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Tradition And Satisfaction: The Mob And Lynching In The Georgian Cotton Belt, 1890-1899

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COTTON BELT, 1890-1899

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TRADITION AND SATISFACTION: THE MOB AND LYNCHING IN THE
GEORGIAN COTTON BELT, 1890-1899

BY

MARCUS THORNTON

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Eastern Kentucky University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

2023

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Ally, Heath, Silas, and Freya.

I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Control and order have been among the defining traits of all societies. Exuding those traits despite a collapsing relevance within their rapidly changing society was *modus operandi* of most middle-class white southern men at the confluence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By understanding proposed substantiation for their place in the established social hierarchy, we gain insight into why they fought so adamantly to protect it. Furthermore, expanded understanding aids in formulating explanations for why they felt so entitled to occupy the peak of the sociocultural dominance hierarchy. This analysis is not simply a matter of a skin color. Perceived physical racial differences made up a single variable in the complex equation that culminated in a lynching event. Despite popular assumptions, lynching events were not always random acts of violence committed by lawless bands of racist, drunken, and ignorant, mobs. Lynching events were the reactions of a middle-class white male population who faced existential fear due to their perceived diminishing status in a sociocultural dominance hierarchy.

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"For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall they do in a dry?"
       -Luke 23:31

I: Introduction

   Growth is often accompanied by pain. This sentiment rings true with individual

growth, but also with expansion of any endeavor. America in the 1890s was no

exception. Less than thirty years after the defeat of the Confederate South, confusion and

frustration around the state of national culture was at an all-time high. Reconstruction, in

the reeling Southerner's mind a stifling punishment seemingly focused on removing

Southern tradition and culture from national history, had left many disillusioned and

disappointed. Many harbored great anger toward the outcome and remained vigilant that

The Lost Cause would resurface and honor would be restored to the southern families. As

modern technologies swept the country at a speed never seen, former slaves became

citizens, and women became more vocal in public, some going so far as to gain elected

public office, one group seemed to be moving down the power structure of American

culture. White southern men, once the obvious residents atop the dominance hierarchy in

all aspects of life, were beginning to see their roles encroached upon by individuals

previously subordinate. Such rapid change over the course of only a few decades led

many to take drastic measures to protect their place in the top tiers of power. Despite

popular assumptions, lynching events were not always random acts of violence

committed by lawless bands of racist, drunken, and apparently ignorant, mobs. Lynching

events were the reactions of a middle-class white male population who faced existential

fear due to their perceived diminishing status in a sociocultural dominance hierarchy.

An analysis of lynching events in the cotton belt of Georgia in the 1890s could help us understand violent group interactions more fully. This specific period and region provide ample context due to the sheer volume of lynching events that took place. In relation to the rest of the American south during "the reckless decade," the cotton belt accumulated top numbers for extra-legal lynching.[1] Furthermore, the ritualistic aspects, presented justifications, as well as economic, social, and cultural institutions in place, provide ample areas of study.[2] Analyses of the various facets of the 1890s Georgian experience sheds light on proper contextual interpretation for why humans were compelled to enact such atrocious acts on their fellow humans. While on the surface one may be compelled to only acknowledge the unbridled violence, or the seemingly clear demarcation lines of physical appearance and class struggle, contemporary factors that led up to lynching events were much mor multi-faceted, convoluted, and complex. We must examine beyond the specific historical period in question and uncover the contextual information that brought about such hatred and fear contained within the annals of newspaper archives.

Information traveled across America in the 1890s by limited means, newspapers the most accessible apparatus. Authors stayed employed long-term and developed avid readerships, not unlike other cultural figures throughout human history. Upon extensive, though nowhere near comprehensive, analysis of many newspapers printed during the

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1. H. W. Brands, *The Reckless Decade: America in the 1890s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

2. I will be taking a multi-disciplinary approach to my analysis of lynching events in the cotton belt of Georgia in the 1890s. Cultural anthropology, social psychology, cultural history, economic history, race theory, gender theory, philosophy, and linguistic analysis are many of the areas of study that have shaped my theoretical lens.

1890s in the Georgian cotton belt and surrounding counties, patterns began to emerge. Not only did the format and stylistic layout of each follow a specific template, but the language employed was common, repetitive, and imbued with racially motivated ideology. Exposure to accusations, mostly unfounded, against black men for violations against female agency were ever present and conveniently located in a reliable position. Often these articles were placed next to the same advertisements for miracle elixirs and cures for addiction to alcohol. For coverage of larger lynching events it was not uncommon to see a two-page spread, complete with artist renderings of the scene. No matter the size of the mob, excerpts were always extracted consisting of three to five sentences summarizing the points of interests for the majority white readership. These snippets were then reprinted in nearly every newspaper in the nation. Each article contained details paramount to the development of a narrative that perpetuated a white supremacy ideology. There was always a black man accused, usually falsely, of allegedly committing some crime, most centered around acts of sexual deviance against young white women. Lynching mobs were described with words that invoked religious undertones, which placed each player in a divine role. White men were assigned as the keepers of divine order. The alleged perpetrator became the incarnation of evil. The white female victim was established as the sacred feminine to be protected and sustained. Patterns emerged in the events themselves that had immense cultural significance for the normalization of extreme violence. Newspapers went further than any other source in exposing the average reader to lynching events, day in and day out, beginning at the earliest stages of national development.

Control and order have been among the defining traits of all societies. Exuding those traits despite a collapsing relevance within their rapidly changing society was *modus operandi* of most middle-class white southern men at the confluence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By understanding the justifications for their place in the established social hierarchy, we gain insight into why they fought so adamantly to protect it. Furthermore, expanded understanding aids in formulating explanations for why they felt so entitled to occupy the peak of the sociocultural dominance hierarchy. This analysis cannot simply be a matter of skin color. The body of scholarship dedicated to the study of these stains on American history is extensive and constantly expanding. Theoretical frameworks as well as in-depth analyses of specific events continue to surface, and the methodology for historical analysis has evolved for over one hundred years.

In 1905, James Cutler, "a student of society and social phenomena," wrote *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States.*[3] He believed he was conducting an objective study of the social conditions that perpetuated lynching as vigilante justice. He began with a brief history of lynching. Cutler then investigated the proposed justifications used by lynch mobs. Though Cutler understood the effects of modernity on traditional southern society, "a condition conducive to the spread of lynch-law," he fell short in another key area.[4] Cutler argued that the failure of the federal government to re-establish civil law during Reconstruction was the main factor for increased lynching. He asserted that weak judicial institutions led to "an unusual amount

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3. James Cutler, *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United* States (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith Publishing Company, 1905), vii.
      4. Cutler, *Lynch Law*, 107.

of disorder and violence prevailing over the country."[5] According to Cutler, without the paternalistic overwatch of white planters, the natural brutish nature of individuals of African descent would surface. In the absence of a swift and just civil system, white southerners took the criminality of the newly freed black population into their own hands.

Another contemporary sociologist with a perspective skewed by racial prejudice was Arthur Raper, who wrote *The Tragedy of Lynching* in 1933.[6] He was the Research and Field Study Secretary for the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in the 1930s. Whereas Cutler viewed African Americans as inherent criminal elements in his study, Raper conversely labeled the white mob as such. According to Raper, these white mobs were not only comprised of criminals illegally punishing alleged delinquents, but they were also innately incapable of acting in another manner. He believed mob violence would have been prevented with "[A]dequate provision for the confinement and treatment of imbeciles, insane persons, and certain types of feeble-minded and hopelessly defective persons."[7] Raper argued that lynching grew from "the South's failure to provide sufficient educational opportunities and adequate institutional care for her population." He declared that the mobs were mostly made up of "unattached and irresponsible youths of twenty-five or less," and that "[D]rinking was in evidence in most of the mobs."[8] More recent scholars argue against Raper's claims, one even calling his work "fundamentally ahistorical."[9] Raper's analysis fell short due to a proclivity to

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5. Cutler, *Lynch Law*, 139.
6. Arthur Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1933).
7. Raper, *Tragedy,* 4.
8. Raper, *Tragedy*, 11.
9. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 11.

generalize the conditions of all lynch mobs based on a limited case study. He analyzed approximately twenty lynching events in 1930, made note of the way mobs carried out the events, and placed each lynching into regional context by analyzing demographic as well as economic conditions. He then applied his conclusions to all lynching events throughout the south. Though extremely skewed, his thesis now dismantled many times over, his narrative approach marked a shift in the scholarly methodology of lynching. Decades passed before another major shift in lynching analyses occurred.

In 1974, Jaquelyn Dowd Hall drastically changed the way historians examined lynching. Her *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching*, follows the trajectory of anti-lynching leader Jesse Daniel Ames in the 1920s and 1930s. Though Hall argues that racism played the major role in the lynching of African American men, she adds that such racism "cannot be understood apart from the sexism that informed their (southern white men) policing of white women and their exploitation of black women."[10] According to Hall, "[R]ape and rumors of rape became the folk pornography of the Bible Belt."[11] Hall's analysis of lynching added gender and sexuality and highlighted the role of female agency, relatively new strategies in the discipline.

The size and scope of lynching scholarship expanded in the 1990s. Among the major works, W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (1993) takes a comparative approach. Since Georgia had the most lynching

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10. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), xx.
11. ibid.

events on record and Virginia the least, examining these two states side-by-side allows

him to see trends in a clearer way. Brundage explains why lynching events plagued these

two states at such quantitatively disparate levels. He identifies economic inequality,

population density, demographic composition, political competition, as well as white

supremacy ideologies among the multicausal factors, contending that "[T]he

South…seemed to be moving against the current of the nineteenth century."[12] Offering

such a general statement begs the application of more precise study of specific regions of

the south at specific times. Brundage declares that "[N]o explanation of the butchery of

lynch mobs can be entirely satisfactory unless it is sensitive to the historical and regional

variations in mob violence."[13] Despite this call for specificity, he continues by exploring

the many aforementioned factors in each state. He tends to place a large amount of

emphasis on the economic conditions experienced by each region. However, he continues

to stress that it was never one specific factor that provoked a lynching event.

As the field of lynching scholarship expanded, interdisciplinary approaches

became more prevalent. In 1995, Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck embraced a highly

data driven approach in their work *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern

Lynchings, 1882-1930*.[14] Using statistical methodology, Tolnay and Beck propose two

general trends for understanding lynching, both of which rely heavily on economic

elements. Rising rates of collective violence correlated directly with the decrease in value

of southern cotton. As cotton value decreased, economic hardship for southern whites

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12. Brundage, *Lynching*, 3.
13. Brundage, *Lynching*, 12.
14. Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck*, A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

increased, and tensions intensified due to competition between white and black farmers. Tolnay and Beck also note the opposite correlation. As the price of cotton increased in certain areas of the south, the number of lynchings in those areas decreased. Whites lynched to assert racial, as well as economic dominance.

Tolnay and Beck also attribute the decline of lynching in the 1930s to a major and relatively rapid decrease in the South's African American population. They note that "by the middle of the (twentieth) century, the appalling sight of black men hanging from shade trees like so much 'strange fruit' had grown much less common."[15] Tolnay and Beck contend that this decrease can be explained by analyzing the relationship between the amount of lynching and the emigration of African Americans away from the South. They first explain that they "are not naive enough to believe the white elite experienced a revelation that exposed the 'evil' of prejudice, discrimination, and racial violence."[16] Therefore, they conclude, there had to be a more practical explanation for the decrease in events.

Other works on lynching by sociologists include "Narrative and Event: Lynching and Historical Sociology."[17] Larry J. Griffin, Paula Clark, and Joanne C. Sandberg factored in statistics of not only fatal lynching events, but what they term "lynchings-in-the-making."[18] For the authors, "prevented lynchings…have formal and substantive properties that set them off from other classes of phenomena and yield valuable clues

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15. Tolnay and Beck, *Festival*, 232.
16. ibid.
17. Larry J. Griffin, Paula Clark, and Joanne C. Sandberg, "Narrative and Event: Lynching and Historical Sociology," in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
18. Griffin, Clark, and Sandberg, "Narrative and Event," 29.

about how to analyze, explain, and interpret them."[19] Comparing the frequency of the two

types of events offers a statistical vantage point for viewing societal trends. This

methodological approach was revolutionary at the time owing to its use of "historical

counterfactuals and historical counterexamples" to seek understanding. The authors argue

that this approach increases understanding of "contested social structures and cultural

meanings."[20] Research in this vein forces us to ask a key question: Why were certain

behaviors accepted in southern culture while others were not?

