

Martin Luther King, Jr., later called the "thingification" of white supremacy.¹⁷⁰ By walking hundreds of miles to protest humiliation and testifying publicly about physical and sexual abuse, African Americans—mostly women—reclaimed their bodies and demanded the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

The legal and moral victory over white supremacy in Montgomery gave African Americans around the country a sense of hope for the future, an inspirational and powerful figurehead in Martin Luther King, Jr., and an organizing model—nonviolent direct action, which they hoped to use throughout the South to dismantle Jim Crow. Segregationists intent on thwarting black advances launched their own war to retain their position of power in the South. A swirling storm of white resistance had been gathering since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. As African Americans in Montgomery returned to the buses and some Southern schools took baby steps toward compliance with the *Brown* decision; the "massive resistance" movement thundered through the South. Drawing on whites' deepest fears about integration and interracial sexuality, Citizens' Council members and other die-hard segregationists used economic intimidation, sexualized violence, and terror to derail desegregation and destroy the developing black freedom movement. Between the Montgomery bus boycott and the student sit-in movement in 1960, African Americans hoping to re-create the Montgomery experience faced the forces of Jim Crow, sparking some of the fiercest battles for manhood and womanhood of the modern civil rights movement.

CHAPTER 4

"There's Open Season on Negroes Now"

THE SEVENTH-GRADE TEACHER AT Dunbar Junior High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, dismissed her students early on May 17, 1954. News of the historic Supreme Court decision striking down segregation in public schools had just hit the airwaves, and she feared a violent white response. As students streamed out of the all-black school, she urged them to "pay attention to where you're walking. Walk in groups, don't walk alone." "Hurry," she added. Melba Patillo, a twelve-year-old African-American student at Dunbar, wondered what all the fuss was about. Still, Melba was happy to have the afternoon free. She gathered her books and started on the route she had taken home for nearly six years. According to her autobiography, published several decades later, she meandered through a grassy stretch of blooming persimmon trees and daydreamed about becoming a movie star and moving to New York or California.

The sound of rustling leaves snapped her back to reality. She stopped and listened carefully, straining to see through the thick flora. Suddenly a deep voice sliced through the brush. "You want



Melba Patillo

a ride, girl?" She could not see anyone. Then it came again. "Want a ride?"

"Who is it?" she asked nervously.

"I got candy in the car," a man's gravelly voice sang out. "Lots of candy." Patillo inched forward and saw a burly white man coming toward her. She turned and fled in the opposite direction, screaming for help and running as fast as her black-and-white saddle shoes could carry her. "You better come and take a ride home," he growled. "You hear me, girl?"¹

He was a "huge" man, Patillo recalled later, built "like a wrestler." He chased Patillo through the wooded path, screaming about "niggers wanting to go to school with his children and how he wasn't going to stand for it." Suddenly Patillo tripped on her shoelaces and fell. As she struggled to stand, he grabbed her shoulders, thrust her to the ground, and flipped her over on her back. "He slapped me hard across the face," she said in her memoir, then pinned her down and began fumbling with his belt buckle.² "I'll show you niggers the Supreme Court can't run my life," he said as he reached under Patillo's dress and ripped off her underwear. In her account, she scrambled out from underneath him and started to run.³

Melba Patillo arrived home, shaken and disheveled. She told her grandmother that a white man attempted to rape her. Patillo's grandmother, who loved to garden and read Shakespeare and Langston Hughes, listened and then quietly shuttled Melba to the bathroom and started a bath. "You soak a while, child. When the water goes down the drain, it will take all that white man's evil with it."⁴ Melba sat in the tub for what seemed like hours, listening to the muffled voices of her parents and grandmother arguing about whether they should call the police. When she finally emerged, her family encouraged her not to feel ashamed about the attack. Her father, Howell Patillo, an enormous man who worked as a hostler's assistant on the Missouri Pacific Railroad, reached for Melba and pulled her close. "We ain't gonna call the law," he said.

⌀ "Those white police are liable to do something worse to her than what already happened."⁵ Survival sometimes required that silence surround sexual violence, especially in an environment poisoned by the fierce backlash to *Brown*. Eventually Melba would tell her story of the struggle in Little Rock for students across the country, but silence was not the only choice. Between 1956 and 1959, sex and sexual violence sat at the center of the freedom struggle, and African Americans deployed different strategies to carry the movement through a crucial and difficult transition, including testimony, armed self-defense, and international pressure.

In the decade before *Brown*, African Americans in Little Rock, Arkansas, and throughout the South had testified openly about white attacks on black women. In the 1940s, for example, Daisy Bates, the acclaimed freedom fighter and leader of the Little Rock Nine, used the power of the *Arkansas State Press*, the newspaper she and her husband, L. C. Bates, owned, to call attention to the long history of white-on-black rape. Like Rosa Parks, Bates was a militant activist long before she orchestrated a showdown between Governor Orval Faubus and the federal government over the integration of Central High School in 1957. Her newspaper became a

thorn in the sides of Little Rock's white and black leaders, whom she pilloried regularly for failing to remedy the injustices of Jim Crow, especially police brutality and the abuse of black women. For Bates, rape was not just a political and legal issue that required state and community action, it was personal.

