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A Mississippi Burning: Examining the Lynching of Lloyd Clay and the Encumbering of Black Progress in Mississippi during the Progressive Era

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A MISSISSIPPI BURNING: EXAMINING THE LYNCHING OF LLOYD CLAY AND THE ENCUMBERING OF BLACK PROGRESS IN MISSISSIPPI DURING THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

By

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ABSTRACT

When twenty-two year old African American Lloyd Clay was strung up from an old elm tree, burned alive, and his body riddled with bullets by a white lynch mob of approximately one-thousand people on the corner of a major intersection in Vicksburg, Mississippi, nothing happened. Vicksburg in the year 1919 was typical of many other cities throughout the United States deep South. When Clay was unjustly crucified, no whites from the mob were put on trial; and there was no backlash or retaliation from the black Vicksburg citizenry. As a matter of fact, Clay’s mother was even told by whites not to go to the morgue to identify her dead son’s body; it would be best, they suggested, if she stayed out of it. This case study will specifically situate Vicksburg, Mississippi, and the lynching of Lloyd Clay within the context of the last decade of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, called by many historians, the Progressive Era. It will examine why black lynchings increased after slavery was constitutionally abolished and the Reconstruction Era in the American South came to an end. It will also juxtapose Mississippi lynchings, blamed for the maintenance of economical, political, and social white privilege, against the Progressive Era to show how those lynchings encumbered black economic, political, and social progress.
INTRODUCTION

Vicksburg, during the early twentieth century, was a city within a state struggling to improve its economic status by becoming more industrialized. But at the same time many of its white citizens were struggling to keep blacks static through racialized political, economic, and social oppression. This period is called the Progressive Era by historians. But black Mississippians in Vicksburg and throughout the state of Mississippi do not fit the Progressive Era paradigm because of the aforementioned racial oppression. Thus historians have, for the most part, ignored them when discussing the history of the Progressive Era. The word progress is a relative term and difficult to define. But for this study, progress can be defined as advocating improvement or favoring change, as opposed to maintaining the status quo. This thesis is a study of a lynching that occurred in Vicksburg, Mississippi, during the early twentieth century, but it is not a study of the Progressive Era. Instead, it will demonstrate that because of the numerous lynchings of blacks during this period, black Mississippians made few strides toward the social, economic, and political progress, so much associated with middle class white Americans during the Progressive Era. Moreover, this study will show that because white Mississippians were so preoccupied with keeping blacks in their place, lynching became the primary terrorist measure used to encumber black Mississippian’s progress. In 1919, the year known as Red Summer, Mississippi led the country in black lynch victims, lynching nineteen blacks, over twenty five percent of the total national number.¹

During Reconstruction, black Mississippians made huge strides toward political equality. Despite the passage of the oppressive black codes, an effort to counter the passage of the 13th and 14th Amendments, many black men throughout the state enjoyed a taste of political equality by casting their votes for Republican candidates at the federal, state, and local levels.² Black leaders met in Vicksburg as early as 1865 to discuss black suffrage, as well as what


steps they could take to insure equal treatment. But black soldiers in blue intimidated whites, especially the white gentility of the old guard, and eventually this, in part, led to racial skirmishes that resulted in many blacks, who were attempting to advance themselves, being killed.

Blacks in Vicksburg participated in the political process during this period. There was a black sheriff and black deputies, for a short time, who lessened the fear of many of the freedmen who still toiled on their former plantations for very little compensation. And although both blacks and whites were poor, the thought of black politicians at the federal level, such as Hiram Revels, who succeeded Jefferson Davis as United States Senator, or Vicksburg’s own black sheriff, Peter Crosby, at the local level, intimidated whites who had reaped and remembered the benefits of slavery just a few years past.

Thus as Reconstruction came to an end white Mississippians wrenched the political power from black hands through extremely violent acts. In 1874, Crosby was indicted and removed from office. A racial skirmish, remembered as the “Vicksburg Massacre,” broke out when he tried to take back his office and resulted in twenty-nine blacks and two whites being killed. As the dawn of the twentieth century approached, white Mississippians, many of whom had lived through the Civil War, still felt the agony of “the lost cause” and the stinging defeat they had suffered at the end of the Siege of Vicksburg. These whites, who staunchly believed in the racial inferiority of the black race, wanted to return to the pre-antebellum social order, deeply rooted in a racialized and gendered society they called “Southern patriarchy” or the “culture of honor.”

As whites in Mississippi struggled to keep blacks ignorant and out of politics, violence increasingly became the vehicle of terror used to enforce the black codes and eventually Jim

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3 Ibid, 546, 555. By 1867 over 79,000 blacks were qualified for the vote. In comparison, only 58,000 whites qualified.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid, 585.

6 Ibid.

7 Euan Hague, Heidi Beirich, Edward Loewen, Ed. _Neo-Confederacy, A Critical Introduction_ (Austin, University of Texas, 2008) 3, 76.
Crow legislation. Black lynchings were a phenomenon that increased with the arrival of the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi shortly after the Civil War ended and continued throughout much of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{8} Because of a preoccupation with white supremacy, Mississippi led the country in black lynchings, thereby ingraining in the black ethos the idea of prioritizing physical safety and basic survival over radical social change, or even education. By 1910 there were 1,009,487 blacks in Mississippi, and 36\% were illiterate. There were only 934 black students in secondary schools, with only 237 enrolled in high school grades or above, and 30 of out of 237 were from other states. By contrast, between the years of 1910 and 1919 there were 616 known black lynchings. Efforts such as these, in part, severely encumbered black progress throughout the state.\textsuperscript{9}

Primary sources used in this study consist of newspaper articles, census records, death certificates and the NAACP Files on lynching. Secondary sources consulted were written by historians and sociologists, as well as scholars who employ social theory in their research. Although many sources proved valuable in shaping my ideas, the following is a list of several pieces of scholarship which were of particular influence in structuring this thesis.

\textit{A History of Mississippi: Volume II} (1973), edited by Richard Aubrey McLemore is part of a large two volume set on many aspects of Mississippi’s history from pre-history to the end of the modern civil rights era. Forty-one historians contributed at least one chapter in their area of focus. The book is especially valuable to this study because it provides background on the political climate throughout the state during the zenith of black lynchings. Particular attention is given to the Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890 and the resulting measures that not only stifled black suffrage and political growth within the state but was the impetus for Jim Crow legislation throughout the South.

Although there is a chapter entitled “The Progressive Era,” written by Nannie Pitts McLemore, it nevertheless demonstrates the lack of progress black Mississippians made during this period. McLemore’s insightful chapter elucidates the staunchly racist climate created by Mississippi politicians such as James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo. Legislation enacted that focused on keeping blacks uneducated and out of politics sheds light on the mindset of white Mississippians and their zeal to reverse the perceived wrongs of

\textsuperscript{8} McLemore, \textit{Volume I}, 579.

\textsuperscript{9} Thompson, 61, 65.
Reconstruction. McLemore attempts to include blacks in the progressive conversation by showing that in a state where blacks were the majority, their nine banks across the state, at the turn of the twentieth century, held $750,000, compared to over $46,000,000 held by white owned banks. But even that number would decrease throughout the early 20th century. Moreover, the progressive measures highlighted, such as education reform, the State Board of Health’s improvement of slaughter houses and meat markets, and reform for child labor, were all geared toward the benefit of whites.

Winthrop D. Jordan’s monumental work, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968), shows the genesis of racism and provides the basis for part of this thesis, which is that lynching and the ethos of white Mississippians during the late 19th century and early 20th century was based in the history of viewing black people as something less than human. It also demonstrates that whites used a racially constructed caste and power dynamic to oppress people of African descent. Jordan is especially useful in chapters two and three, where power and sexuality are explored in more detail.

In *White Over Black*, Jordan follows the pattern of white thought as it related to black Africans during their initial meetings. Jordan concentrates on the English encounter during the 16th century. By showing how the English thought Africans to have a libidinous nature, because of their dress, mannerisms and religious practices, he is able to show how the English thought Africans to be less than human.

Jordan juxtaposes the etymology of the words black and white in order to delve deeper into the mindsets of Europeans. Whereas white connoted purity, cleanliness, and virtue, black, by contrast, symbolized barbarity, dirtiness and evil. Cleanliness and purity would eventually become synonymous with white women. The animal nature of black men was the diatribe used to justify lynchings in order to preserve the cleanliness, purity, and sanctity of white women. Yet in truth, power and white supremacy hid behind the mask of protecting white women’s sexual purity.

Leon F. Litwack’s *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (1998) is an

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11 Ibid, 55-58.
impressive, albeit dismal, account of black strife during the final two decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. His work is used to provide cultural and social context in chapters one and three. His study lends credence to the argument that whites made it especially hard on middle class blacks who tried to rise too far above poverty, or those who failed to show deference toward whites. He paints a cultural picture that shows how whites recreated the archetypes of Mammy and Sambo and expected blacks to be “good Negroes” and remain in their respective servile and subservient roles.

Litwack demonstrates how lynchings were used to terrorize many blacks into subordination and he deals with lynching for white power, disguised as the protection of white purity. But his text is most useful as a corroboration of the legislation used to keep black Mississippians uneducated and out of politics also found in the McLemore volume. His book does not focus on one state in particular, but the hatred whites felt toward black Mississippians in specific cases is almost palpable. He uses the writings of Mississippi native, Richard Wright to recount a view from the black perspective. Litwack’s view is that although some black Mississippians attempted to resist throughout the Jim Crow age, their quasi-rebellions are quickly suppressed.

Litwack also demonstrates how whites believed the judicial system was insufficient as a means of justice for black men who allegedly raped white women. [It] “no longer satisfied the emotional appetite of the crowd. To kill a victim was not enough; the execution needed to be turned into a public ritual.” Although black folk in Litwack’s book are seemingly powerless and have little agency against the white power structure, he adequately demonstrates that they survive the daily human degradation and persevere, even through the constant threat of death.

Throughout the Depression years and the Second European War years the motive for lynching black Mississippians did not change. Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker (1986), is instrumental in demonstrating the function that lynching served, even at the
dawning of the modern civil rights era. The book is a case study of a lynching that occurred in 1959 in the southern part of the state, long after the Progressive Era had ended. Parker had been accused of raping a white woman. And although he was arrested and would have most likely been convicted and served a death sentence, the white lynch mob chose to take matters into their own hands, because they did not think the Mississippi judicial system was sufficient enough to mete out the proper punishment.

Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 (1993), by W. Fitzhugh Brundage is a survey of lynchings limited to two states but is instrumental in unraveling the motives of the lynch mobs and its ability to demonstrate the brutality of the individual acts. According to Brundage, white citizens of the two states differed in their reasoning and justifications for lynching, with more frequent and violent lynchings occurring in Georgia. Virginia, a state of the Upper South, had the fewest lynchings, Brundage argues, because economic and social conditions did not require the continued harshness or racial domination, as compared to Georgia. In light of the fact that Mississippi had more lynchings than Georgia, Brundage’s theory lends credence to the thesis argued in this study.

A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930 (1995), by Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck is an instrumental contribution of scholarship to lynchings in the Deep South. It is a survey of lynchings that focuses on the lynch mob’s attempt to maintain the racial construct by social and psychological control of the black masses. The book employs quantitative data to substantiate the correlation between the many and various types of southern lynchings. Although the authors argue that lynchings were not a form of popular justice they nevertheless show a correlation between power and lynchings.

Lynchings in Mississippi: A History, 1865-1965 (2007), by Julius E. Thompson is an insightful and valuable contribution to the literature on lynching that focuses on Mississippi from the end of Reconstruction to what some scholars call the Second Reconstruction. When I began research for this thesis, Thompson’s book had not been published. It has proved instrumental in uncovering the determination of white Mississippians to maintain racial supremacy throughout the state for a one hundred year period. Demonstrating that white Mississippians went above and beyond other states to control their black citizens through

\[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\text{ W. Fitzhugh Brundage Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 (Urbana and Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993) 15.}\]
lynchings and other forms of physical and mental intimidation, Thompson’s study helps to set
the context for black oppression for the two generations specific to this thesis.

*Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (1978) and *The History of Sexuality: An
Introduction, Volume I* (1990), by Michel Foucault are employed as the basis for the theoretical
analysis in chapters two and three. *Discipline and Punishment* highlights the shift from the
violent and gruesome public spectacle of torture in the 18th century to the garnering of power
via the penal system. *The History of Sexuality* provides a paradigm on harnessing power in
Victorian bourgeoisie society via sexual repression and exploitation that lasted centuries.
Focusing on the disciplinary aspects of harnessing power helps one to better understand the
deliberate and consistent barbarity of such cruel acts as lynching.

Historians and scholars of social science have studied the political, economic and social
implications of de facto segregation; others have presented case studies and surveys on
lynching. But examinations placing black Mississippi lynching victims in their proper context
during the so-called Progressive Era are lacking. This thesis presents a lynching case study in
Vicksburg, Mississippi, and examines the ethos of white Mississippians during the early 20th
century. Mississippi, called by one historian, “the most southern place on earth,” saw more
black people lynched than any other state in the country. “Southern” did not only apply to
geography but to white culture as well. Racial oppression in Mississippi seemed to run deeper
than in other states. And whites, still bitter about “the lost cause” of Southern defeat in the
Civil War aimed to keep their dominant social, economic, and political position. This thesis will
shed light on Mississippi in the context of the New South and the Progressive Era. It argues
that black lynchings by white Mississippians played a major role in the ability of whites to keep
blacks in their so-called proper place, and thus encumbered progress for all but the most
industrious blacks, making the Progressive era in Mississippi progressive primarily for whites.

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17 Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York, Oxford,
Oxford University Press, 1986).

18 James C. Cobb. *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of
Chapter 1

The Lynching of Lloyd Clay

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.
Lyrics by Albel Meerpol

On Wednesday May 14, 1919, an article appeared on the front page of the Vicksburg Evening Post. It read in bold letters, “NEGRO ATTEMPTS RAPE OF YOUNG WORKING GIRL.” The name of the twenty-two year old alleged, attempted rapist was Lloyd Clay, a young black man who worked as a day laborer.¹ The name of the eighteen year old young white woman was Mattie Hudson. Hudson rented a room in a house, on Second North Street (three doors south of Clay street), from Kelly Broussard, a former police officer. She worked in the Birdsong Meat Market, close to the Vicksburg downtown area. According to the newspaper, Broussard woke up to Hudson’s screams at about 5am and ran to see what the matter was. He found her bedroom door locked and could not break it down. He ran around the outside of the house, saw a man fleeing and began firing his revolver.²

¹ Vicksburg Evening Post, “Negro Attempts Rape of Young Working Girl,” May 14, 1919, pg. 1; U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census, 1910. The newspaper articles have Clay listed as being anywhere from twenty-two to twenty-four years old. However, the 1910 census records have him listed as being twelve years old at the time the census was taken. If the Census is correct he should have been between twenty-one and twenty-two years old at the time of his death.

² Ibid.
The next day’s newspaper revealed that all of the windows, except one, in Hudson’s bedroom had been locked, but that the door inside the cottage that connected her room with the rest of the house was open. Broussard had chased a man through the open window seeing only his back. Hudson was unhurt but became hysterical as time passed. Initially questioned by Broussard and later Sheriff Frank Scott, Hudson claimed that she had seen the black man clearly and could identify him in a lineup. Mattie Hudson’s father, W. M. Hudson, came into town later that morning to take her back to his country home in the Vicksburg suburb of Oak Ridge, about ten miles outside the city limit.

Sheriff Frank Scott, W. M. Hudson and Deputy Charley Gantt used bloodhounds to track down the would-be rapist. The dogs initially led them to a white man, but a second attempt brought them to the A and V Railroad Station where they arrested Lloyd Clay. Although the dogs initially led the Sheriff and his posse to a white man, they readily assumed he had to be the wrong man because he was white. Right away they began a new search for a black man. After the white townsfolk heard that an arrest had been made, white men and boys began to gather at the Warren County jailhouse. The crowd grew to about two hundred people. Both Sheriff Scott and Deputy Gantt addressed the crowd to assure them that the hunt to find the real intruder would continue, because other clues had led the Sheriff and his deputies to believe that they had the wrong man in their custody. They implored the crowd to disperse peacefully while continually assuring them that they would be fair in bringing the right man to justice. The Sheriff then asked the people to leave in an orderly manner without taking the law in their own hands, but also to help law officials in any way they could to find the “guilty scoundrel.”

Immediately after Clay was arrested, Mattie Hudson calmed down and her father took her into town to pick out her assailant from a lineup of several black men. As Clay sat in his jail cell he stated that he was glad to have her come and was confident that she would vindicate

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3 Ibid.


6 Ibid, 8.
him of any wrongdoing. As Hudson stood before the lineup, she stated assuredly that none of the men there had attacked her and none had entered her room. After being pressured a little more, Mattie Hudson was later taken to the jailhouse a second time to identify her assailant but she maintained that Clay was not the one. Clay, becoming nervous that the Sheriff and his deputies would not take the word of the young white woman, began to show less confidence. The jailer on duty at the time of the lineup decided for himself that Clay must be guilty because of his timorous disposition. By late evening, the steadily increasing crowd outside the jail grew angrier and more impatient. Cars belonging to hundreds of anxious white folks lined Clay, Cherry, and Grove streets. Men, and now women too, were brandishing firearms and threatening to take matters into their own hands.\footnote{Papers of NAACP, “Antilynching Campaign, 1912-1955”, Reel 13(of 30), Part 7, University Publication of America. Fredericksburg, Va.}

“To Hell With The Law”

Dusk came on that Wednesday, but common sense and reason could not dissuade hatred, angst and notions of white supremacy. The lynch mob, which by now had grown to approximately one thousand white men, women and children, demanded that Mattie Hudson identify Lloyd Clay as the “Negro” who broke into her room and attempted to rape her. Around 8pm the mob used blow torches and a sixteen ft. piece of railroad iron to break down the jailhouse doors and bend open the iron jail cell bars. About forty men made their way past Sheriff Scott and twelve of his deputies as they took Clay from the relative safety of his cell. In the process, Sheriff Scott and Deputy Mark Cockrell sustained minor injuries from the mêlée. The mob tied Clay up, placed him in a truck and drove him to the corner of Clay and Farmer streets, only a short distance from the home of Kelly Broussard, where Mattie Hudson boarded.

The mob then demanded that Hudson identify Clay as her assailant. Clay, desperate and confused, claimed that another man had conspired with him and that if they would give him some time, he would reveal his identity. “Is that the man?” The terrorists screamed at Hudson. On the third attempt of the day, Mattie Hudson looked the trembling Clay up and
down his body and stated that he was indeed the guilty man. Clay, beaten and dazed, initially implored “I’m not the one, lady.” But his pleas meant nothing. Perhaps sensing the impending brutality, Clay changed his plea, “I’m the one, give me a pistol and I’ll blow my brains out, he cried.” But no such mercy was given to him.\footnote{Vicksburg Evening Post, May 15, 1919, 1.}

The men who had taken Clay from the jailhouse tied a rope around his neck, threw the other end over a branch of an old elm tree on the corner of, ironically, Clay and Farmer streets and hoisted their victim into the air. The first branch was not strong enough to hold the weight of Clay’s body and broke, sending him tumbling to the ground. The second branch was strong enough but the knot in the noose was not in the proper place and thus did not break Clay’s neck when he was hoisted in the air. Clay tried in vain to pull himself up in order to relieve some of the pressure around his neck. His efforts to free himself infuriated the crowd even more. The sounds of white people screaming and yelling and car horns blaring could be heard from many blocks away.\footnote{Ibid.}

The mob, having failed in their attempts to kill Clay by hanging, instinctively ripped away the black man’s clothing, doused his body with kerosene and made a bonfire beneath his wriggling body. The sight of the nude black body swinging high in the air from the old elm excited the mob even more. Some men in the crowd, seeing that Clay was not dead but merely close to death, tugged at his legs in an effort to tighten the noose around his neck. Louder shouting and more epithets came from the jeering crowd. Some howled “let him die slowly.” Others suggested he be shot.\footnote{Vicksburg Evening Post, May 15, 1919, 1.}