Amy Wood's book *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in

America, 1890-1940*, profoundly shifted lynching analysis in 2007.[21] In her

groundbreaking work, Wood views lynching from the perspective of the witness rather

than the perpetrator or victim. She analyzes the impact of seeing such violence at the

individual, communal, and national levels. Adding to the traditional source base of

newspapers and correspondence, Wood dedicates an entire chapter to the film *The Birth

of a Nation* (1915). She looks at the popular reception of the film as well as the

impression it made on its viewers. Wood asserts that "[W]hite southerners saw *Birth*

as…a direct address to them, a spectacular vindication of their sectional pride and their

sense of racial honor."[22] The film provided a level of justification for lynching and thus

perpetuated mob violence. For viewers in the south, *Birth of a Nation* was a celebration, a

victory of sorts. Their customs were perpetuated and justified before the entire nation.

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19. ibid.
20. Griffin, Clark, and Sandberg, "Narrative and Event," 31.
21. Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
22. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 147.

Wood also discusses the impact of photography on the popular reception of lynching. Black markets for images taken at lynching events materialized across the south. Postcards and stereographs, an invention that displayed images of lynching victims in three dimensions, served multiple purposes for the population. The event, as well as the lived experience, could be removed from its original context and viewed from the safety of the home. The pervasive character of the lynching photograph further normalized lynching by placing the violence into every facet of an individual's life. Inserting the lynching into any individual's pocket "redramatized the violence, allowing the victim to be tortured and killed once again in the viewer's memory."[23] Every viewing of a lynching photograph reaffirmed the dominance hierarchy. The representation of the white mob juxtaposed with the lone black figure "made visible to white southerners black depravity set against a united white superiority and civility."[24] Photographs thus provided a deeper level of legitimacy to white southern beliefs about African American criminality.

Wood's analysis of the conventions apparent in lynching photographs is paramount for further understanding of white southern social norms. It provides valuable insight into the ways participants viewed themselves in the context of southern honor culture. White men posed for photographs to appear restrained and with an air of emotional control. Wood proposes that this likely contrasted with reality. Lynching events were often emotionally charged, with white men acting with reckless abandon. Also, family portraits had become quite popular as a means "to project, to themselves and

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23. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 103.
24. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 93.

others, images of family and social harmony."[25] If lynch mob participants could represent themselves in the same way, lynching could gain wider acceptance as a necessary and socially protected activity. She also compares the posture of white lynchers to that of hunters posing with their quarry. The similarity of the two further bolstered the idea of white masculine dominance over a weaker being, in this case the black male. This further cemented white masculinity at the top of the constructed sociocultural dominance hierarchy. Lynching photographs further symbolized white masculine dominance by the lack of female presence, even though females were present at nearly every lynching. The conquered depiction of the black body, in contrast, served to reaffirm African Americans at the bottom.

Recently, Donald Mathews has placed lynching rituals in a theological context. *At the Altar of Lynching: Burning Sam Hose in the American South* uses a narrative format to describe the infamous lynching of Sam Hose in Newnan, Georgia in 1899. [26] Hose was burned to death by a mob "[O]n the third Sunday after Easter."[27] Mathews begins by establishing the significance of religion in the South. Masculinity in the south was seen as the divine protector of the "goddess" of femininity. Viewed in this way, the African American man, painted with the narrative of the perpetual rapist, was Satan incarnate. According to Mathews, the ritual of lynching was a religious rite that championed the sanctity of white superiority and brought the natural world back into homeostasis.

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25. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 88.
26. Donald G. Mathews*, At the Altar of Lynching: Burning Sam Hose in the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
27. Mathews, *Altar*, 1.

Many approaches have been taken to study the phenomenon of lynching events, and most contain within them a piece of the puzzle. There is no single cause for every lynching event throughout American history. As culturally recognized undesirable behaviors changed, so did each group's position in the sociocultural dominance hierarchy. Depending on time and space, the mixture of factors that drove individuals to commit atrocious barbarity varied. Just like humans, however, the rituals and culturally accepted behaviors we take part in are messy and complex.

"The world,
And its long days full of labor, brings good,
And evil; all who remain here meet both."
-Beowulf, lines 1060-1062

II: Social Death: A Relation of Domination

Relationship dynamics between blacks and whites in America have been tainted by imbalanced power since America's inception. Upon their arrival, agency and individuality for the African population were nearly impossible to attain due to their assigned status. In *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, David Brion Davis asserts that, regardless of the rare occasions when somewhat tolerable living conditions were granted, "slavery was always slavery in the sense of defining and selling human beings as salable property; privileges of any sort could, and often did, disappear as fast as a flash of lightning."[28] Accepted hierarchical positions were thus established with extreme discrepancies. If complete individual sovereignty occupies one end of a spectrum of human agency, slavery is the obvious oppositional state. When ideologies are espoused that place certain populations at an elevated level of a culturally accepted dominance hierarchy, group solidarity is most often a natural by-product, regardless of overall group motives. Without group cohesion brought about by individual investment in the overarching group values and belief systems, group status cannot be held in perpetuity. Deeply rooted and universally accepted arrangements must be established and maintained with vigilance. People groups tend to require other people groups to operate in opposition to themselves to bolster such cohesion.

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28. David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 124.

Differences in all aspects of life and culture were identified and exploited to establish African social death in America. Every human sense was consulted when identifying such differences. Skin colors, communication styles, traditions, diets, ideals of morality and ethics, and many others became more than mere human traits and customs. Differences had to be exaggerated to establish a more "obvious" and therefore "common sensical" interpretation of reality. Trans-Atlantic slavery operated on such a grand scale due, in part, to the destruction of the sociocultural identity of African slaves. Chattel slavery of Africans and African Americans was amazingly inhuman. Therefore, whites viewed the black slaves they brutalized as subhuman. The power held by whites was built upon not only the subhuman lens through which black bodies were viewed by whites, but on their direct oppression and control. African individuals were introduced to the American way of life in a state of social death, a status that determined their perceived societal value and therefore every aspect of their lives. Through this process, white elites gained a position of dominance. The perpetuity of that status was dependent on the subjugation of blacks.

Social death begins when members of a subgroup of people are seen as less than human by the remaining members of a larger population. This perspective, once generally accepted, allows for a natural progression toward dominance assignment. Power can then be more efficiently wielded due to accepted social contracts. Unwritten laws are embraced, dictating the substance of intergroup interactions. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* by Orlando Patterson provides us with an extensive overview of this social phenomenon that has played out in many cultures across the world and across time. Patterson goes to great pains to analyze slavery across space and time, with research

spanning sixty-six different slave holding societies throughout history. His study

demonstrates the universal nature of such concepts as social death and how they are

mechanisms for power and control. Patterson helps us understand that slavery as an

institution was, and is, not unique to a specific type of society, one with capitalistic

leanings for example. He argues that slavery is a "parasitic relationship…invariably

entailing the violent domination of a natally alienated, or socially dead, person."[29] Rather

than a relationship formed solely out of the necessity for labor and production, slavery

then becomes a reinforcer of sociocultural rules and existential principles. Reputation,

prestige, power, and control became enticing motivators for the existence and

perpetuation of slavery in every human society. Social death thus became a tool in the

process of enslaving entire people groups and therefore in creating dominance hierarchies

throughout many cultures.

Lynching in the 1890s cotton belt of Georgia can be more fully understood by

looking at the process of social death that occurred early in the relationship between

colonial Americans and their African counterparts. At the initial onset of interactions, a

detached approach to African humanity remained necessary and normal. European

traders saw black bodies as commodities to be bought and sold to certain ends. That a

large portion of slaves, as well as indentured servants, were from the criminal elements of

societies set the foundation for this process. Already seen as a lesser contributor to

society at large, individuals either guilty of crimes or falsely accused were more readily

expendable and therefore forgotten. Individuals with a higher social status, that of a

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29. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 136.

landowner or a wealthy merchant, would never have been considered a candidate for such a fate.

Along with extensive analysis and detailed evidence, Patterson also provides the field with a framework to explain how social death occurs. This framework can be applied to the process that occurred in the early Americas. It is therefore integral to understanding the foundation of cultural norms, especially those constructed around what would become race. Race as the social construct we know today was born out of the American version of slavery, a process that I will discuss in the next chapter. For now, I will use Patterson's framework as a lens through which to view how social death occurred early on for those of African descent and was then perpetuated in order to maintain the established hierarchical structure.

According to Patterson, we first must observe within the "relation of domination" that is slavery the power dynamic at work. For this, we must understand the three facets of power relations. The first facet exists in the social realm and involves coercion via the use of violence to express dominance. Second, psychological influence must be in the hands of the oppressor class to mold the ways in which the oppressed "perceives his interests and his circumstances."[30] This is the most nefarious, and therefore important, aspect of a power dynamic. Once the dominant party can infiltrate the mind of the one they intend to enslave, it becomes easier to establish the cultural "norm" of assigned statuses. When an individual is so utterly convinced that their status is as an enslaved individual, and therefore a socially dead member of society, control becomes easier to obtain and subsequently enforce. The third facet is the perpetuation of social death

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30. Patterson, *Slavery*, 2.

through cultural tools such as language, ritual, violence, religion, gender and racial constructs, media, and other institutions. During the time of slavery, these mechanisms were much easier to enforce. Post-Emancipation however, there was no legal protection for such force and intimidation for controlling humans. Once the freedoms of black citizens became, in the eyes of most whites, something to be feared and therefore halted, lynching and other acts of terror regained popularity. Newspaper articles and later movies informed the nation of the innate criminality of all African Americans. Word spread far and wide, word written by white male newspaper owners from the southern United States, of savage acts of sexual violence being perpetrated by black drifters only looking to satiate their brutish appetite. Dehumanization through categorization as a farm implement is not so far removed from categorization as a savage and dangerous beast. As a destroyer of white purity, the black body became anti-human.

Once we understand that the relationship between whites and blacks from the very beginning was established on this framework, it becomes clearer why lynching evolved into a dominant tool for social control. More than simply control, lynching was indeed a reaction to evolving perceived status of African Americans. As the status of the slave, and therefore black, population began to change to one with increasing social identity, tactics for maintaining power and control had to change as well. Use of violence grew from small scale beatings and coercive tactics to lynchings full of spectacle rivaling the largest public executions. White southerners viewed any advance in the status of African Americans as a direct affront to their status at the peak of the hierarchy. Regardless of the reality of the time, one shaped by false promises of liberty and true American ideals, white middle class men had zero tolerance for expansion of black rights.

The Trans-Atlantic Slave trade established violence as the norm for interactions between whites and blacks. Since the origins of slavery, violence has been an ever-present tool for control. Many enslaved individuals occupied the fringes of established society, making the threshold for violence to be used against them low from the start. When groups go further by embracing an us versus them mentality, only division and hypervigilance ensues. Due to the separation between these groups, a certain degree of social death occurs at the onset of interaction. A lack of humanity thus becomes the justification for violent tactics. Rather than observing and embracing human similarities, the obvious differences between white traders and black slaves became the traits that defined each group. This assisted in the establishment of violence as the most common form of communication when dealing with African slaves. Once the American plantation slavery system began to grow with extreme rapidity, violent tactics evolved alongside the institution, as did ideologies of white supremacy and black inferiority. By the time of Emancipation following the Civil War, these ideologies had become so deeply entrenched in American culture that abrupt exorcising of them brought about extreme existential turmoil. As the rights of black Americans began to expand, at least in theory, so too did the violent means of oppression, lynching paramount among them.

Obtaining control through violence was the first step to white domination. As violent tactics became the norm, so too did reception of violence. Humans have the amazing capacity to withstand immense amounts of physical suffering. For this reason, total domination of a people group cannot be complete without also containing a psychological component. It is in the mind that humans become most susceptible to manipulation and oppression. Language is the most subtle tool for psychological

influence, while at the same instance being the most overt. Because it holds such a power position, the following chapter is devoted solely to language and its impact on black and white relations in the early American south and beyond. However, many other means were used to inflict psychological pressure. Poor living conditions, inadequate provisions, malnutrition, threats, degrading tasks, sexual coercion through rape or forced breeding, splitting up known relatives, and an unknown expanse of tactics constantly plagued the mind of the slave. A surveillance culture was established early on, perpetuated by patrols, rewards for information regarding the infractions of fellow slaves, and even sneaky slave breakers amused by hiding in tall grass and surprising slaves who were slacking on their duties. An environment that promoted constant fight or flight flourished. White men lived in a state of entitlement, free to concoct new depraved ways to exhibit dominance.

