

THE DEVIL IS WATCHING YOU:

LYNCHING AND SOUTHERN MEMORY, 1940–1970

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This dissertation is a cultural history of lynching in African American and white southern memory. Mob violence had become relatively infrequent by 1940, yet it cast a long shadow over the region in the three decades that followed. By mining cultural sources, from folklore and photographs to my own interviews with the relatives of lynching victims, I uncover the ways in which memories of lynching seeped into contemporary conflicts over race and place during the long Civil Rights Era. The protest and counter-protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s garner most of the attention in discussions of racial violence during this period, but I argue that scholars must also be attentive to the memories of lynching that register on what Ralph Ellison called “the lower frequencies” to fully understand these legacies. For instance, African Americans often shielded their children from the most painful memories of local lynchings but would pass on stories about the vengeful ghosts of lynching victims to express their disgust with these unpunished crimes. By interpreting these memories through the lenses of silence, haunting, violence, and protest, I capture a broad range of legacies, from the subtle to the overt, that illustrate how and why lynching maintained its stranglehold on southern culture.

“The Devil is Watching You” offers what I call the “blues sensibility” as an alternative to the Freudian sense of “working through” that dominates the literature on historical trauma. If the blues are, as Ellison defined them, “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism,” then many black southerners infused a blues element into their memories of lynching. Freud defined psychological recovery as taking control over traumatic memories through narration, but African Americans who spoke out too directly could face violent reprisals. In the enduring spirit of the blues, blacks often confronted these painful memories under the cloak of metaphor and irony to transcend the past, even if just for a spell.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mari N. Crabtree is an assistant professor of African American Studies at the College of Charleston. She completed her A.B. in Black Studies at Amherst College in 2003, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in History at Cornell University in 2010 and 2014 respectively. Her research and teaching interests include African American cultural history, African American literature, memory and racial violence, and the blues.

To the survivors, and to the victims, may they rest in peace.

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If the blues have taught me anything, it is that despite coming to the tragic realization that graduate school, like life itself, is a lowdown dirty shame, we survive and we endure and we slip the yoke and, even in Ithaca, we see the sun shine in our backdoors now and again. Living with a dissertation about lynching for four years, I sometimes teetered on the brink of despair. The material I used to craft a narrative about memory and racial violence was awful and all too real, and I would not have made it out of these blues alive had it not been for the many people who supported and challenged and encouraged me along the way.

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As important as it is for historians to brave the dust and paper cuts of the archives, the lifeblood of this project springs from the deeply personal and at times heartwrenching stories I recorded in oral histories. The people who trusted me—a stranger with a notebook and a digital recorder—with their stories deserve my deepest gratitude of all: Audrey Grant, Robert Hall, and Willie Head, Jr. of Brooks and Lowndes Counties in Georgia (as well as Mark George for inviting me

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Introduction

The novelist has much to offer the historian. A dexterity with language, certainly, but also a gift for unlocking the mysteries of the human condition through characters and stories that uncover something more elemental than even the most thoughtful reconstructions of the past can. For both reasons I am indebted to the writer James Baldwin whose short story, “Going to Meet the Man,” inspired this project. Baldwin, with his characteristic eloquence and incisiveness, captured in a mere twenty-one pages many of the social, cultural, and psychological legacies of lynching that lingered in the American South for decades. He revealed how the past and the present can collapse and bleed into one another. He named lynching as a southern, if not American, trauma. He staked out the central place that memory and racial violence occupy in American culture. Perhaps most profoundly, he challenged my historian’s sensibility for how to approach the archives and narrate the past.

“Going to Meet the Man” hinges on memories. Set in a southern town at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the story traces the internal struggles of a white deputy sheriff named Jesse reluctantly coming to grips with the dismantling of Jim Crow. Lying awake in bed at night, Jesse remembers an incident earlier in the day during which his tried and true methods for asserting his racial dominance had proved ineffective. No amount of violence or vitriol had compelled a young African American protestor to submit as Jesse viciously beat him in a jail cell. With the sound of black protest songs still ringing in his ears, his mind drifts back to another memory: the scene of a grisly lynching he witnessed as a boy. He returns to this memory of collective, ritualized violence for comfort and reassurance—to return to the moment when he was initiated into the power and meaning of whiteness in the South. Perched atop his father’s shoulders, Jesse had seen his father’s friends lower the black man’s body into flames as

his mother gazed at the man's burned, naked body with a placid smile on her face. By the time one man grabbed a knife to castrate the black man, Jesse "began to feel a joy he had never felt before" and "wished that he had been that man [holding the knife]."¹ Years later, as a deputy sheriff beating a black protestor with a cattle prod, he becomes "that man." The feeling of power and joy he felt at the lynching momentarily returns. This time though, he senses his grasp on that power slipping and the permanence of that joy uncertain.

Baldwin articulated how the past—in particular a history of racial violence—had become deeply embedded in Jesse's identity and could be powerfully wielded in the present. Even though the story follows the anxieties of a white southern man—a *perpetrator* of racial violence at that—the way Baldwin teases out Jesse's impulse to seek refuge in a memory of lynching is instructive for processing the legacies of lynching among African American southerners who were the targets of that violence without glossing over the very real distinctions between victims, survivors, and perpetrators of historical traumas. Power and culture certainly mediate the development and meaning of collective memories, but if a practice as pervasive and disturbing as lynching scarred white southerners, it certainly left its mark on African Americans, even if these memories took different forms. Echoes of the howling mobs and the cries of lynching victims reverberated in the ears of both African American and white southerners alike. Jesse invoked the memory of lynching to affirm a white supremacist way of life, but that same incident could also have fueled the desire within the African American protestors he arrested to defy Jim Crow by trying to register to vote.

¹ As Jesse beats the man in jail, this same feeling of joy creeps back in, which prompts "something deep in him and deep in his memory... [to be] stirred, but whatever was in his memory eluded him." Baldwin then connects this violence of beating the protestor (and the bigotry that provides him such comfort and joy) to the violence of the lynching memory he recalls a few pages later. James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" in *Going to Meet the Man* (1965; reprint, New York: Vintage International, Random House, 1993), 247, 233.

This dissertation is a cultural history that, like Baldwin, unearths memories of lynching in the American South and analyzes the ways in which those memories continued to provide a critical reference point for orienting perceptions of race and place during the long Civil Rights Era. These memories reveal how African Americans confronted and processed the historical trauma of lynching, and by bringing a cultural perspective to the study of lynching and memory, I explore how African American cultural traditions provided productive frameworks for processing the trauma of lynching. Without being tethered to specific historical evidence, Baldwin could construct the emotions, motivations, and subconscious wanderings of the mind that an actual historical actor might not have been conscious of, much less have recorded in the historical record. Baldwin could reveal the interior lives of his characters, but historians, too, can reconstruct the lasting impact of lynching while working within the evidentiary constraints of the historian's craft. To uncover and build upon many of Baldwin's insights, I use a range of cultural sources from oral histories and literature to photographs and folklore that contain traces—and often substantial stories—of the historical memory of lynching.²

Historians have focused primarily on lynching when mob violence was a common occurrence, between 1880 and 1940, but this literature largely ignores the ways this un-American (and yet all-too-American) practice continued to encroach upon the everyday lives of African American and white southerners after 1940.³ During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, lynching was

² Before even entering the archives, I worried that these memories would be too deeply buried to be recovered by a historian. Most southerners, white and black, shied away from the sensitive subject of lynching, but in addition to worrying about whether archives would contain traces of these memories, I also held out for the very real possibility that the historical record might not bear out Baldwin's interpretation of lynching in southern memory.

³ The literature on memory and lynching is slowly emerging, and literary scholars have taken the lead for the most part. See Julie Buckner Armstrong, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Bruce E. Baker, "Under the Rope: Lynching and Memory in Laurens County, South Carolina," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Evelyn M. Simien, ed., *Gender and Lynching: The Politics of Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

not an abstract concept to southerners. Especially in the Deep South, they had personal connections to mob violence and regularly encountered physical and rhetorical reminders of that history. Its specter lingered in the branches of lynching trees and the beams of hanging bridges that carried invisible marks of death. Its memories remained vivid in the minds of southerners with family members and neighbors killed by lynch mobs. Its spirit survived in local lore passed on to their children and grandchildren. Its power pulsed through the political rhetoric of segregationists and the slogans of civil rights organizations. And sadly the practice itself persisted in some pockets of the South, without the large crowds and souvenir postcards of earlier decades, but with the same intent to intimidate African Americans and celebrate white supremacy nonetheless.

Even those studies that examine the social and cultural dimensions of lynching have tended to focus on white lynching culture rather than African American responses to lynching, even though the nuance and meaning of lynching gets lost when African American and white responses are interpreted in isolation from one another. Although I emphasize the experiences of African American southerners, I also look at the interplay between African American and white memories of lynching. The silence an African American father demanded of his son who had barely escaped a Mississippi lynch mob in 1954 becomes all the more poignant and telling when juxtaposed with the silence and projection of a white woman from Mississippi insisting that the lynching of three civil rights workers in 1964 was a Communist hoax. African American and white southerners often seemed to inhabit very different worlds during Jim Crow, but considering these perspectives together brings into sharper relief the often discordant resonances between them.

The tendency to emphasize the white perspective by studying the ritual of a lynching, the spectacle of lynching, the imagery of lynching, lynching culture, and the commodification of lynching has also had the unintended consequence of privileging the experiences of white southerners and perpetuating the objectification of African Americans.⁴ Lynching desecrated black bodies in order to deny dignity and justice to an entire race, but African Americans were more than mere objects of white wrath. Lynching certainly had victims, but it also had survivors—and by “survivors” I am not only referring to the rare cases in which would-be victims evaded or escaped a lynching.⁵ As the most violent manifestation of Jim Crow and therefore a white supremacist social order, lynching targeted the black race as a whole.

⁴ Although the literature on lynching by no means ignores the African American perspective, the emphasis tends to be on white perpetrators, spectators, and apologists. The insights offered by these texts are indispensable to any student of lynching scholarship, but they tend not to explore in much depth the meaning and significance of lynching to African Americans, especially those who lived in the South. See for instance: W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836–1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness Through Racial Violence* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University, 2007); Stewart E. Tolmay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁵ One notable example of a lynching survivor who narrowly escaped a lynching is James Cameron, who wrote about his experiences in a memoir. James Cameron, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1994). The language of victimhood often raises questions about resistance and suffering, agency and sacrifice. All too often the word “victim” raises (in addition to those questions) the hackles of some scholars since, to them, victimhood connotes a loss of agency, the ability to resist, and, in turn, something fundamentally human. The men and women who died at the hands of lynch mobs were victims of a crime, but by virtue of being tortured, mutilated, and killed, they did not relinquish their humanity despite the best efforts of the mob to degrade them. In numerous accounts of lynchings, mobs were disappointed when black men or women refused to confess or beg for mercy or cry out in pain or express remorse. John Henry Williams (lynched in Moultrie, Georgia in 1921) and Claude Neal (lynched in Greenwood, Florida in 1934) asked to smoke a cigarette while being burned alive and tortured, respectively. The thousands of people killed by lynch mobs responded to their certain death in a variety of ways—not everybody was like Williams or Neal—but their racially motivated deaths and the symbolic meaning of their deaths provide sufficient common ground to call them victims of lynching. Also, I want to reclaim the term “victim,” which in contemporary southern accounts was reserved only for the white people who were somehow wronged by the person who was lynched. In light of the infrequency with which lynchers faced criminal charges, using the language of “lynching victims” signals that members of the mob perpetrated a crime and pushes back against the belief that black life was expendable. Jeffrey Ferguson, “Race and the Rhetoric of Resistance,” *Raritan* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 4–32; “Smokes Cigarette as He Burns to Death,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 19 June 1921 from National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Box I:C355, Folder 2 “Lynching – Moultrie, GA 1921,” NAACP; James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 81.

Members of the mob circumvented the law and hardly cared if they had the right person because lynching was meant to send a message to the entire black community about staying in “their place” and not transgressing the etiquette of black deference to whites. To make their position unmistakably clear, lynchers often used a level of violence that far exceeded that of any state execution and other legal punishment, which they deemed insufficiently brutal to terrorize blacks as a group. Most African Americans survived to tell the tale though, and amongst themselves they did.

Recovering black voices from the historical record—treating them as the living, breathing, feeling, thinking subjects of history—tempers the historical and historiographical impulse to render African Americans the silent victims of white oppression. Jim Crow was no picnic, but the black community found ways to affirm black dignity and humanity and that, among many other things, helped people cope in troubled times. In a review of sociologist Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944), Ralph Ellison criticized Myrdal for reducing African American culture to a reaction to American racism, and he raked Myrdal over the coals for assuming that blacks would benefit from becoming more like whites. Ellison rejected the idea that his cultural tradition was produced by “social pathology” and was therefore hollow and damaged: “Much of Negro culture might be negative, but there is also much of great value and richness, which, because it has been secreted by living and has made their lives more meaningful, Negroes will not willingly disregard.”⁶ A lynching or a story about a lynching may have been seared into the minds of many black southerners, but the scars they bore—those memories they carried—did not necessarily consume them.

⁶ Ralph Ellison, “*An American Dilemma: A Review*,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Calhoun (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 340.

The handful of studies that examine African American responses to lynching tend to focus on the anti-lynching activism of major civil rights advocates like Ida B. Wells and the NAACP, but as indispensable as the black protest tradition is for understanding African American history and culture, the emphasis on public protest often gives disproportionate emphasis to one kind of black voice over all others.⁷ In the three decades after 1940, vocal protests against American racism found their inspiration in that anti-lynching tradition. The brutal lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, for instance, sparked outrage across the nation that activists channeled into a mass movement for racial justice, but memories of lynching that register on what Ralph Ellison called “the lower frequencies” also merit recovery.⁸ Most African Americans did not loudly condemn lynching or join civil rights organizations, especially in the South, because the price of speaking up for justice could be your life or your livelihood or your family.

In a conversation with two other blues musicians recorded in 1947, the boogie-woogie pianist, Memphis Slim, quipped with more than a twinge of a blue note: “Yeah, so we had a few Negroes down there [in the levee camp] that wasn’t afraid of white peoples and talk back to

⁷ For some examples of books that examine anti-lynching campaigns, see Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching : Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009). Zangrando and Waldrep provide valuable analysis of the efforts by national civil rights organizations to pass federal anti-lynching legislation and end the practice altogether, so I aim my critique not so much at their scholarship but at the gaping hole in the literature. African Americans in the South did not have the same luxury to openly protest lynching that NAACP officials in New York had, and their perspectives and experiences, which are much harder to recover from the archive anyway, have largely been excluded from the literature. Putting aside the challenges of picking out silences from the historical record and interpreting stories cloaked in metaphor, this omission speaks volumes about the vaunted status of resistance in African American Studies. At its worst, the emphasis on resistance turns African Americans into either Nat Turners or Uncle Toms, which not only denies nuance to these positions but also ignores the vast sea of experience in between. Perhaps scholars worry that talking about human experience outside of overt, public resistance makes it seem as though blacks lay down and accepted their lot or, worse still, internalized racism and came to believe that what racist whites thought was true. Most sources don’t bear out those two experiences, but so what if some people did feel paralyzed by the force of Jim Crow or suffered from self-hate after so much degradation? Are their reactions any less valid because they are not as palatable to some scholars? My biggest objection to the dominance of the resistance paradigm is that so often the complexity of human experience gets smoothed over, and to sift out the grit and gravel of life is to misrepresent the past.

⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; reprint, New York: Vintage International, 1995), 581.

them. They called those people crazy.” Riffing off of Memphis Slim, Big Bill Broonzy told a story about his “crazy” Uncle Jerry who was lynched. Educated and self-assured, Broonzy’s uncle did not take kindly to a white man telling him that his pregnant wife, who was caring for their toddler at home, should be working in the fields. The white man said, “There’s no woman here sits up and don’t work, sit up and in the shade, but Miz Anne [the white man’s wife].” He insisted, “no nigger sits up there without working.” Uncle Jerry, whose wife was also named Anne, responded, “Well, that’s one Miz Anne is a Negro and she ain’t going to work in the field.” That white man got down from his horse ready for a fight, and Broonzy’s uncle beat him up then chased him away. Later that day, a small posse came to lynch Broonzy’s uncle, but they scattered when he shot at every last one of them. Only when a second mob of fifty or sixty white men showed up at his house did the fearless man die, swinging from the end of a rope.⁹

As the word “crazy” suggests, Broonzy’s uncle was an exception, and he and his family paid dearly for challenging a white man. Most African Americans not only avoided shootouts with white people, but rarely channeled their anger and disgust with lynching and Jim Crow into outright confrontations, much less organized protests. Some found solace in faith and family; others drowned their troubles in drinking or kept the blues at bay in a juke joint. Some buried those memories in the deepest recesses of their minds to shield themselves and their children from the pain, and others vowed to keep what happened to their parents and grandparents from happening to their children by leaving the South or secretly joining the NAACP. African American southerners likely turned, consciously and subconsciously, to several different outlets in response to lynching—such is the nuance and complexity of human experience.

⁹ Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, Rounder CD 82161-1860-2, 2003, compact disc. The quotes and Broonzy’s story are taken from track 16, “Conversation Continues.”

With the resistance paradigm looming large over the sub-field, scholars often forget that, like most people, African Americans didn't live their lives fretting over where they fell on the resistance-submission continuum and didn't compartmentalize their thoughts and actions into the discrete categories of protest or resistance. Many scholars of the African American experience give primacy to the most overt forms of "protest" and "resistance," in part because the dominant culture and historiography have denied agency and subjectivity to African Americans for so long. Efforts to combat the stereotype of the shuffling Uncle Tom have often had the unfortunate effect of amplifying the most vocal and the most provocative freedom fighters at the exclusion of other voices. I argue that, for the most part, the voices and memories that take more digging to recover are more typical and no less extraordinary than the voices of men and women whose well-known names grace the pages of history books. Rather than flatten the experiences and emotional complexity of lynching survivors, I sought out sources that would represent the full range of their experiences, for obscuring the intensity of pain and sorrow, the depths of bitterness and despair, and the power of hope and forgiveness betrays the humanity of a people whose resilience and tenacity carried them through troubled times.

Given the range and nuance of responses to lynching, I interpret these memories through four major themes: silence, haunting, violence, and protest. This thematic approach facilitates a comparison between African American and white memories and combats the unfortunate intellectual apartheid that often plagues southern studies. These themes also help to uncover the deeper layers of meaning behind memories of lynching—layers that cut across the simplistic binary of resistance or submission. And although these four themes also impose a particular kind of order onto these memories, they reveal the ways that culture shapes what literary critics call "narrativity." For instance, African Americans often shielded their children from the most

painful memories of local lynchings but would pass on stories about the vengeful ghosts of lynching victims. To express their disgust with members of lynch mobs who evaded legal justice, they spoke of deathbed confessions made by lynchers tormented by their pasts. By interpreting these forms of haunting as a part of a tradition of telling ghost stories, I make the case that, although a ghost or deathbed confession displaces the critiques of racism from the narrator, the creative act of constructing these stories powerfully illustrates the capacity of African American cultural traditions to help people cope with and process trauma.

In closing I'll indulge in quoting Baldwin at length, as I am prone to do, for his analysis of the force and meaning of historical memory reveals the high stakes of revisiting such a disturbing and painful part of American history:

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it ... and history is *literally* present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.¹⁰

The specter of lynching—the terror it left in its wake, its celebration of white supremacy, its shamefulness—continued to haunt the South long after the smiling crowds dissipated, the special excursion trains returned passengers safely home from the thrilling spectacle, and the body, or what was left of the body after spectators had snatched up their “souvenirs,” was cut down and buried. Historical traumas in particular refuse to be contained within the artificial

¹⁰ James Baldwin, “White Man’s Guilt” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 410.

bookends on which historians rely to impose order on the past—dates, decades, eras. Traumas inevitably seep into the present, haunting their victims whether they become unconsciously fixated on those painful memories or repress those memories or act out violently to cope with those memories.

African Americans have little choice but to feel the burden of this history, but, as Baldwin observed, southern whites did not escape from the past unscathed despite their best efforts to paper over or defend their history of racial violence. Much of the white South condoned and even celebrated lynching during the peak period, but even in 1916 the NAACP's James Weldon Johnson, who had grown up in the Jim Crow South and had no illusions about racial violence, described the details of a lynching as "enough to make the devil gasp in astonishment."¹¹ The sheer barbarity of lynching is difficult to comprehend much less adequately represent with words, but that feeling of alienation from the past that makes empathizing with and identifying with that part of American history so difficult involves people who in reality are not terribly far removed from us in time and place. The ugliness and excessive violence of lynching has tempted some to bracket it as beyond the pale and therefore inassimilable into American identity, American history, or the present state of race relations, but the more convenient, comforting story is not always the true story. With justice and American ideals in the balance, Johnson could not afford to dismiss lynching as a distant aberration, and neither can we. Despite the temptation to obscure this painful and disgraceful history in a shroud of silence, the aftermath of this southern carnage is a story that must be wrenched from the shadows and exposed to the lightness of day.

This dissertation most certainly falls under the category of history that Baldwin called "something to be read," but I hope that reconstructing the ways in which the past encroaches

¹¹ "Chance for Humanity," *The New York Age*, 25 May 1916.

upon the present and recovering memories of lynching might lead to some collective self-reflection. The ivory tower has become increasingly remote from the everyday lives of most Americans, but I still leave open the possibility that Americans can “[rob] history of its tyrannical power,” as Baldwin put it. “Changing history” does not mean forgetting or distorting these stories. By assessing the past, which is to say by remembering and confronting the past, we have the potential to liberate ourselves from a future of continued injustice.

Chapter 1: An Anatomy of Lynching

She knew, and the very horror of it lifted her dull and shrinking eyelids. There, heaven-tall, earth-wide, hung the stranger on the crimson cross, riven and blood-stained, with thorn-crowned head and pierced hands. She stretched her arms and shrieked.

He did not hear. He did not see. His calm dark eyes, all sorrowful, were fastened on the writhing, twisting body of the thief, and a voice came out of the winds of the night, saying:

“This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise!”

– W.E.B. Du Bois, “Jesus Christ in Texas”

“Barbecueville,” Texas (1916)

Jesse Washington knew he was going to die. Waiting for the all-white Texas jury to return with what would undoubtedly be a guilty verdict and a death sentence, he looked out at the sea of hostile white faces in the courtroom, his gaze placid, as though the certainty of his impending death somehow muffled the terror in his heart. The jury left the courtroom just long enough to ‘deliberate’—a mere four minutes—and during those tense moments, the seventeen-year-old farm hand must have wondered if this sham trial would pacify the growing mob of over 2,500 that spilled out of the McLennan County Courthouse onto the streets of Waco. He knew all too well that if the law did not hang him, these people would.¹²

In the week between his arrest and the trial, two lynch mobs from Robinson, Texas had piled into cars and buggies and demanded that Sheriff Samuel S. Fleming hand him over—once at the Waco jail and again at the Hillsboro jail in the neighboring county. Robinson was the small farming town just a few miles down the road from Waco where, the previous Monday, Lucy Fryer’s dead body had been discovered, her bludgeoned head resting in a pool of blood. Both times Sheriff Fleming had the foresight to spirit Washington away before the mobs could

¹² “Mob Takes Negro from Court House, Burns Him at Stake,” *Waco Daily Times-Herald*, 15 May 1916; James M. SoRelle, “The ‘Waco Horror’: The Lynching of Jesse Washington,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (April 1983): 526.

kill him, and for good measure, Fleming struck a bargain with the Robinson vigilantes; they promised not to lynch Washington if the law convicted and executed him quickly. The sheriff had made a similar deal with Washington. In exchange for a confession, the sheriff assured him that he would keep the lynch mob at bay until “justice” was served.¹³

So far, the sheriff had held up his end of the bargain, but with every second that passed as everyone waited for the jury, the unruly crowd hovering around him grew ever impatient. Washington must have sensed the prospect of an official state execution fading fast. Since the opening gavel only an hour earlier, spectators had repeatedly disrupted the proceedings. A scuffle had broken out when Washington entered the courtroom flanked by several deputies. A hot-headed white man brandishing a revolver had shouted, “Might as well get him now,” but after a few chaotic moments, another member of the crowd had tackled and disarmed him. “Let them have their trial,” growled the man who had wrested the gun away, “We’ll get him before sundown, and you might hurt some innocent man.”¹⁴ Judge Richard I. Munroe had to call for order several times to silence some chatty boys in the balcony, who, like their adult counterparts, had been drawn to the spectacle of what a local paper described as “the lustful brute” on trial.¹⁵ One man yelled out, “We don’t need any courts,” and although that outburst had been largely

¹³ According to *The Crisis* Supplement based on a report by the suffragist Elizabeth Freeman, Washington was asked for his thoughts on the mob (which mob is unclear in the text), and he said “They promised they would not [lynch me] if I would tell them about it [the murder].” Some scholars speculate that Washington was mentally disabled, and the court transcript and newspaper accounts may bear this out since during the trial he appeared to be confused then indifferent when he was informed that a guilty plea could result in the death penalty. Although he clearly did not write the confession that he signed with an “X,” he testified that “I ain’t going to tell them nothing more than what I said – that’s what I done. I’m sorry I done it.” Even if he were mentally disabled, his responses indicate that he understood that people intended to lynch him, and even if he did not commit the murder, his confession, which was his only hope for avoiding a lynching, indicates that he preferred to be executed by the state than lynched by a fiendish mob. In fact, he did not confess until after he was moved to Hillsboro to evade the first lynch mob, which suggests that he believed that the confession provided his only means (though not a foolproof means) to avoid a lynching. The sources do not reveal whether Washington’s confession was the result of a strategic calculation on his part or compulsion by the sheriff. “The Waco Horror,” Supplement to *The Crisis*, 12 (July 1916): 2–3; “Negro Confesses to Terrible Crime at Robinsonville,” *Waco Daily Times-Herald*, 9 May 1916; SoRelle, “The ‘Waco Horror,’” 520–522, 526; *Waco Daily Times-Herald*, 15 May 1916.

¹⁴ SoRelle, “The ‘Waco Horror,’” 522–523.

¹⁵ *Waco Daily Times-Herald*, 9 May 1916.

ignored, it spoke volumes about the meaning of justice to the white South. What little faith Washington had had in the grossly outnumbered deputies instructed to protect him had likely vanished.

Long before these personal brushes with mob violence, Washington would have known better than to hope that he would live past the date of the trial, May 15, 1916. The Waco newspapers predicted that he would be convicted and executed by day's end, but even if he could read—and he could neither read nor write—he didn't need a newspaper to tell him he would soon die. As an African American male raised in the South, he had long ago been baptized in the ways of Jim Crow, and his mother and father had likely provided him and his younger brother, William, with an education in surviving the often fickle and dangerous ways of white folks. After all, central Texas had a long tradition of lynching African Americans that dated back to emancipation. More recently in 1905 when Washington was just six years old, a lynch mob of six hundred farmers from around Robinson—where Washington lived—broke down the steel gates of the Waco jail using sledgehammers and seized Sank Majors, an African American man accused of assaulting a white woman. After a lively debate between two factions of the lynch mob over whether to burn him alive or hang him, the men and women in the mob strung him up from the Washington Street Bridge, later slicing off fingers and pieces of the rope for souvenirs.¹⁶

Even if his parents had shielded him from the horrifying details of the Majors lynching, Washington most certainly had heard about the barbaric lynching of Will Stanley the previous summer in nearby Temple, Texas. While Stanley was being slowly burned alive by the mob of between five and ten thousand, one member of the mob shot him. Perhaps the man felt pity for Stanley. Perhaps the excitement of the affair made him trigger happy. The mob continued to

¹⁶ "Lynching at Waco," *Dallas Morning News*, 9 October 1905.

drag his body through the flames until all that remained was a charred corpse with large portions of the legs and arms burned off completely. His mangled body was then hanged by a chain to a telephone pole in the town square for people, including little white boys and girls, to pose with in souvenir photographs.¹⁷ Lynching was a fact of life for black Texans, and for Jesse Washington who would soon be convicted of murdering a white woman, it spelled certain death.

Back in the courtroom, the jury had returned, and the foreman read the verdict: “We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of murder as charged in the indictment and assess his penalty at death.” As the judge recorded the outcome of the case into the docket, the room was momentarily still. Perhaps Washington caught a glimpse of the court reporter and Sheriff Fleming slipping out the door, and within a few seconds someone yelled “Get the nigger!” which sent the mob surging toward him over chairs, tables, people, and anything else in its path. The next few minutes were a blur. A deluge of arms descended upon his body, dragging him down the back stairs of the courthouse to the street where four hundred people waited. The mob paused just long enough for someone to wrap a heavy chain around his neck before pressing onward toward the suspension bridge just one block from where Sank Majors had been hanged eleven years earlier. Hands tore at his plain calico shirt and overalls, and he shrieked in agony as the rowdy crowd lunged at him, plunging knives into his flesh and beating him with bricks and shovels. The bewildered teenager must have wondered what animated the blind hatred of the white mob that took such glee in inflicting pain and suffering.

By the time the bridge was in view, Washington was fading in and out of consciousness. The chain tugging at his neck went slack for a moment as members of the mob debated whether to hang him from the bridge as planned or to burn him at the stake in front of the city hall where

¹⁷ William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836–1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 185.

wood had been gathered for a fire. The mob changed direction, dragging his limp body towards city hall, a grand structure and the centerpiece of the downtown market square. He staggered forward, blood pouring out of his wounds and onto his naked body, until they reached a tree just below the mayor's office window. Washington could barely stand as he leaned up against the tree for support. All he could do was hope that the Lord would be merciful and let death come swiftly. The chain around his neck was thrown up around a tree branch, and by now the crowd had ballooned to upwards of fifteen thousand men, women, and children, some hanging out of windows for a better view of his slow torture and death. Several men grasped the chain and thrust his body up into the air, and the mob howled with delight as Washington gasped for breath. They lowered him to the ground, and the mob scrambled to slash at his body, castrating him and cutting off fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs.¹⁸ A second wave of excitement rippled through the crowd as people pressed forward to light a bonfire that would devour much of his body. Washington's charred, lifeless corpse was raised up into the air again, eliciting yet another round of shouts and cheers, before being left on the smoldering coals.

The white mob had given the devil himself a run for his money, but Jesse Washington's soul had finally been freed from the pain and suffering of this hell on earth called Waco, Texas. The desecration of his body, however, continued. A man lassoed the body—all that was left was the torso, head, and the stumps of the limbs—and dragged it behind his horse as he gleefully galloped around the city hall and through the streets of downtown Waco. The head snapped off as the horse bounded down a main street, and some little white boys scurried after it and sold

¹⁸ According to the report in the Supplement to *The Crisis*, Washington was castrated, but the text does not clearly indicate whether this occurred while he was being dragged from the courthouse to the grounds of city hall or once he was at the city hall. I suspect that he was "unsexed" when his ears were cut off as souvenirs since the report says, "Someone cut his ear off; someone else unsexed him. A little girl working for the firm of Goldstein and Mingle told me that she saw this done." Also, the clipping from *The Waco Times-Herald* suggests that he was castrated right before he was burned – I assume that is what is meant by "When they had finished [taking souvenir body parts] with the negro [sic] his body was mutilated." "The Waco Horror," *The Crisis*, 4; *Waco Times-Herald*, 15 May 1916.

each tooth for five dollars. The torso was then stuffed into a bag, dragged several miles behind a car back to Robinson, and hanged on a telephone pole outside a blacksmith's shop for public viewing. An officer later retrieved the remains for burial in a potter's field.¹⁹



In the wake of the lynching, the African American community distanced itself from Washington, who was a convicted murderer after all, and especially after the recent display of savagery by the white citizens of McLennan County, few African Americans had the audacity and steely nerves to publicly condemn mob violence. One notable exception was A.T. Smith, the managing editor of the local black college's newspaper, *Paul Quinn Weekly*. Smith unapologetically placed the blame for the lynching squarely on the shoulders of the "thirsty blood [sic] crackers of the city."²⁰ Smith believed that Washington, like most lynching victims, had not committed the crime but was a convenient scapegoat, and he accused Lucy Fryer's husband, George Fryer Sr., of murdering her. Quite naturally the widower took exception to Smith's brazen accusation and sued Paul Quinn College for libel. The college paid a negligible fine of a dollar, but Smith spent a year doing hard labor on the county chain gang.²¹

Given Washington's signed confession and his guilty plea, Smith's insistence that Washington was innocent may be tempting to dismiss as baseless and provocative, but with endless examples of fabricated accusations of rape leading to a lynching and sham trials that made a mockery of the justice system and overzealous vigilantes lynching the wrong person,

¹⁹ *Waco Daily Times-Herald*, 15 May 1916; SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror,'" 526–528; "The Waco Horror," *The Crisis*, 2–4.

²⁰ [*George Fryer v. Paul Quinn College*, case no. 1194, Case Files of the Seventy-fourth Judicial District Court, McLennan County Archives, Waco, Texas]; Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, 201.

²¹ SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror,'" 530–531; Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, 201.

Smith's skepticism seems less reactionary.²² In recent memory, African Americans in McLennan County had experienced firsthand this kind of lawlessness and indiscriminant terrorizing of their community. During the frenzied search for an assault suspect on the run that eventually led to the 1905 lynching of Sank Majors, dozens of innocent African American men were rounded up along the banks of the Brazos River by roving mobs of armed white farmers and detained for questioning. Some members of the posse, frustrated that the suspect continued to evade capture, hanged a black man they accused of aiding the fugitive until he nearly suffocated to death.²³

Over the years, Smith's sentiments gained more and more credence within the African American community, especially after May 1922 when another Waco mob of five thousand lynched the wrong man. Jesse Thomas had matched the description of a murder suspect in that he was black and had a gold tooth, which was enough for a recently deputized white man to arrest him and bring him to the home of a witness for identification. The witness was still recovering from her attack when she erroneously identified Thomas as the killer, at which point her father shot Thomas several times. Less than an hour later, a mob of several hundred stole

²² For many African Americans, the integrity of the justice system had been corroded by thousands of lynchings that spanned several decades, and this pattern of injustice was widely chronicled in local lore about mob violence, black newspapers' coverage of lynchings around the country, Ida B. Wells' fearless crusade against lynching, and the NAACP's lobbying for federal anti-lynching legislation. Racist juries, judges, and sheriffs deeply undermined the African American community's faith in the due process of the law, and at the same time false accusations and the lynching of innocent people often for minor offenses or mere transgressions of white supremacist norms raised more doubts about the moral compass of the white community. In light of this well-warranted skepticism that pervaded the African American community, Smith's suspicions about George Fryer Sr. seem less outlandish, though Smith's accusation was not substantiated by concrete evidence then or now to my knowledge. Some of Wells' anti-lynching pamphlets and newspaper accounts of lynchings have been reprinted in the following collections respectively: Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedord/St. Martin's, 1997; Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1962). Two leaders of the NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White, use fiction and nonfiction respectively to explain the moral judgment of white community's crimes and the causes and excuses of lynching: W.E.B. Du Bois, "Jesus Christ in Texas" in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 123–133; Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929; reprint, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

²³ "Wrong Negro Caught," *Dallas Morning News*, 16 July 1905.

Thomas's lifeless body from an undertaker and dragged it behind a truck to city hall where, six years earlier, a mob had burned and mutilated Jesse Washington. Thomas's dead body was also stripped and burned before being dragged around the business district a second time. Several months later, another man was arrested for and convicted of the crime Thomas died for.²⁴

Smith's denunciation of the lynching culture that encouraged such excessive brutality and disregard for the rule of law had precedent. In 1905, another African American Wacoan spoke out against the lynching of Sank Majors, and he received one-hundred fifty lashes from a white "vigilance committee."²⁵ That the backs of so many former slaves were crisscrossed with a maze of thick scars was not lost on the white community. This whipping was a conscious, symbolic nod to slavery and represented the white community's intolerance for any challenge to lynching culture as well as an utter disregard for African American life. So when the black employees of a downtown Waco hotel quit en masse in protest the morning after the Majors lynching, the "vigilance committee" likely also hoped that each stripe left by the lash would also serve as an unequivocal warning to them.²⁶ Whether whipping or hard labor, the consequences for condemning extralegal violence could be severe indeed.²⁷

The threat of reprisals—legal and extralegal—muted most public pronouncements against lynching among local African Americans, but silence did not mean acceptance. Soon after Washington's violent death, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sent the white suffragist, Elizabeth Freeman, to Waco to investigate the lynching, and after speaking with several members of the black community privately, she

²⁴ "Negro Killed By Father of Victim: Body is Later Burned by Waco Mob," *Dallas Morning News*, 27 May 1922.

²⁵ ["Negro Whipped by Vigilance Committee," *Waco Times-Herald*, 10 August 1905]; Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, 271 n. 62.

²⁶ "Lynching at Waco," *Dallas Morning News*, 9 August 1905.

²⁷ Smith had difficulty securing legal representation, and according to Richard D. Evans, an African American attorney in Waco who represented him, many members of the black community were afraid to help Smith and afraid for Evans too. SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror,'" 531.

reported to the national office that, “The feeling of the colored people was that while they had one rotten member of their race the whites had 15,000.”²⁸ Private condemnation was more than idle chatter. Naming whites as “rotten” and consciously constructing an alternative to the celebratory white narrative provided recognition that the African American community, not the white community, had morality on its side. With no clear end to lynching in sight, these sentiments sustained people through those harrowing times.

Jim Crow would have African Americans believe they were inferior to whites in intellect, culture, and “biology,” but parents did their best to shield their children from the white supremacist notions that lynching was meant to symbolize and reinforce. On the morning of Washington’s lynching, Vivienne Skipwith insisted that his daughter Carrie avoid Sixth Street on her walk to school. He would not tell her why. The headstrong thirteen-year-old’s curiosity got the best of her, so as usual she took Sixth Street and weaved her way through the crowd of white men congregated on the courthouse lawn. On her way home from school that same afternoon, she and her friends walked by the storefronts of downtown Waco’s white-owned businesses, and they noticed charred chunks of what they eventually determined were human flesh proudly displayed in the store windows. When Carrie walked through the doorway of her home that afternoon, her father didn’t hush up the neighbors who were “up in the air talking about it [the lynching]” because by then he knew that, although he could try to keep his daughter from witnessing the lynching, he could not protect her from the knowledge that a mob had burned and sliced souvenirs from a black man’s body.²⁹

²⁸ Elizabeth Freeman, “The Waco Lynching,” [box, folder] National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress (hereafter NAACP LoC); SoRelle, “The ‘Waco Horror,’” 530 n. 24.

²⁹ Oral Memoirs of Carrie Skipwith Mayfield, 22 December 1989, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, 14–16. Quote from 16.

Generations of African American parents before and since shared Vivienne Skipwith's impulse to protect his thirteen-year-old daughter from seeing the atrocities their white neighbors committed to keep African Americans in "their place." When he carefully mapped out an alternate route for Carrie that morning, in effect he was refusing to allow the white community to poison his child with its hatred and violence. Remembering that day more than seven decades later, Carrie Skipwith Mayfield struggled to find the words to capture her father's act of love:

I said, "Lord have mercy, that's why Papa didn't want me to go that way," because he knew what was happening, but he did not want me to know. That was the most—ooh. And I don't know what to say—I've never—the tree where they hanged his body—the tree was still standing there with its burned leaves, but the rope was gone. And they said they took his [Washington's] body and brought it up Sixth Street. Brought it right up, dragging it behind a car, right on up Sixth Street. But we got home before all that happened. We didn't get to see any of that. We just heard of it after it happened. I don't know what I would have done if I had have seen it. You know, just to see the actual thing. But it happened. It absolutely happened. It happened in my day.³⁰

Though grateful for being spared the terror of watching the slow torture and desecration of Jesse Washington's body, she hesitated—she shuddered—as the memories flooded back. The mob may have dispersed from the square around city hall just as his body and soul, too, had departed from the site of his death, but hours after the lynching, traces of the Waco horror lingered as she retraced the path where his body had been dragged. From the souvenir body parts in window displays to the burnt leaves on the tree branches from which the dead body had swung, the mob left physical reminders of the violence on the landscape, and she carried that psychological debris for the rest of her life. One can only imagine how the lynching would have haunted Carrie had her father's attempts to protect her from "see[ing] the actual thing" been even less successful.

³⁰ Oral Memoirs of Carrie Skipwith Mayfield, Baylor University, 15.

In a time when white men in Waco still would “laugh about a lynching or a killing,” African Americans in and around the city rarely talked about Jesse Washington within earshot of a white person as matter of personal safety, but within the privacy of their homes, fraternal lodges, and churches, those stories persisted in the folklore of the community and passed from one generation to the next.³¹ In May of 1916 when Washington was lynched, Eliza Jane Owens and her husband, Robert, lived on a farm just north of Robinson with their widowed son and their granddaughters. Unlike the Skipwiths whose house was about a dozen blocks from Waco’s city hall, the Owensens lived among the leaders of the lynch mob. She had been born a slave in Georgia and after emancipation had walked from Georgia to Texas, and although she rarely dwelled on the past—her life in slavery, her sojourn across the South, the deaths of her daughter-in-law and several grandchildren—she didn’t shy away from telling her granddaughter Alice, who was just eight years old at the time, what their white neighbors had done to Jesse Washington. Perhaps she intended to warn the child about the hatred in many a white person’s heart—to prepare her for surviving the often unpredictable world of Jim Crow. Alice never understood how even the deepest of hatreds could drive people to drag and burn another human being, but from a very young age she had no illusions about the potentially deadly repercussions for crossing white folks.³²

Telling stories about Washington, Eliza Jane Owens also imparted a much more uplifting, hopeful lesson to Alice about the power of religious faith. As an eighty-five-year-old woman

³¹ This piece was originally a written assignment for a Sociology course at Baylor from 1928, but was republished from the Baylor Archives Texas Collection in this issue of *Waco Heritage & History*. Ida Legett Hall, “History of the Negro in Waco, Texas,” *Waco Heritage & History* 14, no. 3 (spring 1984): 34; Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, 202.

³² Although Eliza Jane Owens’s granddaughter, Alice Owens Caulfield, did not know for certain whether her grandparents had been born into slavery when she was interviewed in 1993, census records from 1900 and 1910 from McLennan County, Texas confirm that both Robert and Eliza Jane Owens were born in Georgia in 1834 and 1845 respectively. Oral Memoirs of Alice Owens Caulfield, January 22 and February 15 and 18, 1993, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, 2–4, 138–140.

still living in Waco, Alice Owens Caulfield recalled that “dragging people and bringing them to the city hall and burning them, those were the kind of stories I could hear my grandmother saying that this will not happen always.”³³ Having endured slavery and experienced emancipation firsthand, this deeply religious woman must have believed that freedom was quite literally the result of the coming of the Lord. “To most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real,” W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in 1935. “They knew Him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of the night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, then afterwards by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free.”³⁴ Owens prayed for the Lord to protect her family from lynching and to deliver the nation from the evil of mob violence, and although she was sure she would never see that deliverance in her lifetime, her faith in the righteousness of the Lord provided hope that Alice would.³⁵ For many African Americans though, prayer could not provide enough solace to cope with the horror of Jesse Washington’s death, and in the months that followed, many black families left Waco for good.³⁶

These responses—whether denouncing lynching in print or praying for deliverance from lynching in church—shared a faith in the possibility of change while expressing a deep disgust with lynching. Even those who picked up and left Waco, at the very least, were seeking a better life elsewhere. The excessive violence of the mob terrorized but did not paralyze the black community. Given the hostile racial climate, two leading black ministers, Reverend John W.

³³ Oral Memoirs of Alice Owens Caulfield, Baylor University, 3.

³⁴ The quoted passage is taken from a chapter of *Black Reconstruction* that is titled “The Coming of the Lord.” W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (1935; reprint, with an introduction by David Levering Lewis, New York: The Free Press, 1998), 124.

