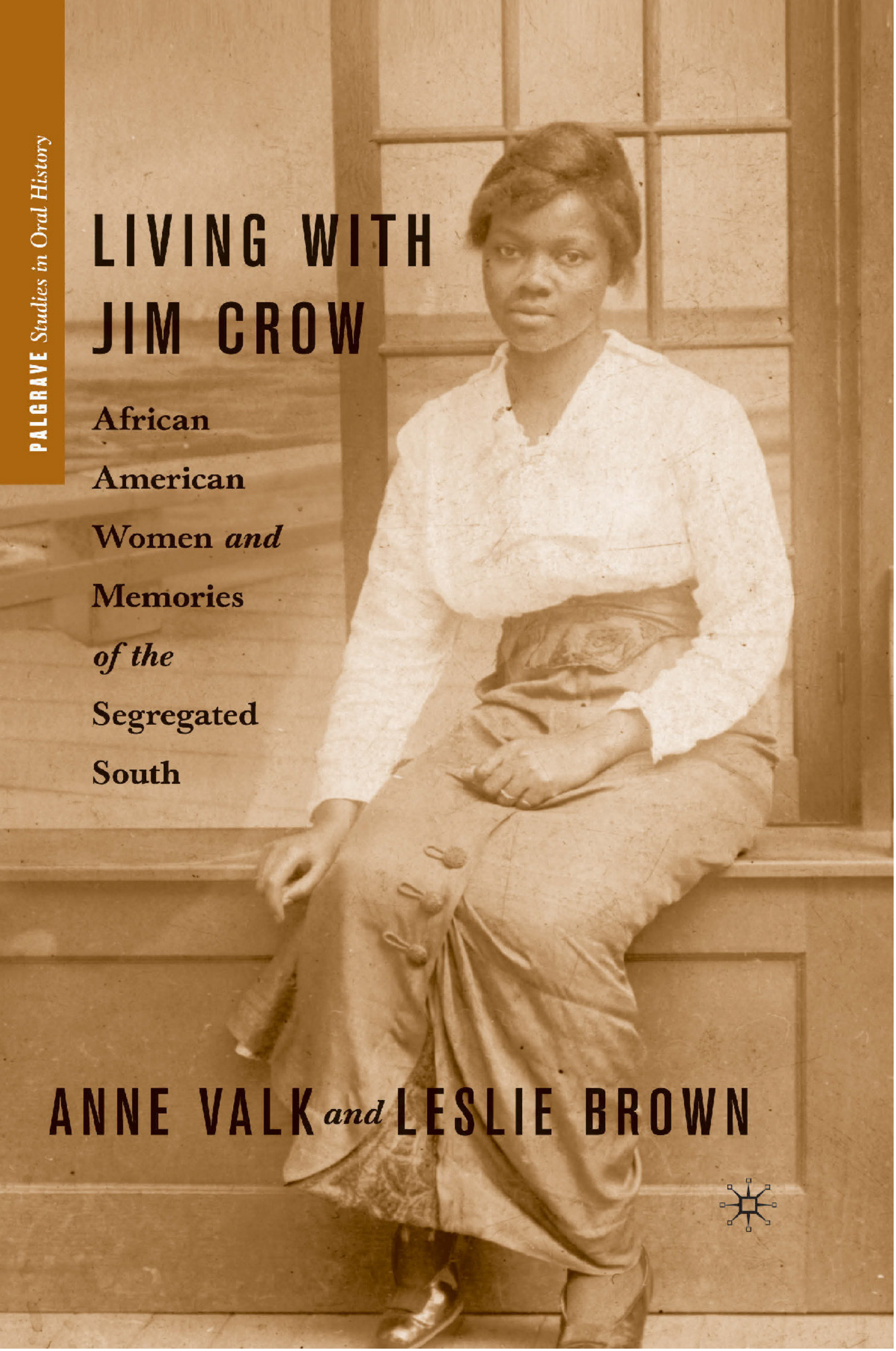

LIVING WITH JIM CROW

African American Women *and* Memories *of the* Segregated South

ANNE VALK *and* LESLIE BROWN

PALGRAVE *Studies in Oral History*

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Living with Jim Crow

African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South

Anne Valk and Leslie Brown

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Series Editors' Foreword

African American history and women's history have flourished in recent decades; indeed they are a defining feature of the current generation of scholarship. And oral history has been essential to both enterprises. Of course, both African Americans and women—and African American women—appear in the written record if we look carefully, a record that is occasionally quite extensive for the more literate, leisured, or prominent among them. But more often when they appear, it is on the whole as a result of their participation in public life or as a result of less than felicitous encounters with the state. Frequently, lived experience is subsumed within a larger context.

