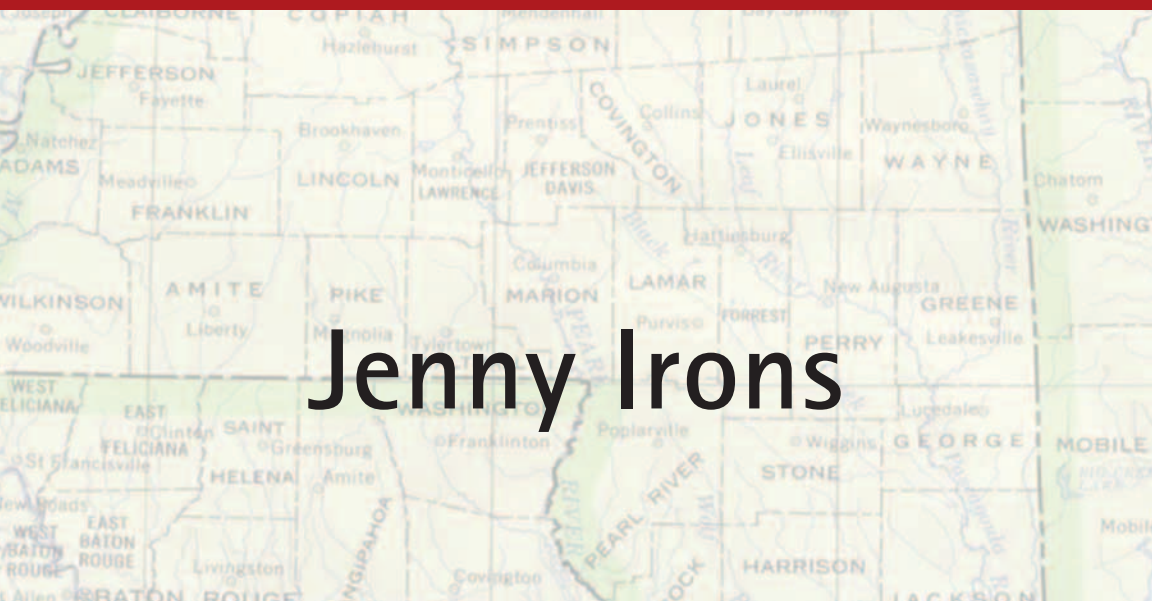




Reconstituting Whiteness

The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission



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Jenny Irons

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*For my parents, Barry and Betty Irons,
and for George*

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK HAS been in the works for far too long. It bears little resemblance to my initial attempt to make sense of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC), and I hope in that regard the intervening years of thinking, reading, and writing have greatly improved that first stab. I was initially drawn to study the organization just after the files were opened in 1998. At the time, I was particularly interested in thinking about the process of racial state formation, and my subsequent focus on white state actors reflects my concern with the question of why racial inequality persists despite change.

My initial interest in the civil rights movement was sparked when I was a student at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, and I have Andy Andrews to thank for that. He remains my academic role model. Andy, George Bey, Ming Tsui, and Frances Coker were amazing professors. Their passion for teaching and their enthusiasm for social scientific research led me to pursue a PhD in sociology and then to search hard for a job at a place just like Millsaps.

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As this manuscript was nearing its final stages, Steve Ellingson and Dan Chambliss offered very useful suggestions on the first few chapters before I approached publishers, especially in terms of trimming the academic jargon. David Cunningham and Andy Andrews offered useful advice, and I am thankful that such smart sociologists were willing to sacrifice their time to read my work. Both David and Andy have been incredibly kind to me in the past few years. I thank Andy in particular for the many ways in which he has helped me—too numerous to count. Lis Clemens also read early drafts of the much revised first couple of chapters. Finally, Jennifer Earl read the entire manuscript and offered thorough and insightful advice. This book has improved in many ways thanks to these folks; the shortcomings that remain are my responsibility alone.

