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WHAT REMAINS:
TELLING THE STORY OF IRENE TAYLOR'S MURDER

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

CHRISTIAN LEUS

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ABSTRACT

This written thesis serves as a companion piece to *What Remains*, a six-part audio podcast telling the story of Irene Taylor, a 19-year-old sharecropper's daughter who was murdered in Altheimer, Arkansas, in 1939. The investigation of the murder, which garnered national press attention, ended with the conviction and execution of Sylvester Williams, a 22-year-old Black man also from Altheimer. This paper expands on the contextual research done in support of the podcast, including close readings of newspaper coverage and fictionalized magazine reports of the case; an examination of the Delta environment's racialized history and its impact on the lives of 1930s Arkansans; and an investigation of the state-sponsored racial violence evidenced in Sylvester Williams' trial and execution. In addition, this thesis reflects on the creative process of documenting the Irene Taylor story as a member of her extended family, including meditating on issues of documentary form, narrative authority, and family trauma and memory.

Contrary to the myth of Southern families passing stories along on the porch, people in my family kept secrets and only hinted at what might have happened. Some days I think the way to make a storyteller is to refuse to tell her what happened.

— Dorothy Allison, *Trash*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2019, I was doing some archival research for a project that would trace the ecological history of Flat Bayou, the sludgy backwater that flows, just barely, through my hometown. Altheimer, Arkansas, a community of about a thousand people in the Arkansas River Delta, started the 20th century as a logging town, running its oaks and cypresses through a sawmill on the banks of the bayou until there weren't any left. After that, it was cotton, picked by Black and white sharecroppers and processed in the gin next to the railroad tracks. My maternal great-grandmother's family, the Taylors, were white sharecroppers who grew cotton in the fields outside of town, between the highway and the northward-snaking bends of Flat Bayou.

I found the first article on accident. It was from Hope, Arkansas's *Star*, published on May 5th, 1939, under the headline "Farm Girl Found Attacked, Killed."¹ It only briefly summarized a story that, as I discovered, sprawls underneath the histories of my family, town, and region. Here's what I know for certain: On the 5th of May, 1939, the body of 19-year-old Irene Taylor was pulled from Flat Bayou where it ran up close to the back of Mt. Moriah Church. She had been missing for three days, having never come home from a visit to her sister's house. A medical examination revealed that she had been sexually assaulted and hit with an axe over her left eye before being strangled to death. Her head was then covered with a gunny-sack and pieces of an old iron stove

¹ "Farm Girl Found," 1.

bound to her arms and legs with haywire so that her body would sink to the bottom of the shallow water.

I had never heard the story, or even heard it referenced. It was like digging in the backyard and pulling up bones. When I asked my mom if she knew anything about it, she only vaguely recalled a similar story from her childhood, told by her great aunt, Jewell. Aunt Jewell was the only one who ever told the story about the murdered girl, my mom said, and, when she told it, she never mentioned that the girl was a member of the family. Irene Taylor was Jewell's first cousin, making her my third cousin.

In some ways, it seemed understandable that my family wouldn't want to discuss or pass down the story of Irene's murder. Her death, shockingly violent and at such a young age, must have been unspeakably traumatic for the family members who lived through it. But there was something else, as well. The story that Jewell told, according to my mom, wasn't as much about Irene's death as it was about her killer's. Sylvester Williams, a 22-year-old Black man who worked the same fields as the Taylors, confessed to the murder, was convicted, and was executed by electric chair. Jewell, along with my great-grandmother and several other members of my family, went, grieving and vindictive, to the state prison to witness the execution.

The story that Jewell didn't tell is how Sylvester Williams came to the electric chair. The newspaper archives reveal everything she left out: Williams was arrested on the same day that Irene's body was discovered and was taken to the county jail in nearby Pine Bluff. When word spread of his arrest, a mob of hundreds of white Altheimer residents, my family among them, gathered outside the jail, demanding Williams be turned over to them for lynching. The Jefferson County Sheriff, a man named Garland Brewster, managed to sneak Williams out of the jail, removing him to the state

penitentiary, where he was held until his trial. The trial itself, anticipated to draw an even bigger mob than the arrest, necessitated the closing of at least six city streets around the courthouse and the activation of two local National Guard units, in what was reported at the time to be the largest military occupation of Pine Bluff since the Civil War.²

In the end, the trial proved to be little more than a state-sponsored lynching. An all-white jury was selected in less than twenty minutes. Williams' court-appointed defense made no challenges, called no witnesses, and, when the jury returned a guilty verdict after fifty-five seconds of deliberation, waived the customary forty-eight hour waiting period between the jury finding and sentencing. Williams was immediately sentenced to death and was executed less than two months later.³

The deeper I got into researching the case, the more apparent it became that this story stretched out in many directions, encompassing not only me and my family, but also the thorny history of our community and landscape. Even though all the events of the story happened over 80 years ago, it still felt urgent, as if understanding why and how it unfolded the way it did would shed new light on life in Arkansas today. The story was troubling, and its scale daunting, but the deeper I dug into researching it, the more compelled I felt to bring it to a new audience. In late 2019 and early 2020, I produced two short documentary films about the story, before embarking on the project's current phase: a six-part audio podcast that uses narration, interview, and ambient sound to trace the events of the Irene Taylor case and my personal experience of investigating it. The podcast, *What Remains*, utilizes and subverts true crime documentary tropes in

² Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 115.

³ Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 116.

order to contextualize the story within broader histories of media exploitation, environmental change, racial violence, and family memory.

In this space, I'll reflect on the process of making *What Remains*, as well as expanding on and analyzing the research that went into telling Irene Taylor's story. While the events of the case began in May of 1939, the industrialized Delta landscape and society that produced them has its roots in the swamp drainage schemes of the late 1800s. These massive engineering projects transformed the lowland swamps of eastern Arkansas into new workable farmland where wealthy white landowners could use sharecropping to impose the antebellum racial order onto the post-bellum landscape. Both the Taylor family and the Williams family cultivated cotton on land that only a few decades earlier was underwater. Flat Bayou, the waterway to which Irene Taylor's story returns again and again—from the dumping of her body to its burial in Flat Bayou Cemetery—provides a geographical and metaphorical throughline fraught with the history of racial oppression in Jefferson County.

In addition to referring to archival and critical sources dealing with the environment of the Irene Taylor case, I also visited some of the story's key sites as they stand today. The ambient sound I recorded at the site of Mt. Moriah Church, Flat Bayou Cemetery, and other places associated with the case, as well as the embodied understanding of the places I gained through my fieldwork, fundamentally shaped my storytelling in *What Remains*. In addition to forming the emotional highpoint of the podcast's narrative, my experience of visiting the now-defunct Mt. Moriah Church graveyard helped me to better analyze how narrative authority, my own and that of others, functions within my documentary work. I'll reflect on how ghost stories

influenced my script writing and how legacies of racial violence complicate my depiction of Sylvester Williams' death.

Williams' death in the electric chair was just the final result of the systemically racist state justice system that tried the Irene Taylor case. One of the highest-profile capital offense cases Arkansas saw all decade, Williams' arrest, arraignment, and trial were all rife with injustices fueled by aggressive newspaper coverage that advertised his guilt. The Pine Bluff papers' headlines about Williams' confession and location at the county jail provided a target for two separate lynching attempts before the trial. Even though the threat of violence was palpable in Jefferson County, Williams' trial wasn't moved, and proceeded without objection from his state-appointed defense attorneys. The trial worked to reinforce white supremacist narratives not only of Williams' guilt, but also of the righteousness and efficacy of the courts in a time of increasingly anti-lynching public discourse. Williams' death at the hands of the court, rather than at the hands of a lynch mob, means that he has been remembered as guilty, despite considerable reason to distrust the truth of his confession. I'll analyze how my mother's recollection of the Irene Taylor story as told by our family reflects our fraught position as narrators informed by and embedded in white supremacist systems.

But, before I can tell those stories, I'll explicate how the murder was first reported in archival sources. The language of the sources, the articles that documented the murder and its aftermath, is often violent in itself, exploiting the people involved in order not just to inform, but to entertain a wider audience. Irene Taylor's case was a press sensation, drawing national attention that lasted over a month after the discovery of her corpse. In some cases, press coverage not only reflected contemporary views and understandings of the murder and proceeding trial, but actually shaped the events as

they unfolded. In other cases, what was published about Irene Taylor's story only heightened the trauma of her death by co-opting it into pulp entertainment. Both, I think, can help me understand what happened in Alzheimer in 1939.

II. PRESS COVERAGE AND TRUE CRIME MAGAZINES

A few months into my research on this story, a family friend mentioned that she had a press clipping about the case. I was expecting a wrinkled column cut from a local newspaper, more than likely of an article that I had already found in my own archival investigation. As it turned out, however, she had an entire copy of *Actual Detective Stories* from January 1941, an oversized magazine with rusting staples in the spine and pulpy newsprint pages that were beginning to curl at the edges.