Oral history, however, restores to the record the individual voice, especially the *agency* of the less privileged, those who have been disinclined or unable to chronicle their own lives, and who have lived largely outside of public view. Oral history affords insight into not only the texture of everyday life but also moments of change and transformation—as well as the meanings people give to their lives. Such is the case with Anne Valk's and Leslie Brown's masterful *Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South*, a collection of carefully edited interviews with forty-seven African American women who were born into the Jim Crow South and lived through the enormous changes in race relations characterizing the last half of the twentieth century. These interviews are part of Duke University's *Behind the Veil* Project, which interviewed hundreds of southern blacks about their lives during the period of segregation. Valk and Brown served as research coordinators for *Behind the Veil*, and theirs is the first book developing out of the project to focus exclusively on women's experiences.

The women narrators included here speak of their upbringing, their families and homes, their lifetime of labor, their churches, organizations, and neighborhoods. They speak of the humiliations and injustices of Jim Crow, but also of their determination to build meaningful lives, their embrace of all that life offers, and their acts of resistance—both small and large. As women, they speak of the gendered dimension of their lives, even as they also reflect differences in age, class, and region.

The narrators included here are all survivors—literally, in that they have lived to a relatively old age despite well-known racial disparities in health, health care, and life span. But they also have survived with their spirit intact—they know they have an important story to tell and came forward to tell it, to a stranger, for the record. Not surprisingly then, these interviews—though often shot through with stories of hardship—convey a tempered optimism; recorded during the later years of the narrators' lives, they reflect the coherence of a life well lived and the satisfaction of having participated in sweeping social changes.

Were it not for oral history, the stories included here simply would have died with the narrators, and our collective store of knowledge about the lives of southern black women "behind the veil" would be much diminished. We are enormously pleased to include *Living with Jim Crow* in Palgrave Macmillan's *Studies in Oral History* series. It joins three previously published works on the subject of southern African American life: Kate Willink's *Bringing Desegregation Home: Memories of the Struggle toward School Integration in Rural North Carolina* (2009); D'Ann R. Penner's and Keith C. Ferdinand's *Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond* (2009); and Kim Lacy Rogers's award-winning *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (2006). Volumes in the series are deeply grounded in interviews and present those interviews in ways that aid readers to appreciate more fully their historical significance and cultural meaning. The series aims to bring oral history out of the archives and into the hands of students, educators, scholars, and the reading public. The series also includes work that approaches oral history more theoretically, as a point of departure for an exploration of broad questions of cultural production and representation.

Linda Shopes
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Bruce M. Stave
University of Connecticut

Acknowledgments

The initial idea for this book dates back to the 1990s when we were completing our work for *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South*. As graduate students at Duke University, we spent several years (1990–1995) working at the Center for Documentary Studies, coordinating the research phase of this large oral history project. That work was intellectually formative and personally meaningful in many ways. It took us into the South for extended periods, a region where both of our families had roots, albeit on different sides of the color line. As we traveled the South together, one of us African American and one of us white, we confronted the legacies of Jim Crow and contemplated the extent of cultural and political change in the region. We marveled at the physical beauty of many places, especially the South Carolina Sea Islands and the farmland of the Mississippi Delta, but we flinched at the economic and racial disparities evident throughout our journeys.

We also reflected on the necessity of this project to collect first-person information about black life during segregation. We discovered that in local communities across the region, the foundation for this preservation effort had begun with groups that collected and celebrated African American communities and institutions from the Jim Crow era, especially alumni associations of black schools and church congregations. On our travels, we sampled the relatively new museums and cultural organizations that sought to tell the stories—indeed, to build a heritage industry around—the tragedies and triumphs of the southern past. Going to museums and historic sites in Charlotte, Jackson, Memphis, and Birmingham, we saw an emerging interpretation of African American history and southern history with the civil rights movement at the center, albeit an interpretation perhaps fueled as much by contemporary economic interests than any collective search for historical truth or reconciliation. In Greenwood, Mississippi, Helena, Arkansas, and other places, however, African American history, indeed the black presence at all, remained mostly outside the bounds of historical coverage. Observing these historical forces at work and conversing with people responsible for new interpretations of southern history, we found important motivations for the project of recovering untold stories.

Since our years at Duke, we have both completed dissertations and books and moved into the world of academe. But the power of the stories we heard through the *Behind the Veil* Project, and the lasting memories of the people we met through the project, remained strong and compelling. Whenever we had the chance, we returned to these interviews and relished the opportunity to work more closely with them. The draw of these narratives has not diminished over the years. As we finish this manuscript in 2009, the first year of Barack Obama's presidency, we are reminded of the importance of understanding social and political change—and the usually complicated effects of that change—from African Americans' perspectives. These interviews are all the more important as the Obama agenda for health care and other domestic policies takes shape.

