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RESISTING LYNCHING: BLACK GRASSROOTS RESPONSES TO LYNCHING IN  
THE MISSISSIPPI AND ARKANSAS DELTAS, 1882–1938

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

“Resisting Lynching: Black Grassroots Responses to Lynching in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1882–1938” explores the social and cultural history of the black experience of lynching. It highlights the pervasiveness of lynch mob violence, the failure of local, state, and federal governments to prevent lynching and how these factors combined to shape the development of black grassroots protest in the Delta region. Given this background, this dissertation traces how Delta blacks responded to the crisis of white lynch mob violence in a variety of contexts. Specifically, it examines the rise and decline of black lynch mobs, black violent confrontations with white mobs as well as lynching’s impact on black popular culture and historical memory. My main contention is that these disparate but related responses represent a grassroots tradition of black resistance to white lynch mob violence.

This dissertation counters histories of lynching that have tended to view black lynch victims and black communities as primarily passive victims of white mob violence. It moves beyond histories of black anti-lynching protest that have primarily focused on prominent black spokespersons and national organizations that lobbied for state and federal anti-lynching legislation. In contrast, it demonstrates that Delta blacks routinely organized resistance to lynching through social networks and vigorously contested white rationales for mob violence. In highlighting black grassroots resistance, I argue that histories of lynching are not necessarily stories of black victimization and disempowerment. Rather, the history of lynching provides a fertile ground upon which to understand

black self activity and the social and political dynamics that produce it. Within this context, “Resisting Lynching” aims to contribute to a new and emerging trend within lynching scholarship that seeks to “rehumanize” black lynch victims by situating the black response as the focal point of lynching narratives.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **A Brief History of Lynching in America**

#### *The Scope of Lynching*

Mark Twain, the prolific writer and observer of American life and culture, once sarcastically noted that America had become the “United States of Lyncherdom.”<sup>1</sup> Between 1882 and 1930, approximately 4,760 men, women, and children fell prey to lynch mobs. No individual or group was entirely safe from lynching. White Americans, Mexicans, Chinese, Italians, and other racial-ethnic groups were all victims of lynching.<sup>2</sup>

Lynchings were extralegal murders carried out by a group of vigilantes and functioned to summarily execute individuals often accused of heinous crimes. While lynching served to punish particular criminals and crimes, it also functioned as a form of mass communication in which the objective was to enforce social conformity with respect to racial hierarchy, social status, and gender norms. Lynching constituted state- and community-sanctioned violence for which federal, state, and local governments and courts rarely prosecuted the individuals involved and even those prosecutions seldom resulted in fines or prison sentences. Lynch mobs murdered with impunity because extralegal violence fit within popular conceptions of social control.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 52; W. F. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 134–135.

<sup>3</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 2–8.

Lynching in the United States has a long and tragic history. Lynch mobs expeditiously executed alleged criminals and perceived social deviants during the colonial period through the Civil Rights era. While present throughout all periods of US history, lynching occurred sporadically prior to the American Civil War. In post-Civil War America, lynching increased dramatically, so that by the end of the nineteenth century, it had engulfed virtually every region in the nation.

Lynching was indeed a national crime, but it was also a Southern hysteria that targeted African Americans, who represented approximately seventy percent of all lynch victims. Lynching was so commonplace in the US South that ten Southern states lynched more individuals than all other states and regions combined. During the peak of Southern lynching (1882–1930), approximately 2,800 Southerners perished as a result of lynch mobs, accounting for nearly sixty percent of all lynching victims in the United States. Moreover, Southern lynching stretched far beyond punishing particular individuals for heinous crimes and became a systematic and constitutive component within Jim Crow segregation—an expansive system of racial subordination and oppression. Between 1882 and 1930, African Americans constituted ninety-four percent of lynch victims.

Lynching came to symbolize black oppression within the system of US race relations. Regardless of region, lynch mobs desired to swiftly and brutally punish individuals who violated seemingly sacred community norms and provided a mechanism by which communities could collectively participate in apprehending

and punishing criminals. In this way, lynching was as much a form of community building as it was extralegal violence.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Geography of Lynching*

Lynching was concentrated within particular sub-regions and social groups. Generally speaking, in the South, lynching functioned as an instrument for racial control and terror; however, depending upon the Southern sub-region in which lynching occurred, African Americans perished “at the hands of persons unknown” at varying rates and for differing reasons. Southern lynching was concentrated and occurred most frequently within Black Belt counties, a contiguous cross section of several Deep South states (Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia) with dense black populations, cotton monocultures, and plantation economies.

The Southern agricultural elite employed lynching to exploit and manipulate black sharecroppers and tenant farmers, whereas lynching outside of Black Belt counties was generally targeted at African Americans who ostensibly violated the labyrinth of racial taboos within the Jim Crow etiquette. For instance, lynching in Louisiana and Georgia was most prevalent in their respective cotton-producing regions. Louisiana’s cotton-producing regions accounted for sixty percent of lynching incidents in the state between the years 1878 and 1946.<sup>5</sup> Between the years 1880 and 1930, 458 lynching incidents occurred in Georgia of which eighty-four percent were concentrated in Georgia’s Cotton Belt region.

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<sup>4</sup> Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 269.

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 15.

White planters did not always resort to mob violence to punish unruly black workers, particularly when racial demographics did not work in their favor. Within Louisiana's black-dominated Mississippi river Delta parishes, white elites employed state-sanctioned executions because they believed African American's numerical superiority made the outcome of lynching unpredictable. State-sanctioned executions took the form of quasi-legal trials where African-Americans were unable to offer testimony and were at the mercy of all-white jury pools that often were unconcerned with the rules of a fair trial. Extralegal executions could lead to widespread quitting, work stoppages, or even retaliatory violence. White planters believed sham trials with legal executions or imprisonment were the most effective means to control black labor. In plantation regions, where large numbers of blacks and whites labored as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, plantation elites less frequently employed lynching as a means to intimidate and control black laborers for fear of retaliation by blacks and the perceived threat of poor whites and blacks uniting against the wealthy plantation owners.<sup>6</sup>

Lynching in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states was virtually non-existent and accounted for less than ten percent of total US lynching incidents. The relatively small number of lynching incidents in the Northeast can be mostly attributed to a civic culture that respected the rule of law. Although lynching was relatively scarce in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, such lynchings as did occur could eerily resemble those in the South. For instance, in 1911, Zachariah Walker, a black steel worker, was burned alive in Coatesville, Pennsylvania for

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<sup>6</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 16–22.

murdering a white man. It is estimated that five thousand men and women witnessed the spectacle and in the lynching's aftermath, several onlookers mutilated Walker's body including his fingers and bones. Between 1882 and 1930, only forty-one individuals were lynched in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic States. The vast majority of persons lynched, though, including Walker, were African Americans, who accounted for roughly eighty-seven percent of lynch victims in both regions. Of the forty-one lynch victims, thirty lynchings occurred within Maryland, while the state with the next highest total (Pennsylvania) had only six total lynchings.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the Northeast, Midwestern and Western lynching activity was much more prevalent and evenly distributed throughout the region. For instance, between the years 1882 and 1930, 588 lynchings occurred within the Midwest for which Oklahoma (160 lynchings), Missouri (116 lynchings), Nebraska (sixty lynchings), Indiana (fifty-two lynchings), and Kansas (fifty-two lynchings) had the highest number of lynching incidents. In addition, Western lynch mobs killed 415 individuals and at least seven out of ten Western states had in excess of thirty mob murders during the height of the lynching epidemic.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Southern lynch mobs, Midwestern and Western lynch mobs primarily lynched whites, who constituted roughly sixty-seven percent of lynching in the Midwest and ninety-three percent in the Western United States. Lynching was never entirely utilized for the purpose of controlling a particular ethnic or racial group but rather to punish individual acts of social deviance such as horse theft,

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<sup>7</sup> Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 134-135.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

counterfeiting, murder, and rape. In addition, Midwestern and Western lynching was more concentrated in rural areas. For instance, lynching occurred more frequently in rural Southern Iowa than the urban centers of Northern Iowa because of the lack of influence of capitalist culture and the relative weakness of legal institutions.<sup>9</sup>

### *Typology of Lynch Mobs*

A lynching was a cultural performance that legitimated the values of mob participants and translated its cultural significance through social rituals or patterned practices designed to broadcast their message.<sup>10</sup> However, the form and content of lynching varied significantly and impacted its overall meaning. The key differences between lynch mobs were their organization, planning, longevity, and the extent to which they engaged in ceremonialism or lynching rituals. Private mobs, terrorist mobs, posses, and mass mobs represent the four persistent patterns of mob behavior.<sup>11</sup>

Private and terrorist mobs were composed of fifty or fewer individuals and were most prevalent in Western and Midwestern lynchings. Private mobs murdered seventy-five percent of lynch victims in California, sixty-three percent of lynch victims in Iowa, sixty-one percent of lynch victims in Washington State, and forty-four percent of lynch victims in Wyoming.<sup>12</sup> In the US South, private mobs claimed the lives of less than half of all lynch victims. For instance, in Georgia, private mobs accounted for thirty percent of lynch victims and forty-six

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<sup>9</sup> Pheifer, *Rough Justice*, 25–26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Pheifer, *Rough Justice*, 42.

percent of lynch victims in Virginia. In addition, private mobs were organized several days or even weeks after an alleged crime occurred. They usually comprised individuals who had become disillusioned with the legal system and the broader community's failure to lynch an alleged criminal and consequently used their anger and disappointment as impetus for their organization. Private mobs were usually composed of friends and family members of the victim and their participation was motivated by their desire to exact revenge due to their sense of collective loss. Since private mobs generally did not seek community support, the lynching was carefully premeditated, secretive, and less preoccupied with the ritualism associated with other lynchings. Despite private mobs' penchant for premeditation and secrecy, their vengeance killings were usually discovered; however, very few private mobs were ever prosecuted or received jail sentences.

Similar to private mobs, terrorist mobs operated clandestinely and rarely gained community support for lynching. Extensive or broad-based community support guaranteed personal anonymity for mob participants and immunity from criminal prosecution. When private and terrorist mobs believed community support was negligible, they wore masks in order to conceal their identities. Unlike private mobs, terrorist mobs did not disband after an accomplished lynching. Rather, their modus operandi was to use lynching as a means of achieving a broader social agenda. Terrorist mobs impact upon lynching was fairly minimal. In the US South, terrorist mobs were responsible for fifty-nine of

460 lynchings in Georgia and only three of eighty-six lynchings in Virginia between the years 1880 and 1930.<sup>13</sup>

Posses and mass mobs usually received the broadest community support. Unlike private mobs and terrorist mobs, posses had quasi-legal status and operated with near impunity. In most communities, posses were respected and viewed as heroes because they were central to apprehending and punishing dangerous criminals. Often, they had the support of local elected officials including the sheriff and mayor as well as community leaders. Mass mobs occurred most frequently during the 1880s and 1890s and consisted of hundreds or even thousands of participants and spectators. White men dominated leadership positions within mass mobs, while women and children often occupied supporting roles, such as cheering and gathering rope used in the lynching. Despite their sheer size, mass mobs often displayed sophisticated organization, planning, and ritualism. During the zenith of mass mob activity in the American South, it was routine for mob leaders to advertise an impending lynching so as to guarantee a “festival of violence.”

Furthermore, mob leaders orchestrated these large gatherings with the intention of demonstrating lynching’s cultural significance, as well as the community’s collective support. Mass mobs encompassed thirty-four percent of lynchings in Georgia and forty percent of lynchings in Virginia. Southern mass mobs were usually reserved for African Americans who were accused of the rape or murder of white men, women, and children. These lynchings placed a premium upon performing racial domination, humiliation, and eliciting

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<sup>13</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 19–28.



excruciating pain. Typical ritual aspects of Southern mass mobs included taking the lynch victim to the scene of the crime, forcing them to confess or pray for forgiveness, mutilating their body parts, and burning the lynch victim's corpse. Individuals who evaded or resisted capture were often pursued by mobs. The families of accused individuals were also subjected to threats and violence as mobs pursued the accused.<sup>14</sup>

### *Lynching and Identity*

If lynchings were indeed cultural performances that legitimated the values of mob participants, sexuality, race, class, and gender identity were cornerstones of those cultural performances. Lynch mobs were organized and carried out by men who believed lynching was an honorable masculine duty that demonstrated their mastery over inferior men and by extension the home, the workplace, and community institutions. Lynching as a ritual of masculine domination and authority was at its root a critique of the legal system and its inability to effectively dramatize or perform collective notions of crime, punishment, and justice. In the Midwest, West, and South, proponents of lynching espoused a "rough justice" ethos which embraced and valorized extralegal vigilantism and violence. Rough justice advocates favored lynching because the legal system seemed remote, abstract, and ineffective in punishing criminal behavior. Its adherents tended to emanate from rural working class communities in the West, Midwest, and South and, in many cases, working class social ties facilitated lynchings.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 33–37.

<sup>15</sup> Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 3.

While Midwestern, Western, and Southern lynch mobs were informed by a working class “rough justice” ethos, racial, gender, and sexual cultural scripts more heavily influenced Southern lynch mobs. Southern lynchings were often gendered performances that crossed racial lines. With respect to black Southerners, the ritual of lynching served as a dramatization of unequal racial and gender power relationships.<sup>16</sup> Through lynching, white lynch mobs asserted and enforced white masculine dominance. It confirmed for white men their right to emasculate black men by demonstrating their impotence as public citizens. Black women were also targets as white men employed sexual violence against black women as a means to demonstrate black men’s inability to protect black women and their combined racial and masculine authority over black men as patriarchs. Lynching’s ability to efficiently communicate racial and gender subordination constituted “lynching’s double message.”<sup>17</sup>

Racial and gender mythologies structured rationalizations for lynching black men and sexual violence against black women. In the Southern racist imagination, black women were viewed as naturally sexually promiscuous and therefore sexual relationships between white men and black women were always consensual. Moreover, lynching apologists persistently trumpeted black men as lustful and sex-crazed rapists who only desired to rape virginal white women. The black male rapist syndrome represented an “emotional logic of lynching” which meant that only swift and sure violence, unhampered by legalities, could protect white women from sexual assault.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, “The Mind that Burns in Each Body: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” *Southern Exposure* 12 (1984): 61–71.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Historiography of Lynching and Anti-Lynching Protest

Historians began to study lynching in earnest during the 1980s. However, several important studies appeared before it garnered academic interest. In general, earlier studies sought to protest lynching. Their approach primarily entailed using statistics and first-person accounts as a means to highlight the injustice of lynching. For example, the Chicago Tribune's records provided the evidentiary basis for anti-lynching activists such as Ida B. Wells Barnett's *A Red Record* (1894) and James E. Cutler's *Lynch Law* (1905). While the immediate purposes behind *A Red Record* and *Lynch Law* were distinct, both authors sought to examine theories for explaining lynching and used available data to dispel lynching myths.<sup>19</sup>

Arthur Raper's *Tragedy of Lynching* (1933) was the product of several years of research and writing on behalf of the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching (SCIC). The SCIC's intent was to understand the causes of lynching and, more importantly, how could lynching be eliminated as a social problem. By and large, Raper's study of the causes of lynching revolved around mob behavior and the elements that promoted mob behavior. The study sought to demonstrate that the primary justification for lynching was murder rather than rape. In addition to empirically demonstrate that more lynch victims were accused of murder than rape, it aimed to demonstrate the brutality of lynching. Using the Tuskegee archival materials and the *Negro Yearbooks*, Raper compiled the best statistical information to date. His statistical tables on lynching

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<sup>19</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings* (New York: Humanity Books, 2002); James E. Culter, *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (New York: Longman, 1905).

included data such as the name of the lynch victim, accusation, date, location, and those involved in the events.<sup>20</sup>

James Chadbourn's *Lynching and the Law* (1933) is another study published under the auspices of the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching. Chadbourn's intent was to elucidate the ways in which the law made lynching possible and conversely how the law could be used as a tool to eliminate lynching if the appropriate measures were taken. In particular, his intent was to demonstrate or elucidate the relationship between law enforcement, the court system, and the legislature and the outbreak of lynching throughout the United States. In order to effectively make his case, Chadbourn created a brief but detailed questionnaire, which he sent to one thousand judges, lawyers, and legislators. Of the one thousand sent questionnaires, 223 responses were received.<sup>21</sup>

Lynching scholarship waned during the 1940s and 1950s. This trend continued until the early 1960s and mid-1970s when influential studies from the 1930s were republished. Ralph Ginzburg's *One Hundred Years of Lynching* (1962) was perhaps the most noteworthy new book published during this period. Ginzburg attempted to provide "unfiltered" evidence of white racial hatred and discrimination. He sought to achieve this goal through two distinct means. In the first part of *One Hundred Years of Lynching*, he compiled approximately 280 lynching newspaper articles spanning the years 1880 to 1961. He does not provide any analysis of the newspaper articles but lets the articles speak for

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur Raper, *Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

<sup>21</sup> James Chadbourn, *Lynching and the Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

themselves. The purpose behind this method was to provide readers with an “unfiltered” way of approaching and understanding lynching. Also, Ginzburg provided a detailed roster of five thousand lynching events that included the lynch victims’ name, location, and date of each respective lynching.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas previous lynching studies were chiefly concerned with protesting lynching, during the 1980s lynching scholarship sought to reconstruct the history of lynch mob violence. These histories provided detailed narrative accounts of infamous lynchings which typically described the lynch victim’s alleged crime, the composition and organization of the lynch mob, the series of events that led to the capture of the lynch victim, the actual lynching, and the white community’s reaction to the lynching. In light of historians’ detailed narratives of mob motivations and violence, their histories of lynching typically neglected black resistance.<sup>23</sup> For the most part, these historians seemingly assumed that blacks responded passively to lynching. For instance, Howard Smead’s *Blood Justice* chronicled the 1959 Charles Mack Parker lynching in Pearl River County, Mississippi. In response to the lynching, Smead argues that “fearing further violence, blacks tried outwardly to continue their daily routines as though nothing

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Ginzburg, *One Hundred Years of Lynching* (New York: Lancer Books, 1962).

<sup>23</sup> See Sundiata Cha-Jua, “A Warlike Demonstration’: Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894–1898,” *Journal of Urban History* 26 (2000). In “A Warlike Demonstration,” Cha-Jua demonstrates that lynching historiography failed to explore the African American response to lynching. Examples of historians who neglect to explore the African American lynch victim and the African American community response are the following: Robert P. Ingalls, “Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa, 1858–1935,” *Journal of Southern History* 53 (1987), 626; John D. Wright Jr. “Lexington’s Suppression of the 1920 Will Lockett Lynch Mob,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 84 (1986): 263–79; Walter T. Howard, “Vigilante Justice and National Reaction: The 1937 Tallahassee Double Lynching,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 67 (1988): 64–81; Jack E. Davis, “Whitewash” in Florida: The Lynching of Jesse Payne and Its Aftermath,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 68 (1990): 277–98; Eric W. Rise, “Race, Rape, Radicalism: The Case of the Martinsville Seven, 1949–1951,” *Journal of Southern History* 58 (1992): 461–490; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “The Varn Mill Riot of 1891: Lynchings, Attempted Lynchings, and Justice in Ware County, Georgia,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78 (1994): 257–80; Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado, 1858–1919* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1995).

had happened, hoping that nothing more would happen.”<sup>24</sup> In Dennis B. Downey and Raymond Hyser’s article entitled “A Crooked Death,” they assert that African Americans in Coatsville, Pennsylvania did not protest the 1911 Zachariah Walker lynching because he was considered an outsider. Moreover, they assert black migrants in Coatsville did not protest the lynching because it was “not their quarrel and silence was prudent.”<sup>25</sup> Lastly, Patrick Huber’s “Caught Up in a Violent Whirlwind of Lynching,” examines the 1885 quadruple lynching in Chatham County, North Carolina. Huber asserts that African Americans were likely “passive onlookers” and did not publicly protest the quadruple lynching.<sup>26</sup>

Some historians interpreted the apparent absence of black resistance as strategic. For example, James McGovern’s *Anatomy of a Lynching* analyzes the 1934 Claude Neal lynching in Greenwood, Florida. McGovern argues that “most blacks responded fearfully [to the lynching] by staying within prescribed social boundaries.”<sup>27</sup> He also asserts that “lynch mobs would probably have been less inclined to aggress against blacks capable of retaliation.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, Walter T. Howard’s *Lynching* analyzes the origins and decline of lynching in Florida.

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 77.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis B. Downey and Raymond M. Hyser, “A Crooked Death: Coatsville, Pennsylvania and the Lynching of Zachariah Walker,” *Pennsylvania History* 54 (1987), 96.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick J. Huber, “Caught Up in a Violent Whirlwind of Lynching: The 1885 Quadruple Lynching in Chatham County, North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 75 (1998), 158–160. Another example of this perspective is Juanita W. Crudele, “A Lynching Bee: Butler County Style,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 59–71. Other examples of this interpretation are James M. Sorelle, “The Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 86 (1983), 530. Joel Williamson’s “Wounds Not Scars: Lynchings, the National Conscience, and the American Historian,” *Journal of American History* 83 (1997), 1228. For sociologists who make similar arguments, see Charlotte Wolf, “Constructions of a Lynching,” *Sociological Inquiry* 62 (1992), 94–95; Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, “Vicarious Violence: Spatial Effects of Southern Lynchings, 1890-1919,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (1996): 788–815.

<sup>27</sup> James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 6–11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Howard argues that in the immediate aftermath of a lynching, rural African Americans behaved in a deferential and subservient manner towards whites. According to Howard, “they [African Americans] relied on this time-tested technique of manipulation, acting out the role of being genial and ingratiating to whites in order to protect themselves and their families.”<sup>29</sup>

During the 1980s when historians of lynching explored resistance, they typically sidestepped questions regarding how black lynch victims and local black communities’ resisted lynching. Rather, their studies primarily explored the histories of formal anti-lynching campaigns conducted by the NAACP.<sup>30</sup> However, by the mid-1990s, historians increasingly challenged the assumption that black grassroots resistance to Jim Crow was nonexistent. This new wave of scholarship has been primarily influenced by James C. Scott’s theory of infrapolitics. According to Scott, oppressed groups rarely organize rebellions against their oppressors. Rather, oppressed groups typically defy their oppressors through daily acts of covert resistance, such as foot dragging, feigning ignorance, arson, sabotage, and flight.<sup>31</sup> In applying Scott’s ideas to the black resistance to Jim Crow, new histories of the period have reinterpreted black behavior once considered “passive” as veiled defiance.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in an

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<sup>29</sup> Walter T. Howard, *Lynchings: Extralegal Violence in Florida in the 1930s* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> See Donald L. Grant, *The Anti-Lynching Movement, 1883–1932* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1975); Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 29 and 33. See also, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>32</sup> See, Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Greta De Jong, *A Different Day: African American Freedom Struggles in Rural*

article entitled, “The Roar on the Other Side of Silence,” W. F. Brundage, a proponent of Scott’s theory, asserted that symbolic gestures of defiance, double-voiced discursive insubordination, theft, flight, and arson were the primary modes of African American resistance to racial violence (with an emphasis on lynching) because these forms of resistance shielded black identities and therefore were less likely to provoke white retaliation.<sup>33</sup>

Besides tracing clandestine resistance, a few historians have demonstrated how black armed resistance prevented specific lynchings. Most notably, in Sundiata Cha-Jua’s essay entitled “A Warlike Demonstration,” he documents how armed blacks in Decatur, Illinois occupied the city’s central business district in order to prevent the lynching of a black male accused of raping a white woman. Decatur blacks utilized armed self-defense because the previous year a black male had been removed from the Decatur jail and lynched in the public square with little or no interference from local authorities. In contrast to W. F. Brundage and other proponents of infrapolitics, Cha-Jua argued that personal self-defense and collective violent self-help were the primary responses by African American communities to racial violence.<sup>34</sup>

The most recent literature on black resistance to lynching has focused on significant anti-lynching activists. Within this new emphasis, Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s life and anti-lynching work has figured most prominently.<sup>35</sup> In addition to

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*Louisiana, 1900–1970*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> W. F. Brundage, “The Roar on the Other Side of Violence,” in *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. F. Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 273 and 285.

<sup>34</sup> Sundiata Cha-Jua, “‘A Warlike Demonstration’: Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894–1898,” *Journal of Urban History* 26 (2000).

<sup>35</sup> See Ida B. Wells and Alfreda M. Duster, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Miram Decosta-Willis, *The Memphis Diary of Ida B.*



scholarship on Wells, literary historians have charted how black and white writers protested racist representations that perpetuated lynching.<sup>36</sup>

Despite these new insights, the nature of black resistance to lynching remains unclear. First, while historians generally agree that black resistance to lynching occurred, it is unclear whether it was primarily characterized by organized protest, infrapolitics, or armed resistance. Second, it is unclear how black communities articulated responses to specific lynchings and the racist discourses that justified lynching and racial violence. In part, these questions remain unclear because few historians have attempted a comprehensive local study or regional analysis of black resistance to lynching during the peak lynching era from 1880 to 1930.<sup>37</sup>

### **Grassroots Anti-Lynching Protest in the Delta**

My dissertation explores the above issues through examining black resistance to lynching in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas between 1882 and

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*Wells*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writing: The Anti-lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900* (New York: St. Martins, 1996); Patricia A. Schechter, “Unsettled Business: Ida B. Wells against Lynching, or, How Anti-lynching Got Its Gender,” in *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Linda O. McCurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells and American Reform, 1880 and 1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ida B. Wells, *Collected Works of Ida B. Wells* (Charleston, SC: Bibliolife, 2008); James West Davidson, *They Say, Ida B. Wells and the Reconstruction of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Paula J. Gidding, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Harper, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984); Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching*; Anne P. Rice and Michelle Wallace, eds., *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> However, several historians have recently analyzed black resistance in a regional, state, or county context. For examples, see Nan Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

1938. In particular, it is organized around three sets of questions. First, how and why did black lynch victims and local black communities in the Delta region typically respond to actual or threatened lynchings? To what extent did blacks employ armed resistance and violent reprisals as responses to white lynch mob violence? How did black lynch victims and local black communities in the Delta organize resistance to lynching? Was black resistance to lynching primarily individualistic and sporadic or was black resistance organized and facilitated through black social networks? Second, how did Delta blacks make sense of and articulate responses to the daily reality of lynching? Was there a black grassroots discourse that protested lynching? What were the central themes of that discourse? Third, what has been the legacy of lynching for blacks who lived during the era of lynching? In particular, what do blacks remember about the history of lynching? What do black memories of lynching reveal about the social and political functions of memory construction?

I chose to pursue my research agenda in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta region because it signifies virulent white racism and oppression as well as black victimization. For instance, in *American Congo*, Nan Woodruff referred to the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas as “some of the meanest corners in the heart of darkness” and James Cobb asserted that the Mississippi Delta was “the most southern place on earth.”<sup>38</sup> The Delta region has inspired these negative connotations perhaps more than any other region in the US South, most probably because there whites relied on terrorist violence to suppress black self-activity.

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<sup>38</sup> Nan Woodruff, *American Congo*; James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

For instance, two of the most brutal repressions of black organized labor in US history occurred during the Leflore County Massacre (1889) and the Elaine, Arkansas Massacre (1919). With regard to the Elaine Massacre, historians estimate that as many as 856 blacks were killed during the week-long pogrom.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, in selecting the Delta region, I was intrigued by the idea of documenting black resistance to lynching in “the most southern place on earth” where we might otherwise assume very little resistance occurred.

In addition, the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta region is an attractive research venue because the numerous lynchings in the region provide ample opportunities to gauge black resistance. Between the years 1882 and 1930, in Mississippi and Arkansas alone, there was a total of 624 black lynch victims. Of these, approximately 256 blacks were lynched in the Delta, accounting for approximately forty-one percent of African American victims in Mississippi and Arkansas during this period. Considered within the context of the South as a whole, Mississippi and Arkansas accounted for twenty-seven percent (624 of 2314) of all lynching incidents between 1882 and 1930.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast to the bulk of previous literature on black resistance to lynching, my approach will emphasize overt resistance, which I define as opposition that is visible, readily recognized by both whites and blacks as resistance, and furthermore is intended as resistance.<sup>41</sup> This project privileges overt resistance to lynching because historians have often underestimated it.

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<sup>39</sup> Woodruff, *American Congo*, 22 and 74–109.

<sup>40</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of lynching during this period see Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *Festival of Violence*.

<sup>41</sup> Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner, “Conceptualizing Resistance,” *Sociological Forum* 19 (2004), 545.

Historians have primarily assumed blacks covertly resisted lynching and white oppression because they lacked the capacity to mount organized struggles and feared white retribution. My analysis contradicts this conventional wisdom by documenting numerous violent clashes between whites and blacks in response to threatened and realized lynching.

My central argument is that there was a rich and varied tradition of black grassroots resistance to white mob violence in the Delta region. I will illustrate this argument in four ways. First, I will explore the rise and decline of black lynch mobs in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas. Between 1880 and 1930, approximately 144 blacks were executed by black and integrated lynch mobs in the South. Over one-third of all integrated and black lynch mob incidents occurred in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas. The rise and decline of black lynch mobs is relevant to black resistance to lynching because it provides a critical backdrop against which to understand the racialization of lynching in the 1890s and black responses to that process. Second, I will explore black resistance to threatened and accomplished lynchings. I demonstrate that Delta blacks typically relied on social networks to escape lynching and when flight was not possible, they violently confronted white lynch mobs. In the aftermath of lynching, they often retaliated against whites who participated in lynchings.

Third, I examine how various black artists explored the meaning and significance of grassroots responses to lynching through an analysis of literature, political cartoons, and Delta blues music. In examining black cultural responses, my goal is to highlight the importance of grassroots resistance in anti-lynching

discourse. Lastly, I will investigate Delta blacks' historical memory of lynching through examining approximately thirty oral history interviews conducted by the *Behind the Veil Project* at Duke University in the mid-1990s. Overall, the *Behind the Veil* interviews aimed to document black life during Jim Crow segregation. While lynching is not the exclusive topic within these interviews, most black interviewees recalled witnessing or hearing about lynching. Similar to black cultural responses to lynching, black historical memory provides a window into the black grassroots discourse on lynching.

In general, my dissertation contributes to theoretical debates regarding everyday resistance. Scholars have long pondered the circumstances under which oppressed groups resist elite domination. James C. Scott's influential study of Southeast Asian peasants argued that oppressed groups typically eschew overt acts of resistance and instead employ covert acts of resistance because clandestine resistance rarely invites retaliation.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, my research suggests that oppressed groups do not always choose the path of least resistance. For instance, Delta blacks' overt resistance to lynching (such as armed resistance) occurred because blacks desired to prevent lynching. Given the failure of the state to protect alleged black criminals, blacks adopted overt resistance tactics that would preserve the lives of lynch victims. In most cases, black lynch victims fled in anticipation of lynching or relied on family members to help them escape. However, in some cases, flight was not a feasible option and blacks had to simply fight back. Therefore, black resistance to lynching suggests that overt resistance is conditioned by how oppressed groups understand the

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<sup>42</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 1987.

utility of overt versus covert resistance rather than a simple calculation of possible risks and rewards that different resistance strategies entail.

In particular, this dissertation contributes to an emerging trend within lynching scholarship that seeks to situate black lynch victims, the black community, and the black response to lynching as the focal point of lynching studies. Most recently, Christopher Waldrep's *African Americans Confront Lynching* (2009) surveys African American resistance to lynching between the end of the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement. Waldrep highlights the variety of rhetorical and legal strategies black anti-lynching activists employed to undermine popular justifications for lynching. While Waldrep's study is not exhaustive, his book represents the first serious effort to synthesize scholarship on black resistance to lynching.<sup>43</sup> Several recent dissertations focus their analysis on black resistance. Most notably, Michele Kuhl's "Modern Martyrs: African American Responses to Lynching, 1880–1940" (2006) reconstructs black religious anti-lynching discourses. In "Modern Martyrs," Kuhl argues that African Americans used rhetoric and imagery of martyrdom in an effort to transform black lynch victims from suspected criminals into symbols of a larger struggle for racial justice. According to Kuhl, blacks' use of religious rhetoric and imagery were important because white Southerners validated lynching through religious language and metaphors in order to perpetuate the idea that lynching was an acceptable response to black criminality.<sup>44</sup> In addition, a recent article entitled

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<sup>43</sup> Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Michele Kuhl, "Modern Martyrs: African American Responses to Lynching, 1880–1940," (PhD diss., State University of New York, Binghamton, 2006); See also, Latonya T. Leonard, "Veneer of Civilization: Southern Lynching, Memory, and African American Identity, 1882–1940," (PhD diss., University of Mississippi, 2005).

“Personalizing Lynch Victims: A New Database to Support the Study of Mob Violence” (2008) provides a methodology for reconstructing the identities of lynch victims through census records and other supplementary information. According to the authors of the study, this new approach to “personalizing lynch victims” will allow scholars to more closely identify the combination of lynch victims’ personal characteristics and local conditions that gave rise to lynching.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, I situate my dissertation alongside recent scholarship that de-centers the lynch mob and the lynching spectacle as the primary avenues of analysis. By doing so, it emphasizes the identity of lynch victims and privileges the history of black agency and resistance rather than rituals of mob violence and black victimization.

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<sup>45</sup> Amy K. Bailey and Stewart Tolnay, “Personalizing Lynch Victims: A New Database to Support the Study of Mob Violence,” *Historical Methods* 41 (2008): 47–64.

## CHAPTER 2

### REDEMPTION IN THE DELTA

In a 1894 speech entitled “Lessons of the Hour,” Frederick Douglass, the nation’s foremost black spokesman, passionately argued that the emergence of disenfranchisement legislation and lynching were the most pressing problems facing blacks since the abolition of slavery. Douglass blamed these developments upon the federal government’s declining commitment to safeguarding Reconstruction-era amendments and Southern whites’ invention of the black rapist, which effectively demonized all black males and stripped them of all public sympathy.

In the speech, Douglass angrily denounced blacks’ erstwhile Republican allies and the federal government’s waning commitment to black political rights when he noted that “the proposition to disenfranchise the colored voter of the South in order to solve the race problem I hereby denounce as a mean and cowardly proposition, utterly unworthy of an honest, truthful and grateful nation.”<sup>46</sup> “When the moral sense of a nation begins to decline and the wheel of progress to roll backward, there is no telling how low the one will fall or where the other may stop. The downward tendency already manifest has swept away some of the most important safeguards. The Supreme Court has surrendered. State sovereignty is restored. It has destroyed the civil rights Bill, and converted the Republican Party into a party of money rather than a party of morals, a party of things rather than a party of humanity and justice.”<sup>47</sup> In conclusion, Douglass

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<sup>46</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Lessons of the Hour,” 1894, 22–23, Stone/60:26, Alfred Stone Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–24.



eloquently described the fundamental transformations and reversals that had ushered in disenfranchisement when he exclaimed, “Rebel rule is now nearly complete in many States and it is gradually capturing the nation’s Congress. The cause lost in the war, is the cause regained in peace, and the cause gained in war, is the cause lost in peace.”<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, Douglass perceived the demise of the federal government’s commitment to the policies of Reconstruction as inextricably linked with Southern whites’ invention of the black rapist and the concomitant rise of lynching. According to Douglass, “this new charge [the rape of white women by black men] has come at the call of new conditions, and nothing could have been hit upon better calculated to accomplish its purpose. It clouds the character of the negro with a crime the most revolting, and is fitted to drive from him all sympathy and all fair play and all mercy.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Douglass asserted, “I do not believe it because it bears on its face, the marks of being a makeshift for a malignant purpose. I reject it not only because it was sprung upon the country simultaneously with well-known efforts now being industriously made to degrade the negro by legislative enactments, and by repealing all laws for the protection of the ballot, and by drawing the color line in all other public places in the South; but because I see in it a means of paving the way for our entire disenfranchisement.”<sup>50</sup>

Douglass’ 1894 speech accurately characterized the rise and fall of Reconstruction and adeptly perceived the interrelationship between

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Reconstruction's demise and impending disenfranchisement legislation in the South, as well as the rise of white-on-black lynching in the early 1890s. While Douglass astutely observed that the end of Reconstruction and decline in federal interventionism had created the context in which disenfranchisement and lynching emerged in the South, the plantation economy was also a critical context for understanding the dynamics of white lynch mob violence within the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas as well as throughout the South.

The postbellum plantation economy gradually emerged after the Civil War. However, by the dawn of Jim Crow in the early twentieth century, at least eighty percent of black Southerners were either sharecroppers or tenant farmers. Sharecropping was premised upon landowners providing land, supplies, housing, and a small cash advance in exchange for a sharecropper's labor. Sharecroppers and landowners generally agreed to split the proceeds of cotton sales evenly minus the cash advance. In many cases, though, plantation owners denied black sharecroppers their portion of cotton profits by inflating the amount of money originally borrowed prior to the cotton harvest. The recurring cycle of inflated debt bogged down efforts of black sharecroppers to purchase their own farm and gain economic independence.<sup>51</sup> If black laborers contested sharecropping's exploitative economic arrangements, oftentimes white plantation owners violently retaliated and in some cases black laborers murdered them in self-defense. In many cases, black defiance precipitated white lynch mob violence.

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<sup>51</sup> Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), Introduction.

This chapter will chart the end of Reconstruction and the rise of disenfranchisement in Mississippi and Arkansas and explain how these developments influenced the emergence of lynching. In addition, it will describe how black-white relations within the plantation economy influenced the dynamics of lynching in the Delta region. My main contention will be that Southern Redemption and disenfranchisement coupled with the exploitative and violent black-white relations within the sharecropping system laid the groundwork for the rise of white-on-black lynching in the Delta.

## **From Southern Redemption to Disenfranchisement and Lynching**

### *The Mississippi Example*

Under military supervision and the Reconstruction Act of 1867, Mississippi blacks helped draft and ratify the state's 1868 constitution. With Republicans in control of the state's Reconstruction legislature, the state adopted the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, which brought Mississippi back into the Union.<sup>52</sup> When Mississippi reentered the Union in 1870, the state constitution specified that all male inhabitants were guaranteed the right to vote and prohibited in state measures that would limit voting rights. With the passage of federal election laws in 1870 and 1871 and a state Supreme Court case in 1873 which reaffirmed voting rights for all male citizens, it appeared in the early years of Reconstruction that both state and federal governments were committed to safeguarding black voting rights.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

In 1873, Republicans controlled state legislatures in only Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. In other Southern states such as Tennessee, Georgia, and Virginia, Democrats had already regained control of state legislatures. Moreover, in Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas, Republicans presided over divided legislatures which appeared to be trending toward Democrats.<sup>54</sup>

Mississippi whites ruthlessly used violence and intimidation in order to supplant Reconstruction governments throughout the state. Mississippi's violent Redemption came to a head in 1874 when widespread racial violence erupted in Vicksburg, Mississippi. During the summer, Vicksburg whites organized paramilitary groups commonly referred to as People's or White Man's Parties. In August during city elections, groups of armed whites patrolled the streets and succeeded in intimidating enough black voters to oust the city's Republican officeholders. In December, amidst Democratic victories in Northern states, armed whites demanded the resignation of Vicksburg's black sheriff Peter Crosby and his board of supervisors. Rather than submit to intimidation, Crosby fled the city and returned with a group of armed blacks. In response, armed whites forced Crosby's group to flee. In the days following the skirmish, whites retaliated by murdering more than three hundred blacks across the Delta countryside. Only after hundreds of blacks had been murdered did President Grant send a military company to Vicksburg to reinstall Crosby as Vicksburg's sheriff.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 539.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

Despite white backlash in Vicksburg and other locales during the 1874 election, Republicans held on to power in Mississippi. Nonetheless, Mississippi whites perceived the 1874 election as a national repudiation of Reconstruction's professed goals to establish and protect black civil rights.<sup>56</sup>

Interestingly, in preparation for the 1876 election, Mississippi's Democratic convention platform supported blacks' civil and political rights. However, white Democrats' lip-service to black equality belied their intentions to violently oust black and white Republicans from office. For instance, in 1875, Mississippi whites devised a "Mississippi Plan" which amounted to a carefully orchestrated campaign of violence and terrorism against Republican supporters. White Mississippians established Democratic rifle clubs which openly brandished their weapons within Republican strongholds and disrupted Republican meetings, as well as assaulted local Republican leaders. Whereas previous groups of armed whites concealed their identities with masks, during the "Mississippi Plan" campaign, whites were undisguised because they no longer feared the threat of federal intervention.<sup>57</sup> While the "Mississippi Plan" primarily rested on terrorism, it also included a fraudulent election law which placed the power to register voters in white control and depleted black proportional representation by creating a "Shoe String" district that weaved through the heavily populated Mississippi Delta counties whereas the remaining congressional districts were predominantly white.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 559.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 39.

