

BEFORE JIM CROW

The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia

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CROW

Jane Dailey

GENDER & AMERICAN CULTURE

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Before Jim Crow

THE POLITICS OF
RACE IN POSTEMANCIPATION
VIRGINIA

Jane Dailey

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5

MAKING BLACK WHITE & WHITE BLACK

The Politics of Racial Identity

Classifications—social, racial, sexual—are constantly disputed in everyday social interactions and in the civic and political sphere. Danville's citizens argued about such classifications on sidewalks. Other Virginians clashed in more esoteric settings. Legislation and court cases involving the definition and establishment of racial identity are two of the best vantage points from which to see classification in movement. Take the prominent example of Virginia's various attempts to define "nonwhite" for the purpose of antimiscegenation legislation. In 1705 a "mulatto" was said to possess at least one-eighth African ancestry. When the 1705 act was amended in 1785, the percentage of African ancestry necessary to be defined as nonwhite was raised to one-fourth. This meant that those who had been classified as mulatto under the 1705 act by virtue of a single African American great-grandparent might, in 1785, claim status as "white." The twentieth-century descendants of many of these nineteenth-century families crossed back again in 1910, however, when the General Assembly redefined black persons as having one-sixteenth or more "negro blood." The fractional loopholes of this law were drawn even tighter in 1924, when Virginia adopted the "one drop" rule, which required that persons designated "white" have "no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian."¹

Racial recategorization by legal fiat was not a strictly southern occupation. For an example from the national level, we may look to the federal government's oscillating attempts to categorize racially the nation's assorted European immigrant groups. The Naturalization Law of 1790 reserved naturalized citizenship for "whites."² But who was

white? In 1909 the United States declared that Armenians were "Asiatics" and thus ineligible for citizenship.³ A year later the federal courts held that Indians from the Asian subcontinent were Caucasians and entitled to all the rights of "free white persons." The Armenian decision was overturned almost immediately, and Armenians were granted white racial status for cultural and historical reasons—because, in the words of the decision, "the outlook of their civilization has been toward Europe." Immigrants from India apparently looked the wrong way. They were stripped of their citizenship in 1923 because they were not (or no longer) "white" according to the "understanding of the common man."⁴

The malleability of racial identity visible in legislation and legal decisions has been useful to biologists and social scientists who point out that there is little genetic justification for speaking of "race."⁵ Historians, anthropologists, and cultural critics of various academic backgrounds have articulated increasingly precise and persuasive definitions of race that are centered around the linkages between social interactions and the construction of individual identity. A growing number of historians now consider race a social relationship, made "within the ordinary and everyday," articulated in the "small gestures of everyday life."⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois demonstrated this way of defining race back in 1923, the year that Indians were declared nonwhite. "The black man," Du Bois said, when pressed for a definition, "is a person who must ride 'Jim Crow' in Georgia."⁷

Even as scholars debunk biological definitions of race, however, we continue to assume that the "common man" employs a strictly biological or phenotypical model of race. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has declared, the late-twentieth-century common man "knows race when he sees it."⁸ This chapter argues the opposite for the late nineteenth century. Far from being self-confident about the "natural" boundaries of race, Gilded Age Virginians, especially "white" Virginians, were extremely anxious about race because they—like Du Bois—saw it as at least partly constructed through social, cultural, and political meanings.

Contemporary legal decisions contributed to such anxieties. In 1892, for instance, the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals determined a man's race posthumously. In the civil case of *Scott v. Raub*, Sarah Raub claimed the inheritance of her father James Scott against her uncle, Robert Scott. Raub was born in 1862 to Ann Settles, a slave of mixed

heritage who cohabited with James Scott, to whom she had been hired out by her master. The union was not recognized as a legal marriage since Settles, as a slave, was incapable of entering into a contract. When James Scott died intestate in 1888, Sarah Raub argued in the Albemarle County Circuit Court and before the Virginia Court of Appeals that her father had been a free man of color and that as such his relationship with Ann Settles had been formalized by an 1866 act of the Virginia General Assembly. This act recognized unions between slaves and blacks begun before emancipation as marriages under the law and conferred legitimacy on the children born of such unions.⁹ James Scott's brother Robert disputed Raub's depiction of her father as black, insisting that his brother, like himself, was white. As a white man, Robert Scott argued, James's relationship with Ann Settles violated Virginia's law prohibiting interracial marriage,¹⁰ and the child born of this liaison was illegitimate. Sarah Raub, the bastard issue of this forbidden union, could not inherit.

Under Virginia law at the time, anyone possessing one-fourth "negro blood" was defined as "colored." In other words, having one black grandparent made one black as well. Although admitting that "the evidence tends to show that these people, both James and Ann, had less than one-fourth of negro blood," the Court of Appeals also conceded that "there is no clear proof offered, and probably none attainable, as to the degree of colored blood possessed by either one." Despite having declared in 1885 that no one should be presumed black "until he is proved to be such," the court nonetheless ruled in this case that James Scott was not white and that Sarah Raub was his legitimate heir.¹¹ The basis for this decision was not genealogical but social. As Justice Benjamin Watkins Lacy explained, both Ann Settles and James Scott were "classed as colored persons, socially speaking." Both had apparently belonged to a church "established and attended by colored persons generally," and James Scott had first voted "when other colored people voted, and not before." Ann Settles, for her part, had "always passed as a colored person," an argument that implies that she was light-skinned enough to have lived exclusively among whites after emancipation had she chosen to do so.¹² We can only guess at Robert Scott's reaction to the court's decision, as he found himself proclaimed the brother of a black man.