When Daisy Bates was just seven years old, three white men brutally raped and murdered her mother. Bates's father blamed the attack on the "timeworn lust of the white man." She was "not the kind to submit," he explained to his daughter, "so they took her."⁶ Overwhelmed by guilt and pain, he abandoned Daisy at a young age. She vowed revenge. "Young as I was, strange as it may seem," Daisy Bates wrote in her memoir years later, "my



Daisy and L. C. Bates and two police investigators examine a Ku Klux Klan cross left in their front yard in October 1956. Bates and her husband were targets of the Klan years before the Little Rock crisis began because of their vocal support for equality and justice for African-American rape victims in their newspaper, the *Arkansas State Press*.

life now had a secret goal—to find the men who had done this horrible thing to my mother." The whole ordeal left her feeling like a "little sapling, which, after a violent storm, puts out only gnarled and twisted branches."⁷ When she became older, Bates decided to transform her hatred and anger into positive action and "make it count for something."⁸ Over time the "little sapling" became a towering oak: Bates became a fierce freedom fighter and leader of the Little Rock NAACP and in 1952 president of the Arkansas State Conference of NAACP branches.⁹ activism

As an outspoken advocate for African Americans, Bates, like Rosa Parks, became known as the go-to person for victims of racial and sexual violence in Little Rock. She listened to them and scribbled notes, then placed their stories on the front page of her newspaper. The *State Press* became Bates's personal bullhorn, which she used to amplify demands for justice and voting rights and call for an end to the wanton sexual abuse of black women. Banner headlines between 1941 and 1955 made the crime public, helped to mobilize the black community, and alerted white officials that crimes against black women would not go unnoticed. For example, on July 17, 1942, the *State Press* published photographs of two white Little Rock police officers who raped Rosa Lee Cherry, a nineteen-year-old African-American student at Dunbar High School. Daisy Bates even printed a transcript of Cherry's grand jury testimony. This helped secure public support for an indictment. Bates then argued that a conviction was necessary to save the "great state of Arkansas." Although the white policemen walked free after their case ended in a mistrial, Bates's vigilance on the Cherry case and others like it made it impossible for white authorities to ignore crimes against African-American women.¹⁰ Her outspoken attacks on rape and other forms of sexualized violence helped secure trials and, in some instances, even rare convictions of white assailants who attacked black women in Arkansas during the 1940s and early 1950s.¹¹

By 1954, however, a veil of secrecy had descended among African-American activists. In the years after *Brown*, more than

half a million people opposed to integration and dedicated to white supremacy joined organizations like the White Citizens' Councils, the Ku Klux Klan, and the American States Rights Association, and launched an all-out war against the burgeoning freedom struggle. Death threats and dynamite blasts shook civil rights advocates across the region. The Patillos understood that the swirling storm of resistance that segregationists unleashed after *Brown* made silence about sexual violence a political imperative.

Segregationist leaders throughout the South urged "massive resistance" to *Brown*. They recruited supporters by denigrating the "traitorous" Supreme Court, while exploiting whites' fears about integration and interracial sexuality. *U.S. News & World Report* announced that many white Southerners opposed *Brown* because they feared "eventual amalgamation of the races—meaning miscegenation, intermarriage or whatever you want to call it." Judge Leander Perez, a political heavyweight in Louisiana, told supporters that the goal of integration was "miscegenation." "You make a Negro believe he is equal to the white people," he said, "and the first thing he wants is a white woman. And that's why there are so many criminal assaults and rapes." In a pamphlet titled *You and Segregation*, Georgia senator Herman Talmadge argued that the Almighty "Advocates Segregation," and warned that the "ultimate aim and goal of NAACP leaders . . . is the complete intermingling of the races in housing, schools, churches, public parks, public swimming pools and even in marriage."¹² The *Brown* decision, he said, was "judicial tyranny" and "the greatest single blow ever . . . struck against constitutional government." "Resistance to tyranny," Mississippi senator James O. Eastland told white supporters, "is obedience to God."¹³ Walter Givhan, an Alabama state senator and ardent supporter of the White Citizens' Council, argued that desegregation was simply a ruse to "open the bedroom doors of our white women to Negro men."¹⁴

Demagoguery of "miscegenation" fanned followers' fears to red-hot rage. Most did not explicitly advocate violence, but their



Alabama state senator Samuel Englehardt, Jr., an ardent segregationist and member of the White Citizens' Council, promotes a "white only" anti-integration rally.

extremist rhetoric undoubtedly encouraged it.¹⁵ Some politicians could not hold back. "A few killings now," a Mississippi legislator boasted, could "save a lot of bloodshed then." At a massive Citizens' Council rally in Alabama, Senator Eastland cheered on the white mob that blocked Autherine Lucy, an African-American woman, from attending the University of Alabama in February 1956. He praised them for not letting the "NAACP run your schools." Southern whites, he told the audience, were "obligated to defy" *Brown*.¹⁶ When some whites responded by launching campaigns of violence and terror, many of those legislators stood silent, offering tacit approval while protecting themselves from blame.

