

**“Miss Otis Regrets”: Late 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Mob Violence Against Southern White Women**

*Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch today, madam,  
Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch today,  
And she's sorry to be delayed,  
But last evening down at lover's lane  
She strayed, madam.  
Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch today.*

*When she woke up and found  
That her dream of love was gone, madam,  
She ran to the man  
Who had led her astray.  
And from under her velvet gown  
She drew a gun and shot her lover down, madam,  
Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch today.*

*When the mob came and got her  
And dragged her from the jail, madam,  
They strung her up  
On the willow across the way.  
And the moment before she died  
She lifted up her lovely head and cried, madam.  
Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch.  
Miss Otis regrets she's unable to lunch today.*

Cole Porter, 1934<sup>1</sup>

Despite the claim that white men lynched to protect white womanhood and the accompanying belief that lynching was reserved for blacks who had committed unspeakable crimes, profound contradictions lay at the heart of the rape/lynch discourse. Victims of lynching, were not always black men accused of rape. Not just

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<sup>1</sup> Cole Porter, “Miss Otis Regrets,” April 1934. First performed on stage by Douglas Byng in *Hi Diddle Diddle*, which opened October 3, 1934 at the Savoy Theatre in London. Ethel Waters, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Bette Mitler, and Joe Jackson are among the many who have recorded their own version of the award winning song.

men, but also women, black and white, were executed by southern mobs. In fact, even as mobs lynched thousands of African Americans on the pretext of protecting white womanhood, they also attacked poor white women deemed unworthy of protection, because they were a threat to the social order.

The rape/lynch discourse certainly functioned as a means of policing the boundaries of race and gender, but it further served to mask white violence against white women in the New South. In contrast to white newspapers' lurid descriptions of alleged crimes committed by black men against white women, white papers rarely mentioned white men's crimes against women, black or white. As the African-American social reformer, Nannie H. Burroughs pointed out, "But over the white man's sin is thrown the mantle of charity. For what? To conceal Anglo-Saxon vice and keep the race on the throne of virtue. To publish such crimes perpetrated by them upon their own women would deprive their women of that protection of which the Anglo-Saxon delights to boast and which he wants his women to feel secure . . . Let the thousands of white women whose mouths are shut by pride speak out."<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the focus on black men's alleged crimes diverted attention from the crimes of white men and deepened the perpetual silence about white men's abuse of women of their own race. Indeed, mob violence against white women, by southern white men was rarely discussed in a society that defined white women's peril in the form of the black rapist.

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<sup>2</sup> *Voice of the Negro*, vol. 2, no. 2 (February 1905); 106-7.

The figure of black rapist proved particularly useful for white Americans seeking to come to terms with post-Reconstruction anxieties over national unity, black emancipation, altered gender roles, growing labor unrest, and increasing poverty.<sup>3</sup> Anxieties over racial contamination and a threatened revision of class and gender roles surfaced repeatedly in cases of mob violence against white women.<sup>4</sup> And while most historians have acknowledged that mob violence against African-American men masked an array of racial and gender problems in the South, few scholars have examined the violent impact that mob violence had on the lives of white women.<sup>5</sup> This conspicuous neglect of the topic is due in part to a lack of evidence and what seems to be a conspiracy of silence on the part of late-nineteenth-century southerners. Lower-class white women, who formed the majority of white female victims of mob violence, did not write memoirs. Most women who survived mob violence chose not to speak publicly about it. Some white newspapers offered evidence about female

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<sup>3</sup> See Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Even in late twentieth century texts such anxieties are resolved with violence against white women. In William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* --- a fantasy of the violent overthrow of the United States government by "patriots." The entry for "August 1, 1993" describes in detail the Los Angeles streetscape after the "Day of the Rope:" miscegenation women hang "from tens of thousands of lamppost," their "grisly forms" hung with placards stating "I defiled my race." See Andrew Macdonald, *The Turner Diaries* (Washington, DC: National Alliance, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Beyond making arguments about how lower-class white used the rape/lynch discourse for their own personal empower, historians have overlooked mob violence against white women at the turn of the century. For discussion on how poor white women manipulated the rape myth see, James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); and Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

victims of mob violence, but these accounts have severe limitations as most were written by middle-class whites or supporters of mob violence. Such reports tell us more about their authors' views than about poor white women's experiences. Yet in the 1880s and 1890s, the years of greatest violence and the years of the highest number of mob attacks on white women, white women certainly had something to say about mob violence and its impact on their communities. We need to recognize however that as in the case of for black women, retrieving the testimony of lower-class white women requires both reading the silences and examining behavior.

Even though the number of white women lynched in the turn-of- the-century South is small in comparison with other groups of victims, these cases call our attention to white Americans responses to white women's challenges to the prescribed roles of race and gender. Uncontrollable white womanhood alarmed intellectuals and politicians of this period. In his 1890 article "Two Perils of the Indo-European," the scientist E. D. Cope identified "the masculinization of women" as a major threat to America's survival.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the narrative of black men who remade themselves as freedmen and were suddenly afflicted with the "disease" of sexual passion, turn-of-the-century white women who asserted new identities figured both as race traitors and as diseased bodies. Seen as equally capable of spreading infection in their midst, they seemed to threaten the racial and gender hierarchy of the southern caste system. Thus the advent of the New Woman and her interest in birth control and female independence proved the need for greater surveillance of white women, especially in the context of sexual desire. Consequently, the emergence of an independent new

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<sup>6</sup> E. D. Cope, "Two Perils of the Indo-European," *Open Court* 3(127) (1890): 2071.

class of poor white women and the middle-class belief that lower-class white women were immoral fed southern whites' anxieties.

