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# Spencer's Voice at the Back Door and the Legacy of Reconstruction

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## Spencer's *Voice at the Back Door* and the Legacy of Reconstruction

IN *KILLERS OF THE DREAM* (1949), HER PROPHETIC ANALYSIS OF THE spiritual and psychological harm that the segregation of the races had worked upon generations of Southerners before her, Lillian Smith describes the “haunted childhood” that “belong[ed] to every southerner” of her own generation (15). Early intimacies were stifled, forced beyond recalling, as the walls of a delicately constructed reality called Southern “tradition” descended:

I can almost touch that little town, so close is the memory of it. There it lies, its main street lined with great oaks, heavy with matted moss that swings softly even now as I remember. A little white town rimmed with Negroes, making a deep shadow on the whiteness. There it lies, broken in two by one strange idea. Minds broken in two. Hearts broken. Conscience torn from acts. A culture split in a thousand pieces. (31)

Like Smith, Elizabeth Spencer grew up amidst the pain and confusion of the Jim Crow South, absorbing yet resisting its relentless logic. Her most revealing confrontation with the reality of race in her own “little town” of Carrollton, Mississippi, takes shape in *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956). Spencer recalls in her memoir, *Landscapes of the Heart* (1998), that she wrote the novel in order to sort out her own views:

I said often that I did not write the book to reform anybody except myself. For I also had subscribed to the “Southern way of life,” had thought that my parents and grandparents could not be wrongheaded, that they had lived a correctly reasoned approach, had died in clear consciousness of having done the right thing during time of slavery and war and all the difficult years that followed.

But an accumulation of experience, known or known about, had gradually begun to pile up on the scales and outweigh my received ideas. I wrote to straighten myself out, letting my story and the characters in it lead me on. (313)

Much as *Killers of the Dream* represents “an act of penance,” its composition being, as Smith herself insisted, “a step toward redemption” (“Autobiography” 197), *The Voice at the Back Door* might stand beside it as an example of what Fred Hobson has identified as the “racial conversion narrative” of white Southerners. In each, a privileged white

woman explores what it means to grow up on the upper tier of a racial caste system. The comparison holds only so far. Smith's crusading rhetoric has more in common with a revivalist's invective than with a novelist's tentative excursions. But both women were troubled enough by what they witnessed in their childhoods that they sought to capture it on paper in order, at the least, to understand it more fully.

Central to Spencer's attempt at understanding is an incident that took place in Carrollton before she was born. The facts were known to her only in barest outline: a dozen or so black men were gunned down by a gang of white men. It happened in the Carroll County courthouse, in the chambers upstairs. Some died from jumping out the window. Though the bullet holes in the courtroom walls were not covered over for decades, the rest of the story disappeared, but for one conclusion: whatever racial strife had gone before was no excuse for this tragic act. Spencer was assured that her own family had had nothing to do with it (*Landscapes* 156-57).



The Carroll County Courthouse today.

Photo by Sally Greene

Writing in the early 1950s, just prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the landmark opinion that would transform civil rights from a regional problem into a national crisis, Spencer grounds her novel in the confusion and ambiguity that marked the era.<sup>1</sup> She works the courthouse massacre—what she knew of it—into the heart of her drama: a half-remembered story, a thing once done, the unspoken narrative that continues to distort lives the way a strong current can take hold of a mariner's course. The recurrent memory of the massacre keeps Spencer's novel rooted in the honest realities of pre-*Brown* Mississippi. It affords a glimpse both of how much was at stake in the struggle for civil rights

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller discussion of this context, see Michel Bandry.

and of how hard the movement forward would be. Smith ends *Killers of the Dream* with a call to the South to forget its racist ways, to “climb thin air into the unknown,” to forge bravely into a new world of goodness and love (256). By the conclusion of *The Voice at the Back Door* we are given to understand that the known world, still tethered to the past, is not so easily left behind.

But as my discussion moves from the novel to the history behind it, we will see that if the Southern past cannot be left behind, neither is it so easily recovered. In the decades following the loss of the Civil War, the stories that Southerners told each other about their past coalesced into a remarkably cohesive myth. “In autobiographies, essays on contemporary issues, nostalgic recollections published in magazines, and historical novels, whites elevated to cliché the moonlight-and-magnolia imagery of plantation life, with its benign portrait of slavery,” writes historian Fitzhugh Brundage. “Taken together, these depictions achieved a kind of classic purity.” Stories of violence involving slaves and their descendants “had no place in this white historical memory” (“Introduction: No Deed but Memory” 6-7). The successful erasure of the Carrollton Massacre from official history was both sign and symptom of the deep unwillingness of the white southern establishment to acknowledge their role in maintaining, by violence when necessary, a social system based on a history of human bondage.

In first considering Spencer's novel, with attention to the role the massacre plays within it, and then exploring the Carrollton Massacre in its historical context, my aim is not to hold up “the truth” in order to measure how the novel compares. Rather, I offer this analysis as a way of placing the novel within a fuller historical perspective. Seen against what from this distance can be known of a tumultuous period, Spencer's novel can be appreciated anew for its fidelity to time and place, its bold refusal to countenance the status quo, and its anticipation of the difficulties that lay ahead for the brave people, black and white, who would finally begin to shatter the walls of the “closed society” of Mississippi.<sup>2</sup> Read within the broad canvas of post-Civil War history, the novel enriches our understanding both of the struggle of African Americans in Mississippi for political rights and of the South's own struggle against memory itself.

