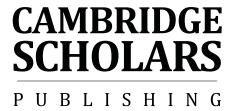# Black and White Masculinity
in the American South,
1800-2000

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1800-2000

Edited by

Lydia Plath and Sergio Lussana

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SCHOLARS
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Part III: Racial Interaction and Masculinity:
Segregation and the Myth of the Black Rapist**

**Part IV: The Representation of Southern Masculinities in Memoirs,
Newspaper Advertisements and Literature**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

MASCULINITY AS A CATEGORY OF ANALYSIS IN SOUTHERN HISTORY

SERGIO LUSSANA AND LYDIA PLATH

This collection of essays emerged from a symposium held at the University of Warwick in June 2008, which was organised as an opportunity for historians to consider how masculinity has shaped the culture and history of the American South from the antebellum period through to the present. Building on the rich historiography of gender and culture in the South undertaken in recent years, this volume aims to highlight the important role Southern conceptions of masculinity have played in the lives of Southern men, and to reflect on how masculinity has intersected with class, race and power to structure the social relationships between blacks and whites throughout the history of the South.

Masculinity is becoming an increasingly popular category of analysis among social and cultural historians around the globe, resulting in some of the most innovative and exciting history writing of recent years. Topics have proved incredibly diverse, and in the past couple of years have included (to name just a few), explorations of nineteenth century British undergraduate masculinity, conceptions of ancient Mayan masculinity, and discussions of television and masculinity in post-WWII Germany.[1] For scholars of the American South, the subject of masculinity is currently producing some fascinating research which adds significantly to our understanding of the region's complex and rich history. For example, Lorri Glover's recent work has explored how antebellum Southern elite white boys came of age and constructed a distinctly Southern masculine identity following the American Revolution, and has charted the impact this identity had on the growing sectionalism prior to the Civil War as these men became Southern political leaders.[2] Work has also emerged in recent years examining masculinity in relation to key events in the South's turbulent history, including the Civil War, lynching in the Jim Crow South, and the struggle for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.[3]

The decision to explore masculinity in the context of the American South owes much to the region's distinctiveness. The most important causes of Southern uniqueness have been the region's predominantly rural economy up until the mid-twentieth century, its class structure, and the often tumultuous race relations between whites and blacks, which have characterised much of the South's past. From slavery, through to Reconstruction, segregation and into the present, these factors have had a major impact on the course of Southern politics, culture and identity, setting the region apart from the rest of the United States. Consequently gender ideals, such as notions of masculinity, have taken their own distinct form in the South, forged out of varied relationships over the years such as those between black and white, master and slave, and landowner and sharecropper. As Ted Ownby has commented, many of these definitions of masculinity "emerged either to justify domination or to resist it." Furthermore, whereas Southern white conceptions of masculinity have typically involved resisting interference from outside the region, black men in the South have frequently constructed notions of masculinity "within or against the boundaries created by slavery, segregation, and poverty."[4] Accordingly, this book will specifically focus on the American South in its own right, and include essays charting some of the different constructions of Southern black and white masculinity during the course of a two hundred year period of history, from slavery through to the end of the twentieth century.

It is well known that gender history has its roots in the new women's history of the 1960s and 1970s, as scholars, inspired by the Civil Rights movements, were looking to reintegrate the experiences of women into a history that they saw as being exclusively male. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg stated, "Without question, our first inspiration was political."[5] Integral to these works rested the conviction that gender roles were man-made and not natural divisions. As Ann Oakley's famous statement read:

> "Sex" is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female . . . "Gender," however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into "masculine" and "feminine" . . . The constancy of sex must be admitted, but also must the variability of gender.[6]

In the United Kingdom, feminist history evolved under the influence of the new social history's "bottom-up" approach based on E. P. Thompson's contention that the working-classes were active agents in formulating their own class consciousness. In Thompson's eyes, shared experiences produced collective identities.[7] Further, parallel to this development was the study of women's "culture" separate from the "public" world of men.