Other political leaders fully supported the White Citizens' Council and its goals but worried that violence could hurt the segregationists' cause. J. P. Coleman, the pragmatic governor who led Mississippi between 1956 and 1960, feared that defiance of federal law would hurt the state's standing in the national Democratic Party or provoke federal intervention. Coleman hoped to achieve the same goals as Eastland and other radicals through what he

called "practical segregation."¹⁷ He pushed for the creation of a state agency that would mirror the FBI's investigative prowess and function as a public relations bureau. His goal was to "keep racial conflict out of the press while quietly and effectively managing the state's fight against integration."¹⁸ Coleman tested the effectiveness of the newly formed State Sovereignty Commission in May 1956, when four white men from Tylertown, a small village in the Piney section of Mississippi, kidnapped a young black woman on the eve of her wedding and gang-raped her.

It was just before dawn on May 13, 1956—Mother's Day—when Ernest Dillon, a twenty-nine-year-old siding salesman; his brother Ollie, a middle-aged construction worker; and Olen and Durora Duncan, twenty-one-year-old cousins, went looking for "some colored women." Wielding a shotgun, Ernest Dillon approached Stennis Butler, a thirty-year-old black sharecropper who was outside preparing for the day's work. Dillon ordered him to take him and his friends to a home with black women inside. Annette Butler, a sixteen-year-old high school student, was in bed with her mother when she heard someone pounding on the front door of their two-bedroom home. Ernest Dillon introduced himself as a policeman. "You're under arrest," he said to the girl, for "sacking up with your boyfriend." When her mother objected, Dillon raised the shotgun, grabbed the teenager, and pulled her outside. He kept the shotgun trained on the girl's mother as his brother pushed her into the backseat of the car. Olen Duncan revved the engine and drove away, leaving Butler's mother alone in the front yard.¹⁹

The four white men drove Butler deep into the Bogue Chitto swamp, where they took turns raping her. Olen Duncan threatened to "cut her neck off" if she resisted. "I followed his instructions," she testified at the trial. When they finished, the four white men piled into the car and left. Annette stranded in the woods. Wandering through the swamp half naked, she stumbled upon a group of black fishermen and ran to them for help. They led

her out of the woods and delivered her to the police. Sheriff A. E. (Bill) Andrews took her complaint and then drove her home to get dressed.²⁰ Later that day Sheriff Andrews brought Olen Duncan in for questioning, and he willingly signed a statement testifying that he had had "intimate relations" with Annette Butler. "It was done with every safeguard for the right of the defendant," Sheriff Andrews said, "after [Duncan] had been repeatedly advised that anything he might say could be used against him."²¹ A few days later District Attorney Michael Carr charged all four men with "forcible ravishment and kidnap" and sent them to the Magnolia jail to await trial.²²

Judge Tom Brady, a fierce white supremacist and one of the fathers of the White Citizens' Councils, presided over four separate trials in Pike County Circuit Court four months after the attack. The assailants must have wondered what kind of punishment Brady would impose since his public pronouncements against interracial mixing were already legendary. *Time* magazine called Brady the "prophet" of segregation and his manifesto, *Black Monday*, the "Bible of the White Citizens' Council movement."²³ When confronted with real interracial mixing and actual rapists, not the fictional black rapists he saw lurking behind every school-desegregation case, Brady buckled under the weight of his own racial prejudices. He appointed the "finest lawyers in Mississippi" to defend the four white assailants.²⁴

Ernest Dillon may not have understood Brady's gesture, since he pleaded guilty on March 26, 1957, to the lesser charge of "assault with intent to rape." It was a risky plea that left his co-conspirators vulnerable. On the other hand, the plea bargain released him from trial and from the threat of the death penalty or life imprisonment—the state's only punishments for rape.²⁵ It also freed the jurors from having to declare a white man guilty of raping a black woman and defused any complaints of unequal justice or outside criticism of the state. It is likely that Dillon believed he would receive a minor sentence or even a suspended

sentence. Politically, the plea deal worked for everyone—except, of course, Annette Butler.

On April 4 Olen Duncan, described by the *McComb Enterprise Journal* as a “slender man with facial skin paled to a dead white,” surprised the packed courtroom by pleading not guilty despite his previously signed admission.²⁶ His declaration of innocence fueled a day of intense testimony. Annette Butler took the stand and provided what the newspaper called “lurid details” of the attack. She easily identified Duncan as the driver and told the jury he was the second man to rape her.

In an effort to portray Butler as a prostitute or at least a juvenile delinquent, Duncan's attorneys grilled her about her whereabouts the night before the attack. Butler told the jury that she had accompanied her mother and cousin to a juke joint called Willie's Penthouse and stayed out past midnight. Defense attorneys then called George W. Wingo, a local white man, to testify about the “general reputation” of Butler. “It is not good,” he said without hesitation. They did not bother asking any African Americans about Butler's standing in the community—even though they trotted out a number of white men who testified that Olen Duncan's stature was impressive.²⁷

Michael Carr, the district attorney, urged the jury to consider Duncan's signed confession above all else. The girl submitted to the four men not because she was easy, he argued, but because the assailants “placed [her] in such fear of severe personal injury and for her very life.” Despite Duncan's admission of intercourse and his friend's guilty plea a week earlier, the all-white, all-male jury unanimously acquitted Olen Duncan of rape.²⁸ On April 5, Judge Brady declared a mistrial when Olen's cousin, Durora Duncan, also pleaded not guilty and the jury deadlocked.