The image of poor white women as morally depraved functioned to reify the pure and virtuous image of elite southern white womanhood.<sup>7</sup> Like the black Jezebel, the figure of the poor white woman as morally corrupt had deep roots in the antebellum South. Whites who engaged in menial labor were often perceived as only a few steps above slaves. To lack property or profession in the slave-holding South was to lack honor and respectability: to be “regarded as a social parasite and a potential threat to social harmony and order.”<sup>8</sup> Poverty was particularly shameful for white women, because it violated norms of white femininity. Lower-class white women who labored alongside slaves were an absolute contradiction to the image of the southern lady, who symbolized leisure, luxury, wealth, and refinement. Thus it is not surprising that elite white women sought to maintain a “clear and often militant

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<sup>7</sup> On relationships between women of different class and the southern ideology of womanhood in the antebellum South see the following: Elizabeth Fox Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Ann Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low County* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Paul H. Buck, “The Poor Whites of the Antebellum South,” *American Historical Review*, 31 no. 1 (October 1925), 41-54.

<sup>8</sup> Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 6.

defense” of their class privilege and their distance from lower-class white women.<sup>9</sup> In her study on yeoman households in antebellum South Carolina low country, Stephanie McCurry suggest that maintaining class boundaries was one of elite southern white women’s “central political roles.”<sup>10</sup> Elite southern whites were not alone in their perceptions of poor white women as deviant and morally depraved. According to Christine Stansell’s study of working class women in antebellum New York City, social reformers often described working mothers as “subhuman species: bestially drunken and abusive, indifferent, ‘sickly-looking, deformed by over work . . . weak and sad-faced.’”<sup>11</sup>

Such images of poor whites liscened a host of abuses and injustices against lower-class white women.<sup>12</sup> Like slave women, many poor white women who

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<sup>9</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 96-97 and McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 127.

<sup>10</sup> McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 209. For more on how middle-class and elite female social reformers of the nineteenth century used the ideology of true womanhood to inscribed social power and class difference, see also Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century United States*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Deviant behavior severely undercut a poor white woman’s demand for protection in the Old South. Even in cases of alleged rape by a black man it was difficult for lower-class white women to prove themselves worthy of protection. For more information on rape in the antebellum South, see Diane Miller Sommerville, “The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered,” *Journal of Southern History* vol. LXI, No. 3 (August, 1995); 481-518; Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstruction the Household: Families, Sex, and Law in the Nineteenth-*

suffered physical and sexual abuse at the hands of white men in the ante-bellum South were often blamed for their victimization and denied legal protection. Representations of poor women as immoral and less worthy of protection from physical and sexual violence met little resistance in the antebellum South, and such ideas continued to relegate lower-class white women to the margins of southern society after emancipation.<sup>13</sup>

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*Century South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1995), chapter 2. Bardaglio argues that in the late nineteenth century, like black women who suffered rape, poor white women continued to face tremendous disadvantages in the courtroom because of widespread beliefs that they were less worthy of protection from sexual violence. Of course white women who brought sexual assaults charges against white men were subjected to interrogation about their sexual histories. For more information on how early American southerners responded to white women who were perceived as sexually deviant, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), chapter 6; Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women*, chapter 4; Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Catherine Clinton, “‘Southern Dishonor’: Flesh, Blood, Race, and Bondage,” in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 52-68.

<sup>13</sup> In the late nineteenth century the judicial system continued to unfairly punish white women who violated late Victorian ideals of womanhood. See, Leslie Dunlap, “The Reform of Rape Law and the Problem of White Men,” in Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 360-361; and Mary Frances Berry, “Judging Morality: Sexual Behavior and Legal Consequences in the Late Nineteenth-Century South,” *Journal of American History* 78 (1991); 835-56.

Also see, Joan Hoff, *Law, Gender, and Injustice: A Legal History of U.S. Women* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 151-180; Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980); and Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 109-20. Joan Hoff describes the period between 1872 and 1908 as one of active discrimination within the judicial system in response to women’s assertion of their rights and serious efforts to press their claims through the courts. Similarly Ann Jones in *Women Who Kill* concluded that in historical periods when women more

Just as the Civil War and Reconstruction had a tremendous impact on the lives of black women, it also brought new meaning to the status of poor white women in the South.<sup>14</sup> During the pitched battles of Reconstruction southern white men began regulating poor white women's sexuality. The figure of the black rapist that emerged during Reconstruction politics externalized the social chaos against which all whites, regardless of class, could begin to unite for the purpose of sectional renewal. In the process of renewal, strictures against interracial sexuality tightened. Whereas prior to Emancipation, relationships between black men and poor white women were often tolerated, after 1865, interracial relationships between black men and white women seemed to be threaten the supremacy of the white race.<sup>15</sup> As the anti-lynching reformer Ida B. Wells argued, "With the Southern white man, any misalliance existing between a white woman and a colored man is a sufficient foundation for the charge of

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aggressively demand rights, punishments of women accused of murder tended to be more harsh. Elizabeth Pleck discovered that at the very time that women launched reform crusades based upon their identity as virtuous women, the virtuous nature of women "increasingly became suspect. . . . No where was women's virtue more suspect than when they became entangled in the criminal justice system."

