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Rituals of Resistance: The Life, Lynching, and Legacy of L.Q. Ivy

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RITUALS OF RESISTANCE:
THE LIFE, LYNCHING, AND LEGACY OF L.Q. IVY

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
In the Department of History
The University of Mississippi

by
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ABSTRACT

The Jim Crow South was a land saturated in religiosity. Emerging from the defeat of the Civil War and the utter oppression of slavery, southerners used religion to make sense of the suffering world around them. This was a time marked by extreme religious conviction that gave way to racial violence. In this study, I will examine the southern lynching culture in the context of southern religion. Specifically I will explore the life, lynching and legacy of L.Q. Ivy, a young man who was lynched in 1925 in Etta, Mississippi. Ironically in Ivy’s case, as well as cases all across the nation, Christianity served as a powerful tool to both support and subvert the South’s lynching culture.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been a labor of love. Yet, as is true with so many endeavors, I would not have been able to complete it without the aid of so many. I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to my academic mentors: Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson, Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owen, and Dr. Elizabeth Payne. In their own way, each of these insightful scholars encouraged, inspired, and challenged me to become a better historian and scholar. I am deeply thankful for their care and cultivation.

Dr. Wilson has been an inspiration to me for quite some time. In his own work, he demonstrates the influential ways that theology shapes the worldview of Southerners and has encouraged me to take seriously these deeply held beliefs. In addition, Dr. Wilson has been an encouraging and thoughtful advisor. I am grateful for his kindness and wisdom.

Dr. Cooper Owens has challenged me from the very beginning to consider broader perspectives. She has shown me the ways that the body, not just the mind, bears one’s worldview. From her insight, I have come to appreciate the ways in which ideology is literally embodied on human flesh. I am truly grateful for her nurture and insight.

I would also like to extend special thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Payne. Dr. Payne was the first to uncover and reconstruct L.Q. Ivy’s story. I initially learned of Ivy through her and she
graciously shared her research and contacts. Without her guidance and previous research I would not have been able to retell Ivy’s haunting and important story. Beyond these academic insights, Dr. Payne has been a warm and challenging mentor. She has shown me the complex nature of the South and encouraged me to look beyond overly simplified stereotypes. I am truly grateful for her guidance and generosity.

Finally I would like to acknowledge the young man this work centers on—L.Q. Ivy. His life was tragically cut short by the worst kind of cruelty that humanity has to offer and his story continues to haunt the residents of Union county. It is my hope that in some small way this work will give voice to the utter tragedy of his murder and help to honor his memory. As was the case with so many lynching victims, L.Q. Ivy was cut down in the prime of his youth and taken from a promising life. His death robbed his parents of a son, his brothers and sisters of a brother, his nieces and nephews of an uncle, and a whole community of their peace. It is only in the honest retelling of such stories that the South will truly exorcize its demons and come to terms with its past so that we might move toward a brighter future.
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INTRODUCTION

In the South, the only thing more pervasive than religion is kudzu. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American South was a land saturated in religion. Emerging from the devastation of the Civil War and looking towards an uncertain future, southerners clung to Christianity to explain their changing world and justify their way of life. Children grew up memorizing Bible verses. Men and women meditated on the stories of Jesus’ life and death. Ministers served not only as leaders in the church but also as prominent figures in the community. In short, churches constituted the center of community life. Yet the rise of religious institutions in the South also marks the rise of lynchings.1

In the United States between the Civil War and 1968, vigilantes lynched over 5,000 people.2 Toward the beginning of U.S. history, lynchings happened in various regions all over

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1 Walter White, Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 247-248. While modern scholarship has cautioned against using this data to suggest a causal relationship, White does demonstrate a positive correlation between the number of churches in a given region and the number of lynchings in that region. Furthermore, recent studies have established that fundamentalist clergymen were disproportionately involved with the Ku Klux Klan. See MacLean Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 91-97.

the county, especially in the frontier lands of the West.³ After the Civil War, however, lynching as a phenomenon became predominately a southern activity and was a newly racialized punishment characterized by white aggression and black victimization. It provided a new means of social control that promoted the perpetuation of southern antebellum racial hierarchies. Lynchings were not just meant to punish but to terrorize black communities and to serve as a deterrent to anyone who would dare challenge racial taboos. As such, African American communities saw a powerful message in the lynching tree. Prominent African American theologian James Cone explains saying, “The lynching tree was the most horrifying symbol of white supremacy in black life. It was a shameful and painful way to die. The fear of lynching was so deep and widespread that most blacks were too scared even to talk publicly about it.”⁴ In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright reflects on his childhood in Mississippi and the terror of crossing racial mores by saying, “I had never in my life been abused by whites but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings.”⁵ From influential theologians such as Benjamin Mays, to famous bluesmen such as Robert Johnson, similar sentiments are echoed in thousands of personal accounts across a wide variety of African American experiences. In the Jim Crow South, the terror of lynching left a deep impression on African American communities.

In this study, I will examine the lynching culture and its relationship to southern religiosity. It is my contention that the religion of Christianity provided the lens through which


southerners—both black and white—understood lynching. They used the language and theoretical framework of Christianity to speak about issues of evil, pollution, and suffering.

The work of anthropologist Mary Douglas can help us better understand such things. Douglas shows, in *Purity and Danger*, a particular society’s concept of “dirt,” or what defiles a person, is important and worthy of analysis. As was the case with the South’s lynching culture, perceptions of community contamination or pollution can result in ritual violence where a community’s collective subconscious is uncovered. Douglas writes,

“The whole universe is harnessed to men’s attempts to force one another into good citizenship...Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by belief in dangerous contagion...I suggest that many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system.”

Douglas’s framework is useful because it helps historians understand the relationship between concepts of sexual pollution and cruelty, as well as the distinctive nature of violence. The lynching culture of the South was exceptional and took on a unique religio-racial character that was particularly reflective of southern values rooted in concepts of racial difference and sustained through a Christian framework. In the Jim Crow South, one finds a potent combination of religious fervor and racial fears erupting into violence and creating the southern lynching culture. Yet this culture was not one-dimensional; lynching perpetrators and victims both understood lynchings through an evangelical Christian framework. On the one hand, lynch mobs offered prayers and sung hymns at lynchings. On the other hand, Christianity was also the tool used by the victims of mob violence to combat their oppression and safeguard their dignity. Ironically, Christianity simultaneously provided the framework and the language used to support and to subvert the South’s lynching culture.

To successfully engage in a study of Christianity and its influence on the South’s lynching culture, one must adopt a nuanced approach that focuses not on immutable theological truths claiming to portray what Christianity is but rather on how theology and Christian language are used to create worlds of meaning. As James Cone succinctly articulates,

Anywhere religion has been in the hands of those, or as instruments of those who are in power, religion is violent. But for those who are the victims, religion can also be used as a means for resisting the very violence in which that is being inflicted on them.\(^7\)

Thus the southern lynching culture is a complex phenomenon to study. To better comprehend it, in this work, I will treat the South’s lynching culture as a distinct phenomenon tied to the Jim Crow era and do not wish to conflate it with other lynching cultures in different times and locations. Although larger lynching studies demonstrate important trends, they miss the unique cultural context in which individual acts of violence are born. Therefore it is important to consider the specific context out of which this lynching culture came.

The potency of the southern lynching culture has captured the imagination of historians for generations. Because of its complexity, lynchings studies have undergone a variety of approaches and stages. Although scholars from the beginning made reference to the religious implications of lynchings, it is only in recent times that this connection has been more thoroughly explored.

The study of lynching in the American South has a long history that only slightly postdates the phenomenon of itself. As early as the 1940’s, social scientists produced studies to quantify and explain extralegal violence. Sociologist Arthur Raper’s *The Tragedy of Lynching* is

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one of the most important of these early works. Raper examined the socioeconomic conditions supporting extralegal violence and argued that mobs were prevalent in isolated and uneducated communities. His assessment, however, failed to take into consideration change over time and produced overly simplistic answers. In these early years, John Dollard, a psychologist, more satisfactorily studied the roots of a southern lynching culture but in the end, his study also fell short. Dollard began his research by asking why the South “needed” racial prejudice. He explored how racial prejudice functioned in the southern context and concluded that prejudice against African Americans served as a socially acceptable channel for white frustration and aggression. Though such early works would prove invaluable to later historians, the work of Raper, Dollard, and other early social scientists was ill equipped to deal with historical complexity and the historical field remained unexamined for decades.

In the 1970’s, historians began to use violence as a framework of analysis and lynching studies surfaced. Eric Hobsbawm’s Primitive Rebels brought about this intellectual awakening. In his work, Hobsbawm argued that an analysis of collective violence sheds light on a society’s common fears and anxieties. Southern historians borrowed on his insight and lynching studies eventually reemerged.

In this phase of historical inquiry, scholars were particularly interested in analyzing social factors that led to lynchings. For example, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s Revolt against Chivalry, one

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of the first major works to reexamine lynching, analyzed gender, racial and class factors that nurtured a lynching environment. Here she asserts that lynching in the South was a social performance meant to symbolically depict and reinforce the mandates of patriarchy’s social hierarchy. Despite its age, Hall’s work is still considered to be a cornerstone piece in the historiography of lynching.11

The 1980’s brought about a flurry of works analyzing the causes behind extralegal violence. Here the work of Betram Wyatt-Brown and Joel Williamson are particularly notable. In *Southern Honor*, Wyatt-Brown’s analyzes southern antebellum culture with a focus on mob violence.12 He highlights the importance of honor to southern culture and traces the ways in which this ideal becomes integral to lynching culture. His work is compelling but criticized by later historians who claim honor by itself is an inadequate explanation for the horror of southern violence.13 Joel Williamson, on the other hand, explored the ways in which violence became part of racial philosophies in the New South. He argued for a correlation between the rise in lynchings and the emerging idea that newly emancipated blacks were unable to properly care for themselves and control themselves.14

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In the frenzy to explain how lynchings could occur, historians have paid more attention to factors that led to white violence rather than examining the aftermath of lynchings and how African American communities reacted to the terror. Although scholars have begun to give greater attention to the perspectives of African Americans, there is still much work to be done and a few historians have stepped up to the challenge. In *African Americans Confront Lynching*, Christopher Waldrep explores black resistance to the southern lynching culture and concludes that African Americans took dramatic and blatant measures to combat violence. Yet, Waldrep’s definition of resistance is markedly narrow. He is most concerned with militant forms of resistance and often ignores what Michel de Certeau called “the guerilla warfare of everyday life.”

Conversely, W. Fitzhugh Brundage and Philip Dray’s scholarship expands the definition of resistance to include passive forms of resistance such as migration and deception rather than merely acknowledging overt forms of resistance. Religion also offered African Americans a path of resistance and recent scholarship is beginning to grapple with this concept. Perhaps the most important historian to study the religious implications of southern lynching culture is Donald G. Mathews. Mathews explicitly outlines the ritual elements of lynchings and contends that evangelical Christian theology informed the South’s lynching culture for white communities. In “Lynching Religion,” he shows how the theology of substitutionary atonement

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influenced white Protestant theology and helped to justify ritual violence.\textsuperscript{18} Later in “Lynching is Part of the Religion of our People,” Mathews begins to explore how black theology informed African American communities’ perceptions of lynchings.\textsuperscript{19} Though compelling, this work lacks much of the primary research that would enrich Mathews’s claims.