Political terrorism was particularly acute in the Delta counties. In September 1875, a white military company in Yazoo County violently disrupted a Republican rally, forced the Republican-supported sheriff to flee for his life, and murdered several of the county's most influential blacks. In October 1875, former Mississippi Governor James Alcorn led a group of armed whites in an attack on a Republican meeting in Coahoma County, which resulted in the death of two whites and six blacks.<sup>59</sup>

As the violence escalated during September, Mississippi Governor Aldebert Ames requested President Grant to send federal troops to the state to quell the violence. Grant received the governors' letter while on vacation at his summer home in New Jersey and famously responded "the whole public are tired out with these annual autumn outbreaks in the South... [and] are ready now to condemn any interference on the part of the Government."<sup>60</sup>

Grant's refusal to send troops to Mississippi in 1875 dealt a crushing blow to Mississippi Republicans and consequently hastened the demise of Reconstruction in the state. For instance, on Election Day, armed whites marauded through black enclaves threatening to murder them if they attempted to vote. In instances in which blacks courageously voted, whites simply destroyed ballot boxes or replaced Republican votes with their Democratic ones.<sup>61</sup>

As a result, the 1875 election return constituted a political revolution. The Mississippi campaign succeeded in mobilizing thousands of disaffected whites

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 560.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 561.

who had not voted during Congressional Reconstruction. Moreover, in areas that had been carried by Republicans during previous elections, they now were decidedly in the Democratic column. For example, Governor Ames carried Yazoo County by 1,800 votes in 1873; however, in 1875, Democrats tallied 4,044 votes to only six Republican votes. This pattern repeated in other Delta counties. In sum, the election resulted in Democrats gaining five of the state's six Congressional seats and a four to one majority in the state legislature.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the "Mississippi Plan" campaign succeeded in redeeming the state from Republican control and effectively brought an end to Reconstruction. After Reconstruction's demise, racial violence against Republicans continued as white Democrats sought to consolidate their power. In Mississippi Delta counties, white Democrats ousted Republican officeholders by requiring them to post new bonds and if they failed to do so, the Mississippi governor had the power to replace them. If these legal measures failed, white Mississippians resorted to assassinations.<sup>63</sup>

Overall, the end of Reconstruction in Mississippi occurred due in large part to widespread political violence and election fraud. While these factors were critical in Reconstruction's demise, the federal government's fading commitment to securing black civil and political rights all but assured Reconstruction's failure. For instance, after President Ulysses S. Grant's successful reelection bid in 1872, he reluctantly used presidential powers such as dispatching federal troops to Southern locales to supervise elections or quell racial terrorism.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 562.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 590–1.

<sup>64</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, 528.

By the early 1870s, the Supreme Court had retreated from defining federal power in a way that could help safeguard black civil and political rights in the South.<sup>65</sup> For instance, in the landmark case *US v. Cruikshank* (1875), the Supreme Court overturned several convictions that sprang from prosecutions of rioters in the 1873 Colfax Massacre. Initially, the prosecution won convictions by demonstrating that white rioters had violated the 1870 Enforcement Act by conspiring to deprive Colfax blacks of their civil rights. However, the Supreme Court reversed the previous convictions because it argued that the prosecution failed to identify the rioters' motivation. More importantly, the Court argued that the federal government could only prohibit violations of black civil rights. Enforcing black civil rights, according to the Court, rested in the hands of the states. Thus, by arguing that federal intervention to protect black civil rights was unconstitutional, the Supreme Court facilitated the diminution of black civil rights particularly throughout the South where local authorities lacked the political power or will to enforce the law.<sup>66</sup> The following year, the Court further eroded civil rights protections when it declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional.

By 1876, the federal government had seemingly retreated from the idea that a powerful federal government would protect the fundamental rights of black Americans.<sup>67</sup> To make matters worse, the Republican Party, which heretofore had been an ally to Southern blacks, increasingly shunned them and instead reorganized their party platform around economic issues.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 582.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 586.



Following the end of Reconstruction, black voter turnout declined more in Mississippi than in any other Southern state. In the 1880 presidential election, more than sixty-six percent of registered black voters did not cast a vote. Of the blacks who did cast a vote, the overwhelming majority voted for the Democratic ticket. In subsequent state and national elections this pattern repeated itself until Mississippi adopted a new state constitution in 1890.<sup>69</sup>

Ironically, class tensions between whites rather than racial antipathy toward blacks initially precipitated calls for a new state constitution. However, in the end, white Mississippians came to agree that disenfranchisement was the paramount issue in creating a new constitution. State and national trends provided the impetus for white Mississippians' change of heart. In 1888 (for the first time since 1875), the Republican Party won control of the presidency and both houses of congress. Following the 1888 election, President Benjamin Harrison requested new measures to protect black voting rights. On the heels of these developments, in 1889, the state's Republican Party fielded a roster of candidates to challenge Democratic rule in Mississippi. However, amidst threats of violence reminiscent of 1875, the state's Republican Party withdrew their ticket. Thus, fearing an emergent Republican Party and renewed federal efforts to safeguard black voting, Mississippi whites now believed formal disenfranchisement measures were necessary to squelch the issue once and for all.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 39.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41.

Whereas in 1875, whites covertly engineered election laws to favor white candidates and minimized overt acts of violence against blacks until days before the election because they feared federal intervention, in 1890, white politicians candidly announced their intent to end black voting in Mississippi. James Vardaman opined “there is no reason to equivocate or lie about the matter... Mississippi’s constitutional convention of 1890 was held for no other purpose than to eliminate the nigger from politics; not the ‘ignorant and vicious’, as some of those apologists would have you believe, but the nigger... Let the world know it just as it is.”<sup>71</sup>

After the adoption of new disenfranchisement measures, the number of eligible black voters nose-dived. For example, between 1890 and 1892, black voter registration plummeted from one hundred eighty thousand to eight thousand registered black voters in Mississippi. In all black counties in Mississippi, the effect of disenfranchisement was even more dramatic. For example, Washington County, Mississippi contained 9,103 eligible black voters; however, only 103 black voters (less than one percent of eligible voters) were registered in 1892.<sup>72</sup>

Consequently, in one fell swoop, disenfranchisement reversed hard-won black gains during Reconstruction and its aftermath. During Reconstruction, when black office holding reached unprecedented levels, black Mississippians elected one black Congressman, two black US Senators, two black state secretaries, and one lieutenant governor. Even after the end of Reconstruction

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 43–47.

in Mississippi, blacks in Delta counties continued to hold minor political offices albeit at the behest of white Democrats. However, after 1890, black office holding ceased to be a political factor in Mississippi.<sup>73</sup>

Dating back to Mississippi's earliest constitutions in 1817 and 1832, voting rights were restricted to white males. This restriction was amended in the state Reconstruction constitution in 1868. From the beginning of Reconstruction to disenfranchisement in 1890, black eligible voters outnumbered the number of white eligible voters by substantial margins. Yet, between Reconstruction and disenfranchisement, white fraud and terrorism deterred black political participation. Reconstruction ended in Mississippi in 1875 when armed whites drove Republicans from power. During the intervening years between 1875 and 1890, whites, through legal and extralegal means, gradually narrowed black voting. In 1890, after years of relying on force and fraud, whites legally disenfranchised the vast majority of blacks in Mississippi.<sup>74</sup>

### *The Arkansas Example*

In Arkansas, Republicans controlled the executive and legislative branches between 1868 and 1874. Reconstruction in Arkansas unraveled due in large part to Republican factionalism. For instance, in the 1872 gubernatorial election, opposing Republican factions fielded candidates in the state governor's race. The state's national liberal faction endorsed Joseph Brooks whereas the state's national Republican faction backed Elisha Baxter, a former US Senator.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 35–36.

<sup>75</sup> Carl Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1994), 258–560.

In the fiercely competitive race that followed, the final results were disputed because Baxter's supporters suppressed Brooks' votes in several counties and precincts, which gave Baxter a slight electoral victory. However, as the Arkansas voting scandal became national political fodder, the Republican-dominated Congress purged the election results. Subsequently, the disputed election was resolved in behind-the-scenes negotiations and Baxter emerged as the state's governor.<sup>76</sup>

Interestingly, as Arkansas governor, Baxter vetoed numerous Republican-backed bills and instead pursued policies amenable to Democrats. Thus by early 1874, after repeatedly appearing to side with Democrats, Baxter's erstwhile Republican supporters sought to oust him and replace him with his former opponent Brooks. As Republican cries for Baxter's dismissal escalated, Baxter amassed the state militia outside the statehouse. Nonetheless, Baxter was removed from office by a state circuit court for judicial irregularities and Brooks became acting governor.<sup>77</sup>

After Brooks' installation as governor, armed Brooks' supporters barricaded themselves around the statehouse and placed two cannons on the statehouse lawn to avert an anticipated violent backlash. In the meantime, Baxter's supporters built cannonball-buttressed fortifications and established a headquarters nearby the statehouse.<sup>78</sup>

As the dispute reached an impasse, both sides appealed to President Grant to decide the outcome. However, Grant refused to intercede but pledged

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<sup>76</sup> William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869–1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1979), 137.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–138.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

to send troops if necessary. Initially, Grant's non-interference policy had the effect of tacitly endorsing Brooks as governor. Yet, after much public outcry concerning the legitimacy of Brooks' governorship and fears that the controversy would hurt Northern Republican reelection bids later that year, Grant reversed his non-interference stance and recognized Baxter as the official Arkansas governor.<sup>79</sup>

Despite Grant's intercession, both factions continued to feud and amass fortifications around the state house. Fearing the outbreak of violence, Grant sent a negotiator and federal troops to Little Rock in order to thwart an impending violent clash. Consequently, with the cover of federal troops, the state legislature voted to reinstall Baxter as governor.<sup>80</sup>

The political turmoil that ensued in the wake of the Baxter-Brooks gubernatorial crisis demonstrated the weakness of the Arkansas Republican party and the federal government's increasing reluctance to interfere in state matters. More importantly, the gubernatorial crisis facilitated Redemption in Arkansas. For instance, as early as 1873, white Democrats had regained control over the state legislature. Furthermore, with Democratic-leaning Baxter as the undisputed governor, Democrats effectively controlled both legislative and executive branches. Sensing their strength, Democrats moved to consolidate their power by holding a constitutional convention which was dominated by conservative Democrats. Subsequently, the Democrats' constitution was ratified by a vote of 74,379 to 23,420. In addition, Democratic candidates won every

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 139-141.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 142-143.

major state office in the 1874 election. The Democrats' landslide victories in the 1874 election brought an end to Reconstruction in Arkansas.<sup>81</sup> Whereas Redemption in Mississippi had been primarily accomplished through political terrorism, Redemption in Arkansas occurred as a result of Republican factionalism.

Unlike Redemption in Mississippi, in Arkansas there were no recriminations, massive proscriptions, or purging of Republican officeholders. In fact, during the 1875 gubernatorial campaign, Augustus H. Garland assured that if he was elected he would safeguard black civil and political rights as well as their access to public education.<sup>82</sup> Garland's campaign promises were immediately tested in the aftermath of the election. Lee County whites implored Garland to remove W. H. Furbush, black sheriff of Lee County, from office. However, Garland refused their request because Furbush "...was our staunch supporter during our whole public trouble; he had, necessarily, to make some sacrifices and bear reproaches from his own people, and I shall sustain him."<sup>83</sup>

Rather than oust blacks from political offices in the wake of the Redemption, Arkansas' white Democrats adopted fusion politics. In Arkansas, the "fusion principle" typically meant Republican and Democratic county committees met prior to the election and selected representatives for each county and state office. These "compromise tickets" usually accorded both white and blacks political offices with white Democrats receiving county judgeships, county clerkships, and state senator and Republicans selecting the county

<sup>81</sup> Moneyhon, *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas*, 261–262.

<sup>82</sup> John William Graves, *Town and Country: Race Relations in an Urban-Rural Context, Arkansas, 1865–1905* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990), 53.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 53–54.

sheriff, the circuit clerk, and three lower-level state representatives. Like other redeemer regimes, Arkansas whites sometimes resorted to violence in order to insure election victories.<sup>84</sup> However, from the late 1870s to early 1890s, tolerance rather than racial terrorism was the norm in post-Reconstruction politics in the state. Particularly in the Arkansas Delta, fusion politics held sway from the late 1870s until the early 1890s. In the aftermath of Redemption in Arkansas, fusion politics likely took hold because they allowed white Democratic politicians to exploit black voting blocks to their advantage and by the same token, they provided Arkansas blacks a modicum of political power.<sup>85</sup>

In addition, other redeemer Democratic governors after Garland continued to safeguard black civil and political rights. One such example is Garland's successor William R. Miller (who served from 1877 to 1881), who promised to safeguard black constitutional rights during his campaign. While in office, he honored his pledge by prosecuting a band of armed whites who killed several blacks during a raid in Union County in 1877.<sup>86</sup>

To be sure, Arkansas Redeemers (like the entire wing of the Southern Democratic party) articulated a white supremacist platform. The only difference between Arkansas Redeemers and their Deep South counterparts was their willingness to safeguard black civil rights and allow for nominal black political participation. Due to Democrats' conciliatory policies, twenty to twenty-five percent of Arkansas blacks voted for Democrats prior to disenfranchisement.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 60.

After Redemption, blacks continued to serve in public office. From 1880 to 1890, at least thirty black legislators (including one senator) served in the Arkansas general assembly. These legislators helped secure a state civil rights law, a public school system, and public accommodations for the handicapped. Furthermore, Arkansas blacks remained active within the Republican Party, voted in elections, and participated in fusion arrangements with the Democratic Party in black-dominated counties in the Delta after Redemption.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, the enfranchisement of ex-slaves in Arkansas allowed for almost a generation of a viable two-party system in Arkansas, particularly in the Arkansas Delta.

Arkansas redeemers' desire to avert federal intervention may explain their conciliatory racial politics. In addition, Arkansas redeemers believed economic development and particularly Northern investment were critical to the state's economic future. Thus, redeemers may have pursued moderate racial policies in order to promote social harmony, which many whites viewed as essential to attracting Northern investors.<sup>89</sup>

Arkansas redeemers' desire for social harmony also influenced labor relations within Arkansas' plantation economy. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, Arkansas Delta planters tolerated fusion politics because they perceived it as a means to attract and keep contented black agricultural labor.<sup>90</sup> Thus, white Democrats' moderate racial policies reflected their chief concerns—Northern investment and unhampered access to cheap black labor.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1890–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–9.

<sup>90</sup> Graves, *Town and Country*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–1.



Despite a decade of relative calm and political cooperation between blacks and whites, the nascent populist movement in Arkansas tore asunder the traditional political alliances and compromises that had structured post-Redemption politics. For instance, in the 1888 state election, the Union Labor Party (composed of disaffected black and white agricultural workers) came closer to upsetting Democratic control than had any party since Redemption.<sup>92</sup> Whereas Democrats had doled out political patronage to Delta blacks prior to 1888 as a means to secure the black vote, it now appeared that approach was no longer sufficient to acquire black votes. Given the strength of the black electorate in the Delta and Democrats' failure to successfully court them, Arkansas Democrats sought to reduce the potency of the black electorate through disenfranchisement devices.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, in 1893, Arkansas became the fourth Southern state to require all voters to present a poll tax receipt before they could legally vote. Similar to Mississippi, the poll tax law had a dramatic and immediate impact on black voting. For instance, in 1890, seventy-one percent of the black electorate voted; however, after the poll tax was instituted, only seven percent of the black electorate voted in elections.<sup>94</sup>

After disenfranchisement, white-on-black lynchings significantly increased in previously Republican-dominated areas. Prior to disenfranchisement, sixty percent of white-on-black lynching occurred in Republican counties that elected black state legislators. Given that the Mississippi Delta produced more black state legislators than any other region, it is unsurprising that it was also the most

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<sup>92</sup> Gordon, *Caste and Class*, 17.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

lynching-prone region in the state before and after disenfranchisement. For instance, between 1882 and 1890, whites lynched twenty-six blacks in the Delta; however, in the decade following disenfranchisement, whites lynched thirty-seven blacks. What is more, in regions where blacks did not constitute an economic or political threat, whites increasingly lynched blacks for no apparent reason. Overall, white-on-black lynching incidents increased by thirty-three percent in Mississippi in the years following disenfranchisement.<sup>95</sup>

Additionally, the character of white lynch mob violence changed. Whereas prior to disenfranchisement the primary accusation that precipitated lynching had been rape, following disenfranchisement, murder and assaults (particularly attacks upon white males or their interests) became the dominant allegation that precipitated white-on-black lynching. For instance, in Republican regions prior to disenfranchisement, rape-related lynchings represented thirty-five percent of allegations that precipitated black lynchings. After disenfranchisement, rape-related lynching only represented twenty-two percent of total allegations. In contrast, murders or assaults increased from approximately thirty-seven to forty-six percent of allegations that precipitated black lynching in the decade following disenfranchisement.<sup>96</sup>

In part, lynching in the Delta region increased after Redemption and disenfranchisement had been accomplished because whites no longer believed the federal government would intervene in Southern race relations. Furthermore, disenfranchisement dramatically curtailed black voting power which in turn

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<sup>95</sup> Terence Finnegan, "Lynching and Political Power in Mississippi and South Carolina," in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 191–193; 201–205.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

diminished their capacity to utilize established political channels to prevent white mob violence. In this way, Redemption and disenfranchisement were important to the history of lynching because it made black Southerners more susceptible to white lynch mob violence than before.

### **The Plantation Economy and White Mob Violence in the Delta**

The postbellum plantation economy was primarily based upon the sharecropping system. Prior to the Civil War, the plantation economy was characterized by large plantations in which enslaved blacks typically worked in gangs. After emancipation, large plantations or landholdings were subdivided into small plots of land ranging from thirty to fifty acres and were typically farmed by an individual family.<sup>97</sup>

The destruction of the antebellum plantation regime and the emergence of sharecropping occurred amidst labor conflicts between plantation owners and ex-slaves. Black freedmen generally desired to own land so as to achieve greater economic and social autonomy whereas white plantation owners desired to maintain a labor system as closely resembling slavery as possible. In the half decade following the end of slavery, both black agricultural laborers and white landowners resisted the other's attempt to gain greater labor control which resulted in somewhat of an impasse because whites continued to own the vast majority of land; however, they remained dependent upon black labor to farm it. By 1870, a compromise gradually emerged in which whites leased land to blacks and in turn black agricultural laborers would receive an equal share of that year's

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<sup>97</sup> Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, 182.

crop. While this system did not completely satisfy either blacks or whites, it did subvert gang labor as the primary method of labor organization within plantation agriculture.<sup>98</sup>

Sharecropping did not emerge immediately following emancipation in the Delta. Rather, the modern plantation economy developed in the Mississippi Delta in the late nineteenth century and later spread to the Arkansas Delta during World War I.<sup>99</sup> In the Delta, black landownership was the intermediary stage between the decline of the antebellum plantation regime and the rise of sharecropping. For instance, during the intervening years between emancipation and the turn of the century, hundreds of blacks migrated to the Mississippi Delta in search of higher wages and the prospect of land ownership. Most commonly, black migrants worked for timber companies or cleared farm land for plantation owners in exchange for cash payments. Over time, many blacks were able to use income earned from clearing land to purchase their own land. In fact, by 1900, black farmers made up sixty-six percent of all Delta farmers.<sup>100</sup>

However, beginning in the 1890s, Delta blacks' economic fortunes declined. As cotton prices began to decline in the late 1880s, merchants restricted and raised credit thereby forcing many black landowners into foreclosure. Thus, by 1930, black landownership was virtually nonexistent. For example, in ten Mississippi Delta counties, eighty-six percent of all farm tenants were black and only two percent of blacks owned land in 1929. In fact, Bolivar

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 183–184; Michael Fitzgerald, "To Give Our Votes to the Party: Black Political Agitation and Agricultural Change in Alabama, 1865–1870," *Journal of American History* 76 (1989): 490; 497; 503.

<sup>99</sup> Woodruff, *The American Congo*, 30.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 21–22.

County had the most black landowners in the Delta and even there ninety-eight percent of all black farmers were tenants and more than ninety percent of the land was owned by whites in 1929.<sup>101</sup> As increasing numbers of black farmers lost their land after 1900, they were forced to work as agricultural workers on large-scale “business plantations,” which used scientific management principles to extract maximum labor productivity. These plantations predominated in the Delta region during the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>102</sup>

The Mississippi Delta Planting Company was one of the Delta’s largest and most profitable corporate plantations. It utilized several labor arrangements with its agricultural workers. One labor arrangement was day labor. Day laborers worked approximately four thousand acres in exchange for a daily wage of fifty cents and lodging. The second option was land rental. Under this model, agricultural workers paid money for renting land or paid rent in the form of one-quarter of their cotton crop and seven dollars per acre of land used for corn production. In addition, renters furnished all livestock, supplies, and labor whereas the plantation owner supplied the land which allowed for the tenants’ greater control over the crop and production process.<sup>103</sup>

Sharecropping comprised the third and most common labor arrangement. By and large, corporate plantations employed more sharecroppers than any other category of workers because wage laborers typically moved from plantation to plantation in search of better wages. Under this arrangement, the plantation owner or company supplied all necessary supplies and tools and sharecroppers

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<sup>101</sup> McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 114.

<sup>102</sup> Woodruff, *The American Congo*, 22–23.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–25.

supplied the labor. Typically, sharecroppers and plantation owners agreed to equally split the proceeds of crop sales. However, plantation owners deducted from the sharecropper's portion the cost of tools for production and living expenses (food, housing, and clothing), which virtually ensured that few sharecroppers would make a profit at the end of the year and in fact most went into debt.<sup>104</sup> For example, at the Mississippi Delta Planting Company, sharecroppers purchased household goods and clothing from the plantation commissary. At the credit or "time" commissary, sharecroppers could get basic foodstuffs and at the cash store they could purchase clothing and other personal items. By requiring or coercing sharecroppers to buy from the plantation commissary it guaranteed that the company would receive payment at settlement time as well as siphon off any cash sharecroppers earned during the year. Moreover, sharecroppers could only sell their crop to the plantation owner or company that they worked for.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, the commissary system further deepened the sharecropper's economic dependency upon the company and/or plantation elite.

In addition to economic coercion, contract enforcement laws made it difficult for blacks to escape economic exploitation. For instance, a 1900 Mississippi statute made it illegal for a laborer, renter, or sharecropper (who was already under contract) to enter into a second contract without first notifying the primary contract holder. In 1906, a false pretense law was enacted which stated that agricultural laborers could be criminally punished if they broke the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 27.

sharecropping contract after accepting an advance.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, Mississippi state laws facilitated the economic subordination of tenant farmers as well as provided a legal framework for debt peonage.<sup>107</sup>

Comments from an ex-slave and sharecropper from the Arkansas Delta best capture how white plantation owners used economic dependency and violence to exploit black tenant farmers. He stated,

After freedom, we worked on shares a while. Then we rented. When we worked on shares we couldn't make nothing—just overalls and something to eat. Half went to the other man and you would destroy your half if you weren't careful. A man that didn't know how to count would always lose. He might lose anyhow. They didn't give no itemized statement. No, you just had to take their word. They never give you the details. They just say you owe so much. No matter how good account you kept, you had to go by their account and now, Brother, I'm telling you had to take the white man's word on notes and everything. Anything you wanted, you could git if you were a good hand. You could git anything you wanted as long as you worked. But you better not leave him—you better not try to leave and git caught. They'd keep you in bet. They were sharp. Christmas come, you could take up to twenty dollars in somethin' to eat and as much as you wanted in whiskey. Anything that kept you a slave...<sup>108</sup>

Given the economic exploitation that existed within the Delta's sharecropping regime, at various junctures, black tenant farmers formed labor unions in hopes of reforming the system. One of the Delta's first major movements to reform the sharecropping system occurred in the late 1880s. Black farmers organized the Tchula Cooperative Store in Holmes County, Mississippi which reflected the emergence of populist politics in the Delta and the cooperative vision of the Farmers' and Colored Farmers' movement during the late 1880s and 1890s. Through the cooperative, black farmers purchased supplies and provided affordable loans as well as marketed their crops.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 143.

<sup>107</sup> Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901–1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 20.

<sup>108</sup> Richard Allan Buckelew, "Racial Violence in Arkansas: Lynching and mob rule, 1860–1930," (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 1999), 51.

<sup>109</sup> Woodruff, *The American Congo*, 22.

Delta whites interpreted black cooperatives and unions as direct challenges to their core economic interests. In response, whites violently suppressed black reform efforts throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, in 1889, the Colored Farmers Alliance, an offshoot of the national Farmers Alliance, actively recruited black agricultural workers to join the cooperative movement that originated in Leflore County, Mississippi. White merchants and planters ordered the Colored Farmers' local leader to leave the state and in response alliance members armed themselves and vowed to protect him.<sup>110</sup> Subsequently, Delta whites spread rumors that the Colored Farmers' Alliance was planning an armed uprising. As tensions escalated, armed whites from Leflore and surrounding counties as well as state troops descended upon Greenwood, Mississippi. While whites mobilized, armed blacks organized in Minter City (approximately twenty-five miles from Greenwood) and prepared for an armed attack. In the violent clash that ensued, it is estimated that approximately thirty to one hundred blacks were slain with no white fatalities. In addition to the violent suppression of the Colored Farmers' Alliance, the Delta's plantation elite banned the distribution of the Alliance newspaper (the *Vaiden Advocate*) and threatened that any further attempts to organize black agricultural workers would be violently repressed.<sup>111</sup>

Two years later in the Arkansas Delta, whites ruthlessly suppressed black attempts to secure higher wages. In September 1891, R. M. Humphreys, the white superintendent of the Colored Farmers' Alliance, declared that Southern

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<sup>110</sup> McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 135.

<sup>111</sup> Woodruff, *The American Congo*, 22.



cotton pickers would immediately strike unless they received \$1 per one hundred pounds of cotton picked, which was 50 cents higher than a cotton picker's standard wage. The general strike that Humphreys threatened never materialized; however, a small contingent of cotton pickers in Lee County, Arkansas urged black cotton pickers throughout the county to strike for higher wages and evidently some cotton pickers joined the campaign. As the campaign began to materialize, Lee County authorities arrested nine strike leaders who were eventually lynched or murdered by white posses. Subsequently, Lee County whites continued to pursue suspected strikers, which resulted in the murder of fifteen blacks and the imprisonment of six others. As a result, the Colored Farmers' presence in Lee County as well as Arkansas precipitously declined thereafter.<sup>112</sup>

The most brutal repression of an agricultural reform movement in the Delta occurred in Elaine, Arkansas in 1919. The Elaine massacre occurred in the wake of a brief period during World War I when black sharecroppers enjoyed relatively higher wages and slightly better work conditions. For example, in 1919, cotton sold for an unprecedented 85 cents and consequently some black sharecroppers were able to net between \$500 and \$1000 dollars—an unheard of sum for sharecroppers at the time.<sup>113</sup> When cotton prices dramatically declined in the immediate post-World War I period, Mississippi and Arkansas Delta planters sought to reassert pre-World War I wage levels and work conditions. In response, black sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Elaine, Arkansas organized

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<sup>112</sup> William F. Holmes, "The Arkansas Cotton Pickers Strike of 1891 and the Demise of the Colored Farmer's Alliance," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (1973): 107–120.

<sup>113</sup> McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 130.

the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America (PFHUA) and planned to sue plantation owners for lost wages in 1919. Black farmers demanded better working conditions and higher wages comparable to those attained during World War I. In order to galvanize black agricultural workers, PFHUA held meetings to recruit and educate workers on the cotton market and formed armed posses to protect meeting halls from anticipated attacks. Plantation owners in Elaine, Arkansas mounted an extensive and organized campaign of violence against farm workers because they believed workers posed a grave threat to white racial domination and ultimately their economic interests. In order to squelch the nascent labor movement, planters arrested dozens of blacks, assassinated prominent labor leaders, and murdered countless sharecroppers. Some newspaper reports even suggested that bombs were dropped on the Elaine, Arkansas black community. Estimates of blacks killed in the Elaine massacre ranged from a few dozen to 856 persons. Despite the disparities in the estimates, Elaine planters destroyed blacks' organized protest to the sharecropping regime, which further entrenched their power within the South's cotton-based economy.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, in the late 1930s, the Southern Tenants Farmer Union successfully organized black tenant farmers in five Mississippi Delta counties; however, their labor organizing all but ceased after violent white opposition.<sup>115</sup>

While Delta whites typically reserved large-scale violent reprisals for labor reform movements that challenged their core economic interests, they routinely

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<sup>114</sup> Woodruff, *The American Congo*, 74–109.

<sup>115</sup> McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 136.

resorted to lynching as a means to discipline individual black sharecroppers who dared to dispute their authority. For example, in 1903, Ben Bryant and Will Morris allegedly murdered W. H. Legg, a prominent planter, near Vicksburg, Mississippi (Warren County). According to a newspaper report, Bryant and Morris burned down Legg's cotton gin. Reportedly, when Legg responded to the burning cotton gin, Bryant and Morris shot and killed him. In response to Legg's murder, Bryant and Morris were arrested and questioned regarding Legg's murder. Apparently, both confessed to the crime; however, a mob (composed of two hundred farmers) forcibly removed them from police custody and executed them in a nearby thicket.<sup>116</sup>

In sum, the postbellum plantation economy emerged in the Delta region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to its emergence, hundreds of blacks migrated into the Delta and became landowners. Beginning in the 1890s, numerous black landowners lost their land to foreclosures and within a generation black landownership was virtually wiped away. As a consequence, Delta blacks transitioned from small landowners to landless sharecroppers. While the sharecropping regime held out the promise of black landownership, the plantation elite maintained economic domination through both state laws that favored white landowners as well as sharecropping contracts that eroded the minimal profits black farmers accrued. Thus, the Delta's sharecropping regime aimed to keep blacks perpetually indebted to white plantation owners.

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<sup>116</sup> *The Newark Advocate* (Newark, NJ), [NewspaperArchive.com], May 4, 1904, p. 2, col. 5.

In response to their economic marginalization, Delta blacks formed unions that attempted to reform the sharecropping regime. However, in each instance, Delta whites violently suppressed those movements. Moreover, when individual blacks seemingly defied white planters' authority, whites resorted to lynch mob violence. What is more, the vast majority of white lynch mob violence occurred when black tenant farmers planted, harvested, and settled accounts with white plantation owners. Thus, white mob violence and lynching in the Delta were inextricably linked to the plantation economy's exploitation of black labor and black resistance to that exploitation.

## **Conclusion**

The end of Reconstruction in the late 1870s accompanied by disenfranchisement laws in Mississippi and Arkansas by the mid-1890s helped facilitate the rise of white-on-black lynching in the Delta region. These political developments made apparent the federal government's declining interest in safeguarding black civil rights and eliminated important legal and political channels for which blacks might have mounted resistance to lynching. Not surprisingly, these developments created a social and political context ripe for white lynch mob violence as well as increased the likelihood that white-on-black lynching would go unpunished. These developments help explain the rise of white-on-black lynch mob violence; however, interracial conflict stemming from black labor exploitation within the plantation economy most directly influenced the dynamics of white mob violence in the Delta region.

## CHAPTER 3

### LYNCHING AFTER RACE

In 1884, Samuel T. Wilson, a white convict guard, allegedly murdered Negia McDaniel, a black fisherman, in Issaquena County, Mississippi. According to a newspaper report, Wilson and a crew of black convicts under his command were hauling lumber aboard a river flatboat. Wilson and his crew landed near McDaniel, who happened to be fishing. Reportedly, Wilson and McDaniel exchanged hostile words and in response, Wilson ordered two black convicts to take McDaniel aboard the flatboat, beat him, and throw him overboard. In response to the alleged crime, Wilson was arrested and arraigned before Adam Jenkins, a black justice of the peace, who reportedly only allowed testimony from two black witnesses and refused to allow persons “friendly” with Wilson to testify. Based upon the testimony of the two black witnesses, Jenkins ruled that a grand jury should decide Wilson’s fate. In response to hearing two black eye-witnesses implicate Wilson in McDaniel’s murder, three hundred blacks (in attendance at the hearing) shouted that they intended to lynch Wilson. The black gallery shouted their intent to lynch Wilson so emphatically that Jenkins requested Deputy Sheriff Lawson, a white officer, to escort Wilson out of town, presumably to a nearby jail. By the time Lawson arrived, tensions appeared to have calmed; however, once Wilson was in Lawson and in the custody of three armed guards, a black mob forced Lawson and his armed guard to hand over Wilson approximately a half mile from the hearing’s location. Wasting very little time, the black mob lynched Wilson. In the lynching’s aftermath, a newspaper report

suggested that the local white community condemned the lynching because two black men (of poor character) testified against Wilson but the report failed to discuss whether the white community took any action against the vigilantes.<sup>117</sup>

The Wilson lynching illustrates blacks' belief that the alleged murder warranted lynching because even though it appeared that the criminal justice system would adjudicate Wilson's crime, the lynch mob usurped the legal process. While the alleged murder precipitated the lynching, Wilson's status as a convict guard may have further inflamed their desire to lynch him. For instance, the convict lease system mushroomed during the post Civil War era because it resolved planter's desire for a dependable labor force and allowed state and local governments to shift the financial burden of incarceration to private labor contractors. Blacks represented ninety percent of convict laborers. Oftentimes, blacks were sentenced to convict labor gangs upon trumped-up charges, usually involving vagrancy or some other petty criminal offense. Within convict labor camps, blacks endured poor working conditions, inadequate medical attention, and routine physical abuse, which produced excessively high death rates. In Mississippi convict labor camps, historians estimate that on average ten percent of the convict labor population died each year. Therefore, given that Wilson was a convict labor guard, his alleged murder of McDaniel likely reinforced blacks' contempt for the legal process and provided blacks with a convenient target on which to vent their rage.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Times Picayune (New Orleans, LA), April 29, 1884, p. 1, col. 6 and 7.

<sup>118</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). Ayers demonstrates that black Southerners received harsher sentences for the same or similar crimes that whites committed. In particular, he showed that black men constituted eighty-seven percent of the chain gang population in Chatham County, Georgia and sixty-one percent of the chain gang population in Whitfield,

In addition, the Samuel Wilson lynching helps illuminate the extent to which black-on-white lynchings were common during the 1880s. For example, a black lynch mob lynched Manse Waldrop, a white man, for raping Lula Sherman, a black child, in Pickens County South Carolina in 1887. Cato Sherman, Lula Sherman's father, and several other black men forcibly removed Manse Waldrop from police custody, shot Waldrop in the head, and hung him from a tree. In response to Manse Waldrop's lynching, Cato Sherman and four other blacks were arrested and subsequently charged with murdering Waldrop. Consequently, two of Cato Sherman's accomplices were sentenced to death; however, curiously, Cato Sherman was found not guilty. In response to the sentencing, both blacks and whites petitioned John P. Richardson, South Carolina's governor, to pardon the two remaining defendants. Interestingly, local and state opinion (while divided) favored pardoning the black men because men who raped women (regardless of their race) deserved to be lynched. Furthermore, black petitioners argued that a black patriarch should have the right to protect his dependants just as a white patriarch did and therefore it would be unfair to punish black men for something that white men were never brought to trial for. In the end, the governor pardoned the two remaining black defendants and ultimately no one went to jail for the lynching of Manse Waldrop.<sup>119</sup>

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Georgia, between 1866 and 1879. Chain gangs were a particularly harsh punishment because convicts worked long hours and under deplorable labor conditions. Between 1880 and 1886, at least ten percent of black convicts died on chain gangs, while only five percent of whites died on chain gangs during the same period in Mississippi. For a detailed discussion of death rates on Mississippi chain gangs, see Vernon Lane Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865–1890* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 234–242.

<sup>119</sup> Bruce Baker, "Lynch Law Reversed: The Rape of Lula Sherman, the Lynching of Manse Waldrop, and the Debate Over Lynching in the 1880s," *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (2005): 273–293.

Collectively, the Wilson and Waldrop lynchings are significant because they highlight two salient points. First, black lynch mobs lynched alleged criminals because they believed certain crimes warranted lynching. Second, they highlight that during the 1880s, blacks had not yet become the primary targets of lynch mob violence nor had lynching become the dominant symbol for white supremacy. In fact, in 1884, approximately 160 whites were lynched compared to only fifty-one black victims.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, during the 1880s, intra-racial lynching (i.e., black mobs lynching other blacks and white mobs lynching other whites) was a common occurrence.

Yet, in less than a decade, the number of black lynch victims increased dramatically. For instance, 1886 was the first year in which the number of blacks lynched (seventy-four) exceeded the number of whites lynched (sixty-four). In 1892, more than 160 blacks were lynched and only sixty-nine whites were lynched in the same year.<sup>121</sup> In addition, during the 1890s, white mobs increasingly staged black lynchings so that thousands of white spectators could witness the execution.

Concomitant with the dramatic increase in black lynchings was the emergence of the black beast rapist discourse. This discourse posited that as a result of emancipation, black men were retrogressing back to a bestial or sexually depraved condition. Whites warned that a direct outgrowth of black retrogression was that black men were increasingly raping white women and therefore lynching was necessary to subdue black savages.

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<sup>120</sup> Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia, PA, 1980) 6.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*



Therefore, by the late 1880s and early 1890s, lynching had become a racialized phenomenon in which blacks were the primary targets of lynch mob violence and racist discourses were increasingly employed to justify the practice. These developments necessarily altered the social relations of lynching and the meaning lynching carried for both whites and blacks. In this chapter, I will explore the impact that the racialization of lynching had upon the trajectory of black lynch mob violence. Specifically, I will explain the rise and decline of black lynch mobs in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas. I will argue that prior to the racialization of lynching, black mobs lynched other blacks because they viewed extralegal violence as a necessary response to violent crimes. Second, I will argue that after lynching became racialized, black lynch mob incidents within the Delta and throughout the South steadily declined in response to the racialization of lynching.