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<sup>2</sup>See James Silver's powerful testimonial written in the aftermath of the forced integration of the University of Mississippi.

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The story of the Carrollton Massacre looms in the background of *The Voice at the Back Door*, playing out into the second generation. Jimmy Tallant, son of the leader of the white gang of murderers, is tied by bonds of guilt to Beckwith Dozer, son of the leader of the slain black men. Within a plot that unfolds over the course of a primary campaign season in 1952 in Lacey, Mississippi, a town much like Carrollton,<sup>3</sup> their loyalty to each other complicates the political ambitions of Duncan Harper, a favorite son who has progressive ideas.

The fatal confrontation had happened in 1919, when black soldiers had returned to Lacey, as they had to towns across the United States after the First World War. The white community experienced a wave of violence, culminating in the drowning of a white girl. Three black veterans were suspected. Also implicated was Robinson Dozer, a black man born in the last gasp of slavery, educated by an old Mississippi senator acting out of *noblesse oblige*,<sup>4</sup> by this time an educator and community leader in his own right. The girl's body was found near a trail leading from the river to his house. The veterans avoided a lynching, but their accusers made demands: first, that the three be arrested and, if found innocent, barred from the county for life; and second, that Dozer's school be closed. With the aim of negotiating these demands, Dozer headed up a delegation of blacks for a meeting with the whites in the courthouse. Before the meeting could even begin, though, it ended in a volley of bullets. One of the veterans met his death jumping out the window. Of the twelve blacks in the courtroom that day, none survived.

Though fragments of this story had been haltingly recalled, in the way of broken memory, by other characters, Spencer chooses to reveal it in full in the form of a recollection that comes to Duncan Harper, the aspiring liberal politician, midway through the novel. By this point

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<sup>3</sup>In 1952, Mississippi, like the rest of the South, belonged solidly to the Democratic Party. The elections that mattered were the primary elections held in the spring of election year. The Republican candidate in the general election in November rarely had a chance.

<sup>4</sup>The senator conforms to the conservative "aristocratic" type that C. Vann Woodward describes by quoting from a southern editor writing in 1879: "The old slave owner . . . feels no social fear of negro equality. . . . He feels no opposition to the education and elevation of the black man in the scale of civilized life" (49).

Robinson Dozer's son Beck has become embroiled in a drama not of his making and has fled the scene. Duncan's reverie is inspired by a portrait of Robinson Dozer in Beck's home, where he had hoped to find him.

The drama is the race for sheriff of Winfield County. It had begun, effectively, with the death of sheriff Travis Brevard, which comes as the climax of the book's opening episode. Echoing the beginning of *All the King's Men*, in which we follow the fast-rising governor Willie Stark on a fast ride out of the capital city, with anxious narrator Jake Burden imagining the car careening off the highway,<sup>5</sup> the novel opens with Sheriff Brevard, alone in a car on a rather different journey. Tunneling deftly along steep graveled roads he knows by heart, past a black settlement where he is noticed, past a bootleg operation that pays him protection money, he speeds across a back-country landscape with one goal: to get back to Lacey before he dies. Not to his wife does he fly but to Duncan, onetime football star, now grocery merchant, in order to anoint him the next sheriff. Travis Brevard is coming home, drawing inward, seeking with his last breath to secure his political legacy.

But nothing within his power can ensure that Winfield County will remain the same. Duncan is not the man Sheriff Brevard thought he was. As he prepares to run for the office, he casts his lot with the new South: he sets out to enforce the county's liquor ban and "apply justice equally for black and white" (44). Jimmy Tallant, on the other hand—Duncan's high school classmate—is a war hero turned bootlegger who has every reason to see the old order maintained. Jimmy's feelings about race are complicated by the memory of what his father did. Though the entire community had done its best to forget, "Jimmy never knew when people were thinking about [it] and when they weren't" (71). His business interest, however, serves as motivation enough for him to oppose Harper's candidacy in the race for sheriff.

Against this backdrop comes the carefully crafted episode that lends the novel its title. Beck Dozer appears one night at the back door of the Harper residence, his mere presence a sign of need ("for it is part of the consciousness of a Southern household that a Negro is calling at the back door in the night" [90]). Suffering from wounds he says he got in a fight with Jimmy's partner Bud Grantham, who refused to sell him liquor (his

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<sup>5</sup>Although Willie Stark has a secure place in literary history, it should be noted that a new edition of *All the King's Men* restores Warren's original name for him, Willie Talos.

roadhouse having been shut down), he implores Sheriff Harper to grant him his “legal right”: he wants to be locked up in the jail for protection from mob retaliation (92-93). Duncan does his duty and remains with him at the jail. At midnight, a gang led by Jimmy Tallant arrives. As they threaten to penetrate the prison cell with a blowtorch, Jimmy gives an order to “shoot”—and Bud Grantham shoots a flash photo.

The voice at the back door was lying. Duncan has been duped in a send-up of a lynching. The picture of Sheriff Duncan Harper protecting Beck Dozer is published in a widely distributed African American newspaper published in Chicago, along with an article describing Duncan as a champion of civil rights. A bit of detective work on Duncan’s part identifies Beck as the author. Confronted, Beck says to Duncan, “Mister Tallant and I are tied together on account of what his daddy did to mine. He wouldn’t lose me, nor let me come to harm for anything in this world” (136). Beck Dozer, a veteran of World War II, is well aware of the potency of civil rights as a personal and political issue, but “I don’t run in pack,” he says. “Any Negro with little enough sense to choose to come back to Mississippi to live, had better hew his own road and not look to right or left” (137).