<sup>14</sup> For more information on white women and the Civil War, see Drew Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) and Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York and Oxford, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Martha Hodes suggest that white fears of black male sexual threats did not pervade the antebellum or even the war years. See "Wartime Dialogues on Illicit Sex: White Women and Black Men," in *Divided Houses*, 239 and *White Women, Black Men*. In Diane Miller Sommerville's study of rape in the antebellum South, she argues that even in cases of alleged rape by a black man it was difficult for white women, especially lower-class white women, to prove themselves worthy of protection. See, Sommerville, "The Rape Myth in the Old South Reconsidered," *Journal of Southern History* LXI, no. 3 (August 1995), 514-15.



rape. The Southern white man says that it is impossible for a voluntary alliance to exist between a white woman and a colored man, and therefore, the fact of an alliance is proof of force.”<sup>16</sup> The policing of interracial sex between black men and white women meant that some poor white women were forced under the umbrella of protection. Under the pretext of protection lower-class white women who transgressed racial and gender boundaries became targets of mob violence.

This heightened intolerance was marked by an epidemic of violence against lower-class white women that lasted throughout the post-Civil War era and well into the early decades of the twentieth century. The protection southern whites extended to lower class white women meant that all white women, regardless of class, would have to live up to the standards of southern ladyhood or suffer the consequences. Historian Martha Hodes argues that the violence of Reconstruction, which included Klan violence against poor white women who consorted with black men, reflected “white men’s quest to regain power in the face of political and economic advances being made by freedpeople.”<sup>17</sup> This translation of the freedman’s impulse toward democracy into a threat against the most intimate aspects of life meant that what began in the late 1860s and 1870s as a political struggle was increasingly characterized by the 1890s as rape. Thus the imperative to project feminized whiteness in danger served as a white supremacists’ justification for terrorism against blacks.<sup>18</sup> In this

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<sup>16</sup> Ida B. Well, *A Red Record*, 62.

<sup>17</sup> Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 165.

<sup>18</sup> See Joel Williams, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 95-115.

process, poor white women came increasingly to be figured as women in need of protection from the black beast.

By the 1890s, proponents of lynching argued that all women, regardless of class and character should be protected against the black rapist. “This proneness of the Negro is so well understood,” wrote Philip Bruce, “that the white women of every class, from the highest to the lowest, are afraid to venture to any distance alone, or even wander unprotected in the immediate vicinity of their homes.”<sup>19</sup> Social reformers, like Rebecca Latimer Felton advocated lynching a thousand Negroes a day if necessary to protect poor white women.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for lower-class white women, the rape/lynch discourse of protection was never separated from the politics of morality, in which hostility to interracial sex fused with concerns about poor women’s sexuality and the security of the larger social order. Indeed, lower class white women who crossed racial boundaries risked being pulled from their beds, stripped naked, and flogged, or even worse, executed by mobs of white men.

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<sup>19</sup> Philip Bruce, *Plantation Negro as Freeman: Observations on His Character, Condition, and Prospect in Virginia* (New York, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1889), 83.

<sup>20</sup> LeeAnn Whites, “Rebecca Latimer Felton and the Problem of “Protection” in the New South,” in Nancy Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock, eds., *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 41-61. Even Felton, who was one of poor white women’s biggest defenders, promoted the policing of poor white women’s sexuality. “Perhaps you may decide that my plan is too radical,” she declared, “but I do believe that a criminal woman should be made immune to childbearing as a punishment for crime.” See, Rebecca Latimer Felton, “Rescue Work,” n.d., Felton Papers.

The majority of poor white women who were assaulted by southern mobs at the turn of the century, however, were accused of a range of social and moral transgression that had little or nothing to do with interracial sex. Hundreds of lower class white women were whipped, tarred and feathered, sexually tortured, warned to leave town, and in extreme cases murdered by southern mobs for a variety of crimes and moral transgressions ranging from prostitution to murder. In fact, some women were punished by mobs for merely associating with black men. In the spring of 1903, for example, 38 unmasked white men broke into the home of a Mrs. Stephens, a white woman who ran a boarding house, and whipped with barbed wire and apple switches her daughters Rebecca (13) and Ida (16) and Joe Shively (50) a Negro. The newspaper report explained the motive for the whipping as “local objection to a colored boarder living with a white family.”<sup>21</sup>

The United States had a long history of abusing women who in some way or another had offended their white community's moral sensibilities. In the accusation of witches, as in the dunking of scolds, gagging of women who gossiped or slandered their neighbors, carting of whores, and riding of adulterous women, colonial Americans often publicly and violently punished women who violated the established race and gender conventions.<sup>22</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the heyday of southern

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<sup>21</sup> *New York Times*, April 27, 1903.