### **Black Mobs in White Discourse**

In general, white Southern newspapers depicted white mob violence against blacks as a necessary response to black criminality. In particular, Mississippi and Arkansas Delta region newspapers tended to amplify lynching sentiment by publishing sensational accounts of blacks accused of raping or murdering whites. According to Richard Perloff, the Memphis Commercial Appeal was among the most vicious Southern newspapers when it came to reporting rape because it consistently inflamed white passions by referring to black men accused of raping white women as “beasts” and “ravishers.”<sup>122</sup> In

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<sup>122</sup> Richard Perloff. “The Press and Lynchings of Blacks,” *Journal of Black Studies* 30 (2000): 320–321.

reaction to newspaper reports of alleged rape, white men responded to perceived black criminality through violence in order to preserve the honor of white womanhood and white masculine dominance over black men.<sup>123</sup>

Similarly, white newspaper accounts of black lynch mobs portrayed them as legitimate by asserting that victims of black lynch mobs were lawless desperados or black beast rapists that deserved extralegal punishment. For example, typical white Southern reports of black lynch mobs headlined, “An Unnatural Father Lynched by His Colored Brethren,” “A Negro Ravisher Lynched,” and “Two Negro Incendiaries Lynched.”<sup>124</sup>

Furthermore, white Southern newspaper depictions of white and black lynch mobs were so similar that if the race of the mob were omitted, it would be virtually impossible to distinguish them. For instance, similar to white mob violence, white newspaper reports suggested that whites tolerated black mob violence because black mobs were “quiet and orderly.” For example, in 1905, Jim Green, a farm laborer, reportedly assaulted a black eight-year-old girl in Cleveland, Mississippi (Bolivar County, Mississippi). After the assault, Jim Green fled the Starkey Taylor plantation and was later captured by a black search party in Shaw, Mississippi. In describing how the black posse captured Green, the newspaper stated, “he was captured by negroes at Shaw Miss., and was being brought to Cleveland for the purpose of being lodged in jail when they were met by a quiet and orderly posse of negroes.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> For an excellent discussion of Southern manhood and the defense of white womanhood through lynching, see Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 1974), Chapter 5.

<sup>124</sup> See Little Rock Arkansas Daily Gazette, July 25, 1885, p. 1, col. 3; Times Picayune, July 1, 1885; Times Picayune, March 3, 1887, p. 1, col. 5.

<sup>125</sup> “Negro Necktie Party,” *The Weekly Panolian* (Batesville, MS), December 14, 1905.

White reporters typically expressed shock or amazement at the occurrence of black lynch mobs. For example, many of the earliest headlines that reported black lynch mobs observed that the “first known” black lynch mob took the life of a member of their race. As a general rule, white newspaper reports condoned black lynch mob incidents because the respectable blacks participated in the lynching. For instance, in 1900, Dago Pete, a farm laborer, allegedly assaulted a black woman in Tutwiler, Mississippi (Tallahatchie County, Mississippi). Pete allegedly entered Allen Duncan’s, a black farmer, home and ordered Duncan’s wife into their sleeping quarters and subsequently “the woman was made the victim of fiendish indignities.”<sup>126</sup> After the assault, Dago Pete fled to Wells, Mississippi and was later captured by a black posse. Reportedly, the posse returned Pete to the alleged crime scene and lynched him. According to the newspaper, “the white people of the section might have stopped the lynching but as it was conducted exclusively by the best colored people of the section, and the victim of the assault was a member of the same race, no opposition was offered and the lynching was quietly carried out...”<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, in one episode, in 1894, Governor William Meade Fishback of Arkansas condemned a black lynch mob for executing three black men accused of murdering a white merchant and offered a reward for their capture.<sup>128</sup>

In addition, the white press generally portrayed the black community as supportive of lynch mobs. At times, white newspapers appeared to manipulate or exaggerate black support, particularly in instances where black lynch victims

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<sup>126</sup> “Lynched by Blacks,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 4, 1900, p. 5, col. 2.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> “Hanged and Then Shot,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 23, 1894, p. 1 col. 7.

were accused of harming whites. For example, in 1885, Martin Jones was tried and convicted for the murder of Christine Umbach in Skipworth, Mississippi. According to a news report, Jones entered Umbach's home, bludgeoned her, and burglarized her home. At Jones' trial, he confessed to the crime and was sentenced to jail in Mayersville, Mississippi. En route to the Mayersville jail (and under the protection of an armed posse), a black lynch mob overpowered the posse and hung him from a tree. According to a news report, the black community supported the lynching even though it was one of their own who was lynched. The news report stated that the black community was "mostly in support of burning Jones in a slow fire."<sup>129</sup> In only one instance did the white press portray blacks as condemning lynching, but even in this instance the black community denounced lynching only to suggest that they would lynch the alleged lynch mob.<sup>130</sup>

Interestingly, white newspapers typically portrayed white authorities as incapable of preventing black lynch mob violence. For example, in most black lynch mob incidents, white newspapers asserted black mobs simply "overpowered" white authorities and easily removed black suspects from their custody. What is more, in instances in which blacks forcibly removed black suspects from police custody, reportedly, white authorities never used lethal force in retaliation. Therefore, white newspapers' depiction of white authorities as helpless to thwart black male aggression is curious given white Southerners otherwise unwavering penchant to punish blacks who defied white authority.

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<sup>129</sup> "Vicksburg," *Times Picayune*, July 4, 1883, p. 1 col. 5

<sup>130</sup> "Negro White Caps," *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, January 15, 1889, p. 1, col. 1.

The striking similarities in how white Southern newspapers reported both black and white lynch mob incidents points to white Southerners' general desire to portray lynching as warranted or respectable. According to Susan Jean, white Southern newspapers constructed narratives of "warranted lynchings" in order to "separate the 'respectable' practice of lynching from the taint of reckless murder..." which served to legitimize "the practice in the minds of white southerners and to the gaze of the outside world."<sup>131</sup> Given whites' desire to portray lynching as an acceptable practice, it is not inconceivable that white newspapers might have fabricated or exaggerated black mob violence. It is possible that through reporting black lynch mob incidents, the white Southern press sought to defend white mob violence through suggesting that blacks supported and practiced mob violence against their own race for the same crimes committed against white women. While this dynamic likely shaped white accounts of black lynch mob incidents, the relatively small number of black lynch mob incidents reported suggests that whites did not go to great lengths to do so. Moreover, black mob violence was never a crucial element in whites' justifications for lynching. During the peak period of white mob violence, whites' best defense for lynching remained the defense of white womanhood. Therefore, while white newspaper accounts of black lynch mob incidents reflect white attitudes about lynching, there is little reason or evidence to suggest that white newspapers fabricated black lynch mob incidents.

### **The Rise of Black Lynch Mobs on the Delta Frontier**

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<sup>131</sup> Susan Jean, "Warranted Lynchings: Narratives of Mob Violence in White Southern Newspapers, 1880–1940," *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (2005): 353–354.

The rise of black lynch mob incidents within the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas occurred within a frontier context. John Solomon Otto described the Lower Mississippi Valley (which included the Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Missouri Deltas) region as America's "final frontier" because it was the last relatively unpopulated and agriculturally unimproved region in the postbellum United States.<sup>132</sup> Prior to the Civil War, settlement in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas concentrated along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, whereas the interior Delta counties were virtually unsettled and unimproved.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, unlike older cotton-producing regions, the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas were sparsely populated and were dotted with large plantations along the Mississippi River.

In particular, the Mississippi Delta remained largely uninhabited because dense forest cover and continual flooding prohibited large-scale human settlement and development. However, beginning in the 1870s, federal, state, and local governments funded flood control programs in the Mississippi Delta, which inclined railroads, lumber companies, and land speculators to heavily invest in Delta real estate. In response to these developments, thousands of blacks began migrating to the Delta region due to deteriorating social and

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<sup>132</sup> John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers, 1880–1930: Settling the Southern Bottomlands* (Westport, CN, 1999).

<sup>133</sup> The Mississippi Delta includes the following sixteen counties: Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tunica, and Washington are considered core counties because their boundaries are wholly contained within the Mississippi and Yazoo river basin. Carroll, Holmes, Panola, Tallahatchie, Warren, and Yazoo counties are considered partial Delta counties because only a portion of their boundaries fall within the Mississippi/Yazoo river floodplain. Similarly, Chicot, Crittenden, Desha, Lee, Phillips, and Mississippi are considered core Arkansas Delta counties. Partial Arkansas Delta counties are Arkansas, Ashley, Craighead, Cross, Drew, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lonoke, Monroe, Poinsett, Pulaski, St. Francis, and Woodruff. See Chapter One of Nancy Woodruff, *American Congo: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge, MA, 2003) for an overview of the historical development of the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas.

agricultural conditions in older plantation regions and the prospect of landownership and higher wages in the Delta.<sup>134</sup> For example, in 1880, blacks constituted sixty-four percent of the total population in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas; however, by the end of the decade, blacks constituted sixty-nine percent of the total population (see Table 1).<sup>135</sup>

**Table 1. Black Population as a Percentage of Total Population in the Delta Region, 1880–1900**

Year	Total Population, Arkansas Delta	Black Population, Arkansas Delta	Total Population, Mississippi Delta	Black Population, Mississippi Delta	Delta Black Population as Percentage of Total Population
1880	218,103	115,359	253,121	190,976	65
1890	318,230	185,094	335,955	262,171	68
1900	383,022	219,362	412,528	328,650	69

Source: Adapted from the Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/> (accessed June 3, 2009).

Black migration into the Delta region coincided with the emergence of black lynch mob violence. According to Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck’s inventory of Southern lynching, between 1882 and 1930, black lynch mobs executed approximately 148 persons across ten Southern states. Of those 148 persons, fifty-four of them were executed in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>134</sup> John Solomon Otto, *The Final Frontiers*, 11–13.

<sup>135</sup> Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/> (accessed June 3, 2009).

<sup>136</sup> A comprehensive lynching inventory for Southern lynch victims between the years 1882–1930, can be accessed online at, Project HAL: Historical American Lynching Data Collection Project, <http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm>. According to Project HAL, their lynching data is derived from NAACP Lynching Records at the Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama. Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck examined these records for name and event duplications and other errors with funding from a National Science Foundation Grant and made their findings available to Project HAL in 1998.

However, my analysis of their data revealed that at least fourteen of the fifty-four lynch victims were executed by interracial mobs or mobs composed of blacks and whites. In addition, my analysis of black and interracial mobs suggests that they should be treated separately because with respect to interracial mobs it is difficult to gauge the degree of black participation and whether it was voluntary or coerced.

In addition, my analysis revealed that in virtually every interracial lynching, blacks were lynched for murdering white landowners, merchants, and overseers or destroying whites' property. For example, Levry and Thomas Mack allegedly burned the cotton gin house of Captain H. B. Prince including sixty bales of cotton and a large quantity of seed in Sidon, Mississippi (Leflore County) in 1887. In a later incident, they were accused of burning another cotton gin house and forty bales of cotton, all of which belonged to Captain Prince. Both Levry and Thomas Mack were arraigned before a local justice of the peace. During the hearing, the newspaper suggested that evidence was presented that linked them both to the arson incidents; however, the report does not state whether they were found guilty. Reportedly, after the hearing, an enraged mob composed of blacks and whites broke into the cell, captured and lynched them.<sup>137</sup> While their guilt or innocence may never be ascertained, it is likely that they burned Prince's property in protest of exploitative labor arrangements. According to Albert C. Smith, "arson was a violent, interracial protest, a form of revenge for racism and poverty that defined the region's race relations."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> "Two Negro Incendiaries Lynched," *Times Picayune*, p. 1, col. 5

<sup>138</sup> Albert C. Smith, "Southern Violence Reconsidered: Arson as Protest in Black-Belt Georgia, 1865-1910," *Journal of Southern History* 51 (1985): 528.



Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck's lynching inventory does not distinguish between interracial lynch mobs and all-black lynch mobs. My analysis of interracial mobs suggests that they should be treated separately from black lynch mobs because it is difficult to gauge the degree of black participation and whether it was voluntary or coerced. Newspaper reports portray blacks as co-conspirators in interracial lynching; however, in two instances, the black community attempted to save the lynch victim's life, which suggests that blacks doubted the lynch victim's guilt. For example, Glenco Bays, in 1904, allegedly shot and killed J. D. Stephens, a prominent white farmer in Ashley County, Arkansas. According to a newspaper report, Bays fled the plantation and hid in a well approximately three miles from the Stephens plantation. In response to the J. D. Stephens' murder, members of the black community offered a reward for Bays' capture. By offering a reward for Bays' capture, the black community probably hoped that the lynch mob would not kill him once he was apprehended. A search party eventually found Bays hiding in the well and returned him to the Stephens plantation. Once captured, Bays supposedly confessed to the murder and stated that the murder and escape were premeditated. Interestingly, if Bays had carefully planned the murder, why would he have sought refuge only three miles from the scene of the crime? Reportedly, once Bays supposedly confessed, a lynch mob composed of both blacks and whites burned him at the stake.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> "Negro Murderer Burned at the Stake," Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, February 20, 1904, p. 1, col. 5 and p. 2, col. 1.

In another example, Richard Washington, Luke Washington, and Henry Robinson were accused of murdering H. C. Patton, a white merchant, in McGee, Arkansas (Ashley County) in 1894. Reportedly, both Washingtons and Robinson entered Patton's store, beat him unconscious, and slit his throat. After they murdered him, they apparently commandeered several items from the store, which were later found at their respective homes. In response to the murder, a search party quickly organized and identified the three men as suspects. In the meantime, the newspaper report stated that the black community urged whites to patiently await the coroner's inquest findings. Once their guilt had been established, the newspaper reported, "the colored population would take the case in their own hands and satisfy the public demand for revenge."<sup>140</sup> After the coroner's inquest in which the three lynch victims allegedly confessed their guilt, the police escorted the lynch victims to the McGee jail. According to a newspaper report, en route to the jail, a mob composed of black and white men overpowered the police escort and lynched the alleged murderers.<sup>141</sup> In both the Bays' lynching and the aforementioned triple lynching, the black community intervened to stall mob violence. If members of the black community doubted the guilt of the lynch victim, it is possible that blacks who participated in the interracial lynching might have been forced to participate in search parties or felt compelled to participate because they feared the lynch mob might turn on them if they did not acquiesce. The degree to which blacks participated in interracial lynch mobs probably may never be fully determined. However, it seems illogical

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<sup>140</sup> "Hanged and Then Shot," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 23, 1894, p. 1 col. 7.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

that blacks would willingly lynch other blacks for the murder of a white planter/merchant, given that they were likely mired in the same exploitative economic arrangements that precipitated the lynching in the first place. Therefore, when interracial lynch mobs are removed, I estimate that black lynch mobs executed approximately thirty-six individuals.

Interestingly, the bulk of black lynch mob activity occurred in the Delta's least populated counties. For instance, the Delta's least populated counties (fourteen thousand inhabitants or less) accounted for sixty-one percent (twenty-two of thirty-six incidents) of black lynch mob activity, whereas the most populated counties (fourteen thousand inhabitants or more) accounted for only thirty-nine percent (fourteen of thirty-six incidents) of black lynch mob episodes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Least and Most Populated Delta Counties, 1880

Least Populated Counties	1880 Total Population	Black Victim, Black Mob, 1880–1930
Quitman (MS)	1,407	0
Poinsett (AR)	2,192	0
Sunflower (MS)	4,661	2
Cross (AR)	5,050	1
Sharkey (MS)	6,306	2
Craighead (AR)	7,037	0
Mississippi (AR)	7,332	1
Arkansas (AR)	8038	0
St. Francis (AR)	8389	0
Tunica (MS)	8,461	3
Woodruff (AR)	8,646	0
Desha (AR)	8,973	1
Crittenden (AR)	9,415	0
Monroe (AR)	9,574	0
Issaquena (MS)	10,004	2

Table 2. (cont.)

Chicot (AR)	10,117	0
Ashley (AR)	10,156	2
Leflore (MS)	10,246	2
Tallahatchie (MS)	10,926	1
Lonoke (AR)	12,146	2
Drew (AR)	12,231	1
Coahoma (MS)	13,568	0
Lee (AR)	13,288	1
Total	198,163	22

Most Populated Counties	1880 Population	Black Victim, Black Mob
Carroll (AR)	17,795	0
Bolivar (MS)	18,652	2
Phillips (AR)	21,262	2
Jefferson (ARR)	22,386	1
Desoto (MS)	22,924	4
Washington (MS)	25,367	0
Holmes (MS)	27,164	0
Panola (MS)	28,352	1
Warren (MS)	31,238	3
Pulaski (AR)	32,616	0
Yazoo (MS)	33,845	1
Total	281,601	14

Source: Retrieved from the Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/> (accessed June 3, 2009).

Black lynch mob violence was likely more pronounced within the least populated and remote Delta counties due to rampant violence. For instance, David T. Courtwright has argued that frontiers were “violent lands” because they have historically accounted for the largest proportion of single male violence. Courtwright observed that the prevalence of male frontier violence stemmed from “the surplus of young men, widespread bachelorhood, sensitivity about honor,

racial hostility...and inadequate law enforcement.”<sup>142</sup> The Delta exemplified Courtwright’s “violent lands” thesis. For example, in the most remote areas of the Delta, justices of the peace represented the legal system and exercised tremendous discretion in punishing crime. In one case, unchecked violence seems to have encouraged vigilantism. For example, during the 1890s, a white railroad agent murdered a black man in Bolivar County, Mississippi. In response, a white justice of the peace fined the railroad agent five dollars and bragged that he would not attempt to collect the fine. In response to the justice of the peace’s slight, “every man carried his own weapons and was his own peace or trouble maker.”<sup>143</sup>

In addition, the criminal justice system’s failure to prosecute crimes perpetrated against blacks may have also encouraged extralegal violence. During Congressional Reconstruction (1868–1877), blacks participated in the legal system in unprecedented numbers. For example, in Warren County, Mississippi, blacks accounted for at least fifty percent of grand jurors between 1870 and 1873.<sup>144</sup> However, despite blacks’ unprecedented participation on grand juries during Congressional Reconstruction, over seventy percent of prosecutions involved white victims and white defendants, whereas black victims and black/white defendants involved no more than eight percent of all cases during

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<sup>142</sup> David T. Courtwright, *Violent Lands: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 3.

<sup>143</sup> John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time*, 43.

<sup>144</sup> Christopher Waldrep, *Roots of Disorder: Race and Criminal Justice in the American South, 1817–1880*, (Urbana, IL, 1998), 133. According to Waldrep, during Presidential Reconstruction, Blacks were excluded from grand jury service. While Black grand juror participation dramatically increased during Congressional Reconstruction, Blacks were still underrepresented, given that in 1870, Blacks constituted seventy percent of Warren County’s total population.

Congressional Reconstruction.<sup>145</sup> When the race of the victim can be identified, sixty-six percent of murder cases involved white victims and defendants.<sup>146</sup> Also, grand juries indicted people for the murder of whites fifty percent more than for the murder of blacks. Given that blacks in Warren County tended to commit crimes against persons and whites more frequently committed crimes against property, these statistics suggest that even under the best circumstances, crimes perpetrated against blacks were seldom prosecuted.<sup>147</sup>

Moreover, as Congressional Reconstruction was overturned in the Delta region during the late 1870s and replaced by conservative white Democratic regimes by the 1880s, black grand jury representation (along with black office holding) precipitously declined. For example, from 1873 and onward, whites in Warren County, Mississippi (particularly Vicksburg, Mississippi) consciously chose lawlessness and extralegal violence to oust blacks from local offices, and thus by 1874, black grand jury representation shrank to twenty-five percent of total grand jurors. Moreover, white jurors increasingly resisted returning many indictments based upon black complaints.<sup>148</sup> Consequently, “the injustice of Southern courts... whites increasingly admitted, alienated blacks, [and] made them see the law as white law.”<sup>149</sup> Therefore, under these circumstances, Delta blacks may have increasingly resorted to lynching. Ultimately, it is impossible to know the degree to which black lynch mobs were motivated by the criminal justice system’s refusal to prosecute crimes perpetuated against blacks;

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 146 and 167.

<sup>149</sup> Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York, 1984) 230.

however, it seems more than coincidental that black lynch mob violence in the Delta emerged at precisely the same juncture in which white jurors were becoming increasingly hostile to black complaints and black participation within the legal system was increasingly diminished.

Thus, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the Delta region was a frontier society. Beginning in the 1880s, thousands of blacks migrated to the Delta in search of a better life. Black lynch mob violence emerged as black migrants settled the Delta frontier. Accordingly, the bulk of black lynch mob activity occurred within the Delta's most thinly populated and remote counties. Given the Delta's frontier conditions, black lynch mob violence likely emerged in response to rampant violence and unresponsive legal institutions. While it is impossible to quantify the extent to which the Delta's frontier conditions precipitated black lynch mob violence, it likely contributed to its development, given that in other plantation regions with black majorities (such as the Alabama black belt and Georgia's cotton belt) they exhibited much less black lynch mob activity.<sup>150</sup>

### **The Identity of Black Lynch Mobs and their Victims**

In a span of two weeks, two black persons went missing in Keo, Arkansas (Lonoke County) in 1910. The two missing persons were Frank Pride and Laura Mitchell's respective spouses. According to a newspaper report, the Pride and Mitchell families lived and worked on plantations in Keo, Arkansas. Shortly after both disappearances, a justice of the peace questioned Frank Pride about his wife's whereabouts. In response, Pride stated that his wife was visiting relatives

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<sup>150</sup> E. M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay, "When Race Didn't Matter: Black and White Mob Violence against Their Own Color," in *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 137–8.

in nearby Conway, Arkansas. In the meanwhile, friends of Pride's wife later learned that the relatives of Pride's wife (who she was supposedly visiting) had been dead for many years. Reportedly, very shortly after their spouses' disappearances, Laura Mitchell and Frank Pride left their respective plantations in Keo, found work on a nearby plantation, and had been living together ever since.

Despite their departures, the search for their spouses continued. Blacks in Keo suspected foul play and searched for Laura Mitchell's husband (Wiley Mitchell) on the plantation in which Frank Pride had recently been employed. During their search, they discovered Wiley Mitchell's body buried in a garden plot that had belonged to Frank Pride. Reportedly, Wiley Mitchell appeared to have been bludgeoned to death with a club, which was later found in a nearby forest. Upon locating Mitchell's body, suspicion immediately focused on Frank Pride.

Subsequently, both Laura Mitchell and Frank Pride were arrested and a preliminary hearing was held. At the hearing, Mitchell and Pride apparently told "conflicting stories" about the death of Wiley Mitchell and the disappearance of Frank Pride's wife. (According to the newspaper report, most blacks believed Frank Pride's wife's body was somewhere on the plantation in which Wiley Mitchell's corpse was discovered.) The newspaper report does not detail their statements, but apparently their inconsistent accounts caused blacks in attendance to emphatically threaten to lynch them and immediately organized a lynch mob outside the courthouse. Given that Mitchell and Pride quickly moved away from Keo and moved in together, it is likely blacks interpreted Mitchell and



Pride's "conflicting stories" as an attempt to conceal a conspiracy to kill their spouses so that they could be together.

Based upon their preliminary trial testimony, the local magistrate charged both Pride and Mitchell with first degree murder pending a formal grand jury investigation and trial. Given that blacks threatened to lynch both Pride and Mitchell, a constable (presumably with armed police officers) was tasked with secreting them out of town before a mob could form. However, en route to their designated safe haven outside of Keo, a black mob cornered them and forced the constable to hand over the pair. Reportedly, within minutes, the lynch mob broke their shackles, hung them from a nearby tree, and shot them to death.<sup>151</sup>

The 1910 Frank Pride and Laura Mitchell lynching typified black lynch mob violence throughout the Delta region in several ways. First, similar to the Frank Pride and Laura Mitchell lynching, the majority of alleged crimes that precipitated lynching occurred on plantations or involved persons connected with the plantation economy. Therefore, victims of black lynch mobs tended to be young black males who were married and employed as farm laborers. Specifically, the average age of lynch victims was thirty-three years old when they were lynched, eighty-eight percent (eight of nine lynch victims' occupation was listed) were designated as farmers or farm laborers, and ninety-three percent (thirteen of fourteen lynch victims' marital status was listed) were married.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> "Negroes Lynched By a Mob of Negroes," Little Rock Arkansas, April 6, 1910, p. 1, col. 7 and p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>152</sup> I identified the following seven lynch victims from the Mississippi Delta: James Green, Mose Lemons, Dennis Martin, Raymond Murphy, Allen Nance, Sandy Wallace, and Columbus White. For the Arkansas Delta, I identified the following eight lynch victims: Eugene Baker, John Barnett, Robert Donnelly, John Farmer, Edward Hardy, Henry Jones, Laura Mitchell, and David Scruggs. For complete census information on the above individuals consult Ancestry.com, s.vv., "Sandy Wallace," 1870 United States Federal Census [database online]. Provo, Utah: The Generations

Given that the alleged crimes tended to occur on plantations, it is likely that black lynch mobs and their victims knew each other. In connection with this point, it is important to note that black lynch mob activity emerged at a time when black settlement patterns were undergoing a transformation from a concentrated pattern associated with the Old South plantation economy to a more dispersed or scattered distribution. Charles Aiken, geographer and historian, argued that in the aftermath of the Civil War, large cotton plantations (particularly in the Delta region) were sub-divided into smaller allotments, which, depending on the size of the plantation, could be divided among several black families.<sup>153</sup> In general, black sharecroppers and agricultural wage workers lived on plantations and if a critical mass of black families settled on a particular plantation or set of plantations, they established community institutions such as churches or meeting places on the grounds of the plantation. Social bonds and ties were most often nurtured by these community institutions and networks. While black institutions were primarily sites for community building and a refuge from white domination, they could also facilitate the formation of black lynch mobs.

For example, in 1923, Ed Hardy allegedly murdered an aged black woman on a plantation in Tunica County, Mississippi. The plantation supervisor and his assistant captured Hardy, who had fled to Arkansas. They returned Hardy to the

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Network, Inc., 2003) and *Ibid.*, s.vv. “James Green,” “Laura Mitchell,” and “Allen Nance,” 1900 United States Federal Census [database online], (Provo, Utah: The Generations Network, Inc., 2004); *Ibid.*, s.vv. “Edward Hardy,” 1910 United States Federal Census [database online], Provo, Utah: The Generations Network, Inc., 2006; and for the remaining lynch victims see, *Ibid.*, 1880 Federal Census [database-online], Provo, Utah: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005. I identified two additional lynch victims in marriage records. See, Ancestry.com, *Hunting for Bears*, s.vv. “Frank King,” Arkansas Marriages, 1779–1992 [database-online], Provo, Utah: The Generations Network, Inc. 2004, *Ibid.*, “Thomas Mack,” Mississippi Marriages, 1776–1935 [database on-line], Provo, Utah: Generations Network, Inc., 2004.

<sup>153</sup> Charles Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD, 1998), 39–49.

plantation and notified the local police of his capture. While awaiting police arrest, a black mob reportedly kidnapped Hardy, bludgeoned him, and threw his body into the Mississippi River. According to a newspaper report, the murdered woman was well liked by both whites and blacks and black plantation workers were “greatly excited” in response to her murder.<sup>154</sup> While the composition of the black mob and their relationship to the murdered black woman is unclear, it seems likely that the black mob was mostly composed of blacks who worked on the same plantation as the murdered black woman. In fact, newspaper reports typically depicted black lynch mobs as small contingents, comprising mainly family and friends of the alleged victim. For example, only two black lynch mob incidents were reported in which the number of participants exceeded twenty people.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, it seems likely that the murdered black woman’s family and fellow plantation workers were “greatly excited” because they were angered by her death and revenged it by lynching Ed Hardy.

Second, Delta black lynch mobs were almost exclusively activated by violent crimes. Murder constituted sixty-one percent (twenty-two of thirty-six incidents) of allegations that precipitated black mob violence. Murders that led to a lynching were oftentimes precipitated by domestic conflicts. In two cases, black mobs lynched black men who murdered a companion or their companion’s relatives. For example, in 1907, Andrew Trice allegedly brutally murdered his mistress in Desoto County, Mississippi. Reportedly, Trice dispatched his mistress with an axe and tossed her body into the Mississippi River. In response

<sup>154</sup> “Negroes Lynch Negro, Slayer of Old Mammy,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1923, p. 1, col. 5.

<sup>155</sup> For those two incidents, see “Two Negro Incendiaries Lynched,” *Times Picayune*, March 3, 1887, pg. 1, col. 5 and *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), February 23, 1913, pg. 1.

to this brutal murder, a mob composed of thirty blacks removed Trice from police custody and subsequently lynched him and tossed his body in the river where it was believed he had concealed his victim's body.<sup>156</sup> In another example, in 1887, Lloyd Martin allegedly assaulted his wife and murdered Bob Jones, his wife's father, in Sunflower County, Mississippi. In response, a black lynch mob seized Martin from police and lynched him.<sup>157</sup>

It also appears that black lynch mobs were provoked by blacks who murdered or attempted to murder for the purpose of ridding themselves of a competing lover. In 1889, a group of nine black men beat and killed Dan Reynolds near Coffee Creek, Arkansas (Phillips County). According to a newspaper report, the black lynch mob murdered Reynolds because he had a relationship with a popular woman. The lynch mob beat Reynolds with barb wire, rubbed mud on his wounds, and left him for dead. Reynolds barely survived the initial attack, but subsequently died from the wounds he suffered. Prior to his death, he named three of his attackers, which eventually led to the arrest of seven of the nine attackers. Reportedly, the black community was incensed by the brutal murder and "there is strong talk among them of lynching the miscreants..."<sup>158</sup> In another example, in 1895, Frank King, a black pastor, allegedly shot and killed William Toney, a deacon, in Portland, Arkansas (Ashley County). Apparently, trouble between King and Toney was precipitated by King's infatuation with Toney's wife. Whether Toney violently confronted King is unclear; however, a confrontation occurred and resulted in King shooting Toney

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<sup>156</sup> Atlanta Constitution, July 21, 1907, p. 33, col. 5; New York Times, July 21, 1907, p. 9, col. 5.

<sup>157</sup> Atlanta Constitution, July 27, 1887, p. 1, col. 4.

<sup>158</sup> "Negro White Caps," Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, January 15, 1889, pg. 1, col. 1.

in the abdomen. Purportedly, “King was locked up and after dark a mob of infuriated negroes repaired to the lockup, took King to a tree and lynched him.”<sup>159</sup>

In addition, black mobs executed black men who murdered another black person as a result of a work-related dispute. For instance, while details related to the disputes that led to the murders are unknown, two murders that led to lynching occurred at work sites. In 1905, John Barnett allegedly quarreled with and killed Albert Wakefield (both of whom were levee workers) in Lee County, Arkansas. In response, a group of twenty black men captured Barnett and hung him from a tree.<sup>160</sup> In 1891, Henry Gentry allegedly murdered George Hillyard on the Palmyra plantation in Warren County, Mississippi. Reportedly, Gentry was arrested and being escorted to trial by two armed guards when a black mob overpowered the guards, seized Gentry, and hung him.<sup>161</sup>

Besides murder, rape accounted for thirty-one percent (or eleven of thirty-six) of black lynch mob incidents.<sup>162</sup> My analysis revealed that approximately eighty-two percent of rape allegations involved black children.<sup>163</sup> For example, Robert Donnelly allegedly raped a twelve-year-old girl in Lee County, Arkansas in 1892. In the 1880 census, Robert Donnelly was listed as a farm worker, married, and having four sons and one daughter.<sup>164</sup> He and his family members were born in Georgia, with the exception of his youngest son. Reportedly, the unidentified

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<sup>159</sup> Fort Wayne News (Fort Wayne, IN), June 21, 1895, p. 10, col. 2.

<sup>160</sup> “Negroes Lynch a Negro,” Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, April 21, 1905, p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>161</sup> “A Negro Lynched,” Daily Picayune, July 8, 1891, p. 2, col. 4.

<sup>162</sup> In addition to murder and rape allegations, three blacks were lynched for other reasons. Frank King was lynched for shooting a man and adultery; Ernest Williams was lynched for obscene language; and Columbus White was lynched for arson. For complete information on these lynchings, see Project HAL, <http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm>.

<sup>163</sup> Eighty-one percent of (or nine of eleven) rape allegations involved children.

<sup>164</sup> Ancestry.com, s.vv. “Robert Donnelly,” 1880 Federal Census [database-online], Provo, Utah: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005.

girl survived Donnelly's attack and informed her parents about what had occurred. The girl's parents reported the crime, Donnelly was arrested, and a preliminary hearing was conducted in which Donnelly was found guilty of the crime. Given that Donnelly was convicted of the crime at the preliminary hearing, it is likely that the girl testified against him. In response, a black lynch mob assembled, forced open his cell, and hung him from a nearby tree.<sup>165</sup>

Furthermore, when alleged rape and murder committed against black women and children are combined, they represent approximately fifty percent of the total allegations that led to lynching. These statistics suggest that black lynch mobs may have been activated by a masculine ethos to protect women and children, who were deemed dependents of male protection. In the post-Civil War South (particularly in the Delta), blacks understood the household as the foundation for their freedom. As the legal heads of the household, black men gained patriarchal power over their wife and children, which allowed them to claim ownership over their labor. Moreover, black men's wives and children now became the symbol of their manhood and the basis upon which they could claim social and political equality with white men.<sup>166</sup> Given this context, it is possible that black men interpreted sexual and violent crimes against women as attacks on their manhood. Therefore, through lynching, black lynch mobs performed black masculine control over the household, of which protection of women and children was central.

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<sup>165</sup> "His Black Neck," *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, July 1, 1892, p. 1, col. 7.

<sup>166</sup> Nancy Bercaw, *Gender Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of Household in the Delta, 1861–1875* (Gainesville, FL, 2003), 99–116.

If gendered discourses partially motivated black men to lynch other black men for alleged violent crimes against black women, they may have also motivated a group of black women to lynch a black man who they deemed a threat to their safety. In 1908, Ernest Williams was lynched by a group of black women in Ashley County, Arkansas. Apparently, Williams' use of "objectionable language" toward black women precipitated his lynching. According to the newspaper report, "negro women of that town are reported to have organized a league to enforce better moral conduct by their race, and to protect themselves from negro men." Furthermore, a newspaper report stated that "Williams... used profane language... in the presence of some of the women in the reported league," and in response the women captured Williams and hung him from a tree.<sup>167</sup> While intriguing, the newspaper version of the lynching is dubious for at least two reasons. First, in no other black lynch mob incident was someone lynched for "offensive language." As noted earlier, the vast majority of black lynch mob incidents were activated by violent crimes. In addition, a lynch mob composed of only women is unlikely given that in no other Delta lynching were black women reported to have participated or even witnessed. Further research might likely reveal that the mob was composed of both black women and men and that the allegation that provoked his lynching was much more serious than his use of "offensive language." Nonetheless, Ernest William's lynching suggests that gendered discourses were an underlying factor in lynchings that involved crimes against women and children.

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<sup>167</sup> Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, June 21, 1908.

Lastly, black lynch mobs typically eschewed rituals of violence associated with spectacle lynching such as mutilation, castration, and burning.<sup>168</sup> Black mobs likely eschewed spectacle lynching because the main objective was to rid themselves of dangerous criminals. Although all black mobs typically hung or shot alleged criminals, in a few instances they tortured their victims. In a lynching involving incest, a black mob tortured an alleged rapist. At the time of the lynching, David Scruggs was a forty-two-year-old farmer, married, and had two daughters (aged ten and eleven).<sup>169</sup> Scruggs was arrested in 1885 for accusations of incest with one of his daughters in Jefferson County, Arkansas. When Scruggs failed to provide bail, he was returned to jail. However, he apparently “sued out a writ of habeas corpus” to a circuit judge and was released. In response to his release, a black lynch mob captured and tortured Scruggs. According to a news report, the “negroes ... carved him to pieces with knives, and the most unusual wounds inflicted on him” and subsequently, he “crept away in the woods and died.”<sup>170</sup>

In another example, a black mob reportedly burned the lynch victim. In 1893, Dan Nelson was accused of murdering Ben Betts in Lincoln County, Arkansas. Reportedly, Betts went to Nelson’s home to collect a rent payment. Betts and Nelson quarreled over the rent payment to such a degree that Nelson

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<sup>168</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of spectacle lynching, see Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009)

<sup>169</sup> Ancestry.com, s.vv. “David Scruggs,” 1880 Federal Census [database-online], Provo, Utah: The Generations Network, Inc., 2005.

<sup>170</sup> “Unnatural Father Lynched by His Colored Brethren,” *Little Rock Daily Gazette*, July 25, 1885, p. 1, col. 3. See the following newspaper articles for the remaining four rape allegations that involved children: “Strung Him Up,” *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, July 15, 1892, p. 1, col. 6; “A Negro Ravisher Lynched,” *Times Picayune*, July 1, 1885; *Times-Democrat* (New Orleans, LA), November 18, 1890, pg. 1; *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), September 20, 1903, p. 3.



shot and killed Betts. Purportedly, in response to the Betts murder “the negroes are worked up to a fever pitch-heat over the affair.” Furthermore, the newspaper report stated “the mob secured a long piece of steel...and with this battered down the door of the jail. This accomplished they had no difficulty securing the prisoner. The men were armed with Winchesters, and as soon as Nelson was taken out of the jail they leveled their guns and filled his body with lead. They then threw him on a pile of trash and set his clothes on fire.”<sup>171</sup> It is unclear why David Scruggs or Dan T. Nelson were tortured given that other lynch victims who committed similar crimes were not tortured. Perhaps some black mobs (particularly those mainly composed of friends and family) were so enraged by a particularly heinous crime that they expressed their collective disdain through torture.

While it is uncertain why some black mobs tortured their victims, it seems evident that black mobs lynched other blacks because they believed violent crimes warranted lynching. For example, black lynch mobs typically lynched blacks after they had already been arrested. On average, Southern black lynch mobs removed alleged criminals from police custody approximately forty percent of the time; however, black mobs in the Delta removed twenty-three of thirty-six (or sixty-four percent) lynch victims from police custody. Perhaps the perception that whites would not prosecute crimes perpetuated against blacks explains the greater frequency of blacks removing alleged criminals from legal authorities. In fact, in one particular lynching, it appears that a coroner’s jury (which consisted of mostly black jurors) was complicit in concealing the identities of mob

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<sup>171</sup> “Bullets and Fire,” Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, November 15, 1893, p. 1, col. 6.

participants. For example, in 1892, Julius Mosley allegedly raped a twelve-year-old girl in Desha County, Arkansas. Apparently, the police arrested Mosley but before he could be arraigned by a black justice of the peace, he was captured and lynched by a black mob. In response to the lynching, the newspaper report stated “a coroner’s jury today viewed the body of the dead brute, and returned a verdict that he came to his death by hanging at the hands of parties unknown. The coroner’s jury was composed of eleven negroes and one white man.”<sup>172</sup>

If blacks perceived the formal legal system as systematically ignoring crimes perpetuated against blacks, why would they have faith that the legal system would render justice, even if in some instances it appeared to be taking seriously crimes perpetuated against blacks? If Edward Ayers' observation that whites' apathy toward crimes perpetuated against blacks created a perception among blacks that the formal legal system represented “white law” is correct, it should come as no surprise then that blacks eschewed “white law,” even when it seemed to be adjudicating crimes perpetuated against blacks.