In his judgment in *Scott v. Raub*, Benjamin Watkins Lacy defined race in Du Boisian terms. "I base my opinion [regarding Scott's race],"

Lacy wrote, "upon the privileges he enjoyed." Lacy's (admittedly circular) reasoning reveals an important social fact about the South at the end of the nineteenth century: in that place, at that time, racial identity was intimately wrapped up with "privileges," social and political. Where did Scott worship? Lacy asked. Did he vote? Such questions highlight something that Erving Goffman has noted: "While it may be true that the individual has a unique self all his own, evidence of this possession is thoroughly a product of joint ceremonial labor" between a person and his social group. In other words, identity—including racial identity—is situational and historical, created and sustained through social interactions.¹³ This does not mean that the creation of social identity is a process of free play: as this chapter will show, symbolic actions gain meaning from context; identity, rather than being a question entirely of self-fashioning, is one of disputation and negotiation. It may be useful to think of this as a tension between self-fashioning and ascription, a tension that is never fully resolved in one direction or another.

As far as racial identity in the South is concerned, novelists have seen this more clearly than historians.¹⁴ Confusion over identity and the loss of identity have been major themes in southern literature since the Civil War. The problem of racial knowledge has been approached by such authors as George Washington Cable, Charles Chesnut, Frances Watkins Harper, Kate Chopin, Thomas Dixon Jr., Mark Twain, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner, who all concerned themselves with questions of racial identity and blood. Indeed, the protagonist of Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), Joe Christmas, may be seen as the allegorical southerner: born a "white" man, lynched as a "black," Christmas is tormented throughout his short life by his unclear racial ancestry. Unable to fall back on appearance (Christmas is "parchment-colored"), the citizens of the fictional town of Jefferson rely finally on gossip and hearsay in an attempt to fix Joe's identity.¹⁵

When we look carefully at the politics of race in the nineteenth century, it becomes clear that real-life southerners also supplemented a biological model of race with behavioral definitions. In a region full of "parchment-colored" people governed by a legal system that defined race in fractions, the clearest indicator of identity was often, as the court in *Scott v. Raub* acknowledged, social actions and affiliations. This is not to say that contemporaries did not make biological arguments. Such arguments were an important part of the construction of white

racial ideology and identity. But they were only one part, and one that did not inspire enough confidence about the integrity of racial categories to preclude great anxiety about other, more obviously cultural, aspects of racial identity.

Contemporaries had as much difficulty pinpointing the boundaries between such categories as political identity, gender identity, and racial identity as historians have had. In the previous two chapters we have seen why the drawing of certain boundaries was so important to the Readjuster coalition's success and how black Readjusters and non-Readjuster whites challenged both those boundaries and their social and political meanings. The Readjusters' initial success in separating an interracial political sphere from a segregated private world depended on drawing and maintaining clear boundaries between stable categories of partisanship, race, and gender. But these categories of identity were neither stable nor independent; by changing some cultural and political variables, interracial alliance in Virginia affected the definition of others. To the surprise of the Readjusters, changes in partisan affiliation altered the definition of whiteness—affecting even the biological conception of race. Nearly always against their will, coalitionists' new political allegiances demonstrated the reciprocal relationship between individual knowledge about oneself and one's identity and public construction and affirmation of both.¹⁶ Once we realize just how dynamic the relationship between categories of identity was, it becomes possible to take the racial rhetoric of Readjuster Virginia more seriously, and to see it as an indicator of the ongoing process of complex ideological formation rather than merely as a chauvinistic attempt to cover up the “real” interests—in other words, the material or economic interests—at stake in any political contest.

Of course, every “white” Virginian had a material, cultural, and political interest in his or her whiteness. Even before legal segregation, whiteness had its privileges. But in the 1880s the wages of whiteness were not yet standardized and they were not purely material. Dignity, “honor,” the right to consider oneself an autonomous subject and citizen—these qualities were not bound exclusively to whiteness after 1865.¹⁷ The social and political worth of whiteness remained in flux in the late-nineteenth-century South. Such instability was a constant irritant to the Readjuster coalition and a source of opportunity to its opponents.

The “race issue,” as white southerners put it (or, as African Ameri-

cans liked to phrase it, “the white problem”) was always present in postwar life, but it did not always carry the same political charge. In the beginning, the Readjusters were able to kindle an affinity of interest between white and black Virginians centered around shared social and economic priorities. But could white and black Virginians change their political behavior and alliances without altering other axes of identity? Certain groups in the post-Civil War South—among them the Readjusters—saw the liberal political community as fundamentally unrelated to other human associations. Other southerners—in this case, Democrats and some black Readjusters—stressed the essential interrelatedness of political allegiance and other forms of identity. Although the conclusions reached here may be generalized to other parts of the South, the inner workings of the Readjuster coalition in Virginia provide an especially good vantage point from which to view the intersection of African American political power and the white social and political imagination.

When William Mahone cast his lot with the Republicans in the Senate in 1881, he effectively transformed the partisan identity of his white followers from dissident Democrats into Republicans. This transformation was no small thing. Wartime Republican governor Francis H. Pierpont warned Mahone of the danger that this switch in political identity involved for white Virginians, most of whom hated the party of abolition: “You have in Va. a great work yet to perform. The name is the great scarecrow now in the way. I don't know that you fully appreciate the difficulty in getting men to adopt a new name and especially one that has been so odious. . . . But Readjusters now have to act with Republicans in Congress and it will continue to be pressed on all Demo[ocrats] in Va. who are acting with the New Party [that they are, in effect, Republicans].”¹⁸

Shrewd distribution of patronage eased white Readjusters' affiliation with the Republicans and reinforced partisan loyalty to the coalition. At the same time, many white Readjusters resisted any construction of the coalition as revolving around African American interests. Such resistance often manifested itself in local disputes over patronage distribution and black influence in party affairs. Despite official pronouncements directing the sharing of power along race lines, some whites rigged the selection process for local leadership committees to favor white Readjusters. “We have two kinds of readjust-

ers in this county, roman nosed and dishfaced,” the white chairman of the Tazewell County Executive Committee informed Mahone. “[F]or this reason I will not select [the committee] until Court. I want to be sure I select from the roman nosed tribe.”¹⁹ Even so, by 1881 a good number of whites who had been with the movement since 1879 were being passed over for patronage positions in favor of black men in the interest of cementing the Republican-Readjuster alliance. More than one angry letter to Mahone complained about the favoring of these “side-door seekers.”²⁰

