Cinematic Memory and the Southern Imaginary: *Crisis in the Deep South* and *The Phenix City Story*

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Abstract

Cinematic Memory and the Southern Imaginary:
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Gareth Hedges, Ph.D.
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This dissertation is a historical and theoretical study of the southern imaginary at the intersection of mass and regional culture. The focus is on two cinematic treatments of significant violent crimes in the region during the 1950s: firstly, the assassination of Albert Patterson, which prompted the clean of the "wide open" town of Phenix City, Alabama; and secondly, the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, which played a critical role in accelerating the African American freedom struggle. *The Phenix City Story* (Allied Artists, 1955), and *Crisis in the Deep South*, an unproduced 1956 screenplay written by Crane Wilbur, were both products of the media frenzy surrounding these actual events and they each involved investigation and research into local circumstances as part of their development and production.

Rooted in film studies, history and cultural studies, the method of this thesis is to look backward to the foundational elements of the texts in question (e.g., the 'raw material' of the actual historical events,), and forward to the consequences of cinematic intervention into local commemorative regimes. In this way, I chart how the overlaps and interconnections between these film projects and others of the era reveal the emergence, consolidation and dissolution of a larger "cycles of sensation," a concept outlined by Frank Krutnik and Peter Stanfield. The thesis offers a radical close reading of these texts to illuminate the complex relationship between Hollywood film and historical fact.

The thesis examines southern exceptionalism and outlines the ways its romantic visions of "moonlight and magnolias" inform the treatment of the American South in the cinematic imagination, while tracing presentations of the modern American South through the popular hicksploitation cycle of the 1970s. The failed attempt to make a film out of the murder of Emmett Till in the 1950s demonstrates the limitations of Hollywood's ability to address civil rights issues. My analysis of *The Phenix City Story* uncovers connections between the film's racial melodrama and the Alabama town's hidden history of racial violence and the Ku Klux Klan activity, while arguing for the role race played in the political corruption that the film's narrative exposes.

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Finally, thanks always to Allison Smith, my partner in all things (from enthusiastic traveling companion to beleaguered co-defendant to wife), who assisted with the critical stages in the development of this project and whose support, humour and good judgment were indispensable. (The first night we talked I showed her my Yugoslavian *Walking Tall* poster, and she understood). Her patient and loving presence is constant source of inspiration and happiness.

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Screening Crime within the Southern Imaginary

The period between the May 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education*—which called for an end to segregated education—and the growing massive resistance culminating the Southern Manifesto of early 1956 is best characterized as a moment of uncertainty in the history and culture of the United States and the region known as 'the South.'[1] Hope for progressive action was ultimately closed off as violence in the South intensified with the growing massive resistance to the *Brown* decision. This was especially true in impoverished Deep South states like Alabama and Mississippi, where the legacy of slavery, the Civil War and its aftermath had done much to shape southern identity and where the culture of segregation strictly governed codes of conduct between black and white societies. This study will investigate this history through the examination of two cinematic artifacts based on sensational crimes in the Deep South that date from the period surrounding the Brown decision—*The Phenix City Story* (Allied Artists 1955) and the unproduced screenplay *Crisis in the Deep South* (1956). This will yield a better understanding of the relationship between mass and regional cultures. This study will also address Hollywood's complex relationship to a range of commemorative practices related to the histories they present.

Origin

This began as a project dealing with commemorative texts and practices and films set in

[1] Today, the region referred to as the South can be divided in any number of ways. The U.S. census bureau divides the South into three categories which do not seem to have attained any traction in popular culture. The evocative entity know as the "Deep South" typically includes Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, but the label can extend to Arkansas as well as parts of Florida and Texas. Urban archaeologist Amy Young defines the South as the 11 seceding states of the Confederacy (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) plus Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland and Missouri. This study will mostly be concerned with Deep Southern states Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi.

the contemporary South. Its original scope was to be broken up discretely by decades from the 1950s through the 1970s, which would follow through to the latter decade's boom in low-budget southern exploitation films known as 'hicksploitation' or 'hixploitation,' with emphasis on the popularity of Buford Pusser and the *Walking Tall* films of the 1970s. Into this framework—and in many ways, in effort to account for the larger popularity of southern subjects in the 1970s—I limited the scope of my enquiry to the twentieth-century South, bracketing off the Antebellum and Civil War periods, about which much has been written. Surveying these cinematic presentations of the modern South, certain continuities and recurring themes soon emerged—among them, issues of family, social problems, agrarian and rural life, race relations, wanton sexuality, dislocation, law and order (especially prisons), crime and corruption, car culture, and moonshine. At the same time, owing to the broader cyclical character of history, I noted regular cyclical eruptions of interest in these issues in popular culture, especially in the 1930s, under the vogue for social problem films, in the 1950s, as well as the later 1960s and 1970s. Each decade seemed to exhibit a discrete character and attitudes.[2]

As work continued, it became clear of the need to limit the scope of this project to the tense period in the 1950s following the *Brown* decision and the key texts *The Phenix City Story* and the Emmett Till script *Crisis in the Deep South*. In each case, research that I conducted sparked fascinating connections between events in the South and the role of Hollywood cinema in actively engaging in southern history during this moment. One of the most critically lauded of

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[2] For example, Allison Graham observes a long standing tendency especially true of Civil Rights films in which villainous poor white trash in the form of the "cracker," who acts as the "signifier of racial ambiguity" and serves as the scapegoat for the racism of the society at large (13). The theme will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Later hicksploitation films would counter images of working class whites as redneck scapegoats, by introducing redneck heroes, wherein bodily excess took on a recuperative form either through the extreme violence suffered by protagonists as with *Walking Tall*'s embattled sheriff Buford Pusser, or through the protagonist's confident, if sometimes laid back, hyper-masculinity. In this regard, 1970s southern film superstar Burt Reynolds' signature moustache and chest hair might be seen to substitute excessively masculine secondary sex characteristics for the historical failings of white southern society of the era of massive resistance.

a cycle of city exposé films, *The Phenix City Story* addresses widespread vice and corruption in an Alabama town and the true story of the assassination of an elected official who campaigned for reform. *Crisis in the Deep South* was the fruit of an attempt to make a film fictionally retell the shocking murder of Emmett Till, a Chicago teenager brutally killed in Mississippi.

Figure 1.1—Press photos showing unnamed Phenix City police officers engaged in target practice in 1953, a year before the city's police and sheriff department was relieved of duty under Martial Rule by the Alabama National Guard following the assassination of Albert Patterson. Handwritten original caption: "Phenix City. Policemen" 2 September, 1953. (Discarded press photo*, Columbus-Ledger Enquirer*, from the author's personal collection)

Case Studies

The core cinematic texts addressed herein were based upon violent crimes in the American South, the circumstances that led up to them, and their immediate aftermath. Appeals to authenticity and lived history are central to each of the film projects. Each showcases the meticulous restaging of true violent events that had left a lasting impact on both the local and national landscape, and which serve as action set pieces. The fact that these film projects were

based on real events foregrounds the relationship between film and fact, and locates these narratives within specific circumstances and histories. The texts emerged following the historic *Brown* decision, and they make visible key changes in the image of the American South in popular culture during this period. Each of these sensational violent incidents would immediately bring national news, press, film crews, and tourists to the affected communities, as well as make a lasting impression on the cultural landscape. Importantly, the historic events addressed involve a great deal of dispute and controversy, often about broader issues that highlight the role of the cinema in shaping popular perceptions of history. This privileged relationship to history, coupled with the fact that each text is connected to broader networks of texts, allows me to use the texts to structure a larger argument about the integration of the postwar American South into national currents.

The Assassination of Albert Patterson

A little after 9 PM on a Friday in June 1954—just as the illicit vice and gambling in Phenix City, Alabama, that he had campaigned against were beginning for evening—Albert Patterson, the presumptive state Attorney General-elect, was shot three times by an unknown assassin as he entered his car. Patterson's assassination led to limited Martial rule in Phenix City, whereby the Alabama National Guard assumed the duties of local police. The assassination sparked a sweeping clean-up of the sensational criminal enterprise there whose ventures beyond gambling and prostitution included illegal lotteries, moonshine and drugs; a coercive "white slavery" ring in which girls assigned to one establishment were numbered with tattoos inside their lower lip; a "school for safecrackers;" an illegal backwoods abortion and "baby selling" scheme; and the widespread robbery and murder of visitors, often soldiers from nearby Fort Benning, Georgia. The media frenzy captured national attention and later helped to propel the murdered man's son into the governor's mansion.

The Phenix City Story

Filmed on location mere months after the events it depicts, *The Phenix City Story* dramatizes the fall of the vice and gambling operators in the "wide-open" Alabama town and the events leading up to the assassination of the state Attorney General-elect, who had campaigned pledging reform. *The Phenix City Story* was produced by Allied Artists, a matured version of the Poverty Row studio Monogram, which had been known for B-movies, low-budget genre films,

especially westerns, that filled matinee programs. The film joined a cycle of films inspired by what the *Washington Post* hailed as the "TV Smash" of 1951: the Senate hearings into organized crime headed by ambitious Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver.[3] *The Phenix City Story* was so indebted to the national media frenzy around the issue of organized crime and reform that the crime docudrama actually begins with a 13-minute documentary prologue featuring interviews with the locals involved in the events, including the murdered man's widow.

The Murder of Emmett Till

Long after dark one night in late August of 1955, two lower class white Mississippians roused and abducted 14-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Till from his great uncle's cabin near Money, Mississippi. Half-brothers J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant were arrested and detained on kidnapping charges the next day. Three days after his disappearance, Till's badly mutilated body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River—identifiable only by a ring that had belonged to his late father. Till's body had been tied to a fan from a cotton gin. Later, allegations would emerge that Till had flirted with Bryant's wife at Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market.

As the murder involved the exchange between North and South, the story garnered national and international attention. The governor of Mississippi ordered local law enforcement to fully prosecute the crime. Frustrated with indignities in dealing with Mississippi authorities that compounded her grief, Mamie Till-Bradley collapsed at the sight of the casket and later insisted on holding an open casket funeral for her son in Chicago, which was attended by thousands. While mainstream press circulated images of his mother's collapse, days before the trial images of Till's disfigured body had been published in leading African American periodicals, including *Jet* magazine.

Newspapers and television closely followed developments over the five-day trial in Sumner, Mississippi. The defense argued that the body was so badly mutilated that it could not be positively identified and wild rumours circulated that Till was alive in hiding as part of a

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[3] The *Washington Post* was responding to the sensational coverage of the testimony of mob boss Frank Costello, who had refused to appear on camera. Instead, the television cameras filmed the gangster's hands. For more discussion of the hearings and their impact on televisual culture, consult Thomas Doherty's "Frank Costello's Hands: Film, Television, and the Kefauver Crime Hearings." *Film History* 10.3 (1998): 359-374.

conspiracy to defame Mississippi. Two African American witnesses courageously identified Till's white abductors in open court. Nevertheless, Milam and Bryant were acquitted by an all-white jury. In January 1956, immune from further prosecution, the men sold their confession to the murder to *Look* magazine, framing the killing as a defense of white supremacy.

Figure 1.2—Press photos showing Phenix City police offices in 1955, after the National Guard cleanup. New police Chief Pat Mihelic poses with confiscated illegal alcohol. Handwritten original caption: "Hot whisky bottle. Pat Mihelic, Dewey Bassett, Tom Scroggins, Phenix City Police Dept." 30 May 1955. (Discarded press photo*, Columbus-Ledger Enquirer*, from the author's personal collection)

Crisis in the Deep South

Into this saga, producers of *The Phenix City Story* sought to exploit the material for a screenplay originally slated to be called "The Till Murder Case." As he had done in Phenix City, screenwriter Crane Wilbur traveled to the area to conduct interviews with locals and attend the trial. The project appears to have grown complicated, as Wilbur expanded its action to incorporate other civil rights tragedies that occurred. He delivered the final draft of the screenplay late at the end of September 1956. The script focuses on a fictional white family as they react to real and fictional developments in the tension between races in Mississippi. Film industry papers chronicle attempts to produce the script in 1956, 1958 and as late as 1962, but it was never produced. *Crisis in the Deep South* has not been widely available, nor has it been subject to critical attention.

Mass Culture and Regional Culture

My work is concerned with situating these cinematic artifacts—products of mass culture—in dialogue with regional culture. This dialogue is especially significant as it occurs during a moment of a transition for the South and the nation, coincident with the upheavals and revisions of the African American Freedom Struggle and the post-war physical transformation of the region with the mixed success of the Sunbelt economic boom and the region's participation in nationwide suburban development.

In the 1950s, historian C. Vann Woodward, a southerner at Yale, worried that the ongoing "Bulldozer Revolution" would encroach "upon rural life to expand urban life" and render the region unrecognizable (6). At the same time, a different "bulldozer revolution" challenged criminal institutions in the national routing out of gambling, vice and prostitution. "Bulldozer Crushes 750 Slots Seized By State Police," one Louisiana newspaper boasted of State Police Superintendent Francis Grevemberg's tireless campaign against vice in his state. The national vice panic following the hearings by Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver afforded some inside southern states the opportunity to take advantage of imposing reform from within.

Culturally, the *Brown* decision came at a moment of transition in line with national trends of suburban development, post-war migration and general civic reform in the 1950s. However, for southern states—which in aggregate had experienced disproportionately greater poverty (especially rural poverty) for longer periods of time than other parts of the country and whose

dwindling agricultural economy had already collapsed—these post-World War II developments came at an accelerated pace.

Mass media portrayals of law and order in the region during this period offer a significant window into this transition. The events on which these film projects were based have each left a significant imprint on the affected communities, and, I will argue, Hollywood narrative cinema has a role to play in the memory of these events. To better assess this aspect, my study will also look at commemorative regimes related to the events both locally and more broadly, which can take any number of forms, appearing as physical landmarks, memorials, and museums, as well as retrospectives, documentaries and websites.

As a project rooted in film studies, this dissertation explores the various cycles of production and institutional contexts that shaped the case studies. Low-budget southern exploitation films that played in drive-in cinemas from the 1950s through the 1970s have only recently begun to be explored, chiefly in articles and essays from the field of southern studies, and the definitive history of this cycle, its pre-history, genesis and dispersion, has yet to be written. In this sense, my work is indebted to work on taste politics and cultures of resistance within the academy as suggested by Jeffrey Sconce.[4] This project is the first step toward

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4 Jeffrey Sconce's 1995 essay "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style" applied Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the judgement of taste as a meaningful expression of class and social position that is often asserted negatively (through personal likes and dislikes) to the field of film criticism. Lingering notions of the high and low art and good and bad objects in film studies are represented by the cinematic canon and even the choice of which films academics endeavour to study or screen for students. Sconce further identifies academic interest in the paracinematic world of cult and B-movies as a reaction to the idea of the canon and the power structures it represents. Sconce suggests value of studying paracinema. The essay "Esper, the Renunciator: Teaching 'Bad' Movies to Good Students" demonstrates the pedagogic value of applying an auteurist aesthetic approach to the oeuvre of Poverty Row filmmaker Dwain Esper, director of the frenzied 1934 movie *Maniac*. Collectively this work strongly asserts the value in studying all cinema as a product of history and culture. Crime melodramas of the torrid, ripped-from-the-headlines variety emerged from earlier exploitation film practices. Recent scholarship on exploitation cinema and its re-valorization by specific taste

locating this later hicksploitation cycle within the context of the 1950s. By singling out particularly strong examples from the 1950s, my work contributes a sketch of a southern production cycle that has larger implications for understanding the way that film cycles operate and their relationship to history.

Cycles of Sensation

The notion of a film cycle has a rich conceptual history within film studies. Rick Altman considers film cycles as a precursor to genre: repetition and imitation of popular narrative film leads to a set of conventions that assumes a codified form in film studies as genres and subgenres. Industry scholars represented by the contributors to the University of California Press' "History of the American Cinema" series (1994-2006) tend to view the concept of the film cycle as more closely indebted to classical Hollywood studios' use of the term, as reflected in industry press like *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*. These cycles were more a market-oriented phenomena of circulation, again based in imitation and repetition but not necessarily

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communities and segments of the academy by Sconce and also Eric Schaefer serves to reinforce the marginal role in the market that these smaller studios occupied. In a forthcoming work, Robert Read argues that Poverty Row studios of the 1930s constituted a residual form of silent film practice. Read argues that these small independent companies carried over business and trades practices from the silent era, making films quickly and cheaply shot on location or in rented sound stages, distributed on the pre-vertical integration "states' rights" system, and often featuring the work of fading silent screen talents. In one sense, the fact of the Poverty Row product and its aesthetic reinforces the dominance of classical Hollywood over the American film industry as a whole at this time. Importantly, most of the Poverty Row filmmakers of the classical exploitation era were still geographically based in Southern California—further emphasizing Hollywood's dominance of the film industry as a whole. Jeffrey Sconce cannot argue that the shabbiness of the work of a 1930s exploitation director like Dwain Esper reminds us of "the valiant yet ultimately doomed attempt of the cinema to transcend not only the eternal struggle between art and capital, but also the medium's foundational anchor in indexical reality" without making reference to Dwain Esper's shaky reproduction of dominant codes of representation and its all-too-visible imitation of the 'invisibility' of classical Hollywood style (2007, 291).

allied to the concept of genre. Frank Krutnik and Peter Stanfield view 'cycles of sensation' as a cultural form whose boundaries exceed medium-specific limitations. In this way, their discussion of cycles is compatible with writing on the melodramatic form like that of Linda Williams (1998, 2000, 2001) and literary scholar Peter Brooks, who view melodrama as a form of cultural production that exists across narrative media. Indeed, films with a southern setting are subject to cultural trends and circulate in waves, but these films range in generic identifications. By looking at commemorative regimes, this project demonstrates how such cycles extend beyond cinema into other fields of production including print, commemorative regimes and political campaigns. Connections with other texts suggest ways that cycles form and break apart.

Popular cycles of sensation are aroused by complex social circumstances and circulate around moments of anxiety, tension, and uncertainty—constitutive sensations that they serve to articulate within culture. As Frank Krutnik and Peter Stansfield explain,

> Serving as a conduit for anxieties over cultural power and cultural production, popular cycles of sensation frequently invoke threats posed to hegemony by modalities of difference, including class, race, sexuality, gender, non-normative bodies, crime—and, especially, youth. Sensational forms of popular culture can certainly provoke anxiety through their content, which often flaunts the spectacle of socially deviant behaviour, bodily or sexual excess, or underground subcultures (criminals, outsider refuseniks, rebellious youth, etc.). (1)

I emphasize the role of crime in these cycles in general and the cycle of sensation surrounding the Phenix City cleanup and Till murder in particular. This cycle was shaped by mid-century anxieties about southern identity and issues of difference, coded in terms of region and race in my case studies.

Why True Crime?

Crime exists at a breaking point of the social contract. In its transgressive violation of social codes, crime reveals much about society. In the 1950s there emerged a broader cultural tendency toward conceiving of crime as an organized phenomenon, epitomized and propagated by the popularity of Senator Estes Kefauver's televised hearings into organized crime. In 1952, Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, two tabloid reporters who had parlayed their knowledge of the urban underworld into a popular and influential series of exposés, wrote,

> All forms of dishonesty lend themselves to organization, before the act or after it. Whores need protection from arrest, bail and counsel after that. Burglars cannot operate without 'fingermen' who stake them out and fences who dispose of the loot—jewels, furs or hot money. All these things must be arranged for before the crime to insure success. (15-16)

Writing amidst the fever of the Lait and Mortimer *Confidential* books and the Kefauver hearings, sociologist Daniel Bell wrote of "crime as an American way of life." Bell argued that as "a society changes, so does, in lagging fashion, its type of crime. As American society became more 'organized,' as the American businessman became more 'civilized' and less 'buccaneering,' so did the American Racketeer" (133-134).

More recently, sociologist Federico Varese suggested that organized crime itself be viewed as a form a "governance," or a social system, that "regulate[s] service and control[s] the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully" (4, 14). Varese also finds that early use of the expression "organized crime" in the United States from the mid-1850s was applied to a varied batch of criminal collusive activities, including lynching. The complex racialized character associated with lynching is not to be overlooked (3).

Even sudden violent behaviour and aberrant illegal acts spawn a different kind of organization as the state legal apparatus descends on the perpetrator or as the journalists rush to report the facts. In this regard, order is applied after the fact. Interestingly, David Bell saw Kefauver and his hearings as looking backwards—uncovering the past, not the present (154). In this sense, crime has a narrative dimension as it is often predicated on activities of detection, investigation, and interrogation. Details are often a matter of life and death.

Narrative forms like Hollywood cinema similarly provide order to criminality. Crime melodrama necessarily understands criminal behaviour, social deviance, and marginality within a Manichean moral universe that draws upon extremes of right and wrong, good and evil, heroes and villains, etc. The secrecy and deceit necessarily involved in criminal activity opens doors to understanding other secrets.

Cinematic crime melodramas present this moral dimension through the immediacy of the medium—visually drawing upon emotional effects including suspense, tension and shock. Of a parallel epi-phenomenon in the imagery of *Inside Detective* magazines of the late 1950s by Burt Owen, Will Straw observes,

> [*The magazine's cover*] images [*became*] more cinematic than journalistic in the way their energies animate the space within the frame. The photojournalism of Weegee and others would capture the aftermath of crimes, the point at which they had already congealed into metaphors of life's futility or human indifference. By staging photographs in the moments of their unfolding, Owen's photographs accomplish something different. A range of emotions is kept active across the space of the image rather than setting to elicit a unitary interpretation of the event. (2006 12)

The cinematic quality Straw describes speaks to the blending of narrative, melodrama and purely visual properties of the images. These qualities are also present in the visual aesthetic of *The Phenix City Story*. (While we cannot know exactly how the *Crisis in the Deep South* script would have looked had it been filmed, its similarity with *The Phenix City Story* and other films noirs of the age offers an evocative guideline.)