Once social death of a group is firmly accepted within a larger population via violence and psychological oppression, the institution created must then be maintained, perhaps even expanded. Patterson calls upon the work of Rousseau to explain the importance of the third facet of power relation, that which resides in the cultural realm. It is within this sphere that newly developed hierarchies become established, accepted, and then perpetuated. According to Rousseau, cultural constructs that grow out of the systems mentioned previously become "the means of transforming force into right, and obedience into duty."[31] Rousseau points out that those at the peak of authority have as their source of "'legitimate powers'… those 'conventions' which today we would call culture."[32] "Those who exercise power, if they are able to transform it into a "right," a norm, a usual

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31. Rousseau quoted in Patterson, *Slavery*, 2.
32. Ibid.

part of the order of things, must first control (or at least be able to manipulate) appropriate symbolic instruments. They may do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or they may create new ones relevant to their needs."[33] The members of the southern white honor culture had to accept the hierarchical structure as uncontestable fact. Then, welcomed into the cultural fold, traditions grew out of the order, some that remain. Traditions born from the milieu of slavery created a mass of symbols, both public and private. Control of both types of symbols led to increased power. Increased power led to a monopoly on authority. If the power and authority was maintained, the "natural order" of the master-slave relationship, and by extension the black and white relationship in the Old South, was maintained.

Patterson asserts that the socially dead group members in a culture exist in a state he calls liminal incorporation. In early America, slaves existed in a state of liminality, meaning they "remained in the society: a part of it, yet apart from it."[34] Slaves, and therefore the individual's position in the status hierarchy of the local culture, became an accepted part of everyday life. However, they were not seen as fully human and therefore as truly contributing members of society. Slaves were the ultimate outcasts and yet, for many plantation families, a necessary part of daily life. From a logistical and economical standpoint, some might argue that slaves were the most important aspect of antebellum society. Contemporaries, however, kept the slave in a status that reflected their position on the margins of society. It is this "institutionalized marginality," when every individual of a certain population and their occupation of the fringes of cultural order is a societal

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33. Patterson, *Slavery*, 37.
34. Patterson, *Slavery,* 46.

rule, is "where the master's authority rested."[35] Without the enslaved, the master cannot exist. Following that same logic, without black inferiority, white superiority could not exit. It is the direct opposition that creates the power dynamic that created fertile ground for racism and the violence it would ignite.

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35. ibid.

"In fact, the use of language, the manner as much as the substance of discourse, depends on the social position of the speaker which governs the access he can have to the language of the institution, that is to the official, orthodox, and legitimate speech."[36]

-Pierre Bourdieu

III: The Power of Language: Creating the Other

We cannot clearly understand the power of language in the construction of sociocultural norms by reading or hearing. The only way to grasp how language impacts a population and the culture therein is to analyze symbolic vernacular used and the outcome of dispersing rhetoric on a mass scale. [37] Lynching was the physical manifestation of a curated body of language designed and implemented to subjugate, criminalize, and murder the black population. Furthermore, those who shaped and wielded such language came by their power relatively easily. In capitalist societies, the group producing the most wealth tends to also achieve higher status and therefore higher degrees of power and control. Through the systemization of slavery, the white southern planter class was in the peak position of the dominance hierarchy by default. With economic power came influence over prevailing narratives. In the early development of America and the institution of slavery, a body of language emerged out of necessity. Runaway slaves, or in the eyes of the owner "missing property," needed to be tracked down and returned. The best way to achieve such an objective was to recruit other plantation owners and townspeople with an advertisement in the local newspaper. Through this process, repeated thousands of times over decades, certain words and

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36. Pierre Bordieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

37. This section of analysis was influenced by *Language and Symbolic Power* by Pierre Bourdieu.

phrases became common place to describe those of African descent. It all began in the ad section.

Language is a barrier for entry, the gate keeper for acceptance, into any culture. Understanding the agreed upon meanings and associated nuance is only the first step. Knowing when to use symbolically significant verbiage and descriptors, when to communicate certain ideas, is a key factor in whether an individual is defined as an integral part of the cultural machine, or an outcast to be eradicated, or at least controlled. Not only does language help to identify the in-group in opposition to an accepted out-group, but it is also a tool to transmit ideologies. Language is wielded by those who occupy the peak position of the dominance hierarchy as a weapon of influence aimed at those below. Certain words and phrases are given power through many tactics that define the acceptable behaviors of the masses and designate which should be punished. Selected tactics used by purveyors of the written word, though varied in application, forced the reader to add their own emotional ingredients to the proposed rhetoric. Generating emotional buy-in by the members of the group garnered increased acceptance of the prevailing narrative. One example of how newspapers stoked an emotional response within group members was through evocation of challenges to safety. Narratives had to demonstrate that, not only was the safety of every white individual at risk, but more importantly, the entire southern way of life. Those wishing to have the greatest influence, middle class white males, utilized the most readily available language transfer method at their disposal: the newspaper.

Sharon Block's groundbreaking study of runaway slave advertisements titled *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America*, explains the

origin of American definitions of race and traces the popular acceptance of a body of language.[38] According to Block, when "colonial advertisers" made "such subjective distinctions," they "reified racial ideologies."[39] Using certain words to describe skin color, facial shape, the body, demeanor, as well as many other descriptive factors, slave holders created a vernacular that facilitated and perpetuated a process of Othering. Whites created race to separate groups of individuals with juxtaposed appearances and social statuses. Race was born out of the necessity of owners to describe pieces of property that had been misplaced. What it evolved into, especially during the era of lynching, was much more convoluted, facilitating fatal consequences.

Both our historical explanation of race and the accepted cultural understanding over time come with a surplus of issues. Race, as it is widely understood today, was not the motivator for the enslavement of millions of Africans in the early years of the Americas. Instead, status, commerce, greed, and a seemingly infinite source of unpaid labor drove the peculiar institution. An abundance of slave labor from Africa led to foundational division between owner and owned. Viewing African slaves as property served to dehumanize them, setting the stage for a detachment that further shaped the reality of the slave and owner relationship. Ironically, the language owners used to describe many of their slaves are traits that are almost exclusively assigned to humans. In the same breath that an owner described their slave as a farm implement, or even livestock to be bred, they also placed culturally undesirable human traits upon them. This

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38. Sharon Block, *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).
39. Block, *Colonial,* 36.

entire process helped further establish the liminal state of the enslaved discussed in the previous chapter.

There were dual purposes for placing such undesirable traits on slaves. First, it served to cement their status within the social hierarchy. In doing so, it consequently affirmed the status of the white owner. A process of establishing the accepted ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority thus began. For white supremacy to develop, another counter group had to be created to serve as an opponent. Without the opposing group, the power dynamic could not exist or be exploited to such a massive extent. Once African enslavement became systematized in the 1660s, the Other in opposition to white owners became more clearly defined.[40] The debate among historians and social scientists continues to rage over the purpose of this human proclivity to establish "in" and "out" groups. Some argue that the Other provides a common enemy around which an opposing group can rally. The survival of any group is enhanced through group cohesion. Therefore, no matter what type of menial intragroup differences may exist, a common enemy that potentially threatens group survival becomes much more impactful. Another school of thought focuses on the creation of the Other as simply a means of ostracizing members of the population of a region that do not espouse desirable traits. Othering then becomes a means of basic social filtering. The reasons for this tactic are multicausal. Group members could wish to only retain members that embody certain moral, ethical, economic, or political attributes. Perhaps their beliefs are centered around their offspring, igniting hopes that as the proverbial wheat is separated from chaff, their children will

40. Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 1, no. 181 (1990): 104.

consequently fare better from a hereditary standpoint. Whichever direction one goes in such an analysis, one thing remains clear: Othering in early America history created an "us versus them" mindset that permeated every aspect of each group members' life. This mindset affected every thought, belief, and behavior, and provided a drastic amount of influence over how group members shaped their reality. In the reality of the slave holder group of the antebellum south, the dominance hierarchy was clearly defined and upheld, to a point that the reasoning behind such class division appeared logical and universally accepted.

Using specific language to control large groups of individuals is how America was made. It began with indentured servitude, the plight of individuals of the least desirable character in the eyes of English lawmakers. They ranged from criminals, vagrants, the Irish, dissenters, and even those that were simply coerced through more villainous means, such as plying with alcohol, or being "spirited away" to the sugar plantations in the early colonies. Racial discrimination did not yet play a significant part in the determination of who these laborers were, but already an ideology was being established. In the minds of the nobility, the traits of these forced servants set them apart, and thus a long process of Othering began.

Once indentured servitude proved to be a less efficient way to support the labor needs of the plantation system, enslavement of Africans became the norm. As the institution gained ground, a formal body of language to describe slaves began to take shape, as is the case with any emerging market. This was an organic process at first, but soon became established culturally through mass dissemination via local and regional newspapers. Physical descriptors of runaway slaves "turned observation, belief, and

imagination into corporeal characteristics."[41] Traits that were the most readily observable became the template that a subjugated population, only meant to perform labor and serve as property or income, were meant to fall into. The language used to describe height, color, mannerisms, clothing, and intelligence became established through print. It was then repeated and therefore accepted every time an ad was displayed and read by the public. During Block's research, she analyzed "more than four thousand newspaper advertisements for runaway servants, slaves, and other missing persons issued between 1750 and 1775."[42] This is likely a conservative estimate for the number of advertisements printed. Also, this does not account for conversations among members of the white community using the same language. Once the accepted body of language was established by the dominant white population, it became a part of the cultural ideology and served as a means of describing the black population. Over time, it became normalized when discussing every possible interaction that involved any non-white member of society.

After slavery became more fully systematized in the 1660s, a new class of enslaved Africans bore the brunt of the white elite judgment and stereotyping. Barbara Fields points to an interesting concept when she describes what was so different between indentured servants and enslaved Africans that the English nobility did not enslave the former for life. Rather than take the stance, as have many other historians, that it was due to racially defined similarities between indentured servant and the elite, or even perhaps a religious commonality, Fields points to the existence of shared history. Despite their

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41. Block, *Colonial Complexions*, 35.
42. Block, *Colonial Complexions*, 3.

obviously disparate class division, indentured servants and English nobility had gone through the state building process together as countrymen. Through this process a certain familiarity was born, and with it came a rapport that Africans simply did not have. The shared history, culture, language, customs, hardships, and even loyalty to the Queen, kept the English nobility from going all-in on lifetime enslavement. When it came to African slaves, however, the historical slate was clean. Traders, owners, and by extension the European descended population, saw little to nothing to be had in common with Africans and thus found it much easier to establish laws making them lifetime servants. Not only did a lack of commonality exist, but opposing cultural practices were also prevalent. Even the ways the two people groups governed their own polities seemed completely opposite. Add into this equation the rampant xenophobia harbored by so many members of the European elite and Othering, perhaps even enslavement, was almost a foregone conclusion from the time of initial contact. [43]

Emancipation after the Civil War may have enacted a multifaceted change on the political, economic, and cultural make-up of the post-bellum south, but the language and ideology of race had already taken root. Even though many black citizens became business owners, politicians, and economically independent individuals, in the minds and mouths of Georgia's white population, they were still described as they had always been. Many whites had only previously interacted with people of color through a slave/owner relationship. The dehumanization that occurred initially greatly skewed the status dynamic in a lasting way. From the moment of introduction, a black man or woman was,

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43. Barbara Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181, (1990): 95 – 118.

and would always be, seen as "less than" to the extreme. Furthermore, it must be considered that the Civil War was labelled "the second war of independence" by a large portion of the white southern population. Placing this much ideological power on the conflict meant that the defeat destroyed not only a large portion of the southern infrastructure. According to white southern men, culture was under attack. The north was not only upending all southern ways of life, but also the white southern population's status in the dominance hierarchy of the entire country. Giving their property a status that was meant to be the same as their own was simply a step too far.