In sum, black lynch mob violence in the Delta was primarily carried out against young black male farm laborers who allegedly committed violent crimes. Given that violent crimes perpetuated against blacks were seldom punished, it makes sense that these crimes represent the bulk of allegations that typically produced black lynch mob violence. While the criminal justice system’s failure to prosecute violent crimes perpetuated against blacks likely encouraged vigilantism, it also seems that black lynch mobs believed murder and rape (particularly when women and children were the victims) warranted lynching.

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<sup>172</sup> “Strung Him Up,” Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, July 15, 1892, p. 1, col. 6.

Moreover, after emancipation, Delta black males were now legal heads of the household and likely interpreted violent attacks on black women and children as attacks on their manhood. Given this background, black lynch mob incidents were as much about performing masculine control over the household as they were about expunging dangerous criminals from the community.

### **The Racialization of Lynching and the Decline of Black Lynch Mobs**

The dramatic rise in white-on-black lynching and the emergence of the black beast rapist discourse occurred after the defeat of Congressional Reconstruction. Its demise signaled the end of Radical Republican politics in the South. In addition, it also meant that the federal government was no longer willing to use federal troops to safeguard black civil rights. Consequently, white conservative Democrats gradually ousted Republican state governments through political chicanery and violence. As white Democrats gained control of state legislatures in the 1880s, they increasingly developed state constitutions that either repealed or circumvented Reconstruction-era amendments that had guaranteed black civil rights. For example, the 1890 Mississippi constitution systematically eliminated black voting blocs through poll taxes, literacy tests, and understanding clauses. As a result, between 1890 and 1892, black voter registration plummeted from one hundred ninety thousand to eight thousand registered black voters in Mississippi. In the Mississippi Delta counties, the effect of disenfranchisement was even more dramatic. For example, Washington

County, Mississippi contained 9,103 eligible black voters; however, only 103 black voters (less than one percent of eligible voters) were registered in 1892.<sup>173</sup>

As white Southerners increasingly undermined black political power, the number of blacks lynched rose dramatically. Between the years 1882 and 1889, 316 Southern blacks died at the hands of white lynch mobs. The following decade, approximately 744 black people (approximately a three hundred percent increase) were executed by white mobs. Furthermore, as the number of black lynch victims rose, fewer whites were lynched. During the period 1882 to 1889, white-on-black lynch mob violence accounted for seventy-two percent of all lynching episodes whereas white-on-white lynch mob violence accounted for sixteen percent. A decade later, white-on-black lynch mob violence had increased to eighty-two percent of total lynching episodes and white-on-white lynch mob violence had decreased to twelve percent (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Number and Percentage of Lynch Victims by Decade, 1882–1930**

Year	Black Victim, Black Mob	Black Victim, White Mob	White Victim, White Mob	Percent Black Victim, Black Mob	Percent Black Victim, White Mob	Percent White Victim, White Mob
1882–1889	42	316	81	10	72	16
1890–1899	56	744	123	6	82	12
1900–1909	36	568	33	6	89	5
1910–1919	10	436	16	2	94	4
1920–1930	2	217	22	1	90	9

Source: Adapted from Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana, 1993), table C-3, 271.

<sup>173</sup> Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, IL, 1989), 43–47.

Interestingly, at the national level between the years 1882 and 1885, the number of whites lynched (411) far exceeded the number of blacks lynched (227). However, for the remainder of the nineteenth century, the number of blacks lynched increased from 227 to 1524 (roughly a six hundred percent increase), whereas white lynch victims increased from 411 to 696 (only a sixty-nine percent increase) during the same period. Yet, absolute numbers somewhat conceal the extent to which blacks were becoming the exclusive targets of lynch mob violence when one considers that in the year 1900, 106 blacks were lynched as compared to only nine whites.<sup>174</sup> Therefore, both regionally and nationally, the widening disparities between the number of white and black lynch victims after the mid-1880s reflected the racialization of lynch mob violence.

In addition, the racialization of lynching was also reflected in the development of spectacle lynching. By the early 1890s, thousands of whites routinely gathered in public squares to witness the torture and execution of alleged black criminals. These spectacles placed a premium upon performing racial domination, humiliation, and eliciting excruciating pain. Typically, spectacle lynching included taking the lynch victim to the scene of the crime, forcing them to confess or pray for forgiveness, mutilating body parts, and burning the lynch victim's corpse. Therefore, spectacle lynching served to dramatize unequal racial and gender power relationships through performing white masculine dominance over black bodies.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> For comprehensive lynching statistics between the years 1882 and 1968, see Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950*, (Philadelphia, PA, 1980), 4–7.

<sup>175</sup> For a discussion of the ritual aspects of spectacle lynching, see W. F. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, IL, 1993), Chapter 1. For an insightful

Amidst the emergence of spectacle lynching, Southern whites increasingly argued that lynching was necessary to thwart black beast rapists. An 1892 editorial published in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* (a white daily circulated within the Delta region) captures the ways in which the black beast rapist theory had become the preeminent justification for lynching. The editorial stated,

The lynching of three Negro scoundrels reported in our dispatches from Anniston, Ala., for a brutal outrage committed upon a white woman will be a text for much comment on "Southern barbarism" by Northern newspapers; but we fancy it will hardly prove effective for campaign purposes among intelligent people. The frequency of these lynchings calls attention to the frequency of the crimes which causes lynching. The "Southern barbarism" which deserves the serious attention of all people North and South, is the barbarism which preys upon weak and defenseless women. Nothing but the most prompt, speedy and extreme punishment can hold in check the horrible and bestial propensities of the Negro race. There is a strange similarity about a number of cases of this character which have lately occurred. In each case the crime was deliberately planned and perpetrated by several Negroes. They watched for an opportunity when the women were left without a protector. It was not a sudden yielding to a fit of passion, but the consummation of a devilish purpose which has been seeking and waiting for the opportunity. This feature of the crime not only makes it the most fiendishly brutal, but it adds to the terror of the situation in the thinly settled country communities. No man can leave his family at night without the dread that some roving Negro ruffian is watching and waiting for this opportunity. The swift punishment which invariably follows these horrible crimes doubtless acts as a deterring effect upon the Negroes in that immediate neighborhood for a short time. But the lesson is not widely learned nor long remembered. Then such crimes, equally atrocious, have happened in quick succession, one in Tennessee, one in Arkansas, and one in Alabama. The facts of the crime appear to appeal more to the Negro's lustful imagination than the facts of the punishment do to his fears. He sets aside all fear of death in any form when opportunity is found for the gratification of his bestial desires. There is small reason to hope for any change for the better. The commission of this crime grows more frequent every year. The generation of Negroes which have grown up since the war have lost in large measure the traditional and wholesome awe of the white race which kept the Negroes in subjection, even when their masters were in the army, and their families left unprotected except by the slaves themselves. There is no longer a restraint upon the brute passion of the Negro.<sup>176</sup>

As similar reports of the black beast rapist increasingly appeared in newspapers across the country, more and more whites (even those most progressive on racial issues) came to view lynching as a necessary response to black male sexual aggression against white women. In fact, in response to the black beast

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discussion of the cultural and political significance of spectacle lynching, see Jacqueline Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 1979), 149–157.

<sup>176</sup> This quotation was taken from Ida B. Wells, *On Lynchings*, ed. Patricia Hill Collins (Amherst, New York, 2002).

hysteria, in 1897, Rebecca Latimer Felton, a liberal activist-writer within the Democratic Party and the first female US Senator, declared “if it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beasts—then I say lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary.”<sup>177</sup>

Thus, before the late 1880s, more whites than blacks fell victim to lynch mob violence and therefore lynchings had not yet become firmly racialized. This does not mean that instances of white-on-black lynching prior to the late 1880s were not racially motivated. Rather, it means that in the wake of Reconstruction’s defeat, whites increasingly employed lynching as a means to reassert white supremacy. Moreover, Southern whites argued that lynching was necessary because black savages were raping white women in alarming numbers. More importantly, whites’ widespread acceptance of the black beast rapist discourse transformed white-on-black lynching into a moral duty to protect white womanhood. Consequently, these developments impacted the meaning and trajectory of black lynch mob violence.

The 1880s represented the peak of black lynch mob activity. For instance, in the South between the years 1882 and 1889, black lynch mob activity accounted for approximately ten percent of total lynch mob incidents. For every subsequent decade, black lynch mob violence (as a percentage of total lynching incidents) decreased. Similarly, in the Delta region, black lynch mob incidents peaked at twenty-three percent of total lynching episodes during the 1880s and declined every decade thereafter. Additionally, sixty-eight percent (or one

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<sup>177</sup> Rebecca Latimer Felton, “The Needs of Farmers’ Wives and Daughters,” in *Lynching in America: A History in Documents*, ed. Christopher Waldrep (New York, 2006), 143–144.

hundred of 148 incidents) of Southern black/integrated mob violence and fifty-five percent (or twenty of thirty-six incidents) of Delta black lynch mob incidents occurred before 1900. Therefore, black lynch mob violence was primarily a late nineteenth century phenomena.<sup>178</sup>

More importantly, black lynch mob incidents steadily declined as blacks were becoming the primary targets of white lynch mob violence. Between the years 1882 and 1889, Southern lynch mob violence had the following distribution: seventy-two percent white-on-black lynch mobs, sixteen percent white-on-white mobs, and ten percent black lynch mobs. In the subsequent decade, white-on-black lynch mob incidents increased to eighty-two percent and both white-on-white and black lynch mob violence decreased to twelve and six percent, respectively (see Table 3). Similarly, white-on-black lynch mob violence comprised seventy-seven percent of total lynching incidents and black lynch mob violence comprised twenty-three percent of total lynching incidents in the Delta. In the subsequent decade, white-on-black mob violence increased to eighty-four percent and black lynch mob violence had decreased to sixteen percent of total lynching incidents. Furthermore, by the 1920s, black lynch mob violence comprised a mere four percent of lynch mob violence whereas white-on-black lynch mob violence accounted for ninety-six percent of lynchings in the Delta region (see Table 4 and Figure 1). Therefore, after the peak period of black lynch mob violence in the 1880s, black lynch mob violence steadily declined as blacks became the primary targets of white lynch mob violence.

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<sup>178</sup> Tolnay and Beck, "When Race Didn't Matter," 136.



**Table 4. Percentage of Blacks Lynched by White and Black Mobs in the Delta Region, 1882–1930**

Decade	Black Victim, Black Mob	Black Victim, White Mob	Total Black Victims	Percentage Lynched by Black Mobs	Percentage Lynched by White Mobs
1882–1889	11	37	48	23	77
1890–1899	9	49	58	16	84
1900–1909	11	71	82	13	87
1910–1919	4	42	46	9	91
1920–1930	1	27	28	4	96
Aggregate Total	36	226	262	14	86

Source: Adapted from Project Hal: Historical American Lynching Data Collection Project, <http://people.uncw.edu/hinese/HAL/HAL%20Web%20Page.htm> (accessed June 3, 2009).

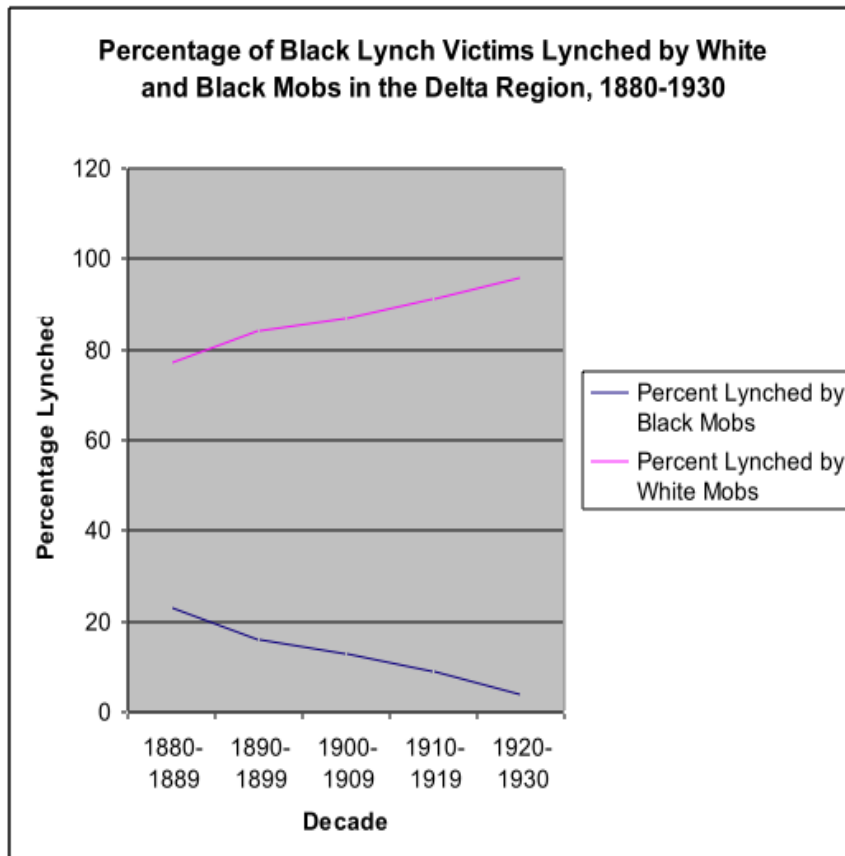


Figure 1. Percentage of Black Lynch Victims Lynched by White and Black Mobs in the Delta Region, 1880–1930. (Note: The top line refers to the percent lynched by white mobs.)

## **Conclusion**

Black lynch mob violence in the Delta emerged amidst several political and demographic transformations in the late 1870s and 1880s. In particular, it coincided with the end of Reconstruction and intense black migration into the Delta frontier. Within the Delta's frontier context, rampant violence and a legal system that was increasingly unresponsive to crimes perpetrated against blacks likely encouraged black extralegal violence. Nonetheless, rape and murder were the predominant allegations that precipitated black lynch mob violence, which suggests that blacks believed those particular crimes warranted lynching. Historically, the 1880s represented the peak period for black lynch mob violence. However, by the 1890s, lynching had become a racialized phenomenon in which blacks were the primary targets of white lynch mob violence. In addition, the emergent black beast rapist discourse rationalized white-on-black lynching as a moral duty to protect white womanhood. These developments likely compelled blacks to increasingly abstain from lynching after the 1880s because black extralegal violence might have possibly implied black support for white-on-black lynching and the racist discourses that rationalized it. Therefore, Delta blacks increasingly eschewed lynching because of the negative implications of black mob violence that overwhelmed traditional rationales for it. Hence, the decline in black lynch mob violence activity should be understood as black grassroots resistance to the racialization of lynching.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESISTING LYNCHING

In 1910, Elmo Curl was accused of assaulting a white woman by attempting to give her an “improper” note as she returned home from work in Panola County, Mississippi. The newspaper implied that Curl made an unsolicited sexual advance. When W. P. Miller, a white plantation manager, attempted to arrest Curl for his indiscretion, he allegedly shot and fatally wounded Miller. Shortly after these two incidents, a white posse was organized and began scouring the surrounding area in order to arrest Curl. The report depicted him as a “negro desperado” and warned that he was “supposed to be hiding in the swamps... and is heavily armed and a battle is expected.”<sup>179</sup> The report likely inflamed lynching sentiment and provided the search posse with a convenient excuse to use excessive force in capturing him. The initial posse failed to locate Curl. In fact, he successfully escaped and traveled over 600 miles to Kansas City (Missouri) where he was eventually captured by J. McHenry, an Arkansas Deputy Sheriff. It is unclear why Curl fled to Kansas City, but perhaps he had relatives in the city who agreed to provide him a temporary safe haven. It is also unclear why or how McHenry was able to capture Curl, but it appears that his motivation stemmed from the financial reward he received. McHenry returned Curl to Panola County where he was given over to a lynch

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<sup>179</sup> *Galveston Daily News* (Galveston, TX), [NewspaperArchive.com], May 17, 1910, p. 2, col. 1 and *Logansport Pharos* (Logansport, IN), [NewspaperArchive.com], June 14, 1910, p. 7, col. 5.

mob. Despite the pleadings of the county sheriff, the mob took Curl to the site of the alleged assault and hung him from a tree.<sup>180</sup>

The Curl lynching typifies how black lynch victims responded to anticipated lynchings. Black suspects typically sought refuge with family and friends. Blacks accused of a crime (particularly the rape or murder of a white person) rarely turned themselves in to white authorities. As in the Elmo Curl case, blacks sometimes traveled long distances (even across state lines) to escape a lynch mob. They went to such great lengths because flight gave them (and potentially their family members) the best chance of escaping a lynching-in-the-making. However, even when fleeing, black suspects were discovered by white authorities or lynch mobs, in numerous instances they refused to surrender and violently defended themselves because of their distrust of the white-dominated legal system. Their refusal to surrender also reflected a tradition of armed self-defense and a militant black masculine ethos for which armed resistance was understood as an acceptable and necessary survival tactic. Besides flight and armed resistance, Delta blacks occasionally threatened to violently retaliate against whites whom they believed were responsible for a lynching.

In the chapter that follows, I argue that black flight and armed resistance in response to anticipated lynchings are best understood as a unit rather than as discrete responses. Accordingly, I argue that flight and armed resistance constitute the dominant black responses to anticipated lynch mob violence in the Delta.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

## Flight as Resistance to Lynching

### *Rationale for Flight*

Within the African American experience, flight has been an enduring and potent form of resistance. During slavery, thousands of enslaved blacks fled Southern plantations in order to secure freedom in the North.<sup>181</sup> In doing so, slave runaways resisted slavery by depriving slave owners of their labor and profits from a potential sale.

Similarly, Southern newspaper accounts of lynching abounded with stories of blacks evading white posses or police, albeit if only temporarily. However, in some cases, blacks outwitted white lynch mobs and successfully escaped. For instance, Georgia Ford, a long-time resident of Elaine, Arkansas, recalled how her father told her and other children stories about the 1919 Elaine race riot. She recalled crying after hearing how dozens of black men and women were hung during and after the riot, how her father killed white men during the riot, and how Elaine blacks helped him escape. Ford stated, “he killed a lot of white people and they put him in a box and put him on a train and shipped him out of there. He said he rode the train until he got to the Mississippi River and he said he jumped off the train and swam across the Mississippi River.”<sup>182</sup> Regardless of blacks’ success or failure in escaping mob violence, flight is significant because it demonstrates that black lynch victims were not simply passive victims. Rather, the numerous instances of black lynch victims evading capture highlight black

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<sup>181</sup> See, Ira Berlin, *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>182</sup> Georgia Ford, interviewed by Paul Ortiz and Mausiki Scales, July, 20, 1995, Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project, Durham, NC.

lynch victims and the black community's efforts to save blacks from white mob violence.

Historian W. F. Brundage argued that forty-eight percent of blacks captured by posses never reached legal authorities and of those turned over to legal authorities; twenty-eight percent were lynched before they were placed in jail.<sup>183</sup> Even when white authorities offered a modicum of resistance to white lynch mobs, they were often overpowered by large and impassioned mobs. For example, in 1909, regardless of the threats of Sheriff C. M. Philpot and the pleadings of Circuit Judge A. B. Grace, a mob of two hundred men removed Lovett Davis, who was accused of assaulting and murdering Amy Holmes, from the Little Rock county jail and lynched him in view of the Little Rock Sheriff, deputies, and Circuit Judge. Prior to the lynching, Sheriff Philpot reportedly "drew his revolver and declared to the mob that the man who attempted to enter the jail would die."<sup>184</sup> While the Sheriff stood off the mob, Circuit Judge Grace arrived upon the scene and in an impromptu speech urged the mob to let justice run its course. Reportedly, the Judge took a chair and delivered an impassioned speech to the mob stating, "if you will go home and let the negro remain in jail, I will order a special Grand Jury at once, and his case will go to trial at the earliest possible moment."<sup>185</sup> When his pleas failed, Judge Grace threatened the mob declaring, "if you take this negro from the custody of the officers I shall make it my special business to see that no stone is left unturned to bring each and every

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<sup>183</sup> W. F. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 33–35.

<sup>184</sup> "Mob at Pine Bluff Lynches a Negro," *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, May 25, 1909, p. 1, col. 7.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

one of you to speedy justice.”<sup>186</sup> In defiance of both Sheriff Philpot and Judge Grace, the lynch mob broke into the jail and hung Davis from a telephone pole in downtown Little Rock.<sup>187</sup>

Given white authorities’ inability to prevent lynchings, Delta blacks rarely submitted to police arrest. For instance, on December 26, 1920, Ragland, a police officer, “walked in” on a dice game and attempted to arrest a group of blacks for playing dice in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Wade Thomas allegedly replied that he would not submit to arrest and shot Ragland. However, Thomas later argued that he did not shoot Ragland until after Ragland fired the first shot. Subsequently, Wade escaped to nearby Hoxie, Arkansas with the help of other blacks. The following day, Jonesboro police captured Thomas at a railroad station in Hoxie, Arkansas and placed him in the Craighead County jail. That night, a crowd of three hundred “infuriated citizens” formed outside the jail and demanded the jailer open Thomas’ cell. In the meantime, Judge R. H. Dudley and Judge R. L. Johnson intervened to convince the mob to allow the law to decide Thomas’ fate. Despite their entreaties, the mob removed Thomas from his cell, hung him from an electric pole two blocks from the jail, and shot him at least ten times.<sup>188</sup>

Additionally, Delta blacks often fled police arrest because they knew white authorities were often passive spectators and sometimes active participants in lynching.<sup>189</sup> In fact, in several instances, police harassment instigated white mob

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), December 27, 1920, p. 1, col. 3, pg. 2, col. 5.

<sup>189</sup> Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 445–6.

violence. In 1909, Walter Marshall, a white policeman in Clarksdale, Mississippi attempted to arrest a group of black men for playing craps. According to a newspaper report, officers Walter Marshall and J. L. Shannon found out that a group of blacks were playing craps in a room nearby the Clarksdale train depot and decided to raid it. The officers stationed themselves in the front and rear of the location, demanded to be allowed entry, and when the black men refused them entrance, the policemen fired three shots into the room. In retaliation, someone in the room fired a shot and killed Marshall. Despite being outnumbered, Shannon managed to arrest two black men who participated in the craps game. Following the shooting, police questioned Nathan McDaniels and three other black men who were involved; however, they released McDaniels because he convinced them that he had not been involved. Subsequently, one of the arrested men confessed that McDaniels had shot and killed the police officer. According to a newspaper report, a fifteen-man posse captured Nathan McDaniels in a swamp near Duncan, Mississippi. In order to avert a mob that had formed to lynch McDaniels, the police bypassed Clarksdale and instead placed him in jail in Jackson, Mississippi.<sup>190</sup>

### *Flight and Delta Geography*

White posses organized quickly in response to rumors of black criminality which in turn limited black lynch victims' ability to outpace them or allow family time to help them escape. Given the limited window of time they had to escape, black lynch victims often fled the scene of the alleged crime on foot. In many

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<sup>190</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 5, 1909, p. 1, col. 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 6, 1909, p. 1, col. 1.



cases, black fugitives in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas sought refuge within the Delta's labyrinth of swamps and dense forests. Black fugitives who fled to swamps or dense Mississippi and Arkansas Delta forests were part of a tradition of using the region's geography as an asset in evading capture and securing freedom. For instance, in *Black Life on the Mississippi*, historian Thomas Buchanan argues that while the precise number of antebellum river runaways is impossible to gauge, documentary evidence suggests that thousands of slaves escaped slavery via western rivers (most notably the Mississippi River) on Northern-bound steamboats.<sup>191</sup>

Similarly, black fugitives in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas used the region's patchwork of dense forests and swampland to evade capture. For example, in 1909, a dispute between Sam Blakely and Bud Harper precipitated a lynching in Chicot County, Arkansas. Harper, a white neighbor, killed Sam Blakely's dog and in response Joe and Sam Blakely allegedly assaulted him. In response, Sheriff W. A. Cain went to Sam Blakely's residence to arrest them. He informed Sam Blakely that he was under arrest to which Blakely replied, "All right just let me get my coat." Next, the sheriff motioned to enter Blakely's residence under the belief that Blakely was indeed getting his coat; however, before he was fully inside, Blakely tried to slam the door shut. The sheriff pushed the door open and when he did Blakely shot and killed him. Blakely fled to a nearby swamp and later boarded a freight train between Montrose and Dermott, Arkansas. It seems a police officer spotted Blakely in Dermott, commanded him to halt, but

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<sup>191</sup> Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 101.

instead Blakely opened fire and fled the scene. While Sam Blakely successfully escaped, his brother had been arrested and jailed in Portland, Arkansas in connection with the Harper assault. In retaliation for Sheriff W. A. Cain's death, a white mob removed Joe Blakely from his jail cell and lynched him.<sup>192</sup>

In another example, in 1925, Hal Winters and an unidentified black male allegedly shot and killed John W. Martin, a white plantation manager in Leflore County, Mississippi. According to a newspaper report, John Martin's murder was precipitated by a dispute between Winters and another black male. Winters and his accomplice borrowed a mule from a black neighbor and apparently began to beat the mule. The mule's owner protested the beating and reported the beating to his boss, John Martin. In response, Martin went to Winters' residence to confront him on the matter and allegedly Martin entered the residence and upon entry Winters shot Martin in the back. Afterwards, Winters and his accomplice immediately fled to a nearby swamp; however, a hastily formed posse quickly surrounded them and shot them to death.<sup>193</sup>

### *Flight and Black Social Networks*

Most fugitives who fled anticipated lynch mob violence often used social networks in their efforts to evade lynch mob violence. For instance, when black lynch victims fled, they routinely relied on family and friends to hide them or secretly convey them out of town. What is more, black lynch victims were often captured by posses in the vicinity of their family's residence. In fact, it seems

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<sup>192</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, May 31, 1909, p. 1, col. 7.

<sup>193</sup> *Vicksburg Herald* (Vicksburg, MS), February 18, 1925, p. 1, col. 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 18, 1925, p. 1, col. 7.

that white posses typically suspected black fugitives to seek asylum with friends and family. For example, in 1905, Dave Sims murdered R. F. Jones, a plantation owner, and his employer in Coahoma County. According to a newspaper report, Sims was quickly captured by a posse and confessed his guilt. Purportedly, he caused a disturbance with another plantation employee on the grounds of the plantation in which Jones intervened. In retaliation, Jones struck Sims twice in the head with a revolver and in response Sims shot Jones in the head with a Winchester rifle. Black employees on the Jones' plantation notified J. W. Baugh, Jones' nearest neighbor, that Sims had murdered him. In response, a sixty-person posse (that included bloodhounds and county convict farm laborers) was ordered to search for Sims. The search party scoured the surrounding countryside and guarded the nearby rail line and docks. The posse believed Sims would seek refuge with one of his brothers who lived in nearby Coahoma and Lula, Mississippi. Apparently, when Sims was captured near Coahoma, he was headed toward his brother's residence. The posse deliberated on the method of his execution, returned him to Jones' plantation, and hung him from a tree.<sup>194</sup>

Also, in 1926, Bud Nelson allegedly murdered Ed Henderson, son of a prominent plantation owner, in Jefferson County, Arkansas. According to a newspaper report, Nelson shot and killed Ed Henderson as he was returning to his father's plantation. After Nelson shot and killed Henderson, he supposedly bragged to black farm laborers on the plantation that he had killed Henderson. Following the murder, a manhunt commenced for Nelson. Jefferson county

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<sup>194</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 22, 1905, p. 1, col. 3.

authorities sent descriptions and photographs of Nelson to authorities throughout Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Nelson successfully evaded the posse; however, a white farmer discovered and “riddled” Nelson’s body with bullets in a swamp near his plantation in Tarry, Arkansas. According to the newspaper report, Nelson had many relatives on a Tarry plantation and likely fled to Tarry for safekeeping.<sup>195</sup>

As the above examples suggest, family members or close friends were willing to risk their own lives to avert an anticipated lynching. However, the consequences of aiding black fugitives were usually deadly. For instance, in the 1906 near lynching of Nathan McDaniels in Clarksdale, Mississippi, McDaniels narrowly escaped a lynching because Hiram McDaniels, his brother, facilitated his escape by providing him with a mule. When it became clear that Nathan McDaniels had escaped, the mob gathered outside the Clarksdale train depot and lynched Hiram McDaniels after he confessed to police that he had assisted in his brother’s escape.<sup>196</sup>

In addition to kin networks, black fraternal networks aided black fugitives in escaping lynch mob violence. This phenomenon reflected the dramatic increase in fraternal lodges and membership rates in the Delta region during the 1880s. According to historian John Gigge, the Odd Fellows Lodge, the largest and most popular black fraternal organization in Mississippi, boasted 117,505 members by 1901.<sup>197</sup> The growth in fraternal lodges occurred in response to new

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<sup>195</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, November 2, 1926, p. 5, col. 6.

<sup>196</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 5, 1909, p. 1, col. 3; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 6, 1909, p. 1, col. 3

<sup>197</sup> John M. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875–1915*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63.

railroad lines which made recruitment efforts easier. More importantly, black males believed fraternal associations offered alternative avenues to assert dignity and status. In addition, fraternal lodges offered black males a measure of financial and emotional stability that was otherwise impossible during Jim Crow. For instance, fraternal lodges offered burial and sickness insurance and small loans for business development and home purchases.<sup>198</sup> Based upon these overlapping and dense social ties, black fraternal members risked their lives to help secure safe passage of potential lynch victims when possible.

For example, in 1892, Henry Lowery, a tenant farmer, allegedly murdered O. T. Craig, a wealthy Mississippi planter and his daughter, Mrs. May Bell Williamson, on Christmas Day in Nodena, Arkansas. Reportedly, Lowery (a tenant farmer on the Craig plantation) arrived at the Craig plantation during dinner time and assaulted a black woman on the plantation. O. T. Craig overheard the assault and intervened. In response, Lowery drew his revolver and shot Craig and his daughter, who ran to her father's aid.<sup>199</sup>

In contrast to the *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette's* version of events, Nan Woodruff, a Delta labor historian, pieced together an alternative story (using NAACP records and oral history testimony) of the events leading up to the violent confrontation between Lowery and Craig. According to Woodruff, O. T. Craig typically refused to settle up with his tenants and behaved as if he did not owe them anything. Seeking to improve his lot, Lowery left the Craig plantation in search of better pay elsewhere. In order to leave without Craig's interference,

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>199</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, January 27, 1921, p. 1, col. 2 and p. 9, col. 2.

Lowery confronted Craig and demanded a settlement for his two years' worth of labor. In response Craig threw a stick at him. According to Woodruff, Lowery retaliated by shooting Craig and subsequently his daughter and sons who came to his aid. In the end, Lowery had killed both Craig and his daughter and wounded his two sons.<sup>200</sup>

According to Woodruff, Lowery hid himself among friends and family (many of whom belonged to either the Masons or Odd Fellows Lodge). In fact, Lowery was a thirty-third degree Mason (the highest distinction within the order). After several days of hiding in and around Nodena, Lowery fled to El Paso, Texas with the aid of his fraternal brothers. Lowery may have escaped a lynching, if a letter he wrote to his friends back in Nodena (which described his whereabouts) had not been intercepted and turned over to the police. The Nodena sheriff immediately sent twelve deputies to El Paso and subsequently captured Lowery.<sup>201</sup>

According to the *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, the Nodena sheriff instructed the officers to place Lowery in the state penitentiary in Little Rock, Arkansas. In addition, the sheriff instructed the officers to select a train route that would insure Lowery's safety. However, in spite of the sheriff's instructions, the officers selected a circuitous route to Little Rock which included stops in New Orleans, Louisiana and Memphis, Tennessee. According to the *Gazette*, scouts were stationed at various railroad terminals along the route. Apparently, between New Orleans and Memphis, a mob composed of fifteen to twenty armed men

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<sup>200</sup> Nan Woodruff, *American Congo*, 111.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

boarded the train carrying Lowery at Sardis, Mississippi, removed him from police custody, hastily returned him to Nodena, and burned him alive near the Craig plantation.

Prior to Lowery's lynching, he allegedly confessed to murdering O. T. Craig and his daughter and implicated two other blacks in the murder.<sup>202</sup> Moreover, according to a *New York Times* report, seven members of the Odd Fellows lodge were arrested for providing Lowery with money, food, and shelter. Of the seven accomplices, three were jailed in Marion, Arkansas and two others in Blytheville, Arkansas. According to the *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, a lynch mob planned to descend upon Blytheville, remove Lowery's accomplices from jail, and lynch them.<sup>203</sup> In response, Arkansas Governor Thomas McRae urged the commander of the American Legion Post in Blytheville to use every means at his command in assisting the police in upholding law and order and to prevent the lynching. In addition, Sheriff Blackwood, the Mississippi County sheriff, confidently asserted that Lowery's accomplices were protected by twenty-five armed deputies and that they "[would] not be taken from the jail." Evidently, the sheriff's show of force worked and the mob did not attempt to lynch Lowery's accomplices.<sup>204</sup>

The Lowery lynching demonstrates the importance of white vigilance in capturing black fugitives. More importantly, it suggests that black social networks made escaping a lynch mob possible. While white vigilance in pursuit of black fugitives typically ended in a lynching, in one rare case, a black man accused of

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<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *New York Times*, [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], January 27, 1921.

<sup>204</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, January 27, 1921, p. 1, col. 2 and p. 9, col. 2.

murdering a white plantation owner in the Arkansas Delta escaped an inevitable lynching with the aid of Ida B. Wells and several other prominent blacks in Chicago. In March 1910, Steve Green, a black tenant farmer, allegedly shot and killed William Sidel, a white planter in nearby Marion, Arkansas. According to a newspaper report published in the days following the incident, Green shot Sidel after he had repeatedly warned Green to remove himself from the plantation.<sup>205</sup> In a later newspaper report published by the *Chicago Defender*, Green contradicted his earlier story. According to Green, the dispute with Sidel developed as a result of his desire to leave the Sidel plantation because another white planter offered him more money to work for him. In response, Sidel told Green that if he quit, “the country would not hold them both.” However, once his contract with Sidel ended, Green left his plantation. According to Green, Sidel came to his cabin with three men and demanded that Green return. When Green boldly refused, Sidel and his posse shot Green four times. Amazingly, Green retreated into his cabin, retrieved his gun, and as he fled to his cabin, he shot and killed Sidel.<sup>206</sup>

According to Green, for a brief while, he hid in a friend’s cabin; however, when his friend became fearful that the posse would find him, he left. With a posse and bloodhounds on his heels, Green reportedly filled his shoes with pepper and wallowed in the mud in order to avert the bloodhounds.

Miraculously, Green escaped the pursuing posse and made his way to Chicago. It is unclear when Green arrived in Chicago or when he was arrested by Chicago

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<sup>205</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, March 3, 1910, p. 2, col. 4.

<sup>206</sup> *Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition), [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], September 24, 1910, pg. 1.



police. Nevertheless, during the period between when he arrived in Chicago and when he was arrested, Arkansas Governor George Washington Donaghey issued extradition papers for Green, which were subsequently honored by Illinois governor Charles S. Deneen.<sup>207</sup>

Meanwhile, Ida B. Wells learned that Green would be extradited to Arkansas and most likely lynched upon his return. Wells apparently convinced two black Chicago attorneys to petition the Cook County Circuit court for a writ of habeas corpus, which would effectively block Green's extradition. It appears on August 23, the court granted the writ of habeas corpus but for reasons unmentioned in published reports, the Chicago police turned Green over to Arkansas authorities.<sup>208</sup>

According to the *Chicago Defender*, while in Arkansas authorities' custody, they told Green that "he was the most important Nigger in the United States since there was a reception committee of a thousand waiting for him in Arkansas with lighted fire."<sup>209</sup> Wells worried that once Green left Illinois, the court extradition would no longer be valid. Fortunately, Alexander County Sheriff Nellis intercepted and apprehended Green in Cairo, Illinois (the southernmost town in the state of Illinois) just as they were about to cross over into Missouri. After Green returned safely to Chicago, Wells praised the Chicago police as exemplary in preventing white mob violence because they "used every method known to modern ingenuity to intercept the prisoner before crossing the line of the State [Illinois]."<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

On September 19 (only a few weeks after his near extradition), Steve Green's trial for the murder of William Sidel was convened in Chicago. Interestingly, within days of the trial's start, Judge Tuthill of the Cook County Circuit Court ruled that Green was innocent of charges and released him. It is not clear how Green's defense attorneys established his innocence or whether the state of Arkansas challenged the courts' ruling. More research has to be done in order to understand the circumstances that brought about Green's acquittal and the state of Arkansas' response to the failed extradition and acquittal.<sup>211</sup>

Regardless of the reasons for Green's release, his story highlights the role black social networks played in averting white mob violence. It is safe to assume that Green would have been captured, returned to Arkansas, and lynched by a white mob without the initial refuge Green's friends provided in Arkansas and the financial and legal support he received from black Chicagoans such as Ida B. Wells and others. However, Green's narrow escape of white mob violence in Arkansas and his near extradition highlights the limited effectiveness of flight as a form of resistance. For instance, the Green case suggests that flight could only be effective insofar as blacks were able to gain legal sanctuary or at the very least anonymity outside the South. Granted that most black lynch victims sought asylum with nearby relatives and in situations in which blacks traveled long distances, white posses relentlessly tracked them down. Given this reality, black lynch victims typically had to violently defend themselves against white lynch mobs or surrender to annihilation.

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, blacks in the Delta and elsewhere in the South faced a dire predicament. They understood that they were trapped in a society that presumed their guilt. If they submitted to arrest or capture, the best they could hope for was a speedy trial that would most likely end in a state-sanctioned “legal lynching” or at worst they would be pursued, captured, and lynched by a mob of enraged whites who were intent on exacting sadistic punishment. Given these options, blacks fled in order to save themselves from white mob violence.

### **Armed Resistance to Lynching**

Black armed self-defense was usually a tactic of last resort to avoid lynching. Blacks typically fled in anticipation of mob violence because flight gave them (and potentially their family members) the best chance of escaping a lynching. However, when fleeing black suspects were discovered by white authorities or lynch mobs, they often refused to surrender and violently defended themselves. In part, blacks typically fled first and violently defended themselves after all other options had been exhausted because armed resistance could provoke white terrorist violence against the entire black community. Yet, despite the risks armed resistance entailed, black lynch victims employed it because it held out the possibility of preventing a lynching-in-the-making.

