

## INTRODUCTION

### Bill Moore's Body

*I began to suspect that white people did not act as they did because they were white, but for some other reason, and I began to try to locate and understand the reason.* —JAMES BALDWIN

**T**his book argues that public policy and private prejudice work together to create a “possessive investment in whiteness” that is responsible for the racialized hierarchies of our society. I use the term *possessive investment* both literally and figuratively. Whiteness has a cash value: it accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations. I argue that white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity. This whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity.

The term *investment* denotes time spent on a given end, and this book also attempts to explore how social and cultural forces encourage white people to

expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness. Despite intense and frequent disavowal that whiteness means anything at all to those so designated, recent surveys have shown repeatedly that nearly every social choice that white people make about where they live, what schools their children attend, what careers they pursue, and what policies they endorse is shaped by considerations involving race.<sup>1</sup> I use the adjective *possessive* to stress the relationship between whiteness and asset accumulation in our society, to connect attitudes to interests, to demonstrate that white supremacy is usually less a matter of direct, referential, and snarling contempt and more a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility. Whiteness is invested in, like property, but it is also a means of accumulating property and keeping it from others. While one can *possess* one's investments, one can also *be possessed* by them. I contend that the artificial construction of whiteness almost always comes to possess white people themselves unless they develop antiracist identities, unless they disinvest and divest themselves of their investments in white supremacy.

I hope it is clear that opposing whiteness is not the same as opposing white people. White supremacy is an equal opportunity employer; nonwhite people can become active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchies and rewards. One way of becoming an insider is by participating in the exclusion of other outsiders. An individual might even secure a seat on the Supreme Court on this basis. On the other hand, if not every white supremacist is white, it follows that not all white people have to become complicit with white supremacy—that there is an element of choice in all of this. White people always have the option of becoming antiracist, although not enough have done so. We do not choose our color, but we do choose our commitments. We do not choose our parents, but we do choose our politics. Yet we do not make these decisions in a vacuum; they occur within a social structure that gives value to whiteness and offers rewards for racism.

I write this book in response to the crisis that confronts us in regard to race. But as with most books, its origins are complex and complicated. Perhaps the best way I can situate my engagement with the possessive investment in whiteness is by relating my connection to a crime that took place decades ago, when I was a teenager. On April 23, 1963, Bill Moore was shot to death at close range alongside a highway in northern Alabama. The thirty-five-year-old father of three children received two .22 caliber slugs in his head and one in his neck.

When Moore was murdered, he was just beginning a one-man civil rights march from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. A white man

raised in the deep South, Moore had been working as a post office employee in Baltimore. He had been horrified in 1962 by Mississippi governor Ross Barnett's efforts to prevent the desegregation of the University of Mississippi. When a federal court judge had to intervene to order the university to admit a fully qualified twenty-nine-year-old Air Force veteran as its first black student, Barnett countered with a pledge of total resistance, declaring the state's authority to be superior to that of the federal government. President Kennedy sent National Guard troops to Oxford, Mississippi to force compliance with the court's order, but a rioting mob of whites resisted with a rampage that left two people dead and almost four hundred injured.<sup>2</sup>

Distressed by the violence in Mississippi, Moore asked himself what he could do to help. He had recently moved from Binghamton, New York, to Baltimore for the express purpose of becoming active in the front lines of the civil rights movement. Encouraged by the positive publicity surrounding a march on the Maryland state capital organized by the Baltimore chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality earlier that year, Moore decided that he would stage his own one-man march. Playing on his identity as a postal worker, he decided to "deliver a letter" expressing support for integration to Governor Barnett. In his message, Moore advised the Mississippi governor "not to go down in infamy as one who fought the democracy for all which you have not the power to prevent."<sup>3</sup>