Integral to this notion was the idea that societies divided into separate gendered spheres. Borrowing the tools of anthropology, cultures in this sense functioned like language, operating through binary oppositions such as male/female and public/private. Indeed, in 1974, Michelle Rosaldo proposed a "structural model" which sought to document the "universal asymmetry in cultural evaluations of the sexes."[8] Chiefly based in the United States, scholars took up this concept producing a wealth of work, such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's famous study of female friendship networks in nineteenth century America, which, she argued, developed in a world where men were excluded, and hence women were able to "develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem."[9]

However, many criticisms were voiced in relation to the separate spheres approach, the most notable coming from an article written by Amanda Vickery, in which she argued that the separate spheres concept was a projection of an idealised society rather than a reflection of concrete realities.[10] Indeed, Carolyn Steedman branded the categories of "public" and "private" as "too much the anxious repetition of an actual society's deepest ideological hope, to be entirely satisfactory as a category of historical enquiry."[11] Most importantly, problems arose with the concept's "universal" nature. This was a major issue raised by black historians, literary critics and philosophers in the United States. Catherine Hall recalled:

> It took the angry black voice demanding "what exactly do you mean when you say WE?"—which must have been heard at countless tense meetings and encounters, insisting that white women must recognize the specificities and limitations of their own experience and the existence of difference—to disrupt that collectivity.[12]

Indeed, during the 1970s and 80s, black feminists were criticising the notion that "all the women are white, all the blacks are men" and highlighting the fact that black women rarely shared the concerns and interests of middle-class white women.[13] Additionally, the publication of histories of black women in this period proved the point, such as Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985). Jones remarked that second-wave feminism was distorting the experiences of black women, and pointed out that "widely held among my (mostly white, middle-class) students was the conviction that work outside the home always amounted to a 'liberating' experience for women, regardless of their race, age, or marital status."[14] Jones's book, which charted the history of black women in the United States from slavery through to emancipation, aptly demonstrated that work outside of the home in no way

represented "liberation" for enslaved women and their descendants. Importantly, Jones's work highlighted how race and class considerably shaped the experiences of black women in America. It established that gender did not operate independently of race and class. Rather, gender was constitutive of racial and class hierarchies. Similarly, Joan Scott's groundbreaking article, "Gender as a Useful Category of Analysis," called for a rejection "of the fixed and permanent quality of the binary opposition [and] a genuine historicisation and deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference." As Scott saw gender as "a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (understanding power as "discursively constituted," in the Foucauldian sense), she argued that gender was a "social creation of ideas" about the appropriate roles for men and women. Consequently, gender, although it appeared "coherent and fixed," was in fact "highly unstable."[15] Thus, the task of the historian became to examine the workings of the gender discourses operating throughout history, and to understand how gender helped forge particular masculine and feminine identities in a specific culture.[16]

Therefore by the early 1990s, historians, as well as literary critics and philosophers, contended that it was vital for gender to be analysed alongside race, which was also re-examined as an ideological construction rather than a biological "fact."[17] In true Foucauldian fashion, they argued that social constructions of race and gender were inseparable from the dynamics of power relations operating in American society. In 1992, for example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham called for scholars to "expose the role of race as a metalanguage by calling attention to its powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality."[18] Spearheading this approach in Southern history was Kathleen M. Brown's work, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996), which highlighted the pivotal role that gender played in the rise of racial slavery and the creation of a patriarchal ideology in colonial Virginia.[19] Likewise, Jennifer L. Morgan's article, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder," explored how the development of racialist discourse was profoundly influenced by gendered notions of difference created by European travellers to Africa, and English settlers in America.[20] These works heralded a new gender history in the 1990s, in which scholars considered race, gender and power to be mutually constitutive categories of analysis.

One of the merits of this new gender history was the explosion of interest in masculinity. Previous historians had often presumed that the normative experience was that of the male, arguing that men, unlike women, were not limited by sex, but by paying attention to gendered

constructions of power, men's behaviour could also be studied thoroughly. John Tosh, a pioneer of this new approach to history, asserted in an influential article published in 1994 that "historians of masculinity are in a strong position to demonstrate (not merely assert) that gender is inherent in all aspects of social life, whether women are present or not." Tosh's article argued that historians should look for the historical negotiation of masculinities by treating masculinity as a social identity, a "social status, demonstrated in specific social contexts," and that masculinity is a subjective identity shaped in infancy and childhood, so historians should be alert to the benefits of a psychically informed approach to masculinity. The job of the historian was to employ simultaneously both of these approaches, while examining the cultural gendered discourses of the particular period under investigation.[21] The resulting outpouring of historical works using masculinity as a category of analysis in the United States, however, chiefly focussed on the nineteenth century Northern middle classes.[22] But for historians of the South, the study of gender, and in particular masculinity, offered the possibility of reinterpreting the driving forces behind major historical events. Historians began to address questions such as: What role did gender, race, and power play during the secession crisis? How did these forces affect the civilian population during the Civil War? And, how did gender, race, and power shape Reconstruction, or the Civil Rights Movement?[23]