Beck’s decision to go into hiding comes after the courthouse charade. This time he has reason to fear for his life. At the Tallant-Grantham roadhouse, Jimmy had been visited by leaders of a New Orleans gambling syndicate interested in affiliating with him. They had come to contribute money to the campaign against Duncan. But Jimmy, believing that Duncan will self-destruct without this help, had not been persuaded to take it. Suddenly remembering an appointment with Beck, he had departed for the field behind the house. Soon thereafter he was found to have been shot. Beck, who was seen in the vicinity, immediately goes on the run.

The episode at the roadhouse provides a window into the novel’s other major plot device: a tangled web of relationships involving two pairs who had once been lovers. Jimmy does not really want to run for sheriff, for running against Duncan means opposing the man who married his high school sweetheart, Louise “Tinker” Taylor. (Tinker, in fact, was with Jimmy at the roadhouse when the men from the syndicate came. By the time Bud Grantham came to find him lying on the ground, she was already at his side.) Duncan had married Tinker after his own sweetheart, Marcia Mae Hunt, had run off, in a fit of rebellion, with a

soldier from out west. After he died a soldier's death, Marcia Mae, in the late winter of 1952, left California and came back home: to family, and, in her own way, to Duncan. Meanwhile for Jimmy, marked so deeply by his father's part in the courthouse massacre, losing Tinker had meant losing any possible standing among the "good families" of Lacey, whose "dirty work" he is convinced his father had done. "So what better was there to do, he asked himself," than to team up with Bud Grantham, a bootlegger, and marry his daughter. Was his marriage, "and everything else in his life, an outgrowth of what his father had done? He didn't know" (71-72).

Spencer dwells on these relationships, allowing them to play against the memory of the massacre, to pursue a favorite theme: the interconnectedness of private and public. While Beck is cloistered in the jail, before the "shooting," Duncan visits Jimmy at the roadhouse. Their conversation, at one level small talk among friends, at another the threat of a duly appointed sheriff against an outlaw, turns abruptly to Tinker:

"It's true things never worked out for us the way we thought they would," Duncan said earnestly. "But what's done is done. I don't think our private lives should have anything to do with the nigger in the jail, or the bootlegging business, or the sheriff's race. I think you've got to face public things in another frame of mind."

"My father did a public thing," said Jimmy Tallant. "He shot Robinson Dozer, among others, and that's Dozer's son that's sitting in the jailhouse. You'd be surprised how private it makes me feel." (107-08)

As the election nears, Harper campaigns alongside young Kerney Woolbright, a candidate for state senate. Kerney, "Lacey's only gift to the Yale law school in twenty years" (21), wants to believe with Duncan that a new day in race relations is dawning, but his idealism is tempered with pragmatism. Accordingly, he hopes to marry Cissy Hunt, younger sister of Marcia Mae, daughter of a respected businessman, a naïve but dutiful girl who seems thoroughly unlikely to bolt for California.

The ritual "all-day speaking" (283) on the Saturday before the election hastens the novel's tragic conclusion. With Beck still at large and presumed guilty, Duncan is on the verge of vindicating him and reclaiming his own chances by proving that someone else shot Jimmy. He is expecting a telegram that will explain that it was the hapless fault of a boy mixed up in the New Orleans syndicate. But what Duncan does not know is that he is about to be betrayed. The first speaker up, Kerney

“disassociates” himself from Duncan and pledges, above all else, to “defend our Southern viewpoint, our Southern traditions, and the will of our Southern people” (300-01). This dramatic gesture sets off a chain of events resulting in a car chase in which Duncan dies. The sacrifice of Duncan Harper, the earnest though unlikely civil rights crusader, makes room for a redefinition of the relationship between Jimmy and Beck, the bond that comes out of their shared personal history. “I answer for Beck,” Jimmy says, “and if he ever tried to shoot me, I’d take damn careful aim next time I saw him and shoot him back.” That much he might have said before. What is different is that he adds—by way of letting his friends know that they do not want him as sheriff after all—that he “favor[s] equal rights” (342-43).

But this end is not the end. Spencer may have written her own “conversion narrative,” but she did not write a fairy tale. The epilogue belongs to Kerney Woolbright, now the Democratic candidate for senate and betrothed to Cissy Hunt. A conversation with Cissy and Marcia Mae’s father had laid the groundwork for his decision to break with Duncan Harper. “Maybe you and Duncan have the right line on this business,” Jason Hunt had said. “[B]ut the fact is that this sort of thing is not going down” (216).<sup>6</sup> So Kerney had followed expediency, compounding betrayal with subversion: he had kept Duncan from seeing the telegram that exonerated Beck. In a brief moment in the company of the Hunt family, Kerney has a chance to confess—“to make himself an outcast, an exile, a hero” (367). This he cannot do. The more tightly the family folds itself around him, the further his redemption recedes. Here is the other side of the communal values that Spencer so often celebrates. “They know,” says Marcia Mae, a bit of an exile herself,

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but you are one of them now and they will protect you. They will organize themselves for evasions and excuses, they will indulge in endless beautiful subtleties,