Born in upstate New York, Moore moved with his family to Mississippi as a child. As an adult, he continued to express great affection for the South and its people. He felt particularly embarrassed by Mississippi's image as a bastion of white supremacy. "I dislike the reputation this state has acquired as being the most backward and most bigoted in the land," he asserted in his letter to Barnett. "Those who truly love Mississippi must work to change this image." Before starting his journey, Moore left a letter for President Kennedy at the White House advising the president, "I am not making this walk to demonstrate either Federal rights or state rights, but individual rights. I am doing it to illustrate that peaceful protest is not altogether extinguished down there. I hope that I will not have to eat those words."<sup>4</sup>

Moore rode by bus from Washington, D.C., to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he began his march on April 21. Pulling a small two-wheeled postal cart containing his belongings, he wore two placards, sandwich-board style, on his chest and back. One read, "Equal Rights for All: Mississippi or Bust"; the other read, "Black and White: Eat at Joe's." On the first days of his trip a white woman smiled at him and another bought him a milkshake. Most of the whites he encountered, however, and at least one of the blacks, greeted him with jeers

and arguments. In Georgia, one group of young white males shouted threats at Moore from a passing car. Another group pelted the postman with rocks and stones. A news broadcaster for Gadsden, Alabama, radio station WGAD later reported that the station had received an anonymous telephone call hours before the shooting reporting Moore's entrance into Etowah County, advising that "there might be a news story of consequence."<sup>5</sup> Moore walked through Gadsden on the afternoon of April 23; a passing motorist discovered his body that night on the pavement of U.S. Highway 11 near Attalia, about ten miles from Gadsden. The sandwich board signs, stained with blood, lay a few feet from his body. Investigators found fifty-one dollars in Moore's pocket and a diary among his possessions. An entry for April 23 noted that he had been confronted by two men who had learned about his walk from television news reports and warned him that he would not finish the march alive. In a final entry he wrote that "a couple of men who had talked to me before, drove up and questioned my religious and political beliefs and one was sure I'd be killed for them."<sup>6</sup>

Even George Wallace, Alabama's notorious segregationist governor, publicly condemned the shooting as "a dastardly act," offering a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Moore's assailant.<sup>7</sup> Alabama authorities filed charges almost immediately against the operator of a store and filling station near Fort Payne, Alabama. They charged Floyd L. Simpson, who had been seen speaking with Moore on the day of the murder, with killing William L. Moore "unlawfully and with malice aforethought."<sup>8</sup> An FBI ballistics test on the bullets found in Moore's body and on a .22 caliber rifle belonging to Simpson led to the arrest. The case was referred to a grand jury, and Simpson was released on \$5,000 bond. Outside the glare of national publicity, however, the grand jury deliberated slowly. In mid-September, the jury announced its refusal to indict Simpson—or anyone—for Moore's murder. The results of the ballistics tests were not made public. Grand jury foreman Robert Tinsley explained that several witnesses had been called, but he refused to explain why no indictment was issued.<sup>9</sup>

In the meantime, civil rights activists responded immediately to Moore's murder. An integrated group of more than one hundred students in Nashville, Tennessee, marched from the chapel at historically black Fisk University to the city's Federal Building. They carried signs proclaiming "Moore Died for Love. Let's Live and Act in Love" and "William Moore. Who Will Be Next?"<sup>10</sup> Diane Nash Bevel led a delegation of eight black civil rights workers from Birmingham to Gadsden to take up the letter carrier's march at the spot where he was killed.

Not sponsored by any organized civil rights group, the eight participants in the march told reporters that “they hoped to prove that a person preaching love of his fellow man, as Mr. Moore had, could walk safely though Alabama.”<sup>11</sup> Members of the group intended to walk all the way to Jackson, and were encouraged during the first hour of their march when they received positive comments from white spectators along their route. But Etowah County Sheriff’s Office deputies soon arrested all eight marchers, charging them with “peace disturbance.”

