RACIAL SUBORDINATION
AND THE POLITICS OF LYNCHING IN AMERICA

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Requirement for
The Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Stacyanne Headley

The Ohio State University
2002

Master's Examination Committee:

Dr. William E. Nelson, Jr., Advisor
Dr. Viola Newton

Approved by

Advisor
Department of African American and African Studies
ABSTRACT

Racial Subordination

And the Politics of Lynching in America

As an American phenomenon, racial violence has many dimensions. One of its most important dimensions is lynching. In the past, many scholars investigating the social and political impact of lynching have looked at the phenomenon in quantitative terms. These researchers have focused on the number of persons lynched without significantly probing the social, cultural and political implications of this American practice. This study diverges from the tradition described above by meticulously examining the historical, political and cultural context of lynching. It specifically examines the rationalizations conjured up by Whites to justify lynching and cement their dominant positions in the American power structure. This thesis also analyzes Black responses to lynching and the impact this phenomenon had on the mobilization of Black interests via the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century. As an analytical context for this discussion, this thesis focuses on the murder of Emmett Till by racists in Mississippi. It attempts to illuminate the lessons that can be learned from the use of lynching as a vehicle for racial power and control in America.
Dedicated to My Mother
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. William E. Nelson Jr., for his intellectual support, patience, and encouragement to get written while sharing his vast knowledge of the field. Dr. Nelson, I hope this document is all that you believed I could do and more. Thank you so much for everything!

I thank Dr. Viola Newton for asking vital questions that forced me to be able to articulate my argument more clearly. Dr. Newton, you are an amazing editor!

I am indebted to my mother, Lorner Veronica Haynes, who has always supported my academic endeavors. She has always asked, when are you getting the next degree? Well Mommy, I'm about to work on the Ph.D.!! All of this I dedicate to you, my heart! I love you!

I also wish to thank Sidney Jones, Jr. who read these chapters countless times, soothed my frazzled nerves, put up with my mood swings and rants, and always assuring me that I had something important to say. Sincerely, To The Pain!

I also wish to thank those who helped at various points during this process: Scott Woods, for getting me jumpstarted at that huge stall; Sowande Mustakeem, you should own stock in B&N by now (good luck with everything); Kimberly Lawson, those
shopping breaks have made all the difference (thanks also for the
printing privileges); Kia Woodward, your constant belief in my
abilities has been well appreciated (I love you, Soror); the
entire crew at the B-flat, poetry is my piece of mind; and the
administrative staff in the Department of African American and
African Studies. If I have forgotten anyone, please know that it
is not intentional.
VITA

June 5, 1977.........................................................Born- Montego Bay, Jamaica

1994.................................................................B.A. Afro American Studies, University of Virginia.

2000-2002........................................................Graduate Teaching and Administrative Associate, The Ohio State University.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: African American and African Studies
Minor Field: History
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapters:</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. The Purpose of Racial Violence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. An Analysis of the Current Scholarship on the Emmett Till Case</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4. The Ramifications of White Violence Against Blacks</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5. The Message and the Response</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6. The Purpose of this Study</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lynching and the Fortification of Racial Boundaries</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Introduction</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Slavery, Punishment and Social Control</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. Blacks, the Post-Reconstruction Era and White Aggression</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4. White Rationalizations for Lynching</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5. Black Responses to Threats of Lynching</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6. Implications for Lynching</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lynching, White Identity and the Institutionalization of Black Subordination</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Introduction</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. The Emergence and Value of White Identity</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3. The Birth of a Ku Klux Klan Nation</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4. The Black Image in the White Mind</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Implications of the Emmett Till Case......................................................... 48
   4.1. Introduction............................................................................................ 48
   4.2. The Racial Climate Surrounding the Till Lynching.................................. 50
   4.3. The 'Facts' of the Emmett Till Lynching.............................................. 53
   4.4. Assumptions and Implications of the Till Case...................................... 57
   4.5. The Significance of the Till Case........................................................ 59
   The Effect of the Emmett Till Lynching on Black America................................ 61

   5.1. Introduction............................................................................................ 63
   The Cultural Foundations of Racial Violence in America................................. 65
   5.2. Fear as a Political Weapon: The Strategic Role of Lynching.................... 69
   5.3. The Emmett Till Case: An American Tragedy......................................... 71
   5.4. Racial Violence and the Shaping of the American Social Order.................. 73

Bibliography........................................................................................................... 79
CHAPTER 1

Introduction:
Racial Lynching: An American Tradition

I. Introduction

Africans had a sense of identity and an understanding of their humanity, as connected to their communities and a dedication to their “group” survival, prior to their interactions with Europeans. Although their European captors asserted that they were not human and invariably treated them as if they were at the level of beasts, within their souls they knew different and they fought from initial capture to the coast. They fought all the way across the Atlantic Ocean and through the passage of time. Through horrific acts during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Slavery, Africans maintained the claim that they were human and should be treated accordingly. Because the structure of their New World was predicated on the denial of their humanity, Africans resisted. As they learned to live in this New World,
Africans repeatedly avowed their humanity in various ways, even though they were suppressed with violence of all sorts, including rape, separation from their families and public punishment to name a few.

The most heinous form of violence leveled against enslaved Africans was lynching. The 1995 edition of the New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary defines lynching as ‘the practice of administering punishment, usually by hanging, for alleged crimes, without trial by law.’ Lynching attacked Black humanity in a brutal way. The ripping apart of Black bodies was a means for instructing society about the place of all involved. Lynching reduced Blacks to basic biological organisms, and relegated them to objects, reinforcing notions of bestiality while ignoring their fundamental human rights. Feeding on the paranoia and hatred of people who would congregate as lynch mobs, American racial violence altered and extinguished Black lives.

Clearly, the atrocities committed against Blacks would be a "voyage through death;" they would only prove to be a harbinger of Black life in the New World as the realities of slavery would give way to the rise of complex, racist "American institutions"

---


across the nation.\textsuperscript{3} America was so dependent on Blacks being in this dehumanized place, that Blacks could not be allowed to step outside of their designated spheres. These historical acts of racial violence were a form of terror, that is, a way to deter Blacks from stepping out of predetermined American societal and racial boundaries. In spite of this violence, Blacks have questioned America’s denial of their humanity for centuries; they have persevered in spite of the American experience of organized violence. They have not surrendered to the violence that is so much a part of the American story. Rather, they have struggled against all odds to define for themselves their manhood and womanhood in the American landscape.

The struggle for Black humanity is much more than a mass attempt at civil rights; it rises to a level of great significance because it challenges and threatens the very foundation of the American social order. Any mass or individual attempt by Blacks to change the American socio-cultural structure is an affront to that structure, and produces, its equal and opposite force, repression. The negation of Black humanity, through the repression of Black humanity is thus seen by many Whites as necessary to preserve the status quo. This relationship is not as simple or painless as it seems. The

\textsuperscript{3} For the purposes of this study the definition of “American institutions” is broadened to include socio-political congregation of certain groups which are influenced by tradition and an investment in maintaining the present social order.
historical use of violence to prevent Black gains is not the only agenda. Black repression is reflective of the systematic and institutionalized act of preserving a country dependent on Blacks staying in 'their place.'

II. The Purpose of Racial Violence

By perpetuating this violence against Blacks, the system is maintained; the structure and thus the hegemony of the present world order is triumphant. The death of one fourteen-year-old boy, Emmett Till, was to change all that, or so it seemed. Symbolic of numerous sons prevented from reaching manhood and the precarious existence of Blacks in America, he changed everything, and yet, nothing. The former contention is simple to support, with information about bus boycotts, marches, court cases, and civil rights bills. The latter is easily corroborated with stories of fire hoses, police dogs and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's wholesale infiltration of Black organizations. These instances illustrate the ageless nature of American racial violence.

This study is concerned with the climate, ideas and fear that created this particular lynching and their connection to other forms of terror utilized to keep Blacks on the level of beasts, undeserving of the rights of citizens and therefore
humans. This is not said without regard to the progress made in the last four hundred years; rather, this statement encompasses and analyzes that history and questions that progress. The history of America’s racial violence, as exemplary in the Emmett Till case, demonstrates the resulting backlash to Black successes (to define their humanity). It supports the notion that racial repression maintains the hegemonic American state and fuels the American history of violence, which to this day burgeons to inconceivable heights.

III. An Analysis of the Current Scholarship on the Emmett Till Case

Scholars have studied the Emmett Till case as a part of the series of events in American history that led to the Civil Rights Movement. Amazingly enough, many history books still omit the event, as if it did not happen, or minimize its importance in a brief one line synopsis. One that acknowledges this noteworthy event, Stephen J. Whitfield, author of *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*, has drawn boundaries around the Till story as reminiscent of the Southern landscape of racial violence. Whitfield’s regionalist point of view works to diminish the national importance of the Till case in American history.

The work of Clenora Hudson-Weems seems to broach this topic
outside of Whitfield's boundaries. She attempts to explain why the Till case is important and why it should be heralded as the event that gave birth to the Civil Rights Movement. Ms. Hudson-Weems demands we recognize that Till's case spawned events within its wake. Yet, she does not couch this milestone event within a larger history of Black repression. Hudson-Weems concentrates on the effects of the Till case on the Civil Rights Movement and how it propelled Blacks, who might have been politically passive, to be more active in their contributions to the movement. While this might be true for the twentieth century pre-Civil Rights era, it is also true for many time periods before and after this event. Hudson-Weems begins this documentation within two years of Till's death, as if that is where the story starts.

This is clearly neither the first violent attack against Blacks in America nor the only event in the Black American past to revitalize the struggle. Hudson-Weems does to these events that which she so harshly criticizes other authors for doing to Emmett Till—she ignores them. Furthermore, Hudson-Weems, in essence, does the same thing that Whitfield does to this case, she isolates it from the American history that created it. Thus, it is important that we analyze the Emmett Till story as both an individual tragedy and a systematic murder; it is also important that we couch it within the American history of violence and the social codes that seem to dictate the emergence of actions as

---

horrific as lynching.

It is important that we resist the temptation to solely reduce this case to factors and probabilities that Roberta Senechal de la Roche utilizes in her article, *The Sociogenesis of Lynching*; Ms. de la Roche does establish that lynching was a rational, rather than a random, action for the people who used it. She also contends that Lynchers "followed allegations of serious criminal conduct." This "popular justice," she argues, did not invariably mete out severe punishments; that is, as long as Blacks had favorable connections to the White community and abided by certain rules, and/or as long as Blacks reacted in the manners dictated as appropriate by those who profited from their submission. By doing all of these things, Blacks could still not ensure the preservation of their lives.