We first presented the idea for this collection at a workshop at the 2006 annual meeting of the Oral History Association. Ably led by Deborah Gershenowitz (then of Palgrave, now at NYU Press) and Linda Shopes, the session provided useful feedback that helped shape this book. We're grateful for the enthusiasm that Shopes, Gershenowitz, and other participants in the workshop demonstrated by their encouragement for this book. That support typifies the community of oral historians in the United States, a group to which we feel privileged to belong.

Two mentors and professors from Duke University deserve particular recognition. Ray Gavins and Nancy Hewitt (now at Rutgers University) provided valuable tutelage and friendship that has sustained us over the past years. As teachers, mentors, and scholars they have profoundly inspired us. We would also like to thank our students at Williams College, Washington University in St. Louis, Brown University, and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville who asked questions and voiced perspectives that reminded us why publications like this are necessary. Sometimes these provocations motivated us to get this book into print.

Other friends and colleagues have provided equally important advice and counsel. Thanks are due in particular to Kathy T. Corbett, extraordinary editor and generous friend, who read the manuscript and recommended important changes. Aliza Schiff similarly offered insightful comments and reactions that helped us think about the interviews and our interpretation. Leslie's colleagues in the history department at Williams College read several early chapters as part of a department colloquium and offered thoughtful suggestions that especially helped us produce the book for a broad audience. Annie's colleagues at the John Nicholas Brown Center, especially Chelsea Shriver, provided encouragement and good advice. Max Krochman at the Center for Documentary Studies and Rod Clare of Elon College helped with last-minute research in Durham, and we thank them for their assistance. The staff at Duke's Special Collections Library, especially Linda McCurdy and Janie Morris, were characteristically helpful and responsive to our questions, immeasurably smoothing our research process. As always, we appreciate Alex Byrd's friendship and brilliance; his decision to meet us in North Carolina for a research trip added extra joy to the last stages of our writing.

As series editors, Linda Shopes and Bruce Stave were patient and wise. Their constant interest in the project helped us envision the book and push it through to completion. Chris Chappell was a model of efficiency and professionalism and Sam Hasey tolerated our many questions as the manuscript neared completion. We thank them all for putting up with us.

Finally, but certainly not least, we are grateful to the many people who made the *Behind the Veil* Project a reality. Bill Chafe, Bob Korstad, Ray Gavins, and Iris Tillman Hill envisioned and led the project with foresight, intelligence, and sensitivity. Our gratitude also goes to the interviewers and the narrators who willingly shared their memories and their time. Over the five years that we coordinated the *Behind the Veil* Project, we were fortunate to meet and befriend the talented and energetic coterie of graduate students who served the project at its grassroots by conducting interviews. They did amazing work, often under strenuous conditions, creating a collection of materials that is as rich in content as it is awesome in size. Once again, we thank these interviewers for their investment in this project. This book and the *Behind the Veil* Project would not have been possible without them. That is doubly true for the individuals who agreed to be interviewed and who shared their time and memories for the sake of creating a fuller historical narrative. We are humbled by the work these women did for decades to support their families, sustain their communities, and push for a more just world. We owe them our boundless appreciation; they have our admiration.

INTRODUCTION

We Did Well With What We Had: Remembering Black Life Behind the Veil

In a 1995 interview, sixty-nine-year-old Olivia Cherry assessed African American life in Hampton, Virginia, during the Jim Crow era.[1] "Things were good, but they could have been much better," Cherry recalled. "We were second-class citizens. I mean, that's the way they classified us and that's the way they treated us. But we still had a very happy life and made the best of the situation.... It's true that we were segregated and we had used [school] supplies and all of that, but we did well with what we had."[2] Conveying a profound sense of pride on the one hand and resentment on the other, Cherry's comments speak to the complexities of life on the black side of the color line. "What we had," Cherry detailed in her interview, necessarily was provided by and nurtured in black communities: the strength, skills, faith, and fight to confront the status quo of racial inequality, instilled by a network of multi-generational kith and kin and institutional bases comprised of schools, churches, and organizations. Collectively these elements reinforced black humanity in the face of persistent assault. For historically, making "the best of the situation" and having "a very happy life" compelled African Americans to define success and triumph on their own terms, to recognize the limits of "what we had," and yet to "do well," despite the harsh and forceful system of racism under which they lived.

