

Civil Whiteness: Legitimate Violence and the Literature of Lynching

Abstract: This paper argues that by the turn of the twentieth century, a new paradigm had emerged in the United States for understanding white racial identity, one which placed whiteness and the idea of legitimate state power in a closer relationship than before. To illustrate this claim, I examine this ideology of “civil whiteness” at work in three texts by white men of distinctly different political and disciplinary backgrounds: the 1902 debut novel of the radical racist Thomas Dixon Jr. (*The Leopard’s Spots*), James Elbert Cutler’s groundbreaking 1905 sociological study of lynching (*Lynch-Law*), and Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan’s celebrated dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). For these authors, white mob violence against African Americans provides a crucial context in which the relation between whiteness and legitimate violence can be articulated. Despite their considerable differences, all three texts reflect and reinforce a newly emergent understanding of whiteness as constituted by an intimate connection to legitimate state violence.

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*The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the
blood of patriots and tyrants.
It is its natural manure.*

- Thomas Jefferson (1787)

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.*

- Abel Meeropol, "Strange Fruit" (1939)

In his 1901 novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, Charles Chesnutt succinctly and incisively summarizes a line of argument often advanced in defense of white mob violence and lynching at the turn of the century. While Chesnutt's story culminates in a fictionalized account of the 1898 race riot in Wilmington, NC—a deadly mob uprising in which several African Americans were killed and many others forced from their government offices—this climactic event is preceded by a narrowly-averted lynching. A young black man is wrongfully accused of robbing, murdering, and presumably raping a wealthy white woman (as the narrator sardonically explains, "The criminal was a negro, the victim a white woman; it was only reasonable to expect the worst.")¹ Countering the common impression that only poor whites were responsible for mob violence, Chesnutt depicts the city's white leaders feeding the public frenzy for a lynching. Major Carteret, editor of the local newspaper, explains to his friends that what has occurred "is more than an ordinary crime, to be dealt with by the ordinary processes of law. It is a murderous and fatal assault ... upon our race in the person of its womanhood, its crown and flower. If such crimes are not punished with swift and terrible directness, the whole white womanhood of the South is in danger."² Carteret's statement is paradigmatic of turn-of-the century lynching discourse in its insistence that the crime at hand exceeds the capacity of "ordinary" legal procedure, as well as in its use of the bodies of white women as a figure for Southern society and

¹ Charles Waddell Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, ed. Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning, Bedford Cultural Editions (Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2002), 156.

² *Ibid.*

the white “race” as a whole.³ Carteret soon publishes an editorial on the subject, which the narrator paraphrases as follows:

If an outraged people, justly infuriated, and impatient of the slow processes of the courts, should assert their inherent sovereignty, which the law after all was merely intended to embody, and should choose, in obedience to the higher law, to set aside, temporarily, the ordinary judicial procedure, it would serve as a warning and an example to the vicious elements of the community, of the swift and terrible punishment which would fall, like the judgment of God, upon any one who laid sacrilegious hands upon white womanhood.⁴

According to Carteret, the righteous fury of “an outraged people” may occasionally demand more than “ordinary judicial procedure” can provide in terms of swiftness, terror, and exemplarity. In this line of reasoning, the task of protecting “white womanhood” (and all it is held to represent) from violation by “sacrilegious hands” takes on an urgency that supersedes the encumbrances of due process. It posits a “higher law” that transcends the merely mortal laws of everyday criminal justice. Carteret’s invocation of higher law and “the judgment of God” is echoed a few pages later when the local judge himself offers an apology for the lynch mob, explaining that “in an emergency the sovereign people might assert itself and take the law into its own hands—the creature [is] not greater than the creator.”⁵

The theological language employed by city patriarchs like Major Carteret and the judge serves as a wry indictment by Chesnutt of white supremacism’s underlying hubris. But more importantly, the judge’s description of the law as a “creature” created by and forever subordinate to the “people” encapsulates a deeply pervasive logic in the turn-of-the-century United States. This kind of rhetoric posits an amorphous popular body or democratic force (understood

³ As Sandra Gunning writes, “In white supremacist fiction, the figure of the assaulted white women functions as a metaphor for the imagined political rape of the white home and the white nation.” Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912*, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 75.

⁴ Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 158.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

variously as “the people,” “the public,” “society,” etc.) that is prior and external to the state and its laws—and, at the same time, fuses this popular foundation of state power with the concept of whiteness. By using the language of sacredness in their apologies for the lynch mob, Carteret and the judge assert that there is a higher power at work, something bigger, more primordial, and more important than the law itself. This “something” is both more real and more abstract than the state’s actual legal codes, and, crucially, it is understood to be coextensive with the prerogatives of “the white race.” This synthesis of the metaphysics of popular sovereignty with the metaphysics of race, I will argue, was foundational to white racial thinking across a range of political positions in the turn-of-the-century US. That is, the defenders of lynch mobs were not the only ones to employ this kind of logic; many of lynching’s avowed opponents also fell under the spell of this deeply racialized understanding of legitimate state power’s popular basis. Thus, rather than a mere ruse allowing white supremacists to cynically justify racial injustice through appeals to “democracy” and “the people’s welfare,” the conceptual fusion of whiteness and governmental authority shaped even the thinking of many whites who explicitly challenged Jim Crow discrimination. Notions of race are not static, and have always had to adjust and adapt to changing historical circumstances in order to survive.⁶ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conscription of ideas of popular sovereignty, democratic authority, and legitimate violence to the project of re-making of “whiteness” served concrete political, economic, and cultural needs. Moreover, the specific context (that is, explaining or apologizing for mob violence) in which much of this thinking was first articulated is critical to understanding how the meaning of “whiteness” was revised and remade near the turn of the century. What emerges in this context, I argue, is not so much an idea of “the people” or “the public” that has been painted

⁶ David R. Roediger, *How Race Survived US History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon* (London ; New York: Verso, 2008).

white, but rather an idea of whiteness that has arrogated to itself the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. Thus, rather than understand this rhetorical and conceptual phenomenon as a "white public," "white republic,"⁷ or "white democracy,"⁸ I find it more helpful to think of it as whiteness that has "gone public," whiteness imagined in terms of the popular will that makes and breaks governments. Not whiteness as a characteristic of civil authority, but civil authority as a property of whiteness—what I shall refer to hereafter as "civil whiteness."