Southern Justice

The corruption in Phenix City and injustice of the Till murder and trial reveal a chasm between local and national attitudes toward these crimes. The apparent prevalence of wide-open towns at southern rural crossroads (addressed in Chapter 4), the opportunities for crime in secluded rural areas, such as moonshining and related activities, and the racial violence of the age of massive resistance all contributed to a perception of regional differences in what was permissible socially. The struggles that my case studies grapple with were contiguous with developments in the South and the rest of the nation during a period of dramatic change following the Supreme Court's historic *Brown* decision in May of 1954. Each incident I address arose from dramatic and complex local circumstances in particular regions of the American South and each of these incidents would play a part in shaping how people all over the world viewed law and order 'down South.' Differences—real and imagined—between southern attitudes towards justice have long coloured perceptions of the region. Criminologist F. Frederick Hawley and sociologist Steven Messner find an "uncritical acceptance" of the belief that southerners are inherently more violent than the rest of the nation despite inconclusive supporting evidence. They cite the influence of prevailing "stereotypes and ideological notions about the South" (482). Indeed, through both legal (institutionalised segregation, discrimination and a corrupt justice system) and extra-legal (lynching, Ku Klux Klan activities and other

informal ways of asserting white supremacy) means, southern justice has also been implicated in the national drama of race over the twentieth century.

Though the racial dimensions of these narratives are not always readily apparent, they emerge from a legal system that perpetuated racial inequality. Alabama journalist Ray Jenkins offered a blunt account of the intersection between race and the judicial system in a 1976 op-ed for the *New York Times*. Jenkins writes:

> In the South, the law has been an instrument of fear. The county courthouse stands there as a mighty symbol of relentless authority, a message so clear that it might as well be engraved in the marble portico over the great columns: "Watch out, Nigger. If you get out of line, we'll send you to the chain gang. Maybe to the electric chair. And you watch out, too, white man. If you get out of line, we'll treat you like a Nigger and put you there with him." (1997, 19)

Jenkins' insights are the product of a lifetime spent covering southern justice and politics in the papers of regional and national newspapers.[5] Jenkins, a southerner born to a landed and politically connected upper middle class family, first made his name working the beat in Phenix City, Alabama, during the upheaval there in 1954-55 before his firsthand coverage of the Civil Rights movement broadened his racial worldview.

These divisions had far reaching consequences for the southern imaginary. In a 2008 essay titled "Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics," Joel Olson argues that *ressentiment*, a concept borrowed from Nietzsche, is a form of deep resentment overlaid with a desire for revenge and is observable throughout white America following the changes of the Civil Rights era. Olson argues that the period marked by the transition from unquestioned white standing to white normalization, wherein white identity is viewed as the social norm thereby preserving structures of white privilege, nonetheless was begrudged and perceived as a loss of standing (708-710).

Importantly, the memory of the events I address, especially within affected communities, continues to be meaningful, fascinating groups dedicated to investigative research, commemoration and sometimes commercial exploitation of this history. Tourist sites, museums,

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[5] Jenkins himself seems to be proud of the passage as he reproduced parts of it in his 1997 book, *Blind Justice: The Ron Moody Mail Bomb Murders* (19).

historical markers, annual festivals and other public memorial activities—which for the purposes of this study I collectively refer to as commemorative regimes—draw upon the historical events and, both directly and indirectly, reference the films. This study examines the complex cultural legacy of these events and the films produced about them, and maps the interplay between their cinematic and mass media retellings and other commemorative regimes.

By focusing on popular American narrative cinema, commemorative regimes and other ephemera of material culture that also trade in sensation, this inquiry proposes to broaden its account of films by locating them within their specific historical conjunctures as objects of cyclic production. While the period under review represents a period of intense social and political transformation, the 1950s also mark a time of upheaval and revision within the American film industry with the rise of drive-ins and niche-marketing that followed the decline of the Hollywood studio system and shaped American film product.[6] The task of mapping the cultural productivity of these historical events is equally attendant to social and political factors as well as to the individuals and institutions responsible for film texts. Importantly, the families of the

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[6] A great number of works trace significant aspects of this transition, including the fragmentation of the American screen audience and reorganization of the American film censorship in the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which can be found in Thomas Doherty's *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002) and Jon Lewis' *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 2000). Mark Harris' popular history of the birth of "New Hollywood," *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008) serves as both a riveting account and an excellent micro-study of this process as seen through trade papers. The broader context for this transition can be gleaned from the relevant entries in the University of California Press "History of the American Cinema" series: including Peter Lev's *Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), Paul Monaco's *The Sixties, 1960-1969* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), David Cook's *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), and Stephen Prince's *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000).

participants in these events play a key role in shaping (and, in some cases, contesting) these narratives. At the same time, reading through the films and other media produced about these events coincides with and illuminates the postwar development of the American South and popular attitudes toward it. My dissertation project sets out to complicate some of the existing scholarship on the representation of the American South in popular culture in the middle twentieth century and intends to contribute to the fields of film studies and North American cultural history.

Research Question and Theoretical Basis

How do mass cultural texts narrate instances of violence and tragedy in the American South during the Civil Rights era? How do the affected communities memorialize and explain these events once their notoriety has passed into history and how does that former notoriety shape these local commemorative regimes? Finally, what are the implications for the study of narrative fiction film and regional culture?

This dissertation is concerned with the role of film in narrating crime, tragedy and violence in the American South in the 1950s, and examines the complex and ongoing dialogue through which narrative films and other representations of historical events in the American South are incorporated into the local body politic. As such, this project proposes close analysis of the cultural imprint of these events—which includes films and other ephemera, as well as the commemorative practices and the physical sites concerned—to arrive at a model of the productivity of historical events in mass culture. This model will pay attention to how regional culture responds to mass cultural texts and, conversely, how mass cultural texts negotiate the demands of presenting local tragedy to a national audience. As the most prominent and farthest reaching aspect of the cultural responses to these events, film occupies a central place in this study and my analysis—which maps these film projects within their social and cultural contexts, including other networks of films to which they belong, the history of film institutions, as well as specific histories they depict and the affected communities they engage.

Recent work in film studies has emphasized cinema as a site of social and cultural exchange (Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers 3). Of this trend, Richard Maltby notes the need for criticism to recognize the "deliberately engineered ephemerality of cinema, both as a property of its commercial existence and as a phenomenon of memory" (11). In a recent special issue of the *New Review of Film and Television Studies* devoted to "cycles of sensation," Frank Krutnik and

Peter Stanfield observe that emphasis on issues of circulation and consumption "push against the tendency towards overly deterministic and symptomatic readings of films" (2). Stanfield posits that film criticism should view cinema in the context of its seriality—citing the methodology proposed by British art critic Lawrence Alloway in the late 1960s who called film an "obsolescent art form."

If film is obsolescent, ephemeral and impermanent, how do we account for rare mass media texts whose lasting impact is contingent upon their status as historical artifacts and whose endurance is implicated with the public commemoration of violent events? A central question of this study is why do particular films endure so long after their core period of commercial exploitation—often in unusual ways?[7] Following the developments in film studies signalled by Maltby, Krutnick and Stanfield, this study locates individual film projects as aspects of serial production and as being part of a dialogue between mass and regional culture.

In this respect, this study is also concerned with the afterlife of films—the often unintended, incidental but consequential ways in which film texts persist within cultural memory long after their initial exhibition cycle, as they continue to actively participate in public life. In the examples addressed here, film can be a critical vessel for the dissemination of these narratives, and the relationship between the films and historical events they depict is essential. Beyond the tedious task of scrutinizing every detail in the films for its historical veracity—which is a favoured pastime of some film critics, fans and internet forums devoted to these texts—I will examine the blurring of the boundaries between film text and historical event and the way in which various commemorative regimes continue to draw from and call upon film texts.

A more fundamental question suggested by my project is what is the status of popular narrative film as a historical document? Indeed, all of the films fall under the extended category of docudrama—a porous and often controversial form that exists somewhere between fiction and

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[7] This is especially true in the case of *The Phenix City Story* (1955), which though unavailable legally on VHS, DVD or other formats until July 2010, built a strong reputation of acclaim among film scholars and cinephiles. As will be discussed, the tiny "Phenix City Story Museum" located within an antique store in Columbus, Georgia, and a CVS pharmacy run by a local history enthusiast did make copies of the film available on DVD in the 2000s. Quantities had sold out by the time of my visit in May 2009.

documentary but stands apart from documentary in its dramatic conventions, institutional contexts and practice (Stewart and Butt 2012). Docudrama can include popular film subgenres as diverse as historical epics, biopics, gangster films, crime melodramas and film noir (Lipkin 2002). However, the film texts under review here have a unique and privileged relationship to their historical index. All were the products of journalistic or historical research and may have involved the direct participation of individuals involved and were filmed on location in (or adjacent to) the sites where the events depicted actually took place. More tellingly, films like *The Phenix City Story* have been treated *as history* in popular discourse including film reviews, festivals, museums, public memorials, and even recent film screenings within affected communities. Images from film are sometimes used in documentaries to stand in for actual historical fact. Questions of indexicality and historical accuracy followed the films and filled their popular reviews. More importantly, the "histories" represented were under constant scrutiny by the press, legal system, family members and a collection of amateur investigators and on-lookers who have a strong presence in commemorative regimes and online forums today.

By locating and contextualizing the events and texts within southern history and culture as well as the history of film and popular culture—especially in the representation of the South in popular culture—this project charts intertextual networks and institutional factors that inform the texts. In the 1950s the classical Hollywood film industry began a general decline following the Paramount Decision of 1948, which forced the major studios to divest themselves of their exhibition holdings, creating a crisis in the exhibition section and introducing new opportunities for smaller production firms catering to a new fragmented audience (Lev 204-212).

Placing films in continuity with cinematic traditions like the social problem film and gangster cycle as well as other "southern films" elucidates the development of an alternative image of the contemporary (sub)urban American South that addressed contemporary southern realities of changing rural and agricultural life, poverty, and segregation and its legal end and attendant racial strife. The events and the cinematic versions of them touch upon southern issues as diverse as urbanization and political change, changing ideas of the role of community, the dissolution of agrarian society and its consequences, the lingering effects and benefits of the Great Depression and New Deal legislation, and the enduring myth of southern exceptionalism. The image of the South that the films present runs contrary to the dominant image of the "moonlight and magnolias" South and its fantasies of antebellum plantation life. Additionally,

though influenced by the cultural image of the region, the texts in this dissertation emerge from a journalistic and nostalgic mode of the crime film and docudrama, and not the adaptations of literary or theatrical properties crafted by luminaries of the southern literary renaissance that dominated cinematic representations of the region in the mid-twentieth century. Further, each film is nestled within networks of other cultural texts—including film cycles like the 'hicksploitation' films of the 1960s and 1970s—that illuminate the ways in which films become disentangled from their historical contexts.

My study also asks, how do these films fit within networks of cultural texts that narrate, polemicize and exploit these historical events? I have located and contextualized the films and the networks of texts that have developed around these events by mapping the shifting loci of historical meaning in these cases. What is the movement between the journalistic modes of reportage and other modes of storytelling such as the spectacle of melodrama, history and commemoration in the construction of these narratives? What role do media institutions (studios, film producers, film critics) play in this process and how do the structures of this relationship shape content?

In each of my case studies, historical authority moves among a range of local and national agents, and battles between these agents continue to be productive. Each case involves contested histories and conflict between family members and other agents and institutions of commemoration. Beyond individual films, I have mapped other retellings manifest in other contexts and media.

Each case involves an incomplete narrative that has been subject to varied interpretive frameworks. Beyond the sense of mystery that often attaches itself to crime and criminality, what role does the openness of the texts play in the controversy over the histories presented? Contestation and conflict often betray the personal and political stakes of these stories locally.

Focus on the changing status of texts over time explores the consequences of media interventions and complements work on fan culture by scholars like Henry Jenkins. By situating my work at the intersection of mass and regional culture, I hope to investigate the way in which the perception of regional difference shapes the way in which narratives about violent crime in the South are constructed, and read my case studies against the history of the South on film, with a mind toward better understanding the related issues of social class, regional identification and race that this line of research introduces.

In a 1997 essay, Eric Lott applied Toni Morrison's provocative thesis about the displacement of race into the shadows to the films noir of the 1940s and 1950s, suggesting the dark aesthetic of films noir comments on American race relations. I find that, though each of my case studies emerged from a particularly race-conscious moment in the history of South, the narrative films and other cultural ephemera similarly confront race by rendering it invisible or by relegating it to the margins—except in brief, and often emotionally powerful moments.

Methodology

My case studies dramatise actual violent crime in the context of a southern society in transition in an attempt to negotiate an acceptable version of white southern society within a changing media environment. My readings of the films are grounded in the context of film institutions (both tangible and ephemeral) but also in terms of the films' social existence by locating them within other larger discursive networks (e.g., the commemoration regimes and other ephemera depicting the same events and individuals, and within the history of representing the South in mass culture).

During my May 2009 research trip which began and ended in Memphis, I traveled by car through McNairy County, Tennessee, to Tupelo, Mississippi, to Birmingham, Montgomery, Tuskegee and Phenix City, Alabama, Columbus, Georgia, and back over a period of two weeks. Across the landmarks, museums, and junk shops that I visited, the legacies of the Civil War, Civil Rights and popular music frequently overlapped in shaping these commemorative regimes. Owing to the way in which southern cities since the 1980s have worked to directly confront local history of past racial inequity, the story of southern race relations is inescapable. Engaging as a participant-observer and reading the experience as texts akin to books, magazine articles or films, I visited local attractions, libraries and second-hand stores, adding to the mass of reception material related to the films, newspaper and magazines articles and other ephemera that I have been collecting since 2004.

<u>Film studies and the South</u>

In choosing to focus on the interplay between regional and mass cultural representations of southern life, my work significantly revises existing scholarship on both the representation of the American South and top-down histories of American film. Early histories on the South on film like those by Jack Kirby, Warren French and Edward Campbell were preoccupied with the

image of the Old South (especially plantation fantasies and romances typified by *Gone With the Wind*), which indeed make up a large part of our cultural image of the South. My work contributes to a growing body of literature that interrogates alternative aspects of what Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee call the "southern imaginary." Tara McPherson's *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* reviewed contemporary local and global images of the southern imaginary at the dawn of the twenty-first century and found a more complex, global entity that mixes old and new images of the South and accommodates "ideologies of race, place, and gender along a varied register" (17). Recent work in southern studies from history and cultural studies strives to locate artifacts of mass culture within the developments in the region, including collections edited by Barker and McKee, Andrew B. Leiter, and Anthony J. Stanonis, as well as work by Karen L. Cox, Pete Daniel, Allison Graham and others. The search for alternative narratives within the southern imaginary has coexisted with politically oriented histories of the region in the twentieth century by Joseph Crespino, Matthew Lassiter and others, as well as with work on American race relations and whiteness by Grace Elizabeth Hale and Linda Williams.

As a work of American cultural history, this project resembles work that locates film within other textual networks grouped around individual texts with similar themes. Following Peter Stanfield and Frank Krutnik's comments on 'cycles of sensation,' I am looking at the films in their historical and institutional contexts—recognizing the seriality of the medium. Individual films might be better understood in relation to other kinds of cultural texts and not strictly histories of narrative film. Linda Williams' work on racial melodrama in her book *Playing the Race Card* and several articles approaches key melodramatic works of literature, stage and film with sections devoted to analysis of the many adaptations of seminal 'racial melodramas' like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Showboat, Gone with the Wind* and the television mini-series *Roots*. Williams addresses each text chronologically and through their many variations. Similarly, Mary E. Strunk's book *Wanted Women: An American Obsession in the Reign of J. Edgar Hoover* looks at attitudes towards America's most wanted women by devoting chapters to notorious female outlaws from the FBI's official "most wanted" lists and to analysis of their mediated image, through newspaper and magazine accounts, books and films.

In the cases I will address, the Hollywood motion picture industry necessarily lags behind action in the region considerably. Both my case studies were part of a short-lived moment in

American film history in which the film industry attempted to court an educated, adult audience by making films that tread "on territory that had previously been taboo" and ignored or challenged elements of the Production Code (Doherty 27). The move toward "adult oriented" fare attempted to adapt to institutional conditions in the 1950s as the film business reacted to the arrival of television and a range of forces that fragmented the film-going audience, including suburbanization, the popularity of European art film and art house cinema. Several of these adult dramas, like *God's Little Acre* (United Artists, 1958) and *Baby Doll* (Warner Bros., 1956), were set in an increasingly lurid, sexualized South.

The progressive potential of cinematic exposés like my case studies of the contemporary South would not last long, contributing to the difficulties in producing *Crisis in the Deep South*. By the end of the 1950s, the film industry shied away from gritty fact-based portrayals of the region altogether, as more fantastic and literary visions of the region came to dominate production of the "southern films" that were made. This is not to say that independent producers outside the major Hollywood studios like Stanley Kramer did not enjoy considerable prestige with his "message picture" *The Defiant Ones* (United Artists, 1958), nor should it diminish the better-known literary and cinematic success of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Universal, 1962), but these were both based in an earlier vision of the South, and on the whole were the exception, not the rule, of Civil Rights era filmmaking. More typically, the region was viewed through either romantic visions of the antebellum South, or images of decadence and sexual depravity as in the decade's many adaptations of Tennessee Williams plays.

Competing Narratives

Locating each film project within discursive networks reveals how each turn and revision in the larger narratives about these events signals not only competing narratives but competing levels of narration, each with different claims to authority and serving different interests. Following recent work by Krutnik and Stansfield, this dissertation also charts how the overlap and interconnection between each of the films reveals the emergence, consolidation and dissolution of larger cycles of sensation. The interconnections between the texts are many and reveal institutional structures and cycles of repetition and imitation. Work on the southern imaginary is just beginning to account for institutional relationships and cycles (see Graham, and Barker and McKee). The fact that both the Langman and Ebner and Von filmographies of the South on screen draw examples from a range of genres suggests the limitations of searching for a

"southern" genre. Though written for a popular press and unsophisticated conceptually, the narrower focus of Von's *Hick Flicks* is instructive for a model of cyclical analysis because so many of the films discussed are arranged into categories like Moonshining films, "Red-necked" Sheriffs or Bigfoot movies that replicate and map the patterns of influence and imitation that form the institutional logic of film cycles. This project likewise maps a network of texts that offer true stories of southern justice.

The late Umberto Eco concludes his essay on *Casablanca* by suggesting, "The required expertise [*to enjoy what he calls "cult movies"*] is not only intercinematic, it is intermedia, in the sense that the addressee must know not only other movies but all the mass media gossip about movies." For Eco, this presupposes the way "in which cult has become the normal way of enjoying movies" (210). In this regard, perhaps the best way to approach these film projects and their relationship to history should not approach the film texts as writing history, but as works of melodramatic and cinematic adaptation bound to the circumstances of their original production and exhibition context. Such notions refigure history in narrative terms and acknowledge films as textual iterations within a larger cycle of sensation and also within their institutional contexts. Jeffrey Sconce addresses Hollywood prestige adaptations of the 1930s and 1940s in his 1988 essay on the adaptation of *Jane Eyre*. He writes, "The primary work of adaptation [...] involved adapting an audience to the material through the socially negotiated signifying conventions of the medium" (61). This helps to understand the diminished priority that issues of strict historical fidelity have in the film projects I address, where they are outweighed by considerations of commercial and narrative economics as demanded by their position within cyclical Hollywood film production.

Spaces of Memory

My approach strives to be exhaustive, looking both back before the events the films depict and out beyond the texts concerned and commemorative regimes related to the same history, mapping the impact of mass cultural intervention into regionally specific history. In each of my cases studies, both the narrative films and specific sites are in the process of becoming what Pierre Nora identified as *les lieux de mémoire*—places or spaces of memory that have become symbolic elements of the commemorative heritage of community. The rise of tourism in the South is illustrative of the broader self-consciousness about historical memory that Nora discusses. Nora writes, "[t]he moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an

immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical study" (10-11).

The case studies in this dissertation suggest that the "politics of space" involved in this commemoration emphasizes the economic character of memory within consumer culture. Agents within commemorative regimes like the Emmett Till researchers and the secretive amateur historians of Phenix City have been adroit in the responding to a changing economy of memory in the South and view the process of commemoration as a part of local commerce. The work on commemorative regimes required travel to many of the sites discussed.

That unresolved national issues about race relations figure so prominently in southern tourism enacts the full irony of William Faulkner's maxim that "[t]he past is never dead. It's not even past." Faulkner's quotation is spoken abruptly without further comment in the play section of his 1951 *Requiem for a Nun,* an experimental novel that blends fictional forms and updates the misadventures of Yoknapatawpha County resident Temple Drake (73). It has gained particular traction as a maxim for the South's relationship to its history. It was adopted in that context by historians and popular commentators, and has come to evoke the ways in which the region is still struggling with the legacy of slavery, the Civil War and its aftermath. Barack Obama employed the phrase—in paraphrased form—in his 2008 campaign speech about American race relations that followed controversy over his association with Reverend Jeremiah White, to evoke the notion of being "bound to, but struggling to overcome the past" (Horton).

A number of recent collections explore the varied ways in which the South has marketed itself and its past to outsiders including *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South*, edited by Anthony Stanonis in 2008, and *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History* from 2012, edited by Karen L. Cox. *Destination Dixie* in particular focuses on the public commemoration of regional history and reveals the intersection of southern myth and mystique with more practical motives. For example, essays address class-based struggles involved in recognizing the poor white origins of Elvis Presley at his birthplace in Tupelo, Mississippi, and the Atlanta boarding house in which Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone with the Wind*.