White opinion on black influence in the coalition spanned from professions of complete equality among men that emanated from a few Republican Readjusters to fears of “Negro domination” that prompted Readjuster congressional candidate John S. Wise, in black-majority Petersburg, to reassure his audience that there was not “too much nigger in the Readjuster party.” More representative of the Readjusters’ white rank and file was the view of “Old Commonwealth.” Writing from Rockingham County, which was represented in Congress by Readjuster John Paul, Old Commonwealth proclaimed in 1881 that his district was “not ready for colored supremacy, although we do not deny to the colored brother any of his legal and constitutional rights.”²¹

The position of Old Commonwealth on the problem of black equality and power was not far removed from that of many Democrats or of those white Readjusters who jumped ship after Mahone’s alliance with the Republicans. In 1882 John “Parson” Massey, a former Readjuster with patronage and political grievances against Mahone, challenged John Wise in the race for congressman-at-large.²² Outlining the reasons why white Readjusters should vote for him, Massey preached the primacy of identity politics. Like Old Commonwealth, Massey claimed to support the rights of black men under the law. At the same time, however, he asserted an identity of interest between all white men and the Democratic Party, arguing that he favored “white men being the governing power in Virginia.” The *Staunton Spectator*, a leading Valley paper, had been making Massey’s point for a year. Combining race and gender language, the *Spectator* insisted that “the question is, whether Virginia is to be ruled, in effect, by negroes or by white men.”²³

It is certainly possible to read such rhetoric as a simple demographic statement: the coalition’s membership, if not its elected representatives or leadership cohort, was African American by a clear majority.²⁴ It was easy to argue, as the Democrats did, that Readjuster

rule meant rule by a black-majority party: in the local vernacular, Readjuster rule was “Negro rule.” But there were other layers to such language. When the Democrats equated Readjuster rule with black rule, they assaulted white coalitionists’ race and gender identity. White Readjusters understood that their opponents’ underlying claim was that white Readjusters were, somehow, no longer white men.

The Readjusters had been vulnerable to race baiting since the first days of the coalition, but before 1882 Democratic attempts to bring race into play were easily deflected. In the 1881 gubernatorial canvass, for instance, Democratic hopes that white voters would privilege race chauvinism over economic self-interest came to nothing. When Democratic newspapers read in the white-majority Valley and western counties accused white Readjuster voters of deserting their race, the Readjuster press responded with complacency.²⁵ Noting the popularity of Readjuster policies on the debt, the public schools, and the poll tax, the *Smyth County Patriot and Herald* declared: “There is nothing left for Funderism [the Democrats] but to resort to its worn out cry of ‘honor and integrity,’ ‘Democracy and a white man’s party!’ But they tried these same things last fall and the people rebuked them. The bait of Funder ‘honor and integrity’ was not taken, the false cry of ‘Democracy’ did not deceive, and the yell of ‘nigger!’ failed to alarm.”²⁶

The rising fortunes of black Virginians changed this. By 1882 black men had gained authority and visibility in Readjuster Virginia and had recalibrated the traditional relationship between political authority and the social meaning of gender, race, and class relations. Beginning in 1882 white voters in Virginia began to exhibit a heightened sensitivity to political languages of race. The reason for this was not some new susceptibility on the part of white voters to racist ideology, but the more common experiences of whites with the growing public influence and confidence of black Virginians in public office, in patronage jobs, in schools, and on the street. Because the coalition supported African American civil and political participation, and distributed the material and honorific benefits of patronage to black Readjusters, the Readjusters could be depicted as challenging white social, political, and economic superiority. What W. E. B. Du Bois later called the “public and psychological wage” of whiteness—deference on the streets, access to public spaces, control of the legal system, and superior public services, particularly schools—was, according to white Democrats, threatened by interracial rule, as black men gained

positions of power and trust through Readjuster patronage and electoral strength.²⁷ When the coalition filled public offices with black men elected and appointed, it suggested that neither the value of whiteness nor that of blackness was intrinsic. Although nearly all white Virginians benefited by Readjuster rule (whether from lowered property taxes, an economic upswing generated in part by resolution of the debt, or the growth and prosperity of the public schools), the Democrats were increasingly able to capitalize on a nagging fear among whites that their “possessive investment in whiteness”—the social and political worth of white racial identity—was being devalued.²⁸

Not surprisingly, the Democrats worked to turn potential white anxieties into real ones. What is more, they encouraged the idea that political alliance with black men could erode white men’s gender and racial identities. While black Readjuster William Jefferson had hoped in 1879 that the coalition would cure black Virginians of their “political leprosy,” the Democrats made much of the contagious nature of that disease. To borrow Horace Mann Bond’s 1935 words regarding white fear of integrated schools, Virginia’s Democrats manipulated the notion that “perhaps black is catching.”²⁹ Bond’s words were a bitter reference to white anxieties that integrated schools would encourage interracial sex and marriage, leading to mixed-race children: in this way, white families might “catch blackness.” The danger to white “race purity” through miscegenation was proximate, not immediate, however, and the links between politics, sex, and race abstract.