Central to the various approaches formerly adopted by historians are questions of ethics. Early on in the historiography, lynching victims were buried under piles of statistical charts and graphs. Even many later historians overlooked the personhood of lynching victims in favor of drawing grand conclusion about society’s social constructions. At times, scholars have become caught up in the pornography of violence associated with lynchings. Historians analyzed in detail the sociological and psychological underpinnings of mob violence but failed to see the \textit{person} who the violence was done to. The result of previous methodologies has, from time to time, strayed into a place where lynching victims are disembodied once again. In such methodologies lynching victims are dehumanized by mobs and then objectified by scholars. Therefore, methodology becomes an issue of ethics as much as an issue of historic inquiry.

At this crossroads in the field, Brundage advises historians to move beyond grand projects with national scopes and to consider the particular contexts of individual lynchings and regions.

As long as lynchings are interpreted as a ritualized expression of the values of united white communities, the task of explaining both the great variations in the form and the ebb and flow of lynching across space and time will remain incomplete. To answer these


questions, an understanding of both variations in the salience of racist ideologies from era to era and the specific historical circumstances of racially inspired violence must be combined…Specific circumstances explain why mob violence persisted in Mississippi years after the practice had declined in North Carolina.  

Brundage’s point is well taken. As he contends, studies of specific lynchings are important to the growth of our historical knowledge but I would also like to suggest that his approach further offers a more ethical methodology for lynching studies. Through a consideration of one person’s story, historians are better able to analyze the underlying causes of lynchings, as well as honoring the personhood of the lynching victim.

In this work, I have taken Brundage’s advice to heart. Here I will share the story of L.Q. Ivy, a young man living in northern Mississippi in the first few decades of the twentieth century. To explore Ivy’s story, however, I will not merely take an analytical approach. Through analysis, historians break down events into smaller components to understand the relationship between the components in a set time period. This approach is important as it allows scholars to find commonalities and underlying trends in historical phenomena. Yet, when trends come to center on the personal experience of a lynching, an exclusively analytic approach is far too reductionistic. Marking the trend does not preserve the experience. The human story is characteristically thick, composed of a synergistic matrix of multiple factors that chaff against the “thinning” and dissection of standard analysis. Critical analysis, which depends on quantification and theoretical insight, is never sufficient to capture the dynamics of a human life. L.Q. Ivy’s story stands on its own; a powerful testament to a life of significance.

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20 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 13. This approach also coincides with larger historical trends favoring micro-histories. Such focused works analyze the motivations, historical setting, and consequences of infamous individual lynchings. Jack E. Davis ‘“Whitewash” in Florida: The Lynching of Jesse James Payne and Its Aftermath’ for example, tells the story of Jesse James’ lynching. 20 Howard Smead’s “Blood Justice: The Lynching of Charles Mack Parker” and Todd E. Lewis’ “Mob Justice in the ‘American Congo’: ‘Judge Lynch’ in Arkansas During the Decade after World War I” are other examples of such work. The biggest proponent of this focused method has been W. Fitzhugh Brundage and his attention to particular lynching can be seen in *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1993).
Therefore this study alternates between narrative chapters that tell L.Q. Ivy’s story and analytic chapters that place him in the larger context of the southern lynching culture. By separating his story from a critical analysis of his context, I hope to give each approach its due. In the narrative chapters I will highlight L.Q. Ivy’s personal experience and the experiences of the community in which he lived. Then, in the analytical chapters, I will take a step back to see how Ivy’s experiences coincide and contradict the larger trends in the southern lynching culture. Scholars can learn a great deal from both approaches. The first reminds historians that the human component in our analysis should always be of primary value, while the second allows historians to understand motivation and context.

In the first chapter, I will explore what we know about L.Q. Ivy and his family before September 18, 1925, when a lynch mob took him. Then I will take a step back to examine the cultural context of the Jim Crow South within which he was born. The third chapter will tell the story of Ivy’s arrest and lynching and the fourth chapter will juxtapose the third through a discussion of lynching rituals throughout the South. In the final chapters, I will explore the aftermath of L.Q. Ivy’s lynching and the repercussions experienced in the wake of other lynchings around the South. Throughout these chapters, I will pay specific attention to the ways that an evangelical Christian framework informed lynching rituals and burial rites. Christianity was the lens through which both the persecuted and the persecutors understood lynching violence. Through this study I hope to illuminate issues of religious practice and rhetoric in the context of L.Q. Ivy’s story as well as in the larger southern lynching culture.

Paramount to my study is the work of James C. Scott and Robin Kelley. In his recent article, “We Are Not What We Seem,” Robin Kelly urges historians to shift their focus from

prominent political leaders to examine “everyday acts of resistances carried out by common
people.” Building on the work of James C. Scott, Kelly hopes to find the, “hidden transcript” of
a dissident political culture in the urban South through the ways African Americans played,
worked and lived in their everyday lives. As he explains,

Beneath the veil of consent lies a hidden history of unorganized, everyday conflict waged
by African-American working people. Once we explore in greater detail those daily
conflicts and the social and cultural spaces where ordinary people felt free to articulate
their opposition, we can begin to ask the questions that will enable us to rewrite the
political history of the Jim Crow South to incorporate
such actions and actors.22

“Hidden transcripts” are ever present in the southern lynching culture. African Americans
developed a variety of tools and methods to survive and subvert Jim Crow mandates. In the Jim
Crow South, the “hidden transcripts” are largely written in religious language and practice.
African Americans used coded Christian language and practice to resist the demoralization of the
white supremacy. Church gatherings provided an opportunity for black communities of faith to
step outside of the degradation of the secular world. Within the walls of the church, congregants
wore their best clothes and were treated with respect. Inside the walls of the church, congregants
greeted each other with titles of esteem (i.e. “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” “Brother,” “Sister,” etc.). Outside
the walls of the church, congregants heard derogatory titles (i.e. “boy,” “girl,” “mammy,”
“nigger”, etc.). Humanity-affirming strategies were important in the context of the Jim Crow
South but became even more important in the context of the southern lynching culture. In the
lynching culture of the South, the most prominent hidden transcripts of resistance are found in
acts of respectability, memory, and burial practices.

22 Robin Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim
Through an analysis of the relationship between religious practice and resistance, I hope to gain greater insight into the function of Christianity in the lynching culture of the South. The living victims of southern violence used religious ritual to combat white supremacy and undermine the lynching culture. These areas of investigation will complicate and deepen an understanding of the Christianity within the South. Furthermore, in the following pages, L.Q. Ivy’s story serves as an anchor, reminding the reader that theories of violence, resilience and resistance are always rooted in the lived experience of flesh and blood human beings.
CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE OF L.Q. IVY

In the fall of 1907, L.Q. Ivy was born in the fertile southern soil of Lafayette County, Mississippi. His family had lived and worked the land for generations; first as slaves and then, after gaining their freedom, they worked as sharecroppers. They coaxed life from the land and were nourished by its richness. The family survived the harsh climate of slavery and then Jim Crow, hoping that one day they might thrive in the rich soil. L.Q. Ivy was born into a contentious world. On the one hand, the mandates of Jim Crow placed a ceiling on how high African American men could climb, yet, on the other hand, the ceiling built over African American men was higher than it had been in previous generations. Over the years, Ivy’s family climbed higher and higher up the social ladder. Soon it would be L.Q. Ivy’s turn to test his skill.

Ivy’s great-grandmother, Lottie, was one of the first in their family to come to Mississippi. She came from South Carolina with her sister, Harriet, when the Pegueses, a


prominent slave owning family, purchased the sisters. Lottie and Harriet traveled over 500 miles from South Carolina to Lafayette County. Having little material possessions of their own, the women walked without shoes and road on the barebacks of mules toward an unknown future in the lower South. The trek took weeks and during their travels, the sisters slept outside on the ground. Their trip was difficult and when they reached the Tallahatchie River, the water was low enough that they were able to ford the river at a spot that would later be known as Rocky Ford and cross into Lafayette County. Here Lottie and Harriet settled into the land that would come to be their family’s home for generations to come.  

When freedom eventually came, Lottie married a man named Sharper and they took the name of their former masters to become Lottie and Sharper Pegues. The couple remained in Lafayette County and raised their family. They worked the land as tenant farmers and together Lottie and Sharper Pegues raised nine children. 

Harriett, on the other hand, married a man named Lee; they also adopted the Pegues family name. Once freed, Lee and Harriett Pegues began to construct a new reality for their family. The couple banded together with other formerly enslaved people to establish the New Philadelphia Church just outside of Oxford, Mississippi in 1869. In this church, African Americans took charge over their own spiritual development. Independent of white control, black leaders preached, sang, cared for each other and guided the congregation’s spiritual growth. Such a feat was a great accomplishment for the formerly enslaved people and Harriett and Lee Pegues’s descendants proudly passed down their legend from generation to generation.

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26 Ibid.,

27 Ibid.,

28 Ibid.,
The hard work L.Q. Ivy’s ancestors began to pay off in the second decade after the turn of the century. In the Jim Crow era, his parents, Jim and Allie Ivy, achieved relatively notable success. The Ivys married in 1903 and had seven children, four girls and 3 boys—Dovie, J.D., Lonzo, L.Q., Magnolia, Lula, and Ludie.\(^{29}\) Like their parents before them, Jim and Allie Ivy worked as tenant farmers to provide for their family. Jim and Allie Ivy made great strides and gave their children more than they had as kids. The Ivy family, from all indications, seemed to be doing quite well.

Unlike many other African Americans in the 1920’s, Jim Ivy even owned his own car. This possession distinguished the Ivy family in the eyes of their friends and neighbors for a car was not insignificant possession. Cars were status symbols often beyond the reach of African Americans and even beyond the reach of many white Americans. Remarkably, within just three generations, the Ivy’s had come from the shackles of slavery to freedom and some economic prosperity.\(^{30}\)

Now it was time for the older Ivy children to strike out in the world and continue on their family’s successful path. They truly seemed up to the task. The oldest children blossomed into adulthood with great promise. Although these children did not attend school, they learned to read. Furthermore the older children continued their passage into adulthood and began to seek out life partners. J.D. Ivy, the oldest of Jim and Allie Ivy’s children, married a young girl named Mattie. Even the youngest of the Ivy boys, L.Q., had a girlfriend. Her name was Inez Williams.\(^{31}\)


\(^{30}\) Allen McDaniel to Hannah McMahan, Interview, 15 February 2012.

\(^{31}\) Ferrell to Payne 2007.
At seventeen years old, L.Q. Ivy, was everything parents could wish for a young man to be. In some ways, Ivy was different from many other boys his age. He wore his hair in braids and was a quiet boy, not rowdy and boisterous. Friends and family described L.Q. Ivy as a young man with a good sense of humor who was easy to be around. L.Q. respected adults and was always willing to lend a helping hand to those in need.\footnote{Ibid.}

Once he came across Jeff Prather, a white man from Myrtle, Mississippi who was stranded on the side of the road. Pranther’s car had broken down on the road and he was unable to get back home. Because his father owned a car, L.Q. Ivy knew a bit about repairing cars. Therefore when Ivy came upon Prather, he stopped and fixed the man’s car. Pranther offered to pay Ivy for his assistance but Ivy refused to take any payment for his kindness. After Ivy repaired the car, the two men went their separate ways. Pranther later recalled L.Q. Ivy was a “nice nigger.”\footnote{Allen McDaniel, “The Rocky Ford Incident: Fifty Years of Guilt” (Research Paper in Mississippi History, University of Mississippi, Tupelo Branch, 1975). Jeff Prather is Alan McDaniel’s grandfather. Both grew up and lived their entire lives in Union County, Mississippi.}

On the morning of September 18, 1925, L.Q. Ivy left his parents’ home in Lafayette County and traveled to western Union County where he had been hired to work for Lawrence Goolsby. Goolsby owned a sawmill in western Union County and hired older boys to cut timber for the mill. This was not a job just anyone could do. One had to be big enough and strong enough to do it well. At the tender age of seventeen and on the very brink of adulthood, L.Q. Ivy had finally grown enough to live up to the requirements of the job. Although the work was
difficult, it was not lonely. He worked alongside three other young men: Cleveland Jones, Sherill Kilpatrick, and Spencer Ivy.  

