

'Warranted' Lynchings: Narratives of Mob Violence in White Southern Newspapers, 1880–1940

Susan Jean

Scholars who study lynching in the American South confront overtly biased sources when they turn to white newspapers to learn of the facts about lynchings. But it is not merely the conspicuous racism of the accounts that poses a problem for scholars, for white southern newspapers drew on highly developed narratives about lynching when they created their reports. These narratives were part of an effort by white southerners to control the representation of the practice, and they served several functions: they imparted lessons to readers about the appropriate and inappropriate parameters of mob behavior, they impeded the efforts of lynching opponents to combat the practice, and in the long term they have helped to obscure some of the reality about lynching from historians. Examining these narratives reveals much about the way that white southerners conceived of lynching; it will also, I hope, help scholars of lynching stay sensitive to the language of their sources.

Keywords: Lynching, African–Americans', Florida, newspapers

On the evening of 25 June 1900 in Polk County, Florida, a black man was lynched for the murder of a white man. Although multiple, extant newspaper accounts describe the affair in some detail, it is impossible to determine the names of either of the two dead men, the circumstances surrounding the original murder, or the actions of the lynch mob. The surviving accounts agree on a few details – an axe, a hiding place, and a posse's gunfire – but the rest of the story transpires very differently depending on which newspaper one reads.

The local *Bartow Courier-Informant* opened its article with the headline, 'Bloody Scene at Kingsford.' The newspaper recounted an unexplained disturbance at the Kingsford Phosphate Mine that ended when a black man named Sam Smith struck a

Susan Jean is a graduate student at Columbia University in New York. Correspondence to: 547 Riverside Drive #4D, New York, NY 10027. Email: sej2001@columbia.edu

white man named Joe Hendricks fatally in the chest with an axe. When word of the murder reached the sheriff, he formed a posse to search for Smith. By the time they found him late that night hiding in a black Mason lodge outside of town, the posse had grown considerably. 'The deputies soon saw and heard signs of lynching,' but they were able to protect Smith as far as the Palmetto Phosphate Mine on their way to Bartow. At this point, the mob demanded the prisoner be released into their hands. For an hour and a half, the officers staved off the mob, but the lynchers finally triumphed. They snatched Smith, dragged him a short distance away, and shot him to death. The reporter commented, 'Thus, two men within the same twenty-four hours were sacrificed to what was, in its beginning, in all probability, a trifling.' He concluded that 'the killing *may* have been a violation of the law, the lynching *certainly* was, and it is hoped that at least the leaders of it may be brought to trial and made to answer for the violent deed.'¹

In striking contrast, the *Tampa Tribune* reported an entirely different affair. Underneath the headline, 'BEHEADED BY NEGRO BRUTE,' the *Tribune* told a story that unfolded not with a possible violation of the law, but with a 'peculiarly atrocious murder.' In this version the perpetrator was Bob Davis, 'a notorious negro,' who 'waylaid' Will Hendrix, respected white citizen of Brandon. First Davis struck Hendrix to the ground and then used an axe to chop off his victim's head. Upon discovering Hendrix's decapitated trunk and severed head, which had rolled down the road, a crowd of Hendrix's friends began to hunt for Davis. The crowd was 100 strong by the time they found him that night. Davis confessed to the murder, and the lynchers marched him back to the scene of the crime and riddled him with bullets.²

If the local paper reported something approaching the truth, somewhere in the transmission from Bartow to Tampa the events of June 25 twisted from a mob murder with ambiguous origins into a stereotypical 'boilerplate' lynching. No longer did the original killing stem from a quarrel; instead, the white man was cravenly ambushed. One fatal blow to the chest turned into a brutal beheading. The black man became notorious, the white man respected. The posse had no longer thwarted a sheriff's honorable attempts to uphold the law, but was instead an uprising of citizens intent on meting out justice. This time, Davis confessed to his crime and was not just shot, but riddled.

Had the events transpired as the *Courier-Informant* reported them, the lynching would have been far less 'laudable.' Rendered as a stereotypical lynching story, featuring a desperate black murderer and an innocent and respectable white man, the *Tribune's* version confirmed the white southern justification of lynching as a defense of white civilization against the threat of the 'black brute.' Employing a scale that rated implied or actual violence against a white woman as the direst offense and accidental or reciprocal violence against a white man as far less offensive, the *Tribune* reporter upgraded the lynching victim's crime to the unprovoked, psychopathic murder of an esteemed white man. This desperate crime provided a justifiable motivation for the now valiant lynch mob and supported a positive interpretation of the lynching.

Given the penchant of white southern journalists to describe the actions of lynch mobs in scripted, laudatory terms, the *Tribune* reporter's use of creative license is

perhaps unsurprising, if extreme. More remarkable is the *Courier-Informant's* comparatively candid report that expressed disapproval of what it deemed the mob's inappropriate behavior. The discrepancies signal no apparent difference in the papers' attitudes toward lynching in general; on other occasions the *Courier-Informant* published viciously racist and sensationalistic accounts of lynchings. Rather, a comparison of the reports highlights the *Tribune's* attempt to uphold one type of lynching – a 'warranted' lynching – and the *Courier-Informant's* attempt to question another type – an 'unwarranted' lynching. Manifest in these conflicting news accounts is the effort by white southerners to control the representation of lynching.

Our knowledge of lynching is inevitably bounded by our sources. Since few cases ever reached the courts, contemporary newspaper accounts remain our primary resource for information on lynchings. This fact is extraordinarily problematic, for white southern newspapers helped to shape the racist discourse of their time, often through their reports on lynchings. Anyone who studies the phenomenon must grapple with the question: how much that is quantifiable, indeed, how much that is plausible can be derived from these reports? The careful scholar can strive for a measure of objectivity by searching for different accounts of the same lynching in order to compare 'facts' and sift for the most probable elements. But this process adds the assumptions of the historian to a chain of uncertainties.

Although scholars of lynching are generally quick to acknowledge the overt biases of their sources, there have as yet been few scholarly attempts to read these sources for their devices rather than their facts. Christopher Waldrep has identified one of the consequences of this problem: quantitative studies of lynching have relied on definitions of the word that were never standardized and have remained subjective across time. In his scholarship Waldrep examines the contingency of the word lynching and the ways that proponents and opponents of the practice in various regions of the country and across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have manipulated its meaning to serve their aims.³ From a different perspective, I posit that white southerners in the lynch-prone decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a fairly constant understanding of what constituted a lynching. Most important, more than simply negotiating the meaning of the term, they were also policing its use.

A close reading of white southern representations of lynchings reveals a struggle to bound the definition and representation of the phenomenon. Lynching opponents were engaged in a similar contest, arguing amongst themselves over how to define lynching. Some hoped to make the term as inclusive as possible in order to underscore the magnitude of the problem; others argued for a narrower definition, insisting that white southerners would stop lynching when it appeared that lynchings were becoming rarer.⁴ Supporters of lynching tried to impose their own boundaries on the phenomenon – with the aim not of eliminating the practice, but of protecting it. Rather than support all lynchings with the same rhetoric, they drew distinctions among lynchings and, when lynchings fell out of the bounds of propriety, they often expressed disapproval or contested the use of the term, sometimes simply omitting the word from their reports altogether. To separate the 'respectable' practice of lynching from the taint of

reckless murder would be to legitimate the practice – in the minds of white southerners and to the gaze of the outside world.