³⁵ Oral Memoirs of Alice Owens Caulfield, Baylor University, 3–4, 130, 138–139.

³⁶ Oral Memoirs of Marcus Langley Cooper, Jr., August 8, 1980, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, 127.

Strong and Reverend I. Newton Jenkins, offered reassurances to the white community, denouncing the murder of Lucy Fryer without mentioning the sadistic lynching that followed. Strong and Jenkins's conciliatory, if not obsequious, public remarks were a common refrain among the "respectable" African American leadership who had little choice but to parrot what white folks wanted to hear, but they told the NAACP investigator in confidence that they were disappointed in the lukewarm response of the white clergy to the lynching.³⁷ Three years later, in June 1919, Reverends Strong and Jenkins, along with the outspoken A.T. Smith, applied to become charter members of the Waco Branch of the NAACP.³⁸ In the immediate aftermath of such unrestrained violence, perhaps Strong and Jenkins took to heart the sentiments of the grandfather in Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*. In his death throes, the old man, who had been quiet and unassuming, startled his family with his final declaration: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. ... Learn it to the younguns.'" ³⁹ Not only was "undermin[ing] 'em with grins" a matter of teaching the "younguns" about survival but, as Strong and Jenkins likely knew, subversion.



³⁷ The threat of violent (or economic) retaliation against African American leaders as well as their communities generally hemmed in more radical rhetoric throughout the South, at least in front of whites. In fact, NAACP branches in the South often requested that the national office send correspondence in unmarked envelopes as a safety precaution. In the Jim Crow South, any perceived threat to white supremacy could have serious repercussions, so strategically and practically, the risks that came with direct challenges to white supremacy often outweighed the benefits. Freeman, "The Waco Lynching," NAACP LoC; SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror,'" 530 n. 24.

³⁸ Reverend Strong was the first branch president, and both he and Reverend Jenkins served on the executive committee. Application of Charter of the Waco, Texas Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 16 June 1919, Box I:G205, Folder 14: "Waco, Texas," NAACP LoC. A man named R.H. Hines had expressed interest in starting a branch in Waco in January 1916, but no record of a 1916 charter exists in the NAACP Records. R.H. Hines to NAACP, 18 January 1916, Box I:G205, Folder 14: "Waco, Texas," NAACP LoC.

³⁹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 16.

After the crowd had dispersed from the lynching of Jesse Washington and their appetites for violence had been sated for the time being, a semblance of calm settled over the city. Some local whites wished the horrific lynching could be explained away as a momentary suspension of rationality exacerbated by the mob mentality, but the violence that these white Texans unleashed on Washington's body was no spontaneous expression of rage. The *ritual* of lynching had been deeply engrained in their culture for generations. Sheriff Fleming had good reason to send Washington to another county to avoid a lynching before the trial. Not only was the lynching planned well in advance, which the two prior attempts to lynch Washington attested to, but the enormous crowds that had congregated at the courthouse, bridge, and city hall before the trial started knew where to go and when to be there.⁴⁰ The location of the burning was practically preordained. In 1905 the mob debated burning Sank Majors on the grounds of city hall, and in 1916 and 1922, mobs did burn Jesse Washington and Jesse Thomas there. A Waco photographer of some regional prominence, Frank Gildersleeve, received a call on the morning of May 15, 1916 to give him ample time to set up his equipment in city hall and take photographs of Washington's grisly death, which he later sold as souvenirs.⁴¹ Lynchings were not impromptu, heat-of-the-moment affairs. That mobs assembled so quickly and predictably had less to do with outrage over a particular incident and more to do with a culture that celebrated white supremacy and embraced racial violence.

Lynching performed an important social function in the white community. Desecrating and torturing black bodies affirmed the white supremacist social structure often referred to as "the Southern way of life," and these rituals, in turn, bolstered white racial solidarity and reinforced the dominant southern white identity that was rooted in racial violence. For a city

⁴⁰ People from out of town began to congregate on the courthouse lawn the night before the trial in anticipation of the lynching, so the lynching was far from spontaneous. "The Waco Horror," *The Crisis*, 3.

⁴¹ "The Waco Horror," *The Crisis*, 6.

with a population of around 33,670, the mob of 15,000 from in and around Waco that had gathered on the grounds of city hall represented a significant portion of the white population. One striking feature of contemporary reports about the lynching was their descriptions of the mob acting as a single unit.⁴² The reporter for *The Waco Times-Herald* dramatized the synchronized, coordinated efforts of the mob:

Great masses of humanity flew as swiftly as possible through the streets of the city in order to be present at the bridge when the hanging took place, but when it was learned that the negro [sic] was being taken to the city hall lawn, crowds of men, women and children turned and hastened to the lawn.

... As rapidly as possible the negro [sic] was then jerked into the air at which a shout from thousands of throats went up on the morning air, and dry goods boxes, excelsior, wood and every other article that would burn was then in evidence, appearing as if by magic. ... The negro's [sic] body was swaying in the air and all of the time a noise as of thousands was heard and the negro's [sic] body was lowered into the box.

No sooner had his body touched the box than people pressed forward, each eager to be the first to light the fire, matches were touched to the inflammable material and as smoke rapidly rose in the air, such a demonstration as of people gone made was never heard before. Everybody pressed closer to get souvenirs of the affair. ...

...

Women and children who desired to view the scene were allowed to do so, the crowds parting to let them look on the scene.⁴³

The language the reporter used to describe the movement of the “great masses of humanity”—“crowds...turned and hastened to the lawn” and “a shout from thousands of throats” and “people pressed forward” and “the crowds parting”—elicited images of swarms of people combining to become a monstrous, single body. In the photographs of the crowd that Gildersleeve took from

⁴² The 1910 and 1920 Census records list the population of Waco at 26,425 and 38,500 respectively, and assuming that the rate of growth was steady during that decade, SoRelle estimates that the 1916 population was around 33,760. SoRelle, “The ‘Waco Horror,’” 518 n. 4. In 1910 and 1920, African Americans made up 23.0% (6,067 people) and 20.1% (7,726 people) of the population of Waco respectively, and the corresponding numbers for whites were 20,333 people and 29,762 people respectively. Note that during this period, the number of Mexican-born residents of McLennan County grew from 17 in 1900 to 496 in 1910 and to 1,502 in 1920. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, 171, 174. Based on these numbers, even if people poured in from the surrounding towns, the mob of 15,000 likely included more than half of the white population of Waco. Also note that the 1910 Census data for McLennan County is 73,250 people, of which 17,234 were black. “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 1.

⁴³ “Mob Takes Negro From Court House, Burns Him At Stake,” *Waco Times-Herald*, 15 May 1916.

the upper level of city hall, individual faces of people disappeared under an endless sea of hats surrounding the black teenager's broken body. The uniform pattern of blurry dots in these photographs captured both the anonymity of the individuals in the mob and the solidarity of the white community. The mob literally contracted when they feverishly closed in on Washington's body to collect "souvenirs," and the singular purpose with which people scrambled to gather wood and set Washington ablaze demonstrated how lynching reinvigorated white supremacy through a collective ritual.

This public display of unity strengthened solidarity within the white community but also silenced dissent among its ranks. One eyewitness to the lynching, Joseph Martin Dawson, recalled nearly five decades later, "I was present at City Hall within a few feet of where the Negro was burned, entirely helpless because five thousand monsters participated and who was I, a lone individual, to do anything about it?"⁴⁴ In the weeks that followed, Dawson, the pastor of Waco's First Baptist Church, gave a sermon criticizing mob rule and introduced a resolution to the Waco Pastors' Association denouncing lynching, but one can probably assume that his tongue-lashings failed to stir the consciences of the members of the Ku Klux Klan among his flock.⁴⁵ Although other white ministers supported his resolution, none of them joined him in leading a public campaign against lynching. In fact, even fifty-five years later, he lamented that, "such noble people as Dr. Charles T. Caldwell, pastor of First Presbyterian Church for a long

⁴⁴ Oral Memoirs of Joseph Martin Dawson, 17 February 1971, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, 53. Dawson writes that the mob included five thousand people, as opposed to the fifteen thousand reported by local newspapers the day after the lynching. Carrigan has noted that estimates made by white people for the size of the crowd decreased both in the days after the lynching and in the decades since the lynching as shame and guilt about the barbarity of Washington's death set in. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, 193.

⁴⁵ During the interview in 1971, Dawson explained that a committee of Klan leaders and members approached him about joining the Klan, and he declined their invitation. The interviewer also asked if any members of his congregation led the lynching, and he answered in the negative. He also noted that although the Klan may have instigated the violence and participated in the burning, "the lowest order of people in the City of Waco" actually led and carried out the lynching. Oral Memoirs of Joseph Martin Dawson, Baylor University, 52–53, 55–57. (The quote in this footnote is from page 56.)

period and highly regarded, refused to say a thing about it, due likely to his intense Southern uprearing.”⁴⁶ Lynching culture and people with an “intense Southern uprearing” had little tolerance for white critics of extralegal violence, and even sympathetic religious leaders felt impotent in front of the mob.⁴⁷

Many prominent Wacoans, including Dawson and, for that matter, the African American editor A.T. Smith, blamed the “the lowest order of people in the City of Waco” for the lynching, but responsibility—or at least complicity—permeated all strata of the white community.⁴⁸ While “the lowest order” may have carried out the lynching, Sheriff Fleming and Judge Munroe did nothing to stop the mob from seizing Washington, and Mayor John R. Dollins and Chief of Police Guy McNamara watched the entire violent spectacle from the mayor’s office in city hall.⁴⁹ In an interview with the NAACP investigator, Elizabeth Freeman, the sheriff claimed that his legal duty to protect a prisoner ended once the trial started, and when asked why his deputies failed to act, he glibly retorted, ““Would you want to protect the nigger?””⁵⁰ Freeman’s questions to the judge about changing the venue of the trial and clearing the courtroom received an equally frosty answer: ““Do you want to spill blood for a nigger?””⁵¹ Perched up in his office watching Washington suffer through unrelenting torture, the mayor was more concerned about

⁴⁶ Oral Memoirs of Joseph Martin Dawson, Baylor University, 54. [SoRelle notes that Dean John L. Kesler of Baylor responded to criticism from Oswald Garrison Villard (owner of *Nation* and a founding member of the NAACP) by saying that Waco ministers, including Caldwell and Dawson, gave sermons denouncing lynching. At the same time, the Supplement in *The Crisis* indicates that Caldwell was the only Waco pastor to speak out, so I may have to check into the notes of the NAACP investigator to figure out Caldwell’s actual position.] SoRelle, “The ‘Waco Horror,’” 532; “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 8.

⁴⁷ My assessment of Dawson may seem too generous since, as a minister, he had a moral obligation to stop this horrific crime, but perhaps expecting such extraordinary courage and commitment to one’s convictions is unfair. In light of Dawson’s relatively progressive stand on racial equality in the decades that followed, I believe his denunciation of lynching reflected his true convictions and was not simply a ploy to save face.

⁴⁸ Oral Memoirs of Joseph Martin Dawson, Baylor University, 56.

⁴⁹ “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 5.

⁵⁰ “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 4.

⁵¹ “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 3.

damage to the tree than the dying teenager chained to it.⁵² In a place where one of the candidates for county sheriff “is said to have three dead “niggers” to his “credit,”” these public officials shared with the “lowest order” of their constituents an unapologetic contempt for African Americans and a tolerance for ignoring the law.⁵³

The lynching of Jesse Washington followed the same tired script that surfaced time and again across the South. His death was grislier than most. The mob was larger than most. But those who came to relish the spectacle of violence arrived with expectations that had been honed by generations of lynchers and thousands of lynchings. White southerners expected to participate in particular rituals that acted out the meaning of white supremacy like castration, dragging a corpse, extracting a confession, and taking body parts as souvenirs. Lynching, therefore, was a vehicle for publically and collectively expressing a racist worldview, both to affirm those ideas and to teach those ideas to future generations of whites and blacks.

Perhaps the most notorious and powerful of those myths was what the African American anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells called “the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women.”⁵⁴ After emancipation, the prospect of racial equality, which white southerners derided as “social equality,” threatened existing race relations, and lynching emerged as the most extreme method of protecting the elevated status of whiteness. Historian George Fredrickson explained that “the only way to meet criticisms of the unspeakably revolting practice of lynching was to contend that many Negroes were literally wild beasts, with uncontrollable sexual passions and criminal natures stamped by heredity.”⁵⁵ With roots in pro-slavery rhetoric that described

⁵² “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 5.

⁵³ “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 3.

⁵⁴ Wells, *Southern Horrors*, 52.

⁵⁵ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1971; reprint, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 276.

blacks as brutes that needed to be tamed by the rigid controls of slavery, the myth of the black rapist, Fredrickson suggested, was most likely “projection of unacknowledged guilt feelings derived from their own [whites’] brutality towards blacks,” including, I would argue, the invisible crime of white men raping black women.⁵⁶ (A crime made visible on the faces of generations of mixed race children.) Or, perhaps, as another historian, Winthrop Jordan suggested: fears about miscegenation were wrapped up in white men’s sexual anxieties over their own virility and who controlled women’s bodies, especially white women’s bodies.⁵⁷ Emancipation only heightened these sexual anxieties since free African American men stood to compete for economic, social, and political power in the South, so although the myth of the black rapist surfaced in the post-Civil War era, it grew out of longstanding anxieties about racial equality and black sexuality.

In light of the cultural currency that protecting white womanhood enjoyed, the prevalence of castration in lynchings is unsurprising. Castration as a punishment for African American men had roots in the colonial period when several American colonies sought to “restrain a lecherous and barbarous people” as one would an aggressive bull or stallion.⁵⁸ Certain offenses, including rape, striking a white person, and running away, were punished by castration, and in all of the colonies with these laws except Pennsylvania, the punishment applied exclusively to African Americans and Native Americans. “Writing sexual retaliation into law,” as Jordan put it, only underscored the sexual insecurity of white men and the “fairly widespread and strong feeling on the ‘protection’ of white women.”⁵⁹ Emasculating black men back in the colonial period and

⁵⁶ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 282.

⁵⁷ Jordan argues that white anxieties about white flaws underlay racism and a corresponding fear of racial equality. Similarly, whites projected sexual licentiousness onto blacks because they feared the unrestrained animal within. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 154–163, 577–582.

⁵⁸ Jordan, *White Over Black*, 156.

⁵⁹ Jordan, *White Over Black*, 154–158. Quote on 157.

during Jim Crow provided a social space for white men to assert their dominance over black men as competition for the affections of southern women, especially white women, but also eased their sexual insecurities.⁶⁰

Although white Southerners never seemed to grow weary of the black rapist myth, in reality most African American men who were lynched were not accused of rape, and in Washington's case, the white community seems to have assumed Lucy Fryer was raped from the moment her murder became news.⁶¹ The Waco newspapers predictably inflamed white racial and sexual fears, claiming that Fryer had been brutally raped before she was killed, but the trial raised some serious doubts about that charge. Washington admitted murdering Fryer in his initial verbal confession, but only in his written version, which the illiterate and possibly mentally disabled teenager certainly did not write himself, did he confess to rape and murder. Despite his written confession, the grand jury did not charge him with rape, and during the trial, the prosecution neglected to ask the doctor who performed the autopsy, Dr. J.H. Maynard, whether Fryer had been raped even though Washington's full confession was read aloud in court. The prosecution's decision to ignore that line of questioning is particularly curious since, only a week earlier, *The Waco Times-Herald* reported that "Dr. Maynard declared this morning [the day after the body was discovered] he was positive that Mrs. Fryar [sic] had been ravished."⁶² The

⁶⁰ For more information on the charge of rape and lynching, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 58–72. During the lynching of Claude Neal in Greenwood, Florida on October 27, 1934, the white men who tortured and killed him cut off his penis and testicles then forced him to eat them. I am not aware of other examples in which a lynching victim was force-fed his own genitals, but the fact that it happened shows the extent of white men's anxieties about black male sexuality. James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 80–81.

⁶¹ White, *Rope and Faggot*, 56–57; Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 68. The ringleader of the first Robinson mob that attempted to lynch Washington expressed the grave importance of his role as a protector of white women, telling the sheriff that their wives, daughters, and sisters "kissed us good bye and told us to do our duty" before they set out for the county jail. SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror,'" 521.

⁶² *Waco Times-Herald*, 9 May 1916.

trial may have been a mere formality, but perhaps the prosecution's omission of any reference to rape reflected a reluctance to further sully the justice system with a fabricated charge.

Another common ritual practiced across the South, the harvesting and purchasing of “souvenirs,” provided physical reference points for shaping white memories of lynching. These grisly “mementos” included parts of the lynched person's body, photographs of the lynching, and objects from the site of the lynching like bits of the rope or chain and scraps of the makeshift scaffold or stake. During Washington's lynching, members of the mob sliced off his fingers, toes, ears, and shreds of clothing, and afterwards some purchased the links in the chain for twenty-five cents apiece as well as souvenir photographs from Gildersleeve.⁶³ One man bought Washington's teeth for five dollars each from some little boys who had extracted them from his severed head.⁶⁴ These profoundly disturbing souvenirs—photographs of dead black bodies surrounded by unmasked white faces in broad daylight and body parts that had been hacked off of a mangled body—possessed (or perhaps were possessed with) the very meaning of white supremacy. James Kuykendall Evetts, whose father had been a county attorney in nearby Killeen, Texas recalled a story that captures the symbolic power of a lynching souvenir: “And the Negro was taken and lynched and the man, the next day, that had been a friend of Dad's—never was after that—came up there [to his office] and brought a toe bone from the Negro's pyre where they burned him and handed it to Dad. And it made Dad so mad that Dad got up and

⁶³ Several scholars have written about lynching photographs, which often were sold as postcards so that members of the mob could tell their friends and family about what was for them an exciting life event. In some cases, the sender of the postcard would indicate where he was in the photograph. James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000); Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Jacqueline Goldsby, “Through a Different Lens: Lynching Photography at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century” in *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Amy Louise Wood, “The Spectator Has a Picture in His Mind to Remember for a Long Time: Photography” and “We Wanted to be Boosters and Not Knockers: Photography and Antilynching Activism” in *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁶⁴ “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 6; *Waco Times-Herald*, 15 May 1916.

threw him down the stairway.”⁶⁵ Evetts’s dad, as the county attorney, had tried to protect that African American man from falling into the hands of the mob the day before. That “friend” proudly handed him the bone to make a point. Like a talisman, that bone reassured him of his place in southern society and served as a reminder of what it meant to be a white southern man.

Lynching culture was, by design, intergenerational. For white children, witnessing these rituals initiated them into the privileges of whiteness, and these public killings not only condoned racial violence and the current racial order but also taught them that, like their parents and neighbors, they should be invested in maintaining white supremacy. Unlike Vivienne Skipwith who had tried to divert his daughter *away* from the mob and the violence, at least one white father in the crowd held up his son so he could get a clearer view. Another little boy perched in the upper branches of the tree Washington was chained to remained there until the flames from the fire consuming Washington’s body below got too hot. Several white boys, probably no more than ten or eleven years old, stood within a half dozen yards of Washington’s body to watch the tortures unfold. Even though they were skipping school to watch Washington die, they received an education of a different sort about how expendable African American life was in Texas.⁶⁶ No wonder African Americans had this saying about the ways of white folks: “‘If you kill a nigger, I’ll hire another nigger. ... If you kill a mule, I’ll buy another one.’”⁶⁷

The consensus among most white Wacoans was that the lynching was understandable given the severity and nature of the crime—the murder and possible rape of a white woman by a

⁶⁵ Oral Memoirs of James Kuykendall Evetts, 23 May 1977, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, 33. Evetts’s father along with the chief of police had tried to prevent the lynching, and Evetts told the story to illustrate his father’s commitment to principles and justice.

⁶⁶ “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 5–7. This supplement to *The Crisis* included several photographs of the lynching taken by Gildersleeve, and in addition to the photographs taken from the upper level of city hall, he took a few shots of Washington’s body from the ground after the burning. In these ground-level photographs, the faces of several members of the mob are clear enough to identify them. Among the faces are a few young boys.

⁶⁷ Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, The Alan Lomax Collection, Rounder Records CD 82161-1860-2. The quote, taken from track 16 (“Conversation Continues”), is from Big Bill Broonzy’s story about working on a levee camp.

black man. Some people conceded that members of the mob may have taken their vengeance too far when they burned and dragged Washington's body, but unrepentant defenders of the lynching abounded.⁶⁸ In an interview with Freeman during her investigation for the NAACP, Judge Augustus R. McCollum, the owner of Waco's *Semi-Weekly Tribune*, assured her that the lynching was a necessary measure for controlling African Americans. In her report, Freeman recounted that "[McCollum] began to tell me how he knew all about the niggers and we northerners do not. He said that as an old southerner he knew perfectly well how to handle the colored population. He told me how he was raised with them, had a colored mammy, nursed at her breast, etc."⁶⁹ McCollum's refrain was typical among white southerners who projected their own violent tendencies onto African Americans to justify a white supremacist social order. Without even a hint of irony, he invoked a somewhat twisted version of paternalism in which he imagined African Americans to be dangerous children who, for their own good, could only be controlled through brute force.⁷⁰ As a judge, McCollum's lack of faith in the law seems particularly appalling, but his full-throated support of lynching was but one voice among many of its defenders.

As news of the city's barbarity spread across the country and around the world, Waco faced an unexpected flood of criticism, and the unwelcome notoriety prompted some city boosters and white elites to become more circumspect. Waco's fledgling business sector had been trying to attract investors in hopes of developing industries that could compete with those in major American cities, so to deflect the negative publicity they distanced themselves from the

⁶⁸ SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror,'" 528–530.

⁶⁹ "The Waco Horror," *The Crisis*, 7. In the NAACP report, McCollum's name is spelled "McCullum," but Carrigan spells it "McCollum." Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, 190.

⁷⁰ Two of the post-emancipation racial images that Fredrickson identifies are a new paternalism and what he calls "Negrophobia." McCullum combines elements from both: a nostalgic fondness for "good" black people (i.e. his mammy) and anxieties about controlling "the Negro as beast" (i.e. Washington). Fredrickson, "The New South and the New Paternalism, 1877–1890" and "The Negro as Beast: Southern Negrophobia at the Turn of the Century" in *The Black Image in the White Mind*.

backwardness of a mobocracy. At the behest of “our ‘City dad’s’” who worried about further tarnishing Waco’s image, Gildersleeve stopped selling souvenir photographs of the lynching.⁷¹ Despite a few half-hearted calls from the white community to protest the lynching, Freeman expressed her frustration and disgust that “no human being in Waco would take it [the case]” and press charges against the leaders of the lynch mob whose identities were widely known around the city.⁷² Many whites hoped that silence—pretending the lynching did not happen and not pursuing the lynchers—would somehow absolve them of guilt and erase this ugly episode from their memory.

About two weeks after the lynching, the faculty at Baylor University, a well-respected Baptist institution and the oldest college in the state, issued a resolution “declar[ing] that we abhor and deplore the violent acts of the mob, although we do not condone the dastardly offense of which the said negro [sic] made confession.”⁷³ The overarching sentiment of the resolution is laudable, but because they tempered their abhorrence of lynching with a nod to Washington’s “dastardly offense,” the faculty seemed more concerned with protecting the university’s Christian image than racial justice. These belated, tepid protests from the white community that were often grudgingly extracted out of shame rather than righteous indignation were too little too late. As far as the editor of the black newspaper, *The Houston Informer*, was concerned, after roasting Jesse Washington alive in 1916 and burning the corpse of Jesse Thomas in 1922, the white people of the self-proclaimed “City with a Soul” had earned their city a new nickname, Barbecueville.⁷⁴

⁷¹ “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 6.

⁷² “The Waco Horror,” *The Crisis*, 7.

⁷³ Resolution of the Baylor University Faculty, 27 May 1916, [Waco] Community Race Relations Coalition Records, Texas Collection, Baylor University.

⁷⁴ In reference to the lynching of Jesse Washington and other lynchings in central Texas, *The Houston Informer*, a black newspaper, referred to Waco as “Barbecueville” in two January 1923 issues. William D. Carrigan, *The*

Brooks County, Georgia (1918)

The tree, a small oak, stood just a few yards from the banks of the Little River. One of its gnarled limbs stretched across the lonely country road that led to Barney, Georgia as if straining to reach the tree across the way. The scorching midday sun beat down on the oak, but only a few rays penetrated through the canopy of the forest to the thick underbrush below. That canopy would soon provide a shroud not just to the bramble and vines below but to the shallow grave of Mary Turner and her baby.

The mob from in and around Barney arrived shortly after noon and settled on the oak with its outstretched limb as the site of its tortures. A few members of the mob hoisted their most recent trophy up in the tree by the ankles as she struggled and screamed, and this crowd of white men laughed and jeered when her dress fell around her waist, exposing her body to their leers. Eight-months pregnant, Mary Turner's belly was heavy and swollen with her third child, and as a hot breeze rustled through the leaves of the oak, the knotty limb sagged and creaked under her weight. The mob worked quickly, splashing gasoline and motor oil on her dress, and with a single match, flames enveloped her entire body. The more her anguished cries and shrieks of pain pierced the air and the more she violently writhed as the blistering heat that consumed her clothing burned her skin, the more the mob roared with laughter and delighted in her slow death. Even after every scrap of her clothing had turned to ash, she still clung to life. A man emerged from the crowd carrying a large knife used to butcher hogs, and he plunged the knife into her belly, which was still holding her unborn child, then jerked the knife down, tearing open her womb. Out of that gash her baby tumbled and gave out two short whimpers before a man, likely the one wielding the knife, stomped on its head with the heel of his boot. Perhaps death

spared Turner the horror of witnessing her baby's skull being crushed after drawing its first two breaths of life, but then again perhaps in her final conscious moments, she watched as her helpless child suffered and died.

The morbid entertainment continued under the branches of the oak. The jovial mob riddled Turner's corpse with hundreds of bullets then cut the rope tied around her ankles so she dropped into a crumpled pile on the ground. Someone thought, as a joke, to mark the hastily dug grave of mother and child using an empty whiskey bottle, and into the neck of the bottle someone stuffed the butt of a cigar that had helped one man's sensitive nostrils stand the stench of burning human flesh. The members of the mob dispersed, returning to the towns and farms where they lived, and they left Mary Turner and her baby buried a few yards from the foot of the small oak tree.⁷⁵

The mob unleashed such excessive violence upon Turner not as punishment for an equally heinous crime but because, according to an Atlanta newspaper, she had made "unwise remarks."⁷⁶ On the previous day, a mob of about forty men had seized her husband, Hayes Turner, from the sheriff and had lynched him on the hanging tree where Morven and Barney Roads met near Quitman, Georgia. His hands remained handcuffed behind his back as his corpse swayed in the breeze and hundreds of spectators passed by to gawk at his body. The authorities left his body hanging for three days before sending some convict laborers to cut it down and bury it just a few feet from that tree. In her fury and anguish, the young widow had vowed that, if the identities of the men who lynched her husband came to light, she would pursue legal action against them, and she vehemently disputed the charge that her husband was involved

⁷⁵ Christopher C. Meyers, "'Killing Them by the Wholesale': A Lynching Rampage in South Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 214–235, especially 224; White, *Rope and Faggot*, 27–29; Walter White "The Work of a Mob," *The Crisis* 16, no. 5 (September 1918), 221–223, especially 222.

⁷⁶ "Woman Lynched by Brooks Co. Mob," *Atlanta Constitution [or Atlanta Journal?]*, 20 May 1918.

in their white employer's death. Her defiance of white supremacy, her demand for justice, and her defense of her husband's innocence enraged the white people of Brooks County, and a newspaper reported that "in their indignant mood [they] took exceptions to her remarks as well as her attitude" and made her and her unborn child pay in no uncertain terms.⁷⁷

The Turners were killed during a lynching rampage sparked by the murder of a prominent white farmer, Hampton Smith, on the evening of May 16, 1918. The young couple worked on one of Smith's farms along with several other farm hands, and they all endured the abuses of their employer, who routinely beat his workers and cheated them out of their wages. Smith did not reserve his blows only for the men who worked for him. He severely beat Mary Turner on several occasions, and Hayes Turner, out of devotion to his wife and a desire to protect her, made verbal threats to Smith that landed him on a chain gang for a spell. The Turners insisted on affirming their birthright claims as American citizens and their innate human rights to dignity and respect. Their refusal to adhere to their prescribed station in life as subservient, expendable laborers was intolerable to their white neighbors, and their defiance proved deadly.

Smith was so notorious for abusing his farm laborers that he struggled to find people willing to work for him. He often resorted to paying the fines of African American men in jail for petty crimes so they would have to work for him to repay him. One such man was nineteen-year-old Sidney Johnson who the county court in Quitman had fined thirty dollars for gambling. After Smith paid his fine, Johnson began working for the ill-tempered farmer, but once Johnson worked off his debts and Smith still didn't pay him, the two men got into a heated argument. A few days after confronting Smith, Johnson became ill and did not go out to work in the fields, and his boss mercilessly beat him. This beating would be Smith's last. Like Hayes Turner, Johnson made some verbal threats to kill Smith, and a few days later, another farm hand named

⁷⁷ "Death Dealt to Man and Wife," *Atlanta Constitution [or Atlanta Journal?]*, 20 May 1918.

Will Head stole Hampton Smith's gun while Smith's wife was distracted in the kitchen preparing dinner. That night, Johnson fired four shots into the Smith home, hitting Smith in the shoulder and the chest and striking Smith's wife in the shoulder. Johnson and his accomplices fled into the swamps under the cover of darkness, and although Smith's wife survived with minor injuries, Smith died instantly.

Once the authorities discovered Hampton Smith's body, several posses scoured the swamps, forests, and homes in the area for Smith's farm hands who local whites immediately suspected of committing the murder. By the following Wednesday, Will Head, Will Thompson, Julius Jones, Hayes Turner, Eugene Rice, Chime Riley, Simon Schuman, Mary Turner, the Turners's baby, three unidentified African American men, and finally Sidney Johnson would all died at the hands of lynch mobs. Johnson eluded capture the longest, but on Wednesday, May 22, he found himself cornered in a Valdosta home. Refusing to be taken alive, Johnson engaged in an extended shootout with a posse led by the police chief, Calvin Dampier. The exchange of fire attracted a mob of several hundred people, and after the posse no longer heard shots fired from the Valdosta house where Johnson had been hiding, they cautiously approached the house and found him dead. With the chief of police and his deputies present, members of the mob castrated Johnson's dead body, threw his severed genitals into the street, and dragged the corpse behind an automobile up Patterson Street in Valdosta then another fifteen miles to the Mt. Zion Camp Ground Methodist Church near Morven. On the grounds of the Methodist church, the mob, which included many members of the congregation, gathered wood around a large pine stump with Johnson's body lying across it then doused his body with oil. Having been denied the spectacle of watching Johnson tortured and killed, they burned his body until all that was left of him was a pile of smoldering ashes.

In the six days between Smith's murder on May 16 and Johnson's death on May 22, mobs lynched at least thirteen and possibly as many as eighteen African Americans. Whites in Brooks County during the Jim Crow years lynched more people than any other county in Georgia and possibly the United States, but residents didn't need a body count to recognize the force and meaning of white supremacy.⁷⁸ The bodies that were left hanging from trees for days and the corpses that surfaced in the Little River and the ashes at the Camp Ground and the grave marked by a whiskey bottle reminded whites and African Americans alike how cheap black life was in southern Georgia.⁷⁹

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh.*

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁸⁰*



Amid this wave of unspeakable and often indiscriminant violence that claimed so many lives, Mary Turner's death weighed most heavily upon members of the black community. If

⁷⁸ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 119.

⁷⁹ In reference to the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose in Newman, Georgia, the last line of Ida B. Wells's pamphlet "Lynch Law in Georgia" reads, "With these facts I made my way home, thoroughly convinced that a Negro's life is a very cheap thing in Georgia." This section of the pamphlet reproduces a report by an independent investigator hired by Wells, Louis P. Le Vin. Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in Georgia," 1899.

⁸⁰ Lewis Allan, "Strange Fruit," (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Corporation, 1940).

their white neighbors had the capacity to tear open a pregnant woman's womb and crush the skull of a baby, they could only imagine what horrors might be in store for the rest of the community. The way in which she and her child died pushed the limits of moral depravity even in a place as deformed by white supremacy as southern Georgia. With the three men lynched on the grounds of the Mt. Zion Camp Ground Methodist Church by a mob that included many parishioners, blacks must have wondered what distorted version of the Gospel that congregation heard in their Sunday sermons that would sanction killing a pregnant woman and her baby with such relish.

Turner and her child's lynchings tested the resolve of local blacks to remain on the land that they and their ancestors had worked for decades as slaves, as sharecroppers, as tenant farmers, as farm hands, and, for some, as landowners. Despite strong ties to the land and to the community, over five hundred African Americans picked up and left Brooks and Lowndes Counties in the weeks and months following the lynching rampage. Most of them likely decided to uproot their families out of fear and disgust, but also out of sheer defiance. Only one or two generations removed from slavery, they knew the significance of leaving white landowners without laborers in May, and they knew the importance of protecting their loved ones and affirming their autonomy as free American citizens. Moving to other parts of the South or even to northern cities meant an uncertain future, but in the face of such unpredictable violence, this decision provided African Americans with some semblance of control over their lives.

Those who remained either did not have the means to relocate or stubbornly refused to give in to the terror and give up their claim to the land established over generations. Judge Head, whose brother Will Head had been the first person lynched during the rampage, decided to wait out the storm. He worked as a sharecropper for decades until he saved enough money to

purchase a small plot near Pavo, Georgia, also in Brooks County, and his grandson, Willie Head, Jr., farms that land to this day.

In the immediate aftermath of the lynching rampage, the black community turned its attention to deciding who would take care of the Turners's two orphaned children, Ocie Lee and Leaster. After her husband had been arrested, Mary Turner had brought her two children to stay with her parents for their safety, and after losing both of their parents and an unborn baby brother or sister to lynch mobs in a matter of days, the children moved in with aunts and uncles on their mother's side. The family still feared that whites would target the young children, so the children took assumed names, Otha Manning and Conie L. Manning, as a precaution.⁸¹ As soon as Ocie Lee Manning was old enough to make a living on his own, he left Brooks County and moved to Florida. His sister, Leaster, remained in Georgia, and she married a man who owned a stretch of land just a few miles north of the place her mother and the baby had been killed. In the decades that followed, members of the black community wouldn't speak of the lynching in her presence to protect her from reliving those memories. That story was hard enough to talk about amongst themselves, and even then they spoke of it only in whispers out of earshot of their children.

The story about Mary Turner's lynching travelled, perhaps by word of mouth, but also through articles published in black newspapers and magazines that circulated throughout the region and the nation.⁸² As a child growing up in Chester, South Carolina during the 1940s, J. Charles Jones heard his father teach him the local lore about the Klan going to the house of a

⁸¹ According to the 1920 Census for Robinson, Colquitt County, Georgia taken on January 12, 1920, "Otha Manning" and "Conie L. Manning" were the adopted children of John and Viola Godfrey, and in the 1920 Census for Barney, Brooks County, Georgia taken a few months later on April 10, 1920, "Ophy Manning" and "Conny Manning" were the niece and nephew of John and Viola Godfrey.

⁸² The NAACP's monthly, *The Crisis*, published Walter White's investigation of the lynchings in Brooks and Lowndes Counties, and the organization frequently cited the case in its campaigns to end lynching and pass federal anti-lynching legislation.

black man who had “said something” to a white woman. As he explained to an interviewer from Duke University in 1993, when they discovered the man was not home, the mob “proceeded to take his wife who was about eight months pregnant to a tree, strung her up by the legs, slit her stomach, and the baby rolled out. They left them both. And to this day, nothing was ever done about that.”⁸³ Jones appeared to have blended elements of the Mary Turner lynching with the lynching of Bertha Lowman near Aiken, South Carolina eight years later in October 1926. Members of the Klan, who included law enforcement officers, took Bertha Lowman, her brother, and her cousin from jail to a field where they shot each of them several times.⁸⁴ The disturbing details of Mary Turner’s death had so deeply made an impression on Jones’s mind that, even though her lynching happened a few hundred miles from where Jones grew up, he subconsciously made that violent story local and personal.

The image of his father’s face, which expressed both fear and indignation as he told the story, remained vivid in Jones’s memory when he retold this story in 1993. Perhaps his father thought that passing on this grisly story would serve as a warning that his son should avoid talking to white women in the South, but recounting the details of the lynching also instilled in his son a refusal to tolerate injustice. Jones had enfolded Mary Turner’s story into his local and personal history, and as a young man living in North Carolina during the 1960s, J. Charles Jones joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to protest against that same Jim Crow system that celebrated the lynching of Bertha Lowman and Mary Turner.

Back in Brooks and Lowndes County, Georgia, those African Americans who remained mourned the deaths of those killed in what locals called “that reign of terror” in May 1918. They mourned, but they also organized. On May 23, 1919, almost exactly one year after the lynching

⁸³ Oral History of J. Charles Jones, 16 June 1993, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

⁸⁴ “Unknown Parties” Who Lynched Three in South Carolina Known,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 3 November 1926.

rampage, a group of fifty African Americans met in Valdosta to become charter members of a local branch of the NAACP. Despite the dangers involved in establishing an NAACP branch in the heart of the Deep South, these courageous citizens, who included barbers, laborers, housewives, and doctors, refused to allow the violent tendencies of their white neighbors to define their place in southern Georgia. The records of the NAACP national office do not contain any correspondence about the subsequent activities of the Valdosta Branch, but the existence of the branch itself spoke volumes about the African American community's perseverance and strength. In fact, the national office of the NAACP proudly touted the courage of the Valdosta Branch and its commitment to racial justice. When the leadership of the Dallas Branch complained in 1923 that the threat of the Klan prevented the branch from convening meetings, the Director of Branches, Robert W. Bagnall, wrote:

Mrs. Addie H. Hunton, our field secretary, is now making an extended tour throughout the South, covering the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida and Louisiana. She even plans to visit Valdosta, Georgia. Under these circumstances, it is apparent that there is no real reason why our [the NAACP's] work should not be conducted in Dallas.⁸⁵

Bagnall cited the strength of the Valdosta Branch to encourage the Dallas Branch—or perhaps shame the branch—to hold regular meetings despite real pressure from the Klan. The white community in Brooks and Lowndes Counties had earned a reputation for lynching a pregnant woman and a baby, but their African American counterparts established a reputation among NAACP officials for their steely nerves and defiance of lynching.



⁸⁵ Robert W. Bagnall to George F. Porter, 19 March 1923, Box I:G201, Folder 25, NAACP LoC.

Unlike the white community in Waco, Texas where certain factions seemed circumspect in the aftermath of the Jesse Washington lynching, whites in Brooks County were decidedly unapologetic. When the NAACP's Walter White went down to investigate the lynchings, one of the local white men he interviewed boasted that the lynching of Mary Turner was "the best show, Mister, I ever did see. You ought to have heard the wench howl when we strung her up."⁸⁶ The NAACP investigator's blue eyes and pale skin let him "pass" for white, and he figured that the only reason some local whites were tight-lipped around him was because they suspected he was an agent of the federal government. Despite these apprehensions, that local man took unabashed glee recounting the details of Turner's death to an outsider. He described Hampton Smith, the murdered white farmer, as "'a mean one, all right...[who] never paid his debts to white men or niggers and wasn't liked much around here,'" and when White asked why the death of such a man would elicit the violent response it did, the local man answered, "'It's a matter of safety—we gotta show niggers that they mustn't touch a white man, no matter how low-down and ornery he is.'"⁸⁷

None of the people involved in the lynchings faced prosecution, nor were they ostracized by their white neighbors. Many died old men and women without any threat of legal punishment. The three men hanged or burned on the grounds of the Camp Ground Methodist Church during that deadly week in May 1918 weren't the first or the last to be lynched at that church. Not only did the memory of that week live on, but the tradition of mob violence in Brooks County lived on too.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Walter White, "I Investigate Lynchings," in *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 252–260, quote from 255.

⁸⁷ White, *Witnessing Lynching*, 255.

⁸⁸ Parishioners at the Camp Ground Methodist Church also lynched other African Americans in front of the church, including an unidentified man in the 1950s, which I discuss in Chapter 2. As recently as 2013, an African American student named Kendrick Johnson died under mysterious circumstances at Lowndes High School in Valdosta. His family and members of the community have successfully pressured the state of Georgia to reopen the investigation



After the smoke cleared and the mobs dispersed, on the surface, Waco and Brooks County appeared to have returned to a normal state of affairs, but even in the immediate aftermath, the traumatic reverberations of these lynchings washed over these communities, leaving no one untouched. In “The Haunted Oak” (1903), the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar felt and saw the presence of an innocent lynching victim linger in the branches of the lynching tree:

Pray why are you so bare, so bare,
 Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;
 And why, when I go through the shade you throw,
 Runs a shudder over me.

...

Oh, foolish man, why weep you now?
 ‘T is but a little space,
 And the time will come when these shall dread
 The mem’ry of your face

I feel the rope against my bark,
 And the weight of him in my grain,
 I feel in the throe of his final woe
 The touch of my own last pain.

And never more shall these leaves come forth
 On a bough that bears the ban.
 I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,
 From the curse of a guiltless man.

And ever the judge rides by, rides by,
 And goes to hunt the deer,
 And ever another rides his soul

with the assistance of the U.S. Justice Department. *The Valdosta Daily Times* has the most comprehensive coverage of the investigation into Johnson’s death, but also see Jordan Conn, “A Death in Valdosta,” *Grantland* (blog), 6 September 2013, <http://grantland.com/features/the-mysterious-death-17-year-old-football-player-valdosta-georgia/>; Christian Boone and Mark Niese, “Mystery Surrounds Valdosta Student’s Strange Death,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 13 October 2013; Alan Blinder, “Federal Review Opened in Georgia Death,” *New York Times*, 31 October 2013.

In the guise of mortal fear.

And ever the man he rides me hard,
 And never a night stays he;
 For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
 On the trunk of a haunted tree.⁸⁹

Not everyone who paused at the site of a lynching would necessarily feel the presence of the ghost as Dunbar imagined it, weighing on the passerby's conscience as the man had weighed down the oak tree's bough. Some southerners certainly shuddered as they passed these places though. The judge in the poem, the one haunted by the lynched man's specter riding his soul, had his very real counterparts among white southerners saddled with guilt. Less remorseful whites would smile as they passed the bough that refused to grow leaves. African Americans, too, felt haunted by the memory of dead men's and women's faces. And for many more, the curse of the haunted bough silently stalked about in the dark recesses of their minds.

⁸⁹ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Haunted Oak" in *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 90–91.

Chapter 2: Silence

Memory / salted, the wounds healed away, / but here, by the sea, grew raw again.
 – Ishion Hutchinson, “Terminus”

The moment Jesse Pennington burst into the house, his mother started screaming—screaming because she knew, even though not a word had passed between her and her fifteen-year-old son, that he was in “white folks trouble.” As a car sped towards the house, his frantic mother warned him, “You can’t run. You gotta hide.” The teenager ducked out the back and crawled under the house into a hole his father had dug for an indoor toilet before he left for a job in Chicago a few weeks earlier. He had left his mother and sister alone to face three hot-headed white men who barged into their house. Just above his head, the men barked, “Where is he? Where is he?” as they tore up the house to find the impudent black teenager who dared to knock down a white man, a deputy sheriff at that. To each question hurled at her, his mother insisted, “He is not here! He is not here!” and unable to find Pennington among all the upturned furniture, the men eventually left.