After a long morning of cutting logs, the crew was tired. They needed a break from their labors and the unforgiving Mississippi sun. So the young men went in search of water and found relief at a local artesian well. This, however, would be the last moment of relief in L.Q. Ivy’s life.  

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34 Ferrel to Payne, 2012.  
35 Ibid.,
CHAPTER TWO

THE CULTURE OF THE JIM CROW SOUTH

As is evident from the complicated social position the Ivy family occupied, Jim Crow marks a difficult era in Southern history, full of contradictions, change, and racism. While the Ivys had achieved a notable level of success, their race largely determined their position in society. As the very name “Jim Crow” suggests, white society expected African Americans in this era to fulfill a certain role. Some historians suggest that the term comes from a song and dance that Thomas Rice, a struggling actor, preformed in 1832. This number presented a highly exaggerated and derogatory picture of African Americans. As Rice would sing, in “Jumping Jim Crow,”

Come listen all you galls and boys,
I’m going to sing a little song,
My name is Jim Crow.
Weel about and turn about and do jis so,
Eb’ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.

The aims of this era were painfully clear; in the wake of emancipation, white supremacists sought to maintain control through the oppression and marginalization of African Americans. The Jim Crow era in the South came about after the end of Reconstruction in 1877.

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and continued into the 1960’s. Through a system of coordinated laws and customs, African Americans were stripped of the rights the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments granted them. These laws were highly effective because their mandates were felt in the day-to-day lives and interactions of people. From prescribing acceptable social behaviors such as preferential seating for white patrons and anti-miscegenation laws, to regulating civil access through voter suppression and uneven police protection, Jim Crow laws sought to maintain the dominance of the white “race.”

Yet, Jim Crow culture was not evenly or universally applied. While the mandates of Jim Crow could be called upon anywhere and at anytime in the South, local customs varied from community to community. Some communities stridently observed Jim Crow culture and some communities held more relaxed customs. For example, the mandates of Jim Crow were established in urban contexts and often did not resonate with rural life. Mark Schultz, a historian specializing in rural life contends, “Segregation was a system of social control first developed in the cities to maintain white supremacy within the social structure particular to cities and towns. Segregation simply did not fit well with the economy, geography, and cultural traditions of the rural South.”

In the cities, white and black southerners could afford to live in relative segregation, however, this was not the case in rural contexts. Most southern rural contexts were societies based on agricultural production, which required white and black southerners to live in close proximity to each other and to work together to reap a successful harvest. Rural neighbors depended on each other more than their urban counterparts. Thus the mandates of Jim Crow were at times contradicted by the mandates of rural life.

Yet, rural African Americans still faced many challenges. Although emancipation brought the possibility of sweeping changes to the South, often blacks did not realize this possibility. National leaders put measures in place to help enslaved African Americans moved from slavery to freedom but these measures were largely neglected and newly freed African Americans faced the daunting task of starting over from scratch. The federal government established the Freedman’s Bureau to address the problems of the over 4 million African Americans newly recognized as citizens through emancipation. In the beginning, the bureau’s goals were ambitious, establishing schools and hospitals and even taking on the issue of land distribution. Hostility, however, curbed their ambition and in the end, the bureau fell short of its goals and African Americans were largely left to fend for themselves and make their own way in a changing world.38

ECONOMICS OF JIM CROW

Although Jim Crow culture affected all aspects of life, the key component it influenced was the economy. As C. Vann Woodward eloquently explained, “Much of the discussion about the Negro’s civil rights, his political significance, his social status, and his aspirations can be shortened and simplified by a clear understanding of the economic status assigned him in the New Order.”39 So let us now consider the economic world in which African Americans lived.

After emancipation, big plantations were split up into smaller farms. In the nine largest cotton producing states (i.e. Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North


Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) according to census data, the size of the average farm decreased from 347 acres in 1860 to 156 acres in 1880. Here the number of farms increased from 449,936 to 1,110,294.\footnote{Woodward, \textit{The Strange Career of Jim Crow}, 14.} Furthermore, during this period the sharecropping system rose dramatically, yet the democratization of land often did not translate into racial uplift for African American communities.

Sharecroppers were given a cut of land to work, farming tools, and a modest home. At the end of the year, sharecroppers would share the profits made from crop sales with the landowner. This relationship often put sharecroppers at a disadvantage since they frequently had to borrow from the landowner to get by and racked up debt throughout the year. Sharecroppers were even more vulnerable to the unpredictable crops and inconsistent markets.\footnote{Dray, 35.} Thus, although African Americans obtained physical freedom, complete economic freedom was still largely out of reach. Black farmers found themselves trapped in the sharecropping system. The 1880 census shows that African Americans owned less than one percent of the farmland in seventeen of the Mississippi counties with the highest black populations. In Woodward’s words, “It is pretty clear that as a rule, the Negro farmer not only worked the white man’s land but worked it with a white man’s plow drawn by a white man’s mule.” By 1900, 75.3\% of African American farmers were sharecroppers or tenants.\footnote{Woodward, \textit{Origins of the New South}, 206.} In Mississippi, a black man working from “sun to sun” could expect to earn between $8 to $12 a month. Both poor black and white farmers were enmeshed in the sharecropping system yet their experiences were different since
African Americans had less legal protection. As one Mississippi planter explained expressing his preference for African American sharecroppers,

Give me the nigger every time…The nigger will never ‘strike’ as long as you give him plenty to eat and half clothe him: He will live on less and do more hard work, when properly managed, than any other class or race of people.\(^\text{43}\)

Rather than unifying around common goals for better treatment, white and black sharecroppers found themselves drawn into competition with one another. African Americans occupied a more vulnerable position in the Jim Crow South and thus were easier to bend to the will of wealthy landowners. Fluctuating crop prices in the early twentieth century further complicated this economic system.\(^\text{44}\)

RELIGION OF JIM CROW

Rivaling racial ideologies, and the agricultural life, religion was perhaps the most unifying factor in the South during the Jim Crow era. Emerging from the devastation of the Civil War and the upheaval of Reconstruction, Southerners felt locked in an unstable and unfamiliar place. As they sought to regain order in their chaotic world, religion became evermore central to the southern way of life and provided a safe port from the storms that raged outside of the church walls. In speaking of how many white southerners used religion to combat anxiety, southern historian Charles Reagan Wilson explains,

Human beings seem to need some way to control events, if only symbolically; this is what religion does, which distinguishes it from philosophy. Southerners have indeed been existentialists, but (like other human beings) they could not bear their experience without the support of religion—the Lost Cause religion. They have remembered their


suffering and have cultivated the memory, in order to affirm that is was not meaningless.\textsuperscript{45}

Wilson goes on to contend that religion provided justification for southern pain and allowed white southerners to see their plight as part of a larger plan for national redemption.

African Americans also used Christianity to gain a foothold in an unstable world and saw in their experience a divine presence ushering them towards redemption. A man formerly enslaved in Arkansas by the name of O.W. Green, for example, saw divine intervention in the Confederate defeat: “When the war was over, de people just’ shout for joy. De men and women jus shouted from joy. Twas; only because of prayers of the culled people, dey was freed, and de Lawd worked through Lincoln.”\textsuperscript{46} Yet, when Reconstruction failed to bring meaningful equality to southern African Americans, they used the narratives of Christianity to explain their further suffering and to endure ill treatment.

Thus white and black Southerners conceived of the South’s historical circumstances in sacred terms. Their interpretations, however, often contradicted one another. Ironically, while the economic landscape of the Jim Crow South provided multiple places of convergence for black communities and white communities, the religious landscape of the Jim Crow South told a different story. Religious spheres were the most segregated space in the South. They were also important sites of power, particularly for African Americans.

After the Civil War, religious autonomy was one of the overt goals black communities of faith sought, according to southern historian John Giggie,


As they built their churches and communities, blacks stressed five overlapping aims: managing their own ecclesiastical affairs with little or no involvement from former masters; worshipping in their own churches; being led by black preachers; building schools; and soliciting and welcoming the advice and financial aid of northern white and black denominations, so long as they controlled their own budgets.47

The church had long been the center of black communities, serving not only as a religious fortification but also a political and cultural one.48 Thus churches were in a position to provide African American communities with spiritual comfort and serve as a foundation for political activism. In Righteous Discontent, religious historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham aptly describes the prominent place the church held within African American communities,

> The church became the most influential force for collective self-help and self-determination in the black community. Since the time of slavery, the church had provided an emotional and spiritual bulwark against individual demoralization and defeat...The black church constituted an arena in which poor, racially oppressed men and women assembled, freely voiced their opinions, and exhibited a sense of national community.49

Although not as optimistically as Higginbotham, W.E.B. Du Bois echoes these sentiments and describes the significance of churches in black communities saying,

> One can see in the Negro church to-day, reproduced in microcosm, all that great world from which the Negro is cut off by color prejudice and social condition...Such churches are really governments of men, and consequently a little investigation reveals the curious fact, that in the South, at least, practically every American Negro is a church member. Some, to be sure, are not regularly enrolled, and a few do not habitually attend services;


48 Curtis Evans wisely advises historians to push beyond a monolith understanding of African American religiosity and specifically the term “the Black Church.” He argues that these concepts shift to suit the need of racial prejudice but are ultimately rooted in paternalistic attitudes at best and white supremacist attitudes at worst. Abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, emphasized black religiosity to portray African Americans as essentially simple. Curtis J. Evans, The Burden of the Black Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

but practically, a proscribed people must have a social center, and that center for this people is the Negro church.\textsuperscript{50}

Thus African American churches stood strategically situated to be powerful advocates for their vulnerable congregants and to stand in moral opposition to the demoralizing culture of the Jim Crow South.

UNION COUNTY MISSISSIPPI

Jim Crow marked an unstable time in southern history as southerners sought to deal with the war’s defeat, modernization, a changing economy, and a new relationship with the nation at large. These and other factors could come together to form a potent combination that often erupted into spontaneous racial violence. In such an unpredictable context, African Americans had to be particularly careful not to offend their white neighbors.

Yet the experience of southerners should not be seen as a monolithic experience. Southerners from New Orleans lived a different kind of life from southerners from Richmond, Virginia. Likewise the lived reality of southerners in Charleston, South Carolina was markedly different from the lived reality of southerners in Etta, Mississippi.\textsuperscript{51} Trends are perceptible but local economic factors and racial mores often changed from community to community. Although not always observed, the tenets of a Jim Crow society could be called upon at any time to reassert the hierarchy of white supremacists. Communities invoked these codes in different ways and different times depending on a particular community’s needs. Thus it is supremely important to investigate local southern contexts and communities to truly gain insight into racial


\textsuperscript{51} Seizing upon this idea, Jack Temple Kirby and Pete Daniel also pushed forward the idea the South was not a monolith and should not be studied as such. Jack Kirby, \textit{Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Pete Daniel, \textit{Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
dynamics. If such assertions are true, then to understand L.Q. Ivy’s story, one must understand the specific southern community in which he lived.

Nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, Union County was established in 1870. Once freedom came, many enslaved people chose to remain on the land they had worked as slaves and continued to work the land as tenant farmers.\(^{52}\) According to census data, African Americans made up twenty-five percent of the county’s population.\(^ {53}\) The black sharecroppers of Union County worked for and alongside white farmers. Unlike the Mississippi Delta, however, with its huge cotton plantations, requiring lots of black laborers and creating a great disparity between the very rich and the very poor, Union County, was made up mainly of smaller farms. Though there was disparity between the wealthy and the poor, the wealth gap was not as pronounced as it was in the Delta. Union County grew cotton but other industries developed up as well. By the turn of the century, timber cutting also provided jobs for young African American men.

In general though, Union County remained a predominately rural setting. Before the turn of the century, few roads existed. This made travel extremely difficult when weather was bad. Fording the Tallahatchie River was especially difficult when the river was high. These realities gave birth to the town of Etta’s nickname. Although it later came to be known as Etta, locals still referred to the small town where the first white settlers crossed the Tallahatchie as Rocky Ford. During the 1920’s, however, this small town could claim only a little over 500 residents. The county seat in Union County is New Albany and in the 1920’s claimed just over 2,500

\(^{52}\) Ferrell to Payne, 2006.

residents.\textsuperscript{54} Thus Union County, like many other counties in Mississippi had a largely rural population.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE

THE LYNCHING OF L.Q. IVY

September of 1925 was a hot one in Mississippi. After a long week of laboring under the hot southern sun, Mississippians from all over the northern third of the state took Friday afternoon to enjoy the Lafayette County fair. They mingled with neighbors, bragged about their harvests, and wondered at the ornate floats parading merrily through Oxford’s principle streets. Fair participants even could get a glimpse of the Governor and Lieutenant Governor who glad-handed the crowd in their bid for public approval.\textsuperscript{55}

Eighteen miles away, the joyful shouts of the fair were not heard. In Etta, Mississippi, Bessie Gaines, a young woman of about 20 and the daughter of Bob Gaines and Amanda Woodward Gaines, a prominent Union County farming family, cried rape. The authorities were called to the Gaines home and Miss Gaines recounted her story to the sheriff of Union County, John W. Roberts. Bessie Gaines told Roberts she had left her baby daughter in the house and had gone down to her father’s fields to pick peas when she was attacked. As the papers would later report, “A negro quietly approached, set upon her and accomplished his beastly, hellish

\textsuperscript{55} Oxford Eagle, “County Fair is a Huge Success,” 24 September 1925.
The “negro” left her in a terrible condition and with all the strength she had left she crawled back through the field and to her father’s house. When her family found her she was in a state of “complete nervous collapse.” Once Bessie Gaines recounted the story, her family carried her to Mayes Hospital for medical attention.57

Sheriff Roberts acted swiftly gathering up deputies and dogs. Once he assembled his team, he took them down to the pea patch Miss Gaines had described and set the bloodhounds to work. The dogs picked up a trail and took chase. Traveling through the fields and woods of Union County with the officers following close behind, the dogs eventually came upon a “gang of negroes” cutting timber.58

No one knows how but in the next frenzied hours the sheriff arrested L.Q. Ivy and charged him with the rape of Bessie Gaines. The Oxford Eagle would later report certain “circumstances pointed to the negro J.P. Ivy” but the paper never specified what these circumstances were. The paper also misidentified L.Q. Ivy and attributed his father’s name to the young man (a mistake often repeated in the coming years). Sheriff Roberts arrested L.Q. Ivy and took him to the county seat of New Albany. Ivy was quickly processed and spirited away to Aberdeen for safekeeping.59

Word had already spread throughout the county that a “negro” had raped Bob Gaines’s daughter and two to three hundred people gathered outside the New Albany courthouse. As The New Albany Gazette later reported, “Men who loved their homes and were busy in the gathering of their crops, laid everything else aside and made their way hastily to the courthouse.” Horrified

57 “Mob Lynches Negro Who assaulted Girl,”
58 Ibid.,
59 “Mob Lynches Negro Who assaulted Girl,”
by the rumors, many in Union County could not believe that such a thing could happen in their home. They refused to allow such an abomination in their backyard to go unpunished.\textsuperscript{60}

The crowd remained in the courthouse lawn from Friday night throughout most of the day Saturday awaiting news and growing more and more angry as the hours passed. City officials began to fear that the crowd would become violent. Mississippi state senator, Hubert D. Stephens, who grew up in Union County, came out to address the crowd and hoped he could calm their anger. Stephens knew that he could not afford for mob violence to break out in his backyard. Federal anti-lynching legislation was up for debate in the U.S. Senate. Stephens detested this bill and saw it as a blatant example of Federal overreach. It would be embarrassing for mob violence to break out in his own town. Violence would justify the law he planned to oppose. Yet, Stephens succeeded in disbanding the crowd, to his relief.\textsuperscript{61}

His gains, however, were short lived. A group of men from Etta procured a writ from a justice requiring Sheriff Roberts to bring Ivy back to New Albany so that Bessie Gaines could identify her assailant. The men claimed that if L.Q. Ivy was not brought back quickly Miss Gaines might die before she could identify her assailant.\textsuperscript{62}

Sheriff Roberts knew that he had to comply with the writ but worried the crowd would become violent if he brought Ivy back to New Albany. Sheriff Roberts decided to secretly bring the young man to the hospital so as to escape the crowd’s notice. Once safely inside the hospital, L.Q. Ivy stood by helplessly as authorities oversaw the proceedings and negotiated his future. \textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{60} "Young Woman Outraged By a Negro Brute."

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.,

\textsuperscript{62} "Mob Lynches Negro Who Assaulted Girl."

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.,
Judge Thomas Pegram of Ripley and attorney L.K. Carlton were present to witness the scene. They asked Bessie Gaines if this was the man and she responded, “she thought” it was. Dissatisfied with her answer, Carlton pushed forward, and asked her if she would testify to Ivy’s guilt in court. “I think I would,” she replied. Uncertainty hung in the room. Bessie Gaines’s testimony appeared shaky and her father openly expressed doubt that this young man was guilty of raping his daughter. Bob Gaines said he would urge his friends and neighbors to avoid hasty action.64

The people milling about on the courthouse lawn got word that Ivy had been brought back into town and taken to the hospital. They hurried to the hospital only a couple of blocks away and angrily demanded that Roberts turn over the seventeen-year-old boy. Sheriff Roberts knew he had to act quickly. He sensed that time was of the essence and every minute he could gain would determine the wellbeing of his prisoner.65

While Sheriff Roberts ushered Ivy out to his patrol car, Judge Pegram and Carlton addressed the hostile crowd. As Judge Pegram spoke, deputies went through the crowd taking weapons from angry men. Judge Pegram urged the crowd to follow him to the courthouse where he promised L.Q. Ivy would receive a special term of the court and a speedy trial. The ruse did not work.66

Once again members of the crowd were tipped off and knew that young L.Q. Ivy had been carried away. Clyde Nash had the fastest car in town and raced to intercept Sheriff Roberts

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64 Ibid.,

65 McDaniels, 5.

66 Ibid., 7.
and Ivy. The Myrtle bridge was just about a quarter mile out of town on Highway seventy-eight. Nash knew that if he could beat Roberts to the bridge he could overpower him.\(^{67}\)

Clyde Nash and the group of men with him succeeded in blocking the bridge. Now it was impossible for Roberts to pass. When he pulled up to the bridge, another group of men parked their cars behind Roberts and hemmed him in so he could not escape with his prisoner. By this time, the rest of the crowd had caught up with them. Some reports say that there were over a thousand people in the mob at this point. Without firing a shot, Roberts turned L.Q. Ivy over to the angry mob. Who knows the terror the young man felt when his protector abandoned him. The terror of this moment, however, was nothing in comparison to what L.Q. Ivy was about to endure at the hands of the mob leaders.\(^{68}\)

A small group of men, including Thad Parker, Bill Greer and his father Book Greer, drug L.Q. Ivy back to where the alleged attack occurred. In Arlo Graham’s barn, the men planned to get a confession out of him. Within the seclusion of the barn unspeakable things were said to have happened to L.Q. Ivy. As they demanded a confession, the grown men brutally beat the young Ivy. When L.Q. did not give it, they hung him by the neck from a rafter in the barn. They burned him and mutilated him. Some say, one of the men sent for a lemon squeezer and then used it to crush Ivy’s testicles. Yet, the men still could not force a confession from the boy’s lips.\(^{69}\)

The mob leaders were not deterred. They brought L.Q. out to Lawrence Goolsby’s sawmill and the mob gathered around. While the leaders tortured Ivy in the barn, the crowd

\(^{67}\) Ibid, 6.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 6
outside had grown to 400-600 people. People from all over the county heard about what was happening and came to witness the spectacle. Even a reporter from Memphis had made his way down to Etta. At least one African American man was present. Aubrey Fowler forced Will Talley to come to remind Tally of his place. A white family had raised Tally and Fowler thought Tally was too smug. It was said that after this experience, Will Talley would not venture out alone at night for months.70 Sheriff Roberts and his deputies claimed they attempted to reach Ivy but were unable to make it through the crowd. Roberts went on to assert he did not recognize anyone in the crowd.71

By this point the mob knew what was next for the young man and began to prepare for the end. L.Q. Ivy was brought to the top of a tall sawdust pile. While the mob leaders drove a metal stake into the ground below the sawdust pile, Ivy bent his head and prayed for God to intercede; for the men to have mercy; for God to save him. But his prayers were not to be answered.72

Before going about the final tasks, the mob stopped to take pictures with their victim. L.Q. Ivy took the keys to his father’s car from his pocket and gave them to Staud Nowlin. He asked Nowlin to return the keys to his father. Nowlin studied the young man for a second and then said, “L.Q., if you done it, be a man and own it.” “No sir, Mr. Nowlin. I didn’t do it.” Ivy pleaded. Nowlin promised he would return the keys to L.Q. Ivy’s father.73

Joe Keith Robins purchased gas from Bob Lee Woodard’s store. They soaked wooden planks in kerosene and poured it on Ivy. The mob wrapped chains around L.Q. Ivy’s feet, wrists,  

70 Ibid., 7.

71 “Mob Lynches Negro Who assaulted Girl.”

72 “Young Woman Outraged by Negro Brute.”

73 Ferrell to Payne, 2006.
and neck and fastened the chains to the stake. They piled brush around him and soaked the wood
in kerosene. Then one of the leaders asked Ivy if would confess. Mob members remember Ivy
did confess and that he named three accomplices. Instantly, a search crew left to find the other
men Ivy was said to have named.  

It was now time to complete what the mob had set their mind to do when they first heard
Bessie Gaines’s story. Five men and one woman struck matches and set the pyre a blaze.
Flames consumed the wood as the young man kicked and screamed for mercy. Roe Manor
stepped out of the crowd, yelling at the mob leaders she begged them to stop. She threw water
on the blaze trying to squelch the fire but several men jumped forward to restrain her.

As the blaze rose higher Ivy was able to free his legs but he was still held fast to the stake
by chains around his arms and neck. As he screamed in pain, someone from the mob yelled,
“You should have thought of this before.” Another person in the crowd yelled, “Let’s finish it
up,” and twelve men piled more wood around Ivy. As flames consumed his body, L.Q. Ivy
screamed, “Oh God, Oh God! I didn’t do it! Have mercy!” A few minutes later, the task was
complete. L.Q. Ivy was dead. The mob disbanded to go find food.

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75 McDaniels, 10.