This essay examines representations of lynching in newspapers from Florida and proposes that we can learn much about the general characteristics of the white southern lynching discourse by studying Florida as a case study. At a certain level, however, Florida had its own lynching discourse. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Florida witnessed immigration, migration, dramatic population increases, a shifting economy, and resulting political struggles that distinguished the state in important ways from neighboring states. Furthermore, tensions existed within Florida itself. Port cities such as Jacksonville, more traditional rural communities in the north and center of the state, and urban residents in south Florida all viewed the world very differently. Differences among Florida communities and the differences between Florida and the rest of the south, however, are not the subject of this essay. Instead, they are fertile ground for future research. This essay seeks to provide a model for examining and understanding regional representations of lynching by reading local newspapers in Florida.⁵

Florida is a good candidate for a case study of lynching discourse because Florida was a state where lynching was a persistent and notable feature of race relations throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mobs in Florida claimed the lives of at least 303 victims between 1880 and 1951, placing Florida above such border states as Kentucky and Virginia but below such Deep South states as Georgia and Mississippi in numbers of lynchings. When Florida's lynching toll is measured against the size of its total black population, however, it ranks among the highest in the region. The important point is not that the phenomenon of lynching in Florida is necessarily representative of the practice everywhere in the South, but rather that mob violence there was chronic enough to generate a sustained public discourse about it.⁶

Of the 292 victims in Florida whose race was documented, 20, or six percent, were white; 272, or 94 percent, were black. Like the majority of white southerners, whites in Florida insisted that lynching was an essential tool for controlling the 'brutish' element of the black male population that was disposed to rape white women. And, as in all southern states, the reality of lynching in Florida belied this claim. Lynching victims were charged more often with murder than any other crime, and 97 men, or 32 percent of all victims in Florida, were lynched for this charge. Another 65 victims, or 21 percent, were charged with sexual crimes, including attempted rape and conspiracy to rape. Non-fatal assault, insulting language or behavior to a white girl or woman, entering a white girl or woman's bedroom, and property theft were some more of the many charges leveled against lynching victims. The timeline of lynching in Florida was for the most part typical. Lynchings rose across the South in the 1880s, peaked dramatically in the 1890s, and began to drop off slowly in the 1900s and 1910s and more rapidly in the 1920s. Lynching in Florida followed this pattern until the 1920s, when it experienced a marked upsurge. And while lynching abated after the 1920s, the steady toll of lynchings in the 1930s and 1940s in Florida placed the state among the worst offenders in the nation during these decades.

As the twentieth century unfolded, the problem of lynching in the South turned into a national concern, and while the number of lynchings climbed in Florida in the 1920s,

grand jury investigations became common, but fruitless, affairs. Members of a white vigilante committee convicted of lynching a white man in 1882 were the last men ever to be found guilty of lynching in Florida.

That lynching was deeply rooted in the landscape of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Florida may surprise those who imagine the state to be in the South, but not *of* the South. Yet with exploitative systems of labor targeted largely at blacks, an abundance of small towns full of provincial and poorly educated citizens, and a standard of race relations as 'southern' as any state in the Deep South, Florida sustained the same environment that encouraged whites across the South to draw the line separating the races in the most violent fashion. And like their neighbors, white Floridians blanketed the reality of lynching with a patchwork of narratives about black criminality and white honor.⁷

Newspapers were by no means the only forum in which whites in Florida and elsewhere carried out their discussion about lynching. Indeed the public negotiation over the representation of lynching took place through a variety of means, including public addresses, songs, folklore, and oral tradition, and further research into these sources would add much to our understanding of the southern lynching discourse. But newspapers played and continue to play an especially large role in the process, for it was there that the 'official' record of events was set down for contemporary observers both inside and outside the South; moreover it is to these accounts that historians most often look to uncover the facts about lynching. The narratives embedded in these newspapers may obscure from us the full truth about lynching as it was manifested in the South, but they reveal volumes about lynching as it was manifested in the white southern imagination.⁸

In the record of white southern journalism, all lynchings were not created equal. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a particular kind of lynching dominated the front pages of white southern newspapers; it seemed to affirm to southern whites the meaning and the value of the practice, and it remains the prevailing popular image of southern lynching. This lynching featured key elements, such as a black man committing a crime against a white woman (or, less frequently, an esteemed white man), public expression of outrage over the incident, and communal execution of 'justice.' This model of lynching was familiar and acceptable to contemporary observers; it was, in the words of one scholar, 'like a text that white southerners read to themselves about themselves,' and whites found in it a confirmation of the 'honorable,' 'redemptive' nature of lynching.⁹ Many of the lynching reports that appeared in white newspapers served to bolster this image and thereby to help legitimize the practice.

When a young white woman was murdered in 1901 in Bartow, the local *Courier-Informant* responded with a frenzy typical of reports describing 'warranted' lynchings. On Wednesday, May 29, the following headline blazed on the front page: 'BLACK BRUTE'S HEINOUS CRIME! A Well Known White Woman Murdered Near Peace River Bridge – Men Scouring Country – Lynching Almost Certain.' According to the *Courier-Informant*, a black man had witnessed the woman's murder the day before and immediately alerted whites about the crime and the identity of the murderer, 16-year-old Fred Rochelle. Whites searching the area recovered the body of young Mrs. Ed

Taggart, a native to Bartow and 'well known to almost everybody in the community and connected with some of the oldest families in South Florida.' At the time the newspaper went to print, a posse of whites had surrounded Rochelle in a swamp, 'and it is only a question of time until they locate him when he will undoubtedly meet the only justice possible.' Though the *Courier-Informant* alluded to the inevitability of lynching, it concluded: 'While there is an air of quiet determination about the men of the community, there is no undue excitement apparent, and it is safe to say that cool judgment prevails, and nothing will occur to further mar the spotless character of this vicinity.'¹⁰

In its next printing, under the headline 'BURNED AT THE STAKE,' the *Courier-Informant* concluded the tale. Later that Wednesday, three black men had apprehended Rochelle and were escorting him to the sheriff when they were approached by two white men who demanded custody of the prisoner. The white men then brought Rochelle into town, 'where a crowd of cool-headed citizens took charge of him, despite the sheriff and his deputies.' Here the *Courier-Informant* reminded its readers, 'To the credit of this community, it should be remembered that the whole affair was conducted so quietly that those living three blocks away heard nothing of it.'¹¹

The mob decided to take its prisoner back to the scene of his alleged crime and postpone further action until all searching parties had returned. When everyone had gathered at the site, the mob hoisted its victim onto a hoghead filled with inflammable material, piled wood around it, and poured coal oil on top. Unrepentant, Rochelle claimed he was ready to die, and the murdered woman's husband lit a match and tossed it onto the pile. 'In eight minutes there was only a charred mass to tell the tale. Awestruck the throng turned homeward, and by midnight the town was as peaceful as ever, and ever since has been trying to forget.'¹²

The *Courier-Informant* filled its editorial page that day with justifications for the lynching. The arguments rested largely on the nature of the lynching itself, which was, in their words, 'the spontaneous work of practically all the best citizenship of this place.' As evidence of the virtuous nature of the lynching, the editorial noted that 'there were no masks or attempts at disguise and it was done in the full light of day. The men who did it are the same who are on our streets today doing the business of the community. Not a man of them would deny for a moment whatever share he took in the tragedy.' In short, the *Courier-Informant* presented the apparent moral certitude of the lynchers as proof of their righteousness, and the core of its defense was the simple assertion that 'all that was done, was done decently and in order by sober and serious men, possessing the full average of kindly instincts, and on this we rest the case.'¹³

The *Courier-Informant's* reporting was typical of portrayals of 'warranted' or 'respectable' lynchings. The most conspicuous feature of such reports was the salacious language used to describe the black man, his alleged crime, and the lynch mob's actions. In 1904, the *Gainesville Sun* crafted the following headline for its report on the lynching of Washington Bradley for the murder of a white woman: 'HUNG AND HORRIBLY MANGLED – With Scores of Shots From Guns and Pistols of Enraged Mob – The Wages of Sin is Death, and Bradley Got What Was Coming to Him.' Describing the lynching of three black men for rape and murder in 1895, the *Florida*