<sup>6</sup>Hunt conforms to a mid-century type well described by Smith:

Tired faces, often, and of a slow charm, and gentle, with voice soft-spoken and of profound hesitation, or sometimes urbane and witty. These were the faces you saw of men who feared the “outbreak of violence,” who wrote editorials suggesting things must change slowly, who read poetry or wrote it, who said, “You can’t turn the South upside down overnight,” who said, “Whatever is done for the Negro—and things should be done—must be done under the system of segregation we have lived under all of our lives.” (*Killers* 132-33)

they will get the door of heaven open for you if they have to unscrew the golden hinges, for your sake and their own. You're safe. (366-67)

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*The Voice at the Back Door* is “profoundly concerned with the mystery of accountability,” wrote Brendan Gill in the *New Yorker*. At the end of the novel, in a moment scarcely noticeable after Kerney’s betrayal, Beck—who had once said to Duncan, “If I had a vote it would be yours” (332)—demonstrates that he remains accountable mainly to himself. He demands payment when Marcia Mae and Kerney ask him try to find out who slit the tire that caused the blowout that led to Duncan’s death. The two of them, in turn, have no illusions about their own motivation: “we want to find an out” (361). In the American South at mid-century, elisions of accountability gave shape to memory and history. The white political elite, desperate to maintain legitimacy in the face of mounting challenges to the assumptions on which its power rested, became accomplished at forgetting the ways in which that power had been won. Whoever committed the Carrollton Massacre, Spencer’s family assured her, “We weren’t mixed up in it” (*Landscapes* 156). She was safe.

Spencer’s decision to portray the massacre as an event involving World War I veterans was utterly realistic. A period of turbulence followed the war, with black soldiers who had fought abroad for American values bringing home a belief that they deserved American privileges. The stereotypical “humble, happy-go-lucky ‘good nigger’ or ‘native’ who ‘knew his place’” gave over to a newly imagined type: “the ‘cheeky, uppity, insolent, treacherous, sly, violent new black man or detribalized scum’ who threatened the status quo” (Williams and Williams 7).<sup>7</sup> To situate the massacre as a response to the killing of a

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<sup>7</sup>In a preface to Sandburg’s *Chicago Race Riots* (1919), Ralph McGill writes of a black soldier who, returning in 1919 to Georgia, “was met by a band of whites who ordered him to remove his uniform and walk home in his underwear.” A few weeks later his beaten body was found, in uniform (xiv). Mississippi native Richard Wright, a boy at the time, writes, “A dread of white people now came to live permanently in my feelings and imagination. As the war drew to a close, racial conflict flared over the entire South, and though I did not witness any of it, I could not have been more thoroughly affected by it if I had participated directly in every clash” (73). A helpful recent discussion of this era, especially the “red summer” of 1919, is found in Karla Holloway’s *Passed On* (65-72).

white woman, as Spencer does, was also realistic.<sup>8</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, lynchings and other acts of mob violence committed by Southern white men were attributed to “deeply rooted psychological tensions about gender and sexuality” (Brundage, “Introduction,” *Under Sentence of Death* 7). But in recent years this argument has been seen as exaggerated, and a more complex picture has emerged.<sup>9</sup> One of the more important dynamics involved the reality of black power after emancipation: the greater the political influence that black men were capable of claiming, the more likely it was that a lynching was intended as mass political intimidation.<sup>10</sup>

The object of the Carrollton Massacre was just such coercion, its success measurable in the degree to which the whole incident was suppressed. Not until the mid-1990s, while writing her memoir, did Spencer learn its precise date or any of the details. “Southerners hear parts of stories with their ears, and the rest they know with their hearts,” she had written in the novel (256), with more irony than she knew.<sup>11</sup> Even with such scant knowledge, though, in framing her novel within an election campaign that puts the rights of black citizens front and center Spencer demonstrated an intuitive understanding of a century of racial politics in her own Carroll County, Mississippi.

The Carrollton Massacre took place in 1886, toward the end of the volatile period between 1875, when the state was “redeemed” from Reconstruction by means of an election that put white-supremacist Democrats firmly in charge (a move solidified in 1876-77 by the “compromise” presidential election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes,

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<sup>8</sup>See Williams and Williams (99-100): “Black men were made to appear as brutal savages out to rape white women or demean them in the eyes of the white man,” they write, adding that although during this period traditional lynching in the form of the singling out of individual black men was “under national attack,” the riot (re)emerged as “a new form of revenge.”

<sup>9</sup>Brundage’s essay collection on lynching exemplifies the breadth and depth of contemporary research on the subject.

<sup>10</sup>This is the thesis of Terence Finnegan; in addition to his essay in Brundage’s collection, see his dissertation.

<sup>11</sup>In *Landscapes of the Heart* (156-57) Spencer writes about the massacre, citing Vernon L. Wharton’s *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890*—a source she learned about from historian Joel Williamson. (Email correspondence with Spencer, Feb. 4, 2005.) She leaves it to her readers to draw the connection to *The Voice at the Back Door*.

with his pledge to restore local rule in the South [see Sallis 239-41]), and 1890, when a new state constitution effectively disenfranchised black Mississippians. The Democratic victories of 1875 had, in fact, been assured through violent intimidation of black voters, including, notably, riots in Meridian (1871) and Vicksburg (1874) (Wharton 188-92).<sup>12</sup> Despite the reestablishment of white dominance, however, the violence in Mississippi did not cease (Miller 430). Across the South, lynching “reached its height not during the pitched battles of Reconstruction but during the transition between 1877 and the establishment of [the] new caste system” of Jim Crow (Hall 131). The Carrollton Massacre was one tragic incident on the road to the closed society.