In what follows, I will examine this concept of civil whiteness at work in several different kinds of turn-of-the-century writing by white men about mob violence. Whether in the polemical and didactic novels of the radical racist Thomas Dixon, the dispassionate sociology of James Elbert Cutler, or the liberal dissent of Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), civil whiteness emerges to explain (if not always to justify) racial violence. By comparing the work of several different writers considered authorities on race relations, I hope to show how their diverse interpretations of white mob violence were shaped by, and helped make visible, a newly emergent understanding of whiteness, one that bound white racial identity and legitimate violence more closely than ever before.

This amalgamation of race and state power represents a subtle but distinct departure from previous forms of white supremacist politics dominant in the United States. Many scholars have documented the ascendancy of "*Herrenvolk* democracy" in the antebellum US, a governmental regime that sociologist Pierre van den Berghe describes as "democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups."⁹ As Alexander Saxton writes, the egalitarianism of the

⁷ Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-century America*, The Haymarket Series (London ; New York: Verso, 1990).

⁸ Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 42.

Jacksonian “Democracy” of the 1820s through 1840s asserted a “political, civil and moral equality of white male citizens” predicated on the exclusion of nonwhites and women.¹⁰ During this period, white workers were forced to reconcile the proud Revolutionary-era ideal of “free white labor” with the realities of American industrialization and capitalist development—thus the term shifted from denoting the labor of self-employed farmers and artisans to encompassing wage labor as well. The disappointment of white workers’ earlier dreams of “manly independence” was compensated, in part, by a rejuvenated understanding of white citizenship tied to voting rights, to membership in the “producing classes,” and most importantly, to not being a slave.¹¹ The enslavement of African Americans provided whites with a reliable counterpoint against which their own freedom could be measured, even if this comparison was not always unproblematic and uncontested. “Whiteness,” as political theorist Joel Olson writes, “was not a biological status but a *political* color that distinguished the free from the unfree, the equal from the inferior, the citizen from the slave.”¹² The abolition of slavery in the US by no means upended white supremacy, but it did pose fundamental problems for definitions of whiteness, citizenship, and freedom that were so dependent upon contrast with African American slaves. The question that Grace Elizabeth Hale identifies as confronting the post-Reconstruction South was a pressing one for the whole of white America: “what would citizenship mean in a world without slaves?”¹³

Civil whiteness emerged from this disruption of the relationship between race and citizenship. White racial identity and white racism would have to adapt to keep serving their

¹⁰ Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 143.

¹¹ Roediger, *How Race Survived US History*, 68–69; Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 144.

¹² Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy*, 43 (emphasis in original).

¹³ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 5.

function of maintaining a cross-class coalition of skilled artisans, wage laborers, tenant farmers, landowners and capitalists. Whiteness, as W. E. B. Du Bois famously observed, had long “compensated” poorly-paid white workers “by a sort of public and psychological wage.”¹⁴ The loss of the citizen/slave status distinction made that wage somewhat more difficult to deliver. Whereas in the *Herrenvolk* democracy of the antebellum era, whiteness was held to be a criterion for inclusion in the body politic, in the postbellum period whiteness became, at a conceptual level, coextensive with state power itself. Jacksonian whiteness conferred privileges upon its members; civil whiteness of the late nineteenth century allowed whites to think of their racial identity not as a ticket into civic life, but as the source of an intimate—even spiritual—connection to legitimate state violence.

If whiteness had thus long existed in close relation to state power, the fact that the roots of racial thinking lay in colonial conquest and chattel slavery also meant that the status of being white had long implied (if not always delivered) a particular, privileged relationship to violence.¹⁵ Close connections between race, state power, and violence, therefore, were nothing new in the late nineteenth century US; what *was* new, however, was the convergence of these three things at the site of the lynch mob, whose deadly force was in many ways understood as foundational to state authority itself. And by the early years of the twentieth century, no fiction

¹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois and W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 700.

¹⁵ Rebecca Hill notes that in early America, “race became a determining factor in what was defined as violent or insurrectionary activity, as opposed to what was defined as popular justice, and the ability to use violence in an orderly way became evidence of whiteness itself.” Rebecca Nell Hill, *Men, Mobs, and Law: Anti-lynching and Labor Defense in U.S. Radical History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 10–11.

writer had popularized and disseminated images of that racialized and lethal force more effectively than the avid white supremacist Thomas Dixon, Jr.

Dixon, whose long and varied career included time spent as a politician, preacher, orator, playwright, novelist, actor, and Hollywood filmmaker, wrote his first novel, *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden—1865-1900*, after attending a stage production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1901. Dixon was outraged by the play's portrayal of the South, and after sixty days of furious writing he had produced his rebuttal in the form of a 400-page paean to Southern white manhood. Historian Joel Williamson describes *The Leopard's Spots* as “virtually an encyclopedia” of what he terms “Racial Radicalism.”¹⁶ Williamson identifies three Southern white racial “mentalities” after the Civil War: a “Liberal” stream of thought which, though paternalistic, acknowledged “that it did not yet know the potential of the Negro” and regretted whites’ abandonment of racial uplift efforts after Reconstruction’s end; a “Conservative” mentality, the most dominant and enduring of the three, that “always began, proceeded, and ended upon the assumption of Negro inferiority”; and finally a “Radical” position that emerged in 1889 and enjoyed widespread popularity until around 1915. Radicals imagined emancipated blacks—especially black men—not merely as inferior to whites but as fundamentally depraved and dangerous. While Conservatives and most Liberals envisioned a subordinate position for African Americans in the nation, Radicals “insisted that there was *no place* for the Negro in the future American society” and wishfully predicted that blacks would soon die out altogether, thereby solving the nation’s “Negro Problem.”¹⁷ In its relentless portrayals of heroic white masculinity, black men’s savagery, and white women’s vulnerability and sexual victimization,