76 “Young Woman Outraged by Negro Brute.”
Within lynching studies there is some debate as to whether or not scholars should reproduce photographs of lynching victims. Some warn that these grotesque images further the objectification of the victim, while others assert that the pictures show how truly awful the southern lynching culture really was. I have elected to include lynching photographs because these photographs became part of the strategy of anti-lynching advocate and were used to subvert the southern lynching culture. More will be said in the following pages on this subject.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE RITUALS OF A LYNCHING

In order to understand how southern African Americans dealt with their oppression, we must first have a better understanding of the nature of this oppression. Lynchings were designed as acts of violence to enact “justice,” punish alleged crimes, and most of all, as symbolic representations of power. Often these acts rose to epic levels of violence causing sociologist Orlando Patterson refer to southern lynchings as “sacrificial murder.”

Currently there is not a comprehensive record of the number and nature of all lynchings in America. Although the National Association for Colored People, and more recently the Historical American Lynching Data Project, have made heroic efforts to gather this information, a complete record does not currently exist. The difficulty of establishing such a database is partially due to the fact that the lynching history is shrouded in secrecy. During the Jim Crow era in the South, many African Americans simply disappeared never to be heard from again. Although racial violence is a likely suspect, we do not have accurate records to prove such theories.

78 Orlando Patterson, Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998) 223.
Furthermore, scholars have to distinguish what constitutes lynching. Various forms of anti-lynching legislation offer different definitions. Anti-lynching legislation proposed in 1922, for example, posited lynching should be defined as, “five or more persons acting in concert for the purpose of depriving any person of his life without authority of the law.” Later Congress amended this bill to include violence perpetrated by a group of three. This is the definition historians most commonly use. Central to these definitions, however, is the understanding that violence is perpetrated by a group and done so outside of the established legal system. Such violence could take many different forms (i.e. hanging, burning, shooting, etc.)

Like Ivy’s accusation, it was commonly reported that lynchings were most often incited by cases of rape. As the familiar trope is repeated again and again, a “black beast” rapes a virginal white woman and her noble neighbors rise up to defend her honor and their own. Here the two main characters are portrayed as foils to one another. On the one hand, you have the sexually depraved, evil black man and, on the other, the innocent, virtuous white woman. Such language is clearly seen in Ivy’s story.

This pervasive narrative, however, does not square with historical evidence. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall shows in *Revolt Against Chivalry*, however, rape charges were often false accusations and furthermore, statistically rape charges made up a small proportion of the accusations aimed at lynching victims.79 “Rape and rumors of rape,” Hall claims, “became the folk pornography of the Bible Belt.”80 Despite its ahistorical base, the rape narrative is pervasive in lynching culture. In cases where rape was cited, participants justified as acts of chivalry. To the southern mind the rape of a white woman by and black man was the ultimate act of

79 Hall, 202.
80 Ibid., xx.
defilement, not only to the woman but to the honor of “the South” itself. Here we see as Mary Douglas suggests,

Many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system…Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolize an ideal theocracy.  

In this framework of sexual purity and societal honor, lynchings served to punish a perceived crime and purified a defiled society. Thus lynchings were often public affairs. As Grace Elizabeth Hale shows, lynchings become a spectacle and drew large crowds of hundreds and sometimes even thousands of people. She argues spectacle lynchings marked the modernization of extralegal violence, characterized by the use of technology (i.e. trains, radios, cameras, etc.) to bring organization and united spectators. For example, mob leaders would sometimes announce their plans in local newspapers or over the radio. 

DESECRATION OF THE LYNCHING VICTIMS BODY

The brutal treatment of L.Q. Ivy’s body falls in line with many other lynching cases. In spectacle lynchings, the desecration of the victim’s body was an essential component of the ritual. Frequently, mobs butchered and disgraced the bodies of lynching victims. Victims were stripped naked, mutilated, tortured, and set on fire. Such horrible acts happened while the victim was still alive and after they died.

\[81\] Douglas, 3-4.
\[82\] Hale, 199-209.
\[83\] Ibid., 224
One of the most gruesome accounts of spectacle violence can be found in James McGovern’s portrayal of Claude Neal’s lynching in Jackson County, Florida on October 27, 1934. This event was advertised in local papers and drew a crowd of thousands. As a mob member he described the details of the lynching in the saying,

After taking the nigger to the woods about four miles from Greenwood, they cut off his penis. He was made to eat it. They then cut off his testicles and made him eat them and say he liked it. Then they sliced his sides and stomach with knives...Red hot irons were used on the nigger to burn him from top to bottom.”

Clearly such acts of cruelty were not meant to merely torture Claude Neal but also to shame him. Accounts of other lynchings, as well as L.Q. Ivy’s, tell similar stories of torture, castration, and burning. Castration seems to hold particular significance to mob leaders. Through this violent act, mob leaders emasculated their victim while asserting their own manhood.

After ritual violence had been completed, mobs further desecrated the bodies of lynching victims. Mob members and other witnesses would take away “souvenirs.” Onlookers scrambled to collect a bit of bone or a piece of flesh from the mutilated victim. The New York Tribune’s account of Sam Holt’s lynching depicts this gruesome phenomenon. Holt, a black farm laborer, was accused of murdering his employer after a disputed about his wages and a crowd lynched him in Georgia in 1899. The Tribune reported,

In the presence of nearly 2000 people, who sent aloft yells of defiance and shouts of joy, Sam Holt was burned at the stake in a public road...Before the body was cool it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits and

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even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate was torn up and disposed of as souvenirs. The Negro’s heart was cut in small pieces, as was also his liver. The Tribune goes on to detail that those who had not been able to collect a souvenir for themselves could buy bits of Sam Holt from mob members. Small pieces of his bones were sold for 25 cents, while bits of Holt’s liver went for ten cents.85

From these accounts, and countless others, it is clear that desecration of the body was a central characteristic in the ritual performance of southern lynchings. Lynching mobs desired not only to punish an individual for a perceived injustice, but also to degrade the very essence of the individual. They wished to assert their own supremacy and power over their victim. In these events, white mobs dominated and utterly shamed lynching victims. And through so doing restored social order.

Through these horrific acts, white mob members wished to intimidate local black communities. Grace Elizabeth Hale shows how mobs intentionally chose specific sites for lynching so their work would be visible. Mobs often chose locations where the lynching victim’s body could be prominently displayed before the local black community. Mobs would choose well-traveled roads, bridges and even churches. For example, when Thomas Devert was lynched in Erwin, Tennessee in 1918, mob members forced the local black community to watch as they burned Devert’s body. Similarly, in 1917 in Memphis, Tennessee, after a lynching mob had exacted their punishment on Ell Person, Person’s head was cut off and thrown onto Beale St, which at the time was the center of black businesses in town.

At times, the location of lynchings conveyed strong religious undertones. In Rosewood, Florida, for example, a lynching mob left its victim strung up by a creek used for baptism. This site inherently conveys religious symbolism. In a place associated with spiritual rebirth, the white community exacted its judgment. Thus it was only through death that this victim could be cleansed.\textsuperscript{86} Surely these chosen lynching sites (and others) were not coincidentally. They demonstrate intentionality and the desire to call on the symbolic meaning of powerful religious metaphors.

BURIAL

Amidst such hostility, there still remained the matter of what to do with the lynching victim’s body. In southern black communities, funerals were immensely important. Funerals served as an individual’s final act of respect in a world where they were afforded little. Thus great care was taken to send the deceased “homeward” in a grand style.\textsuperscript{87} Even poor African Americans took out burial insurance to ensure that they could receive a proper burial.\textsuperscript{88}

As was the case with L.Q. Ivy, however, traditional funeral rites were often subverted or complicated by lynching rites (i.e. community intimidation and mutilation of the victim’s body). Subsequent acts of violence and vandalism frequently accompanied lynchings and thus local black communities were hesitant to be seen in public. This fear robbed lynching victims of an


\textsuperscript{88} Holloway, 43-45.
honorable funeral where community members paid their last respects to the deceased. Rather lynching victims, if buried at all, had to be buried quickly and in inconspicuous places so that the black community could escape the threat of further violence. These burials lack the pomp and circumstance usually associated with southern African American funerals and rather had to be done in secret. Often mourners could not even mark the graves of lynching victims.

In 1931, when Matthew Williams was lynched in Salisbury, Maryland his aunt and closest kin, Addie Black wanted her family to move immediately out of fear that the white mob would come for them. Her husband, Thomas, however, persuaded her to stay until they could bury Williams. Thomas Black called the sheriff, who in turn called the town’s black undertaker to go and retrieve Williams’s body. The body was so mangled that the Black family decided to cremate their nephew.89

As is seen through L.Q. Ivy’s story and the story of the Black family, lynching rituals complicated customary African American Christian burial rites and left families with complex liturgical issues to contemplate. For example, the open casket was one of the most important characteristics of African American funerals. Displaying the body of the deceased was an important step that brought closure to the community and hinted towards the possibility of a joyful afterlife. Yet, lynching rites of bodily mutilation complicated this ritual.

When possible, undertakers attempted to use putty to reconstruct the remains of a lynching victim’s body so that an open casket wake could happen.90 Often, however, these were

89 Ifill, 42-50.

90 Smith, 1-8.
futile attempts and undertakers could not hide the consequences of racial violence. The four
victims of the Moore’s Ford lynching, for example, had so many bullet holes that guests
attending their wake could not help but comment and turn away in horror. One man described
the four lynching victims as “flour sieve[s].”

Some families were so traumatized by the lynching of their family member that they
could not bear to deal with the brutalized body of their loved one. Therefore in protest, some
families refused to claim the remains of their loved one after a lynching mob was through with
the body. In 1897 the aunt of Joseph McCoy, a lynching victim in Alexandria, Virginia, refused
to claim her nephew’s body saying, “As the people killed him, they will have to bury him.”

Lynch mobs relished in depictions of their handiwork and took pictures standing next to
their victim’s lifeless and mutilated body. Mob leaders turned these pictures into post cards,
which they sold at general stores, and circulated among friends. The ease with which such
pictures circulated in the South pointed to the invincibility of mob leaders. They knew that even
if evidence of their crimes surfaced, they would not be punished.

While remaining in the South, lynching photographs displayed the magnitude of white
power as it extended beyond the law and everyday white citizens were free to decide matters of
ultimate moral importance on their own. Yet, African Americans learned to use these
photographs to invert and undermined white power. In the hands of the black press, such photos
took on a different meaning. These images horrified the nation and held a mirror up to the
southern lynching culture. Lynching photos published in the black press and elsewhere shamed
the South in the eyes of the larger nation. Thus white southerners began to monitor the

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91 Brundage, Under the Sentence of Death, 274.
circulation of such photos more carefully. After the Moore’s Ford lynching, local law
enforcement denied photographers access to the funeral home containing the bodies of Roger
Malcolm, Dorothy Malcom, George Dorsey and Mae Murray Forsey’s, the four victims of the
Moore’s Ford lynching in Walton County Georgia in 1946. Don Young, director of the funeral
home, disregarded the wishes of law enforcement and snuck in a photographer under the cover of
night. He felt it crucial for the world to see what happened at Moore’s Ford. After publishing
these photographs, black communities all across the nation held vigils to memorialize the victims
of Moore’s Ford. Fifteen hundred protesters even participated in a funeral march on Washington
D.C. in the wake of this tragedy to demand anti-lynching legislation be passed.92

92 Smith, 9-10.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE LEGACY OF L.Q. IVY

Saturday afternoon, word came to the black community of Etta that a mob of white men had taken L.Q. Ivy. Not knowing what would happen to him but fearing the worst, they gathered at Baker’s Chapel Baptist Church. Within the walls of the church, L.Q. Ivy’s friends and family cried, comforted each other, waited for more news, and prayed.93

Before sundown, everyone returned to their homes. The doors were locked and the lights were extinguished. The Visor family hid away and waited for news. L.Q. Ivy was Eliza Visor’s nephew. He was her older sister, Allie Ivy’s boy. She had known him since he was born and now Eliza Visor waited up with her husband knowing her little nephew was in grave danger.94

Friday, when news first came that he had been arrested, L.Q. Ivy’s father, Jim, hurried to New Albany to see what had happened with his youngest son. As he got to the courthouse, however, the crowd outside was so ferocious that Jim Ivy knew there was nothing he could do

93 Ferrell to Payne, 2007
94 Ibid.,
for his boy. He turned around and went home. He knew the mob was determined that someone should die.  

