

Casting Censor:

Cinematic Responses to Lynching in the Twentieth Century

Olivia Raymond

HIST 397-01W (History Department)

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The Progressive Era in the United States of America produced some of the most stunning technological innovations in human history that would capture and perpetuate racist ideology. The dawn of an industrialized, modern era in the early twentieth century was one of promise with an axiom of progress. However, lynching and other forms of racialized violence would mark this period as one of the most barbaric and regressive in American history. Scholars have defined lynching in many ways, including acts of terrorism, outlets for economic and class grievances, and a product of white supremacy. No matter how lynching is defined, it played a critical role in the rhetoric of both white and black Americans surrounding citizenship and identity. Photography would be the first powerful, visual vehicle for the dissemination of lynching. The advent of film, in turn, amplified the spectacle of lynching—public ritualistic murder. Early silent films would play a very pivotal role in providing the “Spectator of the South” a national audience. Discrepancies between the reality of lynching, from black perspectives, and the sanitized version of accounts publicized in white media rested on two irreconcilable visions. Both divergent viewpoints coalesced over the same provocative question of “who is an American,” a question that plagues *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Without Our Gates* (1920). Directors D. W. Griffith and Oscar Devereaux Micheaux utilized the spectacle of lynching to conceptualize what it meant to be an American.

Both directors agreed that lynching was public execution carried out by white men. However, the differences between their visual depictions of lynching rested on assumptions about “Americanness” vs. citizenship and how those categories related to the “lynch law.” The first was embedded in Ku Klux Klan and racist white American ideology that saw “Americanness” wrapped up in an inheritance. As non-white protestant males, and females, increasingly gained full citizenship, citizenship in the nation alone could no

longer suffice as the definition of “being American” in racist white ideology. Therefore, a sense of “Americanness” as the marker of “being American” was increasingly connected with an inheritance. That inheritance was supremacy over the races ordained by God inherent in their blood. Being American meant being a white Protestant male with the ability to enforce Anglo-Saxon values through the public execution and subjugation of those perceived to be a threat to those values. Those who were a “threat” were black, foreign-born, and non-Protestant after Reconstruction. For black Americans, barred from such an inheritance due to the legacy of slavery, citizenship and economic advancement were the only means by which being an “American” could be achieved. If lynching was the antithesis of a rational, progressive society, and America was a progressive nation, it followed that black people had to construct an ideology of “uplift” to combat the barbarism that justified lynching in their country. By appealing to the rule of law and constitutional values, as well as striving for the so-called “American Dream” through economic security, black Americans answered the rallying cry of blood and soil with demands for freedom and progress.

### **“Lynch Law” and Vigilantism**

What was the purpose of extralegal lynching? Lynching can be summed up as white American’s collective power to subjugate black Americans through violence. Lynching, whipping, rape, and other forces of violence were common in the plantation system during the colonial era and post-Revolution. However, the history of “lynch law” as a concept became conflated with American ideals at its foundation. “Lynch law,” unlike lynching in of itself, has distinct connections with vigilantism, heroism, and patriotism, as opposed to criminality in general. As author Robert L. Zangrando writes, “...the term “lynch law” originated during the American Revolution with Col. Charles Lynch and his Virginia

associates.”<sup>1</sup> Professor Belew explains, “[v]igilante violence has shaped the history and identity of the United States since the era of British colonization” and, “[l]ynching emerged at the same moment as the nation itself, concurrently with its founding documents.”<sup>2</sup> Just as the British government could not be trusted to uphold freedom and the rights of its subjects, the newly formed American government could not dole out appropriate justice and defend citizens by itself. The infamous scarlet letter and witch-hunts of the colonial period were traded for a hangman’s noose for traitors and perceived criminals during the American Revolution. What should be seen as barbaric and criminal was transformed into heroism and being American. Lynching was the patriotic duty of soldiers to uphold American freedom and values, so the story goes. Never mind that it was illegal, committed without a proper trial for the victim, and carried out by those who did not represent the law. What was important was the principle of taking the law into one’s own hands, the duty and right of white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon males to ward away threats to the newly forming American way of life. When the war ended and America began their invasion of native lands, the “[r]aw frontier conditions encouraged swift punishment for real, imagined, or anticipated criminal behavior,” again conflating public execution with vigilant justice for crimes that may not have occurred in the first place.<sup>3</sup> These elements of “lynch law” are important because they are the basis for Ku Klux Klan and racist white ideology in general when it comes to lynching. They, white males, had the solemn duty to protect America from the enemy *within*. As the nation descended into Civil War, this enemy within became increasing black people, a boogiemane that had to be eliminated or subjugated in order to uphold Anglo-Saxon America.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Zangrando, “About Lynching,” *About Lynching*, Accessed November 13, 2017, [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g\\_l/lynching/lynching.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lynching/lynching.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Belew, “Lynching and Power in the United States: Southern, Western, and National Vigilante Violence,” *History Compass* 12, no. 1 (2014), 84, doi: 10.1111/hic3.12121.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Zangrando, “About Lynching.”