The ways newly emancipated slaves were described and discussed in contemporary newspapers signified a lack of a shift in language which reflected the status change of the black population according to written law. While in theory black individuals were now American citizens, the practice of subjugation through mockery assisted in keeping society stratified. In an article printed in *The Weekly Constitution* in 1888, the author described, as he termed them, "Negro Superstitions," a series of false "beliefs" that he claimed represented the entire African American population.[44] He interviewed "a queer specimen of humanity, and ideas and fancies from her weird world of ignorance flew so rapidly to her tongue that one was enticed into desire to hear more of her jargon."[45] His subject was an older black woman, selling "roasting ears," corn roasted in husk, by the roadside. He described the "barbarous belief" transmitted by the vendor when referencing the origins of the "black race." According to the vendor, wrote the author, it is a popular belief "[A]mong those of the race that live far from white

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44. "Negro Superstitions," *The Weekly Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), June 5, 1888.
45. ibid.

people, their teaching and their influence," that "God is indeed the creator of the dominant white race, they, poor blacks, are the handiwork of Satan."[46] Powerful and nefarious prose then shifts quite creatively to exaggerate a difference in dialect. She describes the expulsion of Satan from Heaven, saying he was "[F]lung into hell…en dar he be now. Tied ter de wheel er de chariot er fire! Chained ter de turnin' wheel er fire; en dar he gwine stay twel de great risin' day." [47] Use of this writing style when depicting African Americans in print served to strengthen constructs that reinforced group differences. Black and white narratives around religious justification for espoused ideologies, were defined in opposition. The white dominance narrative places whites at the top of the hierarchy due to the divine judgement of God. Therefore, the black population remained on the bottom. The stereotype that the black population lacked education is supported in the above example by representation of the black woman in the minstrel style, painting her as a caricature meant to represent all black Americans. The language, spelling meant to represent an African descended dialect, was a mechanism used to perpetuate minstrelization, the process of reducing black individuals to mere caricatures of themselves. Presenting a superior intellect when discussing such enlightened ideas helped strengthen the white argument for division of a divine nature. According to the narrative the white author asserts, the black population can only exist in their ignorant and savage state without the intervention of white customs and dominance. To him, the superior race was meant to subordinate the inferior race as decreed by the highest authority.

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46. ibid.
47. ibid.

The group atop the social dominance hierarchy also needed to control their own population. In a brief section of the May 29, 1888, issue of *The Weekly Constitution*, printed in Atlanta, Georgia, an example of in-group policing is described. If the headline is ignored, the tale that follows could seem to play with the heart strings of the reader. A young, seemingly respectable man, "an ex United States deputy marshal, committed suicide last night by taking fourteen grains of morphine."[48] A successful yet lonely young man, J. A. Wilford took his life, a story of potential relatability to any number of young men, the intended audience. But soon, events took a turn toward something quite different. Wilford had in fact been "infatuated with a woman of ill-fame, and spent his money all on her."[49] Reeling from the realization "that his girl had gone back on him," Wilford laid down on the couch at a brothel owned by Maude Williams, and proceeded to overdose on morphine. This was a story that targeted young white men. The description stirred fear of a potential future full of squalor, all due to established undesirable cultural infractions. The author influenced behaviors with a well formulated narrative. By showing the negative side effects of opium and prostitutes, an early and lonely death, as well as open ridicule and potential social ostracization, the author was defining which behaviors would not be accepted within the southern honor culture. Though the targeted behavioral control may have been beneficial to the southern population of young white males, the presence of a will to power is evident. This becomes even more obvious when the headline to the fateful story is read: "Just as Well Dead."[50]

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48. "Just As Well Dead," *The Weekly Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), May 29, 1888.
49. ibid.
50. ibid.

It was also imperative to white southern men to have a narrative that demonized women of African descent, just as rife with the language of control and guided by tactics of character assassination. An article on the same page as "Just as Well Dead" is titled "A Counterpart of 'She:' 'The Woman Who Lives Over There' – A Female Monarch of Africa."[51] The subtitle of the article quickly established the Otherness of women of African descent, placing the group in direct opposition to white males. The reference made to *She* is quite telling. In 1887, Sir Henry Rider Haggard, a career diplomat of England, wrote *She: A History of Adventure*, a novel influenced by his time in South Africa.[52] The lead character was an African queen by the name of Ayesha, a "sorceress" who had lived 2,000 years by the time Haggard's fictional Cambridge scholar finally encountered her. Simply called *She* by the protagonist, Ayesha was a symbol of tyrannical feminine power not to trifled with. This created quite the contrast to white femininity, celebrated as divine and submissive. When referencing *She* in his article, the author clarifies that the African monarch was a very real human. Located in a region in central Africa, "over which reigns supreme a rich and powerful queen – Kabutu by name."[53] Kabutu was "terrible…and so greatly feared…by the natives far and wide that she is never called by her rightful appellation, but is designated as 'The Woman Who Lives Over There,' with a wave of the arm toward the frowning hills."[54] He describes a queen who is "particularly antagonistic to white men, regarding them not only with abhorrence but with an implacable hatred, dubbing them as monsters, wizards, and

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51. "A Counterpart of 'She,'" *The Weekly Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), May 29, 1888.
52. ibid.
53. ibid.
54. ibid.

dealers of magic." Even though Kabutu had a "war like attitude toward them," so much so that "no white man has ever to penetrate her presence," Mr. H., the author's source for the story, was on a mission. The article proceeds to tell the daring tale of how "Mr. H.," trekked to Kabutu's kingdom, determined to gain access to interview the queen. Due to many trials, specifically the harsh conditions of the unforgiving continent, he is unsuccessful with his endeavor, which only stokes a deeper resolve to try again in the following months. No human, not even a powerful African queen, was beyond the reach of the white man's pen and presence. In a time when the status of women in America was changing drastically, more agency and therefore power obtained through female centered movements, it was important for white southern men to show that they were still in the dominant position.

In 1896, a landmark Supreme Court decision further legitimized the more abstract cultural divisions of racial status by bringing them into the physical world. *Plessy v. Ferguson* originated as a case against the unconstitutional nature of the Separate Car Act of 1890 in Louisiana. Criminal charges were placed on Homer Plessy, a man of mixed-race status, when he attempted to travel in a "whites only" train car. The Court ruled, seven to one, that the law did not go against the amendment and therefore had to be upheld. This established a doctrine of "separate but equal," as well as the sociocultural hierarchy with the white male population in the dominant position. Separate but equal sanctioned and strengthened the Othering already taking place in southern culture, now in the physical and daily lived experience of the entire population. Through a clever use of legal language and accepted cultural norms, *Plessy v. Ferguson* added legal authority to a

process of Othering began hundreds of years prior with one of the most basic cultural

tools: language.

"It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities."[55]
-Booker T. Washington

"The South didn't furnish a thing on earth for that funeral but the corpse and the hole in the ground."[56]
-Henry W. Grady

IV: "Know Your Place": Threats to White Male Dominance

In the 1890s south, white masculine honor culture reigned supreme. Within this code were many unwritten laws that few individuals dared challenge. Honor culture dictated the behavioral model for those within the in-group and described how those further down the dominance hierarchy were expected to behave. White men, especially those who owned land and a good deal of economic clout, protected traditions established during the height of southern planter dominance. History, to many, justified their supreme position. Politically, the southern Democrats not only ruled in the sphere of policy but also espoused the ideology of white supremacy. With the Confederacy defeated during the Civil War and Emancipation occurring soon after, an existential fear swept through the white male population. Fear of losing southern power obviously existed, but fear of losing white power was also present. An influx of minimally sovereign black individuals into the southern population generated deep anxiety, not only for safety, but also regarding competition within the job market. Adding to the existential turmoil of white males was an increase in female agency through organizations built and

55. Booker T. Washington, "Speech at the Atlanta Exposition, September 18, 1895," in *The Booker T. Washington* Papers, ed. Louis R. Harlin and John W. Blassingame (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 74.

56. Raymond B. Nixon, *Henry W. Grady: Spokesman of the New South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), 10.

populated exclusively by women. Not only was power normally due white men challenged politically and economically, but the roles of protector and provider were slowly being threatened from within the home as feminine representation increase on a more public scale. Honor culture embraced in the southern United States placed extreme weight on the reputation of a group member in relation to the rest of his peers. Traits such as courage, strength, and the ability to control nature, influenced every social interaction. Honor culture established in pre-Civil War planter society became entrenched, thriving post-Emancipation. Within the ecosystem of the plantation, every group was expected to "know their place." This included not only black men and women, but white men and women as well. Little effort was made to rebel against accepted social norms and change them, and any resistance to roles within the established societal structure proved futile, sometime fatal. Reform and Reconstruction efforts were met with hostility from the still powerful southern white male elite. Lynching became a tool to maintain order, but the events themselves were rife with motivations to uphold southern masculine honor, divinely assigned status, and a sense of order, both divine and domestic.

Politically, the rise in black representation in southern states began to slip. The Republican party of the 1880s and 1890s maintained immense support from black voters across the south, but pressure from Democrats led to a decrease in interest in black causes and support. An allegedly official statement from a Republican leader described the diminishing interest in black representation at the highest levels. A struggling Democratic apparatus saw an opportunity to turn black voters against the Republican party. An article in *The Morning News* of Savannah, Georgia, reiterated the statement from the Republican party headquarters. The spokesman from the Republican party, the author, asserted that

"the great mass of Southern negroes" did not require black representation in President

James A. Garfield's cabinet. Going even further, the author claimed that "[I]t is not at all

likely that the negro politicians in Washington, who are expressing…the opinion that the

negro race will be wronged if Gen. Garfield does not invite a black man to enter his

Cabinet, represent with accuracy any considerable number of the members of their

race."[57] The lack of accurate representation, according to the author, stemmed from a lack

of intelligence regarding political matters at the popular level. He claimed that most

would not "really know what a cabinet is or what a Cabinet officer has to do." To the

author then, representation in the highest levels of the federal government by any member

of the black population was "not justified by sound sense." Furthermore, the author

claimed that "[T]he destiny of the race is not necessarily to hold office." To strive to have

a black representative in the Cabinet of Garfield was "intrinsically absurd." Instead, the

author assumed that "[W]hat the race wants much more than anything else is to improve

its intellectual and material condition, to acquire education, and to learn how to conduct

those industrial pursuits which brings wealth." As proof that his assertion was accepted

amongst the black population, the author pointed to the black business owners in the

north, "the intelligent negros," "who are engaged in business and…have little fondness

for active politics." These ideas shaped the reality of the reader in a drastic yet subtle

way. Some might have found the idea of not burdening the black population with the ire

of politics to be a benevolent act. Having alleviated them of the white man's burden of

governing and sacrificing for the good of man, they had more capacity to focus on

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57. "The Negro Before and After Election," *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), Jan 10, 1881.

becoming productive members of the white society. According to those in power, assimilation into the white man's civilization was all the black population ultimately desired.

Many with nefarious motivations agreed regarding the lack of a need for political representation for the black population at the federal level. But no matter the motivation for espousing such ideas, a façade of credible substantiation was given when the prominent black leader Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute gave a speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia on September 18, 1895. Washington called for the members of both races to "[C]ast down your bucket where you are," though the call to action for both blacks and whites within his sentiment was very different. For the white men in attendance, Washington claimed that if they would cast their bucket "down among the 8,000,000 Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides," black members of the population would make upstanding workers. He emphasized that black workers "have, without strikes and labor wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, built your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South." To lift the black population up through employment, education, and paternal leadership would mean progress for the entire country, especially the south. Doing so would guarantee that white men would be "surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen."[58] While many other black leaders, including W.E.B. DuBois, felt that a

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58. Washington, "Speech," 74-75.

lack of black representation was the ultimate affront to black liberty and equality, Booker T. Washington's ideas, and more, his words, were easily wieldable by those seeking to advance a political agenda based on white supremacy.

Following the collapse of the Confederacy at the conclusion of the Civil War, Georgia was hurting existentially. Economically, Georgia was in shambles, having lost around 40,000 of its white population during the four years of war. Reeling from a detrimental demographic dent, fear was at an all-time high as Georgia, and the south in general, struggled to rebuild. Their efforts were hampered even more owing to the collapse of systematized slavery, the voussoir of the southern economy. In the post-Civil War south, survival became top priority. Efforts were stifled however due to an influx of capable laboring bodies into the job market, land shortages, and infrastructure damage. All these aspects came together to inflict a monstrous blow to southern white men's sense of identity.