I thank Dan Chambliss for suggesting I send my manuscript to Vanderbilt University Press. Eli Bortz has been a gracious editor to a first-time author, and I have very much enjoyed working with him. I thank him for his patience and for his appreciation of scholarship that bridges disciplines. I also thank the reviewers of the manuscript for suggesting ways to sharpen my argument and highlight the data. Finally, I thank Jessie Hunicutt for her insightful and thoughtful editorial work.

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I thank my family, especially my parents, Barry and Betty Irons. They have always supported me, and I would not be where I am today without them. I also thank my brother and sister, Dan Irons and Mary Margaret Irons, for putting up with me. On my sabbatical trip home to write, my

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Preface

NO SIGNS MARK the old city jail in Philadelphia, Mississippi. In an incongruous use of space, the building appears to have been renovated into two apartments, and you would not know what it once was if someone did not tell you, or if you did not remember. I myself forgot, although it had been a jail in my lifetime. During December 2006 and January 2007, I walked past that building nearly every day with my dog, and I had forgotten what it was until my dad joined us on our walk one day and reminded me.

“That was where they held Schwerner and the others,” he said.

The story is engraved in our nation’s collective memory, but the brutality of the crime warrants a retelling, a reminder of what was lost when a group of white men took the lives of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in 1964. The three men had traveled from Meridian, Mississippi, to Philadelphia to investigate the Ku Klux Klan’s burning of Mt. Zion Methodist Church and the beatings of three church members. While driving through town, they were pulled over by Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price and taken to the Philadelphia City Jail. They were not allowed to make a phone call and were released without explanation after being held for several hours. On their way back to Meridian, Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were driven off the road on Highway 19 by the group of men who would ultimately kill them. Their station wagon was burned, and they were taken to a local white man’s land, where they were shot and buried. Their bodies were found forty-four days later, and local Ku Klux Klan members, including law enforcement officers, have been implicated in their deaths.¹

When Rita Schwerner spoke to the nation while her husband, Michael,

was still missing, she probably knew he was dead. And yet, with steely calm, she pointedly censured the press and the national audience, offering a grim reminder of why Goodman and Schwerner, two very young white men, had come South from the North. If only Chaney had been missing and presumed dead, she argued, no one would have cared, or at least cared as much. Chaney was a very young man as well, but he was black.

Footage of James Chaney's funeral swells with emotion. The packed room is heavy with sadness and grief. But it also surges with anger, expressed through David Dennis's eulogy, which reminds the audience why the crime, revolting in its premeditation, its methodical organization, and its brutality, was not shocking in its occurrence. It was not a lone act perpetrated by an isolated group of men who were entirely shunned by their local communities. It was an act of violence, like so many acts of violence against black men, women, and children before it, committed by white men who were enmeshed in their communities. While the Klan members who killed Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner used extreme means, they were simply defending what most whites in Mississippi proudly called their "way of life."²

Dennis, a leader with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Mississippi, said that he blamed not only the men who pulled the trigger but also the government, from the federal to the state level. He blamed those who felt empathy for the movement and for black people, but who remained silent. In the angry aftermath of the murders, Dennis recognized the widespread complicity of the white community. The local whites who remained silent about their knowledge of the crime, the state that failed to bring charges against the murderers, and anyone who accepted or perpetrated the dismissive explanation that civil rights activists themselves were hiding the men to get attention—all were complicit in creating and maintaining a society that denied the humanity of black Mississippians. Whether through violence, denial, silence, or resistance, such complicity worked to deny black citizens full participation in society and affirm white control of economic, cultural, and political resources.