## **Uplift and the (un)Conscious Fear**

“Historically, social control has been an essential aspect of mob rule.”<sup>4</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than during the early twentieth century’s lynching rampage. Modernity was a time a promise for many in America, and it is “...most commonly associate[d]...with a heightened awareness of the era’s changes,” including, “...capitalism, urbanization, the emergence of mass media, secularization, and the growing belief in rational progress.”<sup>5</sup> Rational progress is key here as black Americans stepped out from the shadow of slavery and expected full integration into society. However, “...the Wilson years seemed to celebrate racial discrimination, residential segregation, closed ballot boxes, and Jim Crow accommodations.”<sup>6</sup> With the end of the Reconstruction Era, and the removal of black political power in the South, de jure segregation in the form of Jim Crow and de facto subjugation through the revival of “lynch law” would increasingly marginalize black communities. As Allen notes, “...in response to the perception of a New Negro born in freedom, undisciplined by slavery, and unschooled in proper racial etiquette...the white South denied black a political voice, imposed...racial segregation...and disseminated racial caricatures and pseudo-scientific theories that reinforced...racist beliefs and practices.”<sup>7</sup> From the 1880s to the 1930s, it is estimated that nearly “...3220 blacks [were] lynched in the South” alone, with the South taking up “...82 percent of all lynchings in the nation during the 1880s to more than 95 percent during the 1920s.”<sup>8</sup> The “...weekly phenomena [of lynching], and mob assaults, [was] comparable to European pogroms,” the mob persecution primarily of Jews.<sup>9</sup> However, unlike the pogroms in Europe, lynching in America was widespread public execution on steroids. These social

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<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Zangrando, “About Lynching.”

<sup>5</sup> Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>7</sup> James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Sante Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 2012), 11.

<sup>8</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 93.

conditions in the South drove black Americans out and caused their neighbors in the North to take notice. It also set the stage for the eventual documentation of lynch mobs in photos and representation in popular entertainment of the day, that of film.

While often lumped into one mass movement ending in the 1970s, this paper focuses on the period of urbanization of rural blacks from 1916-1930, often referred to as the First Great Migration. Millions of black Southerners would make small leaps out of the Deep South and then move into the so-called “meccas” of black urban life within the North and Midwest in places such as New York and Chicago. While there were many important stimuli pushing black people north, fear of racial violence was a huge motivating factor. As they moved, a “master narrative” began to develop in the black community, one of “individual self-development and self-realization, with...the potential of genuine citizenship in an ideal America...” in which southern black culture would be remade North of its borders and accepted by the nation at large.<sup>10</sup> White men had constructed a narrative of “Americanness” that rested on the image of the “patriotic freedom fighter.” Like Colonel Lynch before them, they were “American” because they had the duty and the right to root out perceived enemies, as well as define and defend American values. Unable to access this narrative, the black community had to construct its own national mythos in the modern era. That mythos or “master narrative” was one of uplift through education and economic advancement that would lead to eventual full citizenship in the nation. Once citizenship was achieved, the educated middle class would turn around and uplift the black Race left in poverty and ignorance in the South. This sentiment is made clear in W.E.B. DuBois opening to *The Talented Tenth*, “[t]he Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”<sup>11</sup> Though extremely classist in nature, this route to becoming an “American” flipped the narrative of blacks as beasts, as slave, and as property. It aligned it with the prototypical, albeit fake, “American story” of immigration and the quest for freedom

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<sup>10</sup> James Edward. Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 104.

<sup>11</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, “The Talented Tenth,” Teaching American History, accessed December 04, 2017, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-talented-tenth/>.

defining the boundaries of “Americanness.” Therefore, the First Great Migration expanded the scope of what it meant to be a black citizen, and in turn “[provided] the basis of what might be a distinct national or quasi-national culture.”<sup>12</sup>

Though he wrote on the literature of the period, Smethurst’s arguments extend quite logically to other facets of black popular culture. The early photoplays (as films were referred to back then) of Oscar Micheaux were steeped in the same messages of racial uplift, Black Nationalism, and migration that preceded it. Despite his Northern origins in Metropolis, IL, Oscar Micheaux was well aware of the oppression black people faced in the South. He, like many middle and upper class black elites, subscribed to the principles of economic independence and education leading to the political ascendancy of his race. Through film, he spearheaded what would be called the “racial uplift movement” or ideology. Plainly put, “[t]he ideology of racial uplift, the idea that educated blacks are responsible for the welfare of the majority of the race, was a response to the assault on African American civil and political rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”<sup>13</sup> *Within Our Gates* themes of education and migration would link it to “...the North-South axis [of] anxieties about race and culture,” while responding to *The Birth of a Nation*’s racist construction of the past.<sup>14</sup> However, before the photoplay, the camera first captured the public execution of black people.

## **Lynching Black Bodies and Photography**

How does one go about lynching a black body? What role does photography play in the spectacle? A spectacle is intended to be viewed by many, be a visually striking experience, and inspire awe. The spectacle of lynching was sensational during the Progressive era and the mobs that participated were frequently captured on camera for their brutal nature. Understanding the power and controversy of lynching in D. W. Griffith’s and Oscar Micheaux’s films rests on understanding the brutal and spectacular

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<sup>12</sup> James Edward. Smethurst, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin K. Gaines, “Racial Uplift Ideology in the Era of “the Negro Problem”,” TeacherServe, accessed November 04, 2017, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/racialuplift.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> James Edward Smethurst, 122.

process of lynching black bodies. The very definition of lynching, “to put to death, especially by hanging, by mob action and without legal authority,” does not have overt racial connotations. Nevertheless, “[a]ll the everyday humiliation and hostilities that black southerners endured under Jim Crow could, in fact, be distilled into the experience of lynching, so that it came to stand as the primary representation of racial injustice and oppression as a whole.”<sup>15</sup> Lynching, which had been broadly used against, “...criminals and social outcasts...” began to morph after the end of Reconstruction into a form of social control, “[designating] entire racial groups as vulnerable to violence.”<sup>16</sup> Belew shows how lynching and rape “...worked as instruments of racial subordination: both became institutionalized under slavery and both found new life as political weapons following the Civil War.”<sup>17</sup> With this in mind, it is hard to pinpoint specifics of how *all* black people in a Southern, let alone national, context experienced lynching. It was a multifaceted tool of oppression. However, there are enough cases of the following to make general characteristics of lynching. With those characteristics liberally applied, the full reality of lynching is better understood. Lynching black bodies in the 1910s through the 1930s had the following characteristics: intergenerational and interclass mob violence, systematic torture of the body, and commemorative display.