This book presents narratives excerpted from a set of oral history interviews conducted with African Americans who, like Olivia Cherry, came of age in the Jim Crow South, a region and time distinct for harshly codified racial disparities. Born between 1900 and 1947, they were interviewed in the 1990s as a part of a project called *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South.*[3] As the Federal Writers Project had done in the

1930s when it interviewed former slaves,[4] *Behind the Veil* researchers—mostly graduate students—conducted open-ended, life history interviews. Ultimately, interviews were conducted in ten states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia). Now housed at Duke University's Special Collections Library and in libraries and archives in communities where interviews took place, the *Behind the Veil* Collection includes more than 1,200 interviews (recorded on cassette tape) with elderly African American southerners.[5] We, the editors of this collection, served as Research Coordinators for the Project and conducted some of the interviews.

In the tradition of documentary, *Living with Jim Crow* renders memories, observations and reflections to document African American women's lives at a particular time. Although the racist system is an ever-present theme, the stories are not just about Jim Crow or race relations. This book does not compare the lives of black women to those of black men, white women, or white men, or attempt to weigh the oppressions endured or the opportunities enjoyed by each group. Instead, these interviews communicate what African American women did and thought about their lives and their roles, the expectations placed upon them, and the aspirations they had for themselves. They speak of lives as children, adults, workers, community members, and activists. In this way, these narratives tell about how African Americans learned "what a woman ought to be and to do," and about their aspirations to be and do just that—and more.[6]

As scholars have written, African American women have their own story—their own history—one that gives race and gendered meanings to oppression and discrimination as well as to freedom and citizenship.[7] What they did, they did for themselves, their families, communities, and the race. In this way, these stories articulate a strong womanist consciousness, one that does not separate race from gender, and that sees the freedom and rights of one inextricably linked to freedom and rights of the other.[8] Although they used the term feminist only occasionally, these interviewees offer a feminist understanding of their worlds. Often, they fended for themselves and their children. They demanded access to women-specific needs for health care, including reproductive rights. And they used their connections with other women as a source of strength and a foundation for collective action, joining together to register to vote, demand fair payment for their work, or to protest segregation.

The interviews collected here also describe the inner workings of black southern life that were often invisible except "behind the veil," as the scholar W. E. B. Du Bois termed the phrase.[9] Shaped by the particular circumstances of the narrators, the context of their lives, and the passage of time, individual interviews must be approached as meaningful expressions of the experiences of singular women. Hardship, tragedy, sadness, loss—as well as humor, joy, accomplishment, and aspiration—coexist, often within a single interview. The memories and commentaries shared by women reveal the personal reservoirs of strength from which they drew, even as they credit family and community for their own survival. Our narrators describe lessons learned, children reared, and elders honored; tricks played, payback scored, and ruses deployed; barriers crossed and obstacles hurdled by sheer determination. Absolutely aware of the effects of racism—undereducation and underemployment that led to poverty; disfranchisement that ensured electoral powerlessness; the quotidian meanness intended to humiliate and degrade black people—African Americans marshalled their energies and resources in their own interests. The struggle was unrelenting. But, the proscriptions of Jim Crow did not eviscerate aspirations. For, as these interviews assert, despite the harsh daily realities of Jim Crow, African Americans did not live their lives with white people at the center. Birth, death, courtship, marriage, learning, worship, and fun typically occurred without the presence or appraisal of whites.[10]

Examining black life in the Jim Crow South through the eyes of women illuminates differences among African Americans, between communities, and around ideas. Thus, these interviews reveal a variety of experiences, based on place of residence, educational opportunities, and year of birth, as well as a diversity of struggles that cut across these differences. Read in the aggregate, however, the interviews also represent a collective past. They echo dissonance as well as harmony; discord as well as unity.[11] The interviews in *Living with Jim Crow* provide an evidentiary base that supports and reiterates much of the theoretical and historical scholarship focused on African American women. For instance, our narrators tell of work done on behalf of families, institutions, and communities. All of these women worked outside the home for pay and did so as necessary contributions to family sustenance; most labored as farmers or household workers, and many as both. Even among the teachers, social workers, and entrepreneurs speaking here, training in farm work and domestic work was a part of childhood. Still, they did not define themselves by their employment. These interviews detail how African American women prioritized their families and their communities. Their discussions explore how African Americans collected those resources—tangible and intangible—necessary for survival and progress. While detailing possibilities and impossibilities, they convey hopes as well as constraints.