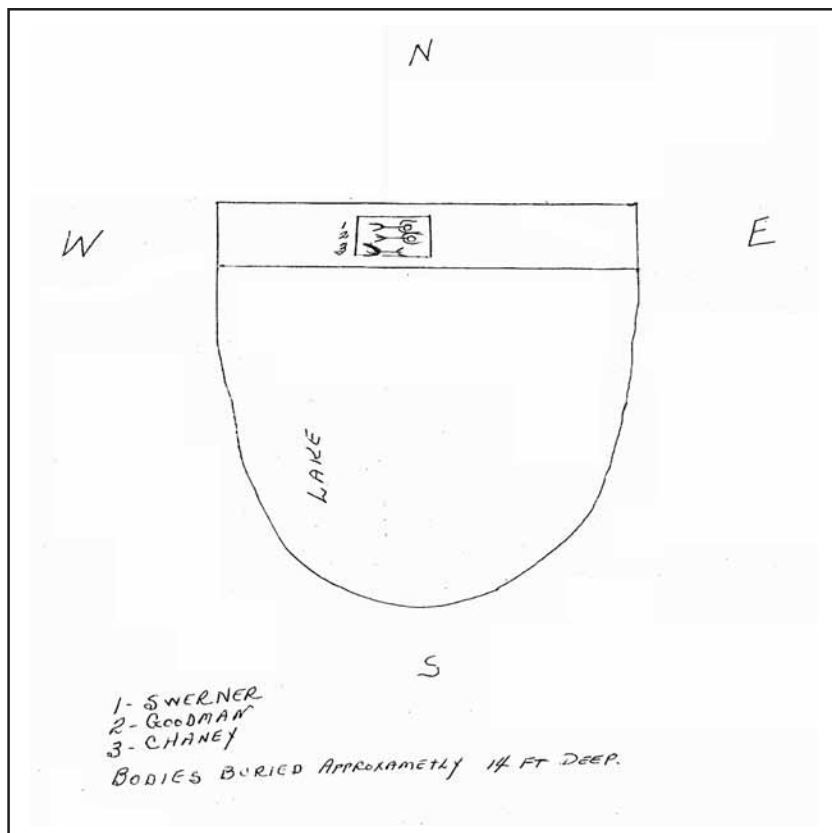
In the decades since, it has come to light that the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC), an agency created by the Mississippi legislature in 1956, was complicit in the deaths of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. The MSSC was largely a public relations and information-gathering agency. Its policy was not to intervene at the county or city level but to make recommendations when asked about how to confront

unwelcome intrusions or challenges. Its policy was also to check into any situation brought to its attention by officials or citizens—typically white but not always—and it often shared information with state and local officials when asked. In this way, information about Michael Schwerner’s license plate was passed along to a state representative in Meridian who had requested the investigation of an “unidentified male” working for CORE in her territory. As the story goes, the representative passed along the information to members of the Klan. Granted, this bit of information may not have been a necessary ingredient in planning the ambush and murders. Klan members involved in the murders were themselves also members of local law enforcement agencies and probably could have identified Schwerner’s vehicle through other means. But the fact remains that the MSSC, an agency of the state of Mississippi, was instrumental in the collection and sharing of identifying information about civil rights workers. While it may not have planned the murders, it was part of the network that led to the crime.

The story of the MSSC’s creation, its work, and its relationships with the Citizens’ Council, business leaders, and the federal government provides insight into the role complicity plays in maintaining racial privilege. It also provides insight into how affirmation and denigration contribute to the construction and reconstruction of whiteness as a racial identity. While the story of this organization has been described by historians, it has not yet been subject to the kind of analysis that yields insight into racial processes. This book examines the MSSC in order to understand the persistence of whiteness—that is, of racial privilege and power—and in turn understand how racial inequality persists despite change.

This book is about how, in their unrelenting, unapologetic defense of segregation and resistance to the civil rights movement, the MSSC and other forces of white backlash fought to uphold whiteness, a racial identity and a position of privilege that was threatened by the changing meaning of blackness and the position of those so classified in American society. As a sociological work, this book begins with the assumption that race is a social construction, a concept that fluctuates in categorization and meaning across time and place. Through institutions and interactions, race is made real, as the sociological dictum goes, in its consequences. This book also recognizes that power is never fixed, but that once attained, it is both resilient and malleable.

