Despite the parchment paper pronouncements of separate but equal and the bright block-lettered signs loudly proclaiming “For Colored” and “For White,” at the heart of the culture of segregation lay a profound ambiguity. Separation, after all, did not necessarily mean racial inferiority. It could also signify the creation of relatively autonomous black spaces, even autonomous black bodies. In fact, even as African Americans fought disenfranchisement and legal segregation in the courts across the South, many black southerners sought to separate themselves as fully as possible from the white southerners who had been their former masters. Segregation certainly meant shabby or nonexistent waiting rooms and train cars where African American passengers were jumbled together with smoking whites and engine soot. W. E. B. Du Bois made the intended indignity clear in revising his 1925 article on Georgia for The Nation while traveling through the state:

**W. E. B. Du Bois**

*We are very near an answer to our question—how may the [white] Southerner take hold of his Tradition? The answer is by violence. Allen Tate*
“I am in the hot, crowded, and dirty Jim Crow car where I belong . . . I am not comfortable.” Yet segregation also created spaces for black doctors, black colleges, and increasingly black business districts—from Auburn Avenue in Atlanta to Beale Street in Memphis—as southern African Americans moved into growing southern cities. The creation of a separate white southern world, a culture of segregation, implied that somewhere there existed a separate black one. As whites strove to create an all-encompassing system of separation, then, they also risked aiding African Americans in the very struggle for more autonomy that white supremacy sought to deny.¹

The culture of segregation was always a process, never a finished product. Despite the dizzying multiplicity of the spaces of consumption, white southerners sought to found their own racial identity within the maintenance of an absolute color bar. Yet black southerners continued to fight separation and exclusion, pushing against each new boundary. And despite Du Bois’s discomfort in the Jim Crow car, the expansion of transportation systems across the region rapidly increased spatial mobility, for black as well as white southerners. As threatening to whites as the development of a separate black world were the ways changes in leisure, consumption, and travel threatened to blur the edges of those carefully constructed white and black spaces. Indeed, southern whites found what the film historian Miriam Hansen has described as “the simultaneous liberation and commodification of sexuality that crucially defined the development of American consumer culture” particularly dangerous and yet also titillating. And threats came from within as well. The shift from an agrarian toward a more industrialized and urban economy and increasing activism among white industrial workers as well as Populists made class lines more visible. Southern white women, too, demonstrated a growing interest in reform and joined the temperance and suffrage movements in large numbers. Would a whiteness founded in a culture of segregation, then, be able to hold white southerners together?

Though Allen Tate referred to an older, antebellum southern white tradition in his essay for the Agrarian manifesto I’ll Take My Stand, he was right about the methods white southerners were using to defeat perceived threats to the racial line they had drawn in the sand. And as Tate participated in yet another recycling of Lost Cause themes of past southern glory and pastoral utopia, he surely would have appreciated the long history of the answer at which he arrived. Unfortunately, white southerners’ best-known acts of violence, lynchings, became increasingly bound up between 1890 and 1940 in the very practices of a modern culture of consumption that Tate hoped his region in 1930 would use violence to reject.⁴

It was an uneasy landscape, the early twentieth-century South, a small-town, small-city world of ice companies and beauty parlors, soda fountains and gas stations. It was a world where people who went to church some days watched or participated in the torture of their neighbors on others. In the decades following 1890, many lynchings no longer occurred in places untouched by the technological advances of the larger world. Lynchers drove cars, spectators used cameras, out-of-town visitors arrived on specially chartered excursion trains, and the towns and counties in which these horrifying events happened had newspapers, telegraph offices, and even radio stations that announced times and locations of these upcoming violent spectacles. Although after the peak decades of the 1890s the number of lynchings decreased even in the South, the cultural impact of the practice became more powerful. More people participated in, read about, saw pictures of, and collected souvenirs from lynchings even as fewer mob murders occurred. In the twentieth century white southerners transformed a deadly and often quiet form of vigilante “justice” into a modern spectacle of enduring power.⁵

Yet not all southern lynchings fit this new and evolving pattern. More often, small groups of white men hunted down and shot or hanged their African American victims after an argument over the year-end sharecroppers’ settle or to send a message to other timber or turpentine camp laborers not to demand any better. These lynchings in the night claimed many more victims than the open-air spectacles of torture that drew such large crowds. And white violence against southern blacks was not limited only to lynchings—white men continued in more private settings to rape black women and assault African Americans for “reasons” ranging from black resistance and economic success to white hatred, jealousy, and fear.⁶ “Private violence,” as W. J. Cash explained in 1941, stemmed from the same circumstances that made spectacle lynchings “socially defensible” from a southern white perspective: “to smash a sassy Negro, to kill him, to do the same to a ‘nigger lover’—this was to assert the white man’s prerogative as pointedly, to move as certainly to get a black man back in his place, as to Lynch.” Southern whites did not need Tate to encourage them to use vio-
lence to secure what he conceived as their more “private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual” way of life—it had been a chosen method of empowerment since colonial Jamestown.  

But something was new about lynchings in public, attended by thousands, captured in papers by reporters who witnessed the tortures, and photographed for those spectators who wanted a souvenir and yet failed to get a coveted finger, toe, or fragment of bone. More was at stake than putting African American southerners brutally in their place, as Cash understood, for “private violence” succeeded in limiting and often eliminating African American political activity and achieving significant white control of black labor. Explanations of the practice of lynching in the twentieth century, however, have focused on the persistence of the “barbaric” practice of the past rather than its transformation, in the case of spectacle lynchings, into a peculiarly modern ritual.

Southern whites, according to both contemporary observers like H. L. Mencken and Arthur Raper and present-day scholars like James McGovern and Joel Williamson, lynched African American men and occasionally women in the absence of “modernity”—because they lacked a “modern” economy, a “modern” white male sexuality, or even a “modern” theater. Even Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in the best analysis of lynching to date, saw the region’s extreme racism as existing in conflict with southern modernizing efforts. And while the historians Fitzhugh Brundage and Edward L. Ayers have convincingly argued that lynching was central to the New South and particularly the structuring of its labor markets in areas experiencing rapid increases in their African American populations, they have focused mainly on the more common private lynchings and their role in the New South economy.

African American anti-lynching activists, too—some of whom had barely escaped lynching themselves—saw lynching as central to the New South, and they examined the function of violence in structuring a changing southern economy and culture. From Ida B. Wells, who founded both the study of lynching and anti-lynching activism, to Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary Church Terrell, James Weldon Johnson, and especially Walter White, they understood that whites’ practice of ritualized violence, what Terrell called “this wild and diabolical carnival of blood,” was central not only to the white economy but to white identity as well. Yet even the liberal W. J. Cash condemned Walter White as an extremist for denouncing the “rape complex” as a “fraud.” African American activists were more often simply ignored.

A practice dependent on modern transportation and printing technologies, increasingly intertwined with the practices of an emerging consumer culture, was not some frontier residue and soon-to-be-lost small obstacle to “Progress,” then, but a part of the southern present and future, a key medium for resolving the contradictions within the culture of segregation in which these brutal spectacles took place. “Lynch carnivals,” as a popular book on the subject written in the 1930s described them, were rituals increasingly bound up with the way southern whites shaped the practices of modern consumption to their own ends, communal spectacles of torture that helped ease white fears of a raceless consumer society even as they helped structure segregation, the policy that would regulate this new southern world. Publicly resolving the race, gender, and class ambiguities at the very center of the culture of segregation, spectacle lynchings brutally conjured a collective, all-powerful whiteness even as they made the color line seem modern, civilized, and sane. Spectacle lynchings were about making racial difference in the new South, about ensuring the separation of all southern life into whiteness and blackness even as the very material things that made up southern life were rapidly changing. Racial violence was modern.

The Genealogy of Lynchings as Modern Spectacle

Despite the roots of an expanding consumer culture outside the South, white southerners made an important contribution to the rapidly evolving forms of leisure in twentieth-century America: they modernized and perfected violence, in the form of the spectator lynching, as entertainment, as what Du Bois had chillingly described as a new and yet grisly form of white southern amusement. And like all cultural forms, over time lynching spectacles evolved a well-known structure, a sequence and pace of events that southerners came to understand as standard. The well-choreographed spec-
tacle opened with a chase or a jail attack, followed rapidly by the public identification of the captured African American by the alleged white victim or the victim's relatives, announcement of the upcoming event to draw the crowd, and selection and preparation of the site. The main event then began with a period of mutilation—often including emasculation—and torture to extract confessions and entertain the crowd, and built to a climax of slow burning, hanging, and/or shooting to complete the killing. The finale consisted of frenzied souvenir gathering and display of the body and the collected parts.13

To be sure, in a perverse twist on regional exceptionalism, Lynchings of all kinds became fixed in southerners' as well as nonsoutherners' imaginations as the dominant form of southern white violence against blacks. And certainly news of midnight shootings and hangings by small groups of white men circulated among both white and black southerners even when not reported in local papers. Hearing that "the white folks" quietly shot his classmate's brother, Richard Wright recalled the impact all "white death" had on young African American men: "the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew. The actual experience would have let me see the realistic outlines of what was really happening, but as long as it remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment, I was compelled to give my entire imagination over to it..." Since southern blacks rarely attended public Lynchings, their knowledge of all these extralegal killings remained paradoxically distant and perhaps fantastic even as their very effective networks of communication publicized the brutality that struck close at hand.

