The Red Record: Lynching, Literature, and Black Flesh in the Press

2022

How to Look at Lynching: A Digital Red Record of Southern Mississippi

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Figure 1: the wreckage following the Clinton Massacre of 1875 (*Clinton*, 2021)

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Witnesses

Given the brutality and obscenity of lynchings, how can we define a witness of such an event? What goes into the act of witnessing such violence? In studying accounts of lynchings from a 21st century perspective, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that the identity of the person who created the account, how they frame the account, the perspective from which the account is given, and the identity of the person "reading" the account all play significant roles in how one understands lynching in America. Using the dark and diverse history of Southern Mississippi between 1870 and 1940 as a control for context, these factors can be more easily observed and adapted to other regions of the country. Those who live in the southern half of the Hospitality State form an identity of place through their understanding of history, which includes their capacity and willingness to mindfully read these accounts of lynchings, accounts heavily influenced by the identities of the authors, filmmakers, photographers, etc.. This is evident in multiple disciplines which offer accounts of lynching, including journalism, literature, and photography. Despite the differences in the demands and formats of these different disciplines, each mediates the same factors which define the process of witnessing a lynching. Regardless of the field, the distance between violence and comprehension is paved with self-perception.

The Place

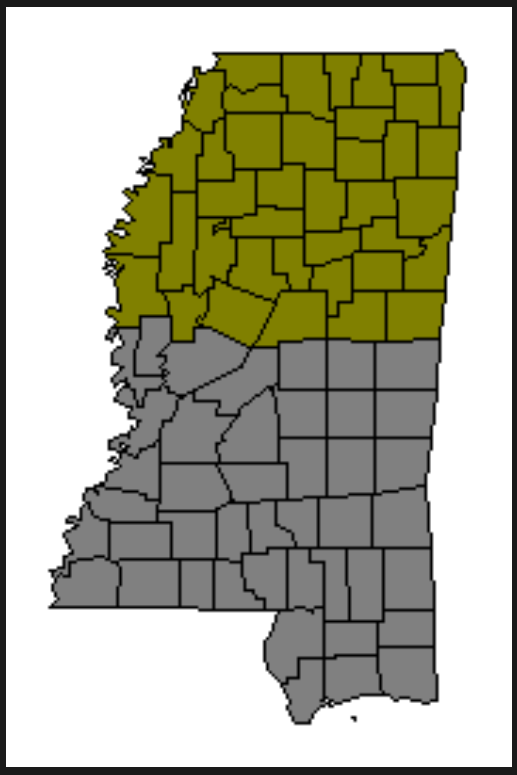


Figure 4

South Mississippi (figure 4) grew up with the dawn of American Modernity in a Post-Reconstruction South. Following the Revolution of 1875- where White Mississippians regained political control, effectively ending and reversing progress made in the Reconstruction Era- most of the leaders of business and government were former Confederate officers (Sturkey, 2018). By far, the largest industry in the region was lumber. Not only did towns such as Hattiesburg develop around large lumber and sawmills, but economic stimulation also came from the transportation of this lumber by ship and train. This cemented coastal cities like Gulfport and river cities like Vicksburg as integral to the formation of a "New South" and connected the southern region of the state with modern railroad systems. The most ambitious and impactful of these endeavors was the creation of the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad company which connected the Gulf Coast with the Pine Belt. The G. & S.I. Railroad is often credited as being the backbone upon which the region was able to prosper.

However, that backbone was not made of American ingenuity and the optimism of the New South, but rather by using forced labor by mostly Black convicts leased to the railroad company- slavery after emancipation. 225 of the Black convict workers died or disappeared, causing the State Penitentiary to cancel the lease and the Government to outlaw the leasing practice altogether (Sturkey, 2018) Given how integral the history of the sawmills and the railroads were in building the Coastal and Pine Belt economies of South Mississippi, one must wonder how this oppressive death toll fits into the residents' place identity, or individual's perception of self in relation to various physical, cultural, behavioral, and historical aspects of their environment (Proshansky, 1970).

Figure 5

Figure 6

Currently, the building which once housed the G. & S. I. Railroad offices (Figure 3) now operates as the Center for Ocean Enterprise for the University of Southern Mississippi (Figure 6), complete with a historical marker nearby which has no mention of the tragedy (Figure 5). However, this instance of cultural amnesia in South Mississippi would certainly be the rule, not the exception (McMillen 1900).

The story of the G. & S. I. Railroad reflects the blatant and growing disregard, even contempt for Black life in the late 1800s. As one Black Mississippian described; "Back in those days, to kill a Negro wasn't nothing. It was like killing a chicken or killing a snake, The Whites would say, 'Niggers jest supposed to die, ain't no damn good anyway- so jest go on an' kill 'em." (McNeil, 1990)

So, they did. Between 1877 and 1950, a total of 656 documented lynchings occurred in Mississippi, a majority of whom were Black Americans (Thompson 2011).