The growing recognition of the importance of tourism and the commemorative regimes in the region has provided many examples of mass culture shaping regional culture and memory. Historical geographer Derek H. Alderman writes in the journal *Southern Quarterly* about the

critical role international Elvis fans played in preserving a Memphis housing project that Elvis Presley had lived in during his teenage years. By the end of the twentieth century, cultural tourism based on popular music genres from country, jazz and blues as well as cinema, especially *Gone With the Wind*, has been incorporated into public policy and continues to be a boon to the local economies of Southern states.

Southern Identity

Each of the films I am concerned with presents different recuperative visions of southern identity while at the same time trading on older stereotypes of "poor white trash." The challenge of telling Emmett Till's story—one filmmakers of the 1950s were ultimately unable to overcome—turns on questions of southern identity and its relationship to white supremacy, an issue rarely addressed directly in popular culture in this era. What are the limits of southern identity? These texts attempt to narrativize the remaking of white southern society from within. The real John Patterson's later political exploitation of white supremacy deeply marred *The Phenix City Story*'s legacy. This relationship allows for both critique and rehabilitation of regional stereotypes (including white southern racism) through an analysis of these visions as they develop and how they informed the commemorative regimes devoted to each case over time.

Textual Analysis

This dissertation proceeds from close reading of these very specific case studies. My dissertation proposes a form of textual analysis that responds to Lawrence Grossberg's call for "a concrete politics of space" and his vision of a cultural studies that is both "radically contextual" and "never merely a practice of textual interpretation and/or audience ethnography" (16, 2, 3). As such, my dissertation proposes a form of textual analysis that is also 'radically contextual,' looking backward to the foundational elements (e.g., the 'raw material' of the actual historical events, individuals and circumstances as well as film conventions and institutional contexts), and forward to consequences and later text use. The continued endurance of these texts through various commemorative regimes signals the productivity of history that I endeavour to map and analyze. This dissertation addresses mass and regional culture to begin exploring how communications technologies, media representations and commemorative practices respond to economic and political change in North America. The cultural productivity of the events

analyzed herein and their mass cultural intertexts suggest ways in which cycles of production, as a concept outside of genre, are formed and how they break apart. The films about these events, locations and individuals involved serve as the starting point and organizing principle of my analysis.

Race

The biracialism of the twentieth-century South and its legacy is a permanent feature of the narratives set there. Historically, the rhetorical and legal separation of white identity under Jim Crow segregation intensified the stakes for white identity and conflated anxieties about social class, race and regional identity in the South. Grace Elizabeth Hale observed that notions of southern identity continue to refer primarily to white Southern identity well into the 1970s, long after the early triumphs of the Civil Rights movement.

National media including film tends to temper or erase discussion of race. Tara McPherson famously identified a tendency to represent the South and race through what she calls a "lenticular logic," which is a sort of either/or logic that emphasizes either black or white perspectives, but rarely treats them together. She explains this logic reaches its limit "when one attempts to understand how the images [of black and white] are joined or related" (26). However, as the centre of authority in the case studies shifts between regional and mass culture, the contours of the real regional differences sometimes become more apparent. This stresses the importance of textual analysis and the mapping of discursive networks—as well as the need for readings that emphasize social and historical context. Hollywood was cautious throughout this period in addressing the "classical" Civil Rights movement (a topic I have addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3).

The *Brown* decision begins many narratives of the "classic period" of the modern civil rights movement, flowing from *Brown* through Till's murder, the Montgomery bus boycott, the rise of Dr. Martin Luther King and the practice of nonviolent resistance of the Freedom Rides through the triumphant Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. The 1987 PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954 to 1965* did much to cement the narrative of a "classic period" or "classical Civil Rights era" limited to this periodization. As Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino note, the series continues to provide a "filter" for this complex history for "many students" to this day (2010 5). Jacquelyn Dowd Hall cautions, "By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single

halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement" (2005 1234). Notions of a "Long Civil Rights Movement" stretching from the history of slavery to the present day have usurped this limited view in the historiography. Further, Lassiter and Crespino criticize narrative of a "classic period" for ignoring racism and discrimination outside of the legal restrictions of the segregated South. This study is concerned with illuminating a very narrow period of uncertainty in popular culture fraught with dramatic cultural changes. Examining mass cultural texts set in the South and coincident with this moment illustrates the racial limitations of even progressive Hollywood films of the time.

Crime melodramas are especially useful in looking at cultural ideas about race because they provide the narrative framework for addressing the moral dimension of these issues. The case studies in this project explicitly involve scenes of interracial cooperation and exchange, sometimes based on true events, but very often in exaggerated or outright fabricated form. While each of the films addresses the biracialism of their settings in ambiguous ways, violence is a persistent theme in these scenes.

The Phenix City Story was based on events that occurred only five weeks after the *Brown* decision was handed down, which helps to explain why a Cold War liberal Civil Rights discourse is present in the film, even if race is not explicitly addressed and seems to have little to do with the narrative of the assassination of a white politician.[8] Yet Phenix City, Alabama, was segregated even in its vices, with separate gambling houses and brothels located in different parts of the city and multiple illegal lotteries (a widespread illegal phenomenon throughout the South

[8] Though not explicitly in the film, the *Brown* decision is inescapably etched in the background of the history that *The Phenix City Story* dramatizes. The outgoing Alabama Attorney General, who would later be accused of conspiring in Albert Patterson's assassination, had hijacked a meeting of state officials who were to discussing *Brown* to talk about his successor's campaign against Patterson. Patterson's son, *Brown* and the question of how southern states would or should address desegregation and race relations no doubt influenced the film's screenwriters, both of whom had a history of producing crusading journalistic exposés reminiscent of social problem films of the New Deal era.

and elsewhere known locally as the "bug") that preyed upon poor African Americans.[9] It also was a town whose corrupt political structure owed as much to the economically motivated compromises between local government and the gangster element during the Depression as it did to the ruling culture of white supremacy. Through the late 1940s, the town was a noted hotbed of violent Klan activity, with annual masked rides to intimidate local African Americans featuring hooded local officials (Howard 23-24).

Race is critical to understanding these texts. Taken together, the treatment of race in the texts of my case studies offers insight into national attitudes towards the issue on the eve of the 'classic period' of the Civil Rights struggle. Beyond explicit concerns, the displacement of race onto other sorts of social and political conflicts in my case studies poses the question of how we really know what a film is about. This is a question that can only really be answered by close archival readings that evaluate the films through other intertexts which surround certain kinds of films.

Consequences

John Patterson, the son of the murdered man in *The Phenix City Story* and "hero" of the film's narrative, used his story to ascend to the governor's mansion—even distributing a lavishly illustrated comic book that retold his story to voters throughout Alabama (a means of appealing to even illiterate voters). *The Phenix City Story* continually screened somewhere in Alabama leading up to the election of one of the film's heroes, until opponent George Wallace was able to obtain an injunction to stop screening of the film in the state. Patterson soon found himself on the wrong side of history in the brewing storm around Civil Rights, accepting the endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan, pushing his political opponents (including Wallace) further into white supremacy. He prominently appears, via archival footage, in documentaries of the era like PBS's acclaimed *Eyes on the Prize* series as a villain of the Montgomery bus boycott and the beatings of the Freedom Riders.

Emmett Till's legacy is much more complex. Cultural historian Grace Elizabeth Hale argues,

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[9] The 21 April, 1938 collapse of the Ritz Café where hundreds of African Americans had gathered to receive results of the "bug" killed 18 and injured 54. The incident was a national news event.

> Events surrounding the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till were more important than *Brown* in prefiguring what would be the successes of the growing civil rights movement and the not very distant destruction of the peculiarly southern culture of segregation. With the Till case, African Americans did not just write a counternarrative. Building what activists had learned in cases like the lynching of Claude Neal and making use of the new technology of television, they staged a counter-spectacle in a new, national, real time. (1998 289-290)

The impact of Till's murder on the African American Freedom Struggle cannot be overstated nor explained imprudently. Civil rights activists Julian Bond (1940-2015) and Representative John Lewis of Georgia (1940-) were both only a year older than Till, and the young man who would become Muhammad Ali (1941-2015), was a one year younger. Till's murder had a profound effect on these men as teenagers and they have all cited its role in shaping their political involvement. The failure of *Crisis in the Deep South* says much about the limitations of the classical Hollywood cinema of the 1950s to meaningfully respond to social change of the era.

Overview

The next chapter will expand on the idea of southern exceptionalism and discusses the ways in which the idea informs the South of the silver screen. Chapter 3 concerns the making of *Crisis in the Deep South* and the murder of Emmett Till in the 1950s. Though the Till murder follows the events in Phenix City, Alabama, chronologically, discussing it permits the introduction of a discussion of racial melodrama and its rhetorical strategies which will be useful for reading *The Phenix City Story*. Chapters 4 and 5 address the history of vice and corruption in Phenix City, Alabama and their film adaptation in different ways. First, I will detail the events leading up the assassination of Albert Patterson and the cleanup, and then present a close reading of the film that focuses on the issue of southern poverty and the film's inventions in the name of fashioning crime melodrama. Next, I return to *The Phenix City Story* to more thoroughly interrogate the film in light of revelations about that town's history of racial violence, including activity of the Ku Klux Klan in the area, and how those issues were involved in part of the political corruption the film's narrative exposes.

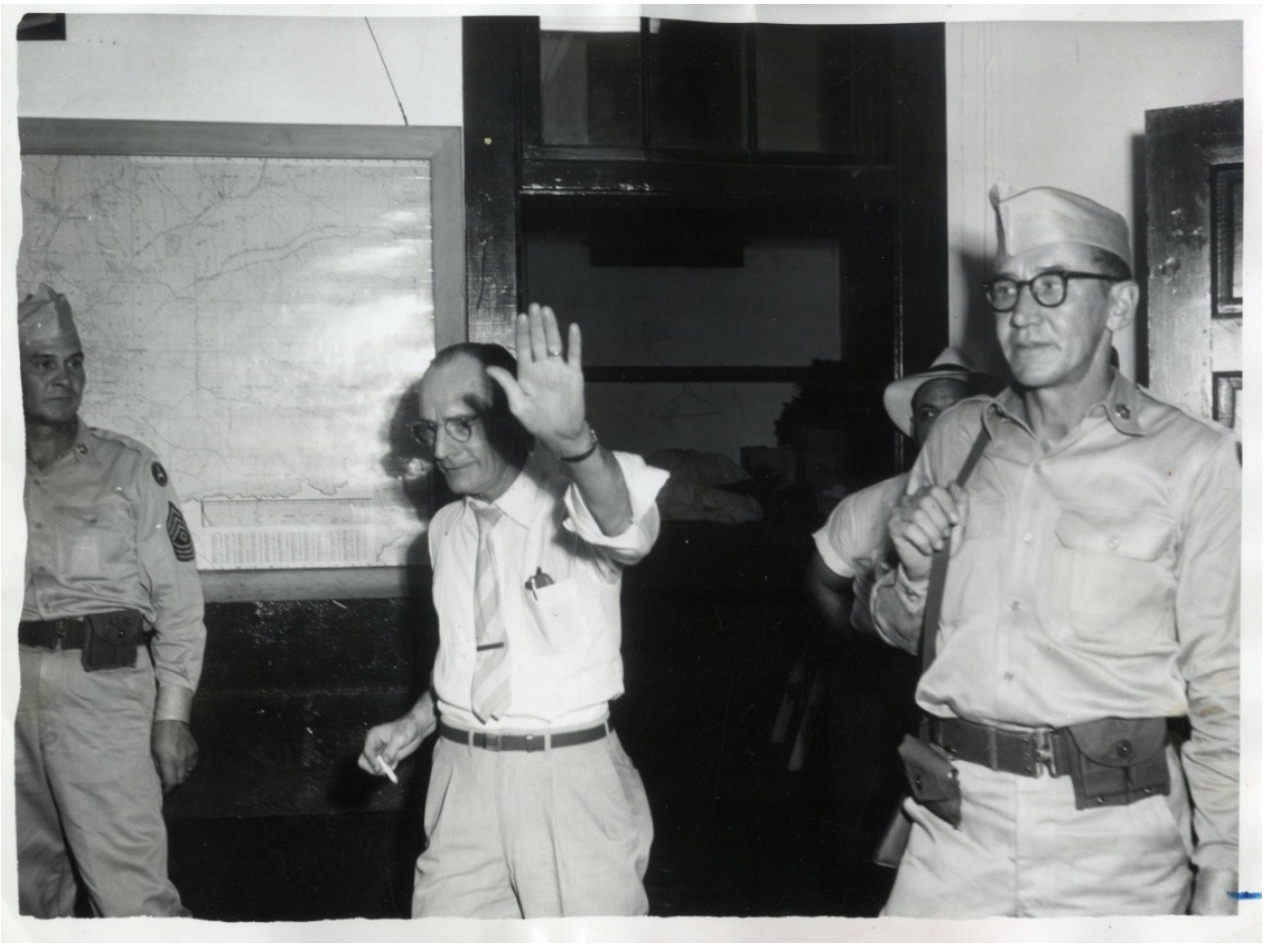

Figure 1.3—Phenix City Mayor Elmer Reese avoids photographers after having been stripped of his title by National Guardsmen, 27 June, 1954. (Discarded press photo, *Columbus-Ledger Enquirer*, from the author's personal collection).

Chapter II: Southern Exceptionalism and the South of the Screen

Another Land

A good deal of hyperbole and emotion attaches itself to discussion of the role of the South within the United States of America. Author and journalist W. J. Cash (1900-1941) famously mused that there exists, "both North and South—a profound conviction that the South is another land" and that its position within the United States was "not quite a nation but the next thing to it" (xlvii, xlviii). Literary and intellectual history scholar Fred Hobson classes Cash as an example of what he calls the southern "rage to explain," arguing that the region "has stood alone as an alien member of the national family, and the most frequently analyzed member of that family" (9). Over the last century, analysis of the image of the South in popular culture has become an interdisciplinary endeavour, attracting cultural scholars, geographers and historians with a range of emphases (including politics, material history, social history, labour and class relations) as well as some film scholars. The last decade has been a very exciting time in the field of southern studies, with each year heralding important new titles that interrogate the development of the notion of the South as a distinctive or *exceptional* region.

My work has bearing on the ideological battle in which taste, politics, geography and mass culture intersect in southern studies and popular commentary. This section will review relevant developments in the field of southern studies, expand on the national image of the South and the concept of southern exceptionalism, and finally, indicate some of the ways that this discussion applies to American popular culture and the motion picture industry.

Understanding the ideology of southern exceptionalism—its genealogy and variations—is essential to understanding American culture. Historians Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino conclude their introduction to their collection *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* by writing that it is useful to frame an account of southern exceptionalism for the concept's utility and function in national culture and politics. This is an area in which the study of the image of the South in mass culture can contribute to understanding the complex ways in which the "myth of southern exceptionalism" has shaped the world in which we still live.[10] Indeed, a sample of

[10] Images of the Old South continue to serve varied functions in a range of international cultural contexts, turning up in such disparate places as advertising, soft-core pornography and the cycle of grindhouse sexploitation films set on Antebellum Southern Plantations, which included

ongoing national debates on issues such as gun violence, the disproportionate police violence against African American males, and the symbolic battles about the place of the Confederate flag continue to foreground issues of southern identity as commentators and journalists turn to history to explain present circumstances.

Figure 2.1—One the hallmarks of southern exceptionalism was that elections in the solidly Democratic Deep South were often decided in the primaries and runoffs. This arresting image shows a rote performance of democratic process in Phenix City, Alabama. The May 1952 primary elections in Phenix City were fraught with violence as members of a reformers group and the press were openly beaten at the polls. According to the original caption the image shows, "Luther Williams, voting. Eugene Spain, mgr of box." Election Day in Phenix City, 15 September 1952. (Discarded press photo, *Columbus-Ledger Enquirer*, from the author's personal collection)

Recent academic work, particularly that of Lassiter and Crespino, has provoked a critical re-evaluation of the myth of southern exceptionalism and the way in which it colours our

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Mandinga (S.E.F.I. Cinematografica, 1976), an Italian cash-in on Paramount's *Mandingo* (1975).

perception of the region we call "the South" and the consequences that distinction has for the United States as a whole. Lassiter and Crespino explain that the idea of "the South […] as a region that is not just different in some matters of degree but *exceptional* from the rest of America and in historical opposition to dominant national trends—has shaped and continues to shape the kinds of narratives that we tell about the region and the nation" (vi). The fundamental question that this scholarship introduces concerns how to address the perception of regional difference and its complicated and often ugly history in the twenty-first century. Answering this requires a review of how scholars have approached the concept. This chapter will explore the utility of southern exceptionalism and the interests it has served as well as its presence in mass culture, especially Hollywood cinema, and will ultimately look at how transformation in the region, notably the decline of agriculture, waves of migration and the rise in suburban development, has altered our relationship to the concept in recent history.

The Uses of Southern Exceptionalism

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the image of the South was bound with the romantic notion of southern exceptionalism. Both distinct from and an addendum to American exceptionalism, the belief in southern exceptionalism held that the region was distinct and separate from the rest of the nation. Historically, this separation emerged both from outsiders and within the region, and has served many functions. Early histories written from this perspective demonstrate the degree to which the notion of southern exceptionalism was bound up with the culture of white supremacy and the Confederate 'Lost Cause.' The first Southern Historical Society was founded by former Confederate generals in New Orleans on May Day, 1869. Historian E. Merton Coulter quipped, "[t]hey might well have called their organization the Confederate Historical Society, for so it was and so it remained" (19). These former Confederate officers sent out calls for Confederate documents. Coulter underscores the degree to which historical preservation was intertwined with Confederate nationalism, writing that participation "was as much an act of patriotism now to send in this material as it had been in 1861 to join the Confederate army" (22). By 1896, the Southern Historical Association was formed in Washington, D.C.; among its members was then-Princeton professor Woodrow Wilson. Many explicitly racist plantation histories followed, including those by the historians of the so-called Dunning school, named for Columbia University's William A. Dunning. Dunning, a northerner, lectured and published works from 1898 on, concluding that Reconstruction marked the

ruination of the South for which he blamed northern opportunists and naïve African Americans for ongoing southern poverty and political chaos. By the teens, Yale historian Ulrich B. Phillips was publishing paternalistic accounts of the benefits of the antebellum Plantation economy for African Americans (Edwards 547-548). Phillips argued that the "central theme of southern history" was the region's biracialism, writing that the South is,

> […] a land with a unity despite its diversity, with a people having common joys and common sorrows, and, above all, as to the white folk a people with a common resolve indomitably maintained—that it shall be and remain a white man's country. (31)

For Phillips, southern identity is expressed through "the cardinal test of a Southerner"—the southerner's "unity despite diversity" in the commitment to white supremacy.

The polemical quality of this era of southern scholarship underscores the way in which southern exceptionalism has always been a political concept. Laura Edwards explains that racism and 'Lost Cause' mythology were legitimated within the academy, enshrined in the twin ideas of the glory of Plantation life (as represented by Phillips) and the nightmare of Reconstruction (the Dunning school). William A. Dunning (1857-1922), Ulrich Bonnell Phillips (1877-1934) and E. Merton Coulter (1890-1981) each wholeheartedly endorsed segregation and white supremacy and their racial attitudes reflected eugenicist racism bustling within segments of the academy and popular attitudes in the first half of the twentieth century. These histories both fuelled and were further legitimized by their mass cultural progeny, D.W. Griffith's celebrated feature *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which was said to have been hailed by former historian President Woodrow Wilson as being like "writing history with lightning."[11]

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[11] Wilson's oft-repeated quotation is the subject of considerable controversy. In popular and academic film studies, the quotation is often used for its power to invoke the emotional impact of maturing narrative cinema in the era and the rise of the feature film form. Most references to the quotation refer to sources from the late 1930s, especially its most famous appearance—on page 175 of Lewis Jacobs' 1939 influential history of motion pictures, *The Rise of the American Film*. In a 2010 article, Mark E. Benbow performed perhaps the definitive forensic examination of the quotation, complete with an appendix listing its variations and sources. Benbow, a former CIA officer (*!*) and staff historian at the Woodrow Wilson House Museum, determined that it is probable that Wilson used some variation of the expression containing the word "lightning" in

These examples signal the degree to which the idea of southern exceptionalism formed the basis of national understanding of American history in the early twentieth century. In *Making Whiteness*, Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that a shared national culture of white supremacy served as the foundation of national reconciliation following the Civil War. As a southerner with a complex racial legacy, Wilson is likely to have shared the racial politics of *The Birth of a Nation*. He implemented the segregation of Washington, D.C., during his first term. The mainstream appeal of the culture of white supremacy in the teens helps to explain how *The Birth of a Nation* inspired the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, which was reborn as a nationwide white nationalist social organization. The "second Klan" was conceived with cinematic flair—ceremoniously first meeting at night in secret in November 1915 atop Georgia's Stone Mountain, on the outskirts of Atlanta, the foremost of the South's emerging metropolises. Later, an elaborately conceived but only modestly realized monument to the Confederacy was carved into the side of Stone Mountain by Danish-American Gutzon Borglum. Despite himself being an immigrant and likely target of nativist prejudice, Borglum embraced the Klan and later recycled aspects of his more elaborate plans for the Confederate monument to his design for Mount Rushmore (Hale 1998 242). Despite perennial controversy whenever it is screened, *The Birth of a Nation* was re-edited and reissued for the sound era in 1930 with an interview prologue featuring director D.W. Griffith and actor Walter Huston—who was then starring as Abraham Lincoln in Griffith's sound biopic. The 1930 version also added a new ending in which immediately following the heroic triumph of the reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan, audiences were treated to a guided sing-along of the "Star Spangled Banner" over a shot of Old Glory waving in the breeze—dramatically enacting national reconciliation in a manner that harkens back to the popular nickelodeon-era attraction of the sing-a-long.[12]

'New Souths': Modernity and Anti-Modernity in Dixie

National reconciliation certainly served the interests of businessmen and city officials in the North and South. Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that a national culture of whiteness served as

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his unrecorded response to the film, but that the earliest versions of the quote to find their way into print are second-hand and differ from its more famous quotation.