Throughout her discussion, Ms. de la Roche assumes that if these Black victims were released and "the law allowed to take its course," they would have been tried fairly and acquitted, if evidence was lacking. In her own accounts of averted lynch victims\(^5\) show that they were not set free. Other investigations purport that these victims were tried and sentenced to death.\(^6\) Though the severity might have been reduced, as most lynchings consisted of various acts of torture before the victim was

\(^5\) Ms. De la Roche defines "averted lynch victims" as those who escaped the rope and faggot by some intervention, usually by a White male of power.

killed, the end product was often the same. Does this mean that a victim, if hung by "the law," without evidence and such was then in effect, is always guilty? Was this was not just a bureaucratic way of carrying out mob rule, a legal lynching? If something as horrific as lynching emerged and "its finders of fact and assessors of guilt" were the possibly same people that presided over the law of the land, what, essentially, was the difference? Why would that legal system acquiesce to the rules of evidence and testimony that might release a person the mob wanted to kill? Furthermore, why would it be surprising that these courts often agreed with the mob, when the basic rationale for the mob was acquired from the very social codes of that same society? Clearly, they could not destroy that which held their world in place. "Lynching was a drama that helped to cement the entire... social order. The dramatic spectacle of each lynching taught all... precisely where in the social hierarchy they stood." Whites could not allow anyone to change that structure, for that would jeopardize their own place in it.

Given her arguments, the reader is confused as to whether Ms. de la Roche believes that Blacks would have been 'in good health' as long as they committed themselves to certain cardinal rules. It seems that Ms de la Roche assumes that adherence to

---


these rules would have eliminated White violence; Consequently, it would have, undoubtedly, waylaid Black progress towards reclaiming their humanity. It would have infringed also on the basic human rights to decide for themselves where they can go, and what they can do; blind adherence to these social codes would have returned Blacks to an enslaved status. By making this assumption, Ms. de la Roche underestimates Black dedication to affirming their humanity in the face of violence; she accepts the assumption that Blacks are not worthy of treatment as complete human beings, that they should be treated as children or well trained apes, who are incapable of making their own decisions, and were not born with the need to be treated as full human beings.

While Ms. De la Roche is correct about the fact that lynching is about rationality and social control, her statements can be easily misread to mean that lynch mobs had no other recourse than to take the law into their hands and murder thousands based on rumor and without evidence. If we are to believe that the justice system was always correct, we must assume that it was the Black criminal element that forced the nation into lynching. However, as Walter White contends in Rope and Faggot, it was “Black progress rather than Black crime that frightened Whites” and produced lynching. 9 Clearly, the negation

of Black progress should not be dismissed, the violence perpetrated to derail it illustrates that Black progress affects whether or not certain American institutions, their norms and the distribution of power, are preserved.

IV. The Ramifications of White Violence Against Blacks

Thus, the history of these violent acts against Blacks is much more than a retelling of the Black American past. Its horrid details reflect on American ideals as a whole, on the violation of those rights purported in the Declaration of Independence and protected by the Constitution. They show America as hypocritical, as "standing" for one set of ideals but punishing Blacks for achieving those same ideals. The combinations of these heinous acts reflect America’s stance to remove any "undesirable element" from an ever-striving hegemonic, ideal America, an America where, coincidentally, Blacks have always been treated as if they were on this list of "undesirables."

Blacks are targeted for these assaults for deeper reasons; it is evident that there is a surreptitious "crime" for which they are being punished. For example, foreigners known to be enemies of the American state, are treated better than Black
political activists. Scholars have either failed to document or overlooked this Black American "legacy." The Emmett Till case is but an example of what happens when boundaries are crossed and absolutes challenged. It is imperative that we know that these acts are not solitary acts of hate and mistrust; they are systematically supported and orchestrated to maintain the present American cultural landscape.

In 1863, during the New York draft riots, Irish immigrants, who believed they were being drafted for the Civil War to fight to free Blacks from slavery, engaged into mob violence. Before the draft could even begin, at the mere possibility of fighting for Black humanity, these immigrants struck out at Black New Yorkers, to the point of burning a Black children’s asylum to the ground. In Two Steps Forward, One Step Back, Larry Kincaid writes “[r]ioters had murdered at least a dozen Black men, women and children, beaten scores more, and left thousands homeless and destitute— all for the crime of being Black.” Kincaid’s last phrase is further reinforced by a letter written by John Torrey, a White New Yorker, who “walked quietly through the midst of


them, without being molested."\textsuperscript{12} No one was arrested or charged with the murders of these Black citizens. While Whites were able to traverse the city "without being molested," Blacks were attacked throughout the city, based on the rioters' perceived notion of their impending freedom, and because of their skin color. Though they were individuals, they could be attacked at any time for the "crime" of being Black.

V. The Message and the Response

Correspondingly, Emmett Till's case is exemplary of the historical and incessant use of violence to send a clear message about the status of Black people in American society. Blacks were expected to stay in their place, as dictated by the White community around them, and anything that might or seem to be insubordinate to this command could result in their death. Just as Black women were burned alive for aiding in rebellions during slavery,\textsuperscript{13} and Black men returning from World War I were lynched in their uniforms, Emmett Till was lynched in the twentieth century for crossing an invisible American racial boundary.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{13} Herbert Aptheker. \textit{American Negro Slave Revolts.} 6\textsuperscript{th} ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 169.

Because Blacks have tried to uphold America’s ideals of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," they have been viciously attacked.

The decades following the Civil War have shown that Blacks have continually spoken out about the torturous nature of lynching and American society’s denial of Black human rights. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, for example, publicized the atrocities of lynching and its widespread use to attack Blacks, despite various threats to her life. Lynch law, the “infliction of punishment by private and unauthorized citizens,” murdered Blacks for trying to vote, “attempting to rule White people,” and the rape of White women. Although these charges were not always substantiated, or based on any solid evidence, mobs mutilated, castrated, hung, and burned Blacks in broad daylight, sometimes even within the presence of sheriffs, police and state officials. Subsequently, between 1882 and 1892, for example, thirty-two Blacks were lynched with no reason given. Although, Black women were not exempt from this atrocity, the wholesale assumption that Black men are constantly conspiring to rape White women accounted for one third of the lynchings in that same decade. The object of White violence all over the American countryside, Blacks have

been lynched for looking at someone the wrong way,\textsuperscript{16} attempting to achieve the American dream by owning a business, and/or telling the truth about America's treatment of its Black citizens, and thus, stepping out of their dehumanized place.

Emmett Till was not the first Black person to be lynched; lynching, as an American social institution, has plagued the lives of Blacks for over a century.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, Till was part of a long tradition of crimes against the Black community for minor or perceived infractions of the American racial code. While some of these cases involved formal charges against Black individuals, (trumped up though those may have been) the preponderance of cases condoned the attack on Black Americans based solely on skin color, and let the "faceless" perpetrators go free. Subsequently, Till's lynching was neither the first offense nor an abnormality in nineteenth or twentieth century Black life.

Though brutal and unwavering, the severity of racial violence has not deterred Blacks from challenging the American social and racial structure. Emmett Till's lynching was significant to Americans of the Civil Rights Era, both Black and White. Its effects were somewhat short-lived; that is, while

\textsuperscript{16} In 1951, Matt Ingram was charged with "rape by leer" in Yanceyville North Carolina. Though seventy five feet away from his 'victim,' because of the way 'he looked at her,' he served almost 3 years. Mary F. Berry and John W. Blassingame. \textit{Long Memory: The Black Experience in America}. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1982), 124.

\textsuperscript{17}While we will probably never be able to single out this first victim, there are numerous sources that cite lynchings before that of Emmett Till. One example, which documents lynching as a reality in nineteenth century Black life, is Ida B Wells' chapter on Lynch Law in \textit{The Reason
Till’s death motivated Americans to get involved in the Civil Rights Movement, the repercussions were overwhelming; Blacks would find themselves faced with even more horrific attacks on a larger segment of their population—whether it was fire hoses and police dogs, wrongful prison time, or death. The wave of violence continued, flourishing, for example, into the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counter Intelligence Program. The new wave of backlash threatened to overpower the preceding gains made but could not do so. This case shows the resilience of the Black community in the face of this type of vile, racial violence. One of the most brutal examples, Emmett Till’s lynching once again garnered the support of Blacks in America to fight for human rights, which their freedom should have granted them. It scared both parents and "children" into stepping out, once again, onto the battlefield of human rights.

VI. The Purpose of this Study

This study seeks to connect the tragedy of the Emmett Till murder to the history of lynching, as a means of terror, to prevent Black progress and maintain the American socio-racial

---


18 Children appears in quotations because I question the definition of someone as a child if they have to be concerned with their mortality and the customs/practices that will extend or reduce their life chances.
structure. If the outcome of an event is a function of the sequence of actions making up the event and how they unfold over time, each chapter is dedicated to the major sequence of actions that contributed to the use of lynching as a means of social control. Chapter two is dedicated to a definition of the particularities which made lynching the punishment of choice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and underlying forces behind its use. It also establishes the history of violence against Blacks in the wake of their progress and the significance of this relationship to White aggression. Chapter three analyzes the socio-political impact of lynching to Blacks, the institutionalization of racial subordination and the emergence of a White racial identity as a means to justify keeping Blacks within well defined boundaries. Chapter four recognizes the Emmett Till murder, as a lynching, and connects it to the history of violence, Black response and the strict maintenance of American social codes. Chapter five scrutinizes the textbook image of America, as the perfect democracy and a compassionate society, which nurtured and maintained lynching for two centuries. This final chapter looks as recent act of race hate and evaluates whether or not the spirit that produced lynching is still very much alive and well. The sum of these items gives some vision into this horrific practice and its impact on the communities affected by its violence.
CHAPTER 2

Lynching and the Fortification of Racial Boundaries

I. Introduction

In America, lynching existed wherever and whenever Blacks endeavored towards the light of humanity, and it tried to stamp out that light as swiftly and severely as possible. It knew neither the restrictions of gender nor age, guilt nor innocence; it knew only that it must exist for the America of the day to progress along the same lines it had, with the same people in power, deciding the fate of all within their grasp. Lynching knew only rope and misfit, torture and inevitable death, blood and tears and its bearers carried out its wishes to brutal precision.