When the flames hit Clay’s body, the gruesome sight of flesh melting from his bones revealed the agony he must have been experiencing. In an effort to escape the flames though, he tried to lift his legs by doubling his knees to his chest. The sufferer made no sounds but instead raised his hands in a prayer like gesture while a salvo of bullets, from the enraged mob that included firearm brandishing white women, riddled his dangling body. Someone poured gasoline on the bonfire below Clay’s body which caused the fire to burn brightly for more than thirty minutes. The lower part of Clay’s body was burned to a crisp. His feet burned
completely off and his legs curled backward revealing the bones of his legs and knees. This
gruesome scene lasted until 10pm when someone in the crowd asked, “have you had enough
fun, boys?” Clay’s corpse was finally cut down and taken to Fisher Funeral Home.\textsuperscript{11}

Coroner John Crichlow examined Clay’s body and decided that “the cause of death was
well known to the public.”\textsuperscript{12} Typical of Southern lynchings, the Vicksburg mob desired
souvenirs. Men, women and children rushed the scene to recover bits of rope as keepsakes.
One young white boy tried to climb the tree to cut down the remaining piece of rope but was
told not to do so. The rope, suggested one of the men, should be left in place as a warning to
other bad Negroes and evil doers.\textsuperscript{13} Clay’s remains were placed in a plain wooden box. Early
the next morning the coroner contacted Hattie Clay, Lloyd’s mother, and asked if she wanted
to identify her son’s body and whether or not she wanted him buried in a pauper’s grave in the
Potter’s cemetery. The distraught mother, who worked as a washerwoman for whites, was
considered a “good Negro” woman and was somewhat respected by whites. She had been
cautioned beforehand to stay away from her son’s remains. Thus, she consented and had his
remains interred in a cemetery for paupers, misfits and “bad” Negroes. Neither family nor
friends escorted Clay’s body to his final resting place. The city paid the total cost of his
funeral, fifteen dollars.\textsuperscript{14}

Two white men who were at the lynching were accidentally shot. Benny Stafford was
wounded in the chin and Charles Lanceskes, an engineer who worked at Anderson Tully, a
local lumber mill, was hit in the brain by a stray bullet from one of the other shooters. He
immediately collapsed and was attended to. Rushed to the Vicksburg Sanitarium to undergo
an operation, Lanceskes died a few days later. His corpse was also taken to Fisher Funeral
Home. In stark contrast to Clay’s burial, Lanceskes’ was quite lavish. White citizens sent
flowers and monetary donations to his family and remembered him as a hero. His remains
were placed in a black broadcloth casket and buried in the segregated City Cemetery for

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Fisher Funeral Home Records, May 1, 1919, pg. 50. Edited by Mary Lois Sheffield Ragland,
April-May, 1986. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
whites. Washing, shaving, embalming and dressing the remains, along with flowers and the
hearse rental came to a substantial two hundred and thirteen dollars.\(^{15}\) His obituary expressed
deep regret that his life had been lost so tragically. In an ironic twist of philosophic
introspection, the author blindly noted “God’s will be done, His ways are not our ways.”\(^{16}\)

Mixed feelings stirred among Vicksburg’s white citizens after the lynching of Lloyd Clay.
Some abhorred the violence connected with the lynching and thought the tree he was hanged
from should be cut down. They did not necessarily feel sympathetic for Clay but instead
worried about the national opinion of Vicksburg. Moreover, many others, especially white
women, felt as though the act was justified. Emily P. Shaw stated:

“It seems to be distressing to quite a few that ladies could witness
and sanction such a thing as the lynching of that negro [sic] brute.
It is equally distressing to me to know that ladies are such physical
cowards as to lock their doors or show fear of a just mob that was
only meting out justice. I, too, consider that tree to be a monument
to our young manhood and we women and girls should stand
behind men in a thing like this.”\(^{17}\)

The *Vicksburg Evening Post* also reported that there had been recent attacks on white
women in Vicksburg. The assumption was that these attacks were perpetrated by black men,
but it was not explicitly stated. Clay’s alleged accomplice was a black man named St. Clair
Webster, a chauffeur. Charley Gantt’s bloodhounds also tracked Webster but he was not
immediately found. Webster was allegedly seen behind the A and V train station standing next
to a restaurant owned by blacks. However, he was arrested in Jackson, Mississippi, about
forty five miles away. When Jackson authorities heard that some white folk from Oak Ridge,
the community where Mattie Hudson’s father lived, were plotting to come to Jackson to lynch
Webster, he was removed from the jail and taken out of the state for safekeeping from
Vicksburg’s irrational white community. Later, he was found not guilty at a hearing and

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 16.

\(^{16}\) Vicksburg Evening Post, “Charles Lanceskes To Be Buried Tomorrow” May 17, 1919, 1.

\(^{17}\) Vicksburg Evening Post, “Woman’s View About Lynching,” May 17, 1919, pg. 8.
Lloyd Clay had two brothers, Archie, 23, was the oldest and his younger brother Harry, was 18. He had one sister named Carolyn, who was also the same age as he. They all lived with their mother, Hattie at 1907 Monroe Street, not very far from the A and V (Alabama and Vicksburg) Railroad Station. Archie owned a barbershop on Washington Street, where he catered to a white clientele only. In his spare time he played piano and sometimes entertained friends and family. Harry also ran his own barbershop. Lloyd was effeminate, and some people even thought he was homosexual. When he was younger, he chose to play with his sister and her dolls instead of joining his brothers in playing more masculine games. Early Tuesday morning Lloyd and Harry left their mother’s house. It was the last time Lloyd Clay’s family would see him alive.

Lloyd Clay’s younger brother, Harry, later tried to defend his deceased brother. He asserted that Clay was innocent and had spent the night in question with him. He told reporters that Clay had not been feeling well and early the next morning headed downtown to buy a cap. According to other witnesses, Clay was walking in the back of the A and V railroad station where Gantt’s dogs were sniffing. When he came to see what the commotion was about the Sheriff and his deputies arrested him. Harry’s mother was naturally distraught over her son’s death. Seventeen year old Harry, on the other hand, claimed that he was not bitter about his older brother’s brutal and inhuman murder.

According to an article in the New York Age, a Jackson resident subsequently conducted an investigation of the Clay lynching. His inquiry revealed that the man who was in Mattie

18 New York Age, “Negro Was Lynched To Save White Woman’s Secret Lover,” June 14, 1919, pg. 1. I traveled to the Vicksburg and Jackson, Mississippi courthouses to look for court records on the hearings after Clay’s death but an employee at the Jackson courthouse told me that they were allowed to burn court records after fifty years and that they had no records of any hearings or court cases that old.

19 U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of the Census. “1910 Census of the State of Mississippi.” Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi. Carolyn could have been a half sister by their now deceased father, George. She could also have been a twin sister or a sister by law.


Hudson’s room was not a black man at all but a white man, her secret lover. Apparently, she did not want her father to find out about the affair. When a member of the Broussard household spotted the white man sneaking in the dark, and wanted to know who he was, the man panicked and ran. He fled to his awaiting chauffeur, a black man named St. Clair Webster, whom he had hired on many previous nights to take him and his lover for midnight drives. After Webster and two other black men were hauled into a Jackson jail, he told the entire story to the authorities. All three men were released and told to leave the state of Mississippi.²²

Lloyd Clay, who worked as a day laborer, was neither a pauper nor a rapist, but a victim of a white supremacist racial caste system in need of an example.²³ But the idea of social and racial justice did not die with the lynching of Lloyd Clay or the countless other African Americans who lost their lives to insure the maintenance of the racial status quo. Instead, his brutal death was a part of the sacrifice blacks and whites alike had to undergo in the transformation of the United States of America in becoming itself—a country based on a democratic experiment that promises—at least the opportunity for—freedom and justice for all of its people. However, that transformation would not take place during the Progressive era.

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²² Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (Baltimore, Black Classic Press, 1962, 1988) 120.

²³ Ibid, 121.
CHAPTER TWO

VICKSBURG AND THE MISSISSIPPI SETTING

Between 1882 and 1930 white Mississippians lynched at least 700 black citizens as the state struggled to industrialize its economy.\(^1\) The state’s economy during and after Reconstruction had remained largely agricultural and many of the state’s political leaders were former Confederate officers, soldiers or sympathizers.\(^2\) During this period, Mississippi was “a closed society” run by an aristocracy of large landowners.\(^3\) Poor blacks and whites worked the land as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, especially in the Delta region just north of Vicksburg. Warren County residents traveled the twenty or so miles on a daily basis to get to the cotton fields in the Delta. Although these two classes, which had different goals and struggled mightily against each other, represented the vast majority of Mississippi’s residents, they did not make up the entire population of the state.

By the 1890s, industry, banking, railroads and business began to replace agriculture in growing cities like Vicksburg.\(^4\) Mississippi’s black middle class was very small, but growing. A strong black middle class was important for a number of reasons: it demonstrated black progress; and it was akin to W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of the Talented Tenth. But what shall be demonstrated is that as more opportunities became available to blacks, it became even more important to whites to maintain the political, economic, and social status quo.

Historian Rayford Logan labeled the Gilded Age the nadir of African American history. But the decades directly following the Gilded Age brought little reprieve to blacks being systematically tortured by whites. Lynchings of black women and men in Mississippi were

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\(^1\) Thompson, 17-77.

\(^2\) McLemore, *Volume II*, 12.


\(^4\) Thompson, 42.
consistently higher than the national average from 1890 to 1910.\textsuperscript{5} Mississippi accounted for almost twenty percent of the total lynchings during the two decades. Considering that lynchings took place in many of the states across the nation, for one state to claim almost twenty percent is overwhelming. From 1910 to 1914 lynchings in Mississippi continued to rise. In 1919 alone, nineteen blacks were lynched in the Magnolia State, more than any of the previous ten years.\textsuperscript{6} Black lynchings in Mississippi during the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries increasingly become a part of everyday life.

By the turn of the twentieth century over ten percent of all blacks in the nation lived in Mississippi (over 910,000) which accounted for 59 percent of the state’s population. But blacks lived in virtual apartheid and the state was an economic backwater. Vicksburg had the largest number of blacks but most of them worked as sharecroppers and lived in extreme poverty. Even when they owned their own land or developed businesses, which only 7 percent did, they were under constant threat of white terrorism.\textsuperscript{7} Mississippi, like other agricultural states, struggled in its effort to become more industrialized. But at the same time the vast majority of its white citizens were more concerned with keeping its retrogressive racial practices in place.