[12] The prologue appears as a bonus feature on the Kino DVD and Blu-ray releases, but sound versions including the 1930 version remain more difficult to find.

the basis for this reconciliation. During this era of national reconciliation, the South embraced the building of monuments commemorating the confederacy in the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, Dothan, Alabama, a modest city near the Florida panhandle, advertised itself as the "American city of the future" (Hobson 135). This remaking of the past and acceleration toward the future speaks to the nature of the southern experience of modernity as a contradictory and confusing process. Southern states, particularly the eleven states of the former confederacy, continued to lag behind the rest of the nation, an economic and cultural difference between regions that only accelerated with the onset of the Great Depression. Indeed, in terms of poverty, the former confederate states continue to lead the nation.[13] The urban boosterism of Dothan, Alabama, represented one avenue of adapting to modernity—economic assimilation to national trends. However, this kind of urban boosterism, with its embrace of technological modernity, inspired backlash both at home and from elsewhere in the nation. Others actively resisted.

The Agrarians

By 1930, a group of "twelve southerners," collectively known as the Agrarians, penned *I'll Take My Stand*, a sprawling manifesto calling for a return to antebellum southern ways of living based in a romantic rejection of modern values. Made up of literary figures assembled at Vanderbilt University in the 1920s, including Allen Tate (1899-1979), John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974), Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) and Stark Young (1881-1963), the Agrarians imagined the region's agrarian past as a radical critical alternative to the advances of the modern age. Their position re-evaluated the meaning of southern identity in relation to modernization and redefined southern exceptionalism in resistance to national mass culture. Historian Laura Edwards insists "*I'll Take My Stand* cleanly severed the region from the rest of the nation" (553). In some respects, *I`ll Take My Stand* took the Plantation myth of earlier histories for granted, and proposed the imagined white southern vision of the antebellum South as a program for social reform, all amid the national uncertainties of the Great Depression. However, the Agrarians were also intellectuals who prized classical humanistic education, including the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome and the high culture of European society—from which

[13] Literally any ranking of poverty on the U.S. Census Bureau's official website consistently ranks Southern states among the lowest in the nation. The listing of studies and papers about Poverty Thresholds are available online.

they considered the southern plantation aristocracy to be directly descended. Though not historians, the Agrarians' notion of southern exceptionalism used an image of the past in their retreat into a mythical Antebellum South which they viewed as superior to modern society in every way. Importantly, the Agrarians' South could not be found in the industrializing region in which they lived—a region better characterized by the boosterism of Dothan, Alabama.

Visions of the South's pastoral nature were not novel. Such ideas were as old as the Jeffersonian idea of the Yeoman Republic. However, these ideations of the Old South distort the degree to which even the Antebellum South was an industrial power. Southern historian David M. Potter (1910-1971) argued that the case for the region's agrarianism was in fact largely imagined, "an illusion, nourished by a wish" (41). In retrospect it is worth observing that the Agrarian message was coincident with a mass culture fascinated with romantic visions of the Old South—whose best evidence is in the cult of *Gone with the Wind* (novel 1936, film 1939)—as well as a national culture of whiteness. This rhetorical power of their text is not surprising given that many of the Agrarians were literary figures: Warren, Ransom and Tate were also key figures in the rise of New Criticism in the 1940s. While Agrarianism as a coherent political movement failed to materialize, Agrarian ideas and rhetoric endure in conservative thought.

In his study of the intellectual legacy of the Agrarians, Paul V. Murphy demonstrates how their romanticised vision of the antebellum South was received as an anti-modernist tract that influenced the rise of conservative political thought over the course of the twentieth century in often surprising ways. Though Agrarianism was never a coherent movement, the openness of its anti-modernist critique and defense of southern society granted Agrarianism an "almost protean quality" rooted in a fervent localism that was selectively embraced within the emerging conservative movement (Murphy 3). For many conservatives, including Vanderbilt alum and literary scholar M.E. Bradford (1934-1993), political commentator Russell Kirk (1918-1994) and historian Eugene D. Genovese (1930-2012), the Agrarians were "perceptive forefathers" and "southern traditionalists," who defended "a social order based on religion […] tradition, culture and values" (7).

Murphy traces the lineage of Agrarian thought as it was diluted of its original radical anti-modernist context to a more modest and more easily embraced romantic vision of a states' rights position grounded in colourblind language. Murphy argues that this version of Agrarianism was incorporated into a modern conservative movement that cast a broad net to

unite the party's fringe and radical elements with the interests of corporate powers and the military defence industry. New Conservatives "considered the Agrarians to be prophets of cultural degeneration and the loss of Christian authority in modern society," offering "a penetrating criticism of the spiritual and social cost of modernity" (Murphy 254). This view effaces the degree to which "the legacy of slavery and the history of white supremacy and racism are deeply intertwined with the Agrarian tradition" (255).

In the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which rendered the practice of segregation under the law unconstitutional, the sectional image reinvigorated interest in the Agrarians and the politics of southern exceptionalism. Historian Pete Daniel considers *I'll Take My Stand* "the last will and testament of agrarian segregationists" (198). More than any of his contemporaries—many of whom grew more moderate with time—"the most reactionary of the original Agrarians," Donald Davidson (1893–1968), continued to work for the preservation of segregation (8). According to Murphy, Davidson's "brand of regionalism was indistinguishable from a revivified sectionalism—his southern patriotism always lurking beneath his scornful condemnations of America's 'pseudo-culture'" (100). Murphy writes, "In Davidson's segregationist Agrarianism, history functioned as the equivalent of race in the definition of southern identity and community," which in turn led him to the belief that African Americans possessed no history (108). In this formulation, white southern identity comes with the claim to history, which in turn formed the basis of southern institutions.

C. Vann Woodward: Southern History Grapples with the Brown Decision

Yale professor and dean of southern history, C. Vann Woodward (1908-1999)—who was also eager to salvage something of the notion of a "distinctive" southern identity in the face of the dual challenges of (semi-)urban development and de-segregation—promoted a similar notion of southern identity throughout the Civil Rights era. Woodward famously observed that "[t]he threat of becoming 'indistinguishable,' of being submerged under a national steamroller, has haunted the mind of the South for a long time" (8). Addressing a South emptied of the material content of southern exceptionalism—segregation by law, an agricultural economy, and a predominantly rural population and concentration of political power—Woodward famously argued that the southern experience of bondage, poverty and defeat countered national myths of freedom, plenty and victory. This, he believed, permitted a detached point of view with which

one can critically approach American history. He explained that the basis of southern distinctiveness lay in what he called the "burden of the southern history," which he outlined in oppositional pairs, explaining that southern experience offered a history of poverty in a nation of abundance; frustration, failure, and defeat in a land that praises victory and success; and guilt over the legacy of slavery and its aftermath contrary to the myth of national innocence. For Woodward, the experience of slavery challenges the language of freedom, and the resulting guilt and tragedy were at odds with the American ideals of optimism and innocence from the wickedness of the Old World. If earlier southern scholars had glorified a romantic or imagined antebellum past, in an ambitious and more accommodating (if potentially circular) argument, Woodward maintained southern history itself could serve as both the mark and enduring source of southern identity.

In his collected essays on the subject, entitled *The Burden of Southern History*, Woodward's tone is more cautious and his claims more measured than those of his predecessors, which makes southern identity seem somewhat ephemeral. He shies away from attempting "to say why the heritage, or the collective character, or the general outlook of a particular geographical grouping of people is distinctive" (ix). He explains that previous "[e]fforts to substantiate the familiar claim of distinctive Southern heritage and explain what produced it have traditionally relied rather strongly on circumstance or situation, policy or purpose of the Southern people" (x). Many scholars are correct to charge that Woodward's description of the "southerner" is all too often exclusively to be understood as white and male. Woodward foregrounds history and geography over race, class or any other category of experience. Larry J. Griffin in particular charged that Woodward's description of southern people should be dismissed as "factually wrong" because his documentary evidence draws too heavily on the self-understanding of white southerners at the expense of African American and other experiences of southern life (Griffin, "Why Was the South a Problem" 19; Griffin and Hargis 44; Lassiter and Crespino 19).

In one of the many ironies of southern history, Woodward was in fact one of the architects of the transition of southern society, as he consulted the Supreme Court on the *Brown* case in 1954. His argument to the court, published in 1955 as *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, argued that legal biracialism was a relatively recent southern invention, in turn providing the justification and legal framework for its dissolution.

The Suburban South and the material legacy of southern exceptionalism

Political change in the South followed a path anticipated by the Agrarians and Woodward, but in a different form. Joseph Crespino, Matthew Lassiter and other political historians have argued that the fracturing of the democratic "Solid South" was a largely a result of suburbanization.[14] Crespino and Lassiter indicate ways in which a form of white class privilege originating in the newly forming suburbs of the South came to influence the rise of conservatism across the nation. In his 2006 book *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, Lassiter explores how white flight and the massive resistance to desegregation orders in anti-busing campaigns shaped a national suburban politics rooted in resistance to federal authority. Crespino's 2007 book *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* looks at similar tensions in Mississippi, home of the most virulent and violent massive resistance campaigns of the southern states, to demonstrate how this process contributed to the rise of the modern conservative movement. Both Crespino and Lassiter argue that southern exceptionalism distorts the dynamics of national political and social phenomena with negative consequences for progressive reform and the civil rights movement. Grace Elizabeth Hale, Laura Edwards and other scholars of race and social class have arrived at similar conclusions.

Still, one cannot dismiss the material legacy of southern exceptionalism nor its impact on the image of the South in popular culture. Though employed to very different ends, the reactionary Agrarian Donald Davidson and esteemed historian C. Vann Woodward both arrived at what proved to be a similar manner of adapting the often troubling legacy of southern

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[14] This conclusion revises a popular argument that the political reorganization of the South produced a national "southernization." Talk of the "southernization" of national politics first appeared in the late 1960s in connection with editorial commentary following George Wallace's populist presidential campaign and Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" in 1968. The notion was popularized by John Egerton's 1974 book *The Americanization of Dixie: the Southernization of America*, and though discredited by historians like Lassiter and Crespino, who counter that the postwar political reorganization and the rise of conservatism in the South and nation as a whole rested on a shared postwar suburbanization. Nevertheless, the idea of southernization continues to be referenced in popular political commentary.

exceptionalism to the changes of the twentieth century: a self-reflective vision of regional distinctiveness based in southern history. Despite its limitations, Woodward's argument illustrates the extent to which the turn to southern history and heritage accompanied the dramatic changes in the region that brought the region closer into line with national currents. Popular culture and the southern tourist industry have embraced some aspect of Woodward's notion of southern heritage as the mark of its distinction. No longer defined by the material markers of the region's distinctiveness or imagined past of the Lost Cause, for Woodward, southern history itself is the mark of southern identity. Recent interest in tourism and its ephemera in southern studies signals the importance that this formulation has had in the development of local economies (Stanonis; Cox 2012). This vision of history and identity makes the study of local commemorative regimes all the more important.

Southern Exceptionalism in Popular Culture

Surveying the evolution of the notion of southern exceptionalism reveals the complex political uses of the concept on a national scale. Tellingly, two of the most strident and melodramatic iterations of southern culture—the seminal feature film *The Birth of a Nation* and the Agrarians' manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*—both began life in opposition to outside conceptions of the region. As much a monument to white supremacy as the cinematic image of the South, *The Birth of a Nation* was derived from two novels by "professional racist" Thomas Dixon, a Baptist preacher who began his writing after attending an 1887 lecture in Boston entitled "The Southern Problem" that preached racial equality (Franklin 418). As Karen L. Cox observed, for all their criticism of mass culture, the Agrarians neglected to take note of the ways in which mass culture had already assimilated their vision of idyllic Plantation life.[15] While the relationship between region and nation often appears as a dialogue, mass culture of the first half of the twentieth century seldom presents images of southern life outside of this romantic vision.

The idea that "[p]opular culture has defined national conceptions of the region," has considerable traction in the field of southern studies (Cox 2009 681). A related idea, voiced by Cox (2009), Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005), Grace Elizabeth Hale (1998) and others, holds that the

[15] Paramount Pictures adapted *So Red the Rose*, written by Agrarian Stark Young, for the silver screen in 1935. Though not a box office success, the Civil War-era plantation romance bears generic and ideological similarities to *Gone with the Wind*, which it preceded.

manner in which the "classical phase" of the Civil Rights movement drew upon negative images of the South in national culture to mobilize support in the fight against racial inequity contributed to its success.[16] Whereas political scholars of southern history tend to emphasize the damage the concept of southern exceptionalism has done, scholars more deeply invested in cultural texts tend to insist upon the material consequences of southern exceptionalism on speech, behaviour, art and popular culture.

Figure 2.2 —Advertisement for a 28 May 1960 Detroit screening that pairs high and low of the southern imaginary as *Wild River* (20th Century-Fox, 1960), director Elia Kazan's sprawling story of the Tennessee Valley Authority's efforts to relocate residents in a floodplain, shares the bill with low-budget *Louisiana Hussy* (Howco International, 1959), whose tagline was "born to take love… and make trouble!"

This dissertation proposes a closer examination of mass cultural texts set in the South during this period of transition surrounding the 1954 *Brown* decision, which also involved a shift in attitudes towards southern identity and race both locally and nationally. In one sense, my case studies signal the material legacy of this transition. The texts under review attempt to negotiate

[16] These historians also conclude that emphasis on the horrors of southern racism ultimately undermined the fight for racial equality on a national scale.

the rocky and symbolically loaded territory between the region and a mass audience, commenting on southern identity and race relations through the rhetorical strategies of melodrama.[17]

Southern exceptionalism has taken on many forms in popular culture, from the overly romantic mythic vision of Dixie that Karen L. Cox investigates in her 2011 book *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* to the long history of viewing the South as a problem for the nation to solve and often set apart from national currents as outlined in the collection by Larry Griffin and Don Doyle. Following 1956—the year 99 politicians from 10 southern states issued the Southern Manifesto opposing integration—the often violent politics of massive resistance to the federal court's desegregation order presented an ugly side to southern pride and the culture of white supremacy. This unstable period is widely recognized to mark a shift in the representation of the South on screen, making the plantation romances of the past seem obsolete. Cultural historian Allison Graham has suggested that as negative representations of the South intensified in the television news, television situation comedies retreated from visualizing the contemporary South at all, with the exception of situation comedies like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

Scholarship on the South of the Screen

By the time of the African American freedom struggle, regional scholars were criticizing the way in which films about the South either embraced the backward-looking romantic image of plantation life with a tendency toward nostalgic fantasy, or offered negative images of the contemporary South as a hotbed of social problems and sexual frustration. In 1965, the peer-reviewed *Mississippi Quarterly* presented an index of narrative films about the South from the sound era that grouped Hollywood films into these two categories, and complained about the "low esteem in which 'typical' Southerners were [*sometimes*] held," particularly in the social problem films of the 1930s (Soderbergh 11).

Since then, a number of scholars in film studies have tried to account for the representation of the South on the screen, but work on the subject has tended to cluster into two

[17] The branch of film studies concerned with melodrama frequently has approached issues of race in the melodramatic form, notably in works by Linda Williams (2001) and Michael Rogin (1996).

periods, the late 1970s and early 1980s, and early 2000s to the present. Scholars generally share the view that the image of the South in popular culture embraced and perpetuated the notion of southern exceptionalism, the belief that the region is substantially different from the rest of the nation.

The first volumes on the subject of the South on film coincided with the peak popularity of films set in the South in the 1970s and Jimmy Carter's presidency. First issued in 1978 (and updated in 1986 and 2004), Jack T. Kirby's *Media-made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* marks out dominant themes of the image of the South constructed across various mass media over a century, citing texts from Shirley Temple movies to then-recent popular genre films. Kirby's analysis begins with the South in the nineteenth century when it carried a negative image lingering from the Civil War and closes questioning the endurance of the image of the region. Kirby added an addendum that discusses the sweeping success of the television miniseries *Roots* and Jimmy Carter's election, which he viewed as "the redemption of the white masses from pity and from racism" (170).

In 1981, Edward Campbell's *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* treated narrative cinema as a "reflection of popular perception of the South" and expanded prevailing histories of the South on screen (xiii). Campbell sought to chronicle the evolution of the "southern mythology" on the screen. This mythology is the nostalgic and romantic vision of southern history that, "like westerns and other historical stories," *was* "intent on preserving images threatened by a modern world" and "depicted a better civilization which still had room for material wealth without the modern repercussions" (34). Campbell argues that plantation mythology reached its peak around the time of *Gone with the Wind* but declined as films focused on "pitiful poor farmers, unrepentant bigots, sadistic rednecks, sex objects, and greedy, ambitious members of a corrupt upper class" (143). Ultimately, Campbell concludes that the "moonlight and magnolias" South had been supplanted by "hick flicks," defined as "less offensive films that drew their origins from […] the *Ma and Pa Kettle* [Universal Studios' light comedy from the 1940s] series at one extreme and [Robert Mitchum's moonshining action melodrama] *Thunder Road* at the other" (194).

While Campbell's teleological argument sometimes eschews complexities within different eras (a bias stemming from the organization of his filmography), like Kirby, his work reflects a general pessimism dominant in this era of scholarship about the future of images of the

South as a region apart from the nation. This pessimism is connected to broader cultural and political debates about southern exceptionalism and the negative image of the region.

Warren French similarly asked if "the Southern" as a "genre" was "another Lost Cause" (3). Exploring why the "genre" of the Southern had been "superseded" by Westerns is the core focus of a collection that French edited in 1981. He contends that "'Southerns' unavoidably involved touchy political issues" (3). This wave of academic and popular interest in the South seemingly waned in the 1980s. The rise of Ronald Reagan and new national conservatism seemingly upset Kirby's triumphant narrative that saw Jimmy Carter as the apotheosis of a national obsession with all things southern.[18]

The brief burst of film scholarship on southern films followed changes in the exhibition sector that ultimately led to the decline of niche and regional cinematic cycles like the hicksploitation films of the 1970s. These developments include the rise of the Hollywood blockbuster, invention of the mall-oriented megaplex, and the resulting decline of the drive-in and grindhouse cinema. The decline of southern subjects in the 1980s is evident in a 1984 article entitled "The Southernization of America in the 1970s" by Kenneth Hey, which attempts to explore the popularity of "hick flicks" by looking at the cycle's increasingly generalized vision of the South. Hey arrives at this provocative thesis by chronologically tracing how the regional markers and specific locations become less and less definite in the films of Burt Reynolds, whose ascent from region college football star to national box office draw in the 1970s paralleled the peak of the cycle.

Though Warren French's collection was the only anthology on the subject of southern films until 2011, scholars would occasionally take up the question of why a region whose identity was so readily identifiable in popular culture did not produce a more cohesive film genre. In 2001, Larry Langman and David Ebner published an elaborately indexed annotated

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[18] Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter each have observed that Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign signalled an attempt to coalesce a national political movement based in suburban concerns, calling on issues that had been important to George Wallace's supporters a decade earlier like law and order and states' rights. Crespino notes that Reagan launched his 1980 campaign in Nashoba County, Mississippi, where Freedom Riders James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered in 1964 (1).

filmography that argued the American film industry had made "southern films" for over a century. However, though categorized under broad themes like "Southern Belles," "The Courtroom and Early Justice," and "Feuds and Feuding," their filmography largely eschews the low-budget exploitation pictures that played the drive-in circuit between the 1950s and 1970s. To fill some—but not all—of the gaps one has to turn to a similar effort from outside of the world of peer-reviewed literature, Doviak Von's 2005 book *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema*, which offers an indexed look at southern-themed exploitation films mostly from the 1970s through 1990s.

Throughout these studies there are inconsistencies in the corpus that cut across taste politics and baffle the process of canon formation. For example, though a substantial body of low-budget and exploitation material (including pornography) set in the South exists, it rarely receives scholarly attention.[19] Many crime films set in the South are excluded from southern studies. (For example, Von brackets off the film career of Elvis Presley entirely.) Film Studies has struggled in its approach to films about the South, which indeed never developed into a film genre like the Western. Indeed, films about "the South"—a geographic region with loosely defined borders and a complex history—often emerge from diverse contexts. For example, in the period addressed by this dissertation, the legacy of the renaissance in southern literature tends to have drawn disproportionate attention at the expense of the exploitation and exposé films.

Over the last decade, more serious work has emerged in tandem with the new scholarship in southern studies that has interrogated the meaning of southern identity through its manifestations in popular culture while giving greater consideration to the polyphony of southern voices. Tara McPherson finds a "cultural schizophrenia about the South" in American culture that paradoxically sees the South as a "site of the trauma of slavery" while being a mythic repository "for a vast nostalgia industry" (3). In *Reconstructing Dixie*, she endeavours to explore a variety of alternative images of the South from the latter half of the twentieth century. Karen L. Cox has written about the entire myth of Dixie as a potent national symbol with a long and intertextual life in popular music, film, tourism and other ephemera. Film scholar Allison Graham's 2001 book *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil*

[19] Exceptions can be found in work on paracinema and in the 2011 collection *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary.* Work on the South and television is only beginning, see Bronstein.

Rights Struggle notes the endurance of rote regional clichés and racial stereotypes at work to this day. Graham finds that the films of and about the Civil Rights era, from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Universal International Pictures, 1962) to *Mississippi Burning* (Orion, 1988), tend to scapegoat evil rednecks instead of probing the reality that segregation and a culture of white supremacy were surprisingly mainstream in modern American society at large. In a 2010 essay in Lassiter and Crespino's collection, Graham identifies the way that southern tropes of small-town bigotry and persecution persist—although displaced to other settings—in modern feature films like *Capote* (United Artists/Sony Pictures Classics, 2005) to *Infamous* (Arclight Films, 2006), the two films about Alabama-native Truman Capote's research for *In Cold Blood*.