They, the infamous unknown, left Black lives as smoldering ash and burning corpses all over America. Although they
undertook extreme measures, they could not extinguish the Black need to continue to reach for the light of progress. They kept trying, hoping each lynched, charred carcass would convince Blacks that the price for their humanity was far too great. They kept trying to perpetuate the privileges of Whiteness they so precariously held, and because of this, Blacks were dragged from life by the thousands. Still, it did not stop. Whites continued to hold onto the power they believed was rightly theirs, deciding the fate of Blacks in manners that best served their purposes, while Blacks struggled to regain what had been stolen from them—their very humanity.

Waging on for centuries, this mêlée has claimed both Black and White lives. While Whites have fought to maintain their power and control over Blacks and their society in general, Blacks have fought for the right to control and define themselves as human beings; for this, they have been the bloodied victims of various forms of White aggression, all of which sought to cement White power, while denying Black humanity. Lynching, the most sadistic form of terror, was neither irrational nor atypical, contrary to popular belief. It had specific, rational purposes, which it satisfied. Lynching maintained societal boundaries and established a structure of Whites over Blacks. It tried to permanently cement Blacks into an inferior position of

subordination. A systemic and organized form of terror, lynching plagued the lives of Blacks during and after slavery; it made Black lives so precarious, no Black person could be sure he or she would not be the next victim.

II. Slavery, Punishment and Social Control

During slavery, White slave owners used public, and often brutal, punishment as a necessary part of everyday life; it was necessary to keep the entire slave population from committing acts of rebellion. For example, runaways were often forced to wear tools of torture or had limbs severed for their offense. In Slave Testimony, Tom Wilson, a former slave in Mississippi and Louisiana, recounts how he was treated when he was recaptured: "They burned my back with a red hot iron, and my legs with strong turpentine, to punish me for escaping. They put an iron collar round my neck, which I wore for eight months, besides two irons, one on each leg."² His account is evidence of the ruthless punishments Blacks received, but he was not alone. Harry McMillan, a former slave from South Carolina, echoed Mr. Wilson's report, when asked about the types of punishments used for runaways.

The punishments were whipping, putting you in the stocks and making you wear irons and a chain to work. Then they had a collar to put round you neck with two horns, like cows' horns, so that you could not lie down on your back or belly. This also kept you form running away for the horns would catch in the bushes. Sometimes they dug a hole like a well with a door on top. This they called a dungeon keeping you in it two or three weeks or a month, and sometimes till you died in there. This hole was just big enough to receive the body; the hands down by the sides... they [also] stretch out your arms and legs as far as they can to ring bolts in the floor and ash you till they open the skin and the blood trickles down.  

These acts of brutality would escalate as Whites learned that Blacks would seize any opportunity to acquire their freedom and treatment as human beings.

Because slave owners were aware of the effects of punishment on the entire slave population, they punished slaves harshly for minor infractions. For example, when a young girl burned the edges of her masters' waffles, she was ...

stretched out, face downwards, on the ground her hands and feet being fastened to stakes. Mr. Farraby [her master] was standing over and striking her with a leather trace belonging to his carriage-harness. As he struck her the flesh of her back and legs was raised in welts and ridges by the force of the blows. Sometimes when the poor thing cried too loud from the pain Farraby would kick her in the mouth. After he had exhausted himself whipping her he sent to his house for sealing wax and a lighted candle and, melting the wax, dropped it upon the woman's lacerated back. He then got a riding whip and, standing over the woman, picked off the hardened wax by switching at it. Mr. Farraby's grown daughters were looking at all this from a window of the house through the blinds.  

---

1Blassingame, 380-381.

2Blassingame, pg 372.
If one could be punished at this level for burning waffles, (and stories of this nature permeate slave testimonies) the accounts of various iniquitous acts during lynchings could not be that far-fetched or abhorrent. For Whites, it was an everyday, necessary, part of the attempt to keep Blacks within strict boundaries and remind them of the consequences of rebellion. Each lynching was used to send a message to many more than the punished victim; it lodged a visual, auditory, olfactory, and recurring nightmare in the mind of any Black who contemplated resisting in any way.

In order to keep Blacks in bondage, slave owners had to provide and reinforce certain boundaries; they realized that the smallest individual show of insubordination would weaken their power over everyone, would cause other enslaved Africans to resist their oppression. For example, in There is a River, Vincent Harding shares the following account:

Most often the efforts at resistance were on a small scale; only by accident did they leap into wider significance. Such an incident occurred in York, Pennsylvania, where... a black woman was convicted of attempting to poison two white persons. But after her conviction, other blacks in the town made several attempts to burn major sections of York to the ground; within three weeks eleven buildings were destroyed. 

If rebellion had this snowball effect, whites could not let small acts of rebellion slip by without reprimand. Just as runaway slaves had to be punished in public to remind the entire slave

---

population of their place, lynching emerged as a brutal reminder of this structure. Its agenda was twofold: it reminded the victim and audience of their place and it stripped the victim of any rights accorded to human beings, such as pride, dignity and/or a sense of self worth and relegated them to innately feral objects. When Blacks were unaffected by these punishments, that is, when they continued to runaway or became uncontrollable, Whites resorted to lynching because lynching served as deterrence to enslaved Africans stepping outside of their society’s boundaries.

Lynching punished Blacks for daring to believe in and assert themselves as full human beings. For example, because runaways intrinsically believed in their right to freedom, their acts were considered extremely revolutionary and thus, their punishments were nefarious in nature; they were used to deter the entire Black population from defying White power. More work was done to prevent Blacks from flouting White power, for once they could think critically about their place in their world, they were virtually useless; Blacks would continue to defy its structure until they were dead or accorded the rights of full human beings. Many Blacks thought the Emancipation proclamation and the constitutional amendments, that later followed, would award them the rights America declared were its basic tenets.
III. Blacks, the Post-Reconstruction Era, and White Aggression

Neither emancipation nor the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments would prevent Whites from continuing to use lynching for the purpose of racial control; it grew in severity, as Whites believed they were losing control of the newly emancipated Black population. Many Southern Whites believed that Reconstruction would cause Blacks to attempt to rule over them; so, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Blacks found themselves neither free nor human in the eyes of America. Instead, they found themselves under pre-Civil War control, titles and action. Black Codes, for example, were established within months of the North’s triumph; they provided ‘guidance’ to the newly freed men and women in the guise of laws regulating their travel, relationships to their prior masters and many other relationships and activities. While Reconstruction allowed Blacks to make marked improvements to their condition, Blacks, especially those who had been voted into office, soon found themselves fleeing the South for fear of their lives.\(^6\) All Blacks found themselves the victims of the following wave of white aggression.

With the end of Reconstruction, many Blacks knew that living in the South all but guaranteed their death, so they began

---

to migrate North in large numbers. Moreover, migration North did not save them from the rope and the whip. For example, whites believed that Black soldiers, returning from fighting for their country in World War I, had returned with pride and some notion that they were men. They promptly reminded these Black soldiers of America’s reaction to those ideas; decorated soldiers were lynched in their uniforms. Yet, Blacks who stayed in the South bore the brunt of the attack; they were witness and/or victims of the largest number of lynchings on the record and were disproportionately more likely to be killed in the South. But Blacks in the North and South alike felt the backlash of Reconstruction gains. Black death was not only physical; American society intended to keep the Black population politically underdeveloped and without significant power.

IV. White Rationalizations for Lynching

Whites infringed on newly garnered Black voting rights by passing laws which excluded Black voters, levying taxes Blacks could not afford, and even killing those who attempted to

---


register to vote. Southern Whites relied on the fact that though the Fifteenth Amendment granted Blacks the right to vote; it did not provide for enforcement. Southern Whites used this loophole to disenfranchise Black voters. Because of Southern tactics, many Blacks could not qualify to register to vote.

Well into the twentieth century Southern states would circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment by instituting poll taxes, literacy tests, property and registration requirements, and the "grandfather clause" that allowed an individual to vote only if his forbears enjoyed suffrage as of January 1, 1866, thereby eliminating many blacks from voting rolls.10

Indeed, "the South is enjoying to-day the results of this course pursued for the first fifteen years of our freedom. The Solid South means that the South is a unit for white supremacy, and that the Negro is practically disfranchised through intimidation."11 Whites also instituted grandfather clauses, poll taxes and literacy tests to prevent Blacks, who would have otherwise been eligible to vote, from doing so. However, the coup de gras was the extralegal measure that restricted Blacks from exercising use of the franchise—lynching.

Whites lynched Blacks, they contended, because they needed to protect the franchise from the Black savage element; they believed the vote was a White privilege. Whites argued that the number of lynchings proved the criminal element in Blacks; further, they used the same criminal element argument to justify

10 Mullane, 294.
11 Wells, 18.
lynching more Blacks.\textsuperscript{12} Whites classified Blacks as beasts and used that classification to kill them for not adhering to White societal laws.

Thus, what the colored people gained by the war they have partly lost by peace... They accorded the freedom and endowed them with citizenship and the right to vote and the right to be voted for... But the spirit and purpose of these have been in a measure defeated by state legislation and by judicial decisions. It has nevertheless been found impossible to defeat them entirely and to relegate colored citizens to their former condition. They are still free... It is a proof that the Negro is not standing still. He is not dead, but alive and active... He is not contended with his surroundings, but nobly dares to break away from them and hew out a way of safety and happiness for himself in defiance of all opposing forces... The enemies of the Negro see that he is making progress and they have naturally wished to stop him and keep him in just what they consider his proper place.\textsuperscript{13}

The lynching documentation that does exist proves overwhelmingly that most Blacks, at least two-thirds, were sadistically murdered because they dared to believe they could make their own decisions, vote, and acquire wealth.\textsuperscript{14} Amazingly enough, these are supposed to be the same tenets that America is purported to uphold; obviously, these tenets did not apply to America's Black citizens.