W. E. B. Du Bois, who is considered a progressive, proposed that a black Talented Tenth help lift other blacks out of poverty and ignorance.\textsuperscript{8} But with institutionalized violence condoned by the government and carried out by lynch mobs, in Mississippi it was, unfortunately, more progressive talk than progressive action. This is not to say that those civil rights leaders worked in vain. Historically, there had always been many civil rights leaders who fought for black freedom—Maria Stewart, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and many others. Admittedly, they set the foundation that would later lead to change. But from the Mississippi State Constitutional Convention in 1890 to the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the handful of rhetorical black civil rights leaders had an arduous, uphill battle against the backdrop of lynch

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 28-65.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, 43.

\textsuperscript{8} Nathan Huggins, Ed. \textit{W.E.B Du Bois Writings} (Library of America, 1986) 842.
mobs, fear and human degradation. In fact, Jack Kirby has argued that southern white progressives benefited by exercising social control over black folk.\textsuperscript{9} Disfranchisement and Jim Crow segregation was a means of bringing harmony, at least in the white mindset. Harmony in the minds of most white Mississippians was when blacks knew their place and remained there. If they did not, the lynching of a black man or woman would easily remedy the problem, and in Mississippi this happened often.

Lynching was a method of terrorism used by Southern whites from the Reconstruction period through the modern Civil Rights era, and even beyond, as a means of controlling black people. Like Clay, lynch victims were often burned, hanged or shot to death. Howard Smead points out the overlapping similarities that all lynchings shared: A lynching mob consisted of at least three people who carried out the act. The mob usually acted outside the jurisdiction of the law, although sometime legal officials surreptitiously engaged in lynchings. Lastly, a lynching resulted in the mutilation of the victim’s body and ultimately his or her death.\textsuperscript{10}

Causes for Mississippi lynchings were varied and could be carried out for petty offenses, such as insulting a white person, or criminal accusations such as raping or murdering a white person. Other offenses included, but were not limited to, arson, burglary, threatening to kill a white person, race prejudice against whites, race rioting, and even killing a horse.\textsuperscript{11} Smead argues that most blacks generally responded to the violence and degradation levied against them by “going along to get along.”\textsuperscript{12} What Smead leaves out is the extent to which the effects of lynchings slowed black political, economic and social progress across the state of Mississippi. W. Fitzhugh Brundage has juxtaposed lynchings in Georgia and Virginia that demonstrate white lynch mobs systematically took their frustrations out on blacks in order to maintain a caste system in the New South.\textsuperscript{13} But going along to get along was not really living;


\textsuperscript{10} Smead, x.

\textsuperscript{11} Thompson, 48.

\textsuperscript{12} Smead, 26.

\textsuperscript{13} Brundage, 10.
it was strictly existential.

One cannot overlook the murky waters of despair, fatalism and nihilism blacks must have experienced during the height of lynching.\(^{14}\) Struggling to maintain some semblance of human dignity (let alone economic and political progress) in the face of what French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre called “the Absurd” paints especially poignant imagery. In this case, absurdity applied to the barbaric and senseless lynchings of blacks. Sartre wrote that “in the end a man can always make something out of what is made of him.”\(^{15}\) When analyzing the lynching of black folk against the backdrop of progressivism, scholars should not overlook how ridiculous that concept must have appeared to the vast majority of poor black folk living in Mississippi during the New South who, arguably, focused most of their energy into simply trying to stay alive.

While middle class whites across the country fought greedy big business owners to increase their own economic status, the vast majority of Mississippi blacks lived in incessant fear. Julius E. Thompson points out that at least 130,000 black folk left Mississippi between 1910 and 1920, and a half million left the southern states.\(^{16}\) What remains unexplained is that the exodus of that many blacks en masse severely hampered the ability of those who remained in the state to improve their education, self-sufficiency, and social conditions for themselves. After Lloyd Clay was lynched, many young men, who could afford to, took what little belongings they had and left Vicksburg. Others borrowed money or worked until they had saved enough to buy a ticket out of town.\(^{17}\) Husbands and fathers also left their wives and children behind and fled to northern or western cities in order to seek jobs and safety. The flight of black folk out of the state prohibited strength in numbers of those left behind. Moreover, few blacks would resettle in Mississippi after they had fled the state and help to educate the uneducated and undereducated. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century


\(^{16}\) Thompson, 60.

\(^{17}\) Best,159.
most black Mississippians remained poorly educated and thus worked in cotton fields or were victims of the prison farms.\textsuperscript{18}

The Progressive Era for most whites in Mississippi meant something a little different than it did for the rest of the country. Small white Mississippi farmers were adversely affected by the price gouging of the railroad companies, who charged them exorbitant fees to ship their goods, but that had little to do with blacks who worked for the benefit of the white landowner. If railroad fees were high or low, either way, sharecroppers were still poor. Progressive railroad reform meant little to the black family trying to eke out a living while in constant fear of their human rights being violated. And while white farmers fought the railroad magnates they also fought ambitious blacks, whom they thought to be out of their proper place, with equal, if not more, zeal.

Black progressivism, or social, economic, and political parity with whites, by contrast, in Mississippi never stood a chance.\textsuperscript{19} Mississippi’s first chapter of the NAACP was opened in Vicksburg in 1917.\textsuperscript{20} However, it had little effect against Jim Crow, race violence, and lynchings during its early years. The NAACP held an investigation of the Clay lynching entitled “Darkest Mississippi,” but no one was ever brought to justice. An article on May 17, 1919, in the \textit{Baltimore Daily Herald} implored Mississippi blacks to “organize for protection.” Another article in \textit{The New Orleans Vindicator} on March 29\textsuperscript{th} asked what were black Mississippians doing when one of its own was being lynched. Mississippi Governor Bilbo had stated that “Negroes” could “go to hell.” The \textit{Vindicator} article argued that if black Mississippians would stand up and make their voices heard, other states would have to listen and the Governor would “wouldn’t dream” of boasting about lynching and telling blacks to “go to hell.” Apparently, Mississippi black folk, valuing life over economic, political, and social progress, thought it better to keep their mouths closed or move away from the Magnolia State.\textsuperscript{21} Blacks had an uphill battle, not only against white men but white women also.

\textsuperscript{18} Litwack, 116.


\textsuperscript{20} Papers of NAACP, “Antilynching Campaign, 1912-1955.”

\textsuperscript{21} Papers of NAACP, “Antilynching Campaign, 1912-1955.”
Thompson argues that in the decade leading up to the 19th Amendment to the United States constitution, proactive white women in Mississippi became more cynical toward black women and black men. Many Progressive Era white women suffrage groups, concerned with the vote for themselves, had little appreciation for black rights or deterring the lynching of the men some of them felt were black beasts.  

Gerald H. Gaither provides an analysis of blacks involved in the Populist movement along the gulf coast states of Alabama, Louisiana and Texas. Mississippi, however, is conveniently left out of the narrative; most likely because by the turn of the century the majority of its black citizens were simply not involved in the political process. Moreover, black folk garnered little support in defending their human rights from the legislative and judicial branches that, for the most part, felt blacks were something slightly less than human. Historian Leon F. Litwack sheds light on what progressivism meant to a typical Southern judge who purportedly tried to stop a lynch mob from lynching a black man before he stood trial in what was a farce of a judicial system. “We’ve always been considered a progressive community and I think we’re progressive enough so’s we can give this boy a fair trial and then lynch him.”

Both Litwack and historian John Ray Skates agree that many southern politicians supported lynching. Mississippi governor James K. Vardaman was overtly racist in his rhetoric. During his campaign he never attempted to restrain his hatred of black folk, stating, “If I were the sheriff and a Negro fiend fell into my hands, I would run him out of the country. If I were governor and were asked to send troops to protect him I would send them. But if I were a private citizen I would head the mob to string the brute up.” Skates argues that the Progressive movement in Mississippi failed because of the race problem. He states that rhetoric like Vardaman’s and Bilbo’s killed the progressive movement. Black lynching was white Mississippi’s business and it supported their brand of progressivism during this period.

22 Thompson, 56.


24 Litwack, 261.

25 Litwack, 301; Skates, 127.
The Progressive Era for blacks did not start with the most commonly accepted date of 1890. In truth it did not start with any particular date; black folk had struggled against white supremacy for some measure of progress for centuries. However, there were social and fraternal groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the Mississippi Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs established during this period. Even though these organizations, along with the black church, were proactive and dedicated to social uplift, progress and economic advancement in the black community, very few poor blacks actually benefited. Many chapters sought to spread cultural and political interest among middle class and less economically fortunate blacks. But their efforts to wage combat against the institution of white supremacy and merciless black lynching were most often futile. Black middle class Mississippians who were too militant or thought of as “uppity” were run out of the state, or they too risked becoming lynch victims.

Historically, anti-lynching rhetoric has been seen as a progressive measure for blacks. But even the support for anti-lynching came from outside of Mississippi. Ida B. Wells Barnett campaigned harder than anyone else to constitutionally outlaw lynching in Mississippi and throughout the rest of the country. Her essay, *Southern Horrors: Lynching in All Its Phases*, was a museful critique of lynching and the absurdity of racism. According to Thompson, “Barnett was successful because of her ability to correctly analyze the lynching phenomenon, based on a study of race, gender, and class issues among the American people.” Although her tireless efforts are often seen as a progressive move, lynching in Mississippi continued unremittingly well into the first half of the twentieth century. Black Mississippians had to endure the barbarity of lynching, the threat of being lynched, the psychological strain it

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27 Litwack, 375.


30 Thompson, 56.
brought, and remain hopeful for a better day ahead.
At dusk on Wednesday May 14, 1919, the white mob dragged Lloyd Clay from his jail cell in Vicksburg, Mississippi, with the intent of lynching him. Clay, a young black man, had been accused of breaking into a white woman’s bedroom with the intent of raping her.¹ Like many black men throughout Mississippi and the Deep South during this time, Clay lost his life for purportedly violating the sanctity of a white woman. Historians have shown, however, that there were many factors that contributed to the brutal lynchings of black men and women and that few had anything to do with violating the sexual purity of white women.

This chapter explores facets of Lloyd Clay’s lynching as a hermeneutical endeavor to get at the base thinking of white Mississippians during this period. A theoretical approach based primarily on the work of French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault is employed. This is done in order to provide an historicized analysis that demonstrates the depth of dehumanization and emasculation that was imposed on black lynching victims in order to keep black folk, at large, at the bottom of the social, economic, and political ladder.