Earlier that afternoon, Pennington had been walking home along Highway 1 after a slow day at work in a Greenville, Mississippi milk barn. It was late June in 1954, and the Delta had already settled into another hot, sticky summer. As he plodded along the highway surrounded by rows and rows of cotton, a car slowed and pulled to the side of the road in front of him. Out stepped a deputy sheriff and two other white men who ambled over to Pennington. One of the men owned a construction company, and somebody had been using his equipment after hours. The businessman eyed the teenager and said, “I got a report that said you look like the boy who’s been doing it.” Pennington placated them with the usual signs of deference—smiles and yes sirs and no sirs—and he told the men he wasn’t the one using the equipment. After several tense minutes of back-and-forth, he finally convinced them he was the wrong person. The deputy

sheriff wasn't satisfied though. He and the other two men jeered at him, saying that, like all black boys, he looked like a monkey. Then, the deputy sheriff saw a cow patty on the ground next to Pennington's foot. He looked down at the half-crusted manure, glanced back at the teenager's face, and said, "I wonder what this nigger would look like if I wiped this shit in his face." The deputy reached down and grabbed the cow patty, but before he could smear it on Pennington's face, the young man hit him with a quick left and right, knocking him to the ground. Pennington took off, tearing through fields and woods until he got home to his mother who instinctively knew her son was in trouble.

An hour after the three men had first torn through the Pennington's belongings, they returned with reinforcements: a truck with several men piled in the back, two more carloads of men, and bloodhounds. Pennington's sister told him to hide as the caravan approach, but with bloodhounds to evade, the hole under the house was no longer an option. He couldn't make a run for it either since the Delta's perfectly flat cotton fields offered no cover. His only option was the outhouse in the backyard. Never an especially pleasant place to be, the outhouse was particularly fetid that afternoon. The outhouse hole was practically filled to the brim with sewage that had been stewing under the Mississippi summer sun all day, but left with no alternatives, Pennington snuck out the back door and climbed into the outhouse hole. As he sank down into the warm sewage, the bloodhounds picked up his scent and led the posse to the door of the outhouse. Hearing the dogs howling and barking excitedly just outside the door, the teenager's mind was racing. "Is this it? Am I going to die?" he wondered. The dogs knew he was hiding just below the seat, but when the man holding the dogs kicked in the door and the stench hit him like a brick wall, he backed away, telling the others, "Naw, he can't be in there." The dogs tugged against their leashes, just inches from his face, but the man jerked them away.

Disappointed, the posse piled back into their vehicles, leaving one man behind to keep watch for a few hours more before he, too, gave up and left.

Pennington's mother sprang into action. She got word to her father in Scott, Mississippi that Jesse was in trouble, and she had her son hide in the woods on the other side of the field until a neighbor could drive him up to Scott, where he washed off and got a clean change of clothing. As luck would have it, Pennington's aunt, his father's older sister, had driven down from Chicago that day to visit her other brother in Hollandale, Mississippi, a Delta town south of Greenville. To this day, Pennington does not know how his mother got in touch with his aunt, but once she reached Hollandale around midnight, she turned right around and picked up Pennington at his grandfather's house in Scott. With a posse and the sheriff still out looking for him, he hid in the trunk of his aunt's car until they reached Kentucky. He was alive. He had escaped Mississippi alive.⁹⁰

The aftermath of his near lynching left Jesse Pennington to grapple with an experience that was all but incomprehensible. He owed his life to the courage and quick thinking of his family—his mother, his sister, his grandfather, his aunt, his uncle—but what began with his mother screaming ended with a long, painful silence. Almost sixty years later, he recalled:

When I got to Chicago and my aunt took me in to see my father. And I ran out to him and said, "Daddy! Daddy! Let me tell you what happened." And he said, "I don't want to talk about it. Stop. I don't want to hear about it." No, that was it.

⁹⁰ Author's interview with Jesse Pennington in Jackson, Mississippi, 5 November 2011. With the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision handed down only a month earlier, whites in the Delta had become more aggressively hostile towards African Americans as their cherished "southern way of life" was threatened. The near lynching of Pennington was part of this almost reflexive backlash against school desegregation and civil rights activism more generally. Almost a decade before the *Brown* decision though, Harris Jesse Fields shot and killed two African American men, David Jones and Simon Toombs, in cold blood just a few towns south of Greenville in Anguilla. Some members of the Fields family said that the Harris Fields and his brothers Bill and Tom had gotten into a fight with a black man who had taken a company car without permission after hours to pick up some machinery, but instead of returning the car afterwards, he went to a juke joint to get drunk. These murders from December 1946 did not result in a trial much less a conviction of Fields. Although some members of the Fields family dispute this version of the story, the similarities between the "joy-riding" in 1946 and 1954 are eerie. Molly Walling, *Death in the Delta: Uncovering a Mississippi Family Secret* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 3–4, 10–11, 27–28, 55–56.

That was it. And that's—people don't understand that black folk kept violence, they didn't talk about things that happened to people, did not talk about it. They would just, you didn't talk about it. Many things that happened to folks, they didn't talk about it within the family, you just didn't talk about it. You just buried it. You didn't talk about it. And remember I said, from that moment on, it was buried. I mean, it was just in my psyche. It affected me in a certain way. It affected me in that I didn't know that it had affected me.⁹¹

Pennington buried those memories and all the feelings that accompanied them. The past had not disappeared, but lay dormant in some hidden corner of his subconscious, waiting for him.

Violence had moved the Penningtons. Even before the deputy sheriff tried to smear cow manure on their teenage son's face, violence had moved the Penningtons. One morning a few years earlier, Pennington's mother told him, "They found Mary's body in the river. I knew that was going to happen," and soon after that the family picked up and moved to Greenville. Mary was a family friend who had often "gone with" white men, and when the last of these men had ordered her to have sex with all of his friends at a hunting party and she had refused, they killed her and threw her body into the river. Jesse wasn't a stranger in a far-off place or even a neighbor like Mary. He was *their* son, brother, nephew, and grandson, and he had hidden in *their* outhouse and the trunk of *their* car to evade a posse of white men set on killing him. Pennington's parents could discuss what had happened to Mary with him, but they refused to talk about his near lynching precisely because his emotional proximity to them made those wounds too tender to reopen. He was too close and too precious, and his escape had been too precarious and too lucky. His survival had been so hard fought that, in the aftermath, the life of the strong-willed young man who punched a white man in Mississippi seemed too delicate and fragile to rehash even after he had safely made it to Chicago.

The head of the family, Pennington's father, not only had been too far away to intervene when the bloodhounds and mob arrived at his home, but he likely would have been powerless to

⁹¹ Author's interview with Jesse Pennington.

intervene on behalf of his son even if he had been in Greenville instead of Chicago. Lynching had long provided the white community with a way to assert control over black bodies, especially black men's bodies, but mob rule and Jim Crow more generally also subverted black men's roles as providers and protectors of their families. Perhaps the father's terse responses to his son grew out of feeling ashamed and frustrated that he had been unable to uphold his paternal responsibility to protect his child. He didn't want to be reminded of his family's vulnerability to the often violent whims of white people and his forced abdication of responsibility, so he imposed a code of silence upon the family.

The silence that enveloped the Penningtons was not the only silence in the cultural memory of lynching in Greenville, Mississippi. The white community also had its share of silences. In a collection of interviews with Mississippi writers published in 1982, the editor said to the historian and novelist Shelby Foote, "I have read that a lot of people think that the fact that there wasn't ever a lynching in Washington County, and the fact that the Klan never gained a foot in the local politics...[Foote: Yes.]...and even the fact that Hodding Carter could come there and write freely this type of journalism, was due to the atmosphere that the Percy family created."⁹² Foote, a native of Greenville, noted that the presence of many prominent Jews in Greenville helped to curb the activities of the Klan, and he concurred:

The Percy influence was the main current sociological bar to the Klan. They set a style and an adherence to truth and justice that the Klan could have no part in, and people subscribed to that, so they had a high example in the community to go by, to guide them. ... Senator [LeRoy] Percy was strongly anti-Klan and expressed himself so at every opportunity. Mr. Will [Percy] as a young man did what he could in that direction, too. In *Lanterns on the Levee*, he tells about the election that was held and how the Klan candidates were defeated. There are still some prominent men in Greenville who were members of the Klan, and old citizens know who they are and don't feel too kindly toward them to this day. It was not

⁹² John Griffin Jones, ed., "Shelby Foote: August 16, 1979" in *Mississippi Writers Talking* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 44–45. Greenville is located in Washington County on the eastern banks of the Mississippi River.

really as horrendous a thing as it sounds now. The Klan was political, almost social. I don't think that they intended to lynch anybody or put anybody in ovens or anything like that. Most of the members of it were politicians who were looking for bloc votes.⁹³

Foote's reminiscences were emblematic of the convenient erasure of racial violence from white historical memory. To begin with, Washington County was certainly not a safe haven from lynching. Between 1890 and 1914, at least sixteen people lost their lives to lynching, and several of those lynchings took place in Greenville where, according to Foote, the Percys had kept the lawless element at bay.⁹⁴ A certain slice of the Greenville elite may have opposed the Klan and preferred the so-called paternalism of the planter class to the blatant racial antagonism of the Klan, but the Klan and later the White Citizens Council certainly served as more than toothless social or political clubs. The physical threats and attacks on African Americans combined with the bald race-baiting deployed in critical elections fomented white racial hatred that was far from benign.

The clash between race-baiters and the more outwardly measured planters was real, but the Percy's motives were less than altruistic. During Reconstruction, W.A. Percy deemed the violent tactics of the Reconstruction-era Klan unnecessary to "redeem" the South from African Americans and northern Republicans. Several decades later in the 1920s, his son LeRoy Percy expended great political and social capital to curtail Klan activity, preserve his political influence, and keep his black labor force from leaving the Delta. A sincere concern for the

⁹³ Jones, *Mississippi Writers Talking*, 45–46.

⁹⁴ The following individuals were lynched in Washington County, Mississippi: Burke Martin in Greenville on March 2, 1890; Green Jackson in Greenville on February 5/6, 1891; Louise Stevenson in Hollandale on September 27/28, 1891; Grant White in [location unknown] on September 27, 1891; unknown African American in Greenville on April 30/May 12, 1892; Wesley Gould in Leland on July 7/12, 1898; William Edwards in [location unknown] on March 27, 1900; Vincent Serio and John Serio in [location unknown] on July 11, 1901; John/Robert Dennis in Greenville on June 4, 1903; [first name unknown] Mayfield in Trail Lake on June 3, 1904; [first name unknown] Van Horne in Trail Lake on June 4, 1904; unknown African American in [location unknown] on March 5, 1905; William Robinson in Greenville on August 12/17, 1909; unknown African American in Greenville on May 5/7, 1912; Samuel Petty in Leland on February 24, 1914.

welfare of African Americans did not animate their opposition to vigilante violence and demagogues like James K. Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo. Father and son fended off the Klan as a matter of political expediency, and neither Percy gave second thought to exploiting their African American workforce, often in ways that closely resembled slavery. Perhaps that ill treatment explained why the Penningtons moved off the Percy plantation two months after Jesse was born in 1938.⁹⁵

Despite Foote blaming the Klan for lynching, the Klan was not even the primary perpetrator of lynching since most cases occurred when the Klan was not active, that is after Reconstruction and before its revival in the 1910s. By placing the blame for lynching on the Klan, Foote displaced responsibility for racial violence from the white men and women in his hometown who organized and joined lynch mobs. Foote readily accepted that lynching plagued the state of Mississippi, but he constructed an imaginary buffer between Greenville and lynching, preferring to keep lynching at a comfortable distance from him and his beloved community. Greenville had a reputation for being a cultured, literary oasis in the heart of the Mississippi Delta because novelists like Will Percy and “progressive” white journalists like Hodding Carter lived in town, and Foote considered himself part of that literary lineage. If the near-lynching of

⁹⁵ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 102–103, 143–155. Soon after emancipation, W.A. Percy made the shift from slave labor to sharecropping, which was often (and rightly so) described as debt peonage. LeRoy Percy also owned vast expanses of land sharecropped by Italian immigrants and African Americans, and muckraking journalist, Mary Quackenbos threatened to expose the illegal contracts and squalid living conditions of his sharecroppers until President Theodore Roosevelt intervened. A few decades later during the Mississippi Flood of 1927, LeRoy Percy conceived of a plan to prevent further damage to the levees near Greenville by forcing African American refugees to reinforce the levee at gunpoint for no pay. Rather than evacuate these refugees suffering without potable water and sufficient food and shelter, he decided that the preservation of his labor force outweighed their well-being. For more on LeRoy Percy’s treatment of sharecroppers and Quackenbos, see Barry pages 111–120, and for more on the abuses of African American labor on the levees in 1927, see Barry pages 303–335. Also note that Barry claims that only one lynching occurred in Washington County on page 122 and that the Percys had “always prevented such happenings [as lynchings]” in Greenville on page 330. Barry not only demotes the lynchings of two Italian immigrants, John and Vincent Serio, to murders but also champions W.A. Percy’s prevention of a lynching in the 1870s on page 103. As Barry’s own writing illustrated, the production and preservation of silences in the historical memory of lynching continued well into the late twentieth century.

Jesse Pennington was too close and *painful* for the Penningtons to revisit, the history of lynching in Washington County was too close and *shameful* for Foote to confront.



Silences litter the collective memory of any historical phenomenon. What Michel-Rolph Trouillot said about historical narratives—that they are “a particular bundle of silences”—equally applies to historical memories.⁹⁶ When professional historians produce historical narratives, at every step of the process—from developing research questions to choosing a methodology to combing through archival materials to writing the narratives themselves—they consciously and unconsciously exclude or erase parts of the past.⁹⁷ The same holds for the custodians of historical memory, whether textbook editors and documentary film directors or the keepers of family lore and local historical societies. In the process of constructing historical memories, southerners of all races silence those parts of the past that they don’t want to remember, don’t want to hear, or don’t want to believe, but just because some remnants of the past end up on the cutting room floor doesn’t mean they disappear. Those omissions tell a story of their own about the people who consciously or unconsciously removed them from their memories.

⁹⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.

⁹⁷ Even if every detail of a given historical event could be captured, which is impossible, no historical narrative could possibly include everything without being unintelligible and meaningless. Historians sift through, sort, and prioritize evidence to make sense of the past, and they necessarily deemphasize, discard, and ignore some elements of the past. The archives themselves also go through several levels of mediation. Archivists choose which collections to add to their holdings and which collections don’t make the cut. They organize those collections into series, boxes, and folders for the convenience of researchers, and although organization makes large collections decipherable, once sense of order obscures other senses of order. Even before that selection process, the survival of documents depends on many factors from environmental conditions (bugs, mold, fire, and the like) to privilege (access to paper, literacy, and the means to preserving documentary evidence) to the management of legacies (destroying unflattering or embarrassing evidence). Every historical interpretation is embedded with layer upon layer of silence, so reconstructing the past necessarily produces an erasure of the past.

Within each member of a society resides a way of imagining the past—a collective memory—that they inherit from their families, communities, regions, and nations, and although individuals are not prisoners to that inheritance, these stories and memories explain who we are and where we come from. In addition to providing the foundations for individual and collective identities, collective memories profoundly shape public policy and social structures, which is why people so vigilantly protect the past as they see it.

Naturally, the promotion of particular narratives requires the silencing of others. Take, for instance, the proliferation of Confederate memorials in nearly every southern town at the turn of the last century. Erected at the moment the New South quite self-consciously tried to shed its backward reputation, these granite monoliths celebrated the bravery of Confederate soldiers who defended states' rights while conspicuously neglecting to mention that the particular rights they defended were the Confederate states' rights to preserve and expand the institution of slavery. One revealing inscription read: "When their country called, they held back nothing. They cheerfully gave their property and their lives." In 1910 when the United Daughters of the Confederacy dedicated this monument in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, the unintentional irony of "cheerfully [giving] their property" during a war in which Confederate soldiers fought so fiercely to continue the practice of owning slaves was likely lost on the thousands in attendance, as was the irony of honoring Confederate service to "their country" when those veterans had fought for a rebellion against the United States.⁹⁸ Removing the blot of slavery from the Old South and the Confederacy allowed whites in Hattiesburg to hold up the Confederacy as part of a noble southern tradition, and that erasure concealed both the suffering whites had inflicted upon generations of African Americans in slavery and the injustice of Jim Crow in the present.

⁹⁸ The proximity of the monument to the courthouse clearly marked downtown Hattiesburg as the center of white authority, and since African Americans were well aware of the pro-slavery position of the Confederacy, the monument demonstrated to them that that authority was steeped in a long tradition of white supremacy.

Clearly the form that a particular historical memory took depended on who was doing the remembering (and forgetting), and the construction of those memories reflected the relative power enjoyed by that particular slice of society. For instance, many of the ex-slaves interviewed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s intentionally left out the most brutal aspects of slavery from their testimony, in part because many of the interviewers were white southerners who they distrusted.⁹⁹ Talking too loosely about white men raping enslaved women or severe whippings that maimed the victim could get them killed. At other times former slaves would say that their former masters were kind and fair, but also tell stories about “other people” who had cruel masters to stand in for their own experiences. Within the African American community though, former slaves showed a greater willingness to discuss their experiences, though even then many remained reluctant to fully divulge all the painful stories from their past. Sometimes the world of Jim Crow was reminder enough of their degraded position in southern society, and they didn’t want their sadness or bitterness or pain to seep into their grandchildren’s impressionable minds.

The “bundles of silences” southerners constructed about lynching told stories. They told the story of the fear and sadness that enveloped African American communities for decades. They told the story of the anxieties that white southerners felt as their “way of life” started to crumble around them. They told the story of the hope African American families kept alive that their children and grandchildren would not have to carry the burden of those painful memories. They told the story of the shame white southerners tried to shed when outside scrutiny became too intense. They told the story of a region struggling to come to terms with an ugly past.

⁹⁹ The local WPA officials in Mississippi, for example, held back some materials from the WPA slave narratives so they would not be included in the Library of Congress collection because they were deemed too inflammatory (i.e. too overtly talking about violence). George P. Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 3, *Georgia Narratives: Part 1* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, Press, 1977), xvi–xvii.



The boy's eyelids were heavy with exhaustion, but dread and fear overshadowed his body's desire for sleep. Hit with wave after wave of drowsiness, he willed himself awake, careful to avoid disturbing his siblings dozing off around him. Robert Hall's quiet struggle to keep his eyes open betrayed the intense anxiety that gripped him. Every night the same image flashed before him the moment he closed his eyes, but he desperately clung to the hope that maybe this night he could close his eyes without seeing the dead black man hanging in the churchyard with a wire wrapped around his neck.

Ever since Hall had been old enough to play outside on his own, his mother, Eva Hall, had strictly forbidden him from going to the grounds of a church that locals in Morven, Georgia referred to as the Camp Ground. One Saturday morning around 1959 or 1960 when his mother was out, Hall disregarded his mother's repeated warnings, and he joined his older brother Jimmy and three other neighborhood boys to go fishing down by the Camp Ground. Hall recalled how he and the other boys had snuck off that morning:

My brother, you know, he was a lot larger than we were, so he, he would always take the lead. And we crossed the highway, and we went into a little wooded area right alongside Highway 76. That highway leads from Quitman, which is in Brooks County, all the way to uh, uh Adel, Georgia, and as we were going through the little trail (because quite a few people would go down there to fish), and he stopped right quick. And he said, "Hey, look there." And there we saw this black man hanging, you know, in this tree with a piece of wire around his neck. And so when we saw that, we took off and went back home. We never told my mother about it because I knew what she would have done because she told us not to go down there.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Author's interview with Robert Hall in Valdosta, Georgia, 28 January 2012.

Hall was born and raised in that stretch of southern Georgia where Mary Turner and at least twelve other African Americans had been lynched in May 1918, and although memories of that horrific violence remained fresh in the African American community, parents shielded their children from these stories until they were grown. Hall and his brother had often wondered why the Camp Ground was off limits, but their mother never told them that members of the Methodist congregation at the Camp Ground had lynched many African American men there. That was one secret she refused to burden her children with, and her children didn't dare ask her about it either. Hall explained, "Well, you know, back in those days you really didn't question your parents [chuckling], you really didn't question them. Because if you, if I had said, 'Well, why mama?' she would have told me I was a bad boy. 'Don't ask me no questions. Just don't go.'"¹⁰¹ So when Hall saw that dead black man strung up in a tree, he too kept what he had witnessed to himself to avoid a whooping for disobeying his mother. He had learned from the dead man hanging in the churchyard what had always gone unsaid between mother and son, that she worried he might walk up on a lynching and get himself killed.

The image of the dead man stayed with him for years.¹⁰² When his mother would turn down the kerosene lamp before bedtime, Hall and his brother insisted that she not turn it all the way off so that its dim glow would provide some comfort when that image crept into their dreams. Neither brother dared to reveal the real anxieties behind keeping the light on. Besides, their mother had reason to believe other dangers caused her sons to fear the dark. Throughout Hall's childhood in the 1950s and into the early 1960s, hooded night riders carrying torches galloped through their neighborhood when a member of the black community had somehow subverted the racial order. On those nights, Hall's mother would hastily extinguish the lamps,

¹⁰¹ Author's interview with Robert Hall.

¹⁰² In 1967 Hall served with the 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam, and he believed that seeing that lynched man prepared him for the carnage of that war.

draw the shades, and corral her children under the bed, hushing them up so they wouldn't draw the attention of the night riders who might shoot into their home. Huddled under the bed in terror, the children absorbed a lesson simply from seeing the fear on their mother's face: staying silent around white people could be the key to their survival in the Jim Crow South.

Just because Robert and Jimmy Hall didn't broach the topic of the lynching with their mother didn't mean she was unaware of it. At the time, Eva Hall worked as a domestic for a white woman named May Lawson, and the Monday after her sons encountered the lynched man in the woods, she returned to work as usual. With a smile on her face, her employer said, "Eva, there's a colored man hanging up down there at the Camp Ground. Uh, if I gave you some kerosene, would you go down there and burn him?" As Robert Hall told it, his mother calmly replied, "Miss Lawson, I don't know that man down there. That man didn't know me. If you want him burned, you go burn him yourself."¹⁰³ She took off her apron, left it folded on the dining room table, and walked out of the Lawsons's house for good. When her youngest child, Robert, reached adulthood, she told him how she had quit her job at the Lawsons that day, and only then did her son reveal what he had seen that Saturday morning he had gone fishing by the Camp Ground.

Before raising ten children with her husband and working for the Lawsons, Eva Hall had experienced firsthand the depths of white hatred for African Americans. She had been a young girl when the 1918 lynching rampage tore through Brooks and Lowndes Counties, and the children in her generation knew the stories about that spate of racial violence, especially the gruesome torture and murder of Mary Turner and her unborn baby. As adults in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, she and her friends would speak in whispers about those times, but never in front of their children and certainly not around their friend, Leaster Grant, who was Mary

¹⁰³ Author's interview with Robert Hall.

Turner's daughter. If a child happened to sneak in or wander in on one of these conversations, the adults would shoo them away. Even in these hushed conversations though, Hall and her friends would inevitably reach a point in the telling of the story when language broke down and tears took over. They choked on the words describing Mary Turner hanging by her ankles and screaming, her body engulfed in flames, but words gave way to tears the moment they tried to narrate how a white man in the mob cut her baby out of her stomach and stomped on its head. The line between protecting *children* from the horrors of lynching with silence and protecting *themselves* from the horrors of lynching with silence disappeared. The violence was too shocking and the memories were simply too painful to put into words.

The African American community struggled to narrate and process those lynchings, but that history was even more fraught for Otha Manning and Leaster Grant, nee Manning, the two surviving children of Hayes and Mary Turner. Once he was old enough to support himself, Otha Manning left Brooks County and moved to Miami, Florida. He remained very close to his younger sister, sending her letters and occasionally coming home, but as much as he cherished spending time with his family and eating his sister's home cooking, he kept his visits brief. Manning told his family he could never live in southern Georgia where black people still seemed to live in slavery since whites hated them so much. He never talked about how white folks had lynched three members of his family when he was just eight years old, but his resentment towards local whites was hardly a secret. If white neighbors dropped in, he would ignore them, stewing in silence on the porch until they left. During his visits, he rarely left his sister's home, but on one occasion he went to the store in Morven and returned fuming. His great-niece, Audrey Grant, never knew what precisely unfolded at the store, but she remembered that when he came home, "he was upset, something about what happened at the store. And he said, 'They

think they're the only people that got money, they're the only people that have anything. I've got money. I've got a car. I've got a big house in Florida. ... I just couldn't stay around here. They treat you like shit.'” Despite these moments of bitterness, Audrey Grant described her great-uncle as “full of life” and always joking. In the hours before he would return to Miami, Manning and his younger sister would hug and cry, and as he was driving home, sometimes he would turn back to spend just a few more moments with his sister. Behind this cheerful, loving exterior, though, was a troubled man who struggled with alcoholism until the day he died. His intense disdain for white people in southern Georgia, his tearful goodbyes when he left his sister in Barney, and his dependence on alcohol all seemed to point to the painful memories he kept buried inside.

Manning's younger sister, Leaster, married a local vegetable grower in Barney named A.D. Grant and settled on a farm just a couple miles from the site of their mother's lynching. A proud, independent man who was fiercely protective of his wife, A.D. Grant insisted on doing all of the shopping for the household, including purchasing his wife's clothing, even though he was blind. He tolerated his wife's white acquaintances, including some white neighbors, dropping by the house now and then, but he insisted that she never work in a white household as a domestic. He told her she had plenty of work to do in her own home between cleaning the house, cooking meals, canning food, and planting and harvesting crops, but his desire to limit her time outside their home likely had more to do with protecting her from the indignities of Jim Crow she might encounter in white homes, white stores, and on the sidewalks of Barney and Morven. In the immediate aftermath of the 1918 lynching rampage, the two orphaned children had hidden in the homes of relatives under assumed names since their aunts and uncles worried that the lynch mob

would come for the children too.¹⁰⁴ In a sense, A.D. Grant simply continued what his wife's intensely private family had been doing for decades: sheltering her from white people who might still want to kill her. Jim Crow had cost his wife so much already, and he was determined to protect her from suffering any more pain and sadness at the hands of white folks.

Although Leaster Grant spent most of her time at home, family and friends visited her often. In the 1960s when her grandchildren were still in grade school, she would sing spirituals and gospel songs with them, and they would sit around and listen to her tell stories about growing up in Barney. One of her granddaughters, Audrey Grant, recalled that sometimes the grandchildren would ask her to tell them stories about her parents. Since these questions would upset her, their grandfather would step in, telling them, "Leave your grandmamma alone about that. Stop asking your grandmamma those questions. She don't like to talk about that." Their grandfather's strictly enforced buffer of silence only intensified their curiosity, so they took to asking their grandmother questions about her family on the sly. Leaster Grant didn't say much about her mother to her grandchildren. One time she said she remembered her mother was a beautiful woman, but most other times she would hang her head and say, "They killed my mother. They did a lot of very bad things to my mother. I had another brother, and they killed him too." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she revisited those memories in front of her grandchildren, but she could never bring herself to reveal the details of her mother's death to the youngsters. Her granddaughter supposed, "Things that bothered [my grandmother], she kept it away and didn't even talk about it. She kept it inside." Audrey Grant didn't find out that her

¹⁰⁴ The 1920 Federal Census for Colquitt County, Georgia listed Conie L. Manning as an adopted girl and Otha Manning as an adopted boy in the household of James and Viola Godfrey. Those entries were recorded on January 12, 1920. The Godfreys moved to Barney, Georgia a couple months later since they showed up in the 1920 Federal Census for Brooks County, Georgia, which were recorded on April 10, 1920. The Barney entries listed Conny Manning as a niece and Ophy Manning as a nephew in the Godfrey household. Since the Godfreys raised Leaster, "Conie L." or "Conny" were likely an alias for Leaster.

great-grandmother had been lynched until the early 2000s, and a few years later she heard the grisly details of her death for the first time. Only then did she fully understand the depths of her grandmother's sorrow.¹⁰⁵



The erasure of lynching from white southern memory came in fits and starts in the thirty years following the American entrance into World War II. Throughout this period some corners of the white South continued to openly defend lynching, past and present, but those pockets of society eventually shrank and became more marginal. As civil rights activists chipped away at Jim Crow and public opinion on white supremacy shifted, denying white-on-black violence and, in turn, projecting that violence onto blacks became dominant modes of silencing the past. All three forms of silence—the *marginalization* of defending lynching, the *denial* of lynching or responsibility for the practice, and the *projection* of violent, criminal tendencies onto blacks—had roots in white southern culture going back to slavery, so by 1940, white southerners almost reflexively turned to these well-worn narratives to construct their identity and history. During the mid-twentieth century, however, these silences also reflected a profound anxiety over threats to what many white southerners called “the southern way of life” or “the southern tradition.”

¹⁰⁵ Authors' interview with Audrey Grant in Adel, Georgia, 20 May 2013. When members of the African American community talked about the lynching of Mary Turner, they often referred to her simply as “the lady who had the baby cut out of her.” The Grant family referred to Mary Turner by her maiden name, Hattie Graham, which is why Audrey Grant did not know her great-grandmother was Mary Turner until a community organization that brought awareness about the lynching rampage began to hold public meetings in the early 2000s. (The 1900 Federal Census for Brooks County, Georgia listed her as Hattie Graham.) A.D. and Leaster Grant owned land adjacent to Rufus Morrison, who in 1918 had witnessed the lynching of Mary Turner as a young boy. The Morrisons were close friends of the Grants and their grandchildren, and in the late 2000s, Rufus Morrison's daughter, Esther, told Audrey Grant all the grisly details of the lynching, which she had heard from her father. Audrey Grant and her cousins were not alone. Willie Head, Jr. the descendant of another victim of the 1918 lynching rampage, Will Head, heard stories growing up that Will Head had been killed for stealing, but only when that community organization began to publicize the details of the lynching rampage did he know his ancestor had, in fact, been lynched. Author's interview with Willie Head, Jr. in Pavo, Georgia, 29 January 2012.

Through these silences they desperately tried to preserve and defend a white supremacist society that was slipping through their fingers as schools integrated, African Americans registered to vote, and the old forms of racial deference faded. For the more contrite, silence provided cover for their shame, especially now that the eyes of the nation and the world fixated on the injustice at the foundation of their “way of life.” Faced with this extraordinary social upheaval, they took comfort in these silences. Whether motivated by defiance or shame, white southerners began to actively suppress lynching as they constructed a more palatable memory of Jim Crow.¹⁰⁶

Once the last federal troops withdrew from the South at the end of Reconstruction, northern Republicans officially relinquished control over the region, leaving social, political, and economic matters firmly in the hands of white southerners. Through the extralegal violence of Redemption, former slaveholders and other ex-Confederates returned to power, so the “southern way of life” in the New South nearly replicated the structures of racial inequality seen under slavery. Although African Americans had thrown off the chains of slavery, the strictly enforced etiquette of black deference and economic exploitation remained, as did the use of physical violence to control black bodies. In the sixty years after Redemption, Republicans in Congress occasionally introduced legislation that threatened to bring federal oversight to cases of racial injustice, including the “Force Bill” of 1890 and dozens of anti-lynching bills in the 1920s and 1930s, but by invoking both states’ rights and extolling the virtues of white supremacy, southern Democrats successfully blocked these attempts to protect African American civil liberties.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ For a comprehensive analysis of white southern responses to the end of Jim Crow see Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945–1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

¹⁰⁷ In 1890 Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts proposed a bill that became known as the “Force Bill” among white southerners. That bill would have brought federal supervision of voter registration and elections in congressional districts in which at least one hundred petitioners had alleged election fraud. J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South 1880–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 29–31; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50–51. Between 1922 and 1950, northern congressmen proposed hundreds of anti-lynching bills, and in 1922, 1937, and 1940, the House of Representatives successfully

In 1940 when the Senate took up the last anti-lynching bill to pass the House, many white southerners didn't bother to veil their enthusiasm for lynching as they urged their representatives in Washington to defeat the bill. In a letter to Senator Tom Connally of Texas, Maud Burnette, a stenographer from Dallas, insisted lynching, not the law, was the best way to deter and punish black male rapists:

This probability or possibility of lynching, is the best thing to hold over the bad niggers of the South, as they fear that more than anything else- for the reason, when a mob goes after them, there is no escape, but if they are convicted by the courts, there is always a big chance they will escape the chair, as some little lawyer trying to make a name, will appeal frist [sic] to the State Supreme Court and perhaps get a reversal and then the chance is, he may get life instead of the chair- then a chance to escape the penitentiary or in some way come out free.¹⁰⁸

Burnette fixated on punishing African American men with certain death, even at the expense of respecting the law itself, because she believed that whites could control the “base instincts” of blacks only through violence. One year earlier, Paul Haggard of Oklahoma City, wrote a letter to Connally in which he reminisced about the 1930 lynching in Sherman, Texas in which a mob, frustrated by a sheriff determined to protect his prisoner, George Hughes, burned down the entire courthouse with Hughes locked inside. From the charred remains of Hughes and the ashes of the courthouse, Haggard believed African Americans and whites in Sherman had gained a valuable object lesson: “A certain principle was emphasized that day that shall for all times guide the destinies of the white and black people in that locality. They now understand each other and

passed anti-lynching legislation. Southern Democrats in the Senate deployed several parliamentary maneuvers to prevent these bills from coming to a vote, effectively killing that legislation. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the ways in which the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s evolved out of the anti-lynching campaigns of the NAACP and other organizations. Also see Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Christopher Waldrep, “NAACP: Organized Resistance” in *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 59–91.

¹⁰⁸ Note that in her letter, Burnette included among the lies spread about lynching in the South that the fingers and ears of lynching victims were distributed as souvenirs. Her denial of the mutilation of bodies and the festive atmosphere at lynchings revealed a kind of silencing on her part. Maud Burnette to Tom Connally, 30 April 1940, Part 1, Box 126, Folder Anti-Lynching Bill — Correspondence — 1930–1944, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

with such an understanding they live together in harmony and peace. Shame on those who would destroy that understanding!”¹⁰⁹

White southerners proved to be equally forthcoming when it came to sharing personal anecdotes about lynching. A man who worked at the Federal Trade Commission wrote to congratulate Mississippi Representative William M. Colmer on his speech criticizing the Gavagan Anti-Lynching Bill, and to express his approval of mob violence itself, he added, “In my own family in Texas my own family was killed by a negro [sic] in protecting his fiancé who was raped. The culprit was caught in a similar act afterwards and lynched.”¹¹⁰ G.D. Meredith of Rice, Texas began his letter to Texas Congressman Luther A. Johnson with the line, “As the Anti-Lynching Bill comes up again, I will tell you of a lynching in Miss. years ago.”¹¹¹ A young white couple Meredith had known growing up in Neshoba County, lived on a farm near the county seat of Philadelphia, and one day when the husband was out, a black man assaulted his wife before slitting her throat and throwing her body into the well. To avenge his wife’s death, the bereaved husband and some other men splayed the black man across a log and chopped off his head. After relating this story from the 1880s, Meredith asked the congressman to “imagine how Henson [the husband] felt when he looked in that well.”¹¹² Meredith didn’t say he opposed anti-lynching legislation. He didn’t need to. He didn’t spell out why lynching was a necessary and appropriate response to such a crime. He knew he could safely assume Johnson understood.

Politicians tended to be better at holding their tongues, in the Congressional Record at least. A couple days before the House passed the Gavagan Anti-Lynching Bill in 1937,

¹⁰⁹ Paul Haggard to Tom Connally, 23 January 1939, Part 1, Box 126, Folder Anti-Lynching Bill — Correspondence — 1930–1944, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

¹¹⁰ M.E. Walter to William M. Colmer, 14 April 1937, Series 1, Subgroup 3, Box 455, Folder 8, The Papers of William M. Colmer, McCain Library and Archives – University of Southern Mississippi.

¹¹¹ G.D. Meredith to Luther A. Johnson, 22 February 1940, Part 1, Box 126, Folder Anti-Lynching Bill — Correspondence — 1930–1944, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

¹¹² G.D. Meredith to Luther A. Johnson, 22 February 1940, Part 1, Box 126, Folder Anti-Lynching Bill — Correspondence — 1930–1944, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Hatton Sumners of Texas, made a forceful speech against the bill grounded in a constitutional argument that federal intervention in state affairs undermined a government by the people. Sumners claimed that the lynching of Roosevelt Towns and Bootstrap McDaniels in Duck Hill, Mississippi two days earlier made him so angry that he “might have joined your mob [i.e. supporters of the bill] to lynch the Constitution” had they voted the day before, but even this well-respected legal mind slipped into the well-worn rhetoric of protecting white women from rape to excuse lynching.¹¹³ Although he claimed that “every drop of my blood revolts against the lynching of a human being,” he related the story of a mob, led by the father of a rape victim, who lynched the rapist, and he wondered aloud, whether arresting the father—“tak[ing] that father away from the bedside of that little torn girl”—or imposing a \$10,000 fine paid to the family of “this hound of hell that had destroyed that child’s life” would prevent lynchings.¹¹⁴ Sumners asked his fellow congressmen to sympathize with lynchers and leave the South to handle its own affairs.

Other members of Congress, like Mississippi’s notorious race-baiting senator Theodore Bilbo, dispensed with the pretense of a constitutional argument and went straight to the point:

I know that I voice the sentiment of all the right-thinking and Christian men and women of the land of Dixie when I state that there is no sentiment in favor of lynching in the South among the best people of the South. I have talked to men, good citizens of the South, who have possibly in the past been swept off their feet, whose reason has been dethroned, whose passions have been so thoroughly roused when some vicious, desperate, crazed Negro brute, controlled by animal instincts only, has raped some sweet and innocent white girl or some good mother that they joined in a mob to deal out immediate and summary justice to the rapist, when they themselves are opposed to mob law.

...

¹¹³ 81 Cong. Rec. H3532 (15 April 1937) (remarks by Hatton Sumners). Sumners constitutional argument conveniently omitted any consideration for the constitutional rights of American citizens to a trial.

¹¹⁴ 81 Cong. Rec. H3534 (15 April 1937) (remarks by Hatton Sumners). Sumners never specified the race of the rapist in that story, but he didn’t have to, given the tacit understanding among sympathetic listeners that the man was black.

So strong has become this sentiment against mob violence...that there [were] only 8 lynchings in the whole United States during the year 1937, whereas in former years lynchings sometimes reached 250 to 300.¹¹⁵

Not only did he sympathize with the “good citizens” who made up lynch mobs, but Bilbo predicted that the legislation would increase “a thousandfold” the number of rapes and lynchings in the South. Bilbo started his political career in the midst of what one political scientist called the “Revolt of the Rednecks,” when populist, race-baiting demagogues seized power from aristocratic planters, so few Mississippians batted an eye when the author of *Take Your Choice: Separation or Mongrelization* made no effort to veil his tacit approval of lynch law.¹¹⁶

Into the late 1940s, overt endorsements of lynching remained fairly common. One Mississippi man who opposed the anti-lynching bill debated in 1948 wrote, “Do not believe any Mississippi jury would convict of sheriff + county of failure to prosecute. If so, the Legislature doubtless would reimburse the county for the fire.”¹¹⁷ Another man complained, “That gang bellowing their heads off to get that Anti-Lynch bill passed, never said a word against Rape, yet there has been more than five hundred rapes to each lynching in the U.S.A. in the past four years. Thousands of lust crazed Negroes has [sic] beaten the brains out of white women during this terrible day, yet these fellows say not a word about it.”¹¹⁸ These men recycled the same rhetoric of riots and rape popular since the nineteenth century, but by 1954 when white southerners

¹¹⁵ 83 Cong. Rec. S874 (21 January 1938) (remarks by Theodore Bilbo).

¹¹⁶ The phrase “Revolt of the Rednecks” came from Albert Dennis Kirwan, *Revolt of the Rednecks: Mississippi Politics, 1876–1925* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1951). When Bilbo’s son, Theodore G. Bilbo Jr., sat for an interview at the University of Southern Mississippi in 1979, he said his father’s racial views were “greatly misunderstood.” He claimed that his father believed “a man is just a good a man as he is and if a colored man can make it then give him credit.” The senator’s son then explained that his father opposed interracial marriage because “mingling” the blood would degrade the white race, and then he said, “He really thought that, and I’m not so sure he isn’t right, because there are certain physical and mental differences that just can’t be overcome.” Speaking in the post-civil rights era, the younger Bilbo tried to cultivate a more palatable memory of his father by denying his hatred for African Americans, but he betrayed that effort when he revealed his own racism. Oral History of Theodore G. Bilbo Jr., vol. 151, 1979, The Mississippi Oral History Program, University of Southern Mississippi, 13.

¹¹⁷ R.B. Zeller to James O. Eastland, 23 April 1948, Box 32, Folder 1948 Civil Rights 1 of 3, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹¹⁸ A.B. Harmon to James O. Eastland, 29 July 1948, Box 32, Folder 1948 Civil Rights 1 of 3, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

mobilized against the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* decision, which struck down "separate but equal" public schools, many whites changed tactics. The Citizens' Councils attempted to put a more respectable face on white supremacy, often emphatically distancing themselves from the violent tactics of the Klan and other fringe organizations in public while maintaining connections with those groups behind the scenes. The Citizens' Councils found pamphlets and speeches more expedient than cross-burnings and church bombings in the battle with civil rights organizations over public opinion, and they preferred to raise the specter of miscegenation rather than defend extralegal violence.¹¹⁹

The 1940s marked a shift in the potency of overtly endorsing lynching. Southern Democrats could still block legislation making the wartime anti-discrimination agency, the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), permanent. They could still defeat the 1948 Civil Rights Bill with a drawn-out filibuster, but they could no longer openly defend extralegal violence and all it stood for without jeopardizing the "southern way of life." Growing support for civil rights reforms by the American public and mainstream white politicians put most white southerners—and not just politicians—on the defensive.¹²⁰ The "way of life" that lynching enforced and celebrated was coming under attack, so for many, their defiance of these threats became inextricably, though often subconsciously, wrapped up in lynching.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Chapter 4 will more fully explore the relationship between the Citizens' Council and more violent white supremacist groups like the Klan. Also, for more on the Citizens' Council refer to Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–64* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

¹²⁰ For instance, President Harry Truman issued an executive order desegregating the military and included a civil rights plank in the 1948 Democratic Party platform. The civil rights bill introduced in 1948 was the first legislation of its kind to be seriously debated since Reconstruction.

¹²¹ Throughout the post-war period, arguments against civil rights legislation ranged from claims that scripture expressly forbid race mixing since blacks were the cursed descendants of Ham to allegations that integration was a communist conspiracy masterminded by northeastern Jews and African Americans to destroy American freedom. At the heart of these various defenses of Jim Crow was a fear of rape and "mongrelization" – precisely the same fear trotted out to justify lynching. One year after the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, a minister from Russellville, Alabama, Willie Dubiose, warned of the nation's demise in an impassioned letter to Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland: "And do you not see that in a course of time, the Black Race through the Communist will soon multiply [sic] and take over – then this will be a nation of mixed, atheist, embiciles [sic] and moral degenerates, and pervers.

When Bilbo died in office in 1947, the Delta planter James O. Eastland became the senior senator from Mississippi, and although Eastland rose to the level of a demagogue in his own right, he operated under the pretense of representing a more genteel, respectable white supremacy that could be embraced by polite society. From time to time, Eastland could unleash hateful barbs reminiscent of Bilbo's unvarnished race-baiting—in a 1945 speech against the FEPC, he derided African American soldiers as inept cowards unworthy of the uniforms they wore—but his strategy to save Jim Crow primarily hinged on denial. In a 1957 interview with journalist Mike Wallace, Eastland disputed that only four percent of African Americans in the state of Mississippi could vote or that local registrars discriminated by race, and he unequivocally insisted that his home state had no local chapters of the Klan.¹²² Purporting to speak for all Mississippians, the senator defended Jim Crow, explaining that “the way [segregation] is handled is endorsed by ninety-nine percent of the people of both races [in the South] who live in peace and harmony, and we have more peace and harmony than any section of the country. ...and we have less racial prejudice.”¹²³ Denying the presence of discrimination, the indignities of Jim Crow, grassroots opposition to racial injustice among southern blacks, and racial violence stood at the core of his four-decade career in the Senate combatting the black freedom struggle.