News of the acquittal and mistrial infuriated a group of African-American women, who wrote an anonymous letter to the *McComb Enterprise Journal*. They criticized the jurors for acquitting “confessed rapists” and argued that “an alleged ‘bad-reputation’” did not “excuse the criminal act which was committed.” “We

feel that no Negro Woman is safe within the bounds of her own home,” they said, “despite the fact that she is a law-abiding citizen.”²⁹ A group of black ministers made a similar argument in a statement submitted to the newspaper: “It is a dreadful thing to think our widows and their children have no protection, that their homes can be invaded by men of other races and that all the security of democracy is denied them.”³⁰

On April 5, 1957, Judge Brady sentenced Ernest Dillon to twenty years of hard labor. Brady castigated Dillon for bringing “bitter condemnation upon his community and state and the entire South” for attacking Annette Butler. His actions, Judge Brady told Dillon, “will bring further vitriolic attacks on our region from those who hate the South.” Brady then scolded Dillon for integrating and declared him unfit for membership in the white race. “No action could be more in contrast with the beliefs of the segregationist,” he argued. Dillon had the “good fortune,” Brady said, sounding disappointed, “of having able counsel . . . and prosecuting attorneys who were willing to show leniency . . .”³¹ It was a harsh way of telling Dillon that he would be a sacrificial lamb.

The twenty-year sentence was nothing to sneeze at. It was highly unusual, if not unheard of, in the Magnolia State. And yet it served a political purpose. The trials and the lengthy sentence blunted outside criticism of the state's long history of racial terror. White leaders could point to Dillon as proof that Mississippi did not discriminate. At the same time, state senator Mayes McGehee, the chairman of the general legislative investigating committee of the State Sovereignty Commission, argued that the state's rape laws tied the jury's hands—they simply had no choice but to acquit most of the men. “There wasn't necessarily any prejudice involved,” he said. “Whether that had been a white girl involved or a colored girl, a jury is very reluctant to pass a death sentence or life imprisonment for that charge upon a man.” The sheriff, the district attorney, and the county attorney, McGehee added, “made every possible effort to get a conviction in that case.”³² Oliver Emmerich, the editor of the *McComb Enterprise Journal*, echoed

McGehee's sentiments and argued that the people of Mississippi think "such crimes are repugnant." "As with all heinous crimes," he said, "it leaves broken, bleeding hearts in its wake." "The world must know, and our people must know," he argued, "that the law enforcement officers of this area were alert and dutiful and that the evidence was taken on the spot, without delay, and to the credit of the people of Pike and Walthall Counties and Mississippi as well."³³ By giving Dillon twenty years, Judge Brady and the Sovereignty Commission sent a message: even the most vehement segregationists still believed in law and order.

Except when they didn't. The lengthy jail sentence did not stop whites from terrorizing blacks in Mississippi or elsewhere. Citizens' Council members, Klansmen, and their ilk harassed African Americans over the phone, on the streets, and in public places. Hate mail peppered black activists, and threatening calls kept their phones ringing through the night. Rosa Parks, for example, constantly received calls from angry whites who yelled "Die, nigger!" whenever she or her husband picked up the phone.³⁴ Like other blacks committed to the freedom struggle, Rosa Parks lost her job and was blacklisted in Montgomery, as were her husband and mother. After an especially vicious death threat in the summer of 1957, Parks called her cousin in Detroit sobbing. "Rosie, get the hell out of Montgomery," he urged. "Raymond's right; Whitey is going to kill you."³⁵

Parks knew that harassment and economic intimidation were not the outer limits of white terror. She packed up her things and moved her family to Detroit in the summer of 1957, just as white vigilantes started bombing black homes, churches, and businesses in Montgomery. Dynamite damaged or destroyed the homes and churches of prominent ministers and bus boycott leaders like Ralph Abernathy, Robert Graetz, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In Birmingham at least twenty-one bombings directed at blacks between 1955 and 1958 turned the "Magic City" into "Bombingham." In small towns and cities throughout the South, white mobs beat and sometimes killed African Americans—especially

those who advocated desegregation or voting rights—with baseball bats, brass knuckles, tire irons, rusty chains, and other implements of torture. In the Mississippi Delta white men murdered three black males in 1955: In May whites murdered the Reverend George Lee for registering voters. In August, Lamar Smith, a sixty-year-old farmer, was killed in broad daylight, apparently for voting in a primary and teaching other blacks how to register.³⁶ Later that month, on August 28, 1955, J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant murdered fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi.