Carroll County lies in the Bluff Hills of Mississippi just east of the Delta region. Economically and politically, in the 1880s it resembled the Delta—each a “dark-soil” cotton economy, once dependent on enslaved labor, now populated by more free blacks than whites (Finnegan, “*At the hands*” 169; Cole 26-27). During Reconstruction, black men in Carroll County helped to energize the Republican Party and were rewarded with appointments to local offices (Cole 22-23; WPA 1:196-99). After the establishment of Democratic control in 1875, however, a complicated political reality emerged. On economic and sectional matters the Democrats were not of one mind. Various independent parties threatened to fracture the party, creating an opportunity for a Republican resurgence. The question of race took on a new urgency: the Democrats could not afford to lose control of the black vote. Writes Albert Kirwan in *Revolt of the Rednecks*, “By the 1880s the majority of [white] people, even if disgusted, could not fight against the party which to them meant white supremacy” (26). Although none of the independent parties won a statewide office, they showed “surprising strength” locally and in congressional contests (Creswell 4). Meanwhile the 1884 election of Grover Cleveland, the first Democratic president since the war, sent shock waves through the black community. It meant the removal of even token federal supervision over elections, opening

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<sup>12</sup>Not all of the intimidation was violent, as Williamson notes. “A part of the Mississippi Plan [of 1875] was to claim during the election campaign that the vast majority of Negroes were going to vote Conservative and to insist after the election that blacks had, indeed, cast their ballots for the Democracy” (83). See also Kirwan 4-5: “Election victories were secured not only by intimidation and force, but also by social and business ostracism, by the drawing of the color line, by discharge from employment and forced resignations, and by a certain amount of vote-buying.”

the door to rampant fraud. Cleveland's election has been called "the beginning of the end of black political rights" in Mississippi, setting the stage, as it did, for "increasingly bloody" confrontations, including the Carrollton Massacre in March 1886.<sup>13</sup>

Any discussion of the events surrounding the massacre must begin by conceding that the source materials are themselves embroiled in the history they record. Reportage in the Southern white Democratic press, with its own inconsistencies, needs to be weighed against the starkly different versions in black and Northern white Republican newspapers—all of it judged cautiously within larger, though still imperfect, frames of historical understanding.

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* published the most detailed version of the massacre and the events that preceded it; the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* added another rather comprehensive perspective.<sup>14</sup> Sometime in February or earlier, a confrontation had taken place on the streets of Carrollton between Robert Moore, a white man from neighboring Leflore County, and Ed Brown, a black Carrollton man. Moore, perhaps intoxicated, scuffled with Brown and was struck on the head with a jug of molasses. On February 13, James M. Liddell, Jr., a lawyer and newspaper editor, also of Leflore County, exchanged "harsh words" with Brown about the incident with his friend Moore. Later the same evening, Ed and his brother Charlie Brown, their friend John

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<sup>13</sup>Miller 430; see generally 424-30.

<sup>14</sup>The most extensive articles were in the white Southern press: H. H. Hargrove's "Slaughtered Negroes" (*Daily Picayune*, rpt. in Jackson *Clarion*); and "Carrollton Tragedy" (*Times-Democrat*). In these two newspapers, see further "Terrible Tragedy" (*Daily Picayune*), and Hargrove, "The Picayune's Correspondent Reasserts His Statement" (*Daily Picayune*); "A Frightful Tragedy" (*Times-Democrat*); and the following editorials: "The Carrollton, Miss., Killing" (*Daily Picayune*), "The Carrollton Massacre" (*Times-Democrat*), "The Carrollton Affair" (*Times-Democrat*). See also the *New-York Times*, "Eleven Men Slaughtered"; and the Natchez *Daily Democrat*, "Thirteen Negroes Shot Down at Carrollton," and editorial, "The Carrollton Outrage." Reports in the black and sympathetic white Northern press include *New-York Tribune*, "A Blight to Civilization" and "The Mississippi Slaughter"; *Washington Bee*, "Thirteen Negroes Lynched," "The Latest Mississippi Massacre," and "The Bloody Assassins"; *National Republican*, "A Protest to the President," and editorial, "How Long?"; and *Cleveland Gazette*, "A Terrible Affair." See also the *Washington Post's* editorial, "The Mississippi Slaughter"; and letter from "Mississippian" in the Jackson *Clarion*, "In Defense of the Carrollton Massacre." Further primary sources are cited in Cole.

Johnson, and perhaps others “armed themselves” on the Carrollton streets “in anticipation of what followed.” After supper at his hotel,

Mr. Liddell started down the streets, when he saw the Brown brothers with a host of their colored friends around them and, it is said, he asked Ed what they were doing there, and received a very interesting reply, whereupon Liddell slapped him, when Ed and Charlie Brown and John Johnson opened fire upon Liddell. Mr. Liddell returned the fire with a double action Colt's revolver, and for a few seconds the noise resembled a regular picket charge.