<sup>22</sup> For information on various punishments used against unruly women in Colonial America, see Alice Morse Earle, *Curious Punishments of Bygone Days* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1896); and Peter Laslett, Karen Oosterveen, and

mob violence, vigilantes, klansmen, whitecaps, regulators, and other nightriders resorting to extra-legal violence were active throughout the country. Mobs did not hesitate to chastise white women who did not live up to white women's role as paragons of virtue. Any woman who ventured outside the bounds of sexual propriety in the late-Victorian South did so at her own risk, but lower-class white women who engaged in illicit sexual activity were likely to find themselves answering to nightriders.

The late nineteenth-century shift from an agrarian to an industrial and urban economy and increasing activism among white industrial workers as well as Populists exacerbated class distinctions among white. As economic realities prevailed over social assumptions, gender roles altered significantly. Although families remained important economic units, their character changed as poverty forced women into wage work. Poor white women began leaving rural communities for cities and towns, where many found jobs in factories.<sup>23</sup> Those unable to find work in mills and factories labored as domestics and service workers. Such employment did not lift them out of the working class, so they were perceived by middle-class whites as poor and lacking

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Richard M. Smith, eds. *Bastardy and Its Comparative History: Studies in the History of Illegitimacy and Marital Nonconformism in Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, North America, Jamaica, and Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980). On Witches, see Carol Kalson, *Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Textiles provided the largest number of industrial job for white women. As late as 1890, one in two cotton mill operatives in the South were women. For more information on women in mill towns, see Jacquelyn Hall, et al., *Like a Family: The Making of A Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

in morality. Certainly economic losses, political and social disruptions, and the evolution of a more industrial and urban South imposed new burdens and presented new opportunities to white women. Middle-and upper-class white women seem to have benefited most from the social, political and economic changes of the New South. They found employment as office workers, clerks in stores, and teachers. Middle-and upper-class women found their greatest outlets in the various reform and mission groups that became involved in a wide range of activities—temperance, child labor reform, day nurseries, foreign and domestic missions, penal reform, education reform, health care and public health, industrial relations, race relations, and woman's suffrage. During this period middle-class white women took interest in reforming the behavior of lower-class white women. It may be no coincidence that mob violence against lower-class white women increased just as Progressive Era social reformers sought to establish an apparatus for the social control and moral reform of lower-class white women who defied middle-class standards of sexual propriety.

Late nineteenth-century mob violence against white women who behaved in sexually deviant ways was part of a more general process in which dangerous sexualities were identified and disciplined. In fact, the violent policing of white women's sexuality had as much to do with white male power as with changing bourgeois sensibilities or a national shift in women's behavior. During the Progressive Era poor white women's behavior was singled out; they were described as wandering about the streets unescorted or drunk and accused of seducing men. Frequently a women's lewd behavior, a fight, or theft brought the police onto the

scene or provoked community actions. For example, Rosa Garen, “a woman of bad character,” who killed two white women in Corbin, Kentucky, in the summer of 1895 barely escaped “the tremendous mob, which was in close pursuit with the intention of suspending her to a tree.”<sup>24</sup> More often than not, such women were perceived as prostitutes. Young women who dressed and behaved immodestly, unmarried mothers, mill girls, women who consorted with black men, and young women without obvious means of support were all liable to be accused of prostitution.<sup>25</sup> With increasing poverty in the 1890s, prostitution became for some a necessary way of earning a living. Respectable southern whites, however, were no longer willing to allow promiscuous and “unruly” behavior among lower class white women.<sup>26</sup> If white men were willing to extend honor and protection to poor white women, the women would now have to live up to ideals of true womanhood.

Progressive era social reformers were particularly anxious about the growing class of white women who sold sex for a living. By the late nineteenth century female reformers all over the country were inventing new ways of policing poor white women’s sexuality.<sup>27</sup> The emergence of homes for wayward girls and the increasing

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<sup>24</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*, July 24, 1895.

<sup>25</sup> For more on prostitution, see Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore, 1982); and David J. Pivar, *Purity Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1865-1900* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1973).

<sup>26</sup> Glenda Gilmore argues that as North Carolina towns grew it became “more difficult” for respectable whites to “overlook the white prostitutes, wayward girls, and drunken women who elbowed their way down the sidewalk beside the dignified white maidens and matron.” See *Gender and Jim Crow*, 72-73.

incarceration of immigrant and poor white women were direct responses to a new generation of “unruly women.”<sup>28</sup> In North Carolina several women’s organization petitioned the General Assembly to create “a central reformatory where [prostitutes] will be forcibly detained from breaking the moral law and have also an opportunity of reforming under moral conditions.” They argued failure to create such an institution would allow prostitutes to “spread moral and physical decay among men and girls.”<sup>29</sup> Their arguments were not very different from those who justified mob violence against prostitutes. Both reformers and mobs believed that virtuous women and men needed to be saved from the evil influences of women who were often beyond redemption. Just as social reformers stepped up their efforts to impose middle-class standards of propriety on poor and working class white women in their communities, many southerners came to believe that a “good whipping” or a tarring and feathering could more effectively reform poor white women’s sexual behavior and turn them into

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of white women sent to asylums for behaving in sexually deviant ways, see Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Steven Schollossman and Stephanie Wallach, “The Crime of Precocious Sexuality: Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era,” *Harvard Educational Review* 48 (1978): 65-94; Kathy Peiss, “‘Charity Girl’ and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working Class Sexuality, 1880-1920,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York, 1984); Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protection and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Anastatia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 74-75.

ideal working class daughters, wives, and mothers: sober, thrifty, chaste and humble Christian women.