It is our task here as editors to mediate between our narrators and our readers. But it is also our task as historians of Afro-America, of the South, of the United States, and of women to bring analytical perspectives to our informants' words. For instance, we are aware that sexism and gender ideology shaped opportunities and expectations that narrators encountered, despite the fact that few dwelt on this topic explicitly in their interviews. Few discuss how their lives might have differed in another social or political context. Importantly, though, our narrators were aware that the construction of gender was racialized, with their sex attached to them as completely as their skin, and that the expectations and realities for African American women differed in vital ways from white women and black men. As narrators recall, even white women with relatively little wealth hired black women as household laborers, thereby establishing a racial hierarchy through women's work, and maintaining a form of white privilege. Still, the silence about sexism stands in contrast to the narrators' discussions of race and racism, a phenomenon that speaks volumes about the relative salience of these forces in their lives.

Stories about work and relationships shared by our narrators give us insight into the ironic workings of gender: in some ways, generation, education, and occupation mattered little; black women's work was black women's work, done by neither white women nor men of either race. Notwithstanding all that was demanded, a profound sexual division of labor existed in most families, even those headed by women, and within black community institutions including churches. This division of labor designated certain jobs as the provenance of girls or women and others to boys or men. Training in household and farm work prepared girls for women's responsibilities to their families—as children and as adults—including employment. Yet women could and did—and often were forced to—do any task that needed to be done, including the heavy work of plowing, a task usually assigned to men. Gender socialization was so ingrained that few narrators questioned the division between the sexes, even in retrospect.[12]

Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, more than a trace of nostalgia appears in some of our narrators' stories. Many seem to wish for another place and time, when a firm hierarchy imposed order. Really, they do not long for the Jim Crow era and its ubiquitous signs of humiliations, but they do yearn for the benefits of community, its alertness, its vigilance, its collective concern—positive and negative—with its residents. "These were all our children," Olivia Cherry observed, remarking on the ways people in the community supervised neighborhood youngsters. Many shared stories of discipline, often physical punishment that any adult could deliver when children stepped out of line. Our narrators did not necessarily approve of whippings, least of all the ones they received. Nor did they necessarily appreciate being under constant scrutiny. But as they understood the role of corporeal punishment, it reinforced the ultimate power of authority, warned of worse things that could happen to a child who lacked self-control around white people, and coerced respect for adults who received little outside the black community. More critically, discipline conveyed children's responsibility for appropriate behavior in public as a reflection on their people, meaning their families, and by extension, their communities and the race. Still, it was in the black community that children found adults who expressed directly a sense of caring and attentiveness. For in addition to the collective supervision of adults, children also received positive feedback for their accomplishments. Our narrators' embrace of strong discipline proffers their expressions of racial affinity, represents a sense of belonging, and details an imperative for the black community to nurture, support, and protect its own.

Looking back from the mid-1990s when these interviews were collected and recalling events and communities many decades in the past, the narrators whose stories we present remind us of the necessity to distinguish between history and memory and to consider the sources from which each derives. History, a compilation of *facts*, or even better, a description of the relationships among facts, records segregation in terms of laws and practices that combined to force black Americans into a subordinate status, depriving them of political rights, confining their occupational choices, and consigning them to neighborhoods and public spaces marked “Colored Only.” Memory draws on history, but is informed by individual experience and perspective. This distinction between living memory and recorded history can be seen, for example, in accounts about segregation customs that were never recorded in written laws. Granted, Jim Crow could vary from location to location, and it was shifty. Each state, county, and town enacted its own statutes, and since racism and racist practices do not require law, segregation conventions varied widely within the region and could change at any time.[13]

Narrators’ memories of Jim Crow reveal this variety and highlight practices for which little historical documentation exists. For example, Theresa Jan Cameron Lyons says in her interview (Chapter 1) that African Americans could not buy Coca-Cola, only Pepsi-Cola. A similar point is made in other interviews, specific references and inferences to race and access to Pepsi or Coke, and there is a well-known photograph from the 1930s of a Coke machine with a sign that read: “Whites Only.” Yet, some interviewees recall drinking Coke or serving Coke in black-owned cafes.[14] In another instance, Ruthe Lee Jackson (Chapter 4), insisted that when she was a girl in Mississippi, “a colored woman couldn’t drive a car.... It was against the law.” This memory sounds preposterous and almost impossible to verify with written evidence. Yet living memory provides some substantiation. Another interview in the *Behind the Veil* Collection claims that black women were forbidden from driving in the 1930s and 1940s, and a third recalls a black woman being stopped in Virginia by a police officer because she was driving a nice car.[15] Considered within the peculiar constraints of African American women’s lives, this collective memory points out segregation’s idiosyncratic nature, and the prohibition on driving seems all the more plausible when Jim Crow can be seen as habitual racial and gender profiling.