Scholarship on masculinity in the South was not new, however, as historians such as Bertram Wyatt-Brown had been writing on the importance of honour and mastery amongst white elite men since the early 1980s. His landmark study, *Southern Honor* (1982) famously contended that the slaveholders of the Old South were governed by a code of honour; a cluster of ethical rules "by which judgements of behaviour are ratified by community consensus." Wyatt-Brown traced two traditions of honour in the western world: primal honour, and a stoic-Christian tradition of gentility. Primal honour had its roots in old European tribal cultures, and was constructed through bravery, oath-taking, physical appearance, sexual honour and the opinion of others. Gentility, on the other hand, emphasised sociability, learning and piety. Wyatt-Brown argued that primal honour was far more prevalent in the South, whereas in the North, the conscience-ridden puritan influence allowed a stoic-Christian tradition of gentility to flourish. Typical manifestations of primal honour in the Old South took the form of duels, vigilantism and lynching.[24] Wyatt-Brown even attributed the outbreak of the Civil War to the widening "ethical" differences between the North and South inherent in these different honour models, rather than an economic chasm triggering the war.[25] Additionally,

by the end of the 1990s, historians of the South had drawn attention to the forces of mastery which pervaded the Old South, as a white man's masculinity was measured by heading independent self-sufficient households, as well as owning land and slaves.[26]

Although the scholarship on honour and mastery did much to re-evaluate the cultural, social and political history of the South, some historians soon became dissatisfied, just as black feminists had been twenty years earlier, that this notion of masculinity was being applied to all Southern men, regardless of race or social status. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover's edited collection, *Southern Manhood* (2004) argued that "these values were co-opted, transformed, and even rejected on occasion by the diverse men who populated the South between the Revolution and the Civil War." Honour and mastery, therefore, could no longer be assumed to be adequate measures of masculinity for the vast numbers of whites who did not own land and slaves, nor for the many small slaveholders who populated the Old South. And just how useful were concepts of honour and mastery to assess the masculine values of free blacks and slaves? As Friend and Glover asserted:

> Urban dwellers, men of colour, and those who owned no land or slaves collectively composed the majority of men living in the early South. Thus it is essential to explore the ways in which those who fell outside the hegemonic ideals thought about masculinity and marked themselves as men.[27]

Recently, work has emerged which appears to confirm the validity of Friend and Glover's arguments, moving away from honour and mastery as categories of analysis for non-elite whites, particularly when exploring Southern masculinity beyond the Old South, and assigning equal importance to the investigation of historical constructions of non-white masculinities.[28]

This collection offers a range of essays which examine the historical construction of Southern masculinities, rich and poor, white and black, in a variety of contexts, from slavery in the antebellum period, through the struggle for Civil Rights, right up to the recent South. Thus, the volume allows the reader to consider not only the varying measures of masculinity for different classes and races of men, but also how constructions of masculinities have evolved over a two hundred year period of Southern history. The volume is also comprised of essays which give equal weight to the study of black and white masculinity, thus placing masculinity within a broader framework of race and power, while also offering the

reader the opportunity to assess how concepts of masculinity have shaped the tense relations between blacks and whites in the South.

Lydia Plath's essay starts the collection by examining how Southern white men in antebellum North Carolina responded to the news of Nat Turner's slave insurrection in the neighbouring state of Virginia. In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion which left around fifty-five whites dead, widespread unrest and rumours of further slave insurrections swept across the country. Plath examines how notions of white Southern masculinity, framed in terms of honour, shaped the extreme violence towards the free black and slave populations of North Carolina. With this violence, white Southern men were attempting to suppress the honour and manhood of rebellious slaves whilst simultaneously affirming a white masculine identity which extended across class boundaries to uphold a "herrenvolk democracy."

Adam Pratt's cultural analysis explores how white Southerners, in the aftermath of the death of George Armstrong Custer at the hands of Sioux warriors in 1876, constructed a highly gendered image of Custer that appealed to their cultural values. Calling Custer a cavalier, white Southerners recognized him as symbolizing ideals of Southern masculinity in the postwar South—a man that could balance the dichotomous qualities of violence and refinement through self-control, exhibit expert horsemanship, and one that could defend his home and family. What makes Pratt's analysis particularly thought-provoking is the fact that Custer had served in the Union Army during the Civil War, killing Confederates and occupying the South during Reconstruction. Pratt explains why Southerners, instead of revelling in his death, praised Custer and honoured him with the title of the cavalier, by arguing that both Southerners and Northerners shared similar concepts of masculinity, especially martial ones in the wake of the Civil War.