A narrative began to take shape that reflected the state of the poor south and the subsequent angst perpetuated by extreme loss. When describing a funeral in Pickens County, Henry W. Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution,* stressed the loss of southern identity by describing the disappearance of southern material wealth. At this "peculiarly sad" funeral, a man was buried "in the midst of a marble quarry: they cut through solid marble to make his grave; and yet a little tombstone they put above him was from Vermont." Highlighting the desire of the southern population to fight to retain their traditions, the burying of a poor, virtually unknown, southern man in solid marble serves as enlightening imagery. Capping the grave with a tombstone imported from Vermont was a symbol of encroaching culture, population, and money from the newly powerful

north. Grady went on lamenting his image of a south taken over by outsiders, pillaged of all she held dearest, in his description of the funeral scene. Though the man was buried "in the heart of a pine forest," his "pine coffin was imported from Cincinnati." Although he was buried close to an iron mine, "the nails in his coffin and the iron in the shovel that dug his grave were imported from Pittsburgh." He explained that the burial occurred in some of the "best sheep-grazing country on the earth, and yet the wool in the coffin bands and the coffin bands themselves were brought from the North." In a clearly exasperated tone, Grady described the man in the coffin, dressed "in a New York coat…a Boston pair of shoes…a pair of breeches from Chicago…and a shirt from Cincinnati." He asserted that the unknown man was heading into the afterlife with no reminders of the south, where "he lived, and for which he fought for four years, but the chill of blood in his veins and the marrow in his bones."[59] Grady's description, as well as his eloquent polemical style, put into words what many southerners, especially those that fought and lived through the Civil War, could not express. Their way of life, defined by dictatorial dominance, was evaporating around them.

Economic hardship created a hostile environment for white southern men outside of the home, but conditions were rapidly changing inside the home as well. Strain on each facet of life surely impacted home life, but the changing roles of women, not only in the south but in the entire country, drastically impacted the accepted status hierarchy. During the time of slavery, it was standard that "[W]omen, along with children and slaves, were expected to recognize their proper and subordinate place and to be obedient

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59. Nixon, *Henry W. Grady*, 10.

to the head of the family."[60] This cultural standard was established early on in southern

life, some even going so far to attribute it to the peculiar institution. Christopher C. G.

Memminger, prior to enlisting as a Confederate officer, spoke of slavery's role in shaping

a strong family unit in a speech to the Young Men's Library Association of Augusta,

Georgia, in 1851. Memminger asserted that "[E]ach planter is in fact a Patriarch – his

position compels him to be a ruler in his household."[61] Therefore, it was a widely

accepted premise that being a good planter and slave owner correlated directly with the

skills required to be a good father, husband, and man. Rather than economic status then,

"[D]omestic relations become those which are most prized."[62] Most prized, indeed, only

if culturally accepted gender roles maintained their integrity. A contemporary of

Memminger, and a staunch proponent for slavery, George Fitzhugh, made note of how

women should act in 1854. He claimed that the southern woman, as "long as she is

nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent," will be worshipped by the

southern man. According to Fitzhugh, "[H]er weakness is her strength, and her true art is

to cultivate and improve that weakness." Showing all the confidence which came with

holding the top position of the sociocultural dominance hierarchy, Fitzhugh went on to

describe the nature of females. He declared that "Woman naturally shrinks from public

gaze, and from the struggle and competition of life…in truth, woman, like children, has

but one right and that is the right to protection."[63] Social norms created by this line of

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60. Christopher C. G. Memminger, Lecture Before the Young Men's Library
Association of Augusta, Georgia, 1851, quoted in W. S. Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in
the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), 210.
61. ibid.
62. Scott, *Southern Lady*, 17.
63. George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South* (Richmond: VA, Morris, 1854),
214-215.

thinking not only kept women subordinate to men, but perpetuated the hierarchical

position of white men. Once white women began breaking these norms, a process which

happened alongside newly freed slaves, men sought a means to regain their control.

During the Civil War, the absence of white men was felt in a very dramatic way

in the home. Women who otherwise fit the previous description of a subordinate wife and

mother had to, alongside looking after children, maintain slaves, crops, finances, and a

myriad of other responsibilities once held by men. Also, due to Georgia's huge loss of

life during the war, many women were now the head of the household, forcing them to

locate and maintain employment and income however they could. Education began

making its way into the south as Reconstruction proceeded. Teachers, and economic

backing for scholastic endeavors came from the north, and many southern women saw an

opportunity. Willingness to seize it was only one factor, however. Many women had to

fight for their right to attend the newly founded public schools throughout the south.

Organizations developed that helped foster heightened enrollment. Owed in large part to

the overwhelming number of issues vying for the attention of men, most of these

organizations were paid little thought. As Anne Frior Scott notes, "[S]ignificant social

changes have a way of taking place while people are looking the other way."[64]

Widespread economic strife, political infighting, the quest for power and control, and

answering the many questions surrounding race and the proper place for black citizens

stole focus. As far as white women and their crusade were concerned, no immediate

threat to white male dominance was detected. Once women's organizations began

gaining ground in the 1890s, however, white men began to take more notice. Again, fear

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64. Scott, *Southern Lady*, 106.

as a tactic for control swept the popular press and by association, the popular psyche. A new narrative had to be concocted and distributed that once again placed while men in the role of savior.

Another idea that stoked fear in 1890s Georgian mind was that of "Negro domination." The increasing instances of black men holding offices in other southern states, particularly in the Fusion controlled areas of North Carolina, created a fear that permeated deeply into the southern psyche. With anecdotes of slave revolts to draw upon, white southern men preached the danger of high black numbers. The level of power held by certain members of the black population teased out a new permutation of fear. The narrative of black domination then morphed with the resurfacing of the myth of the unrestrained sexual urges of black males. Newspapers in the south, mouth pieces of the Democratic Party and their white supremacy motives, produced many original works with a "black rapist" theme. Other papers throughout the country reprinted articles from each of these papers daily, further spreading the ideology. Creation of the "black rapist" narrative not only instilled fear in the hearts of all white people, but also perpetuated the myth of inherent criminality of African Americans, specifically males, which further subordinated the black population. The representation gained ground as a viable means of asserting the white supremacy agenda due to the perpetuation of the narrative in almost every white newspaper in the country. Over time, this narrative became the norm, accepted due to the underlying fears that existed in the white mind for over a hundred years.

An article printed in *The Morning News* of Savannah, Georgia in 1890 describes a story meant to unite the white population, the masculine and the feminine. Under the

heading "A Girl Routs a Black Brute," a story unfolds of a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old white girl, Ida Belcher. While travelling to school on foot, Belcher was allegedly attacked by Henry Brown, a black man, who, having secreted himself in some bushes, "sprang out with a long knife, lifted and ready for use." Through no small effort, "Miss Belcher…a strong and courageous girl… managed to keep the brute at bay." Allegedly, cries attracted the attention of two black men who happened to be walking nearby. When they began to show interest and advance on the scene, Brown, "maddened by being defeated in his purpose, made a savage yet unsuccessful cut at the girl's throat, and ran into the bushes."[65] The story highlights the strength of even the smallest of white Americans to "rout" a savage black man. There is symbolism in the black men who approached the act as well. It is a commentary or their inability to effectively police their own community members, doing only enough to deter their criminal nature for a brief respite. In the end, Henry Brown was arrested and jailed, so legal authority was still somewhat intact in 1890. The author does make it clear, however, that "had any one suggested lynching the brute would have been strung up in short order."[66] The white community was so volatile at this period that the mere suggestion of lynching a black man would have provoked a mob. Throughout the 1890s in Georgia, especially in the cotton belt counties, this story played out time and time again, using the same theme and template, while also reiterating the same "black brute" narrative. Often, the accused did not make it into the custody of official authorities. More commonly, vigilante extra-legal execution at the hands of an ideologically and fear driven mob was the outcome.

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65. "A Girl Routs a Black Brute," *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), March 17, 1890.

66. ibid.

"There is always judgement. There is always condemnation. There is always blood."
-Donald Mathews

V: Sanctified Vengeance: Lynching as Divine Retribution

Every single facet of life and culture in the 1890s Georgian cotton belt was saturated with southern evangelical Christian doctrine, iconography, and ritual. Men had to live lives in opposition with their masculine impulses and conditioning from honor culture. To reconcile aggressive and impulsive male tendencies with moral virtue, religion became the linchpin. Complementary at times, "the opposites of aggressive, fun-loving male impulses and a deep evangelical piety worked to intensify each other."[67] Experiencing two "Great Awakenings" and a surge of revival fever sweeping the culture of the south pushed many to extreme behaviors, both moral and immoral. While "some southerners raised hell to dramatic heights, others felt a special need to bring heaven down to earth on a very personal level."[68] To many white men, heaven on earth was only experienced when they were firmly atop the power structure and all black bodies at the bottom. While race relations, prejudice, ignorance, and blind hatred all played roles in the rise in lynching events in the 1890s, the religious meaning placed on the ritual of lynching carried a profound impact. The body being burned, mutilated, hanged, shot, and displayed carried different meaning to the spectator depending on the spiritual meaning they placed on the experience. Every individual had a spiritual interpretation; the power comes when we realize the opposing accepted interpretations of whites and blacks. By

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67. Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 1.
68. ibid.

the 1890s, lynching events in the Georgian cotton belt and beyond had become ritualized human sacrifices meant as divine retribution to restore order to the spiritual world.

Accusations of rape and attempted rape were the leading crimes for which black men met the public gallows in the 1890s. This corresponds directly with a dramatic rise in lynching events during the decade. Attaching ideological and spiritual ideals to the crimes, developing a narrative that had religious undertones woven throughout, and defining a commonly accepted enemy were the broad steps to increasing violence. Rape of a white women became the major crime due to the divine repercussions of "outraging" the purest creature created by God in the Southern white man's eyes. White women were the keepers of the home, the sacred space that was meant to separate and protect the family unit from the debauchery of the more urban areas. This was always the case, but in the 1890s, with the status of white men under attack, the need to increase the severity of black infractions was paramount. More acceptance needed to be garnered around the more drastic tactics for controlling the black population. Fear of even the slightest perception of living outside of one's station kept many black communities from experiencing large lynching events. This, however, is not to say such events did not occur, and that religious meaning was not attached to them.

The meaning of a lynching event taken away by a spectator varied according to the context of the individual. The most impactful variable was most certainly whether the person was black or white. The most profound difference in interpretation of the event came when describing the role of the victim of the extra-legal murder. For members of the white audience, the black man was meant to be a human sacrifice of sorts. Throughout the Bible are references to cleansing fire that burns away sin. Eye for and

eye, blood for blood--these are also common sentiments. It is for this reason that the white Christian mob saw the sacrifice as a restoration of order and balance not only in the earthly realm, but also in the spiritual. Divine retribution is a common theme in Christianity, and with every facet of life impregnated by the influence of the ideology, it should be no surprise that this theme was universally present.

While whites had a dominance infused interpretation of the role of the lynching victim, the black community had another narrative. Instead of being an evil doer of the deeds of Satan, the black man being tortured and killed, often burned alive, was like Jesus, suffering and ultimately dying for the sins of man. For many blacks, this suffering was merely a step on the path to paradise. By suffering in life in a righteous way, black members of the community were promised a place in Heaven. A lynching event, then became an obstacle to be overcome on the path to spiritual freedom.

Many black pastors and community leaders publicly embraced the idea that lynching events would not occur if not for the rape. When analyzing these sources, it is imperative for the historian to place them in their proper context. Black pastors were not able to speak directly to their congregation in ways not approved by the established racial ideology. Furthermore, some black pastors even became a type of self-designated spokesman for the entire black community. Motivations for this are obviously impossible to fully discern. When Reverend E. K. Love gave a sermon on November 5, 1893, there were 1,500 spectators in attendance hanging on his words. According to Reverend Love, who claimed to speak for the First African Baptist Church, it was up to the black community to police its own and not give white citizens a reason to lynch. "Let us not seek to defend our criminals," declared the reverend, because "we will be measured by

them and we cannot reasonably object as long as we defend them, for then we will become accessories after the fact and thus become partakers of other men's sins."[69] To speak out against the atrocity of a lynching event was to give the white community another reason to persecute black citizens according to Love. By appearing to be defending the actions of the worst type of criminal, the black community at large would only be hurting their cause of equality in even the most basic areas of life. Reverend Love failed to acknowledge to fact that most of the "criminal" were simply black men in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Reverend Love proclaimed that the law was therefore the way to properly deal with criminals, and it was the duty of the black community to whole heartedly abide. According to Love, it all began with "a part in which the Negroes themselves must first play in this matter. We must insist upon it that our people stop committing…the horrible crime of rape."[70] He makes a clear point to admonish those guilty of the crime, even using the language of the existing narrative. "The brutes," Love urges, "who commit this terrible crime are not worthy to live among good people…They ought to die."[71] Love even went so far as to suggest that new laws be put into place officially if the public felt that existing laws were not severe enough. He suggests at one point that perhaps "the terrible penalty of Dnillius be added to our statute books, that those whosoever commits rape, 'shall be burned alive' or any other barbarous or inhuman death."[72] As long as it was the government authorities that inflicted punishment, Love argued, such avenues

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69. Rev. E.K. Love, "A Sermon on Lynch Law and Raping," *First African Baptist Church Newsletter*, November 5th, 1893, accessed online via Library of Congress, 5.
70. Love, "Sermon," 7.
71. ibid.
72. Love, "Sermon," 6.

were not only acceptable, but desired. "We must take broad views as American citizens and love, defend, and protect our government."[73] Sermons such as these went far to legitimize lynching as a form of extra-legal punishment. They supported the false view that black men were instinctively sexually deviant and had to be policed. White readers taking in the words of a prominent black pastor received immense confirmation for their fabricated racial ideology.