Times-Union sketched the entire tale in lurid headlines: ‘FELL A VICTIM TO FIENDS – Awful Fate of a LaFayette County Girl – LOST HER HONOR AND LIFE – Outraged by Negroes and Then Murdered and Mutilated – SHORT WAS THE NEGROES SHRIFT – Three Fiends Carried to a Swamp by Avengers and ‘Lost’ – Flayed and Burned.’ In myriad reports detailing a black man’s lynching for a crime against a white woman, headlines such as, ‘Another Colored Brute,’ ‘Dangling from a Live Oak,’ ‘Negro Ravisher Cut to Pieces,’ and ‘Smith’s Neck Stretched – Lust Cost the Negro Life,’ defined the tone of the coverage.¹⁴

These sensational headlines reflected the conventions of turn-of-the-century yellow journalism, which employed shocking images to attract and titillate readers. Yet the grizzliest headlines were reserved for high-profile, infamous crimes and, subsequently, ‘warranted’ lynchings. Newspapers that branded a lynching victim a ‘black brute,’ an ‘inhuman fiend,’ or an ‘imp of inferno’ were from the start helping to exonerate the lynch mob. In depicting the bestiality of the black man and by contrast the sweet, delicate, and innocent nature of his alleged victim, reporters were courting the fury of their readers and encouraging them to identify with the lynchers.

Yet, paradoxically, when reporters mustered the most lurid descriptions in order to excite the passions of readers, they often described the lynch mob itself as being free of any rash emotion. A tension clearly existed between the desire to depict in graphic terms the lynching victim’s alleged crime and subsequent punishment, and the intent to exonerate the mob of any inappropriate behavior. While the ‘circumstantial chain’ was being collected against Charlie Pittman for rape and murder in 1908, it was ‘with commendable patience [that] the outraged community bided its time and would not be swayed by blind passion.’ After the lynching of Amos Smith in 1907 for attempted rape, the *Arcadia Champion* described the victim’s riddled body; then, a week later, the paper printed this correction of the apparently erroneous detail: ‘Nothing could have been further from the truth. The people who punished the negro considered that they were doing their duty to their community, and they went about the business in the most orderly manner, and no unseemly passion or excitement was shown whatever.’ When a white mob lynched Charles Scarborough for attempted rape in 1909, ‘There was no excitement in the matter at all. The people were determined that the negro should pay the penalty for his attempted crime: that was all.’¹⁵

In the white southern imagination, ‘respectable’ lynchings were executed somberly by men who derived no undue pleasure from them. Local newspapers often reported the absence of whiskey drinking or excessive violence in an attempt to depict these lynchings as sober, earnest affairs. When whites in Marion County lynched Robert Larkin for the rape of 18-year-old Fannie Alexander in 1893, the *Florida Times-Union* dwelled on the purported grave resolution of the mob, remarking that ‘the citizens of the community have risen up in their wrath... those in search are quiet but determined men.’ The men who captured Larkin were ‘two of the most gentlemanly boys that Citra affords’ and after Larkin was identified, ‘the hearts of the Citra people were bowed down in grief to know that a duty was to be performed.’ ‘Three hundred of the best citizens’ overpowered the court at the preliminary trial and ‘with the greatest forbearance’ set about the lynching. ‘There was no excitement much as is looked for at such times,’

‘there was not a drop of whiskey in the crowd,’ and a placard left by the body read, ‘Done by 300 of the best citizens of this county.’¹⁶

In white newspapers, the ‘forbearance’ of lynchers stemmed not only from a solemn understanding of their duty, but also from their upstanding moral fiber. Thus reports of ‘respectable’ lynchings often laid claim to mob members as local citizens and routinely labeled them the area’s best. In 1904 the lynchers of alleged murderer Washington Bradley ‘were among the best people of Levy County, who wanted revenge for one of the most hideous crimes known in the history of that section, and they got it in a well-planned and orderly manner.’ The mob that lynched Richard Anderson for rape in 1916 consisted of ‘300 prominent citizens of Marion, Levy and Alachua counties.’ After the lynching of Bill Collins and two other black men for the rape of a white woman in 1895, the *Florida Times-Union* declared, ‘There are no more law-abiding people anywhere than those of Lafayette County, but they love their wives and daughters and are determined to protect them from the attacks of lustful men.’ No strangers or suspicious characters appeared in these reports – only local gentlemen responding to the imperative of communal duty.¹⁷

Given the virtuousness of the mob and its intentions, a ‘respectable’ lynching drew unanimous support from the community. After the lynching of Walter Austin in 1892 for the murder of a prominent white man, the *Florida Times-Union* concluded that ‘the citizens all approve of the lynching, and it will have a salutary effect on the negroes.’ About the lynching of Lee Bailey for attempted rape in 1891, ‘All felt that it was time to teach such brutes that they must expect vengeance, swift and sure. The lynching is fully indorsed by all the best citizens here, both white and black.’ When Green Jackson was lynched in 1890 for the charge of rape, the *Times-Union* asserted, ‘The verdict of the community is that the brute got just what he deserved.’¹⁸

The final component of the ‘respectable’ lynching was the redemption of the community. Reporters sometimes waxed poetic on this subject. In 1909 the *Tampa Tribune* reporter detailing the lynching of Jack Wade in Polk County for the attempted rape of a young white woman described the wake of the lynching in the following inspirational terms: ‘Almost like the lifting of a fog when the morning sun bursts forth was the change in spirit of the city today after vengeance had been claimed and justice meted out to the negro.’ A coda to the report, which serves also as a reminder of the familiarity of such episodes to southern readers, states, ‘Once more the honor of southern womanhood had been protected and a life had paid the penalty of transgression.’¹⁹

White southerners were not the first to develop a rhetoric in defense of lynching; indeed as Christopher Waldrep shows the outlines of this rhetoric were in place by the mid-nineteenth century, when vigilante groups in California used the press to promote a narrative that defended the necessity of informal collective justice on the frontier. The most prominent component of this narrative was the argument that the public had a right and a need to defend itself when the formal mechanisms of the law were inchoate or ineffective.²⁰ Southerners incorporated this argument into their own narrative when they remarked on the slowness of formal justice and the need to respond to certain heinous crimes in a more immediate and forceful fashion than the law afforded. Yet the inadequacy of the law was never an especially persuasive argument given that Florida

courts, like most southern courts, were unlikely to be lenient with black defendants accused of crimes against whites. More central to the southern defense of lynching was the often hysterical portrayal of black criminality, particularly the rhetorical emphasis on black rapists, and the image of the redemption offered by lynch mobs that avenged awful crimes and helped to restore the social order.

The rhetorical defense of lynching, moreover, took on a particular stridency in the South as lynching became more common and more explicitly racial there in the last two decades of the nineteenth century at the same time that it was becoming rarer elsewhere, and white southern defenders of lynching faced the challenge of legitimating a practice that appeared archaic or worse to many Americans outside the region. And whereas the number of offenses that 'warranted' lynching shrank rapidly outside the South, white southerners were still defending a comparatively expansive definition of 'crimes' that warranted extralegal justice. As accounts of lynchings of black men accused of rape or other inflammatory crimes unfolded in familiar language on the front pages of white newspapers, they reinforced southern whites' understanding of the alleged crimes and subsequent lynchings not as singular occurrences but as pages in a narrative confirming the need to defend white civilization from black savagery and underscoring the value of lynching.