Figure 7

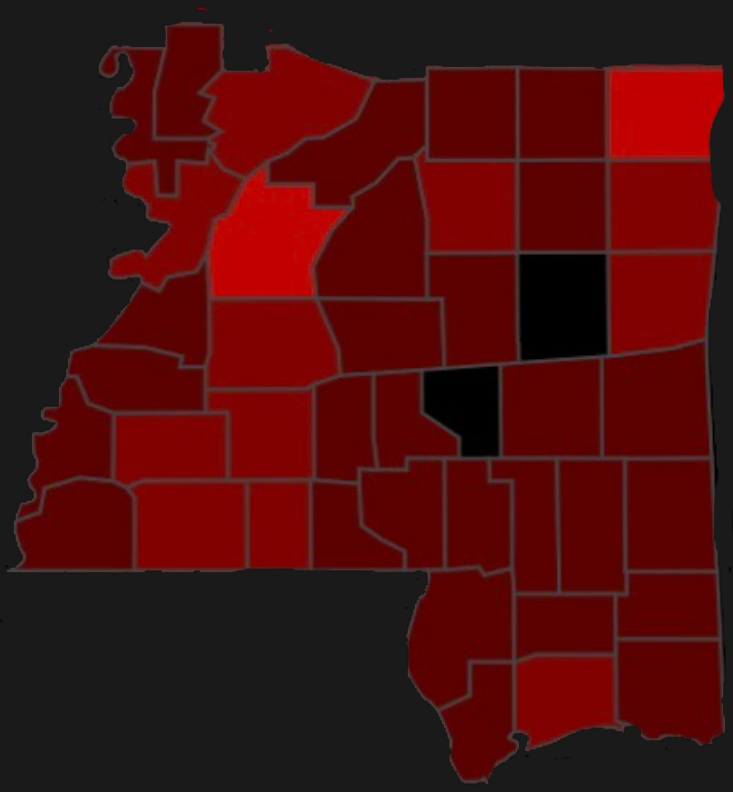


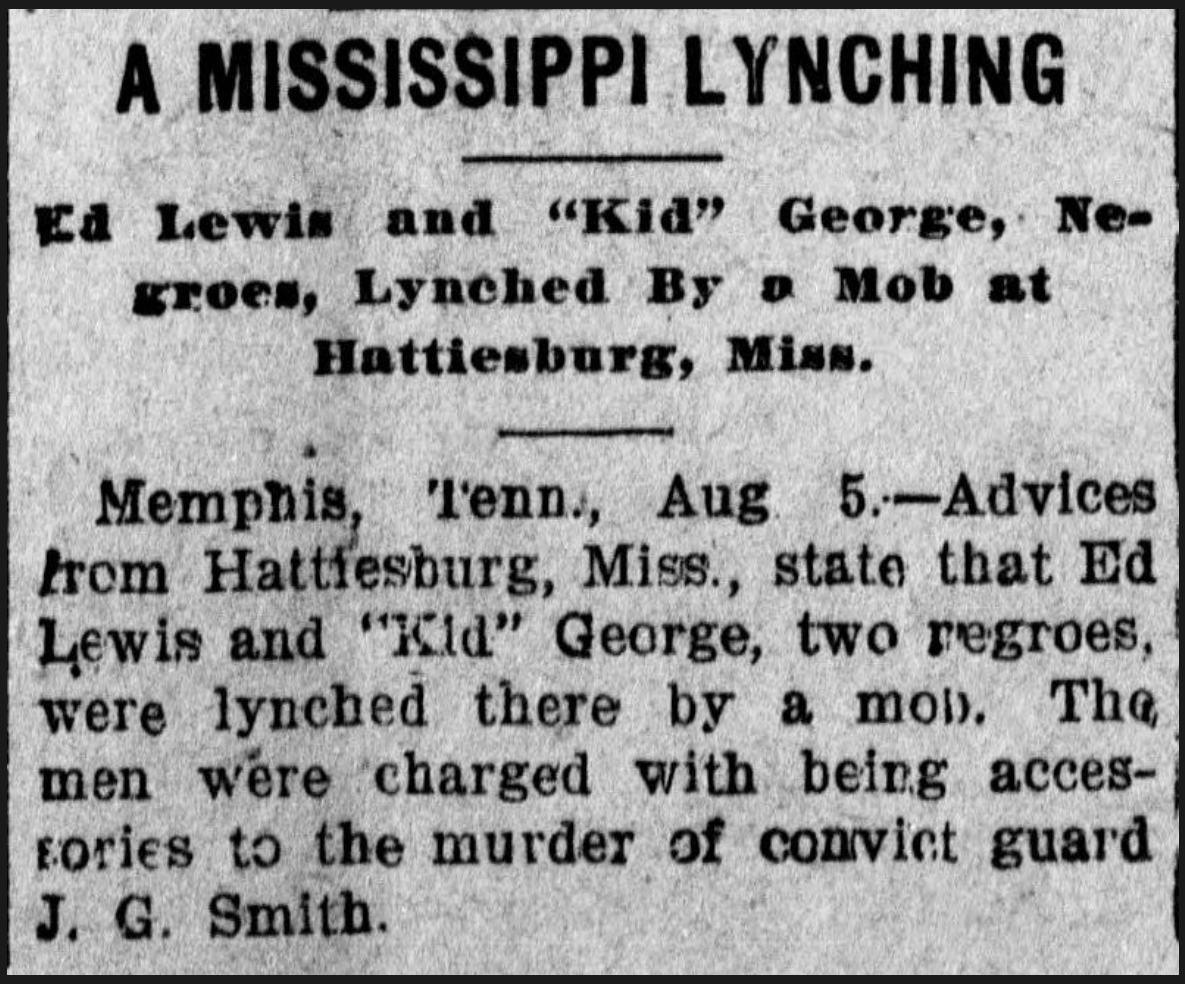
Figure 8: Brightness of the red represents the volume of recorded lynchings in each county (EJI, 2022).