White men wielded southern evangelical Christianity as a tool of justification for extreme violence against black men. Hanging on to ideas shaped during slavery around innate black criminality and barbarity led to easy acceptance of mechanisms for social control such as lynching. White men believed they were divinely ordained to lead all segments of the human population because of their God given superiority. Their superiority was then made evident to them simply through the existence of other groups and a shared history of domination and exploitation.

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73. ibid.

"When there is not enough religion in the pulpit to organize a crusade against sin; nor justice in the court house to promptly punish crime; nor manhood enough in the nation to put a sheltering arm about innocence and virtue – 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."

-Rebecca Latimer Felton

VI: Strength in Numbers: Mob Violence as a Tool for Control

As social tensions mounted throughout the late nineteenth century, the south hit a boiling point in the 1890s. In Georgia, from 1880 until 1889 there were a total of fifty-one black male lynching victims, with nineteen events occurring in the cotton belt counties. In the following decade, 1890 to 1899, there were 106 in Georgia, forty-four carried out in the cotton belt. Lynching event occurrences grew in number rather steadily until the late 1920s and early 1930s. The most drastic shifts back to traditional southern ways of life occurred during these periods of high lynching volume. For that reason alone, it could be concluded that lynching events played a major role in restoring power to the hands of the white male population, while concurrently stripping power from the black population.

Emancipation altered the plantation system in ways that reverberated throughout the entirety of southern culture. This was especially true in the cotton belt of Georgia. Segregation on the plantation was not absolute. White drivers had to have constant interaction with slaves working in the fields. Also, many slaves were relegated to work within the plantation household, placing them in direct contact with white owners in the most intimate setting of their daily lives. The abolition of slavery, in spirit meant to more fully integrate the black population into the existing structure of economic and cultural

societal interactions, served to differentiate these populations more than they had ever

been. This was especially true in urban environments, though effects were felt in rural

areas and small towns sprinkled across the geographic landscape. The different ways

violence manifested in each region deserve a closer look.

In urban areas, violence carried out against black citizens, was mainly perpetrated

by either local authorities or "rock throwing youths."[74] In rural settings, private lynching

events were exceedingly more prevalent. The juxtaposition between racially motivated

violence in cities and rural areas displays the extremes of the spectrum, but small towns

in between tended to host the most extravagant lynch mobs. In these buffer zones, "the

spectacle of lynching" was experienced in full force.[75] Trains delivered a variety of

individuals that spanned different classes, and mobs came from all around to see the

sociocultural dominance hierarchy maintained. The level of severity of violent tactics

according to regional discrepancies can be explained by the economic reality of

agriculture in cotton producing regions, in the presence of a distinct set of cultural norms,

as well as by the roles of law enforcement. Much like the plantations of antebellum

Georgia, urban centers were more desegregated, which assisted in fostering the

normalization of daily interactions between members of both black and white

communities. While these encounters were far from amicable, the fact that they occurred

more often began the process of creating new customs for daily interaction.

In the rural farm country, segregation was a convention, and many times the

presence of a black worker on a white owned farm led to hostilities that resulted in

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74. Brundage, *Lynching*, 105.
75. Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Caroline Press, 2009).

lynching of the laborer, whether guilty of an alleged crime or not. The collapse of many plantations after the Civil War and Emancipation did little to help the struggling racial tension between blacks and whites in the cotton belt. On the contrary, it created an environment of contempt, both against the governing body that slashed away an integral aspect of the southern white way of life, as well as against the former chattel now granted the rights of humans. In a matter of two decades, the power of the white farmer was back at the top of the dominance hierarchy. The rise back to power was fueled by the mob, the rope, and hundreds of thousands of bullets.

Stories riddle the pages of the most popular contemporary newspapers about transient farmhands, the vast majority of which were black men, being the culprits of heinous crimes. In the 1890s cotton belt counties, rape, murder, and sexual assault were the most common. On February 27th, 1890, Brown Washington fell victim to a lynch mob for a combination of the three. A farmhand employed about four miles from Madison, Georgia in Morgan County, his story is all too common in the archives. Washington allegedly took a break from plowing the fields and "secreted himself in a gully, near the place where…the 9-year-old…niece of Mr. Alf Horton…had to pass in going and coming from school and waited for his victim."[76] White males harbored fear of the black population's ability to move freely. To many southern white men, the end of slavery meant that it was only a matter of time before their alleged deviance became the norm. According to southern white ideologies, a black man's innate criminal proclivities would surely surface without white masculinity to control his deviant nature. The prevailing

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76. "A Black Demon Lynched," *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), Feb. 28, 1890.

motive to demonize the entire black population to more easily subjugate them generates

pause when trusting sources. It is important to remember that most accusations of rape

were fabricated and can therefore not be accepted at face value.

The incident allegedly proceeded with Washington "calling her to stop, telling her

that he didn't intend hurting her."[77] For many members of the white population, the

nature of the black man was that of a thief, lying and cheating to obtain whatever

possessions he desired. Describing the event in this way, and then mass producing the

writing for all to see, newspapers reinforced this fear. Even one report of this type of

shady act, hiding and waiting to strike, lying about intentions to do no harm, and the

ability to deface the most innocent member of the community, was enough to solidify the

fear and shape it into prevailing reality. Articles such as these triggered confirmation bias

within an entire population due to the nationwide dissemination of the article. Only

highlighting a few atrocities, real or imagined, and leaving out any sort of uplifting and

positive narrative, affirmed deeply rooted suspicions and assumptions within the white

reader.

When Washington supposedly confessed in the courtroom to his "fiendish crime,"

he told a story that was quite different from that laid out in the beginning of the article.

The author described a murder scene in which the girl was found, in her bed, "her throat

cut from one ear to the other, and cold and still in death." It was only upon the sight of

this grisly crime scene that "the crowd grew frantic with rage and longed to get a glimpse

of the guilty party." According to Washington's alleged confession in the courtroom,

"[H]e told of her pleading for her life, and said that after making an effort to accomplish

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77. ibid.

his evil purpose and murdering the little girl, he returned to his work in the field."[78] If Washington's confession is to be believed, how did the little girl end up back home in her bed? This and many other questions arise with even a superficial analysis of the article. The discrepancies in the two stories outlined by the author are a trait commonly found in the template utilized by journalists when documenting lynching events. What was important to convey was the atrocity, the sensation, and the details that could give the white community a common enemy around which to rally. Adding in the detail, from the lips of the accused, that he was able to so calmly return to plowing the fields after committing such a terrible act stirred more unease. It further cemented the idea that black men were not only poised to attack when white citizens least expected it, but they could do so without remorse, immediately blending back into the population. In the minds of the white population, the only way to stop this evil force within their midst was to make examples out of every potential threat.

Increasing anxieties centered on the specter to the "black brute" were stories of unnamed black men, unknown to the community they entered, seeking to wreak havoc on white families. One such story was written in *The Morning News* on April 15, 1893. According to the author, "a negro tramp" killed a member of a prominent family in Ft. Gaines, GA, "Jeff Burnett, son of Dr. Burnett." The family was "old and aristocratic…[T]he Burnett homestead…one of the finest old-time homes now remaining of ante-bellum times." The murder of Burnett, allegedly perpetrated by the drifter, was committed while Burnett slept in the back room of his country store, where the black man "knocked him in the head with an ax." Once a posse formed and began tracking down the

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78. ibid.

murderer, they made short work of his escape, catching him "five miles from the scene of his crime, coming in this direction," toward Savannah, Georgia. The protection of prominent families as vindication for extra-legal mob murder was a major theme in most lynching articles, proving that white men would kill to protect tradition and honor. It was also common practice to describe the black murderer going about his business in a clandestine way, rather than confronting it head on, *like a man*. To kill a man as he slept was dishonorable at best. If this story was the accepted norm, then it was only a matter of time until black men of ill-repute tried to take what was rightfully earned.

Such commonplace anecdotes were not complete without violent action taken to the extreme by a mob. Once they caught the accused, they forced a confession, another common theme of mob lynching ritual. Confessions legitimized the actions of the mob, both in the eyes of the reluctant-to-act law enforcement agencies, and in the minds of the community. What followed next, as brutal as it may have been, was almost always nonchalantly described. "Preparations were immediately made to burn him alive." The burning was not done in any haphazard fashion. The group rallied together in a seemingly organized manner, securing the man to a stump "around which fence rails were then piled." Once doused with kerosene, the accused man began to plead "pitifully," action that "only infuriated the crowd and they yelled all the louder." The author labels the burning alive as "[T]he Cremation," immediately invoking an air of ritual to be carried out. To emphasize his point further, he described the sounds of pistols being fired, "his body literally being perforated with pistol balls." Firing upon the body of a lynching victim was a symbol used extensively across lynching events. Group solidarity was achieved, everyone present at the lynching taking a turn to fire a volley into the victim.

The ritual harkened back to the firing squads utilized by state-sanctioned execution, adding further credence to the necessity and authority of the mob. The author adds that the black community joined in as well, "bringing fence rails to make the fire, and negro men and women were seen with long poles standing around heaping up the chinks on the burning body and jubilantly aiding in making the cremation a success." If one was to live by the reality created by this story, a few key elements had to be observed. Most importantly, white men were the authority, the protectors of order and tradition. Also, outsiders, which to many white men would be all black men, were to remain under suspicion. Finally, that the "good" members of the black population, those that knew their place, would "jubilantly" join in to help white men maintain their civilization. [79] Emphasis must be placed on the fact that black communal participation was extremely rare if it ever even truly occurred. Stories such as these were often fabricated to add credence to mob actions.

Folk heroes were made from the leaders of the mobs that carried out "speedy punishment" against the "black brute." In an article printed on December 3rd, 1893, the mob that killed Lucious Holt was labelled by the author as "[T]he Avengers." Accused of the murder and robbery of Arthur Reynolds, Holt was snatched away from the authorities by a "large crowd of indignant citizens." He was then taken to Birch Creek swamp and hung from an oak tree with "common plow line about three quarters of an inch in size." The space held special significance due to the discovery of Arthur Reynolds's corpse "within a few feet" of where Holt was murdered. The headline, "Blood for Blood in Pike," celebrated the vigilante "avengers" who claimed justice for a crime symbolically

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79. "Burnett's Murder," *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), April 15, 1893.

committed against the entire group rather than a single individual. Most adopted the

unwritten social contract stipulating that it was indeed up to the mob to inflict justice for

the wrongs committed against white citizens at the hands of black men. The ineptitude of

the official authority is highlighted and exaggerated as well, when "[A] large crowd of

indignant citizens assembled and despite the efforts of the officers of the law to protect

Holt, the angry mob yelled and screamed and seized the prisoner." In the minds of the

"avengers," the law wished to protect the "brute," the inferior race, rather than serve

white concerns, that of protecting them against innate, black criminality. It is apparent,

though, that many members of law enforcement, and even in positions of political power,

agreed with the sentiment of the mob, which often prompted mass amounts of oversight.

Often, it would have been in the best interests of law enforcement in charge of the

accused to step aside for fear of losing their own lives to a vengeful mob. The white men

of the south desperately needed to be the hero to regain their status, and they found their

place by means of the mob.

In many instances, multiple alleged criminals would be put to death for their

infractions. These events always drew a crowd and often raucous fanfare ensued. During

once such event in Columbus, Georgia on June 1, 1896, a heading in *The Morning News*

(Savannah) let the reader know that "the mob [did] its work at 10 o'clock in the

morning." [80] It was a spectacle where "many thousand people gazed upon it with

horror."[81] Despite the shock and terror of the event, righteous anger boiled within the

members of the mob as they claimed their victims. An article printed in the June 8 edition

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80. "Two Hanged on One Tree," *The Weekly Constitution,* Atlanta, GA, June 8th,
1896;
     81. ibid.

of *The Weekly Constitution* (Atlanta) went into much more detail, though, even displaying an artist rendering of the horrific sight.[82] Both individuals were accused of a form of unwanted sexual behavior toward a white woman, and so the mob was praised for their fervor. The way they went about securing their prey, however, also displayed my symbols of the perceived power of the white middle class man in Georgia, including his ability and willingness to step over the law if necessary.