In contrast to the approving and sometimes rhapsodic portrayals of 'warranted' lynchings, incidents that subverted the appearance of respectability elicited a different response. Lynchings for exceedingly petty crimes or lynch mobs that clearly acted out of personal interests, for instance, seemed to cross the line of propriety. These lynchings were not only unseemly; they also invited unwanted attention to the problem of lynching and lent credence to the accusations of anti-lynching reformers who deplored the unruly and impartial nature of popular justice. Rather than provide fodder for the campaigns of lynching opponents, white southerners sought to exert a measure of control over the practice and the representation of it through disapproving accounts of lynchings that fell outside the bounds of respectability.

The murder of Charles Jones in Baker County in 1896 was a clear case of behavior that was indefensible to 'upstanding' southern whites. On the night of May 3, three black men were returning to their work camp from church when they heard sounds of laughter in the darkness and stumbled across five white men sprawled out on the railroad tracks. Without provocation, the white men opened fire, killing Jones instantly. Jones's companions escaped into the swamp, and the next morning they alerted the sheriff about the murder. Jones's body was found shot dead and his head had apparently been scalped. The *Florida Times-Union* reported that the murderers were surely strangers to the community and that 'the citizens are justly indignant over the affair as Jones, though a colored man, was regarded as an humble, peaceable negro.' In an editorial the next day, the *Times-Union* reasoned that 'in the darkness it was difficult to see how the men who perpetrated the murder were known to be white men.' In this wanton murder of an unassuming black man, whites apparently found no positive expression of the virtues of lynching; thus they not only denounced the murder, but also refused to call it a lynching and even implied that the murderers were not white.²¹

The public discourse over lynching revolved partly around its definition – white southerners did not seem to believe that the casual, apparently unprovoked group murder of a black man warranted the title. Of course the term ‘lynching’ has never been objective or precise, but even if some present-day readers may infer that this incident constituted a lynching, it is likely that whites in 1896 did not. The murderers, surely foreigners in the opinion of the white journalist, were acting without the support of the community, and their victim was an ‘inoffensive’ black man. In short, there was nothing ‘honorable’ or ‘redemptive’ about their actions.

Whites occasionally resisted applying the label of lynching even to seemingly unambiguous cases. During the night of 4 December 1891 in Marianna, the daughter of W.G. Holloway woke to the sound of someone in her bedroom. When she rose to investigate the noise, a man jumped out the window and escaped. Suspicion for the offense fell upon a black man named John Ely who worked for Holloway. Holloway and a friend launched a search for the suspect and after several days found him in a nearby town. Holloway delivered Ely to the justice of the peace, who placed him under the watch of a special constable. But at ten o’clock that night a mob, allegedly from across the border in Alabama, overpowered the constable and seized the prisoner.²²

The next day a group of seven white men from the neighborhood, suspecting foul play, began to search for Ely. When they arrived at Holloway’s property, Holloway ordered the search party to leave and threatened to kill them. The next day the town judge ordered the sheriff to organize a posse to search for Ely. The posse headed straight for Holloway’s water mill, where they discovered and unearthed Ely’s dead body. While they removed the body, Holloway appeared and began firing at them. When he refused to stop shooting and discuss the matter, a posse member ordered his partners to protect themselves, and they fired and killed Holloway.²³

The *Florida Times-Union* opened its report on the affair with the headline, ‘MOST COWARDLY MURDER. A MAN BRUTALLY KILLED AND HIS BODY HIDDEN. They Fire in Defense and Kill the Man Who Hid the Body – The Murdered Man Suspected of Entering a Girl’s Room – No Opportunity to Prove His Innocence.’ When contrasted to the types of headlines crafted for ‘warranted’ lynching reports, the remarkable nature of the *Times-Union*’s wording is manifest. This time the black man was only *suspected* of breaking into a girl’s room. And this time he was not the guest of honor at a necktie party – he was brutally killed. Although the article acknowledges that his murder was the work of several men, it does not once refer to the crime as a lynching, and it ends with the assertion that ‘the citizens of Greenwood and Marianna are justly indignant and aroused, and doubtless further investigation of the affair will be had.’²⁴

The lynching of Will English in 1912 for making offensive comments to a white girl apparently provoked similar indignation from whites in Manatee County. While the lynchers who seized and shot English to death may have believed they were justly defending the virtue of white womanhood, Bradenton citizens – or, at least, the *Tampa Tribune* writer reporting the incident – did not concur and wished to divorce from the lynching any appearance of respectability or community support. The *Tribune* reported that ‘the people of Bradenton do not believe the mob had in it a single

reputable citizen of that town. They are of the opinion that the men who lynched English came from another part of Manatee County, and that, even then, [the mob] was made up of men who are not recognized in their own section as being men of affairs or of prominence in any walk of life.²⁵ And when six blacks were lynched at once in Lake City in 1911 on the charge of murdering a sawmill man, the *St. Augustine Record* expressed its disapproval over the lynching, saying, 'It wasn't the carrying out of the lynch law. It was the carrying out of the lynch lawlessness.'²⁶

The rhetoric of white newspapers may appear to have invoked code words for class when it distinguished between 'warranted' and 'unwarranted' lynchings. The emphasis placed on 'sober,' 'serious' and 'upstanding' mobs in discussions of 'respectable' lynchings, for instance, is consistent with the turn-of-the-century language of middle-class propriety. But while observers undoubtedly made pointed references to the class dimensions of particular lynchings from time to time, we should not mistake the general language of respectability that was a key component of the white southern lynching rhetoric for an effort to identify the class status of lynching participants. The logic of the defense of lynching compelled white defenders to deny that any class of white southerners abused the practice of lynching. Acknowledging that any group, whether defined by economic status or some other attribute, were peculiarly prone to mob violence would have called into question the universality of white support for the practice. Whereas observers of lynching outside the South sometimes traced the practice to lawless lower-class ruffians, white southerners generally avoided tying lynchings to a specific class or group of people, instead signaling approval or denunciation of lynchings with their own particular code words and rhetorical strategies.²⁷

Perhaps the most remarkable example of white denunciation after a lynching occurred in 1895 in Columbia County, when a black man was lynched for the charge of raping the daughter of his white employer. Despite the grave charge leveled against the victim, Lake City residents were angered by the lynching and pressed for justice, and their efforts culminated in charges and a trial against the alleged lynchings. A description of this lynching reveals several factors that may have influenced the lynching's reception; it also demonstrates a community's reaction to the prosecution of a lynch mob, as well as their ultimate refusal to convict.

Between 4:00 and 5:00 on the morning of 4 July 1895, a mob of at least a dozen white men, including Constable John Walker, crept into the Hope Henry church just outside of Lake City. Constable Walker was carrying a warrant to arrest Robert Bennett for the rape of the daughter of Brantley Padgett. Padgett and his brother were also present at the church.²⁸ Inside, the mob stumbled upon the sleeping figures of several churchgoers who had stayed after the night's services to attend to a mourner who had been 'down in a trance.' Bennett awoke as the men seized him and began dragging his body toward the door. His loud protests roused the sleeping congregation, who immediately 'set up a great noise and lamentation.' The lynchings exhorted the churchgoers to remain quiet, insisting that they intended no harm to anyone and only planned to take Bennett to his mother's house.²⁹

The mob then drove off with Bennett. About a mile down the road, they stopped their wagon and dragged their victim out. There they fired at him with their guns, sliced

his throat, cut off his ears, and either 'shot or beat out his brains.' When the lynchers were satisfied with their work, they tossed Bennett's body into a cart and drove to an oak tree where a large crowd was waiting. The crowd was disappointed to find Bennett already dead, but they helped string up his 'terribly and horribly mutilated' body and pinned on a warning to rapists.³⁰