The intergenerational (participation by children through adults), interclass (the poor and the elites of white Southern society), mob-oriented, and systematic torture that typified lynching has often been downplayed or outright ignored. There has been a sanitized and rural cultural imagination when it comes to lynching in the United States. It is sanitized because it removes the prolonged state of the ritualistic murder. It replaces what lynching was with a court-ordered lynching where one was summarily executed by hanging. While a criminal could live for hours before suffocation, they were not beaten, raped, and otherwise abused beforehand, during the process, and after death. Just as the process has been sanitized, it

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<sup>15</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Belew, 93.

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Belew, 87.



is seen as something confined to the rural south and an individualistic act of violence. The murderer involved in the lynching of a black person is visualized as a poor white man. He alone, or with a very small number, is the instigator or are instigators, leaving an intact dead black body swinging from a tree. The dichotomy of what lynching is imagined as and what it really was is brought to light in the peculiar medium of lynching photography. American's memory of lynching is faulty; it was much more brutal and intersectional.

James Allen states, “[t]o kill the victim was not enough; the execution became public theater, participatory ritual of torture and death, a voyeuristic spectacle prolonged as long as possible...for the benefit of the crowd.”<sup>18</sup> The terms “public theater” and “ritual” are key here as they connect lynching carried out in real time with fictionalized accounts later portrayed through film. The mob is at once voyeur and actor, directing the ritual of murder while at the same time removed as an onlooker. It is ritualistic because lynching had very overt ceremonial and religious connotations. White men gathered a crowd to bear witness to a sacrificial lamb. That lamb was a black person to be slaughtered in order to rectify a perceived wrong done to the white community. This process was wrapped up in Biblical terminology and symbology, even though a lynch mob’s express purpose was finding pleasure and fulfillment in murder. “The story of a lynching...is the story of slow, methodical, sadistic, often...inventive forms of torture and mutilation,” which included victims being burned alive, dismemberment of bodies, castration, and even the murder of infants that fell from their dead mother’s womb.<sup>19</sup> “Drawn from all classes in southern white society, from the “*rednecks*” to the “*best people*,” lynchers came together in an impressive show of racial and community solidarity,” to maintain social control, dictate interactions between white women and black men, and preserve a perverse sense of values.<sup>20</sup> All these factors constituted what a lynching was for white and black people involved.

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<sup>18</sup> James Allen et al., 13.

<sup>19</sup> James Allen et al., 14.

<sup>20</sup> James Allen et al., 19.

However, it is the aspect of commemorative display that would directly translate into depictions of lynching on film.

In the early twenties, the commemorative display of the victims of lynching is best understood through the lens of photography. The relationship of photography and lynching lies in the subsequent reproduction of an isolated public lynching for a private national audience. Though these definitions may sound oxymoronic on the surface, they make sense in context. A lynching occurred in an isolated community executed in public spaces within that community. Before photography, these lynchings were carried word of mouth by attendees and survivors. However, with the invention of photography, the principal tool to document lynching shifted to the camera and the circulation of lynching photography took the visual aspects of lynching to a national audience. However, pre-film, these photographs could only travel outside their local communities to other individuals via newspapers displaying the victims or by receiving them directly. Therefore, while lynching photography nationalized lynching, those viewing them were still mostly in private settings reading their local newspaper or receiving a letter including a photograph or postcard. Nevertheless, lynching photography as a souvenir became an important aspect of lynching itself. As Apel and Smith show, “[p]hotography documented lynching but also played a role in orchestrating it.”<sup>21</sup>

Participants of lynching often took “souvenirs” such as “...teeth, ears, toes, fingers, nails, kneecaps, bits of charred skin and bones,” and even hair (see Figure 1).<sup>22</sup> This blurred the public and private sphere because lynching was a public act that could be reduced to a single snapshot and taken home. “Photographs were souvenirs of lynching, keepsakes that could be shown as proof that one was there,” adding to the litany of other gruesome “souvenirs.”<sup>23</sup> However, with the advent of lynching postcards, one did not have to attend a lynching to feel as though they were there (see Figures 2 and 3).

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<sup>21</sup> Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>22</sup> James Allen et al., 1.

<sup>23</sup> Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 16.

“Making a photograph became part of the ritual, helping to objectify and dehumanize the victims and, for some, increasing the hideous pleasure.”<sup>24</sup> One could relive the experience of murder repeatedly. For those who had not attended, they could imagine that moment in time in horrible detail. Lynching photographs and lynching postcards commodified the experience much in the same way films would commodify and sensationalize lynching. That was because “[p]hotographic postcard[s] of lynching highlight[ed] the use of lynching photographs in public and private realms, those of commerce and of personal commemoration.”<sup>25</sup> By blurring the line between the public and private sphere, and taking the initial step towards nationalization of the spectacle of lynching, lynching photography transformed the process of lynching black bodies. It became at once a spectacle, a memorial, and a business. One could partake in it, remember it, and sell the deadly results. “Lynching spectacles, photographs, and postcards presented white viewers with a choice between the law and lawlessness and tested their willingness to identify with white supremacy.”<sup>26</sup> More often than not, in a time where Jim Crow was the law of the land and the history of the “lynch law” was seen as heroic, many would choose lawlessness and white supremacy.