Alex Macaulay's piece uses the De La Roche family murder of 1976 as a backdrop to explore the efforts of The Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina, to 'build' men in an all-male military environment during the 1970s. The crucible in which the masculinity of these recruits was forged was the plebe or fourthclass system, a system designed to instil candidates with "manly qualities." By the 1970s, faced with increased legal, social, and political challenges to the single-sex environment of the Citadel, the fourthclass system had evolved into a brutal means of testing a freshman's masculinity. For many, including the father of Harry De La Roche, those that endured the fourthclass system and successfully graduated from The Citadel had proved their manhood, accordingly paving the way for their future success. Conversely, those that quit were "doomed

to failure" and regarded as "inferior." Through the "Citadel man concept," Macaulay's essay highlights the "hyper-gendered" demands that the regional environment of the South placed on its young men to conform to these standards of behaviour.

Rebecca Fraser's essay tackles a subject that has only recently begun to receive attention, that of enslaved masculinity. Focussing on the lives of the enslaved in the late antebellum Upper South, Fraser reflects on what enslaved men defined as masculine behaviour, and the particular masculine ideals they aspired to within the parameters of the experiences of slavery. Despite their status of "slave," enslaved men were able to claim significant provider and protector roles through activities such as hunting and performing extra labour for the slaveholder in return for goods or cash, or taking a whipping for a loved one. Moreover, by performing their masculinity in front of their male peers, such as evading the patrol gangs in order to court women living on neighbouring plantations, enslaved men could cultivate group solidarity among one another.

Bob Batchelor and Josef Benson examine the creation of the "Black Superman" in two seminal works of African American literature, Martin Delany's *Blake; or The Huts of America* and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The authors argue that Delany and Douglass construct their thoughts regarding black masculinity around characters that take on superhero qualities. They conclude by suggesting that many African American men in contemporary society, such as basketball superstar Shaquille O'Neal, use the superhero persona as a way to project their image in a society uneasy with the "wealth, power, and status" of young black athletes.

Shawn Fisher discusses the tumultuous events of the Little Rock crisis in 1957, and utilises the Arkansas National Guardsmen as a way to understand the contested and flexible nature of Southern masculinity during the Civil Rights era. At first these troops were ordered to oppose integration at Little Rock Central High School, and turn away black students. However, later, federal orders instructed the Guardsmen to protect the Little Rock Nine and to ensure their safety at school. Fisher's essay concludes that despite acting as "integrators" the men of the Arkansas National Guard acquired a sense of honour through their professionalism and duty to military service as they faced the daily insults and ridicule of Little Rock segregationists. For Fisher, the Guardsmen were able to claim roles as community protectors and as American soldiers. Moreover, the Guardsmen could still view themselves as Southern men, and not "traitors" to the South as the Southern demagogues claimed.

The myth of the black rapist is the subject of Biljana Oklopčić's paper. She compares and contrasts the performance of the black rapist myth played by two mulatto characters from two of William Faulkner novels, *Light in August* and *Absalom Absalom!* Oklopčić argues that their performance of the black rapist myth relies upon two different conceptions of one-drop "blackness": whereas Joe Christmas, as a homegrown "black," violently challenges the racialised and sexualised discourse of the black rapist myth, Charles Bon, as the exotic "other," performs the black rapist myth with aristocratic splendour, and calls into question its exclusively heterosexual inscription.

Tara Deshpande's paper explores white abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson's account of his experiences in the South during the Civil War. In his *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1869), Higginson recounts his service as a commander of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first regiment of escaped African American slaves officially recruited into the Union Army. Deshpande examines Higginson's attempts to construct fraternal bonds between himself, a white Northerner, and the black Southerners under his command. This was part of Higginson's bid to incorporate African American men into a reunified nation. However, her analysis demonstrates that Higginson's efforts are modified and, at times, hindered by contemporary theories of race and masculinity, which fail to recognise black men as full and equal participants in the national community and encourage "romantic racialist" depictions of African Americans that infantilise and feminise the black soldiers.

Colin Chapell examines the portrayal of the redneck stereotype in Northern newspaper advertisements between 1960 and 1992. Interestingly, Chapell demonstrates that over this time period the depiction of rednecks has not been static. Indeed, for a brief spell it was actually "chic to be hick," and at other times, the image has been synonymous with violent racism, sexual deviancy, corruption, and social degeneracy among Southern men. The essay contends that as these images of deviant Southern masculinity gained national notoriety, they functioned as "the scapegoat of America," through which many middle and upper-class whites, especially from the North, absolved themselves from the moral failings of contemporary culture, such as *de facto* forms of racism and segregation in the Midwest and Northeast.