Paradoxically, social reformers and the rape/lynch discourse of protection contributed to an overall intensification of control, inventing new forms of deviance. Prostitutes and young women who expressed sexual autonomy came under increased scrutiny in the drive to define and discipline “wayward” sexuality. Moral reformers campaigned for the policing of prostitutes as a defense of public health, public decency, and public order. Committed to the supremacy of the white race, southern social reformers were not unlike southern mobs who took it upon themselves to police and punish unrespectable lower-class white women.

Mob violence against women accused of prostitution was part of white supremacist campaigns to control poor white women’s sexuality, to clarify the relationship between depraved blacks and morally superior whites, and specifically to force poor white women to accept their status as embodiments of the white race’s morals. Whites also feared that white prostitutes would sleep with black men. In 1885 fifty masked horsemen, described by some as “regulators” and by other as “Ku Kluxers,” rode into Dalton, Georgia, and visited five houses suspected of being brothels. After wrecking the homes, they severely whipped the men and women they found. Before leaving town the mob went to the home of Mayor Samuel F. Maddox and delivered a “Notice to Citizens of DALTON,” which explained that their objective was to protect “the good people” by ridding the town of thieves, prostitutes, and



miscegenationists.<sup>30</sup> Four years later in Calhoun, Georgia, when a group of self-proclaimed citizens attacked a group of white women accused of prostitution, they also claimed to be protecting the community. The editor of the *Calhoun Times* justified the mob's actions by explaining that the town had been plagued by a "set of lewd women who were leading the youth of this place far from the path of virtue and morality and scattering disease throughout the land." After the grand jury had tried, unsuccessfully, to gather evidence against the women, a group of citizens threatened the women and warned them to leave town. When they stayed put, nightriders forced most of the women to flee by whipping them.<sup>31</sup>

In 1893 a mob in Whitfield County, Georgia, broke down the door of the house of three white sisters who were apparently suspected of prostitution. "The helpless, frightened women were compelled to get up and go out in the yard in their night clothes, where they were unmercifully whipped by the White Caps."<sup>32</sup> Georgia mobs were not unique; communities all over the South took it upon themselves to police poor white women's morality. As one Virginian explained, mob violence in the mountains in the 1890s "started out with the purpose of cleaning up the country and making people behave themselves and do things like they should do. . . If they found too many different men going to a woman's house after night they would lay for them and whip the woman, and the man too if they weren't afraid that he might be a little to

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<sup>30</sup> See *Dalton Argus*, August 22, 1885; *Calhoun Times*, August 27, 1885; and *Atlanta Constitution*, August 21, 22, 23, 1885.

<sup>31</sup> *Calhoun Times*, June 6, 1889.

<sup>32</sup> *Northern Georgia Citizens*, March 2, 1893.

formidable for them.”<sup>33</sup> According to William Holmes, from 1887 through 1900, no less than 239 episodes of “whitecapping” occurred throughout the nation, mainly in the South, and poor white women accused of sexual immorality and racial transgression were among their victims.<sup>34</sup> Mob attacks against white women who were perceived as sexually deviant were part of a wider though piecemeal program to re-make lower class white women into self-disciplined southern ladies. Behaving in sexually appropriate ways was part of this self-discipline. However, as social reformers had already learned, many white women were not interested in changing their behavior or embracing middle-class standards of sexual propriety.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> W. J. Wright, Pound, Virginia- in Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg, eds. *Our Appalachia: An Oral History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). 58-9.

<sup>34</sup> White Caps were bands of white men who periodically came forward to police social relations in the nineteenth century Southern up-country, in the Midwest, and in frontier communities. Named for the hoods they wore on their night-riding raids, these bands of up-standing white community residents terrorized deviants from their collective sense of right and wrong. Whether victim of their masked flogging was an adulterous wife, a hard-drinking father, a rapacious businessman, or an ambitious black sharecropper, the object of the white caps’ visit was the same- to enforce the private and public conduct the world of white proprietor like themselves depended on. On White Caps, see William F. Holmes, “Whitecapping in Georgia: Carroll and Houston Counties, 1893,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64 (1980), 388-404, “Moonshining and Collective Violence: Georgia, 1889-1895,” *Journal of American History* 67 (1980), 489-611, and “Whitecapping: Agrarian Violence in Mississippi, 1902-1906,” *Journal of Southern History*, 35 (May, 1969), 165-85; Ayers, *Vegeances and Justice*, 255-61; Richard Maxwell Brown, “Historical Patterns of Violence in America,” in Graham and Gurr, *History of Violence in America*, 70-71; James O. Nall, *The Tobacco Night-Riders of Kentucky and Tennessee, 1905-1909* (Louisville, 1939); and E. W. Crozier, *The White-Caps: A History of the Organization in Sevier County* (1899; reprint; n.p., 1963).