Rumors spread throughout the county that Jim Ivy was telling others, that “it was a damn lie,” his son did not do anything. This confrontation put unwanted attention on Jim Ivy and threatened his life. The next Sunday, when the Visors went to church, they found long switches left in piles. The switches were meant to beat Jim Ivy for denying his son’s guilt.

Eliza Visor sent her own children, Macy and A.J., to bed early on that Saturday night but they could not fall asleep. The family waited up all night; hungry for news and fearful that the angry mob would come for them. The Visor’s home was just a short distance from the road and more traffic than usual passed. Macy and A.J. peeked out the windows to watch the cars go by wondering if the drivers knew something about their cousin. Twenty-nine cars went by that night, an unusually high number for this normally deserted country road.

Throughout the day, neighbors white and black brought scraps of information to the family. The Visors knew that L.Q. Ivy had been taken by a mob and they knew that he had been accused of raping Bessie Gaines. In their small community, the people were highly interconnected. Thus it was ironic but not shocking that Eliza Visor knew of Bessie Gaines. She was the niece of Eliza Visors’s employer, Mason Gaines Roberson. Eliza Visor tended to Mason Roberson’s laundry and ironing, while Harvey Visor, Eliza’s husband, worked as a tenant farmer on Mr. Roberson’s land. Mr. Roberson had always been fair to them. Roberson would go to market with the African American tenant farmers who worked his land to make sure they got the

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95 Ferrell to Payne, 2006.
96 Ferrell to Payne, 2007.
97 Ibid.,
best price for their produce. Now the Visor and Roberson families were linked in a new way—by Bessie Gaines’s story and L.Q. Ivy’s death.98

But now it was Sunday. And for the Visor family, that meant it was time to go to church. Every Sunday, without question, the family would rise, eat breakfast, put on their Sunday best and then by 8:30 am walk two miles to Baker’s Chapel Baptist Church. As Macy said, “We were church going people. They trained us. Unless it was pouring down rain, it didn’t hardly ever get too cold…We walked every Sunday. My dad never owned a car. He never learned to drive.” Baker’s Chapel was a Missionary Baptist church. Local African Americans pooled their resources and bought the land from the Bakers. On about two acres of land they built a church and had a cemetery. So the Visors got up that morning and went to church just like they always had.99

After church Eliza Visor said, “Well, I’m going to see Allie.” Eliza Visor took her little girl, Macy, and walked to her sister’s house. When they got there, Allie Ivy, L.Q. Ivy’s mother, was lying across her bed. Visor could do nothing to alleviate the pain her sister felt so she just sat quietly by Allie Ivy.100

When Eliza returned home, Rush and America Scott, Visors’ white neighbors, came to talk to her. They had been at the lynching site but left to bring her word when they saw that the young man’s fate was sealed. “Liza,” they started, “they’re going to burn that boy. We went, but when we saw what was going to happen, we left. They are going to burn that boy today.”101

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98 Ferrell to Payne, 2006.
99 Ibid.,
100 Ferrell to Payne, 2007.
101 Ibid.,
Eliza Visor had promised to tell her sister if she heard anything and she knew she had to return to tell Allie Ivy the news. “Allie, you told me if I heard anything, come back and tell you. They burning your child up today.” Allie Ivy slunk down into a chair. She groaned four times but did not cry. Family members remember that Allie Ivy began to die right then and there. She stopped eating and did not want to talk to others. Jim Ivy tried to pull her out of her depression. He pled with her to go to church socials but she refused. For long hours, she sat by herself. Sometime someone spoke suddenly and she would jump up saying, “Oh, I thought that was L.Q.” It was a long, slow death but by the next fall Allie Ivy had died.\textsuperscript{102}

On Monday, September 21, Sam Bullock, a white storeowner from Enterprise, sent word to Jim Ivy that he could come collect his son’s remains. But Jim Ivy could not bring himself to go. Instead J.D. Ivy, Shep Boone and Gates Kilpatrick went to collect their bother and friend’s remains. Gates Kilpatrick drove Jim Ivy’s car to Rocky Ford. As he came upon the site where his kid brother drew his last breath, terror and sadness wrapped around J.D. Ivy. He could not bring himself to get out of the car so Shep agreed to retrieve the remains for the family. Amidst the charred wood and ash, Shep was said to have come upon L.Q. Ivy’s heart. Later Shep and Gates would remember the heart, “was as black as a crow, but it wasn’t burned up.”\textsuperscript{103} It was too pure to burn up. He placed L.Q. Ivy’s heart in an apple box and walked back to the car. At Baker’s Chapel Church they laid the remains to rest.\textsuperscript{104}

In the days to come, Union County’s residents would retell the stories of that fateful weekend. Over the next few weeks, stories of L.Q. Ivy’s last moments on earth were whispered

\textsuperscript{102} Ferrell to Payne, 2007.

\textsuperscript{103} Elizabeth Payne to Hannah McMahan, Interview, 6 January 2012. Elizabeth Payne suggests the oral tradition that L.Q. Ivy’s heart was too pure to be consumed by the flames is reminiscent of the Catholic incorruptible tradition that holds that the bodies of some saints are too pure to decompose are “incorruptible.”

\textsuperscript{104} McMillen, 1.
behind closed doors, murmured in barbershops and scattered throughout various newspapers. The black community in the following days was quiet. “There wasn’t no loud goings on.” Macy Visor Ferrell, Eliza Visor’s daughter, would later come to remember, “Everybody was quite. Fear, there was fear.” Monday the story was in the Commercial Appeal and the school children got together to read it. Inez Williams, L.Q. Ivy’s girlfriend, was there and she cried and cried. “I can’t stand it!” she said, unable to understand the hatred that had so brutally taken her young boyfriend105

Between stories of the county fair and an obituary for a Mrs. A.A. Young, the wife of a prominent physician and Confederate veteran, the Oxford Eagle proclaimed, “Mob Lynches Negro Who Assaulted Girl.” The Eagle juxtaposed Ivy’s, “foul purpose,” with the nobility of the lynch mob. “On lookers report that the crowd of 400 men was orderly and did not strike or taunt the negro, but went through it like men who had made up their minds to take the law into their own hands.”106 The New Albany Gazette was more emotive. In an article entitled, “Young Woman Outraged by Negro Brute,” the Gazette emphasizes Bessie Gaines’s youth and expressed sympathy, “on every side [for] the young lady involved and her worthy and honorable parents,” while describing L.Q. Ivy as a “negro brute.” The Gazette also included an address by Sheriff Roberts where he extended thanks to Sheriff L.S. Reese and his deputies, and then addressed the mob members saying, “I simply say I am sorry for your action; and while I have no hard feelings toward you, I cannot sympathize in your attitude.”107 Throughout, the newspaper described Ivy as “brutish,” “fiendish,” and most commonly, “a negro.”108 Ultimately the explanation of the

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105 Ferrell to Payne, 2006.
106 “Mob Lynches Negro who Assaults Girl.”
107 “Young Woman Outraged by Negro Brute.”
events was put into the common language of the South—religion. *The Pontotoc Sentinel* took up this mantel saying,

That was a shocking occurrence at Etta…It is nothing to moralize over or preach about, because the crime is the only one not mentioned in Holy Writ to which a penalty is prescribed…When a rattlesnake rises up in your path, instinct teaches you to kill him with the first thing you can lay your hands on. Some bone-headed legislator might have inserted in the revised statues of 1866 a section relating to the propagations and preservation of snakes… Some inspired idiot invested with authority to legislate might argue that [the Bible] meant literally to ‘bruise’ and not ‘break’ the snake’s head…All we meant to say is that there is no law, human or divine, to meet the emergency that demanded summary vengeance swift and sure, from the people of the Etta neighborhood…Shut up. Forget it.  

And that is just what the people of Etta did.

Over the next year, the majority of the black community moved away. It was the fall so

once families got the crops in, they packed up all of their belongings and struck out to Arkansas, Tennessee, and Missouri seeking refuge and communities of safety. They scattered and left behind homes, friends, schools and Baker’s Chapel church. As the members left, the church crumbled. Eventually people completely abandoned it. Former congregants cut ties with the land, the building, and the cemetery holding so many loved (ones including L.Q. Ivy).  

Macy Visor Ferrell remembers this sad time, saying,

They all began to move out. We was living with a good man. Mr. Roberson was a good man. But all they black community was moving. We knew we wasn’t going to have a church; we knew we wasn’t going to have school, and so everybody moved out. It was a sad time, a crucial time, for black people. They was quiet as possible, and as soon as they could, they all left the community.

Authorities never charged leaders’ of L.Q. Ivy’s lynching mob were with a crime.

109 “Moralizing to No Purpose”

110 Ferrell to Payne, 2006.

111 Ferrell to Payne, 2006
William Bradshaw, one of the men to participate in the lynching, bragged saying,

> Not an officer in Union County or any of the neighboring counties will point out any member of the crowd. Why, if he did, the best thing for him to do would be to jump into an airplane headed for Germany—quick…Everybody down there knows everybody else. We’re all neighbors and neighbor’s neighbors. I’ve know Sheriff Johnny Roberts since he was knee high to a duck, and I was one of the delegation that called him on Friday night and told him we were tired of him dilly-dallying and that he’d have to produce that Negro or take the consequences.¹¹²

They never saw the inside of a courtroom or a jail cell but according to Union County tales, the leaders of the lynch mob did not escape punishment. Rumors spread throughout the county of the awful fates that awaited L.Q. Ivy’s murders. Each suffered an unusual and painful death. Pleas Traynom, who the community knew as a bully and a drunkard, married Mammie Gaines, Bessie’s half sister. He died in a car crash that took him and his entire family; only one granddaughter survived. Clyde Nash, who took the young man from Sheriff Roberts, owned a garage in Myrtle and after a freak accident in his auto shop crippled him. Doyle Gaines, Bessie’s half brother, developed leukemia and lost his mind before he died. Joe Keith Robbins, a heavy drinker, became a victim of the “jake leg.”¹¹³ After a night of heavy drinking, Bill Greer froze to death in a ditch only a couple of miles from his home. His body was partially decomposed when he was finally found. Pauline Gaines Coffey, who struck one of the matches that set Ivy’s pyre ablaze, burned to death when her electric blanket caught fire and she was unable to escape. Many Union County residents believed that these tragic endings were retribution for lynching L.Q. Ivy.¹¹⁴

¹¹² “Mob Member Laughs at Probe,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, 21 September 1925.

¹¹³ The “jake leg” was a disorder cause by the consumption of poor alcohol that made one loose control of their hands and feet.

¹¹⁴ McMillen.
As for Bessie Gaines, whose story set off the tragic events, she lived to an old age. Bessie never married. Rumors swirled around town regarding her sexual escapades with a number of different men. People around town called her “loose,” and questioned her rape story. Some even thought that she accused Ivy to cover up a sexual liaison. Bessie lived out her old age with her daughter Wilma Agnes who treated her poorly until her death.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.,
MINISTERIAL RESPONSES

In the wake of lynchings, black churches were the likely place to provide communities with aid, comfort, and ultimately empowerment. Despite the growing power of African American churches in the nation and their prominence within local black communities, African American ministers struggled with their response to the South’s lynching culture.