Scholarship mentioning the idea of emasculating black men during lynching is not new. However, few historians who write about lynchings address it in detail, and even fewer deal with sexual exploitation at length. This chapter argues that white power and the emasculation of black men have evolved hand in hand throughout the United States’ social, political and economic transformation. White Mississippi lynch mobs employed this tactic in order to maintain white supremacy. Foucault argues that power and sexual repression are interrelated. But he also argues that it was not always that way. European sexual practices during the 16th and early 17th centuries were relatively open. That is not to say women, gay men, or lesbian women were not sexually repressed, but sexual practices were not burdened with Victorian

¹ Vicksburg Evening Post, May 15, 1919, 1.
bourgeoisie principles. However, as Europeans began to expand their oceanic trade routes and ultimately subjugated other people, sexual repression and emasculation became devices of conquest and increased in popularity over time.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to expand their influence on the African continent beginning in the 15th century, while the Spanish sent their conquistadors to the Americas during the 16th century. Both the Portuguese and the Spanish noted the relative nakedness of African and American natives in their diaries, as well as their savage nature and infidelity. In contrast, the English did not travel to Africa until the mid-16th century. According to historian Winthrop D. Jordan, when the English traveled to Africa to trade with them, they viewed Africans as being different from themselves but did not see them as subjects. Although enslaved Africans had lived in Europe since the 16th century, the idea of Africans as chattel began with the Atlantic slave trade. For the English, who initially valued trade, the most outstanding features about Africans were their so-called savage, apelike and libidinous nature, and the color of their skin. Race, savagery, and sexual exploitation are just three ways in which Europeans dehumanized and ultimately subjugated Africans for the comfort of Europe.

Jordan provides an analysis for the Anglo comparison of Africans to apes. He argues that “by forging a sexual link between Negroes and apes, Englishmen were able to give vent to their feeling that Negroes were a lewd, lascivious, and wanton people.” This idea corresponds with the metamorphosis that Europeans were undergoing in repressing their sexual mores and

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3 Federico Garza Carvajal, *Butterflies Will Burn: Prosecuting Sodomites in Early Modern Spain and Mexico* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003) Carvajal provides an excellent study of how Europeans used their idea of “manliness” as a motive to subjugate Native Americans. A very similar methodology was used time and time again in the subjugation of North American Natives and the enslavement of African people.


6 Jordan, 3, 24.

7 Ibid, 32.
establishing what would become their idea of Victorian sexual purity. No longer was sex out in
the open; it was to be confined to conjugal couples for procreation only, and kept a secret.\textsuperscript{8} In
this way, one’s sexuality could be exploited in order to gain power. To speak loosely about
sexual practices in public or to don improper dress in Victorian bourgeois society could carry
with it an indictment of sexual debauchery.\textsuperscript{9}

Thus when the English encountered half-naked Africans it was no accident that they
likened them to apes and accused them of bestiality. Jordan further notes that when
Europeans associated African human beings with apes they were attempting to stress the
African’s uncivilized or animalistic nature. This was done, partly, as justification for people they
considered “others” and ultimately wished to subjugate.\textsuperscript{10} This dehumanizing process of
Africans increased over time and was used in conjunction with emasculating African men for
the purpose of acquiring wealth and social status. Black men who were lynched during the
Reconstruction period and throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century suffered not only agonizing deaths but
also emasculating deaths at the hands of white men and sometimes white women who
subconsciously needed to rob them of their manhood. Many of these white southerners
considered themselves victims of a “lost cause” and focused on reclaiming the power and
status they had lost at the end of the American Civil War.

Michel Foucault provides a more nuanced correlation between power and sexuality. He
argues that sexual repression in Victorian bourgeoisie society manifested itself in various ways
over the centuries. The conjugal family was the initial model and sex was only to be used for
procreation.\textsuperscript{11} During the antebellum years, slave owning white men viewed sexual
intercourse with their wives as indelicate, so instead they raped their enslaved Negresses.
The interplay of power, sexual economy and sexual repression was the beginning of what

\textsuperscript{8} Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction}, 3.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, 7.


\textsuperscript{11} Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction}, 3.
many scholars call Queer Theory.\textsuperscript{12} In this case it explains both the ambiguity of Victorian sexuality and the ways in which its principles were used to emasculate enslaved black men; these black men were not allowed to provide financial or physical security for their families due to enslavement or racial oppression. Ultimately, this played out in the lives of black men being lynched for the purported crime of raping white women.\textsuperscript{13}

The level of emasculation and dehumanization that white supremacists wished to impose on blacks could not be carried out in the courtroom.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, after being both tacitly and overtly incited by governmental officials and policy makers, common white folk felt compelled to take the law into their hands, time after time, to mete out what they had come to believe was popular justice. This level of commitment in keeping blacks racially oppressed helps to demonstrate the passion that those whites had in maintaining white supremacy. It left them little time to contemplate how progressive measures for blacks might better southern society as a whole. White men, it has been argued, often fulfilled an inner desire to emasculate black men by lynching them.\textsuperscript{15} Litwack aptly demonstrates this point, he writes that:

To endorse lynching was to dwell on the sexual depravity of blacks to raise the specter of the black beast seized by uncontrollable savage sexual passions that were inherent in the race. That is, the inhumanity, depravity, bestiality, and savagery practiced by white participants in lynchings would be justified in the name of humanity, morality, justice, civilization, and Christianity.\textsuperscript{16}

When Lloyd Clay was arrested, it was not because Charley Gantt’s hound dogs had led

\textsuperscript{12} William F. Pinar, \textit{The Gender of Racial Politics and Violence in America: Lynching, Prison Rape, and the Crisis of Masculinity} (New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2001) Pinar associates Queer theory with homoerotic masculinity. Although he explores lynching and prison rapes with the agenda of uncovering “homosexual elements of racism” in the United States, his homoerotic argument is applicable in many lynching cases.

\textsuperscript{13} Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality: Volume I, An Introduction}, 8.

\textsuperscript{14} Smead, 20. Smead argues that although some white Mississippians wanted courtroom justice, the majority felt that real justice could only be carried out by a proper lynching, which included torture, humiliation and emasculation.

\textsuperscript{15} Pinar, 9, 14.

\textsuperscript{16} Litwack, 302.
the sheriff’s posse to him. It was because Clay had gone to buy a cap and was curious about the commotion. The dehumanizing process began with the tracking of a human being with hunting dogs. The sheriff’s posse was not looking for a white man but a black man. In their minds, only a black man could have committed this crime. When the dogs led the posse to a white man they naturally assumed his innocence and let him go. Initially confident, Clay was anxious to participate in a line-up. However, when the authorities would not take the white woman’s word, Clay began to act nervous. Knowing the dangers of being accused of assaulting a white woman, Clay’s manhood began to break down. This, arguably, is the second phase of emasculat.

Sexual contact between black men and white women was the vilest of all sins in the eyes of most southern white folks. The sanctity of white women had to be protected from all manner of contact with black men. A black man could be lynched for touching, speaking or even glancing at a white woman. This was the alleged crime of many lynched black men during the Progressive Era and beyond. Sexual contact between blacks and whites represented a threat to racial purity more than it did to white women’s sexual purity. However, it was the lynchpin that held working class white Mississippians and the white aristocracy in ideological lockstep. For a black man to look a white woman in the eyes was something akin to a death wish, and to smile at one, remembered a Mississippi black man, “would get you hung from a limb.”

A confession was finally forced from Mattie Hudson because the mob, which had grown to nearly one thousand white citizens, demanded that they be allowed to enforce their idea of justice upon the black man they had strung up. Realizing his fate, Clay begged to be allowed to take his own life. But this was not satisfactory for Southerners. A confession was forced from Hudson and a false confession from Clay. The legacy of Victorian principles and power struggle are nuanced in this poignant scene. History has shown that when desired, confessions, demanded by the power structure, are not given freely; they are either forced from the soul or from the body through torture. Foucault argues that “truth does not belong to

17 Litwack, 35, 36.
18 Harris, 392.
19 Litwack, 36.
the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom.” One could argue that Hudson wished to be free from her internal torment, or guilt from the lies she had told, and Clay wanted freedom from his torturers. Nevertheless, Mississippi societal dogma demanded that Hudson’s purity be vindicated by white manhood.

Foucault also argues that the relationship between power and sexuality is a binary relationship. However, Foucault, like many European thinkers, fails to consider race in his theories. When blacks, especially black lynch victims, are placed in this equation, it becomes a ternary relationship. Through her sexual feminization, Hudson, like many other white women, was exploited for a confession to promote the racial status quo. Clay was the third sexual component used in the maintenance of this power dynamic. Thus, the hierarchy began with elite white men on top, white women secondary and black men at the bottom.

Glenda Gilmore highlights how white men used racist rhetoric (where they claimed to protect the sanctity of white women) in an effort to make racially liberal white women choose race over gender. Many of these liberated white women argued that the antebellum period was a time when white women had more of everything, including opulence and protection. They implored their men to take more radical measures to garner for them more money, love and protection from black rapists. These women fell in lockstep with the practice of segregation, lynching and disfranchisement of black men. Gilmore also argues that while some white women bought into the rhetoric of the exaggerated danger of black rapists, they emphasized, as a by-product, their dependency on white men. This in turn put both white women and black men in their proper places—below white men and separated from each other.

William Pinar also convincingly demonstrates that women played a subordinate role during


21 Ibid, 83, 84.

22 Ibid. In this same paradigm lower and working class white men can be secondary and black women can be tertiary in rank.

this period. However, he misses the mark slightly by claiming that white women did not participate in the lynching of black men.\textsuperscript{24} As previously discussed, white women indeed took part in the lynching of Lloyd Clay by shooting him with their own hand guns. Moreover, they were used as the stimulus to incite these types of lynchings. And many white women, afterwards, believed the acts to be justified.

Pinar applies Queer Theory to black men who were lynched by white men. As members of the mob ripped the clothing from Lloyd Clay’s body, the sight of his nude body hanging from the old elm tree extracted excitement from the crowd. Pinar claims that when white men physically and sexually mutilated black men their sadism was a part of their internal fantasies of penetrating the black man’s body.\textsuperscript{25} “By sexually mutilating black men whom he imagined had raped virginal young white women, the white man experienced “sex” with black men while framing the event heterosexually through self-dissociation and disavowal.”\textsuperscript{26} Pinar further argues that even if the black man was not castrated during lynching, the white man, nonetheless, was able to have a psychological sexual experience and frame it in the guise of protecting white womanhood and not acquire the shame of being labeled a homosexual or sodomite.