Yet as the twentieth century progressed—or perhaps regressed—spectacle Lynchings became the most widely known form of white violence against southern blacks even as less public Lynchings claimed many more victims. Cash declared that by 1900, the white South had developed a lynchings habit. As Walter White lamented, however, by the 1920s interest in the practice of lynching had spread far beyond the region in which mob murders were most likely to occur: "mobism has degenerated to the point where an uncomfortably large percentage of American citizens can read in their newspapers of the slow roasting alive of a human being in Mississippi and turn, promptly and with little thought, to the comic strip or sporting page. Thus has lynching become an almost integral part of our national folkways."
The distance was not far, then, between titillation and disgust, a white southern amusement, an African American tragedy, and a new national pastime.14

But just how did a practice of quiet vigilant justice become a modern public spectacle, a narrative of astonishment interest more than horrified concern, a national folkway? Consumer culture, spreading from the Northeast across the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, created the possibility of a new kind of public, a much more heterogeneous group of shoppers, diners, travelers, vaudeville and movie patrons, sports fans, and visitors to local, regional, and national fairs. In the North, as the historian David Nasaw has argued, segregation absolutely excluded African Americans from an emerging world of urban public amusements, denying them access to fair midways, amusement and baseball parks, and vaudeville and movie theaters. Yet segregation alone did not meld these new heterogeneous crowds into a white public. The spectacle of African American otherness was also required. Thus whites of all classes, genders, and ethnicities could gawk at the "Dahomeys" in a fair exhibit of "Darkest Africa," "buy three balls for five" to "dunk the nigger" at Coney Island, and cheer on a black man's Lynchings in Birth of a Nation.15

In the North, then, segregation and the spectacle of black otherness made a mass audience for the new purveyors of commercial entertainments and other new mass products. For southern whites, however, the problem of creating a new white public was both more difficult and, they believed, more necessary. There segregation and spectacle lynching made what Du Bois referred to as a new white "amusement" but also a new southern order. Segregation as culture strengthened racial boundaries without denying southern whites and blacks who could afford consumer products access to them, allowing white-owned businesses to sell African Americans Coca-Cola and movies and yet protect white supremacy too. For southern blacks must, while enjoying their purchases, swallow their pride along with their soda. They could only publicly consume goods within spaces marked, whether "For Colored" or not, as clearly inferior. Yet making a spectacle of lynching disrupted the commonality of even this spatially divided experience of consumption. Only whites, whether they endorsed the violence or not, could experience the "amusement" of a black man burned. Only African Americans could be extralegally and publicly tortured and killed. In a grisly dialectic, then, consumer culture created spectacle Lynchings, and spectacle Lynchings became a southern way of enabling the spread of consumption as a white privilege. The violence both helped create a white con-
suming public and the structure of segregation where consumption could take place without threatening white supremacy.\textsuperscript{16}

Newspaper reporters and men around the stove at the crossroads store, telegraph operators and women at the local meeting of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, law “enforcement” officials and trainmen who jumped from the car to tell the news at each stop—all helped shape the stories of specific events into a dominant narrative of southern spectacle lynchings that evolved in the decades between 1890 and 1940. But widely circulated newspaper stories, as Walter White understood, were central to the power of these new “amusements.” While thousands of white southerners witnessed and participated in lynchings as the twentieth century unfolded, the majority of Americans—white and black, northern and southern—learned about these events from newspapers and to a lesser extent books, pamphlets, and radio announcements. In many cases these accounts were written by reporters who personally witnessed the spectacle, but the experience for their readers or listeners was mediated, a representation at least once removed from actual involvement. And even those spectators who attended the lynching or later viewed the body or examined a display of “souvenirs” were affected as well by the narratives constructed by reporters to describe and explain these events. Beginning in the 1890s, no matter the specific characteristics, representations of spectacle lynchings increasingly fell into a ritualistic pattern as the narratives constructed by witnesses, participants, and journalists assumed a standardized form. Spectacle lynchings, then, became more powerful even as they occurred less frequently because the rapidly multiplying stories of these public tortures became virtually interchangeable.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus the modernization of the practice—the incorporation of cars and trains, radios, phones, and cameras—matched the standardization of the representations. As a dominant narrative evolved and circulated more widely, innovations added in a particular lynching were easily spotted and picked up by subsequent mobs. The grisly dialectic began in the 1890s as newspaper coverage grew, crowds increased, and lynch mobs adapted the rituals of public executions to the needs of vigilantism and racial control. As James Elbert Cutler found in the first academic investigation of lynchings, published in 1905, before 1890 magazines ignored the subject entirely while local newspapers printed small, sparse accounts. Three events in the early 1890s, however, initiated the early development of spectacle lynchings as practice and as narrative. First, the lynching on March 14, 1891, of eleven Italian immigrants accused of aiding in the murder of the New Orleans police chief brought international attention to mob murder in the South as the Italian government condemned the action and demanded indemnities. Before the fervor over these murders had faded, another public lynching in Louisiana occurred: a large crowd of whites tortured and burned an African American named Tump Hampton in St. Tammany Parish on May 30 of the same year. Significantly, publicity generated by the Italians’ murder spilled over in this case onto the lynching of a black southerner. The founding event in the history of spectacle lynchings, however, was the final murder in the gruesome triad, the 1893 lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas, for the alleged rape and murder of three-year-old Myrtle Vance.\textsuperscript{18}

The 1893 murder of Smith was the first blatantly public, actively promoted lynching of a southern black by a large crowd of southern whites. Adding three key features—the specially chartered excursion train, the publicly sold photograph, and the widely circulated, unabashed retelling of the event by one of the Lynchers—the killing of Smith modernized and made more powerful the loosely organized, more spontaneous practice of lynching that had previously prevailed. In what one commentator aptly termed a “neglected feature of railroadism,” from 1893 on railroad companies could be counted on to arrange special trains to transport spectators and Lynchers to previously announced lynching sites. On some occasions these trains were actually advertised in local papers; with railroad passenger service, even small towns could turn out large crowds. Even after automobiles cut into the railroads’ “lynch carnival” business, a 1938 commentator found that “modern trainmen, schooled in the doctrine of service,” helped “in an informative way” by relaying news of upcoming lynchings to train passengers and townspeople “all along the rail lines.”\textsuperscript{19}

As crucial as the innovation in transportation, however, was the publication, after Henry Smith’s lynching, of the first full account, from the discovery of the alleged crime to the frenzied souvenir gathering at the end: The Facts in the Case of the Horrible Murder of Little Myrtle Vance, and Its Fearful Expiation, at Paris, Texas, February 1, 1893. This widely distributed pamphlet is perhaps the most detailed account of a lynching ever written from a lyncher’s point of view. It included a photograph of Smith’s torture, probably also sold separately. This pamphlet initiated a new genre of lynching narrative, the author as eyewitness and in this case also participant.
More important, however, this anonymous lynch as reporter implicated the entire white community in the public torture and murder that had recently occurred: “From the first it was a clear case of temporary insanity of a whole populace, the moral and social shock for the time eclipsing every vestige of temperance in dealing with the culprit.” And “populace” did not mean simply white men. Though the photographer focused on the scaffold, emblazoned with a large sign that proclaimed “JUSTICE,” on which Smith was being tortured, the size of the crowd prevented him from getting very close to the action. The shot, more a picture of the mob than the mob’s victim, depicts a mass of spectators including white women and children. From the earliest spectacle Lynchings, then, white women actively participated in these events as more than the passive alleged victims that fueled white men’s fury. The story of lynching as the entire white community in action, using savagery to protect “Southern” civilization, was born.20

But even in 1893 there was another if extremely vulnerable space from which to narrate these events. In March of 1892 Ida B. Wells lived through the Lynchings of three of her closest friends—Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart, the African American owners of a new and successful enterprise where the streetcar turned on the outskirts of Memphis, the People’s Grocery Company of the colored suburb of the Curve. A quarrel between white and black boys over a game of marbles had escalated into a fight between white and black grocers. The black grocers were arrested. Then a white mob let in by law officers took the three men from their cells, loaded them on a switch engine that ran on a track behind the jail, drove them north of the city limits of sleeping Memphis, and shot them to death. Though no spectators witnessed the event, the good citizens of Memphis were not forgotten, for somehow one of the morning papers knew enough to hold up its edition and subscribers were able to read the details of the murders as they sipped a late cup of coffee.21

Ida B. Wells, however, also owned a paper. And as a white mob helped itself to food and drink at the People’s Grocery, her Memphis Free Speech attempted to set the record straight. Over the next three months the paper agitated against the violence and told African Americans to leave a city in which they could get no justice. Wells was convinced that her friends had been lynched because the success of their business hurt the Curve’s other grocery, a white-owned establishment. She began a closer investigation of the Lynchings, which had been only briefly recorded in the local and regional white papers. In late May 1892, she editorialized:

Eight Negroes lynched since the last issue of the Free Speech. Three were charged with killing white men and five with raping white women. Nobody in this section believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.22

Out of town at a convention, Wells escaped her own lynching, but Memphis whites silenced her southern voice as effectively. In a flurry of city Elite speech making, marching, and threatening, the Free Speech’s office and type were destroyed. By 1893, however, when Henry Smith was lynched for the alleged rape and murder of “Little Myrtle Vance,” Wells had already started her campaign to expose the fallacy of the rape myth as a justification for lynching from her new position at the New York Age.23

Lynching as practice and as story—the newspaper narratives that reported and even created racial violence in the region—never went unchallenged, then, by African Americans and a few brave liberal and radical whites. In fact, even as the dominant narrative of spectacle Lynchings developed, anti-lynching activists worked to subvert the story, believing that by exposing the false accounts of events and empty justifications, they would expose the immorality and end the violence. And the Lynchings they and later white liberals described became a hybrid sort of spectacle lynching as well: the stories they told of real or imagined Lynchings circulated publicly and bumped against the narrative most white southerners had learned to tell so well. Thus the violence occurred and the story was written within a never-ending dialectic—the pushing and pulling at the boundaries of the racialized yet shifting spaces of segregation as culture.