When the lynching was discovered, local blacks were outraged to learn that, although the alleged assault on Padgett's daughter had occurred over a month earlier, Bennett had continued to work for Padgett unmolested until the time of the lynching. According to the *Florida Times-Union*, 'The negroes believed the charge trumped up for the purpose of getting rid of Bennett for other reasons, and few persons believed the lynching was justified.' White and black citizens of Lake City met together in the courthouse to protest 'indiscriminate' lynchings, and 'this particular one in no unmeasured terms.' Governor Henry Mitchell offered a \$500 reward for the apprehension of and evidence to convict the guilty parties. On July 14, Bennett's stepfather swore out a warrant for the arrest of Walker, Padgett, and three other suspected lynchers.³¹

The next day the wanted parties descended on the town with a heavily armed mob of supporters, hired a lawyer, and immediately posted bond. The group returned for the preliminary examination the next day 'fifty or sixty strong, in full battle array.' When their attorney warned them that a carload of armed black men was making its way from Jacksonville, the mob agreed to leave its rifles and shotguns on the outskirts of town. The excitement on the street prompted the mayor to order all bars closed and to call for extra police protection. By the time the trial started, at least 150 supporters of the defendants lined the street in front of the courthouse. The *Times-Union* reported, 'It was freely hinted that if any of [the defendants] were sent to jail that it would be raided and the men liberated.'³²

An equal number of blacks and whites stuffed the courthouse, where the crowding and 'storm-breeding weather' generated suffocating heat. A succession of witnesses testified that they had recognized Constable Walker and the Padgetts in the lynch mob. In his defense, Walker testified that he had gone to the church to arrest Bennett, and that he had needed to tie up his prisoner to prevent him from escaping. After driving a few miles, he was stopped by a mob, which overpowered him and seized Bennett. Despite corroboration by several witnesses for the prosecution, the evidence against the defendants was deemed insufficient. The men were discharged, and they and their friends left town 'triumphant.' The *Times-Union* closed its report with the observation that 'this probably ends the matter and demonstrates the almost utter impossibility of obtaining evidence to convict in such cases.'³³

Though this attempt to bring lynchers to justice was predictably ineffective, its significance should not be overlooked. Lake City hosted more lynchings than any other town in Florida; indeed this was its seventh lynching in just five years. And with nine lynchings claiming 15 victims, 1895 was a busy year for lynchers in the state. Moreover, Robert Bennett was charged with the most 'lynchable' offense in the eyes of whites. Nevertheless Lake City residents were incited to denounce and even prosecute this particular lynching. We can infer potential reasons from the newspaper article. It appears that Bennett had enjoyed a favorable reputation in the white community, for

the *Times-Union* noted that 'Bennett has been rather well spoken of here.'³⁴ It is also possible that Lake City residents did not wish to be cast as dupes in the schemes of 'foreign' men trying to cover up their own misdeeds. But their reaction implies no anti-lynching sentiment. The wording of the protest is critical: they were opposed to *indiscriminate* lynchings. In other words, white southerners who turned to collective punishment had a duty to employ it discriminately. It was when they neglected this duty that 'unjustified' lynchings took place. And because the courtroom was an unpredictable and, for many, an undesirable venue in which to make this point, southern whites occasionally chose to do so through rhetoric.

Well into the twentieth century, white southerners seemed willing, on the whole, to tolerate even those lynchings they found disreputable rather than denounce the entire practice. To successfully prosecute lynchers would be to establish a precedent which opponents of lynching could seize upon and use against all lynchings. Southern whites turned instead to language to instruct each other about the appropriate parameters of lynching through depictions of proper and improper behavior. But by perpetuating distinctions between 'warranted' and 'unwarranted' lynchings, the white southern lynching rhetoric would begin, after World War I, to look hopelessly backward to the rest of the country.

Following World War I, a fundamental shift occurred in the way southern whites publicly discussed lynching. The next three decades presented a host of challenges to the sovereignty of lynching in the South. Under the vigilant watch of antilynching activists and the curious and increasingly critical gaze of the rest of the country, southern whites were forced to tone down their virulently racist defenses of lynching. As the NAACP mounted its campaign against lynching, southern officials found themselves monitored closely and their actions and statements publicized in headlines across the country. Black newspapers now mockingly adopted 'respectable' lynching language in derisive reports that described southern lynchings attended by 'the very best citizens,' who tortured, murdered, and paraded their victims around for sport before church on Sunday mornings. By turning these representations on their heads, black newspapers were using white southerners' own rhetoric to underscore the barbarism of lynching. When the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) launched its campaign for a 'lynchless year,' no southern state relished the ignominy of being the first to break a year's clean record or of 'winning the lynching pennant' and landing in national headlines such as 'Florida's Shame.' The rise of fascism in Europe provided a ready analogy to southern lynch law and allowed lynching opponents to cast white southerners as treasonous. And as northern congressmen pushed for federal antilynching legislation, southern whites were determined to provide no unnecessary ammunition for the crusade. On top of all of this, when lynchings in Florida were reported nationally, the negative publicity threatened the state's booming tourist industry.

In this environment, white newspapers could no longer print brazen endorsements of lynching, and governors could no longer sing its praises without inviting public censure. The influence of these external conditions does not rule out the possibility that white southern opinions of lynching also evolved, but it seems likely they did not

change uniformly or to the extent that journalistic representations shifted. During these years, justifications for lynching became subsumed under a new, self-consciously temperate tone of discussion.

In the 1920s, journalists began to excise the most sensational elements of ‘warranted’ lynching depictions, and southern whites attempted to suppress negative publicity by at least making a show of condemnation after a lynching. Nevertheless, there remained a distinction between ‘warranted’ and ‘unwarranted’ lynching in the pages of newspapers and in the minds of many citizens. When Abe Wilson was lynched in 1923 for the charge of cattle theft, Newberry citizens passed a resolution condemning the lynching and Governor Cary Hardee ordered a grand jury investigation of the lynching. The judge presiding over the (ultimately futile) investigation objected to what he deemed the senselessness of the crime, noting, ‘The execution of Wilson was not a lynching in the plain acceptance of the term; he was not executed by an enraged populace whose reason had become dethroned because of the heinousness of his offense, nor was it to avenge the honor of some innocent woman, but it was murder, as foul as ever perpetrated and has reflected upon this county and the commonwealth of Florida and has been condemned in the great dailies and magazines of the country.’³⁵ Drawing on established notions of the honorable nature of lynching, the judge contended that this ‘unwarranted’ lynching was not a real lynching and that real lynching was not murder. Though the circumstances of Wilson’s death fit seamlessly into any generally accepted definition of lynching, for Long the murder lacked the key element of being ‘warranted.’ In drawing this distinction, he and the majority of southern whites were perpetuating the notion of ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ lynching.

By the end of the 1920s, the kind of grizzly headlines and inflammatory language common in earlier lynching reports had virtually disappeared, and in place of brazen endorsements reporters inserted more subtle reminders of the circumstances that had motivated lynchers. Reporting on the lynching of Homer Williams in 1924, the *Ocala Evening Star* eschewed sensationalism, yet concluded the report with the assertion that ‘the negro is known to have been a desperate character.’ After Nick Williams was lynched for rape in 1926, the *Evening Star* reported the affair in a similarly even-handed tone but finished the article by noting, ‘It is said that all indications and clues led to positive proof of this particular negro having committed the crime.’³⁶