But there were other ways to “catch blackness” in the New South, according to Virginia Democrats—ways in which to alter one’s racial identity in the here and now. Borrowing the language of crossbreeding from the agricultural world, Democrats argued throughout the Readjuster era that by cooperating with black men the Readjusters were attempting to “hybridize” Virginia. Although a few examples exist from the seventeenth century, the word “hybrid” entered the common vocabulary only in the mid-nineteenth century with the work of Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley. Huxley differentiated between “mongrels” and “hybrids,” but nonspecialists used the words interchangeably. In agriculture and animal husbandry hybridity was associated with superior offspring, blending the strengths of different strains to achieve resilience and eliminate weaknesses. Where humans were concerned, however, nineteenth-century Americans used con-

cepts of hybridity to argue against miscegenation, insisting that hybridity among humans resulted in degeneracy.³⁰

The language of hybridity was meant to evoke in the imagination of white voters the violent and corrupting grafting together of naturally distinct bodies.³¹ For the Democrats, this included the alliance of white and black men in the Readjuster Party. The 1881 address of the Conservative State Executive Committee, for example, denounced Readjuster efforts to “hybridize” Virginia. The *Richmond Dispatch* built on this rhetorical foundation when it linked and equated racially mixed political and sexual alliance, as it described the “active amalgamation and miscegenation of the Mahoneites and the Republicans” in the spring of 1881.³² The *Lynchburg Advance* joined the fun when it decried “the tendency . . . to political mongrelism” in Virginia, and a Democratic stump speaker, J. Randolph Tucker, insisted in September that the Readjuster Party was “a hybrid, the product of a vile miscegenation.”³³ If the coalition had a face, it was mulatto.

Democratic references to Readjuster hybridity and miscegenation stigmatized coalitionists as enemies of white supremacy and also branded them as practitioners of “unnatural” political, and perhaps sexual, liaisons. This was not the first time that the word “amalgamation” was used as a double entendre in regard to the politics of race: rumors of amalgamation and lechery among abolitionists were published by the proslavery press in the antebellum era in an attempt to discredit the antislavery cause.³⁴ During the campaign of 1883 Democrats put another phrase with a past into play. In a frontal assault on Readjusters’ masculinity (which constituted, in part, an attack on their fitness to exercise political rights), Democrats denounced Mahone and other Readjusters as “political hermaphrodites.”³⁵ In case anyone had missed the point, John Warwick Daniel, the finest political orator in Virginia and Mahone’s eventual replacement in the U.S. Senate, put the matter succinctly in 1883. Daniel was a Democrat, he explained, “because he was a white man.” Readjusters, he implied, were neither white nor men.³⁶

The language heard on the hustings in Virginia between 1881 and 1883 was not unusual for the postemancipation South. Anyone who advocated interracial alliance of any sort—whether a political party or a labor union—opened himself up to charges of being labeled a gender-neutral “white negro,” as a North Carolina Democrat put it in

1866. In the 1880s North Carolina Democrats argued that whites who joined the Republican Party surrendered their racial status. When the Knights of Labor succeeded nonetheless in organizing across the color line and entered politics as a third party, the Democrats poured forth their usual arsenal of race-based abuse. Complained one white Knight of his Democratic opponents, "They pointed at us with scorn and kept crying 'Nigger! Nigger!' until the two words 'nigger' and Knight became almost synonymous terms."³⁷ A decade later South Carolina Democrat Ben Tillman defined race in terms of political behavior. Referring to those who had supported interracial fusion politics in his state, Tillman recalled that the coalition "had some people of white skin, but I . . . consider that a man with a white skin who consorts with negroes, hugs and kisses them to get votes, is not a genuine white man."³⁸

What is significant about the deployment of this gendered rhetoric of race and politics in Readjuster Virginia is its differential success rate. Cries of "negro domination" did not prevent the coalition from organizing in 1879 or hinder its growth and success in 1881 and 1882. In the election of 1883, however, such language gained greater purchase with white voters. The Democrats' basic rhetorical building blocks remained the same between 1879 and 1883, but the social and political context for this language changed. The assertion by black Virginians of their status as civic equals and white concern about the erosion of race privilege evolved dialectically, with constant reference to each other.

In 1883 African American assertions of civic equality and customary notions of white racial privilege collided in a telling way. In mid-October William M. Flannagan, a candidate for the Virginia legislature, knocked a political opponent from a platform during a debate in Richmond. The next day Flannagan, by now at home in Powhatan County, received a telegram from the man he had struck challenging him to a duel. Although its delivery by telegram departed from tradition (representing a modernization of convention if not content), the challenge to mortal combat resulted from a familiar overstepping of partisanship to an assault on masculine honor when Flannagan punched his opponent in the nose.³⁹

The man who had been attacked on the political dais, and who demanded satisfaction from Flannagan, was black. By issuing "the first

challenge to mortal combat on the field of honor between a white man and a colored man in Virginia," this African American Readjuster made a series of elegant assertions about his equality, his manhood, his liberty, his literacy, his possession of a weapon, and his honor. Every one of these rights and qualities had been categorically denied him before emancipation. Indeed, his former subordination and legal and social inferiority were the very foundation of the code of honor he now appropriated.⁴⁰

Although prohibited by law, dueling enjoyed a brief vogue in Readjuster Virginia. This fact is noteworthy in itself, for dueling was never as popular in antebellum Virginia as in the Deep South and Gulf Coast states; only two duels were fought in Virginia in the first fourteen years after Appomattox.⁴¹ During the four years of Readjuster rule, however, six duels were fought, and several others—as in Flannagan's case—were avoided by a combination of publicity and police action. Each of the six duels involved prominent white coalitionists who were determined to keep their social claim to honor after public attacks on their integrity. In asserting their claim to honor, white Readjusters also reiterated the relationship between honor and race. Most white Readjusters continued to associate honor with whiteness and saw an attack on one as involving the other. Congressman John S. Wise, *Richmond Whig* editor William C. Elam, Supreme Court of Appeals judge Lunsford L. Lewis, and U.S. senator Harrison Holt Riddleberger all fought duels in the early 1880s.⁴²