This was my first clue that the reportage of Irene Taylor's murder went beyond short articles in local papers. The magazine has a bright red cover, emblazoned with the headline "On My Wedding Night Came the Police"; above it, a black and silver photograph shows two men in fedoras looming over a panicked-looking woman with tears rolling down her brightly-lit cheek.¹ The issue originally sold for 15 cents, and included ten "timely, complete, unusual, dramatic" crime stories, all drawn from the headlines of the previous few years.² Compared to the austere black-and-white newsprint that had constituted my research thus far, *Actual Detective Stories* looked sensational, a spectacle of color and chiaroscuro lighting that surely would've been eye-catching on the shelf of a 1940s newsstand. When my friend opened the magazine to a page she had bookmarked with a sheet of typing paper, I was shocked even further. The Irene Taylor story splashes across a double-page spread, columns of text

¹ *Actual Detective Stories*, cover.

² *Actual Detective Stories*, 2.

interspersed with illustrations and photographs, including one of Irene's corpse stretched out next to Flat Bayou.

For magazines like *Actual Detective Stories*, shocking readers was part of the point. By the early 1940s, the popular periodicals that began the century publishing fictional detective stories were becoming well established in the new market of true crime. Writers and editors pulled facts from the juiciest cases and fictionalized them, fitting them into the same generic and aesthetic conventions that filled the pages of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler novels, the ink splashes of early comic books, and the smoky images that were just beginning to pop up on the silver screen. Grim, violent, and pessimistic, the stories of hard-boiled fiction and film noir often featured male detectives investigating women of questionable virtue in cases that trafficked in the shocking and risqué. In *Actual Detective Stories* and magazines like it, a carefully fictionalized tale of a true crime could have all of these features, plus the added gritty bonus of real police photographs. Irene Taylor's story begins on page eight of the January 1941 issue:

The weight on his fish-line suddenly began to move and the fisherman pulled and tugged. The water swirled. The mud from the bayou began roiling to the surface like an angry storm. Then: "By the jumpin' crawfish!" the fellow gasped. "It's a girl—a dead girl that I have on my line!"³

Allegedly told by Jefferson County Sheriff Garland Brewster to Herbert Mason, an *Actual Detective Stories* writer, the piece transforms Irene Taylor's murder into a whodunit detective story, following the intrepid sheriff down a path of red herring clues to an ending with the bad guy in handcuffs.

³ Mason, "He Couldn't Resist," 8.

Even though the story uses Sylvester Williams' name, it completely elides his race and the racial violence that he faced. In fact, it changes most of the course of events that followed Irene Taylor's death, and is riddled with factual inaccuracies—Irene's body was actually found, for example, not by a hapless fisherman, but by county police dredging the bayou while investigating her disappearance. Irene's part-time job selling candy, incidental in the real case, becomes the story's central through-line, complete with "four half-eaten chocolate bars" left at the crime scene by the killer.⁴ The story is heavily illustrated, but it's unclear to the reader which photographs are actual police material and which are stock images or staged ones taken by the magazine—a disclaimer under the table of contents states that the issue's pictures don't legally claim to depict the actual persons involved in the case they accompany.⁵ The photograph of Irene's bound and weighted corpse, however, which fills the bottom half of the story's opening spread, seems to be verifiably real.

While *Actual Detective Stories'* strategic altering of the facts recreated Irene Taylor's murder as a hard-boiled adventure, previous reporting of the case seems to have been more organically wrong. Irene's body was pulled from Flat Bayou on Friday, May 5th, 1939; by May 7th, the story was printed in the Sunday editions of over a dozen publications from Brooklyn, New York, to Oakland, California. Traveling through the wires of the Associated Press, United Press, and International News Service, the details of the case became increasingly amplified and distorted. As the story spread outward from Arkansas, its relevant dates and ages became increasingly misreported, as did the number of attackers, number of suspects arrested, and other salient details. Irene Taylor's age is alternately reported as 19 or 20, while Sylvester Williams varies amongst

⁴ Mason, "He Couldn't Resist," 11.

⁵ *Actual Detective Stories*, 2.

20, 22, 23, and 26 years of age.⁶ “Reporters should, above all else, be accurate,” proclaims the *Oshkosh Northwestern*, in the column right next to a story about the case that misreports Sylvester Williams’s age as 26, the date of the murder as May 16th, and the name of Cummins State Prison as “Cummings.”⁷

In addition to misreporting the facts of the case, out-of-state papers also often added language that emphasized the sensory details of the case. The stories distributed by news agencies fall generally into two tonal and stylistic categories: one that sticks to a more traditional and conservative definition of journalistic writing, using efficient, compact sentences and little descriptive language; and one that more liberally uses visual imagery, qualitative descriptions, and quotations. The *Eagle* of Bryan, Texas, for example, published a story that falls firmly into the first category, using only one multi-clause sentence to convey the barebones features of the case:

ALTHEIMER, Ark. May 6—(AP)—Strangled to death with hay wire, Irene Taylor, 19-year-old daughter of an Altheimer farm couple, was found weighted down with scrap iron in the shallow waters of Old Flat bayou, two miles north of here Friday.⁸

In contrast, one longer AP report, syndicated in whole or part in at least five publications across the country, elaborates further, illuminating the story’s gruesome details through descriptive language. The *Standard-Speaker* of Hazelton, Pennsylvania, was one of many papers to print a version of the story full of colorful details:

PINE BLUFF, Ark., May 5. (AP)—Dark-haired Irene Taylor was found slain today and a few hours later Sheriff Garland Brewster announced he had jailed four negroes, one of whom he said had admitted assaulting and killing the 19-year-old farm girl after seizing her “because she had a pretty box of candy.” Sheriff Brewster said the girl, missing since Tuesday, had been clubbed, raped and strangled with haywire.⁹

⁶ “Negro Youth Admits Slaying,” 1; “Sentenced to Die For Slaying Girl,” 1; “Quick Thinking of Sheriff Saves Negro Slayer From Mob,” 7; “Mob Storms Jail In Vain, Man Wanted Is Far Away,” 5.

⁷ “Mob Storms Jail,” 5.

⁸ “Body Of Strangled Girl Is Found In Pool,” 6.

⁹ “Arkansas Girl Was Found Slain,” 6.

A given newspaper's choice of publication was more than likely at least partially dependent upon factors that are illegible in the finished printed page—available page space, access or lack thereof to wire reports, editorial decisions, political prerogatives, or other influences. But, in any case, the second, more florid version of the story seems to have been printed far more often than any more conservative telling of the facts.

In the 1930s, an era that saw an explosion in nationally syndicated newspaper columnists and juggernaut traveling reporters, this more editorialized style of news reporting was becoming more and more widespread. Though it's not as explicit or drastic as the fact-altering of *Actual Detective Stories*, this pattern of descriptive, detail-oriented language allows the newspapers that utilize it to create portraits of real people colored in the light of fictionalized tropes and ideals. Importantly, none of those literary roles are ideologically neutral, and, therefore, have racialized, gendered, and political implications for their real-life antecedents.

Perhaps the most obvious target of the press's recreation is Irene Taylor herself, the teenager turned corpse at the center of the case. Much of the descriptive language of the newspaper copy is devoted to describing how Irene looked, creating a posthumous ideal of her that emphasizes her youth, innocence, and desirability. As we saw in the *Hazleton Standard-Speaker's* report, the most popular AP copy on the case described Irene Taylor as "dark-haired"; the *Sun-Democrat* of Paducah, Kentucky, specified "brunette."¹⁰ While a few papers do explicitly describe Irene as a "white girl," most rely on the implicit silence of not describing her as "Negro." Another AP story, syndicated in Tennessee's *Bristol Herald-Courier* and *Johnson City Chronicle*, characterizes her as a

¹⁰ "Quick Thinking," 7.

“pretty 19-year-old farm girl.”¹¹ Other publications emphasize Irene’s connection with candy, listing her as a “candy sales girl” or, as the *Hazleton Standard-Speaker* did, including an alleged quote in which Sylvester Williams confesses that Irene’s “pretty box of candy” was what motivated his attack.¹² Across all of the publications in my body of research, Irene is most often referred to as a “girl,” never as a “woman,” and as a “young woman” only once.¹³

Actual Detective Stories doubles down on this gendered image-making, including taking the extra step of aging Irene down two years, from 19 to 17.¹⁴ The story also makes sure to establish both Irene’s attractiveness and her innocence, with her mother assuring the police detectives that Irene wouldn’t have done anything untoward with a man:

Irene had quite a few dates, all right. She was popular with the boys, but I always tried to get her to wait until she was older before she got too serious with any of them. And that was what she did.¹⁵

In addition to creating Irene as pretty, young, and sweet (if only by her candy association), this portrait of Irene absolves her of any of the sexual, economic, or social transgressions for which hard-boiled stories often punish their female characters. Pastoral and vulnerable, with no greater economic ambitions than selling candy bars, Irene had broken no moral code that would deserve retribution. She perfectly fulfills one of the two roles performed by single women that Erin Smith identifies within hard-boiled fiction—not a designing, voluptuous femme fatale, but the opposite, a

¹¹ “Charges of Murder and Rape Against Negro,” 1; “Negro Confesses Rape, Murder Of White Girl,” 2.

¹² “Arkansas Girl,” 6.

¹³ “3 Negroes Die in Electric Chair for Women Attacks,” 77.

¹⁴ Mason, “He Couldn’t Resist,” 8.

¹⁵ Mason, “He Couldn’t Resist,” 10.