<sup>35</sup> Anastatia Sims argues that after 1900 the King’s Daughters, the Florence Crittenton League and the WCTU of North Carolina had abandoned most of their attempts to rehabilitate prostitutes and were turning to the government to take action to stop

### **Southern Womanhood Betrayed: Mobs Execute White Women**

Lynching of poor white women in the South was almost unheard of before the Civil War, but between 1882 and 1900, at least 14 white women were killed by whites who took the law into their own hands.<sup>36</sup> As the historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has emphasized, “it may be no accident that the vision of the black man as threatening beast flourished during the first phase of the southern women’s right movement, a fantasy of transgression against boundary transgressing women, certainly the rebelliousness of that feminine generation was circumscribed by the feeling that women were hedged about by a nameless horror.”<sup>37</sup> While the fantasy of rape may have functioned as a means of keeping middle-class white women in their defined place, the spectacle of lynching reminded lower-class white women of the dangers lying outside their defined sphere. For example, the mob that lynched Jesse

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prostitution. In *The Power of Femininity in the New South*, she explained, “white organized women increasingly adopted a coercive approach toward moral reform” and “became more interested in enforcing their moral code than in reclaiming lost souls who strayed from the straight and narrow.” Sims, 75. In *Gender and Jim Crow*, Glenda Gilmore highlights the efforts of late nineteenth century citizens of New Bern, North Carolina to police lower class white women’s behavior, when the city council passed the following ordinance: “Any lewd woman who shall be found on the streets or alleys soliciting male persons, drinking, sitting on the streets in front of or lounging about bar rooms, or conducting herself in a forward or improper manner shall be deemed guilty of a nuisance... and fined.” Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> At least five white women were lynched outside the South between 1880 and 1900. See Appendix B.

<sup>37</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘The Mind That Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983): 337.

Washington in Waco, Texas, placed parts of Washington's charred body on the stoop of a "disrespectable" woman's home.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the lynching of black men sometimes incorporated warnings aimed at women of both races, but it was the execution of white women by southern mobs that brought into relief the class and patriarchal gender structures of the New South.

By 1895 at least 10 white women had been murdered by mobs, 6 of whom lost their lives in the southern regions of the United States.<sup>39</sup> Over half of the white women executed by southern mobs were lynched between 1880 and 1900, part of the wave of mob violence that surged through the South at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike the hundreds of women who were flogged or tarred and feathered for moral and sexual transgressions, the majority of white women executed by southern mobs were accused of violent crimes. Of the 20 white women lynched in the South between 1880 and 1930, at least 8 were accused of murder and one of making violent threats. Of the remaining 11 women lynched, five were executed for unknown reasons, four for moral or sexual transgression, one for strike activity, and one whose identity was mistaken. It is difficult to know why these women were executed and

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<sup>38</sup> Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 234.

<sup>39</sup> The most notorious lynchings of women --were the 1851 lynching of Juanita (a Mexican woman) in California, the 1885 lynching of Elizabeth Taylor (white) in Nebraska, and the 1889 lynching of "Cattle Kate,"- Ella Watson (white) in Wyoming—all took place in the western region of the United States. See William B. Secrest, *The Only Woman Lynched in the Gold Rush Days* (Fresno, California: Saga-West Publishing Company, 1967); Jean Williams, *The Lynching of Elizabeth Taylor* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: The Press of the Territorian, n.d.); and George Hufsmith, *The Wyoming Lynching of Cattle Kate, 1889* (Wyoming: High Plains Press, 1993).

others who committed similar crimes were not, clearly these women were perceived as threats to the value of their communities.

*“Her Infidelity the Cause”*

“A handful of men forced Mrs. T. J. West and William Dever to pay with their lives the penalty for their sins,” began the story in the Louisville *Courier-Journal* on December 30, 1895. Mrs. West was burned to death in her home and Dever was shot as he tried to escape the flames. The couple was allegedly living “in open adultery,” and had been warned to leave the county after Dever had killed Mrs. West’s husband, Thomas. Prior to the killing of Thomas West, both families had “stood well in the community and were regarded as worthy people,” reported the local newspaper. Thomas West was described as a fifty-year-old farmer in “fairly good circumstance.” A man of “domestic habits,” West seldom left the farm where he lived with his wife and seven children. Mrs. West, a forty-year-old-mother was described as “far from good looking.” A fifty-year-old widower, Dever had moved to Marion County from Knoxville, Tennessee, the previous year with his sixteen-year daughter, Alma. “Aside from occasional indulgence in liquor,” Dever was “looked upon as rather a steady man.” In the course of the Devers’ first year in Kentucky, Alma had befriended the West children and became their frequent visitor. Under these circumstances an “infatuation” allegedly sprang up between Mrs. West and Dever. When West learned of his wife’s “infidelity,” he left her and filed for divorce, naming Dever as co-respondent. After leaving his wife, West allegedly “took to drinking,” and “it became generally known that he and Dever were armed for each other.” On the morning of December 6, Dever killed West in self-defense. Dever surrendered and at the

examining trial was acquitted on the grounds of self-defense. Despite the outcome of the hearing, some residents believed that Dever had plotted the murder. A witnesses testified that Mrs. West had confided in her that Dever had offered to buy poison for her to give to her husband.<sup>40</sup>