One week later, civil rights advocates announced another attempt to resume Bill Moore’s march. Marvin Rich, community relations director for the Congress of Racial Equality, explained from the group’s national headquarters in New York, “This is to give the people of Alabama and America another chance. William Moore traveled through this country to express his hopes for equality and justice and he died. This was a failure for the people of Alabama and the people of America.”<sup>12</sup> When the group of six white and six black demonstrators started their walk from the Greyhound Bus Station in Chattanooga, bystanders taunted them and threatened them with violence. “Hope you stop a .22,” one white man shouted to the group, in reference to the bullets that killed Bill Moore. On the second day of the marchers’ journey, a convoy of cars filled with whites chased them across the Alabama–Tennessee border, screaming threats and throwing rocks and bottles. Members of the mob yelled “Throw them niggers in the river” and “Kill them.” Officers of the Alabama Highway Patrol met the march at the state line and arrested the civil rights demonstrators for “breach of peace,” manhandling them and attacking them repeatedly with electric-shock cattle prods as they lay on the pavement in nonviolent protest. From their cells in the Kilby State Prison in Montgomery, the arrested demonstrators announced that they would not accept bail. They explained that they intended to remain incarcerated as a way of calling attention to the assault on their rights of free speech and free assembly. They remained in jail for nearly a month.<sup>13</sup>

In mid-May, civil rights groups tried once again to deliver Bill Moore’s letter to Mississippi’s governor. Marchers held a memorial service on the spot where Moore had been killed, but soon Alabama highway patrol officers and Etowah County sheriff’s deputies arrested and jailed the entire delegation of five whites and six blacks for breach of the peace.<sup>14</sup> Later, about thirty African American men, women, and children from a local church joined civil rights workers from around the nation for a memorial service honoring Moore at a roadside park. James Peck, editor of the Congress of Racial Equality’s national newsletter, praised Moore as “a genuine idealist—he worked for brotherhood all his life.” Reverend E. W. Jarrett of Galilee Baptist Church in Gadsden eulogized

Moore as having “died but not in vain.” A twenty-six-year-old white participant in the march, a native of Chattanooga then living in New York, explained, “I have come down here to make amends for the way this thing has been going on for the last 200 years. If Christ was on this earth today, I’m sure he would be killed just like William Moore.”<sup>15</sup>

Bill Moore’s murder made many people feel that they had to act, that it was no longer acceptable to be a spectator in the struggle over civil rights. To be sure, many others claimed that Moore had no one to blame but himself, that he had brought about his own death through provocative actions that he should have known would inflame the anger of white supremacists. A *New York Times* editorial on April 26 condemned the murder, but at the same time described Moore’s march as “a pitifully naive pilgrimage.” An investigator for the Alabama State Police reported that he had spoken with Moore thirty minutes before his death and asked the postman to cancel his march or at least remove his signs. “I warned him about the racial situation in Alabama but he wouldn’t listen,” A. G. McDowell related. “He told me in a very nice way that he wanted to prove something and he couldn’t if he turned back.”<sup>16</sup> U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy withheld the support of the Department of Justice to those attempting to complete Moore’s march, arguing that “perhaps their energies might be better used in a different direction than taking a walk.”<sup>17</sup>

About six weeks after Moore’s murder, Medgar Evers, field secretary for the Mississippi chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), addressed a mass meeting in Jackson, vowing to carry on the struggle against all forms of segregation in that city. When he returned to his home that night, Evers was killed; shot in the back by a sniper. Although his assassin, Byron de la Beckwith, would successfully avoid a conviction for more than thirty years, the brutal repression required to silence people like Moore, Evers, and their supporters exposed the venomous pathology of white supremacy to people across the nation.<sup>18</sup> In Los Angeles and San Francisco, mass rallies protesting the murders of Moore and Evers attracted more than twenty thousand participants.<sup>19</sup> In every region of the country during the summer of 1963, the deaths of Bill Moore and Medgar Evers made people ask themselves what they were prepared to do to about the pervasive presence of white supremacy in their society.