Anne Brown analyses "Three Men," the centre piece of Ernest J. Gaines's only collection of short stories. The narrative, which is set in a single jail cell occupied by three African American men of different ages, backgrounds and offences, explores notions of masculinity and identity. The protagonist and narrator, Proctor Lewis, a nineteen year old man who

lands in jail after killing another man, enters the cell unable to recognise that age is not necessarily the sole marker of masculinity, and that adulthood also involves accepting responsibility for one's actions. However, through the surrogate mother and father figures played by the two other men in the cell, Proctor learns lessons on masculinity, self-respect and integrity, which force him to accept the consequences of his behaviour. Accordingly, Proctor's incarceration leads to his "psychological liberation."

The essays in this collection do not purport be a definitive study of black and white masculinities in the American South, rather the volume highlights the multifaceted nature of Southern masculinities. Indeed, what becomes apparent upon reading the different essays is the changing ways black and white masculinities have been both imagined and practised over the years. However, strands of continuity do emerge. Throughout the two hundred year period of history studied in this volume, conceptions of black and white masculinity in the American South rarely seem to be divorced from wider questions of class, race and power.

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[2] Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore, 2007).

[3] Christopher J. Olsen. *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830–1860* (New York, 2000); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, eds., *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton, 2000); Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, 2005).

[4] Ted Ownby, "Southern Manhood," in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret E. Carroll (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2003), 429.

[5] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Gender," in *Historians on History*, ed. John Tosh (London, 2000), 129.

[6] Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society* (London, 1972), 16.

[7] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1963), see especially his preface, 9-14.

[8] Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, 1974), 17.

[9] For a good historiographical survey on this literature see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History*, 75 (1988): 9-39. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs*, 1 (1975): 14.

[10] Amanda Vickery, "Age to Separate Spheres: A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993): 383-414.

[11] Carolyn Steedman, "'Public' and 'Private' in Women's Lives," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 3 (1990): 295.

[12] Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Oxford, 1992), 21-2.

[13] Cited from the title of Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, NY, 1982). See for example, Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York, 1981); bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, 1981); Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham (London, 1982), 212-35.

[14] Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985), xi. The same year also saw the publication of another landmark history of black women: Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985).

[15] Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender as a Useful Category of Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York, 1988), 40-1,42, 32, 38.

[16] This was done in part by utilising Foucault's concept of "bio-power"; historians of gender turned to how women internalised the circulating discourses of a culture in a particular period of history, instead of viewing women's subordination as an externally imposed force acting against the subject. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (London, 1991), especially 92-102; Colin Gordon, ed., *Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York, 1980), especially. Chapter Three, "Body/Power," 55-62.

[17] For a selection of the most significant works calling for gender to be considered alongside race in this period, see Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, 17 (1987): 64–81; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History," *Gender and History*, 1 (1989): 50-67; Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18 (1992): 295-312; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham,

"African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs*, 17 (1992): 251-74. The re-examination of race as a social construction by historians owed much to Barbara Fields' article published in 1982: Barbara Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 143-77.

[18] Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History": 252.

[19] Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

[20] Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travellers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 54 (1997): 167-92. See also her subsequent book: Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004).

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PART I:

WHITE PERCEPTIONS OF MASCULINITY: HONOUR, THE CAVALIER IMAGE AND THE CITADEL

CHAPTER ONE

NORTH CAROLINA AND NAT TURNER: HONOUR AND VIOLENCE IN A SLAVE INSURRECTION SCARE

LYDIA PLATH

> Summary justice was executed yesterday morning, by the PEOPLE, on four of the ringleaders, engaged in the conspiracy, the frightful disclosures respecting which now agitate the public mind. The guilt of these monsters in human shape, is established beyond a doubt. A deep conviction settled in every bosom—that the measure was indispensable to the safety of the community—called for their execution. If ever stern necessity required a prompt and vigorous course, in making public examples, this necessity *now exists* in our country.
> —*Cape Fear Recorder*, September 21, 1831.

In August 1831, a slave called Nat Turner led a rebellion that resulted in the deaths of around fifty-five whites in Southampton County, Virginia. The news of this massacre caused widespread unrest across the South, in particular causing panic in the neighbouring state of North Carolina. The subsequent frenzied violence towards innocent blacks that occurred there, though, far outweighed any real danger. Terrible rumours about slave insurrections spread from county to county, including a report that five hundred rebellious slaves had burnt the town of Wilmington to the ground. Even when such stories proved false, the violence did not diminish, and it took several months for North Carolina to return to a state of calm. In the meantime, tens if not hundreds of African Americans, both free and slave, were whipped, mutilated, shot, hanged, burned to death or otherwise viciously tortured on suspicion of being involved in a conspiracy.