Kelly Brown Douglas has also endeavored to shed light on the problem of black sexuality, homosexuality and white power through black emasculation. Douglas grounds her work in the scholarship of Winthrop Jordan to demonstrate how Europeans initially perceived Africans on the shores of West Africa. Whites ultimately invented the stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sambo. At the base of these caricatures was heightened sexuality and promiscuity.\textsuperscript{27} Douglas argues that because African culture was not like the Greek culture whites idolized, they assumed African people had no knowledge of God.\textsuperscript{28} Her analysis provides insight on

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24} Pinar, 17.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 6-9, 52.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 9.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27} Kelly Brown Douglas, \textit{Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective} (New York, Orbis Books, 1999) 36.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28} Douglas, 14.}
the background of Eurocentric Christian canon and demonstrates that it has been the chief framer of attitudes toward sexuality. She also asserts that Christian morality involved pagan ethics such as the rape of black women by white men, the castration of black men and the barbaric lynching of black men and women. These practices of sexual deviancy and exploitation, she argues, sought to further maintain white supremacy.29

Caste and class distinction were primary concerns of the two competing classes of white Mississippians and white southerners during this period. As bourgeois and aristocratic whites fought to maintain their positions at the top of the food chain, lower and working class whites fought ardently for a second tier based on blood purity, or their white skin privilege. Working class whites were proud of the fact that no matter how poor they were they would never be accused of being a Negro.

Racist rhetoric, more than any other stimulus, caused southern white women to fear being raped by a black man. Many whites bought into the assumed sexual depravity and uncontrollable sexual passion that was allegedly inherent in the black race, as well as the size of the black man's penis. According to Litwack, southern whites believed that blacks possessed a dual nature: they were docile and likable when enslaved but savage and nefarious when free and uncontrolled. Just as slave owners felt little need to defend the convictions on which they held blacks as chattel, white lynch mobs during this period, likewise, believed in their own white supremacist rhetoric. “The Negro as beast became a fundamental part of the white South’s racial imagery at the turn of the century, taking its place alongside the venerated and faithful Sambo retainer, and whites were perfectly capable of drawing on both to sustain their self-image.”30

Litwack also argues that white fear was based on the assumption that most of the lynchings were the result of a black man sexually assaulting a white woman. However, most of the cases were spurious and without base. Often, a black man’s only sin was that he brushed up against a white woman, looked at her the wrong way, whistled at her or made some socially unacceptable gesture which caused her to panic and cry out for help. In the case of Lloyd Clay, he did nothing. Antilynching campaigner and civil rights leader, Walter

29 Ibid, 47, 48.

30 Litwack, 302.
White argued that many southern white women were prone to hysteria where black men were concerned. Most often, he argued, white women created a situation of “imagined rather than real” sexual attacks. Unfortunately, their imagination caused many innocent black men to lose their lives.\textsuperscript{31} Because white women’s purity grew to be unquestionable and synonymous with the purity of the white race in the minds of white southerners, it was virtually impossible for a black man to escape an enraged lynch mob, let alone get a fair trial in a monopolized white court of law.\textsuperscript{32} Once the white citizens of Vicksburg decided that a black man had to pay, Lloyd Clay’s chances for survival, let alone a trial, were virtually nil.

The courtroom, however, was not where vigilante whites were interested in meting out justice to blacks who committed the cardinal sin or had stepped too far out of line. In 1905, Thomas Dixon Jr. published \textit{The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan}, which became Hollywood’s first blockbuster film \textit{The Birth of a Nation}. The film was produced and directed by David Llewelyn Wark (D. W.) Griffith in 1915. Many whites across the country, including Dixon’s former classmate President Woodrow Wilson, identified with the film’s racist plot that castigated the Radical Republicans (of the Civil War and Reconstruction era) for allowing blacks to become involved in the political process, thereby enabling them to prey on innocent white women. Dixon’s preoccupation with interracial sex began when he observed the dysfunctional relationship of his parents.\textsuperscript{33} Notwithstanding, his writing “filled a real cultural need for whites when he emphasized the menace of black men raping white women and predicted that a ‘mongrel breed’ threatened the social order.”\textsuperscript{34} This film was paramount in stimulating the rise of the second generation Ku Klux Klan.\textsuperscript{35}

In \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, the villainous Silas Lynch represented white America’s ultimate fear by his lust for white women. Whites easily juxtaposed this fictitious character with the

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 306.

\textsuperscript{32} Gilmore, 72, 86.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 68. Gilmore provides an explanation of Dixon’s obsession with both the sexuality of black men and his mother’s sexuality, as well as his father’s alleged infidelity. This seems to give credence, at least in part, and for some white men, to Pinar’s thesis.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 68.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
boxer Jack Johnson to add credence to their claims of both the lecherous nature of blacks and their sub human caste. Black Mississippian, Richard Wright remembered the hope and inspiration Jack Johnson gave black folk in Mississippi when they had little else.\textsuperscript{36}

The famous black boxer, Jack Johnson was arguably the most despised black man by white Americans and especially southern whites during the early twentieth century. Johnson was the first African American to defeat a white man and become heavyweight champion of the world in 1908. Johnson defeated “white hope” after “white hope” in the ring and dared to break every racial custom outside of it. He flaunted and married three different white women, dressed flamboyantly, and drove fast sports cars. Because of it, he brought on the ire of many southern whites.\textsuperscript{37} When Johnson defeated Jim Jeffries, whom whites were sure would have no problem disposing of the bumptious black champion, chagrined whites lashed out with violence toward black communities all across the state of Mississippi, as well as in every other southern state and much of the country. These violent, and sometimes deadly, racial skirmishes cast light on the gravity that white supremacy, racial caste, and place held in the ethos of whites across the country.\textsuperscript{38} They also represented the disgust whites held for black men who dared break the social taboo of sexual intimacy with white women.

Congress busied itself with outlawing the interstate transportation of prizefighting films that depicted victorious blacks over whites.\textsuperscript{39} This type of legislation was instrumental in maintaining the confidence of the white race, purported to be superior to all others, especially the Negro. Mississippi was historic in its ability to murder with impunity its black citizenry in an effort to control those who stepped out of their proper place. Glenda Gilmore argues that New White Men, that generation of southerners born after the Civil War, blamed their fathers for losing the Civil War, which had allowed blacks to engage in the political process, and thus retarded their idea of modernity.\textsuperscript{40} But in reality, many Progressive Era Mississippi politicians

\textsuperscript{36} Litwack, 441.  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 439.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 442.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 443.  
\textsuperscript{40} Gilmore, 67.
were so concerned with righting the wrongs of black advancement that they most often missed the mark on properly promoting economic and industrial growth, and in many ways stifled their own push toward modernity, at least economically.

Of course none of the rhetoric about chastity and protection from sexual predators applied to black women. It was no secret that white men kept black mistresses. And when a white man or a black man raped a black woman it was a rare occasion that he was arrested and brought before a jury. The double standard in Mississippi’s “negro law” was doubly bad for black women. They had little recourse against the violation of their womanhood because they were seen as naturally licentious. If a black person killed a white person he or she would be sentenced to death, whether by jury or a lynch mob. In contrast, if a black person killed another black person, that individual often pled guilty and became a lifetime ward of the penitentiary system, and labored to augment the state’s revenue.

Lynching, if viewed as a form of eugenics necessary to rid southern society of so called “bad niggers,” was the primary means of shaping the mindset of those blacks who lived through the lynch era, and white supremacists were its movers. In other words, white Mississippians killed many of the black people they thought to be “bad” and attempted to make docile those who remained in the state. Blacks who showed deference toward whites or who were valued for their labor were also shown leniency in the courtroom and pardons were more readily given to black men if their labor was considered valuable and their offense had been against another black person. Letters to the governor asking for pardons for black men who worked for white Vicksburg businessmen were typical during this period.

Dear Sir; I am taking the liberty to write you in behalf of a negro [sic] for whom a Petition for Pardon will be presented to the Pardon Board to-day. This negro, Jim Woodson was convicted of

41 Litwack, 267.


43 Governor’s Records. Collection 879, Folder 33. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
manslaughter and given a sentence of Eight [sic] years in the Penitentiary of which he has served between two and three years now. I became interested in this case and after his conviction I reached the conclusion from what I could gather that he should not have been convicted at all. The man he killed was a bad negro and had treated his sister in the most outrageous manner and it was just the sort of case that would never have been brought up if the parties had been white. This boy, Woodson has friends among the most substantial and influential citizens here and that will show you what sort of man he is. I will thank you for any influence that you may be able to exert in the direction of getting him a favorable hearing before the Board.44

In another case, a Vicksburg, black man was sentenced to life in prison for killing another black man. The Mississippi Supreme court reversed the decision because it thought that “the average white jury would take it for granted that the killing of a white man’s nigger is a more serious offense than the killing of a plain every-day black man.”45 The dead man’s widow sat and watched helplessly as her husband’s murderer was set free.

In 1919 alone, whites lynched 20 black Mississippians, more than any other state in the South.46 Their zeal for the maintenance of white supremacy by lynching was unmatched for the first three decades of the twentieth century. Undoubtedly, this played negatively in the psyche of the black population. Foucault argues that the machinery of production needs docile bodies for optimization.47 White Mississippians used every means available to them in order to insure their own racial supremacy, economic advancement, and social domination. Another of the primary ways of garnering white power was through limiting black education. The progress, such as black owned banks or other small businesses in the capitol city of Jackson or other small enclaves like Mound Bayou, that a very small percentage of black

44 Ibid. This letter was written to Mississippi Governor Theodore Bilbo on January 10, 1919 by Vicksburg Police Justice William Waggener. Prominent white businessmen had signed petitions because the black man was seen as a “good negro.” Jim Woodson was subsequently freed from Parchman prison.

45 Litwack, 266.

46 Thompson, 59.

47 Foucault, 140.
Mississippians made during this period was extremely rare and was made against all odds.
A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas. Foucault

On October 16, 1889, Mississippi Senator James Zachariah George gave a speech in Greenville on the seriousness of the Negro suffrage problem. Senator George had been an avid secessionist before the Civil War and served as a Confederate officer with the 5th Mississippi Cavalry during the war.¹ He talked about the necessity for the continued political supremacy of the white race and declared that he was in favor of a new constitution.

