GHOSTS OF SEGREGATION

AMERICAN RACISM, HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

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PART 7

GHOSTS

"What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened."

—TONI MORRISON, *BELOVED*

There is an aliveness to the places around us. They are not just the backdrop for what happens in our lives; they are happenings too, impacting us in ways that we may or may not realize. They haunt us. The following is a reflection on all of that and on what I think is the most affecting takeaway of the collection: the history of white supremacy and anti-Black racism is so deeply entrenched in American history that it is everywhere—in the land, in our bodies, and as I say in the essay's concluding lines, in "enduring racial disparities in educational, economic, health, and criminal justice outcomes; in the violence, profiling, and discriminatory treatment that the nation's carceral system subjects on Black people and communities; in gerrymandering and other tactics of Black disenfranchisement; in gaps in access to fresh and affordable food; in gaps in the possibility of dignified and equitable experiences at work and wherever they—We—go; in the meticulously manufactured hysteria surrounding the teaching of histories that are hard and brutal but nevertheless true." A ghost is a history. That sometimes subtle and sometimes unleveling feeling that the nation's racial history evokes is, as Avery Gordon writes, a reminder that "what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us."

Lake Michigan was quiet. Full of nothing but itself, a reflection of the sky, and something too far away to say what it was. Tanya was dancing, her feet moving quietly across the concrete revetment near the water's pastel edge. Ethan was following her with his camera, sometimes close like he was dancing too and sometimes moving away from her and the water. Tanya's husband, Thaddeus, was watching, doing his own dance in the background. He raised his fist and lowered his head until he got ready to do something different. Pound his foot into the concrete. Twist his hips. I was standing to the side watching them and the water, waiting for it all to deliver a word or a line—in that way that places do—that I could add to the script. We were there working on a short film.

There was something else there too, something that had seemed to be hovering over the water all

morning. Something out there that struck something inside of me, a sense of an aliveness that wasn't ours or us. It was like I knew the water from somewhere, like there was a memory of something out there that wasn't quite mine but was still there waiting for me to bump into it again. And I had bumped into it.

By the time I made the trip to Chicago, I had already been thinking about this collection. I had looked over the environments that Rich had captured. I'd studied the photos. I'd read around the histories that set them apart. I had been thinking about the collection's name and guiding idea too, *Ghosts of Segregation*. It sounded like the title of an essay I'd read in graduate school, "The Ghosts of Place," in which sociologist Michael Mayerfeld Bell writes about the "felt experience" of the places where we live our lives, that sense that those places—because of their history or our memories—move us, whether toward happiness, nostalgia, or melancholy. "The scenes we pass through each day," he writes, "are inhabited, possessed, by spirits we cannot see but whose presence we nevertheless experience."

In *Ghostly Matters,* sociologist Avery Gordon also writes about the "invisible forces" that give life to the places around us, that thing separating (and connecting) past from/and present, living from/and not living. Like Rich and Bell, she called these spirits

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CHURCH BENCHES

Notasulga, Alabama

The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the African American was an infamous and unethical clinical study conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the U.S. Public Health Service. The Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church was the first recruitment site for the experiment. On these benches, African American volunteers in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study would wait to have their blood samples drawn by registered nurse Eunice Rivers outside Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Notasulga, Alabama.

Six hundred Macon County Black men began the study: 399 had syphilis, 201 did not. When public outrage ended the study in 1972, only 74 of the test subjects were still alive. Of the original 399 men with syphilis, 28 had died of the disease, 100 died of complications, 40 of the subjects' wives had been infected, and 19 of their children were born with congenital syphilis.

When the study began in 1932, there was no known cure for the disease, only highly toxic arsenic treatments to control the symptoms. In 1943, the newly available antibiotic penicillin proved to be the first effective cure, but treatment was intentionally withheld from ill volunteers, in order to continue tracking the effects of syphilis on the human body.

"ghosts" and added *haunting* to the spring of feelings, like nostalgia or melancholy, that places sometimes bring up in us. Yet Gordon frames ghosts and haunting as more than just generalized ways that we experience place. For her, they are the residue of a particular type of experience—a ghost is a history, and a haunting is us knowing it. "Haunting," she writes, is what you get when "abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security)."

A haunting is a reminder. The subtle flurries we feel. The whirs of grief. The pulsing anger. The whispers of "there is something else here." That is how history reminds us that though we believed her to be dead and gone, she is alive and all around us, in some cases still as she was in years past. Something not *was,* here. That was the message of *Ghosts,* I thought: the environments were the physical remains, the traces and memories, of the abusive system of power relations that white supremacy and anti-Black racism both *have been* and *remain.* They were traces that could touch the tenderest parts of our emotional registers, sometimes in ways too big to describe and sometimes as a subtlety.

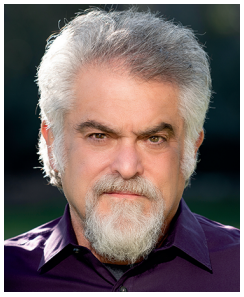
I had seen the quiet waters of Lake Michigan before. They were on page 50 of the photo catalog that Rich had sent to me earlier in the year:

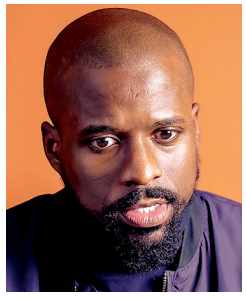
> **Chicago Race Riot Outbreak Site; Chicago, Illinois (Page 250).** *In this one, the lakefront is quiet, and the water is still and flat and the kind of blue that glows a little, even on the page. The city's famous skyline is there. Willis Tower. Metropolitan Tower. Tribune Tower. So is the McCormick Place Convention Center and Arie Crowne Theater; the complex is to the left of the page, glowing like a sleeping something in the trees, overlooking the concrete revetment that seemed to hug the water like it knew it. Unlike most of the photos in the collection, this one has people. Six of them sit, in singles and pairs, on the concrete risers, and a man—he is white with no clothes on—stands near the water's edge, wet like he had just come back.*

What is concrete in the photo used to be, as described by one historical account, "a strip of sand about fifty feet wide and a short block in length." It was a beach, and on July 27, 1919, Eugene Williams, a seventeen-year-old Black boy from the south side, went to that beach with four of his friends. As described by one of the boys, they had ridden north on Wabash Avenue on the back of a produce truck, got off and walked east on Twenty-Sixth Street, then north for a block, then farther east on Twenty-Fifth until they reached the sandy shores.

Like everything else in American life in the early twentieth century—bathrooms, trains, water fountains, waiting rooms, the prospects of earning a living and living free—the boys found the sandy shores surrounding Lake Michigan segregated, something they and everybody knew. The Twenty-Sixth Street Beach and the waters beyond it, where Williams and his friends set out from on a raft that they'd made, was for Black folks. And the Twenty-Ninth Street Beach and its waters, where the raft would be pushed toward by the waves of Lake Michigan, was for white folks. When the boys and their raft crossed

ABOUT THE AUTHORS





Zaire Love

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.

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.

Also by B. Brian Foster

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

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