All but Johnson, who escaped, were wounded, though it was said to be a “miracle” that no one died.<sup>15</sup>

The Brown brothers were jailed but quickly posted bond, escaping a mob that would have lynched them.<sup>16</sup> On or about March 13, they initiated an arrest warrant for Liddell and six other prominent white men (though there is no evidence that any other men were involved) for assault with intent to kill. On March 17, that trial commenced. A conclusion offered by a Carroll County resident many years after the fact seems entirely credible: “By the time the trial came up, men throughout Carroll and adjoining counties were enraged over the audacity of the negro in bringing the case to court” (WPA 1:209). The state did not even provide lawyers for the prosecution (“Carrollton Massacre,” Jackson *Clarion*).

An hour into the proceedings, white men on horseback—reports say either fifty or a hundred—stormed in from the direction of Leflore County. The men, “armed with every conceivable firearm” (Hargrove, “Slaughtered Negroes”), dismounted, surrounded the courthouse, and rushed upstairs. In a shooting spree that lasted less than ten minutes, at least ten black men were killed and others mortally or severely wounded. Some did jump out the windows (as in the novel's version), to meet various fates.<sup>17</sup> The Brown brothers were each shot multiple times.

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<sup>15</sup>Hargrove, “Slaughtered Negroes,” excerpting the February 20 *Carrollton Conservative*.

<sup>16</sup>The white men did take and lynch another black prisoner who was jailed for killing a white man. This detail emerges in an interview with Will Liddell, brother of J. H. Liddell, in the *Times-Democrat* (“Carrollton Tragedy”).

<sup>17</sup>Most accounts say that ten men died and three were seriously wounded. But the African American *National Republican* reports that “the colored people were almost paralyzed with fear by the outrage, and that a number had fled to the woods and it was

No report suggests that any white men were injured, and whether the black men were even armed is questionable. The assailants departed on horseback “as quietly and quickly as they came in” (“Thirteen Negroes shot Down”).

Almost immediately the forgetting began. The coroner held no inquest, for “the manner of death was known to everybody” (Hargrove, “Slaughtered Negroes”). A grand jury issued no indictments (“Bloody Assassins”)—a task that would have been difficult in any case since no one claimed to have recognized a single assailant (“Thirteen Negroes Shot Down”). Nothing was said by the distinguished United States senator from Carrollton James Z. George, whose son was rumored in Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune* to have been “one of the ‘Regulators’” (“A Blight to Civilization”). President Cleveland, pleading the sanctity of local authority, declined to order a federal response (“A Blight to Civilization”), and a request for a congressional investigation was defeated (“The Carrollton Massacre,” *New-York Tribune*). “The authorities are as silent as death on the subject,” observed the African American Cleveland *Gazette* (untitled editorial, April 3, 1886), a fact also noted by Frederick Douglass in his Emancipation Day speech later that spring in Washington.<sup>18</sup>

Governor Lowry, for his part, saw no need to intervene. The county was capably handling the affair, it seemed to him, and besides, “the negroes were the aggressors.” In the face of obvious realities, the governor clung to the theory that the violence was self-defense: once the mob had appeared in the courtroom, Ed Brown was said to have fired the first shot, which, in turn, “provoked” a “riot” (“Carrollton Tragedy”). This story was ridiculed in the black press (e.g. “The Carrollton Massacre,” *Cleveland Gazette*) and challenged in at least one white

... unknown how many were killed and had died of their wounds” (“Protest to the President”).

<sup>18</sup>At the annual celebration of the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in Washington, on April 16, 1886, Douglass called the Carrollton Massacre yet another senseless act of violence aimed at maintaining the color line. “We are used to the shedding of innocent blood, and the heart of this nation is torpid, if not dead, to the natural claims of justice and humanity, where the victims are of the colored race. Where are the sworn ministers of the law?” he asked. “Where are the guardians of public justice? Where are the defenders of the constitution?” (227-28). Indeed, he continues, “I have sometimes thought that we should be about as well situated for the purposes of justice, if there were no constitution of the United States at all” (229).

report ("The Carrollton Affair"), but beneath its patent absurdity lay one of the most powerful indictments of the Brown brothers: they were "desperate, bad men" (Hargrove, "Slaughtered Negroes").

Ed and Charlie Brown, according to the *Daily Picayune*, were sons of Adam Brown, a free black man, three-quarters Indian, a blacksmith who "made money enough to be considered rich." Their mother, also part Indian, was a slave whose freedom had been purchased by her father. Adam, who succumbed in 1872 to a "shooting difficulty" with the editor of the *Carrollton Conservative*, "was one of the finest specimens of pure and concentrated meanness that the days of reconstruction produced." Ed Brown "was the *fac simile* of his father in looks, disposition, devilment, hatred to the white people, and everything else that would make him dangerous," and his brother fell under his "influence and example" (Hargrove, "Slaughtered Negroes").

Whatever the truth to this assessment, it is also true that the trope of the black "desperado" took on ideological power in the postwar period. With emancipation came a loss of the "distant intimacy" that had existed between the races.<sup>19</sup> "A new generation of blacks, born in freedom and less willing to act out the etiquette of obsequiousness, seemed to many whites to betoken a society whirling away into the unknown," observes Jacquelyn Hall; "the dominant image of blacks in the white mind shifted from inferior child to aggressive and dangerous animal" (133). In this context, writes Edward Ayers, the "bad nigger" emerged as the very embodiment of "pure force, pure vengeance," for whom there was "no hope of social redemption." A blend of fact and motivated fiction, the black desperado "became a stock character in the region's imagination and its reality."<sup>20</sup> With this kind of character, it was said, "the ordinary process of law is powerless to deal."<sup>21</sup>

The Brown brothers certainly were seen as "ignorant colored desperadoes" ("The Carrollton, Miss., Killing") and may have played the

<sup>19</sup>Hall (133) takes this phrase from Pierre L. Van den Berghe, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective* (1967).

