

# GHOSTS OF SEGREGATION

AMERICAN RACISM, HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

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FOREWORD BY **IMANI PERRY**



CELADON  
BOOKS  
NEW YORK

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# TRACES

*“There may be remnants that slip from immediate vision . . . intimate injuries that appear as only faint traces, or deep deformations and differentiations of social geography that go by other names.”*

—ANN LAURA STOLER, “IMPERIAL DEBRIS: REFLECTIONS ON RUINS AND RUINATION”

*In 2014, I moved to Clarksdale, Mississippi, to begin fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation. I was doing what social scientists call an “ethnography,” a detailed study of a culture that requires the researcher—in this case, me—to immerse himself in that culture for a period of time. During my time in Clarksdale, I did most everything that everybody who lived there did. I went to church and the grocery store on Sunday. I found a gym and a barber. I attended community meetings and spent time at the many, many, many blues clubs, festivals, and performance venues around town; since the early 1980s, Clarksdale has turned to hospitality and heritage tourism to bolster its economic profile. I also interviewed longtime and native residents, read everything I could find about the history of the town, and took note of Clarksdale’s landscape. Between the observations, the interviews, the books and archival materials, and the land, I was struck by the ways that the town’s past crept into its present. People would talk, and the past would jump across their faces and tighten their voices. I would read, and it would make sense why the town was known as the home of the blues*

*and why, in recent time, it had turned to the blues for an answer to its economic challenges. I would look at the landscape, and the landscape cried past too. “Traces” is two stories in one. In the first story, I reflect on one of the times I went to the Juke Joint Blues Festival, the biggest event that the town hosts each year. In the second story, I chronicle a brief period in the town’s civil rights history. The two stories are separated by fifty-plus years, the ebbs and flows of the town’s economic profile, and all the other things that make a place change over time. They are tied together by traces of the past left in the land.*

**I went to a big blues festival in Clarksdale, Mississippi, one day in April about ten years ago.** They had it in the historic downtown area, a roughly thirteen-block stretch in the heart of town, bordered to the west by the Sunflower River and to the south by a set of railroad tracks. I did not have a good time while I was there—I am more backyard party and southern soul blues than Clarksdale festival blues—but I did hear a lot of good stories. The mostly white

crowd told them out of their mouths and with the way they tried to move their bodies on the right beat. I listened and laughed with them and with the few Black festivalgoers I saw, and I wrote a lot in my notebook so I wouldn't forget.

I'd come to Clarksdale as a graduate student. I was working on a dissertation that would become my first book, *I Don't Like the Blues*—a book about Black community life and blues tourism in the Mississippi Delta. I was doing what social scientists call an “ethnography,” a detailed study of a place or culture in which the researcher must immerse himself in that place or culture for a period of time, observing daily life, talking to local people, and reading everything from books about the place to old issues of the local newspaper to archival materials. Over time, if you do enough observing, talking, and reading, the stories you see and hear begin to add up, and you come to know a place a little bit. During my time in Clarksdale, stories came from everywhere. Other than ones that the festival-going white folks told

with their mouths and bodies, and the ones I heard from Black folks in their homes, at their jobs, and as we drove or walked from here to there, I found stories embedded in bits and pieces of Clarksdale's landscape—a gravel-filled swimming pool, a set of old railroad tracks, the backdoor entrance of a movie theater. I want to call these bits and pieces “traces,” what remains of what a structure used to be.

A “trace” is not a monument or a landmark—those are structures that were left behind on purpose; they are intended to tell a particular story—but it could be the alleyway entrance of an old theater or a bridge with no bottom:

**Colored Entrance; Tylertown, Mississippi (Page 54).** *You might miss the alleyway entrance to the theater in Tylertown, Mississippi, if you were not looking for it. In some ways, it isn't even there. It has been bricked over and, in terms of the function it used to have, forgotten about. But the trace remains. It is barely visible but there, hold-*

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## **SWIMMING POOL**

Clarksdale, Mississippi

This parking lot across from Oakhurst Academy and the old Clarksdale High School has a history that few recall. It was a town centerpiece for white people, a large public swimming pool reserved exclusively for their enjoyment. In the early 1960s the city built a much smaller public pool in the Black part of town. When civil rights legislation required integration of public facilities, the town council chose instead to have this “white” pool filled with gravel.