The 2011 collection *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals since the 1970s*, edited by Andrew B. Leiter, contains work on subjects as diverse as recent changes in the representation of black masculinity and the pseudo-Orientalism with which Hollywood approaches Appalachia. Such work underscores the fact that what we refer to as the "South" is never a cohesive or singular entity, and that the southern imaginary is in fact a vast field offering a plurality of images.

As perspectives on the South on film have multiplied in recent years, scholarship has moved beyond the limitations of genre theory. The 2011 collection *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, edited by Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, approaches the problem of "the southern imaginary":

> The southern imaginary (and the cultural work it performs) is not contained by the boundaries of geography and genre; it is not an offshoot or subgenre of mainstream American film but is integral to the history and development of American cinema. Therefore, we use the term "southern imaginary" precisely because of its evocative, overdetermined, and contradictory impulses and its many critical and theoretical resonances. (2)

Recent work on this southern imaginary has emerged in tandem with the new political scholarship investigating race and the construction of whiteness. Two cinematic milestones of the early twentieth century—D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the David O. Selznick produced *Gone with the Wind* (1939)—explicitly frame the southern experience of the Civil War and its aftermath in sweeping epic terms through the melodramatic form. While, historically, race has been a significant lens through which the films have been addressed, in the

field of southern scholarship the inverse is also true: southern films provide a significant stage for exploring racial themes in American culture. Scholars like Michael Rogin and Donald Bogle have similarly placed the films within the history of imagining race. Film scholar Linda Williams categorizes both films as seminal "racial melodramas," manifestations of a continuing pattern expressing racial attitudes and stereotypes.

Race and the South in film

The interrogation of the construction of whiteness engendered an interdisciplinary field of scholarship called whiteness studies. Historian David Roediger argues that racial consciousness in the United States arose and intensified alongside the development of the nation, following different courses in the North and South of the antebellum era. In the early American republic, the reality of slavery in the South offered white wage workers of the North something they could position themselves against, thereby mollifying the complaints of wage labour. For Roediger, whiteness came to be seen as a benefit in industrial society: "the wages of whiteness." Following his work, Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that modern whiteness "grounded national reconciliation," and that the southern culture of segregation was merely one aspect of this larger trend (1998 9). Both Roediger and Hale find that the discussion of southern exceptionalism works to obscure the hegemonic structures of power that shape racial and class relations in America. For evidence of this, Hale often turns to the southern imaginary and its function in reifying whiteness in national mass culture.

Regional stereotypes in popular culture often address southern identity through its connection to whiteness and working class identity. The preeminent historian of working class culture, Pete Daniel, views the rise of working class cultural forms like rock'n'roll, country music and stock-car racing as consequences of the diaspora of southern workers, both black and white, who left farms following the collapse of the agricultural system in southern states during the Great Depression. Sociologist John Hartigan, Jr. similarly finds enduring regional identifications among members of that southern working-class diaspora that he studied living in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1990s. Recent collections in cultural studies such as the two-volume 2012 anthology *Blue-Collar Pop Culture: From Nascar to Jersey Shore,* edited by M. Keith Booker, offer a class-based analysis of working-class culture that focuses on class above region. The shift to issues of whiteness and class complicate discussions about regional identification while also changing the longstanding isolation of the South. A shared working-class sensibility

also provides a rationale for the number of hicksploitation films from the 1970s set and filmed in the southwest, including *White Line Fever* (Columbia, 1975) about a vigilante trucker in Tucson, Arizona, and Clint Eastwood's Californian (and occasionally chimpanzee-accompanied) ventures into this milieu of country music and honky-tonks in the late 1970s, *Every Which Way But Loose* and *Any Which Way You Can* (both Warner Bros., 1978, 1980). The growing scholarly emphasis on whiteness and class has also paralleled a shift in southern studies that has addressed a southern diaspora, greater diversity within the region and other manifestations of the region's growing participation in the global economy.[20]

"The Problem South": "A Category of Pollution"

From the perspective of the second decade of the twenty-first century, where the popularity of innumerable cable reality television shows like the TLC series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014) and A&E's *Duck Dynasty* (2012-2016) invite viewers to gawk at the presumably intrinsic backwardness of southerners, the spectacle of an overdetermined southern identity still commands popular attention, even as such images draw charges of exploitation from media critics. One is tempted to draw continuity between these programs and the cycle of working-class and largely southern-themed "hicksploitation" or "hixploitation" films made and marketed to the rural drive-in circuit from the 1950s into the 1970s. Junior CBS-TV commentator Conor Knighton even recently dubbed the reality phenomenon "redneck-sploitation," echoing this earlier cycle. Knighton criticized reality shows for "perpetuating outdated stereotypes," while Michelle Dean finds these shows merely the latest in a long history of "'white trash' entertainment." In either case, the fact that the titular "Honey Boo-Boo," Georgia pre-teen pageant queen Alana Thompson, was able to briefly turn her portmanteau "You Better Redneckognize!" into a catchphrase and internet meme demonstrates the way in which tensions about whiteness, class and region continue to circulate in American popular culture.

Sociologist John Hartigan, Jr. discusses how the concept of "white trash" functions within the category of whiteness to police its boundaries. This concept helps to suggest the negative consequences of southern regional identification as it intersects with negative stereotypes of class and race.

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[20] The 2005 collection *The American South in the Twentieth Century* provides examples of such recent work.

Enduring images of white southern backwardness date back to the nineteenth century and are important for considering how American culture understands the region. Literary scholar Sylvia Jenkins Cook argues that "[t]he southern poor white is one of America's oldest and most enduring folk figures […] derive[d] from the alliance of extreme material deprivation with slyness, sloth, absurd folly, and random violence" (ix). Images of southern backwardness often synecdochally present the South as predominantly rural and backward and firmly on the wrong side of American progress. This image overlaps with class-based hierarchies of taste. In his famous 1988 work *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine discusses the development of organizations like symphony orchestras and art museums that would enshrine and elevate American culture as a primarily urban phenomenon. The nascent cultural hierarchy that Levine discusses necessarily involved a sharpening divide between rural and urban cultural centres. As a region historically tied to agriculture, the South had few cities. The emergence of the Southern city was a long and slow process that had profound consequences on the development of the region. Even plantation historian U.B. Phillips had found that "[t]he lack of a metropolis was lamented in 1857 by an advocate of Southern independence, as an essential for shaping and radiating a coherent philosophy to fit the prevailing conditions of life" (30-31). Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. (1888-1965) framed regional distinctiveness in the middle of the nineteenth century in the context of urban development:

> [T]he widening breach between South and North rested in considerable part on differences between rural and urban ways of life. The South, possessing few sizable towns and believing itself yoked to agriculture by slavery, became increasingly isolated from the currents of civilization flowing through the northern cities. […*As a result, because the region lacked*] the necessary nerve centers for creative cultural achievement, it fell far behind in arts, science, and letters. (55)

For Schlesinger, the slave-system that shaped the economic and urban development of the South also served to distance the region from the urban North in terms of cultural development. This no doubt contributed to the stereotypes of rural southern backwardness. Consider H.L. Mencken's famous critique of the South as a "Sahara of the Bozart" (whose title implies inherently retrograde cultural wasteland and parodies southern pronunciation of Beaux-Arts) in this context. Mencken (1880-1956) wrote, "The vast hemorrhage of the Civil War half

exterminated and wholly paralyzed the old aristocracy, and so left the land to the harsh mercies of the poor white trash, now its masters" (161). Early twentieth-century spectacles of southern ignorance such as Dayton, Tennessee's 1924 anti-evolution Scopes Monkey Trial, Alabama's 1931 rape trial of the nine black youths known as the Scottsboro Boys, as well as the continued celebration of lynching and its impassioned defenders, did little to counter Mencken's low opinion of the region. Ignoring folk art and the contributions of African Americans, Mencken's view of the South was coloured by stereotypes of poor whites—variations of the term "white trash" appear 10 times in the 12-page "Sahara of the Bozart" essay.

Hartigan argues that the term "poor white trash" is used as "a category of pollution through which white middle- and working-class Americans evaluate the behaviors and opinions of other whites of similar or lower class status" (113). Hartigan traces the etymology of the expression 'white trash' from regional racial epithet (coined, it is said, by black slaves in the South to describe more lowly whites) "to nationally circulated cultural figure" in the 1850s and 1860s amidst the conflict between Northern and Southern states (113). This broadening of the expression occurred shortly after the period in which Schlesinger found a widening gap in urban development. Historian Laura Edwards explains that as a host of progressive movements bore fruit around the turn of the twentieth century, the South's experience made "the region an ideal location from which" progressives could "speak critically about the United States as a whole," with the work of black intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and popular critics like Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken as the foremost examples of this tendency (550). These progressives helped cement an ideation of the South in the twentieth century that scholars like George Tindall, Charles P. Roland, Fred C. Hobson and others have termed alternately "the Benighted South," "the Savage South," or more simply, "the Problem South."[21] At the same time, these negative stereotypes also fuelled the region's defenders like the Agrarians and journalist and amateur historian W.R. Cash.

Hollywood and the Southern Imaginary

In mass culture, images of the poor white southern society circulate in cycles. The 1930s offered images of the South as the nation's "number one economic problem," as F.D.R.

[21] Fred Hobson's essay "The Savage South" surveys the topic in general and discusses George Tindall's "The Benighted South" in detail.

proclaimed in 1938, echoed by social problem films featuring unhappily transplanted northerners reckoning with the systemic failings in the South like Warner Bros.' *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), *Road Gang* (1936) and *They Won't Forget* (1937). Warner's films played in studio-owned theatres in blue collar industrial cities like Pittsburgh, and offered urban labourers a glimpse of (southern) lives worse than their own.

Following the sweeping success of the overly romanticized portrait of more elevated antebellum southern life in *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick/MGM, 1939) in the 1940s, the mythic portrait of southern living gave way to imitations of an antebellum planter class and "Lost Cause" ideology that had been softened and refashioned into a system of excessive manner and wounded pride. For example, in the 1940s, the popular recurring character Senator Beauregard Claghorn (played by Kenny Delmar on Fred Allen's radio show and in the 1947 Monogram comedy *It's A Joke Son!*) and ultimately his animated progeny, the *Looney Tunes* character Foghorn Leghorn, reduced the southern aristocratic bearings of Lost Cause ideology to comic braggadocio. This converged with persistent images of nonthreatening folk hokum like the "Ma and Pa Kettle" series of the 1940s carried through TV series like *Green Acres* (1965-1971) and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971) in the 1960s—what Allison Graham calls "harmless hillbillies"—and existed alongside more self-consciously serious work that traded upon lurid over-sexualized images of southern poverty cloaked under the literary prestige of William Faulkner (1897-1962), Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987) or Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), many of whose works were frequently adapted for the silver screen from the 1950s into the 1960s.

The wartime and postwar era were marked by a shift in the representation of the South, with a number of Hollywood films increasingly featuring southern settings as a cue for social problem films. A film like *Juke Girl* (Warner Bros., 1942) is a wartime social problem film that stages a labour conflict among migrant farm workers in Florida and stars a young Ronald Reagan. In 1951, Reagan appeared in Warner's anti-Klan film *Storm Warning*, which followed a series of new social problem films that even touched upon issues of race and racial violence including 20th Century Fox's *Pinky* and MGM's Faulkner adaptation of *Intruder in the Dust* (both 1949). Chris Cagle identifies a number of films contemporary to *The Phenix City Story* whose narratives revolve around the need for federal authority to intervene in local matters and seemingly endorse an "ideology of liberal consensus"—the belief in the need for strong expansive federal power to resolve problems beyond the pale of local authorities (104).

From the theatrical psychological melodramas of the Tennessee Williams adaptations to the films about crime and social justice like *In the Heat of the Night* (United Artists, 1967) and *Cool Hand Luke* (Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1967), southern settings (as well as southern accents) increasingly appeared on American screens in tandem with the presumption of some sort of trouble about to occur. Sharon Montieth finds that the age of massive resistance in the South found paracinematic expression in a cycle of exploitation films from the 1960s. Allison Graham and John Hartigan, Jr. (in his discussion of Warner's *Deliverance* from 1972) have suggested the ways in which films of the Civil Rights era tend to stage a form of the boundary-patrolling function in whiteness that the concept of poor white trash serves for Hartigan.

Media institutions and their controlling interests have historically been located in urban centres, chiefly New York and Los Angeles. The classical Hollywood studio system largely catered to urban audiences from which they drew most of their business. In terms of taste politics, the cultural status of southern subjects, which had been associated with landmarks of middlebrow culture and film history like *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, were downgraded throughout the turbulence of civil rights era—cementing and expanding the progressive vision of the South as a stepping off point to address national concerns.

Industry, Institutions and Audience from the 1950s to Hicksploitation

The 1950s also marked a critical and tense period in the American film industry. A film like *The Phenix City Story* bears witness to a changing institutional context. It was produced by Allied Artists, a reformed version of the old poverty row studios Monogram, famous for its westerns that catered to the largely rural market of the independent exhibitors. The standing of independent exhibitors improved with the changes in the film exhibition that followed the 1948 Paramount Decision, which compelled the major studios to divest their stranglehold on North American exhibition. The rising popularity of suburban drive-ins was symptomatic of a changing post-war media marketplace. Studios like Allied Artists were uniquely positioned to exploit these markets. Coupled with post-war technological developments, a larger number of films were shot on location in the South in the 1950s. A good number of different southern films emerged from this moment in film history, including actor-producer and sometimes calypso and country music recording artist Robert Mitchum's pet-project, the moonshining action melodrama *Thunder Road* (United Artists, 1958), as well as lower-budget fare like *Louisiana Hussy*, distributed by New Orleans based Howco in 1959. Studio films were frequently acquired by

small regional distributors, re-edited and re-circulated at drive-ins for years after initial release. *Bayou*, a sultry swamp drama shot on location in Louisiana, was released by United Artists in 1957, starring a young Peter Graves, Lita Milan and Tim Carey. After bouncing around on the bottom of the bill for a few years, it was re-edited with a little more sex, re-titled and re-released to independent theatres and drive-ins by a lower-end distributor with some new footage—gratuitous inserts of semi-nude scene and a violent rape—under the new sensational title *Poor White Trash* in 1961.

Figures 2.3 & 2.4—Newspaper display ads of *Bayou* (United Artists, 1957) and *Poor White Trash* (Cinema Distributors of America, 1961).

The vision of the South in these films often presents a dangerous place rife with criminality just below the surface. As an actor, Mitchum would probe this South in both *The Night of the Hunter* (United Artists, 1955)—also featuring a young Peter Graves—and *Cape Fear* (Universal International, 1962). *Hot Summer Night* (MGM, 1957) offers a young reporter (played by Leslie Nielsen) who, while on his honeymoon, pursues an interview with a notorious bank robber only to be threatened by his backwoods criminal gang. These horrific visions of the

South are drawn from a tradition with a long history outside of cinema.

The southern gothic in literary works by Faulkner, Caldwell, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and others had only been sparingly adapted for the screen. Based on Faulkner's scandalous 1931 novel *Sanctuary*, *The Story of Temple Drake* (Paramount, 1933) presents the South as something akin to the isolated jungle wilderness in *The Most Dangerous Game* (RKO, 1932) or the Skull Island sequence of *King Kong* (RKO, 1933). The story follows a woman's descent into backwater white slavery. The novel was also adapted under its original title in 1961 by 20th Century Fox.

Bolstered by a relaxing of the Motion Picture Production Code in the 1950s as well as the increased opportunity for exhibition in newly independent theatres, lower budget fare revelled in this sultrier side of the southern gothic. The exploitation film *Girl With an Itch* (1958), produced by the Don-Tru Company and distributed by the Howco Productions Inc., chronicles the trouble that follows a buxom young woman hitchhiking in the South.[22]

The forerunner to Warner Bros.' seminal 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Bonnie Parker Story*, also emerged from this era, produced by AIP in 1958 and aimed at the largely teenage audience that frequented the drive-ins. In this sense, the sensational popularity of the Warner Bros.'s *Bonnie and Clyde* and its perceived "youthful sensibility" can be also understood as a maturing of the outsider distribution strategies pioneered by companies like Allied Artists and AIP. Indeed, *Bonnie and Clyde* heralded the rise of and the unlikely pairing of Southern subjects and hip youth culture. The film's use of bluegrass music by Flatt and Scruggs coincided with the revival of modern country music, as Nashville, Tennessee, and Austin, Texas, emerged as important media centres within the South—all trends that had their roots in the 1950s as the fallout of rock and roll music fueled the revival of country music (Pecknold, Reid). Other countercultural visions of southern society were offered in two 1969 films—*Easy Rider* with its hippie-dippy scenes of Mardi Gras in New Orleans and *Midnight Cowboy*'s opposition between Joe Buck's unpleasant life in Texas and Ratso Rizzo's "Florida fantasy." Both films presented Souths in conflict and southern locations and redneck stereotypes in both films serve as barriers to realizing the protagonists' countercultural ambitions.

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[22] Incidentally, *Girl With an Itch* features Robert Armstrong, star of *The Most Dangerous Game* and *King Kong*, in the Poverty Row twilight of his long acting career.

The changing media landscape that followed the decline of the classical studio system and introduction of a film ratings system signalled a changing taste politics, wherein media institutions would and could cater to regional audiences by featuring southern locations. The period from late 1950s on through early 1970s offered the germ of what would be later called hicksploitation. Propelled by alternative venues like the drive-in circuit and ties with the increasingly popular cultural forms like country and western music, southern subjects were often easily subsumed by the working class culture that historian Pete Daniel discusses. However, the image of southern identity continues to be dogged by the stigma of "white trash" even as contemporary scholarship and the actual demographics of the region have moved towards recognizing the plurality of identities in the South.

The Birth of a Nation, 1954

Late in 1954, a group headed by fibreglass and plastic manufacturer Ted Thal announced plans to re-make *The Birth of a Nation* for the modern Civil Rights era and modern film audiences in colour and using the widescreen process of Todd AO or CinemaScope. It was a plan that *Variety* described as being met with "consternation and dismay on the part of Negro leaders and considerable head-shaking among whites" ("Ku Klux Remake..."7). The trade paper ran several stories on the announcement and controversy under the banner headline "Ku Klux Remake Worries Biz," with subheadings "Bedsheets Are Poison" and proclaimed that the film was "a hot potato." Actor Donald Crisp, meeting with original *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) co-stars Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh at the MGM commissary as described in a feature story by Bob Thomas, told the venerable Hollywood columnist that, "you couldn't make it today [...] It is too controversial. The theaters would be blown up" (5).

In his column, Walter Winchell wrote "the plan to remake "Birth of a Nation" should be deplored" and condemned the original film's "bigotry" (4). Meanwhile, Scripps-Howard and United Features Syndicate columnist Inez Robb was incensed at the "brash Hollywood syndicate" behind the remake and called for a boycott—not for its provocative racial subject, but for the "blasphemy" of "tamper(ing)" with a "sacred" film (29). Robb does note that the "Griffith picture still has the power to rouse intense feeling," having been banned in the state of Maryland as recently as 1952. *Variety* reports that a 1951 New York revival of the film "died at the b.o. and was pulled after one week" ("Ku Klux ... Biz" 61).

The Thal group paid in excess of $750,000 for the rights from the estates of D.W. Griffith

and author Thomas Dixon. Thal's partner Phil L. Ryan tried to be reassuring, saying criticism was "premature." Stranger still, the group publicly offered the writing assignment to critic and screenwriter Dudley Nichols, who had written *Pinky,* the 1949 sympathetic racial passing film directed by Elia Kazan. Nichols wavered, concerned about "how to handle [its] racial and social sensitivities" (61).

Variety reports that Roy Wilkins of the NAACP sent a wire to Ted Thal charging that "new film version of this inflammatory novel cannot escape being regarded as an effort on the part of some group or groups to encourage the 1876 rather than the 1955 view of Negroes as American citizens and as a roadblock to the orderly and just attainment of rights" (61). "Land." in the same issue of *Variety*, suggested parties wait until the film was made, as it would have to clear censors, and noted that *The Birth of a Nation* "is an established pre-sold title, and that, the invidious angles set aside, its choice for a remake is not without showmanship" (7).

The film never happened. This misguided and rightly failed effort seems to be the only thing of note that Ted Thal and company ever did in motion pictures. In the end it was a bad idea roundly shouted down by the popular outrage that met the announcement, but the fact that this seemed like a good and potentially profitable idea at the time to the group of southwestern businessmen speaks volumes to the canonical status of Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* and the endurance of the romantic vision of southern identity within mass culture. That film's place in both film studies and racist canons is a source of continued tension through its history as "the most controversial motion picture of all time," which is detailed in a 2008 book by Melvyn Stokes. In any case, the Thal project offers a salient reminder of the contentious nature of cinematic southern subjects at this tense moment in the middle 1950s.

Beyond the myth of southern exceptionalism

The case studies at the core of this dissertation capture these institutional and cultural changes at a moment of possibility. My case studies present concrete examples of stories that integrate distinctive elements of southern culture—including images of poverty, segregation and racial violence—into narrative texts intended for a national audience. These texts are not always included in studies of the South on film. In this regard, my work amends the existing literature to include atypical texts based on true events. These cases are influenced by but not derived from the waning romantic "moonlight and magnolias" traditional representation of the South as well as texts indebted to but not fully belonging to the social problem cycle of the late 1940s and

early 1950s.