“passive victim of male sexual aggression, in need of rescue by the hard-boiled hero, who has no sexual designs on them.”¹⁶

It’s the failure of that rescue, then, that creates Irene’s tragedy. However, the trap of the “passive victim” trope means that, by virtue of her very innocence and passivity, Irene attracted violence. In Herbert Mason’s story, Sheriff Brewster’s fictionalized narration identifies Irene’s attractiveness as the mechanism of her downfall: “Somebody must have liked her too much, I thought. She was too attractive.”¹⁷ The newspapers, whether intentionally or not, reinforce this idea in their diction, reporting that Sylvester Williams was “attracted” to Irene’s box of candy, perhaps the most potent representation of her youth and desirability. A victim who is not threatened with harm, after all, has no narrative efficacy—both literally and figuratively, Irene does not enter the press’s story until she is killed. It is not enough for Irene to be consumable; for the story to play, she must also be consumed.

This act of consumption is also registered in the dehumanizing language with which the press describes the violence perpetrated against Irene. By the end of the *Bristol Herald-Courier*’s report, for example, Irene’s body was transformed from that of a pretty farm girl into that of “the victim,” dehumanized flesh referred to by de-gendered pronouns: “They aided Williams in weighting the victim’s body with iron and dumping it into a bayou where it was found yesterday.”¹⁸ Knoxville’s *News-Sentinel* goes even further, describing the violence experienced by Irene without using personal pronouns at all:

¹⁶ Smith, *Hard-Boiled*, 156.

¹⁷ Mason, “He Couldn’t Resist,” 10.

¹⁸ “Charges of Murder,” 1.

The body had been weighted down with pieces of an old stove and a water pump. There was a deep gash in the forehead. A gunny sack had been tied over the head. The hands and feet were bound with wire.¹⁹

Instead of the personal possessive “her,” the article uses the article adjective “the,” rendering Irene’s body parts anonymous pieces of evidence that exist within the narrative separately from her person. In suffering the violence she was created to attract, the characterized Irene becomes functional, a story element that can be used to further the male hero’s journey towards catching the bad guy.

For the Irene Taylor story, that hero is Sheriff Garland Brewster. In 1939, Brewster was in the sixth of the twelve terms he would serve as Jefferson County Sheriff. In office from January 1927 to December 1950, Brewster held the position for longer than any other Sheriff in the county’s 190-year history.²⁰ In *Actual Detective Stories*, Brewster’s persona is employed as a first-person narrator, as seen above. The Brewster characterized in the story is commanding and clever, leading his team of investigators through a maze of suspects and clues and, eventually, to the killer.

The newspaper coverage of Brewster’s actions in the case also portray him as a hero, but in a different context. It isn’t until Brewster foils the lynch mob outside the county jail that he becomes an active character in the press’s story, complete with snappy dialogue. For out-of-state papers like Paducah, Kentucky’s *Sun-Democrat*, the AP’s copy served to paint a vivid portrait of Brewster:

PINE BLUFF, Ark., May 6—AP—A quick thinking, steel nerved sheriff was credited today with saving from mob action late last night a Negro held for the assault-killing of a 19-year-old white farm girl. “Come on in boys,” invited Sheriff Garland Brewster, “you can search this jail if you want to but you won’t find that Negro. We got him away a long time ago.”²¹

¹⁹ “Charges of Murder,” 1.

²⁰ “History of the Sheriff’s office.”

²¹ “Quick Thinking,” 7.

Instead of being on Sylvester Williams' welfare or on the actions of the mob, the focus of this and many other articles about the attempted lynching is on Sheriff Brewster's bravado in the face of an angry crowd. Williams, like Irene, becomes a narrative tool for furthering Brewster's story, referred to anonymously as "a Negro" or "that Negro."

From the newspapers' diction, it seems clear that, at least for the most part, a commitment to racial justice was not the driving concern behind praise for Brewster's actions. In out-of-state papers, the AP copy was the most frequently used; but, as Marlin Shipman writes, Brewster's hometown publications had their own, more explicitly racist take on his actions. The *Pine Bluff Commercial*, the evening daily newspaper for the Jefferson County seat, first reported the gathering not as a lynch mob, but as a "group" or "crowd" who came to the jail with the intention of appointing "representatives" to parley with police and ascertain if Williams was in the jail.²² Shipman writes,

The next day's *Graphic* [Pine Bluff's morning paper] praised Sheriff Brewster's quick action not because a life was saved but rather because the Wagner Anti-Lynching Law was pending in Congress and a lynching in Pine Bluff would perhaps have aided passage of the bill and led to "intermeddling by the federal government" in the affairs of the South.²³

While out-of-state coverage is more implicit in its disregard for Sylvester Williams' welfare, the Arkansas papers were clear that the Sheriff was to be praised for upholding the rule of law and the political and racial status quo, and not necessarily for saving the life of a Black prisoner. In this case, and not coincidentally, the shaping of Sheriff Brewster into a wise-cracking hard-boiled hero works to uphold white supremacy.

Over and over again in this case, we see the press exploiting the lives of the people involved in the actual events for the sake of an entertaining, consequence-free narrative for white audiences. While this may not be surprising, the result is that, for most white

²² Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 115.

²³ Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 115.

audiences learning about the case from newspapers or magazines, Irene Taylor's murder came somewhere between news and detective story, contextualized just as much in the rules of hard-boiled fiction as it was in the actual experiences of those who lived through it.

In my retelling of the story, I wanted to undo as much of this exploitation as I could, using context to make visible the media structures that had previously been transparent in the historical representation of the case. This involved not only the textual analyses I've laid out in this chapter, but also a critical examination of my own storytelling strategies. In the time since *Actual Detective Stories* was published, the genre of true crime has grown massively, evolving new tropes and conventions that audiences have come to rely on. This is especially true in the world of podcasts, where true crime shows like *Serial*, *My Favorite Murder*, and *S-Town* have garnered massive listenerships. And while today's true crime podcasts occupy a wide variety of tones, structures, and narrative goals, they still share many of the same hallmarks that defined the genre in the 1940s: they purposefully interact with crime stories that are sensational or spectacular in some way; they often structure themselves around an investigation narrative, which, whether it solves the crime or not, seeks to be revelatory to the audience; and, most importantly, they place significance on their own claim to veracity.

The troubling of that claim to veracity is perhaps true crime's key feature. Sometimes, the ambiguity of the truth or the dubiousness of the storyteller's access to it forms the core of the story, as it does in a work like Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*. Other times, the veracity of a story or the honesty of its storytellers is questioned after the fact. This is an issue native to all documentary media: a documentary's relationship with actuality is always necessarily filtered through the experiences, biases, intentions,

and interests of its storyteller. However, because true crime works often define and advertise themselves *in terms of* their veracity—by setting themselves in opposition to fictional crime stories, for example, or by placing a word like “actual” in bold font on their front cover—the stakes of their relationships to reality are especially high.

As we’ve seen with the story of Irene Taylor’s murder, the claims to truth that documentary accounts of true crimes make can reshape how the people involved with those crimes are viewed, treated, and remembered. For the family friend who gave me her copy of *Actual Detective Stories*, fiction was just as strange as truth. Her father-in-law kept the magazine not because of some desire to document his community’s past, or a sense of grief and wonder at the death of a neighbor’s daughter, but because he played a bit part in the story. A picture of his shovel, the wooden handle engraved with his initials, was photographed by reporters as a fictional piece of evidence and preserved in black and white next to a photograph of the police pulling Irene’s drenched corpse out of Flat Bayou. For seventy years, the family kept the magazine, not as a grim artifact, but as a curio, the trauma of the murder worn off with the cover gloss.

It is not the goal of this work to argue that all true crime media is immoral or exploitative—not only do I not believe that, I’m not particularly interested in making an argument about morality. I do, however, want my work to consciously interact with and deconstruct true crime tropes, especially since they had such dire real-world consequences for the people involved in the story I’m telling. In that vein, when scripting my podcast, I worked to set up my audience’s expectations in such a way that they would not expect the story to unfold like a typical true crime investigation. From my first episode, I wanted listeners to understand that, instead of solving a murder or revealing a secret, my story would investigate the events themselves, reflecting on their

contexts and on my own relationship with the reality of their occurrence. One of the most important parts of this work involved investigating Sylvester Williams not as the culprit in a murder mystery, but as an individual at the hands of a white supremacist state justice system with roots in the land itself.

III. ENVIRONMENT

Jefferson County, Arkansas, is in the southeast part of the state, on the western edge of the delta that stretches between the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. I've lived there my whole life, surrounded by the hundreds of acres of flat fields that produce the corn, rice, soybeans, and cotton that power the state's agricultural economy. When I started researching Irene Taylor's story, I was familiar with many of its central settings: Flat Bayou, the shallow waterway on the north side of Altheimer where Irene's body was hidden; Gilliland Road, the narrow blacktop where the Taylor family once lived that connects the more rural parts of the county to the highway; and the Tucker Unit, the modern iteration of the prison where Sylvester Williams was executed, which announces itself with "Beware of Hitchhikers" signs along Highway 15.

What surprised me was realizing just how physically close all these places are to one another. The north end of Gilliland Road is less than five miles from the penitentiary at Tucker. The bend of Flat Bayou where Sylvester Williams killed Irene Taylor is only seven miles from where he died himself; it's only a mile and a half from where Irene is buried. Not counting the mob attack and trial 15 miles away in Pine Bluff, all of the events of the story happened within a ten-mile radius of one another. In order to better understand the events themselves, I began researching how and why they were contained within such a small section of the Delta landscape.