Historical and sociological works demonstrate how whiteness came



Investigator A. L. Hopkins's sketch of the location where the bodies of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were uncovered in Neshoba County, August 1964. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History (SCR ID # 2-112-1-50-1-1-1).

to be the dominant racial identity in the Western world and the United States. While whiteness has been contested and its meaning and associated privileges challenged, Ashley Doane notes that it has "exhibited tremendous flexibility in redefining itself and group boundaries in order to maintain a dominant position."³ This book examines the case of state-sponsored white backlash to the civil rights movement to ask how whiteness is repaired and negotiated as a dominant group identity when it is effectively challenged by collective action. In the tradition of the work of sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, this book focuses on the

state, privileging the political as a central realm through which the “terms” of race, to quote Matthew Jacobson, are set.⁴

I WALKED PAST the jail where Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were held because I had gone to Philadelphia, Mississippi, where my parents grew up and now lived, to write for a little more than a month during my sabbatical. I wanted to isolate myself from distraction, but I also wanted to motivate myself to write by returning to the place that led me to study race and the civil rights movement in the first place.

I grew up in Tupelo, Mississippi, and often visited my grandparents and extended family in Philadelphia. I also grew up white, privileged by my skin color and largely unaware of civil rights history and unaffected by the racism that persists not only in Mississippi but also in the United States and around the world. Upon reflection, I also grew up racist. I remember a friend’s mother scolding us in junior high for using racial slurs. I had no idea what she meant. I also recall a time during my junior high years when, if a white friend—and all of the friends I spent social time with were white—asked one of us to do something, we might say, “What color do you think I am?” The rhetorical question usually generated appreciative laughter. We certainly did not think of ourselves as racist; we did not wave confederate flags or act violently toward black schoolmates. Our parents taught us to treat black people with respect and to never use the “n-word.” But we were racist. We were racist in our joking and in our lack of awareness. Admittedly, there are mild forms of racism and extreme forms of racism, but in the United States, they tend to result in the same thing: the privileging of white skin and the devaluing of black skin.

These things are embarrassing to admit as a sociologist who now teaches courses on race, but they are important to admit. I may have become sensitized to race and my home state’s civil rights history in high school, but it was my liberal arts college and the professors there who opened my eyes to critical thought. I learned to step back and really see my world, to ask questions that had been silenced by the normalization of whiteness.

When I started my first year of college, my parents moved back to Philadelphia. Around the same time, my interest in the civil rights movement began to grow. I did not have to look very far to find out about violence and complicity in a white community, and courage and loss in a black community. Certainly, a few whites spoke out against black op-

pression, even in Philadelphia, but that adjective is important: few. The machine of white backlash was so intense that it was nearly impossible for whites to speak up, because speaking up against racism meant the potential loss of a job, a home, even a life. And yet, speaking up meant the same thing for black Mississippians, and speak up they did. They had no privilege, no security to protect.

Thus, the story of the civil rights movement is not just about black Mississippians challenging what being black meant in a recalcitrant, segregated state. It is also about white Mississippians' collective, though not always aligned, defense of what being white meant. While this book is a story of the past and an atypical case, it provides insight into how the meaning of whiteness was changed during the civil rights era, even as continuities remained.

Reconstituting Whiteness

CHAPTER 1

“Nothing to Hide”

Whiteness and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission

ON JUNE 19, 1956, the director of the newly formed Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC), Noy Gore, wrote to U.S. Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois, a member of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on civil rights legislation. The letter was part of a campaign Gore was waging to persuade the subcommittee to visit Mississippi and gain “first hand knowledge of conditions as they actually exist.” On behalf of white Mississippi, Gore fought to counter Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who had testified before the committee about the backlash that black Mississippians experienced when they tried to register to vote. Gore expressed his disbelief that accurate knowledge about his home state “could be obtained from the deliberate misrepresentations of Roy Wilkins and others of his ilk.” Gore boldly concluded, “We have nothing to hide in Mississippi.”¹

Nothing to hide, in 1956, in Mississippi. Months before Gore’s letter was written, two white men earned \$4,000 from *Look* magazine for admitting they had murdered Emmett Till a year earlier, although an all-white jury had acquitted them of the crime.² Black families who had signed petitions to desegregate local schools in 1955 following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision were harassed by local whites and sometimes forced to leave town. Less than 5 percent of the voting-age black population in Mississippi was registered to vote. In 1956, Roy Wilkins brought information to Congress that every black person in Mississippi knew was the truth: if

you tried to register to vote, you were likely not only to fail in your attempt but also to lose your job and possibly your life.