The 1950s also marked a period of increasing mobility of Americans within the nation and the common post-war experience of leaving the city for the suburbs. This occurred at a critical moment in the development of American society and of the South's self-understanding in particular—a self-understanding that (as Allison Graham has investigated) presented a challenge to dominant images of the region in mass culture. Recognition of the suburbanization that was rapidly transforming the region throughout the postwar decades did not significantly diminish the mythic power of the image of the region as a respite from the perils of urban life. After the urban confidential cycle of the 1950s, the 1960s would see the embrace of a neo-Agrarian vision of the largely rural region as an alternative to urban decline. The 1967 box office success of *Bonnie and Clyde* was received in this context (Geduld 2). Five years later, *Walking Tall* opened with a weary Buford Pusser and family returning to the South after a failed attempt at city living. To the film industry, the success of *Walking Tall* confirmed a new exhibition system pioneered by exploitation cinema known as *four-walling*, which emphasized small theatres and rural drive-ins for revenues. This would usher in the era of mainstream hicksploitation.

My work responds to Karen L. Cox's call to historians to account for how perceptions of southern identity have been shaped from outside the region. She writes,

> (…) because the South has participated in the creation of national mass culture—through music (blues, jazz, country music) and an indigenous literature with a national audience, for example—another avenue of historical research exists for examining regional variations of mass culture, including consumer culture, radio, and even tourism (2009, 681).

In the following chapters, my case studies will be located within this history of the Southern imaginary and address both film narratives as well as the commemorative regimes devoted to preserving the history the films portray as part of the material history of the myth of southern exceptionalism.

My work contributes to a discussion of how this myth was imposed from outside the region and addresses the complex ways in which aspects of this myth are still embraced, sometimes nostalgically, within the region's commemorative regimes. Each of my case studies involves a complex mediation of local events by national and media institutions and takes place during a key moment of transition in southern society.

Within weeks of the assassination of "Man Against Crime" Alabama Attorney General-Elect Albert Patterson, *The Phenix City Story* screenwriter Crane Wilbur, a film industry veteran whose career stretched back to 1914 when he played the male leading role in *The Perils of Pauline* serial, was in Phenix City doing research alongside the flood of national journalists there to cover the clean-up by Alabama National Guard. The film will be addressed first within its production and reception—emphasizing the ways in which the film was understood in its time. Then, in a separate chapter, I will return to the film and expose how its treatment of race suggests a deeper history of how the "wide open" town's history of corruption and criminality was inseparable from southern racial violence. In this way, I argue that the film actually offers us a better way of understanding the historical event than most contemporary accounts of the event there. A year after *The Phenix City Story*'s release, it was widely announced in trade papers that its producers dispatched Crane Wilbur to Mississippi to investigate the death of Emmett Till and the trial of his murderers. The results of that trip and other attempts to bring the Till story to screen are addressed in a chapter about the fate of Wilbur's screenplay. The impossibility of realizing those projects even in the lowest segments of the Hollywood film industry in this era are illustrative of the difficulties of addressing changing race relations in mass culture and the complex ways in which the myth of southern exceptionalism shaped American popular culture. As a result, this chapter will come before those on *The Phenix City Story*.

Chapter III: Emmett Till and the "Crisis in the Deep South" for Hollywood cinema of the 1950s and early 1960s

A Southern Cycle

As *The Phenix City Story* began filming in March of 1955, *Variety* ran an item under the wry headline "Save Your Confederate Money, South Rises Anew In Upcoming Features," announcing a slate of Hollywood movies to be set in the South (3). The 'southern cycle' it describes originates from all levels of the film industry, crossing films genres and appealing to different audiences, while at the same time suggesting a broader preoccupation with southern themes. Films discussed include Disney's *Davey Crockett* [sic] TV series, a southern travel segment in the roadshow extravaganza *Cinerama Holiday*, recent adaptations of Tennessee Williams' plays, prestige melodramas like Warner Bros.'*Giant* and Elia Kazan's *Wild River*—as well as *The Phenix City Story* and two Sam Katzman 'city confidential' crime cycle quickies for Columbia, *The Houston Story* and *New Orleans Uncensored*. Most of these films appeared between 1955 and 1956. *Wild River*, based on a story by southern author and journalist William Bradford Huie about the struggle between a federal agent of a New Deal Tennessee Valley Authority and residents of an island to be flooded for a new dam, was delayed until 1960. In the interim, Elia Kazan would direct two other high-minded adult southern-themed films, Tennessee Williams' *Baby Doll* (Newtown/WB, 1956) and Budd Schulberg's *A Face in the Crowd* (Newtown/WB, 1957).

It is interesting that a cycle of southern films—many with contemporary settings—surrounded this contentious moment in southern history. This item appeared in *Variety* five months before the murder of Emmett Till and eight months before the Montgomery bus boycott—before the modern African American Civil Rights movement had really arrived as a national concern. The *Variety* scribe does not draw any connection between this supposed southern cycle and developing conflict about integration following the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which had declared school systems segregated by race to be unconstitutional and lay the foundation for larger desegregation.

Outside of documentary, Hollywood motion pictures was slow to wrestle with the unbelievable violence of the Civil Rights era and the concerns of the movement. Indeed, few

films explicitly concerning southern race relations came out of this contemplative moment in national media during the intense period of the Civil Rights struggle between the *Brown* decision and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—a period during which the meaning of race, freedom and regional identification were elsewhere subjected to inquiry. The exceptions to this are often bizarre and *auteur*-driven, and emanate from outside the "big five" or "majors" of the classical Hollywood studio system (MGM, Warner Bros., Paramount, 20th Century Fox, and RKO). Films that addressed Civil Rights issues directly in this era were the exception, not the rule. These included allegorical social problem films by independent producer-director Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (United Artists, 1958), the prestigious literary allegory *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Universal, 1962), low-budget/low box-office fare like Roger Corman's *The Intruder* (Pathé-America, 1961), and foreign exploitation movies like *I Spit on your Grave* (AKA *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes,* Audubon, 1959).

The hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and resulting communist witch-hunts of the early 1950s had curtailed an earlier social problem film cycle that confronted American prejudice and racism in various sectors of American life, raising the stakes for investment in the issues of the Civil Rights movement. These films included 1947's anti-anti-Semitism films *Gentleman's Agreement* (20th Century Fox)—set in polite daylight of upper-class society—and *Crossfire* (RKO)—set in the noirish urban night; the drama of a black soldier in World War II *Home of the Brave* (UA), male and female racial-passing melodramas *Lost Boundaries* (Louis de Rochemont) and *Pinky* (20th Century Fox), MGM's version of Faulkner's lynching drama *Intruder in the Dust* (all 1949), and the noirish mainstream debut of Sidney Poitier's *No Way Out* (20th Century Fox, 1950). These films were as daring for the age as they were rare, and again with a few exceptions, they were largely the work of independent producers testing the boundaries of a changing industry or adaptations of prestigious literary works. The postwar social problem cycle all but dried up and was displaced by crime melodrama and anti-communist films in the early 1950s, such as *The House on Telegraph Hill* (20th Century Fox, 1951) and *I Was A Communist for the FBI* (Warner Bros. 1951).[23]

A number of scholars including film scholar Allison Graham and historian Grace

[23] The 'city confidential' films (addressed in tandem with *The Phenix City Story*) also belong to this transition.

Elizabeth Hale have suggested that the immediacy and authority of live television was better suited to capturing the Civil Rights' growing crisis. By December 1960, *Variety* reported that film producer Darryl F. Zanuck announced that the integration crisis in the South should provide the basis for a film, but "though he had read a number of scripts on the subject none of them was any good" ("Integration Films?" 1).

To understand the relationship between Hollywood cinema and the narration of violence and tragedy in the American South, it is instructive to look closer at the troubled relationship between narrative cinema and the events following the murder of Emmett Till. Preceding the Montgomery bus boycott and the Civil Rights Act of 1957, Till's murder and the widespread outrage that followed its resolution proved a pivotal moment in the African American Freedom struggle as well as the national conception of regional differences in race relations.

The Murder of Emmett Till

Less than a year after the August 1955 kidnapping and brutal murder of Chicago teenager Emmett Till in Mississippi, movie producers Samuel Bischoff (1890-1975) and David Diamond (1900-1979) dispatched film veteran Crane Wilbur (1886–1973) to investigate and develop a screenplay of "The Till Murder Case" for Allied Artists. Slated to begin filming by August 1956, the New York *Times* reported, "[t]he picture, according to Mr. Bischoff, will deal with attempts by 'some politicians and hoodlums to gain control of the White Citizens' Councils in the South and turn them into terrorist organizations.'" Bischoff also promised that the film "would advocate a solution to the integration problem through education and peaceful means" (Pryor, "Movie Planned About Till Case," 40). At a cost of $30,000, Wilbur conducted interviews with locals, attended the trial of two of the men charged with the murder, and delivered the final draft of the screenplay late, on 25 September 1956, incorporating up to the minute developments in a wider Civil Rights story, which had accelerated following Till's murder.

By this time, the Till story was well-ingrained in the national imagination, even as the details remained highly contentious. Emmett Till (1941-1955) had fallen victim to the harsh realities of Southern segregation while staying with his maternal uncle Mose Wright in Mississippi. On a visit with young friends to Bryant's grocery store in nearby Money, Mississippi, Till somehow said or did something that offended the store owner's wife, Carolyn, who was alone behind the counter. Known as "Bobo" to friends and family who described him

as a playful teenager, Till may have been acting on a dare. Testimony and press reports would later insist that the 14 year old had 'wolf-whistled' at the 21-year-old white woman, and for this violation of southern racial social polity, he was kidnapped from his bed in the middle of the night, savagely beaten, shot in the head and dumped in the river weighed down by a fan from a cotton gin. His mangled body would only be found three days later. Two white men, half-brothers J.W. Milam (1919-1980) and Roy Bryant (1931-1994), were tried and swiftly acquitted of all wrongdoing. The trial was a fiasco. In cross examining the boy's mother and in closing statements, the defense actually echoed ridiculous local rumours that the body was far too mangled to determine its race, let alone be recognizable as Till, and suggested that Till may be alive hiding in the North as part of a NAACP-led conspiracy to stir up trouble in Mississippi. Some in national media even took to referring to "the 'wolf-whistle' murder"—foregrounding the racially overloaded sexually transgressive elements of the story and implicitly indicting the victim ("Mississippi Men Released on Bail" 40).

Crane Wilbur and producers Bischoff and Diamond would have read this in the national press and, more importantly, seen it on television. The trial of Till's murderers became "the first race story to be covered by national television" (Graham 118). However, national interest in the story followed from something that television did not show, but that thousands in Chicago lined up to see: the mangled corpse of Emmett Till in an open-casket funeral that extended over the first four days of September 1955. The boy's body was so disfigured that the identification was only made when his uncle saw Till's father's ring on his finger, which was the boy's only connection to his late father who had been killed during the Second World War (Smith, "Emmett Till's Ring" 156). Chilling photographs of Till's body were widely circulated in the African American press, notably in the 15 September 1955 issue of *Jet* magazine. National newspapers reported that upon seeing her son, Mamie Till-Bradley (1921-2003) insisted on the open-casket funeral so that people could "see what they did to my boy" and "so that this will not happen again" ("Slain Youth's Body Seen by Thousands" 1, "2 Held for Trial in Slaying of Boy" 19). The NAACP immediately called the murder a lynching, placing the murder in continuity with a long history of extralegal violence in the South.

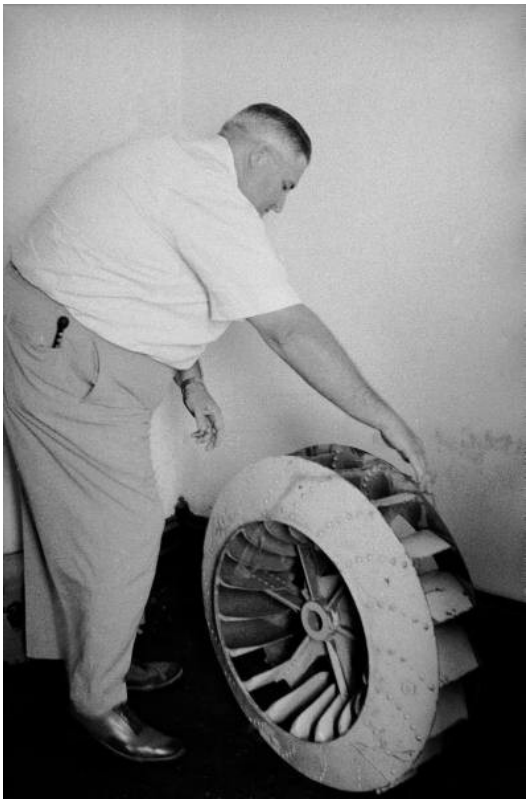

Figure 3.1 & 3.2—At left, Till's accused murderer J.W. Milam with his family inside the Sumner courthouse during the trial. On the right, Sheriff Strider displays the 100-pound fan used to weigh down Till's body. Both images captured by *Life* magazine photographer Ed Clark.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the previous summer had stirred movement from several sectors, prompting both the coalescence of the African American freedom struggle and resistance of white segregationists. For the first time, television coverage of the trial bore witness to the culture of segregation, and suggested the brutal violence that enforced it to a national audience. Cameras showed the Tallahatchie River and the 125-pound cotton gin blower which had been tied to the boy's neck with barbed wire to make his body sink. On TV screens, Tallahatchie County Sheriff Henry Clarence Strider, Sr. (1904-1970) appeared as a broad caricature of rural southern law enforcement: pudgy and pink, sweating, chewing and spitting tobacco during press conferences that he was clearly annoyed to have to be giving. The cameras also showed the segregated courtroom, the all-white jury, and the small table Sheriff Strider set up to separate members of the black press, Till's mother and African American U.S. Representative Charles Diggs of Michigan as they observed the proceedings. More importantly, television captured the smug defendants, half-brothers Roy Bryant, 24, and J. W. Milam, 35, smiling, laughing and embracing their wives in court, having admitting that they abducted Till

from his uncle's shack at two in the morning on the Sunday Till was murdered, but falling short of admitting the murder. Television also showed Mamie Till-Bradley and Representative Diggs leaving the courtroom before sentencing, anticipating what was to come. For historian Grace Elizabeth Hale,

> …television not only crossed but also marked [the] regional divide. Fusing graphically brutal spectacle and story in a much more instantaneous and much less mediated way than film, television made visible civil rights activists' sense of the difference between the South and the rest of the nation. (291)

Following the acquittal, the case remained news. In October, Bryant and Milam were freed on bail pending kidnapping charges and, despite massive public protests, U.S. federal courts refused to pursue further action on the Till case. On 15 October, in an effort to defame Emmett Till, following investigation by Mississippi Senators James Eastland and John C. Stennis, the Jackson (MS) *Daily News* printed revelations that while serving in Italy during the Second World War Till's father had been executed by hanging for rape and murder. The U.S. military had never informed Mamie Till-Bradley of the circumstances of her husband's 1945 death.

Look **magazine's "Shocking Story"**

By November, another Mississippi jury failed even to indict Bryant and Milam on kidnapping charges. However, the full-extent of the injustice perpetrated by the state would only be revealed in January 1956, when *Look* magazine published an exclusive interview with the killers, who were immune from further prosecution under 'double jeopardy' protection. Under the headline "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," Roy Bryant and "Big" J. W. Milam coolly explained to the Alabama-born journalist and author William Bradford Huie that killing Emmett Till was a defense of white supremacy. News of the article appeared a week ahead of the magazine's printing ("Milam Shot Everett," 3).

Described as "an author who knows a dollar sign when he sees it," journalist and author William Bradford Huie (1910-1986) was no stranger to scandal or the South—both of which were central to his work (Dard 8). At the time the article first appeared, Huie was facing fines and potential prison time for contempt of court charges in Florida, stemming from his role in the defence of Rose McCollum, an African American woman who had been accused of the murder of a white doctor. Huie's research exposed the doctor's sexual exploitation of McCollum.

African American newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* launched a campaign to raise money for Huie, whom they praised as "a Tennessee author and editor who was outraged by the "railroading" of Ruby McCollum in a backwoods Florida town, who investigated the case at his own expense, got the colored woman sent to an asylum instead of the death chair, incurred the enmity of local authorities and now has a six-month sentence hanging over his head" ("Waving an Empty Gun" 6). He had written *The Revolt of Mamie Stover*, a 1951 scandalous novel about a woman from Mississippi who becomes a prostitute and moves to Hollywood. By coincidence, 20th Century Fox released a film version a few months after the Till article appeared in *Look* magazine, directed by Raoul Walsh and starring Jane Russell.[24]

Huie reportedly paid Till's killers $4,000 for the exclusive interview. The article stressed the killers' poverty—"Carolyn and Roy Bryant are poor: no car, no TV. They live in the back of the store…" (Huie 1956 46)—and framed their confession through their perverse understanding of Southern sense of honour: "[o]nce Roy Bryant knew, in his environment, in the opinion of most white people around him, for him to have done nothing would have marked him for a coward and a fool" (47). Huie recorded the men justifying their actions and explaining Till's perceived transgression and unwillingness to show due deference by speaking respectfully to his white assailants. Later in the piece, Huie suggests the men intended their actions as a political statement against miscegenation, and repeats their claims that Till was boastful and defiant as they beat him, screaming, "[y]ou bastards, I'm not afraid of you. I'm as good as you are. I've 'had' white women. My grandmother was a white woman" (49).

The article itself was positioned to be a sensation, with advance advertisements appearing in newspapers across the country (see figure 3.3). The allegation of Till's aggressive racial transgression was in itself sufficient to make the front page of a midwestern paper like *Des Moines Register*, under the headline "Shooting of Negro Boy Laid to Defiant Boast"essentially transforming the victim of a ghastly crime into an aggressor and drawing upon racist stereotypes of African American masculinity. Though the *Des Moines Register* summarizes the details about the shocking killing first, the newspaper story closes with a summary of Till's alleged actions.

Throughout "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing In Mississippi," Huie explicated regional codes of white behaviour in the South, with asides that outlined the boundaries of the

[24] The film eliminates the Hollywood section of the novel.

culture of segregation—e.g., "Moreover, in the Delta, no white woman ever travels country roads after dark unattended by a man" (46). Historian Sara Evans identifies this as a "paradox of southern womanhood" wherein "[t]he meshing of sexual and racial symbolism throughout southern history created a mythology which functioned as a powerful weapon against social change" (154). Similarly, cultural studies scholar Robert Jackson maintains that such was the intensity of racial paranoia in the South that "any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman" (119). The Till case thrust this mythology out into the open. By allowing the killers to present their action through what southern author W.J. Cash calls the "southern rape complex" (114-117), Huie's article accepts Till's murder as a lynching and invites *Look* magazine's national readership to evaluate this mythology. It is in this way, that the Till saga and the confession introduced a provocative challenge to the national culture of white supremacy, which was an ideology that historically "refused to recognize its own violence" (Wood, Wilson and Reagan 12).

With his Till story, Huie had caused a sensation. Immediately after the story's release, the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported Milam's reaction to the piece:

> "I'll say one thing for the article," he grinned. "It was written from a Mississippi viewpoint. I've gotten a lot of letters from people commending me for what Look said I did." He pulled out fourteen of "today's batch." ("Look Says…" 3)

Milam also lied to journalists, saying he had not received payment for his participation. Though many in Mississippi had been shocked by the violence of the incident and the unwelcome publicity it brought to local enforcement of the state's 'peculiar' institutions, to that point, Bryant and Milam had enjoyed the tacit support of their neighbours. Some contributed to their defense fund.

However, the response to Huie's article quickly turned them into an embarrassment for the state. The fact of the killers' profiting from the murder while avoiding taking responsibility for their actions in court did not help Bryant and Milam. A year later, in a follow-up piece for *Look*, Huie reported that the killers now found themselves isolated and ostracized by both white and black communities, and the infamous grocery had failed.

Figure 3.3—Ad for William Bradford Huie's *Look* story in the 11 January, 1956 issue of the *Des Moines Register*.

Attempts to bring Emmett Till to the Silver and Small Screen in the 1950s

Initially, the medium-specificity of live broadcast television's success in covering the Emmett Till case was not immediately apparent to the Hollywood film industry, which clamoured to exploit the case. Bischoff and Diamond's Crane Wilbur-scripted film was not the only Emmett Till film in development in 1956. A month after the sensational *Look* story ran, *Variety* reports United Artists had optioned William Bradford Huie's *Look* Magazine story to be

made into a feature film entitled *Approved Killing in Mississippi*. A representative added that the company believes "it is capable of presenting 'both sides,' not condoning the murder but sympathetically rendering the Dixie point of view so that the film can play theaters in the Southern States" (Arneel, "'Hot' Issues into H'wood Focus," 1, 16). A year later, in his follow-up piece for *Look*, Huie addressed the backlash about his payout to the murderers with a question:

> Did I pay Milam and Bryant? I didn't pay them for the truth. I already had it. I did, later, purchase from them the right to portray them on the screen. I regard this story as the best of the race-sex cases with which to explain the nature of the racial conflict in America in 1957. I intend to film it. (65)

In 1965, while working on *Three Lives For Mississippi*—another novel using checkbook journalism to get to the truth about racially motivated violence that Huie hoped to turn into a film—Huie would be more candid, revealing he had been able to deduct the money paid to Till's killers. He told *Variety*, "I don't like to pay murderers [...] and I don't trust them. However, in a situation like this, you may have no other alternative" ("Mississippi Murderers Give No Receipts..." 2).