Whites, in an attempt to reinforce the fact that they were superior, and therefore worthy of their power argued that Blacks

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Shapiro, 31.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Wells, 29-43.
\end{itemize}
were not human and therefore unworthy of human treatment and privileges through nineteenth century race theory. They argued that Blacks were innately savage and violent. Whites often asserted that although Blacks had been trained to act as human beings, Blacks often reverted to their natural bestial tendencies. For example, lauded American biologist, Louis Agassiz, argued that Blacks were "incapable of living on a footing of social equality with the whites...without being an element of social disorder."\textsuperscript{15} He contended that, "Blacks must be regulated and limited, lest an injudicious award of social privilege sow later discord:

'No man has a right to what he is unfit to use... Let us beware of granting too much to the Negro race in the beginning, lest it become necessary to recall violently some of the privileges which they may use to our detriment and their own injury (10 August 1863)."\textsuperscript{16}

Based on nineteenth century race theories such as those articulated above by Agassiz, Whites contended that Blacks were more likely to commit crimes and thus, Whites had to keep them subdued with the threat of lynching.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid
V. Black Responses to Threats of Lynching

The restrictions placed on Black life and progress reinforced the same spirit of rebellion seen during slavery; Blacks felt the need to try to control their lives in the wake of the attacks to keep them subjugated. While Blacks realized that the slightest inappropriate action could result in casualty, they thoroughly contended with the precarious nature of their existence in America; they employed both active and passive approaches to dealing with the racial subordination problem. For example, while some Blacks endeavored towards the American dream by acquiring wealth, others tried to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Regardless of whatever way was suitable for them, Blacks endeavored towards the light of progress, to ensure a better life for themselves and their children.

Many Blacks spoke out about the tortuous and savage nature of lynching; together they even besieged Congress with an anti-lynching bill. Ida B. Wells-Barnett a staunch supporter of the anti-lynching bill, risked her life on a daily basis to entreat the American legislative branch to take action to prevent this atrocity. The federal legislature would not take any action to stop the horror that claimed so many lives. She argued that the rights that Blacks thought they had secured with the Civil War had been obliterated by
...political massacres, by midnight outrages of the Ku Klux Klans, and by state legislative enactment. That the legislation of the white south is hostile to the interests of our race is shown by the existence in most of the southern states of the convict lease system, the chain-gang, vagrant laws, election frauds...and the many political massacres where hundreds of black men were murdered for the crime(?) of casting the ballot.\textsuperscript{17}

Although Wells-Barnett meticulously documented the numbers of Blacks lynched and for what reasons, using white newspapers as her primary sources and proving that more than two-thirds of Blacks were not murdered for the rape of white women, there is no anti-lynching legislation in America. Although she collaborated with various sources that supported her case, including a rather detailed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) database of lynching details, hoping this documentation would lead to federal action, the federal government chose to leave lynching regulation in the hands of state and local government, virtually reinforcing the justifiable homicides of those murdered and sealing the deaths of thousands more. Wells-Barnett herself had been forced to leave the South, under penalty of death by lynching if she returned; her printing press and newspaper office were destroyed. She was one of the fortunate--she lived; because of this, Wells- Barnett dedicated a large portion of her work to informing the public of the myths and realities of this horrific phenomenon.

Blacks, like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who defied the boundaries assigned by whites were often victims of white

\textsuperscript{17} Wells, 16.
aggression. Indeed, actively retaliatory Blacks could almost guarantee their death; however, Blacks also learned that a lack of active response did not prevent one’s death. Any Black person could be seized at any moment to be used as an example to the entire community; they need not have committed any crime, outside of being Black. Many whites believed that when a mob was on the prowl punishing any Black would be “all the more powerful... It would serve notice on the niggers that we shall hold the whole race responsible for the misdeeds of each individual.”\textsuperscript{18} Whites believed that lynching a Black example would make Blacks even more likely to observe the social codes that dictated their positions. Because Blacks could be attacked at any time, even when innocent (though whites on the whole did not conceive of Blacks as such), it motivated even more Blacks to speak out for their race.

Since American leadership took action to secure democracy abroad but would do nothing to secure the humanity of Blacks at home, Blacks grew to question these restrictions even more vocally than before. For example, in an NAACP sponsored silent march on July 28, 1917, Blacks carried signs that read “Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy?”\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, W.E.B. DuBois advised Black soldiers returning home from World

\textsuperscript{18} Shapiro, 83.

\textsuperscript{19} Mullane, 460.
War I to tell America to “Make Way for Democracy!” When Black soldiers, who enrolled to bring democracy to other nations in the world as well as pride to their race, found themselves assaulted and executed on American soil and their murderers acquitted by juries based on arguments of justifiable homicide, they articulated their dissent. ‘Ham,’ a Black soldier in the Sixth Virginia Cavalry, noted

Hasn’t a week passed since we have been in this pest hold of a South that some of Uncle Sam’s black boys in blue, haven’t been ‘justifiably homicided,’ at least this is the only word that seem to strike the minds of all juries who try cases for ‘killing nigger soldiers’…

Blacks did not allow this intimidation to prevent them from questioning and defying these boundaries; by the time Ham’s regiment left the South at least three soldiers had been killed in incidents stemming from refusal to relinquish street car seats. They also took axes and cut down a tree that had been used to lynch Blacks and tore down insulting signs saying ‘No niggers and Dogs Allowed in Here’ in a local park. These soldiers, and silent marchers, demonstrated the sentiment upon which many Blacks believed and acted; they would continue the tradition of their ancestors, they would not sit silently as Whites buttressed the notion that Blacks had no rights a white person would ever respect.


21 Shapiro, 87.
VI. The Implications of Lynching

If taken in an isolated manner, the events recounted above may seem violent but not systematic. To fully comprehend the total impact of lynching, one must understand the greater implications of these events. The creation of an argument that Blacks were sub-human and inferior was a vital cornerstone of the process of institutionalization of lynching as a form of social and political control. When a creature is deemed less fit to live and as other than human, no matter how human like, that creature can be used in a number of ways for another’s comfort, pleasure and benefit, without regard to how it affects that creature. For example, one cannot justify the enslavement of a being that can be classified as human. That being must be classified and rationalized as less than human. This rationalization absolves these persons, defined as human, of mistreatment of their ‘fellow man’ and claims those being mistreated are not worthy of that consideration because they are not really human. This process of sub-humanization is outlined by Joel Kovel in White Racism: A Psychohistory identifies characteristics that illustrate mechanisms of sub-humanization:

A particular master-slave relation developed under the specific circumstances of American history. Although there were points of similarity with other slave systems (much of which remains the subject of active investigation), a basic, and characteristically
American, style emerged as black slavery hardened into an institution.\textsuperscript{22}

Kovel not only defines the structure of the relation between master and slave but goes on to identify the characteristics that determined human and sub-human. He says,

The slaver in effect said to his slave, "While I own much, much more than my body, you do not own even your body: your body shall be detached from your self and your self shall be thereby reduced to subhuman status. And being detached and kept alive, your body shall serve me in many ways; by work on my capitalist plantations to extract the most that can be taken from the land in the cheapest and therefore most rational manner; as a means to my bodily pleasure—both as my nurse to my children and as female body for sexual use (for my own women are somehow deficient in this regard); and as a medium of exchange, salable like any other commodity of exchange along with or separate from the bodies of your family. For in fact, you have no family, since a family is a system that pertains to human beings, and you are not human.\textsuperscript{23}

The most horrifying respect of this sub-human situation is recalled in Kovel’s quote as he shows the way Blacks were made subservient.

And since I, being a man of the west, value things which are owned above all else, I hold you—or, rather, the owned part of you, your body—in very high regard and wish to retain you as my property. On the other hand, since I have a certain horror of what I am doing, and since you are a living reminder of this horror and are subhuman to boot, I am horrified by you, disgusted by you, and wish to have nothing to do with you, wish, in fact, to be rid of you. And since this set of ideas is inconsistent and will stand neither the test of reason nor of my better values, I


\textsuperscript{23} Kovel, 18-19.
am going to distort it, split it up, and otherwise defend myself against the realization."\textsuperscript{24}

As Kovel notes above, Whites controlled Black bodies; they assigned value and managed the facets that increased or decreased Black worth. While controlling Blacks, keeping them close at hand, Whites also kept Blacks separated from themselves. They maintained their link to Blacks, based on ideas of property and wealth accumulation, but they resented this dependence. They could not fully justify their position and the means by which they maintained it.

For this reason, White claims to Black sub-humanity attempted to pardon whites of their iniquitous acts during slavery. This rationale supported lynching, defining it as an appropriate tactic to utilize when dealing with beasts. Therefore, lynching was not simply about sadistic violence against alleged criminals, it was a modus operandi to keep the oppressed, in this case Blacks, in well defined places in the social order. It is an attempt to dehumanize and control the progress of Blacks towards defining themselves as full human beings.

At times when Blacks tried to achieve progress toward regaining their humanity, they were attacked in violent ways; the most reprehensible of them was lynching. Lynching, and other forms of terror, were intended to dissuade Blacks from progressive action, from changing their societies to be more

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
inclusive of, instead of dependent on, them. These forms of racial subordination were also intended to make Whites feel an investment in, and the need to maintain and protect their societal structure; these ideas and practices became entrenched in the fabric of America and institutionalized as the appropriate manner in which to react to Black attempts at progress. Thus lynching was specifically designed to establish and institutionalize permanent social, economic and political boundaries between Blacks and Whites. The twentieth century would prove to be a continuation of this battle; the history of these interactions cemented these two groups together—Blacks would attempt to prosper and progress, and Whites would try to intimidate Blacks into non-action with brutal force. However, as Whites would learn, the wave of Black humanity could not be subdued even with lynching, the vilest tool they had in their arsenal.
CHAPTER 3

Lynching, White Identity
And the Institutionalization of Black Subordination

I. Introduction

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Whites unified on a biological basis; they used biology to maintain their claim to superiority and stratify American society. This stratification nurtured the development of a White racial identity; it forged relationships among all the classes based on their need to keep Blacks subjugated. By acting as "finders of fact" and "assessors of guilt," they, the faceless White mob, eradicated the undesired element; to remedy the racial subordination problem in the most democratic manner, they took the law into their own hands and lynched Blacks.¹ They combined as one, through their laws and leadership, to decide the fate of

Blacks in America by taking control of Blacks in their own communities; they terrorized Blacks, while at the same time reinforcing segregation, inequality, and discrimination.

The lynch mob should not be portrayed as some wave that overtook the crowd; this group identity merely gave Whites the leeway to commit these acts a few times per year.² To accept the fallacy that lynching overtook the crowd is to take away the autonomy of the people, those who rationally decided to carry out these sordid acts and those who sat in silence as it happened. This terrorism served as a mechanism for keeping Blacks under control, and for keeping Blacks within well-defined social, economic and political limits. As race and skin color stratified America, it provided power and prestige to Whites and forced Blacks into a position of subordination, with great restrictions to their basic human rights.