...God never did intend for the nations to be conglomerated in any such mess.” Ultimately, underneath that Alabama minister's grim prophecy about “conglomerated” races was a legitimate fear that racial justice, in all facets of American life, would destroy a social order that artificially elevated whites economically, politically, and socially. The prospect of having more than a few token African Americans who were more successful and more influential than whites scared men like Dubiose. Willie Dubiose to James O. Eastland, 7 October 1958, Box 37, Folder 1958 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹²² In an interview in 1964, Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan of America, Robert Shelton, bragged that each of Mississippi's 82 counties could boast a local chapter. Kenneth Toler, “Trio ‘Up North or in Cuba?’ Could Be Governor Thinks,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), 27 June 1964.

¹²³ James O. Eastland, interview by Mike Wallace (CBS, 28 July 1957), from the University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center, *The Mike Wallace Interview*, video and transcript, http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/eastland_james_t.html.

Eastland stood on a more prominent soapbox to express his denial than the average American did, but his views on “racial harmony” reflected popular opinion and resonated with whites across the South. Just twelve days after Medgar Evers was gunned down in front of his Jackson, Mississippi home, Kate H. Steele, a woman from Chattanooga, Tennessee in her late-seventies, wrote a letter to all the Democrats in the Senate claiming, “The WHITE people of the South have never mistreated the negro [sic]- They have done what no other section of the country has done- They have GIVEN him schools GOOD SCHOOLS- helped him build his churches--- have given him jobs- helped him earn a living and above ALL they have given him FRIENDSHIP-- There are negroes [sic] who appreciate this and are on the side of the White people.”¹²⁴ With coverage of Evers’s racially motivated assassination making front page headlines and crowding the airwaves, Steele chose to imagine the South as a place of racial harmony and noblesse oblige. Many other whites shared Steele’s paternalism and her blind spot for racial violence, discrimination, and the everyday degradation of racial etiquette in the South. Hoyt Bass, the wife of a pecan grower in Lumberton, Mississippi, reported to Eastland that at her son’s funeral, “about a hundred [blacks] stood on one side of the grave, near enough to hear every word, [and] it was really a wonderful point of contact.”¹²⁵ In the senator’s reply to Bass, he wished “our northern friends” could see “in moments of great sorrow...the demonstration by southern negroes [sic] at [white people’s] funerals,” and he wondered aloud if those northerners supporting civil rights legislation might just be “jealous of the life that has been evolved in the South of two races living side by side and getting along so well together.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Kate H. Steele to James O. Eastland, 24 June 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 3 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹²⁵ Hoyt Bass (Mrs. I.H. Bass) to James O. Eastland, 19 July 1957, Box 37, Folder 1957 Civil Rights 3 of 5, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹²⁶ James O. Eastland to Mrs. I.H. Bass, 31 July 1957, Box 37, Folder 1957 Civil Rights 3 of 5, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

In the same vein, Eastland's constituents often sent him newspaper clippings or personal anecdotes about African Americans who opposed the Civil Rights Movement. One clipping from Mississippi's *Jackson Daily News* showed three photos of smiling African Americans returning to Jackson from Chicago, suitcases in tow, under the headline, "Coming Back Home to 'Home Sweet Home.'" ¹²⁷ Another constituent sent a letter to the editor written by a black porter named James Maxie who wrote, "I am very happy to be a Mississippi Negro. I have no complaints about the way of life I am used to. ...I am concerned about the attitude of many of my race who suddenly think that everything ought to be changed in Mississippi." ¹²⁸ Maxie also seemed to embrace the paternalism Steele endorsed, praising the generosity and kindness of whites who gave him loans and Christmas gifts, and he was confident that many African Americans agreed that relations between blacks and whites were harmonious. White southerners trotted out Maxie and other "good Negroes" to stave off criticism from African Americans and northern critics of Jim Crow, but they also sought out these exceptions to reassure themselves that blacks also supported a system designed to benefit whites. When Congress nearly passed the FEPC and the NAACP argued for school desegregation before the Supreme Court, most white southerners blamed "outside agitators" for these measures. Even when African American southerners demanded the right to vote, equal job opportunities, and access to public facilities, they insisted that the desire for social equality came from without—whether from "a few yellow Northern Negroes...[who] urge[d] on the humble Negro of the South" or "professional agitators

¹²⁷ "Coming Back Home to 'Home Sweet Home,'" *Jackson Daily News*, 31 July 1957.

¹²⁸ This clipping enclosed with the letter from W.R. Haynie did not have any publication information. The letter mentioned that Haynie got the clipping from the "Miss. Co. Op. paper," but I could not locate any further information about this publication. Maxie was a porter in the building that housed the Mississippi Federated Cooperatives. W.R. Haynie to James O. Eastland, 18 January 1957, Box 37, Folder 1957 Civil Rights 3 of 5, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi.

from afar...[who] invaded the South and have browbeaten and otherwise persuaded negro [sic] children to force themselves into the white school.”¹²⁹

Behind Eastland’s public denials of racial unrest lurked a closely guarded, ugly family secret involving his father, Woods Eastland. On February 3, 1904, just about ten months before the senator was born, an African American man named Luther Holbert had a violent confrontation with the senator’s uncle, James Eastland, and another man who worked for the Eastlands on their Doddsville, Mississippi plantation. Holbert shot and killed the other two men and fled for the Yazoo River with his wife, Mary. Upon hearing that his younger brother had been murdered, Woods Eastland swore he would personally avenge his brother’s death, so he assembled a posse and bloodhounds to pursue the Holberts. While waiting for bloodhounds to arrive from a nearby town, an impatient Woods shot and killed a black man who worked on his plantation on the suspicion that he was an accomplice. Three days later, the posse successfully apprehended the couple near the Yazoo River, but not before mistakenly shooting three other African Americans who had no connection to the murders. Although the Holberts were captured on a Saturday, Woods waited until after Sunday services to mutilate, torture, and burn the couple in front of a black church near the Holberts’ home.

The well-publicized burnings orchestrated by Woods attracted over one thousand spectators. Members of the lynch mob cut off the victims’ fingers and ears, distributing them among the onlookers, and they severely beat Luther Holbert, leaving him with a skull fracture and one eye hanging out of its socket. Before burning the couple alive, a white man used a large corkscrew to bore into their arms, legs, and torsos, extracting long ribbons of flesh from their

¹²⁹ Wilmer C. Johnston to James O. Eastland, 18 January 1946, Box 32, Folder 1946 Civil Rights 2 of 2, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library; Press Release from Richard B. Russell, 24 September 1957, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, P. Little Rock, Box 133, Folder 6, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

bodies. Woods openly oversaw the pursuit and burning of the Holberts, but he never stood for trial since his lawyer, U.S. Senator Anselm J. McLaurin no less, convinced the judge to dismiss the case. McLaurin argued that the state had insufficient evidence showing that Eastland had lit the pyres, and furthermore, he reasoned that, given the circumstances, Woods Eastland had justifiably lynched the Holberts.¹³⁰

Born only two months after his father's case was dismissed, James Oliver Eastland grew up in the shadow of his namesake's death. Even though the family didn't openly discuss how Woods Eastland had lynched two African Americans as retribution, the senator likely knew the details of his uncle's murder and the Holberts' lynchings. When "one of [his] old Rebel friends and neighbors" wrote the senator a letter denouncing the Freedom Rides in May 1961, this family friend assumed Eastland would recognize the reference when he wrote: "I often think of your father Judge Eastland; we had lots of fun together. ...I would like to hear from the Hon. Jim Eastland from the deep south, raise up on his back legs and let them have both barrels, like the Judge did in the good old days."¹³¹ This "old Rebel friend," John S. Boyette, had lived just a couple miles north of Doddsville until 1945, and since the lynchings had been common knowledge among locals, he didn't need to explicitly name the Holberts or mention the lynching in his letter as he waxed nostalgic about "the good old days" when Freedom Riders wouldn't dare to ride through the South on buses "with the purpose of exciting a riot."¹³² What was

¹³⁰ J. Todd Moyer, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3–18; Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 69, 23–32; Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 62–63.

¹³¹ John S. Boyette to James O. Eastland, 25 May 1961, Box 39, Folder 1961 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹³² Boyette was born in Ruleville, MS in 1903, just one year before the senator was born, and though he would have been an infant at the time of the lynchings, his familiarity with what happened in Doddsville in 1904 indicated that the lynchings were common knowledge among whites in the early decades of the twentieth century. Boyette to Eastland, 25 May 1961, Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

considered common knowledge (and therefore went unsaid) for the senator's generation was lost to the next generation. The senator's four children remained blissfully unaware of the family secret well into adulthood.¹³³

Another acquaintance of "Mr. Woods," Ruby Sheppard Hicks, penned a letter to the senator the night of the October 1962 riot that erupted in Oxford, Mississippi when James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi. Alarmed by the presence of almost 2,500 federal troops in her state, Hicks "wander[ed] tearfully through my long hall of memories" in search of something comforting, and she settled on a memory from 1903. Sunflower County, where she and the senator had grown up, had refused to be "degraded with a Negro postmistress" that President Theodore Roosevelt had re-appointed, and rather than withdrawing his support for postmistress Minnie Cox, Roosevelt had closed the post office. That story of white Mississippians defying a president who meddled in their racial affairs made a clear nod to the current confrontation with President John F. Kennedy. She looked to these memories for strength and reassurance. A few sentences later when she reminisced, "The murder of your uncle Jim was the first real tragedy I remember," she conveniently erased the lynching and murder of blacks that immediately followed.¹³⁴ The lynching of the Holberts would not be the only instance of racial violence in Eastland's home state that he and his fellow white southerners would paper over in order to defend Jim Crow.



¹³³ Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 33.

¹³⁴ Ruby Sheppard Hicks to James O. Eastland, 1 October 1962, Box 41, Folder 1962 Civil Rights 5 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library. Hicks published a nostalgic, romanticized memoir about growing up in the Delta in 1976 in which she almost entirely ignores the existence of African Americans. Ruby Sheppard Hicks, *The Song of the Delta* (Jackson, MS: Howick House, 1976).

As lynchings and racially motivated assassinations came under greater public scrutiny during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, white southerners concocted increasingly fantastical conspiracy theories to explain away violence against African Americans in the region. Writing to President Harry Truman about some black churches and a black school in Walton County, Georgia that burned to the ground in 1947, C.W. Sherlock, the manager of the Monroe-Walton County Chamber of Commerce assured the president, “We are positive that in no place in these United States are our colored friends treated with more respect and deference than in Walton County, Georgia.”¹³⁵ In denying that the Klan had any involvement in the arsons, Sherlock neglected to mention that his hometown of Monroe, Georgia was the site of a gruesome, highly publicized quadruple lynching of two African American couples only a year earlier.¹³⁶ People like Sherlock touted the racial harmony of the South, despite clear evidence to the contrary, because, with Congress still debating anti-lynching legislation, openly defending lynching could invite federal intervention. Rather than ignoring the quadruple lynching, F.P. Bennett from nearby Decatur, Georgia tried a different tactic. He claimed that “Now that the F.B.I. has taken over the investigation of the slaying of the four negroes [sic], I wonder if they will go so far as to ascertain whether this violence was perpetrated by a group of those few people in Georgia who are so hell-bent on setting up racial equality in the State. ... Personally, I think the same little group would stop at nothing to achieve their aims.”¹³⁷ Using a tortured logic that would be replicated time and again over the years, Bennett accused the NAACP of lynching the four African Americans in Monroe as part of a grand scheme to force racial equality upon the South.

¹³⁵ C.W. Sherlock to Harry S. Truman, 23 December 1947, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, A: Anti-Lynch, Box 1, Folder 4, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

¹³⁶ For more on the 1946 lynchings of George Dorsey, Mae Murray Dorsey, Dorothy Malcom, and Roger Malcom in Monroe, Georgia, see Laura Wexler, *Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

¹³⁷ F.P. Bennett to Richard B. Russell, 31 July 1946, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, OO: Supreme Court, Box 201, Folder 4, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

Nine years later in 1955 while much of the nation gasped in horror as details of Emmett Till's lynching came to light, rumors swirled among whites in the Mississippi Delta that the body recovered from the Tallahatchie River was not Till's. The County Sheriff H.G. Strider cast doubts upon whether anybody could identify a body that decomposed, and Deputy Sheriff James Cochran testified that one of the witnesses, Moses Wright, admitted that he could not positively identify the body because it had been so badly mangled. Wright, the lynched boy's great uncle, denied he had made any such statement, but to quash any further skepticism, the prosecution called Till's mother to testify that the body she had displayed in a Chicago funeral home and later buried had, in fact, been her son's. Till was wearing his father's ring with the initials L.T. (for Louis Till) engraved on the band when his body was recovered from the river, but despite this piece of evidence, speculation and doubts abounded.¹³⁸ Two years after the trial, the white Greenwood physician, L.B. Otken, who had examined Till's body wrote a letter to Eastland describing the body as "that of a man 55 to 60 years old, practically white, with dirty reddish blond hair."¹³⁹ By transforming a dead black boy into a middle-aged white man, Otken rhetorically did what so many white Mississippians did subconsciously: he denied victimhood to African Americans and turned white southerners into the victims.

These denials not only shifted the focus of the trial away from securing justice for Till, but they also opened the door to even more farcical theories. In his closing arguments, one of the defense attorneys at the trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, John Whitten, speculated:

¹³⁸ A few months after a Sumner jury acquitted Bryant and Milam, *Look* magazine published an interview with the two men in which they admitted to kidnapping, beating, and killing Till, and they described wrapping barbed wire around the fourteen-year-old's neck to secure the gin fan to the body before throwing him into the Tallahatchie River. The doubts about the "real identity" of Till's body are entirely unfounded given the ring, his injuries, and the gin fan all match accounts by the killers and his family. John Herbers, "Till's Mother Due to Testify: Will Dispute Claim Body Wasn't Son's," *State Times* (Jackson, MS), 21 September 1955; James L. Kilgallen, "Wright Tells Story of Negro's Kidnapping," *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), 21 September 1955; William Bradford Huie, "Whole State Condone It," *Look*, 24 January 1956.

¹³⁹ L.B. Otken to James O. Eastland, 8 August 1957, Box 37, Folder 1957 Civil Rights 5 of 5, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

There are people out to put [blacks and whites in the South] at odds who are willing to go as far as possible to commit any crime to widen the gap between us. If these people had the opportunity to create a commotion to stir up a trial such as this and focus national attention on Mississippi and focus national attention on the strained relations here, they would do it. ... They would not be above putting a rotting, stinking body in the river in the hope he would be identified as Emmett Till.¹⁴⁰

Suggesting that civil rights organizations like the NAACP planted the body reinforced the perception that groups labeled as outside agitators were trying to disrupt a social system in which African Americans were treated well. In an interview nearly fifty years later, Whitten still maintained that defending Milam and Bryant “didn’t bother me at all. I felt like we didn’t mistreat them in our own lives. Blacks, I mean.”¹⁴¹ This imagined disjuncture between lynching and the rest of white southern society illustrated just how thoroughly racial violence could be scrubbed from white southern memory when it was convenient to do so.

White southern anxiety over losing racial dominance escalated as the black freedom struggle grew into a mass movement supported by prominent political figures like the Kennedys, so on June 12, 1963, when the NAACP Field Secretary in Mississippi, Medgar Evers, was gunned down in the driveway to his Jackson home, his death spawned a spate of new conspiracy theories to explain away his assassination. With public scrutiny once again bearing down upon Mississippi, many whites convinced themselves that the assassination was an inside job intended to further damage the reputation of the South.¹⁴² Most of this speculation resembled some variation of what Slim Gilmore, a man from Meridian, Mississippi concocted:

¹⁴⁰ “Mississippi Jury Acquits White Men In Slaying of Negro Boy of Chicago,” *Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch and the Portsmouth Star* (Norfolk-Portsmouth, VA), 24 September 1955; Paul Hendrickson, “Mississippi Haunting,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, 27 February 2000, 26.

¹⁴¹ Paul Hendrickson, “Mississippi Haunting,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, 27 February 2000, 26.

¹⁴² In a letter to Eastland, a resident of Jackson, Mrs. W.Q. Sharp, wrote, “We think this m murder that was done in our city is to discredit us. We have our own theory that Evers was not successful in contaminating enough of our negro [sic] population.” In just two sentences, Sharp both denied a white southerner had killed Evers and that local blacks thought Jim Crow was unjust. Sharp Mrs. W.Q. Sharp to James O. Eastland, 13 June 1963, Box 41, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 1 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

If no one is apprehended in the Madgar [sic] Evers murder case—no one convicted—then we'll know the job was done by a Negro. If some one [sic] is caught and convicted we'll know it was a White Person. Many people down here are willing to take odds that this job was done by a Negro or backed by some Negro groupe [sic]. This was a squeeze to bring out Kennedy's new legislature bills to pass. This furthered the Negro civil rights bills and their equality. Think how much money they have collected since this affair. Every Negro and some white's [sic] have contributed and some heavy. Sometimes I think perhaps the communists are behind the Negro movements.¹⁴³

Gilmore echoed those white Georgians who, back in the 1940s, warned that the quadruple lynching in Monroe was part of an elaborate scheme to bring social equality to the South, but this time the proposed legislation was far more sweeping and had stricter enforcement mechanisms than any anti-lynching bill ever had. In the intervening years, two presidents had sent federal troops to the South to protect students integrating schools and Freedom Riders, and Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The nation seemed to be on the precipice of a Second Reconstruction. The more circumspect among the conspiracy theorists appeared to be driven more by desperation than conviction. L.T. Dempsey from Jackson wrote a letter to Eastland admitting that “most of our folks are of the opinion that Evers was the victim of another negro [sic] altho [there is] no evidence to this effect.”¹⁴⁴ Dempsey's letter illuminated just how determined some southerners were to search for a culprit—any culprit—that wasn't a white southern man with a shotgun. Few Americans were surprised that three Mississippi juries heard the case against Evers's murderer, Byron de la Beckwith, before finally convicting the avowed white supremacist in 1994.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Slim Gilmore to James O. Eastland, 20 June 1963, Box 41, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 1 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁴⁴ L.T. Dempsey to James O. Eastland, 16 June 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 3 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁴⁵ Eastland even received a letter supposedly sent by an African American woman named “Mary” in Baton Rouge, Louisiana who claimed that when her husband was talking in his sleep he admitted to accepting five thousand dollars from President Kennedy and a U.S. marshal to assassinate Evers. “Mary” also said that a white southern man would be falsely blamed for the murder. The authenticity of the letter is questionable at best given the conviction of Bryon de le Beckwith for Evers' murder and the overwhelming evidence of his guilt. Mary to Richard

The following summer—Freedom Summer—Mississippi revived its taste for lynching. On June 21, 1964, three civil rights workers with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner, drove to Philadelphia, Mississippi from their offices in Meridian to meet with leaders of Mt. Zion Methodist Church, a small all-black congregation that the Klan had burned to the ground a few days earlier. They never made it back to Meridian. On their way to the COFO offices that afternoon, the three men were pulled over by a deputy sheriff and Klan member, Cecil Ray Price, who took them into custody purportedly for speeding. Price arranged for other Klan members to intercept the civil rights workers as soon as they were released from the Neshoba County Jail, and by the end of the night, the Klan, which included several members of local law enforcement, had killed and buried Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. Federal investigators and troops swooped in to find the missing civil rights workers, but their bodies remained undisturbed in an earthen dam until August 4, when the FBI excavated their badly decayed remains. Goodman and Schwerner, the two white New Yorkers, had a bullet lodged in each of their torsos. Chaney, the black Mississippian, had three bullets in his torso, and his jaw had been shattered, his shoulder and arm mangled. His skull had been battered so badly that one side of his head had caved in. The Klan members had poured their hatred, frustration, and anger onto Chaney's body, trying to beat back the advance of the black freedom struggle in Mississippi with each blow.¹⁴⁶

During the forty-four days the men remained missing, speculation ran rampant. The governor of Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson quipped that the civil rights workers could be “up

B. Russell forwarded to James O. Eastland, 14 June 1963, Box 41, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 2 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁴⁶ Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Nation Books, 2006), 1–14, 35–41, 395–401.

North or in Cuba,” but “there are so many possibilities it would be foolish to make a guess.”¹⁴⁷

In a speech Eastland gave on the floor of the Senate, he all but called the lynchings a hoax:

No one wants to charge that a hoax has been perpetrated because there is too little evidence to show what did happen. But as time goes on and the search continues, if some evidence of a crime is not produced, I think the people of America will be justified in considering other alternatives as more valid solutions to the mystery, instead of accepting as true the accusation of the agitators that a heinous crime has been committed.¹⁴⁸

In a private letter, he confided to a sympathetic constituent, “There are growing indications that the Philadelphia incident may have been manufactured, though no one, in view of present information, could make this assertion, and I certainly would not want to do anything further than to call attention to such a possibility. I hope that it develops this way.”¹⁴⁹ Eastland’s “hope” that the disappearance was “manufactured” by Communists was probably motivated less by a sincere concern for the well-being of the three missing men and more by a desire to conceal blemishes on his state’s reputation. Some white Mississippians took issue with their elected officials’ insensitive, if not outrageous, remarks, especially once the bodies were located and the intimate ties between the Klan and law enforcement came to light, but Johnson and Eastland’s unwavering popularity attested to the extent to which their views reflected a dominant strain of white southern society.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Kenneth Toler, “Trio ‘Up North or in Cuba?’ Could Be Governor Thinks,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), 27 June 1964.

¹⁴⁸ 110 Cong. Rec. S16596 (22 July 1964) (“Communist Infiltration into the So-Called Civil Rights Movement” by Sen. Eastland).

¹⁴⁹ James O. Eastland to Rose Wilder Lane, 31 July 1964, Box 43, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 2 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas J. Reed, a white Presbyterian minister from Natchez, Mississippi, told Eastland that he owed the families of the three lynched men an apology for dismissing their deaths as a hoax, and James Ballard from Piney Woods, Virginia sent Eastland a postcard that simply asked, “Dear Mr. Eastland: Still think it’s a hoax?” The vast majority of letters sent to the senator about the lynchings supported the sentiments expressed in his speech though. Thomas J. Reed to James O. Eastland, 6 August 1964, Box 43, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 2 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library; James Ballard to James O. Eastland, 7 August 1964, Box 43, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 2 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

What these elected officials hinted at with a wink and a nod, many of their constituents made explicit. Unhampered by an obligation to uphold even the veneer of social decorum, some whites sneered that the mother of one of the missing men didn't appear sufficiently bereaved to have lost her son to the Klan and that her television appearance was just a ploy to engender sympathy for the summer voter education and voter registration drive.¹⁵¹ Ann Parker of Jackson, for instance, scoffed at what she considered a publicity stunt to drum up support for the summer voter registration drive:

Now look to the three who are missing after being released from jail in Philadelphia on Sunday night. The station wagon plainly set on fire etc. I said at once: "Another Emmett Till case." You remember five reputable Drs. examined the body pulled out of the river and stated "It is the body of a mature man & not a boy." Still Mississippi is today called the murderer! The three I am sure lost themselves to put another blot on Miss.¹⁵²

Having already dismissed Till's lynching as a fabrication, Parker didn't require much prodding to point an accusatory finger at the civil rights workers themselves. She even claimed to have seen Schwerner walking around Lynch Street near the COFO headquarters in Jackson a few days after they went missing. Dozens of other alleged "sightings" cropped up across the country. By personalizing the denial—after all Parker claimed to have witnessed Schwerner walking by her house—she revealed that the depths of her determination to erase this "blot" from Mississippi.

In the weeks between the disappearance of the three civil rights workers and the recovery of their bodies, Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which once again raised the stakes for the counteroffensive against civil rights. One year later, the Voting Rights Act became the law of the land. At a moment when denying lynchings past and present became most imperative for saving Jim Crow, militant white supremacists like Klansmen and lone vigilantes responded to

¹⁵¹ A. Klingerof (?) to James O. Eastland, 26 June 1964, Box 42, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 2 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁵² Ann Parker to James O. Eastland, 23 July 1964, Box 43, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 3 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

advances in voter registration and desegregation with an escalation of bombings, arsons, death threats, and murders, producing even more acts of violence to explain away and cover up and ignore.

In 1966 when a white man from Memphis, James Norvell, shot and injured James Meredith on his one-man March Against Fear, the conspiracy theorists once again came out of the woodwork. Four years after integrating the University of Mississippi, Meredith had marched along that barren highway to challenge the fear that paralyzed so many African American Mississippians in their everyday lives, and he wanted to encourage them to register to vote.¹⁵³ Newspapers printed photographs of the shooting taken by reporters covering the march from Memphis to Jackson, which fueled speculation that the shooting was a publicity stunt and that the photographs were somehow staged.¹⁵⁴ Some white southerners acknowledged that Norvell had acted alone when he staked out the route of the march and shot Meredith, recklessly jeopardizing the already damaged reputation of the South, but the more skeptical disagreed, including J.R. Perry of Vicksburg, Mississippi who penned a letter to Eastland writing, “You know as well as I do that if [Norvell] had wanted to kill Meredith he wouldn’t have used bird shot. This man was no doubt paid a substantial sum to perpetrate this deed.”¹⁵⁵ In response to a different constituent who also was convinced that Norvell had been paid by a civil rights organization to shoot Meredith, Eastland only fed those suspicions: “The person who is accused of shooting [Meredith] has an Army medal for expert marksmanship with a rifle. One Eastern senator told me that when his name was called three times that was to give the photographers

¹⁵³ James Meredith, “Statement: My Walk from Memphis to Jackson,” 31 May 1966, Box 97.25.14, Folder 2, James Howard Meredith Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁵⁴ For instance, C.C. Alexander from Kosciusko, Mississippi wrote to Eastland: “There is something ‘Phony’ about the picture as reports state that he (Norvell) gave a warning.” C.C. Alexander to James O. Eastland, 5 July 1966, Box 45, Folder 1966 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁵⁵ J.R. Perry to James O. Eastland, 14 June 1966, Box 45, Folder 1966 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

time to focus their cameras.”¹⁵⁶ Anxieties about racial equality lay at the heart of these theories. Many white southerners like Perry and Eastland dreaded the day when African Americans across the state of Mississippi would fearlessly walk to the polls and cast votes as Meredith had envisioned.

In life and in death, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. inspired countless elaborate rumors about his ties to radicals or wild claims that nonviolent direct action was, in fact, a ploy to create disorder and spark violent unrest. Although the wholehearted embrace of a defanged version of King every January might suggest otherwise, a considerable slice of the United States openly reviled him in the 1950s and 1960s, even after his assassination on April 4, 1968. Many white southerners thought President Johnson’s order to fly American flags at half-staff to mourn the civil rights leader’s death dishonored the flag itself and all that it stood for. Those who opposed King often suspected the Baptist minister of being a pawn in a communist plot to destroy American democracy, and those suspicions followed him to the grave. Eastland, for instance, suggested that “it has been apparent that King was assassinated by a hired assassin and we may never know the source of the money,” though only a few lines down in that letter he confidently asserted, “I think the theory that there may have been some Communist money involved and a Communist conspiracy in the assassination of King has a lot of validity.”¹⁵⁷ Whether the communists behind the assassination were from China or Cuba or Russia or Vietnam, he couldn’t be sure, but he was certain that the white South’s conscience was clean.

These conspiracy theories invented to explain away lynchings, assassinations, and other kinds of racial violence were not merely a marginal or exceptional element of white southern

¹⁵⁶ James O. Eastland to H.C. VanZant, Sr., 24 June 1966, Box 45, Folder 1966 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁵⁷ James O. Eastland to L.L. Price, 17 April 1968, Box 45, Folder 1968 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

culture. This persistent, reflexive denial permeated all strata of society and constantly reappeared over the thirty years after 1940. U.S. Senators and pecan farmers alike spun these intricate tales of Communists, Jews, African Americans, and “do-gooders” conspiring to destroy the United States. They took comfort in transferring the blame for violence and unrest to outsiders, reassuring themselves that “their” black folks remained content under Jim Crow and that their stance against civil rights was righteous.



Conspiracy theories shifted responsibility for violence away from the white South, and the exculpatory power of silence could provide comfort as white southerners ignored their transgressions. Projection, or the rejection of one’s own feelings and desires and the displacement of those feelings and desires onto others, also became a common outlet for white southerners to shed their guilty consciences by inverting the roles of victim and perpetrator. The silent transfer of guilt littered the historical record with glaring, if not ironic, contradictions that were seemingly lost on those who projected their own guilt onto others.

Among the piles of correspondence elected officials in the South received as debates over anti-lynching legislation, integration, and voting rights raged on in Washington were an assortment of newspaper clippings about those cesspools of crime and immorality, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia.¹⁵⁸ Dripping with lurid details about ruthless mobsters, depraved rapists, and roving gangs of juvenile delinquents, these articles supplied southern

¹⁵⁸ In the floor debates over legislation covering everything from anti-lynching to the FEPC to civil rights, southern senators and congressmen rattled off one crime statistic after another, often read directly from the FBI’s annual “Uniform Crime Reports” distributed by J. Edgar Hoover. Politicians used these statistics and crime stories to argue against anti-lynching legislation that targeted the South when the North had higher crime rates. They also used these statistics and crime stories to argue that the crime rate would skyrocket if integration spread across the South.

politicians with evidence that if any region needed to crack down on violent crime, especially black-on-white violence, it was the North. A particularly zealous woman from Millington, Tennessee sent Eastland an annotated spiral-bound scrapbook of clippings ranging from “Negroes Held in Attack: 7 Accused of Assaulting Philadelphia White Girl” and “5 Youths Admit Attacking Girl in Racially Mixed Neighborhood” (in Chicago) to “Mental Test for Boy Attackers” (in New York) and “Does North Know Its Own Part in Racial Troubles As Well as It Knows South’s?”¹⁵⁹ This woman’s obsessive cataloging of black criminality and the perils of race mixing was atypical, but so many other white southerners also diverted attention from southern racism and racial violence by pointing to the North. In 1949 L.A. McLaughlin of Miami sent Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia an article with the title, “Asserts That Klan Killed Fewer Victims Than CIO Mobs Under Roosevelt and Truman,” and scrawled above the headline, “N.B. ‘The Klan’ punishes guilty persons, rapists, wife-beaters, etc. Labor Union Racketeers beat and murder innocent citizens.”¹⁶⁰ One clipping sent to Eastland featured two photos side by side: black and white women standing on a corner patiently waiting for the lights to change and a car engulfed in flames with firefighters scurrying around it. The caption printed below read “Racial Harmony Prevails in Jackson while Riots Rage in Chicago.”¹⁶¹

White southerners had long harped on black criminality and northern racial tensions to justify placing tight controls over African Americans in the South. They claimed to “know the Negro,” but the true meaning of the phrase, with its many layers of paternalism and racism, was, as one white woman who grew up on a Greenville plantation put it, “know[ing] the mentality,

¹⁵⁹ Agnes Whitman to James O. Eastland, 3 March 1960, Box 38, Folder 1960 Civil Rights 1 of 2, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁶⁰ The clipping included no publication information but was an editorial column by Westbrook Pegler. L.A. McLaughlin to Richard B. Russell, 7 April 1949, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, A: Anti-Lynch, Box 1, Folder 1, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

¹⁶¹ The clipping was the cover story from the 29 July 1957 issue of *Jackson Daily News*. Jackson Daily News to James O. Eastland, 29 July 1957, Box 36, Folder 1957 Civil Rights 1 of 5, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

amorality, and primitiveness of the majority of our negroes [sic].”¹⁶² Criticizing white northerners who couldn’t properly control “their” blacks or maintain “good relations” with them simultaneously excused and erased southern oppression and violence. A banker from Carthage, Mississippi, J.A. Sasser, boldly claimed:

Race relations in the South are not nearly as bad as they are in Northern states. Up to now we have had no violence in our State. A majority of our white people believe [in] and practice fair play with the Negro. Most of our people have a greater affection for the negro [sic] than the people who were not reared with them. We will not have race trouble down here. It will be in St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington.¹⁶³

Hailing from the state with the highest number of lynchings—the same state where, just two years earlier, Emmett Till had been lynched for flirting with a white woman and Reverend George Lee and Lamar Smith had been murdered for registering to vote—Sasser transferred the violence against African Americans that plagued his state and his region to the rest of the country. Perhaps he felt hounded by a guilty conscience, but rather than confronting the violence in his state, he projected that violence onto northern cities.¹⁶⁴

Sitting in her Houston home in the summer of 1957, Judy Barnett must have felt quite pleased with herself as she sealed the envelope bound for Senator Eastland’s desk in Washington DC. While doing genealogical research she had stumbled upon an item she thought might be pertinent to the debate raging in Congress over the civil rights bill, so she took it upon herself to

¹⁶² Herbert forwarded a copy of her letter to President Kennedy to Eastland. Frances F. Herbert to John F. Kennedy, 2 October 1962, Box 41, Folder 1962 Civil Rights 5 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁶³ J.A. Sasser to Henry Jackson bcc James O. Eastland, 30 July 1957, Box 37, Folder 1957 Civil Rights 3 of 5, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁶⁴ This tendency to project rather than confront lynching had clear parallels to the projection of sexual violence onto African American men. The “justification” of lynching had historically been to punish black men for raping white women, even though white men had raped black women since the seventeenth century without facing punishment. Whites castrated black men as part of the ritual of lynching, in part because white men felt threatened by what they perceived to be their greater virility, but also because they projected their own rape of black women onto black men. White southerners continued to use this logic to justify Jim Crow more generally well into the 1960s, claiming that integration would lead to a spike in the number of rapes and assaults.

have a photocopy made and sent it to the senator. Barnett had discovered a short description of a monument dedicated to Confederate veteran Calvin Crozier by the chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Newberry, South Carolina. According to the brief account of his death included with this description, Crozier was released from a federal prison after the Confederate Army surrendered, but on his way home to Texas, he had a brief entanglement with an African American Union soldier in Newberry who had spewed “gross insults” at a young white woman travelling with him. For protecting a white woman from the advances of a black man, the narrative read:

[Crozier] was hurried in the nighttime to the bivouac of the regiment to which the [African American] soldier belonged, was kept under guard all night, was not allowed communication with any citizen, was condemned to die without even the form of a trial and was shot to death about daylight the following morning and his body mutilated.¹⁶⁵

Crozier’s death in 1865 had oddly convoluted resonances with the thousands of southern lynchings that followed. The protection of white womanhood, the circumvention of the law, a victim murdered by members of another race without facing legal consequences, and the mutilation of the body all had a familiar ring, but these elements were reversed, and the horrifying violence against African Americans in the intervening ninety years or so was conspicuously absent. The dedication of the Crozier monument in 1913 came at a moment when white supremacy and Jim Crow seemed steadfast and secure, but written on the precipice of a Second Reconstruction, Barnett’s note came in an age more closely resembling the post-war South in which Crozier died. This story of white Confederate victimhood certainly reflected Barnett’s anxieties that federal civil rights legislation might become law for the first time since

¹⁶⁵ Judy Barnett to James O. Eastland, 28 July 1957, Box 36, Folder 1957 Civil Rights 1 of 5, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

Reconstruction, and she projected nearly one hundred years of lynching African Americans onto black southerners in an effort to purge the white South of its violent past.¹⁶⁶

In addition to using stories like the one Barnett told to purge the white South of its guilt, white southerners projected violence onto blacks using the rhetoric of lynching. Going back to the 1890s when Ida B. Wells began to so courageously and forcefully denounce lynching and the “reign of mob rule” that gripped the South, the rhetoric of mob rule and mob violence took on a particularly racialized tone. Southern newspapers would run sensationalist headlines like “Buggy Collision Incites Mob to Lynch Ala. Negro” or “Two Saved from First Mob Are Lynched by Second Mob” or “Negro Killed by Mob after Slaying Three / Downed by Machine Gun Fire After 15-Hour Chase” or “Courthouse, Negro Burned / Mob Destroys Three Blocks in Negro Part of Sherman.”¹⁶⁷ The mobs documented in these headlines were well-planned, organized assemblages of white southerners who used the ritualized torture and murder of black people to punish the victims, terrorize the African American community, and affirm their supremacy in southern society. The rhetoric of mob rule remained salient in the South during the 1950s and 1960s, but white southerners usually reserved that rhetoric for African Americans participating in demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts rather than the thousands of white counter-protests across the South erupting in violence and vitriol reminiscent of lynch mobs. Just like

¹⁶⁶ As recently as 17 March 2013, the South Carolina Division Children of the Confederacy rededicated the Crozier monument on the one-hundred-year anniversary of the dedication with members of the Calvin Crozier Chapter, United Daughters of the Confederacy and members of the John M. Kinard Camp, Sons of Confederate Veterans attending. A speaker lectured the children about the importance of “character,” and the children placed a wreath on the grave along with “flags” that likely were Confederate flags. The meaning of these ceremonies shifted depending on the historical context: the original dedication affirmed the system of Jim Crow that was alive and well in 1913 and the rededication in 2013 was nostalgic for those days. In both contexts though, remembering the Confederate dead came with a conspicuous erasure of slavery and racial oppression from their memory. “Children of the Confederacy Rededicate Calvin Crozier Monument,” *Newberry Observer* (Newberry, SC), 1 April 2013.

¹⁶⁷ “Buggy Collision Incites Mob to Lynch Ala. Negro,” *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL), 11 November 1912; “Two Saved from First Mob Are Lynched by Second Mob,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 September 1916; “Negro Killed by Mob after Slaying Three / Downed by Machine Gun Fire After 15-Hour Chase,” *Dallas Evening Journal*, 15 December 1923; “Courthouse, Negro Burned / Mob Destroys Three Blocks in Negro Part of Sherman,” *The Ennis Daily News* (Ennis, TX), 10 May 1930.

their predecessors who projected their own barbarity onto African Americans to justify lynching, these anti-civil-rights mobs projected their own lawlessness onto blacks to justify the strictures of Jim Crow and their opposition to black freedom.¹⁶⁸ The process of erasing the violence of one “mob” and projecting that violence onto another “mob” was replicated throughout the Civil Rights Era, in particular, in white southern responses to the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the March on Washington of 1963.¹⁶⁹

Thick plumes of black smoke billowed above the Greyhound bus as a stream of choking, coughing, bleary-eyed humanity poured out onto the shoulder of the highway near Anniston, Alabama. Its tires slashed, its windows bashed in, its interior consumed by flames, the battered bus barely fared better than its passengers who stumbled down its stairs. Later that day a second bus pulled into the station in Birmingham, only to be greeted by the Klan, who had coordinated with local law enforcement to allow them ten minutes to beat the passengers with pipes before the police arrived. A third bus arrived in Montgomery a couple days later. The sixteen Alabama patrol cars that had accompanied them from Birmingham for protection disappeared as they entered Montgomery, and again hundreds of angry white Alabamans met them at the bus station wielding baseball bats, clubs, and chains for bludgeoning the passengers. When that third bus made it to Jackson, Mississippi, the riders were promptly arrested without incident, despite a Jackson banker warning that, “much bloodshed will result from Robert Kennedy’s inspired

¹⁶⁸ White southerners sometimes described white behavior with the rhetoric of mob violence, even when they were sympathetic to the position of the white mobs. Although a complete erasure of mob or lynching rhetoric to describe whites never happened, the tendency to describe whites as members of a crowd and blacks as members of a mob revealed the depths of white denial.

¹⁶⁹ Another useful pair of events to analyze is the 1962 riot at the University of Mississippi and the 1968 riots following the assassination of King. Many white Mississippians preferred to describe the white rioters as a “crowd” persecuted by federal marshalls rather than a “mob,” but they were quick to condemn black rioters as disruptive, violent mobs.

freedom riders when they hit Mississippi. This state will be an armed camp.”¹⁷⁰ Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Freedom Rides had come to the Deep South to test the enforcement of a Supreme Court decision banning segregation in interstate bus travel. They were met with throngs of irate whites and a level of violence, though not deadly violence, that illustrated in blood and hatred the real meaning of Jim Crow.¹⁷¹

An editorial in the *The Washington Post* optimistically reported that these “unhappy incidents” had made white southerners “[realize] the dangers of incendiary public behavior and mob response,” but in the days and weeks that followed, many whites continued to lash out against the Freedom Riders.¹⁷² While carefully avoiding the terms “rioters” or “mob” to describe white Alabamans, the local press and politicians branded the CORE and SNCC activists as rabble-rousers intent on inciting riots and igniting racial animosity. A state representative from Mississippi, Walter Sillers, wrote to his good friend Jim Eastland that the Freedom Riders (or “fanatical stooges” as he called them) “[were] making these invasions with the hope of provoking violence and disorder” as part of a well-organized Communist conspiracy.¹⁷³ Similarly, Melvin T. Weakley of Dyersburg, Tennessee railed against these “trained outside agitators” for going to Alabama to “stir racial strife” and “inflame the citizenry.”¹⁷⁴ The mobs that had set that bus aflame somehow morphed into unwilling participants in a riot inflamed by

¹⁷⁰ Louis W. Cotton to James O. Eastland, 21 May 1961, Box 39, Folder 1961 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁷¹ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 77–82; Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn, *Voice of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 73–96

¹⁷² “After the Violence,” *The Washington Post*, 27 May 1961.

¹⁷³ Walter Sillers to James O. Eastland, 21 June 1961, Box 39, Folder 1961 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁷⁴ Weakley also beseeched Eastland to continue his fight to prevent the destruction of American freedom and the “enslavement of our people” without even an inkling of irony. Melvin T. Weakley to James O. Eastland, 3 June 1961, Box 39, Folder 1961 Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

an invading force of self-righteous do-gooders. By shedding responsibility for attacking the Freedom Riders, not only had the white mob seemingly lost its free will, but the victimizers had become the victims.

In the spring of 1963, only two years after the Freedom Rides, African Americans in Birmingham launched a campaign to protest segregation and discrimination in the city. By then the attacks on the Freedom Riders appeared to have faded in the memory of the city's mayor, Arthur J. Hanes, who told the chairman of the Senate Sub-Committee on Internal Security, "Citizens of Birmingham [are] determined not to tolerate further mob action fomented by anyone and certainly not by the Negro [Martin Luther] King."¹⁷⁵ Hanes also turned the rhetoric of mob violence on its head. When mobs of whites had clubbed the Freedom Riders, white Alabamans blamed civil rights activists for their own beatings. When police dogs and fire hoses scattered a "mob" of activists peacefully protesting in Birmingham, Hanes believed the activists provoked the police to club them with night sticks.¹⁷⁶ Whether participating in "mobs" on the streets of Birmingham (and being beaten by the police) or being beaten by "mobs" in Alabama bus stations, African Americans—not the police or the white mob—shouldered the responsibility for violence in the imaginations of many white Alabamans.