### **The Myth of Anglo-Saxon Virtue**

As lynching photography gave way to film, especially the production of *The Birth of a Nation*, the ideological justifications for lynching became paramount to understanding how white directors and black directors visually constructed lynch scenes. Lynching can easily be understood as ritual murder cloaked in terminology invoking honor. Moreover, it had a direct line to the nation’s foundations through the mythicized colonial lynch mob under Colonel Lynch. Nevertheless, the connection with perceived “Americanness” and lynching on the part of white Americans cannot be understood without understanding the specific ideological underpinnings of why white men lynched. Despite the brutality of lynching, European-Americans typically portrayed lynching as a noble, chivalrous act in defense of white

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<sup>24</sup> Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 24.

womanhood and Anglo-Saxon virtues. Alleged belief in Anglo-Saxon virtues propelled white Southerners to seek out vigilante justice and “[w]hile vengeance is frequently invoked to justify vigilantism, the latter is distinguished by its effect: shoring up or constituting systemic power.”<sup>27</sup> Lynch mobs were not honorable vigilantes as much an arm of the white, Jim Crow state. “The defense of a woman’s honor was...part of every Southerner’s creed...” as much as their belief in the superiority of their lineage and the white race.<sup>28</sup> Rape of white women was the central accusation and call to arms for white men when it came to lynching, but as Ida B. Wells-Barnett first showed “...the lynched Negro was the victim of a white woman's falsehood.”<sup>29</sup> As an NAACP pamphlet emphatically states, rape was not the reason black men were lynched (see Figure 4). Even before the *The Red Record* was published, Frederick Douglass wrote, “I hold that men who openly and deliberately nullify the laws and violate the provisions of the Constitution of their country, which they have solemnly sworn to support and execute, are not entitled to unqualified belief in any case...”<sup>30</sup> In short, he believed men who would circumvent the court system had no authority to even launch the accusation of rape. White Southerners used white womanhood, and the fear of miscegenation polluting the race, as a motivating myth behind why they had to commit a lynching. By reporting instances of miscegenation and willing participation of white women, Patricia A. Schechter argues that Ida B. Wells “...undermined the assumption of white women’s moral purity used to justify lynching.”<sup>31</sup> “Wells understood lynching as sometimes arbitrary, sometimes tactical terrorism against an entire race of people and a particular assault on black males and black “manhood.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, while white men killed over the supposed rape of white women, they “...condoned or ignored white rape of black women,” a very real consequence of black bodies and black wombs being the property of white slave owners pre-Emancipation, and not an imagined crime to justify murder.<sup>33</sup> Before films, rape

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<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Belew, 92.

<sup>28</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1968), 148.

<sup>29</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States* (1895), 6.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Why is the Negro Lynched?* (Bridgewater: John Whitby and Sons, Limited, 1895), 9.

<sup>31</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, 293.

<sup>32</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, 295.

<sup>33</sup> James Allen et al., 23.

featured prominently in circulated lynching photography and postcards with one stating "...reverse reads, "Four Niggers hanged by a mob in the State of Georgia for assaulting a white woman" (see Figure 5). But like so many others, this was simply a convenient excuse because there was a long history in Southern society of "defending" white women's honor through preserving their virginity and protecting them against rape. Moreover, it is through these lenses that the lynching of Gus in *The Birth of a Nation* and the lynchings of Eph and the Landry family in *Within Our Gates* can be understood.

### **Analogies between Film and Lynching**

Hugo Munsterberg, in one of the first pieces of film theory published, explained how "[d]epth and movement alike come to us in the moving picture world, not as facts but as a mixture of fact and symbol."<sup>34</sup> He argued that individuals uniquely perceive depth and movement in films, understanding it to be real and not real at the same time. This is in contrast to the way viewers contemplate photography and sculptured images. Photographs take up a moment in time and freeze it for the viewer, and they can only gather what is going on from the elements within in it. Sculptures give a viewer a three-dimensional view, but one does not speculate on what would be around it or its context. A sculpture is isolated in reality as a photography is isolated in time. However, in the "photoplay," a viewer's mind builds upon what is happening in the film. Viewers can fill in gaps such as the historical period and location when elements move on and off screen. In addition, one can speculate on what they are seeing in real time on a higher level, coming to conclusions about the symbols used. Moreover, on the most concrete level, segregated, dark theaters of the early twentieth century would have many analogies with the collective spectacle of lynching. Seeing a lynching on screen was not an individualistic experience like receiving a lynching postcard would have been. White audiences would be in a mob of sorts, witnessing a lynching on the screen in a crowd of familiars, speculating on the symbols of the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy

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<sup>34</sup> Hugo Münsterberg, *Hugo Munsterberg on Film: The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2001), 78.

while feeling themselves draw into the mob. Black audiences, on the other hand, were forced to be simultaneously in the role of the victimized and spectator, seeing themselves lynched on screen and unable to stop the process.

A poignant example of this dichotomy between white audiences as mob and spectator and black audiences as victim and spectator is found in the survival narrative of James Cameron. A survivor of arguably the most famous lynch mob in a lynching photograph ever taken, the survivor's own words mimic the transition from lynching photography to depictions of lynching on film (see Figure 6). He recounts that "[t]he roomful of negatives disappeared and I found myself looking into the faces of people who had been flat images only a moment ago."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, "[m]any in the crowd wore the headdress of the Ku Klux Klan without the patented white robes and a mask to hide their identity," meaning they were unafraid to have their photos taken.<sup>36</sup> Finally, he reflects, "[t]here was a manner of gaiety among the people in the crowd, a carnival atmosphere."<sup>37</sup> It can be gathered that "Cameron perceive[d] his actual experience of lynching through the lens of the images that have shaped his imagination of lynching."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, "...he understands how he is about to pass into the realm of representation himself, how his life's story is about to be stilled in the image of a hanging corpse, how he is about to take a place in the national imagery of racialized torture and murder."<sup>39</sup> As Cara Caddoo states, "[u]nlike theatrical performances, which were locked into a single place and time, or the printed word, which presupposed the reader's solitary and intimate relationship with the text, the movie could be distributed and exhibited to thousands of people all at once."<sup>40</sup> The experiences of James Cameron reflect the audience who would eventually flock to the theaters to witness scenes of lynching. As a new and exciting mode of entertainment, the carnivalesque mood James Cameron described in white lynch mobs was replicated

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<sup>35</sup> James Cameron, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1994), 74.