James Cutler describes such slave insurrection scares as "extraordinary occasions," and it is by examining such "extraordinary" occasions that we

may be able to enhance our understanding of the role of violence in Southern society and culture.[1] The insurrection scare in North Carolina, for example, can also be used as a window into the nature of masculine violence in the South, as during the scare white men clearly articulated not only their deepest fears about their slaves, but also their idea of what it meant to be a "man." Accused slaves, they thought, were not "men"; they were "monsters." A deeper understanding of the methods Southern men used to restore order, and the justifications they gave for their actions, will therefore add another dimension to our understanding of Southern white masculinity in the antebellum period. This essay will examine how notions of "honour" and "manhood" affected white men's behaviour during the insurrection scare, and will argue that the scare aided the formation of a distinct and cohesive Southern white masculine identity across class boundaries.

Ever since the first Africans set foot in North America, Southerners had been continually uneasy about the possibility of an insurrection amongst their slaves, although they did not often admit it. From the first slave-ship mutinies to the Nat Turner Rebellion, slaves fairly regularly conspired to free themselves by murdering those who held them in bondage. Although the majority of these plans were never put into action, as outraged whites violently executed any suspected conspirators, the fear that one day they would succeed was ever-present in the white mind. As Clement Eaton explains, white Southerners "suffered at times and in certain sections from a pathological fear of their slaves."[2]

However, the extent to which Southerners expressed their fears depended on their gender. Patrick Breen has examined the responses of white Southern women to the news of slave insurrection, and has argued that while men outwardly suppressed their fears about slave rebellions, women more frequently spoke of the threat posed by their slaves. For example, Frances Kemble commented that "Southern men are apt to deny the fact that they do live under a habitual sense of danger; but a slave population . . . *is* a threatening source of constant insecurity, and every Southern *woman* to whom I have spoken . . . has admitted to me that they live in terror of their slaves."[3] Southern slaveholding men continually maintained that they were in full control of their slaves and told themselves they had nothing to fear. They left their houses open and allowed their slaves to roam freely around their plantations. However when slaveholders thought their slaves were attempting to increase their autonomy, an insurrection scare could be the result. Even a minor change in their attitude could cause widespread panic, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown points out, "a glum stare, a brusque reply to a question, a reluctant move—

such gestures in face-to-face encounter raised instant worries" because they demonstrated that slaves were not accepting their subordinate status.[4]

The Southampton Insurrection was, however, much more than a mere "gesture." On Sunday August 21, 1831, six slaves, led by a religious fanatic called Nat Turner, began a "crusade against bondage" in the Cross Keys area of Southampton County, Virginia. Within twenty-four hours, they had been joined by approximately seventy more slaves, and by the morning of August 23, at least fifty-five whites, mostly women and children, had been killed by the rebels.[5] The citizens of Southampton County were understandably terrified.

The news of the massacre quickly spread Southwards to North Carolina, and across the nation. Robert S. Parker, who was from Murfreesboro, less than twenty miles from the Cross Keys, hurriedly wrote to explain how news of the rebellion had alarmed the people there. He described how "Old Tommy Weston actually got scared or allarmd to death; for he died on the spot when the news came that they were bending their course toward the Boro."[6] Mr MacDowell, writing in the *Richmond Enquirer* some months after the Nat Turner Rebellion, accounted for the reaction by arguing that the rebellion had created "a suspicion that a Nat Turner might be in every family, that the same bloody deed might be acted over at any time and in any place, that the materials for it were spread through the land and were always ready for a like explosion."[7] This was certainly the case in North Carolina. The fear was especially strong in Sampson, Duplin and New Hanover counties, where the people were plagued by rumours of insurrection amongst their own slaves. Moses Ashley Curtis, a prominent minister, described the unrest in Wilmington in his diary, writing on September 12, "Help me! now the explosion has taken place indeed & the women . . . are in a desperate taking . . . Fear & despair, what confusion!"[8]