II. The Emergence and Value of White Identity

During slavery, there was no need for the idea of Whiteness, Whites simply acted in the manner that would be in their best individual interest; it is only with the end of slavery that Whites felt the need to solidify their sameness so as to secure their power. Whites found that lynching, as Arthur

Raper writes in *The Tragedy of Lynching*, "tend[ed] to minimize social and class distinctions."\(^3\) Whites, by deeming Blacks as chattel, had command over Black social mobility. When Black emancipation threatened this control, Whites needed to define themselves as a monolithic group, based on their skin color. In much the same manner, Whites had made a similar distinction when the beginning waves of Blacks arrived in the Americas; in the mid seventeenth century, Whites officially defined Blacks as lifetime slaves, conferred their slave status to their Black progeny, and denied freedom to Blacks based on their conversion to Christianity.\(^4\) These steps made it possible for Whites to restrict Blacks to a specific place and role, and cement their own superior position, in their society.\(^5\)

Although punishment was commonplace during slavery, the grotesque process of lynching was altogether another phenomenon; while connected to this history of public punishment, lynching took public punishment to a new level of gruesome anguish and forced control. In 1936, William and Cora Wales, an elderly Black man and his sister, refused to sell their property, desired by the town for the expansion of a cemetery. The town alleged that Mr. Wales had threatened a White woman so that the sheriff


could arrest him. When Wales resisted, a crowd of 5,000
surrounded their house, set it on fire so the Wales' could be
shot down, and burned it to the ground. But that was not enough:

When the embers of the house had sufficiently cooled the
murderers entered the building and hacked the bodies into
small pieces to be taken away as souvenirs... even pieces of
bone were carried off.

In the post-Reconstruction era, lynch mobs reveled in
dismembering and castrating victims, while they were still alive,
and saving fingers and genitalia as souvenirs. White mobs showed
no distinction between the treatments they gave men, women and
children; they indulged them all with the same malevolence. As
if each wanted to have a hand in the end of this Black 'person,' they
sometimes took hours killing their victim so that this was
possible.7

The commonality of Whiteness and its value in American
society, regardless of social class, was enough to reassure the
White masses that Blacks were the common enemy.8 Because Whites
believed that Black social mobility was the key to their
political, economic and social ruin, Blacks became the scapegoats
for every economic, social and political ill in American society;
Whites blamed changes in the any of these on Blacks and punished

---

6 I place person in quotes because, as stated in the previous chapter, most
Whites believed in Black inferiority and sub-humanity. Therefore, to this
population they were not murdering a person, they were getting rid of an evil
animal or savage, one who if he/she was not removed would cause more harm to
their beloved community and its structure.

7 Raper, 48.

8 Hadley Cantril. The Psychology of Social Movements. (New Jersey: The Haddon
Craftsmen, Inc., 1941), 66.
them for these changes in various ways. While White investment in their Whiteness required that they be somehow involved in the act, it did not require them to actually deal the deathblow; for some, they aided in this atrocity by remaining silent as it was carried out. Whiteness became the rallying force for their way of life and sources of intimidation, such as lynching, were employed as the means to maintain the desired configuration of these factors. Active participation in lynching and a variety of institutions that supported these carnal acts, allowed Whites to feel they had some control over Black life choice, and more control over what factors affected their own lives.⁹

III. The Birth of a Ku Klux Klan Nation

Lynching aroused White masses to participate in its very public ritual; it allowed Whites to take the laws of their society and the character of the residents in their hands. It allowed them to seize democracy in the most fundamental approach, rationalizing that the courts would not enforce the will of the people with urgency.¹⁰ Using lynching as an extra legal form of popular justice, they trusted that in their hands justice was

⁹ Cantril, 117.

served by the people it affected--Whites. Thus, the effects
Blacks incurred, as a result, were secondary, and unimportant.
Since White power and status rested on Black disfranchisement,
segregation and discrimination, Whites had something to lose if
Blacks were allowed to break down the established demarcations of
their subordinate place. The institutionalization of these acts
merely solidified the precedent established within slavery as the
expected method of addressing Black insubordination.

While, in essence, all Whites had an investment in their
Whiteness, for some their need to preserve their Whiteness was
heightened because it was the only marker of worth to which they
could cling. These Whites, typically of the lower working class,
had more in common with Blacks as far as wealth and property than
with rich Whites. Their action in the lynching drama gave them
"a sense of closure and a feeling that they have vindicated their
status." By virtue of Whiteness, they would be better than any
Black person, even if that Black had more wealth and property
than they did.

Whiteness overrode money and hard work, and even allowed
someone who had not persevered through rough times in order to
gain wealth to pilfer it from another, if the former was White
and the latter was Black, without fear of legal action. Because
lynching tended to minimize social and class distinctions, lower
class Whites could place themselves above Blacks in America's
social strata. They could allege biological superiority and enjoy the fruits of Whiteness, while reminding Blacks that they were of more value.

Whiteness allowed them to use lynching to stand together, without class distinctions, to exorcise that which they saw as the 'resident evil;' it gave them an inherent value that required preservation and protection. Lynch mobs allowed sordid acts to be committed by individuals and reinforced by the rest. Most often they shielded these individuals from punishment, especially when they were members of the community’s law enforcement or its cloaked assassins, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). It allowed Whites to blame Blacks for whatever pathological crimes had been committed and condemn Blacks to death without due process of law or threat of punishment for that murder.

Ironically, as Frederick Douglass argued for Black men to be given the right to vote, the inaugural meeting of one of the most formidable Black progress opponents over the next century, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, organized their attendees to defend against what they saw as the pending demise of the America they knew. Committed to the preservation of their way of life, by whatever violent means of intimidation necessary, they donned White robes and armed themselves with guns, burning crosses and a

---

11 Cantril, 111-112.
12 Cantril, 114.
newly institutionalized and collectively supported racial
hierarchical structure that declared them biologically superior
and thus, justified in doing everything they could to keep Blacks
at bay. They would grow to ride through the night terrorizing
Blacks all over the South; they forced Blacks to leave the South,
sometimes alive, sometimes as a part of a mounting number of the
disappeared.

The emergence of the KKK, along with similar groups of this
nature brought to the forefront the hate that Whites had for
Blacks. They wielded intimidation and hate to remedy the
dissolution of old traditions, which Blacks were challenging.\textsuperscript{14}
The mob’s mentality focused on the preservation of the rights,
safety, and structure of their society, and their way of life.
These excuses allowed mobs to relieve their own tension, about
losing their power and control over Blacks, whilst relying on
lynching as a concrete way out of their dilemma.\textsuperscript{15}

If we look at lynching as a product of community standards
that will not be condemned by that community, it becomes easier
to understand the mindset of the people who provided the manpower
for these groups. These Whites would argue against anything that
might grant Blacks equal rights and social, economic or political
mobility, and disregarded the violence that made those boundaries
hold strong against Black progress. In much the same vein, White

\textsuperscript{14} Cantril, 66.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
Citizen Councils would emerge all over the South, perpetuating the racial propaganda of inferiority and sub-humanity. These organizations rose to defend the orchestrated power of Whites, and allegedly, explain the segregation and discrimination of Blacks. These groups could do this because they saw nothing wrong with the use of lynching for these purposes.

Since Whites believed that a change in Black status would reduce their distance from Blacks and make their superiority negligible, the relative status of Whites had to be maintained. Feeling that their status is being threatened, Whites are then motivated to preserve their status by removing what they believe are the circumstances threatening their place. ¹⁶ For the ideology of keeping Blacks in their place, also implies that Whites have a place, albeit a superior one, that must be maintained as well. Whites cannot allow Blacks any improvement in their conditions and opportunities, unless their own conditions are, at a minimum, proportionately increased.

White Citizen Councils, the KKK, and lynch mobs collaborated in the attempt to justify segregation, the obvious restriction of Black progress, and discrimination by condoning, charging and executing Blacks without due process and/or substantial evidence. The source of these motivations, which burst into lynching and other forms of aggressive lawlessness, are always present, though perhaps unrecognized. They exist as

¹⁶ Cantril, 87, 112.
'social pressures,' which expressed themselves in traditional attitudes and practices," and affect Black-White interactions.\textsuperscript{17} Jim Crow legislation, disenfranchisement, judicial discrimination and violent group intimidation were included in the techniques used to keep Blacks under control.\textsuperscript{18} These groups prevent Blacks from stepping out of their predetermined places, by hindering Black economic, social and political growth, and Black life in general, to preserve their own status. The concentrated efforts of these three institutions, more than anything else, executed Blacks for not being White; Whites lynched Blacks to keep themselves markedly different from those whom they needed to oppress. If these Blacks were White, Whiteness would have assumed they were of some human value and therefore worthy of due process of the law. Whites used these organizations to reinforce the association between Blackness and pain, inferiority and sub-humanity.

IV. The Black Image in the White Mind

Since lynch mobs acted on the fear that if Whites did not keep Blacks within well defined boundaries Blacks would overpower

\textsuperscript{17} Raper, 48.

them, Blacks could not be assumed innocent; Blacks were
implicitly guilty and drawn to crime by this definition of
humanity and associated inferiority. Whites rationalized that
the problem was not lynching. Rather, they contended, it was
"the rapid increase of crime among negroes of the South and the
alarming frequency of the most brutal outrage upon white women
and children." 19 Whites would then argue that "the brutality of
the white retaliation was more than justified by the increasing
'horror and brutality' of the crimes allegedly committed by
blacks." 20 They required no actual proof of this accusation;
though, the lynching documentation shows that only a third of the
charges against Blacks were for rape. These accusations created
the image of a Black attacker and a vicious cycle of assumed
Black guilt and resulted in even more unsubstantiated lynchings.

Clearly, Whites had an image of Blacks that overrode even
their own lynching figures to condemn thousands of Blacks to
death, most of which were murdered based on mere suspicion; in
the White mind, Blacks were violent brutes who needed to be
controlled. Belief in this assumption necessitates that one
disregard the reality that White failure to control Blacks would
lead to instability in the system that kept Whites on top; by
perpetuating the image of Blacks as attackers and rapists, and

19 George Frederickson. The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-
American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914. (New Hampshire: Wesleyan University
20 Ibid.
inherently pathological, whites preserved their own status.