Two victims of one such event were Jesse Slayton and Will Miles. Slayton was a black man said to have "outraged Mrs. Howard Bryan, a respectable white lady of this (Muscogee) county."[83] After commission of the crime, officers were able to arrest Slayton prior to his discovery by vengeful mob. Had they found him first, it is likely his death would have occurred four days sooner. On the morning of June 1, Slayton, having already been indicted, was to attend a session where "a jury was being impaneled."[84] It was during this process that an "avenging, determined, restless, furious mob" violently entered the courtroom.[85] Spurred by the knowledge that "the fiend's victim, who was in critical condition, was notified that she would have to go into court, a leader of the mob said that she should not be subjected to such mortification, which was the signal for the rush for the courtroom."[86] Within the current cultural climate, the frenzied orders of a mob leader held more weight than those of any elected or appointed authority figure. "[Y]elling and brandishing rifles and pistols," they "seized the terrified man, threw a rope

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82. "Two Lynched at Columbus," *The Morning News,* Savannah, GA, June 2nd, 1896.
83. ibid.
84. ibid.
85. ibid.
86. ibid.

around his neck and dragged him a hundred yards down Broad Street, riddling his body with bullets at every step."[87] After this display of human brutality, members of the mob hung the "mutilated mass of humanity" from a tree, hungry for another soul.

Will Miles was a prisoner in the jail, accused of attempted sexual assault two years prior. The alleged victim was "Mrs. Albright, a lady of this city."[88] The mob entered the jail to remove Miles for reasons that went much further than the accusations against him. In the two years that Mile's had been incarcerated, he "had been tried and convicted twice, and his case, had been twice sent to the supreme court on technicalities for a new trial."[89] As if this wasn't enough delay, "[H]is last trial resulted in a new trial and he was in jail awaiting his fourth trial."[90] Frustration among the inhabitants of Columbus was reaching critical levels. In case there was any lingering confusion as to why the mob went after Miles as well, the author states that it was "the law's delay in this instance" that caused "the mob to override the law and court itself this morning."[91] Respect for law enforcement and the judicial system was at an all time low, and citizens, especially middle-class white males, felt the need to reassert dominance. A lack of recognition for officials is also apparent with the seizing of Will Miles. The jailer, full of fear from the murderous energy emitting from the crowd, "pleaded with the mob, but to no avail, and was compelled to surrender Miles to save his life and the jail from destruction." Justice had to be carried out. The mob had no qualms about destroying the existing authority in order to bring it about.

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87. ibid.
88. ibid.
89. ibid.
90. ibid.
91. ibid.

Both men were dispatched relatively quickly, being "riddled with bullets" soon after capture. What followed their deaths, though, was a statement being made by white southern men to black southern men. The scene of both mangled bodies hanging from a tree was gruesome enough, but additions were made that added to the impact of the moment. The tree chosen to hang Miles and Slayton from was in the center of the business district to allow for maximum display and reach. Placards were hung from the bodies in case the visual message lacked clarity. On Jesse Slayton the sign read, "All cases of this kind shall be treated likewise." On Will Miles, the sign read, "Both cousins. This one convicted twice, mistrial once. Father hung for same offense."[92] The mob needed all other black men to be aware of the repercussions of crossing the white community in any way. They also needed to convey a rather important message to the members of their own community. The story of Will Miles, they asserted, should be a cautionary tale to all to never trust any member of the black population. Furthermore, because it took the mob, illustrated in the drawing in *The Weekly Constitution* as well dressed and honorable white men, to enact real and lasting justice, they were therefore the savior for which the south had been longing.

Extra-legal murder committed by the lynch mob was a powerful force in reasserting white male dominance in the 1890s Georgian cotton belt. The events brought communities together against a common enemy. That enemy was a generalized image of black masculinity based on existential fear. Increasing occurrence of such events highlighted a need for rituals which further established the murderous tirade as a necessary part of a highly functioning society. A clear message was being sent to every

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92. ibid.

member of the black community, not only in Georgia, but across the entire south. Infused

with loosely interpreted religiosity, tainted morals and ethics, a bastardized code of

honor, and false chivalry, a lynching event perennially proved to be a powerful tool of

control. It was not until lynching became more common that a deeper ritualistic

significance could be established and exploited. As the number of lynching victims grew

during the mid- to late-1890s, so did the size of the mob, as well as established norms.

People making their way to the spectacle of a lynching event knew what they were in for,

and many of them relished in that fact.[93]

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93. For a deeper analysis of lynching through the eyes of the spectator, see Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*.

"And once practical needs of this sort are ritualized often enough either as conforming behaviour or as punishment for non-conforming behaviour, they acquire an ideological rationale that explains to those who take part in the ritual why it is both automatic and natural to do so."[94]

-Barbara Jeanne Fields

VII: Ritualistic Retaliation: The Normalization of One-Sided Violence

Violence has always been an accepted means of solving disputes and achieving a status of power, one individual over another. To exert one's dominance, to have an adversary cower in fear at the very thought of disobeying an order, was the norm in Southern honor culture. Violence as a tool for control was used on a much smaller scale, through just as powerfully, during the height of Southern planter class dominion. Lasting marks served as advertisements for pain and punishment that all other slaves could see. Scars were daily reminders that death was not the option that awaited, no matter how many would have preferred such a fate. No business owner would ever destroy his means of production. Emancipation brought a monumental decrease to the economic status of the planter class and system, but the old habits of control through violent coercion remained. Asserting dominance through fear and force had become a compulsion, accepted by the masses, which had to be carried out in the light of day rather that behind the confines of plantation fortresses. It is for these reasons that lynching events became the new normal when re-establishing the white male position in the sociocultural dominance hierarchy.

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94. Fields, "Slavery," 108.

Griffin, the seat of Spalding County, Georgia, hosted a triad of lynching events from 1896 through 1898. Analysis of these events provides a powerful look at the prevalence of ritual within Southern lynching. Violence in Griffin once ruled center-stage as a reactionary manifestation of a culture beset by external challenges to their central identity. Southern white men saw their traditions, rooted in honor, masculine dominance, white superiority, and economic sovereignty, threatened by modernity. They consequently deployed lynching as the dominant tactic within their arsenal of weapons for social control. Rituals shaped all facets of life for Southern white men. Individuals constructed their identities through many complex and often abstract traditions. Identities attached to traditions shaped the ideology of Southern white masculinity. A hierarchy, white male identities at the apex, was maintained through repeated rituals during lynching events. Control of the dominant narrative, impregnated with white supremacy rhetoric, was therefore established through merciless violence. Lynching was not a chaotic event carried out by barbarians and driven by raw emotion. Instead, lynching was an organized repetition of rituals orchestrated by white men, cementing their position atop the dominance hierarchy throughout the 1890s.

The lynching events of Henry Milner, Oscar Williams, and John Meadows, follow a traumatic template. Lynching of African American men accused of committing "the fearful crime" of rape against white women was common in the American South, especially by the mid-1890s. [95] The three lynching events performed in Griffin from 1896 through 1898 provide clear examples. Allegations of rape provided the foundation for the dominant narrative, while also perpetuating the criminalization of black men. Groups in

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95. *The Morning News* (Savannah, GA), October 16, 1896.

opposition, in this case Northern and Southern white men, were therefore united by their common enemy. Repeatedly associating rapist instincts, bestial nature, brutish behavior, and fiendish foundations with every black man conditioned the minds of white men nationwide. The white female form, painted as frail and in need of protection, became a symbol of purity. Fortified by a hollow air of fickle chivalry, the feminine became justification for the mob's violent rhetoric. The most immediate and direct threat to that symbol came with Emancipation. Pleas for equality were heard by white men as pleas for sex with their wives and daughters and provided ammunition for extreme aggression. With a positively identified enemy upon which to focus their rage, they needed a means to obtain complete control. This came in the form of lynching.

Henry Milner, a twenty-three-year-old black man who had only recently been released from the Spalding County chain-gang, was accused of raping, "Miss Blanch Gray, a young lady of splendid family."[96] On the afternoon of October 14th, as Gray made her way from a friend's home to the residence of her sister-in-law, Milner is said to have ambushed her on a path, dragged her into the woods by the throat, and then, "outraged her in a most horrible manner."[97] Milner then allegedly fled the scene, leaving an unconscious Miss Gray lying in the woods. Regaining consciousness, she was finally able to report to a loved one the nature of her encounter. A "posse was secured and…augmented, until the woods were full of outraged people looking for" Milner. [98] At one o'clock in the morning on October 16th, he was captured by the mob, attempted to escape, and was shot in the back.

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96. ibid.
97. ibid.
98. ibid.

Upon his return to the custody of the mob, Milner was presented to Gray, and "[S]he had no trouble identifying her assailant."[99] According to the report, upon positive identification, Milner proceeded to confess to the crime and expressed his remorse. He was taken to a local physician's office to have the bullet extracted from his back when "a crowd of determined men" seized him and loaded him into a buggy for transport.[100] To best defend the honor of Miss Blanch Gray, and by extension all the white women of Griffin, "he was carried out about a mile and a half from the city and hung and shot to death."[101] The mob attached a sign to Henry Milner's suspended body that made it clear to any passersby the explanation for the grisly death. The sign read, "[T]hus we defend our women from outrage."[102] Believing themselves to be justified in their actions due to the severity of their victim's crime, the white men of Griffin and the surrounding areas carried on a tradition that was repeated many more times.

Not even a full year after the murder of Henry Milner, another lynching of a black man accused of rape was carried out in Griffin. On the morning of July 10th, 1897, Oscar Williams allegedly sexually assaulted Jewell Campbell, the six-year-old daughter of C.E. Campbell. This was how the event was portrayed to the public at least. What really occurred that summer morning will remain unknown, and the reporting by area newspapers provides little in the way of clarity. According to a reporter for *The Weekly Constitution* of Atlanta, Georgia, Williams assaulted Campbell and then immediately went on the run. Over the next four days, he was "chased through four counties by an

99. ibid.
100. ibid.
101. ibid.
102. ibid.

angry mob of outraged citizens."[103] Williams was then captured in Lamar County, a few miles outside of Barnesville. The author conveyed the harrowing story of a prominent Pike County farmer, Ben Perdue, arresting Oscar Williams at the home of his sister three miles outside of Barnesville. In the report, Williams allegedly "made an attempt to get his shotgun, which was near by [sic], but Perdue, who had a shotgun, got the drop on Williams and he surrendered without trouble."[104] Williams was lodged in the Barnesville jail. A short time later, news of his arrest began to circulate across Georgia. Trains from Griffin began spewing out irate individuals "and all of them seemed determined to take Williams's life."[105] A mob formed outside of the jail, forcing a stronger hand from the local authorities.

As the crowd of angry white Georgians swelled, Mayor Huguely requested that Governor Atkinson, "order out the troops."[106] At this point, a likely worried "governor authorized the mayor to call out the military and in a few minutes the Barnesville Blues were marching down to the guardhouse with their guns, and in full uniform."[107] Though the number of troops ordered to guard the jail from the mob is unknown, the author was likely correct in their assessment that, without the show of force, "Williams would have swung to a telegraph pole."[108] Despite the presence of the military, the crowd remained around the jail until one o'clock the following morning. The case was gaining notoriety, the people were becoming incensed, and moves had to be made to maintain the integrity

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103. *The Weekly Constitution*, Atlanta, GA, July 19, 1897.
104. ibid.
105. ibid.
106. ibid.
107. ibid.
108. ibid.

of the law. Knowing that it would be a guaranteed death sentence to transport Williams

from Barnesville in broad daylight, local authorities quickly decided on another plan.

Early on the morning of July 15th, Williams was loaded into a buggy, his guards ensuring

that he was "heavily shackled," and driven on "a circuitous route…through the country

twenty-five miles" to the train station at Macon. [109] From there, at eleven o' clock, Oscar

Williams was placed on a train with his two guards. They began their voyage to the jail in

Atlanta where it was assumed that he would be safe from the hands of the blood-thirsty

mob. Little did they know that they would barely make it halfway.