Till, a Chicago native in Mississippi to visit his uncle, Mose Wright, accompanied a group of black teens and children to Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market to purchase candy. Unaware of the strict racial etiquette governing interracial interactions, the black youngster allegedly flirted with Bryant's young wife after purchasing some bubble gum. Four nights later Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam kidnapped Emmett Till, brutally beat him, and then shot him in the head. They tied a metal cotton gin fan around his neck with barbed wire and pushed him into the Tallahatchie River. A fisherman spotted Till's body, and investigators pulled the mutilated corpse from the river three days later. *Jet* magazine printed photos of the gruesome remains, exposing the savage and murderous side of segregation to the nation and the world, and the NAACP launched a national campaign for justice. Still, an all-white jury acquitted Bryant and Milam of murder on September 23. Four months later they admitted guilt to the journalist William Bradford Huie for an article in *Look* magazine. Bryant justified his actions and accused Till of wanting more than bubble gum that August afternoon. "When a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman," Bryant argued, "he's tired o' livin'."³⁷ The response to the article was immediate. "There's open season on the Negroes now," one Mississippi man said. "They've got no protection and any peckerwood who wants can go out and shoot himself one and we'll free him." The NAACP demanded punishment for the shocking deaths. It issued a

pamphlet, titled *M Is for Mississippi and Murder*, to publicize the killings.³⁸

Besides murder, whites also used sexual violence as a weapon of terror—and not always against black women. In Union Springs, Alabama, about forty miles southeast of Montgomery, Klansmen attacked Edward Judge Aaron, a thirty-four-year-old African American, while he and his wife walked along a country road on September 2, 1957. Klan members berated Aaron, known among whites as a “white folks’ nigger,” before they pistol-whipped him. “You think any nigger is as good as a white man? You think nigger kids should go to school with my kids?” they shouted. As the men pummeled Aaron to the ground, one of them managed to tear off Aaron’s pants. Then he flashed a shiny razor blade and grabbed Aaron’s scrotum and pressed the blade into his flesh, severing his testicles.³⁹

The castration of Edward Judge Aaron vividly illustrated white fears that Brown would unleash the black beast rapist of Reconstruction lore. The fear was so great that an unsubstantiated rumor or an innocent glance, a misconstrued gesture or an informal greeting between a black man and a white woman, could end in murder. In Montgomery, for example, a group of Klansmen heard a vague rumor that a black truck driver was intimately involved with a white woman. On a cold January night in 1957, three dedicated Klan members randomly attacked Willie Edwards, Jr., a delivery truck driver who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Klansmen walked Edwards to the edge of a bridge that stretched across the Alabama River. Edwards swore he was innocent and denied any interest or involvement in an interracial tryst, but his speech fell on deaf ears. The Klansmen forced Edwards to the edge of the bridge and made him jump to his death.⁴⁰

African Americans were not always victims. In Richmond,

Virginia, on July 27, 1956, Rudolph Valentino Henry, a thirty-one-year-old combat veteran, stabbed a white man for harassing his wife. Henry and his wife, Carrie, were walking home from a downtown movie theater when John Morgan, a white city employee, whistled and honked his horn at the couple as they passed in front of his parked car. “Who are you whistling at,” Henry asked. “Don’t you know that’s my wife?”

“I don’t give a damn if it is your wife,” Morgan shot back. “If I want to make a date with her I will.” Morgan reached for what appeared to be a gun, jumped out of the car, and a fight ensued.

“They began to scuffle,” Carrie Henry told the newspaper, “and the white man had a grip on my husband and was getting the best of him.” In order to break loose, she said, her husband “stabbed [Morgan] with a little clasp knife.” “He had to do something,” she insisted. “It was his life or the other man’s.” Finally Morgan backed off and turned and walked away. “We thought he was going to get some help,” Henry said, “so we ran across the parking lot and went home . . . We didn’t know that he was dead until we read about it in the papers.”⁴¹

The murder may have been a mistake, but the clash between Rudolph Henry and John Morgan was part of a larger struggle that had been brewing all summer. “It happens every night,” Rufus Wells, a writer for the *Richmond Afro-American*, argued in an article titled “Mashers Molest Women, Police Look Other Way.” “After sundown,” Wells said, “certain colored neighborhoods in Richmond become a happy hunting ground for white men on the prowl for illicit romance.” White men in “limousines and Tin Lizzies,” Wells reported, “cruise slowly around the block and leer and whistle” at black women. The bolder ones simply parked their cars and waited, he said, “ready to proposition any woman who chances by.” Wells argued that these “wolves, mashers and sex perverts” roam the streets and assault women with impunity. “They’re getting worse and worse,” an older black woman argued. “One night last week, a car containing three white men drove

slowly past the house three or four times. Finally they parked a few doors away and two of them started toward my house. I got up and went inside and locked the door," she said. "They're getting so they'll snatch you from your own porch."⁴²

She was one of many residents who argued that violence would flare if police refused to protect black women. To be sure, John Morgan was not the first white man to pay a price for "molesting" black women that summer. Local African Americans killed a thirty-one-year-old white man earlier in the summer and severely beat another man in late August for "accosting women in the vicinity." "They [the police] are not going to protect our women," a local black man stated, "so we have to do it ourselves. Every time we catch a man molesting women we try to beat his brains out."⁴³

When Rudolph Valentino Henry stood trial for the "Wolf Whistle" murder of John Morgan in front of an overflowing courtroom on November 10, 1956, he pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter. He did not intend to kill Morgan, he said; he simply tried to defend his wife from attack. Henry's lawyer, Martin A. Martin, a prominent attorney and NAACP leader, placed the case in the long history of white-on-black assault and argued that Henry had a right to protect his family. A white police officer served as the key witness. Detective Sergeant F. S. Wakefield of the Richmond Police Department testified that he had received "numerous complaints of white men molesting colored women in that neighborhood." The judge must have recognized the volatility of the situation and decided to suspend Henry's sentence. "I'm mighty happy to be back," the former vet declared after the judge issued his ruling. "I've been around the world," he said, "but there is no place like home."⁴⁴