### *Lynching as a Response to Armed Resistance*

Armed self-defense to lynching was rooted in a much longer tradition of armed resistance. For instance, during the antebellum period, Southern blacks

organized militias.<sup>212</sup> During the Civil War, enslaved blacks in Natchez, Mississippi rebelled against their masters.<sup>213</sup> During Reconstruction, Delta blacks formed Loyalty Leagues to organize black voters and protect them from anticipated white terrorist violence.<sup>214</sup> Moreover, in 1890, a group of four hundred armed blacks guarded election results in Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>215</sup>

While black self-defense was rooted in a tradition of armed resistance in the Delta, in part, its emergence reflected national trends. According to Sundiata Cha-Jua, blacks increasingly defended themselves against mob violence and endorsed self-defense as a tactic to protest/prevent mob violence by the 1890s because blacks had lost faith in moral suasion and legalism as strategies to prevent lynching. For example, according to Cha Jua, in 1894, armed blacks in Decatur, Illinois militarily occupied the city's central business district in order to prevent the lynching of a black male accused of raping a white woman. Decatur blacks utilized armed self-defense because the previous year a black male had been removed from the Decatur jail and lynched in the public square with little or no interference from local authorities.<sup>216</sup>

Also, in 1899, Henry Delegale, a black worker, allegedly raped a white woman in Darien, Georgia (McIntosh County). Interestingly, Delegale voluntarily turned himself over to local authorities and was placed in jail. According to

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<sup>212</sup> See, Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, "Rehearsal for War: Black Militias in the Atlantic World," *Slavery and Abolition* 26: (2005), 1–34.

<sup>213</sup> See, Winthrop Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1993).

<sup>214</sup> See, Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1989).

<sup>215</sup> *New York Times*, [ProQuest Historical Newspapers] September 3, 1890.

<sup>216</sup> Sundiata Cha-Jua, "A Warlike Demonstration: Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894–1898," *Journal of Urban History* 26 (2000), 610.

Brundage, the local authorities decided to transfer Delegale to jail in Savannah in order to prevent a lynching. Apparently, Darien blacks believed Delegale would be lynched if he were transferred to another jail. In response, a group of armed blacks surrounded the Darien jail so that neither the police nor a mob could remove Delegale from the jail. The local authorities attempted to remove Delegale several times from the Darien jail; however, each time a group of armed blacks rebuffed them. Eventually, the local authorities requested the state militia. When the state militia arrived, Darien blacks provided no resistance and allowed them to transfer Delegale to a Savannah prison.<sup>217</sup>

Within the Delta, black armed self-defense as a response to an anticipated lynching was more often than not precipitated by violent confrontations between blacks and white plantation owners, merchants, and white police. For instance, approximately forty-four percent of black lynch victims were accused of murdering whites between the years 1880 and 1930. If attempted murders are included, over fifty percent of all black lynch victims were accused of murder. In addition, my analysis of Delta lynching revealed that approximately half of all black lynch victims accused of murder allegedly murdered white police or plantation owners, managers, and merchants. The murder of white police and whites connected to the plantation economy represents a significant proportion of murder allegations primarily because violence and coercion characterized relations between white authorities, the plantation elite (which included plantation owners, managers/overseers, and merchants), and blacks. For instance, at least a half dozen Delta lynchings were precipitated by black armed resistance to

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<sup>217</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 238–243.

police arrest. Two such incidents occurred as a result of white authorities' attempts to raid black leisure establishments. For example, in 1914, a white posse lynched Jim Robinson for his alleged complicity in murdering Morrow Love, a white police officer, during a police raid near Robinsonville, Mississippi. The police raid appeared to have been prompted by allegations that a black "hoodoo preacher held wild orgies" and "preached to the negroes ... to believe they were immune to death at the hands of white men." On the night of the incident, Morrow Love (along with several other officers) carried high-powered rifles into the "hop dive" (reportedly owned by the hoodoo preacher) in order to shut it down.<sup>218</sup> Upon entering the establishment, black patrons seized Morrow Love's rifle and shot him during the ensuing struggle. In response, a white posse immediately organized and executed two blacks who were implicated in Love's murder. Jim Robinson fled and evaded capture for four months; however, he was eventually captured and lynched for Morrow Love's murder.<sup>219</sup>

Violent clashes between blacks and white plantation owners/managers typically occurred as a result of labor-related disputes. In 1924, Walter Bell, a black tenant farmer, shot and killed a white plantation manager (named "Mr. Barbee") in Tunica County, Mississippi. According to the newspaper report, Barbee was returning from a trip to Memphis, Tennessee when he discovered Walter Bell and Jesse Field with a carload of household goods and bedding tied on the side, and with his wife and Walter Bell's family in the car. Reportedly, Mr. Barbee asked Fields if he was moving. Fields replied, "No, sir, I'm just moving

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<sup>218</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 30, 1914, p. 6, col. 5.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

Walter's things for him." Subsequently, Mr. Barbee went to Field's house and found it empty. Armed with a shotgun, Barbee pursued Fields and eventually caught up to him. Barbee demanded Fields turn the car over to him; however, Fields refused. Next, Fields allegedly struck Barbee over the head with a monkey wrench and in response Barbee shot and killed Fields. In retaliation, Walter Bell shot and killed Barbee. Subsequently, Bell and two unidentified black women escaped and a posse of several hundred men surrounded them in a thicket. The women surrendered and were brought to jail, but Bell, who was armed with a shotgun, refused to surrender and was killed by members of the posse.<sup>220</sup>

In another example, in 1915, William Patrick, a tenant farmer, allegedly shot and killed Bard Nichols, son of a white plantation owner, in Forest City, Arkansas in a dispute over a settlement price. According to a newspaper report, Patrick was a tenant farmer on the Nichols' family farm. On the day of the incident, Bard Nichols went to his family's farm in order to negotiate a settlement price for the crops Patrick had raised. Subsequently, Patrick and Nichols quarreled over the settlement price and consequently Patrick shot and killed Nichols. However, Patrick told a different story. Patrick asserted that he shot Nichols because he knocked his daughter down and threatened him. After killing Nichols, Patrick fled, but was captured by a search posse ten minutes later. According to a newspaper report, Patrick was given two trials, and each time, the jury failed to reach a verdict. As a result of the judicial stalemate, the newspaper

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<sup>220</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 16, 1924.

argued that Patrick was taken from the county jail and lynched by a mob because it was believed that he would escape punishment.<sup>221</sup>

While labor disputes precipitated most violent clashes between white planters and black tenants, disputes between black tenants could also precipitate a lynching. For instance, in 1904, Luther Holbert and an unidentified black female were burned alive for the murder of James Eastland, a wealthy plantation owner, and Albert Carr, a black tenant on Eastland's plantation, in Doddsville, Mississippi. According to one historian, Eastland's murder was precipitated by a black tenant farmer who made unsolicited advances toward a woman believed to have been Holbert's wife. Holbert complained to Eastland, but he refused to intercede. While the details are unclear, it appears Holbert may have confronted the tenant about his unwanted advances. In response, Eastland (accompanied by Albert Carr) went to Holbert's cabin and demanded that he either submit to the other man's advances or leave the plantation. Rather than surrender to Eastland's ultimatum, Holbert shot and killed both Eastland and Albert Carr.<sup>222</sup> Holbert and his wife initially fled into a nearby swamp, apparently with the aid of his fraternal brothers, and escaped capture for nearly four days. Eventually, Luther Holbert and his accomplice were captured as they slept in a forest in Shepherdstown, Mississippi (approximately one hundred miles from Doddsville). They were returned to Doddsville and burned alive as a mob of one thousand whites looked on.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, December 3, 1915, p. 1, col. 7.

<sup>222</sup> J. Todd Moyer, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4–18.

<sup>223</sup> For newspaper coverage of the 1904 Luther Holbert lynching, see *Atlanta Constitution*, February 4, 1904, p. 3, col. 1; *The Daily Democrat* (Greenville, MS), February 5, 1904, p. 1, col. 3.; *Fort Wayne News* (Fort Wayne, IN), [NewspaperArchive.com] February 6, 1904, p. 17, col. 1, *The*



In several cases, it appears black tenant farmers violently retaliated against white plantation owners/managers for past abuses. For example, in 1927, Owen Fleming, a reported black convict laborer, shot and killed Roy Waters, overseer on the J. H. Woods plantation, near Helena, Arkansas. According to a news report, Fleming was a “bad negro” who continually shirked work.<sup>224</sup> As a result of Fleming’s refusal to work, he was not allowed to receive daily food rations. Moreover, Waters sent emissaries to persuade Fleming to perform his work duties; however, Fleming refused. In response, Waters confronted Fleming, who shot Waters. Next, Fleming seized Waters’ pistol, fired two more shots into his body and fled. Shortly afterwards, a posse surrounded Fleming’s tent and lynched him. While Fleming’s motivations for murdering Waters were not identified in the newspaper report, it seems likely that Waters’ refusal to provide Fleming with food may have provoked the attack.<sup>225</sup>

In sum, given the power that white police and the plantation elite wielded in the Delta, blacks who murdered powerful whites challenged the foundations of white local authority. Furthermore, the significant proportion of murders that were precipitated by violent clashes between black tenants and white authorities/ plantation elites highlights the frequency with which blacks employed armed resistance and whites’ penchant to use lynching as a means to suppress black armed resistance.

### *Social Bonds and Collective Armed Self-Defense*

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*Courier* (Connellsville, PA), [NewspaperArchive.com], February 8, 1904, p. 3, col. 1.

<sup>224</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, June 9, 1927, p. 5, col. 4.

<sup>225</sup> *Waterloo Evening Courier* (Waterloo, IA), [NewspaperArchive.com], May 5, 1927, p. 2, col. 1.

Social capital is a sociological theory premised upon the idea that trusting relationships and the creation of social bonds between individuals allow them to work cooperatively. Conversely, social capital theorists argue that groups with low levels of social capital are less likely to develop trusting relationships and therefore are unable to use their relationships for their mutual benefit.<sup>226</sup>

Black sociologists have utilized social capital theory in arguing that high levels of social capital were crucial to community building. Cheryll Ann Cody's research on black social networks in the Delta after emancipation utilized social capital theory in comparing the survival and operation of family and kin networks among Good Hope, South Carolina blacks who came to the Arkansas Delta after the Civil War. She demonstrated that the Good Hope blacks that remained in the Arkansas Delta had greater access to relief and charitable agencies in the post-war period, which allowed them to accumulate greater wealth and education than their counterparts who subsequently migrated to Texas. What is more, Arkansas Good Hope blacks lived in close proximity, which allowed them to pool their earning to purchase land to build churches and schools. In contrast, the Texas Good Hope community was less successful in maintaining close ties after emancipation due to their geographic dispersion. Consequently, they were more impoverished and less able to provide mutual assistance to family and kin.<sup>227</sup> Thus, the day-to-day functions of mutual support were the ties that bound the Arkansas Good Hope community together and allowed it to prosper.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Ronald Burt, Karen Cook, Nan Lin (eds.), *Social Capital: Research and Theory* (Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2001).

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Furthermore, Sharon Wright examined the factors that allowed blacks to organize political campaigns in the Mississippi Delta during Jim Crow. She concluded that despite the lack of institutional resources and white intransigence, Mississippi Delta blacks developed strong relationships and bonds, which, in turn, allowed them to collectively take political action in their communities.<sup>229</sup>

Strong social bonds were necessary for blacks to survive the Delta's exploitative plantation economy. For instance, Dora Dennis, a domestic and wife of a sharecropper, reflected that whites utilized various forms of "oppressions" to stifle blacks, which included plantation owners restricting sharecroppers' food allotments to the point of starvation, withholding an equitable share of proceeds from the sale of cotton from sharecroppers, and forced evictions from the plantations.<sup>230</sup> However, despite plantation owners' strategies to intimidate and coerce black tenant farmers and sharecroppers, African Americans in the Delta forged survival strategies based upon informal networks of exchange. Thelma Nash and Delores Woods, long-time residents of Forrest City, Arkansas, observed that black sharecroppers and farmers helped one another during lean times. Nash stated that "if a sharecropper went sick or got behind in picking his crop, the community would give them a day's work to catch up on the crop."<sup>231</sup> Woods observed that black people would pitch in to build homes for each other. She states, "the men would build, while the women would cook and clean."<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Sharon D. Wright Austin, *The Transformation of Plantation Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, and Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta*. (Albany, NY, 2006), 12–14.

<sup>230</sup> Dora Dennis interview, interviewed by Paul Ortiz, July 19, 1995, *Behind the Veil Project Oral History Collection*, Duke University Rare Books and Special Collections, Durham, North Carolina.

<sup>231</sup> Thelma Nash and Delores Woods interview, interviewed by Mausiki Stacey Scales, *Behind the Veil Oral History Collection*, Duke University Rare Books and Special Collections, Durham, North Carolina.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

Nash and Woods illustrate the informal networks of exchange and friendship that allowed African Americans in the Delta to provide for their collective well-being and community perseverance.

More importantly, strong social bonds facilitated collective armed self-defense to lynching. In several cases, blacks collectively resisted lynch mob violence as families. Typically, black fathers and sons or siblings brazenly defended each other during a lynching-in-the-making. Black fugitives' refusal to submit to surrender to white men was perhaps informed by a hyper-masculine black working class discourse. Michael McCoyer, a historian who examined the construction of black masculinity in Mississippi and Arkansas Delta levee camps, argued that black sharecroppers (who toiled seasonally in the levee camps) constructed an image of themselves as hyper-masculine "rough mens" who had the masculine prowess to survive the often-violent relationship between white contractors, overseers, and other "rough mens" in the levee camps.<sup>233</sup> According to McCoyer, black sharecroppers' "rough mens" masculinity was tied to their declining ability to provide for their wives/children whom they deemed as their dependents. Specifically, as black sharecroppers' ability to earn a profit in plantation agriculture steadily diminished, their wives' access to alternative economic opportunities expanded and as a result threatened black sharecroppers' entrenched masculine identities.<sup>234</sup> McCoyer makes clear that black levee workers mostly exhibited the "rough mens" ideal in their interactions with other black levee workers and their sexual relationships with black women,

<sup>233</sup> McCoyer, Michael, "'Rough Mens in the Toughest Places I Ever Seen': The Construction and Ramifications of Black Masculine Identity in the Mississippi Delta's Levee Camps, 1900–1935," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (2006), 58.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–5.

but he illustrates how in some instances, the “rough mens” hyper-masculine identity also informed black levee workers’ challenges to white authority in levee camps.<sup>235</sup>

Similar to the “rough mens” culture in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta levee camps, black collective armed self-defense against white lynch mob violence can be read as an extension of the “rough mens” black hyper-masculine ethos. For example, in 1889, A. M. Neely and his father told white authorities and a white mob that they would rather die fighting than surrender to white men in Forest City, Arkansas. According to published reports, A. M. Neely, a black Republican politician, allegedly urged blacks to attack Fussell, a white Democrat, who was competing with him in a city-wide election. Apparently, a group of blacks attacked Fussell, but he was able to escape and request Police Captain Parham’s protection. In the meantime, a posse assembled and tried to capture Neely; however, Captain Parham asserted he would protect Neely as well. Neely slipped away into a nearby building and later was joined by both his father and brother. As the mob grew larger, the Neelys barricaded themselves in a building and insisted that they would not surrender alive. However, Neely’s father subsequently softened his position and negotiated his surrender based upon the fact that his son was not present in the building and that he and his other son’s safety was assured. After tense negotiations between Neely’s father, the police, and the mob, Neely’s father and brother vacated the building and immediately the mob searched for Neely who had cleverly hid himself underneath the building’s floor. Unfortunately, the mob located Neely’s hiding place, but before

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

they captured him, Neely opened fire on them. Despite Neely's resistance, the mob overpowered him and riddled his body with bullets.<sup>236</sup>

In another example, in 1904, Henry and Walker Griffin quarreled with Searcy, a white man, and threatened to hit him over the head with a beer bottle in St. Charles, Arkansas (Arkansas County). Several days later, the Griffins encountered, briefly quarreled with, and attacked Searcy and his brother at the Woolfork and Norsworth General Store in St. Charles, Arkansas. Reportedly, after the melee, the Griffins fled and a search party headed by the St. Charles sheriff immediately pursued them.<sup>237</sup>

The St. Charles sheriff found and captured one of the Griffins in a store owned by a black man. However, during the arrest, he knocked the sheriff in the head and fled into the woods. It is reported that after the Griffins attacked the sheriff, blacks armed themselves and resolutely stated that no white man could arrest them. In the meantime, whites organized a search party, dispersed themselves along the roads leading into the town, and questioned and arrested any black person passing through. Later the white search party encountered three black men (Randall Flood, Will Baldwin, and Will Madison), questioned them about the Griffins' whereabouts, and reportedly the three men cursed and drew their weapons. In response, the search party fired and killed them.<sup>238</sup>

As the hunt for the Griffins escalated, dozens of innocent blacks were arrested. According to newspaper reports, thirty blacks were held in a black-

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<sup>236</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, May 21, 1889, p. 1, col. 1 and 2; p. 4, col. 2 and 5.

<sup>237</sup> *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock, AR), March 27, 1904, p. 1, col. 6 and 7; *New York Times*, [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], April 3, 1904, p. 1; *Chicago Tribune*, [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], April 3, 1904, p. 1.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

owned store in St. Charles. Of the thirty, the search party singled out six black men whom they believed were involved and shot them to death. They released the remaining black men and told them to leave town. Later it was reported that one of the six black men survived, crawled a half mile to a nearby cornfield, where he was apparently found and shot by a white deputy.<sup>239</sup>

### **Violent Retaliations as Resistance to Accomplished Lynching**

In the aftermath of several lynchings, Delta blacks publicly condemned local governments for failing to prevent them. In many cases, whites perceived blacks' visible opposition to lynching as a sign of an impending "race war." For instance, there were several lynching incidents in which prosperous and well-respected black families resisted arrest for rape and were slain by white mobs. White newspapers documented these instances and reported that blacks were visibly outraged about the lynching because the black community believed the lynched men were innocent.

For example, in 1898, G. W. Ricks, a prominent black farmer, and Rev. Moses Ricks, his son, were lynched for allegedly raping the wife of a white farmer in Monroe County, Arkansas. A group of three hundred farmers hung, shot, and placed placards on both Moses and G. W. Ricks as a warning to other local blacks. Reportedly, the double lynching of the two men caused "great excitement" within the black community and "while some of them [were] getting out of the neighborhood in terror others [were] showing an ugly temper that portends future trouble."<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> "Two Negroes," *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, June 15, 1898, p. 2, column 2.

Also, in 1901, Jesse Phillips, a black preacher and fraternal lodge member, allegedly murdered Lucius Reed, a white plantation manager, in Cleveland, Mississippi. Phillips fled to a nearby swamp but was eventually discovered by police. According to a newspaper report, a white mob intercepted police (as they were returning to Cleveland) and forced the officers to release Phillips into their custody. Subsequently, the mob took Phillips to the spot where Reed was allegedly murdered and hung him from a telephone pole. In response to Phillips' lynching, a group of armed blacks rode into Cleveland in search of the white men who took part in the lynching. Reportedly, the group of armed blacks made threats and fired upon several white men before they themselves were either killed or wounded.<sup>241</sup>

At least one black person was lynched for allegedly inciting a race riot against whites in retaliation for a lynching. In 1890, Dennis Martin allegedly shot and killed Gus Aron, a local white merchant in Leflore County, Mississippi. Martin and others were "loudly" playing craps outside Aron's store and Aron reprimanded Martin. Reportedly, Aron "lightly" slapped Martin in the face and in response Martin pulled his gun and shot Aron in the chest, killing him almost instantly. It is more likely that Aron violently confronted Martin, which in turn, made Martin respond with deadly violence. After Martin killed Aron, he reportedly opened fire on two store clerks and fled to a nearby church. Within an hour, a mob composed of blacks and whites organized a search party and found Martin hiding in the church. The next morning Martin's body was found hanging

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<sup>241</sup> *Newark Daily Advocate* (Newark, NJ), [NewspaperArchive.com], July 22, 1901, p. 7, col. 2.



from a tree.<sup>242</sup> In response to Martin's lynching, Mose Lemons allegedly attempted to incite blacks in a nearby town to retaliate against those responsible for his death. According to a news report, whites sent Lemons to inform the Mayor W. H. Morgan of Martin's lynching in Shepardsville, Mississippi. Reportedly, Lemons bypassed the mayor and attempted to incite the black community to retaliate against whites for lynching Martin. Apparently, the black community reported Lemons to the mayor and he was later captured by a lynch mob. If indeed Lemons did solicit blacks, it is likely that he would have approached blacks who had ties to Martin rather than those who might have considered him a stranger. If Lemons sought to incite blacks to retaliate, why would the black community report Lemons to white authorities? Rather, white authorities probably questioned members of the black community about their involvement in Lemons' conspiracy, which they undoubtedly denied. Given that Lemons bypassed the sheriff, they probably lynched him on suspicion for inciting violence against whites.<sup>243</sup>

Typically, when blacks threatened physical violence, white authorities responded by mobilizing white militias to suppress a "black riot." For example, Ebenzer Fowler, a black saloon keeper, in Mayersville, Mississippi (Issaquena County) allegedly sent an insulting letter to a respected white lady. A posse arrested Fowler; however, he took a gun from a member of the posse and apparently fired one shot and the posse shot and killed him. According to newspaper reports, blacks made "intemperate threats" following Fowler's murder

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<sup>242</sup> *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), December 8, 1890, p. 1, col. 1

<sup>243</sup> *Daily Picayune*, December 10, 1890, p. 2, col. 3.

and in response twenty-two members of the Volunteer Southrons were called for assistance. However, the militia left the following day because tensions between blacks and whites had calmed.<sup>244</sup>

Interestingly, in at least one case, white authorities capitalized on the white fears of black retaliation in an effort to avert a lynching. In 1902, Isaac Wells allegedly attempted to murder Max Campbell, a train conductor, in Wynne, Arkansas (Woodruff County). Supposedly, Campbell and Wells got into a dispute and in response Wells attempted to cut Campbell's throat. Apparently, the Woodruff County police arrested Wells and decided to place him in the Forrest City, Arkansas jail for safekeeping. The Woodruff County sheriff and Wells boarded a train to Forrest City, but before the train was able to leave the station, a posse boarded the train, disarmed the sheriff, and apprehended Wells. Reportedly, in an attempt to convince the posse to spare Well's life, the Woodruff County sheriff phoned the Cross County sheriff (the county in which the train conductor and posse resided) and threatened that local blacks would surely attack Campbell's train if they executed Wells. Despite the sheriff's threats, Wells' body was found later hanging from a tree near Wynne, Arkansas.<sup>245</sup>

Threatened violent retaliations further illustrate the significant role that armed resistance played in responding to white lynch mob violence. Also, it contradicts historians' assumptions that blacks' passively responded to white mob violence because they feared white reprisals. In fact, the 1902 Isaac Wells' lynching suggests the opposite—whites feared black reprisals. Also, while

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<sup>244</sup> *Times Picayune*, February 1, 1886, p. 1, col. 4.

<sup>245</sup> *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, November 22, 1902, p. 1, col. 6.

further research would be necessary to establish the assumption, it seems plausible that whites' fear of black violent reprisals could have prevented a number of lynchings.

## **Conclusion**

At the grassroots level, black suspects (particularly those accused of murdering or raping white persons) had few avenues to save themselves from white lynch mob violence. In general, Delta blacks could not rely on the legal system to fairly adjudicate their cases because the white-dominated criminal justice system typically presumed their guilt. Furthermore, if black suspects turned themselves over to white authorities (in hopes of gaining protection from lynch mob violence), in some cases, white police officers voluntarily handed black suspects over to the mob and even participated in the lynching. Thus, for blacks, submitting to arrest or capture usually facilitated a "legal lynching."

In response to an anticipated lynching, black suspects typically sought refuge with family and friends. However, when fleeing black suspects were discovered by white authorities or lynch mobs, in numerous instances they refused to surrender and violently defended themselves. Blacks initially avoided violent confrontations with whites because black armed resistance usually provoked white terrorist violence against the entire black community. Despite the threat of massive white reprisals, blacks (individually and collectively) violently defended themselves because armed resistance (in most cases) was their last resort and because armed self-defense held out the possibility of preventing a lynching of a friend or family member. Given blacks' limited legal and extralegal

avenues to protect themselves, flight and armed resistance became the dominant black responses to threatened lynchings in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas.

By and large, black grassroots tactics did not prevent lynchings. Armed confrontations with whites only heightened racial tensions and led to the organization of additional white posses. In many cases, white posses unleashed violence against innocent African American bystanders. However, if black grassroots resistance to lynching is exclusively framed around success and failure, the larger historical significance is missed. Black grassroots resistance to lynching highlights the high levels of black social capital in the rural South. In contrast to infrapolitics or “hidden transcripts” models for explaining black resistance during the Jim Crow South, Delta blacks relied upon their institutional and organizational networks to resist white lynch mob violence. Additionally, black grassroots resistance to lynching, particularly armed self-defense, refuted enduring plantation stereotypes of blacks as docile. Also, individual and collective armed confrontations with whites demonstrate that there was a tradition of grassroots militancy in the Delta region and presumably in other regions of the South as well. Moreover, blacks who valiantly stood up to whites were likely viewed as heroes within the black community and subsequently provided militant models for other blacks to follow. Finally, black armed confrontations with whites, particularly bloody ones that spilled over into the national press, likely placed pressure on local and state officials to rein in white lynch mobs. Thus, despite the fact that flight and armed resistance did not

necessarily prevent lynchings, it nonetheless shaped the history of mob violence in the Delta region.

## CHAPTER 5

### NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE

In 1900, thousands of whites gathered to witness the beating, mutilation, and burning of Robert Charles, who had allegedly murdered two New Orleans police officers. Prior to the lynching, white newspapers stirred up lynching sentiment by depicting Charles as a “ravisher,” “fiend incarnate,” and “desperado.”<sup>246</sup> Within months of the lynching, Ida B. Wells published a pamphlet entitled “Mob Rule in New Orleans” in response to the lynching. Wells’ pamphlet provided a searing counter-narrative that refuted white newspaper depictions of Charles as a desperado and instead argued that he was a courageous, hardworking individual, who selflessly defended his life against an unwarranted police arrest and mob violence.

The bulk of Wells’ counter-narrative carefully showed how the white press distorted the actions that led to the melee between the New Orleans police and Robert Charles as well as his motivations for shooting the police officer and fleeing arrest. Wells stated,

The policemen, however, secure in the firm belief that they could do anything to a Negro that they wished, approached the two men [Robert Charles and Leonard Pierce], and in less than three minutes from the time they accosted them attempted to put both colored men under arrest. Charles was made victim of a savage attack by Officer Mora, who used a billet and then drew a gun and tried to kill Charles. Charles drew his gun nearly as quickly as the policeman, and began a duel in the street, in which both participants were shot. The police got the worst of the duel, and fell helpless to the sidewalk. Charles made his escape.<sup>247</sup>

In addition, Wells asserted,

In any law-abiding community Charles would have been justified in delivering himself up immediately to the properly constituted authorities and asking a trial by a jury of his peers. He could have been certain that in resisting an unwarranted arrest he had a right

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<sup>246</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynching* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002), 188–190.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

to defend his life, even to the point of taking one in that defense, but Charles knew that his arrest in New Orleans, even for defending his life, meant nothing short of a long term in the penitentiary, and still more probable death by lynching at the hands of a cowardly mob.<sup>248</sup>

Not only did Wells provide a rationalization for Robert Charles' refusal to submit to arrest and subsequent flight, she also endeavored to counter racist representations of Charles as a ruthless desperado. For instance, Wells investigated Charles' background and found several white character witnesses to attest that he was peaceful and a law-abiding individual.<sup>249</sup> Moreover, Wells highlighted Charles' courage and manliness by suggesting that despite superior numbers and better-armed whites, Charles bravely refused to submit to arrest even as he was cornered by the lynch mob. In addition, she marveled at the fact that as Charles shot and killed mob participants, he forced them to flee in a cowardly manner for cover. In this way, Wells implied white newspapers' celebration of mob participants as courageous was nothing more than a pretense. For example, Wells stated,

Betrayed into the hands of the police, Charles, who had already sent two of his would-be murders to their death, made a last stand in a small building, 1210 Saratoga Street, and, still defying his pursuers, fought a mob of twenty thousand people, single-handed and alone, killing three more men, mortally wounding two more and seriously wounding nine others. Unable to get him in his stronghold, the besiegers set fire to his house of refuge. While the building was burning Charles was shooting, and every crack of his death-dealing rifle added another victim to the price which he had placed upon his own life. Finally, when fire and smoke became too much for flesh and blood to stand, the long sought for fugitive appeared in the door, rifle in hand, to charge the countless guns that were drawn upon him. With a courage which was indescribable, he raised his guns to fire again, but this time it failed, for a hundred shots riddled his body, and he fell dead face fronting to the mob.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 195–197.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 170–171.

Furthermore, Wells concluded that “the white people of this country may charge that he was a desperado, but to the people of his own race Robert Charles will always be regarded as the hero of New Orleans.”<sup>251</sup>

Wells’ extensive praise of Robert Charles’ actions and her depiction of him as a hero suggest that she believed that he provided a militant model for other African American men to follow. Therefore, in retelling the story of Robert Charles’ pitched battles with a white lynch mob, Wells simultaneously sought to counter racist representations of the Robert Charles lynching and develop a narrative of grassroots resistance that rationalized armed self-defense as a legitimate and courageous response to white lynch mob violence.

Similar to Wells, other late nineteenth and early twentieth century black leaders and thinkers advocated grassroots resistance as a necessary response to white lynch mob violence. In this chapter, I will survey black leaders’ evolving attitudes toward grassroots resistance to white mob violence. In addition, I will examine how several black writers, artists, and musicians developed counter-narratives to heroic portrayals of white mob violence and imagined black grassroots resistance. In particular, I will examine Sutton Griggs’ *The Hindered Hand* (1905) and Richard Wright’s “Long Black Song” as literary explorations of the feasibility and meaning of armed resistance. Second, I will analyze the ways in which political cartoons published in the *Chicago Defender* encouraged black Southerners to flee lynch mob violence. Third, I will examine blues musician Robert Johnson’s “Hellhound on My Trail” (1937) as a narrative of grassroots resistance. While these artists’ explorations of black grassroots resistance

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<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.



overlapped with prevailing ideas within the black anti-lynching discourse, these particular texts differed in that they carefully explored the complex social and psychological factors that motivated black grassroots resistance through the lens of lynching that occurred in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas in the early twentieth century. Therefore, these artists employed Delta lynchings to frame their understanding of lynching in general as well as the possibilities and meanings of grassroots resistance. Therefore, similar to racist representations that justified white-on-black lynch mob violence, I argue that these were narratives of resistance that provided a rationale for black grassroots responses to lynching.

### **Debating Grassroots Resistance to Racial Violence during the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

Two critical developments shaped the evolution of black perspectives regarding the necessity of black grassroots resistance to white mob violence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. First, during the mid to late 1870s, white Southerners increasingly used violence and intimidation in order to oust black-white Republican coalitions from office. By and large due to white violence and intimidation, conservative Democratic regimes replaced Republican coalitions in Maryland in 1867; West Virginia in 1870; Georgia in 1870–71; Alabama in 1874; Mississippi in 1875; and in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida by 1876.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Joe William Trotter, Jr., *The African American Experience, Complete Edition* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 284.

Second, as white mob violence intensified, the federal government seemed increasingly unwilling to protect black civil rights. During the height of Congressional Reconstruction, the federal government passed the 1871 Enforcement Acts (which made it a federal offense to interfere with an individual's civil rights) in response to rampant Klan violence. Subsequently, the federal government arrested, arraigned, and jailed hundreds of Klan members across the South. However, by 1875, the federal government increasingly refused to send federal troops to quell terrorist violence. For example, after white Mississippians ousted Republicans from power in 1875, whites inaugurated a campaign of ruthless violence against the remaining vestiges of black political power. In response to the heightened violence, Adelbert Ames, Mississippi's Republican governor, requested federal troops to quell the violence; however, President Grant refused his request because "the whole public are tired out with these annual autumnal outbreaks in the South.... [and] are ready now to condemn any interference on the part of the Government."<sup>253</sup>

Moreover, by 1877, the tentative nature of the federal government's fledgling commitment to protecting black civil rights became more readily apparent. For instance, as a result of the disputed electoral votes in Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina during the election of 1876, Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes brokered a deal with Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden that allowed Hayes to become President on the condition that the federal government would cease interfering in Southern race relations. Consequently,

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<sup>253</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, eds., *The African American Odyssey*, Combined volume (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 299.

Hayes removed the remaining federal troops from the South, thereby effectively bringing an end to Congressional Reconstruction.<sup>254</sup>

Within this context, during the intervening years between the 1871 Enforcement Acts and the Compromise of 1877, white violence against blacks intensified as conservative Democratic regimes violently restored “Home Rule.” With the threat of federal intervention no longer a real possibility, white violence against blacks emerged more spiritedly and unabated during the 1880s and 1890s.

Furthermore, as the federal government’s commitment to black civil rights continued to fade and white-on-black lynching surged in the years following the end of Reconstruction, black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, the preeminent nineteenth century black leader, and T. Thomas Fortune, militant journalist, opposed black migration out of the South as a response to white violence and instead held fast to the belief that racial violence could be remedied through agitation and party politics. In part, both Douglass and Fortune’s opposition to grassroots resistance was due to their devotion to the Republican Party and their belief that party politics was the key instrument of change in society. For instance, Douglass observed that “if any good is to come to us politically it will be through that [Republican] party.”<sup>255</sup> While Fortune shared Douglass’ belief that party politics was the best approach to ameliorating race relations, he offered a different strategy. Fortune proposed that blacks eschew their dogged devotion to the Republican Party and instead divide their loyalties

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<sup>254</sup> Trotter, *The African American Experience*, 285.

<sup>255</sup> Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and the Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 36.

between both the Republican and Democratic Parties. In doing so, he believed blacks would achieve a measure of political independence and the necessary political leverage to push back against white violence, disenfranchisement, and segregation.<sup>256</sup>

Political philosophies aside, both Douglass and Fortune were pragmatists. In their estimation, black grassroots resistance to racial violence was ineffectual. For example, in 1879, as thousands of black Exodusters left the South for Kansas and Oklahoma, Douglass criticized migration as an illogical and illusory response to mounting racial violence.<sup>257</sup> Douglass reasoned, “Is the total removal of the whole five millions of colored people from the South contemplated? Or is it proposed to remove only a part? And if only a part, why a part and not the whole? A vindication of the rights of the many cannot be less important than the same to the few.” Douglass also argued that black migration from the South to less oppressive regions undermined the idea that black civil rights should be protected in every state.<sup>258</sup> T. Thomas Fortune additionally opposed Northern migration as well as emigration to Africa because he believed America (particularly the South) was African Americans’ natural home.<sup>259</sup>

Despite Douglass and Fortune’s faithful allegiance to the Republic Party and party politics as a solution for racial violence and discrimination, during the 1880s, they both became increasingly cynical and openly criticized Republicans’ commitment to black equality. In a speech to a black audience in 1886,

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>257</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *The African American Odyssey*, 323.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Douglass angrily catalogued the federal government and Republican Party's failure to protect black civil rights. He commented,

The Federal Government, so far as we are concerned, has abdicated its functions and abandoned the objects for which the Constitution was framed and adopted, and for this I arraign it at the bar of public opinion, both of our country and that of the civilized world. I am here to tell the truth, and to tell it without fear or favor, and the truth is that neither the Republican Party nor the Democratic Party has yet complied with the solemn oath, taken by their respective representatives, to support the Constitution, and execute the laws enacted under its provisions. They have promised us law, and abandoned us to anarchy; they have promised protection, and given us violence; they have promised us fish, and given us a serpent.<sup>260</sup>

Douglass' increasing cynicism reflected the hardening of black attitudes toward white racism and the rise in white-on-black lynch mob violence in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

During this period, Douglass and Fortune's approach to racial reform was increasingly challenged by other African American leaders who also had become disillusioned by white racism and terrorist violence. Nationalist leaders such as John Edward Bruce, journalist and proponent of armed resistance, and Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, a pastor and ardent emigrationist, reasoned that whites were indifferent to the violence committed against blacks and therefore grassroots resistance was necessary.

John Edward Bruce advocated emigration to Africa as a long-term solution to racial injustice.<sup>261</sup> However, in the short term, he believed that armed resistance would bring about a speedy end to white mob violence. In a fiery 1889 speech, Bruce proclaimed,

If they burn your houses, burn theirs. If they kill your wives and children, kill theirs. Pursue them relentlessly. Meet force with force, everywhere it is offered. If they demand blood, exchange with them until they are satiated. By a vigorous adherence to this

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<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 586–88.

course, the shedding of human blood by white men will soon become a thing of the past.<sup>262</sup>

While Bruce understood self-defense as a necessary response to white violence, he also viewed it as a means to attain racial uplift. According to Bruce, “The Negro must preserve his racial identity, must unite his energies, talent and money, and make common cause.... Unity and harmony of sentiment and feeling, of act and deed, are the levers that must of necessity overturn American caste-prejudice.”<sup>263</sup>

Like Bruce, Bishop Henry Turner McNeil was skeptical that America would ever live up to her ideals and therefore believed blacks’ best option was to return to Africa. Turner’s disillusionment with America began in the late 1860s when he was voted out of office by conservative white Democrats in the Georgia state legislature. In one of Turner’s last speeches delivered to the Georgia legislature prior to his removal in 1868, Turner angrily retorted,

You may expel us, gentlemen, but I firmly believe that you will someday repent it. The black man cannot protect a country, if the country doesn’t protect him; and if tomorrow, a war should arise, I would not raise a musket to defend a country where my manhood is denied. The fashionable way in Georgia when hard work is to be done, is for the white man to sit at this ease, while the black man does the work; but, sir, I will say this much to the colored men of Georgia... Never lift a finger nor raise a hand in defense of Georgia, unless Georgia acknowledges that you are men, and invests you with the rights pertaining to manhood.<sup>264</sup>

In the aftermath of Reconstruction, McNeil still hoped that race relations in the South would improve. However, the repeal of the 1875 Voting Rights Act in 1883 as well as other reversals gradually convinced him that emigration to Africa was the only viable solution to white racism and violence.

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<sup>262</sup> Shapiro, *White Violence and the Black Response*, 42.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>264</sup> Deirdre Mullane, ed., *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing* (New York: Random House, 1993), 316.

During the 1893 National Black Convention, Turner forcefully argued that “justice or emigration should be our watchword.” Turner reflected,

To passively remain here and occupy our present ignoble status, with the possibility of being shot, hung or burnt, not only when we perpetrate deeds of violence ourselves, but whenever some bad white man wishes to dark his face and outrage a female, as I am told is often done, is a matter of serious reflection. To do so would be to declare ourselves unfit to be free men or to assume the responsibilities which involve fatherhood and existence. For God hates the submission of cowardice.<sup>265</sup>

Subsequently, Turner noted,

We must offer some plan of action to our people or admit that we are too ignorant and worthless to do anything. This nation justly, righteously and divinely owes us for work and services rendered, billions of dollars, and if we cannot be treated as American people, we should ask for five hundred million dollars, at least, to begin an emigration somewhere, if we cannot receive manhood recognition here at home.... Money to leave and build up a nation of our own, where we can respect ourselves at least, or justice at the hands of the American nation, should be the watchword of every Negro in the land.<sup>266</sup>

Despite Turner’s passionate appeals, black leaders in attendance voted down resolutions supporting emigration to Africa but agreed to intensify the fight against racial injustice at home.<sup>267</sup>

Like John Edward Bruce, Ida B. Wells was a staunch advocate of armed resistance to white mob violence; however, she also encouraged blacks to employ a range of grassroots tactics to circumvent mob violence. For instance, in 1892, shortly after three black men (Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and William Stewart) were lynched in Memphis, Tennessee, Ida B. Wells wrote *Southern Horrors*, her first major anti-lynching pamphlet. In *Southern Horrors*, Wells carefully cataloged the brutality of white lynch mob violence against blacks and incisively critiqued whites’ rationalizations for lynch mob violence. In the

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<sup>265</sup> Phillip Foner and Robert James Branham, eds. *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787–1900* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 786.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 788.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

pamphlet's last section entitled "Self Help," Wells reasoned that grassroots resistance was necessary to bring an end to lynching. She stated,

In the creation of this healthier public sentiment, the Afro American can do for himself what no one else can do for him. The world looks on with wonder that we have conceded so much and remain law-abiding under such great outrage and provocation.