¹⁶ Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/white Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

The Leopard's Spots lays bare quite unself-consciously the key tropes, fantasies, and phobias of the Radical mentality. Given the book's bestseller status (it sold 100,000 copies in its first few months, with over one million copies eventually being printed) and its role in launching a literary career that would culminate in the screenplay for D.W. Griffith's 1915 blockbuster, *Birth of a Nation*, *The Leopard's Spots* is a particularly significant text in the literature of turn-of-the-century US white supremacy.¹⁸

This novel demonstrates not only an affinity with Radical racism, but also a closely-related investment in civil whiteness. Dixon's fiction enjoyed such great popularity among the white reading public because it rearticulated and reinforced what was, by 1902, already a widely held view of race relations in general, and white mob violence in particular.¹⁹ In its presentation of lynching, the Ku Klux Klan, and anti-black rioting, *The Leopard's Spots* invokes a metaphysical and transcendent white racial history that finds expression in acts of government power (whether that power is fully institutionalized or not). That is, the novel marries a primal racial spirit with the people's sovereign right to self-determination, both of which are manifest in state (and state-like) action. It is this union of the spiritual and the worldly to which the novel's hero, Charles Gaston, refers in a debate with his future father-in-law about embarking on a career in politics: "I believe that the Government is the organized virtue of the community, and that politics is religion in action. It may be a poor sort of religion, but it is the best we are capable of

¹⁸ Ibid., 158.

¹⁹ Comparing Dixon's freewheeling historical revisionism with anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells's meticulous gathering of statistics, Jeffery Clymer suggests that Dixon's best-selling novels "are excellent examples of propaganda that did not need to marshal evidence that could in any way be thought of as objective, because his narratives already meshed with the naturalized and ideologically dominant conception of lynching." Jeffery A. Clymer, *America's Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 104.

as members of society.”²⁰ Gaston, the orphaned son of a Confederate war hero, is a tireless and ultimately victorious champion of race Radicalism, an undaunted idealist who believes that government, at its very best, can be a faithful and “organized” expression of white “virtue.” A robust, red-blooded specimen of white manhood who, we read, is destined from childhood for the North Carolina Governor’s Mansion, Gaston embodies the collision of Anglo-Saxon racial heritage and governmental authority that is essential to civil whiteness.

That racial inheritance is shown to be in profound crisis in at the outset of *The Leopard’s Spots*, which opens during Reconstruction. “The task before the people of the South was one to tax the genius of the Anglo-Saxon race as never in its history,” Dixon writes, referring to the social and economic disruptions of Emancipation. “The task of organizing this wrecked society and marshalling into efficient citizenship this host of ignorant negroes, and yet to preserve the civilisation of the Anglo-Saxon race, the priceless heritage of two thousand years of struggle, was one to appal the wisdom of the ages” (35). This racial “genius” and “heritage” is a precious and vulnerable legacy to be protected and, at the same time, the potent means of its own protection. The invocation of millennia of white racial history is repeated many times throughout the novel, but most emphatically during Gaston’s climactic speech to the state Democratic Convention near the book’s end. In this scene, Gaston works his audience into an ecstatic frenzy as he calls for the absolute exclusion of African Americans from political life in North Carolina. Urging his fellow Democrats to buck up in the face of “Negro domination,” Gaston warns against leaving final authority with mere “paper constitutions.” Gaston reminds the men of their proud “Aryan” history, insisting: “We are not free because we have a Constitution. We have a

²⁰ Thomas Dixon, *The Leopard’s Spots: a Romance of the White Man’s Burden--1865-1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1902), 284. Subsequent references to this text will be made by page number in parentheses.

Constitution because our pioneer fathers, who cleared the wilderness and dared the might of kings, were freemen. It was in their blood, the tutelage of generation on generation beyond the seas, the evolution of centuries of struggle and sacrifice” (442). Here, Dixon intermingles biological heredity with a less tangible kind of legacy—freedom is “in their blood,” yet it has been passed on through generations of “tutelage.” This overlay of the bodily and the spiritual through racial identity reflects what Gail Bederman sees as “a Darwinist version of Protestant millennialism” that prevailed in the late nineteenth century.²¹ In this line of thinking, the mechanism of evolution (as understood by pseudo-Darwinian racial science) executed the divine task of pushing humanity forward in the long, slow battle of good against evil. Thus, while whiteness is clearly a matter of flesh and blood for Dixon, its corporeal manifestation is merely the outward expression of a far more ethereal reality. As Walter Benn Michaels writes, what matters more for Dixon than the whiteness of the body is the whiteness of the soul; in Dixon’s novels, “identity ... is always fundamentally spiritual.”²²

This spiritual inheritance is at the same time a political inheritance, a right to sovereign self-rule not altogether unlike the legitimate right of dominion passed along a royal line of descent. To demonstrate this, Dixon turns to the political upheaval of Reconstruction as a crisis and limit case in which this conception of legitimacy is put to the test in two ways.²³ First,

²¹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (University Of Chicago Press, 1996), 25.

²² Walter Benn Michaels, “The Souls of White Folk,” in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry, Selected Papers from the English Institute (SPEI): 12 (1986) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 190.

²³ Saxton offers the following account of racism as a theory or hypothesis: “Physical differences between groups may be easily visible and are certainly real, but racism reaches beyond them to assert that moral, intellectual and psychological qualities are also racially characteristic; that they are transmitted, along with physical traits, by heredity; and that these together constitute a major chain of historical causation. Racism is thus fundamentally a theory of history.” Dixon seeks to

Reconstruction entailed the removal of whites not from positions of power altogether, but from exclusive control of the state. It is the shock of losing absolute white supremacy in political matters that constitutes an unprecedented crisis in *The Leopard's Spots*, and for this reason the terms “negro dominion” and “negro equality” are used almost interchangeably (137). The incorporation of African Americans into state power structures drives a wedge between whiteness and authority, troubling their easy identification with one another. What ensues in the absence of exclusively white governance? The answer, as Dixon’s repeated references to Reconstruction as sheer “anarchy” would suggest, is that one winds up with no government at all. The second way Reconstruction confirms civil whiteness involves the various vigilante movements to “redeem” white supremacy in government. For Dixon, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the 1860s and the Red Shirt campaign in the 1890s demonstrate the power of white political authority to reassert itself even without access to an official state apparatus—their spontaneous appearance bears witness to irrepressibly authoritative nature of whiteness.