The intensified efforts of lynching opponents in the 1930s placed supporters of lynching increasingly on the defensive, and southern whites responded by arguing for a narrower definition of the word. Assigning a more restricted meaning to lynching would seem to diminish its toll while reserving the use of the term for those lynchings whites still found supportable. In 1934, Robert Johnson remained in jail for chicken theft after a baseless rape charge against him was dropped. When Johnson was seized from his cell and lynched by a group of unmasked men, the classification of his death became a point of contention. The *Bradenton Herald* and the *Tampa Tribune* both labeled Johnson’s death a ‘gang-killing,’ not a lynching, and the *Tribune* noted in its report, ‘There was no mob. The victim was not strung to a tree. He was simply taken a little way from the roadside and shot five times.’ The *Tribune* elaborated on the matter in an editorial which explained, ‘The killing of the negro Robert Johnson cannot

correctly be classified as a lynching, according to the accepted meaning of that term. There was no 'infuriated mob,' no identification of the 'fiendish assailant' by his 'outraged victim,' no attack on a jail or defending officers, in fact no charge of the 'usual offense' had been made against the prisoner.' For the *Tribune* writer, the fact that Johnson's death did not fit the 'warranted' lynching mold and was, on the contrary, 'deliberate, cold-blooded murder,' made it imperative for the governor to take action.³⁷

The *Tallahassee Democrat* echoed the *Tribune's* sentiment when it editorialized: 'As more facts come to light in connection with the so-called lynching of a negro at Tampa, it becomes apparent that it was not a lynching at all but a murder.' The newspaper defined lynching as 'the act of a large body of the populace, discontented with the slow wheels of justice, taking a short cut to enforcement of moral laws and acting preferably with some semblance of order and some attempt to establish guilt.' 'If there is a distinction, and lynching is to be classed a little above first degree murder,' the editorial concluded, 'then this does not appear to be an instance of it.'³⁸ With reformers pressing their assault against the practice, defenders of lynching began to draw distinctions they had not often bothered to make in previous decades, yet even in denouncing this particular incident they continued to promote a rhetoric of 'respectable' lynching.

Under pressure from the ASWPL, Governor David Sholtz pledged that every effort would be made to find Johnson's murderers, and the state attorney claimed, 'We certainly can't afford to let such things go unnoticed... It is a question of stamping out lynching, more particularly under the inexcusable and unwarranted circumstances as are evidenced in this case.' The ensuing grand jury investigation ended with the finding of no evidence on which to base an indictment and no proof of a mob or of lynching 'in the usual sense of the word.'³⁹ Yet the jury stamped its own disapproval on the lynching by finding the original charge of rape leveled against Johnson to be unfounded. The obvious innocence of the victim was clear proof that this mob murder was 'unwarranted.'

In striking contrast, the exceptionally gruesome lynching of Claude Neal that same year for the charge of rape and murder elicited much commentary on the nature of the crimes that provoked such lynchings and the merits of mob justice. When the American public learned that Neal's lynching had been advertised in advance and that Governor Sholtz had been forewarned yet had declined to take action to prevent the lynching, bitter protests poured into the governor's office. A man from Michigan wrote to Sholtz, 'Even if the Claude Neal lynching has been your only experience in the popular and ancient art of murder while engaged as State Supervisor of Human Butchers you are still almost on a par with Germany's Hitler.' The chairman of the Chicago Committee on Anti-Lynch Legislation warned the governor, 'Remember, Honourable sir, the eyes of America, ah! the eyes of the world are focused upon the sunny clime of the state of Florida. Not as a bathing beach or a summer resort this time, we remind you, but as a place where men are lynched and the law goes on vacation.' His warning was substantiated by scores of letters and postcards from northerners expressing their intentions to boycott the state and vacation elsewhere that winter.⁴⁰

White newspapers across Florida responded defensively to the criticism. The *Sanford Herald* stated, 'In the Marianna case, a negro had raped and killed a girl. No chances

were taken that he might escape punishment. He was promptly seized and strung up. It is mob law. It is primitive. But what can you expect?' In an editorial called, 'Much Ado About the Jackson County Lynching,' the *Dade City Banner* quoted a Marianna citizen who said, 'It is one thing to say "let the law take its own course" and another for men to stand emotionless in the presence of a crime that staggers humanity.' The public southern white response to this lynching was not entirely uniform; the response that perhaps best captures the tone of the discussion during this era came from the *Fort Meyers Press*, which followed its description of Neal's alleged crime with the pronouncement, 'It is doubtful if the law anywhere is a match for the human emotions stirred by such a story. It explains, if it cannot condone, the dogged pursuit and savage retribution which ensued.'⁴¹ The idea that lynchings could no longer be explicitly condoned, but could sometimes be *explained*, now pervaded white responses to lynching.

By the 1940s, the predominant tone of all lynching coverage was denunciatory, and yet the distinction between 'warranted' and 'unwarranted' did not disappear. In Quincy in 1941, A.C. Williams's lynchers failed to kill him on their first attempt for 'attacking' a 12-year-old white girl, so they seized his badly beaten body a second time from an ambulance and fired at Williams until there could be no doubt about his death. Newspapers across Florida registered their dismay over this 'double lynching.' But when acerbic national columnist Westbrook Pegler penned a column in which he called Northwest Florida a 'social and intellectual slum' and the entire state 'adolescent, irresponsible, and, thus far, incorrigible,' the southern defenses mounted. In a meeting of the Florida legislature, a senator from Marianna lashed out at Pegler as a 'soul-sick, mud-wallowing, gutter scum columnist' and declared that a federal antilynching bill would never 'strike from the heart of southern men the love and respect of womanhood.' The senate unanimously adopted his remarks as the judgment of the body.⁴²

The *Tampa Tribune's* response to Pegler's column, which asserted that '999 out of every 1,000 Floridians deplore and denounce lynching in any of its forms,' was countered by an editorial in the *Fort Meyers Press* which responded, 'In a town of 10,000 like Fort Meyers it would mean that all but 10 people would 'denounce and deplore' the lynching of a negro who had criminally assaulted a 12-year-old white girl and if the crime were in these parts we dare say that far more than one in a thousand would feel that the fiend got what was coming to him. And by no means would they all be people with low and brutal instincts.' Whites across Florida gave substance to this claim in letters to the editor that expressed sentiments such as, 'I agree with Governor Sholtz when he said we don't tolerate lynching. However, I favor lynching 100 percent for the usual crime.... Governor Holland has too much Southern blood and consideration for our women to put much pressure on an investigation of the Quincy lynching.'⁴³ The bulk of the discourse during this era demonstrates that it was possible at once to denounce lynching and still to perpetuate the idea that it was sometimes warranted.

The persistence of these attitudes does not render the denunciations that dominated the public southern discourse over lynching in this era entirely false; it is likely that, whether for ethical reasons or for expediency, there were many white journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens who believed it would be better if the brutal and unseemly

practice died out. Yet ultimately, white southerners demanded jurisdiction to pronounce lynchings justified or unjustified and to endorse or excuse them if they found reason. Southern white journalists and politicians most often preferred to monitor lynching with language, not direct action, knowing that this passive approach would allow lynch mobs to continue to murder largely with impunity. For all their proclamations during this era about the lamentable nature of the practice, to many southern whites, the lives of a few black men were still worth less than the ability to maintain control over the meaning of lynching.

Throughout the lynching era, while southern whites couched their defense of lynching in terms of white womanly virtue and black degeneracy, lynching opponents labored tirelessly to expose this model of lynching as a myth. At the forefront of this campaign, Ida B. Wells trumpeted statistics that proved that rape was not the usual charge leveled against lynching victims.⁴⁴ Yet the hard objectivity of lynching opponents' statistics was met by a vigorous rhetoric that promoted a particular vision of lynching. When every lynching of a 'black beast rapist' was emblazoned on the front pages of white southern newspapers, and when these reports contained all the tropes of the 'respectable' lynching, southern whites could feel secure in the justness of the practice. Moreover, when 'disrespectable' lynchings were denounced and stripped of credibility, lynching supporters could divorce themselves and the entire practice from them. By maintaining such slippery edges, lynching as it was represented by the white southern press proved hard to corner.