To Northern capital and Afro-African labor the South owes its rehabilitation. If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South. A thorough knowledge and judicious exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution. The white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities.<sup>268</sup>

In part, Wells' optimism that grassroots strategies could "stop outrages in many localities" reflected the success of a black boycott of white business in the aftermath of the city's triple lynching in 1892. For example, Wells (along with other Memphis black leaders) urged blacks to leave Memphis. Within days of the lynching, arguably hundreds of Memphis blacks had left the city. Those who remained behind refused to patronize white businesses or the city's bus system. Consequently, blacks' economic boycott created an economic crisis for the city's white business community. According to Wells, black patronage of white-owned "business came to a standstill" and created an oversupply of items that black customers had typically purchased.<sup>269</sup> Likely in response to pressure from the white business community, city leaders passed resolutions condemning the lynchings although those who participated in the lynching were never brought to justice.<sup>270</sup>

While Wells was optimistic that a "bloodless revolution" brought on by economic boycotts could bring about gradual change, she believed armed

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<sup>268</sup> Ida B. Wells, *On Lynching*, 50.

<sup>269</sup> Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 53.

<sup>270</sup> Ida B. Wells, *On Lynching*, 50.



resistance to lynching was the most expedient means to prevent white mob violence against blacks. She wrote,

Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did not occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and Paducah, Ky., and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self defense. The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life. The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched.<sup>271</sup>

Wells' comments were not idle threats. In 1883, Wells violently resisted a white railroad agent who tried to remove her from the train's "ladies car."

According to Wells, it took three men to eject her from the train.<sup>272</sup> In addition, despite the fact that a Memphis city ordinance prohibited blacks from purchasing guns, following the triple lynching, Wells purchased a gun and carried it with her at all times.<sup>273</sup>

Wells' advocacy of armed self-defense reflected the unwillingness of the criminal justice system to protect black lynch victims or prosecute mob participants. Moreover, this dynamic likely emboldened whites who may have shied away from mob violence if imprisonment had been a consequence. Yet despite these circumstances, Wells maintained that white men would desist from lynching if blacks would desist from cringing and begging for white decency in the face of white terrorism.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 51–52.

<sup>272</sup> Mia Bay, *To Tell The Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 48.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>274</sup> Ida B. Wells, *On Lynching*, 51–52.

By suggesting that armed resistance could prevent mob violence, Wells simultaneously implied both black and white men were cowardly. With regard to black men, Wells' suggestion that armed blacks in only two instances had violently defended themselves implied that in other lynchings, black men had cowardly stood by and allowed white mobs to lynch blacks. Therefore, black men had been complicit actors in white mob violence. As for white men, Wells suggested that white heroic masculinity, which was often celebrated in newspapers following a lynching, would in fact crumble in the face of armed resistance when she suggested that when "the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life."<sup>275</sup>

In the aftermath of the triple lynching in Memphis, Wells began a twenty-year crusade to bring an end to lynch mob violence. During that time, she tirelessly gave speeches, wrote pamphlets on lynching, and toured the United States and Europe in order to educate whites about the horrors of lynching and win support for anti-lynching laws. Despite Wells' desire for anti-lynching laws, she never lost sight of the centrality of black grassroots resistance in the struggle to end lynching. The 1892 triple lynching and black Memphians' response provided a template for her decades-long anti-lynching activism. For Wells, the success of the economic boycotts as well as instances of armed resistance that prevented lynchings suggested that with determination, organization, and courage blacks could effect positive change through grassroots resistance to white mob violence.

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

While Wells was the most outspoken black leader on lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Booker T. Washington, who rose to national prominence after his 1895 Atlanta Exposition address, was perhaps the most conciliatory black leader on the issue of lynching. Booker T. Washington's philosophy of political accommodation heavily shaped his response to racial violence. Washington typically responded to lynch mob violence by appealing to the "best" and most influential white Southerners to prevent violence and condemning black criminality.<sup>276</sup> In Washington's "letter to Southern people," which was written after a series of lynchings in 1899, he tacitly condemned lynching but was careful to ingratiate himself to Southern whites and chide blacks to live moral and upright lives. For instance, he claimed that no white man loved the South more than he did; he opposed federal intervention against lynching; and argued that lynching had been instituted to punish the rape of white women (though he provided statistics to show most lynchings were precipitated by other causes). Moreover, Washington sidestepped publicly advocating on behalf of victims of mob violence; however, he privately offered whatever assistance he deemed politically palatable.<sup>277</sup>

After the 1906 Atlanta race riot, Washington offered his most unequivocal denunciation of mob violence and uncharacteristically criticized white authorities for aiding and abetting lynch mob violence. In a private letter, Washington sullenly remarked, "there were many unspeakable cruel acts perpetuated in Atlanta during the riot; on the other hand, there were some brave, fine things

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<sup>276</sup> Shapiro, *White Violence and the Black Response*, 132.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–35.

done by colored people and by a few of the white people in behalf of the lives of the Negro race, but so far as handling the immediate trouble is concerned, I think all agree that the police authorities were criminally negligent and, in fact, in many cases sided with the rioters.”<sup>278</sup> However, in the face of state-sanctioned mob violence, Washington continued to espouse that the “best white people and the best colored people” should unite to end mob violence and he emphatically urged blacks “to exercise self control and not make the fatal mistake of attempting to retaliate.”<sup>279</sup>

Similar to Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the twentieth century’s greatest civil rights activists, initially believed that through education and appealing to whites’ moral conscience, lynching could be prevented. However, after the 1899 Sam Hose lynching in Coweta, Georgia, in which Hose’s knuckles were put on display in a local grocery store, Du Bois acknowledged that the savagery of racism could not be overcome simply through reason and moral persuasion. Consequently, Du Bois committed himself to political agitation and increasingly embraced armed resistance as the most appropriate response to lynching. For instance, in response to the 1906 Atlanta race riot, Du Bois implied that white violence would be met with violent resistance if it did not abate. Du Bois stated, “Let the cup pass from us, tempt us not beyond our strength, for there is that clamoring and clawing within, o whose voice we would not listen, yet shudder lest we must,—and it is red.”<sup>280</sup> However, ten years later, Du Bois firmly declared the necessity of armed resistance to racial violence. In response to a

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<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.* 137.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> Anne P. Rice and Michele Wallace, *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 116.

lynching in Gainesville, Florida in 1916, Du Bois lamented that blacks did not violently resist the lynch mob despite superior numbers. Perturbed by Gainesville blacks' seeming indifference, Du Bois directly asserted that "the men and women who had nothing to do with the alleged crime should have fought in self-defense to the last ditch if they had killed every white man in the county and themselves been killed." Moreover, Du Bois thundered that lynching would cease "when the cowardly mob is faced by effective guns in the hands of the people determined to sell their souls dearly."<sup>281</sup>

Du Bois' emphatic call for armed resistance reflected heightened the racial tensions and black militancy of the post-World War I period. In particular, the "Red Summer" of 1919 represented the apogee of racial violence against blacks in the early twentieth century. With the exception of the East St. Louis (1917) and Tulsa race riots (1921), the numerous urban conflagrations that occurred in 1919 were more destructive and likely claimed more black and white lives than any other race riots combined during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>282</sup> In response to this wave of racial violence, black armed resistance to white mob violence became the touchstone of black anti-lynching rhetoric. For instance, black poet Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" (1919) epitomizes heightened black militancy in the post-World War I era. McKay reflected,

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

<sup>281</sup> Shapiro, *White Violence and the Black Response*, 131.

<sup>282</sup> Trotter, *The African American Experience*, 404.

O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!<sup>283</sup>

In sum, late nineteenth and early twentieth century black leaders were divided on the most appropriate response to racial violence. In the 1880s, Republican Party stalwarts such as Frederick Douglass believed through continued agitation African Americans could force whites to protect black civil rights, whereas emigrationists such as Bishop Henry McNeil Turner promoted a return to Africa because he doubted that African Americans and whites could ever live peaceably and on equal terms. While debates on how to respond to racial violence remained fractious through the turn of the century as evidenced by the differing positions offered by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, increasingly after the mid-1890s, black leaders embraced grassroots resistance (particularly armed resistance) to white mob violence. Likewise, late nineteenth and early twentieth century black writers, artists, and musicians developed competing and sometimes overlapping interpretations of the purpose and meaning of black resistance to racial violence. While black cultural workers explored a wide variety of issues regarding black responses to racial oppression, black grassroots resistance to lynching was a central motif.

### **To Stand and Fight: The Meaning of Armed Resistance in Sutton Griggs' The Hindered Hand and Richard Wright's "Long Black Song"**

Sutton Elbert Griggs was born in Chatfield, Texas on June 19, 1872. His father, Allen R. Griggs, was a Baptist preacher in Texas. Griggs attended public

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<sup>283</sup> Rice and Wallace, *Witnessing Lynching*, 190.

school in Dallas, Texas before graduating from Bishop College in 1890. From there, Griggs attended Richmond Theological Seminary and later accepted pastorates at the First Baptist Church in Berkley, Virginia upon graduation. In 1895, he moved to Nashville, Tennessee to accept the pastorate at the First Baptist Church.<sup>284</sup>

Griggs' militant phase occurred between 1895 and 1908 when he was a pastor in Nashville. Due in part to his writing and oratory, he was considered by many to be an outspoken racial leader. For instance, one observer noted, "with a brilliant mind and a ready pen, Doctor Griggs went to the fray in such a militant fashion that he was almost termed a radical on racial matters. He was acclaimed as a champion in all sections and his appearances before the sessions of other religious groups were occasions of wild demonstrations of enthusiastic approval."<sup>285</sup>

During this period, Griggs published *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), *Overshadowed* (1901), *Unfettered* (1902), *The Hindered Hand* (1905), and *Pointing the Way* (1908). Collectively, his literary canon sought to provide a blueprint for black political action and narrate the complexities of black identity and miscegenation as well as describe both the internal and external conditions that threatened black society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Griggs' emphasis on these themes emerged in response to racial segregation and white violence against blacks. Accordingly, he proposed that blacks ought to strive for psychological, social, and economic independence. Yet, his calls for

<sup>284</sup> Arlene A. Elder, "The Hindered Hand: Cultural Implications of Early African-American Fiction (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press), 70.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71.

black self-determination belied his belief that racial progress would depend upon conservative black and white leaders.<sup>286</sup>

Furthermore, W. E. B. Du Bois and other black contemporaries noted that Griggs' body of work appealed primarily to the black masses. Although Griggs' upbringing was more befitting to the black middle class, his position as a pastor allowed him to develop an intimate knowledge of the black working class life and culture. In addition, his relationship to the working class was strengthened through his reliance on the educated black working class to purchase his novels and essays. For instance, Griggs was known to sell his materials door to door, on black college campuses, and at places of employment during lunch hours. While Griggs depended upon the black working class to purchase his books, he also believed the purpose of literature was to serve the black working class. In particular, he believed that it could provide a basis for racial unity as well as inspire a new generation of educated and principled black leaders.<sup>287</sup>

In 1905, Griggs published *The Hindered Hand* at the request of the National Baptist Convention. They believed Griggs was best suited to pen a literary response to Thomas Dixon's popular romance, *The Leopard's Spots* (1902). In part, Griggs could accept the National Baptist Convention's request because unlike other black writers of his time, he did not depend upon white literary patrons to publish his creative work. Rather, Griggs sold his novels and

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–70.

<sup>287</sup> Wilson J. Moses, "Literary Garveyism: The Novels of Reverend Sutton E. Griggs," *Pylon* 40 (1979): 204–5; 213.



other writings through the Orion Publishing Company in Nashville and therefore he could speak to a black audience without fear of white editorial censorship.<sup>288</sup>

Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* appeared as Southern legislatures chipped away at black voting rights at the turn of the century. During this period, Dixon and other prominent Southern writers led a literary movement to justify disenfranchisement. As such, Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* epitomized turn-of-the century Negrophobia. Throughout the novel, he portrayed African Americans as thieves, parasites, and even an "A Thousand-Legged Beast."<sup>289</sup> The novel's main contention was that black people were unfit for citizenship because they were degenerating back to their savage African heritage. In making this argument, Dixon developed a scathing attack on the black church and the black family. He dismissed black education as a means to uplift individuals and instead asserted that its primary concern is for black men to achieve interracial marriage with white women. Moreover, he belittled returning black veterans from the Spanish American War and justified spectacle lynching as a necessary social control mechanism.<sup>290</sup>

Throughout *The Hindered Hand*, Griggs one by one refutes each of Dixon's racist depictions of black life. In doing so, Griggs explores three primary approaches to uprooting the racial caste system: passing as white, armed resistance, and political agitation. With regard to passing, the plot revolves around the Seabright family who interestingly migrated to the South in order to

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<sup>288</sup> Clayton Allen Cerny, "Reconstructing Freedom: Romance and Race in American Culture, 1877–1915" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1996), 168.

<sup>289</sup> Hugh M. Gloster, "Sutton E. Griggs: Novelist of the New Negro," *Pylon* 4 (1943): 335–36.

<sup>290</sup> Geraldine Hord Seay, "The Literature of Jim Crow: Call and Response" (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1996), 111.

escape racial prejudice in the North. As a mixed family who look white in appearance, the Seabrights easily establish themselves within the Southern white elite. Mrs. Seabright plans to use the family's position within the white elite to curtail race prejudice. She cultivates a marriage between Eunice Seabright, her daughter, and a prominent white politician, who appears amenable to their goals. However, before the plan can proceed further, Eunice inexplicably flees her husband. Subsequently the Seabright's plan unravels when Eunice's husband finds her, charges her with bigamy, and discovers that she is mixed race. Upon this news, her husband disowns her and thereafter Eunice and the Seabright family are forced to endure the indignities of racial prejudice.

The novel's dramatic tension revolves around several lynching scenes as well as how black characters respond to lynch mob violence.<sup>291</sup> In depicting white lynch mob violence, Griggs' primary goal was to challenge the legitimacy of lynching by illustrating how innocent blacks were lynched without sufficient cause or due process of law. For example, Henry Crump, a fourteen-year-old boy, is the first of three lynchings in the novel. As Crump is walking to school, he is harassed by a group of white children. Though Crump momentarily stands his ground, he walks away to avoid trouble. In response, the white children begin to pelt him with stones. In defense, he returns a volley of stones in their direction. Unbeknownst to him, a police officer spots him throwing stones at the white children and he is arrested and jailed. At his trial, the judge fines him twenty-five dollars, but rescinds it after the Crump family immediately pays the fine. Sensing that the Crump family is attempting to upstage him, the judge sentences him to

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<sup>291</sup> Geraldine Hord Seay, "The Literature of Jim Crow," 140–54.

hard labor on a prison farm. Henry Crump panics, flees the courtroom, and temporarily escapes but is later surrounded by the police. Although he appears to have surrendered to the police, one of the white spectators who had gathered to witness the chase, shoots and kills him. Whites in attendance murmur “Shame! Shame! Shame!” when they realize Crump is dead; however, Crump’s killer goes unpunished.<sup>292</sup>

Also, in the novel’s second lynching, Dave Harper is falsely accused of murdering Arlene Daleman, a prominent white woman. Initially, he is captured and jailed but later a white police officer hands him over to a lynch mob. Subsequently, the mob hangs him from a post and repeatedly fires bullets into his body.<sup>293</sup>

In the novel’s third lynching, Griggs further undermines the legitimacy of lynching by highlighting its barbarity. In this example, Bud Harper and Foresta Harper flee to Mississippi and assume new identities when they discover that the lynch mob intended to lynch Bud but mistakenly lynched his twin brother Dave Harper. While in Mississippi, the Harper’s presence raises the ire of local whites and consequently whites hire Sidney Fletcher to kill them both. In self-defense, Bud Harper shoots and kills Fletcher and, fully realizing they will be lynched if they remain, the couple again flees but is eventually caught and burned at the stake. Griggs’ description of the Harper double lynching is a near-verbatim description

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<sup>292</sup> Sutton E. Griggs, *The Hindered Hand: Or the Reign of The Repressionist*, reprint (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 53–61.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 104–107.

of the 1904 Luther Holbert lynching in Doddsville, Mississippi as originally reported in the Vicksburg Evening Post.<sup>294</sup> Griggs wrote,

The mob decided to torture their victims before killing them and began on Foresta first. A man with a pair of scissors stepped up and cut off her hair and threw it into the crowd. There was a great scramble for bits of hair for souvenirs of the occasion. One by one her fingers were cut off and tossed into the crowd to be scrambled for. A man with a corkscrew came forward, ripped Foresta's clothing to her waist, bored into her breast with corkscrew and pulled forth the live quivering flesh. Poor Bud her helpless husband closed his eyes and turned away his head to avoid the terrible sight. Men gathered about him and forced his eyelids open so that he could see all.

When it was thought that Foresta had been tortured sufficiently, attention was turned to Bud. His fingers were cut off one by one and corkscrew was bored into his legs and arms. A man with a club struck him over the head, crushing his skull and forcing an eyeball to hang down from the socket by a thread. A rush was made toward Bud and a man who was a little ahead of his competitors snatched the eyeball as a souvenir.

After three full hours had been spent in torturing the two, the spokesmen announced that they were now ready for the final act. The brother of Sidney Fletcher was called for and was given a match. He stood near his mutilated victims until the photographer present could take a picture of the scene. This being over, the match was applied and the flames leaped up eagerly and encircled the writhing forms of Bud and Foresta.

When the flames had done their work and had subsided, a mad rush was made for the trees which were soon denuded of bark, each member of the mob being desirous, it seemed, of carrying away something that might testify to his proximity to so great a happening.<sup>295</sup>

Griggs further underscores lynching's barbarity through depicting white children's sadistic appetite for witnessing lynching. Prior to Bud and Foresta Harper's lynching, Melville Brant, a nine-year-old white child, begs his mother to take him to the lynching. Melville's motivation to attend the lynching stems from his belief that Ben Stringer, his white companion, had witnessed lynchings and therefore was held in higher regard amongst their playmates. Refusing his request, his mother locks Melville in the attic, but he escapes and joins his friends at the lynching anyway. In the aftermath of the lynching, Melville finds a charred piece of the lynch victim's flesh and triumphantly rejoices that "Ben

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<sup>294</sup> Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>295</sup> Sutton E. Griggs, *The Hindered Hand*, 133–134.

Stinger ain't got nothing on me now."<sup>296</sup> Furthermore, Griggs contrasts Melville Brant's supposed childhood innocence with his sadistic desire to witness the execution and appropriate lynching souvenirs. In doing so, he employs sentimental notions of childhood to make lynching more monstrous.<sup>297</sup>

Given that Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* portrayed lynching as a necessary response to black retrogression and criminality, Griggs counters these assertions by depicting black lynch victims as peaceful and law-abiding citizens who were hapless victims of crime instigated by white intolerance. In addition, Griggs suggests that lynching is less about black criminality and more about imposing a racial caste system. For instance, in the aftermath of the Harper double lynching, a white spectator admits,

You want to know how we square the burning of a woman with the statement that we lynch for one crime in the South, heh? That's all rot about one crime. We lynch niggers down here for anything. We lynch them for being sassy and sometimes lynch them on general principles. The truth of the matter is the real 'one crime' that paves the way for a lynching whenever we have the notion, is the crime of being black.<sup>298</sup>

Therefore, by emphasizing black lynch victims' innocence overlaid with the barbarity of lynch mob violence, Griggs sought to suggest that it is indeed whites who were degenerate savage beasts.

Following the lynching, those responsible for lynching Bud and Foresta are placed on trial. The identities of those who participated in the lynching were well known and it is up to an all-white jury to decide their fate. During the trial, a white lawyer makes an impassioned plea to the jury to look beyond their racial prejudice and thereby convict the lynchers. While the jury unsurprisingly renders

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<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>297</sup> Cerny, "Reconstructing Freedom," 185.

<sup>298</sup> Griggs, *The Hindered Hand*, 136.

a not-guilty verdict, the lawyer's appeal seems to represent Griggs' fundamental hope that American institutions will one day dispense justice impartially.<sup>299</sup>

More importantly, the Bud and Foresta Harper lynching served as a catalyst for exploring how blacks ought to respond to white lynch mob violence. Griggs' exploration involves two black leaders who hold opposing political views. Within *The Hindered Hand*, these two characters seem to represent two opposing impulses within early twentieth black political thought: black militancy and black conservatism.<sup>300</sup> Black militancy is represented by Earl Bluefield, who is of mixed race and embodies radical politics. He admires Native Americans because in his words "... the dead Indian refusing to be enslaved was a richer heritage to the world than the yielding and thriving Negro."<sup>301</sup> Ensal Ellwood is a pastor of unmixed African ancestry and signifies black conservatism. Ensal believes that if race relations are to be improved, the conservative factions of the black and white race will have to provide a solution to the race problem.

After the Harper double lynching, Earl and Ensal meet to plan a response. Earl proposes emigration but later dismisses the idea because whites would not tolerate a general exodus from the South. He also proposes a general uprising but abstains from it because whites had superior resources. However, Earl ultimately recommends capturing the state capitol and the United States federal building as a means of forcing the race question into the national conscience.

Earl reflects,

In Almaden here, I have picked a band of five hundred men who are not afraid to die. Tonight we shall creep upon yonder hill and take charge of the state capitol. When the city

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<sup>299</sup> Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, 80.

<sup>300</sup> Elder, *The "Hindered Hand,"* 101.

<sup>301</sup> Griggs, *The Hindered Hand*, 49.

awakes tomorrow morning it will find itself at our mercy. We also have a force of men which will take charge of the United States government building. This will serve to make it a national question.

When called upon to surrender, we shall issue a proclamation setting forth our grievances as a race and demanding that they be righted. Of course, what we shall call for cannot be done at once, and our surrender will be called for. We shall not surrender. Each one of us has solemnly sworn not to come out of the affair alive, even if we have to commit suicide. Our act will open the eyes of the American people to the gravity of this question and they will act. Once in motion I am not afraid of what they will do. I am not fearful of America awake, but America asleep.<sup>302</sup>

Ensal wholly rejects Earl's plan because he believes it would certainly invite a general slaughter of innocent black people. Ensal agrees that whites are inherently morally upright and that they simply needed to be awakened to the plight of blacks. However, in contrast to Earl, Ensal proposes to distribute a pamphlet to every white person that would educate them on the race problem and therefore convince them that black equality was the best course of action. While swayed by Ensal's impassioned speech, Earl contends that a moral appeal had to be supplemented with brute force and thus he reaffirms his commitment to capturing government institutions.

Later in the novel, Ensal intercedes to stop the planned takeover of the government buildings. Consequently, a physical struggle ensues until Ensal accidentally shoots Earl in the side. With Earl subdued, Ensal successfully has foiled the plot but subsequently decides to emigrate to Africa. Despite Griggs' opposition to armed resistance (as suggested by the foiled plot), Ensal physically assaults Earl to prevent the assault on the state capital. This is an ironic twist that Griggs does not explore further and it suggests his conflicted feelings toward violence as a strategy for black liberation.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 144.

While Earl and Ensal are the novel's main black leaders, Gus Martin represents the antithesis of both their approaches. Unlike Ensal, Gus discounts Christianity because it "unmanned" the race. Furthermore, unlike Earl, he despises the idea of patriotism despite the fact that he served bravely during the Spanish-American War. Also, contrary to both Earl and Ensal, he asserts that group action (whether conservative or radical) is doomed to failure and therefore favors individual and targeted acts of defiance.<sup>303</sup> For example, Gus murders a black man, who was passing as white, because he saw him kiss a black woman. Gus proceeds to barricade himself within an armory and announces to white bystanders that he intends to surrender but would like to talk with the sheriff first. Gus calls the sheriff, the governor, the President, and the British legation and they all refuse to protect him from the lynch mob that has formed. In response to white rebuffs, Martin angrily retorts, "I have telephoned 'round the world and there ain't no justice nowhere fur a black man. We'll fight it out right here."<sup>304</sup> Gus is later visited by Tiara, the sister of the man he murdered, who convinces him to surrender but shortly after turning himself over to the police, he is shot and killed by a white mob.<sup>305</sup>

While Griggs abhors violence (particularly as a means to garner black equality), Gus' failed attempt to get the state to protect him and his subsequent violent confrontation with the mob suggests that Griggs supported armed self-defense as a tactic of last resort. By the same token, Gus Martin's ignored appeals for protection from white authorities suggest that armed resistance might

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<sup>303</sup> Elder, *The "Hindered Hand,"* 89.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.



as well be the first response.<sup>306</sup> Thus, while Griggs seems to conditionally accept armed resistance, he does not glorify it. Gus Martin, like every black character of the novel who violently resists white mob violence, is eventually murdered by whites.

Griggs continues with Earl recommitting himself to ending racial oppression through nonviolent means following his foiled armed resistance plot. In part, his political reversal is motivated by the intense depression of Eunice Seabright, his wife, which was triggered by whites' discovery of her black ancestry. Consequently, Earl places Eunice in a Northern sanatorium and commits himself to fomenting a plot that will hasten the demise of racial prejudice. Unlike Earl's previous plot, he employs traditional political channels. In doing so, Earl assumes a white alias, convinces Southern radical racists (particularly the governor of Mississippi) to organize a virulent anti-black campaign throughout the North and then he stealthily convinces Southern and Northern liberals to unite and oppose it. While Earl successfully unites the moderate factions of both races to oppose racial prejudice, his wife remains convinced that racial intolerance will remain and falls deeper into insanity.<sup>307</sup> Interestingly, by the novel's end, Earl is responsible for the improved racial climate in the South.<sup>308</sup>

Earl's transformation is part of a trend in *The Hindered Hand* in which conservative characters (such as Ensal) coerce radical and moderate black factions to adopt a conservative political philosophy. This motif likely reflects

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<sup>306</sup> Michelle C. Sublette, "Spectacle and Ideology: Twentieth Century Representations of Lynching," (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, 2003), 130.

<sup>307</sup> Griggs, *The Hindered Hand*, 240–68.

<sup>308</sup> Elder, *The "Hindered Hand,"* 92.

Griggs' belief that racial change would occur if conservative leaders of both races unified and/or silenced radical elements.<sup>309</sup>

Despite Earl's success in uniting both Northern and Southern moderates in opposition to Southern extremism, *The Hindered Hand* concludes pessimistically. In light of the black characters' expressed hope in white moral renewal, the novel's concluding chapters suggest that racial reform is unlikely and therefore blacks ought to find alternative solutions. For example, Ensal loses faith in God and the American political system in the aftermath of the Bud and Foresta Harper lynching as well as Gus Martin's violent death. These developments dramatically undermine Ensal's faith in rational, nonviolent solutions to racial intolerance as well as the viability of white cooperation in that struggle. As a result, Ensal emigrates to Africa, which suggests that Griggs understood it as a place where a desperate people could return if every other political solution failed.<sup>310</sup>

In sum, Sutton Griggs' *The Hindered Hand* depicts the daily indignities blacks suffered under Jim Crow segregation as well as the horror of white lynch mob violence. In addition, it explores the possibilities and meanings of black resistance to white violence. Throughout the novel, Griggs suggests that blacks should eschew armed resistance in favor of interracial coalition building for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. For instance, Griggs portrayed armed resistance as futile because whites had superior numbers, weapons, and training; therefore, black armed resistance would always be doomed to failure.

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<sup>309</sup> Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, 80; Cerny, "Spectacle and Ideology," 132.

<sup>310</sup> Elder, *The "Hindered Hand"*, 93.

More importantly, Griggs suggested that armed resistance would likely engender a white backlash and consequently endanger the possibility of interracial coalition building, which Griggs believed was a requirement to end racial oppression. Thus, Griggs' *The Hindered Hand* portrayed political agitation and moral suasion as the only feasible options to oppose lynch mob violence.

### *Richard Wright's "Long Black Song" and Armed Resistance*

In contrast to Griggs' emphasis on the political implications of armed resistance, Richard Wright explores the psycho-cultural meanings of black armed resistance to white lynch mob violence. In particular, Wright explores what it means to stand and fight and/or flee lynch mob violence. Like Griggs, Wright suggests black armed resistance to lynching would precipitate white retaliation against blacks. However, despite the obvious danger of white retaliation, he portrayed armed resistance as a legitimate and necessary response to white lynch mob violence because it affirmed African American manhood and humanity—two things that white lynch mob violence sought to undermine. Therefore, Wright suggests that accommodating white lynch mob violence emasculated African American men, whereas armed resistance affirmed black manhood.

Richard Wright's formative years (particularly his family's abject poverty and his exposure to racial violence) were the central concerns in his early published work.<sup>311</sup> In 1908, Richard Wright was born on a plantation outside of Natchez, Mississippi. His father, Nathan Wright, was a sharecropper and his mother, Ella Wright, was a schoolteacher. Between 1908 and 1914, the Wrights

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<sup>311</sup> Kenneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 4.

shuffled between Natchez and Memphis, Tennessee in search of better employment opportunities. However, Richard Wright's father abandoned the family in 1914 and consequently the Wright's economic hardships increased significantly. In order to survive, Richard Wright and his siblings were placed in an orphanage. By 1916, however, they had moved in with relatives Aunt Maggie and Uncle Silas, a saloonkeeper, in Elaine, Arkansas. For a brief respite, Wright and his siblings were lifted out of poverty, but after his Uncle Silas was murdered by whites who resented his successful business, the Wrights narrowly escaped to West Helena, Arkansas.<sup>312</sup>

Wright left the Delta region for Chicago in 1927 where he remained for the next decade. Between 1927 and 1937, Wright worked menial jobs all the while honing his ability as a writer. Wright's hard work and sacrifice began to pay off when he won the 1937 *Story* magazine prize in fiction for his short story "Fire and Cloud," one of the five short stories that later comprised his first book *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). *Uncle Tom's Children* received widespread critical acclaim and, over the next decade, Wright established himself as a literary icon with publications such as *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945).<sup>313</sup>

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright primarily explores the role of physical and psychological violence in Southern race relations.<sup>314</sup> Each of the short stories' dramatic tensions revolve around how blacks (individually and collectively) should respond to white oppression. Of the five short stories, "Long Black Song"

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<sup>312</sup> Robert J. Butler, *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1995), x.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv; Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*, reprint (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), xx.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

is the most vivid portrayal of the psychological underpinnings of black armed resistance to white lynch mob violence.

The main protagonists of “Long Black Song” are Silas, an industrious black sharecropper, and Sarah, his wife. The story’s drama unfolds while Silas is in town selling his cotton crop at market. The same as other black sharecroppers, Silas had long endured the exploitative sharecropping system and dreams of owning his own farm which he expects to purchase from the proceeds of his cotton sales. While he is away, Sarah anxiously awaits his return because he has promised to bring her some fine cloth. Nonetheless, Sarah feels lonesome in his absence and fantasizes about Tom, her old lover, who has gone off to fight in World War I. She prefers Tom as a lover, but reassures herself that Silas is a good provider. As she daydreams, she is visited by a white clock salesman. At first, Sarah and the salesman innocently chat; however, their encounter escalates when the salesman fondles her. She initially resists but seemingly relents to his advances and they have intercourse. Afterwards, the salesman leaves a clock upon the promise that he will return to collect payment the next day.<sup>315</sup>

In the meantime, Silas returns home and happily relays to Sarah that he sold his cotton for \$250 dollars and used a portion of the profit as down payment on ten acres of land. Feeling his fortunes changing, Silas exclaims that he will need to hire a laborer (like white folks) to help farm his new landholdings. Amidst Silas’ joyous return, he gradually discovers Sarah’s sexual indiscretion, destroys the clock, and threatens to beat her and the salesman with a horse whip.

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 125–38.

Fearing for her life, she flees to a nearby hill where she remains until the following morning.<sup>316</sup>

As expected, the salesman returns the next day. From the hill upon which she hid from Silas, she observes the impending confrontation. As she feared, Silas angrily relays to the salesman his disdain for the clock and then proceeds to lash and shoot him. Silas then opens fire on the white man accompanying the salesman. He narrowly escapes and later returns with a lynch mob. Before the mob returns, Sarah returns home and pleads with Silas to flee before the mob returns. Instead, he sends her away and barricades himself in their house. When the mob returns, he shoots several white men and in response the mob sets fire to the house. In the end, rather than flee the burning house and submit to a certain lynching, Silas chooses to remain and therefore dies in the fire.<sup>317</sup>

Prior to Sarah's betrayal, Silas believed through personal sacrifice and hard work he could become equal with whites. In pursuit of that goal, he patiently endured the indignities of white supremacy and sought to emulate whites. By emulating whites, Silas saved enough money for a down payment toward the purchase of a farm; he planned to hire laborers to improve the farm, and even restricted Sarah to household duties rather than fieldwork which was typically required of black farm women. Therefore, Silas believed if he followed the white man's rules, he could insulate himself to a degree from white oppression.

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<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–48.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 149–56.

Silas felt betrayed by Sarah because she allowed the white salesman into their home and was unfaithful to him. Of the two, it seems allowing the white salesman into their home was the most egregious. Furthermore, Sarah's betrayal destroys Silas' hope that his individual strivings could stave off white supremacy. Upon this realization, Silas' repressed hatred of whites replaces his desire to be their equal. For instance, Silas angrily reflects,

Gawddam yo black soul t hell, don yuh try lyin t me! Ef yuh start layin wid white men Ahll hoss-whip yuh ta incha yo life. Shos theres Gawd in heaven Ah will! From sunup to sundown Ah work mah guts out t pay them white trash bastrards whut Ah owe em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house! Ah cant go into their houses, n yuh know Gawddam well Ah cant! They don have no mercy on no black folks, wes just like dirt under their feet! Fer ten years Ah slaves lika dog t git mah farm free, givin every penny Ah kin t em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house.... Ef yuh wans t eat at mah table yuhs gonna keep them white trash bastards out, yuh hear? Tha white ape kin come n git that damn box n Ah ain gonna pay im a cent! He had no bisness leavin it here, n yuh had no bisness lettin im! Ahma tell tha sonofabitch something when he comes out here in tha mawin, so hep me Gawd!<sup>318</sup>

Silas' transformation is symbolized by his violent confrontation with the white salesman. For instance, Silas' first act of resistance to white supremacy occurs when he lashes the white salesman with a horse whip. By lashing him, Wright suggests that Silas (who had considered himself a slave to whites) was now emancipated from being deferential to whites and now literally holds the power to exact revenge on them for various insults.

Moreover, Wright's emphasis on Silas' desire to emulate whites and his embittered realization that his goals were impractical suggests that Silas' confrontation with the white salesman was precipitated by accumulated oppressions rather than from a militant consciousness. Since Silas' violent confrontation with the white salesman was precipitated by accumulated white indignities rather than black militancy, Wright suggests the inevitability of black-

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 143.

white violent confrontations because they are unavoidable byproducts of white supremacy.

Given the inevitability of violent confrontations, Wright portrays the mobilization of a white lynch mob to avenge Silas' insolence as a matter of course. Moreover, rather than flee an almost certain lynching, Silas rebuffs Sarah's invitation to flee and chooses to stand and fight. In deliberating on how to respond to the approaching lynch mob, Silas sullenly remarks,

It don't make no difference. Fer ten years Ah slaved mah life out t git farm free... Now it's all gone. Ef Ah run erway, Ah ain got nothin. Ef Ah stay n fight, Ah ain got nothing. It don make no difference which way Ah go. Gawd! Gawd, Ah wish all them white folks wuz dead! Dead, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill em all! The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in yo whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo lan! They take yo freedom! They take you women! N then they take yo life! Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me, Gawd, Ah'm gonna be hard! When they come fer me Ah'm gonna be here! N when they gime me outta here theys gonna know Ahm gone! Ef Gawd lets me live Ahm gonna make em feel it! But lawd, Ah don wanna be this way! It don mean nothing! Yuh die ef yuh fight! Yuh die ef yuh don't fight! Either way yuh die n it don mean nothin....<sup>319</sup>

Thus, by refusing to flee to the safety of a nearby relative's home, Silas chooses individual rather than collective resistance. It seems for Wright, Silas' refusal to embrace informal networks of resistance, only underscores his personal courage and manliness. For instance, as the mob arrives to lynch Silas, Wright contrasts Sarah's fear and subsequent flight with Silas' unflinching resoluteness to violently resist the lynch mob. In doing so, Wright suggests that individual acts of violent resistance (while arguably doomed to failure) require masculine heroism.

Although Silas heroically chooses to stand and fight, he came to this decision reluctantly. As the above quotation suggests, he didn't want to have to kill whites—whites' need to deprive him of all that was significant forced him into this violent posture. In this way, Wright reemphasizes the notion that violent

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 152–53.



retaliation to white supremacy emerges as a result of accumulated oppressions rather than black militancy. Although Silas seemed to lament his desire to kill whites, his hatred of them blunted his remorse. In the end, Silas decided to be “hard” like them and make them “feel” the suffering that they had wreaked upon his life. Moreover, in coming to the decision to stand and fight, Silas is empowered because through violently confronting and killing whites, he will for once be able to deprive them of their dearest possession—life.

In addition, while Silas’ actions were suicidal, his underlying objective was not suicide. By standing and fighting, Silas gains control over how he is going to die. Through embracing his impending death, he liberated himself from the fear of white violence which Sarah’s flight represents. Therefore, Silas was no longer controlled by fear, rather he had mastered it. Also, rather than flee his burning home, Silas remains inside and is ultimately killed in the fire. In refusing to flee, (which likely would have resulted in a lynching), Silas once again denied whites the ability to define the meaning of his death.

Ultimately, Silas chose armed resistance in response to the white salesman’s intrusion into his home and anticipated white lynch mob violence. Throughout his life, he had accommodated white supremacy with the hope that one day he could be the equal of any white man. In order to achieve this goal, he worked diligently and repressed his hatred of whites as he gradually accumulated enough money to purchase his own farm. However, when Sarah had an affair with a white salesman, his manhood was irretrievably violated but more importantly he realized the futility of seeking equality with white men. In a

fit of rage, Silas kills the white salesman. Rather than flee the approaching lynch mob, he steadfastly awaits their arrival and violently defends himself. His decision to eschew flight dramatizes his new understanding of white supremacy —“yuh die ef yuh fight! Yuh die ef yuh don fight!”<sup>320</sup> Essentially, Silas came to believe that whites would always win no matter how much he tried. While Silas’ dim view of black agency and its inability to alter white supremacy may to some reflect a defeatist mentality, it seems more likely that his decision to remain was mostly concerned with his desire to exert a measure of control over his life—even if that control occurred with the limited strictures of white supremacy. Thus, by refusing to flee and engaging in armed resistance, Silas decided he would be “hard” like whites and in doing so he would force them to recognize his humanity.