<sup>36</sup> James Cameron, 55.

<sup>37</sup> James Cameron, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Cara Caddoo, 146.

when a family attended a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* directed by D. W. Griffith. Similarly, black audiences would have witnessed and felt many of the same things in the collective spectacle of on-screen lynching, projecting themselves onto the victims rather than the victimizers in *Within Our Gates* directed by Oscar Micheaux.

### ***The Birth of a Nation* (1915)**

*The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D.W. Griffith, and its source material *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) by Thomas F. Dixon Jr., exemplified the mythologized and sanitized vision of white lynching. It presented the myth of the first Ku Klux Klan as all-American saviors, as well as a lynch scene that was carried out in service of the nation. *The Birth of a Nation* galvanized the black community who "...argued that cinema had exceptional powers to alter the public perception of the race."<sup>41</sup> Its premiere also, in some ways, foreshadowed the Red Summer to follow in 1919 in which widespread "race riots" engulfed the nation.<sup>42</sup> While most of Ku Klux Klan's ideology was not widespread, "[m]ainstream white American racial prejudice against African Americans was more compatible with the anti-black principles of the Invisible Empire than with other elements of Klan racial doctrine."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, a story of a valiant and heroic Ku Klux Klan protecting vulnerable white Southern society during Reconstruction found a waiting audience who was captivated by the tale. In the second half of the film, three major scenes convey the sanitized vision of lynching that would be the "perfect" lynching in the white imagination: an embittered Cameron at the end of the Civil War, the attempted rape of his sister Flora, and the ending scene showing war, Christianity, and a double marriage.

After the war, a Northern politician designates "...Silas Lynch, as a symbol of his race, the peer of any white man living," a mulatto man who is the villain of the story.<sup>44</sup> Silas Lynch being half-black and

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas R. Pregram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), 146.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas R. Pregram, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas R. Pregram, 59.

<sup>44</sup> *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; USA: Epoch Producing Co., 2014), [YouTube Video](#).

half-white, and a conniving Reconstruction politician who desires a white woman is important to the narrative of social decay justifying lynching in the film. Rape was the central reason why white men said they had to lynch black people. However, fear of white women sleeping with black men and producing children was the central threat to racist Anglo-Saxon beliefs around white womanhood and purity. To put mixed-race children in positions of power over white men and allow them to marry white women was completely unacceptable. It is the reason Silas Lynch's character is a symbol within the film. He is what America was becoming by allowing more people to become citizens in racist white ideology—a country of “mud races.” Juxtaposed with Silas Lynch is Cameron, a veteran and future founder of the Ku Klux Klan. Cameron acts as a symbol of white anxieties surrounding the emancipation of black people. Various intertitles detail his fears over the changes Reconstruction is bringing to the south and the pressure it is putting on white women, including his sister Flora and mother. Cameron watches in horror as slowly, but surely, the Freedman’s Bureau gives out supplies to newly freed black people who turn on their former white masters (see Figure 6). In the House of Representatives, D. W. Griffith claims to use historical photographs and amalgamates various racist stereotypes into an image that is false but presented as the truth (see Figure 7). Black representatives eat fried chicken, are barefoot, dirty and asleep during the proceedings. The newly elected black representatives go as far as to pass bills “...that all whites must salute negro officers on the streets,” and allow “...for the intermarriage of black and whites.”<sup>45</sup> Both of these bills, which never happened in real life, go to show the power that perceived social decay has on white men’s need to reestablish white supremacy and Anglo-Saxon values.

Thrown into the mix of Cameron’s embittered world is the shocking attempt by Gus, a black union veteran, to rape his sister, Flora. Here, the catalyst for the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and in many ways the rebirth of the nation is found. Flora acts as a stand-in for Anglo-Saxon white womanhood and virtue and decides to jump to her death than be “tarnished” by a black man (see Figure 8). To honor her memory, the

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<sup>45</sup> *The Birth of a Nation*, [YouTube Video](#).



Ku Klux Klan is formed. An intertitle reads “The Ku Klux Klan, the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule, but not without the shedding of more blood than at Gettysburg, according to Judge Tourgee of the carpet-baggers.”<sup>46</sup> Their first act is to “terrorize a negro disturber and barn burner,” presenting the movement as law and order when it is the exact opposite.<sup>47</sup> When they get a hold of Gus, it is no coincidence that all present are white military veterans punishing a black military veteran. The scene has a direct connection to Colonel Lynch and the history a “lynch law” enacted on traitors. Gus becomes a turncoat revolutionary soldier with Cameron and his small band of men the righteous servants of justice and Anglo-Saxon virtue (see Figure 9). Gus’s lynching is highly ritualistic, with flags dipped in the virginal blood of Flora that “...bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization.” Furthermore, another intertitle reads, “Here I raise the ancient symbol of an unconquered race of men, the fiery cross of old Scotland’s hills.....I quench its flames in the sweetest blood that ever stained the sands of Time!” This line conflates racist white ideology with white Americans’ European ancestral roots, with costumes that resemble the Crusaders.

When Cameron reveals his face, he shows he is unafraid of the consequences of his actions because he has the moral high ground. He and the KKK are above the corrupt legal system infiltrated by Northerners, black people, and mulattos. They *are* the white mob that attacked James Cameron in reality even though white American controlled all branches of government in the new south. The lynching of Gus is in many ways the “perfect lynching.” It is sanitized, not a process of prolonged torture, with Gus a sacrificial lamb to reunite north and south under the banner of Anglo-Saxon virtues. As the veteran Cameron and the Ku Klux Klan fight to overthrow the black populations rule, an intertitle reads, “[t]he former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright.” It is through the murder and subjugation of black upstarts that white values reunite across the nation torn apart by the Civil War. The final intertitles read, “Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!”