But North Carolina was no stranger to rumours of slave insurrection. Only the previous year, the citizens of Wilmington had discovered David Walker's (by then infamous) abolitionist pamphlet amongst their slave population, and as a result rumours of insurrection were rife. Entitled *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World. But in Particular and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America*, this pamphlet quite openly encouraged the slaves to rebel against their masters. James F. McRae, a magistrate of police in Wilmington, described its contents to the Governor, John Owen, as "treating in most inflammatory terms of the condition of the slaves in the Southern States exaggerating their sufferings, magnifying their physical strength and underrating the power of the whites . . . and

throughout expressing sentiments totally subversive of all subordination in our slaves."[9] Walker certainly used "inflammatory" language, for example he argued that

> The whites have had us under them for more than three centuries, murdering, and treating us like brutes . . . they do not know . . . that there is an unconquerable disposition in the breasts of the blacks, which, when it is fully awakened and put in motion, will be subdued, only with the destruction of the animal existence . . . they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition—therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed.[10]

The pamphlet most likely entered North Carolina through Wilmington, sometime in August 1830, but was still fresh in the minds of North Carolinians a year later during the Nat Turner insurrection. In early November, 1831, McRae explained, seven slaves were sentenced "to be executed for a conspiracy, the origin of which may without much presumption be traced to the Seditious Walker Pamphlet."[11]

Since 1830 then, whites in North Carolina had remained on alert for a slave insurrection. A petition to the Governor from the citizens of Bladen, Sampson, New Hanover and Duplin counties later that year demonstrates how some whites had realised that they no longer had complete power over their slaves. They complained "that our slaves are become almost uncontroulable, they go and come when and where they please, and if an attempt is made to correct them they immediately fly to the woods and there continue for months and years."[12] In November, a runaway named Moses was captured and imprisoned in Newbern, with a number of other runaway slaves. One evening the wife of the jailer overheard these men talking, and "learned of an extensive network of slaves and runaways conspiring throughout eastern North Carolina."[13] When questioned, Moses admitted that a rebellion had been planned for Christmas day. On December 25, according to the *Roanoke Advocate*, sixty armed slaves had assembled in a swamp near Newbern, ready to rebel, but all were killed by the local militia.[14]

Calvin Jones, a prominent citizen of Wake County, in central North Carolina, also expressed his concerns about both the circulation of Walker's pamphlet and the freedoms given to slaves during the Christmas period in a letter to Governor Stokes at the end of December 1830. Jones suggested a number of measures that the governor should take in order to maintain the security of the state, including the establishment of better patrols and legislation to prevent slaves being able to preach or learn to read or write. In his words, "the crisis demands something to be done."[15]

The legislature agreed. It went into secret session to discuss how to combat the possible consequences of the Walker pamphlet, and on December 9, 1830 the General Assembly passed a bill to disallow the teaching of slaves to read and write and to make illegal the circulation of "seditious publications."[16] The patrol regulations were also revised, and patrols were given greater powers to search and punish slaves. These laws were particularly restrictive, especially for North Carolina, whose slave code was generally less repressive than those of Virginia or Georgia. Therefore there was already a tense atmosphere in North Carolina when Nat Turner rebelled. The editor of the *Richmond Enquirer* even asked of Turner and his followers, "were they connected with the desperadoes who harrassed N. Carolina last year?"[17] This is why Derris Raper argues that "as one views the white population of North Carolina in the spring of 1831, he finds them in an agitated, apprehensive mood, half-expecting at any moment to hear the crack of doom."[18]

Therefore it is clear that North Carolina was ripe for an insurrection scare even before Nat Turner. So when he and his followers began their massacre in Virginia, it is perhaps unsurprising that the people of North Carolina overreacted. At least sixty slaves were tried by the courts for involvement in various conspiracies around the state, of which around half were convicted, and twenty swiftly executed. However we will never know how many African Americans were murdered by vigilante mobs without a scrap of evidence, let alone a trial.[19]

This extreme violence towards the slave and free black population of North Carolina gives us insight into ideas about masculinity in the South, which contemporaries framed in terms of honour. Arguably the most significant works on Southern honour are those by Wyatt-Brown, whose examination of the concept and its relationship to violence in the South is still definitive. He explains the three basic components of honour, which are an "inner conviction of self-worth," "the claim of that self-assessment before the public," and "the assessment of the claim by the public."[20] In other words, the concept of honour in the South was intimately connected to the idea of "reputation." Only when the public had judged a man honourable could he be so, and the easiest way for a man to earn this judgement was with a violent response to any perceived challenge to his reputation. Honour was therefore at once personal and public; if a man did not defend his honour with violence, he risked no longer being considered a "man" by the rest of the community. While the duel is the most obvious example of elite Southerners' use of violence to defend their honour, as Steven Stowe points out, the duel "was only the most visible part of the affair of honor, a masculine ritual that went deeply into the reaches of

authority and manhood," not only in the lives of planters but the whole
community.[21] Wyatt-Brown also points out that the idea of honour was
gender-specific, as by very definition it "stresses the division of the
sexes."[22] Honour was a male trait, an extension of the notion of
"masculinity." Although women could behave honourably, they were
expected to "bear burdens with grace, courage and silence," rather than to
defend their reputations with violence, as men did.[23] Indeed, Wyatt-Brown
explains that male honour and violence in the South were fundamentally
related to the subordination of African Americans: "the social necessity for
men of all ranks to preserve white manhood and personal status in the
fraternity of the male tribe to which all belonged."[24]