A few months later on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King spoke about an unpaid promissory note, and the SCLC's John Lewis implored, "Wake up America! Wake up!" Hundreds of thousands of Americans gathered on the national mall that sweltering August afternoon for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom to demand the passage of strong

¹⁷⁵ Telegram from Arthur J. Hanes to John McClellan, 12 May 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 2 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁷⁶ In a telegram to Armistead Selden that was forwarded to Eastland, Alabama Governor George C. Wallace placed the blame for the bombings in the African American neighborhood that became known as "Dynamite Hill" at the feet of the civil rights protesters who wanted to "create internal strife and turmoil." He did not indicate why those protesters would target fellow African Americans who were sympathetic to the movement though. Telegram from Armistead Selden to James O. Eastland, 13 May 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 2 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

civil rights legislation, and they left feeling uplifted and hopeful yet knew their work remained far from finished. In the weeks leading up to the March, many white southerners predicted chaos and violence would erupt in the nation's capital.¹⁷⁷ Five days before the March, Mrs. Frank M. Bianca of Natchez, Mississippi wrote, "This mass civil rights march which is only a 'mob march' controlled and led by many communists is degrading to the American way of life."¹⁷⁸ The Martaks, a couple from Memphis, wrote to the congressional delegation of Tennessee that civil rights activists who "are objecting [to segregation] shall take their case to their local law and the courts of our land, and not endeavor to force our law makers to enact laws through mob action."¹⁷⁹

Many white southerners agreed with the Martaks that the nation had descended into a mobocracy—that mobs of civil rights activists controlled the President and Congress—even though the activists themselves worried that the coming legislative debate would be a struggle and that Kennedy would water down the bill. The "mob" rhetoric that cropped up in discussions of the March reflected a widespread belief among white southerners that racial equality would spell the end of freedom and democracy for whites, and many even feared that black freedom would mean white slavery.¹⁸⁰ Both the "mob" rhetoric and the "slavery" rhetoric revealed a

¹⁷⁷ Some of the more radical groups participating in the March, like SNCC and CORE, had hoped for a massive show of civil disobedience that would shut down Washington, but by early July the organizers had decided to limit the activities to a rally on the National Mall. Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 152.

¹⁷⁸ Mrs. Frank M. Bianca to James O. Eastland, 23 August 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 3 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁷⁹ William K. Martak to Estes Kefauver, 2 August 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 3 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library. For instance, because Congress had called a recess during the March, Mr. and Mrs. J.V. Pace Jr. of Forest, Mississippi lamented, "This Republic has truly become a Democracy controlled by masses of mobs, which in reality is a 'mobocracy.'" Mr. and Mrs. J.V. Pace Jr. to James O. Eastland, 27 August 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 3 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

¹⁸⁰ For instance, the Paces wrote that "it is better to perish than to live as slaves" in their letter to Eastland condemning the March on Washington as a dangerous mob. Mr. and Mrs. J.V. Pace Jr. to James O. Eastland, 27 August 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 3 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library. Soon after the Civil War ended, white southerners began to argue that they weren't responsible for slavery since slavery itself had been foisted upon them by the North, which profited greatly from the slave trade and

deeper anxiety that empowered African Americans would treat white southerners as they had been treated for over three hundred years. Projecting lynching onto African Americans and claiming oppression for themselves perhaps assuaged some of their guilt, and these odd reversals provided comfort in a time of great upheaval.

Just three weeks later on the morning of September 15, 1963, a powerful explosion tore through the walls of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church just before Sunday services. Most of the parishioners emerged from the church unscathed or with minor injuries, but four little black girls chatting in the church basement after Sunday school were killed by the blast. Coming on the heels of the March on Washington, the bombing provided a sobering reminder that the fight for racial justice in the South could have deadly consequences, even for the youngest members of the black community. In the tense days that followed, two more African American children lost their lives to gunshots fired by a white boy and a white police officer. Armed guards had been patrolling the homes of middle class blacks in Dynamite Hill since the spring after a wave of bombings orchestrated by the Klan damaged several homes, but the bombing of a church on a Sunday morning and the deaths of four children made people around the world wonder what moral boundaries, if any, those who most fiercely defended Jim Crow wouldn't cross.¹⁸¹

Many white southerners expressed shock and horror at the deaths of four children attending church, and some local whites even visited the families of the slain girls to offer their condolences, even though they were complete strangers. Others reverted to the comforting habit

abolished slavery in fits and starts only in the late-eighteenth century. Before emancipation, white southerners concocted all sorts of excuses to cover up the brutality and inhumanity of slavery from describing slavery as "civilizing" blacks to claiming that slavery was a benign, paternalistic system, and the dominant memory of the Civil War, especially in the South, often marginalized or erased slavery as a cause.

¹⁸¹ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 889–892.

of denial and projection. William M. Spencer, a native of Birmingham, blamed the bombing on outside agitators determined to start a race riot, and he resented accusations that whites from Birmingham were responsible for the deaths of four black girls.¹⁸² Gene Oliver of Knoxville, Tennessee thought the NAACP had perpetrated the bombing to generate revenue, explaining that “Having lived in Georgia most of my life, and coming in contact with Negroes, I have a reasonably good idea as to their cunning. Therefore, I cannot help but wonder if the various bombings are not—to a great extent anyway—the work of their own hands.”¹⁸³ Exactly three weeks after the March on Washington, King gave a eulogy at the funeral for three of the girls, and he reaffirmed his faith in redemptive suffering, expressing his conviction that their deaths might provide a “redemptive force” for justice in the South. In front of eight thousand mourners, including hundreds of white clergy, he held out hope for his white brothers and sisters in the South: “Indeed this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience.”¹⁸⁴ For some the deaths of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley forced them to recognize the humanity of African Americans, but others surrounded their conscience with an impenetrable wall of silence. From the Freedom Rides to the Birmingham campaign to the March on Washington to the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the inversion of mob rhetoric and the projection of guilt left many African Americans wondering whether moral appeals to people who refused to confront their guilt would ever produce a more just society.

¹⁸² William M. Spencer to Richard B. Russell, 1 October 1963, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, AA: Racial – Out of State, Box 155, Folder 8, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

¹⁸³ Gene Oliver to Richard B. Russell, 20 September 1963, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, AA: Racial – Out of State, Box 155, Folder 8, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

¹⁸⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing,” in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2001), 97.



Long after Jesse Pennington made it safely out of the Delta to Chicago, his mother's screams still rang in his ears. Even though he had locked away his memories of that day, echoes of her pained cries followed him to college, to the Vietnam War, to law school, and to his law practice in Mississippi. In 2004 when Pennington went to see an exhibit of lynching photographs in Jackson, Mississippi, those distant echoes grew to a thunderous crescendo:

As I walked in, I could hear the music play, and as I got halfway down the hallway, I—I can feel it now—just started crying. I mean, I just burst. I cried, I cried, I cried. And they had to come help to get me because what happened, everything that happened to me came up because from that moment, I had suppressed from that moment on, I suppressed everything—all the horror, the escape, the getting away, everything was just suppressed inside. Now when I saw [the exhibit], I could hear the music. I could see the sign. I could see the lynching, hanging, and all this stuff. I mean, I just went crazy. That was the first time that it ever came [back]. I had never, never, ever talked about it. Never [told] any[one] about it. They didn't even know. [I] never talked about it. And that's when it, that's when it came back. Uh, and that's, that's how, say that's to say that black people would do, family would not talk about it. They'd just leave it [?]. But it affected you in a certain way. It affected you. ...It came back.¹⁸⁵

The images of dead bodies, the stories of each victim printed on little cards, and the sound of spirituals and field hollers playing in the background finally cracked the wall of silence he had erected around those feelings. Piece by piece those barriers crumbled, and the past flooded back. First he remembered the look of terror on his mother's face when he burst into the house; then came the sound of her screaming, "They're going to kill you!! They're going to kill you!!" He could hear the white men berating his mother and the howling of the bloodhounds, and then he was back in that outhouse with the dogs straining against their collars to get him. Overwhelmed by guilt and sadness, he cried for the next three days. He cried for endangering his family. He

¹⁸⁵ Author's interview with Jesse Pennington. The exhibit, "Without Sanctuary," featured items from James Allen and John Littlefield's collection of lynching photographs. Originally shown at a New York art gallery in 1999, the exhibit travelled around the country to the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change in Atlanta, and elsewhere before arriving at Jackson State University where Pennington saw the collection.

cried for the pent-up fear and panic he felt that day. He cried for all the stories of lynchings and beatings and insults and abuse he had heard growing up. All that crying was therapeutic. At long last he was free from the silence that had imprisoned him for fifty long years.¹⁸⁶

As liberating as it was for Pennington to confront those emotions, his response to the photograph collection provided a sobering reminder of the burden he and his family had carried for half a century. Unlike Pennington, his mother returned to Mississippi only once after leaving in 1954. A cousin she had been particularly close to had passed away, and she drove down from Chicago for the funeral. During her visit, she didn't like something a white person said to her, and afterwards she vowed to never come back to the state of Mississippi. Reminiscing about his mother, Pennington mused with a chuckle, "my mother has these things about some of these southern white folks," but in light of his own experience at the exhibit, he also wondered if whatever had transpired between her and that white person triggered all those bitter memories of Jim Crow she had tried to forget. Unlike literal silence—the absence of sound—these cultural silences were far from empty and weightless. They could exact a heavy toll upon a person or a community, and they could come back with a vengeance.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Pennington had lived in Chicago for just over one year when Emmett Till was lynched in the Mississippi Delta. Till's mother decided to have a public viewing of her son's body to expose the unvarnished barbarity of white Mississippians, and Pennington went to see the body. He described the experience as the most intense expression of grief he ever witnessed. Hundreds of people were crying, screaming, and fainting all around him, and their anger and sadness was palpable. Pennington didn't have a comparable outpouring of emotion after his own near-lynching until that 2004 exhibit, which reflected just how potent that shroud of silence was among black southerners.

¹⁸⁷ Author's interview with Jesse Pennington.

Chapter 3: Haunting

People pay for what they do, and still more for what they have allowed themselves to become, and they pay for it, very simply, by the lives they lead.

— James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*

The shadows and ghosts of the past remind us that those who would be tyrants cannot be called free men.

— Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The African-American Ordeal in Slavery*

Ominous gray clouds blanketed Waco on the morning of May 11, 1953. By mid-afternoon, the rain began to fall, sending the people running errands downtown scurrying to nearby buildings for shelter to wait out the storm, but this was no ordinary storm. The sky only grew darker as more and more clouds converged over downtown. A rumbling, at first low like the sound of charging horses in the distance, disturbed the soft pattering of the rain, but then the rumbling grew louder and louder like dozens of jet engines descending from the sky. According to a Huaco (Waco) Indian legend, this stretch of land along the Brazos River was protected from tornadoes, but for almost thirty-seven years to the day, God had watched the unrepentant city of Waco ignore and leave unpunished an unspeakable crime. On this spring afternoon, God had come to this sad corner of Texas for blood.

As hail and rain battered the city and the skies dimmed to near blackness, the raging winds of God's tornado blew out windows and swept up cars and telephone poles. As the hand of God crashed down upon the R.T. Dennis Furniture Store, the hysterical people huddled inside gasped in terror as the five-story building collapsed into a pile of rubble. Then God breathed life into the ALICO Building—the pride of Waco that had once been the tallest building in Texas—stretching and twisting and bending its steel frame so that the hulking marble building leaned over and smashed an adjacent parking lot with all God's might, killing dozens of people, before being jerked upright again.

The deafening winds barreling down Franklin and Austin Avenues headed straight for the city hall square, the epicenter of the city and what had been the site of the crime. God reached down from the twister and sent dozens of cars flying around the square with each car crashing into contorted heaps of metal as He swatted them to the ground. The tornado leapt up across the Brazos River to Bridge Street in East Waco, ripping up block after block of businesses and homes along the way before turning back towards downtown on Garrison Street. With God's wrath satisfied, the twister ascended back up into the sky, leaving much of downtown Waco leveled. The square, where a mob of fifteen-thousand had gathered on May 15, 1916 to torture, mutilate, hang, and burn an African American teenager named Jesse Washington, had been decimated. The path of destruction left by the tornado marked where a white man from the nearby town of Robinson had lassoed Washington's charred corpse from atop his horse and had dragged it through the streets of downtown, whooping and waving his hat in the air as he galloped along. God had emblazoned on the land an unmistakable reminder that the Lord was the ultimate arbiter of justice and righteousness, even in Waco, Texas.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ My recreation of the tornado myth synthesizes fragments of stories from several oral histories and books about the Waco tornado of 1953. Oral Memoirs of Kneeland H. Clemons, 21 October 1988, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, 33 (hereafter Baylor Oral History); Oral Memoirs of Maggie Langham Washington, 18 April 1988, Baylor Oral History, 51; Author's interview with Lester Gibson in Waco, Texas, 24 February 2012; Louis Mazé, "Radio and the 1953 Waco Tornado," KWBU-FM in Waco, TX from *Living Stories*, 3:38, aired 10 May 2011, <http://www.baylor.edu/livingstories/index.php?id=82072>; Gene Fowler, *Texas Storms: Stories of Raging Weather in the Lone Star State* (Mankato, MN: Capstone Press, 2011), 56–67; Mike Cox, *Texas Disasters: True Stories of Tragedy and Survival* (Guilford, CT: Insiders' Guide, 2006), 145–154. Maggie Washington's oral history includes a description of the tornado's path, which she says is where Jesse Washington's body had been dragged. The route she describes is through East Waco, the predominantly African American neighborhood located just across the Brazos River from downtown Waco. The tornado touched down on the downtown side of the Brazos River then jumped the river to East Waco. Newspaper accounts of Jesse Washington's lynching in 1916 and Jesse Thomas's lynching in 1923 indicate that in both instances the bodies were dragged through downtown but not in East Waco. The tornado destroyed several black-owned businesses located on the part of Bridge Street that was on the downtown side of the river, which would have been only one block from the square and close to where the corpses would have been dragged, but these businesses may not have been located there in 1916 and 1923. Perhaps she confused the two sides of Bridge Street, though the part of Bridge Street in East Waco presumably also had black businesses as well. Despite some discrepancies between her story and the actual path along which Jesse Washington's body was dragged, the underlying sentiment behind this story and its variations reveals how the lynching lingered in the African American community's folklore and consciousness.

Or so the stories went...

Until recently, this story about the 1953 tornado circulated exclusively among African Americans. In an interview from 1988, Maggie Langham Washington (no relation to Jesse Washington) told her surprised, if not skeptical, white interviewer, “That tornado relived the story of that lynching.” Rather than asking follow-up questions about the story, all the interviewer could muster in response was a polite “oh really,” “that’s interesting,” and “how interesting.”¹⁸⁹ Most white Wacoans had little interest in revisiting an event that had tarnished the reputation of the city, and confronted with white neighbors who preferred to suppress those memories or even chuckle about the lynching among themselves, African Americans, who had little leverage under Jim Crow to begin with, looked to otherworldly forces for justice. Even if they couldn’t point an accusatory finger directly at white folks without facing severe repercussions, they took some consolation in the notion that the tornado had punished the city by taking lives and livelihoods and had left a physical reminder of the racial violence perpetrated there. Telling this story provided a measure of satisfaction to African Americans, and what Maggie Washington told that interviewer not only wrenched the past from the shadows of obscurity but marked downtown Waco as the site of a crime.

Since African Americans swapped these stories about the tornado among themselves, they were more concerned with affirming their faith in divine justice and the moral case against racism than prompting the white community to confront its culpability in the lynching. Vengeance, but in particular divine justice, carried cultural significance in a community that was deeply religious and had witnessed at least three lynchings in downtown Waco alone. When Lester Gibson, who moved to Waco from nearby Freestone County in 1958, retold the story about the ALICO Building, divine justice naturally stood front and center:

¹⁸⁹ Oral Memoirs of Maggie Langham Washington, Baylor Oral History, 51.

[W]e got one high building [in Waco]. That's the ALICO Building. ... [T]hat building leaned over in the parking lot and killed oh about forty people in the parking lot and then raised and straightened back up, you understand. So from a spiritual point of view, this was like Moses crossing the water, you understand, when God parted the water, you know. So that was that retribution, I mean, thing. That God was uh, uh... It was payback time.¹⁹⁰

Gibson's story illustrated in no uncertain terms that, in God's judgment, the city of Waco had incurred His wrath for lynching Jesse Washington and others. The fifteen-thousand people in the mob who had attended Washington's lynching had blood on their hands, making this truly a collective sin for the white people of Waco and McLennan County.¹⁹¹ Texas courts would never bring Washington's lynchers to justice, so many members of the African American community believed that the tornado was, in a sense, a supernatural disaster. God intervened, just as he had when Moses led the Israelites to Canaan, when the legal system refused to.¹⁹²

These stories not only reminded African Americans of the difficult times they had been through and the moral failings of their white neighbors but also resonated with the historical moment in which they lived. Jim Crow was alive and well in 1953. Many of the stores and restaurants in downtown Waco refused to serve African Americans or made them enter through

¹⁹⁰ Author's interview with Lester Gibson in Waco, Texas, 24 February 2012. Some details in Gibson's story check out. Thirty people died when the Dennis Building across the street collapsed, and the strong winds of the tornado caused the ALICO Building to sway so violently that people working on the top floors were thrown against the walls.

¹⁹¹ In the immediate aftermath of the 1916 lynching, some whites believed burning and mutilating Washington's body, but especially dragging his body through the streets, exceeded the limits of decency even for a lynching. Many of these same people, however, did not oppose lynching in general. They made a distinction between "good" and "bad" lynchings. Even so, guilt and shame seeped into pockets of the white community, especially after the 1923 lynching of Jesse Thomas who was later cleared of all wrongdoing, but as far as I can tell, white Wacoans did not associate the tornado with the lynchings that occurred downtown.

¹⁹² The folklore around Pecos Bill, a legendary cowboy who lassoed a tornado in Kansas and rode it to California, offers a productive counterpoint to the Waco tornado/lynching story. According to this tornado legend, Pecos Bill was a mere mortal – though an admittedly extraordinary one – who tamed and controlled nature to create the Grand Canyon, and although the actual "taming" and "controlling" of the West exacted a devastating death toll upon the native population, this story considers westward expansion as a time of creation rather than destruction. While this triumphant story of a cowboy taming nature celebrated the imperialist project of white settlement in "untamed" Native American lands, the story of God's vengeance upon a Texas city served as a powerful indictment of racial violence.

an alley door. At the white-owned clothing stores that did serve blacks, they could not try on clothing or hats, and even though African Americans paid the same price for a ticket at the movie theater, they could only sit up in the balcony—what African Americans in Memphis called the “pigeon roost.” The buses had a section in the back for African Americans, and, of course, the schools remained segregated until the 1960s. Many African Americans in Waco refused to subject themselves to the indignities of alley doors and pigeon roosts by taking their business elsewhere, and although the tornado demolished many black businesses on Bridge Street too, at God’s bidding the high winds also swept away these physical reminders of racism.¹⁹³

Over the years the 1953 tornado—the deadliest in Texas history—became a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Waco’s history. The tornado destroyed over a thousand buildings, causing \$51 million in damage, and left 114 people dead and 1,097 others injured. Even after the piles of broken glass, bricks, and twisted metal debris were cleared, the downtown business district and surrounding neighborhood never fully recovered from the devastation. Businesses relocated to other parts of the city, and the once bustling downtown area languished. The heart of the self-proclaimed “City with a Soul” slowly decayed over time, leaving physical traces of God’s fury that helped the cultural traces of miscarried justice endure.¹⁹⁴



¹⁹³ Oral Memoirs of Kneeland H. Clemons, Baylor Oral History, 25–27; Oral Memoirs of Maggie Langham Washington, Baylor Oral History, 51–52; Oral History of Ada Ateman, 20 June 1994, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South*, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University (hereafter *Behind the Veil*, Duke University). Ada Ateman and others from Memphis, Tennessee used the term “pigeon roost” to describe the Jim Crow section of movie theaters. This term may have been used elsewhere in the Jim Crow South as well.

¹⁹⁴ Harry Estill Moore, *Tornadoes Over Texas: A Study of Waco and San Angelo in Disaster* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), 35; Cox, *Texas Disasters*, 152–153. The \$51 million figure is in 1953 dollars. In addition to the tornado, an urban renewal project, growth of suburbs, and the construction of Interstate 35 displaced many homes and businesses and contributed to the decline of the neighborhood.

The vengeful 1953 Waco tornado was not an isolated case of a lynching coming back to haunt a community. Throughout the South, African Americans told stories about haunted courthouses, inexplicable afflictions, mysterious deaths, and agonized deathbed confessions that resurrected the ghosts of local lynchings. These stories came out of a folk tradition, born in slavery and with roots in Africa, that used “haints,” spirits, and signs not only to entertain but also to give cultural expression to social critiques and to impart lessons about morality and justice. During slavery, white slaveholders dictated so many aspects of African American life and desperately wanted to impose their own distorted racial perceptions onto African Americans. Far from being quaint superstitions divorced from black people’s material circumstances, folk beliefs provided the enslaved with what Lawrence Levine called “sources of power and knowledge alternative to those existing within the world of the master class.”¹⁹⁵ In essence, these folkways empowered blacks to subvert and reject a dominant cultural sensibility that defined them as inferiors who were undeserving of human dignity and human rights.

Among the enslaved, encounters with ghosts occurred regularly. They were, as Jordan Smith put it in his WPA narrative, “as common as pig tracks.”¹⁹⁶ Long after the American-born slave population outnumbered the African-born slave population, elements of central and western African belief systems persisted in African American culture after emancipation, including the “good” ghosts of deceased relatives offering protection, guidance, and the way to buried treasure and the “bad” ghosts of masters and overseers who had left thick scars crisscrossing the backs of the enslaved. In an interview from Reconstruction, a self-

¹⁹⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63.

¹⁹⁶ Norman R. Yetman, *Life Under the “Peculiar Institution”: Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1970), 289, citation from Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 79 n. 73.

emancipated man from Kentucky, Lewis Clarke, recalled watching two other enslaved men dig a six- or seven-foot grave for their master, and when he asked them why they dug so far down, they replied that they “wanted to get the old man as near *home* as possible.” Clarke and the two men “hailed the largest [stone they] could find, so as to fasten him down as strong as possible.”¹⁹⁷ Given the master’s fondness for the lash, they didn’t want to take any chances in case this corpse came back from the dead to whip them. No wonder so many of the enslaved people Clarke knew asked to be buried as far from their masters’ and overseers’ graves as possible.¹⁹⁸

With so many ghosts flying around back then, these spirits naturally slipped into folk stories. In the towns near South Carolina’s Congaree swamp, African Americans passed on a tale of a particularly cruel slave trader, Ole Man Rogan, who took a fiendish pleasure in selling husbands away from their wives and children away from their mothers. Well into the twentieth century, local blacks swore that the sound of clinking chains, the cries of screaming babies, and the wails of inconsolable mothers calling their children’s names echoed across the moonlit creek called Boggy Gut, which had been Ole Man Rogan’s favorite spot for fishing. Through the darkness, they might catch glimpses of distraught mothers and children and shackled men slumped over with their hands covering their faces while the ghost of Ole Man Rogan cackled at

¹⁹⁷ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 79; Lewis Clarke, “Questions and Answers” in *Interesting Memoirs and Documents Relating to American Slavery, and the Glorious Struggle Now Making for Complete Emancipation* (1846; reprint, Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 87, citation from Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 79 n. 76. In the twentieth century, African Americans continued to talk about supernatural things like ghosts knowing where to find buried money and owls being a sign of an imminent death in the family. See Oral History of Daniel Swanigan, 12 July 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

¹⁹⁸ Clarke, “Questions and Answers,” 91, citation from Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 79 n. 76. Just above the passage cited here, Clarke told the story of an enslaved man named George whose dying master told him that he would reward George by arranging for him to be buried alongside him and other (white) church leaders. George liked the idea of being buried in a nice coffin, but he told his master some of his reservations: “Well, I fraid, massa, when the debbil come take you body, he make mistake, and get mine.” Although this isn’t a ghost story, Clarke uses humor to point out that, after a life of sin, even the most “pious” of slave masters will get what they have coming to them – a place in hell with the devil.

their misery. According to legend, neither God nor even the devil would take Ole Man Rogan, so his spirit was cursed to wander the swamps without rest.¹⁹⁹

Sadistic white men like Ole Man Rogan might terrorize the living from beyond the grave, but ghosts of the enslaved also returned from the afterlife, often to avenge the injustices they suffered under slavery. According to Jane Arrington's WPA narrative, an enslaved man in North Carolina named John May haunted the two white men who beat him to death. After May's death, those men never slept well again. Every night as the terrified men lay in bed, May tormented them with his groans and shrieks, and they fitfully tossed and turned in their sleep, moaning, "'Go [a]way John, please go away.'"²⁰⁰ Just like Ole Man Rogan whose soul would never rest in peace, the two men who killed May suffered for their sins for the rest of their lives. The tales of Ole Man Rogan and John May brought into stark relief the emotional and physical violence of slavery in order to expose the moral depravity of owners, overseers, and slavers, and this impulse to use ghost stories to condemn American racism as morally repugnant continued to inform African American folklore.

Ghosts and signs remained ubiquitous in black folk culture more than a century after emancipation, especially among African Americans in the rural South. When asked by an interviewer in 1995 whether her mother told her tales about haints and signs, Theresa Pearson retorted, "I've seen them myself!" The incredulous interviewer somewhat more cautiously asked, "Oh really?" Pearson then launched into a veritable inventory of all of the haints she and

¹⁹⁹ Edward C.L. Adams, "Ole Man Rogan" in *Congaree Sketches: Scenes from Negro Life in the Swamps of the Congaree and Tales by Tad and Scip of Heaven and Hell with Other Miscellany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927), 49–51, citation from Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 10 n. 17. For another example of a cruel slaveholder coming back to haunt her slaves, see the WPA narrative of Jane Arrington in George P. Rawick, ed., *North Carolina Narratives*, vol. 14, pt. 1 of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, vol. 14, pt. 1 (1941; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), 46, citation from Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 79 n. 74.

²⁰⁰ Jane Arrington, *North Carolina Narratives*, 46, citation from Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 79 n. 74.

her brother, Will Swanigan, had seen. In fact, Will had seen so many ghosts that “most every time he would go down that road, he would see something like a haint. I got tired of trying to keep up with him and them haints.”²⁰¹

For people like Theresa Pearson and Will Swanigan, ghosts were real. After all, they had personal encounters with ghosts, but over time, skepticism about their existence gradually began to creep into the black community. Even though fewer people believed ghost stories were literally true by the middle of the twentieth century, African Americans continued to tell these stories, and their cultural meaning remained salient. Besides, no amount of skepticism could dampen children’s appetites for thrilling stories about a headless ghost walking down the railroad tracks or a ghost that lapped up whiskey poured on the ground or ghosts who sat around the dining room table of a house down the street.²⁰² As a little girl growing up in the Arkansas Delta in the 1910s and 1920s, Cleo Jeffers sat around the fire eating peanuts and listening intently to her father tell stories about the haints he had seen. In an interview from 1995, she told several stories about her relatives’ personal encounters with ghosts, but paused for a moment, musing, “But I don’t know where they are now. I don’t see no haints now. But now they really believed then.”²⁰³

The ghost stories that came out of slavery and those that were inspired by lynchings shared the sentiment that James Baldwin and Nathan Huggins expressed in the epigraphs to this chapter: whites who committed these transgressions against African Americans did not walk away unscathed. Even those who suppressed their guilt or remained defiantly unrepentant carried the burden of their past with them whether they liked it or not. In other words,

²⁰¹ Oral History of Theresa Pearson, 13 July 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

²⁰² For the specific stories about these ghosts, see Oral History of Cleo Jeffers, 11 July 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University; Oral History of Mary Robinson, 26 June 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

²⁰³ Oral History of Cleo Jeffers, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

punishment came from within—the psychological anguish caused by guilt and their corroded sense of human decency. Ghost stories also laid bare the internal anguish of white folks, but they also exposed the costs incurred by defending white supremacy in terms of justice and retribution from without.²⁰⁴

Many southern ghost stories, told by whites and blacks, simply tried to make sense of the inexplicable—the sound of creaking floorboards in the dead of night or a mysterious light floating through the woods or an infant suddenly stricken with illness and dying. However, because ghosts haunted the living on account of unfinished business, most of these stories did more than simply offer explanations for things that go bump in the night. Ghosts often remained suspended between the living and the dead after something with clear moral implications had transpired like improper burials, the desecration of their bodies, tragedies, and unresolved crimes, so tales of lynchers suffering for their crimes gave cultural expression to a deep and abiding faith in supernatural justice that had sustained African Americans through slavery and Jim Crow. This folk tradition preserved and affirmed for generations to come the righteousness of their moral convictions when the dominant culture refused to.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ In other texts, like *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin sends a more explicit warning about divine vengeance. After all he opens that book with, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign / No more water, the fire next time!” James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963).

²⁰⁵ White southerners also had a rich tradition of telling ghost stories. The structure and themes of those stories often mirrored the tales told among African Americans, but because ghost stories reflect the cultural values of a particular community, some of the themes and portrayals of white and black characters differ considerably. For instance, one ghost story from Pontotoc, Mississippi involved a faithful slave who protected his master’s family and home during the Civil War. Uncle Eb, as they “affectionately” called him, patrolled the grounds of the plantation at night carrying a lantern, and after his death, people periodically saw the light from his lantern bobbing through the woods. This story reeked of the rhetoric of paternalism that white southerners often deployed to justify and defend slavery as a benign institution. Similarly, a ghost story about Andersonville Prison, where thousands of Union POWs died during the Civil War, intimated that the commander, Captain Henry Wirz, should not have been found guilty of war crimes. The author suggested that Wirz’s ghost roamed around the prison site because he was still waiting to have his name cleared. Defending and celebrating the Confederacy, including the most reprehensible figures from the Confederacy, certainly did not resonate with the historical memory and cultural values of African Americans. Kathryn Tucker Windham, *13 Mississippi Ghosts and Jeffrey* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 9–17; Windham, *13 Georgia Ghosts and Jeffrey* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 47–56.

Passing along stories like the one about the Waco tornado certainly provided an outlet for righteous indignation but also offered a counter-narrative to the overwhelming impulse among white southerners to silence or justify the South's violent past. These ghost stories empowered African Americans to control the memory of lynching, at least within their own communities. By naming lynchings as crimes to be condemned and mourned, not celebrated, this collective memory reclaimed the dignity and humanity of lynching victims, many of whom suffered unimaginable torture and mutilation.



Violence often left behind physical scars like the charred branches of a lynching tree or the rope still tied to the beam of a bridge after a body had been cut down, but the sites of lynchings also seemed to absorb the memories of the crimes perpetrated there. Even when the physical markers of the lynching disappeared from the landscape—the tree or telephone pole or courthouse or bridge—injustice lingered as though the air and earth were saturated with memories of violence. The sense that memories cling to a place is what Toni Morrison captured in a scene from *Beloved* in which an escaped slave, Sethe, warned her daughter, Denver:

“Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. 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. ... Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.

So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you.”²⁰⁶

Even a decade after emancipation, Sethe believed the horrors of slavery would still be lurking around the Kentucky farm where she had been held in bondage, waiting not just for her but also for Denver and subsequent generations of African Americans. Like many trauma survivors, Sethe had little control over when those memories would come back to haunt her, so in a way, they existed outside of her even while they were a part of her. These memories existed outside of her in another sense too since, even after Sethe would no longer be alive to remember her suffering, they would remain tied to the site of physical and psychological violence during slavery. When she described the farm with its cruelly misleading name, Sweet Home, as “real,” she not only referred to the all-too-real vividness of those memories *in her mind* but also to the permanence and timelessness of those memories that stubbornly clung *to that place*.

Morrison's novel memorializes the trauma of American slavery, not lynching, but the novel's commentary on trauma, memory, and place has many resonances with the spectral presences haunting sites of lynchings. Just as Denver could bump into the rememories of humiliation, rape, and death at Sweet Home decades after emancipation, the sites of lynchings remained haunted well after the memories of those who experienced lynching firsthand had vanished. At first glance, the memories embedded in these places might seem too elusive for a historian to recover—and some of them are forever lost, locked away in the minds of the dead—but many of these seemingly ephemeral memories took a tangible form through the local lore that passed from one generation to the next. Suspended in the collective memories of African Americans and whites, these ghosts revealed how the past lay in wait for those who might stumble upon it in the present.

²⁰⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 43–44.

From a second-story window of the small brick courthouse in Pickens County, Alabama, a face, etched onto the windowpane, peers out onto the tiny town of Carrollton. For the locals, that pane of glass has become the stuff of legend or, to be more precise, legends. Most explanations for the apparition in the courthouse involve the death of an innocent black man at the hands of a lynch mob, but the differences between the stories about the haunting reveal how African Americans and whites in the area constructed disparate memories of the apparition in the window and ascribed different meanings and uses for these stories.

Growing up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi during the 1940s and 1950s, James Reed heard his great aunt, Maggie Rose Barnett Reed, tell all kinds of stories about living in rural Mississippi at the height of Jim Crow. When the extended family came over to visit, they talked about everything from Klan violence to the daily indignities of segregation, but one story in particular stuck out, a story about a face that would appear in a courthouse window. Reed remembered it this way:

...growing up, my great aunt who raised me used to tell me of a story of a situation that took place back in the, oh I guess, early twenties, of an African American being lynched in some [part] of Alabama, which was actually, it was right across the river. Let's see, Noxubee County is [where] we were, our family was. And it was right across the river, so it had to be the Tombigbee River in Alabama. So whatever is close to Noxubee County in Alabama is where this took place. The story goes, there was this African American that was allegedly dating a white woman, and he was arrested and killed. And he said that he was not guilty of anything. He hadn't raped—it was a rape situation—that he had not raped this woman. But they took him out and killed him anyway. The story goes is that he said, "You will see my face in the courthouse window once a month," or something to that effect. And according to [the] way it was told to me, they tried changing out the window and everything, and regardless of the number of times they tried to change the window out, his face would appear as he predicted.²⁰⁷

By the 1920s, the legend had not only crossed the Tombigbee River and reached Noxubee County, but it had piqued the interest of Reed's great aunt and her brother, Bud, enough to get

²⁰⁷ Author's interview with James Reed in Jackson, Mississippi, 9 November 2011.

them to take a trip to Carrollton to see the face in the window for themselves. With all the cousins and grandkids and aunts and uncles gathered around, Maggie Reed told her rapt audience how she had seen that ghostly face appear in the uppermost window of the Pickens County courthouse. That innocent man had kept his promise to remind anyone who walked by the courthouse that this edifice of the justice system was the scene of a horribly unjust crime.

For African Americans like Maggie Reed, the folklore about what was likely the 1893 lynching of James Williams was emblematic of the violence and racism of Jim Crow. In other words, the injustice of lynching stood front and center. The Reeds passed this story on to the younger generation during the 1940s and 1950s precisely because racial violence remained alive and well as the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, the 1959 lynching of Mack Charles Parker, and several other post-war lynchings in Mississippi attested. Their depiction of Williams helped to restore his dignity and reputation. To begin with, they described him as unwavering in his defiance. He was no coward; he was no criminal. The Reeds also maintained that the victim was erroneously accused of raping a white woman, a crime that was constantly deployed to excuse lynching despite the relative paucity of cases involving accusations of rape.²⁰⁸ The appearance of the face in the window itself reinforced Williams's innocence since his threat to haunt the town was contingent upon his innocence, which further delegitimized the stereotype of the black brute and the association between lynching and rape. This ghost story, though in a somewhat muted way, levied the same critiques against lynching and its defenders that outspoken activists like Ida B. Wells and Walter White of the NAACP had been making for decades, and by telling the story among family members into the 1950s, the Reeds made certain that this counter-memory survived.

²⁰⁸ Although James Reed couldn't recall the precise circumstances that led to the lynching, the face in the window likely belonged to a man named James Williams who had been accused of "miscegenation" and lynched on January 19, 1893 in Pickens County.

Among whites in Pickens County, the story was no less widespread but the differences between white and African American historical memories are striking. A brief sketch of the story titled “The Face in the Window” appeared in *Records of Pickens County, Alabama*, a collection of documents about white settlement in Pickens County compiled by Mrs. C.P. McGuire, Sr. and the Birmingham Genealogical Society in 1959. According to McGuire, the face in the window was the likeness of an African American man named Henry Wells who allegedly torched the newly rebuilt county courthouse on November 16, 1876. After two years without any leads or a suspect, the sheriff arrested Wells, who was also accused of committing a few other crimes. A mob of angry whites began to gather in town, so the sheriff hid him in the garret of the new courthouse. A storm was brewing, and as Wells looked out the garret window, lightning struck, stamping the image of his face on the pane. The mob apparently dispersed, and Wells died in jail from wounds inflicted when he tried to escape sometime later. This version of the story entirely erased the lynching from the town’s past.²⁰⁹

Journalist Kathryn Tucker Windham and folklorist Margaret Gillis Figh spun a slightly different tale in their collection of ghost stories, *13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey*, published ten years later in 1969. After many months without any leads or suspects in the arson case, the sheriff began to feel pressure from his constituents to make an arrest, so he eventually took Wells into custody based on scant circumstantial evidence. Legend has it that Wells looked down from the window of the garret at the mob struggling to break into the courthouse and defiantly shouted, “I am innocent. If you kill me, I am going to haunt you for the rest of your lives!”²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Mrs. C.P. McGuire, Sr. and the Birmingham Genealogical Society, *Records of Pickens County, Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Willo Publishing Company, 1959), 12.

²¹⁰ Kathryn Tucker Windham and Margaret Gillis Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey* (Huntsville, AL: Strode Publishers, 1969), 65. Although Windham and Figh don’t explicitly indicate that they collected these ghost stories from white sources, they dropped several hints indicating as much. In almost all of the stories they compiled in *13 Alabama Ghosts and Jeffrey* and Windham compiled in other volumes of southern ghost stories, the protagonists were white, and they celebrated white southern culture from plantation estates and southern belles to Confederate

At that moment, lightning struck, forever searing the image of Wells's face on the pane of the garret window. Although the Reeds unequivocally deemed this case a lynching of an innocent man, Windham and Figh vacillated. They reported that, according to some people, lightning struck Wells dead, and the mob dispersed, "satisfied that the Almighty had meted out just punishment to a criminal."²¹¹ Clearly, some whites in Carrollton believed that Wells got what he deserved, but by scrubbing the lynching from their memories, they chose to interpret the face in the window as a reminder that God punished the man who burned down the courthouse rather than a reminder that the town of Carrollton had lynched an innocent man.

Other residents Windham and Figh interviewed said that the mob went ahead and lynched Wells despite his warning, and the following morning, a member of the lynch mob who saw the face in the window believed that the devil had appeared in the courthouse to haunt him. Others told Windham and Figh that, on particularly stormy nights, you can sometimes hear Wells screaming from the courthouse.²¹² Even those whites who admitted that a mob had killed Wells tried to rationalize the lynching of an innocent man. In Windham and Figh's version, the sheriff bent under considerable pressure from the citizens of Carrollton to find a suspect, after all they had waited two years since the arson for an arrest, so he charged Wells who "had a bad name" since he got into fights and "was rumored [to]...always carried a razor."²¹³ Although nobody witnessed Wells committing the arson, he allegedly was seen in town the morning of the fire, which the sheriff deemed sufficient grounds for charging him with the crime. Even if Wells had not committed the arson, he was, in their eyes at least, a suspicious and dangerous character and

veterans and southern honor. At one point, Windham included this line: "Almost before their honeymoon was over, the War Between the States (call it the Civil War, if you must) had erupted," so I read their version of the Pickens County Courthouse haunting as a product of the white community. Quote in footnote from Windham, *13 Tennessee Ghosts and Jeffrey* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 143.

²¹¹ Windham and Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts*, 66.

²¹² Windham and Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts*, 63–69.

²¹³ Windham and Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts*, 64, 65.

therefore not truly innocent. Windham and Figh alternated between describing Wells as a menace who “confronted [the mob], defiantly shouting at the top of his lungs” and a coward whose face was “distorted by fear” and “anguish and terror.”²¹⁴ These attacks on his character served to further justify the lynching and reflected a palpable anxiety over their guilt, which the face in the window reminded them of every day they walked through the center of town.

White collective memory was primarily concerned with the entertainment value of the story. They emphasized the novelty of the haunting itself, not the circumstances that led to the haunting. This fascination with the ghost (but not the lynching) continues to this day since, a few years ago, the city of Carrollton attached a tacky sign to the courthouse itself with a large arrow pointing at the face in the windowpane. Between 1893 and 1917 the citizens of Pickens County lynched no fewer than ten people, which only made this deliberate attempt to reduce the site of a crime to a tourist attraction all the more troubling.²¹⁵ For the Reeds, this piece of family lore represented far more than just another ghost story, but for whites in Carrollton, the story was just that—a story.

Perhaps the best way to explain these different, if not competing, historical memories of lynching is to read them in the context of Lost Cause mythology and white southern memories of Reconstruction. According to white memory, Wells had destroyed a symbol of white southern resistance to Reconstruction. Windham and Figh explained that the 1876 fire “unleashed an emotional torrent that swept away both patience and reason” since, only eleven years earlier,

²¹⁴ Windham and Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts*, 65, 63, 66.

²¹⁵ According to Ralph Ginzburg’s records, the following ten people were lynched in Pickens County, Alabama: James Williams in Pickens County (town not specified) on January 19, 1893; Paul Archer, Emma Fair, and Paul Hull in Carrollton on September 15, 1893; John Marritt in Pickens County (town not specified) on March 26, 1897; Bud Beard in Carrollton on December 17, 1897; John Lipsey in Pickensville on August 27, 1907; Lemuel Weeks in Pickensville on July 1, 1916; unknown African American in Reform on July 16, 1917; Poe Hibbler in Pickens County on July 23, 1917. The town of Carrollton is spelled “Carrolton” in Ginzburg, but since no town called “Carrolton” exists in Alabama, I assume that “Carrolton” refers to Carrollton. Also, note that Ginzburg has no record of the Wells lynching, Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1962), 253–255.

federal troops had burned the original courthouse.²¹⁶ The new courthouse, which was built during the federal occupation, symbolized the white residents' "defiance of Yankee authority" and "a restoration of law and order."²¹⁷ Not only did this language of "defiance" and "restoration" reek of Lost Cause and Redemption rhetoric, to say nothing of the violent, extralegal tactics employed by Redeemers to end Reconstruction, but pinning the blame for the arson on an African American man also conveniently fit the narrative of tyrannical Republican (and therefore northern and black) rule during Reconstruction. The perception of Reconstruction as "the tragic era" remained dominant among white southerners through the 1960s, and condemning Henry Wells only reinforced this deeply entrenched sense of white southern victimhood at the hands of dangerous African American men.²¹⁸

One detail in the Reed family's version—that the face reappeared even after the window had been repeatedly replaced—captured the active attempts by whites to forget the lynching. *Replacing* the window over and over again was an attempt at *displacing* a persistent ghost, but just as Sethe saw the horrors of slavery permanently stamped onto the location of Sweet Home in *Beloved*, the courthouse itself seemed to be permanently afflicted. Whites in Pickens County

²¹⁶ Windham and Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts*, 63.

²¹⁷ Windham and Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts*, 63–64.

²¹⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois's final chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, "The Propaganda of History," still offers the most comprehensive and biting critique of Reconstruction historiography, which sadly held until after the Civil Rights Movement when the academy finally took seriously Du Bois's interpretation of Reconstruction – "the attempt to make black men American citizens" – as "a splendid failure." Until then, the Dunning School, which derided African American voters and politicians as inept and corrupt, dominated the scholarship and white memory (North and South) of Reconstruction. At times Dunning and his disciples even defended Klan violence and other forms of intimidation, and this defense of extralegal violence to protect white political, economic, and social interests from African American and northern threats bled into the rhetoric deployed to defend lynching throughout early twentieth century. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Propaganda of History" in *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (1935; reprint, with an introduction by David Levering Lewis, New York: The Free Press, 1998), 711–729, quote in footnote from 708. For more about the Lost Cause and white southern memory, see David Blight, "The Lost Cause and Causes Not Lost" in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 255–299. Also, for more information on Redemption, see Eric Foner, "Redemption and After" in *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1988), 564–601; Steven Hahn, "Of Paramilitary Politics" in *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 265–313.

recalled that at least one and maybe two severe hailstorms over the years shattered every pane of glass in the courthouse except the one with Wells's face. They also recounted how the sheriff was so distressed by the face in the window that he carried "buckets of water up the steep stairs to try to wash away the symbol of a town's guilt, but he only succeeded in making the picture more clearly defined. No amount of scrubbing, not even with gasoline, would remove the image from the windowpane."²¹⁹ The lynching victim's presence could not be exorcized from the courthouse—not by city workers replacing the window or a sheriff scrubbing the pane or the sky hurling hail at the building. That sheriff certainly seemed wearied by the ghost's dogged persistence. He knew all too well what the aptly named bluesman Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins meant when he sang: "You better be careful 'bout what you do / I just want to [re]mind [you] the devil's watching you."²²⁰

Not every lynching site had a ghost lurking around to remind southern communities of the crimes perpetrated there. Sometimes a sense of hauntedness settled onto the sites themselves and wriggled its way into the imaginations and mythologies of local communities. In these ghostless hauntings, local memories remained fixated on the site of the lynching, which is unsurprising given the tendency of lynch mobs to repeatedly return to the same sites for subsequent lynchings.²²¹ Mob violence was at its core a ritual that affirmed a white supremacist social order, so the location of these rituals often held symbolic significance that certainly was not lost on either white or African American communities. Black bodies swinging from trees at sites of white power like the grounds of a courthouse, in front of city hall, or in the town square tacitly

²¹⁹ Windham and Figh, *13 Alabama Ghosts*, 69. McGuire also referenced attempts to remove the image from the windowpane, writing "Through all the years, in spite of hail and storm, which destroyed all other windows in the Courthouse, that particular pane, with the striking image, remains. The glass has been scribed [sic] with soap and gasoline as well as other means, but still that pane has met all tests and to this day, (August 1959) the face remains unchanged." McGuire, *Records of Pickens County*, 12.