The Lynching of Sam Hose

If the lynching of Henry Smith marked the beginning of the transformation of the practice from quiet vigilante justice to modern public spectacle, the lynching of Sam Hose in Newnan, Georgia, in 1899 made an isolated event into a new and horrifying pattern. The alleged crimes, the chase, and the lynching occurred in and around places like Palmetto, Newnan, and Griffin—small southern towns like any others yet within forty miles of Atlanta. Easy
access to train and telegraph lines ensured that the lynching of Hose would be an “event” not just in the rural Georgia Piedmont but in the self-proclaimed capital of the New South as well. The Hose murder, then, added a key innovation: local and regional newspapers took over the publicity, promotion, and sale of the event and began the development of a standardized, sensationalized narrative pattern that would dominate reporting of spectacle lynchings through the 1940s.24

“DETERMINED MOB AFTER HOSE; HE WILL BE LYNCHED IF CAUGHT” began the story in the Atlanta Constitution on April 14, 1899. The best men were in the mob, unmasked white men and proud, the cream of “a half dozen counties,” “lawyers, doctors, merchant farmers, and every creed and class of men.” “Driven ... almost to a frenzy” and vowing “never to give up the chase,” these citizens, however, remained “perfectly cool” and would, the Atlanta papers assured readers, do what had to be done “as thoroughly and as orderly as though nothing unusual was involved.” From the first, local and regional papers never doubted that the African American would be tracked down by the mob and killed, and the large black letters in the papers gave an eerie certainty to an act of violence that had previously been both anticipated and feared. After all, the entire white community was behind these best men, not really a mob, the Journal stressed, but more of a crowd. Sam Hose’s alleged crimes had “closed the store doors in the towns and stopped the plows in the country,” as white men, women, and children sought “the fiendish beast.”

The white folks in Palmetto believed that on the previous night Sam Hose, a laborer on Alfred Cranford’s farm, had split open to the eyeballs the skull of the respected white farmer with an ax and then injured his children and raped his wife within reach of the bleeding corpse. As one of those lawyers or doctors or merchants, boastfully unmasked and yet unwilling to be identified, calmly told a reporter, “whatever death is most torturous, most horrifying to a brute, shall be meted out”; “let him burn slowly for hours.” Apparently no death was too horrifying for the lynching “crowd” or for the large numbers of white spectators whom newspaper announcements and especially chartered trains from Atlanta were certain to bring as soon as Hose was captured and the telegraph lines could transmit the appointed time and place. Hose’s fate had already been decided by the papers ten days beforehand, and as mobs of white men sifted the countryside, ransacking black houses, black farms, and black sections, the days grew hotter, the reading audience larger, and chances that the torture and killing of a black man would provide white amusement more certain. On April 23, a Sunday afternoon, in Newnan, Georgia, it was done.25

But the finale was ten days away when the Atlanta papers began developing the story, and they needed more than the repetitive details of the chase to hook their audiences. Mrs. Cranford, the wife of the murdered man and the alleged rape victim, provided the most exciting copy in those early days, but the reporters’ attempts to use her as both subject and source of the story exposed the gendered tensions at the center of spectacle lynchings. Granting interviews with reporters from both the Journal and the Constitution, she demanded an active role in planning the lynching, expressing a desire to witness Hose’s torture and death and her preference for a slow burning. Mrs. Cranford, then, was the voice of the crime that set the elaborate ritual in motion, a witness to her husband’s brutal murder and yet a survivor, a white who had easily outsmarted a black man determined not to leave without money by giving him a Confederate bill and convincing him of its worth. She was, in fact, the source of all that was known about the attack on her family.26

Yet could a white woman play so important and public a role in a ritual that both brought out and created the white community, that made whiteness? With their desire for authenticity and gore, the newspapers after all had put their spotlight on Mrs. Cranford. She had only claimed the power, possible through her sudden “fame,” to shape the story. But the papers were determined to put Mrs. Cranford back on the pedestal. No longer simply a good and common farm wife but now a woman of “refined parentage,” Mrs. Cranford, they sympathized, was a lady doubly savaged by the “black beast rapist.” The woman who had despite her horror upheld white supremacy by outsmarting her black assailant with a worthless bill was now described as “the horrified and hysterical wife.” Proclaiming that “death would have been mercy,” the reporters related details of the rape that she alone could have given them. Just as white women both helped in the chase and cheered on the “best men,” although it was Mrs. Cranford’s account of the crimes that initiated the spectacle lynching, the papers transformed her from active participant to passive victim. In the end, Hose was murdered in Newnan. And Mrs. Cranford’s desire to see the lynching, for the spectacle to take place near her home in Palmetto, was ignored.27

As the unfolding narrative of the spectacle lynching moved forward from the crime, the story of Hose’s capture provided a somewhat lighter interlude between Mrs. Cranford’s gruesome descriptions of rape and mur-
der and the anticipated climactic horror of Hose's torture and death. His captors claimed they caught him going to a cakewalk after recognizing him as a "strange negro" near his mother's house outside Marshallville. In one account Hose constructed his own disguise, while in another white men applied the lampblack to conceal his distinguishing copper color and increase their chances of delivering him safely to the sheriff for the promised reward. Either way white readers could find amusement in the picture of a black man in blackface as images of blackened-up black minstrels performing the cakewalk merged with the very different form of entertainment in which Hose would soon star. In this early spectacle lynching, it seemed, the minstrel act bridged the distance between the faithful, laughing slave and the "black beast rapist." Before he could be the beast, Hose played a more familiar role, the joking black fool.  

The small group of white men who had captured Hose took him to Griffin on the regular Macon-to-Atlanta train early Sunday morning. Again the papers played up the festive atmosphere. The railroad, eager to please and keep this special traffic separate from the other passengers, provided an excursion train to take Hose and the fast-growing mob from Griffin to Palmetto. En route the reporters cornered their star, and Hose confessed the murder but insisted he had not raped the white woman. His version of events, however, little mattered. He was checked with the sheriff like a package for the official receipt that entitled his captors to a reward. The mob soon stole him back from the sheriff, and the papers reported that "it was marvelous how the news spread and thousands came here to satisfy their curiosity and to take part in the lynching." Other trains too converged on Palmetto for the lynching, and officials of the Atlanta and West Point Railroad estimated they sold one thousand tickets and that stowaways stole five hundred spaces more. The show, it seemed, was on.

But eyewitness descriptions of the main event, the torture, burning, and souvenir gathering for which the large white crowd had assembled, threatened to unhinge the lynchers' role as enforcers of white supremacy. While the papers insisted that the mob escorting the captured Hose was an orderly, determined "crowd," reports did stress that at every step these good citizens feared some crazed outsider would shoot the pride and deny them their fun. Afraid, ironically, that Hose would be killed, they lynched him at Newnan, still ten miles from Palmetto, that Sunday just after church let out. Receiving word quickly by telegram, the papers had special correspondents at the scene, and in the Monday editions reporters as eyewitnesses detailed the cutting off of Hose's ears, his castration, and his very slow burning. Again the papers went to great lengths to "civilize" the mob, though at least one got Hose's name wrong: "the crowd that burned Holt—it could hardly be called a mob, so orderly was its action—has made no mistake...the crowd was cool and went about its work carefully and almost with a system." Another paper pronounced "absolute order and decorum." An ex-governor of the state, W. Y. Atkinson, bragged that though he had not prevented the lynching he had at least succeeded in persuading them to move the spectacle out of Newnan's town square and away from the white women and children. "The crowd was a marvel of coolness and determination and...was remarkably orderly," said Atkinson. The reporters even went so far as to praise the courage of the victim, who, they wrote, did not flinch as he marched to the stake or cry out as his legs slowly burned. "I stood as close to the flames and the writhing figure in their midst as the heat would permit," wrote the Journal's reporter. He described Hose "battling in the flames with the wildest superhuman energy": "now he was twisting around the tree, now biting at the back of the pine, jumping and springing and twisting and fighting for every inch of life, kicking the embers with his dangling legs, blood vessels bursting, eyes protruding, but not a word, not a tear, but, oh God, the horror of his face..." The stronger the victim, the greater the glory of the mob that defeated him. The "superhuman" Hose became both more and less than a man.

Certain images, however, threatened to break through the narrative of a calm avenging white civilization—images of "frenzied men" and "delirious delight," of an old white-haired man screaming "God bless every man that had a hand in this" and "thank God for vengeance," and of a mingling of white and black blood as men rushing to cut off pieces of Hose's body cut the hands of their friends instead. The barbarism of the trophy-gathering in particular exploded any claim of white deliberateness and calm. Mob members had collected some body parts, the choice ears and penis and fingers cut off before the fire, and many spectators afterward turned "souvenir seekers," rushing in to push back the still-hot coals and hack up the body, cutting out the heart and other internal organs, fighting rival onlookers for the most cherished prizes. The Journal reported that "men scrambled and fell over each other in their mad haste to secure something that would be a memento to the horrible tragedy. And everything that had any bearing on
the occasion was grabbed and pocketed, even the ashes were picked up in handkerchiefs and carried away in triumph. Men left the scene bearing huge chunks of burned wood, limbs of the tree which was made the stake, pieces of bone, and revolting and bloody segments of skull.” A market for souvenirs quickly developed, as spectators too far away from the burning bargained with luckier men and purchased at “inflated prices” their own keepsakes of that glorious day. In the process of giving its readers the sensationalized details of the spectacle, the papers blurred if not obliterated the fine distinction between a ritual of civilization taming savagery and actual savagery itself. If indeed “the whole male community seemed to be a unit,” what that unit accomplished did not seem as clear as many southern whites wanted to think.31

After there was nothing left to collect, the crowd broke up and went home, and those souvenirs also traveled, ending up in dusty mason jars in crossroads stores, on the mantles of farmhouses, in the homes of some of those best men. At least one of these bloody relics made it back to Atlanta. Although W. E. B. Du Bois did not write his alternative narrative of the aftermath of Hose’s lynching until decades afterward, this “souvenir” certainly extended the reach of the horrifying spectacle:

a Negro in central Georgia, Sam Hose, had killed his landlord’s wife. I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta Constitution office, carrying in my pocket a letter of introduction to Joel Chandler Harris. I did not get there. On the way the news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down Mitchell Street, along the way I was walking. I turned back to the University. I began to turn aside from my work. I did not meet Joel Chandler Harris nor the editor of the Constitution.32