"These efforts to ‘explain’ or justify lynching help account for the popularity ... of the stereotype of the ‘Negro as beast.’"\textsuperscript{21}

Similarly, "segregation could be defended in terms of ‘racial instincts.’"\textsuperscript{22} Though, rationalizing disfranchisement was more controversial, Whites simply had to refer to the accepted notion of Black intellectual inferiority to make a case for Blacks being unfit for self-governance.\textsuperscript{23} Whites used lynching as a means of showing the harsh consequences of defying White definitions of Black humanity.

Whites chipped away at all the avenues available for Blacks to achieve progress, hoping that once Blacks learned the harsh consequences of breaking through these boundaries they would retreat to where White wanted them and stay there. However, that was not to be the case; instead, Whites pushed Blacks so harshly that Blacks grew to have a strong sense of nationalism and self worth, one that required that the system that commanded they stay in an inferior position be questioned and destroyed. Blacks would fight to secure the civil and human rights they should have been afforded at Emancipation and had enjoyed before their ancestors were brought to America as slaves. They would gain their humanity, or die trying.

\textsuperscript{21} Frederickson, 275.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Frederickson, 275.
CHAPTER 4

Implications of the Emmett Till Case

I. Introduction

White aggression has been perpetuated against Blacks throughout American history and on both Northern and Southern soil. The variance of location within the phenomenon of lynching alone typifies its national attack. Although the North has long been thought of as the bastion of liberal and democratic freedoms, its citizens have participated in this often rational murder of Blacks under the guise of democratic or systemic preservation. It is the South, however, that captures our historical memory; the South has overwhelmingly extinguished the lives of Black men, women, and children, undeniably almost guaranteeing their death for attempting to change their condition. The boundaries were vigorously watched and those who crossed them suffered grave consequences. The death of Emmett Till was a classic expression of the Southern system of racial
oppression. Till’s murder motivated Blacks to return en masse to the battlefield of human rights.

The Emmett Till lynching was both tragic and brutal; to isolate this event from America’s history of hate and its vicious attacks on Blacks is to exonerate Till’s murderers a second time. It is to reduce the thousands of documented and even more undocumented, men, women, and children who have died as a result of racial hate to the status of animals, without human value. These thousands have already been reduced to such because we do not remember all of their names.¹ To detach Till’s death from this history, because he is one of the few whose name we do know, is to assume that his murderers acted in the best interest of America and Americans, or worse yet, that his death was a necessary casualty to give birth to the of America today.

Blacks in America saw the Till lynching as linked to their own human struggle and the deaths of those nameless thousands before him. While, inevitably, the struggles, triumphs, and deaths of the previous generations brought forth the lives of the present generation, this human cycle of life should not been seen as a means to justify their dehumanization or minimize the loss

¹ There is no one figure for the number of people who died by lynching; these figures vary based on the lynching definition and the sources used. However, most estimates agree upon a figure of just over four thousand (4,000) for the documented periods of 1865–1925. However, this does not mean that lynching was restricted to this span of time. One would heed a few important things when looking at this figure. First, not every lynching was reported. Second, most sources stopped documenting deaths as ‘lynching’ when mob size diminished and different methods of torture were exercised. Third, deaths prior to Emancipation, would not have been termed lynching; they were simply an owner dealing with his property. Fifth, most sources will claim that lynching ended in the late 1920’s. All of these details affect the total number of lynchings recorded.
of human life.

II. The Racial Climate Surrounding the Till Lynching

In the twentieth century the institutionalization of Black sub-humanity remained intact; the North reinforced this notion as much as the South, even if in a different manner. While Northern industrialization brought Blacks better paying jobs and schools than in the South, Blacks soon learned that White aggression still existed despite the change in location. Blacks found themselves restricted to inhabiting certain job positions, usually the lowest paying and most manual, and residential locations, where landlords charged exorbitant rent for slum housing, in these Northern cities.

Blacks found that not much was different from the South from which they fled; strict social codes were still enforced in the North. Black soldiers returning from World War I, for example, were lynched in the North as well as the South because Whites believed their fight abroad would make Black soldiers more haughty and insubordinate. America quickly reminded these soldiers of what their country thought of them in what has been termed the Red Summer of 1919; Blacks were executed in riots, scuffles, and lynchings from Missouri to Georgia to Washington,
D.C.—some just thirty miles from the White House. However, these riots were only the climax to the throng of "racial tension that had been festering for some time." The South is the region that is commemorated as the bastion of race hate and violence, for proving itself to be the most overtly vicious of the two regions.

Being the nucleus of Southern notions of the racial hierarchy and deemed the "Most Southern Place on Earth," Mississippi upheld the institutionalized racial code with carnal precision. Mississippi Blacks were careful to abide by this social code as much as possible, or leave. The latter is what Till's mother had done before he was born. However, she had not forgotten the exacting code of her home state. She reminded her son, as she sent him off for the summer, to answer Whites in the appropriate fashion, that is, to say yes sir and yes ma'am instead of yes and no and to lower his eyes when addressing them.

These admonitions might have surprised her son; for Emmett Till grew up in the wake of an upsurge of Black consciousness, where the more vocalized notions of Black pride were manifestations of the rising concept of race representation. For example, within two decades of Till's birth, Marcus Garvey had

---


founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the largest Black nationalist organization to grace American soil, "uniting all the Negro peoples of the world into one great body...;" W.E.B. Du Bois had founded the NAACP and the Pan-African Congress and, in an open letter, criticized president Wilson, for his "do-nothing attitude toward lynching;" and Claude McKay had written the poem, *If We Must Die:*\(^5\)

*If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our cursed lot.
If we must die, Oh let us nobly die!
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then the monster we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us, though dead!
Oh kinsman! We must meet the common foe;
Though outnumbered, let us still be brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying but--fighting back!*

En masse, Blacks had realized that the acts perpetuated against individuals were not actually aimed at the individual.

In 1955, merely within a year of the Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka Kansas case, which would later desegregate American schools, lynching raised its ugly head again. In the flurry of racial intimidation cases that followed, Whites vented their frustrations at Blacks attempting to improve their condition. These attacks were intended to tear at the very fabric of Black America, to publicize an institutionalized hatred

---

\(^5\) Mullane, 468-469; 369-467.
for Black people and prevent further Black gains. Whites attacked Blacks, trying to push Blacks back to where Whites believed was their place.

The recognition of the concerted effort to keep Blacks in specific, inferior roles led Blacks to be particularly incensed by Till’s lynching. Blacks realized that none of their children were safe and America would continue to remind them of their precarious positions. Blacks grew increasingly aware that lack of criminal conduct did not preclude Blacks from dying at the hands of lynch mobs. Also, the threat of death did not deter Blacks from resisting; Blacks realized that while individuals could always be attacked, united action might eliminate racial oppression. The Till case pushed Blacks into action; if not for their own sake, then for the sake of their children.

III. The ‘Facts’ of the Emmett Till Lynching

There are many versions of the sequence of events surrounding the Emmett Till lynching. In the many conflicting accounts that have followed this incident some certainties, as well as contentions, arise. These certainties are accepted because they are confirmed by many of the publicized accounts: Emmett Till was born and reared in the North, Chicago. At the age of 14, his mother sent him South for the summer. Knowingly
or unknowingly, depending on the various interpretations, Till broke the unwritten social code and stepped out of his place by acting inappropriately to a white woman. While some say that Till "wolf whistled" at Carolyn Bryant, the White female whose husband owned the store where Till and his friends were shopping, other accounts accuse Till of speaking to or even grabbing her.

In the flurry of events that were to follow, Bryant’s husband and brother-in-law became aware of this infraction of the social code. They traveled to the home of Mose Wright, the uncle with whom Till was spending the summer, around 2 am and asked to see the "Chicago Boy." When Till’s uncle tried to tell them that Till would be punished and hesitated to hand over his nephew, Bryant and Milam threatened the 64 year old. They advised him that if he did not comply with their demand, he would not live to see his 65th birthday. Ultimately surrendering Till to Bryant and Milam, Wright believed Till would sustain a beating and nothing more. Mr. Wright watched his nephew leave in Bryant’s truck, not knowing that he would never see Emmett Till alive again. When Emmett had not returned by that evening, Mose Wright called Till’s mother, Mamie Till-Bradley, and told her what had happened.

In the meantime, Bryant and Milam had driven Till to an unused barn and beat him until the sun came up, and his eye had popped out of the socket. They then made Till carry a huge

---

cotton gin fan to edge of the Tallahatchie River, shot him in the head and dumped his body in the river. When Till's body resurfaced less than a week later, He was swollen and unrecognizable. Till was only identified because he always wore a signet ring with the initials "FT," which had been given to him by his father. Contrary to lynching tradition, his murderers, were arrested by the local officials. Put on trial for Till's murder, Bryant and Milam denied having harmed Till. They conceded to giving Till a stiff talking to and sending him on his way. After they were acquitted and all appeals were denied, they proudly sold their story to Look magazine. They contended they would have let Till go free, if only he had showed them some respect. Bryant and Milam claimed that all the while they beat Till, he would not bow to them in the subservient manner the South expected. For this staunch rebellion, that is, refusing to cower and grovel in the mannerisms of subservience, Bryant and Milam felt that had to kill Emmett Till.⁷

This case differed from the many before it, first of all, because Bryant and Milam were brought up on charges and tried for the charge of murdering Emmett Till. This had not been the tradition of the South; however with the national eye on the South via the media coverage the case received Mississippi had to put forth some semblance of justice on behalf of Emmett Till. This case also stood out from many before it because Mrs. Mamie

⁷Look, 46-49.
Till-Bradley held an open casket funeral. Thousands attended despite the inability to recognize Emmett Till from the condition of his body; Jet magazine published the pictures. For those who thought that atrocities such as these did not happen any more, Till’s lynching and funeral were a rude awakening. In essence, Till had been lynched twice, by extralegal and legal means. All of America was made aware of the brutality of Till’s murder. Beyond the basic details, the stories differ regarding the concrete action Till took to ‘deserve’ his cruel demise. But now, Whites who did not participate in the act could not longer pretend it did not happen. Blacks who thought they had left it behind when they left the South could not deny its existence and threat any longer.