The Press as a Witness to Lynching

South Mississippi contributed significantly to these statistics. In June of 1902, Amos Jones was imprisoned in the county jail in Hattiesburg for supposedly planning to kill a conductor on the G. & S. I. Railroad. He attempted to escape, but was unsuccessful. Before he could be tried, a mob broke into the jail, fought off the sheriff, and lynched Jones on a telegraph pole about a half mile away after dragging, mutilating, and shooting him (Sturkey, 2018).

The version of this event in the local press, however, was highly sensationalized. On August 10, 1903, *The Hattiesburg Daily Progress* printed an account which describes Amos Jones as a "desperate negro" who tried to remove the jailer's tongue with one hand and choke him out with the other before shooting him multiple times and running upstairs ("Negro Shoots M. M. Sexton," 1903). Any account with such a biased and exaggerated narrative requires extreme skepticism at best. In many instances, such news articles are our only evidence for lynchings in South Mississippi. But, those same sources are deeply embellished and sensationalized, calling attention to the need for close readings conscious of the identity and agenda of the writer.

In the Post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras of South Mississippi, the White press and the rhetoric which its writers used served one of the primary goals of the White majority of the state: the justification of the mistreatment of Mississippi's Black population. In order to accomplish this, many stories changed and embellished details or painted the Black victims to be deserving of their fate. Other times, journalists would justify it by writing a short article with little attention and acting as if such brutality is acceptable. (Figure 9) Whichever method of normalizing brutality the papers used, the reader can identify the inconsistencies when conscious of the racial identities of the journalists.



A MISSISSIPPI LYNCHING

Ed Lewis and "Kid" George, Negroes, Lynched By a Mob at Hattiesburg, Miss.

Memphis, Tenn., Aug 5.—Advices from Hattiesburg, Miss., state that Ed Lewis and "Kid" George, two negroes, were lynched there by a mob. The men were charged with being accessories to the murder of convict guard J. G. Smith.

Figure 9

Take the account of the lynching of Walton Clayton printed in *The Birmingham Age* on August 6, 1908, for example. According to the report which was wired to Birmingham from Mobile, Alabama, Clayton assaulted a white woman at her home on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. Mr. Clayton was then taken across state lines for a trial, but lynched before a verdict could be reached ("Two Negroes are Lynched for Crime", 1908)

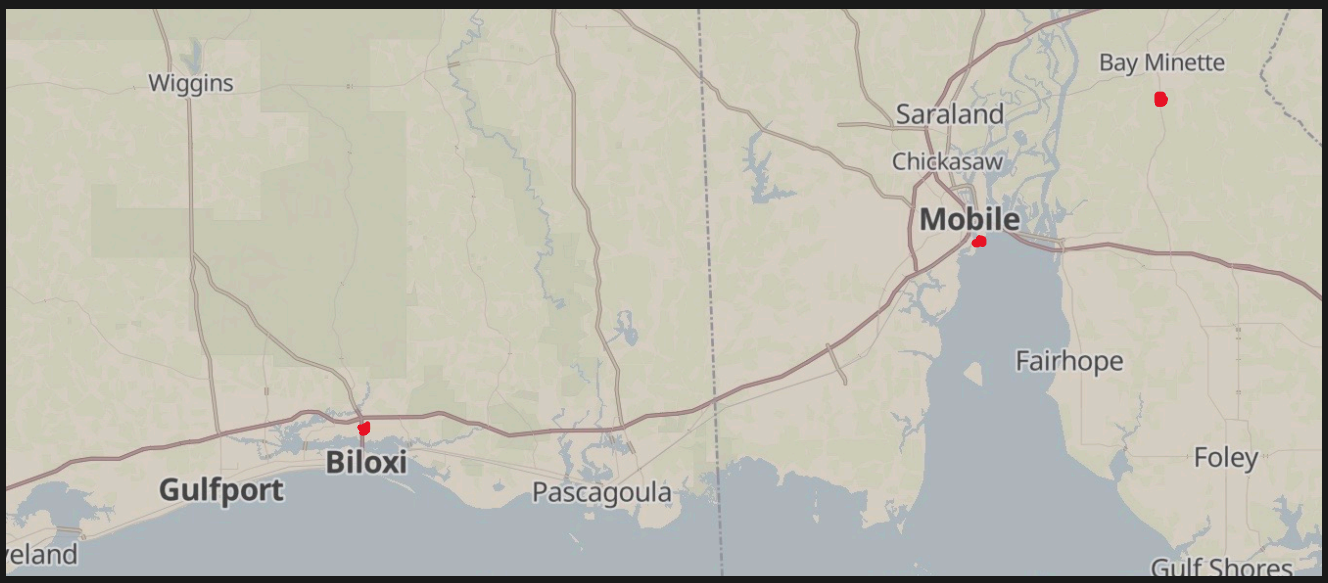


Figure 10

The following inconsistencies bring reasonable doubt to the accusations against Clayton:

1) The article states the woman's home is six miles below Biloxi, MS. Given the fact that Biloxi is a coastal city, the article seems to claim the woman's house sat in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico.
2) The actual lynching is said to have occurred twenty miles outside Bay Minette in Alabama near the scene of the crime. However, this supposed lynching scene is a great distance from the original location of the alleged crime in the Gulf south of Biloxi.
3) Conveniently, the article claims the woman's uncle just-so-happened to have known Clayton in prison, where, the uncle claimed, Clayton confessed to murder. More likely, this was fabricated to further deface Clayton's character and justify his death.

Another clear example of journalism as a tool for asserting the White Man's rhetoric on racial identities is the story of Charles Caldwell (Figure 11). Caldwell was a Black State Senator during Reconstruction. He had, however, stepped down following the Revolution of 1875, becoming a community leader in Clinton, Mississippi and advocating for Black Mississippians and their right to citizenship. While organizing for voting rights that same year, a race riot erupted in Clinton, killing and wounding many, mostly Black. This event became known as the Clinton Massacre of 1875 (Figure 21)(*Clinton*, 2021). Being a Black political organizer in the community, Caldwell was mentioned for his interventions and aiding of the Black citizens in *The Weekly Clarion's* account of the event, printed on September 8, 1875 in Jackson (The Weekly Clarion, 1875).

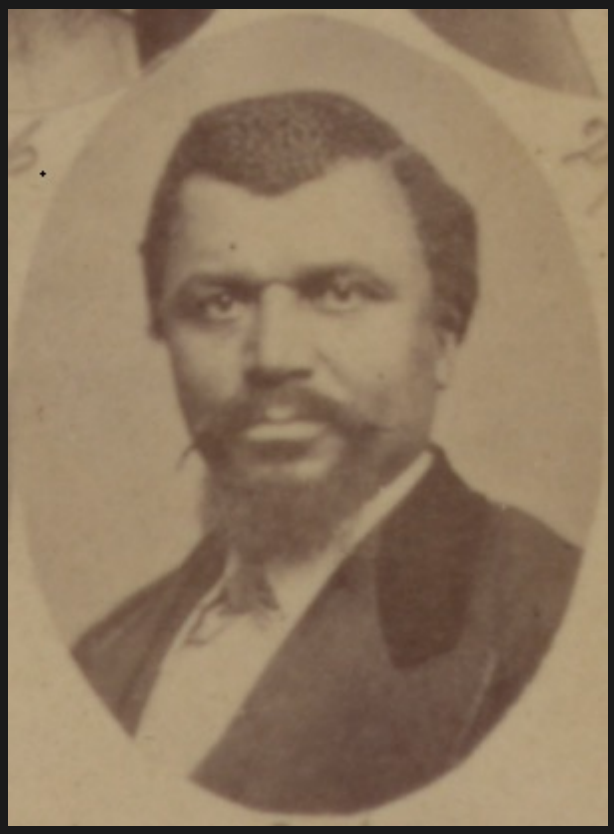


Figure 11

Three months later, Charles Caldwell and his brother were killed by a mob of White men. The account given by the *Richland Beacon* in Rayville, Louisiana on January 8, 1876 is an extremely unrealistic and sensationalist one. The article describes a night where Caldwell, a respected community member and ex-U.S. Senator, was wandering around town drunk when he wandered into a store, yelling. According to mainstream news reports, one of the men in the shop "accidentally" fired his gun at Caldwell, which prompted Caldwell to try to kill the men in a shootout. Caldwell's brother heard about the fight and came on a horse to assist Charles, but was immediately shot and killed by the men. Eventually, Caldwell was killed by the white men, too and his death was framed as a relief (The Richland Beacon, 1876).

This was a very detailed and dramatic account, albeit probably fictitious. *Somebody* must have been interviewed in some capacity. However, in the report from the Hinds County Grand Jury about the riot and Caldwell's death, printed in *The Daily Clarion* from Jackson on February 9, 1876, the jurors were unable to find any "proof sufficient to attach guilt to any man."(The Daily Clarion, 1876) When witnesses do not testify, the record is incomplete.

THE CLINTON AFFAIR.

The Trouble and its Origin.—Full Particulars.

Figure 12 (1875)

Beyond inconsistencies, the language which the White journalists used undeniably betrays the influence of their whiteness on their coverage and its purposes. This is clear in accounts such as the one of Clod Singleton's murder in the *Stone County Enterprise* from Wiggins, Mississippi, printed under the headline, "Negro Lynched at Poplarville" on April 20, 1918. (Negro Lynched at Poplarville, 1918) The article says the crowd gathered outside the jail and Singleton was "hanged without much ado." This depiction of mob violence as civilized and orderly is intended to cultivate a certain positive self-perception among whites. Such inconsistent, imaginative, and heavily biased journalism covering lynching by White publications were not solely intended to degrade Black People so as to justify lynching but rather the justification of lynching promoted a White identity which was not just superior physically and mentally, but morally as well.