Huie extended his *Look* articles into a 1959 memoir, *Wolf Whistle*, and a more lavishly fictionalized screenplay of the same name written the following year.[25] In *Wolf Whistle*, he depicts himself as a crusader for truth mediating between the prejudices of the national media and southern bigots: "The case needed truth; so I went to Mississippi and Chicago and established it" (17). Explaining the nature of racial conflict in America on screen proved to be more difficult than Huie imagined. Before the original article's publication it was announced that a film version of Huie's work would use actual names and locations. Huie boasted the film "will have the same documentary flavor of [On the] 'Waterfront, 'The Phenix City Story,' and similar documentary-fictional movies" ("Till Case Movie..." 8). The film never materialized.

Addressing the Till saga in fiction on television also proved to be a significant challenge. Television writer Rod Serling (*Twilight Zone*, *Night Gallery*) struggled to get his version of the

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[25] English scholar Christopher Metress catalogues and analyzes Huie's Emmett Till cycle in an informative 2008 article. *Wolf Whistle* contains three sections: the Till murder, Alabama's Big Jim Folsom's affairs and the sad story of Iwo Jima hero Ira Hayes.

Till story filmed. The project went through innumerable drafts and ultimately involved considerable compromise with Serling changing the nature of racial prejudice involved and moving the setting to New England, the American Southwest and the year 2215 in various drafts—anywhere but the American South.[26]

The Till Story gives way to *Crisis in the Deep South*

Meanwhile, contemporary film trade journals traced the story of Wilbur, Bischoff and Diamond's troubled production, soon renamed "Crisis in the Deep South." Despite the crumbling production code, which ushered in a new frankness in the depiction of sexuality, drug use and violence, "the Dixie integration strife" remained a third rail in Hollywood film. In the face of another Civil Rights milestone in Arkansas, as Governor Orval Faubus blocked integration at Little Rock High School in 1958, *Variety*'s correspondent Gene Arneel reported "Hollywood wants no part of Dixie's segregation situation so far as thematic material for a picture is concerned" ("H'wood Nix on 'Little Rock'" 1). Arneel reported that producer David Diamond "approached the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People and other civil liberties groups with a scheme for getting the picture about discrimination [*Crisis in the Deep South*] made" (14). Fifty years before internet financing platforms like *Kickstarter* launched, Diamond proposed a complex crowd-sourcing arrangement in which progressive organizations would send notice to their membership soliciting support for the film and, more importantly, requesting that they enclose $1.50 which would serve as admission to the film once it was made. This money would fund the production, and would be returned to the donor if the feature was not made. Arneel notes wryly, "[t]his, of course, is a new twist in production financing." In the end, this desperate gesture never materialized.

In 1962, six years after the Wilbur-scripted project was first announced, African American newspapers carried word that the Bischoff-Diamond team had hired Ed Smith, an African American filmmaker, as an associate producer on the project about "a white Southern family divided and victimized by an economic boycott because of its anti-racial attitude" ("Star

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[26] Though Serling complained about network interference, at least three versions of the *Twilight Zone* scribe's story have been produced: "Noon on Doomsday" which aired 25 April, 1956 on CBS's *The United States Steel Hour*, "A Town Has Turned to Dust" on CBS's *Playhouse 90* 20 June, 1958, and *A Town Has Turned to Dust*, a 1998 TV movie based on Serling's script.

Gazing" 6). The producers boasted Smith, who had been assistant camera on Paul Coates' *Confidential File* TV show (KTTV-LA, 1953-1959) and had written and produced two documentaries about the Civil Rights movement and served as president of Sepia Hollywood News Service, would be "the first Negro to be given a top production post by a Hollywood film making company" ("Smith Gives Hollywood…" 15).[27] *The Pittsburgh Courier* also reported that *Crisis in the Deep South* would be distributed by Bischoff and Diamond "personally on a city-to-city basis," an arrangement similar to the exploitation distribution practice known as 'four-walling' (15).

Though the team certainly believed in the project and went to great lengths to see the film made, in the end, cameras would never roll on *Crisis in the Deep South*. All that remains of the film are the notices in trade journals and newspapers and a draft of Crane Wilbur's screenplay dated September 25, 1956, which seems to have traveled through private sale (judging by the "$15.00" in pencil at right on the document's first page) to the Black Studies collection of the University of California at Santa Barbara.[28] The screenplay still carries the address of the Bischoff-Diamond Hollywood production offices on Beachwood Drive, a block away from the famous Gower Gulch, where the low-budget Poverty Row film studios operated before being displaced by television.

It is worth noting that both these significant efforts to bring the Till story to the screen came from outlying segments of the industry—and that these items in newspapers and the trades are thinly-veiled pitches for financing. Allied Artists, through which the independent Bischoff-Diamond team distributed their contemporary efforts in the 1950s, was a grown-up version of the old Monogram studio. Various reports, beginning before the publication of William Bradford Huie's first Till article for *Look*, connect his failed *Wolf Whistle* screenplay to A. Lloyd Royal and Panorama Pictures, a small southern production house out of Meridian, Mississippi, which had an undistinguished record, having only produced a few low-budget westerns like *Jesse James' Women* (1954). Later, *Wolf Whistle* was slated to be filmed by independent producer

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[27] The *Baltimore Afro-American* article claims Smith was the "first colored person to be given a top production post in any movieland film company." (6)

[28] I was able to obtain this copy of the screenplay through inter-library loan from the UC Santa Barbara collection. The script does not seem to appear in any other collection.

Louis de Rochemont, who had moved from producing the *March of Time* newsreel series (1935-1951) into feature films based on fact, including several film noir crime docudramas like *Boomerang* (20th Century Fox, 1947) and *Walk East on Beacon!* (Columbia, 1952) (Metress 60).

Lynching in Classical Hollywood Cinema

However, in the late 1950s, there was no reason for filmmakers to suspect these films would not materialize. Films resulted from other tragic southern legal spectacles. The 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, the 1925 Scopes Monkey trial, and the Scottsboro Boys rape trials of 1931-38 inspired a number of films and literary works including *They Won't Forget* (Warner Bros., 1937), *Inherit the Wind* (United Artists, 1960) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Universal, 1962). Robert Jackson argues, "[b]ecause the official record was so indifferent to lynching's presence and influence, mass culture became an increasingly important site where lynching was represented and contested, often in innovative and surprising ways" (103). Jackson identifies a number of lynching-themed films, often in the western genre, but also in films as diverse as *King Kong* (RKO, 1933), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (20th Century Fox, 1943), the RKO noir *Crossfire* (1947) and MGM's adaptation of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948).

Indeed, for nearly as long as it has been portrayed on screen, the contemporary South—that is to say, not the agrarian image of the antebellum South made famous by films like *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick/MGM, 1939)—tended to offer viewers the spectacle of southern law and order. Even Hollywood romantic southern melodramas built around female stars like *Coquette* (United Artists, 1929), *The Cabin in the Cotton* (Warner Bros., 1932) and *Pinky* (20th Century Fox, 1949) feature extended trial sequences. Indeed, as *Variety* commented again and again the southern race issue seemed ripe for cinematic exploitation.

Robert Jackson argues that Mamie Till-Bradley's insistence on her son's receiving an open-casket funeral as well as the publication of the gruesome photographs in the 15 September, 1955 *Jet* magazine "contributed to Till's becoming perhaps the most famous lynching victim in an American history more notable for the anonymity and invisibility of those victims" (103). The spectacle of public lynching had declined during the Second World War. 1952 marked the first year in 70 years without a single reported lynching ("1952..." 2.7). For Robert Jackson, Till's murder marked "a new phase of contestation in the realm of memory" involving mass culture—the moment when the "incendiary presence and imagery of lynching largely disappeared from the immediate experience of so many Americans, black and white" (103).

Though, as Linda Williams finds, "the post-civil rights era would increasingly locate its most convulsive forms of black and white racial melodrama in reality-based forms" (220). As the examples of the failed Till films of Wilbur and Huie show, Till's story also marked a limit for Hollywood narrative cinema as well.

As Hale explains, Till's funeral established context for the national understanding of everything that followed: his murderers' trial, their acquittal, their complete evasion of punishment under law, and their "shocking" confession. Locals in Mississippi complained that outsiders and "'rabble rousers' had brought 'notoriety' and national newspaper coverage to Sumner" ("Mississippi Jury Acquits 2 Accused in Youth's Killing" 1). At the same time, for white southerners, Hale writes, "[u]nlike the *Brown* decision, the Till lynching divided rather than united southern whites, splitting apart those who were invested morally and practically in national opinion from those who were not" (292). Allison Graham finds that the entire Civil Rights crisis of the era is only barely visible in fiction film and television, with southern identity seemingly reduced to a series of stereotypes of harmless hillbillies and vengeful rednecks—best exemplified by residents of Mayberry on TV's *Andy Griffith Show* on the one hand, and the violent river dwellers of *Deliverance* (WB, 1972) on the other. Looking at Wilbur's unproduced screenplay will illustrate some of the limitations on the southern imagination that existed within Hollywood and American culture of the 1950s.

Crane Wilbur

Born between 1886 and 1900, by the late fifties, Crane Wilbur, Samuel Bischoff and David Diamond were sexa- and quinquagenarians with experience in the film industry dating back to the silent era. As Hale argues, this historical period (1890s through 1940s) also coincides with the period during which segregation by race and white supremacy was a prominent and seldom questioned feature of American life—both inside and outside the South. The trio had weathered major changes in the structure of the classical Hollywood industry with considerable success. Many press notices for *Crisis in the Deep South* note the trio's past success with *The Phenix City Story* (Allied Artists, 1955), another true crime melodrama film set in the American South and the biggest financial success for the Bischoff-Diamond team ever ("Dave Diamond solo," 28). The new film would have matched *The Phenix City Story*'s $350,000 budget, and Diamond claimed that by 1958 Wilbur's efforts had already cost the company $30,000 (Arneel, "H'wood Nix," 1).

Unlike William Bradford Huie, a Southerner whose 'checkbook journalism' and portrayals of Till's murderers invited controversy, Wilbur's varied works suggest the writer's point of view: liberal, sympathetic to all races, and committed to social justice. Raised working class surrounded by wealthy families in the upstate New York town of Athens, Wilbur began to identify with society's underdogs when he faced ostracization and shame following his father's suicide when he was 6 years old.[29]As an actor, Crane Wilbur had played the male hero of the 1914 *Perils of Pauline* serial. After his screen acting career faded, he returned to theatre where he acted and also wrote stage plays. An association with producer Bryan Foy provided entrée into the lower ranks of the classical Hollywood studio system. Wilbur amassed credits as a writer, director and producer and carved out a niche for himself with topical, fact-based quickie B-movies. He had written and directed a series of gritty social problem films based on first hand research on a range of subjects, especially crime and life in prison. In their sensational and melodramatic treatment of topical subject matter, the films often exhibit a kind of daring and frankness exemplary of low-budget exploitation cinema, pushing the boundary between crime melodrama and horror.

Tomorrow's Children (Bryan Foy Prod., 1934) tackled the subject of eugenics and forced sterilization by looking how state eugenic policies affect a young girl in love—culminating in a dramatic chase to stop her forced sterilization. Wilbur's *Canon City* (Bryan Foy Prod., 1948) retold the story of a Colorado jailbreak from the previous year and was shot on location with a cast of non-actors. Based on Wilbur's first-hand research, *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* (Warner Bros., 1951) was also shot on location and used 1,500 prisoners as extras—in the opening titles, some are credited by their number and crime: 07321-Murder, 08438-Arson, etc. (Wilbur and Smith 24). In an expressionistic touch, the film is 'narrated' by the prison itself; beginning with the words "I am Folsom Prison, at one time they called me 'Bloody Folsom'...."

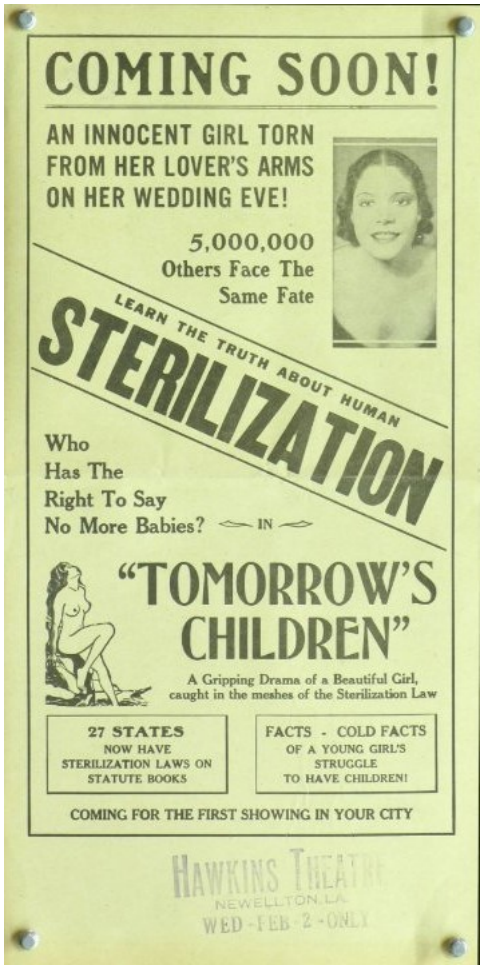
Wilbur explained his humanist interest in prisons,

> I was fascinated by prisons. I was constantly being warned that I was asking too many questions, and delving too deeply into the men's lives. But, I never found this to be so. [...] I have talked to men who have been tied up in their cells for 30 days at a time. They

[29] Details about Crane Wilbur's life are derived from the American Film Institute's 1972 oral history interview with Wilbur and Brent Walker's bibliographical article.

> have never been let out at all. [...] It's hard to stand alone that way day and night. You look into a man's heart and into his soul, if anybody but God can do that. That is why I liked prison stories. (Wilbur and Smith 51-52)

Seeing *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* inspired singer Johnny Cash to write the first-person song "Folsom Prison Blues" with the famous line, "I shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die." Out of this, Cash also pursued his prison concerts and activism (Streissguth 20).



Figures 3.4 & 3.5—Crane Wilbur's 1917 portrait, from the end of his career as a hero of action melodrama serials, including *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) (left). A poster for the Wilbur-directed 1934 exploitation film *Tomorrow's Children* (right).

Between 1937 and 1945, working mostly under Bryan Foy at Warner Bros., Wilbur wrote and directed a number of patriotic short subjects offering stories about human aspects of American life and history including the struggle of cancer-stricken founding father Caesar Romney to deliver a crucial vote to the Continental Congress in *The Declaration of Independence* (1938), Native American twins separated at birth and living on different sides of a

frontier conflict in *Sons of the Plains* (1938), and a Polish-American family whose children serve in the Civil War in *I Am an American* (1944). The most successful of these, *It Happened in Springfield* (1945), was an Academy Award winning two-reeler that presented desegregation efforts underway in Massachusetts. *Variety* hailed it as "a socko appeal to decency and Americanism, an ex-position of American democracy and racial tolerance at work [...that...] should forever muzzle any bigots" (Green 20). In a promotional letter circulated to its distributors, Warner Bros. announced that the film was "part [of] our effort to combine good citizenship with good picture-making," boasting:

> This picture can do much good for civilization. It is good entertainment, and it is a timely subject of much interest. You will find the people of your community will welcome it. Church, social and civic groups will support it. It will earn good will for your theatre. I am sure you will want this picture. Since it is just a matter of booking it quickly, I am anxious that you give it your best possible playing time. ("Pictures: H. M. Warner Pitches To Exhibs for 2-Reeler," 6).

However, despite finding support from educators and being released for television broadcast in 1945, these shorts were prohibitively costly to produce ($135,000 for just 20 minutes). The Warner's series was soon discontinued and Wilbur moved back to features, writing and sometimes directing a cycle of post-war socially conscious, quasi-documentaries like *He Walked By Night* (Bryan Foy Productions, 1948).

Crisis in the Deep South is a crime melodrama based on real events that shares with the Warner shorts an investment in presenting a fact-based vision of a particular American experience. It struggles to re-present the early Civil Rights struggle through the generic language of melodrama. Importantly, the lens Wilbur selected to bringing the Civil Rights story to national film audiences is a white southern family, and one son in particular, a journalist. As *Variety*'s Gene Arneel summarizes:

> Focal point is a family of whites and how each member is disturbed and influenced by the inequalities and inequities, socially, of the times. (...) Scenario includes some factual material, such as the Emmett Till murder case. Till, a Negro, was killed in Mississippi. Two white men, one of them the husband of a woman allegedly molested by Till, were indicted, and then acquitted. Also in Mississippi, a preacher was shot and killed and this was linked to his demand that he exercise his privilege to vote. It's pointed out in the

> script that he had to recite the Constitution and Bill of Rights before he could cast his ballot. ("H'wood Nix," 1, 14.)

By focusing on a white family, *Crisis in the Deep South* seems to be indicative of what film scholar Tara McPherson calls the "lenticular logic" of popular representations of the South. White and African American experiences can be presented separately under governance of an either/or logic that works to reify racial divisions and whose limitation is in the inability to present an understanding of any connection or consequence between these perspectives. Overemphasizing the white southern family naturalizes and reinforces a national culture that equates whiteness with Americanism and the perception of inherent racial difference. However, Wilbur's screenplay shared this limitation with the broader American culture. *Crisis in the Deep South*'s sympathetic African American characters are extremely problematic, given to Uncle Tom stereotypes. The characters are not given any space to comment on the events as their white counterparts are, and we have limited access to their home life outside of the violent spectacle of massive resistance to desegregation in Mississippi. At the same time, the way in which Wilbur attempts, through this very limited perspective, to access and address currents in African American life tells us a great deal about how mass culture processed the integration era of the Civil Rights movement.

New York Times southern correspondent John Popham commented that public reaction to the Till murder trial revealed "the wrenched feelings of Mississippi," observing that "[t]he picture [*of local reaction to the murder trial in Sumner, MS*] is one of white supremacy that skates the thin ice separating it from white tyranny" ("Racial Issues Stirred," 1).[30] It is important to observe that in the eyes of the *New York Times* reporter, white supremacy was still narrowly viewed as a defensible political policy—a peculiar southern institution in 1955. The rhetorical use of tyranny also should be considered from its postwar Cold War context. Popham discusses the "outrage" at the Till murder among Mississippians but notes the complexity of local feeling as it "involves the whole picture of race relations."

Wilbur's melodramatic thriller parallels Popham's distinction between 'white supremacy'

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[30] The emphasis on white accounts and commentary about these events is in hopes of illuminating the limitations of even 'progressive' white attitudes towards race at this moment in history.

and 'white tyranny'—and implicitly condemns only the latter, while leaving room to preserve white supremacy. At the time, this was a moderately liberal position, and one that was easily shared by voices across America calling for gradual desegregation in the South.

Work on melodrama in film studies by Thomas Elsaesser, Christine Gledhill (1987) and Linda Williams (2001) build upon work by literary scholar Peter Brooks, who finds that melodrama is fundamentally concerned with a clearly defined Manichean moral universe of absolute good and evil. For Brooks, melodrama aspires to moral legibility. Thomas Elsaesser and Jane Gaines have both noted that melodrama tends to side with the oppressed. Wilbur's attempt to create a white family who are also oppressed by the recent spate of racial violence in the South—engages a melodramatic racial scenario as old as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's melodramatic 1852 novel that has had a long history of stage and cinematic adaptations.

Crisis in the Deep South attempts to portray different positions within southern society while calling upon the melodramatic logic of good and evil in its plea for a moderate solution that would not necessarily threaten the national culture of whiteness. In this way, the screenplay does not propose any solutions to its titular crisis—it merely follows as a white family becomes even more deeply ensnared in a cycle of violent retribution from white tyrants opposed to even a moderate or gradual view on integration.

Looking more closely at the screenplay will illustrate these issues. As the screenplay runs long, has a complex plot, and remains unpublished and difficult to find, I will offer a summary of its story first and provide context and explanation afterwards.

Crisis in the Deep South **screenplay**

The 25 September, 1956 draft of the screenplay devotes nearly twenty of its one hundred and thirty eight pages to characters observing and reacting to the Till trial. Much less than the early press reports had suggested, but a significant amount of screen time (about 20 minutes) is devoted to restaging an actual event outside of the film's main narrative. The action of the film essentially stops for the trial. If Till's murder and trial were his starting point, Wilbur works backwards and forwards from it right up to the date on the draft. Reading Wilbur's screenplay, real events are alluded to throughout and one has the impression that the cascade of events from the Civil Rights struggle developed much too quickly for the screenplay to contain them all.

The screenplay begins with the words of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren

in the May 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision over which a montage dramatically shows shock from all sectors of southern life. Importantly, our entry into the South comes through shots of cities and industrial bosses. From this, we meet a relic of the Agrarian mindset, Buford Mason, "a modern Southern (cotton) planter" and the patriarch of the southern family at the centre of *Crisis* (17). The elder Mason narrates recent developments and introduces the fictional town of Attica, Mississippi, population 12,650. It is a modest southern city: Sumner, the site of the Till trial, only had a population of 550; while Phenix City in the same era had a population of about 25,000. Buford introduces each of the various members of his family, including a high school teacher (daughter Ruth), the proprietors of a hardware store (son Orrin) and a grain and feed store (Joel), and finally editor of the *Daily Sentinel* (son Chris and his wife Laurie who have two children, Mike, 6, and Kit, 4). Buford Mason also introduces some of the townspeople of Attica.

The action then shifts to an African American ex-G.I., Amos Cato, who attempts to take his children to a white school and is taunted and beaten by two "burly rednecks in work clothes grimly conscious of their white supremacy" who watch from their "battered old pickup truck" (6). Meanwhile, Chris Mason is at the newspaper writing the first of many editorials, this one calling for southerners to "face this crisis with patience and forbearance" fearing "economic suicide of the South" (13). At this moment, as if to signal the looming threat, a rock breaks through the office window. Chris dismisses it as "vox populi (...) the voice of the people" (14).