The public exposure of Southern white men's proclivity for "night-time integration" did not stop the usual suspects from railing against perceived threats posed by desegregation. Citizens' Councilors and Klansmen busied themselves by educating their progeny and protecting them from the threat of race mixing. Though

their children were not yet afflicted by puberty or the hysterical fear of black men as rapists—what W. J. Cash called the "southern rape complex"—adults seemed to feel it necessary to spell out the unwritten rules of white supremacy.⁴⁵ "The racist," Southern poet and essayist Wendell Berry wrote, "fears that a child's honesty empowered by sex might turn in real and open affection toward members of the oppressed race, and so destroy the myth of that race's inferiority."⁴⁶ They created a pamphlet for young whites called the *Manual for Southerners*, which claimed that "if boys and girls share the school room, lunch room, dances, sports, rest rooms and playgrounds, then the boys and girls will want to date each other." Worse, the booklet warned, "integration always leads the races to marry one another."⁴⁷

Segregationists fought to keep their children insulated in lily-white schools, but they could not control the growing affection for African-American music among their youth. Many whites greeted rock and roll as if it were "a guided missile," as Eldridge Cleaver remembered, "launched from the ghetto into the very heart of suburbia. It succeeded, as politics, religion, and law could never do, in writing in the heart and soul what the Supreme Court could only write on the books."⁴⁸ Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, LaVern Baker, Little Richard, and their interracial bands belted out blues, ballads, and bebop over integrated airwaves, effectively launching a revolution that rattled and roused teenagers and shook up segregationists, who bristled at the idea of their offspring listening to the new "jungle music." Dancing was worse since, in their opinion, it would inevitably lead to race mixing, juvenile delinquency, and sexual immorality.⁴⁹

Because black musicians performed in front of segregated but sold-out crowds of screaming, ecstatic teenagers, it became impossible to maintain a strict color line in the South. As a result, many concerts inadvertently became interracial dance parties, where black and white fans found themselves pressed against one another. For example, in the mid-1950s, black and white teenagers mobbed concerts given by Fats Domino, whose songs "Ain't

That a Shame" and "Blueberry Hill" propelled him to the head of the Top 40 charts. The petrified parents of white teens picketed these concerts with signs that read "Rock and Roll Breeds Integration" and "Ask Your Preacher about Jungle Music."⁵⁰ One worried parent summed up their complaint in a letter to Sam Phillips, the producer and owner of Sun Records, which launched the careers of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Rock and roll, the parent informed Phillips, was "ruining our children. These little kids are falling in love with niggers!"⁵¹ Similar complaints forced many venues to ban interracial dancing. In 1956 the Louisiana legislature outlawed mixed-race dancing entirely.⁵²

Asa Carter, a notorious anti-Semite and racial terrorist who served as head of the North Alabama White Citizens' Council and later became Governor George Wallace's speechwriter, railed against "sensuous Negro music" in his magazine *The Southerner*.⁵³ Rock and roll, he said, appealed to the "base in man" and encouraged "animalism and vulgarity." It was part of an NAACP plan, he warned, to "mongrelize America."⁵⁴ Carter fanned the flames of interracial fear and sexual paranoia around Birmingham in the weeks before Nat "King" Cole was scheduled to give a concert at the Municipal Auditorium on April 10, 1956. He printed pictures of Cole standing next to adoring white females in *The Southerner* above captions like "Cole and His White Women" and "Cole and Your Daughter." In an accompanying article, Carter insinuated that Cole had ulterior motives that any self-respecting segregationist would recognize. "You have seen it," he said, "the fleeting leer, the look that stays an instant longer . . . the savagery."⁵⁵

No one had to stretch his or her imagination to understand what Carter was getting at. Indeed, the whole world witnessed white reaction to the "fleeting leer" when whites murdered Emmett Till in Mississippi the year before. The Till slaying cast a pall over every interracial exchange, but Nat "King" Cole did not expect to be attacked simply for singing his songs, especially in front of a segregated audience. Still, he went out of his way to

remove any hints of sexuality from his show and presented himself as nonthreatening in style and demeanor. When the footlights burst open and illuminated the stage, Nat "King" Cole bounded forward and sailed through two songs. Suddenly, a group of white thugs scurried to the platform, leaped over the footlights, and knocked Cole to the ground. Their goal was to push Cole out of the way and "take control of the microphone and lecture the audience about integration."⁵⁶

While Asa Carter's low-life allies literally attacked Nat "King" Cole, more sophisticated segregationists pressed the issue. James J. Kilpatrick, the elegant and conservative editor of the *Richmond News-Leader*, told James Baldwin that he regarded the Negro writer as a citizen, but that did not mean he wanted Baldwin to marry his daughter. "You're not worried about me marrying *your* daughter," Baldwin shot back. "You're worried about me marrying *your wife's* daughter. I've been marrying *your* daughter since the days of slavery."⁵⁷ Baldwin's comment brilliantly captured the cruel conundrums of interracial sex and sexual violence between white men and black women in the South.