The initial appearance of the Klan in Dixon’s debut novel also marks his *oeuvre*’s first lynching. When Tim Shelby, the local black Republican political boss, asks a young white woman for a kiss in exchange for giving her a job, he is soon pursued by “two hundred white-robed silent men whose close-fitting hood disguises looked like the mail helmets of ancient knights” (151). The next morning, Shelby’s body hangs from the balcony of the city courthouse with a note signed, “K.K.K.” The formation of the Klan, we then read, was “a spontaneous and resistless racial uprising” in the interests of good public order: “This Invisible Empire of White Robed Anglo-Saxon Knights was simply the old answer of organised manhood to organised crime. Its purpose was to bring order out of chaos, protect the weak and defenseless ... and

present Reconstruction and Redemption as historical moments in which this “theory of history” was vindicated. Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 14.

redeem civilization” (151-2). Preparing members of the local Klan for a voter intimidation campaign, their chief admonishes, “You are asked to violate a statutory law. There is a higher law. You are the sworn officers of that higher law” (163). The “law” these “officers” are sworn to uphold—the ideal, true law of which any actual statutes can only be an imperfect copy—is here inseparable from the idea Anglo-Saxon racial essence of which white Americans are merely an instantiation. The suddenness with which the Klan emerges to fulfill its function implies, as Rebecca Skidmore Biggio argues, the enduring presence of a latent “white fraternity” that flares up violently in response to external threats.²⁴

Yet, a striking contradiction marks Dixon’s portrayal of Reconstruction: while the period is represented as a tragic aberration that temporarily hindered the forward march of race and nation, it is also depicted as a cataclysmic event that permanently entrenches a bitterly antagonistic racial order. While the nation quickly moved on from the war, Dixon writes, the lingering effects of the Reconstruction regime were quite another matter:

We have easily outlived the sorrows of the war. That was a surgery which healed the body. But the child has not yet been born whose children's children will live to see the healing of the wounds from those four years of chaos, when fanatics, blinded by passion, armed millions of ignorant Negroes and thrust them into mortal combat with the proud, bleeding, half-starving Anglo-Saxon race of the South. Such a deed once done can never be undone. *It fixes the status of these races for a thousand years, if not for eternity.* (85, emphasis added)

²⁴ Biggio compellingly reads *The Leopard’s Spots* alongside *A Fools Errand: By One of the Fools* (1879), by Albion Tourgée, one of the postbellum period’s most celebrated racial liberals, and attorney to Homer Plessy in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Whereas in Dixon’s novel, the Klan *appears* swiftly and spontaneously, in Tourgée’s it is the sudden *disappearance* of the clansmen that is triumphantly noted. Despite their opposite political affiliations, Biggio argues, both authors work “to contain the visible, active manifestation of white supremacy in order to restore the ostensibly peaceful and orderly white fraternity underneath.” Rebecca Skidmore Biggio, “Violent Fraternities and White Reform: The Complementary Fictions of Albion Tourgée and Thomas Dixon,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 67, no. 2 (2011): 88, 92.

Together, the Civil War and Reconstruction are understood to affirm both white unity and an irreconcilable disunity between black and white. Moreover, Dixon's Reconstruction is held up as conclusive proof that without total white control of the state, the "spirit of anarchy" will inevitably prevail and government will "become organized crime instead of the organized virtue of the community" (94). Thus, as Dixon would have it, while Reconstruction did nothing to change the putatively natural relation between the races, it did eliminate whatever doubt there may once have been about whites' exclusive prerogative to wield state power. In this view, "negro government" can never be anything more than a "preposterous joke," as Gaston's dejected mentor, Reverend Durham, describes the Republican regime (136, 98). While most postbellum white accounts of Reconstruction may seem primarily concerned with black failure and misrule, Dixon's frank exaltation of whiteness reminds us that these retellings of the war's aftermath ultimately serve to reinforce the claim that only whites are capable of governing themselves and others. In his retelling of postwar history, Dixon not only presents whiteness as a necessary condition for governmental authority (as in the *Herrenvolk* democracy), he also strives to erase any difference whatsoever between whiteness and legitimate state power—to make any nonwhite exercise of governmental authority, or whiteness submitting to anything outside itself, look like an absurd contradiction in terms.

Dixon's novel also underscores the economic function of civil whiteness in the postwar era—that is, whiteness's longstanding task of forging a cross-class coalition in which poor and working-class whites are compensated psychically and publically for subordinating their own economic interests. Civil whiteness does this by positing and celebrating a self-governing public (inheritor of both a racial history and an inalienable right to govern) that stands over and above the rough-and-tumble realities of the market. This civil, civic and *public* whiteness transcends

the *private* interests of particular individuals or groups. In *The Leopard's Spots*, certain whites fail to rise to the occasion, pursuing their own private, parochial interests at the expense of the racial public. Arch-villain Simon Legree, lifted from the pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and appearing in Dixon's narrative as a the former slave-driver turned robber baron, builds a corporate empire on the backs of brutalized northern workers, seeking personal financial gain at all costs. The Republican leader Allan McLeod pursues political power above all, engaging in interracial political coalitions that threaten to revive the Reconstruction era's "conspiracy against human progress" (196). Economic interest groups can be guilty of this racial betrayal as well. The Farmers' Alliance, which forms a coalition with McLeod's integrated Republicans, puts class interests over the public good, calling for an inflationary monetary policy that would amount to "issuing money on corn and pumpkins and potatoes stored in a government barn" (312). Reverend Durham sums up the economic imperatives of civil whiteness when he insists upon the absolute priority of race over class: "Two great questions shadow the future of the American people, the conflict between Labour and Capital and the conflict between the African and the Anglo-Saxon race. The greatest, most dangerous and most hopeless of these is the latter" (334). For Durham, as for Dixon, the very fate of humanity rests upon the ability of "Anglo-Saxons" to set their economic interests aside and unite around their common whiteness.