This idea of innocence as central to White identity heavily influenced White accounts of lynchings. It is an identity White people have defended and clung to through centuries of justifications and it is an identity which acts as a barrier for White People in South Mississippi to understand and remember the history of lynching to this day. But while much of South Mississippi is content with forgetting, there are others who cannot forget.

Figure 13

On May 13, 1910, *The Hattiesburg News* printed a story titled, "OBSESSED BY FEAR MAN ENDS HIS LIFE." The article describes Lucas Mozaraa, an Austrian living in Biloxi with his wife and seven children. After losing his job, Mozaraa becomes terrified the Biloxi community will lynch him; consistent with other lynchings allegedly caused by vagrancy and unemployment (Harris, 1995). To escape his fate, Mozaraa commits suicide. While the article frames Lucas Mozaraa as delusional, he had good reason to be scared. When lynching victims were not Black, they were foreign. Lynching was not only a way to construct a Black identity as inferior and a White one as superior. It was also a way to construct American identity as White, creating internal struggles for Black Patriots and making anything un-American (or non-white) a possible target for racial violence. What Mozaraa is experiencing is not delusion. It is the trauma of constant fear. It is the trauma Black Mississippians have passed down through generations since the first slave ship arrived in Gulfport.

These communities remember. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward describes the lynching of her great-great-grandfather on the Gulf Coast (Ward, 2018). Her mother's great-grandfather, his name was Jeremy. Ward's family remembers how they left his body laying on the railroad tracks. Similarly, descendants of Abraham Smith and Thomas Shipp- the victims in one of the most widely circulated images of lynchings- have opposed efforts to memorialize the tragedy because they feel it just expands the oppressive effect of the violence. "We're the ones that are going to have to live with it until the day we die," Roberta Richards says (Apel & Smith, 2017) while many others find memorials like the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL, (Figure 24) to be effective in helping America to heal. Regardless of any larger cultural acknowledgement, the families and communities left behind still carry the pain of lynching.

Figure 14

However, Black Mississippians were not simply passive victims. At the turn of the century, Black People all over the country were actively crafting a new Black Identity- one beyond the pain brought on by White Supremacy. This "New Negro" movement was meant to be completely different from the "Old Negro," the one which existed only under the oppression of slavery and survived by self-betrayal and self-degradation (Gates, 1988). One medium through which this movement mobilized was through what became known as the Black Press. The Black Press formed as a way for African Americans to have their voices heard and engage in discourse in a manner relevant to Black communities they were unable to achieve in the White, or mainstream press. Throughout the early Twentieth century, the formation of this new Black identity was entirely creative and took place upon a backdrop of racial violence, exemplified in Allen R. Freelon's sketch, "The New Negro," printed in *Carolina Magazine,* a Black periodical, in 1928 (Figure 9).

While a Black Person speaking out against lynching in South Mississippi often meant death, there were some who took the risk. In the *Afro-American Courier,* a Black newspaper based in Yazoo City, Mississippi, Emmet J. Stringer's winning piece for an essay contest was published which condemned lynching as a form of unconstitutional, extralegal justice and predicted more lynchings of White Mississippians if the violence is not stopped (Stinger, 1937). The essay also exposes misinformation- such as the idea that Black citizens are not the only targets of lynching but simply commit more crimes- and makes the case for Black Americans' entitlement to full citizenship. This is what advocacy journalism looks like. Not only did Black newspapers share financial and urgent information, but they served to cultivate positive self-perceptions throughout Black communities through the transmission of information and through discourse such as this essay (Nelson 1998). Beyond that, journalistic coverage lynching and other racial issues differed between types of publications in one very important aspect: while White journalists in South Mississippi sensationalized and embellished the death, Black journalists encouraged communities to keep living.

Figure 15: Burrill with partner, Lucy Diggs Slowe

Literature as a Witness to Lynching

This is a quality seen in most literature surrounding lynching as well. Lynching dramas were plays heavily rooted in the communities left behind by lynching. In Mary Powell Burrill's 1919 play, *Aftermath*, a Black soldier returns home from fighting in World War I to find that his father has been lynched and his family has been struggling in his absence. While depicting the often-forgotten financial impact of lynching the patriarch of a family, the play also engages controversial topics within the Black community, such as the role of religion in coping with and upholding lynch law, the concept of what Black masculinity meant both in the face of the emasculation of black men by Whites through lynching and in the wake of a revival of the more militant "New Negro" movement, as well as the idea of Black Patriotism and the internal conflict a Black Person must engage with in order to embrace that label (Mitchell, 2012). Over 20,000 Black Mississippians fought in World War I (Thompson 2011). After fighting for their lives and witnessing the difference in racial attitudes in Europe, these people returned to the same abusive racism of Jim Crow South There is no doubt that these same questions of patriotism and militancy were on the minds of Black soldiers and their families throughout South Mississippi.

This focus on the aftermath of lynching was radically different than White accounts and immensely important to Black survival and advancement. Stories of death and and violence in lynchings serve only to spread the knowledge of death and violence. Literature about lynching, however, offered sociocultural contexts of the communities affected by lynching.