It is difficult to know precisely the extent to which white southern journalists were aware of the process they were engaged in when they produced and reproduced stylized narratives of lynching, or the methods they used to do so. They might determine that a 'warranted' lynching had taken place and subsequently imbue it with 'respectable' lynching tropes or suppress details that would subvert this image. Or they might consider individual elements of a lynching, like the shady reputation of the lynchers, and cast the entire tale in a 'disrespectable' tone. Whatever the process used to create these representations, the outcome was consistent – a discourse that can be classified as approving or disapproving, with little shading or complexity. White newspapers marked the distinction between isolated 'unwarranted' lynchings and lynching in general by stripping the former of 'respectable' characteristics such as the participation or approval of upstanding citizens.⁴⁵

White newspapers wielded tremendous power in creating ostensibly factual representations in order to convey particular messages, and the narratives they promoted not only impeded the efforts of lynching opponents to expose the truth about lynching; they also had important consequences for southern blacks in communities where lynchings occurred. Because they were intended in part to convey lessons on the fundamental nature of race relations, tales of 'warranted' lynchings had tremendous potential to generate wholesale brutality against the black community. Newspapers often followed sensational accounts of lynchings with reports that black citizens were fleeing town in droves. If whites assigned various meanings to different lynchings, blacks likely perceived these distinctions and monitored each lynching's capacity to fan white hostility.⁴⁶

Following the previously discussed 1901 lynching of 16-year-old Fred Rochelle in Bartow, local blacks recognized the potential for sustained white retribution and acted quickly to prevent it. Next to its report on the lynching, the *Courier-Informant* printed a letter 'From the Colored Citizens – Who Have the Betterment of Their Race at Heart.' The letter professed the black community's sympathy toward aggrieved whites and asserted the need to 'shoulder arms and march to the front and show to our white citizens that we do not uphold such conduct as that.' In language that sounds remarkably close to that of white southern journalists, the author continued, 'Just to think that a white woman can't go out for air and exercise or fishing without being accosted by a brutish negro.' Finally he pleaded, 'It is not because we are negroes that we cannot be respected. We can if we will show that we do not conceal and cloak each other when he or she commit such heinous crimes as occurred here today.' He then reminded whites that it was indeed black citizens who had apprehended the alleged murderer, and he closed the letter with a request that blacks be admitted to the next meeting of the town council.⁴⁷

This evidence of black commentary after a lynching is hardly representative of most cases; in day-to-day life local blacks had little opportunity to assert their voices in the public discussion about lynching that was carried out by white southerners and recorded in white newspapers. But the letter suggests that there was a limited space for blacks to participate in the discussion *if* they appealed to white sensibilities. The approach was shrewdly crafted; the author at once mimicked the language of white southerners and at the same time controverted it by asserting the uniqueness of the alleged murderer and the blamelessness of the black community at large. Thus it appears that Bartow blacks were trying to reform the representation of this lynching in order to secure a measure of protection for themselves. The attempt seems to have been at least temporarily successful at localizing the outburst of racial violence, and the *Courier-Informant* confirmed in an editorial, 'It is extremely gratifying that ALL OF THE VERY BEST of our negro population stand heartily with us in this matter.'⁴⁸ While there is some reason to doubt the wisdom of this assumption, the letter writer clearly understood that, although the lynching itself was irreversible, the way it was interpreted and discussed by southern whites had important implications for the future of community race relations. The long-term implications of their approach are more problematic. For by inserting their own approving voice into the discussion over Rochelle's lynching, they were at once deflecting the immediate threat of white aggression *and* helping to perpetuate the notion of the 'warranted' lynching in white southern discourse.

Opponents of lynching confronted an enormous challenge in trying to strip white lynching narratives of their power. Black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* attempted to fight white southern depictions of lynching by refashioning them with their own often dubious details, so that in their version of a lynching a man charged with raping a white woman would be guilty only of walking too close to her on the sidewalk. In the immediate sense it was important for lynching opponents to ensure that white southern voices did not monopolize the discussion over lynching. The attempts of black newspapers to counter white depictions were significant in the long run as well,

for the ‘facts’ that white newspapers reported have not only clouded our understanding of what actually happened; they have also bequeathed us a lengthy text on black criminality. For instance, since many reports included the lynching victim’s confession as a central element, present-day observers may accept this element at face value and imagine that all lynching victims were indeed ‘brutes’ and that lynching was something like a ‘hallmark of the American vigilante spirit.’ It would be harder to sustain such a notion if these observers knew that, in many instances, a lynching victim likely confessed while his executioners held a match inches away from the gasoline-soaked woodpile beneath him – or that he never confessed at all.

White narratives of lynching also pose a challenge to present-day scholars intent on making sense of the phenomenon. Any effort to tackle the assumptions embedded in and reproduced by white accounts of lynching should make no claims, for instance, to exonerate all lynching victims of having committed a crime; such an attempt would place the historian in the position of trying to counteract the white discourse of black criminality while showing as little concern for the truth as the original depictions. It is enough to say what we know – that lynching victims were innocent in the eyes of the law – and to work assiduously to reveal the various devices white southerners used in creating representations of lynchings and lynching victims, for as long as these devices remain obscured, they will continue to influence our perceptions of the phenomenon. As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued, ‘The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.’⁴⁹ And, indeed, the most potent tool for deconstructing and disabling the power of the white southern lynching discourse may be simple awareness of it.

Notes

- [1] Emphasis added; *Bartow Courier Informant*, 27 June 1900.
- [2] *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 28 June 1900.
- [3] See Aldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*.
- [4] Waldrep discusses the struggle of antilynching activists to define lynching in *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 127–50.
- [5] Further research on Florida and on other southern states will prove or disprove the reliability of Florida as a case study of the larger white southern lynching discourse. I am certain that Florida’s lynching discourse departs in certain ways from the lynching discourse in other states, but I am also certain that this problem would bedevil any case study of lynching discourse. Given the limitations of time and energy required for historical research, it seems best to select a state and propose a model for further research.
- [6] In looking for evidence of lynchings in Florida newspapers, I used the definition agreed upon by various delegates from antilynching organizations at a 1940 conference at Tuskegee Institute. After a fierce debate, the delegates decided that a ‘lynching’ must include the following criteria: ‘There must be a dead body, which met death illegally at the hands of a group, acting under pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition.’ [Letter from Jessie Guzman (Acting Director of Tuskegee Institute’s Department of Records and Research) to Governor Millard Caldwell, 19 February 1946, in Lynching File, Series 576, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.] Whether the figures cited in this article even begin to approach the actual scope of lynching in Florida will never be known. In my research, I collected some form of evidence for 238 lynchings claiming the lives of 303 victims between the years 1882 and 1951. A systematic

perusal of every newspaper printed in every town in Florida during the lynching era would undoubtedly reveal more lynchings and, even then, would fail to reveal those lynchings that were never reported in the first place. Moreover, many incidents elude easy classification, and the researcher must decide whether to label them lynchings or pass them over as, perhaps, another instance of a black man killed by a sheriff's posse for 'resisting arrest.'