And, as Dixon well knew, nothing brought turn-of-the-century white American men together across class lines more quickly or more effectively than the perceived need to protect white womanhood through mob violence. This unifying power of this pursuit is emphatically dramatized in *The Leopard's Spots* when a search party and proto-lynch mob gathers to look for a poor, young white girl who has gone missing:

In a moment the white race had fused into a homogenous mass of love, sympathy, hate and revenge. The rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the banker and the

blacksmith, the great and the small, they were all one now. The sorrow of [the girl's father] was the sorrow of all; every heart beat with his, and his life was their life, and his child was their child. (372)

The fury of this wrathful white mass rises beyond measure when it is subsequently discovered that the girl has been raped and murdered by—everyone seems to agree—a black man. When the crowd returns with its alleged culprit (whose guilt is assumed by narrator and mob alike), it turns out to be Gaston's childhood playmate, Dick. Gaston looks out in "wonder" at the crowd, teary-eyed, and sees "a giant crawling, swaying creature, half reptile, half beast, half dragon, half man, with a thousand legs, a thousand eyes, and ten thousand gleaming teeth, and with no ear to hear and no heart to pity!" (384). The spectacle here is primarily about neither the suffering of the victim nor the terrorization of the local black community. Spectacle lynchings, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall asserts, served "as much to reaffirm solidarity and demonstrate power *to whites themselves* as to punish and intimidate blacks."²⁵ Dixon's thousand-legged beast is likewise a spectacular manifestation of uncontainable and incontestable white power.

This is not to say that lynching violence is unproblematic for Dixon, who seems to need to disavow the mob's excessive brutality through Gaston's bootless entreaties for a "fair trial" (382). Still, any reservations on Dixon's part are put forward without denying that the lynch mob is a manifestation of unstoppable, world-conquering Anglo-Saxon masculinity. Lynching may be tragic and cruel, but it is ultimately explained as a normal behavior of the "natural man"—a concept newly popular at the turn of the century, which Bederman characterizes as the "idea that an innate, uncivilized savagery lay simmering in the hearts of modern men." Indeed, even many critics of lynching tended to bolster this excuse by accepting mob violence as a natural (if

²⁵ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching*, rev. ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 144 (emphasis in original).

condemnable) practice.²⁶ Lynching's close association with the "natural man" furthered its function in forging alliances between white men of different classes. The emergent language of "masculinity," as Bederman demonstrates, served to synthesize a Victorian, middle-class ideal of manly self-restraint with working-class practices of manhood (including boxing, drinking in saloons, and fraternal organizations like the Freemasons).²⁷ Middle-class white men asserted and celebrated the idea that the same red blood, replete with aggressiveness, physical prowess, and sexual drives, flowed in their own veins as in those of their working-class cousins. It is to this gendered and racialized notion of white men's immutable animal nature that the title of *The Leopard's Spots* refers. The utility of this concept in uniting whites across political, regional, and class differences is apparent when George Harris Jr. (*Uncle Tom's Cabin's* escaped slave child all grown up) declares his love for the daughter of his white patron, liberal Republican Congressman Everett Lowell of Massachusetts. Despite his high-flown notions of political equality for African Americans, Everett nonetheless reverts to animal fury at the mere suggestion of Harris courting his daughter: "Lowell sprang to his feet as though a bolt of lightning had suddenly shot down his backbone. He glared at the Negro with widely dilated eyes and heaving breath as though he had been transformed into a leopard and was about to spring at his throat" (396). The dispirited Harris begins wandering around the country after this rejection, eventually making a tour of lynching sites across the US, placing flowers upon the piles of ash that remain. This journey ultimately leads him to a small town that had been a station of the Underground Railroad through which he and his family had passed as fugitives—despite the village's abolitionist history, Harris is shocked to find "one of these ash-heaps in the public square" (407). In a perverse way, Dixon's portrayal of antiblack mob violence as a national phenomenon

²⁶ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 73, 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17–19.

anticipates Jacqueline Goldsby's influential recent argument that lynching should be understood not as a parochial, archaic, and narrowly Southern practice, but as a form of violence that "fit" within the national culture of the modern United States.²⁸

The lynching scene in *The Leopard's Spots* provides a favorable contrast for the white supremacy campaign that Gaston leads a few chapters later. When a black newspaper publishes an editorial, an angry mob of five hundred burns the presses to the ground and puts the editor on a train out of town with a noose around his neck. This restrained, bloodless, "legitimate" lynching nonetheless deploys lynching's lethal iconography. Likewise, Gaston's campaign for governor, in which "Red Shirt" vigilante voter intimidation tactics play a crucial role, is presented as a stately, awe-inspiring display of force utterly unlike the savagery of the lynch mob. "There was no violence," Dixon assures us, "except the calm demonstration in open daylight of omnipotent racial power and the defiance of any foe to lift a hand in protest" (450). When Gaston speaks in the city of Independence, "five thousand white men in scarlet shirts" ride wordlessly through the streets while "six thousand Negroes" look on in terror: "The silence of the procession gave it the import of a religious rite" (450). Like the Klan in the 1860s, the Red Shirts of the 1890s offer a sanitized, unproblematic alternative to the uncontrolled brutality of lynching.²⁹

Racial violence in general, and lynching in particular, provided a key imaginative space at the turn of the century for refashioning the meaning of whiteness. Whether in its more or less respectable incarnations, however, white mob violence is presented by Dixon as the bursting

²⁸ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6.