A few daring ministers blatantly confronted the South’s lynching culture. Vernon Johns, legendary pastor and predecessor of Martin Luther King Jr. at Dexter Baptist Church Montgomery from 1947 to 1952, was one such religious leader. He boldly took on southern white violence proclaiming that the attitudes of most southern white churchgoers rendered them no more Christian than “sun worshippers.” Johns became particularly incensed after an incident in which officers in Montgomery stopped a black man for speeding and beat him half to death while other African Americans looked on and did nothing to help the man. Responding to this atrocity Johns announced his upcoming sermon title on the church marquee, “It’s Safe to Murder Negroes in Montgomery.” In doing so, Johns violated the southern code of silence that nurtured racial violence and prompted retaliation. He received calls throughout the night threatening to
burn down the church if he did not take down his insulting message. Saturday night the Klan burned a cross in the church yard but undaunted on Sunday morning Johns preached that the violence done to southern African Americans was tantamount to the “lynching of Jesus.” When asked about his actions, Johns explained, “Everywhere I go in the South the Negro is forced to chose between his hide and his soul…Mostly he chooses his hide. I’m going to tell him that his hide is not worth it.” 116

Johns is important because he represents a counter point in the African American community that urged southern blacks to guard their humanity and mental health through defiant confrontations with racism. Most ministers, however, did not directly address the South’s lynching culture. During Jim Crow, local black churches were largely silent in the face of lynchings. Ministers frequently avoided direct political speech or action against lynching and opted instead to pacify their congregations. In his autobiography, influential African American preacher and president of Morehouse College Benjamin Mays reports,

In the process of writing this book, I read widely the most reputable newspapers of the South published between 1880-1910…I do not recall ever having seen a single article by a minister, a group of ministers or by anyone speaking in the name of the church and Christianity that condemned the horrible crime of lynching. 117

Mays instead contended that black pastors in the Jim Crow South urged their congregants to endure. He finds that 50% of black ministers said nothing of white people, while 17% instructed their congregants to obey white people. Describing his own family pastor at Mount Zion Baptist church, Mays says, “The Gospel he preached was primarily an opiate to enable

116 Taylor Branch, 22.

them to endure and survive the oppressive conditions under which they lived and at the hands of the white people in the community. I never heard him utter one word against lynching...sometimes an opiate is good medicine.”

If Mays’s observations are true, then black churches of the Jim Crow era are markedly different from many of the black churches in the Civil Rights era. For rather than overtly opposing injustice, churches sought to shelter and comfort their congregants.

AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES BECOME TARGETS

It is telling that local black churches often became targets of the southern lynching culture. As a site of black power the institutional church was vulnerable to the retaliations of white supremacists and often became the object of terrorism. Such was the case in Eli Cooper’s lynching on August 28, 1919 in Caldwell, Georgia. As rumors spread that Cooper was organizing laborers to lobby for higher wages, a group of twenty local whites formed a posse. They roamed the countryside burning three African American churches and a lodge before heading for Cooper’s home. Once there, the posse broke into Cooper’s house, and in front of his wife, repeatedly stabbed Eli Cooper. When the posse declared Cooper dead, the men drug his body to the Ocmulgee African church, where they set the church on fire and threw Cooper’s body into the inferno.

The cloth was not enough to protect African American ministers either. Medger Evers took over as NAACP coordinator in Mississippi when vigilantes murdered Rev. George Lee. Rev. Lee stridently served four different churches in the Mississippi Delta and advocated for

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118 Ibid., 15-16.

119 “Church Burnings Follow Negro Agitator’s Lynching” Chicago Defender, Sept 6 1919.
African American voting rights from his pulpits. His work caught the attention of disproving whites, who threatened him for years, but Lee refused to give in to their demands and be silenced. This choice cost him his life. On May 7, 1995, Rev. George Lee was driving home when several white men in a convertible pulled up alongside his car and shot the minister. One of the bullets ripped through Lee’s lower facing and tore off his jaw. In a final act of defiance, Rev. Lee received an open casket funeral.120

HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS OF RESISTANCE

Without the protection of the law or the church, African Americans were largely left without an institutional champion against southern lynching culture.121 Thus the only recourse afforded to many African Americans after lynchings and other events of racial violence was to flee. Often whole communities, as was seen in the lynching of L.Q. Ivy, would leave after violent episodes. In doing so, African Americans were able to deny wealthy white farmers and other business owners a labor force. This could become a dire situation especially in agrarian communities where the profit of wealthy white farmers depended on African American labor to get in a good harvest.

Outright resistance was often not possible. Thus African Americans had to develop a variety of coping mechanisms to resist the physical and mental oppression of the southern lynching culture. Personal faith provided the foundation for such nuanced attacks. While Mays

120 The NAACP brought in Medger Evers to replace Rev. George Lee as a regional secretary. In 1963, Byron De La Beckwith, a member of the White Citizens’ Council, killed Evers for Evers’s work with the NAACP. See Michael Vinson Williams, Medger Evers: Mississippi Martyr, (University of Arkansas Press, 2011) 118-122.

121 Many prominent national leaders emerged to denounce the horrors of lynching (i.e. Ida B. Wells Barnett, John Mitchell Jr. Walter White, etc.) but their work was national in scope and in the beginning did little to suppress spontaneous violence on the local level. For more on this see Crystal Feimster, Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.; Paula J. Giddings, Ida, A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching (New York: Harper, 2009).
criticized the lack of overt defiance in African American churches, another prominent African American theologian of the Jim Crow era, Howard Thurman, espoused an ideology that justified such methods. As a prolific author, Dean of the chapel of Boston University and mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., Thurman was one of the most respected black theologians of his time and his works are still classic sources for theologians today. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in 1949, Thurman states that the black community exemplifies the “suffering servant.” He argues that, although often overlooked, the Christian religion at its core is not meant for the powerful in society but for the “disinherited.” Thurman went on to say that Christianity offered techniques for survival for African Americans and other minority groups living within oppressive societies. Christianity’s narrative of the life of Jesus provided a model for African Americans to deal with the South’s harsh oppression. As he explains,

> The solution which Jesus found for himself and for Israel, as they faced the hostility of the Greco-Roman world, becomes the word and the work of redemption for all the cast-down people in every generation and in every age. I mean this quite literally. I do not ignore the theological and metaphysical interpretation of the Christian doctrine of salvation. But the underprivileged everywhere have long since abandoned any hope that this type of salvation deals with the crucial issues by which their days are turned into despair without consolation. The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of the Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed.¹²²

Thurman sees in the life of Jesus an existence remarkably similar to the circumstances of black southerners. Just as Jesus had come into a cruel and unjust world and that world rejected him and he suffered at its hands, so did African Americans in the South. Suffering, therefore,

¹²² Ibid., 29.
was the natural state of living in a broken world but in the end would transform into redemption. Thurman claimed that for the disinherited, resistance comes in many forms. Even nonresistance can be a form of resistance when it preserves the life and mental health of the oppressed. He found this example in Jesus of Nazareth.

He recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however, great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them.123

Thus local church pastors grappled with the ideologies espoused by Mays and Thurman in their own struggles to comfort and care for their congregations in the midst of overwhelming terror. Although local black ministers acknowledged the suffering of their people, more fell in line with Thurman’s theology and preached a gospel of patience and respectability. The gospel of patience argued that God would eventually intercede and the gospel of respectability hoped that black communities could win respect and just treatment from hegemonic white communities. For example, when racial tensions were particularly high on the eastern border of Georgia and the western border of South Carolina, one black minister preached these words of consolation to his community,

A race despised and rejected of men, a race of sorrows and acquainted with grief, a race that is shot down like rabbits, and denied in many ways the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness…When I think of these things, I also remember that the God of Israel slumbers not nor sleeps, and that, if we trust him the God who brought us safely though the red sea of slavery will also deliver us from the hands of the wicked and unjust men. And [if] we will not bless God for the night, we most certainly ought to thank Him that the night is no deeper, and that He has promised to deliver us, if we call on Him, in the time of trouble [sic].124

123 Thurman, 21.

124 Georgia Baptist, ed. William J. White. December 1, 1898
African American ministers all over the South preached similar sentiments in the aftermath of lynchings. In May of 1900 in Richmond County, Georgia a verbal dispute between a white man and two black youth escalated into the murder of the white man and then the subsequent lynching of one of the black youth. In the wake of this tragedy, local ministers faced the difficult task of finding words of comfort to speak to the angry and stunned community. One local minister who presided over the boy’s funeral urged the community to practice “quietness and forbearance,” saying,

Let us remember that under the strained conditions brought about by this sad tragedy, we must all take more and suffer more for the next two months than would have been necessary had this not occurred...We cannot afford to fight...We do not wish to fight our brethren.”

Thus local southern black ministers had to walk the thin line between providing comfort and care to their congregants and facing the threat of new violence from white vigilantes. Most found a middle way in coded biblical language that allowed them to speak to their congregants without rousing white anger. The image of Christ as Isaiah’s suffering servant was key to this strategy. It allowed ministers to speak to the suffering and injustice of their community, without directly implicating their southern white neighbors.

While most religious leaders refrained from direct forms of resistance and overt language, African American national leaders and artists took up this mantle and regularly employed Christian themes to confront and dismantle the South’s lynching culture. The most

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125 Ibid., May 17, 1900.
popular was to compare the horrors of lynchings with the crucifixion of Christ.\textsuperscript{126} Countee Cullen’s “Christ Recrucified,” published in 1922, is a vivid example of this rhetorical tool.

The South is crucifying Christ again  
By all the laws of ancient rote and rule:  
The ribald cries of ‘Save Yourself’ and ‘Fool’  
Din in his ears, the thorns grope for his brain,  
And where they bite, swift springing rivers stain  
His gaudy, purple robe of ridicule  
With sullen red; and acid wine to cool  
His thirst is thrust at him, with lurking pain.

Christ’s awful wrong is that he’s dark of hue,  
The sin for which no blamelessness atones;  
But lest the sameness of the cross should tire  
They kill him now with famished tongues of fire,  
And while he burns, good men, and women, too,  
Shout, battling for his black and brittle bones.

Another prominent and controversial example of this rhetorical tool was “Jesus Christ in Georgia.” First published as, “Jesus Christ in Texas” this newspaper ad displayed two images, one of Jesus on the cross and one of a lynching victim hanging from a tree.

\textsuperscript{126} For a full discussion on the connection between the southern lynching culture and the crucifixion see James Cone, \textit{The Cross and the Lynching Tree} (New York: Orbis Books, 2012).
While national leaders could speak out against the southern lynching culture, local leaders risked swift and harsh retaliation for actions of overt defiance. Thus their methods had to be more nuanced. Local black communities and ministers therefore used coded language and symbolic acts to rebuff southern lynching culture and protect their own mental health.

It is from this context that we should understand the oral traditions that grew up around L.Q. Ivy’s lynching. Institutionally the black citizens of Union County were not able to overcome the southern lynching culture’s power. The case of Ivy’s lynching was never investigated by civil authorities and did not receive its day in court. Neither was the institutional

127 “Jesus Christ in Georgia,” *Crisis*. December 1911.
church able to intercede to right the wrongs of white racism and violence. In fact, the desecration done to the bodies of lynching victims subverted traditional religious burial customs designed to provide dignity to those who had lived in an undignified world. Furthermore, although, the small church of Baker’s Chapel provided comfort to its congregation in the wake of L.Q.’s lynching and served as a hub for community support, in the end, it broke under the weight of southern lynching culture and had to disband.