I was one of those people. The bullets that killed Bill Moore changed my life. I remember hearing news reports about his disappearance and death on the old gray radio in my bedroom on the second story of my family’s home in Paterson, New Jersey. I was fifteen years old. The first broadcasts advised that

Moore was missing; the next morning newscasters reported his death. I can still remember the impression that his murder made on me: Moore was a white man murdered by other white men because he opposed white supremacy. I had never encountered a story like that. It made me look into myself and provoked me to think about what I was willing to risk for my own beliefs.

The city that I grew up in was racially diverse, and I had seen enough even at the age of fifteen to realize that good and bad people come in all colors, that both virtue and vice characterize every community. But Bill Moore made me think harder about what it meant for me to be white in a world where the advantages of whiteness were carved out of other people's disadvantages. I knew that those of us in the almost exclusively white neighborhoods on the east side of Paterson lived in better houses and had more money than our classmates in minority or mixed neighborhoods. I did not know then the way residential segregation and home-loan discrimination skewed life chances along racial lines and inhibited opportunities for asset accumulation among members of aggrieved "minority" groups. Yet I did know that my own neighbors included slumlords who failed to provide decent, sanitary, or even safe living conditions for the tenants they gouged, that profits produced by charging high rates for broken-down tenements in slum neighborhoods in other parts of town paid country club dues and college tuition fees for people in my neighborhood.

The murder of Bill Moore opened up new possibilities and personalized the civil rights struggle for me in dramatic ways. For Bill Moore, disapproving of white supremacy in principle wasn't enough; he felt he needed to put his life on the line trying to end it. Bill Moore fought against white racism because he personally found it intolerable, not just because he imagined it might be intolerable for someone else. Certainly I had been aware of many of the black martyrs before him in the civil rights movement whose deaths were equally tragic and dramatic. Over the years many writers have justifiably criticized the dynamics whereby white people like Bill Moore martyred in the civil rights movement have received a disproportionate share of attention compared to the overwhelmingly greater number of black people killed in that struggle. As Rita Schwerner noted when the murder of her husband, Michael, and his fellow civil rights workers James Chaney and Andrew Goodman led to a massive federal investigation and search in Mississippi's rivers and coastal waters for the three victims' missing bodies in 1964, "We all know this search with hundreds of sailors is because Andrew Goodman and my husband are white. If only Chaney was involved, nothing would have been done."<sup>20</sup> Hollywood films, made-for-television movies, and popular books have similarly honored white seminarian

James Reeb who was killed in the battles over desegregation in Alabama in 1965, but not Jimmy Lee Jackson, a black youth murdered in the same struggle. They have chronicled the killing of white civil rights volunteer Viola Liuzzo who was shot to death on the night following the Selma–Montgomery march, but not that of Herbert Lee, a black farmer and voting rights activist shot and killed by a member of the Mississippi state legislature who was never prosecuted for the killing.<sup>21</sup> History textbooks still routinely credit President Lincoln with freeing the slaves and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson with ending segregation, without mentioning the grass roots pressures from people of color that forced those leaders to take the steps that they did.

Hollywood films about the murders of Medgar Evers (*Ghosts of Mississippi*) and Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman (*Mississippi Burning*) have rewritten the historical record by placing white FBI agents and white attorneys at the center of a struggle for social justice that actually depended almost entirely upon the determination and persistence of black people in the face of indifference and even outright hostility among most whites, including those in law enforcement agencies. I hope that my attention to Bill Moore does not contribute to the erasure of black people from the story of their own struggle for emancipation. I have to admit, however, that the murder of Bill Moore did affect me to an unusual degree, even more than the many reports of the deaths of dozens of blacks in the civil rights struggle. It is only fair to ask myself if my own conditioning as a white person did not make me somehow value a white life more than a black life. Yet I also now see how rarely our society produces or even imagines genuinely antiracist white people. To be sure, many whites are embarrassed by the benefits they receive from white supremacy, and other are inconvenienced or even threatened by the resentments it creates. Some view white supremacy as economically wasteful and socially destructive, while others may wish they could live in a society without racial distinctions. Yet individuals like Bill Moore are rare. Few white people are willing to risk their lives in the fight against white supremacy, are eager to join a movement with minority leadership, or are cognizant of the fight as something of urgent import for themselves rather than as a favor done for others.