In addition to pointing out the difference between living memory and recorded history, the preceding examples highlight the challenges of corroboration. As personal accounts, many of the stories in this book cannot be verified by other primary or secondary sources. In fact, the inability to access an internal history of African Americans—as opposed to race relations—in this era was the reason that the *Behind the Veil* Project was conceived. Public or written records rarely reflect everyday life from black perspectives, especially in the early twentieth century. Archives other than those at the historically black colleges and universities rarely collected African American manuscripts. Black newspapers are rich with material about black public life and editorial comment on the plight of black people, when available, but southern mainstream newspapers excised stories about black resistance and white violence. Others maintained a policy to not cover local black news at all.[16] Given the dearth of traditional sources of historical evidence, it was all the more important to gather and assemble interviews that captured the memories of elderly blacks. They have not forgotten this past and wanted very much for their stories to be passed on.

Most of our narrators remember their lives with pride, including—indeed because of—their accomplishments at shouldering tremendous burdens of work and responsibility. The harshness of narrators' lives comes through in these stories, but closely held secrets and deeply personal topics are not the emphases of these interviews. Depression, alcoholism, domestic abuse, and other well-known affects of poverty—exacerbated by racism—can be detected in discussions of these women's lives, but such conditions carried limited weight in the interviews. This is not to say that such questions would or would not have been appropriate in the interviews, or to ignore that such conditions existed. Still, as graduate students the *Behind the Veil* interviewers did follow a cross-generational (and sometimes cross-gender and cross-racial) etiquette—as well as a research agenda—that prioritized other topics among the interview questions.

Finally, the value of these stories as historical sources must be understood as a function of their initial form, the oral history interview. Along with accentuating experiences and issues of significance to narrators, interviews are shaped by the participation of an interviewer who asks questions and records answers. The agenda and interests of an interviewer may influence how stories were remembered and information passed on. Told orally, interviews also involve performance, the telling of stories and the recalling of memories to a listening audience whose responses inevitably shape the account. Words, gestures, tone, speed and pacing, and numerous other verbal and nonverbal forms of expression combine to convey meaning in the interview, but they are not recorded on tape or transcribed onto paper. As one oral historian puts it, "the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity. . . . Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did."[17]

African American Women Tell about Their Lives in the Jim Crow South

The narrators in *Living with Jim Crow* came of age between two landmark court cases, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which established the legal foundation for racial segregation and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that overturned the principle of "separate but equal." Their histories reach back even further. They inherited the memories of slavery and dreams of freedom from elders who populated the multigenerational homes and communities where they lived. Their interviews certainly detail Jim Crow as an American apartheid, a system of racial abuses and insults, and they tell stories of struggle against racism.

The book's oldest narrator, Dora Dennis of Arkansas, whose interview appears in Chapter 1, was born in 1900. The youngest, Shirley Sherrod of Georgia, from Chapter 5 was born in 1947. Dennis and Sherrod nonetheless shared many realities. Their interviews both recalled the unremitting struggle to make a living as farmers in the Jim Crow South, the experience of attending segregated schools, and the pervasive violence that threatened to roll back any success. Balancing the economic and racial oppression in their stories, Sherrod and Dennis similarly reflect on the importance of family and community cooperation. They acknowledge the distinctive role played by women who cared for families, managed homes, and stood up to protect the welfare of loved ones.

But separated by more than a generation and their families' different economic status, their interviews reveal the disparate paths black women's lives could follow. Born in the Mississippi Delta and raised without a father, Dennis and her family eked out a living as sharecroppers. The family moved frequently in search of a better situation, ending up in Arkansas around the time the United States entered World War I. For many African Americans war-era migrations led to improved circumstances. With this move, however, Dennis' education ended and she entered the labor force full-time, working in white families' homes. Shirley Sherrod was born in rural southwest Georgia, and when her father was murdered by local whites, her family struggled as well, although they farmed land owned by kin for generations. A generation after Dora Dennis came of age Sherrod attended college, actively participated in the civil rights movement in Albany, Georgia, and with options and choices that Dennis never could have anticipated, embarked on a lifelong career of activism devoted to black landownership.

The differences in Dennis and Sherrod's accounts remind us that the segregated South was neither static nor homogeneous, nor was the black community. Their stories reveal the limits of change in Jim Crow over time *and* shifting opportunities made possible or denied by access to education and economic resources. At the same time, the similarities in their stories accentuate the distinctive characteristics of black women's lives under Jim Crow. Black women played critically important roles in families and communities. Whether living in small towns, large cities, or rural enclaves, women were not just members, but makers of churches, clubs, and voluntary associations. Taking their cues from their fathers and mothers and respected elders, they viewed themselves as accountable to others. These themes, reiterated throughout the interviews reveal how Jim Crow produced and exacerbated the precarious circumstances with which many of our narrators lived as children and as adults. Many more stories tell of insecurity. Dora Dennis moved around a lot, sharecropping with other families. She recalls a white landlord who locked her mother out of their house, forced her to pick other families' cotton, and still refused to settle up with her. Another Arkansan, Cleaster Mitchell (Chapter 1) describes how a landowner threw her family out of their home on Christmas Day because her mother refused to work for him on short notice. In these stories and others, mothers are heroes. Interviewees tell of feeling safeguarded by mothers who protected their children.