²⁹ As Gunning writes of Dixon's second novel, *The Clansman*, "Only in the highly ritualized, controlled executions performed by the Ku Klux Klan does white male violence become a fully liberating, purifying experience that absolves whites of guilt and restores the 'natural' order." Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching*, 41.

forth of an ancient and indomitable racial spirit; a scene of lynching, for Dixon, serves to confirm the reality of civil whiteness. Yet, *The Leopard's Spots* also demonstrates that it is precisely in the midst of such violence that this authoritative notion of whiteness is constructed. Dixon repeatedly speaks of a unity or fusion of the “Anglo Saxon race” that *results* from violent collective undertakings like the Klan’s clandestine killings, the Red Shirts’ parades, or the mob execution of Dick. Violence serves same race-making function near the novel’s end when the Spanish-American War breaks out, consolidating the unity of whiteness in waging war abroad and emphasizing the unbridgeable gap between whites and blacks on the home front: “When the Anglo-Saxon race was united into one homogenous mass in the fire of this crisis, the Negro ceased that moment to be a ward of the nation” (413). While Dixon presents the “melting” or “fusing” of Anglo-Saxons as if it were the re-union of a preexisting racial whole, it is actually in the act of interpreting the mob’s violence that this whole is created and made visible. An inherent ambiguity of this homogenous mass of Anglo-Saxon manhood was its scale—the innate authority demonstrated in a lynching could be seen as extending to a municipal government, a state, the nation, or even the whole world. This uncontainable scope of white claims to legitimate dominion, implicit in the discourse of civil whiteness, is apparent during Gaston’s speech to the North Carolina Democratic convention: “Our old men dreamed of local supremacy. We dream of the conquest of the globe” (439).

Although his fiction starkly exhibits many of the rhetorical and theoretical underpinnings of civil whiteness, one did not have to be a rabid race radical like Thomas Dixon in order to participate in this remaking of racial meaning. James Elbert Cutler, a young, white, Yale-trained sociologist who could be placed somewhere between Williamson’s “Conservative” and “Liberal” racial mentalities, confirmed much of Dixon’s logic when he published the first book-length

study of lynching in 1905. In *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States*, Cutler surveyed the history of summary punishment from medieval Ireland and Germany to the early twentieth-century US. Throughout his discussion of American lynching, Cutler reads this violence as an unambiguous expression of “public sentiment.” It is at this level of popular feeling, Cutler concludes, that the “only ultimate remedy for lynching” can be found.³⁰ Legislation, he argues, tends to be ineffective and under-enforced if not backed up by popular opinion. Observing a decline in the frequency of lynching in states both with and without anti-lynching laws, Cutler infers “that the same causes which led to the enactment of the laws also brought about the decline in the number of lynchings, namely, public discussion and condemnation of the practice of lynching, a stronger public sentiment against it, a deeper realization of the seriousness of the lynching problem in the United States” (252). The future of lynching, he suggests, lies in the hands of the sovereign people who currently condone and carry out the practice—a sovereign people who, it thus goes without saying, are white.

Like Dixon, Cutler wavers about whether or not lynching can be seen as in any way legitimate or acceptable. Cutler is entirely credulous of the claim that lynchings were undertaken to compensate for “governmental inefficiency” in dealing with accused criminals, explaining that the only possible ground of justification would be if “the law as formulated and administered has proved inadequate to deal with the situation” (224). This excuse, he writes, should never be valid under “a government founded on the idea that ultimate power and authority shall rest with the people, and in which sufficient facility has been given to the expression of [their] collective will.” And yet, Cutler acknowledges that in light of actual, non-ideal historical circumstances, “it

³⁰ James Elbert Cutler, *Lynch-law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1905), 265. Subsequent references to this text will be made by page number in parentheses.

is possible to see how justification has come about.” Thus, in a rather remarkable rhetorical contortion, Cutler equivocates: “while we cannot justify the practice of lynching on any ground whatever, yet the fact remains that it has been repeatedly justified in one way or another” (226). Ultimately, however, these moral questions are rendered rather immaterial in light of lynching’s ostensible inexorability; since Cutler understands lynching to be the expression of a white popular will that cannot be thwarted by anything other than itself, the matter of lynching’s justifiability loses its relevance. The circular reasoning Cutler employs here causes any distinction between legality and extralegality to break down. In writing that public opinion “is the *sine qua non* of lynching,” he contends that the will of the people is what defines this particular species of illegality, and yet this nefarious popular will is at the same time the very root of all legitimacy in government (276).

Despite some glaring assumptions about African Americans’ inferiority beside the “highly civilized and cultured race” of whites, Cutler generally lacks Dixon’s radical cant about white supremacy (224-25). In *Lynch-Law*, whiteness tends to fade into the background behind talk of a popular sentiment that remains racially unmarked. This tendency, however, is not an indication that race is irrelevant to Cutler’s analysis, but that whiteness is working as an unspoken norm: true to the logic of civil whiteness, the popular will that Cutler sees as lynching’s true cause is inseparable from whiteness—and an exceptional American whiteness, at that. Lynching, Cutler writes, is a “peculiarly American institution” (267). Likewise, his historical treatment of the subject understands the “public” whose insuppressible will drives this violence not as a universal political category, but through the specific historical context of white settler colonialism in North America. Cutler describes American lynching’s roots in “frontier” regions, in both anti-Indian violence and white-on-white vigilantism in the absence of an

established legal system. While noting that extralegal punishments were carried out in well-established communities in the eighteenth century (such as the “Regulators” of the Carolinas and New Jersey), he explains that lynching as summary *execution* emerged in the context of Western expansion, and was later transferred to the postbellum South (135). Like so many whites of his era, Cutler accepted the standard narratives of Reconstruction as a chaotic period of misrule, civil instability, and “negro domination.” In his account, then, the postwar South was a chaotic and frontier-like environment conducive to the adoption of summary killing.