The trademark landscape of the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas—wide, flat, open land, filled with hundreds of acres of rowcrop fields divided by muddy ditches—is,

in the grand scheme of things, relatively new. A hundred years before Irene Taylor was born, Jefferson County was primarily swamp, low-lying wetlands consisting of many slow-moving streams, like Flat Bayou, flowing through dense oak and cypress forests. Though the swamplands were, in many cases, successfully inhabited by homesteaders living on relatively small parcels of land, they proved troublesome to the brand of large-scale agricultural capitalism that picked up speed in the middle of the 19th century.¹

By the 1840s, large-scale monocrop farming supported by the forced labor of enslaved people had proven to be the most lucrative business for landowners in the areas surrounding the Arkansas Delta wetlands. Underneath the water and cypress trees of the swamps, the plantation owners knew, was soil made exceptionally fertile by thousands of years of alluvial deposits from cyclical flooding—perfect for growing cotton, the cash crop *du jour*. At that time, the wetlands were owned by the Federal government, so landowners in Arkansas began campaigning for the right to purchase the land and reap the benefits of the changes they were already making to it: the drainage of the swamps through ditch-cutting and levee-building. In 1850, Congress granted their wish in the form of a Swamp Land Grant, which turned somewhere between five hundred thousand and five million acres of swampland over to state control.² The terms of the grant explicitly detailed that the state should sell off the land and use the proceeds to fund the construction of levees and canals to drain the swamp and make it viable for commercial agriculture.

Swamp drainage, which by 1850 had seen success in Louisiana and other Mississippi Valley states, involved a labor- and engineering-intensive process to divert

¹ Whyne, “The Power of the Plantation Model,” 56.

² Harrison and Kollmorgen, “Land Reclamation in Arkansas,” 371.

water from swampy areas and to prevent them from re-flooding in the future.³ In addition to building levees along nearby rivers, drainage projects included cutting miles of ditches that acted as runoff channels for the swamps. Crews used dredgeboats to hollow out new canals and deepen the existing beds of bayous, sometimes using dynamite to blast through patches of quicksand or dense earth.⁴ This excavation channelized the bayous, transforming the naturally meandering, multi-channel braided streams into two-bank waterways that left the surrounding land dry. Once the land was drained, the timber, mostly cypress, oak, and other bottomland hardwoods, was clear-cut, opening up thousands of acres of alluvial soil for planting. Even though drainage infrastructure was not always initially successful—in the early days, especially, levees were often built too low or too close to rivers to be effective, and had to be rebuilt—by the first decades of the 20th century, drainage construction had completely resurfaced the face of the Delta.⁵

While later initiatives for wetland drainage in Arkansas claimed to better the public weal by controlling damaging floods and cutting down on habitat for disease-bearing mosquito populations, the language in this earliest legislation was straightforwardly mercenary.⁶ The grant was intended to “enable the State of Arkansas to construct the necessary levees and drains to reclaim the swamp and overflowed lands therein... made unfit for cultivation.”⁷ First and foremost, we see here the idea of “reclamation” take root: a persistent implication that swamp drainage was not the terraforming of a naturally-occurring landscape, but the recovery of some lost

³ Harrison and Kollmorgen, “Land Reclamation in Arkansas,” 369.

⁴ “Arkansas News Briefs,” 2.

⁵ Harrison and Kollmorgen, “Land Reclamation in Arkansas,” 393-4.

⁶ Jackson, “Levees and Drainage Districts.”

⁷ Harrison and Kollmorgen, “Land Reclamation in Arkansas,” 369.

cotton-growing Eden that *shouldn't* be covered by water. The grant's diction characterizes the land as "overflowed" and "made unfit for cultivation," as if the presence of water there was an imposed and temporary condition, rather than an integral aspect of the environment.

This is perhaps an unsurprising expression of the 19th-century sense of manifest destiny, but it's nevertheless illuminating of the capitalist intention that fueled swamp drainage from the beginning. It's also an indicator of how drainage (referred to throughout its 19th- and 20th-century heyday simply as "land reclamation") depended upon and helped prop up the system of agricultural labor that oppressed generations of Black Southerners. Again, the language of the grant prioritizes the swamp land's fitness for cultivation, building in from the beginning an intention that conventional farming be the end use for drained land. At the time, the convention was the plantation system, which exploited the forced labor of enslaved workers to cultivate massive tracts of land. When governmental swamp drainage planning picked back up after the Civil War, it provided a kick start for sharecropping and tenant farming, the systems that would replace slavery in the South's agricultural industry.

Just as the intention for plantation agriculture is woven into the language of the Federal swamp land legislation, it's baked into the state governmental mechanisms built to run the drainage program. The initial boards created by the state to oversee drainage were given free reign to identify, survey, and place value on lands to be drained, including lands that board members had already laid claim to in the form of state swamp land scrip. Board members also reserved the option of being paid for their services outright in land or in swamp land scrip.⁸ In northeast Arkansas, planters with

⁸ Harrison and Kollmorgen, "Land Reclamation in Arkansas," 374-5.

properties that bordered swamp lands petitioned the courts for legal access, via common law riparian rights, to the land that would be there once the swamps were drained.

“Those planters,” writes Jeannie M. Whyne, “envisioned the development of cotton plantations and stood ready to employ tenancy and the crop lien, two tools of plantation farming, to further their designs.”⁹ Though the courts repeatedly denied their claims, state legislation took advantage of the loosely-written judicial rulings to allow the neighboring planters “preferential” purchasing rights to the swamp land.¹⁰

Bureaucratic confusion and investigations into the activities of the swamp land boards led to the entire state drainage program being overhauled three times in the second half of the 19th century, all without much land getting successfully converted. Drainage in and around Altheimer didn’t really get going until 1905, when the town was organized under the Plum Bayou Levee District, one of three such governmental bodies established to oversee drainage in Jefferson County. By that point, state-run drainage projects had proven so ineffective that most of the work had been turned over to the counties. The counties set up their own programs to levy taxes to raise money for drainage construction, campaigns often spearheaded by local planters and entrepreneurs with vested interests in the swamp land.¹¹ In Altheimer, the most vocal proponent of draining the swamps around Flat Bayou was Louis Altheimer, the enterprising son of the town’s namesake. Louis (I’ll refer to him by first name to avoid confusion with the town itself) worked to rally support for a project that would drain and clear 18,000 acres north of the city limits.¹² The goal, of course, was increased cotton production, and Louis claimed that the drained land would allow Jefferson

⁹ Whyne, “The Power of the Plantation Model,” 57-61.

¹⁰ Whyne, “The Power of the Plantation Model,” 62.

¹¹ Harrison and Kollmorgen, “Land Reclamation in Arkansas,” 413-5.

¹² “District Will Reclaim About 18,000 Acres,” 4.

County to become one of the most profitable areas in the state. At the time, Altheimer already housed four cotton gins, which processed the 8,000 bales the town and its surrounding land produced per season. Louis claimed that, once the swamp was drained, Altheimer would produce 50,000 bales per season.¹³

In 1917, the Plum Bayou Levee District hired Parkes Engineering Company to drain the Flat Bayou swamp at an estimated cost of \$70,000.¹⁴ The money proved easy to find: voters in Jefferson County agreed to have their taxes levied to help pay for the project, and the board sold \$90,000 worth of drainage bonds to the National Bank of Arkansas alone.¹⁵ Of course, most of Jefferson County's voters would see little return on their investment, as white landowners began to reap the benefits of the seeds they had sewn in swampland legislation decades earlier. From 1910 to 1930, the total agricultural acreage in Delta counties vastly increased, but the number of farm owners increased only moderately; meanwhile, the number of tenant operators skyrocketed. In northeast Arkansas's Mississippi County, for instance, the total number of acres operated as farmland increased from 179,747 in 1910 to 335,034 in 1930. In 1910, 58% of agricultural acreage was operated by tenants; by 1930, that had grown to 77%, with the acreage operated by landowners actually decreasing by some 4,300 acres.¹⁶

Notably, much of this land was already inhabited by homesteaders, who were often driven away either by the formidable legal strength of the planters or by men hired by the same planters to harass them out of their homes.¹⁷ Not coincidentally, counties with swamp drainage projects in the second half of the 19th century were also the

¹³ "District Will Reclaim About 18,000 Acres," 4.

¹⁴ "District Will Reclaim About 18,000 Acres," 4.

¹⁵ "Drainage Bonds Sold," 6.

¹⁶ Whyne, "The Power of the Plantation Model," 58-59.

¹⁷ Whyne, "The Power of the Plantation Model," 64-65.

counties with the highest populations of Black people, populations that were expanding as newly enfranchised African-Americans migrated from the East to frontier states like Arkansas.¹⁸ From 1870 to 1900, the state's Black population grew from 122,169 to 366,856, a growth of over 200 percent; fifteen counties, including Jefferson, had majority Black populations.¹⁹ Even though Black political society was making advances in cities like Pine Bluff and Little Rock, individuals seeking to own or operate farms were often driven away by white mobs.²⁰ Swamp drainage, with its built-in mechanisms for white landowners to aggregate newly-cleared land, worked as a tool for the white supremacist state to keep Black agriculturalists as tenants and sharecroppers instead of upwardly-mobile landowners. New land, combined with the influx of Black homesteaders needing agricultural jobs, allowed white landowners to not only continue, but actually *expand* the plantation system of agriculture in Arkansas in the decades following Reconstruction.