America was witness to the strength of Till’s family and its dedication to stopping the atrocity of lynching from occurring again. The intense media attention that this event wielded, as photos of Till’s body graced the cover of Jet magazine along with the details of his case, yielded national attention. The indignation of Mrs. Bradley about speaking to the press clearly and frequently, as a mother, an educator and a Black American, stirred mothers, Blacks and Americans across the country. Mrs. Bradley’s dedication to seeing that “this did not happen again” was evident in her actions as well as her proclamation that she wanted the “world [to] see what they did to

---

[her] son." 9 The testimony of Till's uncle, Mose Wright, to identify, in open court, the men who seized his nephew, took remarkable strength and garnered respect from the Black community who knew its ramifications.10

Indeed, the very political consciousness of the American people of that era, based on the South's previous actions and the details of the death of a mere child as a result, could also be listed as strong reason for why the Till lynching is significant. The presence of all of these particularities has, in all probability, helped America to remember Emmett Till's story. Likewise, their absence has perhaps secured that forgotten place for scores of others; Blacks have been killed throughout time, and with less provocation, to send the same message.

IV. Assumptions and Implications of the Emmett Till Case

Many argue that there is no one to blame except Emmett Till himself for his death. These persons argue that if Till had known and obeyed the social codes of his world, he would not have, so childishly blundered or loudly boasted, in a fashion that led to his bludgeoned and swollen demise. This argument


10Juan Williams. Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-65. (New York: Viking, 1997), 47-48; 49.
assumes that if Till had known and stayed in his place, he would not have died. This assumption ignores the many Blacks before Till who have been murdered regardless of whether or not they were guilty. This argument also singularizes the attack on Till by separating him from similar attacks on Blacks attempting to acquire human rights in America. Till’s lynching is not separate from those stories; the motivation for killing Till were based on the same tenets that extinguished those Black lives.

In addition, this assumption ignores the negation of Black America’s right to the American caveats of ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ and restricts Blacks to do only what Whites tell them to do. By assuming that Blacks were entitled to this subhuman place, this conjecture accepts an inferior status, and White control, over Blacks. In addition, several other points of contention still subvert this problematic assertion of Till’s blame. The actions of Till’s murderers, for example, even within the bounds of an illogical racialized southern system, did not fit the ‘crime.’ Till’s body was so disfigured, by the horrific beating that he had received, that one policeman deemed it the “worst that he had observed in eight years of law enforcement.”¹¹ For that reason, and many more, this story is disquieting. It was so alarming that even a member of Mississippi police, often purported as a regime that aided in forcefully keeping Blacks in

¹¹ Whitfield, 22.
their place, noticed its severity and gave testament to its significance.

V. The Significance of the Emmett Till Case

Emmett Till's death, in particular, is often written as the very real, but also symbolic, answer to the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision, and any other attempts to regain their humanity that Blacks in America might make. As Stephen Whitfield, in A Death in the Delta states, the Till Murder was "the definitive expression of Southern racism, the lethal but logical culmination of the Jim Crow system itself."12 The chronological placement of the Till murder, for example, within a year and a half of the Brown decision, reminded Blacks of the resistance they would meet if they decided to continue in the social and legal battle for Black human and civil rights. However, the Till lynching did not serve the purpose its White perpetrators or supporters believed it would.

The motivation and focus on the civil rights struggle gained new momentum by the public murder of Emmett Till. The viciousness of the Till lynching convinced Blacks of the importance of securing their civil and human rights, if not for themselves then for the scores of men, women, and children,

12 Whitfield, ix.
killed by the South’s wrath, and the future of their own children. The Till murder served as a catalyst to the already established civil rights resistance movement; it reminded Blacks of the reason for their fight and the lengths and tactics their White opposition was willing to use to hinder their efforts.  

This story is also significant because it directly connects all of the individual, historical attacks to a larger force of Black repression within the American past. Till’s lynching was meant to send a message to Blacks about their place in society; just as the Convict Lease Programs and Black Codes of the nineteenth century and the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counter Intelligence Program of the twentieth century were meant to show the ramifications of ignoring social and racial codes. For as Frederick Douglass wrote, America, the South in particular, has tried to keep Black Americans in slavery, “though it is now gone, its asserted spirit remains,” while it may not exist in a formal, de jure manner, de facto observances keep it in place. As such, these occurrences, in particular the murder of Emmett Till, were not isolated events; they are exemplary of America’s historic repression of Black human and civil rights throughout the centuries.

13 Whitfield, 107.

VI. The Effect of the Emmett Till Lynching on Black America

It would be negligent to look at this event in isolation from the people it affected most, Black America. Their wholesale presence at Till’s funeral shows their indignation at remembering this event, its significance to themselves and their children’s lives and their determination to fight for civil and human rights in light, and in spite, of this event. This event meant more than the death of one more son or brother or Black boy; it was also the story of what happens when Blacks see these occurrences as linked to their fate in the same system. Emmett Till cannot be forgotten by Blacks, because to forget him, would be to forget themselves and the countless others that have died in the same manner. It is not that those Black men, women, and children are of less importance, rather Till’s lynching reminded Blacks of these often forgotten Black sons and daughters and the thousands more who would die if Blacks failed to change their conditions. The death of Emmett Till was so appalling that it was able to act as a catalyst for Black political consciousness, despite the wholesale repression of Black efforts.

The Emmett Till case served specific purposes for Black Americans and the American people as a whole. For the Black community, the media coverage, pictures, proclamations, and such served to cement Emmett Till within Black history as a symbolic tribute to those who are often forgotten. We may never recall
the names of the countless Black women, children and men that met the same fate as Emmett Till, but still we remember him as representative of the scores of others, whose names we do not know. For America as a whole, these particularities focused attention on the plight of Black Americans, within a system which would not allow Black children to grow into adulthood. For what might have been considered, if committed by a White teenager, impertinent but not worthy of death, Emmett Till met a bludgeoned end.

Steeped in the politics of the civil rights era, the murder of Emmett Till is not only of symbolic importance, it is of cultural significance to the Black community and America as a whole. It reflects the determination of the Black community in the wake of the barrage of similar attacks before and after Till’s death, to prevent its reoccurrence, and certify that the promises of democracy would become burning realities for all American people.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion:

Racial Violence

And the Social Construction of American Life

I. Introduction

Blacks in America found that though America claimed to be the bastion of democracy and the supporter of freedom, it required the dehumanization of Blacks. Because White America condemned Blacks to an inferior status and needed to believe it was entitled to the power that it received as a result, the relationship between Blacks and America was strained. Blacks hoped, as Frederick Douglass did in his 1893 introduction to The Reason Why The Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American’s Contribution to Columbian Literature, that America would live up to its lofty philosophical tenets. Blacks clung to the American ideals, hoping that with
the passage of time their conditions would improve. Blacks wanted to speak well of their country:

that American law is now the shield alike of black and white; that the spirit of slavery and class domination has no longer any lurking place in any part of the country; that the statement of human rights contained in the glorious Declaration of Independence, including the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is not an empty boast nor a mere rhetorical flourish, but a soberly and honestly accepted truth, to be carried out in good faith....

Blacks could not claim America lived up to these ideals "without qualification and without flagrant disregard of the truth."

Blacks urged America to live up to its ideals, and questioned its actions when it did not. The very presence of Black people demonstrated the hypocrisy of American ideals. They contradicted the American image of liberty and freedom. The brutal treatment of Blacks was a necessary blemish on the American Constitution. After all, White America had become a wealthy, world power only by cementing Blacks into an inferior position.

The condemnation of Blacks to the most inferior status had been promoted through various avenues. Whites had systematically made it impossible for Blacks to escape or shield themselves from violence against them. Black humanity could not

---


2 Ibid.

be acknowledged or restored in any minor facet for that acknowledgment would undermine the rationalizations America had used to subordinate Blacks. They were a double threat; Blacks were America's stabilizer and its greatest weakness. Whites would fight to keep America as it was, a land characterized by White supremacy and Black subjugation, whatever the cost.

It was precisely for this reason that the actions of each Black individual were treated as representative of the entire group. It was for this reason that "punishments" could be meted out as if the entire group was at fault. It was for this reason that Emmett Till's body could be so destroyed that it was almost impossible to recognize him; White lynch mobs saw each Black individual as representative of the group and delivered a punishment of overkill, one fit for ten men instead of one. Although, the damage was done to one mother's child, each example sent a message to the entire group-- "You have a place, stay in it!"

II. The Cultural Foundations of Racial Violence in America

The establishment of racism at the foundation of America dictated Black treatment. Designation of Blacks as less than human in the American laws and customs reinforced the sentiment of Black inferiority. The application of the sub-humanity
argument to every facet of American life including the legal system would impact Black life in the most significant manner. ⁴ As a result, Blacks would be subjected to institutional and ideological racism such as that documented in The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders: A Comment.

In the twentieth century, Blacks would be forced to become the institutionalized symbol of a criminal. Blacks would be arrested and jailed at rates disproportionate to their population percentage, not because they committed crimes at a more alarming rate than Whites but because the “institutional racism in the United States [was] nearly as old as the nation itself.” ⁵ Blacks could be arrested for unsubstantiated charges and sentenced to jail time, while Whites would be acquitted when all evidence pointed to their guilt. ⁶ The privilege of Whiteness extended to every facet of American culture, as detriment of Blackness was reinforced and maintained.

Blacks found that institutional racism was deeply embedded in American society:

Slavery was only the earliest and most blatant practice. Political, economic, educational, and religious policies cooperated with slaveholders to ‘keep the nigger in his place.’ Emancipation changed little. Jim Crow laws as well as residential and employment discrimination guaranteed that black citizens remained under the control of white citizens.

⁵ Knowles, 4.
⁶ Bromley, 100-113.
Second-class citizenship quickly became a social fact as well as legal status.\textsuperscript{7}

American society sustained ideological patterns which have historically and presently been appropriately labeled as "institutionally racist."\textsuperscript{8} These patterns can be identified in other factors crucial to the social development of Blacks.\textsuperscript{9} To define these patterns, we must acknowledge that the social arrangements which fix unequal opportunities for Black and White citizens can be traced back through American history—farther back, as a matter of fact, than even the beginning of slavery.\textsuperscript{10}

It is from a European socio-historic foundation that America grew. With the underlying current of Black subjugation, Americans were able to substantiate their actions towards Blacks on American soil. America’s relationship with Africans within their boundaries mirrored their European ancestral history, as a child often does its parents. The unequal relationship between Europe and Africa sets the stage for the American story. Black Americans could not be allowed to step outside of their assigned societal places; for if the status of any one player was altered, it would change the entire structure of the system that connected them. Joel Kovel expresses this notion when he writes the following:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Knowles, 6.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Knowles, 6-7.
\end{flushright}
The reduction of a black person to a thing afforded the slaver much more than gratification. It also became necessary for his security. In order to safeguard the gains he was extracting with his new world view, and to protect himself from his inner reaction to what he was doing to other humans, he had to maintain absolute control...[for] the slaver had to contend with real threats to his power.  