Yet, institutional powers do not have the final say in this story. The people created and carried on an oral tradition that upheld L.Q. Ivy’s innocence and the injustice done to the young man. Through the story of his incorruptible heart, the people of Union County honor L.Q. Ivy in their memory. The story of his pure heart surviving the insatiable flames should be considered not on the basis of its authenticity but rather on the basis of its function. Such stories provided communities with some sense of injustice being recognized and punished. Though justice could not be found in the court system, it had the final word through memory and story. Thus resistance is to be found through the memories and stories passed down about lynching atrocities. When these stories incorporated religious imagery (such as Ivy’s pure heart surviving his torture, and the mob leaders dying horrible deaths) they called on a powerful system of ethics deeply embedded in southern tradition—Christianity. Ironically it was the same system that the perpetrators of their violence called upon as well. Thus, through story, African Americans struck at the root of white racism by challenging the basis of its ideological power. Furthermore through clinging to a Christian identity, African Americans called into question the religious authenticity of their oppressors.

EPILOGUE

Through L.Q. Ivy’s story and in the larger context of the southern lynching culture, we see a complex relationship developed between the southern lynching culture and the culture of Christianity. Like a vine climbing a trellis, the southern lynching culture grew up around a Christian framework. Both perpetrators and victims used this structure to advocate for their version of southern justice.

African American churches provided a safe haven for black communities struggling with the uncertain and harsh condition of Jim Crow. As Richard Wright said, “Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows of death.”¹²⁹ Churches provided African Americans with a safe place to escape the degradation of the outside world. Yet for all of its prominence within African American communities, the institutional church was not able to stand up as a force against southern lynching culture. Without the resources to directly confront southern lynching culture, ministers and other church leaders built an environment that soothed and comforted their congregants. It was within this context, however, that African Americans developed tools of resistance.

These tools of resistance sustained African Americans in the aftermath of lynchings and allowed them to carry on in the harsh Jim Crow context. Eventually these tools came to overwhelm southern lynching culture. The culmination of such techniques can be seen in the lynching and burial of another young man in Mississippi.

Thirty years after the lynching of L.Q. Ivy and one hundred miles down the Tallahatchie River, another young boy was murdered in Mississippi. On August 31, 1955 two boys fishing in the Tallahatchie saw a pair of what looked like human feet sticking up from out of the water. They fished the object out of the water and discovered the desecrated body of a young man named Emmett Till. At the time, Till was unknown to the two boys but in a short time his name and story would be known all over the world.

Emmett “Bobo” Till was a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago. He was the only child of Mamie Till Bradley. His father, Louis Till, died in 1945 just before his son’s fourth birthday. Till came down south in the summer of 1955 to visit his mother’s relatives in Money, Mississippi and was enthusiastically welcomed. He stayed with Moses and Elizabeth Wright, his great-uncle and aunt. They were kind and devout people. Influenced by his first wife, Lucinda, Moses “Mose” Wright, became a circuit preacher in the Church of God in Christ. He developed quite a reputation in the Mississippi Delta when he refused to register for the draft because of his religious convictions.\(^\text{130}\)

All was well with Till’s visit until one fateful day. On August 27, 1955, after a long day of work, Till and a few other young men, stopped off at a little store in Money, Mississippi to buy candy and see other youth. Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market was a gathering place for African American youth in Money. A young white couple owned the struggling little store. Roy

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\(^{130}\) Simeon Wight, *Simeon’s Story: An Eyewitness Account of the Kidnapping of Emmett Till* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010).

Bryant was twenty-four and a veteran of the U.S. Army’s 82\textsuperscript{nd} Airborne Division and his wife, Carolyn, was twenty-one and a former beauty contestant winner who dropped out of high school to marry Roy. In later newspaper articles, Carolyn Bryant would be called a “crossroads Marilyn Monroe.”\textsuperscript{131} The couple lived in the back of the store and spent most of their time tending the shop. On the day that Till and his friends came in, however, Roy Bryant was away helping his brother transport a load of shrimp from New Orleans to San Antonio.

Accounts vary as to what happened on that day but Till was accused of whistling at Carolyn and making advances towards her. These accusations set in motion a chain of events Till and the other young boys could not foresee. When Roy Bryant returned home, Carolyn told her version of the events and Roy was enraged. He relayed the story to his half brother, J.W. Milam and the men decided to take action.

With a small crew of accomplices, the men traveled to the Wright home. Milam carried with him a gun he had used in World War II “to kill the Germans.” Like Bryant, he had served in the military as an Army lieutenant in WWII.\textsuperscript{132}

When the men arrived at the Wright home, it was just a little after midnight. Bryant called out into the darkness, “Preacher, Preacher.” Moses Wright awoke from his sleep and went outside to see who was calling for him. “This is Mr. Bryant,” Roy Bryant stated, “I want to talk to you and that boy.” Behind, Bryant and J.W Milam there stood a third man covering his face. Moses Wright would later say he believed this third person to be an and black man who knew his family and helped the white men find their home.

\textsuperscript{131} David W. Houck and Matthew A. Grindy, \textit{Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press} (Jackson: The University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 13.

Bryant and Milam, enter the Wrights’ home and roamed from room to room until they found Till asleep in his bed. They woke him ordering him to get dressed and come with them. Mrs. Wright broke into the room and pleaded with the men not to take the boy. She offered to pay them but nothing could dissuade the two men.

They took Till to a vehicle parked outside in the darkness and asked the person inside if this was the boy. The person inside (who Moses Wright would later recall had a voice “lighter” than a man’s) confirmed it was the boy they were seeking. After confirming Till’s identity, the men pushed him in the car and sped away. Mrs. Wright ran next door to ask her white neighbors for help but they refused. All the family could do was wait and pray.  

No one knows what happened to Till on that dark night. The only clues left behind were to be found on the young man’s brutalized corpse. Before he died, Till was brutally beaten and tortured. Sheriff H.C. Strider of Tallahatchie County reported the body was, “cut up pretty badly like an axe was used. We found a bullet hole one inch above his right ear. The left side of his face had been cut up or beaten up, plumb into the skull.” After the beating, Till’s body was weighed down with a 70-pound cotton gin fan fastened around his neck with barbed wire and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. Around noon on August 31, 1955, the deputy sheriff retrieved Moses Wright from his cotton field to identify a body found in the Tallahatchie River. The body found, was bloated, badly beaten and it was hard to recognize any distinguishing traits that would point to the person’s identity. The only clear identifier was the silver ring on the boy’s finger. It was the same ring that Emmett Till’s father, Louis Till, had owned and bore the initials, “L.T.”

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133 Wright, 41-66.

Once authorities discovered and identified Emmett Till’s body, H.C. Strider, sheriff of Tallahatchie County, and other county officials, insisted that Moses Wright bury Till’s body immediately. The undertaker corroborated the officials’ claims arguing that because Till’s body was in such bad shape, they should not delay.\(^{135}\) Wright followed their advice and began to make funeral preparations. Till’s family came in from the cotton fields and dressed for a funeral, while two young men dug a grave and the funeral home prepared Till’s body for burial.

Before the service started, however, an uncle spoke to Moses Wright saying that Emmett Till’s mother and grandmother disapproved and wanted Till’s body brought back to Chicago for burial. Sheriff Smith of Leflore County also interrupted the proceedings to insist that Till’s body be sent back to Chicago. Smith, fought with the undertaker who insisted that he had orders from Tallahatchie County to bury Till’s body immediately.

In the end, authorities packed Emmett Till’s coffin with lye and shipped to Chicago. Newspaper photographers captured the reunion between mother and son. The pictures showed an overwrought mother being held up by three ministers while her son’s body was unloaded from the train. Despite the objections of Chicago undertaker A.A. Rayner, Mamie Till Bradley insisted on inspecting her son’s body. After seeing the full weight of the southern lynching culture, Till Bradley, turned to Rayner and insisted that her son’s body be displayed in an open casket funeral with no retouching saying, “Let the people see what they did to my boy.”\(^{136}\) Mamie Till Bradley decided that she wanted Emmett’s death to count for something and hoped that though displaying her son’s brutalized body she would expose the evil that was the South’s

\(^{135}\) Houck and Grindy, 21-24.

lynching culture. Till Bradley would later say, “Lord you gave your son to remedy a condition, but who knows, but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching.”

Till’s casket was on display for three days, and during this time, over six hundred thousand people visited Rayner’s funeral home to view the young man’s body. Visitors were so overwhelmed by Till’s body, that reports indicate some broke windows in the funeral home. Mamie Till Bradley also allowed for pictures to be taken of her son. *The Crisis*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and most notably, *Jet* magazine published the photographs. Hundreds of thousands viewed the photographs of Till through these publications. After the viewing, the family finally laid Emmett Till’s body was finally laid to rest in Burr Oak Cemetery.

In the past, the ritual of resistance adopted by Mamie Till Bradley (i.e. an open casket funeral to show the brutality of lynching) succeeded in providing solace to families of lynching victims but proved unsuccessful in raising the national consciousness in a sustained way. Mostly the victims of lynchings died in obscurity and their stories were intentionally forgotten or hidden. Mamie Till Bradley’s daring course of action, however, turned the tide on this trend. The burial rites of Emmett Till caught the attention of a horrified nation and sparked a firestorm. Hundreds of thousands of people attended Emmett Till’s open casket viewing and saw the pictures of Till’s brutalized body. The nation had finally seen the true nature of southern lynching culture.

This moment deeply affected people all across the country, especially young African Americans. In Louisville, Kentucky, a thirteen year old boy named Cassius Clay, later to be known as Muhammad Ali, remembers standing on a street corner transfixed by Till’s
photographs and thinking that Mrs. Bradley had, “done a bold thing.” As a fifteen year old boy at the time of Till’s lynching, future Georgia congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis recalled, “I was shaken to my core. He could have been me. That could have been me, beaten, tortured, dead at the bottom of a river.” Later, Lewis spoke of Emmett Till’s lynching saying, “It galvanized the county. A lot of us young black students in the South…weren’t sitting in just for ourselves—we were sitting in for Emmett Till. We went on Freedom rides for Emmett Till.” Emmett Till’s lynching created a firestorm in the nation. In fact, many historians see Till’s death as the spark that ignited the civil rights movement. Author Clenora Hudson-Weems captured these sentiments when she named Emmett Till, “the sacrificial lamb of the civil rights movement.” Indeed, the African American community had turned a corner. Eschewing proponents of gradual change, Martin Luther King Jr. called on black people to rise up and demand “freedom now.” Three months after the lynching of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. In this movement, African American churches became radicalized and formed the backbone of resistance. Church support would inspire and sustain the civil rights movement. In the fight for civil rights, pastors and other church leaders became the officers while congregants served as their foot soldiers. Thus what began as small acts of defiance rooted in a religious framework but often not supported by institutional structures, came to employ the full power of institutional black churches to organize resistance.

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142 Cone, 66.
Through her decision to display her son’s brutalized body, Mamie Till Bradley followed in the footsteps of other lynching victims’ families and stepped into a tradition of ritual defiance. From these families, she adopted a ritual of defiance created and cultivated in the context of the South’s merciless lynching culture. Whether through lavish funerals, subversive folklore, or open casket viewings of lynching victims, the living victims of the South’s lynching culture found ways to challenge white supremacy in their burial rituals. Although white supremacy succeeded in taking the life of their loved ones, the families of lynching victims refused to let white supremacists have the final word. African Americans developed an arsenal of tools to asserted the humanity of their loved ones in juxtaposition to the inhumanity of lynching. These burial rituals served as jeremiads against the southern lynching culture and exposed its true nature and cruelty.
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