The Atlanta shopkeeper or perhaps an enterprising seller of Hose’s knuckles must have taken the special excursion train to be back in Atlanta from Newnan so quickly. The Hose lynching signaled a turning point for Du Bois, a transformation in his own thinking on the “race problem” generally and racial violence in particular. The display of Sam Hose’s knuckles, he claimed, irrevocably changed his life. Having recently reconstructed the African American experience for an international exhibition, Du Bois was robbed of access to the newspaper of his own city and brought to his knees by a white southerner’s own display of the meaning of blackness. Perhaps if Du Bois had reached the Constitution, its editors would have at least spelled Hose’s name correctly. Yet while Hose lived on in a kind of gruesomely pickled and dried immortality, Du Bois later regained his voice and directed it even more loudly at the horrors of white supremacy. He forgot the facts of the case but he always remembered the fingers.33

The Lynching of Jesse Washington

Though seventeen years had passed, the lynching of Jesse Washington in the City Hall square of Waco, Texas, in 1916 mimicked the pace and structure of events in the Hose lynching, at least as constructed by the Atlanta newspapers. Though early reports did not so assuredly predict a lynching beforehand, the Waco papers presented the details of Mrs. Lucy Fryar’s murder and rape in the standard sensationalized pattern set in the pamphlet about the lynching of Smith. The doctor reported that she had been surprised by her attacker, killed by the first blow, and ravished while dead. And yet one report followed the dominant narrative and stressed how the highly respected white woman had struggled valiantly against her violator. In the lynching narrative, even the corpse of the white woman recoiled from the black man’s lust. The Waco Semi-Weekly Tribune provided a “Chronology of the Crime”; though the law-breaking referred to was the rape and murder of Mrs. Lucy Fryar, this summary of events culminating in an eighteen-year-old African American’s lynching provided as accurate an outline of the ritual of southern spectacle lynchings as had ever been published. The local Waco papers in 1916, then, told much the same story, revealing similar tensions between sensationalism and newspaper sales, white supremacy and civilization.34

But Waco was a small modern city, sixteen years inside the twentieth century, and a far cry from the dusty, slow farm town of Newnan in 1899. Much had happened in the South and in the nation in those seventeen years. The Leo Frank case had subverted the color line by making a Jewish factory supervisor the victim of a public, widely promoted and reported lynching. Yet the class conflict that fueled this 1915 lynching in Atlanta remained within the spaces of the culture of segregation: it was an argument about whether whiteness would be defined by local farmers, mill workers,
and small merchants or by an emerging professional and corporate class with ties outside the region. In 1915, the hugely popular film Birth of a Nation at least symbolically resolved this conflict within whiteness; D. W. Griffith reworked the spectacle lynching into a gripping film scene and appropriated its power to advance a national rather than southern white unity. The political scientist Michael Rabin has argued that “the nation was born in Gus’s castration,” as “the passivity forced upon the defeated South”—and here he might have added, upon Leo Frank’s lynching’s more recent crisis of masculine authority as well—was “now enforced on Gus,” made to stand as the archetypal southern black man. Making a spectacle of lynching, Birth both provided a ground for the national unity necessary in the Great War and created the modern film industry.35

The 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington, then, was a transitional event in the history of spectacle lynchings. The time and place changed the tone of the event—at Waco no one could deny that violence was modern even as after Birth, the presidency of Virginia-born Woodrow Wilson, and the Great War the practice of spectacle lynching would never be the same. White supremacy had long been a national concern, but as Birth captured on film, by Wilson’s presidency North and South again formed a truly unified nation. The southern whiteness that the culture of segregation made took on a double and sometimes contradictory duty, as both a space of national reunion and a ground for the region’s continuing difference.

There were ice trucks at the Waco fire. The leader of the mob was a big white man, a driver for the Big Four Ice Company, and trucks were good to stand on for a latecoming spectator hoping to see over all the other people. Waco, a town with 40,000 inhabitants, sixty-three churches, and ten colleges and universities in 1916, could get up quite an audience. No special trains were necessary here to create the festive atmosphere lent these occasions by large, milling crowds. Since Hose, lynching towns had advertised; in a twisted form of town boosterism they used the standard methods of promoting commerce. But in Waco telephones helped tremendously, speeding the circulation of news by neighborly word of mouth. In the city with the ice trucks the Raleigh Hotel, too, advertised, billing its lodgings as “ten stories of comfort and safety, sleep where life is safe, absolutely fire proof,” where “Waco welcomes You.” The focus of all this attention, a black man named Jesse Washington, unfortunately did not have a room there, and the estimated 15,000 white folks—men, women, and children—who welcomed him instead to Waco’s jail, courthouse, and finally City Hall Square found his body very flammable indeed. The burning alive of Jesse Washington in 1916 was a peculiarly modern ritual. As the Houston Chronicle recounted with shame, “they did such a thing in the cultured, reputable city of Waco.”36

In other places participants in such events had sometimes later bragged to journalists and investigators, and as in the Hose case reporters had even been eyewitnesses themselves. But an investigator sent by the recently organized NAACP, a white woman named Elisabeth Freeman, found no one in Waco willing to describe his or her role in the torture. The newspapers largely omitted the gruesome details, even though their correspondents covering the trial must have been at the scene. The only exception was the Waco Times Herald, which could not help admitting that “fingers, ears, pieces of clothing, toes, and other parts of the negro’s body were cut off by members of the mob that had crowded to the scene as if by magic when the word that the negro had been taken in charge by the mob was heralded over the city.” People from farming settlements outside Waco, in fact, had been arriving as early as Sunday afternoon for Washington’s quickly scheduled Monday morning trial. Prominent Waco businessmen had driven out to Robinson, the village nearest the Fryar farm, and arranged a deal with the murdered woman’s friends and relatives to let the trial proceed unhindered. In exchange these good men promised that the Robinson folks would get to carry out the little-doubted death sentence. Everyone was certain that young Jesse Washington was guilty. Even Freeman reported in an undated letter scribbled hastily to NAACP secretary Roy Nash from Waco that “the boy committed the foulest crime. He premeditated the crime—killed the woman in cold blood—raped the dead body—went back to his work [and] finished the day in the fields—came back and put up his mules and went home. When arrested he frankly admitted his guilt, was coarse and bestial [sic] in the telling.” She claimed that the leading African American citizens, too, were “stung and disgraced” by Washington’s actions, and the Waco Semi-Weekly Tribune even reported—most likely falsely—many blacks among the spectators who witnessed Washington’s burning.37

Many prominent town citizens had reportedly watched if not participated in the lynching. One paper reported that “from the windows of city buildings hundreds look[ed] out upon the activities of the scene below.” Mayor Dollins was perhaps the most prominent Wacoan with this bird’s-eye
view. The tree the mob chose to hold Washington, luckily for the mayor, was right under his office window, ten feet from the building, and from his box seat he must have seen the mob cut off Washington’s ear as a prelude to the obligatory castration. Later, Waco citizens told Freeman that the fire had damaged the tree’s beautiful foliage. Only a young manicurist whose window at work also looked out on City Hall Square had been willing to go on record with her description of the horrible scene. As the NAACP investigator recorded, “it was generally known that something was going to happen, and when they heard the noise everybody rushed to the windows, and that child saw them unsex the body . . . [and] others say . . . that they were carrying the proof around in a handkerchief showing it as a souvenir . . .”

A photographer, too, tried his hand at the souvenir business. Freeman discovered that Gildersleeve—he put his name on the photographs—was tipped off by telephone and arrived in time to set up his camera even before the mob lit the fire. “It was a cooked business between the Mayor and himself. The getting of the pictures was a certain amount of take-off.” Quickly printing the photos as postcards, he sold them for ten cents apiece to those unfortunate enough to have missed acquiring their own portion of Washington’s body. Ten cents, after all, was significantly cheaper than the five dollars that by day’s end Washington’s teeth were reportedly fetching and less even than the links of the chain that were trading for a quarter. No one, it seemed, was selling the more coveted body parts. The only important difference in the case of the burning alive of Jesse Washington in Waco in 1916 was that Freeman got the pictures. But Gildersleeve charged Freeman, posing as a suffrage activist, five times his regular price.

The photographs filled in with graphic visuality what the papers with their nods to politeness and decency and the “cultured and reputable city” had largely left out. The pictures gave witness to the new, multistoried buildings, City Hall Square spilling over with Wacoans, and the setting of a black man on fire. They showed the body burning, burnt and charred beyond human resemblance, and the white boys smiling with the ash. Freeman specifically asked only for pictures of City Hall, the courthouse, and the judge, claiming as a motive her desire to show folks up north that Waco was a nice and friendly place. The mayor and sheriff hesitated and hemmed and hawed over her request, reluctant to circulate the pictures further by giving them to outsiders. As even the on-the-take mayor and the sheriff sunk in the politics of his own reelection came to see, these images would subvert the story they wanted told about Waco once they had circulated beyond the approving context of the souvenir-seeking crowd. But they relented and granted Freeman the pictures. Erasing the fine line between civilized ritual and savage spectacle, the photographs appeared widely in the weeks afterward, provoking regional and national condemnation and challenging the often recycled story of the white community in action. Despite Birth of a Nation’s declaration of national reunion, the narrative of white unity would not hold.