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<sup>46</sup> *The Birth of a Nation*, [YouTube Video](#).

<sup>47</sup> *The Birth of a Nation*, [YouTube Video](#).

and, “Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more./ But instead—the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace,” giving a patriotic and Christian flourish to lawlessness and murder. The double union of Cameron, a southerner, and his wife, a northern, and another couple with the same dynamic symbolize north and south physically coming together after Reconstruction ends. To revive America and be American meant eliminating the people that had broken down the Anglo-Saxon values that preserved white society. *The Birth of a Nation* was able to effectively propose falsehoods as truth by weaving together historical facts with fictionalized memory. This film represents a rebirth of a recent war-torn nation, consecrated in the blood of traitorous blacks instead of turncoat Brits, and sanctified by the blood of pure white Southern women.

### ***Within Our Gates* (1920)**

*Within Our Gates* (1920) directed by Oscar Micheaux is often viewed as a direct response to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). An editorial in the *Chicago Defender* referred to *Within Our Gates* as “...the sensational propaganda feature,” and “...the greatest protest against injustice and the finest preachment against prejudice that was ever screened” created by “Race leaders” for white audiences and the “Race people in Chicago.”<sup>48</sup> Like *The Birth of a Nation*, *Within Our Gates* was pushing an agenda. However, unlike the latter, it offered a nuanced and critical view of race and racial violence in United States. Due to the lynching of a black people by a white mob, “...the Chicago Board of Movie Censors...ruled that in their collective judgment its effect on the minds of the audience would result in a race riot similar to the one...” in Chicago during 1919.<sup>49</sup> The irony is that *The Birth of a Nation* helped to ignite the “race riots.” *Within Our Gates*, on the other hand, pushed back against the dominant imagery and discourse D. W. Griffith’s film set forth around lynching and the representation of black people on the silver screen.

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<sup>48</sup> “GREAT LESSON,” 1920, *The Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966), Jan 17, 7. <http://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.flagship.luc.edu/docview/493406400?accountid=12163>.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 152.

Allyson Nadia Field explains how “[b]ookerite principles of humility, work, thrift, and usefulness were widely accepted at the means of African American survival and social stability in the new century,” and made their way into the first “race films” of the early 1900s.<sup>50</sup> “The presumption that training in citizenship is the basis for improved race relation is...[seen in] before-and-after rhetoric” or photography coming out of the Tuskegee Institute and similar organizations.<sup>51</sup> Like lynching photography, these photos of uplift were meant to immerse black viewers, but instead of showing them dead bodies, it showed them a path to acceptance in American society. Therefore, “...it is logical that cinema was a natural successor to uplift photography and its narratives.”<sup>52</sup> “Uplift would move to race films, carrying with it the same ideology of self-representation but also concerned with showing “...the Black community as it is.”<sup>53</sup> However, Oscar Michaux challenged black notions of economic security and full citizenship by showing how black people effectively “lynch” themselves along with the savagery of white mobs.

*Within Our Gates* contains four important scenes that relate to lynching: the initial flight of the main character Sylvia to the north, the lynchings of Eph and the Landry’s, the attempted rape of Sylvia, and the call for nationalism preceding marriage at the tail end of the film. The first intertitle reads, “[a]t the opening of our drama, we find our characters in the North, where the prejudices and hatreds of the South do not exist —though this does not prevent the occasional lynching of a Negro.”<sup>54</sup> Oscar Michaux attempts to show reality as it is in the north and south, painting a much more favorable picture of the north that is not under strict Jim Crow to which Sylvia escaped to for reasons yet unknown. All is not well in the north however as “Mrs. Geraldine Stratton, a rich Southerner passing through Boston—a bitter enemy of woman’s suffrage, because it appalls her to think that Negro women might vote,” causes trouble

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<sup>50</sup> Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Allyson Nadia Field, 59.

<sup>52</sup> Allyson Nadia Field, 81.

<sup>53</sup> Allyson Nadia Field, 246.

<sup>54</sup> *Within Our Gates*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1920; USA: Micheaux Book & Film Company, 2015), [YouTube Video](#).

when Sylvia wants to raise money for a black school.<sup>55</sup> She states, “[t]heir ambition is to belong to a dozen lodges, consume religion without restraint, and, when they die, go straight up to Heaven.”<sup>56</sup> And to do so, she funds had a black preacher who keeps his congregation submissive with sermons that state, “[w]hile the white folk, with all their schooling, all their wealth, all their sins, will most all fall into the everlasting inferno!”<sup>57</sup> This shows that Oscar Michaux believed the black community were holding themselves back by not embracing modernity and playing into prejudiced white stereotypes. Furthermore, even northerners would hold themselves back, such as a white woman not wanting the vote if it meant black men and women could gain the right as well. Therefore, citizenship as the end all be all of being American is problematized. This shows the level of nuance Oscar Michaux was able to interject in his film where racist tropes populate D. W. Griffith's film.