²²⁰ Lightnin' Hopkins, "Devil is Watching You," recorded 1962, on *Lightnin' Strikes*, Vee-Jay LP1044, 33½ rpm.

²²¹ For more on ghostless hauntings consult Judith Richardson, *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

gave official sanction and social legitimacy to extralegal violence. The character of towns and collective identities of their residents were formed in public spaces where everything from the annual peach festival to campaign rallies took place, so even when a relatively small portion of the white community participated, the proximity of lynchings to public spaces imprinted that violence onto the character and identity of the town. Mobs that dragged dead bodies through black neighborhoods or hanged bodies at the border of black and white neighborhoods, in essence, laid claim to those streets and the people who resided there, unsettling the sense of security and autonomy among African Americans even in their own homes. Even as time passed, these crimes continued to mark these places as symbols of white supremacy and black degradation.

Just a few hours south of Pickens County on the Mississippi side of the border, the town of Shubuta sits alongside the Chickasawhay River. Tucked away in the piney woods, the small town had been the site of a Choctow settlement until a series of treaties in the early-nineteenth century forced some of the indigenous people onto a nearby reservation and the rest to endure the Trail of Tears. In the 1830s, one of the South Carolina planters who settled on that land erected the first bridge across the Chickasawhay in the vicinity. The introduction of the railroad in the years leading up to the Civil War and the timber boom that swept the New South brought speculators and then lumber mills that razed the giant pines by the thousands, and over the years, the railroad, new roads, and other bridges diverted much of the traffic from the original bridge.²²² Despite the influx of new industries and transient laborers, the bridge soon reclaimed its local notoriety.

²²² Gayle Graham Yates, *Life and Death in a Small Southern Town: Memories of Shubuta, Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 67–71.

Just a few days before Christmas in 1918 local whites snatched four African American murder suspects, two brothers and two sisters, both pregnant, from the Shubuta jail and brought them to the bridge. The mob tied nooses around their necks and shoved them over the side of the bridge to their deaths. Maggie House, the older sister, refused to die easily. To silence her as she struggled and screamed that she was innocent, a member of the mob clocked her with a monkey wrench; the blows knocked out some teeth and left a large gash on her forehead. When they pushed her over the edge, she managed to grab onto the side of the bridge to break her fall twice before they successfully hanged her on the third try. The mob left the bodies of Andrew Clark, Major Clark, Alma House, and Maggie House hanging from the bridge's girders for the sheriff to cut down.²²³ A couple decades later in October 1942, another mob returned to the bridge to lynch two fourteen-year-old boys, Charlie Lang and Ernest Green, accused of attempting to assault a thirteen-year-old white girl. In its new incarnation, what became known as the Hanging Bridge turned into the most visible and most powerful symbol of white supremacy in the area.²²⁴

The Hanging Bridge and Shubuta's violent reputation spread beyond the neighboring counties. When an African American man was suspected of attacking a white woman in Mobile, Alabama in 1939, a member of the Mobile Branch of the NAACP wrote to the field secretary in the national office, "If mob spirit should seem to be uncontrollable we shall make direct appeal

²²³ The murdered man had likely impregnated Alma House, who was sixteen years old and eight and a half months pregnant, and her older sister Maggie House, who was twenty years old and five months pregnant. Andrew Clarke, the older of the two brothers, had been seeing Maggie House and did not like that the white farmer had been having sex with her. Walter White, Extract from Confidential Report on Shubuta Lynchings, 19 January 1919, Box I:C337, Folder 6, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress (hereafter NAACP LoC).

²²⁴ According to a *New York Times* clipping about the lynching of Green and Lang, the alleged attempted assault happened on the Hanging Bridge itself. Cases involving African American males, white females, and assault often led to lynchings, but perhaps the violation (an attempted assault) of this symbol of white supremacy (the bridge) made their lynching all the more likely. "2 Negro Boys Lynched," *New York Times*, 13 October 1942, Box II:A408, Folder 5, NAACP LoC.

to all law agencies of state, county and city, also to federal government. I think the present affair proves there is not ten minutes difference between Mobile and other so-called liberal cities in the South and Shubuta, Miss.’”²²⁵ More than twenty years after the 1918 lynchings, Shubuta had lodged itself so deeply into the regional memory as the quintessentially backward and racist southern town that an NAACP official in Mobile could mention the small town to the field secretary in New York City and safely assume that he would recognize the reference.²²⁶

In 1918, whites would boast about these displays of white power and hatred, but as white public opinion on lynching shifted, many whites stopped telling stories about the unpunished crimes perpetrated at the bridge. Even though residents of Shubuta continued to refer to the bridge as the Hanging Bridge, most white children born after the 1940s assumed the name referred to the structure itself “hanging” over the Chickasawhay River, not to the dead bodies left “hanging” from the beams by their family members and neighbors. As the Civil Rights Movement chipped away at the foundation of Jim Crow and the imperative to obscure and deny racial conflicts grew among staunchly racist southerners, whites often chose to erase the memory of racial violence from this landmark.²²⁷

²²⁵ J.L. LeFlore to William Pickens, 22 June 1939, NAACP LoC.

²²⁶ Local, regional, and national press outlets carried articles and editorials about the 1918 lynchings of the Clarke brothers and House sisters, so in addition to coverage in the *Meridian Star* published less than forty miles away, regional newspapers in Jackson, Mobile, Memphis, New Orleans, Houston, and St. Louis and national newspapers in New York, Washington DC, and Los Angeles broadcasted Shubuta’s crimes to the nation. The NAACP journal, *Crisis*, ran an extensive report on the lynchings based on an investigation conducted by the Assistant Secretary to the NAACP, Walter White, so the case was widely known, especially among NAACP members. Newspaper clippings, Box I:C360, Folder 41, NAACP LoC.

²²⁷ For decades, a local hunting lodge called the Hanging Bridge Hunting and Fishing Club proudly displayed a sign bearing its name on the bridge until a judge ordered the club to remove the word “Hanging” from the sign after the NAACP filed a suit in the 1980s. Rather than replacing the sign, the club simply painted over the offending word, making even more explicit the grudging acceptance of the post-Jim Crow way of life. The monument to the segregationist senator Strom Thurmond on the grounds of the South Carolina state capitol (the same state capitol that flies a Confederate flag), which listed the names of his children, raised similar questions in 2005 when the South Carolina General Assembly added the name of his biracial daughter, Essie Mae Washington-Williams, to the monument. The text, “father of four” had to be changed to “father of five,” and Washington-Williams’s name had to be added. Because the text of the monument had been etched in stone, the process of filling in and recarving the text left a stain around the word “five,” and Washington-Williams’s name was added below the names of Thurmond’s four white children since the line where the four white children’s names appeared could not fit any

Despite the willful forgetting of these lynchings among many whites, African Americans in Shubuta passed on stories about the men, women, and children lynched at the Hanging Bridge, but out of earshot of their white neighbors, some of whom had been members of the mobs. Black parents raising families in and around Shubuta couldn't afford to spare their children from these stories given the persistent threat of racial violence. They told stories like the one that Shubuta resident, Reverend Jim McRee, had heard from his nephew who was sitting in an adjacent jail cell that night in October 1942 when a mob took Charlie Lang and Ernest Green from the county jail to lynch the two fourteen-year-old boys at the Hanging Bridge. McRee's nephew heard the two boys desperately pleading with the sheriff, asking him to stop the mob from taking them to the bridge. Instead, the sheriff dropped the keys to Lang and Green's cell on the floor for the mob and left.²²⁸ Ghosts weren't necessary to terrify the two boys or, for that matter, generations of black children in the area. The stories about the lynchings and the physical presence of the bridge itself provided bone-chilling reminders to African Americans that some whites would readily resort to violence to enforce the racial order of Jim Crow. The Hanging Bridge stood like a specter on the outskirts of town, casting a long shadow upon the people of Shubuta.

Fear and silence were not the only responses to the lynchings in Shubuta. Encouraged by the successes of the 1964 Freedom Summer, activists from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic

more text. The belated inclusion of her name and its separation from her half-siblings' names only highlighted her marginal status both in the family and in South Carolina society. In fact, although the Thurmond family acknowledged Washington-Williams as Strom Thurmond's daughter, she waited to come forward until after the senator's death. Joseph Crespino, "The Scarred Stone: The Strom Thurmond Monument," *Southern Spaces* 19 April 2010: <http://www.southernspaces.org/2010/scarred-stone-strom-thurmond-monument>.

²²⁸ Jeneane Jones, "Mississippi Looks Back, Forward After Inauguration," *United Methodist News Service*, January 27, 2009, <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1LtH&b=2072519&ct=6648861>. Note that the white community claimed that the mob had forcefully taken the keys from the sheriff, throwing a blanket over him and pinning his hands behind his back. Many lynching cases investigated by the NAACP turned up similar discrepancies. Law enforcement officers didn't want to face criticism for failing to uphold their responsibilities, especially after public opinion began to turn on lynching, and although some sheriffs legitimately tried to prevent lynchings, even more remained complicit in or participated in lynchings. *New York Times*, 13 October 1942, NAACP LoC.

Party (MFDP) set up shop in Shubuta in 1965 to organize the fledgling Head Start program, run voter education workshops, and organize a grocery co-op in the black neighborhood.

Confronting lynching was not explicitly on their agenda, even though only one year earlier three activists with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had been lynched in nearby Philadelphia, Mississippi, but these activists certainly understood their work as combatting the system that would condone and often celebrate what had happened at the Hanging Bridge. The KKK, in keeping with the local tradition, responded to these efforts with death threats and intimidation, sometimes in writing, sometimes from the barrel of a gun. In the Civil Rights Era, these community organizers did not end up swinging from the Hanging Bridge, but carloads of whites shot into their offices and sent them bomb threats.²²⁹ They even received a flyer that read: “All nigger’s [sic] will be shot and killed if any demonstrations accure [sic] in Mississippi, All kinky headed darkies better stay on your guard, and kut [sic] out all this smart allic [sic] demonstration. ... If you find your car windows dash in and it burn up, or your wife hanging on a light pole, or kids strung up in the outdoor toilet, it will be alright.”²³⁰ The Klan’s allusion to the lynchings of women and “kids” at the Hanging Bridge not only made the threat the bridge represented all the more palpable, but also laid bare the Klan’s deployment of the bridge as a symbol of a racist system they so violently tried to preserve.²³¹

Shubuta was unexceptional among southern towns where lynchings had taken place. Most of these towns bore physical reminders of the violence with landmarks like the Hanging Bridge. In

²²⁹ In Mississippi, civil rights activists took these threats very seriously since over the years so many among their ranks had been beaten and killed. Just among the leadership of the NAACP in Mississippi, the death toll included Reverend George W. Lee in 1955, Herbert Lee in 1961, Medgar Evers in 1963, and Vernon Dahmer in 1965.

²³⁰ Yates, *Life and Death in a Small Southern Town*, 155.

²³¹ Yates, *Life and Death in a Small Southern Town*, 152–156. The white community more generally shoulders some responsibility for the Klan’s reign of terror. After one woman with the MFDP by a member of the Klan, the local hospital in Quitman refused to treat her, so another MFDP member had to drive her to Meridian for medical attention, which carried its own risks since a black man driving a white woman in a car could invite even more violence.

Kirven, Texas, that physical marker was a plow that sat on a vacant lot between the Methodist and Baptist churches in town. In May of 1922, a mob of several hundred white men, women, and children watched in awe as three African American men bound by ropes to the plow—John Cornish, Snap Curry, and Mose Jones—were castrated, doused with several gallons of gasoline, and burned alive.²³² White residents left the plow on the vacant lot for nearly twenty years to remind blacks to “stay in their place,” which was one of the many ways in which physical “places” and social “place” reinforced one another.

During World War II, a father and son who didn’t realize the significance of the plow added it to a scrap heap that they sold to a junkyard, which infuriated many local whites. The iron plow had presumably been melted down and cast into something else, perhaps for the war effort, but at least one white man didn’t need the actual plow to feel its symbolic power. The man who castrated Curry and Cornish displayed six framed, professional photographs of the lynching on the wall above his bed because he “always wanted to remember it.”²³³ In 1922, that man had been a twenty-year-old farm laborer raising and butchering hogs, and in his mind at least,

²³² According to a relative of John Cornish speaking in 1999, members of the mob cut off Cornish, Curry, and Jones’ fingers so they could not untie the ropes and escape, and these fingers along with some tongues were preserved in a pickling jar and displayed in a Kirven storefront for years. Monte Akers, *Flames After Midnight: Murder, Vengeance, and the Desolation of a Texas Community*, rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 204–205. Although Akers conducted dozens of interviews that shed new light on the collective memories of the lynching, I strongly disagree with many of his interpretations and conclusions. I was appalled by Akers’ borderline racist skepticism of the legitimacy and reliability of African Americans who shared their stories with him. At one point he admits that, during an interview with an African American woman named Bertha Williams, “in my ignorance, I believed she was merely repeating some myth about the event that had grown up in the black community to exculpate the lynching victims. I paid lip service to what she was saying, but promptly returned to my original line of questions.” (quote from 92) Williams’ story, it turns out, was more likely to be accurate than what he calls “the traditionally accepted account of Eula’s murder,” by which he means the white memory of the murder that sparked the lynchings. (quote from 103) Akers only began to take Williams seriously when he came across a report by a white NAACP investigator that corroborated her story. Akers similarly dismissed the relative of John Cornish mentioned above who offered the information about the jar of body parts at a 1999 book signing in Teague, Texas. He prefaces that man’s insights by writing, “occasionally a person [at the book signing] came forward claiming special, dubious knowledge.” (quote from 204) The morbid practice of preserving “souvenir” body parts from lynchings was widespread and common in the South, and Akers provided no reasonable explanation for disparaging that “claim” as “dubious.” Because Akers quotes reports, articles, and interviews at length, his sources can be analyzed without being tainted by his interpretive bias, so I have cautiously drawn on these sources in this chapter and other parts of the dissertation.

²³³ Akers, *Flames After Midnight*, 214.

castrating those black men in the same way he butchered hogs was the way he proved his manhood. He was less forthcoming about his role in the lynchings in front of his family, but grateful for the opportunity to talk about an experience that stayed with him for a lifetime, he proudly told a documentary filmmaker all the gory details in a series of phone calls he made in 2002. Until his death in 2006 at the age of 104, those photographs of the plow and the charred remains of the three men represented his domination over African American men and had become a reassuring talisman that sustained this remorseless man to the very end.²³⁴

In Leesburg, Georgia and Carrollton, Mississippi, the past stalked around, not in the shadows of black-and-white photographs, but in the branches of lynching trees. All five of the recorded lynchings in Leesburg occurred between February and July of 1899, and the memory of those men hanging from tree limbs lingered in the community. Nearly one-hundred years later in 1994, Willie Jackson, at the age of 111, still worried he might be killed for discussing what he had seen all those years ago. Before revealing to an interviewer what he knew about the deaths of George Bivins, William Holt, and George Foot, he sighed, “There’s so much [to] say, and so much you can’t.”²³⁵ If those memories still made Jackson uneasy in 1994, they certainly stirred up anxieties in the early 1920s when a fourteen or fifteen-year-old African American mechanic named John Henry Taylor punched a white teenager. With a group of white men looking for him, Taylor and his family worried that they might string him up from those trees as they had done to those men a couple decades earlier. Taylor was lucky though. His mother, Dolly

²³⁴ Akers, *Flames After Midnight*, 188–190, 213–215. Akers did not reveal the identity of the man who castrated Cornish and Curry. That man’s son did not want his father’s story to be public knowledge, which is why the father secretly called documentary filmmaker Gode Davis when his family was away or asleep. Davis noted that in one of his later phone conversations, the man seemed ever so slightly more circumspect about the lynchings. Davis wouldn’t describe the man as remorseful, but he mentioned that he would give African Americans “a lot of extra peaches” without them knowing that they had come from him. (quote from 215) Perhaps the man was anonymously giving peaches to African Americans as a gesture of pity or regret, but the prominent display of those photographs cast some serious doubts on what that attempt at generosity meant.

²³⁵ Oral History of Willie Jackson, 15 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

Raines, was a well-respected midwife in the community, so the sheriff helped smuggle him out of town on a train headed to Orlando where his father lived.²³⁶

About fifty years later in 1972, John Henry Taylor finally returned home to Leesburg to retire with his wife, Robella. The lynching tree was still there. His wife had harbored many apprehensions about moving to Georgia. She explained to an interviewer, “They say black, black had a hard time in Georgia. [chuckle] Georgia was a terrible place. Even Leesburg where [her husband’s] home is now, there’s a tree out there now. They say, ‘that’s where they hung niggers.’ That’s what they say. ‘That’s the truth.’ People always point out to me, say [?], ‘See, that’s the tree they used to hang niggers on.’ They’d hang them and leave them hanging in the tree.”²³⁷ Robella Taylor was no stranger to lynching, having grown up in Alachua County, Florida where over twenty recorded lynchings had occurred, but since she was a newcomer to the area, locals made sure to warn her about the town’s violent past (or perhaps to intimidate her), using the lynching tree as shorthand for what had made Georgia such a terrible place for African Americans. The lynching tree remained a haunting reminder of the crimes that had been committed there as well as the standing threat—or at least the perceived threat—the tree represented a century later.

The lynching trees in Carrollton, Mississippi also had a way of continually dragging the past into the collective consciousness of the local African American community. When Mary Robinson was a little girl in the 1910s, she attended a school at the base of a hill on the outskirts of North Carrollton, the town just across the Little Sand Creek from Carrollton where she lived. One day the teacher took Robinson and the other schoolchildren on a short fieldtrip of sorts

²³⁶ Oral History of John Barry Taylor, 19 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University. John Barry Taylor is the son of John Henry Taylor and Robella Sally Taylor. Although he grew up in New York City, he spent summers in Leesburg and Albany, Georgia, and he moved to Albany as an adult.

²³⁷ Oral History of Robella Sally Taylor, 30 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University;

through the woods behind the school. Following their teacher's lead, the children made their way up the hill, snaking their way between the trees. She never forgot what her teacher showed her that day. Way up in the woods, the children came upon a few trees with ropes hanging from the branches. Now, Robinson had heard the older folks talk about lynchings in Carrollton—she undoubtedly knew about the three members of the McCray family, Betsy, Ida, and Belford, who had been lynched just a few years earlier—but these stories had always seemed disconnected from her life. Seeing those ropes dangling up above her head was enough to make those stories tangible and real, so even though she had never witnessed bodies hanging in the trees, the feeling those trees evoked haunted her. Robinson explained that “[her teacher] said she wanted us to see it, but I didn’t want to see it no more, even if it was true, was true. I didn’t want to see it no more. I didn’t want to see that anymore.” Mary Robinson never went up into those woods ever again. The palpable aura of hatred and death that emanated from those trees kept her away for good.²³⁸



Brooks County sits on the southern border of Georgia, just a few dozen miles from Tallahassee, Florida. Named after Preston Brooks, the infamous South Carolina congressman who beat Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a cane on the floor of the U.S. Senate, the county lived up to its namesake's violent reputation and defense of white supremacy. By most counts, that county in southern Georgia recorded more lynchings than any other county in the United States. It was the county where mobs of white people lynched Mary Turner, her

²³⁸ Oral History of Mary Robinson, 26 June 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

unborn baby, and between eleven and sixteen other African Americans during one week alone in 1918 alone.²³⁹ That lynching rampage, especially the brutal killing of Mary Turner and her baby, devastated the African American community in Brooks and neighboring Lowndes Counties, but faith in the righteousness of the Lord sustained them through that difficult time. Members of lynch mobs escaped legal punishment in this life, but many members of the African American community believed that nobody, not the sheriff or even the wealthiest planter, could elude God's judgment. The deathbed and the day of reckoning loomed like twin specters of eternal damnation over this county.²⁴⁰

Robert Hall, who grew up in Morven, a town just a few miles south of the site of Mary Turner's lynching, saw the physical realization of that faith as a teenager in the early 1960s:

One day we was going to the store, my mother was along with us, and we were going to the store, and we would always see this old white gentleman. He walked slumped way over, and you know, kids being kids, we kind of laughed at him, you know, and momma told us, you know, "Don't laugh at him." And so we asked her, "Well what happened to him?" And then she went on to tell us that, "Do you remember me telling you all that, uh, the lady that was lynched and her baby was cut out of her stomach?" And we said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "Well they said he's one of the ones that did it." And you know we got kind of tensed up at that time. And um, he wore a white shirt all the time, and the reason why he wore that white shirt [was] because, according to what my mother was saying, when he cut Mary Turner's stomach open, you know, her water broke, and so everywhere that water hit on their skin, a skin cancer came there. And that's why this old man wore these long-sleeve shirts, was to hide those cancer, but, you know, he had them all on his hands. And uh, that's what, you know, our mother told us. And when he died, he lived in a little shack alongside Highway 76 there in Barney. That's a little town, called Barney, Georgia. And when he got sick, you know, black people, you know, took care of him 'cause he lived right next door to a black family, so they would look in on him, give him, you know, food and stuff like this, and said when he died, he, they had to hold him down on the

²³⁹ Chapter 1 includes an extended discussion of the 1918 lynching rampage in Brooks and neighboring Lowndes Counties.

²⁴⁰ During a 2000 public forum in Atlanta about how to present the "Without Sanctuary" lynching photography exhibit, David Smith said that, during his career as a nurse in Florida, older white patients often confided to him that they were haunted by memories of attending lynchings. That these patients directed these deathbed confessions at an African American man may indicate that they were seeking out forgiveness for sins that had festered in their consciences for years. "Thee Smith Notes," Box 1, Folder 9, Without Sanctuary Project Files, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

bed when he died, and said all he could say, all [that] was coming out of his mouth was, “Y’all get that nigger woman and that baby away from me.” I guess he was having uh, um nightmares about it I guess. That’s all he was saying until his last breath left him. “Y’all get that nigger woman and that baby away from me. Get that nigger woman and that baby away from me.”²⁴¹

Hall had seen with his own eyes how the old man’s sins were marked upon his body, and even though that man may not have believed that those sores were physical reminders of his guilt, his desire to hide his disfigurement only reinforced the perception that his guilt and his shame had taken a physical form.

Hall told a variation of a story that circulated among blacks from neighboring towns for decades, and the idea at the core of that story—that lynchers would get their comeuppance—cropped up elsewhere in the South too.²⁴² In 1917, a mob in Memphis tied Ell Person to a log and burned him alive before taking “souvenirs,” decapitating him, and dragging his body through the city streets. Person had been falsely accused of murdering a white woman, and the man who actually committed the crime, a white grocery store owner, had the gall to bring Person’s ear to his store to show off as a souvenir. Edmonia Taylor, a Memphis schoolteacher, recalled that “everything happened to somebody that had a part in lynching that man,” including a white man whose car “jumped off the levee,” killing his entire family.²⁴³

Just like the African American community around Barney, Georgia, Taylor understood untimely deaths and other bad luck to be forms of punishment. Telling those stories provided a modicum of comfort, yet they were not wholly comforting because punishment from without—

²⁴¹ Author’s interview with Robert Hall in Valdosta, Georgia, 28 January 2012.

²⁴² In my interview with Willie Head Jr. who grew up in nearby Pavo, Georgia, he talks about seeing that same old man walking in Barney and asking his father about the sores on that man’s hands. Head’s father told him that the sores appeared where Mary Turner’s blood had splashed on his arms. Author’s interview with Willie Head Jr. in Pavo, Georgia, 29 January 2012.

²⁴³ Although Taylor does not mention the name of the lynching victim in her oral history, the date and details appear to match the 18 May 1917 lynching of Ell Person. Oral History of Edmonia Taylor, 26 June 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University; Oral History of Margarette Edmond, 22 June 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University; Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (1962; reprint, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1988), 112–113.

careening off a levee, developing sores, and the like—did not require introspection, much less feeling guilty or taking responsibility. Hall's story about the old white man walking down Highway 76 included a powerful deathbed scene, which made for a more satisfying story. Perhaps the generosity of his African American neighbors moved that man to feel the weight of his sins, or maybe the sheer barbarity of cutting open a dying, pregnant woman's stomach with a hog skinning knife made it plain that he should be worried about the fate of his soul. Alternatively, the mere presence of African Americans surrounding him on his deathbed may have forced him to confront the crime he committed against the Turners and the black community more generally. Regardless of what actually prompted him to dread the imminent final judgment of his sins, he clearly believed that after he drew his last breath he would have to reckon with the ghosts of Mary Turner and her baby. In fact, they had already begun to torment his conscience as he lay dying. What amounted to a deathbed confession left African Americans with the sense that some white people who had carried out or had been complicit in lynchings suffered the anguish of guilt and the dread of eternal damnation and therefore fully and consciously understood that what they had coming to them was punishment, not mere happenstance like the white Memphis man whose car crashed on a levee.

A couple counties northwest of Barney and Morven, another elderly white man contemplated the prospects of his soul making it up to heaven. During his tenure as sheriff, Claude Screws had rarely hesitated to use violence to intimidate and demean African Americans in Baker County, Georgia. In 1943, he and two deputies arrested a local African American mechanic, Robert Hall (not to be confused with the Robert Hall from Morven), then beat him to death with a nightstick and dragged his lifeless body into a jail cell. Hall's death was, by most standards, a lynching and certainly a murder, but Screws successfully appealed his case to the

Supreme Court. The Justice Department had argued that Hall's death violated civil rights legislation from Reconstruction that was intended to protect freedmen from draconian measures designed to curb their new-found freedom. The Court granted that the Justice Department had proven that Screws had intended to kill Hall, but since the government had not shown that Screws intended to violate Hall's civil rights, the case was overturned.²⁴⁴ Screws was a "free" man, in one sense of the word, but African Americans in the area believed that his conscience was far from "free." In an interview, Shirley Sherrod, a civil rights activist and former official with the USDA, recounted the sheriff's attempts to unburden his soul:

Now I've heard some of my cousins talk about Screws. They say—and I don't know whether this is [an] old folk tale or whether it's true—but they said he had killed a number of black people. And I guess, during his later years he lost his eyesight and I don't know what else was wrong with him. But they said he would be...he lived somewhere down there in Newton and he would, he would be saying, he'd hear someone and say, "Is that a nigger? If that's a nigger, please come in here. Please." You know, he just wanted black folk around him during the years when he was about to die. And they said he told the Gator [Warren Johnson, the new Baker County Sheriff], said, "Whatever you do, don't kill a nigger."²⁴⁵

Screws had sought out African Americans to ask for forgiveness, to absolve him of his sins against their race. He seemed to have hoped that, through a series of confessions, his soul could rest in peace. Sherrod expressed some skepticism about this repentant incarnation of Screws, probably because that image appeared to be so grossly out of character with the man who had killed Robert Hall and abused countless other African Americans. Even with its veracity in question, the story still made a powerful cultural statement about African American dissatisfaction with human justice. When (or if) Screws begged for forgiveness, he revealed, at the very least, the extent to which he feared going to hell for his crimes. His admission of guilt

²⁴⁴ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 408–409.

²⁴⁵ Oral History of Shirley Sherrod, 30 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University. Warren "Gator" Johnson did not take Screws' advice to heart since in 1963 he shot, though not fatally, civil rights activist Charlie Ware.

may not have indicated that he felt remorse—the fear of spending an eternity in hell and genuinely feeling remorseful are not the same—and for African Americans, the prospect of divine justice articulated in this story served to remind them that, with a Supreme Court that would let a known murderer go free, divine justice was their only option.²⁴⁶



For some African Americans, the haunting was palpable, a ghost that could intrude upon their everyday lives. Lynching was more than just a terrifying story. Having witnessed a lynching or lost a family member to a mob, the horror and anguish of the past not only seeped into the present but these psychological wounds still throbbed. Memories of the violence usually did not consume these survivors, but even decades later the pain was still raw, the sadness was still overwhelming, the sense of loss was still devastating. Haunting, for some, meant trying to keep painful memories at bay just long enough to avoid reliving the past.

Will Head was a thirty-year-old farm laborer when a mob of about three hundred white men in Brooks County, Georgia lynched him on May 17, 1918. After getting him to confess to stealing the gun used to kill his white employer, the mob tied a rope around his neck, made him climb up a large oak tree, and, after fastening the other end of the rope around another tree, forced him to jump to his death. Over the next week, somewhere between twelve and seventeen other African Americans would die at the hands of lynch mobs in Brooks County and neighboring Lowndes County. No member of these mobs attempted to conceal his or her

²⁴⁶ A more optimistic reading of Screws, one in which he actually felt remorse, might have provided a glimmer of hope to African Americans. If even the most unapologetic white supremacist had the capacity to feel remorse, perhaps the prospect of redeeming the nation wasn't so dim after all. Like Sherrod, I tend to be skeptical of such an optimistic reading.

identity, and nobody faced prosecution.²⁴⁷ Will Head's death devastated his father, Frank Head, who would break down and cry whenever he talked about what had happened to his son. Born a slave in Georgia's Black Belt, Frank Head must have had his faith in the promise of freedom shaken when, even in freedom, a black man's life was so worthless. Eventually Frank Head moved away from Brooks County to somewhere in Florida, where that big oak tree and the smug looks on white men's faces would not remind him of his son's terrible death. Even though moving meant leaving many of his children and their families behind, finally he could mourn in peace.

Another one of Frank Head's sons (and Will Head's older brother), Judge Head, defiantly refused to leave and uproot his family from Brooks County. He had dreams of farming his own land, and although the lynching of his brother weighed heavily on his soul—after all he had sons of his own to worry about—he decided to purchase a small stretch of uncultivated land in Pavo. With a shovel and a mule as his only tools, Judge Head dug up stumps that were upwards of four feet in diameter for ten cents apiece until, 3,000 stumps later, he had the \$300 down payment for that land—land that his grandson, Willie Head, Jr. owns and grows vegetables on still. His younger brother's death never left him. In the 1940s and 1950s, when Judge Head would tell his son and daughter-in-law about how his father had cried and cried over Will's lynching, he too had tears streaming down his face.²⁴⁸

Among the members of the Head family who remained in Brooks County, the lynching also crept into their daily lives in less jarring ways than the uncontrollable emotional responses

²⁴⁷ Christopher C. Meyers, "'Killing Them by the Wholesale': A Lynching Rampage in South Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 222, 219.

²⁴⁸ Author's interview with Willie Head, Jr. in Pavo, Georgia, 29 January 2012. During my interview, Willie Head, Jr. said that Frank Head (1840/50?–?) was Judge Head's (1875/81/82?–1964) brother, but according to the 1900 Census, Frank Head was Judge Head's father and Will Head (1888–1918) was Judge Head's younger brother. Despite some discrepancies between several censuses regarding Frank and Judge Head birth years, because Judge's younger brother Edson is listed as a son of Frank on the 1900 and 1910 Censuses, I concluded that Frank was Judge's father.

those memories provoked. The fear that yet another young man in the family might suffer a similar fate stalked around in the backs of their minds. Fifty years after the family lost Will, Willie Head Jr., Will's grand-nephew, "sass[ed]" the vegetable buyer at the Thomasville market, a white man named Cordy Paris, by refusing to sell some butter beans at well below their market value. Right after Willie Jr. left with all his butter beans in tow, Paris called Willie Sr., telling him that his teenage son ought to show more respect to white folks. Willie Sr.'s mind flashed back to the family lore about what white people had done to Will Head, and the moment Willie Jr. got home, his father took him out to his truck and drove him to his Uncle Rufus's farm for his safety. Willie Jr. demanded that his father take him home, insisting that he was overreacting, and although the older man eventually did turn around and head home, the fear that white folks would kill his son lingered. When Willie Jr. arrived back at the house, he was met with his mother, Jessie Mae Head's, worried gaze. She warned him in a grave voice, "Son, they'll kill you. They'll kill you. It's a wonder they didn't kill you." Reflecting back on that day in his home, which sits on the same land Judge Head had cleared, he said, "You would think that [Will Head's lynching] was long past them...but to them it was kind of fresh."²⁴⁹

The categories of past and present appeared to collapse for the older members of the Head family. Memories that perhaps should have yellowed and faded with time instead remained, as Willie Head Jr. put it, fresh. The immediate threat of violence had passed fifty years earlier, but the past had not loosened its grip on them. They couldn't know for sure whether they could trust that the white people of Brooks County had changed, but the memory of Will Head's lynching convinced them that the consequences of trusting were too high to risk it.

A few states over in Mississippi, Minnie Weston grew up amid so many lynchings and so much racial violence that she struggled to fight off those traumatic memories even as a ninety-

²⁴⁹ Author's interview with Willie Head Jr.

year-old woman. By the time Weston was fourteen years old, two of her brothers had been murdered, and some white men had visited her home in the dead of night to take her father and another brother out into the darkness, presumably to beat them. Around this same time, her family had run off from a plantation in Chickasaw County after a dispute at settling time with the white man they sharecropped for. At a very early age, she knew what whites in Chickasaw County thought about the value of an African American's life. Weston recalled that her father, after hearing that one of his sons had been murdered—drowned—by his white employer, went to see about his son: “We didn’t know nothing about it until it was done, but and then uh when my daddy went to him and ask him about that boy, only thing he said to, the white man said to him, ‘Go ahead on and bury that nigger.’ So that’s all my daddy got out of him.”²⁵⁰ The family never knew what possessed that white man to commit murder, and unsurprisingly, no court of law ever bothered to look into the matter either.

Raising children at the turn of the nineteenth century when racial violence was a part of everyday life in Mississippi, Weston’s parents hid the “hanging, executing, just all kind of death among the black [people]” under a shroud of secrecy. With three recorded lynchings of African American men in the county seat of Houston between 1904 and 1913, black parents had plenty of violence to conceal.²⁵¹ As a child, Weston wondered what caused the pain she witnessed when her mother, aunts, and others would gather “over there [in] that old wood uh place there, in old shacky houses, [sitting] over [by] that old fireplace and crying...and whispering to each

²⁵⁰ Oral History of Minnie Weston, 8 August 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University

²⁵¹ Weston was born in 1905, and her family moved from Chickasaw County to the Mississippi Delta around 1919. She would have been born a year after the Jesse Tucker lynching on 10 July 1904 and alive during the lynchings of Robby Buskin on 9 February 1909 and Andrew Williams 7 February 1913. Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings*, 263, 265.

other,”²⁵² but she sensed that she shouldn’t ask about the things that brought tears to her mother’s eyes.

Weston suspected that her parents shielded their children from stories about racial violence out of fear that the children might say something out of turn in front of a white person, but her father’s experience as a child pointed to other worries. Although her father was born free, his parents had been born slaves. As a young boy, her father had heard a story about how his mother’s master would abuse her. He would build a large fire until the bricks in the fireplace got good and hot then would force Weston’s grandmother to stand on the bricks, burning her feet and legs. Listening to that story as a child, Weston’s father wished that he could have helped his mother, but all he could do was try to suppress the impotent rage that welled up inside:

That [story] made him hate because, you know, see, they told him when they shouldn’t have told him. ... He said when he grew up, to get grown, he was, was going to kill people just as they come to it. But when he did grow up, God had fixed his heart. ... He said he often thought about how his mother’s legs were burned by slavery, but he forgive those people, and that’s what he told, told us. ... So that’s the way that [we] come up.²⁵³

Even though her father had taught his children not to hate white people, “still something was raised up against” his two murdered sons, and no amount of forgiveness could soothe his or his daughter Minnie’s aching souls.²⁵⁴

On the tape of the interview in which Weston recounted these stories, the pain in her voice cuts through in the recording. Moments earlier, she had been wistfully reminiscing about the generosity and kindness within the African American community during her childhood, but when the interviewer asked her about race relations during Jim Crow, she stopped. All of a sudden, words escaped her. Like her mother and aunts who had huddled around the fireplace in

²⁵² Oral History of Minnie Weston, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

those shacks back in Chickasaw County, her voice shrank to an unsteady whisper. As she struggled to get out a few words—“Oh, well they didn’t care [?] any time with the black people. No, they didn’t. No, they didn’t allow any black people [?] around there. Uh-uh. No. They would not.”—she seemed to weigh how deep into those old wounds she would be willing to plunge. In time she revealed that one of her brothers had been drowned, but couldn’t go further: “So, so that’s all I would want to tell about my people.”²⁵⁵ The interviewer gently urged her to tell more, and she did, but every word seemed to push her deeper and deeper into a past she didn’t want to revisit.

A few minutes later, the interviewer asked Weston whether she had heard stories about slavery as a child. Again, she hesitated as though she were girding herself for another wave of painful memories. With some more encouragement though, she dove even deeper into those old wounds: “I never forget what my daddy told me about his mother. And I could never forget uh... He was some related to, to us that my grandma told me that they hung him and put a chain around his neck. I just can’t, I tried and tried to get, forget it. I can’t forget.”²⁵⁶ Weston paused before starting again. This time her whisper cracked, as though she were on the verge of tears. She told the story about the three or four white men who visited her home in the middle of the night, but she began with an image: several children, herself included, sleeping on a pallet. The rest of her story unfolded in nonlinear fragments—a piece here and a piece there—but she always returned to that image of the sleeping children.

Weston’s reconstruction of that story mimicked the classic symptoms of trauma: vivid fragments of memory with gaps that made reconstituting the whole story seem impossible, returning to the same image repeatedly, and feeling the same panicked emotions that arose

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

during the traumatic event. Some of that fragmentation resulted from never knowing what happened that night after those men took her father and brother outside, but the intensity of her emotional response in that moment likely disrupted her ability to process all that happened. As she lay on the pallet that night pretending to sleep alongside her brothers and sisters, she sensed that she should be afraid and keep quiet as her father and brother left the house. That fear stopped her from asking her parents to explain what happened the next day, and that anxiety persisted some eighty years later. Weston ended that part of her conversation by reflecting on her struggle with those memories: “I think about it, that time. Now they run across my mind, but to think of it, I don’t hold it. Now that’s it. That’s it.”²⁵⁷ She seemed to have seen enough of those ghosts for that day, and now was the time to lay them to rest once again.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Violence

She kisses her killed boy. / And she is sorry. / Chaos in windy grays / through a red prairie.
 – Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till”

An effigy dangled outside the second-story window of Vardaman Hall, a men’s dormitory on the University of Mississippi campus. Its head crooked from the rope tied around its neck, the limp figure wore a sign that read “GO BACK TO AFRICA WHERE YOU BELONG.” Tucked inside the back of the collar was a small Confederate flag that brushed the top of the figure’s forehead. The effigy’s crudely painted eyes stared out at Baxter Hall, the residence hall of James Meredith, the man the effigy was meant to represent.

The effigy was the third to appear on campus in as many weeks. The first appeared back on September 13, 1962, even before Meredith had enrolled in his state’s public university as its first African American student. His classmates strung up the second effigy on October 2, one day before the third effigy was hanged. The sign draped around this second figure informed Meredith, “We’re gonna miss you when you’re gone,” and in the middle of the night, a crowd of students gathered outside Vardaman Hall to set the effigy

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IMAGE

Figure 1: Students hanged this effigy of James Meredith on the University of Mississippi campus on October 3, 1962 to protest his admission to the university. (AP)

aflame and to shoot off firecrackers to intimidate Meredith with the sound of the explosions.²⁵⁸

The dormitory where the last two effigies hanged took its name from Mississippi's race-baiting, populist politician, James K. Vardaman, who served as the state's governor and senator in the early twentieth century. He openly endorsed lynching as a way to maintain white supremacy, so hanging the effigies from a building named in his honor was sadly fitting.²⁵⁹

The similarities between the effigies of James Meredith and the thousands of black bodies hanged and burned by southern lynch mobs over the years were intentional. Just as their parents and grandparents had used ritualized violence against black bodies to celebrate white supremacy, the University of Mississippi students who displayed and burned these effigies performed a ritual desecration of Meredith's body. The bodies left hanging around campus may have been filled with cotton, not the flesh and blood of African Americans, but these effigies proudly invoked a tradition of lynching that reinscribed the same culture of white supremacy that lynching had celebrated for over one hundred years.

To say that these effigies were merely representations of violence would ignore the reality that these were far from empty threats. Meredith's "welcome" to the campus began with a violent riot put down by thousands of U.S. marshals that left two people dead and hundreds of marshals and rioters injured. For the remainder of the academic year, armed marshals accompanied Meredith almost everywhere he went to protect him from physical violence, though they could do little about the verbal barbs and epithets hurled his way almost daily. In the weeks

²⁵⁸ Charles W. Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 284, 372; McCandlish Phillips, "Meredith Lonely But Will Remain," *The New York Times*, 3 October 1962; "Effigy Hanging Breaks Calm at Ole Miss" *The Bellingham Herald* (Bellingham, WA), 3 October 1962.

²⁵⁹ Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 224.

and months that followed, Meredith received hundreds of death threats.²⁶⁰ A letter from Troy, Alabama signed “The Sovereign States of Alabama and Georgia” made a sorry attempt at poetry, practically shouting through the page in all uppercase letters:

ROSES ARE RED
VIOLETS ARE BLUE
I KILLED ONE NEGRO
I MAY MAKE IT TWO.²⁶¹

The subsequent stanzas threatened that, if Meredith’s friends set foot in Alabama or Georgia, “THEY’LL HANG BY THEIR BALLS”—his friends presumably being Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and Robert Kennedy. A letter signed simply “Buddy” predicted that someone would “pinch [his] head off” and make his wife a “black widow.”²⁶² Others entertained fantasies about his death by lynching, like one postcard that read:

Dear Nigger bastard, I hope they hang your black ass from the biggest tree around. You fucking aborigini [sic] prick. You eight ball cocksucker. You prick cannibal. Your [sic] a mother-fucker you black fuck. Love, The Whites²⁶³

These letters, and dozens of others like them, not only threatened Meredith’s life but did so by deploying the rhetoric of lynching. That letter from Alabama made a direct allusion to one common feature of lynching, the mutilation and castration of male victims. Descriptions of what

²⁶⁰ I first became aware of the burning of effigies on the grounds of the campus, ironically enough, when I was reading “Letters of Support” in the James Howard Meredith Collection at the University of Mississippi’s Archives and Special Collections. I came across a letter from a fifteen-year-old white girl from Audobon, New Jersey named Eileen Potts, who wrote that, by hearing about the burned effigy, “for the first time I could really imagine what was going on there [in Oxford, Mississippi].” I got up from my desk in the reading room to ask the archivists if they had any images of the effigy referenced in the letter, which they did not, or if they had heard about the effigy, which they had not, but a few hours later I came across a newspaper clipping of the image reproduced here in one of the folders labeled “Negative Letters,” a massive understatement, to be sure. Eileen Potts to James Meredith, 3 October 1962, Box 97.25.3, Folder 11 “Meredith Letters of Support October 3, 1962,” James Howard Meredith Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁶¹ “The Sovereign States of Alabama and Georgia” to James Meredith, undated 1962, Box 97.25.6, Folder 13 “Negative Letters, 1962 (mostly undated),” James Howard Meredith Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁶² “Buddy” to James Meredith, 13 October 1962, Box 97.25.6, Folder 4 “Anti-Integration Corr 10-14 Oct 1962” James Howard Meredith Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁶³ “the Whites” to James Meredith, undated 1962, Box 97.25.6, Folder 3 “Meredith–Negative Letters 1962 Oct 5-9,” James Howard Meredith Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

Meredith's body might look like hanging from a tree also evoked the spectacle of lynching: the carnivalesque atmosphere of the ritual, the souvenir photographs sold afterwards, the display of the body for passersby to gawk at. These letters also spewed racial epithets that, like lynchings themselves, communicated that these warnings were directed not only at Meredith but at the African American community as a whole.