No sooner had the trial ended, then Denver and his daughter took up residence at the West household. At the same time, all of Mrs. West's children left and moved in with neighbors, declaring they "would countenance no such open profligacy." It was "common talk" that Dever and Mrs. West "had been too intimate." Soon after the hearings, threats were made against the couple and demands that they leave town.<sup>41</sup> On December 28, a mob of white men went to the West house and commanded the couple to come out. When Dever's fourteen-year-old daughter Alma answered the door, one of the men pulled her from the house and told her "to run for her life if she did not want to be killed." Seeing that the couple would not come out, one member of the mob set fire to the house. As the flames began to consume the small log structure, Dever, a pistol in his hand, dashed out the front door. Shots were fired at him and he fell dead behind a stack of hay. Mrs. West, however, was too afraid to venture over the threshold. She crawled into the family fireplace, where her burnt body was later found by neighbors.

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<sup>40</sup> See *The Courier-Journal*, December 30 and 31, 1895; *New York Times*, December 30 and 31, 1895.

<sup>41</sup> *Courier-Journal*, December 30, 1895.

“Woman Burned to Death. Her Paramour Shot Down as He Fled. HER INFIDELITY THE CAUSE,” read the *Courier-Journal* headlines.<sup>42</sup> According to those who justified the mob’s actions, Mrs. West, a mother of seven children, had betrayed her husband and abandoned her children for another man. Her infidelity had not only, violated community notions of right, but had cost Thomas West his life. It seems, however, that not all members of the community believed Mrs. West’s punishment just. Indeed, Mrs. West had been a respected and upstanding member of her community until her husband accused her of adultery. Other than her affair with West, the only other fault that the local newspaper could find with Mrs. West was that “she was far from good looking.” In fact, a group of “indignant citizens,” unconvinced by the mobs’ justification, assembled at the courthouse and adopted a resolution in which they “express[ed] their horror of the crime and their determination to use every effort to discover and bring to justice the brutal perpetrators.”<sup>43</sup> Even the Governor of Kentucky, condemned the lynching and declared, “I regard it as the most outrageous an barbarous crime that was ever committed in Kentucky. I shall spare not labor, money nor force to bring its perpetrators to that punishment which they so richly deserve.”<sup>44</sup> It seems that Mrs. West class position as well as national news coverage of the lynching provoked “the good people” of Marion County to speak out publicly against the lynching.

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<sup>42</sup>*Courier-Journal*, December 30, 1895.

<sup>43</sup> “Resolution,” published in *The Courier-Journal*, December 31, 1895.

<sup>44</sup> See *The Courier-Journal*, December 31, 1895 and *New York Times*, December 31, 1895.

Unfortunately for Mrs. West, many southerners still believed that women who committed adultery, regardless of their class status, were dangerous to the social order. Just as colonial Americans had thought that “unless tamed, subdued, and mastered, women tended toward promiscuity and evil, both of which destabilized marriages, households, and communities,” nineteenth century southerners also believed in their right to punish “bad wives.”<sup>45</sup> In the winter of 1901, Wesley Powell and Rachel Thomas were indicted for living in adultery in Oconee County, South Carolina. A mob of white men intent on running them out of town decided to tear the couple’s house down, plank by plank. After the mob had torn most of the roof off and knocked the chimney to the ground, the couple emerged from the house. Rachel Thomas was shot and killed by one of the members of the mob.<sup>46</sup> The fact that Thomas was a fifty-year-old mother of five children did not prevent the mob from taking action against the woman. Indeed, it seems that her status as a mother who had failed in her domestic responsibilities may have provoked the mob’s actions.

Women who committed adultery were not viewed as unhappy wives, but as threats to the natural gender hierarchies- their subversion of male authority exposed husbands’ failures to maintain natural dominance and wreaked havoc in their communities. Under headlines such as “Unfaithful Wife: Causes A Tragedy in Louisville, In Which Two Men are Killed,” and “Work of the Pistol: Doings of the

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<sup>45</sup> Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> *The State*, November 27, 1901.



Wicked World Yesterday: Three Tragedies Reported From Louisville, Kentucky, in Two of Which Unfaithful Wives Cause Trouble,” southern newspapers reported case after case in which one man killed another because he thought his wife had been unfaithful.<sup>47</sup> The shooting of Rachel Thomas and the burning of Mrs. T. J. West by mobs of southern white men reflected the precarious position of white women in southern society. Outbreaks of white violence against white women who committed adultery were provoked not by rape or even consenting interracial sex, but by the actions of white women who had betrayed their husbands and abandoned their duties as a wives and mothers. The white men of Marion County, Kentucky, justified their actions and echoed the rhetoric of purity, domestic protection, and the exclusive right of white men to regulate white women’s sexuality, when they declared “HER INFIDELITY THE CAUSE.”