But economic insecurity was not the only horrific expression of Jim Crow. Dorcas Carter of New Bern, North Carolina, (Chapter 4) illustrates how a major fire changed life not only for her family, but also for the most affluent of her city's black residents. Violence and terror, like the burning of black neighborhoods, random beatings, murders, bombings, and harassment appear often in these interviews. As women describe Jim Crow, it operated effectively to keep most African American southerners aware of "their place," even if they dared to challenge it. The problem of learning about Jim Crow for young people was that so many racial restrictions were unwritten, following a skewed logic of power relations based on race. Thus the presence of sexual violence is also a prevalent theme in these interviews. Cleaster Mitchell recalled, "I learned very early about abuse from white men [when working in people's houses]. It was terrible at one time, and there wasn't anybody to tell." Accusing African American women of hypersexuality, whites believed that black women were licentious, incapable of fidelity, *and* available for and willing to engage in sexual liaisons.[18] Black women had no means to accuse white men of rape, and no recourse. Thus, within the context of Jim Crow, African American mores were inevitably affected by the past. Slavery had provided white men license to sexually access virtually every African American woman or girl, a circumstance that, as some narrators recall, resulted in separate black and white branches of families with a rainbow of complexions. White males did not easily yield this alleged right when slavery ended, and these interviews tell how white men continued to seek sexual access to African American women, with or without consent, throughout the period about which our interviewees speak.

For the Jim Crow generation, then, girls and women learned a distinct set of expectations about their public and private actions, especially regarding how they should comport themselves around boys and men, other women, and their elders. Given the weightiness of the subject, there is little humor in the ways that our interviewees talk about these expectations, both imposed and embraced. Respectability was not just about manner and morals, although this discourse was always present. Rather, respectability was a way for black women to reclaim themselves, for it required taking ownership and control of one's body and repelling unwanted advances. Forged out of a sense of self-preservation, respectability intended to build a sense of self-esteem and self-determination, self-respect in a setting that granted African American women and men very little. Elders instructed that whites viewed one bad black person as representative of all, and conversely, the positive characteristics of one as an anomaly. In this way, young women learned early that the burden of the race—its image, its progress—rested on their shoulders. As Margaret Rogers (Chapter 2) details, respectability could be used as a criticism of others. Her mother, who had run away at age twelve and had a child out of wedlock, "talked about people having children and not being married, people having sex. . . . The girls were called dirty and no good and they usually would say, 'Well, you know, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. The mama is no good therefore the daughter can't be no good.' You know, if one person in the family did something, then everybody in the whole family was blamed for it. And so my parents picked who I could talk to." Nonetheless, white-on-black rape and sexual assault were frequent, and such offences typically were ignored by police who, like many other white southerners, considered black people so sexually immoral that consent to sexual intimacy went unquestioned. At issue in these stories is control, or better yet, autonomy, and the tension between what Jim Crow demanded black women be and do and what they wanted for themselves.[19]

Women's stories about work, harassment, economic struggle, and limited education demonstrate that Jim Crow was more than the practice of racial segregation; it was an applied ideology of white supremacy that did not just keep African Americans in a fixed subordinate position in society, it tried to push them further down, if not to eliminate them altogether. Braced by violence, discrimination was built into the legal, political, cultural, economic, social, and educational scaffolding that reinforced white power and denied African Americans the means to improve their lives, hence the term American apartheid.[20] Our narrators speak of resistance and protest that occurred throughout the Jim Crow period and, for some, continued to the time they were interviewed. Inasmuch as these stories provide evidence of the early twentieth-century roots of the civil rights movement, they also prove that Emancipation continued into the late-twentieth-century. Our interviewees inherited the memories of slavery and hopes of freedom directly from freed people, their great-grandparents or their grandparents, and from their parents. Freedom promised autonomy and that promise mattered. And in this vein, as historical actors, these narrators shouldered the cause of racial destiny.[21]

Methodology

The *Behind the Veil* Project, the source of the interviews included in this book, was motivated by the realization that the memories of American apartheid were about to pass with the generations who experienced it. The urgency of the work is evidenced in the contemporary classroom. Generations born after the 1970s know some facts of segregation, but little more about Jim Crow. They are shocked by its severity, its illogic, and its elaborateness. Thus, the *Behind the Veil* Project set out to reclaim a history of individuals, families, institutions, and communities that endured decades of legal discrimination and survived to take part in the mass movements that changed the South's political, economic, and social worlds.