<sup>20</sup>Ayers (*Vengeance and Justice* 232-33) is quoting Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977).

<sup>21</sup>"The Carrollton, Miss. Killing," *Daily Picayune*, March 19, 1886, p. 4. Another theory was that Gov. Lowry's "immeasurable leniency . . . in commuting death sentences" had caused (white) people to take the law into their own hands; see "Ten Negroes Murdered." Cf. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice* 246.

part. But something else conspired with their bad name to bring down such a mighty retribution: the continuation of politics by other means. In Carroll County, where during Reconstruction blacks had gained remarkable power, the battle for Redemption had been intense. Loyal Leagues, secret black organizations with a loose national structure, were active in the county in the mid-1870s, terrifying whites and provoking their wrath (Wharton 164-66; Cole 24; WPA 1:197-99). “[T]he overthrowing of the Republicans,” a Carroll County resident recalled in the 1930s, was “a difficult matter” (WPA 1:196). Prior to the crucial election of 1875, in fact, tensions could scarcely have been higher. Local leaders threatened a race war should Republican governor Aldebert Ames exercise military authority to enforce voting rights (Cole 25). When he arranged to do no such thing,<sup>22</sup> the stage was set: as one local source put it, “the young and old stood at the polls. The watchword was ‘Carry the election honestly if you can, if not, carry the election.’ Never was any community better organized,” he continued, “than was Carroll county in 1875 and 1876,” when the presidential and congressional election served to complete the revolution (WPA 1:200-01).<sup>23</sup> Democrats had cause to remain ever vigilant, however. “The serpent is only scotched, not killed,” the Jackson *Weekly Clarion* observed in 1877.<sup>24</sup>

If the Brown brothers represented a political threat in the 1880s, one method of containment would have been to brand them as isolated criminals.<sup>25</sup> That the massacre may have had less to do with the personalities of two “desperate” men and more to do with racial politics is the distinct possibility raised in newspapers not “tinged with Democratic die” (“How Long?”). The African American New York *Freeman* claimed that Ed and Charles Brown were leaders well worthy

<sup>22</sup>After Gov. Ames’s appeals to President Grant for assistance went unanswered, he agreed “to abandon all efforts to form a militia” in exchange for “a fair and peaceful election” (Wharton 192-94).

<sup>23</sup>“With an excess of 60,000 colored people,” Ames recalled twenty years later, “Mississippi became the seat of a white man’s government” (Wharton 198).

<sup>24</sup>Untitled editorial, 10 Oct. 1877, p. 2; see further Sallis 242.

<sup>25</sup>“We certainly will not for a moment admit that the whole South is to be blamed for any injustice or wrongdoing that might have grown out of the deeds of negro and Indian desperadoes in a remote corner of a single State” (“Question of Fact”).

of fear.<sup>26</sup> The *New-York Tribune*, quoting a “prominent white citizen of Mississippi,” similarly theorized that the massacre “was thought necessary by the ‘Regulators’ to teach the colored men a lesson,” to “put a stop to their organizing” (“The Mississippi Slaughter”). What happened in the courthouse “was not Lynch law,” one observer carefully noted, for “there was no attempt to punish particular colored men for alleged wrong-doing.” It was “a deliberate, cold-blooded massacre, the sole aim of which was to cow the colored voters of the whole region.” Once again “the solidity of the South is strengthened by the cement of innocent blood.”<sup>27</sup>

The Republican press was scandalized that law-abiding citizens could be murdered in a courthouse, “a temple of justice.”<sup>28</sup> The Jackson *Clarion* also noted uncomfortably that the tragic incident occurred “in the very sanctuary of the law,” while counseling the repudiation of the whole affair. But if in condemning the “wholesale butchery” the paper was out of step with the average white citizen, it was at least straightforward about what was at stake: “if [the citizens] do not condemn such an outrage as that at Carrollton, the judgment they will receive and merit from the civilized world would aptly fit a nation of savages” (“The Carrollton Massacre”). The Natchez *Daily Democrat* put a finer point on the matter. “[A]ll good citizens had fondly hoped that when the political revolution had been accomplished, that law would resume its sway.” With the state now “completely in the hands of the white element,” mob violence could only be “an acknowledgment of incapacity for legal government” (“The Carrollton Outrage”). Indeed it was just that. The black vote could not legally be suppressed: that was the “fundamental condition” of Mississippi’s readmission to the Union in 1870.<sup>29</sup> But

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<sup>26</sup>See Cole 64.

<sup>27</sup>“The Carrollton Massacre,” editorial, *Cleveland Gazette*; possibly reprinted from the *New-York Tribune*.

<sup>28</sup>“How Long?”; see also untitled editorial, *Cleveland Gazette*, April 3, 1886; and *Washington Bee*, “The Latest Mississippi Massacre.”