In accounting for lynching as peculiarly American, Cutler compares US and European attitudes toward the law. Americans, he argues, lack Europeans’ reverence for the law in and of itself; instead, they venerate the “people” behind the law. And as Cutler’s historical narrative has shown, this “people” in back of the law and the state, a “people” that becomes visible as such in mob acts of summary execution, was constituted through colonial white violence itself—whether in the setting of frontier settler colonialism, the suppression of slave revolts, or racial lynching after the Civil War. For Cutler, the popular will held sacred above all else in America is fundamentally the will of whites. This collapse of whiteness and popular sovereignty is what allows him to describe “public sentiment” as a separate factor from “race prejudice” in driving white-on-black lynching (272). In Cutler’s study, it is not the case that the whiteness of the “people” has become invisible; rather, it is so visible, so obvious and unremarkable that it ceases to be seen at all. Only when white supremacy is hidden in plain sight like this can the continual murder and dismemberment of black persons by white mobs be seen as not primarily a matter of “race prejudice.”

Still, Cutler admits that racial difference and antagonism tend to exacerbate an already-present proclivity towards lynching. After all, he presents lynching throughout his study as a

settler colonial behavior, the inevitable response of a (white) public to the disorder it experiences and produces as it moves into frontier spaces. In Cutler's account, that is, lynching is a byproduct of what Amy Kaplan calls "the anarchic encounters of empire."³¹ He makes this colonial framing of white mob violence explicit when he writes that the "lynching of negroes is now so distinctively an American practice" because "[n]owhere else in the temperate zone does a colored race of tropical origin come into contact in such numbers with a highly civilized race of European stock. *The 'native question' of tropical regions has here been transplanted, as it were, to the temperate zone*" (272, emphasis added). Racial lynching, Cutler indicates, thus persists because the US remains a space of colonial confrontation. It is from such violence that Cutler constructs his understanding of an all-powerful "public sentiment" coterminous with whiteness. Like Thomas Dixon, Cutler looks into the heart of white incivility and sees the basis of democracy—a stately, civil whiteness.

As a final example, the landmark US Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) provides an instance of civil whiteness at work not just in literary or scholarly production, but in the highest reaches of government. This is true not only of the majority opinion, which entrenched "separate but equal" racial segregation in US constitutional law until the 1950s, but of Justice John Marshall Harlan's celebrated dissent as well, in which he declares that "[o]ur Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among its citizens."³² Garnering little attention at the time, Harlan's *Plessy* dissent was eventually lionized during the 1960s, transforming the lone Southerner on the Court into a "judicial saint" and an icon of

³¹ Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 16.

³² Brook Thomas, ed., *Plessy V. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, First Edition (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 57.

American racial liberalism.³³ Yet, Harlan's dissent also proceeds from an understanding of the body politic that is inseparable from whiteness. In this way, Harlan confirms in more liberal reasoning the invocation of civil whiteness that underlies the majority's notorious decision.

In this case, lawyers for Homer Plessy, a light-skinned Louisianan with one-eighth African, seven-eighths European ancestry, challenged the constitutionality of a Louisiana statute requiring separate accommodations on railway cars for "white" and "colored" passengers; the law subjected conductors and travellers alike to fines and imprisonment should they fail to respect the color bar. In a carefully orchestrated test case, Plessy was arrested in 1892 for refusing to leave a "whites only" railway coach and was convicted of violating the Separate Car Act. When the case reached the US Supreme Court, Plessy's lawyers contended that the law violated their client's rights under the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. The court overruled these objections in its decision, and upheld the law as a legitimate exercise of the state of Louisiana's police powers. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Henry Billings Brown asserted that lawmakers must be granted discretion to "act with reference to the established usages, customs and traditions of the people, and with a view to the promotion of their comfort, and the preservation of the public peace and good order."³⁴ It is in this talk of "public peace and good order" that the shadow of lynching looms in the court's decision. Given the alleged influence of what Brown described in *Plessy* as immutable "racial instincts," any policies promoting "enforced comingling" were both ineffectual and reckless, threatening to intensify the deadly racial strife that already rocked the nation. Attempts to "abolish distinctions based upon physical differences," Brown wrote, "can only result in accentuating *the difficulties of the*

³³ Anita Krishnakumar, "On the Evolution of the Canonical Dissent," *Rutgers Law Review* 52 (2000): 801.

³⁴ Thomas, *Plessy V. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, 50. Subsequent references to this text will be made by page number in parentheses.

present situation” (50-51, emphasis added.) Brown’s euphemistic language avoids directly naming the racial violence then sweeping the country, but, like both Dixon and Cutler, Brown looks to white mob violence as the outward sign of an unstoppable popular will. By supposedly preventing the eruptions of race hatred that occurred in the context of interracial contact, Jim Crow segregation statutes were seen to meet the court’s requirement that state-sanctioned discrimination furthered the “public good,” and not merely the “annoyance or oppression of a particular class” (49).

In rebutting the majority opinion, Harlan acknowledges African Americans as “a part of the political community called the People of the United States,” building his argument against the segregation statute on the basis of blacks’ US and state citizenship under the Reconstruction Amendments (60). The formal inclusion for blacks that Harlan advocates is less circumscribed than the insubstantial formal equality offered by the majority—“the thin disguise of ‘equal’ accommodations,” as Harlan dubbed it (59). And yet, as the lines immediately preceding the celebrated “color-blind Constitution” statement reveal, this equal citizenship was for Harlan entirely compatible with continued racial hierarchy:

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. But in view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. (57)

Here, Harlan expresses his faith in the heritage of the “white race” and the persistence of Anglo-Saxon dominance in worldly affairs. Like the majority, he sees racial stratification as a salutary outcome of good government and “constitutional liberty.” What distinguishes him from the majority and marks him as a racial liberal is the role he envisions for the government in

furthering this outcome. For Harlan, white supremacy does not need nor does it benefit from propping up by legislation like Louisiana's Separate Car Act. A color-blind constitution is for Harlan an instrument for the perpetuation of white supremacy, and not a tool to dismantle it.³⁵ In this sense, Harlan's *laissez-faire* brand of racial liberalism exhibits greater confidence in white supremacy's stability than segregationists like the *Plessy* majority or race radicals like Dixon.