*“Bad Characters Brought to Earth”*

When Jane Wade and her lover J. R. Dorsey were accused of killing Mary Davis and C. C. Jones in Chatooga County, Georgia, a mob of forty masked citizens took Wade and Dorsey from the jailhouse and hung them from the limb of a nearby oak tree. According to local newspapers, Jane Wade was a forty-six year old woman “of bad character.” The description of a white woman as having a “bad character” referred to her class status as well as her adherence to proper gender roles. Defenders of the lynching sought not only to undermine Wade’s moral character, but also to

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<sup>47</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, July 28, 1886.

justify the mob actions. Undoubtedly, the journalist hoped that his readers would understand that Wade was no lady. Involved with a man at least twenty years her senior, she was portrayed as a wanton woman who hung around the local bar drinking. According to an eyewitness account, “Dorsey was pleading for his life, but Jane was made of sterner stuff and told him that if they were going to hang them, let them hang and be \_\_\_\_ to them.”<sup>48</sup> To highlight Wade’s vulnerability or to suggest that she had any feminine qualities might generate sympathy for her. If newspaper accounts stressed Jane’s weakness it would have been difficult to justify the mob’s actions, because gender identity based on a white women’s helplessness conferred the right to demand honor and protection.

The 1884 lynching of Jane Wade exemplifies the majority of late nineteenth-century female victims. Because they were usually women on the fringes of southern society, we know very little about them except that they were perceived as menaces to society. While female victims of mob violence varied in age and marital status, most of them were poor and socially isolated. In some cases, the absence of male protectors willing to take responsibility for their misconduct made them targets of mob violence, and in other cases the very presence of men made women vulnerable to lynch mobs. “Four Alleged Bad Characters Brought to Earth” read the headline describing the lynching of Molly Smith and her lover, Abitahl Colston in Trigg County, Kentucky, in the summer of 1895. The mob pursuing Colson after he had allegedly murdered two men, found him with Smith. Both their bodies were riddled with bullets. Described as

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<sup>48</sup> See *Calhoun Times*, October 30, 1884; *Atlanta Constitution*, October 22, 1884; and *Walker County Messenger* (Lafayette, Ga), October 30, 1884.

Colston's "mistresses," and as an "undesirable citizen" Smith's execution went unchallenged and "among the better class of people" explained the newspaper, there being "little mourning over [her] removal."<sup>49</sup> Molly Smith, like so many poor white women who associated with criminals or were themselves perceived as criminals, could not assume that their status as women would guarantee protection.

Most of white women lynched in the South were accused of violent crimes. Whether as perpetrators of violence or as female accomplices to male violence, female victims of lynching were described as "disreputable" or women of "bad character." Such a accusation functioned not only to vilify female victims of mob violence, but as way of blaming the woman for her own victimization. "Caused By A Woman," read the headline describing the lynching of West Dixon and his wife in Gallatin, Tennessee, less than three weeks after the lynching of Mollie Smith. According to local accounts, it was at a public picnic that "a fuss arose about Mrs. Dixon" who was described as "a woman of bad character." While it is not clear as to what the argument was about, it is clear that William Davidson, a sixty-year-old man had played a part in the dispute, because when he later passed the Dixons' wagon he was shot and killed. As soon as Davidson fell dead, Dixon and his wife "broke to a run," and a crowd of "fifteen of Davidson's friends" started in pursuit, shooting at them at every opportunity.<sup>50</sup> Eventually both were shot down and killed by the mob. Even

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<sup>49</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, July 2, 1895.

<sup>50</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*, July 21, 1895.

though it was reported that Mr. Dixon had shot and killed William Davidson, the local newspaper blamed the tragedy on Mrs. Dixon. Portrayed as a woman of “bad character,” she exerted the evil influence that instigated her husband’s actions and provoked the mobs attack.

Those who justified the lynchings of lower-class white women shared the belief in female frailty. To excuse the lynchers, they insisted that their victims were far from fragile. Indeed, mobs saw themselves as protecting themselves and their communities from the influences of women they thought as aggressive and immoral. In another time and place, lower-class white women’s behavior would have offered a familiar and mild challenge to public morality; but in the turn-of-the century South, it posed serious implication for the white supremacist social order. Those who justified mob violence against poor white women, demanded resistance, violent if necessary, to creeping moral decay, marital disorder, sexual license, and gender confusion.

The Tin Pan Alley tune, “Miss Otis Regrets” describes a lynching and reminds us that not all white women received protection. Undoubtedly, those women who were “lead astray” and were attacked by mobs of southern white men had to offer “regrets.” If the rape/lynch complex, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall so convincingly argues, functioned to regulate white women’s behavior by “keeping them in a state of anxiety and fear,” one can imagine the terror white women experienced when mobs took it upon themselves to lynch a white woman. As nineteenth-century black women repeatedly pointed out in a variety of contexts, middle-class white women-- the

women who stood to benefit most from race and class stratification—were by virtue of their position, accorded the greatest access to prevailing notions of “womanhood.” Although nineteenth-century white supremacy claimed to privilege all white women on the basis of race, such privileges were contingent upon white women’s acquiescence to patriarchal and class rules. Thus, it is not surprising that poor white women’s inclusion into the category of those deserving protection at the turn of the century did not come without cost or “regrets,” like Miss Otis’s, especially for those who transgressed racial and gender boundaries.