This agricultural industry scheme proved hugely economically successful for white landowners. As Harrison and Kollmorgen explain, swamp drainage formed the foundation of many of the region's most lucrative businesses:

There is little doubt but what state officials and levee contractors got the 'pick' of the lands. In many cases they obtained lands easy to protect from overflow and relatively well drained. Tracts selected by administrative officials as payment for services and those selected by contractors working on public projects were considerably larger than those purchased by actual settlers. Many of the great lumber companies as well as agricultural holdings found their start in the lands obtained under the Swamp Land Grants.²¹

¹⁸ Matkin-Rawn, "The Great Negro State of the Country," 1.

¹⁹ Moneyhon, "Black Politics in Arkansas during the Gilded Age," 223-224.

²⁰ Moneyhon, "Black Politics in Arkansas during the Gilded Age," 227.

²¹ Harrison and Kollmorgen, "Land Reclamation in Arkansas," 416.

This was certainly true for Jefferson County, which, by the 1930s, was almost entirely economically dependent on businesses born out of the swamp drainage projects Louis Alheimer campaigned for. Cotton production increased, and a lumber mill was established on the northern bank of Flat Bayou to process the cypress and oak timber that was cleared from the swamp. Rural Black families like the Williamses, as well as poor white families like the Taylors, worked as sharecroppers, growing cotton on the newly-cleared land surrounding Flat Bayou that was now owned by planter families, including the Alheimers. While there were attempts at fostering political unity between Black and white sharecroppers throughout the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, the racial antipathy enshrined in and promoted by Jim Crow laws meant that violence between the two groups was far more common than cooperation.²² Where there were swamps in 1900, there were sharecroppers' houses in 1930, and an almost inescapable cycle of poverty for many of Alheimer's farm workers.

Swamp drainage in Jefferson County also provided the land for Tucker State Prison Farm, the second of Arkansas's two plantation-style penitentiaries. Built on drained land bought by the state from the Plum Bayou and Tucker Lake levee districts, Tucker was designed as (and still operates as) a self-sustaining plantation, with imprisoned men laboring to grow cotton, rice, and other crops that are then sold at market. While Tucker held only white prisoners until the 1970s, with Black prisoners kept at Cummins in neighboring Lincoln County, it did house the state's death row until 1964.²³ When Sylvester Williams was executed in Tucker's electric chair in June of 1939, he was still within the geographical boundaries of the Jefferson County swampland that was cleared by drainage at the turn of the 20th century.

²² Moneyhon, "Black Politics in Arkansas during the Gilded Age," 240.

²³ Woodward, "Tucker Unit."

The more I researched the environmental history of Jefferson County, the clearer it became that the closeness of all the sites of the Irene Taylor story—the bayou to the farm, the farm to the prison—was not coincidental, but rather the result of centuries of organized effort to make plantation agriculture, and the racial hierarchy it relies on, inextricable from the Delta landscape. Swamp drainage was a tool in that effort, and was hugely successful at reimposing and expanding the antebellum racialized economic order that had begun to collapse during Reconstruction. The lives that Irene Taylor and Sylvester Williams lived were direct results of this environmental change: the land that their families cultivated in the 1930s was underwater only a few decades earlier. They both fit into a white supremacist social order that maximized the profits of white landowners, and when Sylvester Williams was executed less than ten miles away from where he lived, he proved the efficiency of the revived plantation system’s subjugation of Black farmworkers.

For me, as a researcher, storyteller, and inhabitant of Jefferson County, this history also illuminates the centrality of Flat Bayou in Irene Taylor’s story. It becomes the geographical and metaphorical throughline in the story’s landscape of trauma, death, and remembrance. Both Mt. Moriah graveyard, where Irene was killed, and Flat Bayou Cemetery, where she’s buried, were built along the water before the swamp was drained. Her body was sunk into the bayou, itself just recently transformed by the ecological apocalypse of swamp drainage. Representing these places, explicating to my audience both an understanding of their vitality in the Irene Taylor story and a sense of their haunted and haunting history, became an important priority in my documentary work. The best tool for accomplishing this, I discovered, was visiting the places themselves.

IV. GHOSTS

One of my biggest challenges in telling this story about the Irene Taylor case through documentary was the story's lack of documentable material. All of the story's key events—the murder itself, the subsequent investigation and trial, even the publication of *Actual Detective Stories*—happened over eighty years ago. The evidence they left, while compelling enough for me to want to tell this story in the first place, is often intangible, stored in my family's memories or in the invisible histories of Jefferson County's landscape. In order to share the story with a new audience, I needed to find a way to make the invisible visible—or, in this case, audible. While I had used film and photography to document this story in previous iterations of this project, I realized that an audio-focused approach would allow me to spatially construct the world of the Irene Taylor case, using present-day sound to describe the environments at the center of the story.

In a practical sense, this allowed me to overcome the logistical issue of a lack of documentable material. It also pushed me to critically examine the relationships I wanted my work to build, both with its subject material and with its audience. As I discovered in my research, the documentary media that reported the Irene Taylor case as it was unfolding seemed completely uncritical of their own relationships to the information they presented. Prioritizing selling copies over telling a nuanced or even an accurate story, the newspapers and magazines I studied advertised their complete authority over the case and implicitly claimed that it was their story to tell. As I further

investigated the damaging consequences of that reportage on the people involved in the case and on its legacy, I realized that I wanted my work to complicate this stance, picking apart not only the original reporters' narrative authority, but my own, as well.

The medium specificities of audio documentary formed the foundation of my work towards that goal. Film theorist Christian Metz argues that Western culture tends to place image hierarchically above sound in our consumption of media, meaning that we give more attention to and place more importance on the meanings carried by images than we do those carried by sound.¹ While Metz, writing at the end of the 70s, couldn't have theorized about narrative podcasts, our cultural listening habits in the 2010s and 2020s bear out his assertions of the hierarchical subordination of sound. Since podcasts don't demand our visual attention, they often become accompaniments to the things we're looking at, whether that's the road we're driving along, the trail we're hiking, or the dishes we're washing. This isn't inherently detrimental to how stories in podcasts are heard and understood, but it does mean that the narrative voices in those stories are often de-centralized in listeners' sensory experiences.

Sensorily de-centralizing narrative voices, in turn, delimits and de-centralizes the authority of those voices. Whereas an audiovisual piece of documentary can rely on the indexical power of its images to capture its audience's attention, the audio documentary is culturally less empowered to convince a listener of its diegetic world. And, while this cultural power structure may be frustrating to some documentarians, it actually served my project's goals of destabilizing the authority with which the Irene Taylor story has been told. The images of her body, for instance, which were so instrumental in drawing attention to the case as it was printed in the Pine Bluff papers and in *Actual Detective*

¹ Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema," 38.

Stories, can only be described in my podcast. Suddenly, instead of emphasizing the sensational violence of her death, my inclusion of the photographs in the narrative emphasizes the troubling experience of looking at the photographs.

In this way, audio documentary also involves the audience's imagination as one site of narrative authority. Instead of being able to see the photographs, they're asked to imagine them using the tools I give them in my descriptions. This means that my control over what my audience actually sees is more limited than it would be if I were using images—I can use my descriptions to teach the audience how something looks, but I can't show them the right answer.

Again, this was an advantage for this project rather than a hurdle. By involving my audience in the work of image-making, I could implicitly build context and contextual questions into the meanings of those images. Once out of sight, the visual spectacle of Irene's body in the police photographs can be de-powered, as the audience never encounters the image without also encountering its historical and emotional context. This works as an implicit stylistic echo of the work I do in my scripts to challenge and roll back the exploitative methods by which this story has been told in the past. Both creatively and personally, as a narrator with an intimate connection to her story, I wanted to make work that was purposefully kind to its characters; sticking to audio documentary allowed me to discuss and analyze the violence that was done to them without reenacting its perpetration.

This does not mean, however, that I don't use the shock of violence to capture or hold my audience's attention. Many of my podcast's climactic moments are closely tied to the story's most troubling tableaux. Even as I endeavored to make work that challenged narrative power structures, I was conscious of the authority I held as the

story's writer and, perhaps more importantly, narrator. Because I was telling a historical story, I settled on scripted voiceover as the best way to convey information. Since I scripted and recorded the voiceover myself, it offered a good way for me to emphasize my personal connection to the story. However, as Mary Ann Doane writes, voiceover in documentary has a long history of claiming authority from a position of power. For Doane, it's the absence of a body in connection with the voiceover voice that allows it to make its dangerous claim to absolute authority:

It is precisely because the voice is not localizable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth. Disembodied, lacking any specification in space or time, the voice-over is, as Bonitzer points out, beyond criticism—it censors the questions “Who is speaking?,” “Where?,” “In what time?,” and “For whom?.”²

While Doane's arguments pertain specifically to audiovisual cinematic documentary, I think they ring even more true when applied to voiceover in audio documentary. Often, the narrator's voice in audio documentary is a listener's sole source of information and only guide through the world of the story. The voice in audio documentary might be hierarchically subordinated to the images that it lacks, but it is also unchallenged by the power those images hold to persuade an audience.

Just as I wanted my work to challenge the authority of previous narrators of the Irene Taylor story, I likewise wanted it to destabilize the power of my own voiceover. While I wanted my audience to believe what I was saying and trust me as a narrator, it was also crucial that they be encouraged to ask the questions that Doane argues voiceover censors. After all, the core of my retelling of the Irene Taylor story lies in asking “Who is speaking?,” “Where?,” “In what time?,” and “For whom?,” and I wanted those thematic questions to permeate my documentary work at all levels.

² Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema,” 43.

Partly, my solution came in writing scripts that explicitly contextualized my voice in my body, in a particular time and place. My narration described my investigation of the story over a period of several months, and detailed my personal relationship to the case and the area where it happened. Rather than trying to fill in all of the gaps in the facts, I wrote into them, emphasizing my lack of knowledge and the ambiguities that still exist in the case. But, with the history of voiceover that Doane references in mind, I also wanted to stylistically convey a sense of my narrative voice not as the voice of God, but as that of an individual thoroughly embedded in the environments of my story. I recorded ambient sound from locations associated with the Irene Taylor case, including Flat Bayou, the cemetery where Irene is buried, and the now-defunct churchyard where she was killed.

Placing my voiceover within an environmental soundscape changed my work in a few ways. From a practical sense, it gave me more valuable documentary material to work with and offered a contrasting aural texture to break up the monotony of my voiceover. It also shaped the tone of my podcast. To accommodate enough of the ambient audio to create a full portrait of the landscape, the pace of my storytelling needed to slow down, incorporating more and longer pauses amongst my narration. Atmospheric, contemplative, and consciously connected to place and to my own embodied voice and experience, my work became more reflective of my goals for the project.

The process of recording ambient sound also dynamically changed how I approached researching the Irene Taylor story. As I searched for and traveled to the places connected with the case, I developed a keenly embodied awareness of the events that archival research alone wouldn't have facilitated. First, the process pushed me to

spend a lot of time looking at maps of the area. Since the land around Altheimer has been reworked multiple times since the 1930s, many of the landmarks in the case—the road Irene was walking along, the church where she was murdered, her family’s home—now leave only traces that usually aren’t visible from the road.

To find the site of Mt. Moriah Church, for example, I needed to first find it on historical maps made by the U.S. Geological Survey when the church was still standing. Then, I compared those illustrations to modern satellite images of the area to ascertain whether or not there was anything left of the building. It was in analyzing different iterations of the Jefferson County landscape, comparing distances and landmarks, that made me realize exactly how close together the sites of the Irene Taylor case were to one another. This led me to further investigate how the landscape had been shaped by centuries of racialized agricultural industry, a crucial context for understanding the world Irene Taylor and Sylvester Williams lived in.

I couldn’t see any remaining trace of the Mt. Moriah Church building on the modern maps. But, since I knew that Irene was killed in the church’s attached graveyard, I surmised that the patch of trees I saw where Mt. Moriah once stood was actually the overgrown burial ground. To find out, I drove out to the site, separated from the current road by a mile or so of field. I then recorded sound and images of what I encountered in the patch of woods: the few gravestones that indeed remained standing; Flat Bayou as it runs by the site; the still-visible bed of the road that once ran between the bayou and Mt. Moriah; and a set of bones that I stumbled across in the leaf litter. Their size and shape (not to mention their suggestive location in a graveyard where a murder was once committed) prompted me to report them to the police, who agreed they looked suspicious enough to investigate. The forensic team at the Sheriff’s

Department eventually determined that the bones were from a deer, but my experience of discovering them while investigating the Mt. Moriah graveyard was so emotionally charged that I used it as the centerpiece of the climactic episode of my podcast.

I couldn't have predicted how emotionally intense traveling to the sites of the case, and especially to Mt. Moriah, would prove to be. Visiting the location of Irene Taylor's murder gave me an eerie sense of physical connection with the events themselves, as I did the work of imagining how the place would've looked in the 1930s and the violence that it witnessed. I discovered that one way to reach my goal of creating a documentary rooted in time, place, and specific experience was to lean into this feeling of hauntedness. By presenting the Irene Taylor case as a ghost story as well as a true crime story, I could more directly humanize the violence that permeates it. A ghost story, after all, is about remembering the trauma of the past and being troubled when that past trauma suddenly becomes a volatile force in the present. Including my experience investigating Mt. Moriah and discovering the bones offered a way for me to literalize the more abstract thematic work of my documentary: to use what remains of this story to reconnect its archival record to the real, human experiences of its characters.

Telling a ghost story also complicates the authority I held as a narrator. Walter Benjamin, writing about storytelling in the mid-1930s, argues that death is the source of authority for every narrator, and that stories about people are impossible to tell without the clarity that death brings:

It is, however, characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life - and this is the stuff that stories are made of - first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end - unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it -

suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the source... Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back.³

Benjamin argues that, since only the finality of death can produce full knowledge of the contents of a life, a story only gains its reality and meaning through its reference to and proximity to death. Consequently, Benjamin perceives a stagnation of storytelling in the 20th century, when the process of dying, previously something done in the home or even in public space, was increasingly being relegated to hospitals and other places where it could be kept out of sight. “In the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness,” he writes. “There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died.”⁴

In Benjamin’s terms, I wanted my documentary work to gain its authority, its sense of embodied realness and urgency, by making the deaths of Irene Taylor and Sylvester Williams omnipresent and vivid throughout my telling of the story. While this may sound like grim work (and frequently was), it actually allowed me to emphasize the humanity of the violence that had, in contemporary reportage, been decontextualized into spectacle. By incorporating ambient sound from Mt. Moriah, and by consciously dwelling on the emotional impact of the death that had occurred there, I sought to re-link Irene Taylor’s death with her life and to carefully examine the ways in which it has been remembered.

Of course, this strategy is not without its political implications, as well. When Benjamin wrote that the 20th century’s hiding of death from public view was a

³ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 368-9.

⁴ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 368.

detriment to humanity's storytelling ability, he left little room to account for the trauma of lynchings in America, public deaths that sought, through fear and violence, to reinforce white supremacist social hierarchies. As a white narrator, a descendant of the family who led a lynch mob against Sylvester Williams, I needed to first understand the systemic racism that led to his death before I could learn how to depict it in my work.

V. STATE-SPONSORED RACIAL VIOLENCE

When Sylvester Williams was arrested on May 5th, 1939, he entered a state justice system that had been racist since its founding, and one that used capital punishment to maintain the supremacist status quo. As of 2017, Black males accounted for 137 of the 196 inmates executed by the Arkansas judicial system in its 104-year modern history. The Depression Era was especially bloody—from 1926 to 1935, the state executed 35 prisoners, all of whom were Black.¹ Black men accused of raping white women were at special risk of extra-legal lynching; if they made it to trial at all, the proceedings often flagrantly and openly eschewed due process, making conviction and execution a foregone conclusion.

In *Actual Detective Stories*, Sheriff Brewster’s investigation ends with Sylvester Williams confessing to Irene Taylor’s murder and begging for death. Just as Irene is portrayed as the perfect victim, Williams becomes the perfect criminal, guilty and contrite, leaving no ambiguity in either the morality of his fate or the rightness of the Sheriff’s solution to the whodunit:

“I don’t know why I did it. I want to die. I don’t want to live. I don’t even want a trial. I want to plead guilty and die. I’m not fit to live.” The court accepted Williams’ plea of guilty, and granted him his wish. He was electrocuted on June 30, 1939.²

Of course, *Actual Detective Stories* makes no mention of their version of Williams being Black, and so excludes the racialized elements of his experience from their story entirely.

¹ “A century of death.”

² Mason, “He Couldn’t Resist,” 45.

In reality, it's likely that Williams confessed not with a sense of open contrition, but under some amount of duress. Four years earlier, in Blytheville, Arkansas, two young Black men, Bubbles Clayton and James X. Caruthers, reported that they were beaten with rubber hoses in order to secure confessions of their guilt in a robbery case. After not being tried for the robbery, the two men were later convicted, again using coerced confessions, in the rape of a white woman in 1934. When the unfairness of Clayton and Caruthers' treatment was brought to the attention of the Little Rock office of the NAACP, it began a four-year series of appeals and claims for clemency, and the case became known as Arkansas's "Scottsboro," after the infamous Alabama case from earlier in the decade. However, unlike in the Scottsboro case, the Supreme Court refused to hear Clayton and Caruthers' case, and the two men were eventually executed.³

Sylvester Williams' case shares many similarities with Clayton and Caruthers'. All three defendants were accused of raping white women, confessed to the crime, and were executed. Clayton and Caruthers were actually killed on the same day as Williams, June 30th, 1939, at Tucker State Prison Farm. According to witnesses, Caruthers admitted his guilt in his last words from the electric chair, but Clayton maintained his innocence until his death.⁴ Comparing the two cases allows us to see that Williams' confession, far from being the unimpeachable guarantee of guilt that both the newspapers and *Actual Detective Stories* claimed it to be, was actually yet another method by which the state justice system sought to condemn Williams regardless of his guilt.

And, in Williams' case, the press worked as a hugely effective mechanism of this. We know that at least three individuals were in the room with Williams during his confession, including two *Pine Bluff Graphic* reporters. Before the due process reforms

³ Smith, "Arkansas 'Scottsboro' Case."

⁴ Smith, "Arkansas 'Scottsboro' Case."

that began in the national court system in the 1960s, press access to criminal defendants had few limitations. In the 1930s, newspaper reporters often sat in on pre-arraignment proceedings in order to get the scoop on unfolding stories; in some cases, defendants confessed directly to reporters, instead of to legal officials. These confessions were then printed, sometimes alongside photographs of the defendant at the crime scene, posing with police officers or reenacting the crime they were accused of committing.