<sup>29</sup>Gabriel Chin 1581-82, 1581 n.1. Mississippi’s readmission was pursuant to the Military Reconstruction Act (1867) and its amendments. Writes Chin, “The Reconstruction Acts had a much greater impact on African-American suffrage in the South than the Fourteenth or Fifteenth Amendments, at least until the end of Reconstruction and arguably until the Second Reconstruction in the 1950s and 1960s; for a while, they worked. They failed to prevent the political, cultural, and economic

sixteen years later, the margin between the level of fraud and violence that it took to keep the blacks from the polls and the level of such tactics that would provoke federal intervention had worn perilously thin.

Weary, frightened, even ashamed, the white establishment soon conceded that it was time for a new approach. If a legal means to suppress the black vote were not found, it was feared, a whole generation would grow up having internalized the violence but not the rationale. “[I]t is no secret . . . that we have been preserving the ascendancy of the white people by revolutionary means,” wrote one man during the discussions leading up to the Constitutional Convention of 1890. “No man can be in favor of perpetuating the election methods which have prevailed in Mississippi since 1875 who is not a moral idiot” (qtd. in Wharton 206; see also Kirwan 58). Carrollton’s own Sen. George had a heavy hand in all of the new constitution’s franchise clauses, including the infamous “understanding clause”—a literacy test easily manipulated to exclude undesirable voters (Kirwan 69-70; Wharton 213). So great was the outcry even among whites against such a transparent evasion of the Fifteenth Amendment that the convention delegates promulgated the constitution without putting it to ratification by popular vote (Chin 1583; Wharton 214). Sen. George emerged with his “reputation tarnished,” as Ayers observes (*Promise of the New South* 149). Nonetheless, the constitution found its way to acceptance in Mississippi and imitation elsewhere (Wharton 215). At last an effective means had been found to sidestep the “fundamental condition” of readmission to the Union. Rewritten constitutions in Mississippi and across the South ushered in a new era: literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, all became part of an elaborate formal system of evading federal law to suppress the black vote (Chin 1582-83). Not until the Second Reconstruction of the 1950s and 1960s would the system’s legality be challenged. Not until then would the promise of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments begin to become a reality.

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The full story of the Carrollton Massacre remained unknown to Spencer for four decades after she wrote *The Voice at the Back Door*.

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tragedy of Jim Crow, however, because the fundamental condition—unalterable suffrage requirements—was not honored” (1582).

Her own mother had discouraged her from asking the local newspaper editor about it, for fear of hurting the woman's feelings (email correspondence with Spencer, Feb. 4, 2005). A Works Progress Administration history of Carroll County recorded in the 1930s suggests that the relevant issues of the Carrollton *Conservative* were long lost even by then (to this day, no copies can be found).<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the newspapers were innocently lost, or perhaps not. When Spencer's own witness makes the community's willful forgetting so clear, it hardly matters.

Had she had a better grasp of the facts, Spencer might have written a very different novel. For one thing, she would have had to wrestle with the discovery that the one "fact" she thought she could count on—that her family's hands were clean—was not strictly true: James Liddell, Jr., was a relative through a distant family connection.<sup>31</sup> But even had she been armed with the bloody details of the Carrollton Massacre and all of the contradictory claims that it stood for, it would be hard to imagine a novel that more vividly reveals the fault lines of racial politics in small-town Mississippi as they persisted from Reconstruction to the eve of the civil rights movement. The parts of the story she had not heard with her ears were nevertheless inscribed upon her heart. *The Voice at the Back Door* dramatizes a fundamental reality of Southern power that W. J. Cash, ten years earlier, had plainly called out: lower-class white men like Jimmy Tallant's father were indeed pressed into the quiet service of the upper class to do its dirty work.<sup>32</sup> The repercussions upon both classes of whites, as well as blacks, were visited from generation to generation until the genteel fiction of the Southern aristocracy was strained to the breaking point.

The novel's unsettling conclusion, with its precarious assertion of blind solidarity, sounded a timely warning of the trouble that lay ahead.

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<sup>30</sup>"The files of the *Conservative* date back to April 19, 1869, but are not entirely complete, as many would-be historians have borrowed them and failed to return all of them." WPA 2:154.

<sup>31</sup>Through her McCain grandfather, Spencer was related by marriage to the Liddells (email correspondence with Spencer, Feb. 4, 2005). For more about her McCain lineage, see *Landscapes of the Heart* 8-17; on the Carrollton household of James Liddell, Jr.'s, brother W. W. (Will) Liddell, see WPA 1:97-98.

<sup>32</sup>See Egerton 279. For a fuller discussion of Cash's *Mind of the South* (1941), see Jenkins ch. 2.

With other Southern novelists of the pre-*Brown* 1950s, Spencer was, as John Egerton writes, “preparing what amounted to a scouting report, an early forecast of the social climate. Out of the depths of their exploration and creativity, they were giving us a portent of variegated and interdependent but still inequitable things to come” (539). Set against the context of the Carrollton Massacre of 1886—the signal event that she was cautioned not to touch—*The Voice at the Back Door* invites us to consider again the “mystery of accountability,” as Brendan Gill so aptly put it: the still untold lengths to which the white establishment in the American South was willing to go to avoid the day of reckoning that was certain to arrive.

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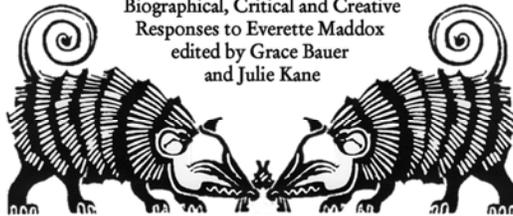
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