As the film progresses, Sylvia decides to return to the south in order to uplift the black community. Two intertitles read, “[i]t is my duty and the duty of each member of our race to help destroy ignorance and superstition...” and “...during that sleepless night she could think of nothing but the eternal struggle of her race and of how she could uplift it.”<sup>58</sup> These quotes reflect the Bookerite and DuBois schools of thought that the educated elite should propel African-Americans into modernity. Through economic advancement and education, full citizenship and integration could be achieved. A scene where a black doctor reads a newspaper with Theodore Roosevelt on the cover with various articles on black uplift drives home the notion that the Progressive Era should be one of progress for black people as well (see Figures 10, 11, 12). However, in the south “...ignorance and the lynch law reign supreme...”<sup>59</sup> It is there that the story of Sylvia’s adoptive family is told. The Landry’s are accused of the murder of the wealthy white southern Griddlestone. Eph, an Uncle Tom like characters, rats out the family with a false story. The lynching sequence is horrid as the family flees there home and are chased

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<sup>55</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

<sup>56</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

<sup>57</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

<sup>58</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

<sup>59</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

into the forest. During the process, the white mob made up of old and young, women, men, and children mistakenly kill another white man and lynch Eph because they cannot find the Landrys (see Figure 13 and 14). Through these scenes, Oscar Michaux shows that black and white Americans, by buying into white supremacy, ultimately hurt themselves. Furthermore, lynching was a long process that brutalized entire families, often because of an overt lie. Once caught, the Landry's are beat, lynched, and their corpses burned off camera with the young son escaping to an unknown destination (see Figure 15). During this time, Sylvia returns home and is almost raped by a white man (see Figure 16). "A scar on her chest saved her because...Gridlestone knew that Sylvia was his daughter—his legitimate daughter from marriage to a woman of her race—who was later adopted by the Landrys."<sup>60</sup> This last act of racial violence, that of attempted rape inverts and subverts the attempted rape of Flora in *The Birth of a Nation*. It paints a more realistic and brutal picture of what lynching means. It is the extension of generational, systematic violence committed against black people. The legacy of slavery and the new terror of lynching are literally thrust upon Sylvia, who barely escapes and will always carry the scars. Her brother escaping into the unknown symbolizes a new generation who will face unfathomable terrors in their quest for full integration in the United States.

In the last scenes of the film, upon hearing this story, Sylvia's suitor, a black doctor, tells her to, "[b]e proud of our country, Sylvia. We should never forget that our people did in Cuba under Roosevelt's command./And at Carrizal in Mexico./And later in France, from Bruges to Chateau-Thierry, from Saint-Mihiel to the Alps!"<sup>61</sup> He ends with the exclamation "[w]e were never immigrants," and convinces her to marry him.<sup>62</sup> The ending is multifaceted and leaves the viewer with a hollow satisfaction. Though it is shown that striving for equality through education and economic achievement can still end in death, patriotism and citizenship are still the only viable solutions to escape racial violence. The union of Sylvia, an educator, and a successful black doctor is ultimately ambiguous when compared to the triumphant

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<sup>60</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

<sup>61</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

<sup>62</sup> *Within Our Gates*, [YouTube Video](#).

union of North and South in *The Birth of a Nation*. Their union does not heal a country or the black race. It patches two individuals together carrying the physical and mental scars of oppression. Lynching has stained their community. Their way cannot lead to full acceptance in the nation nor can servitude to white supremacy, as shown with the lynching of Eph. In the end, they are still forced to toe the line, relying on the constitution and fighting for freedom with the hope one day they too will be free. *Within Our Gates* is both an anti-racist proclamation as well as an examination of generational trauma. The only path left is citizenship and education because all other doors have been closed, mentally and physically, to black humanity and liberation. The film is introspective, testing the limits of freedom and self-determination in the black community, with lynching a manifestation of white backwardness and black peoples' inability to escape the legacy of slavery.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the truth is always stranger than fiction. Race and racial violence have a long and troubled history in the United States of America. During the Progressive Era, lynching was the most poignant manifestation of racial violence in the nation. Lynching photography and lynching postcards were the first step in nationalizing, commodifying, and commemorating the widespread ritualistic murder of black people during the early twentieth century. By nurturing a false narrative that justified why white men lynched, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) directed by D. W. Griffith propelled long-standing racist ideology to a truly national audience. What followed was a reinvigorated second Ku Klux Klan, drawing on Crusader imagery that acted as symbols of Anglo-Saxon virtue and the rape of a white woman in the film to empower their movement. By conflating a white man's ability to define American values and subjugate through the threat of the "lynch law," a truly bizarre definition of Americanism arose. Being American, in those terms, meant being white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, and in the short, a willful murderer. In the wake of this reality, and the bloody "race riots" that spread across the country during the Red Summer of 1919, the race film *Without Our Gates* (1920) directed by Oscar Devereaux Micheaux sought to present black and white audiences an alternative view of what it meant to be American. This

version saw lynching as a symptom of a much larger, two-pronged disease. On one hand, the black community was over-eager to please and to be accepted into hostile white communities. In addition, the leaders of the black community were stuck in antiquated modes of thinking. By not investing in their own progress in the modern era, black people were effectively “lynching” themselves. On the other hand, lynching was the barbaric practice of backward southern society. In a truly modern, cosmopolitan nation, founded on freedom, and ruled by the laws of the Constitution, being American meant achieving citizenship, gaining a civic education, and becoming economically independent. Being American simply meant achieving the American dream, and those who lynched black people were the reason America was not at its full potential.

Both visions of lynching contribute to understandings of the connections between race and violence in the modern era in which individuals are inundated with photographs and videos veiling prejudice as patriotism. As the intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates eloquently stated, “[w]e believe white dominance to be a fact of the inert past, a delinquent debt that can be made to disappear if only we don’t look.”<sup>63</sup> In reality, the legacy of white supremacy is pervasive in *everything* Americans look at. It can be seen in token black characters killed off in popcorn flicks with insidious implications. In addition, when the White House recently stated, “[i]t doesn't matter if anti-Muslim videos are real because 'the threat is real,’” one cannot help but be reminded of the power of video to subordinate and spread racist ideology.<sup>64</sup> D. W. Griffith successfully profited off propaganda. He made use of faulty historical records and white ideology that justified lynching and presented these lies as truth to a willfully ignorant audience. If sources of truth, such as the news, become vehicles for bigoted ideology, the United States risks reinforcing hatred and justifying violence on those deemed to be the “other.” Without voices such as Oscar Micheaux to be critical of such voices, it will become harder to separate fact from fiction and news

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<sup>63</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

<sup>64</sup> Christina Wilkie, “White House: It doesn't matter if anti-Muslim videos are real because 'the threat is real,’” *CNBC*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/29/white-house-it-doesnt-matter-if-anti-muslim-videos-are-real-the-threat-is-real.html>.

from films. When that happens, when fiction reinforces bigotry and replaces the desire for a more just reality, Americans risk the stability of United States society, which is supposed to be free for all and not just a few.