Perhaps more importantly, the oral histories in *Living with Jim Crow* demonstrate the valuable link between the past, present, and future. Collected in the mid-1990s, the interviews tell of the past while also sharing elderly women's observations about the broader culture. Undoubtedly, contemporary issues shaped the topics our interviewees discuss. Most significantly, memories and commentaries reflect on the demise during the Reagan-Bush years of a public social safety net, which some of these women had been part of creating; a major overhaul of welfare under the Clinton administration; the election of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first black president; the trial of O. J. Simpson for the murder of his ex-wife; and major floods that swept through southwest Georgia in 1994. Our informants also told their stories through the lens of the mid-twentieth century's upheavals, and most describe the importance of changes in legal civil rights after the 1950s. Although differing in their broader historical implications, such events inevitably shaped the conversations between narrators and interviewers and helped shape the interviews themselves.

We chose the excerpts included in this book using several criteria. Most importantly, we decided to exclusively use interviews with women.[22] Notwithstanding the excellent and voluminous scholarship published since the 1990s by African American women's historians, studies of the Jim Crow era reveal a dearth of information about everyday life; there is still much more to understand about the gendered aspects of living with Jim Crow. To get at this information, we sought to represent the diversity of experiences of southern black women, including differences attributable to location. Our interviewees hail from rural, small town, and urban areas; from the upper and lower South; from the Delta and the Sea Islands, and other locations in between. We also wanted the collection to present interviewees' range in generation, education level, financial means, and occupation. We wanted to illuminate the lives of domestic servants and sharecroppers, the two occupations most common for African American women during this period. In addition, the collection includes educators, social workers, hairdressers, and businesswomen, most of who had retired by the time of the interview. Finally, we selected interviews that contained sufficient depth and detail to make them interesting.

The original interviews are long, often two or more hours, and varied in their coverage. Because few oral histories translate smoothly from recording to publishable text we worked carefully to prepare the materials for this book. The act of transcription—moving from the recorded interview and the oral narrative into a written account of that interview—inevitably transforms the original meaning of a narrator's stories. Translating the spoken word into written form requires a series of decisions and determinations that affect the written account. Where to add punctuation? Can punctuation capture the subtext of an interview? How can we convey nuance or emotional content, such as laughs, sighs, cries, or long pauses that embellish and give additional weight to interviewees' words? Oral historians hope that the process of transcription can illuminate the many layers of meaning contained in people's words, remaining faithful to a speaker's intent while necessarily elucidating the content.

Editing for publication imposes still more levels of interpretation and decision making upon oral historians.[23] Our process was guided by the goal of transmitting the power and meaning of the interview. Narratives were changed in several ways. First, we omitted the interviewer's questions in order to emphasize the narrator over the interviewer, although occasionally, a question appears in brackets to provide context for the speaker's recollections. Second, we edited interviews to enhance readers' comprehension. Typically, we omitted repetition and conventions that would be distracting to readers, including stops and starts, "uh's," "um's," and similar phrases. Sometimes we reordered sections or sentences. Words or phrases added by the editors appear in brackets, and only to clarify a narrator's reference. It is our intent to smooth the way for readers; in each case, however, we worked faithfully to retain and convey the narrator's message. The names of interviewers and interviewees appear in Appendix A, and a short example showing how we edited an interview is provided in Appendix B.

The aspects of the interviews that remain unchanged also deserve note. In particular, we elected to retain outdated or unpopular descriptors for African Americans. When interviewees used terms such as *colored*, *Negro*, and *nigger*, we kept the original words. Sometimes these terms are used in specific ways to convey a distinct meaning. In other places, these words express individual preference for or ease with certain vocabulary. We noted that our narrators used the so-called "*n-word*" infrequently. As elders, not all of our informants were comfortable using the terms African American or black, recalling an era when references to Africa or blackness were insults. Similarly, where narrators referred to white southerners as *crackers* we left that terminology unchanged. The mention of Jewish families is also worth noting: narrators' stories often differentiate Jews from other groups of whites, thus hinting at their distinct place in the South's social order. (Indeed, as our interviews detail, Jim Crow relegated Jews to the same neighborhoods where African Americans lived.) Our usages are in line with the current conventions of publishing, but this complexity reminds us of the fluidity of language and that customs regarding vocabulary, like those related to race and ethnicity more generally, are historically and culturally specific.