William Mahone managed to avoid becoming involved in a duel, although he came close twice. In 1879 a contest between Mahone and former governor James Lawson Kemper was narrowly averted after Kemper backtracked from an attack on Mahone's honesty. Of greater interest is Mahone's refusal to duel with longtime irritant General Jubal A. Early in 1881. After Early denounced Mahone during the legislative campaign as "a miserable coward and a base liar"—a more formulaic call for a duel is hardly imaginable—Mahone refused to consider the challenge, claiming that Early "could give me no satisfaction."⁴³ In dismissing his former colleague in arms as an unworthy challenger, Mahone evoked the cultural understanding of dueling as something done between equals to deny this status to Early.⁴⁴

In 1882 and 1883 Virginia Democrats matched their physical and verbal assaults on white Readjusters with social ostracism. William

Royall, a leading debt payer, urged social death and economic ruin on Readjusters by “all decent white people,” and a Brunswick County Readjuster reported that funder leaders had exhorted local Democrats to shun Readjusters.⁴⁵ Across Virginia, Democratic merchants called in chits, Democratic landlords threatened to raise rents or turn tenants off land, and Democratic churchmen boycotted Sunday school classes taught by Readjusters.⁴⁶ The possibility of severed lines of credit in a largely agricultural society was an enormous threat to the economic viability of families, and unless balanced by Readjuster patronage positions could easily result in lost votes for the coalition. In some cities, small businessmen who voted Readjuster were boycotted and urban workingmen lost their jobs. In December 1883 a physician who desired a patronage position explained that all his Democratic patients had left him since he joined the Readjusters. Earlier that year white workingmen in Lynchburg worried about finding jobs had asked Mahone to erect a public building in their city to reassure working people that “they will not be permitted to suffer should they be denied work because they work & vote according to their own convictions.”⁴⁷

Such a line of argument may have exaggerated Democratic repression in order to jump the patronage line. But the Democrats’ social and economic shots often hit their target. By becoming a Readjuster a man could spoil his own or his daughter’s marriage prospects, disrupt his wife’s social life, and splinter his church. One Readjuster wrote Mahone that “Funders have been heard to say that they would not allow a Readjuster to enter their houses.” The woebegone author of this letter added that he had felt compelled to resign as vestryman of his church, a position he had held for seventeen years, because all the other vestrymen were funders.⁴⁸ A Prince George County correspondent complained that families who had pledged to contribute to the building of a church backed out when they discovered that it was being built by Readjusters.⁴⁹ Stressing the disapprobation of his family and neighbors, one unemployed young Readjuster precinct worker wrote to Governor Cameron in 1882 that “I stood alone at my precinct when I was the only white person who had the courage to stand up & fight for the rights of the People. My brother & kinsfolk were against me. I have been threatened with political ostracism & cannot obtain a position on that account.”⁵⁰ A Readjuster vote could even result in the loss of filial piety. In an excess of emotional blackmail M. B. Nesbitt, a Democratic precinct leader, was said to be “guilty of telling his parents that if they

voted the readjuster ticket he would not visit them when sick[. T]here seems to be nothing to mean for this man to do to gain a political advantage.”⁵¹

In addition to turning their backs on their white Readjuster friends and neighbors, Virginia Democrats raised the possibility that the color line, as well as the social line, could be breached. In 1883 the Democratic press warned in increasingly shrill tones that whites who cooperated with the coalition would become black by association. In an attempt to realign the political and racial divide during the spring and fall elections of 1883, the Democrats presented “black” as socially constructed and encouraged white voters to consider how their actions could affect racial boundaries. Articles circulated in the *Alexandria Gazette* intimated that white men who voted the Readjuster ticket would henceforth be classed with blacks. This was certainly the point of the young Dinwiddie County Democrat who equated coalition with miscegenation when he told an older white Readjuster that “all white men who voted for the Readjuster candidate ought to be made to associate with & sleep with negroes.”⁵² The intent of the Democrats in 1883 was to read Readjusters out of the category of white man.

Anthony M. Keiley, Richmond’s energetic Democratic leader and future mayor, distinctly articulated this white supremacist strategy. In a bid to woo back white Readjuster voters, Keiley asserted the primacy of the race issue over all others. While stressing the commonality of whiteness, Keiley exposed its social, political, and economic worth. “There are other things even more valuable to me personally than the right of creditors,” he wrote. “I do not own a State bond, and never owned one. But if I owned [a] thousand I would regard my interest in the supremacy of the white people vastly more valuable than my interest in the public securities. And to secure that, if I had to let go my hold on either, I would drop the interest of the creditors without a sigh.” In the interest of white supremacy, this prominent Virginia Democrat alerted New York and Washington, debt repudiation would henceforth be regarded as a dead issue.⁵³

Throughout the summer and fall of 1883, Readjusters across the state reported that local Democrats were depicting the coming election as a choice between “white government or negro” and equating whiteness with the Democratic Party.⁵⁴ Democrats went door-to-door asking potential white voters, “‘Are you going to vote with the whites, or niggers, this time?’”⁵⁵ Exposing the connections between racial

and gender identity in the postwar South, Readjusters in Spotsylvania County accused of voting against their race were faulted as well as for failing to live up to the standards of white manhood by voting against the interests of their wives and children. The threat of being rhetorically or socially reconfigured as black compelled some Readjusters to assert their whiteness against Democratic charges of race treason and transformation. "We are all white in Wise County, but Readjusters nevertheless," one local Readjuster assured Mahone. "[I]n every speech I made," a Blacksburg Readjuster explained later, "I adopted this policy—that we were as white as they, that if a real race issue came that we would be formed side by side with our white people."⁵⁶

Two events—the integration of the Richmond School Board and the shooting in Danville—seemed to call for a definitive decision about racial alliances and identification on the part of white Readjusters. The replacement of the Petersburg School Board in 1882 had passed without controversy. But Governor Cameron's decision to supplant the Richmond board set off a firestorm of white supremacist rhetoric. This reflected in part the differences in political makeup of the two cities: black-majority Petersburg, the hometown of both Cameron and William Mahone, was controlled locally by the coalition. White-majority Richmond, on the other hand, remained decidedly Democratic, despite a strong Readjuster organization among white and black workingmen. In addition to reflecting demographic and political patterns, the response of Richmond's Democratic leadership also represented a more widespread concern among white Virginians about the reallocation of state resources from whites to blacks and the ways in which such reapportionment could corrode white dominance. As one white newspaper put it during the Richmond School Board controversy, if Readjuster patronage policies continued on course, soon black Virginians would demand representation on school boards equal to their numbers in school districts. Then, "once in control of the school funds he [the black superintendent] will not recognize the fact that a teacher of a higher grade is demanded for the white school than the colored school, or that more money should be expended in one direction than another."⁵⁷ Black education and black suffrage and office-holding endangered white supremacy, and southern whites and blacks knew it.