Figure 16

The oldest surviving film by a Black director, Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920) also offers much needed context to racial violence, originally written as a response to the infamously racist film, *Birth of a Nation* directed by D.W. Griffith (1950). Micheaux (Figure 16) countered the false, animalistic depiction of Black people in *Birth of a Nation* with a film about intelligent, flawed, and resilient Black Mississippians, framing the White lynchers as the truly depraved and brutal characters. Set in Boston, Massachusetts and Vicksburg, Mississippi, the film features themes of Black Patriotism, race as a social construct, accommodationism, and the trauma of surviving racial violence (Micheaux, 1920).

The main character of *Within Our Gates* is a Black school teacher named Sylvia who struggles with relationships and finding funding for the school where she works. The school, Piney Woods, is based on an actual school in South Mississippi's Rankin County which educated Black children in the early 1900s (figure 17) when no other school in the Pine belt would and is still operating to this day (figure 18). As Sylvia travels to secure funding, we also see her struggle with helplessness and shame, which we learn stems from her having survived the lynching of her entire adopted family by a mob of angry white people and an attack from her white biological father.

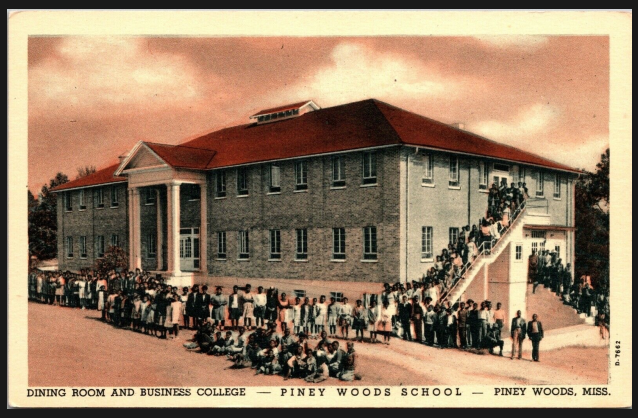


Figure 17

Figure 18

Survivor's guilt is further explored through the characters of Ned (Figure 19) and Efrem, two Black Men who survive racism by accommodating the denigration by white people and behaving in a subservient and respectful manner, much like minstrels of the time. The former does so by preaching subservience in his sermons and allowing white men to physically assault him and the latter by selling out other Black People to lynchers. However, the film demonstrates that while the White citizens prefer Efrem to other disrespectful Black People, his respect is not enough to save him from being lynched as well. They see the world in black and white. Ned gives a deeper insight into the shame of survival by accommodation when he is leaving a meeting with his White "friends" having just responded to an assault with the words, "Yessir, White folks is mighty fine." In this scene, Ned's face sinks the moment he has closed the door. He says to himself:

"Again I've sold my birthright. All for the miserable 'mess of pottage.' Negroes and whites- all are equal. As for me, miserable sinner, Hell is my destiny."
(Micheaux, 1920, 39:10)

Figure 19

This kind of self betrayal made necessary for many Black People trying to avoid racial terrorism in the Post-Reconstruction and Jim Crow South Mississippi is also detailed in the poem, "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Lawrence Dunbar (Figure 20) where he writes, "We wear the mask that grins and lies… with torn and bleeding hearts we smile…" (Dunbar, 1895) The poem speaks to the shame caused by the contrast between the pain of racial oppression and the happy, content persona Black People had to put on in order to appease White People and avoid White aggression. Such intense cognitive dissonance would have had incredibly negative impacts on Black Mississippians' sense of self-worth.

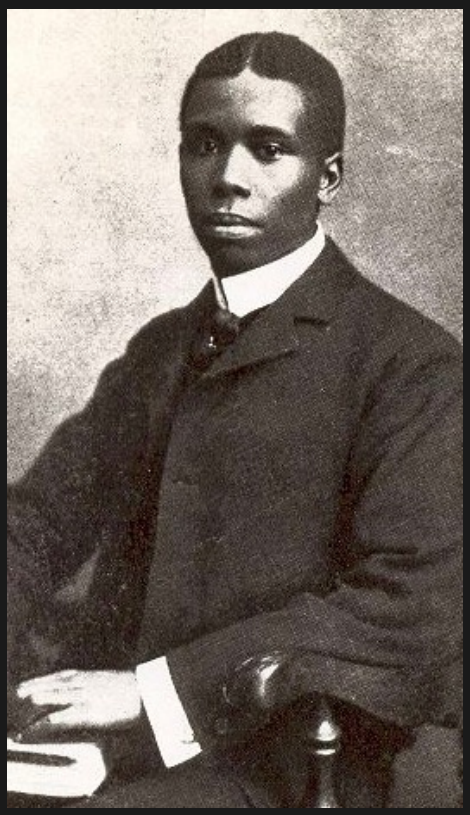


Figure 20

Figure 21

This type of survivor's guilt is prevalent when many Black People witness lynching. Richard Wright (Figure 21), a renowned writer from South Mississippi, delves into this psychological impact of lynching in his short story, "Between the World and Me," written in 1935. The narrator's role as an observer happening upon a lynched body and the wreckage surrounding the scene shifts halfway through the story when time is reversed and the narrator becomes the lynched victim themself. This is best displayed in comparing the last lines of the second and final paragraphs when the narrator is viewing the body and when they have become the lynched body:

"And through the morning air the sun poured yellow surprise into the eye sockets of a stony skull…"

"Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun…"(Wright, 1935)

Photography as a Witness to Lynching

This experience is consistent with the reported viewing of photographs of lynching. James Allen, creator of the world's largest archive of lynching photographs, *Without Sanctuary,* describes his experience viewing the photos in the afterword of his book, saying:

> "These photos provoke a strong sense of denial in me, and a desire to freeze my emotions. In time, I realize that my fear of the other is fear of myself. Then these portraits, torn from other family albums, become the portraits of my own family and of myself. And the faces of the living and the faces of the dead recur in me and in my daily life." (Allen, 2018, pg. 205)

When considering the effects of witnessing lynching on the Black psyche, it is important to remember that the effects were intentional. In the case of photography, the brutalized bodies were framed as one might frame a news story to fit a desired narrative. Since lynching photographs show us death from the perspective of the White murderers and away from sociocultural contexts, the photographers are able to theatrically humiliate and degrade not just the victim but any Black Person who comes across the photos.

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24

These photos make the usual arguments of lynching. Despite not including names or backgrounds for most of the victims shown, what most lynching photographs do not exclude are captions which attempt to frame the violence as justice. Figure 23 is a photograph of Will Moore's body lynched in Ten Mile, Mississippi (forty minutes south of Hattiesburg) in 1919, the year Black troops returned from war in Europe and racial tensions rose exponentially (Thompson, 2011). Inscribed on the photo are the words, "Negro who shot J. H. Roberts in Ten Mile, Mississippi." It is known from Allen's research in *Without Sanctuary*, that his name was, in fact, Will Moore (Allen 2018). But all anyone who finds the photo away from the archive would know of the victim would be his alleged crime, his race, and his death; in the eyes of the white photographer, the only three things which matter. Will Moore was not just a lone victim. His body was meant to be an example. This demonstrates the use of lynching and photographs of lynching by White perpetrators for political speech and fear.

Furthering the spread and commodification of African American death, lynching photographs became very popular as postcards which could be easily bought and sent in the mail as seen in figure 24, a postcard circa 1915. In this rampant circulation, Black People were more and more often painted as morally, physically, and intellectually inferior. Taking advantage of the staging and artistic aspects of photography, figure 15 shows just how theatric lynching photography often was in its humiliation, with the victim wearing stage makeup most likely meant to mock African tribal paint.

Figure 25

But, lynching photography did not only function to promote fear and negative perceptions of Black identity. They also served to promote a racially superior white identity. In the visual literature of lynching photography, proximity to whiteness was synonymous to proximity to the act of destroying Black bodies (Goldsby, 2006). Lynching was an act of White pride. Figure 25 shows another postcard, this one of Jesse Washington's charred remains surrounded by a crowd in Waco, Texas.

The inscription on the back says, "This is the Barbecue we had last night my picture is to the left with a cross over it your son Joe." This Joe had sent his parents an image of a human body he helped burn because the fact that he was able to get so close bolstered his white superiority. Such crowds as the one in Waco as well as the postcards brought communities together to solidify a broader White identity through the proud unity of violence. It is likely, given the notoriety of the Waco lynching, that postcards of this event circulated South Mississippi, further impacting White and Black identities in the Magnolia State

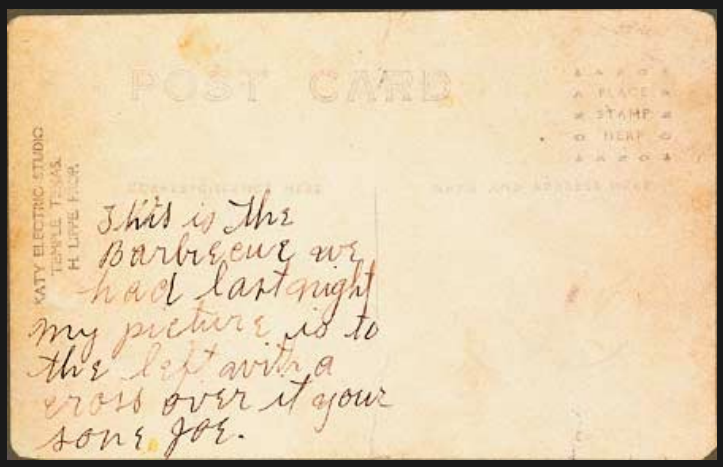


Figure 26

Figure 27


THE WACO HORROR 7

THE TORTURE (Note the "Freeman" Mob)

that woman?" He answered, 'No.' 'If it had been a colored boy and a colored woman? No.' 'We would not have stopped the niggers doing anything they wanted to.' 'Do you think they would?' 'No.' 'Then, they prove their superior civilization.' Then he began to tell me how he knew all about the niggers and we northerners do not. He said that as an old southerner he knew perfectly well how to handle the colored population. He told me how he was raised with them, had a colored mammy, nursed at her breast, etc.

"There is a bunch of people in Waco who are dying to see someone go forward and make a protest, but no one in Waco would do it. Ex-Mayor Mackaye and Colonel Hamilton both said, 'We do not know what to do. We are not organized to do it. It is a case of race and politics.'