These fears gripped whites in the small town of Monroe, North Carolina, in 1958, when an innocent kissing game between black and white children became front-page news around the world as hysterical adults cried rape and demanded revenge. This single event reinforced Gunnar Myrdal's observation a decade earlier that sex was "the principle around which the whole structure of segregation . . . is organized."⁵⁸ Indeed, the "Kissing Case," as it became known, exposed the power of sex in maintaining the South's racial hierarchy and underscored the extent to which whites would fight to preserve it.

Sissy Sutton, a seven-year-old white girl, and her two friends must not have read the *Manual for Southerners*. If they had, they would have known that playing a kissing game in a ditch on an autumn afternoon with David Ezell "Fuzzy" Simpson and

James Hanover Grissom Thompson, eight- and ten-year-old African-American boys, was strictly prohibited. The three girls had been minding their own business, watching a group of black and white boys play cowboys and Indians on October 28. "At first it was just boys playing," Thompson later recalled. "We was just running through the water with our feet first, acting crazy like kids." Sutton and her friends joined the fun, and after a few boys drifted off toward home, a white boy suggested they play a kissing game.

According to the rules, one of the boys said, each girl would have to sit on a boy's lap and kiss him, "like on TV or in the movies."⁵⁹ Though nobody knows exactly who kissed whom, somebody seems to have kissed somebody.

Sutton told her mother about the game when she returned home that evening. When Mrs. Sutton realized her daughter had actually touched a black boy, she was furious. Hysterical, she called the police and reported that Simpson and Thompson had attempted to rape her little girl. Mr. Sutton grabbed his gun, gathered up some friends, and went searching for the prepubescent assailants. The growing mob of angry men first went to Thompson's home, where they threatened "not only [to] kill the boys but to lynch the mothers." Mrs. Sutton insisted that she "would have killed Hanover myself if I had the chance."⁶⁰

Later that afternoon police officers spotted the boys tugging a red wagon down the street, completely oblivious to the growing mob of men searching for them. The officers jumped out of the car "with their guns drawn," grabbed the boys, and shoved them into the car. "We'll teach you little niggers not to kiss white girls," one of the officers snapped. When they arrived at the jail, Thompson recalled, the policemen "threw us down and then started beating us." They "hit us hard in the chest, call[ed] us all kind of names . . . and talked about how they was going to lynch us." The police put the boys behind bars and held them there for six days as the Klan clamored for blood outside. No one contacted their parents.⁶¹ Even if the police wanted to call the boys' mothers, they

would have had a hard time finding them. Both women had holed up with neighbors after their homes became targets of terrorist attacks. Evelyn Thompson fled after a carload of angry whites sprayed her windows with bullets and masked men burned a cross on her front lawn. The final straw may have been when someone shot the family's dog and left it dead in the front yard.⁶²

News reports of the illicit kissing game hewed closely to the politics and prejudices of the color line. Some white reporters detailed an attempted rape in which one of the boys held Sutton down until the other could extract a kiss or more. White officials argued that the boys were guilty of "molesting three white girls." Even Governor Luther Hodges insisted that Thompson and Simpson "had assaulted" the girls. The *Carolina Times*, on the other hand, a black newspaper, argued that the "crisis in Monroe . . . had nothing to do with assault or delinquency." According to Louis Austin, the editor, the racial hubbub was the product of white angst and shame, and that Thompson and Simpson had not yet learned the "unwritten law of white supremacy" that "white is right and God . . . has made one race of men superior to another." "No one but a bunch of numbskulls," he fumed, "with hearts full of the filthiest kind of dirt would attach any significance to what children of six to ten years of age do at play."⁶³

At a hearing on November 4, 1958, J. Hampton Price, a juvenile court judge, found Hanover Thompson and Fuzzy Simpson guilty of molestation and sentenced them to the Morrison Training School for Negroes in Hoffman, North Carolina, for "indeterminate terms."⁶⁴ The ridiculousness of the charge and the harshness of the sentence, not to mention the fact that Judge Price referred to the boys twice as "niggers," convinced Robert F. Williams, the militant leader of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP, to launch a major publicity campaign. Williams organized the Committee to Combat Racial Injustice (CCRI) with assistance from Conrad Lynn and George Weisman, activists in New York who had connections to the Socialist Workers Party; C. K. Steele, president of the Tallahassee, Florida, NAACP and head of the successful 1956

Tallahassee bus boycott; and Carl Braden, co-founder, with his wife, Anne, of the liberal Southern Conference Education Fund. Their plan was to remove the story from the narrow confines of Monroe, North Carolina, and place it on a world stage, shaming the state and ultimately the entire nation.