Most of these threats arrived as letters and telegrams, but his fellow students hurled more than taunts and jeers at him—they also threw rocks, bottles, cherry bombs, and firecrackers. One day Meredith even found a dead raccoon on the hood of his car.²⁶⁴ Within a matter of weeks, the dead bodies had piled up, though, thanks in part to the marshals, Meredith's was not among them. The list of bodies included three effigies, the remains of Paul Leslie Guihard and Ray Gunter who were killed in the riot, the dead raccoon, and the figurative corpse of Meredith imagined in a growing stack of death threats sitting on his dorm room desk.²⁶⁵ A couple weeks prior to Meredith's enrollment, a white undertaker from Corinth, Mississippi named Bill McPeters sent a telegram offering to take the corpses of Meredith and any other "troublemakers" off Governor Ross Barnett's hands and to bury them free of charge. What might have seemed like rhetorical chest-thumping had some substance to it. In his telegram, McPeters boasted about "own[ing] the ground that the tree still stands on that was used about 55 years ago: when one got out of place."²⁶⁶ The lynching the undertaker referenced had occurred well before he was even born, but McPeters used the force and power of that lynching to lend credibility to his offer. Meredith was spared bodily harm and McPeters's services weren't necessary, but the students

²⁶⁴ Eagles, *The Price of Defiance*, 391.

²⁶⁵ The two dead men, the dead raccoon, the effigies, and the death threats were all bodies of a sort connected to lynching and racial violence in some way, but I don't mean to equate all of these bodies with lynched bodies. Rather, I try to tease out the ways in which the violence of lynching was replicated in the period between 1940 and 1970.

²⁶⁶ Bill McPeters to Ross Barnett, 19 September 1962, Western Union Telegram Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

who repeatedly hanged these effigies intended these representations of lynching to have the same practical effect as lynching itself. They hoped to intimidate Meredith into dropping out of the university so that their “southern way of life” (i.e. white supremacy) could continue unchallenged.

Meredith remained remarkably unflappable despite the daily onslaught of verbal and physical threats. When a reporter asked what he would like to say to his classmates, he answered, “I’ve noticed that a number of students looked like they’re mad. I don’t know what they’re mad at, but if they’re mad at me, I’d like to know about what.”²⁶⁷ He gave measured responses to reporters’ questions about the violence and vitriol, the isolation and insults, but after his 71-year-old father was awoken in the dead of night by shotgun blasts fired into his house, he wondered how much harassment he could stand to put his family through. In an article he wrote for the April 19, 1963 issue of *Look*, he lamented that “hearts have now shown that they don’t intend to change,” but he also vowed to continue his fight for racial justice, despite his trepidations about threats to his family. Meredith made only passing reference to the threats directed at him, which he derided as undignified and shameful. What must have been an unnerving barrage of verbal and physical attacks to endure, he largely brushed off as more evidence of his home state’s well-deserved reputation for racist vitriol.



Violence and white supremacy remained closely linked well after lynchings became less frequent, as the effigies of James Meredith and other threats to his life so clearly illustrated.

²⁶⁷ McCandlish Phillips, “Meredith Lonely But Will Remain,” *New York Times*, 3 October 1962; James Meredith, “I Can’t Fight Alone,” *Look*, 19 April 1963, 70–78.

Racial violence had deep roots in the South. After emancipation, white southerners replaced the brutality of slavery—the whippings, rapes, iron collars, brandings, hangings—with the hardly less violent practices of lynching, convict leasing, Klan terror, and a slew of unpunished beatings, murders, and rapes. One popular adage among black southerners during Jim Crow was “You got to buy a license to kill everything but a nigger. We was always in season.”²⁶⁸ In a supposedly free and democratic society, white southerners could kill African Americans with little to no interference from the law. Even on the rare occasions when white suspects faced criminal charges for committing violent crimes against African Americans, convictions were virtually unheard of.

After World War II, white southerners continued to use racial violence, including lynching, to maintain white supremacy, but over the course of the next few decades that violence largely went underground and changed forms as the more “respectable” pockets of white society frowned upon violence as a passé embarrassment to the region. This shift resulted, in part, from the growing influence of the NAACP, the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), and other organizations that convinced local law enforcement to prevent mob violence. These organizations also encouraged the press to cover lynchings and pressured Congress to intervene on the federal level. Federal anti-lynching legislation never made it past the filibuster of southern Democrats in the Senate, but the FBI and the Justice Department investigated several post-war lynchings in the South. Southern grand juries increasingly indicted suspected lynchers—the two men who lynched Emmett Till, for instance—though few if any indictments led to convictions.

²⁶⁸ William Ferris, *Give My Poor Heart Ease: Voices of the Mississippi Blues* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 154.

Between public opinion turning against lynching and the rising risk of legal punishment, many would-be lynchers were discouraged from organizing and joining lynch mobs. Just because fewer lynchings occurred didn't mean that the meaning and significance of lynching was any less powerful. In the 1890s when, on average, one person was lynched just about every other day, Jim Crow was deeply embedded into southern politics and culture, so the ritual of mob violence provided affirmation for a seemingly permanent and invulnerable system of white supremacy.²⁶⁹ In the 1940s and certainly by the 1950s, the foundations of Jim Crow were beginning to crack and crumble. In fact, with Jim Crow increasingly under threat from civil rights activists, the Supreme Court, federal civil rights legislation, the media, and public opinion, the stakes of defending white supremacy were higher than ever. When white southerners invoked lynching through effigies and rhetoric—and even through racial violence itself—after World War II, they were clinging to a system of white power that was slipping from their grasp. The tried and true practice of using excessive racial violence to intimidate African Americans seemed to be losing its potency, but whites continued to return to these three modes of articulating the ritualistic violence of lynching—effigies, rhetoric, and physical violence—in part as an act of desperation.



In Panel 15 from Jacob Lawrence's series of paintings, *The Migration of the Negro* (1940–1941), the *absence* of a body marks a barren, washed-out landscape as a place burdened

²⁶⁹ According to the NAACP's figures, 1,665 lynchings occurred between 1890 and 1900, which amounts to just under one lynching every other day. Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (1929; reprint, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 231.

with the memory of a lynching. The mourning survivor bent over in the foreground is evidence enough that the noose left hanging from the branch had strained under the weight of a dead body. Against the bleakness of this spare landscape, the figure in red, though devastated by the loss of yet another life, somehow breathes—or perhaps sighs—life into the painting. Lawrence recognized the need to remember the grief and despair of lynching survivors and to capture an experience that sadly continued to be a reality for African Americans in the 1940s. The painting both depicts a person haunted by an absent body and elicits a visceral response from the viewer by awakening memories, personal and collective, of the South's violent history.²⁷⁰ The son of southerners who migrated to the Northeast around 1920, Lawrence made visible a violent history so often hidden from view, which in itself was a bold act of protest against American racism.

²⁷⁰ The identity of the viewer certainly impacts the personal and collective memories that Lawrence's painting and any image of lynching produces. For one thing, survivors and perpetrators directly impacted by a lynching remember the past differently, in large part because the traumatic event (i.e. the lynching) was mediated by a significant power differential. Even though some perpetrators could also be traumatized by a lynching, the broader context of culture and social position and power must be taken into account when considering how images can reawaken memories in viewers. For two excellent discussions of this painting and Lawrence's artistic representations of lynching more generally, see Farah Jasmine Griffin, *"Who Set You Flowin'?" The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13–15; Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 112, 136–141, 164–167.

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Figure 2: Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, Panel 15: "Another Cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this." 1940-41 (The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC)

Lawrence was certainly not alone in using lynching imagery in his art. The Japanese American artist, Isamu Noguchi, modeled his grotesquely disfigured sculpture titled *Death (Lynched Figure)* (1933) on the 1930 lynching and burning of George Hughes in Sherman, Texas, and the muralist Aaron Douglas painted mourners surrounding a lynched body hanging from a tree in "Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South" (1934). Not only did the NAACP sponsor art exhibits and theater productions that depicted lynchings, they also reproduced graphic photographs of lynchings in their pamphlets to shock the collective conscience of northerners.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 83–131; Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia:

Lawrence and the NAACP used these violent images to protest lynching and to memorialize the victims of mob violence, but white southerners often appropriated the imagery

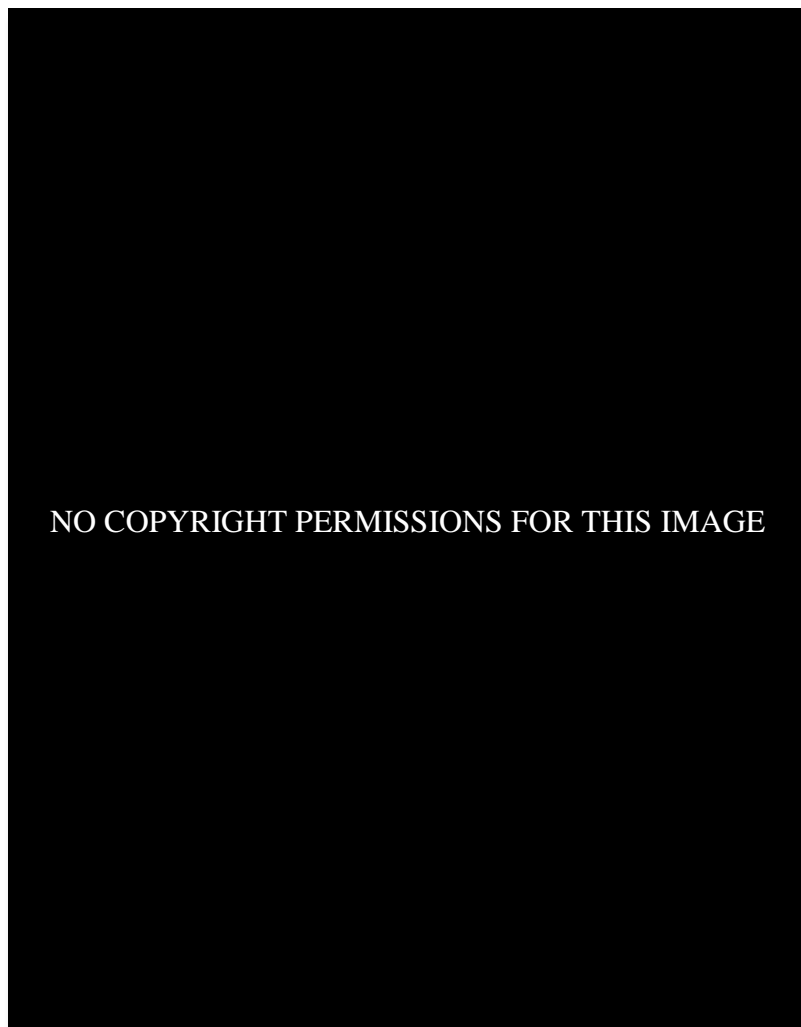


Figure 3: In January 1946, a constituent of Senator James O. Eastland sent him a clipping from *Life* magazine that included this image of an effigy that the Klan hanged in Miami, Florida in 1939 to intimidate African American voters. (*Life*, October 16, 1944)

of lynching for their own purposes too. Some kept photographs of lynchings in their homes, perhaps tucked away in the back of drawers or maybe even displayed on the mantles of their fireplaces.²⁷² In public spaces, they often took representing lynching beyond two dimensions. Effigies like the ones left hanging on the campus of the University of Mississippi in 1962 regularly cropped up across the South. In 1939, for instance, the Ku Klux Klan

hanged a black effigy from a telephone pole in Miami, Florida to

intimidate African Americans who had registered to vote. The bloodstain that spread from the

Temple University Press, 1980), 125–126. One NAACP official was arrested for passing out pamphlets that included an image of a teenager named Rubin Stacy who was lynched in 1935 by a Ft. Lauderdale, Florida mob. See also Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

²⁷² The self-described “southern picker,” James Allen, compiled a collection of over one hundred lynching photographs, often purchasing the photographs directly from people who had been holding onto these images for decades in their homes.

effigy's heart and ran down its torso onto its legs was partly covered by a sign announcing, "THIS NIGGER VOTED."²⁷³

As the number of post-World War II lynchings declined, the figurative bodies of effigies began to replace these literal dead bodies. Three decades after the bloodied effigy hanged in Miami, dead black crows with nooses around their necks hanged from the limbs of the stately oak trees lining the road just outside Tchula, Mississippi in Holmes County. African Americans driving to the county seat, Lexington, knew those crows swinging from the tree limbs were meant for them to see, even without a sign telling them what would happen if they registered to vote.²⁷⁴ The Voting Rights Act, which passed in 1965 over the protestations of southern congressmen, dealt a severe blow to Jim Crow, but whoever methodically killed and hanged those dead crows didn't intend to represent the slow demise of racial oppression. Instead, the decaying bodies of the crows were reminiscent of a dead body found floating in a lake a couple counties over in 1946. A black tenant farmer named Leon McTatie had been whipped to death in Lexington for stealing a saddle. The planter he worked for, along with five other white men, killed McTatie, stuffed him into the trunk of a car, and dumped his body in the lake. The dead crows silently echoed an unspoken death threat that reverberated from McTatie's corpse and the dead black man hanged outside the Lexington courthouse in 1938 and the thousands of other black bodies lynched across the nation: if you register to vote, you might be strung up like these crows.

²⁷³ Anonymous from Hot Springs, AR to James O. Eastland, 25 January 1946, Box 32, Folder 1946 Civil Rights 2 of 2, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library. The enclosure with this letter was an article from the 11 September 1944 issue of *Life* titled "P.A.C.: CIO's Political Action Committee Raises a Storm" that included the photo and description of the effigy hanged in Miami in 1939.

²⁷⁴ Oral History of William J. Stewart, 7 August 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South*, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University.

The correspondence between lawyers for the circuit clerk in Holmes County and Mississippi's senior senator, James O. Eastland, told quite a different story. Local whites hoped to keep the Justice Department from intervening in elections, especially now that the Voting Rights Act provided oversight to counties with voting irregularities. In 1965 Holmes County had more African Americans than whites eligible to vote, so to keep political power squarely in white hands, the local registrar adopted a general policy of African American disenfranchisement while allowing token numbers of African Americans to vote. These local white officials assured Eastland that the clerk had registered over one thousand African Americans, who he derisively referred to as "illiterates," which they hoped would be sufficient to satisfy Justice Department lawyers and keep them from meddling in local affairs. Ever responsive to his white constituents' needs, Eastland called Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach with the necessary reassurances that the circuit clerk would resume registering "illiterates" and that a federal registrar would be unnecessary.²⁷⁵

The attorney representing the circuit clerk apologized for hassling Eastland with these local issues, writing "we regretted so much to have to bother you about this matter, but it is really one of life or death to us here."²⁷⁶ His word choice was telling. Whites in Holmes County worried about relinquishing their "southern way of life"—sharing political power with a black majority would sound the death knell for white supremacy—but registering eligible African American voters was a matter of "life or death" in another sense too. The Ku Klux Klan had already burned crosses on the lawns of local civil rights leaders, and they had fired bullets into their homes. The Sanctified Church, where local African Americans had been meeting to

²⁷⁵ Edwin White to James O. Eastland, 2 November 1965, Box 18, Folder Holmes County, MS Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁷⁶ Edwin White to James O. Eastland, 2 November 1965, Box 18, Folder Holmes County, MS Civil Rights, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

organize a voter registration drive, had been burned to the ground in 1964, and in 1963, police dogs attacked the handful of African Americans who attempted to register to vote at the courthouse. White Mississippians had murdered Reverend George Lee in 1955, Herbert Lee (no relation to George Lee) in 1961, and others for registering African American voters. The end of black disfranchisement spelled a kind of death for white supremacy, but for African Americans voting literally had been a matter of life or death for nearly a century.

Those dead black crows physically embodied memories of dead black bodies. In the past, lynching had preserved white social power and—like this most recent attempt at voter intimidation—political power. The people who hanged those crows likely were grasping for a time in the not too distant past when lynching provided them comfort, reassuring them that they stood atop the social hierarchy. Many members of the black community refused to be cowed by these fresh corpses. Around the same time the crows appeared, a group of activists marched around the town square in Lexington, circling the county courthouse where the registrar had turned away black voters. They walked past white-owned businesses that took money from black customers but refused to hire them as employees. Several cars lined up along one side of the square, and inside these cars sat members of the Ku Klux Klan, some of whom likely owned the stores being picketed. A domestic worker participating in the protest named Bea Jenkins walked up to one of the cars and said to the Klansmen dressed in full regalia—hoods, robes, and all:

“I’m not afraid of you. ... I just [as] soon to die today or tomorrow. ... What you need to do, go somewhere. Pull those hoods and those robes off, and go back into your store. And then try to make you some money there if you can because those robes and things don’t excite me.”²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ Oral History of Bea Jenkins, 17 January 2000, “Civil Rights Documentation Project: The Holmes County Movement,” Center for Oral History and Cultural Studies, University of Southern Mississippi.

When confronted with Klan members occupying the town square in broad daylight, Jenkins made it clear that their presence wouldn't deter her from registering to vote or demanding employment opportunities or protesting police brutality. But the hoods and robes they wore to

conceal their identities, like the black crows they hanged, seemed to provide the Klan with a sense of security amid a changing world.²⁷⁸

White southerners hanged other effigies in response to civil rights activists chipping away at Jim Crow. Two effigies, one black and one white, dangled from a makeshift scaffold that the Citizens' Council placed in Montgomery, Alabama's Court Square during the 1956 bus boycott. The black effigy, dressed in a suit, was labeled "N.A.A.C.P."; the white effigy had "TALKED INTEGRATION" written across its torso. Black birds that appear to have been killed and stuffed sat perched directly above each body, and like the Meredith effigy, two small Confederate flags flew above. The city police led the white men who assembled the scaffold to the square, giving official sanction to the display. The message here was clear: African American

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Figure 4: White Alabamans hanged these effigies in Montgomery's Court Square during the 1956 Bus Boycott. The "Built By Union Labor" sign referred to the decision among some southern locals of the AFL-CIO to ignore the national union's order to integrate. (<http://www.africanafrican.com/negroartist/SEGREGATION%20INTEGRATION/index.html>)

boycotters and white sympathizers had violated the racial code of Jim Crow and would face

²⁷⁸ According to Jenkins, the men wearing Klan attire were driving their own cars, which most everyone in that small town recognized on sight. This oversight may have been the result of neglect or poor planning, but perhaps the hoods and robes were less for concealing their identities and more for intimidating the protestors.

violent retaliation with no legal recourse. After all the symbols of the Confederacy and Jim Crow were physically looming above these effigies. Rather than lynch people, their chosen method of intimidation and violence was homemade bombs that tore apart the homes of Martin Luther King, Jr., E.D. Nixon, and other civil rights leaders in Montgomery. Feeling pressure from this well-organized and disciplined boycott, white racists reverted to the powerful symbol of lynching, indicating their willingness to resort to violence to preserve white supremacy.²⁷⁹

The mob congregated outside of Little Rock's Central High School on the morning of September 4, 1957 had a similar agenda. A shy but determined fifteen-year-old, Elizabeth Eckford, got off at the Sixteenth Street bus stop that morning and stepped into the middle of an angry white mob. As she approached the school, the national guardsmen stationed outside to keep the peace allowed white men and women to spit on her and yell racial epithets and insults. Clutching her notebook, Eckford, a solitary black child in a sea of enraged whites, steeled herself against the verbal onslaught and quickly walked back towards the bus stop. Somebody screamed, "Lynch her!" and others joined in: "Lynch her! Lynch her! Lynch her!" Shaking in terror and barely holding back her tears, the high school student sat on the bus stop bench and waited. Only when the other eight African American students arrived at the school, escorted by local NAACP leaders and ministers, did most of the mob redirect its attention away from the girl on the bench.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 3, *Birth of a New Age, December 1955–December 1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 357; Robert S. Graetz, *Montgomery: A White Preacher's Memoir* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 88–89.

²⁸⁰ Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, The Crisis that Shocked the Nation* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 2–6; David Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 50. A *New York Times* reporter, Benjamin Fine, sat next to Eckford on the bus stop bench to comfort the clearly rattled teenager, telling her not to let her tormenters see her cry, and for showing some compassion for Eckford, the mob threatened to lynch and castrate him. A Jewish New Yorker, Fine was, in many ways, an easy target for these white southerners who distrusted white outsiders, especially Jews, for not "acting white." Although African Americans made up the vast majority of lynching victims, lynch mobs often targeted white ethnics as well.

When Elizabeth Eckford's mother, Birdie, heard news coverage of her daughter's first day of school over the radio, the death threats shouted at her child must have resurrected frightening memories in this woman (and parent) who had grown up in the Jim Crow South. Back in 1927, a mob in Little Rock had brutally lynched a black father of five named John Carter. After hanging him from a telephone pole until he was strangled to death, the mob pumped over two hundred bullets into his lifeless body then dragged his corpse behind a car for an hour. They dumped the body in Little Rock's black neighborhood, and a mob of three or four thousand whites gathered to watch Carter's body burn for three hours.²⁸¹ The Little Rock Nine's white classmates had not been alive to witness Carter's lynching, but they parroted the epithets and mimicked the violent rituals they had absorbed as children from their families and community. On October 3, a group of white students walked out of their classes in the middle of the school day, refusing to attend school with their nine African American classmates. With national attention fixed squarely on Central High School, they hanged a black effigy from a tree on the school's front lawn. Egged on by the adults in the mob while national guardsmen stood by and watched, the students took turns pummeling the figure as it swung through the air, and they lit the effigy on fire just as another white mob in Little Rock had done to Carter thirty years earlier.²⁸² The strong desire among these high school students to reenact the lynching ritual—in front of news cameras no less—grew out of an impulse in the white community more generally to return to the well-worn performance of white supremacy through violence against black bodies.

²⁸¹ Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son*, 1. Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel*, 17–19

²⁸² “WSB-TV newsfilm clip of African American students—the ‘Little Rock Nine’—integrating Central High School and white students burning an effigy in protest in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957 October 3,” Civil Rights Digital Library, Digital Library of Georgia, University of Georgia Libraries.



Figure 5: A student at Little Rock's Central High School took his turn beating an effigy of his African American classmates on October 3, 1957. (AP)

In August
1963, three high
school boys from
Gadsden, Alabama
walked and hitchhiked
to the March on
Washington with only
\$10 between them,
grazing on vending
machine snacks and
sleeping in bus

terminals along the way. The final leg of their journey took them through the mountains of Virginia, and they passed by gas stations flying Confederate flags and with effigies hanging from light posts. Fifty years later, one of those boys, Robert Avery, recalled that the effigies were “sending a strong message...they went to a lot of care to make them, to make sure [black] people understood you can’t stop here and buy gas.”²⁸³ Though vividly aware that they had narrowly avoided real physical danger, Avery and his friends safely made it to Washington DC unfazed and determined as ever to protest Jim Crow. The three boys from Alabama had come upon dummies, not actual corpses, along the road. But what makes the repetition of the symbolic lynching of James Meredith and others so troubling comes to the fore when we remember that you don’t need a flesh-and-blood body dangling from the end of a noose to realize that these representations, and the racist sentiments behind them, carried with them a standing threat to the

²⁸³ Michele Norris, “Determined to Reach 1963 March, Teen Used Thumb and Feet,” NPR, podcast audio, 14 August 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/08/14/210470828/determined-to-reach-1963-march-teen-used-thumb-and-feet>.

African American community. These symbols of death were not only a throwback to Jim Crow terrorism at its worst. These gruesome yet comforting images affirmed the power and influence white southerners had enjoyed for centuries, and feeling cornered and made anxious by the sense that Jim Crow was on the decline, they clung to these representations of lynching.



That same desire to find reassurance and legitimacy in the ritual reenactment of lynching also manifested itself in the rhetoric of white southerners. “You ought to go to Old Abe Linco[l]n[s] Grave and Dig the old sunfitch [sic] up and Burn him,” wrote a white man named Willie J. Denson in a handwritten letter to the Democratic senator from Georgia, Richard B. Russell in 1957. “The first Negro I Ever see Burn was in Parris [sic] Texas,” he continued, “and the next on[e] I saw Burn was in Tylar [sic] and the next two was Burn in Sulphur Spring[s] Texas so that[s] all the Negro I have Ever seen Burn up.”²⁸⁴ From his home in Shreveport, Louisiana, Denson casually reminisced about having joined four different lynch mobs in Texas as he urged Russell to put his hat in the race for the presidency, impeach Eisenhower, and desecrate the body of Abraham Lincoln. Just a couple weeks earlier, President Eisenhower had sent federal troops to Little Rock’s Central High School, and by seamlessly shifting from Eisenhower to that “old sunfitch” Lincoln to lynchings, Denson not only connected two historical moments, nearly one hundred years apart, in which American presidents sent troops to the South, but he also linked white southern honor and pride to lynching. He had taken the time to list these four lynchings in his letter to boast and to establish his bona fides as a white southern

²⁸⁴ Willie J. Denson to Richard B. Russell, 14 October 1957, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, P: Little Rock, Box 132, Folder 1, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

man. If he believed that Lincoln had perpetrated the most egregious crime against the South by fighting the Civil War—and also presumably for freeing the slaves—then burning the assassinated president’s corpse would be another symbolic affirmation of southern white culture and white supremacy.

The prevalence and power of lynching rhetoric in the age of civil rights is difficult to comprehend without reading this language alongside the collective memories of Reconstruction. Almost immediately after the surrender at Appomattox, former Confederates engaged in the struggle over the memory of the Civil War. What became known as the Lost Cause cultivated a mythology of the war that denied pro-slavery interests were the primary catalyst for secession and erased the brutality of slavery itself. In this same vein, most white southerners imagined Reconstruction to be a tragic era during which the white South became the victims of Republican tyranny and African American political corruption. Many even held up the violent tactics of the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups as the saving grace of the white South while, of course, simultaneously maintaining that race relations had always been harmonious in the region. Extralegal violence eventually wrested political power from the Republican Party and African American voters, which led to the “redemption” of the Old South. The Civil War ended in 1865, but for the next few generations of white southerners, the war, Reconstruction, and Redemption seemed very much alive and well in the present. The Lost Cause provided the foundational stories that shaped white southern identity, race relations, and public policy, so on the cusp of a second Reconstruction when white supremacy was once again under attack from African Americans and the federal government, many whites were drawn to a rhetoric that attempted to justify extralegal violence.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ For more on the Lost Cause mythology see David Blight’s discussion of three competing strains of Civil War memory that developed in the fifty years after the war ended in *Race and Reunion*. Also consult Steven Hahn’s *A*

The Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision and President Eisenhower's order to send troops to Little Rock's Central High School were particularly instrumental in resurrecting—or at least bringing to the fore—these bitter memories of Reconstruction. About one year after the *Brown* decision, a woman who had lived in Mississippi for nearly eighty years, Mrs. Will Henry, lamented, “The Republicans and Communists are trying to destroy the South, and they are taking the only way they know how, through the negro [sic], as they did during, and after the Civil War.”²⁸⁶ Politicians from Henry's home state also drew parallels between debates over nullification and secession in the nineteenth century and contemporary debates over how to respond to the Supreme Court's desegregation decision.²⁸⁷ The kneejerk collapsing of the 1830s and 1860s with the 1950s illustrated how this preoccupation with the racial politics of the nineteenth century ran deep in white southern culture.

These comparisons often went beyond sympathizing with nineteenth-century political maneuvering against African American freedom and, in some cases, included the open endorsement of the violent extralegal tactics that had ushered in Jim Crow and the disfranchisement of African Americans in the 1870s and 1880s. After the integration “crisis” in Little Rock, one white Atlantan said, “Every advance in race relations in the South will go by the boards [and] the Ku Klux Klan will ride hard again and there will be anarchy in our land if the

Nation Under Our Feet and Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* for a more detailed analysis of Redemption and vigilante violence. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Steven Hahn, “Of Paramilitary Politics,” in *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 265–313; Eric Foner, “The Challenge of Enforcement” and “Redemption and After,” in *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863–1877* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1988), 412–459, 564–601.

²⁸⁶ Mrs. Will Henry to James O. Eastland, 6 June 1955, Box 34, Folder 1955 Civil Rights 2 of 2, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁸⁷ W.B. Alexander to James O. Eastland, 15 December 1955, Box 34, Folder 1955 Civil Rights 2 of 2, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

presidents [sic] forced methods are continued.”²⁸⁸ Six years later in 1963, a Mississippi man wondered, “Is it time for the KKK to come to the aid of our country? – again –”²⁸⁹ A fellow Mississippian ominously warned his senator, James O. Eastland, “Please remind LBJ of all the South has done for the colored people since the Reconstruction days. And also in the ‘hot summer’ ahead, to plead with his ‘pals’—Negro leaders,—to advise their people against leading ploitical [sic] meetings in their churches, to avoid another church bombing.”²⁹⁰ A lawyer from Jackson, Mississippi even invoked the Klan to establish his credibility as a white southern man, writing to Eastland, “If we don’t fight to the finish now, we may as well arrange for our mulatto grandchildren. In less than a year from [now] we will have niggers and whites in the same school and nigger teachers for white children. My father rode with [the] KKK in 1875 and ran the scoundrels out. Now our leaders surrender.”²⁹¹ In response to the imminent passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, another constituent of Eastland, R.W. Rawls, threatened, “I am hoping the South will stick together and hold their Electoral votes, throw it back in the House, but should that not happen, and the Civil Rights bill is passed, looks like the South [will] have no alternative but to revert back to reconstruction (KKK).”²⁹² Eastland replied, “I agree with you that we are going through another tragic era in the south.”²⁹³ The Klan had been actively trying to drag the South backwards into the nineteenth century since its resurgence in the 1920s. A few days after Rawls sent his letter to Eastland, the Neshoba, Mississippi klavern kidnapped and lynched three

²⁸⁸ William L. Brady to Richard B. Russell (telegram), 28 September 1957, Subgroup C, X: Civil Rights, P: Little Rock, Box 133, Folder 6, Richard B. Russell, Jr. Collection, Richard B. Russell Library – University of Georgia.

²⁸⁹ Louis G. Hoffman to James O. Eastland, 5 July 1963, Box 41, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 1 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁹⁰ Mabel B. Sheldon, 15 June 1964, Box 43, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 3 of 6, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁹¹ Archibald S. Coody to James O. Eastland, 29 August 1956, Box 35, Folder 1956 Civil Rights 1 of 3, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁹² W.R. Rawls to James O. Eastland, 18 June 1964, Box 43, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 3 of 3, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

²⁹³ James O. Eastland to W.R. Rawls, 30 June 1964, Box 43, Folder 1964 Civil Rights 3 of 3, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

civil rights workers a few hours away from Rawls's home in Petal. What otherwise might have been dismissed as nostalgic blustering about a much longed for past sadly turned out to be prophetic.

Other outraged whites in the Mississippi Delta responded to the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision by organizing the first Citizens' Council, and in just a couple years, the Councils spread across the South. Primarily concerned with defending segregation and "states' rights," the Citizens' Councils cultivated an image as a "respectable" and "law-abiding" force that defended the racial status quo. The organization's message of states' rights and what they called "racial integrity" reached millions of southerners through their voluminous publications and extensive speaking tours.²⁹⁴ These pamphlets, magazines, and speeches stoked white southern fears of "miscegenation" in language that closely resembled justifications for lynching. One flyer quoted the race-baiting Mississippi politician, Theodore G. Bilbo, who had warned, "if the blood of our white race should become corrupted and mingled with the blood of Africa, then the present greatness of the United States of America would be destroyed and all hope for the future would be forever gone."²⁹⁵ Bilbo was an outspoken apologist for lynching to the day he died in 1947, and like many of his contemporaries, he had often used the specter of "miscegenation" to excuse and even commend mob violence. When the Citizens' Councils recycled the rhetoric of "miscegenation" and quoted demagogues like Bilbo, they spoke in a transparently coded language of lynching.

Despite the Citizens' Councils "respectable" veneer, the moderate white journalist Hodding Carter accused them of being modern reincarnations of the Klan that would quickly

²⁹⁴ The official logo for the Association of Citizens' Councils of Mississippi included an American flag next to a Confederate battle flag circled by the phrases "Citizens' Councils," "states' rights," and "racial integrity."

²⁹⁵ "Famous Quotations" (flyer), Box 1, Folder 31, Citizens' Council Civil Rights Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi.

devolve into “instruments of interracial violence.” In response, Robert B. Patterson, the executive secretary of the Mississippi Councils, insisted that his organization was neither “anti-Negro,” nor did it foment racial hatred when it advocated for segregation, and he maintained that God condemned racial mixing both in schools and in the bedroom.²⁹⁶ Patterson carefully avoided the basest forms of racist rhetoric in his response to Carter and, for that matter, in many of his public speeches, opting instead for a paternalistic version of white supremacy.²⁹⁷ The Citizens’ Councils purported to condemn violent tactics in favor of economic threats, political organizing, and the rhetoric of states’ rights, but given their propensity for quoting notorious white supremacists like Bilbo, Carter had a point. After all, their supposedly kinder, gentler version of racism still reverted to the same arguments made to rationalize lynching.

In fact, the stark distinction that the Citizens’ Councils drew between their brand of non-violent white supremacy and the decidedly violent white supremacy of the Klan is less stark than the leadership of the Councils led the public to believe.²⁹⁸ Not only were many Klansmen members of the Citizens’ Councils, but in Alabama, for instance, two factions of the Citizens’ Councils publically clashed over the role of violence in their tactics. The Central Alabama Citizens’ Council led by a planter and former state legislator, Sam Engelhardt, maintained that political pressure and propaganda would stem the tide of integration, but the North Alabama Citizens’ Council’s Asa Earl “Ace” Carter took a more militant tack. While Engelhardt

²⁹⁶ The *Times-Picayune* article reprinted a few of Carter’s quotes that originally appeared in an article for the magazine *Look*. “Patterson Hits ‘Klan’ Comment: Blasts Editor on Article in National Magazine,” *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), 9 March 1955.

²⁹⁷ One Citizens’ Council pamphlet, for instance, included this line that reeked of paternalism: “We intend to carry on the peaceful relations we have had with our colored citizens, to help them to help themselves and to try to help instill in them a sense of pride in their race as we have in ours.” “The Citizens’ Council” (pamphlet), Box 1, Folder 31, Citizens’ Council Civil Rights Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi.

²⁹⁸ The economic pressure that the Councils placed on African Americans involved in (or suspected of being involved in) the Civil Rights Movement included firing activists and their family members, denying them loans, and demanding that they immediately pay existing loans in full. Because so many members of the Council controlled the economic sphere as employers and bankers, these tactics were devastating to grassroots organizing efforts.

welcomed Catholics and Jews to the membership and corresponded with prominent southern politicians, Carter excluded Jews and alienated the upper crust “Bourbons” by agitating for the forced retirement of the University of Alabama’s president after the school integrated.²⁹⁹ In April 1956, members of the North Alabama Citizens’ Council assaulted Nat King Cole as he performed in Birmingham, and by 1957 the line between the North Alabama Citizens’ Council and the Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy, also based in Birmingham, became increasingly blurred. Members of both white supremacist organizations performed an initiation ritual that involved the castration of an elderly African American man, a crime for which they were convicted later that year.³⁰⁰ Since castration had been such a common feature of southern lynchings, the Klan initiation quite literally replicated a lynching ritual that white men believed represented their unwavering dominance over African American men.

Carter’s expulsion from the mainstream Citizens’ Councils was unusual for so blatantly revealing these direct connections to racial violence, but other more covert relationships between violent white supremacists and the “respectable” set persisted. Kate H. Steele, a wealthy woman from Chattanooga, Tennessee, played a critical role in organizing the local Citizens’ Council in 1962, and she appeared to limit her activism to organizing pro-segregation rallies and lectures sponsored by the local Citizens’ Council. In her correspondence with Eastland in 1963 though, she enclosed a series of pamphlets and newspaper clippings for him to read during a filibuster and suggested that he also read articles from *The Citizen*, the Council’s monthly publication, on

²⁹⁹ Without even a hint of irony, one Citizens’ Council member, Alston Keith, warned against allowing anti-Semitism to taint the organization, chiding, “There is no place for prejudice...in this movement.” Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction 1954–64* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 50.

³⁰⁰ The demographics of the hill country region in northern Alabama and the Black Belt of central Alabama help to account for the divergent leadership styles of Carter and Engelhardt. The hill country was predominantly white and dominated by small farms, and since the Black Belt had been the bastion of large-scale cotton plantations, central Alabama had a large African American population that, in many places, constituted a majority. McMillen, “Alabama: The Bourbon and the Redneck,” in *The Citizens’ Council*, 41–58.

the Senate floor.³⁰¹ Steele also casually asked the senator if he subscribed to the neo-Nazi newspaper published by the National States Rights Party, *The Thunderbolt*. She not only encouraged him to read these bigoted messages into the Congressional Record but also implied that she endorsed the newspaper and its anti-Semitic, white supremacist, pro-violence message. The FBI suspected that the National States Rights Party, which had close ties to the Klan, was behind dozens of bombings of synagogues and black churches across the South, and one faction in Kentucky attacked a group of African Americans, which led to two deaths. Steele not only felt comfortable corresponding with both a U.S. Senator and this fringe group, but also presumed that Eastland shared her sympathies for a neo-Nazi organization that advocated for the extermination of Jews and the removal of African Americans from the United States. The Citizens' Councils hid behind a "respectable" and "non-violent" façade and claimed to change hearts and minds through rhetoric.³⁰² During this period, however, rhetoric that glorified racial violence was rarely *just* rhetoric.³⁰³



"Have you ever smelled a nigger burn?" A man's voice rang out over the P.A. system again, "Have you had the privilege of smelling a nigger burn?" Four semi-conscious African American men lay in a pile on a stage as a crowd of three-hundred white men and women

³⁰¹ Steele was listed as the "temporary secretary" in a pamphlet announcing the organizational meeting for the Chattanooga Citizens' Council, and the pamphlet included a form for interested persons to send to her home address. "Why Must Chattanooga Organize?" (pamphlet), Box 1, Folder 31, Citizens' Council Civil Rights Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi.

³⁰² Kate H. Steele to James O. Eastland, 24 June 1963, Box 42, Folder 1963 Civil Rights 3 of 4, James O. Eastland Collection, University of Mississippi Library; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "White Extremist Organizations: Part II National States Rights Party," May 1970, <http://vault.fbi.gov/National%20States%20Rights%20Party/National%20States%20Rights%20Party%20Part%201%20of%201%20>.

³⁰³ I don't mean to insinuate that rhetoric is ever toothless but rather that violent rhetoric alone is distinct from violent rhetoric backed up with physical violence.

dressed in Klan hoods and robes waited for someone to fetch some gasoline. Moments earlier, several Klansmen pummeled the four men, egged on by some women in full Klan regalia yelling, “Castrate the bastards!” “Kick their balls out!” “Knock their heads off!” “Get the rope!” Robert Hayling, one of the men left bleeding on the stage, regained consciousness long enough to hear the man with the microphone work the crowd to a near frenzy as they waited for the gasoline. Before the Klan could burn the four men alive, the police arrived, and the crowd scattered. The four men had suffered serious injuries, including broken bones, knocked-out teeth, and lacerations to the head, but they had survived.³⁰⁴

This scene unfolded just outside St. Augustine, Florida, not in 1873, but on September 18, 1963. The four men kidnapped by the Klan were local NAACP activists who had parked close to the Klan rally to get a glimpse at the most militant opposition to their efforts to desegregate St. Augustine. Before being taken to the stage, several Klansmen beat them with ax handles and baseball bats. Hayling, a local dentist, was singled out, in part because of his leadership role in the local civil rights struggle, but also because some of his white patients recognized him when he staggered onto the stage.³⁰⁵ What transpired that night narrowly fell short of a lynching. Had a sympathetic white man in the crowd not contacted the police in time though, the Klan would likely have replicated the violent rituals of lynching—the beating, mutilation, burning, hanging, and public display. During the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the force and power of lynching tended to manifest itself in rhetoric or representational violence, but physical violence, including lynchings, remained a reality. Fortunately, the four men in St.

³⁰⁴ David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877–1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 51–53.

³⁰⁵ The Klansmen beating Hayling paid particular attention to injuring his right arm so that he could no longer practice dentistry. Oral History of Robert B. Hayling, 14 September 2011, “Civil Rights History Project,” Southern Oral History Program, Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress.

Augustine recovered from their injuries, but other so-called “do-gooders” and “rabble rousers” in this period weren’t so lucky.

Much of the racial violence that occurred during the civil rights era took a different form from lynching—bombings, arson, cross burnings, beatings, and assassinations—all of which were intended to intimidate and terrorize those who opposed Jim Crow. But remembering that actual lynchings occurred during this period complicates the neat bookends historians have tended to place on the “end” of lynching. What distinguished lynching from “ordinary” murder was the social meaning ascribed to specific rituals and to the use of excessive violence. That social meaning—the psychological power of white supremacy and domination over black bodies—continued to carry great significance for many white southerners.

When several anti-lynching organizations met in 1940 to settle on a common definition for lynching, they agreed that these crimes involved a “group acting under pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition.” By the end of the meeting, they failed to reach a consensus on a definition, in part because some “progressive” white southerners wanted to define lynching out of existence.³⁰⁶ The decidedly paternalistic ASWPL routinely cast doubts on whether particular lynchings were “real,” and they were quick to announce that no lynchings occurred in a given year, despite evidence to the contrary from the NAACP or Tuskegee Institute.³⁰⁷ Despite these

³⁰⁶ The most contentious part of that meeting involved hashing out what constituted sufficient evidence for what they called “borderline lynchings” or “probable lynchings” to be considered “definite lynchings.” “Summary of the Conference on Lynching and Reports on Lynchings, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama,” 14 December 1940, Box 5, Folder 93, Arthur Franklin Raper Papers #3966, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁰⁷ The ASWPL not only opposed federal anti-lynching legislation on the grounds that states should be left to enforce laws without federal intervention, but they also excluded African American women from their membership. The executive director of the organization, Jessie Daniel Ames, was very friendly with some of the most ardent opponents of anti-lynching legislation like Representative Hatton Sumners of Texas who defended lynching on the floor of the House of Representatives in rape cases. Ames even wrote in a memo “since both these organizations [the NAACP and Tuskegee Institute] are working for the passage of a Federal AntiLynching [sic] Bill (which the ASWPL does not endorse) they have a patritic [sic] interest in seeing that lynching continue.” Memo pasted to letter from Tuskegee, 28 May 1937, Subseries 1.1, Box 1, Folder 6, Jessie Daniel Ames Papers #3686, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

attempts by supposedly sympathetic activists to declare the end of lynching, the practice remained a reality in the United States well after 1940.³⁰⁸

News of Emmett Till's lynching in 1955 shocked the nation. This visceral response to his death occurred, in part, because lynchings had become less frequent in the previous decade, but also because of his tender age, the relatively minor social transgression that led to his death, and the grisly disfigurement of his body captured in a photograph was published in *Jet* magazine. Condemnation of the lynching was widespread across the country, but racial violence was so fundamental to white identity in the region that whites in the Mississippi Delta defended and ultimately acquitted Till's lynchers. Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago, was spending the summer with relatives in Money, Mississippi, when he got into trouble for whistling at a white woman working behind the counter at a general store. Her husband, Roy Bryant, and her brother-in-law, J.W. Milam, wanted to teach this "uppity" northerner a lesson about his place in the Jim Crow South, so they took him out in the dead of the night to scare him with a severe beating. The fourteen-year-old's refusal to grovel and submit infuriated the two white Mississippians. Their tactics of intimidation and brute force didn't work on the stubborn teenager, and in anger and desperation, they put a bullet through his head and dumped his body into the Tallahatchie River.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ This tendency to erase lynching, and therefore the social meaning of these deaths, has crept into some of the scholarship on lynching, in particular the use of the term "murder" in place of "lynching." Although Fitzhugh Brundage is careful to acknowledge many of the post-World War II lynchings, he downgrades the lynching of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman in 1964 to "murder" and talks about "the disappearance of lynching by 1950" and "the passing of one of the most significant rituals of black degradation." Brundage argues that "small, secretive mobs" in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s operated like the "terrorist mobs" that preceded them, but he turns around and distinguishes Civil Rights Era racial violence from lynching because the public element of "mass mobs" had largely disappeared. Brundage does not explain why lynching by "terrorist mobs" and "private mobs" in the earlier period "count" but similar mobs in the Civil Rights Era don't "count." W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 252, 257–258.