Edward Ayers argues that honour was so important because of the
institution of slavery, as all white men, regardless of their economic
standing, were united in the fact that they were not slaves. He cites the
anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, who explained that honour was a system
in which a man's worth was entirely dependent on how others regarded
him: "the being and truth about a person are identical with the being and
truth that others acknowledge in him." Therefore even the poorest whites
could satisfy themselves with the knowledge that blacks could have no
honour unless it was conferred upon them.[25] As J. G. Peristiany argues, by
"cutting across all other social classifications [honour] divides social
beings into two fundamental categories, those endowed with honour and
those deprived of it."[26]

This is similar to George Fredrickson's concept of "*herrenvolk*
democracy"; a society in which there is a democratic system for the master
race, but a tyrannical system for subordinate groups. This was certainly the
ideology espoused by proslavery advocates, whose aim was to unite all
whites under the slogan of white supremacy. For example, Georgian legal
scholar Thomas R. R. Cobb claimed that the poor white felt that he
belonged to the elite sector of society because "he is not of the inferior
race; he is a freeborn citizen . . . The poorest meets the richest as an equal;
sits at the table with him; salutes him as a neighbour . . . and stands on the
same social platform."[27] Therefore even the poorest white men clung to
the notion of honour as it made them part of the superior class, regardless
of the reality of their economic circumstances. This can be seen in the
actions of poor whites during slave insurrection scares; they allied with the
planter class and used whatever means necessary to restore the status
quo.[28] The ex-slave Harriet Jacobs, for example, observed that in Chowan
County, the scare "was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no
negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to exercise
a little brief authority . . . All day long these unfeeling wretches went

round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless."[29] Poor whites could use the panic caused by insurrection scares as an excuse for violence towards slaves, whom they could not usually touch as they were protected by their value as property. James Oates points out that some men "joined in the carnage out of sheer racial hatred," as they travelled to areas like Southampton to "kill somebody else's niggers" without being punished for it.[30] Similarly, Jeff Forret argues that "perhaps out simply to entertain themselves, to assert their racial superiority over slaves, or to release their own pent-up resentment and frustration over their impoverishment and lowly social status, these poor whites sometimes randomly beat the first unfortunate slave they stumbled across."[31] The former slave Charity Bowery certainly believed that this was the case. She explained how poor whites in Edenton, Chowan County, used the anxiety created by the Southampton Insurrection as an excuse to persecute those blacks they found especially intimidating. "The brightest and best men were killed in Nat's time," she explained; "Such ones are always suspected . . . the low whites would fall upon any slaves they heard praying or singing a hymn, and often killed them."[32]

White men were simultaneously able to deny honour to slaves and reaffirm it for themselves by constructing the "Sambo" stereotype and viewing slaves as childlike and dependent. For example, black men in the South were repeatedly denied status as "men" when they were called "boy" by all whites, regardless of their actual age. This was a way for white men of all social classes to assert their honour on a daily basis.[33] Although it is clear that this was not "real" honour, Orlando Patterson argues that "what was real was the *sense* of honor held by the master, its denial to the slave, [and] its enhancement through the degradation of the slave."[34] This is a crucial distinction to be made, as it was the *appearance* of honour in front of the community that was important to white Southern masculinity, regardless of personal belief or feeling. This is why white men in the South took great efforts to refute any allegations that would show them in a bad light, for example calling a man a liar could easily trigger a duel to the death in defence of his honour, whether or not he was actually bothered by the accusation. For example, when the *Roanoke Advocate* mentioned in an article that some members of the Murfreesboro Militia had taken money and a watch from the bodies of three blacks they had killed whilst helping to suppress the insurrection in Southampton, others in that troop felt it necessary to publicly separate themselves from the offenders, and to deny all knowledge of it:

> We the undersigned members of the Murfreesboro volunteer Troop . . . have learned to our great surprise and mortification, that a detachment of