Our history and our fiction contain all too many accounts of whites acting with unctuous paternalism to protect “helpless” people of color, but very few stories about white people opposing white supremacy on their own. Members of aggrieved racialized groups appear most often as threatening strangers or servile sidekicks in the stories we tell about our past and present, and only rarely as self-active agents operating in their own behalf. The difficulty of imagining



an antiracist white subject is part of what made Bill Moore's story so compelling to me years ago and what makes it resonate for me even today. At the moment I learned of Bill Moore's death, I found myself thinking about commitment as well as color. What would it mean to believe in something so powerfully that you would give your life for it? I thought I understood how Moore felt, how tormented he must have been by the terrible injustices in our society, and by his own inability to do anything meaningful about them. Later I would learn about the dangers of individual action, about the ways in which any one person's intentions—no matter how sincere—need to be coordinated with a collective social movement and connected to carefully thought out strategies and tactics produced by a democratic process that changes individuals and society at the same time. I learned later that Moore had been advised repeatedly against his one-man march by officers of national civil rights organizations, that he had been a mental patient at the Binghamton State Hospital between 1953 and 1955, and that personal desperation as well as social commitment shaped his decision to march on Mississippi and deliver a letter to the governor.<sup>22</sup> Yet I think it would be a mistake to let Bill Moore's human problems and contradictions overshadow the basic idea that he got absolutely right. Like another man often described as mentally ill—John Brown—Bill Moore found white supremacy an abomination even though he was white. He did not imagine himself innocent of the privileges he had received as a result of being white, nor did guilt drive him to seek the approval of those he might have oppressed. He correctly identified white supremacy as a problem he needed to confront, and he took resolute action toward a solution.

Bill Moore's murder was a terrible crime, but culpability for it does not rest solely with the person who fired the shots that killed him. Bill Moore was murdered because too few people had his kind of courage and commitment, because too many white people kept silent about white supremacy even though they knew it was wrong. Today, I think his example remains more relevant than ever, not because dramatic moments of individual heroism will solve our problems, but because white Americans like myself have not yet come to grips with the structural and cultural forces that racialize rights, opportunities, and life chances in our country. Too many of us continue to imagine that we would have supported the civil rights struggles of years ago, when our actions and opinions today conform more closely to the record of that struggle's opponents. We have so demonized the white racists of 1960s Mississippi that we fail to see the ways in which many of their most heinous practices and policies have triumphed in our own day.

At the time of Bill Moore's murder, Mississippi began to emerge as a public symbol of the sickness at the center of race relations in the United States. In some ways the state deserved that reputation. The rioters in Oxford opposing desegregation of their state's university knew that they could count on overt and covert support from Mississippi's elected officials and leading citizens. Antiblack vigilantes operated with impunity throughout the state, burning the homes and churches of civil rights leaders, bombing black-owned businesses, and shooting civil rights workers. A state agency, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, gave covert support to white supremacist groups, including those distributing license plate holders emblazoned with slogans like "Federally Occupied Mississippi, Kennedy's Hungary" and "Most Lied About State in The Union." The Sovereignty Commission helped Byron de la Beckwith escape a conviction for the murder of Medgar Evers by helping the defense screen jury members, and its agents conspired with Klansmen to set up the murders of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman.<sup>23</sup>