The sheriff’s and the mayor’s changes of heart about the photographs, however, were not the only evidence of cracks within the standard white southern lynching story. The unnamed reporter at the Waco Semi-Weekly Tribune began well, describing how Washington was seized in the courthouse and making the necessary nod to law officers who had valiantly performed their duty yet somehow misplaced their guns: “once the huge mass of humanity moved, it moved in such a compact formation that nothing could stop it.” The paper described the crowd as made of men, women, and children, “all classes of people and among them many negroes.” But soon a slip appeared: “Not all approved, but they looked on because they had never seen anything of the kind. No hand was raised to stop the movement, no word spoken to halt the progress of those who carried the negro to his death.” Evidently not all 15,000 Texans enjoyed the murder of a man who within days would have been legally executed. In a similar fashion, another local reporter admitted that “many turned away,” suggesting that not everyone in Waco wanted to watch such barbarism. By the end of its story, however, the first Waco paper had resurrected the old refrain: “This is the story of the execution of this Negro by the citizens of this county. No one section was implicated more than another. They were here from all parts, and all parts and Waco participated equally.” Compelled to assert the unity of the white community, then, newspapers inadvertently included blacks among the citizenry, thereby undermining precisely the point they wanted to make. The act of trying to clarify the boundary between white and black revealed the very fluidity of the color line.

Nonlocal papers also focused on the white crowd in motion and ignored the effects of such blatant white barbarity on southern African Americans, but their accounts did not display a decidedly different moral. The Houston Chronicle and Herald put the matter baldly: “The Chronicle leaves him [Washington] entirely out of consideration. It is not him, nor his race, that has been affected; it is the hundreds of whites who participated, the thousands who looked on, the millions who will read.” Calling lynching
an “American institution,” the San Francisco Bulletin concluded that “the strangest delusion in connection with lynching is that it is the victim who suffers most. In reality it is the community who is lynched.” Commenting on the call to “civilize” Mexico popular among Texan whites, the Bulletin implied that “civilization” might be safer here. Even the African American paper the Chicago Defender implied that “white culture” was in great danger if it stood “for such bestial cruelty.” Only the local Waco Morning News editorially took up for the town, but it too saw white Wacoans as the prime victims. Asking who would cast the first stone, the paper presented the Texas city as a victim of national self-righteousness. The culture of segregation conflated “civilization” with white space, and the order of Waco’s City Hall Square had been undeniably violated that May morning. The News did not understand how much it gave away when it claimed “Civilization is but skin deep.”

With Washington’s lynching in 1916, then, replaying the familiar ritual of white supremacy, reconstructing the master narrative, was much more complicated than in the 1890 lynching of Hose. Regional papers had abandoned altogether that story of the white community upholding civilization. Instead they deployed varying degrees of outrage over the spectacle’s destruction of the very whiteness it was supposed to save. National anti-lynching agitation increased after the Washington lynching under the leadership of the NAACP, and Congress considered the Dyer Anti-Lynching Act in 1919 and 1920. Northern big-city papers, too, expressed a clearer condemnation.

But interpretations of the meanings of these events had never been their main attractions. As NAACP official Walter White stated thirteen years after Waco, many white newspaper readers around the nation could encounter the spectacle with “little thought” and perhaps a small amount of titillation. Even locally the question was less one of agreement than of interest. As the Waco Semi-Weekly Tribune had put it, “once the huge mass of humanity moved, it moved in such a compact formation that nothing could stop it... Not all approved, but they looked on because they had never seen anything of the kind. No hand was raised to stop the movement, no word spoken to halt the progress of those who carried the negro to his death.” Some southern whites had always publicly condemned lynching. Their numbers grew as the twentieth century progressed. But it was white participation, not white agreement, that empowered lynching as modern spectacle, creating a white consuming public and easing white divisions of gender and class. And participation—in a continuum, certainly, of moral repugnance and responsibility—ranged from performing the tortures to watching the murder to looking at the pictures. As the film critic Dana B. Polan has explained, spectacle condensed sense and understanding into sight and “jettison[ed] a need for narrative myths... Contradiction itself [became] a new coherence, the modern seduction.” Du Bois had boldly stated that even the deadly spectacle of African American otherness had become an amusement. And the amusement, the cultural power of spectacle lynchings, lay not in the assignment of cause and blame, the tallying of rights and wrongs, but in the looking.

As the Smith, Hose, and Washington lynchings demonstrated, then, innovations like trains and cars, telegraphs and telephones, and cheaper newspapers and photographs could expand and strengthen the power of each incident as easily as they increased white condemnation. And Birth of a Nation, shown widely from its release through the end of the decade, merged the twentieth-century spectacle lynching with Reconstruction era violence, producing a spectacle of lynching for the entire nation. The symbolic reunion of North and South that Birth captured so vividly and to such popular acclaim echoed the political reconciliation evident in the election of the southerner Woodrow Wilson to the presidency in 1912 and the segregation of Washington, D.C., during his first term. The North, then, had accepted southern whites’ version of Reconstruction as black space and installed the culture of segregation at the very center of the nation. With America’s entrance into the Great War in 1917, Wilson realized what George Creel, his chair of the Committee on Public Information, bluntly stated: the need to “weld the people of the United States into one white hot mass instinct.” The president borrowed Birth of a Nation imagery to celebrate another American ride to the rescue, the entrance of America into the war. In both the movies and in life, the spectacle of African American otherness created white unity and gave birth to the modern nation. Whether most Americans rationally agreed with Birth’s interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction little mattered. As Wilson understood, the film “wrote history in lightning” because of the pleasure of the looking.
Lynching continued, as southern elites without business connections outside the region and southern whites without business connections at all continued to murder African Americans, not in contradiction to but because of other white southern elites' and nonsoutherners' increasing opposition. As lynching became more about conjuring "southerness"—understood as white—than about "whiteness"—understood as American—the form and narration of the spectacle necessarily changed.

The Lynching of Claude Neal

The lynching of Claude Neal in Marianna, Florida, in 1934 signaled the end of the gruesome southern practice of spectacle lynchings. The lynching of Matthew Williams in 1931 in Salisbury, Maryland, had served as a practice run for Neal. Sending Johns Hopkins professor Broadus Mitchell to investigate the "gaudy show," H. L. Mencken sarcastically commented on and editorially condemned the entire Eastern Shore from the Evening Sun in Baltimore. A crowd of over two hundred white men—Mencken called them "town boomers"—took Williams from a hospital and hanged him from a tree by the courthouse for the enjoyment of a thousand spectators. And there were a few other gruesome murders of black men and women after 1934—the burning to death of two black men with gasoline blowtorches in the town square of Duck Hill, Mississippi, in 1937 stood out for its barbarity across the entire history of southern white racial violence. But the Neal lynching, unfolding against the background of the case of the Scottsboro men, was different. Local whites pointed to the nationally publicized trials and appeals of these nine young African Americans accused of raping two white women on a train as evidence of how justice was thwarted when citizens let "the law take its course." But the NAACP learned a very different lesson from its struggles with the International Labor Defense, a popular front organization, over control of the Scottsboro men's defense. The correct publicity could transform an event into a tool for achieving the organization's larger goal, the passage of a federal anti-lynching bill, and from the Neal lynching forward the NAACP worked to capture the cultural power inherent in sensationalized, gruesomely voyeuristic stories and even more grisly pictures for the anti-lynching crusade. Though Neal was lynched in an isolated backwoods area of northern Florida instead of in broad daylight in the center of a southern city, the NAACP made the torture and murder of Claude Neal into a spectacle. It uncovered the details, constructed the story, and provided the meaning, telling the nation a tale of white southern injustice rather than of the still-persuasive black beast rapist. And they told it well.

The local, regional, and national press, however, certainly did not ignore the lynching. In fact, the Marianna (Florida) Daily Times-Courier and the Dothan (Alabama) Eagle announced the "lynch party" in their October 26 morning editions, at least twelve hours in advance of Neal's torture and murder. The Associated Press issued a series of dispatches from the area around Marianna beginning with an October 26 morning report, and newspapers from the Richmond Times-Dispatch to the Bismarck (North Dakota) Tribune announced "Mob Holds Negro; Invitations Issued for a Lynch Party." But the details of the lynching, which occurred at the hands of the approximately one hundred white men who had taken turns torturing Neal over ten hours, did not appear in the press. The local and state law officials had made a show of trying to prevent the lynching, and no one from the press admitted being a witness to the event.

The NAACP, however, was determined to make use of the case to strengthen its hand in the ongoing fight for the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill. Within eight days of the lynching, it sent an undercover investigator, Howard Kester of the Committee on Economic and Racial Justice, a white liberal southerner in his early thirties, to Marianna, instructing him "to get all the gruesome details possible together with any photographs of the body, crowd, etc . . . ." On November 7 Kester wrote Walter White, then secretary of the NAACP, that the night before a member of the mob had related "with the greatest delight" all the specifics of Neal's prolonged torture. By November 30 the NAACP had published Kester's report, and at last the details of perhaps the most chillingly brutal lynching to date were available for public and nauseating consumption.