“I, for my part, say that a constitutional convention ought to be called… The present Constitution, though many of the original most obnoxious laws have been amended or thrown out, was the handiwork of the most corrupt government that ever disgraced any state of this Union, and I believe it is time it should disappear from the statute books, head, body, and soul.”²

The die had been cast for amendments to the state constitution that excluded black Mississippians as well as other black Southerners. The year 1890 has, among others, two things in common: it is the year of the Mississippi State Constitutional Convention and the accepted beginning year of the Progressive Era.³

Although 1890 launched many progressive movements for whites, it launched repressive

¹ McLemore, Volume II, 12, 29.
² Ibid, 8.
³ The accepted date is 1890 but it often varies. Some historians mark the beginning of the Progressive Era as far back as the 1870s.
movements for many blacks, especially those who lived in Mississippi. The 1890 State Constitutional Convention marked it a watershed in Mississippi history. The main purpose was to disfranchise the black citizenry and retard black progress by putting blacks back in their proper place, which was on the bottom of the social, economic and political ladder. The delegates, at first, were worried about a negative federal reaction, because of White politicians’ audacity to nullify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth constitutional Amendments.\(^4\) However, that problem was quickly overcome by articles that did not seem to overtly discriminate between black and white voters. The delegates still reasoned that some casualties were inherent in war; if some poor whites were temporarily disfranchised, so be it. The Constitution met its aims. By 1904 less than 2000 out of 910,000 voting age black Mississippians were even registered to vote.\(^5\) The most damaging effects with regard to black suffrage made by the delegates were the articles pertaining to the poll tax, educational requirements, and apportionment.\(^6\)

Although segregation had been a part of Mississippi life since Reconstruction, the period had brought some relief to blacks. But the 1890 Mississippi Constitution provided the fuel whites needed to spread full racial oppression back into social custom. It was the stimulus that sparked a white assault from almost every angle imaginable on black humanity.

White Mississippi politicians were cunning and their schemes were nefarious. Theory was one thing but application was something far different. The result of the legislation cut the black vote down to almost nothing. And black folk had to spend the next seventy five years trying to win back the right to vote. Isaiah T. Montgomery, of Mound Bayou, was the lone black man at the 1890 convention. He was also the only Republican. However, Montgomery delivered a speech in favor of amendments which would disfranchise blacks and poor whites alike. He

\(^4\) Skates, 123.

\(^5\) Silver, 19.

\(^6\) Buford Satcher, *Blacks in Mississippi Politics, 1865-1900* (Washington D.C., University Press of America, 1978) 165. The three major proposals forced citizens to pay a two dollar poll tax; required voters to pass a literacy test (although the pollsters decided who passed or failed); and the apportionment system sought to divide up counties where the majority of citizens were black, thus robbing them of their strength in numbers.
claimed that he hoped that the adoption of the plan would make the race question “a thing of the past” but it only reified notions embedded in the white ethos that most blacks were content with de facto Jim Crow law.\footnote{McLemore, Volume II, 12; Albert D. Kirwin Revolt of the Rednecks, Mississippi Politics: 1876-1925 (Lexington, University of Kentucky, 1951) 11. Kirwin explains that many black political leaders at the end of the 19th century believed that race relations between blacks and whites would improve. He provides an explanation for black politicians who worked with whites to maintain the color line. Many tried to work with whites because they claimed to fear for the safety of black citizens, who owned few weapons; Satcher, 1. Satcher’s book is a concise history of black Mississippi politicians during Reconstruction to the end of the century. His study shows that blacks in the state were the majority but whites had tried to (illegally) disfranchise blacks by stuffing the ballot boxes with Democratic votes. More importantly, whites were also afraid of a race war and sought to make their crimes legal with the 1890 convention.}

By the turn of the century many of the former Confederate generals in political power were being replaced by younger leaders, also called New White Men. They agreed that industry must be brought into the state to supplement the agricultural economy.\footnote{McLemore, Volume II, 29.} Six candidates expressed their desire to be governor of the state in 1899, including James Kimble Vardaman. However, he was an officer engaged in the Spanish American War at the time of the campaign and was unable to compete for the governorship of Mississippi. He did however, campaign successfully in 1903. His campaign had been largely based on education reform, in the way of distribution of school funds. He insisted that school funds should be allocated according to the amount of taxes paid. His argument was that state taxes were raised from property taxes and since blacks owned very little property they should receive only the smallest amount of school funds.\footnote{Ibid.}

One of the most important pieces of legislation passed during the Progressive Era in Mississippi was the creation of the State Textbook Commission. Although few, if any, black students were privy to new textbooks, the State Textbook Commission’s goal was to create uniformity in selecting textbooks for the use in white public schools throughout the state. There was an interesting clause which made it illegal to use a textbook that did not teach the history of the Civil War from a Confederate point of view. The wording of the clause was
eventually changed but the initial goal was nevertheless implemented de facto. Because of Vardaman’s way of thinking and these types of reforms he was very popular with the vast majority of Mississippi’s white residents. He espoused so much racial hatred during his political career that it became his legacy.

While campaigning for governor he stated that, [Mississippi] “spent $150,000 to disfranchise the Negro [and] six million to bring him back into politics.” When Vardaman spoke about education reform for the people, he made it perfectly clear that he meant the education of white people. He firmly believed that: “Education had not improved the Negroes but had rather increased their criminality. In the South millions had been spent for negro[Sic] education, he argued, but no results could be seen. The Negro is necessary in the economy of the world but he was designed for a burden bearer.” Vardaman’s statement and convictions about educating blacks, demonstrates the limitation commonly held in the ethos of many white Mississippians at the time and arguably had more impact on retarding black growth than any other racist measure. Vardaman was attempting to find his niche in the global economy and at the same time he was trying to bifurcate blacks and whites, not only in Mississippi but all over the world. This stagnant way of thinking stifled black progress but it also led to Mississippi’s economy remaining near or at the bottom of the nation during the entire twentieth century.

Populism was a national endeavor to procure some of the power from big business and special interest groups and implement more equitable social measures in the government, but it did not really take off in Mississippi. It had a short life from 1890 to 1895 and failed to gain much influence. The party tried to garner the support of black Mississippians by aligning itself with the Republican rhetoric of racial equality but was quickly stifled by the Democrats.

10 Ibid, 37.
11 Ibid, 34.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid, 57.
14 Skates, 127.
15 Satcher, 161.
Vardaman, who won on the Democratic ticket, served as governor of Mississippi from 1904 to 1908 and as senator from 1912 to 1918. Although he implemented a few progressive changes for whites, such as education and railroad reform, he had little regard for blacks. Not only were his reforms not meant for the advancement of black folk, he wished for a repeal of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the United States Constitution. Vardaman was an extreme racist and white supremacist who enthusiastically supported the lynching of black folk. His progressive ideology was in alignment with the small farmer faction of Mississippi Democrats. John Skates argues that the Progressive movement failed in Mississippi because of the race question. He asserts that the rhetoric and legislation of two overtly racists governors, Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo, killed the Progressive movement in Mississippi. By trying so hard to stop the growth of blacks, white Mississippians, in many ways hurt themselves.

At the dawning of the early 20th century, blacks continued to strive for land and business ownership in Mississippi, even though it threatened white security. By 1910, there were eleven black owned banks across the state with resources of over $602,000. But more often than not when blacks reached a certain level of success they had to be stopped by the white supremacist power structure. “In Meridian, Mississippi, authorities destroyed a black settlement on the edge of the city. Officials justified their actions on the pretext that it represented a public health hazard.” Similarly, in Natchez, Mississippi, “authorities removed blacks from their homes and destroyed the structures on the premise that they were

16 Skates, 127.

17 Kirwin, 163.

18 Kirwin, 175; Julius E. Thompson, 47. Vardaman won the support of small farmers in Mississippi who had identified with the populist movement of the early 1890s. They wanted railroad restriction, legislation to regulate monopolies, direct election of senators, and the vote for women. Although Satcher tries to give voice to black Mississippians in the context of the Populist Party, it is obvious they had little voice. The Mississippi Constitutional Convention was in 1890 and by 1895 the Populist Party in Mississippi was dead. By 1900 there were 970,630 blacks in the state and 641,200 whites. Only 3,300 black people were registered to vote. By 1904, when Vardaman took office, fewer than 2,000 were registered vote.

19 Skates, 132.
contaminated with yellow fever.” 20  Even when rich northern philanthropists Andrew Carnegie and Julius Rosenwald invested in Isaiah Washington’s beloved town of Mound Bayou, whites in surrounding communities sought to diminish the black enclave’s prosperity. Isaiah Washington worked in conjunction with Booker T. Washington to procure the help of these philanthropists in order to build a self-sufficient black-run town in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. There was a black owned cotton seed mill, black owned businesses and a black owned bank. However, when the bank failed in 1914, surrounding white bank owners and businessmen raised interest rates for the black citizens of Mound Bayou and demanded that they bring their cotton to white towns for ginning and sale. 21  Events such as these served to not only choke black growth and economic prosperity but also statewide economic prosperity.

White Mississippians were systematically destroying a part of the state’s economy that could have led to modernization that was on par with other industrialized states in the country. Moreover, their bigotry and conservatism impeded their ability to possibly compete on a global level. Black migration out of Mississippi also served to hurt the state’s economy and weaken black enterprise. Approximately 103,000 black people escaped the degradation and hardship that Mississippi offered them between 1910 and 1920. Julius E. Thompson attributes the tensions of black migration with an increase in lynchings during the second decade of the 20th century, right alongside the exodus in the lynching aftermath of WWI and the Red Summer of 1919. 22

Black economic benefits during this period were mostly reaped by the relatively few black folk who were brave and fortunate enough to escape the South and gain a college degree or an advanced college degree from one of the northern universities and find a relatively decent job, even if they were over qualified for it. Admittedly, some blacks, educated as physicians or lawyers, came or returned to the South only to face the bigotry of whites who respected their education no more than they respected the color of their skin. Black physicians could not obtain jobs in white hospitals, and sometimes their own practices were boycotted by whites, as well as some blacks, or they were run out of town. Thompson argues that whites sometimes

20 Thompson, 43.


22 Thompson, 67.
intimidated blacks when they patronized black businesses. Blacks were also led to believe that they would receive substandard service from black physicians.  