In 1964, the challenge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the openly white supremacist state delegation to the Democratic National Convention, coupled with the murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, attracted national and international attention. Magazine articles and best-selling books attempted to diagnose the conditions that gave rise to the state's racial antagonisms, while popular songs by the Chad Mitchell Trio, Phil Ochs, and Nina Simone criticized Mississippi's practices as outside the pale of civilized society. Nightclub and television audiences viewed Mississippi through the bitter and biting satire of black comedians Moms Mabley and Dick Gregory, whose topical humor singled out the state's white supremacist culture for special ridicule and critique.<sup>24</sup> Gregory joked that the state was so racist that "a white moderate in Mississippi is a cat who wants to lynch you from a *low* tree."<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, however, a different side of the state of Mississippi became visible through the actions and ideas of the state's African American residents as they mobilized for change along with a small number of white allies. I remember watching the televised testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer before the Credentials Committee at the 1964 Democratic National Convention as she described her attempts to register to vote as well as the harassment and retaliation she suffered for those efforts. As a warning, local authorities once harassed her with a one-month water bill of \$9,000, threatening to jail her if she did not pay it.<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Hamer was fired from her job, evicted from her home, and beaten by sheriff's deputies, but she continued to fight for freedom. "Is this America, the land of

the free and the home of the brave where we are threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings?" she asked.<sup>27</sup>

In an election supervised by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and open to all voters regardless of race, Mississippi voters had chosen Hamer and her colleagues to represent their state at the convention. The national Democratic Party, however, seated the all-white segregationist delegation of party regulars, many of whom had already pledged to support Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, who campaigned as an opponent of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As I learned later, President Johnson sent liberal senator Hubert Humphrey as his representative to a secret meeting at the convention with members of the MFDP in an attempt to persuade them to drop their demands to be seated as official delegates. Hamer had been eager to meet the senator, whom she had admired because of his reputation as a proponent of civil rights, but she was disappointed to find "a little round-eyed man with his eyes full of tears." When warned by the MFDP attorney, Joseph Raugh, that their effort to be seated at the convention would damage Humphrey's chances for nomination as Johnson's running mate, Hamer asked, "Well, Mr. Humphrey, do you mean to tell me that your position is more important to you than four hundred thousand black people's lives?"<sup>28</sup> Humphrey's inability to answer that question embodied a larger inability among white liberals to distance themselves sufficiently from the possessive investment in whiteness, an inability that plagues them to this day.

At college in St. Louis in 1964, I encountered some Mississippians who had worked with Fannie Lou Hamer and who displayed the same kinds of courage and commitment. Joyce and Dorie Ladner especially impressed me. They had worked almost alone in Natchez, Mississippi, as civil rights organizers in the early 1960s when nearly everyone else was afraid to challenge white supremacy in that section of the state. I heard the Ladner sisters speak at the campus YMCA at meetings organized by civil rights supporters, and their knowledge, tactical insights, and commitment left a lasting impression on me. As Charles Payne shows in his excellent study of the civil rights struggle in Mississippi, people like Fannie Lou Hamer and the Ladner sisters emerged from an entire community that made up for a lack of material resources and political power with an abundance of courage and vision. Their example provided hope and inspiration to many people living in circumstances far different from their own.<sup>29</sup>

With the passage of the 1964 and 1965 civil rights laws, Mississippi's brand of white supremacy was revealed as symptomatic of a much broader psychosis.

Ending *de jure* (by law) segregation in the South did little or nothing to end *de facto* (by fact) segregation in the North. Mississippi, the home of William Faulkner, Chester Himes, and Eudora Welty, of Elvis Presley, Jimmie Rodgers, and Robert Johnson, was not an aberration isolated from the rest of the United States. Although the form differed from state to state and from region to region, the possessive investment in whiteness that poisoned political and private lives in Mississippi was a quintessentially American problem. We discovered that laws guaranteeing the right to eat at a lunch counter did little to correct the elaborate web of discrimination in housing, hiring, and education that left minorities less able to pay for a lunch-counter meal, let alone raise the capital necessary to own a lunch counter. We found that school segregation and unequal education did not end when courts banned “separate but equal” Jim Crow schools, but left intact segregated neighborhoods and school districts. Even the right to vote meant less than we thought when gerrymandering and the high costs of political campaigns left aggrieved minority communities with no one to vote for who would be likely to represent their interests accurately. Those of us who might have been inclined to view white racism as a particularly Southern problem at the time of Bill Moore’s murder soon saw the wisdom in Malcolm X’s observation that as long as you’re south of the Canadian border, you’re in the South.