The NAACP's Lynching of Claude Neal was widely circulated—Mencken sent it out to his Christian friends with a Christmas card attached—and over 15,000 copies were distributed and sold. And yet Kester's description varied little from turn-of-the-century narratives of lynchings published by local and regional white papers in praise of the practice. The key differences were his inclusion of a picture taken of the naked and mutilated body, the kind of photograph usually sold as a souvenir but never published in a newspaper, and his arrangement of the narrative's parts. Kester began not with
Neal's alleged crimes, mentioning only that he had been arrested for the murder of Lola Cannidy, but with the mob, “car loads of men” cast as savages hunting down a black man already in custody and threatening his also jailed mother and aunt. The mob played the role of the villain, then, less because of what Kester said about them than because he had not yet proclaimed Neal guilty of rape. And Kester's accounts of the shortcomings of law enforcement officials had also been present in narratives justifying lynchings, though perhaps with less detailed evidence. But most strikingly, Kester moved next to recount the lynching itself, still without having described in voyeuristic detail the black man's alleged crimes. And although later, in a concluding section on the historic, social, and economic context of the Marianna area, he would describe it as otherwise, here he placed the northern section of Florida and southeastern Alabama squarely within 1930s America, a place where newspapers, telephone calls, and even a radio station in Dothan, Alabama, advertised that a “lynching party” would be held “to which all whites were invited.” The scheduled “modern Twentieth Century lynching” of Neal, he claimed, drew between three and seven thousand whites to the “ringside seats” at the murdered white woman’s home.49

Kester did make three subtle innovations in the dominant lynching narrative, however, providing more detail in one central plot section, clarifying necessary ambiguities in another, and extending the story past a frenzied souvenir-gathering aftermath. Though the torturing of lynching victims had been described before, no other report surpassed the NAACP's unblinking accounting of Neal's castration, framed as the words of a bragging eyewitness: “they cut off his penis. He was made to eat it. Then they cut off his testicles and made him eat them and say he liked it.” And Kester's arrangement of the Neal story fully utilized these details, transforming the eye-for-an-eye narrative structure in which one violated body demanded another more violated one, a black man's body for a white woman's contaminated soul, into a tale of competing bodies as metaphors for competing truths. Lola Cannidy's clothed and only beaten and still not raped corpse could never overcome, then, the horror of Neal's mutilated remains, scattered across the countryside and shattering the narrative frame, entering the future as alcohol-preserved fingers in a jar.

In addition, Kester clarified the ambiguities that surrounded white women in the lynching narrative. For the story demanded women's participation—identifying their or their relatives' rapists, relating the specifics of their own or other women’s torments, and calling for the most brutal deaths for the black men they accused. And yet it also depicted their victimization—the living torture of raped "ladies" whispered better off dead and the shocked and speechless horror of a murdered woman's relatives. Kester presented white women unflatteringly detached from their pedestals. He reported how an unidentified woman at the Cannidy house drove a butcher's knife through the heart of Neal's corpse, brought to the door by some lynchers in a car. His report also described Lola's sister shouting that no possible punishment could ever fit the crime. Most importantly, however, Kester described how Lola herself, about to marry a white man, wanted to end her sexual relationship with Neal and threatened him with lynching. This alternative female image contrasted sharply with the picture of violated ladyhood drawn by the local papers. And whether or not Kester had evidence to back up his account of Lola Cannidy's and Claude Neal's affair, the NAACP engaged in the same kinds of exaggeration that had become standard in the lynching narrative. NAACP activists by the 1930s were as little interested in the truth as the white southerners who defended lynching. Their agenda was a moral, not a historical one—they wanted to save not facts but lives.

Finally, Kester added a postscript to his narrative, describing the lives of African Americans in the days between and after Cannidy's and Neal's murders. Playing "Uncle Tom" and "Sambo," terrified local black men desperately tried to distance themselves from Neal's publicly predicted fate. But a riot broke out after Neal's death anyway, as the thousands of spectators who went to the wrong location and were thus deprived of the promised entertainment roamed the town looking for other victims. In Kester's version, instead of an implied return to white order beyond the narrative frame, the lynching ended with another charge by those rampaging and revenging white men. As the riot exploded, so did white unity. Kester ended his narrative and began his analysis with the image of whites protecting, sometimes with shotguns pointed at other whites, their cherished black butlers and maids.

Lynching as a story of the entire white community in action, using savagery to protect southern "civilization," was dead. And Walter White, then secretary of the NAACP, followed up on the success of the Neal pamphlet by attempting to create yet another lynching spectacle. The NAACP was a silent sponsor along with a distinguished list of published patrons of "An Art Commentary on Lynching," an exhibit of paintings, prints, and drawings about lynchings at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries in New York City.
Almost three thousand people saw the exhibition of thirty-nine works—some directly inspired by the killing of Neal—on display from February 15 through March 2, 1935. Copies of the catalog, with moving forewords written by Sherwood Anderson and Erskine Caldwell and reproductions of five of the works, circulated widely. The NAACP and other organizations also began using photographs and grisly descriptions of lynched black men on petitions circulated for signatures in support of federal anti-lynching legislation and on postcards mailed out to raise funds. The lynching spectacle, then, had given way to the growing anti-lynching crusade’s attempt to make a spectacle of lynching. Lynching may have remained a white southern pastime, but it became a much more private sport. If the nation wanted to look at or read about the mutilated and murdered bodies of black men, it would have to sign the petition.\(^5\)

And yet since the spectacle itself was enough to create a white public, the NAACP’s capture of the lynching narrative, its impact on national interpretations of lynching’s meaning, did not disrupt the cultural work of the spectacle. Whites were not blacks, and blacks were still humans who could be tortured and killed with impunity. No doubt for some whites the slippage between titillation, self-righteousness, and disgust remained. White southern elites blamed “crackers,” and northern whites pointed a finger at white southern barbarity. Having reunited in their common racial identity, northern and southern whites argued, then, about whether lynching protected or damaged whiteness while glossing over the plight of the African American victims. And by continuing and expanding the circulation of the stories, even anti-lynching activists’ use of Lynchings as spectacle helped maintain the power of the practice as a cultural form and aided in the cultural work these narratives performed. That they had no other option demonstrated the power of the spectacle in setting the boundaries of racial meaning.

After the Neal lynching, spectacle Lynchings seldom happened, and Lynchings that became spectacles—the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till was perhaps the best known—were overwhelmingly condemned. W. J. Cash was right about the continuing need of white Southerners to reassure themselves with yet another reenactment of the old white supremacy ritual. What he failed to understand, however, was that southern whites no longer needed to “dirty” their towns with actual Lynchings. The spectacle circulated in detailed written accounts of tortures, pickled and dried body parts, a radio announcement, an Edison recording, a film, and even a gruesome picture postcard sent and saved: these artifacts increasingly did the cultural work of othering southern African Americans, of making whiteness across gender and class lines, for them. And from the perspectives of anti-lynching activists, the African American public that supplied the victims, and small-town boosters alike, this shift was progress. Yet the image of the “black beast rapist,” providing a foundation for the culture of segregation beyond the reach of rational discussion, remained. The modern twentieth-century lynching had become the white South’s own ritual of transgression, and by the late 1930s representations of Lynchings worked almost as well as Lynchings themselves.\(^5\)

The Meaning of the Spectacle

At a country picnic in 1896, a young white boy hurried up to the booth to trade his sweaty nickel for a rare chance to hear that marvelous modern wonder, the Edison talking machine:

With the tubes in my ears, the Pitchman was now adjusting the needle on the machine . . . My excitement increased, my heart was pounding so I could hardly hold the tubes in my ears with my shaking hands . . . “All Right Men. Bring Them Out. Let’s Hear What They Have to Say,” were the first words I understood coming from a talking machine . . . The sounds of shuffling feet, swearing men, rattle of chains, falling wood, brush, and fagots, then a voice—shriill, strident, angry, called out “Who will apply the torch?” “I will,” came a chorus of high-pitched, angry voices . . . [I heard] the crackle of flames as it ate its way into the dry tinder . . . My eyes and mouth were dry. I tried to wet my lips, but my tongue, too, was parched. Perspiration dripped from my hands. I stood immobile, unable to move. Now the voice of the Pitchman saying, “That’s all gentleman—who’s next?” . . . [and] sensing what my trouble was, said, “Too much cake, too much lemonade. You know how boys are at a picnic.”\(^5\)

Perhaps little Mell Barrett would have been as sick and excited if he had actually witnessed the lynching of these unidentified men, burned to death by a mob after being forced to confess to rape and after pleading desperately for mercy. A place in a giant rushing crowd and the slow building, perfect pacing, and almost delicate choreography of a lynching such as Hose’s three
years later might have counteracted the uniquely nauseating stench of burning flesh. Through the recording and the quick working of a young boy’s imagination, however, as his physical reactions revealed, Barrett was there. Representations of lynchings, multiplying and increasing their power with the spread of consumer culture, made the line between individual and collective experience much more permeable than the line between the races. As Richard Wright knew well, a person did not have to experience the violence directly to feel its effects. And despite the chasm that separated African Americans’ mediated experience of the terror and white Americans’ mediated experience of the titillation, in both cases contact with a representation of the event was enough. To the newspaper story, the warning or bringing word overheard, and the remembered sight of fingers floating in alcohol in a jar were added as the decades passed those more modern ways of spreading knowledge: the radio announcement, the Edison recording, and even the gruesome picture postcard sent and saved.

Lynching was the brutal underside of the modern South, the terrifying and yet for whites also pervasively titillating practice and increasingly mediated narrative that made the culture of segregation work and even seem sane. As participants, spectators, investigators, and present-day scholars have all to varying degrees argued, lynchings, particularly the blatantly public spectacles, worked by ritualistically uniting white southerners, by embodying the community in action. Thus the “whole populace,” the “whole male community as a unit,” “the citizens of this county,” and “all the white people” lynched Smith, Hose, Washington, and Neal. Even the naming of lynchings revealed their communal nature, as lynchers and anti-lynching activists alike called them after the cities and towns, the white communities that had performed them. But even as early as Hose, cracks appeared in white southerners’ stories of lynching as the unified assertion of white supremacy. Lynchings conjured whiteness, then, through their spectacle of a violent African American otherness as much as through the narratives of white unity they generated. And that spectacle eased the contradictions at the heart of segregation, enacting the whiteness segregation simultaneously created and undermined.

The culture of segregation made race dependent on space, and the color bar became less a line than the ground on which southern people were allowed to drink and buy and stand. The ritualized lynchings of the twentieth-century South were in part the controlled inversion of this practice of racial separation, the southern version of the medieval ritual of “woman on top” in which boundary crossing served as boundary control and the ambivalence and contradictory nature of the proceedings expanded their power. In these spectacles, a transgression of segregated spaces occurred that eased without eliminating the subtle contradictions between the practice of segregation and the ideology of absolute white supremacy upon which it was based. As separation of the races became the foundation for white racial identity, black homes, businesses, churches, and bodies threatened to provide a ground of black autonomy that could challenge white supremacy. Yet lynchings denied that any space was black space, even the very bodies of African Americans were subject to invasion by whites. And public violence asserted this right in a way that was much more visible than the many undoubtedly frequent but much more privately horrible rapes and murders. These “lynch carnivals,” then, were not about a lingering frontier past but about strengthening the culture of segregation, creating a new southern future in which an expanding consumer culture created and maintained rather than blurred and transformed racial difference. Lynchings ensured that a black man or woman was not just, as Du Bois had stated, “a person who must ride Jim Crow in Georgia,” but also someone who could be publicly tortured and killed, prevented even from being a person.