Democratic electoral candidates and the Democratic press in Virginia used the integration of the Richmond School Board to make

concrete previously abstract rhetoric about "Negro domination" of whites under the Readjusters. This rhetoric was reported to have been effective in some county elections in the spring of 1883. From Culpeper County came the news that a Colonel Gibson would sweep the white vote in the fall because he "is opposed to mixed schools, Negro Trustees or Negro managers where white children are going." W. E. Talley of Hanover County lost his race for magistrate, he said, because the Democrats "got up a hard lie to defeat me. They said I was in favor of mixed schools." This was a common Democratic tactic that prompted numerous speeches and handbills of denial by white Readjusters. But the new, integrated Richmond School Board was only the most recent and sensational investiture of black Readjusters. Generalizing from the narrow issue of the school board decision to the broader question of African American social and political power under the Readjusters, Thomas H. Cross of South Quay put matters squarely in a letter to Mahone. Cross was running for sheriff, and the voters of his district objected to his plan to appoint a black man, Jordan Thompson, as a deputy. "They say," Cross reported, "the Readjuster party has too much niggers in it for them."⁵⁸

The integrated school board in Richmond was a convenient lightning rod for white dissatisfaction with the redistribution of state resources under Readjuster rule. But this was an old critique of the coalition and one that it was experienced at repelling. More ominously for the future of the third party, the Democrats interpreted the new school board as a direct threat to white racial purity. The *Lynchburg News* thundered that a vote for the coalition in 1883 was a vote for mixed schools then and mixed marriages in the future. The *Staunton Spectator* left nothing to the imagination, warning in sexually charged language against "submission to the wishes of the negro," and argued that it was but a short distance from mixed school boards to the time when "every other form of an abhorrent social equality will stare us in the face."⁵⁹

The most immediately recognizable form of such "abhorrent social equality" was mixed-race children, whom the Democrats considered a direct threat to white racial identity. Insisting that the Readjusters intended to integrate schools and repeal the law forbidding racial intermarriage in Virginia, one Democratic paper made the extravagant claim that soon "everything will look like Africa."⁶⁰ Extending the language of pollution and corporeality to politics, Democratic news-

papers argued that the Readjuster coalition corrupted the white body politic and warned that the integrity of white Readjusters' racial identity was compromised by political alliance with black men. While the *Staunton Spectator* contented itself with raising issues of purity and contact when it worried about the effects of white Readjusters' "touching elbows right and left" with their black coalition partners, former Readjuster John Massey posed the question of outright racial transformation through political alliance. Massey understood why a black man might want to be a white man, but he could not comprehend the reverse; on election day he wondered "how many white men in Lynchburg will go back on their race and make negroes of themselves today."⁶¹ Massey was not alone in posing this question. The *Abingdon Virginian* put the matter crudely but unmistakably when it editorialized, "If you would skin a Mahoneite, you would find a black hide under a white skin!"⁶²

The theme of racial transformation through politics evident in John Massey's question and the *Abingdon Virginian's* biopsy found its echo in the Democrats' 1883 campaign song, "This Way, Freeman!" In addition to alluding to old equations between race and freedom, the tune's lyrics argued explicitly the case for racial disinheritance (or, alternately, redemption) through political action:

Ho, this way, freemen! If ye will not heed,
Then never call yourselves Virginians more;
For men will mark you as some mongrel breed,
Unworthy of the name your fathers wore.⁶³

If the prospect of severing oneself from generations of white Virginians past was not traumatic enough to white Readjusters, the Democratic press anthropomorphized white-black political coalition and speculated about the relationship between political alliance and racial identity for the sons of white Readjusters. In September the *Lynchburg Advance* reported the following story: "Little Ambrose, son of Major R. W. Page, had heard persons talking about coalition, white and black, etc. A few days ago he fell down the steps and broke his arm. Before the bandages were on his arm it had become discolored by the bruised blood. The little fellow, with tears streaming down his face, appealed to his father, 'Is it going to be a coalition arm?'"⁶⁴

Little Ambrose's purported anxiety that his arm might be transformed into "a coalition arm"—that a political alliance of one genera-

tion could be revealed in the flesh of its sons—raised fears about the future of Virginia and mirrored the concerns of many white Readjuster voters. We should not misunderstand these concerns: white Virginians did not expect to wake up one morning looking any different. Rather, corporeality was used metaphorically: the boundaries of the body were used to represent other boundaries that were threatened or appeared precarious.⁶⁵ In the case of coalition rule, the boundary that seemed to many white men to be threatened was that of whiteness itself. When they asked how many "white" men would "make niggers of themselves" by allying politically with African Americans, the Democrats revealed that racial identity in Virginia was neither static nor superficial.