Nearly ten years later, the third director of the MSSC, Erle Johnston, perpetuated the pretense that Mississippi had nothing to hide, albeit in a different way. In May 1965, Johnston, along with the state highway patrol, the FBI, and local officials, responded to reports in Forest, Mississippi, that two crosses had been burned—one in front of a lumber company and one in front of the home of the company's executive vice president and manager. Weeks prior, the company had hired "two colored males for positions formerly held by white personnel." Investigators found a Bible owned by a recently fired white employee by the side of the road in front of the lumber company owner's home, and Johnston noted that arrests would likely be made soon. The flames had been extinguished quickly, and all present agreed that "there would be no publicity on the cross burnings."³ While the commission paid some attention to the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan, the organization mostly turned a blind eye to violent white resistance. If such events were acknowledged in the files, they were intentionally masked from public visibility. If acts of violence became publicly visible, they were characterized as the lone deeds of deviant individuals. In this case, a notable point is that the victim was a white business owner, not a white civil rights activist; thus, he was deemed worthy of state actors' concern. Johnston's efforts in dealing with this cross burning represent the MSSC's frequent involvement in masking incidents that threatened to expose the fiction of the dominant story told about race in Mississippi: segregation was mutually beneficial for blacks and whites alike, and blacks were content to depend on the leadership of morally superior whites.

The claims and actions of MSSC directors and agents, both in public and behind the scenes, maintained this fiction of white superiority in multiple ways. In effect, these men told stories to themselves and to the public about the "racial situation" in Mississippi that articulated the distinction, grounded in the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow, between "blackness" and "whiteness" as natural and unequal. "Blackness" was the inferior category, marked through denigration to affirm the superiority of "whiteness" in multiple ways. This was the Jim Crow version of whiteness, advanced by the state through its members and policies.

Historical studies of whiteness have tended to focus on how the definition of "white" in the United States has changed over time to include or exclude those who sought privileges associated with the racial designa-



Cross burned in the driveway of Forest Industries, May 1965. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History (SCR ID # 2-128-O-32-3-I-I-1).



Cross burned in the driveway of the white executive vice president and manager of Forest Industries, May 1965. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History (SCR ID # 2-128-O-32-5-I-I-1).

tion.⁴ This study, however, focuses on the reconstitution of white privilege, on how the social identity of whiteness was articulated and enacted in ways that sustained the cognitive and cultural elevation of whites as superior to blacks. During the civil rights era, the legitimacy of white privilege was effectively challenged, but scholars of race have documented its resilience, even in an era of color blindness. What, then, are the mechanisms through which it was sustained?

The simple answer to this question is that those people designated “white” have controlled political and economic resources and institutions, enabling them to assert their own racial identity as superior and assign degrees of inferiority to other groups. However, in a democratic nation, particularly one with a nominally successful civil rights movement, this answer is wanting. A fuller answer demands more attention to the nuances of politics and the negotiation of meaning. More pointedly, we must ask how whites, both individually and collectively, maintain a sense of identity that allows them to ignore the realities of racial inequality that systematically privilege whites and disadvantage racial minorities, especially American blacks.

A key historical period for investigation of this question in the United States is the civil rights era. Michael Omi and Howard Winant cite the interplay between states and social movements as the central dynamic in the process of racial formation, and they note that scholars have not fully attended to the implications of white response to the civil rights movement for understanding the persistence of whiteness.⁵ Organizations of state repression do crucial work in the maintenance and reconstruction of dominant group identity, just as movements challenge imposed dominant group assertions about the identities of the marginalized or oppressed groups they represent.⁶ For example, civil rights activists fought for the right of African Americans to vote, but they also challenged what it meant to be black. In so doing, they challenged what it meant to be white, because the material supports that upheld an oppressive, dehumanizing meaning of blackness also upheld a privileged, supremacist meaning of whiteness.⁷ Whites responded to these challenges, sometimes violently. They fought to retain not only their control of societal resources but also their entitled sense of privilege and superiority.