And lynchings reversed the commodification of black bodies begun with emancipation. In spectacle lynchings, blacks themselves became consumer items; the sites of their murders became new spaces of consumption. After the lynchings of Smith, Hose, and Washington, markets in the gruesome souvenirs sprang up within minutes of the victim’s death, and professional and amateur photographers alike rushed eagerly to the scene to capture the lynchers posing with the body. In other cases, stereographs of lynched black men were made and sold for three-dimensional viewing. Spectators occasionally even broke into black-owned general stores and passed out soda, cake, and crackers as refreshments. In one rare case, a lynch mob in Texas skinned a black victim called “Big Nose” George and made the tanned “leather” into a medical instrument bag, razor strops, a pair of women’s shoes, and a tobacco pouch. The Rawlins National Bank proudly displayed the shoes for years in the front window. As H. L. Mencken ironically asked, referring to a much more typical collection of body parts, in his coverage of the 1931 lynching of Matthews Williams: “What has become of these souvenirs the Marylander and Herald [the local paper] does not say. No doubt they now adorn the parlor mantelpiece of some
humble but public spirited Salisbury home, between the engrossed sea shell from Ocean City and the family Peruna bottle. I can only hope that they are not deposited eventually with the Maryland Historical Society.”

Even if no historical society ever received such family heirlooms, Mencken was hardly exaggerating. Souvenirs were often publicly displayed. In the Hose lynching, townspeople considered it a supreme act of friendship when a man offered to split Hose’s finger with his neighbor. Claiming all spaces and all consumption as white, lynchings closed off any access, however contingently, to the transformative possibilities of consumer products and consuming spaces by changing blacks themselves into the objects of white desire. This much, these lynchings said, could never be changed: blacks were humans who could be treated as nonhuman, and no amount of care on their part to follow the “rules” could in the end ensure their safety. Segregation seemed, on the other hand, if discriminatory, at least to offer places of relative safety and security, to allow at least the minimal right to exist to the new black bodies and spaces of freedom, a right that public spectacles of violence absolutely denied. Lynching was among other things the horror that made that oppressive system of segregation seem tame. Encountering Hose’s knuckles, Du Bois confronted the very center of southern whiteness itself.57

But lynchings as a cultural form transgressed the color bar in another way as well. For the lynching narrative joined whiteness and blackness symbolically and bodily as the ritual built to a climax of torture and death. Cutting between the scene of Gus’s castration and a Klan ceremony performed with the alleged rape victim Flora’s blood, Griffith’s original print of Birth of a Nation only made more explicit the mixing of white and black blood that was reported in the Hose lynching as white men rushing to cut souvenirs off the still live body sometimes stabbed each other instead. Spectacle lynchings, as the literary critic Robin Wiegman has argued, “enact[ed] a grotesquely symbolic—if not literal—sexual encounter between the white mob and its victim.” Certainly this mixing of whiteness and blackness occurred only temporarily. And yet representations of lynchings suspended this moment in time, as pictures or pieces of mutilated bodies became souvenirs much like sexy photographs of or gifts from cherished lovers. Whiteness and blackness merged and civilization became savagery to defeat savages; in the end blackness was destroyed, and whiteness was all. Souvenirs of spectacle lynchings warned southern African Americans that violations of the color line could occur in both directions, that integrated spaces could prove deadly. Whites’ transgressions, then, reinforced separation even as they cut out any authority black spaces threatened to provide. The lynching act publicly revisited the biracial origins of southern culture only to deny in its narrative what it furiously displayed in its spectacle. After the “carnival,” the white order of the culture of segregation was restored.58

Yet the sexuality at the center of spectacle lynchings, the castration of the black beast rapist in exchange for the violated white “virgin,” proved that the “ritual of transgression” involved gender as well. Beyond reversing the decommodification of black bodies, the spectacle lynching also reversed the desexualization that also began with emancipation. The black man who during Reconstruction could no longer be stripped and beaten by a white man had demanded the removal of his female relatives from the spaces of white male control. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, he could be stripped and killed, becoming a sexual victim himself. The lynching narrative would never have been so powerful a ritual of subversion if the spectacle had not been invented within the late nineteenth-century context of changing southern white gender relations examined in Chapter 2. As historian Nancy Maclean has argued about the lynching of Leo Frank, “charged issues of sexuality and power between the sexes . . . [acted] as a trigger” for the mob’s brutal actions.59

In fact, categories of gender and race would not stay fixed within these violent rituals, a slippage Griffith made explicit in the original cut of Birth of a Nation but perhaps even more visible in Jean Toomer’s 1923 poem “Portrait in Georgia,” which transforms a white woman into a lynched black man:

Hair—braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher’s rope,

Eyes—fagots,

Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,

Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,

And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.60

In his Light in August (1932), William Faulkner too explores this violent conflation of womanhood and blackness through the culmination of the racially ambiguous Joe Christmas’s fantasy of “womanshenegro” in his murder of his white lover Joanna Burden and his lynching and castration as a
black man at the hands of the white Percy Grimm. These writers, then, only made more apparent a transformation working in less artistic lynching narratives as well. In the Hose and Neal lynchings, as in others, the white men seem to fall into a strange love of their victims, praising the supermasculinity displayed by these black men through their calm courage in facing torture and death. White women refused to sit passively on their pedestals: Mrs. Cranford demanded that Hose be burned before her eyes, women in the crowd cheered the slow roasting of Washington, and a female relative of Lola Cannidy drove a butcher’s knife through Neal’s heart. And Toomer evoked the contestation of bodies, the mutilation and killing of the black man’s body in return for the violated one of the white woman, visible in these lynchings as well.\footnote{61}

Ida B. Wells was the first investigator to delve beneath southern whites’ loudly proclaimed connection of lynching to the “black beast rapist,” and her 1892 suggestion that white women’s sexual desires played an important role has been largely neglected. Twenty-four years later, Sheriff Fleming of Waco, the law enforcement official who did little to stop the 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington, tried to assure the voting public of his manliness, bragging about his “virility” in campaign ads. But it was not until 1941 that W. J. Cash first connected lynching to a crisis of masculinity. Cash provided one of the first examinations of a threatened white male authority as the overthrow of slavery’s racial order also endangered its sexual order:

For the abolition of slavery, in destroying the rigid fixity of the black at the bottom of the scale, in throwing open to him at least the legal opportunity to advance, had inevitably opened to the mind of every [white] Southerner a vista at the end of which stood the overthrow of this taboo. If it was given to the black man to advance at all, who could say (once more the logic of the doctrine of his inherent inferiority would not hold) that he would not one day advance the whole way and lay claim to complete equality, including, specifically, the ever crucial right of marriage. What [white] Southerners felt, therefore, was that any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern [white] woman.\footnote{62}

Cash implied that white male power challenged by black men’s political and economic advances translated into white male sexuality threatened by black male sexuality. Rape of white women signaled metaphorically white men’s fear of the loss of ability to provide for white women and physically their fear, given their treatment of black women, of the loss of white racial purity.\footnote{63}

In his examination of Thomas Dixon, popular author of The Leopard’s Spots and The Clansman, on which Birth of a Nation was based, the historian Joel Williamson has made Cash’s argument much more explicit, describing a crisis of white male sexuality as southern white men worked themselves into a corner within which black and white women became unavailable sexually. Fear of the white women who held families and communities together after the war competed with white men’s romanticization of their brave deeds. Beginning in the Reconstruction era as white men increasingly glorified white women, the pedestal rose too high for the satisfaction of white male sexual desires. At the same time, with the emancipation of female slaves, white men found themselves less and less able to take their sexual desires to the quarters. Lynching, then, relieved these tensions and transferred the supersexual powers of the white-constructed “black beast rapist” to the sexually diminished white man even as it diminished the feared power of the white woman who now needed white male protection. White women and black men were conflated as fear of and the desire to protect the white woman became fear of and the desire to destroy the black man.\footnote{64}

And yet more than elite white manhood was at stake. Lynching helped reconcile the ambiguity of gender difference at the heart of a society in which the primary boundary was the color line. The gender lines within the whiteness made by the culture of segregation were less than clearly drawn, no matter the amount of effort both white men and women expended in the praise of the “lady on her pedestal.” For white supremacy always carried with it the possibility of strengthening the white woman as it emasculated, often literally, the black man. Toomer’s poem can as easily be read as an empowering exchange in which the white woman, not the white man, takes her existence from the last breath of the burned black man. White women, after all, shared a racial power that contradicted the supposed inferiority of their gender. And fear of the “black beast rapist” exploded not in the 1870s, when African American men were more recently released from the reportedly “civilizing influence of slavery,” but in the 1890s, as whites began building segregation as culture upon segregation as policy. The historian Jacquelyn Hall has emphasized, “it may be no accident that the vision of the black man as a threatening beast flourished during the first phase of
the southern women's rights movement, a fantasy of transgression against boundary-transgressing women. Certainly the rebelliousness of that feminine generation was circumscribed by the feeling that women were hedged about by a 'nameless horror.'