- [7] Florida's lynching pattern was intensely spatialized with most lynchings occurring in the north and west of the state, precisely those areas with small, traditional, rural communities most linked culturally to Georgia, Alabama, and other parts of the Deep South.
- [8] A word about my sources: in my research I searched for every extant newspaper report from Florida on every lynching in the state that has been recorded. Due to the scarcity of extant Florida newspapers dating before 1900, Jacksonville's *Florida Times-Union* is unfortunately the sole available newspaper source for information on many lynchings occurring in Florida in the 1880s and 1890s. Throughout the lynching era, the *Times-Union* most consistently reported lynchings from across the state; the large majority of known lynchings in Florida receive mention in the *Times-Union*, if only in a paragraph, whereas other large dailies like the *Tampa Tribune* and the *Miami Herald* often reported only those lynchings occurring locally. The small local weeklies that survive yield the richest and seemingly most reliable information on lynchings. In a few instances, lynchings reported in the *Times-Union* or other large dailies are conspicuously missing from the local papers where the lynchings took place, which seems to signify a deliberate silence on the part of the communities. Yet on other occasions, small, local papers offer the kind of details and layering that can provide an enlightening contrast to the accounts that appeared in larger papers, and the researcher can see the way that characterizations of lynchings shifted from one account to another. Extant local newspapers are more abundant in later years and, in general, the later the lynching, the easier it is to find more – and more varied – sources that discuss it. It is especially unfortunate that in my research I was unable to find any extant black newspapers from Florida discussing lynchings, and for discussions of lynchings in Florida in black newspapers from outside the state I searched through the clipping files of the Tuskegee Institute and the NAACP, as well as national newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*.
- [9] Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 17.
- [10] *Bartow Courier-Informant*, 29 May 1901.
- [11] *Bartow Courier-Informant*, 5 June 1901.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Ibid.
- [14] *Gainesville Sun*, 7 September 1904; *Florida Times-Union*, 19 May 1895; *Florida Times-Union*, 26 November 1897; *Florida Times-Union*, 13 June 1884; *Florida Times-Union*, 13 September 1894.
- [15] *Madison New Enterprise*, 6 February 1908; *Arcadia Champion* quoted in *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 22 June 1907; *Bartow Courier-Informant*, 29 April 1909.
- [16] *Florida Times-Union*, 18 July 1893.
- [17] *Gainesville Sun*, 7 September 1904; *Florida Times-Union*, 29 January 1916; *Florida Times-Union*, 11 June 1895.
- [18] *Florida Times-Union*, 16 February 1892, 28 September 1891, 19 December 1891, and 19 July 1890.
- [19] *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 14 February 1909.
- [20] Waldrep, 49–61.
- [21] *Florida Times-Union*, 5 May 1896 and 6 May 1896.
- [22] *Florida Times-Union*, 16 December 1891.
- [23] Ibid.
- [24] Ibid. Apparent white indignation over the lynching of Ely reveals the fluid nature of the phenomenon. Each lynching had its own actors, circumstances, and situation in time and space, and there is no way to predict with certainty the reception each lynching would receive

in its community. We can only surmise the reasons why Marianna residents may have found Ely's lynching unacceptable. The fact that a group of white men from the neighborhood took it upon themselves to search for the missing black man suggests that Ely had supporters in the white community. [Edward Ayers has argued that 'mobile' blacks, or blacks who were strangers in a community, were more likely to be lynched than familiar blacks. See *The Promise of the New South*, 157–8. W. Fitzhugh Brundage has similarly argued that black men with whites who could 'vouch' for them were less likely to become lynching victims. See 'The Varn Mill Riot of 1891,' 257–80.] This possibility is strengthened by the article's assertion that Ely had no chance to prove his innocence, when of course lynching victims never had any opportunity to do so. It is possible, too, that Holloway was a 'suspicious character' in the eyes of the community, for the paper emphasized his strange behavior and the claim that all his accomplices came from out of town. Although the crime of entering a white girl's room often inspired communal outrage against a black man, in this instance Marianna residents, or at least the *Times-Union* reporter, evidently found lynching to be a grossly unwarranted response.

- [25] *Tampa Tribune*, 3 July 1912.
- [26] *St. Augustine Record* quoted in *Lake City Citizen-Reporter*, 2 June 1911. See also *Live Oak Democrat*, 22 May 1911 and *Montgomery News*, 25 May 1911.
- [27] Michael Pfeifer argues that in much of the country, particularly outside the South, middle-class reformers regarded collective violence as a phenomenon largely of the lower class and sought to sanitize retributive justice through the advocacy of due process and reforms of capital punishment. See Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*.
- [28] *Florida Times-Union*, 5 July 1895 and 21 August 1895.
- [29] *Florida Times-Union*, 5 July 1895.
- [30] *Ibid.*
- [31] *Ibid.*
- [32] *Ibid.*
- [33] *Ibid.*
- [34] *Florida Times-Union*, 5 July 1895.
- [35] *Gainesville Sun*, 10 February 1923.
- [36] *Ocala Evening Star*, 30 May 1924 and 11 January 1926.
- [37] *Bradenton Herald* quoted in *Tampa Tribune*, 5 February 1934; *Tampa Tribune*, 31 January 1934 and 1 February 1934.
- [38] *Tallahassee Democrat*, 5 February 1934.
- [39] *Tampa Tribune*, 1 February 1934; Report of the Grand Jury for the Fall Term 1938, in Lynching File, Series 278, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.
- [40] Paul B. Rey to Governor David Sholtz, 6 November 1934, and Ulysses S. Keys to Governor Sholtz, 29 October 1934, in Lynching File, Series 278, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee. This file also contains myriad postcards from northern whites expressing their intentions to boycott the state. For an exhaustive account of the Neal lynching and its aftermath, see McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching*.
- [41] *Sanford Herald*, 31 October 1934; *Dade City Banner*, 9 November 1934; *Fort Meyers Press*, 30 October 1934.
- [42] *Gadsden County Times*, 15 May 1941; *Chicago Daily News*, 17 May 1941, and *Shreveport Journal*, 27 May 1941, in the Tuskegee Institute News Clipping File, microform edition, reel 232.
- [43] *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 20 May 1941; *Fort Meyers Press*, 24 May 1941; *Tampa Tribune*, 5 September 1941.
- [44] For a discussion of Wells's antilynching campaign, see Bederman, 'Civilization, the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Antilynching Campaign (1892–94),' 4–30; and Patricia A. Schecter, 'Unsettled Business: Ida B. Wells against Lynching, or How Antilynching Got Its Gender,' in Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death*, 292–317.

- [45] The *Gainesville Sun*, for instance, apparently employed this kind of editing after four black men and two black women were lynched in Newberry in 1916 following the killing of a constable. The *Sun* acknowledged the enormity of the constable's murder but could not approve of the mob's decision to kill two women and insisted in an editorial that 'the law-abiding people of the county condemn [the lynching] in no uncertain terms.' Yet in 1977, a white Newberry resident named Frank Dudley remembered the event differently. Dudley explained, 'There was no sense of outrage over the lynching... at least not publicly.... There was more like a feeling of relief.... There was a white preacher who didn't like what happened, but he had enough sense to keep his mouth shut.' In his recollection, the people who participated were 'the very best people who lived in this neighborhood – law-abiding citizens who wouldn't hurt a kitten under different circumstances.' When Dudley was asked if the reality of what happened that night would ever be revealed, he answered, 'Nope. No one outside here is ever gonna find out. No one is ever going to know the 100 percent truth.' See *Gainesville Sun*, 20 August 1916 and 6 November 1977.
- [46] W. Fitzhugh Brundage has pointed out that 'extended campaigns of violence typically followed mass lynchings but only rarely lynchings by either private mobs or posses. Although these episodes of ongoing terrorism were not the work of mass mobs, the whites who carried out the violence almost certainly believed that their deeds represented the continuation of the mass mobs' labor.' [See Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 44.] Lynchings carried out by mass mobs were often synonymous with 'warranted' lynchings because they seemed to express the outrage of the entire white community, and these were the same cases that often flared into attacks on the black community at large.
- [47] *Bartow Courier-Informant*, 5 June 1901.
- [48] *Ibid.* For a similar example where blacks tried to 'turn the rhetoric of white supremacy to their advantage' in the midst of a terror campaign, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, 'The Roar on the Other Side of Silence: Black Resistance and White Violence in the American South, 1880–1940,' in Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death*, 275–7.
- [49] Rolph-Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xix.

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