It was not difficult to sell the story outside the South. The *London News-Chronicle* gobbled up the "Kissing Case" and prominently placed it on the front page on December 15, 1958. With the paper's circulation of more than one million, the story quickly spread. In Italy newspapers ran sympathetic photos of Thompson and Simpson in juvenile detention on the front page under headlines bemoaning the excessive punishment: "He Will Grow Up in Jail." Similar stories appeared throughout Europe; even the Soviet Union and China ran the story, presenting it as a mockery of American democracy. The CCRI hoped the "lever of worldwide publicity and the fulcrum of Cold War politics would lift them to victory."⁶⁵ At the very least, they knew it would expose the South's growing racial and sexual hysteria. But what they really desired was enough global pressure to prod President Eisenhower or Congress to take action. After two months of negative publicity at home and abroad, Governor Hodges finally issued the order to release Fuzzy Simpson and Hanover Thompson. The two boys reunited with their mothers on February 13, 1959, nearly four months after their arrest.⁶⁶

Domestic racial politics had vexed America's cold warriors for many years, forcing the federal government at times to intervene on behalf of African Americans in order to avoid international embarrassment. For example, when Arkansas governor Orval Faubus activated the National Guard to block nine African-American children, including Melba Patillo, from integrating Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, and then removed them as an angry mob converged on the school, the whole world took notice.⁶⁷ Televised images of well-dressed black children surrounded by

straight-faced soldiers and angry, screaming whites transported Jim Crow into homes around the country and the globe, making Little Rock the "foremost international symbol of American racism."⁶⁸

President Dwight Eisenhower, furious that Faubus had defied both federal law and tolerated, if not encouraged, mob violence in the streets of Little Rock, decided to let the governor know that, as David Halberstam put it, he did not "look kindly on frontal challenges by junior officers."⁶⁹ On September 24, Eisenhower sent one thousand paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock, becoming the first president since Reconstruction to use the military to defend African Americans' constitutional rights. In a televised address that night explaining his decision, Eisenhower told the nation that the Little Rock crisis had threatened America's position in the Cold War. "It would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety of our nation around the world," Eisenhower argued. "Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation. We are portrayed as a violator of those standards of conduct which the peoples of the world unite to proclaim in the charter of the UN."⁷⁰ By the next day the fierce and flinty paratroopers, from the unit that had stood up to the Nazi Wehrmacht and the Chinese People's Liberation Army, stared down the segregationists and escorted Melba Patillo and eight others to class.⁷¹

Federal intervention finally forced Governor Faubus to integrate Central High School, but it did not stop demagogues in Dixie from flirting with secession, passing resolutions of interposition, and terrorizing African Americans. On the contrary, the sight of federal troops on Southern soil fueled massive resistance. That year Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida "nullified" Brown.⁷² Overall, eleven Southern states passed more than 450 acts and resolutions in the decade after the controversial Supreme Court decision in order to maintain "lily-white" schools.⁷³ Southerners' deep-seated fear of interracial sexuality trumped their

enthusiasm for anti-Communism. Not even the threat of international embarrassment stopped some segregationists from enforcing their beliefs and biases with violence and terror. The Southern Regional Council, a liberal organization, reported more than 530 acts of segregationist violence and economic intimidation against African Americans between 1954 and 1959.⁷⁴

Because of this backlash, direct action campaigns like the Montgomery bus boycott waned, prompting the historian Adam Fairclough to call the period between 1956 and 1960 the "fallow years."⁷⁵ Even Martin Luther King, Jr., found himself in a tactical conundrum. "No matter how many cheers he received or how many tear streaked faces assured him that lives were transformed," Taylor Branch notes, "tomorrow's newspapers still read pretty much like today's. Segregation didn't disappear."⁷⁶ The NAACP, legally banned from operation in Alabama and starkly curtailed in Texas and Arkansas, avoided confrontation with white authority and instead sponsored legal cases, which slowly crept through the courts.⁷⁷ The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), created in 1957 to parlay the Montgomery success into a national movement, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a mostly Northern organization formed in 1948 to protest racial segregation, had yet to come up with a strategy that would mobilize the masses. Roy Wilkins, the head of the national NAACP, recognized the threat posed by massive resistance. "The race," Wilkins said, "is in a life and death struggle for all the ground it has won since Reconstruction. Between the ruthlessness of the South and the what-the-hell attitude of the North, we could lose."⁷⁸

Although civil rights organizations confronted increasingly hard sledding in the years after Montgomery, the "fallow period" actually yielded a fertile crop of campaigns. As Montgomery had in the 1940s and 1950s, these struggles focused national attention on sexualized violence toward African Americans and the sexual exploitation of black women at the hands of white men. Reaction

to the *Brown* decision was sexually charged and it unfolded in a Cold War context that confined civil rights movements, yet made "sex cases" especially useful for organizing purposes. Federal sensitivity to world opinion, and the existence of a left-wing media that spotlighted black women's testimony, brought the issue of white-on-black rape to the forefront of the freedom struggle. Indeed, Montgomery, Alabama, and Little Rock, Arkansas, were not the only places in which attacks on black women fueled protests against white supremacy.

Often ignored by historians, a number of these campaigns led to trials and even convictions throughout the South. For perhaps the first time since Reconstruction, Southern black communities could imagine state power being deployed in defense of their safety and respectability as men and women. This was clear in Tallahassee, Florida, where Betty Jean Owens, an African-American college student, stood in front of an all-white jury in 1959 and testified about being kidnapped and gang-raped by four white men. "All eyes," Roy Wilkins argued, "will be upon the state of Florida."⁷⁹