In the final analysis, Silas knew he was going to die at the hands of the mob, but that did not matter to him. What mattered most was to reclaim a sense of dignity, honor, and integrity of which he had been heretofore deprived.<sup>321</sup> Therefore, in Wright’s “Long Black Song,” armed resistance to lynch mob violence was is about actually defending oneself and saving oneself; rather, armed resistance to white violence fills a psychological void. In Silas’ case, it affirms his manhood and humanity (which he had strived to express through landownership but ultimately was forced to express through armed resistance).

In conclusion, Griggs’ *The Hindered Hand* and Richard Wright’s “Long Black Song” arrive at very different conclusions concerning the purpose and implications of armed resistance as a response to white mob violence. For

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<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>321</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 60.

Griggs, black armed resistance was counterproductive because blacks could never defeat better-armed whites. More importantly, armed resistance would more than likely engender a violent white backlash in which innocent blacks would be killed. Furthermore, armed resistance might undermine the possibility of an interracial political coalition which Griggs believed offered the best hope to bring an end to racial oppression.

Richard Wright's understanding of the function and meaning of armed resistance ignored political concerns. Wright was much more concerned with the devastating effects white racism and lynching had upon the black psyche. For this reason, he suggested that blacks (particularly those who faced the threat of racial violence) could employ armed resistance as a means to reclaim the dignity and humanity which was denied them within the narrow strictures of white supremacy. Thus, whereas Griggs eschews glorifying armed resistance for political purposes, Wright portrays it as an empowering masculine/heroic response to white mob violence. However, despite the positive psychological ramifications of black armed resistance, Wright somewhat pessimistically suggests that blacks could only reclaim manhood and humanity through death. Therefore, Griggs and Wright's differences in perspective on the role and meaning of armed resistance to white lynch mob violence reflect their conflicting priorities.

Despite their differences in perspectives, their explorations of the function and implications of armed resistance highlight the prominence of armed resistance within the black imagination. In addition, it suggests the extent to

which blacks figuratively and literally had embraced grassroots resistance as a strategy to resist white violence. Despite Griggs' opposition to armed resistance, in two instances, black characters came close to violently retaliating against whites in response to lynching, although in both instances, moderate black characters interceded and stalled it. Griggs' discussion of armed resistance (given his politics) illustrates the extent to which armed resistance to white lynch mob violence had become the status quo within black discourse and therefore Griggs could not simply dismiss it. Rather, he had to provide a cogent argument against it as a means to persuade a black readership who likely did not share his politics or his abhorrence to armed resistance. Additionally, Wright does not explore other alternatives to white lynch mob violence; rather, he portrays black armed resistance as a natural response. Given this, Wright seems to have taken for granted that black readers would violently resist mob violence. By way of response, he simply sought to provide a literary framework for explaining the psycho-cultural dimensions of armed resistance.

### **Freedom Bound: Southern Lynching and Black Political Cartoons as Narratives of Grassroots Resistance**

At its height, the Chicago Defender was the nation's largest-selling black newspaper with an estimated circulation of 250,000 distributed copies per week. As the nation's most widely circulated black newspaper, it was also the nation's most outspoken and racially conscious black newspaper, particularly for its biting criticism of Southern race relations. Consequently, white Southerners attacked it and in many Southern locales it was banned altogether. Moreover, perhaps more than any other black newspaper of its time, the Chicago Defender fervently

encouraged the Great Migration from the South.<sup>322</sup> For instance, a 1917 editorial remarked,

To die from the bite of frost is far more glorious than at the hands of a mob. I beg you, my brother, to leave the benighted land. You are a free man. Show the world that you will not let false leaders lead you. Your neck has been in the yoke. Will you continue to keep it there because some “white folks’ nigger” want you to? Leave for all quarters of the globe. Get out of the South. Your being there in the numbers in which you are gives the southern politician too strong a hold on your progress.... So much has been said through the white papers in the South about the members of the race freezing to death in the North. They freeze to death down South when they don’t take care of themselves. There is no reason for any human being staying in the Southland on this bugaboo handed out by the white press.

If you can freeze to death in the North and be free, why freeze to death in the South and be a slave, where your mother, sister and daughter are raped and burned at the stake; where your father, brother and sons are treated with contempt and hung to a pole, riddled with bullets at the least mention that he does not like the way he is treated. Come North then, all you folks, both good and bad. If you don’t behave yourselves up here, the jails will certainly make you wish you had. For the hard-working man there is plenty of work—if you really want it. The Defender says come.<sup>323</sup>

The Defender’s sharp criticism of Southern race relations and its endorsement of a mass black exodus reflected its founder’s political consciousness. In 1905, the Chicago Defender was founded by Robert S. Abbott for twenty-five cents. Abbott spent his formative years in Georgia and attended Booker T. Washington’s Hampton Institute in 1897 before he arrived in Chicago. He admired Washington as a race leader but did not share his accommodationist politics. Rather, Abbott’s politics were more akin to W. E. B. Du Bois’ militant and confrontational political posture. His decision to publish news stories had to meet one basic criterion—serve the interests of the race. Also, beyond presenting news stories of interest to black Americans, the Defender sought to convey racial

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<sup>322</sup> Alan D. DeSantis, “Selling the American Dream to Black Southerners: The Chicago Defender and the Great Migration of 1915–1919,” *Western Journal of Communications* 62 (1998): 477–79.

<sup>323</sup> Trotter, *The African American Experience*, 381.

pride. For instance, breaking with the status quo, Abbott eschewed referring to blacks as “Negro” and substituted it with “the race,” and “race men.”<sup>324</sup>

By the time of the Great Migration, Abbott’s racial rhetoric and militant style combined with the newspaper’s immense promotion and distribution network catapulted it into the nation’s largest and most widely circulated black newspaper. In 1915 (in the earliest stages of the black Northern migration), the Defender’s circulation was approximately 33,000 per issue. However, by 1919, as blacks increasingly migrated to the North for industrial employment, it is estimated that the newspaper’s circulation skyrocketed to 230,000 copies per issue.<sup>325</sup>

Interestingly, two-thirds of the Chicago Defender’s circulation occurred outside Chicago. For example, in 1919, over 1,500 Southern towns and cities (both populous and remote) were listed on the Defender’s shipping manifest.<sup>326</sup> In fact, the Defender’s shipping manifest illustrates that the Delta region received as many copies of it as any other region.<sup>327</sup>

Despite Abbott’s fervent support for a general black exodus in 1917, as late as the spring of 1916, the Chicago Defender had advised Southern blacks to remain in the South. Abbott’s reluctance to support a general exodus reflected employment discrimination within Northern industries and unions. However, by the summer of 1916, Abbott shifted his position as it became clear that Northern employers needed to hire black unskilled laborers to replace the declining white

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<sup>324</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 74–75.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–77.

immigrant labor pool.<sup>328</sup> Thus, between late 1916 and mid-1919, the Chicago Defender enthusiastically campaigned for a mass black exodus from the South to the urban North. In particular, it sought to persuade black migration through (1) illustrating racial inequality/violence throughout the South, (2) portraying Chicago (and the urban North) as a promised land, and (3) overtly urging black Southerners to migrate to the urban North.<sup>329</sup> Moreover, during its migration campaign, it published 191 items (which included editorials, cover stories, political cartoons, poems, pictures, and investigative reports) that depicted the negative aspects of Southern race relations. While black Southerners were certainly aware of white oppression, the Chicago Defender's coverage sought to portray it as systematic and unrelenting.<sup>330</sup>

Within the Defender's campaign to expose the brutality of Southern race relations, it emphasized unprovoked white-on-black violence. In particular, it published forty-five items (typically as front-page news stories and investigative reports) on Southern lynching. Furthermore, the Defender likely carried dozens of stories on lynching because it symbolized white racial oppression but more importantly it conveyed to black Southerners that all blacks (regardless of age, gender, class, or color) were potential targets of racial violence.<sup>331</sup>

In addition to negative portrayals of the South, the Chicago Defender likewise portrayed the North as a promised land—a land in which racial equality, material wealth, leisure, and consumption awaited them. For instance, during its migration campaign, it annually published five pages of advertisements per week

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<sup>328</sup> DeSantis, "Selling the American Dream to Black Southerners," 498.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 481–82.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.

that featured time-saving devices, leisure activities, and beauty products.<sup>332</sup> Furthermore, the advertisement and entertainment sections persuasively illustrated to black Southerners that a better life existed in the North and more importantly they could attain a better life through migration. Since the Defender understood that most black Southerners were either misinformed about conditions in the North or simply cautious, the newspaper frequently reprinted migrant letter-articles (largely written by Chicago migrants) that extolled the North as an actual promised land.<sup>333</sup>

The Chicago Defender also conveyed its migration message through political cartoons. Political cartoons were significant to the Defender's migration campaign because they provided simple yet potent illustrations of Southern race relations. As such, political cartoons offered a visual migration narrative that complemented front-page cover stories and migrant testimony. For example, a July 22, 1916 cartoon entitled "After Fifty Years: Uncle Able Outdone" depicts black Southerners as a long-suffering people. Figuratively, the cartoon portrays black Southerners as bottled up in a barrel labeled "Slavery," "Race Prejudice," "Disenfranchisement," and "Jim Crow Laws." The cartoon shows Abraham Lincoln opening the barrel fifty years after emancipation. Upon opening the barrel, Lincoln appears to be shocked at the social, political retrogression of blacks fifty years after emancipation. In disbelief, Lincoln tiredly laments, "Ain't you out of there yet?" Therefore, this cartoon somewhat pessimistically suggests

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<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 489–91.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 495–99.



that Southern race relations after fifty years have not changed but more significantly will not change in another fifty years.<sup>334</sup>

Also, the May 7, 1921 cartoon entitled “We Can at Least Keep These Weeds Out of Our Garden” depicts a black farmer holding a hoe with the word “determination” etched on it. The farmer is standing in a field in which “The North” is etched into it in big bold letters. The farmer’s field is unencumbered with weeds, which represents his prosperity in the North. In addition, the farmer’s field is bordered by “The South.” The South is depicted as an untended field with weeds sprouting in all directions. These weeds (which are labeled discrimination, segregation, lynching, hatred, etc.) suffocate black progress. Thus, this political cartoon invited readers to understand the stark social, political, and economic differences between the “North” and “South.” Therefore, in contrast with the South, the North was portrayed as a promised land where black determination and prosperity were possible.

While the Chicago Defender’s political cartoons typically portrayed the South as an undifferentiated region, with regards to Southern lynching, they routinely highlighted the practice in Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama. The newspaper likely emphasized these states because they annually led the nation in the number of persons lynched. Therefore, racial violence in these states was offered as a paradigm for understanding lynching and the culture of lynching in the South. For instance, the January 20, 1923 cartoon entitled “For Distinguished Service” showed a devilish figure awarding a Georgia politician

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<sup>334</sup> “After Fifty Years,” Chicago Defender (National edition), [Proquest Historical Newspapers], July 22, 1916.

with a skull medallion for “the highest lynching score for 1922.” This cartoon implies that Southern states vied for recognition as the most lynching prone and celebrated lynching as an achievement. In addition, a 1922 cartoon humorously poked fun at Mississippi by referring to a town in which a lynching had occurred as Hemp, Mississippi (alluding to the materials that are used to make ropes and ultimately lynching nooses) and described a Georgia town as Lynchton, Georgia. By insinuating that Southern place names were named in honor of lynching, these cartoons emphasize the depth of white supremacy as well as the foundational role lynching played in shaping Southern society.<sup>335</sup>

In addition to emphasizing the prominence of lynching in the South, the Defender’s political cartoons also challenged Southern rationalizations for lynching. For instance, the July 1, 1922 cartoon “If the Daily Press Dared to Tell the Truth,” dismisses the black beast rapist charge. The cartoon shows how a Southern newspaper’s front page would appear if it told the truth about lynching. The cartoon’s headline sarcastically declared that a truthful Southern newspaper headline would read “Girl Screams Rape When Surprised by Father—Negro Lynched,” “Millionaire Daughter Elopes with Negro,” and “Refuses to Walk in Gutter; Negro Mobbed.” Therefore, contrary to the black beast rapist myth, these cartoons collectively implied that white-on-black lynching occurred not only because black men engaged in voluntary relationships with white women but also because black people refused to submit to Jim Crow segregation.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> “For Distinguished Service,” Chicago Defender (National edition), [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], January 20, 1923.

<sup>336</sup> “If the Daily Press Dared to Tell the Truth,” Chicago Defender (National edition), [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], July 1, 1922.

Given that lynching powerfully symbolized white supremacy and black subordination, the Chicago Defender repeatedly employed the imagery of lynching to encourage black migration. For instance, the September 2, 1916 “Desertion” cartoon is perhaps the most explicit conjoining of lynching and black migration from the South. The cartoon depicts a black migrant who has fled a lynch mob (with hound dogs in pursuit) to the safety of a Northern labor recruiter. In order to escape, the migrant had to first break shackles that were placed around his ankles and then skip across floating sheets of ice. Once the migrant crossed the ice, a northern labor agent awaited his arrival with an outstretched hand to welcome him and presumably offer employment. Like other Defender migration cartoons, “Desertion” suggests that jobs and prosperity await black Southerners in the North whereas the South offers racial terrorism. However, this cartoon added a new dimension to the migration narrative by suggesting that black migration to the North should be understood as resistance to lynching. In addition, it suggests that black Southerners should migrate in spite of any difficulties that might encumber them along the way.<sup>337</sup>

Another example of the explicit conjoining of lynching and migration was the October 23, 1923 cartoon entitled “It Must Be Embarrassing.” This cartoon satirized the often-stated contention that black Southerners should remain in the South because it was the black man’s natural home. On the contrary, the cartoon humorously depicts a Northern politician (referred to as a silver-tongued propaganda expert) chastising a black migrant for leaving the South. The

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<sup>337</sup> “Desertion,” Chicago Defender (National edition), [Proquest Historical Newspapers], September 2, 1916.

politician remarked, “You were foolish to leave your happy home in the South and come North—The South is the black man’s friend.” Simultaneously, the Northern politician was interrupted by a newspaper boy that yells “Extra paper!! Two black men and three women lynched in Alabama!! Extra!!” In response to this news, the politician shudders in horror, whereas the news of Southern lynching simply affirms the migrant’s decision to leave the South. Similar to “Desertion,” “It Must Be Embarrassing” impressed upon potential migrants that the North provided a sanctuary from lynching. Migration cartoons that depicted Southern lynching asserted, in the most visceral way possible, the promise of Northern migration.<sup>338</sup>

In sum, prior to spring 1916, the Chicago Defender counseled blacks to remain in the South. However, as industrial jobs in Northern cities opened to blacks, the Defender enthusiastically encouraged black migration. Between 1916 and 1919, the Defender orchestrated a migration campaign that sought to convey the systematic and unrelenting nature of white oppression, portray the North as a promised land for black Southerners, and most importantly persuade blacks to leave the South for Northern jobs and prosperity. Within the Defender’s broad efforts to encourage black migration, lynching and images of lynching played a significant role. For instance, it employed front-page cover stories of lynchings that were situated alongside articles of leisure and consumption in Chicago to dramatize the differences between the North and South. In addition, it skillfully employed political cartoons that visually depicted

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<sup>338</sup> “It Must Be Embarrassing,” Chicago Defender (National edition), [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], October 20, 1923.

the brutality of lynching while also highlighting it as a systematic and unrelenting form of racial oppression.

Thus, the Chicago Defender implied that through migrating to the North black Southerners were resisting the perpetuation of lynching and Jim Crow segregation. In this way, the Defender's political cartoons as well as their larger migration campaign encouraged black Southerners to employ grassroots resistance to lynching. However, after the 1919 Chicago riot (which resulted in numerous black deaths), the Chicago Defender all but ceased to endorse migration to the North. In part, advocating black migration to the North amid the nation's bloodiest period of racial strife likely seemed disingenuous. Yet, despite the fact that the Defender abandoned its migration campaign after 1919, it continued to shine a penetrating light on Southern racism and discrimination.

### **The Lynching Blues: Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail" as a Narrative of Grassroots Resistance to Lynching**

Since Robert Johnson's death in the 1930s, he has become a cultural icon and has been referred to as the "King of the Delta Blues."<sup>339</sup> During his brief life and career, he traveled and performed throughout the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas and as his fame spread he began performing in St. Louis, Memphis, Detroit, Chicago, and New York.<sup>340</sup> As a "walking bluesmen," Johnson sometimes

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<sup>339</sup> Patricia R. Schroeder, *Robert Johnson, Mythmaking, and Contemporary American Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2; See also Barney Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch, *Robert Johnson: Lost and Found* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 27–30. According to the authors, in 1961 and 1970, Columbia Records released a collection of Johnson's studio recordings in an album entitled "Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers," which established him as a mythical and seminal figure in early blues music.

<sup>340</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson: The Life and Legend of the King of the Delta Blues Singers* (New York: Plume, 1998), 18–19.

traveled from town to town by train, hitched a ride, or even rode on the back of a farm tractor. When Johnson arrived at his new destination, he performed on street corners, in front of barbershops and restaurants, town squares, or in a local juke joint.<sup>341</sup> According to a Johnson biographer, he chose the life of a walking blues musician because it was preferable to the backbreaking and monotonous work that sharecropping entailed.<sup>342</sup> In doing so, Johnson gained the admiration of Delta blues musicians and black listeners.<sup>343</sup> However, despite Johnson's stellar reputation within the Delta blues circuit, his music never reached a wide audience. During his brief recording career (which began approximately two years before his death in 1938), Johnson recorded fifty-nine songs of which only forty-two have survived. Of Johnson's discography, only his song "Terraplane Blues" achieved modest commercial success.<sup>344</sup>

Despite Johnson's small body of recorded blues, his "Hellhound on My Trail" (1937) is noted as one of blues music's most terrifying songs as well as a cornerstone of early blues music.<sup>345</sup> In the song, Johnson agonizingly wails, "I've got to keep moving, I've got to keep moving, blues falling down like hail, blues failing down like hail.... And the days keeps on 'minding me, there's a hellhound on my trail...."<sup>346</sup> Robert Johnson biographer Elijah Ward described "Hellhound on My Trail" as a "saga of haunted flight," "a poetic masterpiece," and "painfully

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<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>342</sup> Tom Graves, *Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson* (Spokane, WA: Demers Books, 2008), 23.

<sup>343</sup> Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson*, 20.

<sup>344</sup> Graves, *Crossroads*, 6–7.

<sup>345</sup> Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson*, 23; 44.

<sup>346</sup> Eric Sackheim, ed. *The Blues Line: Blues Lyrics from Leadbelly to Muddy Waters* (New York: Thunders Mouth Press, 2004), 223.

autobiographical.”<sup>347</sup> Wald writes, “it is the cry of an ancient mariner, cursed by his fates and doomed to range eternally through the world without hope of port or savior.”<sup>348</sup> Moreover, blues musician and literary historian Adam Gussow has persuasively argued that early blues music developed in response to the eruption of spectacle lynching.<sup>349</sup> Therefore, Gussow argues that early blues songs such as Robert Johnson’s “Hellhound on my Trail” contain veiled references to lynching which express black anxieties of being captured and tortured at the hands of a lynch mob.<sup>350</sup>

Indeed, Robert Johnson’s “Hellhound on My Trail” seems painfully autobiographical. According to a Johnson biographer, he was born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi in 1909 and spent his formative years traveling between Memphis and the Mississippi Delta. Johnson’s stepfather Charles Dodd was a prosperous wicker furniture maker and landowner in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. Local whites envied Dodd’s success and threatened to lynch him. Consequently, a white mob nearly lynched Dodd; however, he narrowly escaped and fled to Memphis in 1911. Over the next several years, Robert Johnson and his siblings left Hazlehurst and rejoined Dodd in Memphis. In the meantime, a family legend developed concerning Charles Dodd’s near lynching. Apparently, the legend recounted that Dodd was able to escape the lynch mob because he disguised himself in women’s clothing. From approximately 1914 to 1918 (between the ages of five and nine years old), Johnson lived in Memphis with his stepfather.

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<sup>347</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2004), 171.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 23.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 22; 27–28.

However, after an unexpected encounter with his mother Julia Major on the streets of Memphis in 1918, he returned with her to the Delta (near Robinsonville, Mississippi) and never again resided with his stepfather.<sup>351</sup> Despite Johnson's brief contact with his stepfather during his formative years, it is plausible that his "Hellhound on My Trail" was inspired by stories he heard as a child about his stepfather's near lynching in the Mississippi Delta.

Adam Gussow and others have thus correctly observed that Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail" expresses fear of being captured by a lynch mob. However, given the song's likely derivation, it should also be understood as a narrative of grassroots resistance to lynching. In particular, similar to Johnson's stepfather's clandestine escape from white lynch mob violence, "Hellhound on My Trail" describes black flight and black social networks aiding in black flight from lynch mob violence. Therefore, I argue that "Hellhound on My Trail" expresses more than black anxieties of spectacle lynching. Rather, it conveys blacks' seemingly omnipresent fear of lynching as a means to highlight the way in which white terrorist violence forced blacks into a perpetual state of resistance.

In the vast majority of early blues music, there were very few direct references to lynching such as mobs, nooses, or hound dogs.<sup>352</sup> As such, "Hellhound on My Trail" is one of the most overt discussions of lynching in early blues music. In the song, Johnson focused on the black subject position because he endeavored to convey the psycho-emotional experience of lynching

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<sup>351</sup> Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson*, 10–12.

<sup>352</sup> Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 22.



to black listeners. In doing so, Johnson sought to imaginatively transport the blues listener to a lynching. Moreover, given the popularity of Robert Johnson within the Delta blues circuit, it is plausible that “Hellhound on My Trail” shaped how black listeners understood the psychological trauma of lynching and consequently the necessity for black grassroots resistance to lynching.

A recurring motif in “Hellhound on My Trail” and early blues music more generally was a fear of being encircled or surrounded by whites.<sup>353</sup> Perhaps the most vivid example of encirclement in early blues music is Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Hangman’s Blues.” In “Hangman’s Blues,” Jefferson pictures the hanging of a black man accused of murder. Jefferson narrates,

Hangman's rope sho' is tough and strong  
Hangman's rope sho' is tough and strong  
They gonna hang me because I did something wrong  
I wanna tell you the gallis Lord's a fearful sight  
I wanna tell you the gallis Lord's a fearful sight  
Hang me in the mornin', and cut me down at night  
Mean ole hangman is waitin' to tighten up that noose  
Mean ole hangman is waitin' to tighten up that noose  
Lord, I'm so scared I'm trembling in my shoes  
Jury heard my case and they said my hands was red  
Jury heard my case and they said my hands was red  
And judge he sentenced me be hanging till I'm dead  
Crowd 'round the courthouse and the time is going fast  
Crowd 'round the courthouse and the time is going fast  
Soon a good-for-nothin' killer is gonna breath his last  
Lord, I'm almost dyin', gasping for my breath  
Lord, I'm almost dyin', gasping for my breath  
And a triflin' woman waiting to celebrate my death<sup>354</sup>

While the song is not a protest song per se, it attempts to highlight the most appalling aspects of mob violence. In this way, the song emphasizes the white subject position in lynching. Besides protesting spectacle lynching, it likely

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<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–28.

<sup>354</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, “Hangman’s Noose,” Harry’s Blues Lyrics Online, [http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/lyrics/blind\\_lemon\\_jefferson/hangman\\_s\\_blues.htm#top](http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/lyrics/blind_lemon_jefferson/hangman_s_blues.htm#top) (accessed July 16, 2009).

imagines the white subject position for black listeners because spectacle lynchings were white spaces.<sup>355</sup> For instance, the song describes how a white mob crowds around the courthouse to witness a black man's execution, describes the white executioner who readies the rope for the hanging, and finally describes the anticipated emotional catharsis of a female mob participant who anxiously awaits the black man's hanging. More importantly, Jefferson imagines the black hanging victim as overwhelmed by fear because he is encircled by a white mob without any possibility of escape.

Similarly, in "Hellhound on My Trail, Johnson broods,

I got to keep movin', I've got to keep movin'  
Blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail  
Umm mmm mmm mmm  
Blues fallin' down like hail, blues fallin' down like hail  
And the days keeps on worryin' me,  
there's a hellhound on my trail,  
hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail  
If today was Christmas eve  
If today was Christmas eve,  
and tomorrow was Christmas day  
If today was Christmas eve,  
and tomorrow was Christmas day  
(Aow, wouldn't we have a time, baby?)  
All I would need my little sweet rider just,  
to pass the time away, huh huh, to pass the time away  
You sprinkled hot foot powder, mmm  
mmm, around my door, all around my door  
You sprinkled hot foot powder, mmm,  
all around your daddy's door, hmm hmm hmm  
It keep me with ramblin' mind, rider  
Every old place I go, every old place I go  
I can tell, the wind is risin',  
the leaves tremblin' on the tree,  
tremblin' on the tree  
I can tell, the wind is risin',  
leaves tremblin' on the tree  
hmm hmm mmm mmm  
All I need's my little sweet woman,  
and to keep my company, hmhm hm, hey hey  
My company<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Amy L. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 34–35.

<sup>356</sup> Eric Sackheim, *The Blues Line*, 223.

As the lyrics suggest, Johnson's narrative revolves around a fugitive who has physically evaded a lynch mob signified by hellhounds; however, psychologically, he cannot escape the fear of encirclement. Johnson alludes to this point when he sings "blues falling down all around me and the days keeps on 'minding me, there's a hellhound on my trail...." Johnson's fugitive is so tormented that even the wind, trees, and leaves remind him of the lynch mobs' pursuit.

In addition, "Hellhound on My Trail" implies that a lynch mob will perpetually pursue the fugitive until he is physically captured. Indeed, Johnson's pessimism regarding the inevitability of capture was rooted in reality. For example, in 1921, Henry Lowery, a black farm laborer, allegedly murdered white planter O. T. Nelson in Nodena, Arkansas. Fearing that he would be lynched, Lowery fled over one thousand miles to El Paso, Texas. However, he was eventually captured, returned to Nodena, and burned at the stake after local whites intercepted a letter written by Lowery.<sup>357</sup> Johnson's stepfather (who was nearly lynched in Hazlehurst, Mississippi) was so fearful that he would be located and captured by a posse that he changed his name after he successfully fled to Memphis.<sup>358</sup> Given the mental anguish precipitated by the seeming inevitability of encirclement, Johnson's fugitive yearns for a psychic escape.

In addition to highlighting encirclement and the psychological torment it entails, "Hellhound on My Trail" also illustrates black fugitives' reliance on social networks to evade capture. For instance, as the narrative unfolds, it is apparent that Johnson's fugitive has been provided shelter by his lover. However, it

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<sup>357</sup> Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, January 27, 1921, p. 1, col. 1 and p. 9, col. 2.

<sup>358</sup> Graves, Crossroads, 14.

seems because the ever-pursuing hellhounds “keeps me ramblin mind” and therefore he “must keep movin,” he is forced to flee his lover’s protection and the psychic escape it offered. Consequently, Johnson’s fugitive fantasizes about reuniting and celebrating Christmas together again.

Also, the song more directly references black grassroots resistance to lynching when it mentions black fugitives’ creativity in outsmarting their pursuers. Johnson’s fugitive mentions that his sweet little rider “sprinkled hot foot powder, umm around my door, all around my door.” The song’s reference to foot powder describes black fugitives’ real-life attempts to stifle hellhounds’ ability to track them to a specific location. For example, in 1910, Steve Green, a black tenant farmer, allegedly shot and killed William Sidel, a white planter nearby Marion, Arkansas. With a posse and bloodhounds on his heels, Green reportedly filled his shoes with pepper and wallowed in the mud in order to avert the bloodhounds.<sup>359</sup>

In sum, Robert Johnson’s “Hellhound on My Trail” and its perspective on black resistance and its psychological ramifications were likely etched in his consciousness during childhood as he listened to stories of his stepfather’s successful flight from a white mob. Despite the song’s obsession with the seemingly omnipresent threat of white lynch mob violence, it is not a song about the inevitability of black victimization. On the contrary, the song actively encourages black grassroots resistance to lynching and implies that black social networks make possible black fugitives’ ability to physically escape capture. Still

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<sup>359</sup> “Steve Green Liberated,” Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition) [ProQuest Historical Newspapers], September 24, 1910.

in all, Johnson's emphasis on being perpetually tormented by hellhounds suggests that his overall point was to stress that black fugitives could physically evade lynch mob violence, but never psychologically detach themselves from the omnipresent threat of white lynch mob violence. Thus, while Johnson portrays resistance to lynching as possible and effectual, he also emphatically suggests black Southerners lived under the sentence of death.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grassroots resistance to white mob violence was a central concern within the black anti-lynching discourse. In general, black leaders typically debated the usefulness of grassroots resistance and the likely impact it might have upon white mob violence. During the 1870s and 1880s, prominent black leaders such as Fredrick Douglass and T. Thomas Fortune argued that black out-migration from the South and armed resistance to white mob violence were at best ineffectual responses to racial violence. Rather, they urged blacks to work within established political channels (namely the Republican Party) in order to curb white mob violence. However, by the 1890s and the early twentieth century, Douglass and Fortune's views were eclipsed by prominent black leaders such as Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois who passionately advocated grassroots resistance (namely armed resistance) as a means to curtail white mob violence.

Whereas black political leaders debated the utility of grassroots responses, black artists typically imagined the social and psychological implications of grassroots resistance to white lynch mob violence. In this vein,

Richard Wright's "Long Black Song" portrayed armed resistance to white lynch mob violence as the epitome of black masculine courage and Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail" characterized black flight as a response to white lynch mob violence that was physically liberating but psychologically tormenting. Notwithstanding black artists' different emphases, their texts were grassroots narratives of resistance that countered heroic depictions of white lynch mob violence. More importantly, their narratives supplied rationales for black grassroots responses to lynching and in doing so they encouraged blacks to resist white lynch mob violence through armed resistance, flight, and migration as well as other grassroots tactics.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONTESTED MEMORIES

In the mid-1990s, Daniel Swanigan reflected on his family's violent encounters with whites in the Arkansas Delta. He remembered that a white sheriff in Wheatley [Arkansas] tried to make his father pay poll taxes. "He [the sheriff] seen papa with that money and was gonna make him pay the poll tax and papa wouldn't give him a quarter. He [the sheriff] saw him out there and chunked a bottle at papa and papa got that same bottle and ran him into a store and chunked it back at him."<sup>360</sup> Moreover, he connected his father's open defiance of white authority with the memory of his sibling's near lynching in Wheatley. He recalled that a white man hit his brother over the head and his brother "went crazy on him." A search party quickly organized and he vividly remembered that airplanes circled above their farm and the roads in and out of Wheatley were blocked. The Swanigan's weighed whether they could defend his brother against a white mob, but soon realized that they had only two Winchester rifles and one box of ammunition. Instead of armed defense, the Swanigan's secretly received assistance from the sheriff. Swanigan recollected that the sheriff said "that there was only one way out—dress that boy in women's clothes and get a police escort to get him out." Fearing that the sheriff would betray them, the family relied on their kin networks to secretly convey his brother out of Wheatley and across the Arkansas state line.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Daniel Swanigan interview, interviewed by Paul Ortiz, August 2, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

Swanigan's vivid recollections of racial violence and resistance reverberated throughout hundreds of black oral history interviews conducted by historians at Duke University in the 1990s. These interviews became the basis of the award-winning book *Remembering Jim Crow* and the documentary project entitled *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South* based at Duke University. According to the *Behind the Veil* website, interviews were conducted in eleven Southern states so that the narrative of the Jim Crow South could move beyond the simplistic understanding of the period as an era defined as total domination by whites and passive submission by blacks. In order to accomplish this goal, they believed it was necessary for the complex realities of the period to emerge from lived experiences of African Americans. Through documenting African American lived experiences during Jim Crow, they believed the interviews would provide historians with sources to tell the "real" story of Jim Crow.<sup>362</sup>

Collectively, the *Behind the Veil* oral history testimony provides a rich archive for recovering black life during Jim Crow. Oftentimes in vivid detail, blacks discussed the commonalities of black life such as sharecropping, domestic work, attending church, and participating in fraternal organizations. In addition, blacks recalled the indignities they suffered such as disenfranchisement, segregated schools, and lynching. While there were certainly differences in how blacks remembered the Jim Crow era, the

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<sup>362</sup> *Behind the Veil: Project Overview*, [http://cda.aas.duke.edu/btv/btv\\_basic\\_html/projectoverview.html](http://cda.aas.duke.edu/btv/btv_basic_html/projectoverview.html), [date accessed, October 30, 2008].



commonality of the black experience during this period impressed upon them a shared memory of it.

This chapter utilizes approximately thirty *Behind the Veil* interviews from blacks who lived in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta region. In general, my objective is to explore resistance and black historical memory. I seek to analyze patterns in how blacks remember and make sense of the history of lynching. For most interviewees, lynching was an immensely personal topic. For instance, most interviewees recalled experiences in which distant relatives, immediate family, or friends were lynched or escaped a lynching. Despite the passage of time between the era of lynching and the 1990s, many black interviewees recalled specific lynchings with candor, vivid detail, and passion. As a result of the interviews' rich detail, I have been able to reconstruct a detailed portrait of black memories of lynching in the Delta region.

In the chapter that follows, I seek to make two arguments. First, I argue that memories of lynching played a critical role in socializing black children in the Delta region. My analysis revealed that parents and schools taught black children about race and racial customs through routinely sharing with them lynching stories. In addition to lynching stories, blacks renamed previous lynching sites as a way of commemorating significant lynchings. Second, I argue that black memories of lynching constitute a counter-memory to the dominant memory of lynching. In part, I illustrate this argument by analyzing white and black memories of a lynching in Greenville, Mississippi in 1903. In general, my analysis revealed that blacks rejected the idea that black criminality was the root

cause of lynching. With regard to rape, blacks were typically skeptical of allegations and often believed that white women voluntarily engaged in sex with black men. However, when these relationships were discovered, blacks asserted white women cried rape. In addition, I describe how black memories of lynching emphasized agency rather than victimhood by analyzing black memories of armed resistance to lynching.

### **Black Memories of Lynching as a Usable Past**

#### *Memory as a Negotiated Text*

Oral history can be defined as a process of recording an individual's memories of the past and transforming those memories into a coherent narrative. However, oral historians do not simply record and transform a narrator's memories into a narrative. Rather, both oral historian and narrator share authority in the process. According to Michael Frisch, "shared authority" refers to the interviewer and narrator's shared responsibility for and authorship of the final narrative.<sup>363</sup> Therefore, oral histories are negotiated texts because the interview's content is shaped by the narrator and interviewer's editorial choices, which conversely affect the narrative's overall structure and meaning.

While oral histories are co-creations of the interviewer and narrator, interviewers and narrators have only varying degrees of control/authority depending upon which phase of the oral history project they are engaged in. For instance, the oral history interview can be divided into three phases: (1) the research design phase, (2) the interview phase, and (3) the editing/transcribing

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<sup>363</sup> Michael Frisch, *Shared Authority: Essays on the Meaning and Craft of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY, 1990).

phase. Interviewers largely control the research/oral history design phase.

According to Mary Larson, the research design phase includes deciding on the type of oral history project, deciding on the theoretical approaches to oral history interviewing, selecting interviewees, and completing background research.<sup>364</sup>

During the interviewing phase, both interviewers and narrators jointly construct a narrator's memories of the past. Alessandro Portelli, a noted oral historian, has convincingly argued that a narrator's memories are reworked and given new meanings as a result of the interviewer/narrator dialogue.<sup>365</sup> However, it should be noted that the interviewer's questions/topics establish the structure and contours of the interview. In addition, the question-answer structure (which is largely controlled by the interviewer) privileges the interviewer's desired content and as a result the interviewer may disproportionately shape the interview's overall content and meaning. Moreover, oral historians have noted a tendency for both interviewers and narrators to eschew shared authority during the interview process. According to Lisa Shopes, historian and former president of the Oral History Association, "interviewers at times run over narrators with their questions, failing to wrap them around what's really on a narrator's mind; narrators don't answer questions asked but use interviews to comment on subjects far removed from the presumed topic of inquiry."<sup>366</sup>

During the editing process, both interviewers and narrators make choices in deleting or adding material to the original interview in order to insure that the

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<sup>364</sup> Mary A. Larson, "Research Design and Strategies," in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).

<sup>365</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre" in Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., *Narrative and Genre* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>366</sup> Linda Shopes, "Commentary: Sharing Authority," *Oral History Review* 30 (2003), 104.

narrator's memories are accurately represented. The editing process, according to Carl Wilmsen, affects the interview's content and meaning in more pronounced ways than any other phase of the interview process because it allows time for both narrator and interviewer to recollect and think purposefully about what kind of statement they want to make for the historical record.<sup>367</sup> Furthermore, according to Wilmsen, narrators and interviewers are concerned with how the interview will reflect on them as they go about their daily lives and potentially how the interview might endanger personal/professional relationships or ongoing political/legal struggles.<sup>368</sup>

Additionally, interviewers and narrators often have differing objectives for interviews. In general, narrators desire for their testimony to conform to, revise, or create new historical interpretations.<sup>369</sup> Oral historians have found that it is common for narrators to use oral history interviews as an opportunity to "get the story down right."<sup>370</sup> An interview from the *Behind the Veil* collection illustrates this dynamic. For example, Susie Rolling, a black domestic worker in Yazoo, Mississippi, described how black books and schools instilled black pride through highlighting black historical achievements that were diminished by whites. According to Rolling, [Christopher] "Columbus did not discover America. Balbo (Columbus' slave) discovered America. He [Balbo] saw America first and then

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<sup>367</sup> Carl Wilmsen, "For the Record: Editing and the Production of Meaning in Oral History, *Oral History Review* 28 (2001), 67.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 68 and 79.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–79.

asked Columbus, what was that? Columbus took the patent and went with it. This is stuff we were taught in school.”<sup>371</sup>

While interviewers and narrators usually approach interviews with goals in mind, in some instances, narrators can be unsure of the interview’s purpose and therefore become alienated by the process. For instance, *Behind the Veil* project interviewers (Paul Ortiz and Mausiki Scales) interviewed Ms. Georgia Ford and Ms. Clay, both long-time residents of St. Charles County, Arkansas, about their experiences growing up in Forest City, Mississippi. During the course of the interview, Ms. Clay questioned the purpose and significance of recording the stories and histories of blacks in the Mississippi Delta. The conversation went as follows:

**Ms. Clay:** Listen, one question that I want to ask you, and I want the truth. What good is this going to do anybody?

**Paul Ortiz:** Well, it’s going to do good for young people that don’t know these stories and struggles that African American people have went through in this country. I believe that if you don’t know where you come from, you don’t know where you are going.