Historian J. William Harris points out that during the summer of 1918, a prominent black Vicksburg physician, John A. Miller, was tarred and feathered by whites, as a mob of over 2000 people watched, and then run out of town because he was thought to be unpatriotic. Miller was lucky. Southern racists thought that no matter how much education a black person had, they were still black and should never consider themselves equal to a white person. 

The vast majority of black people in Mississippi, however, during the Progressive Era were uneducated and poor. Almost ninety percent of all Mississippians lived in rural areas. Nevertheless, some blacks became successful business people and worked hard, saved their money and managed to buy land and even build a house. But there was an inherent danger in doing so. To acquire too much wealth or education was to break the southern social code and to become “uppity.” Scores of lynchings were justified by whites because a black man had “stepped outen his place when he got dat eddycation.” If black people wanted to live like anything that resembled a normal life and die a natural death they had to learn how to get along with white folks and not achieve too comfortable a living. Tolnay and Beck argues that blacks who competed in the southern economy were seen as a threat; whites believed they were stealing opportunities from them and they challenged racial hierarchical dogma.

Many southern politicians supported lynching. Some were overtly racist in their rhetoric; others gave tacit support for it. Although Vardaman outright supported the lynching of blacks he worried that the inhumanity of the acts might lead to the “moral deterioration” of the white civilization. However, throughout his tenure as governor of the state he never attempted to restrain his outright hatred of black folk, and moral deterioration took a backseat to the maintenance of white supremacy. Like many political figures of the period, he thrived on

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23 Thompson, 73.

24 Harris, 388.

25 Thompson, 59.

26 Litwack, 6.

27 Ibid, 301.
building his politics around publicly promoting white supremacy and racial separation. His ranting about being a Sherriff and a “Negro fiend” falling into his hands and running him out of the county, or stringing him up if he were a private citizen overtly supported lynch mob rule.\(^{28}\)

Vardaman’s rhetoric encouraged public black lynchings in Mississippi and placed a palisade between improved race relations during the so-called Progressive era. Although blacks did commit crimes they were no more heinous than those committed by any other ethnic group. Many blacks died for offenses far less serious than rape, attempted rape or murder. Vardaman thought their punishment had to fit the crime and lynching was the only form of punishment fit for black men who threatened or was accused of threatening the sanctity of southern white women. Lynching, Vardaman said, “was the only adequate punishment for a black two legged monster that defiled the exalted virtue, the vestal purity and superlative qualities of southern [white] women.”\(^{29}\)

Thus whites had to insure that blacks knew their social position and that they accepted it with no objection. Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punishment* that power is wielded through the mind. When the state wanted to create what he calls “docile bodies” it started with physical discipline and mental indoctrination. “When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and being their masters.”\(^{30}\) Litwack points out that by early adolescence black kids had learned and adopted the social customs set forth by the framers of the New South.\(^{31}\) Good Negroes, as they were often called, learned to be humble; they accepted insults, epithets, bowed their heads when passing white people, and addressed them as “sir” or “ma’am,” being careful not to look them directly in the eyes. Some blacks accepted subservience as the best way to get along with whites, yet even they ran the risk of being verbally and physically chastised if they stepped out of line.

The malcontent and vocalized rebellion that came along with race consciousness created

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\(^{28}\) Kirwin, 152.

\(^{29}\) Litwack, 301.


\(^{31}\) Litwack, 17.
what whites called the “bad Negro.” These blacks stood in stark contrast to the good Negro. They were accused of being indolent, shiftless and transient and were accepted as the younger generation of blacks who had been born after American slavery was constitutionally abolished. But many other so called bad Negroes challenged the status quo by standing up to whites and even fighting or killing them, even if often in self defense. Litwack shows that these black heroes or “bad niggers” developed into black folklore. They were mavericks and outlaws who broke the social customs and struck fear into the hearts of whites by meting out their own brand of renegade justice.\(^\text{32}\)

Black spirituality, along with the black church, has been the primary vehicle for solidarity and mobilization in the black community for hundreds of years. Spirituality has been paramount in combating the vice grip like hold of white supremacy and all its absurdities. When Lloyd Clay was dangling from a noose and being burned alive, the only thing he could rely on was his spirituality. In an existential moment he suffered in silence, raising his hands in a prayer like gesture, while the white mob crucified him. In his form of resistance Clay was able to devalue all efforts of the racist mob to control his mind or his spirit. Although Clay lost his life, for a singular moment he destroyed centuries of denigration and dehumanization that African people had endured since the first Europeans likened them to apes.

\(^\text{32}\) Ibid, 437.
CONCLUSION

Generations after the Civil War ended, emancipated black Mississippians still lived in virtual slavery. A very few were able to transcend the harsh conditions enforced upon them by black codes and Jim Crow legislation. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries many blacks chose to leave the apartheid like conditions in Mississippi and the rest of the South. Those who remained in Mississippi and eked out a living for themselves did so in the face of extreme human degradation and life-threatening danger. Lynching was critical in maintaining the caste system of white racial supremacy in many southern states but it was paramount for its maintenance in Mississippi.

The 1890 Mississippi Constitutional Convention legally paved the way for white Mississippians to exclude blacks from every phase of political activism and participation. White Democrats had been able to retake control of Mississippi’s political machine through fear tactics, racial oppression, and later by duping some blacks into selling their votes. By 1890, many white politicians had grown tired of sharing any control of state and local politics with their black counterparts. Other states soon followed suit and eventually Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), guaranteed that blacks across the South could be excluded in virtually every facet of life; Mississippi used the Supreme Court decision to its fullest potential.

By the turn of the century, less than 2000 out of more than 900,000 black voting age Mississippians were even registered to vote. James Kimble Vardaman would enact legislation disguised as “separate but equal” but in fact would keep the vast majority of blacks uneducated and outside of the better jobs. Vardaman’s racist rhetoric, along with that of Theodore Bilbo, is legendary and gave the state’s white supremacists tacit approval to lynch those blacks whom they felt were a threat to the racial status quo without fear of judicial reprisal.

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1 McLemore, 8.

2 Ibid, 15.

3 Silver, 19.

4 McLemore, 34.
The many black Mississippians who were sharecroppers and toiled for the luxury of white landowners saw very little economic and social progress during the first several decades of the 20th century. Their lack of education forced many to remain tied to the land they worked. The debt they accrued kept many of them in poverty and financially unable to leave the state. Most urban dwelling blacks worked as day laborers and took various odd jobs when they could get them. Many of Vicksburg’s day laborers, like Lloyd Clay, worked loading cotton or lumber onto the barges that transported it down the Mississippi river to the gulf coast. But even those periodic jobs went to black men only when whites refused to take them.

Black laborers were kept outside of the labor unions’ political positions. Qualified blacks were often physically attacked and run out of town by whites who wanted their jobs. Once, in 1925, when a contractor came to Gulfport, Mississippi, and brought his own black carpenters, the local white union members told him to hire local whites for the job. When he refused, they assigned a white man to each black man to “influence—-in any way he saw fit” the black carpenters to leave the city. Two days later, the black carpenters had left town and white men took the jobs they left behind. Physical threat was a part of everyday black life in Mississippi and northerners who ventured into the state quickly found out the grim realities of assaulting, in any way, the social structure of “Mississipuh.”

In Foucault’s *Discipline and Punishment*, Damiens the regicide was condemned to die in March, 1757, for the attempted assassination of Louis the XV. He endured a lengthy and barbarous public torture. The flesh was torn from his breast, arms, and calves; boiling oil, wax, and sulfur was poured on his body; four horses pulled him and the limbs were torn from his body; finally, his body was consumed by fire and reduced to ashes. Foucault argues that public spectacles such as this created a desire for the prison system and the mental manipulation of prisoners. The juxtaposition of the discipline and punishment of the French lowly served to create an infinite supply of manpower that could be used for the comfort of the ruling class. In Mississippi and much of the Deep South, that supply of manpower mainly

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5 McLemore, 303, 304.

6 Ibid, 257.

7 Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, 93.

8 Ibid, 7.
came from socially, economically, and politically oppressed black folk. The creation of the United States’ constitution came at the cost of a reversion back to the early 18th century public torture tactics for those enslaved Africans in America. The public spectacle of lynching during the American lynch era is its lasting legacy.

Under the cruel system of lynching, blacks were lynched for almost nothing; and nothing was done about the many innocent blacks who were lynched at the behest of any white supremacist. White Mississippians lynched more black people than in any other state in the country. Under this same system, relatively few whites were hanged. The benefit of white skin allowed those whites accused of all but the most heinous crimes a chance to defend themselves in the court room.

The level of emasculation that came with black lynching contributed to a disciplining of black men in Mississippi. Arguably, the fear that any accusation whatever by a white woman could result in a black man being lynched cannot be properly or accurately articulated. This is one of the many important reasons that black progress in Mississippi was repressed for such a long time. Although many blacks garnered some agency by leaving the state for good, others, who did not have the means or chose to remain there, had to “get along by going along.” If they accrued too much wealth, education, or attitude they risked physical danger or worse.

Because white Mississippians were, as Foucault has pointed out, able to indoctrinate most of its black population from birth, they were able to control their black bodies. Many black Mississippians would disabuse themselves from their mental psychosis and leave the state. That chapter of history is a much happier story. Blacks who headed north or to western states did not escape racism or Jim Crow entirely, but they did relieve themselves from the constant threat of being lynched.

The pessimism and fatalism that most black Mississippians seemed to have had during the early 20th century may seem like harsh judgment; but pessimism does not always equate to apathy. In fact, one could argue that black Mississippians were actually realistic. Because blacks in Vicksburg did not retaliate with violence or protest after Lloyd Clay was brutally murdered does not mean that they did not exert agency within the state. Nevertheless, agency and progress are two different things. As it has been shown, most black Mississippians remained poor, uneducated and disfranchised, because the state’s white minority was able to control the political machine and maintained the status quo through terrorist tactics. Black
Mississippians (like most other blacks in the Jim Crow South) stuck together in their small communities and battled the “blues” through religion, music, song, strong family ties, and thus survived the harsh realities of the many Mississippi Burnings.
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