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(Without Sanctuary Figure 2).

I bought this in Highwongille 15<sup>th</sup>  
each. They are set on sale openly.  
I forgot to send it until just now I can  
across it. I read an account of the  
night riders affairs where it says they  
men were hung without any apparent  
cause or reason. whatever.  
A law was passed forbidding them  
to be sent thru the mail or to be  
sold anymore.

# Post Card

|                                  |      |
|----------------------------------|------|
| PLACE POSTAGE<br>HERE            |      |
| DOMESTIC<br>IS. POS-<br>SESSIONS | } 1c |
| CANADIAN<br>MEXICAN              |      |
| FOREIGN                          | 2c   |

This Space for Address only.

(Without Sanctuary Figure 3).

## RAPE IS NOT THE REASON

A Lee County Farmer named McGuinn, shot by a mob, took refuge in old man Lake's house. The sheriff came for the wounded man while the Lake boys were out of the house, and was shot by McGuinn. Although the mob knew the Lakes had nothing to do with the shooting, they returned the next night and hanged old man Lake, his three sons, and a nephew to "The Dogwood Tree," merely as an expression of White Supremacy. (See front page.)

### This woman did not commit rape

Albany, Ga., October 4, 1916.—A negro woman, named Connelly, whose son is charged with killing a white farmer after a quarrel in which she took part, was taken from the jail at Leary, Ga., some time Monday night and lynched, according to reports reaching here to-day. Her body, riddled with bullets, was found to-day.

The son is under arrest.—Associated Press dispatch, New York Times, Oct. 5.

### Five hung for a hog

On August 18, 1916, the sheriff went from Gainesville, Florida, at two o'clock in the morning to arrest Boisy Long for hog stealing. Boisy shot the sheriff and escaped. In retribution next morning, the mob hanged Boisy's wife, Stella Long; Mary Dennis (pregnant), James Dennis, and Bert Dennis, neighbors; and Josh Baskin, a colored preacher—all to the same "Dogwood Tree," as an expression of White Supremacy.

### Here is a typical year—1915

|                               |    |                                     |    |
|-------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------|----|
| Colored men lynched.....      | 74 | For Murder.....                     | 32 |
| Colored women lynched.....    | 5  | For Stealing.....                   | 9  |
| Colored children lynched..... | 1  | For Rape and attempted rape.....    | 9  |
| Colored Citizens.....         | 80 | For Resisting arrest.....           | 6  |
|                               |    | For Unknown reasons.....            | 6  |
| Hanged.....                   | 71 | For Improper Advances to women..... | 5  |
| Shot.....                     | 3  | For Assault.....                    | 3  |
| Drowned.....                  | 1  | For Threats and insults.....        | 3  |
| Burned alive.....             | 5  | For Poisoning mules.....            | 3  |
| Tortured Citizens.....        | 80 | For Concealing fugitives.....       | 2  |
|                               |    | Miscellaneous.....                  | 2  |
|                               |    | American Citizens.....              | 80 |

THREE REGIMENTS, 2 850, LYNCHED SINCE 1885

LESS THAN 33 PER CENT. FOR RAPE,  
ATTEMPTED RAPE, AND  
ALLEGED RAPE

## THE WACO HORROR

THERE ARE CRIMES EVEN WORSE THAN RAPE

HERE IS ONE:



On May 8, 1916, Jesse Washington, a boy of seventeen, of deficient mentality, raped and murdered the wife of his employer.

On May 15, 1916, he was tried in Waco, Texas, and condemned to hang that same afternoon. With the connivance of Sheriff Fleming and without protest from Judge Munroe, the mob took the prisoner from the courtroom to the square under the Mayor's window, where the camera was set up which took the above photograph. Fifteen thousand Texans shouted their approval while those near enough unsexed him; cut off his fingers, nose, and ears; and burned him alive; after which the remains were dragged through the streets of a city of 40,000, bouncing at the end of a lariat.

The teeth brought five dollars each, and the links of the chain, twenty-five cents.

This while the gallant Negro Troopers of the Tenth Cavalry were on their way to Carrizal.

HOW LONG ARE SUCH MOBS TO BE ALLOWED TO  
DRAG THE NATION'S GOOD NAME IN THE DUST

?

(NAACP Figure 4).



*(Without Sanctuary Figure 5).*



*(Without Sanctuary Figure 6).*





*(The Birth of a Nation Figure 7).*





*(The Birth of a Nation Figure 9).*



*(The Birth of a Nation Figure 10).*



*(Within Our Gates Figure 11).*

Rev. Thurston has begun an active campaign for the education of the black race. He asks that the federal government contribute significantly, so that Negro children in all of the United States can receive proper instruction. He has called on a number of senators and congressmen with the goal of . . .

(*Within Our Gates* Figure 12).

The Negro is a human being. His nature is not different from other human nature. Thus, we must recognize his rights as a human being. Such is the teaching of Christianity.

(*Within Our Gates* Figure 13).



*(Within Our Gates* Figure 14).





(*Within Our Gates* Figure 15).



( *Within Our Gates* Figure 16).



*(Within Our Gates Figure 17).*