*ing the Jim Crow history that we have come to know. It was once the theater's "colored entrance."*

**Sidaway Bridge; Cleveland, Ohio (Page 67).** *If you squint, you might think what remains of the old bridge in Cleveland is a power line, stretching across the sky over the trees. But it isn't. It isn't a bridge anymore either. In 1966, white residents of a nearby neighborhood pulled up the planks and set the bridge on fire to prevent Black children from crossing it to get to school.*

Traces are like fingerprints, I think. They are signs that a particular something was here before but isn't now; and the thing that left them behind does not always know it did. Because of that, there is some truth to traces. They are, as Rich has written of the landscapes in this collection, "more honest than anything we might intentionally present."

Honesty is especially important with difficult histories—the genocide of Indigenous Americans, the enslavement of Black Americans, the internment of Asian Americans, and I could go on—histories that don't fit with the stories that the nation wants to tell about itself. From its inception, the United States declared that "all men are created equal." One of the nation's most decorated presidents, Thomas Jefferson, wrote that "bigotry is the disease of ignorance." People, corporations, and bumper stickers continue to say, "All Lives Matter." But we know from the nation's traces that those things are just not true, which is to say they are not reflected in the historical record. The slave markets and trading posts in Charlottesville (**Slave Auction Site; Charlottesville, Virginia, Page 101**), Charleston, New Orleans, and Natchez were used for what they were used for. "Whites only" means what it means, and "Pomp's

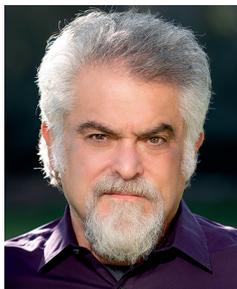
Wall" isn't called Pomp's Wall for nothing (**Pomp's Wall; Medford, Massachusetts, Page 88**).

**By the time I made it to Clarksdale's downtown** area for the big blues festival, the stories that I'd seen and heard had begun to add up; I felt like I knew the place a little. Initially the land of the Choctaw and Chickasaw, Clarksdale was colonized by European settlers in 1848. Less than a decade later, it was home to one of the largest populations of enslaved Black people, and, by extension, one of the most productive cotton economies in the region. I had heard about what it had been like to live in Clarksdale more recently, from the era of sharecropping and tenant farming in the early 1900s to the impact of predatory agricultural policies toward the middle of the twentieth century.

And I had read about the struggle over school desegregation in Clarksdale in the 1960s. Like it was in most public cities and towns across the country, Clarksdale's school district was segregated for much of the twentieth century. Black students attended either W. A. Higgins High School or Coahoma County Agricultural High School, and white students attended Clarksdale High. In 1964, a coalition of local Black organizers filed suit to dismantle the segregated system, demanding that Clarksdale High immediately open its doors to Black students, beginning with twelve-year-old Rebecca Henry. The school district responded with a more gradual plan: admit Black students one grade level at a time, beginning with first graders in 1964 and continuing until the school was fully integrated.

White residents of Clarksdale responded to the desegregation plan the same way that white folks in

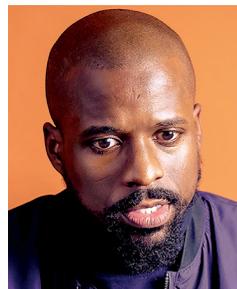
## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Richard Frishman's** photographs explore how the built environment reveals our cultural histories. In 2021, Frishman was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for photography. His current documentary project, *Ghosts of Segregation*, explores the vestiges of racial oppression in the landscape of the United States.

Frishman's photography is included in a wide range of collections, including the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, and the OAS Art Museum of the Americas. His work has garnered numerous awards, including the 2019 Review Santa Fe Curator's Choice Award (juror: Makeda Best), the 2019 PhotoNOLA Portfolio Award, two Sony World Photography Awards (2018), a Communication Arts Photography Award (2018), and a Photo District News Photo Annual Award (2018). In 1983, he was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in feature photography.

He lectures around the United States about the intersection of the designed environment, history, and social issues.



Zaire Love

**B. Brian Foster** is a writer, storyteller, and sociologist from Shannon, Mississippi. He earned his PhD in sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and currently works as an associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. His award-winning book *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black* chronicles Black community life and blues tourism in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Brian has also directed two award-winning short films and written for *Bitter Southerner*, CNN, Delish.com, *Esquire*, the Ford Foundation, *Veranda* magazine, and *The Washington Post*, among others.

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Also by B. Brian Foster

*I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life*



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