Such press coverage of pre-trial defendants presented huge complications for the fair legal treatment of those defendants. Today's press-bar guidelines, the legal recommendations that seek to preserve fairness and the rights of defendants in trial reporting, advise against publishing confessions, as those confessions might later be deemed inadmissible at trial. Speculating in print about possible evidence, witness testimony, or the criminal record or character of the defendant are likewise advised against, as they can bias communities before trial proceedings even begin.⁵

Historian Marlin Shipman writes that, in the cases of Black defendants in Arkansas in the 1930s, these potential consequences of pre-trial press coverage were wielded as weapons to maintain the racial status quo. On average during the decade, Shipman reports, Black defendants in capital offense cases garnered less media coverage than white defendants accused of comparable crimes.⁶ However, Black defendants were also at the center of some of the decade's most widely publicized trials, including Williams' and Clayton and Caruthers'. The difference, notes Shipman, is that capital trials involving Black defendants only went unreported when the victims of the crimes were also Black. Conversely, when the victims were white, the trials received more public attention than those involving white defendants:

⁵ Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 115, 118, 119, 112.

⁶ Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 111.

The quickest ticket to banner headlines (and, in most cases, a speedy execution) for any defendant was to kill a police officer, or for a Black man to rape a white woman. Those scenarios almost always produced huge headlines, volumes of news coverage, and in some cases extreme community reaction.⁷

The “extreme community reaction” in these cases usually involved lynching attempts or other mob action by white members of the communities in which the crimes occurred.

This was certainly true in Sylvester Williams’ case. The *Pine Bluff Commercial* and *Graphic* not only published notice of his confession on May 6th, before he was indicted or even arraigned, but also broadcast confirmation that he was being held at the county jail in Pine Bluff. This gave the white citizens of Altheimer a destination for their racialized mob violence—they made their first attempt at lynching Sylvester Williams the same day that the *Graphic* published his whereabouts. Shipman argues that the mob’s lynching attempt didn’t just coincide with the *Graphic*’s and *Commercial*’s reporting, but was actually directly provoked by it, fueled by the papers’ graphic descriptions (and police photographs) of the violence done to Irene Taylor, their repeated reporting of Williams’ confession before he was arraigned, and their broadcasting of his location.⁸ Certainly, and as discussed earlier, the editions of the *Graphic* and *Commercial* following the May 6th lynching attempt offered no condemnation of the mob’s actions, instead praising Sheriff Brewster’s defense of the jail and maintaining of order.

Two weeks later, an even larger mob returned to the jail, convinced that Williams had been returned there. In actuality, the lingering threat of violence meant that Williams wasn’t returned to Pine Bluff until his trial later in May, where he was escorted by armed guards into a courthouse surrounded by police and National Guardsmen. It

⁷ Shipman, “Forgotten Men,” 111.

⁸ Shipman, “Forgotten Men,” 115.

was the *Graphic* that reported the defensive deployment at the courthouse as “the greatest occupation of Pine Bluff by military troops since the Civil War,” running the trial as its front-page headline.⁹

Even though the force with which Jefferson County officials defended Williams’ trial, not to mention the two attempted lynchings in the previous weeks, evidenced the severity of the violence that Williams faced in Jefferson County, no objection was raised to him being tried there. Shipman’s survey reveals that this was part of a pattern in 1930’s Arkansas’s high-profile cases—although the defendants in fourteen out of twenty-seven of the decade’s death penalty cases needed to be moved from their county jails to avoid extra-legal violence, none of them had their trials moved to safeguard either their physical wellbeing or their legal rights.¹⁰

As a result, and in keeping with the theme, those trials themselves were riddled with violations of the defendants’ rights to fair treatment. Shipman calls Williams’ case, in particular, “the worst abuse of a Delta defendant’s fair trial rights during the 1930s”:

The state called twelve witnesses. Williams’ court-appointed attorneys called none. One of Williams’ attorneys said in an opening statement that the armed guards protecting Williams to get him to trial left the attorney with the feeling that “this was truly the spirit of George Washington... A man, no matter who he is or what he had done, should have a trial...” The attorneys told the jury that defending Williams was “unpleasant,” but that it was their duty to do so.¹¹

The all-white jury deliberated for fifty-five seconds before finding him guilty. In the next morning’s *Graphic*, an editorial praised the court for “seeing that this humble Negro, without funds to retain counsel, was given a fair and impartial trial by a jury of 12 men, disinterested except in seeing that justice was done.”¹²

⁹ Shipman, “Forgotten Men,” 115.

¹⁰ Shipman, “Forgotten Men,” 116.

¹¹ Shipman, “Forgotten Men,” 115.

¹² Shipman, “Forgotten Men,” 116.

In the rhetoric of the papers, Williams' condemnation, so clearly to modern readers the end result of a thoroughly racist and comprehensively unfair state justice system, was a just and moral act. Here again, it comes down to narrative. Neither the newspapers nor the court, it seems, were interested in Williams' actual guilt or innocence, but rather in crafting a story that casts him as the villain and punishes him accordingly. More important than the accuracy or fairness of their depiction of Williams, local newspapers valued his fulfillment of their own racist ideal of Black criminality. Williams' conviction supported white supremacy's vilification of Black men, as well as its deification of the white femininity that was damaged in Irene's assault and murder. Public discussion and treatment of the case both responded to and fomented a need in the white population of Williams' community to see him punished.

However, it seems that, at least for the public justice officials of Jefferson County, the means of that punishment were just as important as the ends. The actions of the courts and the Sheriff's Department to prevent Williams' lynching make it clear that extra-legal death wouldn't have been a satisfactory conclusion for their version of Williams' story. First, as we've discussed, there was the practical concern, expressed in the local papers, that a high-profile lynching would catch national attention and end up promoting anti-lynching laws designed to curtail the power of the white supremacist state over Black bodies. By the 1930s, activism on a national scale had all but reversed public opinion on lynching, having worked for decades to combat the 19th-century view of it as a "natural" mechanism of white community justice.¹³ While local papers like the *Commercial* and *Graphic* were still refusing to condemn lynch mobs, they had by and large ceased openly praising them. As we've seen, this didn't mean that they weren't

¹³ Weaver, "Judge Lynch' in the Court of Public Opinion," 295-296.

continuing to promote violence in other, more implicit ways; however, it does indicate that, by that point, public rhetoric about lynching in Jefferson County reflected nationally shifting ideas of lynching as much as it did the local cycle of racial violence.

The shifting tone of public rhetoric may explain, at least in part, why Sylvester Williams was given a full, highly-publicized trial, complete with state-appointed lawyers and multiple witnesses, after he had already confessed to the crime. While it's unclear why the Jefferson County judge deemed it necessary to argue the case after Williams' confession, he was not the only judge in 1930s Arkansas to do so. In a 1933 Phillips County case, Black defendant George Hill was denied his request to plead guilty to the rape of a 16-year-old white girl. Instead, the judge appointed Hill three public defense attorneys and stationed Phillips County police and National Guardsmen in the hallways of the courthouse, only for the jury to convict Hill in a matter of minutes.¹⁴ The prevalence of trials like Hill's and Williams', which stick doggedly to the image of due process while flagrantly disregarding their defendants' legal rights, indicates that these cases also provided opportunities for officials to advertise their adherence to the letter, if not the spirit, of law and national public opinion.

But, of course, the ostensible legality of Sylvester Williams' execution on June 30th, 1939, less than two months after his arrest, does not erase the racist systems that pushed him into the electric chair. It does, however, make those systems somewhat harder to spot for people remembering the story as history has preserved it. While public understanding has shifted to ostracize lynching, understanding of systemic racism in the legal system has proved more intractable, especially among white audiences who, knowingly or not, benefit from it. The Pine Bluff papers' assertion that

¹⁴ Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 121.

Williams' execution was the due end of the law carries forward; *Actual Detective Stories*, for example, used it to reverse-engineer Williams as a guilty criminal who not only deserved death at the hands of the law, but also desired it.

This all works to erase the ambiguity that still remains as to whether or not Williams actually did kill Irene Taylor. As we've seen, a guilty verdict or even a confession from a Black defendant in the 1930s was more likely to be the device of the court than a reliable indicator of the defendant's actual guilt or innocence. Defendants often recanted confessions that were made under duress or coercion, and many maintained their innocence until their deaths. So far in my research, I haven't turned up records of Sylvester Williams' final words from the electric chair, but it seems to me entirely possible that he went to his death an innocent man. While it's unquestionable that Williams faced incredible unfairness in his trial, I don't have enough evidence either to exonerate him or to prove him guilty.

In telling his story in my podcast, then, I wanted to emphasize the ambiguity, rather than try to solve the mystery of his guilt. Here again, I needed to manage the expectations of my audience, who, from familiarity with true crime media, might expect such a revelation to be the end goal of the project. Instead of pressing the question of who killed Irene Taylor, I worked to recenter the audience's attention on how we understand Williams himself, and how the systemic racism he faced continues to affect that understanding. Whether Williams was guilty or not, he is *remembered* as guilty, both by public retellings of the story and, as I discovered, by individuals connected to the case.