³⁰⁹ William Bradford Huie, "Whole State Condone It: The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look*, 24 January 1956, 46–49.

Despite the scrutiny of the national and international media, the all-white jury that deliberated in the Sumner courthouse returned a verdict of not guilty. That a grand jury indicted two white men for murdering an African American teenager in the first place seemed to violate the unspoken racial code of the South. In fact, many local whites came to the defense of Bryant and Milam to register their opposition to “outsiders” interfering in local racial affairs, which echoed the states’ rights rhetoric used during the Civil War era and during campaigns to defeat federal anti-lynching legislation. The broad social support that Bryant and Milam enjoyed took a different form from the mass mobs that had cheered as African Americans were strung up in trees, mutilated, and burned in the preceding decades, but the explicit and implicit public approval of Till’s lynching had an eerie resemblance to the recent past when lynching was openly sanctioned. Only after Bryant and Milam’s tell-all interview appeared in *Look* a few months after the verdict did whites in the Delta ostracize the two men. Not only did the extreme physical violence of the Till lynching resemble the brutality of lynchings past, but the social meaning and collective support for this violence sadly fit that mold.³¹⁰

Nine years later, Klan members carried out a triple lynching, this time in Neshoba County, Mississippi. More often than not, scholars and journalists describe the deaths of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in the summer of 1964 as “murders.”³¹¹ They point to efforts to hide the bodies and conceal the identity of perpetrators as evidence that their deaths were categorically different from lynchings. However, just because the Klan took steps to avoid prosecution and to hamper the FBI investigation didn’t strip away the intended

³¹⁰ Huie, “Whole State Condone It,” *Look*, 24 January 1956.

³¹¹ Seth Cagin and Philip Dray’s meticulous reconstruction of the 1964 civil rights lynchings shy away from using the term “lynching,” preferring “conspiracy” or “killings” instead. Like Brundage, they argue that a lynching required a mob that didn’t have to worry about being convicted because they had public opinion and “the law” on their side. This definition strikes me as far too narrow given the motivations for the “conspiracy.” Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Nation Books, 2006), 284–285. Also see Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 457–463.

consequences of these lynchings or the physical harm done to the three civil rights activists. The Klan targeted these men for helping locals start a voter registration drive and set up Freedom Schools, and since the Klansmen intended for these lynchings to shut down the Mississippi Freedom Summer, these crimes were clearly racially motivated. The physical violence was indistinguishable from other lynchings. The two white New Yorkers, Schwerner and Goodman, died from single, close-range gunshot wounds, but when the FBI recovered Chaney's body from that earthen dam, the physical deterioration of his body was noticeably more advanced. After conducting an autopsy at the request of Chaney's mother, the New York pathologist David Spain determined that Chaney "had been beaten to a pulp." The bones in his jaw and right shoulder were so completely shattered that Spain described them as looking like Chaney had been in an airplane accident.³¹² This was not just an assassination. This was a lynching.

Since slavery, black bodies have been sites where white southerners demonstrate and perform their racial privilege, and this phenomenon continues in the present, in the age of mass incarceration, Stop and Frisk policies, and Stand Your Ground laws. Social anxieties about power and privilege are difficult to shake when they're so deeply tied to culture and identity, so when the institutions and traditions that ensconce that power and privilege come under fire, people take refuge in those rituals that affirm their place in society. As activists and politicians dismantled Jim Crow in the American South, many white southerners returned to lynching to cope with this incredible social upheaval. In 1894, lynching reinforced a robust system of white supremacy. Seventy years later in 1964, some white southerners invoked lynching in their attempts to cling to a system that was beginning to crumble and fall.

³¹² John Dittmer took Spain's report seriously as evidence that Chaney had been severely beaten by the Klan, but Cagin and Dray conclude that because the FBI witnesses never mentioned beating Chaney, those injuries must have been caused by the bulldozer. John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 58–59; Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 406–408.



Given the persistence of literal and figurative violence inspired by lynching, African American defiance of Jim Crow during the Civil Rights era is all the more remarkable. James Meredith certainly refused to be cowed by these death threats. In 1966, only four years after being hanged in effigy on the University of Mississippi campus, he decided to embark on a one-man March Against Fear. Meredith began walking from Memphis to Jackson to, as he put it, “challenge that all pervasive fear that is so much a part of the day to day life of the Negro and to encourage the Negro to register to vote.” He also wanted his courageous act to inspire young African Americans to dream of opportunities beyond the cotton fields of Mississippi and have the economic and social wherewithall to achieve those dreams.³¹³ As he walked down Highway 51 into northern Mississippi, he greeted his supporters who lined the highway, ordinary Mississippians who saw in Meredith an inspiring symbol of defiance.³¹⁴

Meredith made it through only one town. Just two miles south of Hernando, a white man from Tennessee, crouched in the wooded area alongside the highway, yelled, “James! James Meredith!” and fired three rounds of birdshot at him. The first shot hit his shoulder and knocked him to the ground. With a bloodstain spreading down his sleeve, he crawled to the other side of the highway, where he was hit with the second round in the back and the back of his neck. The

³¹³ Notes by James Meredith about the March Against Fear, undated, Box 97.25.14.3, Folder 4 ““Walk to Jackson, MS’ June 1966” James Howard Meredith Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

³¹⁴ Even the act of appearing in public to support Meredith was quite daring. Their town, Hernando, had been the site of at least six lynchings between 1889 and 1935, so the black residents were certainly aware of the dangers involved in refusing to “stay in their place.” The lynchings in Hernando include Robert Biggs on October 12, 1889; Henry Crower on October 6, 1897; Thomas Clayton on March 10, 1900; W.J. Jackson on October 15, 1908; Thomas Burns on November 3, 1914; Reverend T.A. Allen on April 5, 1935. Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynching* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1962), 263–265; “A Negro Fiend Lynched,” *Washington Post*, 13 October 1889; “ILD Lynch Report of 24 is Four Higher than Tuskegee,” *Chicago Defender*, 11 January 1936.

third shot missed Meredith entirely, and the gunman ran off into the woods pursued by state and county law enforcement. Meredith implored the members of the press snapping photographs, “Isn’t anyone going to get me to a doctor?” until a fellow marcher helped him.³¹⁵ While recuperating in a Memphis hospital, Meredith released a statement to the press in which he reflected on the shooting:

Just the night before I went into Mississippi, I made that faithful decision—the decision was to carry a Bible instead of a gun. “What did I think while the man was shooting me?” I was thinking that I had made a mistake not to carry a gun with me. “How did I feel?” I felt embarrassed. Embarrassed because I could have knocked this intended killer off with one shot had I been prepared, but I was not. My father, who lived in Mississippi for 74 years and died there, would have been prepared.³¹⁶

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Figure 6: During his 1966 March Against Fear, James Meredith was shot by a sniper, and journalists shot photos of him as he cried out in pain and crawled to safety. (AP)

³¹⁵ The photographers covering the march replicated, to some extent, the exploitative voyeurism of photographers who took and profited from lynching photographs. “Sniper Halts Meredith With Shotgun Blasts; Shelby Countian Held,” *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), 7 June 1966.

³¹⁶ “Statement on the Walk to Jackson, Mississippi,” James Meredith, 7 June 1966, Box 97.25.14.3, Folder 4 “Walk to Jackson, MS’ June 1966” James Howard Meredith Collection, University of Mississippi Library.

The non-violent approach of Martin Luther King, Jr. gave shape to much of the Civil Rights Movement, but armed self-defense was not only a common response to white supremacy but one that had deep roots in the black community, particularly in the rural South. For instance, during the early decades of the twentieth century, African Americans in the Arkansas Delta often resorted to armed self-defense to protect their families from their white neighbors.³¹⁷ When rumors swirled around that a race riot could explode in Memphis in the 1920s or 1930s, Henrene Jenkins's father instructed her brothers to guard their house with shotguns. He had to leave town for a few days because of his job as a railway mail clerk, but he informed his sons, "When I come back...I expect to see your dead bodies across the doorstep. Defend them [their mother and sisters]." ³¹⁸ In the early 1940s, a farmer in Shelby County, Tennessee named Clifford Wilson warned the white men who hired his teenage sons not to raise a hand against his children or he would kill them. When some white men tied his son to a tree and whipped him until he was unconscious, Wilson stormed over to the men toting a shotgun and demanded that they "turn my child loose...right now or I'll kill everybody out here."³¹⁹ So when James Meredith revealed that he felt embarrassed for not carrying a gun during his abruptly curtailed March Against Fear, he highlighted a long-standing belief about the importance of protecting not only his body but his dignity from white supremacists. And when he said that his father would have been prepared, he placed his protest in a tradition of defending oneself from harm with actual weapons.

³¹⁷ Oral History of Le Roy Boyd, 19 and 22 June 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South*, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University (hereafter *Behind the Veil*, Duke University); *Oral History of Tommy Wells*, 12 July 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

³¹⁸ Oral History of Ada Ateman, 20 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University. *Although the interview is filed under Ada Ateman's name only, her older sister, Henrene Jenkins, also participated in the interview.*

³¹⁹ Clifford Wilson and his wife, Elizabeth Wilson, were strict disciplinarians in their home, but they refused to allow whites to humiliate their children. According to their daughter, Earline McDowell, Clifford Wilson told the white men who employed his sons, "I'm their daddy. Ain't nobody going to discipline them but me and their momma. ... One thing I do not allow is no white folk whooping my children." The son who was whipped had refused to load some sacks of dry goods into a general store because the white man who owned the store did not intend to pay him for the work. Even as an elderly man, that son had thick scars across his back from that beating. Oral History of Earline McDowell, 30 June 1995, *Behind the Veil*, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University.

When news of the shooting broke, civil rights leaders from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) decided to continue Meredith's march, picking up where he had been shot. These groups had collaborated on various campaigns and projects over the years, but by 1966 the ideological fissures within the movement began to show. After the police in Greenwood, Mississippi arrested some protestors, including SNCC's Stokely Carmichael, the twenty-four year old activist announced, "This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested. I ain't going to jail no more. What we gonna start saying now is 'black power.'" Later that night, when Carmichael shouted out at the people gathered at the rally, "What do you want?" they responded with a thundering cry of, "Black Power!"³²⁰ As the call of "What do you want?" was answered with "Black Power!" again and again, these chants for black self-determination echoed out into the Mississippi night—in the birthplace and headquarters of the Citizens' Councils no less. White racists continued to draw upon lynching for inspiration when they perpetrated violent acts against civil rights activists and the black community more generally, but African Americans increasingly shed what Meredith called "that all pervasive fear" and stood up against these violent threats, even in the heart of Dixie.

³²⁰ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990*, 2nd ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 84.

Chapter 5: The Blues Sensibility

Serves me right to suffer, serves me right to be alone
 Serves me right to suffer, serves me right to be alone
 Because the life I'm living, I'm living in memories gone by.
 — John Lee Hooker, “Serves Me Right to Suffer”

Deep inside, I'm hurt, sad, and mad. But I stay silent. . . . What do I have to say and who's gonna listen to me? . . . my anger is a secret that stays away from the light of day because the square is bright with the smiles of white people passing by as they view the dead man on display. I feel disgust and disgrace and rage and every emotion that makes me cry without tears and scream without sound. I don't make a sound.³²¹

This image of a limp black body hanging in broad daylight was hardly unfamiliar to southerners during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Even so, the memories of this scene stayed with the twelve-year-old boy who bore witness to the black man's corpse hanging in the town square of Lexington, Mississippi in 1938. Nearly sixty years later, this experience remained a moment “of shock and pain that [couldn't] be erased from [his] memory.”³²² Witnessing that violence was one of many hardships he endured during his childhood, but with the support of his family, his faith, his community, and music, he made it through those tough times. By the mid-1940s he had grown tired of sharecropping, so he packed his guitar, left the Delta, and moved to Memphis, unaware that, in a matter of years, he would become the “King of the blues.” That boy who “screamed without sound” in the square that day was B.B. King.

That afternoon back in 1938 was not King's “baptism” in the “meaning and force of race,” to borrow a phrase from Leon Litwack.³²³ He had already heard about the horrors of

³²¹ B.B. King with David Ritz, *Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 51.

³²² *Ibid.*, 50.

³²³ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 8.

slavery from his maternal great grandmother, and he knew about the lynchings and cross burnings that happened all around him. Those stories combined with warnings from his parents imparted valuable lessons for navigating the capricious racial etiquette of the Jim Crow South. By the time he encountered firsthand the brutality of southern racial violence in Lexington's square, "his instinct [had him] staying away" from the crowd of whites in front of the courthouse, despite his burning curiosity to see what novel attraction stirred up such a commotion.³²⁴ His instincts, honed by previous humiliations and lessons in survival, proved to be correct since the smiling crowd was gathered around the dead body of a young black man with "his mouth and his eyes open, his face contorted."³²⁵

The image of the body elicited anger, pain, sadness, disgust, and rage in the young boy out delivering clean laundry for his stepmother, but he couldn't help but sneak a few looks at the man whose anguished final moments of life remained frozen on his face. The limp corpse hanging in broad daylight was meant to be a warning to people who look like him to stay in their "place," and King also knew all too well that, despite his natural impulse to scream and cry, he had to stay silent. Even the softest grumble or the slightest angry glance might be interpreted by the white folks smiling at their "trophy" as insolence, so he enveloped his grief and anger in silence and buried it away somewhere deep inside. For King to survive in the Jim Crow South, he had to repress these feelings and impulses to react, but the image of the dead man's contorted face remained seared into his memory.

As a child, King suffered from a terrible stutter, as did his maternal great grandfather and his uncle. Just expressing the simplest thoughts required intense concentration to remove those invisible barriers blocking him from getting past a letter or a syllable. King likened his stutter to

³²⁴ King, *Blues All Around Me*, 51.

³²⁵ Ibid.

an internal battle in which silenced injuries tried to burst free: “Sometimes I wondered about Pop’s [his great-grandfather’s] stuttering, which, like Uncle Major’s, frustrated him like crazy. I wondered if a speech impediment has something to do with boiled-up fury inside.”³²⁶ Pop, “a stutterer who talked with his shotgun and liked to ride his mule while swigging moonshine whiskey out of a jug,” had accumulated a significant backlog of anger and resentment after living through slavery and Jim Crow.³²⁷ King wryly recalled one afternoon when a white landowner demanded that Pop’s daughter return to work on his farm. Pop emerged from his cabin with his Winchester rifle, and after ordering this trespasser off of his property, he fired two warning shots at the enraged, bewildered white man.³²⁸ That feisty old man with his trusty gun struggled to contain his “boiled-up fury inside,” and the words trapped behind his stutter had come out through the barrel of a gun.

Unlike his rifle-toting great-grandfather, King coped with the traumatic memory of that lynching and other hardships through the blues. Music had long sustained his family and community through great adversity. His maternal great-grandmother had told him stories about enslaved people singing work songs, and from those stories he understood that “singing about your sadness unburdens your soul. But the blues hollerers shouted about more than being sad. They were also delivering messages in musical code. . . . The blues could warn you what was coming. I could see the blues was about survival.”³²⁹ Even before King was old enough to work in the cotton fields, he had heard “shouting in the fields” or “music meant to take the ache out of our backs and the burden off our brains.”³³⁰ After a hard day’s work, he would listen to the blues, jazz, and gospel on his aunt’s Victrola, and when his mother suddenly died when he was

³²⁶ Ibid., 37.

³²⁷ Ibid., 8.

³²⁸ Ibid., 36–37.

³²⁹ Ibid., 8–9.

³³⁰ Ibid., 22.

just ten, he spent hours listening to the blues to comfort him in his grief and loneliness:

“Something in the music kept pulling me in. The blues was bleeding the same blood as me. The blues didn’t have to explain the mystery of pain that I felt; it was there in the songs and voices of singers like Lonnie Johnson and Blind Lemon Jefferson, in the cries of their guitars.”³³¹

Eventually the blues became more than just a refuge for King but also an antidote to silence—a way to finally give expression to those painful memories and “unburden [his] soul” just as his enslaved ancestors and his relatives had while toiling in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta.³³² The solitary child who stuttered and who “scream[ed] without sound” let his soul speak through the sound of his voice and guitar, helping generations of listeners articulate and work through their own troubles.³³³ King learned to capture the essence of the blues without words, letting his beloved guitar, Lucille, do much of the singing:

By bending the strings, by trilling my hand—and I have big fat hands—I could achieve something that approximated a vocal vibrato. I could sustain a note. I wanted to connect my guitar to human emotions. By fooling with the feedback between my amplifier and instrument, I started experimenting with sounds that expressed my feelings, whether happy or sad, bouncy or bluesy. I was looking for ways to let my guitar sing.³³⁴

After hours upon hours of patient experimentation, King and Lucille could cry and scream, laugh and swoon, and convey the anger and disgust that he “[kept] away from the light of day” all those years earlier on a sunny summer afternoon in Lexington, Mississippi.³³⁵



³³¹ Ibid., 33.

³³² Ibid., 8.

³³³ Ibid., 51.

³³⁴ Ibid., 127.

³³⁵ Ibid., 51.

Although the blues music that B.B. King plays occupies but one corner of the African American cultural tradition, the sensibility of the blues permeates far more than this single musical genre. The folk tradition that produced tricksters who could slip the yoke and the spiritual tradition that provided a path to transcend the pain of this world both speak a dialect of the blues sensibility. The blues simultaneously articulate hope and sorrow without contradiction, and the blues possess an agility—a wink and a nod—necessary to not just survive but to land on one's feet with elegance and grace. And although the African American experience is far richer and nuanced than a litany of tragedies, this cultural tradition, hewed out of the African American experience, contains an uncanny ability to heal and process the tragedies and traumas of the past four hundred years of American history—historical traumas like lynching in the American South that persistently and rudely intrude upon the present.

In 1903 when Elijah Muhammad (Eliza Pool) was six years old, an African American man was lynched in his hometown of Cordele, Georgia. The lynching so traumatized the child that he started wetting the bed, and these embarrassing accidents continued until he was twelve. Just a few years later in 1912, another lynch mob in Cordele killed one of his closest friends, Albert Hamilton. Before hanging Hamilton from a tree in the black section of town, the mob beat him nearly unconscious. While still struggling for air as he dangled from the end of the rope, he was shot over three hundred times. Members of the black community were too terrified to dare cut down the body, so Hamilton's corpse remained until the coroner took it away. The image of his friend's lifeless body covered in bullet holes and hanging from that tree haunted Muhammad for the rest of his life. Many years later, as founder of the Nation of Islam, he paid

tribute to Hamilton by installing in every mosque an image of a tree with a black body hanging from one of its branches.³³⁶

Yet another lynching was the catalyst for Elijah Muhammad's decision to leave the South when he was in his twenties. Not only did he worry about the safety of his family, but had he remained in Georgia where African Americans were denied justice, he worried that his rage against white people would grow even deeper and more corrosive. He feared that such a stifling environment, where African Americans couldn't freely protest this pervasive mistreatment, might lead him to kill or be killed.³³⁷

Muhammad understood that feeling of powerlessness all too well. What likely caused him to wet the bed as a child was wrapped up in being denied the proper avenues for processing that 1903 lynching, which must have been even more bewildering for such a young and impressionable mind. When Hamilton was lynched, a member of the mob snapped a photograph of the body and sold prints of it in and around Cordele. Mourning the violent death of his friend was painful enough, but in such a repressive society, Muhammad also had to bottle up his disgust with this perverse exploitation of his friend's lynching. For African Americans like Muhammad, the trauma produced by lynching itself was compounded by a social order that refused to punish lynchers and for over half a century made it nearly impossible to fully and openly process those traumatic memories.

Most of the literature on trauma theory comes out of Holocaust Studies and uses Freud as a model for understanding how individual survivors and societies "work through" traumas. According to Freud, survivors needed to narrate or represent their traumatic memories in order to make sense of an often fragmented, painful, and seemingly incomprehensible event. In this same

³³⁶ Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 23–24, 38–41, 227.

³³⁷ *Ib id.*, 48–51.

vein, Dominick LaCapra, who has written extensively on trauma theory, has argued that “writing trauma” involves “processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic ‘experiences.’”³³⁸ Survivors need to find ways to articulate their traumatic memories, but these memories also needed an audience. The psychoanalyst Dori Laub, whose work includes recording and preserving Holocaust survivor testimonies, has pointed out that, in addition to “giving voice” to traumatic memories, survivors need others to bear witness to those memories. A Holocaust survivor himself, Laub argues that survivors struggle to fulfill their compulsion to tell their stories, and that “[memories] become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life...so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.” Witnesses help make those memories “real” again, so public witnessing of testimony allows survivors to “reclaim” and “repossess” their experiences.³³⁹

Although some aspects of the Holocaust map onto the historical trauma of lynching, the white response to lynching in the United States was a far cry from the vigorous responses of the post-war West German state and civic organizations to prosecute perpetrators, memorialize victims, and pay reparations to survivors. West German citizens tended not to pass on stories about their role in the Holocaust to the post-war generation, especially among family members, but because of the visibility of the Holocaust in the public sphere, even the younger generation was relatively fluent in the discourse of Holocaust memory and claims for justice. In the American South, the social consensus among whites tended towards silencing and suppressing a public discourse on lynching or, among the more unrepentant, glorifying and celebrating

³³⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 186.

³³⁹ Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle” in *Trauma: Explorations in History*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 64, 70.

lynching. The threat of economic and physical reprisals remained real for African American southerners who dared to openly “give voice” to the trauma of lynching, to borrow LaCapra’s language, so instead, they often repressed those memories (like Muhammad) or resorted to more indirect forms of expression (like King).

The American context demands a homegrown metaphor for “working through” trauma—one that resonates with the cultural sensibilities of a people who lived through American slavery and Jim Crow—and that metaphor, I contend, is the blues. Ralph Ellison described the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”³⁴⁰ The blues, as Ellison pointed out, leaves open the possibility of personal transcendence over adversity by “fingering its jagged grain”—as he said—to “squeeze” from that pain something beautiful to ease a troubled mind.

What Ellison called “transcendence” the blues musician Mississippi Fred McDowell described in more tentative terms as keeping the blues “off my mind.” In a track from his record *I Do Not Play No Rock and Roll*, McDowell explained how the blues worked. As he lightly glided his fingers over the guitar strings, he mused, “the more you play, the bluer you get, until you get to it. ... When I got satisfied I put [the guitar] down... You see, [the blues] was off my mind. But it’s a worrisome thing, man.”³⁴¹ Like Ellison, McDowell recognized that returning to a painful memory, though unpleasant, was necessary for “getting satisfied,” but playing the blues did not provide a neat resolution for McDowell. The blues were *off* his mind but not *out of* his

³⁴⁰ Ralph Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Calhoun (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 129.

³⁴¹ Mississippi Fred McDowell, “Everybody’s Down on Me,” recorded ca. November 1969, on *I Do Not Play No Rock ‘N’ Roll*, Capitol Records CDP7243, 1995, compact disc.

mind. Another writer, Ellison's good friend Albert Murray, agreed with McDowell that the blues were much more difficult to shake:

[The blues] do not appear and disappear. They are there because they have already come, and they linger somewhat as if clinging with tentacles, and they go, mostly when driven. But never soon enough. Nor do they ever seem to go far enough away even so. Once they have been there they only shift from the foreground to the background, and maybe you forget about them for the time being, but only for the time being.³⁴²

Unlike Freud who considered psychological recovery to be the resolution for trauma, the blues sensibility assumes that "life is a low-down dirty shame," but with a touch of irony and cleverness to confront troubles, people can temporarily keep the blues at bay.

"Working through," according to the blues sensibility, meant revisiting painful memories until the feeling of despair dissipated enough that a person felt "satisfied," but those memories and that pain never fully vanished from consciousness. "Satisfaction" lacked the permanence of catharsis and the exuberance of something like euphoria. The blues could convey love and joy but most blues musicians took a far too ironic posture and were generally too skeptical of earnestness to embrace sentimentality. Take, for instance, the cautiously optimistic chorus to the blues standard, "Trouble in Mind":

Trouble in mind, I'm blue
But I won't be blue always
'Cause the sun is going to shine in my backdoor someday.

These three lines encapsulated what Ellison meant when he described the attraction of the blues as "at once express[ing] both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit."³⁴³ The verses—"the agony"—sandwiched between the hoped for sunshine of the chorus—"the possibility"—tempered the optimism of the song, though even tragic verses occasionally had a sense of humor. In a version of "Trouble in Mind" that Sister Rosetta Tharpe

³⁴² Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (1976; reprint, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000), 3.

³⁴³ Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," 143.

recorded live in an abandoned train station, the desperation and rawness of the verses came through:

Trouble in mind, I'm blue,
I almost lost my mind,
So when you see me laughing and laughing, laughing just to keep from crying.

I'm gonna lay, lay my head
On some lonesome railroad line [spoken: Must I do it?]
Let the 2:19 train pacify my mind.³⁴⁴

The only thing holding her back from letting the 2:19 train pacify her mind was the possibility of better days ahead, but looking forward didn't magically erase the pain of the past or the present. Being "satisfied" meant living with these troubles, or perhaps living despite these troubles.

With lyrics like "I was sitting by my window when I saw my man walk by / he was with another woman and I felt like I wanted to cry," blues music might seem easy to reduce to sad songs that wallow in self-pity and passivity, but blues musicians considered their music to be a form of confrontation, albeit an indirect confrontation at times.³⁴⁵ The blues piano player Memphis Slim said that the blues were "kind of a revenge." As an African American man living in the South, he often felt restricted in what he could say or do to white people when he was frustrated, angry, or insulted, so when he couldn't say something, he would sing it, as he put it, "you know signifying like."³⁴⁶ His friend, the bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, told a story about a man who, rather than confront his boss, yelled at his mule:

I've known guys that wanted to cuss out the boss and he was afraid to go up to his face and tell him what he wanted to tell him, and I've heard them sing those things—sing words, you know—back to the boss, just behind the wagon, hooking up the horses or something or another—or the mules or something. And then

³⁴⁴ "Sister Rosetta Tharpe – Trouble in Mind," YouTube video, 3:51, from a performance in Manchester, England in 1964, posted by "cerinto," 8 September 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3PNc_cWv9M.

³⁴⁵ Big Mama Thornton, "Goodbye Baby," *The Complete Vanguard Recordings*, Vanguard, 175/77-2, 2000, compact disc.

³⁴⁶ Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim, and Sonny Boy Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, recorded 2 March 1947, Rounder Records 82161-1860-2, 2003, compact disc.

he'd go to work and go to singin' and say things to the horse, you know, horse—make like the mule stepped on his foot—say, 'Get off my foot goddam it!' or something like that, you know, and he meant he was talkin' to the boss. 'You son of a bitch, you.' Say, 'You got no business on my...stay off my foot!' and such things as that—that's the point.³⁴⁷

Like the man berating his mule rather than his boss, Big Bill Broonzy also aired his grievances, whether cheating women or Jim Crow, but through his music. In "Black, Brown, and White,"³⁴⁸ he sang about his personal experiences with racial discrimination:

Me and a man was workin' side by side,
This what it meant:
They was paying him a dollar an hour,
They was paying me fifty cent.

Chorus:
They said, if you was white, you're alright,
If you was brown, stick around,
But as you's black, oh brother,
Get back, get back, get back.

I helped build this country,
And I fought for it too.
Now I guess you can see
What a black man have to do.

[Chorus]

Broonzy's unambiguous critiques of Jim Crow and the hypocrisy of racial discrimination against American citizens were somewhat unusual for their directness and overt political message.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Broonzy, Slim, and Williamson, *Blues in the Mississippi Night*.

³⁴⁸ Big Bill Broonzy, "Black, Brown, and White," recorded 14 November 1956, on *Trouble in Mind*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW CD 40131, compact disc.

³⁴⁹ Most of Broonzy's music fit more typical blues subjects like loneliness and betrayal, but he also wrote a song "When Will I Get to be Called a Man" about being called a boy all his life that opens with these lines: "When I was born into this world, this is what happened to me / I was never called a man and now I'm fifty-three / I wonder when, I wonder when, I wonder when will I get to be called a man / Do I have to wait till I get ninety-three." Big Bill Broonzy, "When Will I Get to be Called a Man," recorded 1957, on *Trouble in Mind*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW CD 40131, compact disc.

Most blues songs cloaked these complaints and laments in metaphor or humor, like another Broonzy song that took up a less controversial subject, “Diggin’ My Potatoes.”³⁵⁰

Chorus:
 They been diggin’ my potatoes.
 Lord, they tramlin’ on my vine.
 Now I’ve got a special plan now, baby,
 Lord, that a-restin’ on my mind.

Now I don’t want no cabbage sprouts.
 Bring me a solid head.
 Supposed to call the wagon
 Now if I catch them in my bed.

[Chorus]

Now my vines is all green,
 Taters they all red.
 Never found a bruised one,
 Till I caught them in my bed.

[Chorus]

Now I’ve been all around,
 Lookin’ up and down,
 Never found my baby
 ‘Cause she was layin’ in another town.

[Chorus]

In the most literal interpretation of the lyrics, this is a song about stolen vegetables and a farmer’s plan for catching the thieves, but Broonzy is actually talking about infidelity—happening in his own bed no less. Although a “bed” can be a patch of land for planting potatoes and cabbage, Broonzy slyly uses double entendre to indicate that what has been stolen isn’t produce but his “baby” and what has been trampled isn’t a vine but his manhood. Freud’s decidedly direct and earnest model of psychological recovery left no room for the intentionally

³⁵⁰ Big Bill Broonzy, “Digging My Potatoes,” recorded 1957, on *Trouble in Mind*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW CD 40131, compact disc.

slippery nature of signifyin(g) or the irony of Broonzy's blues in which making light of betrayal through double entendre and humor softened the blow of heartbreak.

The blues emerged out of an African American cultural tradition that frequently combined tragedy with humor and hope. Spirituals, for instance, often used coded language to help enslaved people survive. The spiritual, "Steal Away," cleverly disguised a more incendiary message with words that white slaveholders might assume to be a pious affirmation of Christian faith:

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away home
I ain't got long to stay here.

Within the more literal religious framework, the lyrics suggest that the singer is talking about dying and going to heaven to be with Jesus, but those same lyrics could be interpreted to announce somebody's intention to run away to the Promised Land of the North. Big Bill Broonzy's double meaning for the word "bed" had roots in a folk culture that played on ambiguity to conceal subversive messages. Whereas Broonzy used signifying as a salve for the pain of heartbreak, his ancestors had used coded language to avoid being caught running away to freedom.

The scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois believed the spirituals, which he called "the Sorrow Songs," were the most beautiful cultural expression of human experience the United States had to offer the world. He celebrated these "weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" because they told "of death and suffering and unvoiced longing towards a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways."³⁵¹ Written by enslaved Americans who bore unimaginable suffering in their everyday lives, the spirituals carried a

³⁵¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (1903; reprint, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997), 185, 187.

message of hope that a more just world might come to pass. Du Bois captured the force and beauty of the spirituals with these poignant words:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.³⁵²

Like the spirituals and work songs that preceded them, the blues were also concerned with getting through hard times and still left room for hope. Even before B.B. King was old enough to work in the cotton fields of Mississippi, he heard his family singing work songs “meant to take the ache out of our backs and the burden off our brains.”³⁵³ Just as singing about backbreaking work helped a long day in the fields go more quickly, singing the blues and listening to the blues helped the pain of loneliness and grief, heartbreak, and despair fade, at least for a time.



Ghosts, real and metaphorical, haunt these pages, and like the ghosts that make appearances in earlier chapters, this last ghost pays us a visit to illuminate the possibilities for taking control over memories that haunt us. The bluesman Lightnin’ Hopkins grew up in the East Texas town of Centerville in the 1910s and 1920s when lynchings happened every couple years in the area. He fit the prototype of the bluesman. He drank, gambled, and womanized. He got into fights, avoided working in the fields, and spent some time on a chain gang or two. By 1964 when he recorded “Black Ghost Blues” for his *Soul Blues* album, he had accumulated a fair

³⁵² Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 192.

³⁵³ King, *Blues All Around Me*, 22.

number of personal demons, but like any good blues singer, he sang the blues to rid himself of the blues.³⁵⁴ This song was no different.

Black ghost, black ghost
Please stay away from my door
Black ghost, black ghost
Will you please stay away from my door
Yeah, you know you worry poor Lightnin' so now
I just can't sleep no more.

Yeah you know I go to dreaming' first night
Black ghost is all poor Lightnin' can see
I go to dreaming first night
Black ghost is all poor Lightnin' can see
You know that's why I begin to wonder
Why you keeps on worrying me?

Black ghost is a picture
And that black ghost is a shadow too
Whoa a black ghost is a picture
And a black ghost is a shadow too
You just can see him but you can't hear him talk
Ain't nothing else that a black ghost can do.³⁵⁵

The progression from one verse to the next is revealing. In the first verse, the unseen ghost lurks just outside Hopkins's door, haunting him as he tries to fall asleep. By the second verse, the ghost has crept into his dreams, edging dangerously closer and closer to engulfing his soul. Hopkins engages with the ghost—confronts the ghost—asking it questions, imploring it to leave him alone, and in the final lines of the third verse, he comes to realize that the ghost, while appearing both in the material world (a picture) and the ethereal world (a shadow), can't harm him.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Alan Govenar, *Lightnin' Hopkins: His Life and Blues* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 1–19.

³⁵⁵ Lightnin' Hopkins, "Black Ghost Blues," recorded 4 and 5 May 1964, on *Soul Blues*, Prestige LP 7377, 33⅓ rpm.

³⁵⁶ An alternative reading from the ghost's perspective reveals something different. The ghost, though menacing, is unable to speak. That this is a black ghost and not a white ghost may reflect Hopkins' sense that whites see blacks as threatening, but blacks are ultimately powerless, though "black" may not necessarily be a racial reference.

“Black Ghost Blues” illustrates quite transparently how the blues works in three stages, and by laying bare the architecture of the blues sensibility, Hopkins unwittingly makes the case for the blues as a metaphor for processing traumatic memories. When I say that the blues sensibility may be an instructive *metaphor* for collective healing, I am not suggesting that sitting around and listening to Mississippi Fred McDowell or Big Mama Thornton play the blues will make decades of resentment, anger, injustice, fear, sorrow, guilt, and a willful silencing of the past melt away. However, in the spirit of the blues, many African Americans revisited the horrors of lynching among themselves through family lore, folk stories, and blues music itself, and shielded by the ironic bent of the blues, they found ways to transcend the past, even if just for a spell.



Farmer and NAACP activist Hosie Miller died from bullet wounds on March 25, 1965 in Newton, Georgia. His neighbor Cal Hall, his wife’s white uncle no less, had murdered him over a dispute regarding a few head of cattle.³⁵⁷ Shirley, his oldest daughter, was just seventeen years old and was finishing up high school when he was murdered. She had been planning to go to college up north to escape the farm, the South, and Jim Crow permanently, but the night her father died, she decided, “my answer to what happened to my father was to say that I would devote my life to working for change.”³⁵⁸ A few years earlier in 1961, local activists, including the Millers, had organized the Albany Movement with the help of SNCC workers like Charles

³⁵⁷ As I mentioned in chapter 3, the infamous sheriff of Baker County, Georgia, Claude Screws, lynched an African American mechanic named Robert Hall in 1943. Sherrod’s mother, Margaret Grace Miller (nee Hall), was related to Robert Hall (black) and to Cal Hall (white), who murdered her husband, Hosie Miller.

³⁵⁸ Oral History of Shirley Sherrod, 30 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

Sherrod to register African American voters, desegregate businesses and public facilities, and end employment discrimination. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC had come in and brought national attention to the local protests, but having made little headway after a few months, the SCLC soon left.³⁵⁹ Local activists continued to agitate for change, but Miller's death in 1965 reignited the local civil rights movement. Miller's oldest daughter channeled her grief into this reborn struggle for change, which is how she met her future husband Charles Sherrod, and from the age of seventeen onward, Shirley Sherrod made racial and economic justice her life's work.³⁶⁰

Just a few months after Hosie Miller's murder, several white men burned a cross on the front lawn of the Miller family home in Newton. His widow, Margaret Grace Miller, turned off every light in the house and stepped out onto the front porch with a gun. The mother of six told them to leave and fired a few warning shots to show that she meant business. Meanwhile, one of her daughters called the sheriff and some of their African American neighbors to defend the home, and once the white men knew they were surrounded, they left. Even though Margaret Miller could name several of the men who burned the cross in her yard, the sheriff never pressed

³⁵⁹ The SCLC and many of the scholars who study the King or the SCLC have chalked up the Albany Campaign as an early defeat in the Civil Rights Movement. Although the Albany Movement faltered in the short term, this interpretation places too much emphasis on King rather than the local activists who did not have the luxury of leaving. Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 85–109; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 524–561.

³⁶⁰ In July 2010, the arch-conservative blogger, Andrew Brietbart released a short sound bite taken out of context from a speech Shirley Sherrod gave at an NAACP function in Georgia earlier that spring. Brietbart edited the video to make Sherrod appear as though she discriminated against white farmers in her job with the Department of Agriculture, and without carefully considering the full context of her statements, the Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, forced her to resign. Sherrod told the story about initially being less sympathetic to a white farmer losing his farm to make a broader point about how she grew to see the importance of economic justice for people of all races. That sound bite has overshadowed both this broader point and her lifelong commitment to bring about positive change. The NAACP released a video of the speech, which can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9NcCa_KjXk. Note that Sherrod opens her speech by talking about how this history of violence against members of her family prompted her to become actively involved in social justice issues. Karen Tumulty and Ed O'Keefe, "Fired USDA Official Receives Apologies from White House, Vilsack," *Washington Post*, 22 July 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/21/AR2010072103871.html>.

charges. The Millers were hardly surprised. After all, two grand juries had failed to indict Cal Hall for Hosie Miller's murder, even with the testimony of three witnesses.³⁶¹ Local African Americans had shown that they weren't afraid to defend themselves against white violence, and Shirley Sherrod (nee Miller) believed this standoff marked a turning point in Baker County during which "white people maybe finally saw that black people were sticking together."³⁶²

Inspired by her father's tragic murder, Shirley Sherrod decided to confront racial violence head on. She didn't mask her feelings with metaphor or double meanings. She didn't call upon ghosts to stand in for her own critique of racial violence. Nevertheless, Sherrod's direct challenge to racism and racial violence still placed her squarely within the mold of the blues sensibility.³⁶³ Blues musicians often disarmed their listeners with humor, metaphor, or a catchy rhythm, but not always. Big Bill Broonzy wrote songs like "When Will I Get to be Called a Man" in addition to playing tunes like "Hey, Hey, Baby." Lightnin' Hopkins sang about the injustice of racial discrimination in "Black Cat Blues" but could also wryly recommend the merits of drinking whiskey and smiling to keep from worrying and crying in "Ain't Nothing Like Whiskey."³⁶⁴ The flexibility of the blues sensibility could capture a range of responses to lynching, from silence and violence to haunting and protest.

³⁶¹ Oral History of Shirley Sherrod, 30 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University; Margaret Burnham, "Sherrod's Father Still Needs Justice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 4 August 2010.

³⁶² Oral History of Shirley Sherrod, 30 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

³⁶³ When I speak of overt or direct critiques, I don't mean to suggest that being direct should be conflated with being humorless. When Mary Grace Miller, Sherrod's mother, became the first black elected official in Baker County, for instance, the Superintendent was explaining to an older white man on the School Board who she was. As Sherrod told it, "the Superintendent was trying to tell him she was Joe Hall's daughter. And he said, 'Yeah, the nigger Joe Hall.' How did he put it? 'Best nigger I ever known.' ...so Mother said everybody else, you could see they were sort of cringing a little and she said, 'That's okay. He's old.' And she said, 'I can kind of understand because he's old, but there are times when I might slip up and say "cracker."'" Oral History of Shirley Sherrod, 30 June 1994, *Behind the Veil*, Duke University.

³⁶⁴ Big Bill Broonzy, "When Will I Get to be Called a Man" and "Hey, Hey, Baby," recorded 1957, on *Trouble in Mind*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW CD 40131, compact disc; Lightnin' Hopkins, "Black Cat Blues," recorded 16 November 1960, on *Lightnin' in New York*, Candid LP 8019, 33⅓ rpm; Lightnin' Hopkins, "Ain't Nothing Like Whiskey," recorded 6 or 7 July 1960, on *Down South Summit Meetin'*, World Pacific LP 1296, 33⅓ rpm.



That blues tradition of confrontation that Big Bill Broonzy and Lightnin' Hopkins riffed on through their music continues today, though more often than not, this kind of expression is more out in the open. Along the stretch of Georgia Highway 122 between Barney and Hahira in Brooks County, just past the bridge at the Little River, you can see an official historical marker from the Georgia Historical Society. Unlike the faded, weather-beaten marker at the county courthouse in Quitman, this marker looks shiny and new. Most of the historical markers that dot the countryside of Georgia celebrate the incorporation of a county or the bravery of Confederate soldiers; this new marker reads “Mary Turner and the Lynching Rampage of 1918.” During the seven-day “rampage” in which at least thirteen African Americans were lynched, one of the mobs composed of local whites hanged Mary Turner from her ankles and burned the pregnant woman alive before a man cut the baby out of her swollen belly and crushed the baby’s skull under the heel of his boot. The mob then riddled her body with bullets and buried her and her baby in a shallow grave. According to the papers, she suffered and died because she had made “unwise remarks” the day before when her husband, Hayes Turner, had been lynched.

Ninety-two years after the lynching in May 2010, the dedication of the marker drew a crowd too, this time mostly black. The descendants of the Turners joined members of a community organization called the Mary Turner Project and the local branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to dedicate the marker just a few yards from the place Mary Turner and her baby had been killed. They gathered to publically mourn the suffering of lynching victims and to remember the racial violence that plagued their county. They vowed to

combat racial injustice in the present and to pass these stories on to their children and grandchildren. However, some residents of Brooks County resented these efforts to remember and mourn, and about one and a half years later, somebody shot the sign. Vandals returned in 2013 to further desecrate the memorial with five more bullet holes. The bullet holes provided an unmistakable reminder that the history of lynching and the battle over its memory are far from confined to the past.



Figure 7: Locals noticed the first bullet hole in the historical marker for Mary Turner and the Lynching Rampage of 1918 just a year and a half after the sign was dedicated in May 2010. (author's photo)

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