**Ms. Clay:** They [whites] are always going to carry it their way. Our way ain’t gonna mean a damn thing to nobody.

**Ms. Georgia Ford:** History can open up a lot of black people’s eyes and white people’s eyes.

**Ms. Clay:** The same thing is happening with the OJ Simpson case.

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<sup>371</sup> Susie Rolling interview, interviewed by Mausiki Stacey Scales, August 8, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

**Ms. Georgia Ford:** It was a change among whites after they saw this picture because they never really believed that their forefathers [referring to slaveholders] would have a black woman and then turn around and have a baby by that black woman, sell they mother, and have them. A lot of the people [white] was so hurt by this and they said they heard but I never thought it. And that's why he believes this [the interview] can open up both whites and blacks' eyes. This does help.<sup>372</sup>

Based upon Ms. Clay's question and subsequent comments, it is clear that she understood the relationship between power and memory and the implications of telling the black version of events. Undoubtedly, her skepticism regarding the utility of black narratives was enmeshed in her experiences during Jim Crow in which whites always seemed to come out on top. In addition, her underlying pessimism that nothing much had changed in black-white race relations since Jim Crow was evidenced by her reference to the OJ Simpson trial. For her, simply relaying past injustices for posterity was useless if they were intended to affect how whites understood the history of Jim Crow.

In contrast to Ms. Clay's perspective, the *Behind the Veil* interviewers and Ms. Georgia Ford preferred a more empowering understanding of the role of black memory, which could possibly liberate both blacks and whites from racism and ahistorical thinking. For example, in response to Ms. Clay, Georgia Ford stated, "history can open up a lot of black people's eyes and white people's eyes."<sup>373</sup> In addition, Ford argued that "it was a change among whites after they

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<sup>372</sup> Georgia Ford interview, interviewed by Paul Ortiz and Maukiki Scales, July, 20, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

saw this picture because they never really believed that their forefathers would have a black woman and then turn around and have a baby by that black woman, sell they mother, and have them. A lot of the people [white] was so hurt by this and they said they heard but I never thought it. And that's why he believes this [the interview] can open up both whites and blacks' eyes. This does help."<sup>374</sup> Moreover, given that Ms. Georgia Ford desired her testimony to teach social lessons to both blacks and whites, it is likely that she selectively related narratives in her life to impart knowledge that would lead to improved racial understanding and cooperation. In addition, during editing/transcribing the interview for public use, it is likely that the *Behind the Veil* transcribers (with the help of Georgia Ford) might select only those experiences and stories that would fulfill their stated desire to impart knowledge and insight for younger generations that did not experience Jim Crow segregation.

In sum, Ms. Clay, Ms. Georgia Ford, and Paul Ortiz's discussion highlights the idea that oral history interviews are negotiated texts which represent the efforts of the interviewer and interviewee to transform an interviewee's memories into a relevant and coherent narrative. Their discussion also illustrates that the interviewees and interviewers' goals for the interview shape what is or is not said during the interviewing process. Specifically, it suggests that an interviewer's failure to explicitly state their intended goals for the interview or surmise the interviewee's objectives can undermine the integrity of the interview, as evidenced by Ms. Clay's comments. By extension, historians must be keenly aware of interviewers and interviewees' goals and historical perspective so that

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

interviewees' memories are understood within their proper rhetorical and historical contexts. In what follows, I will apply this critical perspective in analyzing black memories of lynching.

### *Memories of Lynching as Socialization*

During the era of Jim Crow, blacks recalled the routine and at times seeming randomness of white violence against them. John Johnson, a long-term black resident of Greenville, Mississippi (Washington County), recalled, "I can tell you a great number of people got killed but you just—they was done under cover. Like, we had a fellow that ran a grocery store on the corner of Edison and Nelson, a man named Hamlin Franklin. He was missing two or three days and nobody couldn't find him.... So he [Hamlin Franklin] left home one Saturday night and he didn't open up Monday morning, folks said, 'Where's Hamlin?' And in near about a week they found him floating down there by Wineman's Saw Mill, so somebody had killed him and thrown him in the river. When they quit hanging and lynching them to a tree, they'd do away with you in the dark and throw you into that river...."<sup>375</sup> John Johnson also remembered a black male who was murdered by a white police officer. John asserted, "he (a black male) got into it with this Italian or Assyrian or whatever he was. But all these guys are just like the rest of the poor class folk—always wanting to hurt, to start something, and they got into it about kerosene or something. Some colored person hollered for the police and so the policeman went up there and told him to get his hands up, and he wouldn't allow him to put the cans down, and the man couldn't get his

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<sup>375</sup> John Johnson, interviewed by Roberta Miller, April 28, 1977, *Oral History Project: Greenville and Vicinity*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History and Washington County Library System, Jackson, MS, 91.



hands up too high, so the policeman shot him down. The policeman shot him down right in the street and nothing was done about it, nothing was ever done about it. It was just open season on killing colored people.”<sup>376</sup>

Given whites’ penchant to employ violence against blacks, black families and schools inculcated black children with the idea that they had to follow the rules of racial etiquette or suffer dire consequences. Tolbert Chism, a black factory worker who was born in Coat, Arkansas, described how black teachers taught black children how to cope with unpleasant whites. Chism stated “that was one thing that he [referring to his teacher] taught that I think has been a jewel to me until this day and that was good manners is being able to put up with the other person’s bad manner.... By putting up with the other fellows’ bad manners kept me out of a lot of things that could have got me into deep trouble or no doubt caused me to lose my life.”<sup>377</sup> With regard to white children (particularly white girls) black parents taught black boys to be deferential in their presence. J. M. Williams, a black farmer who resides in Yazoo City, Mississippi (Yazoo County), opined “they [black people] knowed the law or the white folk law. They taught it to us, don’t do this, don’t do that. Be careful... And they tell you, you know don’t do such and such thing, and don’t pay them little girls no attention, turn your head, turn your head.”<sup>378</sup>

Also, black families often used stories of lynching to educate black children about life in the Jim Crow South. For instance, Johnnie Williams vividly

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<sup>376</sup> John Johnson interview, *Oral History Project*, 90.

<sup>377</sup> Tolbert Chism interview, interviewed by Paul Ortiz, July 15, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

<sup>378</sup> J. M. Williams interview, interviewed by Mausiki Scales, August 8, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

recalled his mother discussing a lynching with him. Williams reminisced “let me tell him this, maybe he heard or hadn’t, on East Main right on the folk, at the court house there.... Right there at the court house, where the road folks... the year I was born, they burned a black man there. My mother told me about that. This black man didn’t take no foolishness and this white man told him to come from under the bed, and [when] he stoop down to shoot him and that black man shot and killed the police, and they burned him.”<sup>379</sup>

### *Black Memories of Spectacle Lynching*

Interestingly, blacks usually remembered “spectacle lynchings” and the brutality associated with them. John Johnson remembered that “the[y] was telling me about how they poured gasoline on this big old barrel or something, had him [a black lynch victim] hanging over the fire like a barbecue and the rope burned loose and the guy got himself free and run and they shot him and put him back in the fire and burned him up....”<sup>380</sup> In another example, Susan Rolling remembered the lynching of a black man for refusing to repair a white man’s flat tire in Yazoo County, Mississippi during the early 1950s. Rolling recalled, “we were told that this black man was riding with white people. A white man named Bailey told the black man, he had a flat and to fix the flat. Because the black man was drunk, he told Bailey to fix his own flat.”<sup>381</sup> In response, Bailey and other whites attacked him and subsequently placed him in a fifty-pound barrel, tied it to the back of a truck, and dragged it through town all day. At nightfall,

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<sup>379</sup> Johnnie Williams, Mildred McKinney, and James Story, interviewed by Mausiki Stacey Scales, July 21, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

<sup>380</sup> John W. Johnson interview, *Oral History Project*, 89.

<sup>381</sup> Susie Rolling interview, *Behind the Veil*.

Rolling remembered that they removed him from the barrel and threw his body into the river.<sup>382</sup>

The predominance of spectacle lynching in the black historical memory of lynching is important. Spectacle lynching more than any other category of lynching sought to convey black powerlessness and white supremacy. Typically, spectacle lynchings involved hundreds or even thousands of white spectators who gathered to watch the execution of alleged black murderers and rapists. Spectacle lynchings were “festivals of violence” because they placed a premium on performing racial domination, humiliation, and eliciting excruciating pain from lynch victims. Ritual aspects of spectacle lynching included taking the lynch victim to the scene of the crime, forcing them to confess or pray for forgiveness, mutilating their body parts, and burning the lynch victim’s corpse. In the lynching’s aftermath, black lynch victims’ bodies were often left suspended from trees or poles for hours or even days. In addition, it was customary to attach placards to the lynch victims’ bodies.<sup>383</sup> For instance, in 1885, an unidentified black male allegedly attempted to assault Mr. A. L. Holt’s (a planter) daughter in Warren County, Mississippi. In response, a posse captured the black male and lynched him. After they hung him, they placed a placard around his neck that read, “The penalty of outraged society awarded by citizens, 5 o’clock P.M.”<sup>384</sup> Placing threatening signs on the bodies of black lynch victims served as a stern warning for other blacks who would eventually see the dangling black corpse.

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<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>383</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 42–43.

<sup>384</sup> *Times Picayune* (News Orleans, LA), July 1, 1885.

Therefore, as Jacqueline Hall has noted, “like whipping under slavery, lynching was an instrument of coercion intended not only to impress the immediate victim but all who saw or heard about the event.”<sup>385</sup> Furthermore, Richard Wright, famed black author and childhood resident of the Mississippi Delta, summed up the terror of lynching and the impact it had upon the black psychology. Wright observed, “the things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness. Indeed, the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew. The actual experience would have let me see the realistic outlines of what was really happening, but as long as it remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment, I was compelled to give my entire imagination over to it.”<sup>386</sup>

To some degree, black memories of lynching shared Wright’s sense of terror and amazement. For example, James Story, who was born and raised in Magnolia, Arkansas, recounted how at times, fear of white reprisals prevented blacks from challenging white authority. Story asserted that “whenever these things took place, if there was one black, there was a hundred whites doin it, so the black couldn’t rebel because they were outnumbered. White men had their way with black women, but what could you do about it. See now something that I don’t know anything about, but was told to me there was a time when a group of white boys used to ride around in the community at night and stop at this black

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<sup>385</sup> Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “The Mind That Burns In Each Body: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” *Southern Exposure* 12 (1984), 62.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

man's house and tell him to send his daughter out there so they could take her for a ride. And there was nothing he could do but let her go. If he didn't they were going to set his house on fire or kill the family."<sup>387</sup>

Particularly ghastly spectacle lynchings were etched in black historical memory. In some cases, the memory of a particular lynching survived through blacks renaming spaces/places in which a lynching occurred. For example, Johnnie Williams recalled that "on Highway 19... they caught this black man in the bed with a white woman... and they had horses and they tied him and with a rope and tied the rope to the tail of the horse and the horse just run with him until they killed him. So then they named it [Highway 19] Horsehead...because they killed that negro."<sup>388</sup> Previous lynching sites came to be viewed as haunted. For example, Sarah Ray stated "that I just saw where they told me it was [referring to a lynching]. I don't know whether it was truth or not, but there was a big grass rope about that big. It was right at the place where I had a crop. So one day I was out there chopping and I heard something say Whooo, whoo-oo-oo. That was on the turn row [referring to rows in cotton field] and the next time it did it, it was down about my feet and I ran away as fast as I could."<sup>389</sup>

Although I have not identified other spaces that blacks renamed in order to closely associate it with a lynching, it is likely that other black communities followed suit. Through renaming lynching sites, blacks were engaging in what Irwin-Zarecka terms "memory work" or "concerted efforts to secure presence for

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<sup>387</sup> Johnnie Williams, Mildred McKinney, and James Story interview, *Behind the Veil*.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Sarah H. Ray, interviewed by Daisy H. Greene, *Oral History Project: Greenville and Vicinity, Mississippi Department of Archives and history and the Washington County Library System*, Jackson, MS, 8.

certain elements of the past.”<sup>390</sup> Given that blacks in the Jim Crow South could not officially commemorate the death of a lynch victim, renaming lynching sites likely became a way to commemorate a black lynch victim as well as a means to transmit the history of that particular lynching to future black generations. For instance, it is likely when future generations of blacks questioned the origins of the name “Horsehead Road” it provided a way for older generations to teach the history of the community and important lessons about the past. In other words, renaming lynching sites such as “Horsehead Road” became de facto black public monuments that attested to the history of white violence and black suffering.

### **The Politics of Remembering Lynching**

#### *Memories of Lynching in Black and White*

Blacks’ collective memory of the past has differed dramatically from whites. At every major turning point in US history, black historical memory has constituted a counter-memory to popular understandings. Black and white historical memory has differed because historical memory is rooted in lived experience. As a result, blacks and whites often constitute distinct “communities of memory.” A community of memory can be defined as a group of people who share a direct or indirect memory of a specific event or process.<sup>391</sup> For example, in antebellum Virginia, slaves and free blacks developed a “hidden transcript of memory” of American and Atlantic slave rebellions through songs and phrases

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<sup>390</sup> 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), 320.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

that emphasized blacks' desire for freedom.<sup>392</sup> In the years following the demise of slavery, black freedmen celebrated emancipation by organizing hundreds of commemorative parades, speeches, and ceremonies in order to reflect upon the experience of slavery as well as envision blacks' future in America.<sup>393</sup> Given that whites and blacks occupied fundamentally different social and political positions during slavery, these memories were not possible for whites.

Similarly, blacks and whites typically remember the history of lynching differently. The 1903 John Dennis lynching in Greenville, Mississippi provides an opportunity to compare black and white memories of lynching. While I will discuss the ways in which black and white memories of the Dennis lynching diverged, it should be noted that black and white memories of the lynching were similar in at least one regard—both whites and blacks vividly remembered the lynching, which suggests that it made a deep impression upon both groups. In fact, Bruce Baker, a historian, argues that both blacks and whites remembered specific details of a lynching when it was memorable in some regard. According to Bruce Baker, whites typically remembered lynchings in which hundreds or even thousands participated as spectators.<sup>394</sup> Therefore, the Dennis lynching likely remained lodged in white historical memory because it occurred when

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<sup>392</sup> Greg D. Kimball, "African, American, Virginian: The Shaping of Black Memory in Antebellum Virginia, 1790–1860" in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 62–63.

<sup>393</sup> Kathleen Clark, "Celebrating Freedom: Emancipation Day Celebrations and African American Memory in the Early Reconstruction South," *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 107–8.

<sup>394</sup> Bruce Baker, *Under the Rope*, 324.

Greenville's streets were "crowded with women shoppers" and a mob composed of two hundred men participated in the lynching.<sup>395</sup>

Lawrence Wade, who was a child when John Dennis was lynched, attests to the profound impression it likely made upon Greenville whites. According to Wade, he "was just a barefooted boy in short pants and was down at the ball park, which was then on Edison, close to the Court House." He and several other boys were near the jail when a lynch mob arrived and broke into the jail, using a railroad rail for a battering ram. "They were looking for a man, (a negro preacher) who had attacked a telephone operator, who was coming to work late one night. The others in the jail pointed at the one who had done this as they were afraid for themselves. The mob marched him down Washington to the corner of Popular where the telephone exchange was located. They put a rope over a telephone cable and lynched him."<sup>396</sup> In reaction to the lynching, he recalled that "it was fun running with the crowd at first," as he really didn't understand what was going on. But afterwards, it made him sick. According to Wade, "I couldn't sleep that night, and kept waking my mother all night long."<sup>397</sup>

Additionally, Florence Bailey's description of Greenville blacks' response to the Dennis lynching suggests that it was a defining moment for the black community. Bailey observed, "he [John Dennis] ran up under the house, but they caught him. And the Old Opera House, you know, where they tolled that old big tall thing that had a bell on it. When anything would happen, they would always

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<sup>395</sup> *New York Times*, [ProQuest Historical Newspapers] June 5, 1903.

<sup>396</sup> Lawrence Wade Thomas, interviewed by Roberta Miller, December 20, 1977, *Oral History Project: Greenville and Vicinity*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History and Washington County Library System, Jackson, MS, 29.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*



ring that bell. Whew! Late that night, that bell rang, and everybody knew it, and the next morning, better go down there and get that nigger down off that thing we hung him on last night.”<sup>398</sup> Moreover, Baker argues that blacks were more likely to remember a lynching because the victim’s surviving friends and family preserved the memory of the lynching. Given that John Dennis was about 43 years old and married with three children it is possible that his wife and children remained in Greenville and passed down stories of the lynching to family and friends.<sup>399</sup>

Despite some similarities, white and black memories of the Dennis lynching differed dramatically. In particular, white memories suggested that John Dennis actually committed the crime that led to his lynching. According to several newspaper reports, John Dennis attempted to rape a “well known” white telephone operator in Greenville, Mississippi. Reportedly, two hundred men demanded the jailer turn over Dennis to them. When the jailer refused, the mob stormed the jail and used a railway rail to break into Dennis’ cell. Subsequently, the mob took Dennis to the telephone exchange and hung him from a telephone pole.<sup>400</sup> Similar to the initial news reports, Ernest Buehler, another white witness recalled, “there was a woman who worked at the Telephone Office. She was going to work, and a colored man grabbed her right across from Dr. Hirsch’s Clinic there. And he dragged her off in that lot and they got to tussling and she got to screaming, and he started running, and he ran down Shelby Street. A mob

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<sup>398</sup> Florence Bailey, interviewed by Daisy H. Greene, December 4, 1976, *Oral History Project: Greenville and Vicinity*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History and Washington County Library System, Jackson, MS, 23.

<sup>399</sup> Ancestry.com. *1900 United States Federal Census* [database online]. Provo, UT: The Generations Network, Inc., 2004).

<sup>400</sup> *New York Times*, June 5, 1903.

formed and they located him down there in front of Joe Mauceli's store, up under a house... and got him from under the house and took him back up on Nelson Street and lynched him on a cable there, a telephone cable...."<sup>401</sup> Also, despite Lawrence Wade's misgivings about the lynching, he confidently asserted that a white telephone operator "was attacked by a negro man."<sup>402</sup>

White memories of lynching (particularly the uncritical acceptance of rape allegations) reflect the dominant white discourse on lynching that gained popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, white apologists tirelessly trumpeted black men as lustful and sex-crazed rapists who only desired to rape virginal white women. While lynching historians have argued convincingly that white Southerners frequently cited rape as the cause for lynching, it only accounted for a small percentage of allegations. Despite the divergence between white perception and reality, sexual relations between black men and white women aroused the fury of white lynch mobs greater than any other allegation. In the white imagination, any sexual encounter between a black male and a white woman had to be rape, because a white woman would not willingly enter into such a relationship. According to Jacqueline Hall, the black male rapist syndrome represented an "emotional logic of lynching" which meant that only swift and sure violence, unhampered by legalities, could protect white women from sexual assault.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Ernest Buehler, interviewed by Roberta Miller, March 17, 1977, *Oral History Project: Greenville and Vicinity*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History and Washington County Library System, Jackson, MS, 41–42.

<sup>402</sup> Lawrence Wade Thomas, *Oral History Project*, 30.

<sup>403</sup> Jacqueline Hall, "The Mind that Burns in each Body: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," 64.

The story of Alma Thomas Hall's grandparents captures whites' fear of interracial sex between black men and white women. Hall remembered that "her grandmother was a very fair woman. She was supposed to have been seven-eighths white, one-eighth negro. She had red hair and blue eyes and they lived on a farm. She would come to town once a year during Christmas with grandfather, who was a very dark man—. My grandmother and grandfather took a wagon one Christmas Eve to town to shop and while they were there they were noticed by the people in the general store. They attempted to lynch grandfather, and she begged and begged. She had to get someone who knew that she was not white to save his life. Of course, that kept the two of them from ever coming to town, to the point where my grandmother died because... she got sick and died because she said she would rather die than to come to town with my grandfather because they would have lynched him."<sup>404</sup>

In contrast to white memories, Florence Bailey's recollections of the 1903 Dennis lynching were much more skeptical of the rape allegations. Bailey claimed that "a telephone girl *said* (my emphasis) this boy tried to catch her and do something to her, and they caught him."<sup>405</sup> While Bailey's memories certainly do not reject the possibility of an attack, in contrast to white memories, her emphasis on the "telephone girl said" suggests her skepticism.

Moreover, with regard to other lynchings provoked by rape allegations, blacks tended not to use the word rape to describe alleged black-white sexual encounters; in contrast, they frequently described black men as "getting caught

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<sup>404</sup> Alma Thomas Hall, interviewed by Daisy Greene, July 7, 1978, *Oral History Project: Greenville and Vicinity*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History and Washington County Library System, Jackson, MS, 6.

<sup>405</sup> Florence Bailey, *Oral History Project*, 22.

with” or “caught up with” a white woman. For instance, in explaining why lynching occurred, John Johnson simply stated that “these was just people you hear ‘m say they’d been having some dealings with a white woman and these guys got killed.”<sup>406</sup> Johnnie Williams discussed one instance in which a white farmer caught his wife kissing a black tenant farmer. Williams stated, “you know what, a brother-in-law of mine, named Rueben Ratford ... he had a son that was working for an old rich white man in Louisiana and this white man had this big barn with horses and cows. And there was this old poor white man that was living on this same place, but this boy Rueben know what time to feed up, so he was down there feeding up and here comes his wife [wife of the poor white man] down there and she smacked on him. He [Rueben] knew it was bad news in Arkansas and they’d kill you in Louisiana. The husband so saw this and so when he walked up the hill, she hollered, he raping me, he raping me... and he [the woman’s husband] said naw you lying I saw it all. He said now what business do you have being at the barn anyway at this time of night, this is that man’s job, why are you down here. You ain’t got no reason for being down here. And the white folks in Louisiana did not want to turn him loose after the husband told him that.” According to Williams, the mob eventually let Rueben Ratford’s son go, but made him leave Louisiana.<sup>407</sup>

Interracial relationships were sometimes discovered when a white woman gave birth to an interracial child. For example, Lawrence Wade mentioned the lynching of a black male for fathering a child with a white woman in Greenville

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<sup>406</sup> John Johnson interview, *Oral History Project*, 91

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

before World War I. “Before World War,” Wade reminisced, “a negro who worked at the Hospital, was lynched in the area which is now Strange Park. He was supposed to have fathered a child by one of the white nurses, and her brother and a mob chased him, when they found out, shot at him, and finally strung him up, on a low limb.”<sup>408</sup> (According to the interviewer, Mr. Wade did not see this happen but he did see the lynched man still swinging from the limb the next day.)

Interestingly, blacks asserted that if black men refused to engage in interracial sex with white women, their lives could still be in danger. According to Thelma Nash, a life-long resident of Forest City, Arkansas, “you see back in those days, white women use to always like black men. And white men used to like black women. Don’t fool yourself. And see a lot times a white woman, if a white woman was stuck on you and you went on and refused her, she could tell a lie on you and say you raped her or you tried to rape her just because she wanted you.”<sup>409</sup> James Story added that “I have also known black young men who had to enlist in the Marine Corps and Army to get away from some white girl. He would have to leave or get hung, or get killed or shot.”<sup>410</sup>

In addition to interracial sex, black men also faced the threat of lynching if they sought to protect their wives from white male sexual entreaties. For instance, Susie Rolling describes the vulnerability of black men to lynching who complained about white men who sexually assaulted or raped their wives.

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<sup>408</sup> Lawrence Thomas Wade interview, *Oral History Project*, 30.

<sup>409</sup> Thelma Nash and Delores Wood interview, interviewed by Mausiki Stacey Scales, July 19, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

<sup>410</sup> Johnnie Williams, Mildred McKinney, and James Story interview, *Behind the Veil*.

Rolling recalled, "I know of one [black] lady... she had this white man and her baby came out. Her husband was so black... this baby was light skinned and he [her husband] was not allowed to say anything... They could not say anything about that white man because if he did they would have found him in the river the next two or three days."<sup>411</sup>

In general, blacks' skepticism with regard to rape allegations reflected their general skepticism of white rationales for lynching. Blacks who were lynched for murdering whites were oftentimes seen as defending themselves against white violence. John Johnson commented, "some of them got killed for that [allegedly raping a white woman] and then some get lynched, you know, for killing a white person, like that. The last big killing they had here was back in the thirties. They had some kind of levee camp down there and at the levee some white folks jumped on a colored guy down there and beat him up." In response, the black male "shot some of the white folks and so he took at shelter in Winterville near the Mounds there and they hid him. And he hid up there in a house, and a colored fellow that was staying in the house... went to town in order to buy some cartridges, and instead of doing that he went and told the law or somebody down there where he [the black fugitive] was... and he told them and they carried a mob out there." The mob included "Mr. 'Boots' Rowland, Mr. Emmett Gibson... Mr. Doolittle, the policeman, and a boy that used to drive Mr. Doolittle around, named Lamar.... And he [Lamar] was getting up in the tree to spy on the guy and this fellow didn't have anything but some bird shot, and he shot that boy and he fell out of the tree and he shot Mr. Doolittle too... 'Mr. Boots'

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<sup>411</sup> Susie Rolling interview, *Behind the Veil*.

Rowland went up there with some cotton balls and set the house afire while a man was shooting a machine gun at the window and they burnt this house down and when the fire got so hot the guy run out... and they killed him.”<sup>412</sup>

Furthermore, black skepticism of rape allegations were rooted in late nineteenth and early twentieth century black anti-lynching discourses. In general, black anti-lynching protest writings sought to challenge notions of white female victimization and the black beast rapist. For instance, Ida B. Wells argued that white mobs lynched the black man “not because he is always a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women.” Wells argued “the fact that colored men, advancing as they are in intelligence and position, have become attractive to certain classes of white women.” She suggested that there were “many white women in the South who would marry colored men.”<sup>413</sup> Frederick Douglass argued that rape was “the best excuse available to conceal and legitimate white hostility to black achievement.”<sup>414</sup>

Black skepticism of white rape allegations existed alongside whites’ historic skepticism of rape allegations. For instance, historian Diane Sommerville analyzed the social and legal history of black-on-white rape incidents in the antebellum South and observed that white Southerners typically dismissed rape charges against blacks and rarely lynched those convicted of rape. Rather, during the antebellum and early Reconstruction periods, whites pursued legal solutions to black-white rape allegations. In fact, Sommerville documented

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<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 92–93.

<sup>413</sup> Patricia A. Schechter, “Unsettled Business: Ida B. Wells against Lynching, or, How Anti-lynching Got Its Gender,” in *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 296.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

several court cases involving white allegations of black rape, in which white jurors openly doubted the veracity of white female allegations. While black defendants in these cases were found guilty of rape or a lesser charge, lingering white skepticism oftentimes led to rescinded or reduced jail sentences.<sup>415</sup>

In short, blacks expressed skepticism regarding rape allegations because they believed interracial sexual relations were often times consensual. Black memories of lynching reveal that blacks constructed white women (rather than black men) as lustful and sexually aggressive toward black men. Collectively, these two strands of black memory challenge the “black beast rapist mythology” by situating voluntary (rather than forced) interracial sexual relations as the cause of lynching and white women as central actors rather than passive victims.

### *Memories of Lynching and Armed Resistance*

Black testimony emphasized resistance to lynching and racial violence. Delores Woods remembered how both her great grandmother and her father violently resisted white violence. According to Woods, “now my great grandmother whipped two white men in this mercantile store because they were going to ravish her. She took a chair and whipped them two white men. And then my daddy and his brother, they had went to the store and they had a car and that white man came up there and was going to jump on my uncle for it. And before he knowed it, my daddy had grabbed out that knife and put it on that white man. They [her grandparents] didn’t take no mess.”<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Diane Sommerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth Century South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 203–7.

<sup>416</sup> Thelma Nash and Delores Woods, *Behind the Veil*.



Blacks recounted stories of how black armed resistance prevented a lynching-in-the-making in Jericho, Arkansas. Chism recounted, "I can remember one time this story was told of this fellow that was supposed to be the deputy that lived in our community and his name was Clem Simmons. The whites had it in for some of the blacks that lived up in our community. And in particular this was an uncle of mine that was name Forrest Chism. Forrest was what they called half Choctaw Indian and then half black. But he was really a marksman with a Winchester or any kind of gun. They had gathered up a posse and had the sheriff with them to go and get Forrest Chism about something... but I think everybody had been alerted in the community because everybody had the Winchester... every black house in the community at one time had a Winchester in it. And the reason why they did that was a lot of those blacks came in from over there in the Indians in Tennessee. And so this fellow Clem Simmons was at the head of the posse the story goes... he held up his hand when he got to a certain point and said... now all those houses in the community [black community] have a Winchester in them and Forrest Chism is the captain and he really knows how to shoot those guns. And he [Clem Simmons] said that I am really afraid to go over there and offend them because if we do, all of us will not be coming back. Now it entirely up to you, if you want to go on with it, we can go on with it, but if you don't want to, we all can stay alive." According to Chism, after deliberating, the posse decided to "turn around and leave those people alone."<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>417</sup>Tolbert Chism, *Behind the Veil*.

Taken together, Delores Woods' memories of her family boldly defying white folks and Tolbert Chism's memory of armed blacks preventing a threatened lynching reflect the tradition of black armed resistance. In reference to this tradition, Ida B. Wells (perhaps more than any other black anti-lynching activist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) argued that armed self-defense was a necessary and legitimate response to white lynch mob violence. Wells' pamphlet *Mob Rule in New Orleans* best illustrates her views on armed self-defense. It chronicled the 1900 Robert Charles lynching and his attempt to save his own life. Wells argued that Robert Charles' use of armed self-defense was justified. Wells wrote, "in any law-abiding community Charles would have been justified in delivering himself up immediately to the properly constituted authorities and asking for a trial by a jury of his peers. He could have been certain that in resisting an unwarranted arrest he had a right to defend his life, even to the point of taking one in that defense, but Charles knew that arrest in New Orleans, even for defending his life, meant nothing short of a long term in the penitentiary, and still more probably death by lynching at the hands of a cowardly mob."<sup>418</sup> More importantly, Wells portrayed armed self-defense as honorable. In closing, Wells wrote "the white people of this country may charge that he was a desperado, but to the people of his own race, Robert Charles will always be regarded as the hero of New Orleans."<sup>419</sup>

Black lynch victims who "took some whites with them" were remembered as heroes. For example, Susie Rolling recalled that her family feared for her life

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<sup>418</sup> Ida B. Wells, "Mob Violence in New Orleans," in *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 49.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

because she was not afraid to challenge whites. Rolling defiantly responded that if whites tried to kill her, “then you are going to know who did it because I am going to carry someone with me.”<sup>420</sup> Marcus Lucas, who was born and raised in Mound Bayou, Mississippi proudly explained that his family “did not take nothing off white folks.” Lucas’ comments stemmed from his family’s armed resistance to lynching and subsequent forced migration from Amite County, Mississippi to Bolivar County, Mississippi around 1903. He recalled “they [his family] had an incident in Amite County, with a white guy. Big Mama’s cousin was a Mr. Hood. He and a white guy was teaching school and it was a math problem the white teacher could not work and he [Mr. Hood] worked the problem.” Lucas remembered, “Mr. Hood told the white teacher that ya’ll don’t have the sense but you make all the money.” In response to Mr. Hood’s remark, “the next day they [whites] came to lynch him.” According to Lucas, “they never listed how many white people he killed down there. They wouldn’t even let them print it in the books down there. And the only way that got him is his bullet jammed up.”<sup>421</sup>

The ethic of “taking someone with you” reflected the hardening of black attitudes toward white mob violence. By the late nineteenth century black writers and activists increasingly advocated armed self-defense as a response to white mob violence because of the sharp rise in black lynching and governments’ unwillingness to thwart mob violence.<sup>422</sup> For example, in an 1889 speech entitled “Organized Resistance is Our Best Remedy,” John Edward Bruce, a militant

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<sup>420</sup> Susie Rolling interview, *Behind the Veil*.

<sup>421</sup> Marcus Lucas, interviewed by Mausiki Stacey Scales, August 7, 1995, *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project*, Durham, NC.

<sup>422</sup> Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 422–28.

black journalist, forcefully called for blacks to take up arms against white mobs. For example, Bruce asserted, “under the mosaic dispensation it was the custom to require an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth under no less barbarous civilization than that which existed in that period of the world's history; let the Negro require at the hands of every white murderer in the South or elsewhere a life for a life. If they burn our houses, burn theirs, if they kill our wives and children, kill theirs, pursue them relentlessly, meet force with force everywhere it is offered. If they demand blood, exchange it with them, until they are satiated. By a vigorous adherence to this course the shedding of human blood by white men will soon become a thing of the past.”<sup>423</sup>

Thirty years later, Claude McKay and Hubert Harrison (both black socialists based in Harlem, New York during the 1920s) forcefully rearticulated the ethic of “taking someone with you” in response to white terrorist violence. In particular, renewed calls for black armed resistance occurred in response to race riots raging across the US during the “Red Summer of 1919.” For instance, in McKay’s famous poem “If We Must Die,” he wrote,

If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!<sup>424</sup>

Hubert Harrison praised blacks for both defending themselves and killing white perpetrators during the “Red Summer of 1919.” He exclaimed,

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<sup>423</sup> John Edward Bruce, “Organized Resistance is Our Best Remedy,” BlackPast.org, <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=1889-john-e-bruce-organized-resistance-our-best-remedy>.

<sup>424</sup> Claude McKay, “If We Must Die,” in *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 60.

During the past fortnight great events have taken place. The race battles in Washington and Chicago, although tragical, are nevertheless to be recorded as brilliant events in the history of the Negro race in America. It is most gratifying for us to note that the New Negro spirit is a fait accompli. It has been too long the practice of the Southern Negro victim to beg and plead for mercy at the hands of a sordid mob. We have often wondered why these men, at the first sign of trouble, do not arm themselves preparatory for self defense. If they are to die at the hands of a "legalized" mob, then it is up to them to sell their lives as dearly as possible. The white man must be made to take his own medicine so that he may learn to appreciate its disagreeable and disgusting flavor.<sup>425</sup>

Memories of lynching that emphasized armed resistance and the ethic of "taking one with you" had at least two functions. First, black armed resistance challenged the ideology of white supremacy. In general, lynching served as a dramatization of unequal racial and gender power relationships.<sup>426</sup> Through lynching, white lynch mobs asserted and enforced white masculine dominance and confirmed for white men their right to emasculate black men. Therefore, blacks who bravely defended themselves (and killed a few whites in the process), demonstrated black manhood and undermined the myth of black docility. Second, black armed resistance elevated lynching from simply a narrative of black degradation and victimization to a narrative of black courage and dignity. As black oral history testimony suggests, blacks who valiantly stood up to whites were viewed as heroes within the black community and subsequently they provided militant models for other African Americans to follow. Hence in these two ways, black memories of armed resistance counteract narratives of black victimization and therefore help blacks to cope with the painful history of lynching.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>425</sup> Jeffrey B. Perry, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 97.

<sup>426</sup> Jacqueline Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 156.

Black memories of lynching provide an important counter-memory to dominant interpretations of lynching. Delta blacks discounted white narratives that emphasized rape and instead portrayed lynching as an attempt to suppress interracial sexual relations. In their recollections, white women became the sexual aggressors rather than black men. Furthermore, Delta blacks candidly recalled how family members and friends were brutalized by white lynch mob violence. Yet, they also emphasized black agency when they described escaping mob violence or violently confronting a lynch mob. Particularly, Delta blacks reminisced that if they had been lynched, they would have killed as many whites as possible in the process. In this way, black memories attempted to transform memories of lynching into narratives that privileged black agency rather than victimhood. In addition to challenging white narratives, black memories of lynching constituted a usable past. Parents and schools taught black children about race and racial customs through routinely sharing with them lynching stories. Thus, black memories of lynching provide a rich archive for understanding black life during Jim Crow as well as illustrate the varying political and social functions of historical memory.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

After being hidden from view for decades, sixty lynching photographs and postcards were publicly displayed in the exhibition *Witness: Photographs of Lynchings* from the Collection of James Allen at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in Manhattan in January 2000. The exhibit created an immediate buzz. People waited for hours in long lines to view the photos, which led the gallery to issue only two hundred tickets per day. At least five thousand people viewed the exhibit before it was closed. Subsequently, Allen redisplayed the photographs at the New York Historical Society between March 14 and October 1, 2000, more than fifty thousand people viewed the exhibition.<sup>427</sup> Based upon the exhibit's popularity, Twin Palms Press published ninety-eight of the lynching photos and postcards in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* in late 2000. Since publication, it has sold over thirty thousand copies. Thus, perhaps more than any other individual in the last decade, James Allen has reinserted the history of lynching into mainstream consciousness.

Yet for all the accolades Allen deserves for stirring up interest in the history of lynching, his collection of photographs (most of which depict white spectators gazing at dismembered black bodies) reduce black Southerners to hapless victims of white mob violence. For instance, in *Without Sanctuary's* introductory chapter, historian Leon Litwack suggested that during the era of lynching, black Southerners lived in an immutable society and that they viewed

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<sup>427</sup> Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 8.

themselves as “interior exiles that were empty of belief or hope, vulnerable, without sanctuary.” In the book’s final chapter, Allen added, “lust propelled the commercial reproduction and distribution of [lynching] images, facilitating the endless replay of anguish. Even dead, the victims were without sanctuary.”<sup>428</sup>

In contrast, my dissertation has sought to counter histories of lynching that emphasize the inevitability of black victimization and powerlessness. In general, I contend that the failure of legal authorities and institutions to prevent white mob violence spawned a tradition of grassroots resistance to lynching in the Delta region. In particular, my analysis revealed several patterns in black responses to white lynch mob violence. First, by the 1890s, lynching had become a racialized phenomenon in which blacks were the primary targets of white lynch mob violence. In addition, the emergent black beast rapist discourse rationalized white-on-black lynching as a moral duty to protect white womanhood. These developments likely compelled blacks to increasingly abstain from lynching after the 1880s because black extralegal violence might have implied black support for white-on-black lynching and the racist discourses that rationalized it. Therefore, Delta blacks increasingly eschewed lynching because of the negative implications of black mob violence that overwhelmed traditional rationales for it. As such, the decline in black lynch mob violence represented a grassroots response to the racialization of lynching.

Second, in response to an anticipated lynching, black suspects typically sought refuge with family and friends. However, when fleeing black suspects

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<sup>428</sup> James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000), 8; 204.



were discovered by white authorities or lynch mobs, in numerous instances they refused to surrender and violently defended themselves. Blacks initially avoided violent confrontations with whites because black armed resistance usually provoked white terrorist violence against the entire black community. Despite the threat of massive white reprisals, blacks violently defended themselves because armed resistance was their last resort and because armed self-defense held out the possibility of preventing a lynching of a friend or family member. Given blacks' limited legal and extralegal avenues to protect themselves, flight and armed resistance became the dominant black responses to white mob violence in the Delta region.

Third, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grassroots resistance to white mob violence was a central concern within the black anti-lynching discourse. In part, black artists' representations countered heroic depictions of white lynch mob violence. More importantly, their representations supplied rationales for black grassroots responses to lynching and in doing so they encouraged blacks to resist white lynch mob violence through armed resistance, flight, and migration as well as other grassroots tactics.

Lastly, my analysis of oral history testimony revealed that black memories of lynching countered dominant interpretations of lynching and transformed lynchings into narratives that privileged black agency rather than victimhood. As such, black memories retold the history of lynching in a way that empowered black lynch victims and emphasized their humanity.

In sum, the history of black grassroots resistance to lynching in the Delta region contradicts scholarly and popular explanations of lynching that have tended to view blacks as primarily victims of mob violence and black overt resistance to lynching as negligible as well as the idea that lynching evidenced black powerlessness. By situating black communities and lynch victims at the center of analysis, my goal has been to portray them as active historical agents whose actions and ideas profoundly shaped the history of lynching in the Delta region and elsewhere.

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