Like the majority, Harlan is also concerned about preventing social disturbances and disorder; but for Harlan, it is enforced segregation, rather than interracial contact in public places, that drives mob violence. Rather than promoting "the public peace and good order," as Brown's majority opinion claims, Harlan argues that segregation statutes like Louisiana's "can have no other result than to render permanent peace impossible, and to keep alive a conflict of races, the continuance of which must do harm to all concerned" (58). The stability and security of the social order depends upon the restrained and discriminating exercise of state power; excessive governmental intervention will only hinder the natural processes of racial and social organization that Harlan assumes will result in whites' continued supremacy.

Another crucial moment in Harlan's dissent that troubles its easy appropriation by advocates of color-blind egalitarianism is the text's nod to Chinese exclusion.³⁶ Criticizing the Separate Car Act as an arbitrary and inconsistent practice of discrimination, Harlan points out its inapplicability to Chinese immigrants, despite the harsh immigration restriction policies imposed on them. This passage, too, is revealing of the intimacy of race and citizenship for Harlan:

³⁵ Commentators frequently dismiss Harlan's reference to whites as "the dominant race" as an unfortunate but ultimately incidental sign of his racial chauvinism. See, for example, Brook Thomas's introduction to *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, 36. Rather than shrug this passage off as "a product of its time," I suggest that it be understood as central to the logic of Harlan's dissent in *Plessy*.

³⁶ Passed in 1882 and in full effect until the 1940s, the Chinese Exclusion Act barred nearly all Chinese immigrants from legal entry (or return) to the United States.

There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race. But by the statute in question, a Chinaman can ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States, while citizens of the black race in Louisiana, many of whom, perhaps, risked their lives for the preservation of the Union ... are yet declared to be criminals, liable to imprisonment, if they ride in a public coach occupied by citizens of the white race. (58)

Harlan's declaration of Chinese persons' irreducible difference from "our own" race is not only an endorsement of the racial logic of the exclusion policy—it is also an assertion that the "we" who makes and debates the laws of the United States is strictly white. Despite his arguments for recognition of African Americans' membership in the body politic, Harlan does not cease to think of the US as a fundamentally white nation whose prerogative it is to exclude other races that seem insurmountably "different." Indeed, his argument rests upon this assumption, presenting African Americans as an exceptional case due to their particular historical relationship to the US. In making this case, Harlan effectively positions blacks on a continuum between the two extremes of white belonging and Chinese alienation. Blacks are acknowledged to be of an alien race, but owing to concrete historical developments (such as their participation in the Civil War and the passage of the postwar amendments) they can now stake a claim on being citizens of "our country." For Harlan, there is a place for African Americans in the republic, even if it is a subordinate one; for the "Chinaman," there is not even that.³⁷ The Chinese are conceived of *purely* as racial others, having none of the historical entanglements with white America that would oblige Harlan to recognize them as "a large body of American citizens, now constituting a part of the political community called the People of the United States" (60).

³⁷ Julia H. Lee argues that Harlan "does not consider blacks and whites to be on opposite sides of a racial binary but on the same side of a historical/national one. According to Harlan, the Chinese do not belong on the train because they have not participated in the history and struggle by which the nation defines itself." Julia H. Lee, "Estrangement on a Train: Race and Narratives of American Identity," *ELH* 75, no. 2 (2008): 349.

Harlan's plea for civil rights for African Americans rests on what he perceived as the obvious incommensurability of US citizenship and Chinese ancestry. In making his case, he appeals to the sovereign right of the American people to "absolutely" exclude and expel unwanted others, a right that is at the very root of legitimate state power and violence. If Harlan's attempt to make an exception for African Americans based on commitments the nation made during Reconstruction proved unconvincing to his fellow justices, it is not hard to see why. Harlan's triangulation of white, black and Chinese reaffirms in one case the same white supremacist principles he is trying to temper in the other. The difference between politically assimilable blacks and the abjectly alien Chinese derives, ultimately, from a sovereign white public that has willed and enacted the inclusion of the former (through the postwar amendments) and the elimination of the latter (through the Exclusion Act). Thus, the comparison reaffirms a belief in an uncontainable popular will that makes itself seen in acts of violence and domination. When Harlan laments that faithful African Americans are "declared to be criminals" and "liable to imprisonment" if they set foot in Louisiana's whites-only car, he ignores the fact that the "Chinaman" in question would likely be subjected to the same treatment under the Exclusion Act, which created the status of "illegal alien" in the US. In advocating for deserving blacks, Harlan helps normalize the state's violence against the Chinese. Thus, it is a shared ideology of civil whiteness that authorizes the detention and deportation of Chinese immigrants, that validates the enforcement of Jim Crow segregation statutes, and that ennobles, excuses, or explains the actions of white lynch mobs.

As Dixon, Cutler, and Harlan's texts show, racial discourses shaped by civil whiteness produce varied, sometimes contradictory images of racial otherness—the beast rapist, the passive object of sociological inquiry, the faithful veteran and citizen-in-training, the inassimilable

foreigner. It is true that all these racial figures connote some kind of inferiority, and on this basis the set of writers discussed above could be written off together as merely subscribing to outmoded and defunct ideas of black (and Chinese) incapacity. Rather than stewards of a new mutation in American whiteness, they could simply be dismissed as turn-of-the-century white bigots. But to do so would be to focus exclusively on what they have to say about *nonwhites* while ignoring what they simultaneously were saying about whites and whiteness. By overlooking the implicit claim about *white* capacity for citizenship underlying each outward assertion about “colored” incapacity, we risk taking the intersection of whiteness and legitimate authority for granted. To do so would mean reproducing the white gaze that made blacks’ relationship to state power a subject of debate but left whites’ own claims on civil authority unquestioned, even unquestionable. As long as an unacknowledged commitment to civil whiteness conditions our view of the past (and present), the lethal violence it was created to account for will continue to look like a symptom and not a cause, a product of “race relations” rather than the scene of race’s remaking.

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