As white Virginians weighed Democratic arguments about the relationship between political behavior, race, and individual identity, the city of Danville exploded into violence. As we saw in Chapter 4, more than manners was at stake in the public confrontations between whites and blacks that led to the bloodshed. In contesting the rules of civility, black Virginians challenged a primary social interaction through which racial identity was claimed and performed. In insisting on uniform standards of public behavior, African Americans denied white privilege and struck at both the boundaries of whiteness and the assumptions and purposes of racial categorization. The meaning of whiteness, as both Justice Benjamin Watkins Lacy and W. E. B. Du Bois understood, lay mainly in the privileges accorded it. Strip whiteness of privilege and its meaning and boundaries became unclear. This is what the Democrats meant when they accused the Readjusters of corrupting whiteness through interracial government. Insisting that "white men in Danville were being forced to walk in blood to assert their rights," Virginia Democrats turned the 1883 election into a referendum on black rule and white racial identity.⁶⁶

White voters were not caught entirely unawares by the violence in Danville, as the Democrats had already made tensions there a subject of the fall campaign through the medium of the Danville Circular. Before the shooting, coalitionists generally managed to rebut the circular.⁶⁷ Readjuster Party workers in the Valley and mountain counties displayed in their store windows testimonials from Danville residents who denied the claims of the circular and used their extensive rural network of local precinct workers and postal employees to pass informational flyers from hand to hand. As late as Halloween, the Readjusters were lighthearted in their attempts to downplay Democratic

arguments about the elimination of racial boundaries and privileges under coalition rule. In a speech in Roanoke that appears to have backfired, Governor Cameron even teased the crowd, saying, "I understand there are white people here who are afraid that their daughters will have negro babies."⁶⁸

But the coalition failed to factor in the organizational strength of the Democrats. Under the leadership of new party chairman John Strode Barbour, a railroad magnate like Mahone, the Democrats finally had a party machine that rivaled the Readjusters'. Cameron's "negro babies" speech was broadcast across the state. In stoutly Readjuster Tazewell County, Democrats circulated a printed script of the governor's reported remarks, and prominent Readjuster Richard F. Walker complained that Democrats in Richmond had distributed "lying handbills about 'Cameron and the white ladies of the State.'" Most Readjusters insisted that the speech had been misrepresented; others tried to shrug off the story by claiming that Cameron had been drunk on the podium.⁶⁹

The new Democratic organization also came in handy for publicizing and misrepresenting the violence in Danville. Although it appears that the Democrats did not plan the Danville Riot, they nevertheless used it to their advantage in the election. Democratic presses worked overtime on Sunday, November 4, to print flyers declaring that Danville was currently in a state of race war as a result of coalition policies. These circulars were distributed throughout the state by train and horseback.⁷⁰ A circular entitled "War Declared between the Races" was distributed in Patrick County the night before the election, and Botetourt County was the recipient of a flyer screaming "WHAT COALITION RULE MEANS! The People of Danville Sustain the Accounts Heretofore Given of the Condition of Affairs There! A BLOODY ROW IN DANVILLE! Democrats! Save the State from a War of Races!"⁷¹ By the time election day dawned the following Tuesday, the news that whites and blacks were fighting to the death in Danville had been nailed to half the trees in Virginia.

The news of the shooting in Danville, including the false claim that the violence had been precipitated by blacks, sent a shiver up the collective spine of white Virginia. Rumors of black violence exploited deep-seated anxieties of white Virginians and called on memories of slave insurrections and postemancipation insurrectionary scares.⁷² Now as then, white Democrats stoked and manipulated this fear of

African American violence to alter the political balance of power in Virginia. In some counties, the combination of the Danville Circular and reports of the violence convinced white voters to desert the Readjuster Party. A coalition leader in Amelia County reported that the Democrats' portrayal of themselves as "the white man's party" coupled with "the fraudulent Danville circular and their false representations as to the 'Danville Massacre' had the effect of making many of our men, who were either weak or timid, vote with the Funders or remain away from the polls." From Abingdon came the news that "the Danville circular and massacre frightened a number of our timid friends, especially among the Tunkers [Dunkers] and Mennonite religious societies. These people being non-combatants would take no part in an election out of which they were made to believe a war was to come."⁷³

The violence in Danville also checked the black vote in Pittsylvania County and adjacent areas. Black voters there feared that if they went to the polls, they would be fired on by Democrats. William Powell, a black Readjuster in Danville, stated succinctly black men's reasons for not voting, testifying later that "while we were attached to our party, we were afraid to risk our lives for the right of suffrage."⁷⁴ Democratic scare tactics did not always work as intended, however. Although the party's drawing of the color line secured it "many white cowards who had heretofore voted with the Readjuster party" in Essex County in the east, the same tactics enraged black voters and assisted the coalition "in polling a much larger colored vote than usual." And though white Readjusters in Abingdon "deserted, like rats from a sinking ship," J. H. Ballard reported, the town's black Republican Readjusters "stood to their guns like men — [I] never saw them more determined, or united." Robert W. Hughes, a federal judge and a longtime political ally of Mahone, concurred: "Almost throughout the state, they [black Readjusters] voted fully the usual strength, and with a quiet and manly courage and unanimity that I cannot but admire."⁷⁵

Heavy turnout by black voters could not overcome the state's white majority, however, and the Readjusters lost control of Virginia. White voters newly enfranchised by the separation of the school tax from the suffrage, a Readjuster reform implemented for the first time in this election, flocked to the Democratic banner of white solidarity. The formerly Readjuster mountain counties that had been the target of the Danville Circular went Democratic. In the mountain southwest, the coalition vote declined from over 60 percent in 1882 to 48 percent in

1883.⁷⁶ One white Readjuster compared the hysteria whipped up by the Democrats in 1883 to that of the New York City draft riots twenty years earlier. According to this correspondent, “men shaking with fear threw away the Coalition Ticket. They came to vote, and rallied under the Bourbon cry against the ‘Nigger party.’”⁷⁷ The Readjusters’ loss at the state level was a blow not only to the interracial coalition but also to the national Republicans, who had counted on Virginia’s electoral votes to offset expected Democratic gains in Ohio, New York, and Pennsylvania in the 1884 presidential election.⁷⁸