VI. FAMILY MEMORY

The last of the Taylor family who lived through Irene Taylor's murder passed away with my grandfather, Joe, in 2019. Joe was only four when Irene was killed, and seemed not to have personally remembered the events. My mother, Rene, heard the story not from him but from his mother's sister, Jewell Hopper. Aunt Jewell, as she's known in my immediate family, was known for being outspoken, and, according to Rene, was the only Taylor to ever discuss Irene's story at all; even then, she referred to Irene only obliquely, as a girl from the community rather than a member of the family. Jewell and her sister Florence, my great-grandmother, were Irene's first cousins, and both attended Sylvester Williams' execution on June 30, 1939. Respectively, they would have been 29 and 24 years old at the time.

Because Irene's story was so rarely discussed by my family, and because the people who would've had firsthand memories are no longer around to share them, I can trace the pattern and life of the story only vaguely. My mom's memories are filtered through the decades she's lived since she heard the story as a child. When I asked her why she thought Irene wasn't talked about in the family, she speculated that the embarrassment of Irene's sexual assault, in addition to the lingering trauma of her death, meant that the story wasn't considered appropriate to share. Aunt Jewell, Rene suspects, only told it because of her penchant to spite propriety. Rene's account of what Jewell said or didn't say might not be accurate; however, the way in which she

remembers the story, and the fact that she remembers it at all, reflects how the emotional toll of the events must have been carried by the Taylors.

When I asked Rene about Aunt Jewell's telling of the story, she most vividly remembered how emotionally intense Jewell's words were, even decades after Irene's death. But, while Rene remembers Jewell being upset about Irene's death, Jewell's emotional associations with the case weren't wholly negative. In our interview, my mom remembers being struck by Jewell's pride and satisfaction with the case's conclusion:

Um, cause she was even when she would talk about it, you could tell she was still in turmoil about what happened to this girl... But Aunt Jewell was, uh, she was a very forceful person. She didn't mince words. Um, she said pretty much whatever she wanted to say. She was the only one who ever talked about it. And she boasted about the fact that she went to watch him burn, as she said. She boasted about it, that she was glad she was there to witness his execution, which is, you know. It's all very hard.

For my mom, and for me, as well, Jewell's relish of Sylvester Williams' death—satisfaction not just that it happened, but that she was there to see it—is incredibly troubling. While it's easier for us to imagine the grief the Taylors must have felt after Irene's death, it's more uncomfortable to reckon with the retributive violence they engaged in against her alleged murderer. Both of the lynch mobs that attempted to seize Williams from the county jail were led by members of the Taylor family, supported by dozens of other white families from in and around Altheimer.¹ While the Taylors didn't actually lynch Williams themselves, they had the court on their side, and quickly saw Williams' death, anyway. While I can't be sure about other members of the family, Jewell, at least, seems to never have come to regret Williams' death or her part in bringing it about.

¹ Shipman, "Forgotten Men," 115.

Jewell's relationship with Williams' execution complicates my understanding of why Irene Taylor's story was so suppressed in my family's oral history. First, it brings into sharp focus the complications of my position as the narrator of not only Irene Taylor's story, but of Sylvester Williams', as well. In my documentary work, I wanted to emphasize Irene's humanity and the trauma of her death. But, as I researched and reckoned further with my family's place within the cycle of racial violence embedded in the Arkansas Delta, it became increasingly important for me to not use the trauma and grief they faced to absolve the historical Taylors of their actions. Rather than trying to resolve the tension in my mom's remembrances of Aunt Jewell, I structured my work to lean into it, placing our discussion of Jewell's execution story right at the center of my podcast's emotional climax.

But, while the structure of *What Remains* might preserve the troubling emotional tension that Aunt Jewell's telling of the story has left in our family, it doesn't really analyze the contexts of Jewell's sentiments. Jewell's reaction to the execution bears out what Dwight Conquergood theorizes is the performative power of the death penalty. Conquergood, writing shortly after the executions of Timothy McVeigh and Juan Raul Garza in 2001, argues that modern pro-death penalty political arguments wilfully mischaracterize the way capital punishment actually functions in society. Instead of a tool of justice and order, Conquergood contends, modern capital punishment works as a high-stakes ritual performance that relies on systemic injustices to present a tableau of social morality and purification. Conquergood cites Federal Judge Robert Bork to demonstrate how even legal concepts of the death penalty reveal its performativity:

In a brief he filed in support of the 1976 Supreme Court decision that reinstated the death penalty—the Gregg Decision—he argued that capital punishment “serves a vital social function as society's expression of moral outrage.” This

thinking releases capital punishment from accountability as a crime-fighting tool, a deterrent, and reframes it as a theatre of retribution and revenge. It becomes a form of “poetic justice,” a “revenge tragedy” that operates on the principle of mimetic magic: the belief that only violence can cross out violence.²

In this way, the modern death penalty works on the same psychological foundations that justified and valorized lynching in the 19th and 20th centuries. Not coincidentally, and as Conquergood explicates, capital punishment in the United States is highly racialized, overwhelmingly targeting Black people and other people of color.

So, in some ways, Jewell’s satisfaction with Williams’ execution represents the success of 1930s capital punishment to perform violent poetic justice that reinforced the moral security of a white audience. However, not all of Jewell’s actions, as my mom remembers them, bear this out. Rene recalls that Jewell never characterized Williams as Black in her stories about his death:

She never mentioned if he was Black or white. Not to my recollection. I don't ever remember her mentioning that. Which is interesting, too, because, you know, well, that was back in the day when everything was still segregated, so nobody would have a problem with executing a murderer if he was Black.

As my mom’s response highlights, the lack of racialized language in Jewell’s storytelling subverts an expectation that explicit racial hatred, so clearly a factor in the Taylor family’s attempted violence against Sylvester Williams, would likewise play into Jewell’s satisfaction in his death.

Of course, this secondhand remembrance of Jewell’s words can’t reveal her actual understanding or belief of how race functioned in the prosecution of her cousin’s murder. Jewell could have simply not felt the need to emphasize Williams’ race because she was speaking to an audience who already understood the racial implications of the story. On the other hand, the language of racial hatred, including slurs or other

² Conquergood, “Lethal Theatre,” 359.

racialized epithets, seem not to have been a part of how she recounted her memories. At least, it was not a prominent enough part of her speech to be remembered by my mom, who didn't know that Irene's killer was Black until I shared my research with her before our interview. It seems that, whether intentionally or not, the Taylor family was leaving the racial contexts of Irene's murder and the trial that followed it out of their telling of the story.

As my mom speculated in the Taylors' silence on Irene's sexual assault, perhaps concerns of familial propriety prevented discussions of race in their remembrances of Irene. Jewell would have been 29 at the time of Irene's death, presumably old enough to either have participated in the lynch mobs herself or to have known about them and understood their intent and significance. Again, by the 1930s, public discourse surrounding lynching had shifted towards a de-legitimation of the practice as a socially acceptable method of restitution. The Taylors' attempted lynchings might have been socially permissible in Altheimer in 1939, but the growing cultural censure of the practice could have made discussion of their actions socially risky in later decades. If my mom's characterization of Jewell is anything to go on, she was the family member most likely to skirt propriety and discuss taboo subjects; the fact that she didn't discuss Williams' race might suggest that no one did.

But, of course, this is all, at best, informed speculation. Based on the evidence I have, the memory of Irene's murder wasn't something that the Taylors wanted to keep alive in their day to day lives. They might have felt embarrassed or ashamed by it, or might have simply been too hurt to talk about it in a way that didn't re-trigger their individual and collective trauma. Certainly, the intense violence with which Irene met her end was only compounded by the way her death was co-opted into a press spectacle.

By necessity, the Taylors who experienced Irene's death must also have experienced the media frenzy that followed it, witnessing the story explode into the imaginations of a nation of newspaper and magazine readers. As they saw the facts be changed and changed again, did the Taylors still think of this as a family story? Did they want to control the narrative and feel they couldn't? And what about the family of Sylvester Williams? How did they remember his life and death?

The presence and urgency of all these questions is why *What Remains* is not only a documentary about the Irene Taylor case, but about memory. Even though I can use research to contextualize the story, I'm still dependent upon memories of it to understand its impact and implications. In every telling of this story, my analysis has revealed just as much, if not more, about the story's audience than it has about its characters. In a lot of ways, Irene and Sylvester remain shadowy—silhouettes only defined by how other people have seen them. This is their story, and yet it's so often been built to serve the listener or the teller, rather than to serve the interests of those most hurt by these events. My work, my telling of the story, doesn't directly call for justice or concrete restitution, as I'm unsure what good could come of that; but I hope that it at least offers grace to the memories of Irene Taylor and Sylvester Williams. As I keep researching their stories, I'll continue to interrogate the sources that represent them, as well as the contexts that define how they are remembered.

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VITA

CHRISTIAN LEUS

EDUCATION

2019-2021. University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS. MA in Southern Studies.

2014-2018. Hendrix College, Conway, AR. BA in English: Film Studies.

PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

2020-2021. Southern Studies Graduate Writing Fellow, University of Mississippi,

Oxford, MS. Consulted on drafts for Southern Studies undergraduate students to improve arguments, structure, and research methods; provided writing and research resources for Southern Studies undergrads.

2019-2020. Southern Studies Teaching Assistant, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS.

Assisted professors in preparing class materials, proctoring exams, grading assignments, and meeting student needs. _____

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Spring 2015. Robert L. Campbell-Walter A. Moffatt Award, Hendrix College, Conway, AR. Awarded annually to outstanding underclassmen in the English major.