"I put out a lot of wires for a lawyer to take up the case, but no human being in Waco would take it up. I wrote to a friend in Austin and one in Houston, and the Austin friend telegraphed me that he would send me word as soon as he had found someone. I had a letter from the Houston friend who gave me the names of three lawyers, but am not sure whether they would take up a case of this kind. All have their doubts of ever getting the case into court.

"I did not dare talk much about lawyers.

"As a result of the lynching a Sunday School Convention which was to have met there, with 15,000 delegates, has been stopped.

"W. A. Braselton, the foreman of the Jury, was very outspoken against the whole affair and blames the officials for it. He felt that as foreman of the Jury he could not lead in a protest but thought some protest ought to be made.

"Mr. Ainsworth, one of the newspaper men, seemed the

Figure 28

In another example of Black resilience in response to lynching, however, some Black people repurposed the oppressive photos, utilizing them for education and awareness. Although the precise location of the photo seen in figure 27 is unknown, one can guess that it was taken somewhere in Mississippi from its bold inscription. James Allen's research tells us it was probably taken around 1910 (Allen, 2018). However, the photo was discovered in the 60s inside of an abandoned SNCC freedom house used to educate Black people on citizenship and political organizing in Mississippi.

From this, one can deduce that SNCC members were most likely utilizing the photo to educate activists on the Lynch Law of the state. Similarly, Elizabeth Freeman published an investigative report on the lynching in Waco (Figure 28) which included some of the photographs. In contrast to most lynching photography, this display features pages of text providing geographic, political, and sociocultural contexts while exposing the brutality of the event.

The key difference in these two examples and the previous photos is the context given in their presentation. We have some photos of victims of lynching when they were alive. Figure 29 shows Lamar Smith and his wife posing for their portrait in the early 1900s decades before Lamar was lynched in front of the courthouse in Brookhaven, Mississippi.

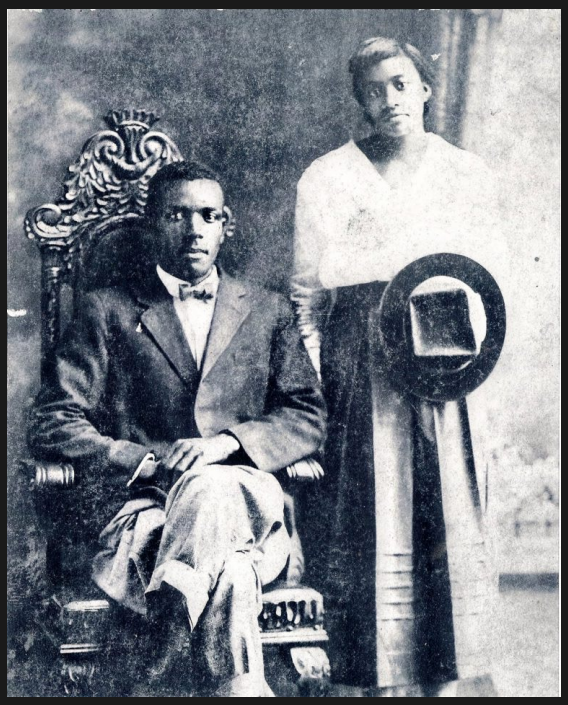


Figure 29

However, this is a rarity. Often, the only depiction of these people that survive are of the lynchings themselves. Sometimes even lacking a name or geographic location, these people become nothing but violence and fear. Their lives cease to exist and cease to matter. Today, only the death remains. There is no information available about the man in figure 20. James Allen only found that it was taken somewhere in the American South (Allen, 2018). However, the vegetation featured in the image resembles that of the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. One can only speculate when grasping at lives forever erased from history, replaced with destruction.

And with only this destruction, the viewer is left incapable of understanding. Although the eye is drawn to the gore of the body, such violence must mean explanation. But when there is no explanation, comprehension is stalled. In this urge to look, to witness, there are only feelings of denial and shame, creating an urge to look away (Goldsby, 2006). In this light, the cultural amnesia of lynching in South Mississippi begins to look more like cultural repression.

Figure 30

You: Looking Beyond and Within.

As previously stated, racial identities in South Mississippi have been actively created throughout recent centuries. However, those identities have also been shaped by shame of the past and fear of what it might mean. Our ability to interpret this history through mindful readings of these accounts heavily influences our identities. This is why Toni Morrison said to her people to "love your heart. For this is the prize." (Morrison, 1987) This is why South Mississippi understands itself through watered down history and why the marker at the G. & S. I. building does not mention its death toll. This is why the narrator in *Between the World and Me* is written to be racially ambiguous in the beginning. It allows for White interpretations to feel the enveloping and aggressive shame of the past and the fear that such a reckoning with it will destroy who they believe themselves to be as White People, reducing identity to a stony skull.

The history of lynching exists throughout South Mississippi. The accounts are everywhere and almost unavoidable, making each person a witness who encounters them. Richard Wright depicts witnessing lynching as part of the formation of identity in South Mississippi. If this is true, the act of witnessing mindfully is urgent. To paraphrase James Allen, what we fear is ourselves.

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