Historians of the Readjuster movement have uniformly attributed the coalition’s defeat in 1883 to “race antagonism” leavened to a greater or lesser degree by charges of Democratic fraud and intimidation and by local Readjusters’ resentment of William Mahone’s autocratic style of leadership. But in treating “the race issue” as static and unchanging, scholars have missed the fluidity of racial identity and the process of its formation.⁷⁹ On the day of the election, wrote a Richmond Readjuster, “[a] certain class of ignorant white men . . . feared they would be classed by funders with Negroes unless they voted the funder ticket” and felt that “nothing but a funder vote could distinguish them from ‘Niggers.’”⁸⁰ When they voted Democratic, “a certain class of ignorant white men” in Virginia—the tenor of our source suggests that this class was closer to the bottom than to the top of the economic ladder—believed that they were reclaiming their whiteness. Through the action of distancing themselves from the interracial coalition, white men asserted their racial identity and laid claim to its attendant privileges.

Black Virginians appear to have understood both the competitive and the strategic qualities of racial definition. In December 1882 the *Richmond Star*, the city’s foremost African American paper, editorialized on the arbitrariness of racial categories in a story about disputed racial identity in the North. The children of Mason Brown had been excluded from the white public schools of Cedarville, Ohio, in 1880 on the grounds that they were black. Two years later the children were “declared to be white by the courts” and admitted to the white school. “That is very much like the work of the foolish prejudice against color,” commented the *Star*. “It will make black white or white black as the case may be, if thereby it can effect its end.”⁸¹

Much remains to be done to document and decode the ways in which it was possible to “make black white or white black” in the post-

emancipation South. To begin, we must take seriously the fears of white men that they endangered their own identity as “white” by allying politically with African Americans.⁸² Whiteness had to be *maintained* in the postwar South; white people in Virginia could, it seems, jeopardize their racial status through a variety of actions. In 1881, to give one final example, the *Marion Conservative Democrat* carried a story that exemplified the ways in which an action could alienate a person’s racial identity. That spring a white girl who had worked as a servant for an African American family quit her job and returned to the local white public school. Claiming that the girl had “lost caste” through her dependent relationship with African Americans, the other children protested her attendance and then boycotted the school until the school board barred the girl as “colored.”⁸³

Rhetoric about the precariousness of racial identity, rhetoric that made plain the relationship between racial identity and economic and political actions, was always available to be put into play politically. Such stories as the one about the “white” girl ostracized by her peers did not galvanize political opposition to the Readjusters in 1881. In 1883, similar language did. Neither the definition of whiteness at law nor white racial mores had changed. The Readjusters had left alone the legislative definition of whiteness, as articulated in Virginia’s anti-miscegenation law. But Readjuster political and patronage practices had invigorated white supremacist rhetoric, and made people more receptive to its claims, by undermining the customary privileges of whiteness. As many whites in Danville, Petersburg, and Richmond were only too happy to explain, coalition government in Virginia ate away at important props of white supremacy. By leaving untouched the state’s articulation of the genealogical foundation of racial identity, the Readjusters failed to challenge the construct of “race” outright. But through their support of black voting rights, officeholding, jury duty, and political leadership the coalition challenged Democratic notions of the value of whiteness. This was, as people recognized at the time, a threat to white privilege: in a world where identity is constructed in the everyday interactions between people, it is possible, even easy, to be misapprehended and reclassified.

One architect of the Democrats’ 1883 white supremacy campaign soon had occasion to know just how much his whiteness was worth and how his own social alliances affected the value of that asset. After serving as mayor of Richmond in the newly Democratic Virginia, An-

thony Keiley, a Catholic, was appointed ambassador to Austria under President Grover Cleveland. To Keiley's consternation, Vienna protested this appointment on the grounds that Keiley's wife, the former Rebecca Davis, was Jewish. According to the Austrians, "the position of a foreign envoy wedded to a Jewess by civil marriage would be untenable and even impossible in Vienna." Keiley's name was withdrawn, but not before the almost-ambassador denounced his fate in terms that Du Bois could barely have improved. "It is proclaimed that in the official regard of Austria," Keiley expostulated, "Hebrew blood brands us with a leprosy, not only excluding all tainted with it from high honor at Austria's hands, but . . . so fatal indeed, that even a marriage connection with it by a citizen of whatever blood or belief, unfits him for the representation of a foreign and friendly power at this imperial and royal court." As Keiley and others had argued to such purpose in the 1883 Virginia campaign, there was more to whiteness than met the eye.⁸⁴

EPILOGUE

The Voice of the People

What lessons can we draw from the defeat of the Readjusters in 1883? Certainly the potency of race as a political issue cannot be denied. As one Richmond party leader concluded in December of that year, "There is no doubt that every issue was absorbed in the one issue, [the] Race issue."¹ But as this quotation makes clear, race was never experienced independently of other social relationships. It was always in flux, always connected with the articulation of other social categories. As I have tried to show throughout this book, the implications of race become clear only when they are anchored in specific political, cultural, and economic circumstances. Whether in the post office, on the sidewalk, or in the schoolroom, white and black Virginians worked out the meaning of "race" in local encounters.

Grounding racial rhetoric in everyday experience ought to help us avoid treating race as the most transcendent of all social categories. In many ways, the master narrative of postemancipation southern history is true: the cry of "Nigger!" was (and is) always a potent cry in the South. But recognizing this tells us nothing about how race functioned politically in the postwar South. The power of racial rhetoric and the divisiveness of racial politics derived from the everyday experiences of individual white and black southerners, not from any essential political meaning of "race." Of course, to say this is also to say that the example of Readjuster Virginia cannot be paradigmatic; it cannot (nor can anywhere else) stand as "the most southern place on earth."² Every southern state had its experience of black-white political coalition after emancipation, and each community can in some sense be said to have inscribed its own particular history of racism. But