An examination of white state response to the civil rights movement provides an ideal opportunity to theorize how whiteness, as a racial identity and position of power, is achieved. As Amanda Lewis notes, “Race is not something with which we are born; it is something learned and

achieved in interactions and institutions. It is something we live and perform."⁸ This book explores how state actors enacted and achieved whiteness in the face of obvious discrepancies, and then reconstituted that identity even as the rules of the game, and its material supports, were challenged and changed. It argues that the achievement of whiteness through state repression was circumscribed by legitimacy imperatives, or prescriptions and proscriptions for appropriate discourse and action, associated with relationships significant for state action. Recent historical analyses of white backlash have noted that while important changes followed the civil rights movement, including massive black voter registration, the election of black officials, and the desegregation of public schools, continuity was preserved.⁹ While these works provide invaluable insight into the facts of continuity, they do little to explain *how* continuity was preserved despite change.

As the civil rights movement challenged what it meant to be white in the South, state actors were forced to reconstitute the dominant narrative that cognitively and culturally bolstered whiteness as the privileged racial identity. While multiple narratives of whiteness, or any other racial identity, may exist at any given time, state actors and organizations advance the politically dominant content of racial identities (their own and often that of others) that become the basis of institutions, policies, and interactions.¹⁰ During the civil rights era, affirmation and denigration were given form through both discourse and action and were enacted not only to intimidate those who challenged white supremacy but also to maintain a sense of identity and privilege for the dominant group itself. Consider the following examples: White men who committed violence against black children were deemed exceptions, individuals who blemished the state's commitment to law and order; at worst, they were considered justified in their emotionally charged reactions to deliberate provocation. Blacks who tried to register to vote were regarded as uppity, irresponsible, unqualified, or under the influence of communists. Such claims were integral to the enactment of white identity in the civil rights era, and they were given form through white backlash, which often forcibly tried to deny black entrée to public space, politics, and humanity in general. Current research on racial inequality demonstrates that these claims continue to exist in different forms, particularly through the individualization of racism and the valorization of color blindness, suggesting that while the institutions supporting white supremacy collapsed, the cognitive and cultural mecha-

nisms that bolstered whiteness shifted shape to persist into the present day.¹¹

To understand the ways in which state actors reconstituted affirmation and denigration during the civil rights era, we have to understand the relational contexts in which they were embedded. To maintain power, state actors must negotiate rules regarding legitimate discourse and action associated with key relationships at the individual, organizational, and institutional levels. For example, the director of the MSSC was directly answerable to the governor of Mississippi, but he was also often under the influence—whether he liked it or not—of leaders of a powerful segregationist organization, the Citizens' Council. At the organizational level, the MSSC was tied to the Citizens' Council from the state agency's formation to its slow demise in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it also eventually sought alliances with white moderate business groups, although unsuccessfully. Finally, the MSSC was embedded in the institutional context of the federal, democratic state. Each of these relationships, whether imposed from above or intentionally crafted, was associated with legitimacy imperatives, or proscriptions and prescriptions regarding appropriate action and discourse. Thus, an understanding of how whiteness was reconstituted as the dominant group identity depends on understanding how particular relations became more or less relevant to state actors and how they bolstered, fragmented, or undermined the legitimate enactment of affirmation and denigration.

As key relationships that determined the boundaries of legitimate discourse and action were altered, the MSSC began to use new tools in its public discourse. Behind the scenes, dissension arose over the emergence of new strategies, including the suggestion of appeasing some black demands, even as investigators continued to monitor "racial trouble." Further, affirmations of MSSC success and white benevolence and denials of local black participation in organized resistance persisted, despite the fact that the facade of acquiescence by all, including the subordinate group, was presumably unnecessary in documents not intended for public consumption.