The story of Oscar Williams concludes with a familiar script. On Thursday, July

22nd, 1897, "a mob boarded the train, took the negro from his guard, marched him

through the principle (sic) business street of the town, to a point 200 yards outside the

corporete [sic] limits, where they hung him from a small oak tree. His body was then

riddled with bullets."[110] Williams became another symbol of Southern white male

dominance, and therefore Southern black male inferiority. Under the guise of chivalry

and a sacred duty to uphold the divine status of beloved yet meek white femininity, white

men in the South felt justified in committing extralegal capital punishment. They were

defending their honor. They were maintaining their perceived position in the status

hierarchy of Southern white culture. They did not simply want to be right, they *needed* to

be right, for the sake of the existence of their constructed identity. Such convictions

warranted the ultimate violation against nature, the taking of the life of another human

being.

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109. ibid.
110. *The Brunswick Times*, Brunswick, GA, July 23, 1897.

A bit over a year later, on August 8th, 1898, Griffin was the stage for yet another

lynching of a black man for the alleged sexual assault of a young white girl. John

Meadows was the accused. The events of the entire ordeal transpired with an uncanny

similarity to that of the lynching of Oscar Williams. Like the case of Williams, the victim

of the assault was a young white girl, reports noting only one year difference between

their ages. Unlike the six-year-old Jewell Campbell, Dora Camp, the "daughter of this

highly esteemed farmer," Benson Camp, was seven years old. [111] Meadows was a hired

hand on the Pike County plantation of Camp tasked with working that Sunday to "feed

the stock and look after the place."[112] At around noon, Dora's mother sent her to the barn

to fetch some eggs for the meal she was preparing. That is when "the dastardly crime was

committed."[113] No one beside Meadows and Dora Camp knew what transpired. In any

case, regardless of whether Meadows assaulted Dora Camp or not, it was his word

against that of a little white girl. After his arrest, on the way to the Griffin jail, Meadows

leaped from the buggy and fled, thus cementing his guilt in the minds of the community.

Shortly after his escape, John Meadows made a mistake that ultimately proved

fatal. While on the run, Meadows decided to stop in at a farmhouse and ask for something

to eat. However, word had already made it to the resident of the farmhouse of his alleged

transgressions. While Meadows ate, a member of the family "entertained" him while

word was sent to the authorities regarding his presence.[114] Local law enforcement arrived

and took Meadows into custody for a second time. As they attempted to make their way

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111. *The Morning News*, Savannah, GA, August 9, 1898.
112. ibid.
113. ibid.
114. ibid.

to the Griffin jail, the buggy was stopped and the two guards escorting Meadows were "overpowered by a mob of about 150, who took" Meadows "and hanged him."[115] As with the lynching of Oscar Williams, it took some persuasion to keep the mob "from hanging Meadows to a telegraph pole on the main street."[116] This time the cooler heads that prevailed were some local business men. The leaders of the mob finally decided to proceed with their prey "to the west end of the city, where they hanged the brute and then completely riddled his body with bullets."[117] As with other lynching events throughout the South, routine served a purpose, and consistency became a matter of pride to many.

Pleased with the consistency of vigilante justice in Griffin within a three-year span, the author of the article refreshed the memories of his readers. He pointed out that, in October of 1896, "a negro was captured near Griffin for the crime of rape and was lynched near the city."[118] The individual referenced is obviously Henry Milner, though the author was not compelled to say his name. Further demonstrating the continuity of punishment for criminal acts of black men in Griffin, the author harkens back to the lynching of Oscar Williams who "committed the same crime and paid the same penalty."[119] The most striking detail to be found that links the lynching events of Williams and Meadows, however, is centered on the exact physical location of each event. Not only did they take place in the same town, for the same crime, but the author stresses that they were both executed from "the same tree and limb."[120] The ritualistic

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115. ibid.
116. ibid.
117. ibid.
118. ibid.
119. ibid.
120. ibid.

similarities of the two events were set on the same stage, giving power and meaning to a space and an object as simple as a solitary tree branch.

Focusing on the details of the lynching of Oscar Williams and shifting the gaze to the lynching of John Meadows just over a year later, helps to demonstrate the repetitive structure of these lynching events. It was repetition that ultimately led to normalization of rituals. Repetition further established the desired narrative, simultaneously entrenching the ideologies espoused by Southern white honor culture. When the actions of a dominant group, repeated for a prolonged period, become common place, it is more likely that the meanings behind those actions will become common place as well. As these meanings become more accepted by most of the community, the validity of them is less likely to be questioned. Therefore, as the rituals associated with lynching became synonymous with the upholding of law and order, the perception of the white male position in the dominance hierarchy was one of increasing necessity. If the perpetrators, the co-authors of the superior narrative, were seated firmly at the top of the cultural power structure, the logical conclusion is that their victims must be at the very bottom. Near constant exposure to the ritualistic lynching of black men, increasingly common in the 1890s, served to normalize and legitimize the events and their meanings. Such exposure also served to desensitize the Southern communities to violent displays, further normalizing lynching as a tool to display power.

Reinforcing the criminalization narrative through repetition in newspapers also served a significant purpose. It created the automatic association between black men and depraved acts in the minds of the white population nation-wide. Clever wording, used repeatedly, was one tactic used by authors. Another was the use of a formalized template

to convey only the most deviant acts such as rape. Placing the name of the individual, followed by his race, then ending the sentence with his murder, reinforced a permanent cognitive link. Perennial display normalized the myth, twisting the subconscious of the white population into a vessel for unsubstantiated hate toward all black Americans. In a brief forty-nine-word message in *The Roanoke Times* from Virginia, the headline "Paid the Usual Penalty" blared when reporting of the lynching of Oscar Williams. [121] Often, numerous newspapers from many different states would simply re-print the exact same article. Two small papers in Minnesota, *The Willmar Tribune* and the *Warren Sheaf*, as well as the *Griggs Courier* in Cooperstown, North Dakota, circulated identical brief messages concerning Williams on July 27, 29, and 30, respectively. The wording followed the usual template, stating that "Oscar Williams, a negro who committed an assault on the daughter of a Henry County farmer, was hanged by a mob at Griffin, Ga."[122] This pattern can be found for many if not all reports of lynching across the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

National news coverage of the lynching of John Meadows also made sure to stay the course of perpetuating the criminalization of black men through repetition. *The Alexandria Gazette* of Virginia briefly spread the news of Meadows's lynching in the predictable fashion. The author wrote that "John Meadows, a negro, who on Sunday attempted to assault the 7 year-old daughter of Benson Camp at Carmel, a small place near Griffin, Ga., was hanged on the edge of the town yesterday and the body riddled

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121. *The Roanoke Times*, Roanoke, VA, July 23, 1897.
122. *Willmar Tribune*, Willmar, MN, July 27, 1897; *Warren Sheaf*, Warren, MN, July 29, 1897; *Griggs Courier*, Cooperstown, ND, July 30, 1897.

with bullets."[123] An aura of mundane nonchalance can be felt as one reads the headlines over the snippets of fragmented writing that say "Still Another Negro Lynched,"[124] or even more sparse, "Brief Items of News."[125] Writing in a way that made lynching events seem trivial added to the normalcy of the event. The more that these heinous events could be downplayed and de-sensationalized, the more widely accepted by the community at large they would become.

123. *Alexandria Gazette*, Alexandria, VA, August 9, 1898.
124. *Rock Island Argus*, Rock Island, IL, August 9, 1898.
125. *Richmond Planet*, Richmond, VA, August 13, 1898.

"Even as we acknowledge the continued racial oppression that freedpeople faced in the late nineteenth century, the impulse is to chart the progress of freedom – unfinished but certainly not dead."[126]
-Carole Emberton

VIII: Conclusion: Understanding Change

Whether in the discipline of history or moving through the conscious human experience, context is king. It is important when we look at events throughout history, and in our own lives, that we understand why and how things happened. It is not enough to read about or even experience something and to make a lasting judgement based on our own lived experience and emotions. The human, without any prior training or background knowledge, is flawed and biased. Even with extensive training and experience, most of us have more biases than we consciously realize. It is for this reason that our interpretation of events must always be questioned. The same sentiment rings true when analyzing history, especially a time and place not so far removed from our own. The closer we are in time and space to the events we study, the more aware we must be of our own biases, judgements, and cultural inclinations toward certain lines of thinking or behaving. The closer our timelines, the more cultural similarities we will have and therefore more unexposed knowledge gaps.

Change is frightening when it initially occurs. When our established world views are threatened it is only natural that we would defend their integrity at all costs. It is what we know, what we have always known, and what we could not imagine living without. These are powerful forces at play that we cannot see or often comprehend. No one wants

126. Carole Emberton, "Cleaning up the mess," in *Beyond Freedom: Disputing the History of Emancipation* eds. David Blight and Jim Downs (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017), 137.

to accept that they are not entirely in control of their station in life, but quite frankly, many are not. We must come to terms with it, especially as students of history, before we can fully grasp, with practiced empathy and understanding, why and how groups of people in the past acted.

If modernity is the accepted cause of such an existential crisis, how do we define modernity? This is a fluid concept that often gets misconstrued. The confusion lies in the moments when contextual information is left absent from the historical equation. Modernity, the changes that are taking place in each historical period under examination, must contain within it all the contemporary facets of existence. Economic shifts, societal evolution, changes in gender norms, political disruptions, displacement of hundreds of thousands in a regional population via technological evolution, all fall under the umbrella term. One key aspect that the nineteenth century contained, setting the stage for an ever-larger reaction to encroaching modernity, was the emancipation of slaves. A group of human beings who, up until the 1860s and in many places beyond, were viewed as property, were granted the rights of their oppressors. This, of course, only happened theoretically. As many freed slaves would find, the definition of freedom was interpreted on a spectrum.

Following emancipation, the workforce of the southern United States was flooded with new bodies, eager to eek their way into a sustainable living. New competition within the ecosystem emerged, and with it came new methods of control and coercion. While the rural areas saw a fair amount of lynching, it was in the cities and their surrounding communities where most events occurred. The most heinous acts that drew the largest crowds were in these specific locations. One contributing factor was the spectacle

associated with public displays of violence, state sanctioned executions being a prime example. Another major cause for such large public turnout, though, was the central locations of lynching sites. Cities were the hubs of industry and economic growth, and therefore became the proverbial melting pots of the racial and cultural milieu. In the 1890s, the tensions of the previous decades of change, and thus existential threats, percolated in the cities. When these tensions came to a head, violence tended to erupt. The residue of such violence stretched far beyond the mob and the moment, permeating every facet of life for generations of black Americans.

Empathy is understanding; agreement is something completely different. Taking on a topic like the motivations of middle-class white men for lynching in the 1890s Georgian cotton belt is challenging because of what it exposes in the researcher. Even more, struggles arise when we discover what such a topic exposes in humanity at large. Seeking to understand historic events helps us to be more aware of when we might be on track to repeat or at least mimic them to a certain degree. Every human has the capacity for both light and dark, and it is by paying attention and remaining curious that we can consciously choose which path we wish to take.

The study of lynching draws a wide variety of scholars from many disciplines. Whether historians, sociologists, or anthropologists, the complex nature of lynching events is now being viewed from many different angles. Theoretical interpretations are becoming increasingly complex as we begin to accept humans as complicated creatures. The motivations of economic stability and political gain can only influence events to a certain degree. Therefore, lynching has a deeper causality that can only be teased out through rigorous and abstract thinking. This is not to say more practical factors did not

play a role. They did not play the only role, and in some cases, they did not play the most significant role. As the field develops and more sources become available, theoretical approaches to case studies will become the norm in lynching scholarship. As more scholarship is generated through this model, more statistical compiling will follow, taking into consideration nuances not yet scrutinized.

Despite the debunking of the thesis early on, a surprising portion of the general population still contend that lynching events were predominately carried out by backwards, poor, rural, uneducated white men. Many believe that it could have only been at the hands of the most vile and evil men, fueled by liquor, that lynching events were carried out. This is simply not the case. New studies have shown that a large portion of the perpetrators were comfortably seated within the middle classes. In the areas where lynching occurred most, it was the seemingly honorable men who fought the hardest to locate black fugitives. It was the individuals with the most to lose, from a societal standpoint, which stood at the center of the mob. These men had amassed monetary comfortability, as well as the reputations of being staples in the white communities. When the many dimensions of modernity encroached upon their status in the sociocultural dominance hierarchy, existential waves of fear drove them. Change and a deeply rooted sense of white male superiority provided the push and pull for so many to carry out the atrocious acts I and many others have, and will continue to, examine. A human group pushed to their perceived brink are capable of heinous violence against their perceived Other. All of us are potentially at risk of committing similar outrages, if only we move beyond our point of no return.

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