This book identifies the ways in which power, property, and the politics of race in our society continue to contain unacknowledged and unacceptable allegiances to white supremacy. I write it, in part, to pay the debts I owe to Joyce and Dorie Ladner, to Fannie Lou Hamer, and to many other Mississippians. I want to make it clear that Fannie Lou Hamer’s appeals did not fall on deaf ears and that Bill Moore’s letter can still be delivered after all these years.

Yet I would not be honoring the work of these Mississippians properly if I let it go at that. I now live and work in California, a state where demagogic political leaders and a frightened electorate have repeatedly launched decidedly racist attacks on communities of color. The mendacity and meanness of Governor Pete Wilson, the passage of the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 and the anti-affirmative action Proposition 209, initiatives against bilingual education, and the refusal by legally constituted authorities to enforce laws protecting the civil rights, wages, and working conditions of the people of the state made California in the 1990s the human rights equivalent of Mississippi in the 1960s.

Forty years ago, Californians could afford to view the events transpiring in Mississippi with pity and contempt. California then was a high-wage and high-employment state where taxpayer support provided quality schools and social service programs geared toward bringing chances for upward mobility

to an impressively broad range of its population. The state's political leaders acted with foresight and vision, preparing for the future by speaking honestly and openly with the citizens of their state about the things they needed to do to ensure the common good. Mississippi, on the other hand, used the power of the state to maintain a low-wage, low-employment economy characterized by vivid contrasts between the dire poverty and financial anxiety of most state residents and the monopoly power and luxury lifestyles of a handful of wealthy plutocrats. It trailed most of the other states in educational expenditures per pupil. Its political leaders rarely leveled with citizens, resorting instead to demagogic scapegoating of powerless and nonvoting populations to divide and conquer. As John Dittmer points out in his fine book, *Local People*, one of the intended consequences of racially segmenting the labor force in Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s was to preserve wealth in a few hands by deterring workers from joining together to seek union representation or legislation regulating the conditions of labor.<sup>30</sup>

Today, California has caught up with the Mississippi of 1963. State agencies fail to enforce laws regulating wages, hours, and working conditions, much less bans on discrimination in housing, hiring, and education. The growth of unregulated low-wage labor has launched a race to the bottom that enables wealthy consumers to pay less for foodstuffs and food preparation, for construction and maintenance, for child care and domestic cleaning, while the majority of the population confronts the stagnation and even the decline of its real wages. California now stands near the bottom in state school spending per pupil—in no small measure because most public school students are now members of racial “minorities.” We discover to our sorrow that our elected officials cannot lead us so they lie to us, fomenting hatred against the poor, immigrants, and racial minorities to hide the ways in which their own policies are destroying the economic and social infrastructure of our state. If this book represents an effort to deliver at last the letter that Bill Moore wished to bring to Ross Barnett in 1963, I hope that it will also help send a message to Sacramento as well.

I think I now know why Bill Moore's murder affected me so deeply in 1963. His actions forced my first confrontations with the possessive investment in whiteness—a poisonous system of privilege that pits people against each other and prevents the creation of common ground. Exposing, analyzing, and eradicating this pathology is an obligation that we all share, white people most of all. I hope that this book will be a step in that direction.

In the darkest days of the 1990s, as the governor of California and his political puppets on the board of regents were resorting to the crudest kinds of

racist scapegoating to protect the possessive investment in whiteness, a group of young students at the University of California, San Diego, where I was then teaching, created an interethnic antiracist coalition that expressed and enacted a compelling vision of social justice. Their dignity, discipline, and determination to fight every measure designed to increase the “wages of whiteness” (including Proposition 209, Proposition 187, and SP1 and SP2) provided an inspiring alternative to the unjust and immoral policies advanced by the most powerful and wealthy individuals in their state. They learned the lessons of history well, and their actions point the way toward a better and more just future. The members of the No Retreat! coalition have inherited the vision and the courage of Fannie Lou Hamer, Bill Moore, and many others. I dedicate this book to them, with deep respect and gratitude.