The MSSC has been portrayed both as an evil villain of white state backlash against the civil rights movement and as a group of incompetent, bungling wannabe cops. It has been analyzed both as having undergone a significant organizational shift toward moderation and as representing relative political continuity.¹² The MSSC did engage in damaging, consequential activities, but it also amassed volumes of surveillance that com-

posed an incomplete picture of the civil rights movement and an inaccurate assessment of the threats posed by local movement organizing. The MSSC did undergo some organizational change, specifically through one leader's attempt to realign key relationships and implement new discourse and strategies, but for the most part its efforts represented the preservation of continuity in the racial order generally, and in the meaning of whiteness specifically.

The historian Elizabeth Grace Hale writes of southern lynchings as "modern spectacles" that united whites in public ritual. Whether whites participated in the violence or stood as bystanders, they were all complicit, she notes, in the violence.¹³ Examples of such dramatic public displays of power and complicit audiences abound in the southern past, and they all served to affirm the meaning and privileges of whiteness. The MSSC, as an agency of state repression, is best conceptualized as a political spectacle of this sort, a perspective that captures its place in the wider historical terrain of the political construction of whiteness. Thinking of the organization in this way suggests not only that analysis of its discourse and actions is important but also that the organization should be considered as an embodiment of white resistance for the general public. As long as the organization existed, it was a visible reminder that the state was invested in protecting white racial privilege.

Created in 1956, the MSSC was given a substantial budget and broad powers and charged with the protection of state sovereignty. Though the founding document did not mention race, the local segregationist press and politicians heralded the new "segregation watchdog." By no accident, the MSSC's birth followed the growing reach of Citizens' Council chapters across the state. Founded the year before, the council was composed of leading white citizens who used coercive means, often economic, to thwart black challenges to segregation. By the time of the MSSC's formation, the state legislature was reportedly dominated by Citizens' Council members, and a quickly suppressed minority objected to the possibility that the MSSC would be used to further Citizens' Council goals. Once established, the MSSC created a public relations program and began to develop an investigative division; it existed until 1977, when controversy developed over what to do with the organization's massive files. Despite an initial legislative decision to destroy them, the lawmaking body was persuaded to seal the records until 2027. Their earlier-than-expected unveiling in 1998, precipitated by various factors, offered a wealth of data that provide insight into how an organization of state repression negotiated the

defense and preservation of racial power. While the MSSC is an atypical case in one regard—no other organization quite like it has ever been created in the United States—it is also a critical case that presents an unusual opportunity to explore how racial state repression was negotiated both in public and behind the scenes.

Examining the Reconstitution of Whiteness

As an organization, the MSSC represented the state defense of whiteness to the public, a display of white backlash that promised to do everything possible to preserve sovereignty and segregation. Its investigators were race police, white men who were called upon to check into situations that threatened the racial status quo. Board members met monthly to assess the work of the organization, suggest strategies of action, and reassure themselves that the state was doing its job to protect whiteness. The public relations director created and distributed literature and information to counter criticism of Mississippi and segregation and to package race relations in the state as beneficial for all. The director issued reports to the all-white state legislature to show that the organization was deeply engaged in its mission. Money was given by the MSSC to organizations and people deemed useful in the fight against integration. Files were amassed to chronicle organizations and people identified as threatening or potentially threatening to Mississippi's "tranquil" way of life. While all of the MSSC's work was done in the name of preserving segregation and sovereignty, it embodied the achievement of whiteness.

One of the primary values of the MSSC as a historical case is that it provides a record of how repression was negotiated both in public and behind the scenes. Most records of repression focus on the public acts in which states engage to thwart change, for the very reason that we have limited access to often intentionally hidden data.¹⁴ And while some have expressed concerns about the past destruction of more incriminating evidence in the MSSC's case, others feel that the files offer a largely complete record of the agency's work.

To understand how MSSC actors interpreted challenges and deployed strategies, I focus on the discourse of the files. Studies of both change and resistance in the political sphere have increasingly focused on discourse to elaborate social processes.¹⁵ Additionally, studies of whiteness and racism have also established the importance of examining discourse as a cultural