Spectacle lynchings did sometimes incorporate warnings aimed at unconventional women. When the lynching mob dragged Washington's corpse through the streets of Waco in 1916, some of his charred limbs fell off. The NAACP's investigator discovered that these reminders of the white community's power to define acceptable sexual behavior, instead of being sold as souvenirs, were placed on the stoop of a "disrespectable" woman's home in the reservation district. And yet white women often directed the very rituals by which white men recaptured their own masculinity through the castration of the black male. After all, as in the Hose lynching, the black man's supersexual image was often the result of their testimony. White women like Rebecca Felton, perhaps the region's most popular white woman journalist, were empowered by the lynching narrative. Felton owed much of her region-wide fame to her demand in a speech before hundreds at an 1897 meeting of the State Agricultural Society of Georgia that "if it takes lynching to protect [white] woman's dearest possession from drunken, raving human beasts, then I say lynch a thousand a week."

The spectacle lynching began in a setting that emphasized a sharp gender difference, with the white woman endangered by a "black beast rapist." For no matter the actual crime, as Wells had argued as early as 1892, no matter that the evidence was inconclusive that Hose, Washington, or Neal committed sexual assault, rape provided the justification. Yet the act of the torture and murder itself brought white men and women together symbolically and physically just as it had merged whiteness and blackness. White women often participated as announcers of the upcoming event, as spectators, and as gatherers of wood and other fuel. They directed the actions of large numbers of white men by alleging rape, attempted rape, or even an attempted rape, and by demanding tortures and egging mobs on. In one case a woman even stood on a car and repeatedly yelled "roach the nigger" when it seemed the mob might show mercy. Not just the white man was empowered when the black man was literally and symbolically deprived of his masculinity. The lynching narrative moved white women toward masculinity even as it subtly shifted white men away from the maleness, embodied in the black beast, that they were trying to capture through castration. Thus spectacle lynchings operated upon gender ideologies in very contradictory ways. Replicating a process at work in the larger southern world, the lynching narrative simultaneously empowered white women as it emasculated black men and limited white women as it signified their need for protection.

The lynching narrative, then, conferred a power that white women accepted ambivalently. No doubt some white women used it. The NAACP reported that Lola Cannidy attempted to break up with Claude Neal by threatening him with lynching. Yet white women were never allowed to assume the major roles in the spectacle, to participate directly in the torture. The southern suffrage movement too had pursued a strategy that sought white women's political power in the name of their racial identities, as a way to strengthen whiteness, and had almost totally failed. Only the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), led by Jessie Daniel Ames, seemed to walk the tightrope between racial strength and gender weakness well, mobilizing this very contradiction in the 1930s and 1940s to help decrease racial violence. Donning a veil of white womanhood—emphasizing and even exaggerating gender difference—white women nevertheless argued privately that even "southern ladies" did not need the protection of the mob. When lynchings seemed imminent in their towns or counties, members of the ASWPL called sheriffs and mayors and quietly reminded them that as women they could not actively intercede with the mob but that as whites they were voters too. The activist Lillian Smith hinted at southern white women's contradictory experience of whiteness and womanhood in her autobiographical work Killers of the Dream:

One day, sometime in your childhood or adolescence, a Negro was lynched in your county or the one next to yours. A human being was burned or hanged from a tree and you knew it happened. But no one publicly condemned it and always the murderers went free. And afterward, maybe weeks or months or years afterward, you sat casually in the drugstore with one of the murderers and drank the Coke he casually paid for. A "nice white girl" could do that but she would have been run out of town or perhaps killed had she drunk a Coke with the young Negro doctor who was devoting his life to the service of his people.

White women's access to the power of whiteness could be effective against lynching, then, but not against the system of segregation that helped create
their racial identities in the first place. In the end, both the racialized spaces of consumer culture and male power were restored.⁶⁹

Finally, lynching as the controlled inversion of segregation also helped ease the class tensions within white supremacy. For poor whites, too, experienced a racial power that contradicted the inferiority of their class position. No matter the economic strength of southern progressives, of the mill owners and professionals, or of the new southern middle class that created segregation as policy. Any white man and some white women, too, could “burn a nigger.” And white southern elites, even when they wanted to, could not stop other whites from lynching without threatening the system of segregation, itself based on white supremacy, that had helped secure their rise above their fellow farmers in the first place. But as sociologist Arthur Raper found in his 1933 study of lynchings, the “best men” seldom condemned the practice:

Not infrequently more unanimity can be had on a lynching than on any other subject. Lynching tends to minimize social and class distinctions between white plantation owners and white tenants, mill owners and textile workers... This prejudice against the Negro forms a common meeting place for whites.

Only in the Neal case did published accounts question that all whites supported the spectacle. The culture of segregation created a cross-class construction of whiteness, and the mass of white spectators and mob members provided its physical embodiment. For tenants and mill hands, being able to commit unpunished acts of violence created an illusion of individual power, of control over their destinies, however, that their deteriorating place in the southern economy belied.⁷⁰

By the end of World War I, increasing numbers of white elites, especially in cities, had developed important ties beyond the region and had become concerned about outside condemnation of the practice. In addition, lynchings often created race riots, and certainly the same racial tensions fueled both. Many of the buildings, houses, and businesses burned by rioters in Wilmington in 1898, in Atlanta in 1906, and in the widespread racial violence in 1919 after the end of the war did not belong to these poorer whites. And Leo Frank had brought home the danger of calling the white masses into motion— they could turn on their white employers, a task no doubt made considerably easier by Frank’s Jewish otherness, instead of their African American neighbors.⁷¹

Between 1890 and 1940, however, a profound shift occurred within the class tensions that spectacle lynchings ritualistically resolved. The practice had in part originated in the late nineteenth century as white elites tried to consolidate their power in the postbellum economic order by pulling less wealthy whites away from possible Populist allies, the black tenants who lived the same difficult rural lives. By the time of World War I, however, as national reconciliation between northern and southern whites peaked in a recognition of their common racial identity, the class dynamic within southern whiteness reversed. Small-town and rural southern whites continued to lynch in defiance of wealthier and often more urban and nationally oriented members of their race. The lynching of Leo Frank, an early example of this shift despite its urban context, had essentially been an argument about which southern whites would shape this collective racial identity. In the 1920s and 1930s, lynching asserted its practitioners’ southern distinctiveness, their own definition of whiteness, in opposition to a more urban, national version. Though spectacle lynchings could not occur without the complicity of mayors, law enforcement officials, and local businessmen, mob leaders were less likely to come from these groups, which increasingly voiced a public appeal for the rule of law. In the Neal case, law enforcement officials did make some effort to avert the lynching, and despite making a secret deal with the lynchers, Marianna businessmen did not publicly lead or support the mob. In addition, especially by the 1930s, southern big-city newspapers always condemned the practice. Their concern, however, passed over the African American victims to focus on injury to white “civilization,” as demonstrated by Mencken’s attack on the lynchers of Salisbury, Maryland, in 1931 and the Atlanta Constitution’s condemnation of the 1934 Neal lynching.⁷²

Somehow the violence had to be controlled, then, without upsetting poorer whites’ support for the culture of segregation. And here again a growing consumer culture making less violence better known and thus more powerful reinforced the culture of segregation by reconciling its ideological contradictions. Whites could now consume a lynching without consuming a black man, alleviating the danger of a lynching spilling over into an anarchy that destroyed valuable property. A lynching somewhere else could create a white public and yet not hurt local town boosting or challenge local
class hierarchies. In growing urban eras, police forces increasingly stepped in to stop extralegal violence and protect property. For many white southerners, representations of lynchings had become better than lynchings themselves.

But not for all. Though the circulation of the lynching narrative—especially with the NAACP’s escalation of the anti-lynching campaign—helped eliminate spectacle lynchings, in more isolated places like Glendora and Poplarville, Mississippi, whites continued to assert what they thought was their racial right to kill African Americans, albeit more privately. Private lynchings continued and may even have increased in the 1930s as some rural white southerners saw the violence as an act of southern patriotism. For some whites, then, images of lynchings did not work quite as effectively as lynchings themselves in reconciling the class differences within the whiteness empowered by the culture of segregation.  

Spectacle lynchings symbolically and physically subverted segregation, separation as culture, in order to strengthen it. These grisly rituals ensured that the whiteness segregation created remained unbroken within by gender and class divisions and unchallenged without by a black autonomy nurtured on the ground of separation. But as some white southern elites increasingly saw their own interests connected culturally and economically to a North whose conception of justice did not as routinely include extralegal violence, lynchings could no longer conjure southern unity across a growing class divide. The contradictions between more dominant American conceptions of “civilization” and southern whites’ claims of superiority cracked whiteness in a way that lynching, as the cause, could not seal. For some whites, then, lynching, “smashing a sassy Negro,” became a badge of southern distinctiveness as well as racial identity. The federal government and the moralistic North could not again tell these southern whites how to manage their own affairs. By the 1930s, violence became one way to mediate between the desire for Americanization, a connection to the larger nation, and the fear of losing the white southern self.

But perhaps most frighteningly, the lynching narrative worked as a ritual of inversion that created white unity within the nation as well as the region. Resolving the contradictions of a nationalism based on racial identity—a national white supremacy—the white South could always be condemned by the North as excess, as lack, thereby providing the mask underneath which the inequalities of American whiteness could be ignored. The fact that northern African Americans could look south and see a much more explicit oppression must have dampened their confidence in demanding greater rights at home. As NAACP director James Weldon Johnson declared so eloquently, “lynching in the United States has resolved itself into a problem of saving black America’s body and white America’s soul.” Despite the moral as well as racial ambiguity with which William Faulkner surrounds Joe Christmas, perhaps the most famous fictional victim of a lynching mob, then, many whites continued to see the “black beast rapist,” their own simple and therefore defeatable devil, their own collective construction of evil. On the black side of Calvary, however, African American and white liberal anti-lynching activists offered a vastly different interpretation of southern white atrocities, attempting to make the Christlike natures as well as the racial identity of lynching victims transparently clear. Only the African American body hung on that charred cross. For whites it meant damnation, the perhaps permanent loss, as Johnson understood, of a large part of America’s soul.