The necessity of absolute control gave birth to lynching as a form of public punishment. Lynching became harsher because White property investment was replaced by a stronger need to maintain absolute control of the structure of their entire society.

The institutionalization of racial subordination allowed the ideology of White superiority and Black sub-humanity to be used in all facets of American life, including housing to job possibilities as well as social and political positions. Racial oppression governed the very structure and success of American institutions; for example, racialized science proved Black inferiority and sub-humanity, and justified Black disfranchisement, unequal education opportunities, and lack of marked social mobility. These factors established the institutional context for the development of lynching as a form of racial dominance and social control in America.

11 Kovel, 18-19.
III. Fear as a Political Weapon: The Strategic Role of Lynching

The use of lynching had more to do with Whites defining themselves as superior and in control than with irrational murder. Restricting Black travel, voting rights and maintaining that lynching rectified the rising brutality of Blacks was merely a ruse to distract the world from seeing the White American necessity for absolute control. Far more heinous than telling Blacks where they could live and inhibiting free choice of employer was the mob action that all but guaranteed Black death. The phenomenon of lynching, reminiscent of the public displays of punishment during slavery and the Middle passage, rose as the most effective means to try to convince Blacks to stay in their predetermined spheres.

White lynch mobs extinguished the lives of many thousand Black people and sent a message to millions more, all to maintain the structure codified by American slavers:

[They] did not simply own the body of his black slave—although even that may have been more extreme than some earlier variants of slavery, where the slave’s freedom was but limited and only his work owned.\(^{13}\)

Whites attempted to control the very human context in which Blacks had to exist. The American slaver reduced his Black slave from a human being to an object:

\(^{13}\) Kovel, 19.
he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange.\textsuperscript{14}

Perpetuating an ultimate Black destiny of inferiority, the slaver manipulated the very definition of Black life in an attempt to define Black reality and humanity.

In the creation of this world market, the Westerner was changing his entire view of reality— and changing reality in accordance with his new conception of it. Thus in the new culture of the West, the black human as reduced to a black thing, virtually the same in key respects as the rest of non-human nature— all of which could become property.\textsuperscript{15}

In creating, maintaining, and justifying racial subordination, Whites made it extremely difficult for Blacks to express themselves as human beings. Whites restricted the lives of Blacks to that of property that needed to be instructed. The only way to do this was to use extreme measures to intimidate Blacks.

Whites made sure that Blacks could not take comfort in being able to just live their lives. They installed hoops and tricks that Blacks had to perform, like pets or small children, to ensure the good favor of their masters. As in slavery, Black mothers had to teach their children how to conduct themselves. Because Whites still attacked innocent Blacks, this instruction could not end in the nineteen thirties, as some researchers would

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
like us to believe. As Mrs. Till-Bradley learned, this
instruction did not guarantee the safety of one's child.

Blacks were continuously faced with the precarious nature
of their existence. They never knew who would be its next victim
or what new form this White need for social control would take.
Whites used lynching to force a cyclical relationship between
Blacks and crime, for example, as a way to prove that Blacks were
innately more prone to commit crimes. Purporting that Blacks were
more prone to violence allowed Whites to assume, when crimes were
committed, the villain was always Black. A Black attacker was
singled out, regardless of solid evidence of their guilt, and
lynched. The fingerling and execution of Blacks added to the
numbers of Blacks involved in crimes, thus reinforcing the
assumption that Blacks were indeed attacking Whites.

IV. The Emmett Till Case: An American Tragedy

The Emmett Till lynching, as Ms. Hudson-Weems contends,
should be heralded as the catalyst for the Black Civil Rights
Movement. Although he lost his life, Emmett Till brought the
Black community together in the battle for human rights. His
murder horrified Black America and reminded Blacks that their

16Jesse Daniel Ames. The Changing Character of Lynching: Review of Lynching,
lives were uncertain; even the slightest action, deemed inappropriate by Whites, could result in their death.

In addition, this case teaches that even small actions of resistance can bring change. Like the solitary slave woman that started a wave of resistance by poisoning her master, Emmett Till brought the iniquities of the practice of lynching to light. Because of this case, Blacks realized that they had nothing to lose. Forced to face Till’s body in Jet magazine, Blacks could no longer let lynching reign without a concerted effort against changing the system that supported it.

Whites were forced to face Blacks willing to die for their civil and human rights. Whites who had condoned Black subjugation by simple non-action had contradictory images coming into their homes through their television sets. Blacks showed the nation that they were intent on obtaining first-class citizenship. They faced police dogs, fire hoses, jail and death, with and without the cameras aimed at them. Though obtaining Civil Rights could be considered a pyrrhic victory, Blacks risked their precarious existence for a chance at being treated as human beings.
V. Racial Violence and the Shaping of the American Social Order

Some seventy three years since the Emmett Till lynching, the threat of White violence against Blacks still exists. While these threats might not be defined today as lynching or even come in the shape of night-riding hooded Klansmen or large mobs, they send the same message. These tactics have become increasingly difficult to prove as they continue to exist both inside and outside of the blatant form of physical race violence that was lynching. Connections must be made between the covert and overt limitations placed on Blacks in America both in the past and the present.

The legacies of violence continue into the present. To comprehend the connection between these various forms of violence against Blacks, one must look at each particular case within the context of American history. Blacks of every nationality are guilty until proven innocent. Whites punish Blacks without provocation and evidence. In the Luima sodomy case, for example, Abner Louima was arrested in front of the Rendez-Vous Club in Flatbush, Brooklyn late one night, when police arrived in force to break up a fight outside the club. While Louima had done nothing, he was arrested and placed in a police cruiser. The Revolutionary Worker, in analyzing the case, says the following:
This was not an example of a tense cop "overreacting" to an extreme situation... from the beginning the cops made it clear that they were punishing Haitians—"for being Haitians. One cop yelled, "Why do you people come to this country if you can't speak English?" The cops loudly called the Haitian people gathered at the Rendez-Vous Club "n****rs." 

It is important to note the similarity with lynching methods, the cops in this case use rationality in addition to brutality.

The beating of Abner Louima was drawn out and methodical. After arresting Louima, several cops met in different locations and took turns beating him. This was not an example of one or two bad cops going against standard procedures. At least half a dozen cops were involved in this brutality. They had an established routine for their attack. For example, all of them reportedly removed their name tags before beating Louima. To add insult to injury, Abner Louima was then taken to a precinct bathroom where officer Justin Volpe rammed a plunger into his rectum and then into his mouth.

This was pre-meditated: Volpe had borrowed gloves from another cop to protect his hands. A second cop held Louima as this was done. Volpe threatened to kill Louima if he made any noise...

Like the Emmett Till lynching, the Abner Louima case is an exception. His story broke into the media because Abner Louima had survived and dared to tell what the police had done. The


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.
Louima family was also determined to bring the specific details of this brutality to light because they were so extreme and infuriating. The Abner Louima case provides a glimpse at the daily reality of police operations—where brutality is expected, encouraged and protected by the system itself.

In isolation, and with media manipulation of the details, the Louima case might seem to symbolize the expression of the alleged Black pathology for crime, or a mere coincidence that has nothing to do with race. Knowledge of the history of iniquitous destruction of and disregard for Black life, in addition to the longevity of these trends dating back to the initial contact between Blacks and Whites on the African continent, would make this argument difficult to believe. If one is not aware of this history, or does not see the connection between the past and the present, cases as extreme as the Louima sodomy seem detached from the history of racial violence in America.

Throughout American history, Blacks have resisted White definitions of Black inferiority and sub-humanity. As a result, Whites have restricted Black progress to secure the continuation of their power. Whites used lynching as a means of terror, to deter Blacks from stepping outside of their White assigned, inferior places. Contrary to White arguments, Blacks were not lynched because of any innate pathology to commit crime. Rather,
Whites lynched Blacks to maintain the structure that reinforced white superiority and White power.

The contention that Blacks were the victims of White violence, as opposed to the reverse, is contrary to most racial violence research. In line with the time honored tradition of 'blaming the victim,' some argue that Blacks were treated harshly because they were inherently violent.\(^{20}\) According to these studies, Whites were only attempting to keep their savage tendencies at bay and preserve the spirit of the South.\(^{21}\) These assertions maintained that Blacks deserved what they received for failing to acquiesce to White designations of their place. To place the blame on Blacks is to see the smoke and disregard the fire.

This study argues that Whites, retroactively, created reasons for killing Blacks. The creation of the Black attacker, and/or the savage beast, absolved Whites of the initial crimes of capture, enslavement, disfranchisement and segregation. Lynching Blacks, based on arguments of this Black beast attacking Whites, then justified the rights of Whites to protect themselves from this attacker. With an examination of the details of this history, we see that Whites are the ones who have attacked

---

\(^{20}\) Frederickson, 275.

Blacks, for laying claim to the same ideals Whites held high in their break from Europe. Whites denied Blacks the right to be treated as human beings.

Future studies should continue to link these seemingly isolated events of violence, with a racial element, to the troubled relationship that Blacks and Whites have had in America. Researchers should extend this argument to various disciplines, outlining the ideologies that drive the various manifestations of racial violence. Future generations should remain aware of current research and anticipate how the information from these studies will benefit all Americans. Some recent attempts to analyze the DNA of Blacks as different from that of Whites have provided biologists with the possibility of manipulating that information towards the same end as the mustard seed tests of the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{22} One should not assume that the spirit of a country that spent an extended period of time trying to prove that Blacks were inhuman and inferior would easily acquiesce to contrasting data. As Douglass writes in 1865 about the end of slavery, "we must wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth."\textsuperscript{23} Whites have used various forms of violence to keep Blacks within certain societal boundaries. No matter the manifestation, Americans must recognize the message beneath this


\textsuperscript{23} Mullane, 308-11.
history, and decide if the America of the past is to be radically transformed in the future.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