Throughout the screenplay, activities around the newspaper, especially Chris Mason's editorials, are interspersed with often violent incidents—a mixture of real and invented events—illustrating deteriorating race relations and the growing activities of the local White Citizens' Council. Initially made up of local professionals, all-white Citizens' Councils had sprung up in response to the *Brown* decision throughout the South to coordinate massive resistance to integration.

The narration introduces Reverend George T. Lee, an African American preacher, as he delivers a sermon that emphasizes the opportunity for self-improvement that the *Brown* decision represents and encourages his parishioners to register to vote. He intones, "the first step in that direction is to become first-class citizens" (14). Listening in from outside are "men of the lower element in a Southern rural district"—a phrase which recurs in many variations through the screenplay. These men ambush and murder Rev. Lee as he is driving home. The murder is

framed with the visceral directive that "both barrels [*of the shotgun*] blast into LENS OF CAMERA" as the preacher is shot (16).[31]

The next scenes show the Mason family reacting to Rev. Lee's murder and the beating of Amos Cato. While all deplore the violence, Orrin and Buford are steadfast in resisting integration. Throughout, Chris is the voice of moderation. Many of the Mason men employ and interact with African American characters. Chris Mason had served with Amos Cato in Korea. Afterwards, the men of the Mason family attend a meeting of a group of fourteen "solid, responsible men," all white, at an attorney's office, including a State Senator, a doctor, a lawyer and a clergyman. It is a meeting of the White Citizens' Council, at the moment that, paraphrasing the *New York Times*' John Popham, white supremacy lurches toward white tyranny.

Buford's narration gives way to a montage showcasing increasing fear and tension, in which scenes of the White Citizens' Council's planning are followed by bad actions carried out by the 'lower element' in the South in reaction. Southern rabble are roused by speakers from the council at mass meetings. The screenplay proposes incorporating newsreel and TV footage of the recent riots in Clinton, Tennessee. Throughout newspaper editor Chris Mason is motivated to speak out.

At another meeting of the White Citizens' Council, Bibb Tarver (a southern populist modeled on Alabama governor "Big" Jim Folsom, and his political operatives—but with none Folsom's racial moderation) proposes economic sanctions in the form of boycotts against anyone, white or black, who helps to register black voters. This decision prompts the Masons to break with the group. Scenes of economic discrimination follow. For example, Amos Cato's father is rudely refused a bank loan in retaliation for his son's seeking the right to vote. The Masons are also each individually shunned. After facing intimidation from whites, Buford's long serving black sharecropper quits working for him. Bibb Tarver soon runs for office. He holds a meeting in a smoky locker room with his advisers—all from the Citizens' Council—

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[31] Rev. George Washington Lee was murdered late on 7 May, 1955. Shot in the face while driving home, Lee's family insisted on an open-casket funeral four months prior to Till's funeral (Houck 231). It is not clear why Wilbur insisted on using the middle initial T.—perhaps an allusion to (or mistaken association with) Civil Rights activist and educator Booker T. Washington (1856-1915).

where they review their successes in stirring up public outrage.

Scenes of white violence escalate, building to a recreation of the "Emmet (sic) Till" story (50).[32] Over images of an old pickup truck—the vehicle of choice of white 'rednecks' throughout the screenplay—stopping outside a small shack at night, Buford Mason's narration explains, "[t]he Citizens' Councils were appalled and shamed by these senseless crimes. Then there was an 'incident' that was heard 'round the world and it shamed the entire nation" (49). The phrase "'round the world" alludes to the rhetoric of the American Revolution bound to strike a patriotic nerve.

Typical of crime films of the era, the screenplay skips the actual murder, cutting away from Till's abduction to the discovery of his body three days later. Tallahatchie Sheriff H.C. Strider is introduced, described as "a gross man wearing a sweat-stained shirt, wrinkled jeans, a badge and a gun on his hip. He is chewing tobacco" (51). Till's uncle Mose Wright identifies the body by a ring engraved, "May 25, 1943 - L.T." (51). The scene ends suggesting that the film would show Till's mangled corpse (or a recreation):

> 73 CLOSEUP - MOSE
>
> His horrified reaction.
>
> 74 WHAT HE SEES
>
> The boy's head, with swollen countenance of beaten, bruised flesh that looks like a rubber Hallowe'en horror mask. As the background MUSIC hits a frightening chord:
>
> FADE OUT. (52)

The film fades back in as Chris Mason is covering the trial. The trials scenes highlight Sheriff Strider's actual disgusting behaviour at trial. He insists African Americans use a

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[32] Incredibly, Emmett Till's name is misspelled throughout the screenplay. However, my research turned up such errors in the popular press. The *Washington Post and Times Herald* got Till's name completely wrong in the 14 January, 1956 headline, "Milam Shot Everett (sic) Till Says Magazine Writer."

restroom up the street at a segregated gas station. The screenplay reproduces details of Strider's misleading and disingenuous testimony about Till's body and comments upon it through a northerner reporter who asks Chris Mason, "[i]f he couldn't tell whether the body was white or colored, why did he call a colored undertaker?" (58). The script follows the rest of the proceedings somberly. As the undertaker testifies, Wilbur parenthetically inserts the directive that, "(No colored witness is a comedy character)" (underlining in script, 62). Wilbur clearly was aware of the pervasiveness of broad African American stereotypes in Hollywood filmmaking.

Buford Mason narrates the conclusion of the trial. After the acquittal, quite unlike television coverage or William Bradford Huie's work, Wilbur does not linger with the jubilant white defendants, who scarcely appear in the screenplay, or the crowds outside. Instead, we see Buford Mason back in Attica reading his son's paper:

> Men can be forgiven for prejudice as a sign of ignorance or imperfect understanding of their religion; but no righteous man can condone a brutal murder. [...] Sleep well, Emmet [sic] Till. You will be avenged. You will also be remembered as long as men have tongues to cry against evil. It is true now as it was when Christ said it almost 2000 years ago: "For there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed: neither hid that shall not be known." (67)

This extended passage is quoted directly from a widely-reproduced *Life* magazine editorial that appeared immediately after the trial, and in the screenplay the words appear under the direction "([i]f necessary, we credit *Life* Magazine.)"[33]

The situation continues to deteriorate. Chris and Laurie Mason visit the local bank to discuss their business loan for the newspaper. The manager is a member of the Citizens' Council and he insists that the bank will have to evict them from the Sentinel Building. Then, "THREE MEN of the redneck element" threaten African American newspaper drivers Gabe and Matt (70-71).

Chris Mason writes an editorial under the headline, "THE NEW KU KLUX KLAN, ALIAS WHITE CITIZENS COUNCIL!" (79) The Mason family are worried. The family's

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[33] The editorial appeared in the 10 October, 1955 issue of *Life*. Interestingly, William Bradford Huie reproduced parts of this passage in his published *Wolf-Whistle* story in 1959.

economic pressures and isolation grow along with the bite of Chris's editorials. Scenes glorifying the newspaper printing process and distribution showcase black and white labour working together. A fiery editorial is heard over another montage—"Integration in our schools [...] cannot be stopped by gangster methods or by murder" (83).

In the background, Chris Mason covers news of the Montgomery bus boycott and the screenplay calls for specific newsreel footage from clashes over integration throughout the South. Buford Mason narrates footage of angry protesters,

> As schooltime came around, racial tensions erupted into violence, and ugly incidents were reported from the hill country of Tennessee to the plains of Texas [...] (in gentle irony; his Southern accent purposely emphasized for this) Yassir, boy, you're white! And you gotta demonstrate your white supremacy. Like that lady you see jumpin' up and down. (100-101, parenthetical direction in original text)

The Citizens' Council and politician Bibb Tarver again discuss the situation while playing poker in a smoky backroom. In response, local gas stations refuse to sell gasoline to the delivery trucks, the paper receives threatening phone calls, a group of menacing figures gather outside, and the power goes off, but the workers at the *Daily Sentinel* soldier on using an antique rotary press with a gasoline motor.

The screenplay then moves into an extended climactic action scene. Amid confusion around the newspaper office, Chris and Laurie Mason's young children playfully hide in the truck driven by Gabe to make country deliveries. After the truck leaves, "[s]even burly rednecks, armed with crowbars and sledge hammers" enter the press room, destroy equipment, and savagely beat Chris (106-108). Once he revives, Chris realizes that the children must have left with Gabe and chases after them in his own car. Soon after, Gabe discovers the children were hiding in his truck, the same "rednecks" fire at him, running him off the road. The screenplay cuts between Chris's pursuit and Gabe's heroic struggle to save the children, dragging them from the wreckage. Chris arrives with the local sheriff. In defense of segregation, the sheriff refuses to allow Gabe to ride in the ambulance with the white children. With Chris Mason at his bedside, Gabe identifies Jed Whittaker, a lowly associate of Bibb Tarver's, as the man responsible for running him off the road and then Gabe dies.

Chris Mason prints editorials detailing the incident and describes Whittaker without naming him. Nervous, Whittaker meets with Tarver, who is furious but vows to prevent Chris

Mason from going any further.

Finally, Chris is alone late at night, blocking out an editorial that imagines the potential available to "young people of the South," who appear in a montage. Chris quotes a campaign speech by President Eisenhower calling for national unity: "[e]ach group in our nation has special problems but none has special rights. Each has peculiar needs but none has peculiar privileges." The speech comes from a radio and television address delivered to launch Ike's re-election campaign just six days before the date on Wilbur's draft of the screenplay—so Ike's comments had just come in the nick of time. The speech is patriotic and national in scope, and the scene offers a moment of optimism before things get worse. Sensing danger, Chris adds a note to the manuscript asking his wife to ensure its publication if anything happens to him. He returns to bed.

Outside, a Klan rally gathers on Chris Mason's doorstep. Wilbur parenthetically notes "[a]ccording to the record [*Klan*] ceremonies are a rare mixture of corn and blasphemy" (136). African Americans observe, and, presumably, inform the other Masons. The Klansmen enter and snatch the children from the Mason's African American maid. They tie Chris to a tree and whip him. Armed, his brothers Joel and Orrin race to his rescue. The Klansmen scatter. The lead Klansman shoots Chris in the back as his brothers cut him free. Joel Mason shouts, "you white trash scum" and the brothers return fire hitting the Klansman, who in death falls and removes his hood, revealing himself to be political leader Bibb Tarver (137). Chris Mason dies in his wife's arms. The screenplay ends by returning to his final editorial and his plea to the "Youth of the South" to "check this plague -- for it is your world that we build today, the world that you must live in tomorrow, and only you have the right to decide what it shall be...!" (138).

Reading *Crisis in the Deep South*

Though it may not come across in this synopsis, the pacing and suspense that Wilbur is able to generate throughout the screenplay, particularly as the action cascades in the final scenes, justifies the faith producers Bischoff and Diamond voiced for *Crisis in the Deep South* as a potential $350,000 motion picture between 1956 and 1962. The previous year's *The Phenix City Story* seems to be an apt model for the kind of motion picture *Crisis in the Deep South* would have been. Both films trace the evolution of a movement through multiple actors, building to a physical confrontation between principle characters representing both sides of the script's melodramatic moral battle. Unlike *The Phenix City Story*, *Crisis in the Deep South* traces an

idea and a general mood of racial unrest as seen exclusively from the Mason family. The film follows the family's ostracization from southern society, drawing on the tropes of the Southern Gothic. Relationships of cause and effect drive the action, but those relationships are not always direct. There are also multiple actors, and broader sociological events are loosely woven into this chain of cause and effect.

In this way, *Crisis in the Deep South* shares economical narrative strategies with some of the patriotic short subjects Wilbur wrote and directed at Warner Bros. *Crisis* is a martyr story about Chris Mason's idealism facing severe consequences as it clashes with racist community values. *The Monroe Doctrine* (1939) similarly revolves around the conflict between competing ideological interests. It frames the U.S. foreign policy of American dominance throughout the continent as a struggle to prevent efforts on the part of European nations to colonize or interfere with state affairs within the American continent under threat of U.S. intervention. The short film closely follows the genesis of the doctrine through charismatic figures in the U.S. Congress to the executive office, and then its application by a series of U.S. presidents into the twentieth century. Like *Crisis*, *The Monroe Doctrine* features its villains—in the form of "the ministers of Spain and her allies"—gathered in a smoke-filled room plotting and discussing the problem. Such scenes economically advance the plot, provide exposition and explain motivations while melodramatically providing a stage for villains to identify themselves as such. Wilbur's scripts generally often feature villains huddled plotting together in smoke-filled rooms, even in the prison films like *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison*.

Fashioning melodramatic villains out of southern whiteness

Wilbur's frequent mention of "burly rednecks" and "men of the lowest element" in *Crisis in the Deep South* draws upon old stereotypes of poor southern whites. This is consistent not only with the contemporary news coverage that Wilbur cites in his screenplay, but also with some of the best known later Hollywood narratives about the Civil Rights era from *In the Heat of the Night* (United Artists, 1967) through *Mississippi Burning* (Orion, 1988), as well as what Allison Graham calls the "Post-Reagan Civil Rights films" like *Ghosts of Mississippi* (Columbia, 1996), and *A Time to Kill* (Warner Bros., 1996), wherein unreconstructed "white trash" are blamed for the violence and problems of the Civil Rights era (185). However, while the portrayal of southern massive resistance provides much of the violence in the screenplay, the chief villains of the screenplay are Bibb Tarver and the "political demagogues" of the White Citizens' Council

who provoke the "lower element of whites."

Riots in Clinton, Tennessee and *The Intruder*

In one of its montages of stock and newsreel footage, the screenplay refers to "a howling mob, women included" outside a high school about to be integrated in Clinton, Tennessee (101). Wilbur notes, "[t]his scene was shown on news telecast of Channel 4, 11 PM, Sept. 18th. There was of course no dialogue, but the action is the same as above." The broadcast occurred a week before the date on Wilbur's screenplay, but the riots had taken place over the first days of September. This again illustrates the speed and economy in Wilbur's practice and further emphasizing the value of *Crisis in the Deep South* as a document of the moment.

The Clinton riots brought Asa Earl Carter, a local White Citizens' Council leader and founder of the militant hate group the Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy, to ignominious fame. Within two years, men associated with Carter's Original Ku Klux Klan of the Confederacy were responsible for an assault on Nat King Cole during a Birmingham concert and the abduction, assault and castration of a 33-year-old African American war veteran and handyman named Judge Edward Aaron.[34] In a thoughtful re-evaluation of the Aaron assault and castration, African American studies scholar Niambi Carter makes an excellent point about the consequences of blaming such violence on the actions of select "white trash," in explaining, "that by framing Aaron's attackers as residing on the periphery of acceptable white society, the legal apparatus could deal with these men harshly and with little rebuke from fellow community members" (377).

In the 1960s, Asa Carter would be unofficially employed to author Alabama Governor

[34] The assault on Judge Aaron is described in detail by Gene Hackman's character in the 1988 Hollywood blockbuster *Mississippi Burning*, although his name is changed to protect his privacy. As of September 2016, Judge Aaron may still be alive (or at least no notice of his death has been reported). Meanwhile, following a political defeat in the late sixties, Carter disappeared from public life. In the 1970s, Asa Carter quietly re-emerged under the guise of a Texas author called Forrest Carter. Carter adopted a phony Native American past and wrote the outlaw Josey Wales novels and *The Education of Little Tree*. Carter's racist past would only be revealed long after his 1979 death. The saga is chronicled in a 2010 PBS-TV documentary *The Reconstruction of Asa Carter*.

George Wallace's most virulently racist speeches, including Wallace's infamous "segregation now, segregation forever" inaugural address. Incidentally, over the vocal protest of author William Bradford Huie, Gov. Wallace pardoned four of the six men responsible for Aaron's assault ("Interview/Huie;" N.M. Carter 378).

The riots in Clinton also directly inspired the Gene and Roger Corman production *The Intruder* (Pathé-America, 1962). As one of very few Hollywood movies of the early sixties to directly address racial violence and Civil Rights, *The Intruder* serves as an intertext for *Crisis in the Deep South* and the troubles the later film encountered during production offers important insight into the forces that kept *Crisis* from being made.

Scripted by *Twilight Zone* writer Charles Beaumont and based on his 1959 novel, *The Intruder* refashions its white racist provocateur into a loathsome and potentially deranged northerner, played by a young William Shatner, who stirs up racial hatred in a southern town. Set in the South, it was filmed on location in Missouri—which is not a Southern state but a state bordering the South and one that carries its own complex racial history. The 1942 lynching of Cleo Wright in Sikeston, Missouri, marked the first incursion of the U.S. Department of Justice into a Civil Rights case (Capeci 859). Portions of *The Intruder* were filmed in Sikeston in summer 1961 ("Want to…" 1). During production, the local newspaper explained that the film told "the story of a quiet small town where things move smoothly until a rabble rouser appears on the scene, stirs 'em up and generally causes a lot of grief for everybody" ("Cameras Begin Rolling…" 1). The articles make no reference to race and the Cormans were discreet, going as far as to film actor William Shatner delivering an incendiary speech separate from the crowd reaction shots to it.[35]

The papers also underscored the prestige that Beaumont's source novel lends the

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[35] *The Pittsburgh Courier* reported that a local African American youth cast in the film had to leave town following production for the intensity of racial feeling the film aroused ("Negro Actor's Reel Role…" 1). Roger Corman often tells of how during filming the crowd of locals during the racist rally in the film were "cheering and applauding [William Shatner's character] with real gusto, and they were totally heartbroken when they found out he was the film's villain." (Huffhines 4C). The Canadian Shatner approaches his role with the same larger than life, scenery-devouring lustiness that would propel him to fame on television.

production: “This is not one of those fly-by-night operations but a genuine filming of a story by a prominent author” (“Want to...” 10). As an original work, *Crisis* lacked this pre-sold literary prestige—which may have further harmed its chances. As an indication of the nature of the problems that *Crisis in the Deep South* may have faced had it been produced, *The Intruder* was to be filmed for $200,000 ($150,000 less than *Crisis*’ proposed budget), but delays and rescheduling on account of local opposition cost the production an extra $30,000. Local law enforcement and members of the school board objected to the filming of black and white children together.[36] Corman claims that *The Intruder* was the first film he had produced that lost money (Dixon 147). The irony that a film about racial unrest should itself produce conflict is worth noting and serves to underscores the pervasiveness of racism in 1950s America beyond the South.

While *The Intruder*’s outside agitator is a deranged northerner—echoing the paranoid, conspiratorial claims made by Sheriff Harold Strider of outside influence during the trial of Emmett Till’s murderers—the angry townspeople in the film appear indistinguishable from the “men of the lower element in a Southern rural district” in the Crane Wilbur screenplay. Allison Graham argues that, “[t]he centrality of the “cracker” to our understanding of American racism cannot, I believe, be overestimated” (13). Sociologist John Hartigan suggests that the problematic status of “poor white trash” can and should instead be reframed within an awareness of the term’s rhetorical identity, and the way the term polices class boundaries by acting as “a category of pollution through which white middle- and working-class Americans evaluate the behaviors and opinions of other whites of similar or lower class status” (113).

Following the murder of Emmett Till, southerners were increasingly concerned about how they were viewed in national media. Niambi Carter observes that the southern white community of the 1950s was “in flux” as local civic leaders were “severing all ties with ‘white

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[36] *Variety* reports that Corman and company attempted to film in three successive integrated Missouri schools, but each time filming was to begin permission was abruptly denied. Corman made a deal with another segregated school to pay $100 dollars for three days of filming, only to be chased away by police when workers saw black and white children together. Another sequence involving a Ku Klux Klan rally in an African American neighbourhood was met with threats from angry townspeople. (“‘Integrated’ Pic Adds 30G to Cost,” 1, 62).

trash' and moving to a more refined racist praxis" that emphasized "institutional enforcement" over acts of physical violence like lynching, which had been in decline since the 1940s (371). Carter also insists that the "White Citizens' Council style of racism [...] relied heavily on protest and smart uses of media, and away from more traditional KKK style tactics of brutality and explicit intimidation" (372).

In *Crisis in the Deep South*, Crane Wilbur attempts to portray these changing circumstances while indicting segments of the white southern elite for the violence carried out by the "lower elements." In this way, *Crisis in the Deep South* counters the tendency of later films about the Civil Rights movement to exclusively demonize and blame white "rednecks" by trying to illustrate the 'institutional enforcement' through scenes involving white and black members of the community shunned and facing economic consequences. However, it makes no attempt to distance its villains from southern stereotypes. In order to hold the Citizens' Council directly accountable for extreme violence in the South, *Crisis in the Deep South* has to make the two organizations synonymous, revealing in the final scene that Bibb Tarver is the chief Klansman--thereby proving the headline in Chris Mason's banner editorial, "THE NEW KU KLUX KLAN, ALIAS WHITE CITIZENS COUNCIL!" (79).

The Manichean of Melodrama

The *Crisis* script draws upon the twin moral institutions of press and family. In looking for white heroes from the early days of the Civil Rights movement, Crane Wilbur may have been thinking of Hodding Carter, editor of the Greenville (MS) *Delta Democrat-Times*. Nearly four decades after Wilbur, author Ann Waldron rediscovered Carter while looking for sympathetic progressive white southerners from the Civil Rights era. In 1993, she published *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist*, chronicling Carter's political evolution, which is similar to that of the Mason family. Carter and his paper were considered among the most liberal in Mississippi. From 1947 to the *Brown* decision, Carter wrote "prodigiously" about race relations and condemned racially motivated violence (Waldron 203). Following the Till murder, the *Saturday Evening Post* published his "Racial Crisis in the Deep South," a lengthy editorial very similar to those by Wilbur's Chris Mason, warning, "that it is needed for the nation to know of the hardening of the hearts of white and black men in the Southern areas of greatest Negro density--and especially Mississippi--and to know why this tragic deterioration in human relations is taking place" (26). The piece situated "the 'wolf-whistle' asserted murder [... *as*] only the

most dramatic and, superficially, the most incomprehensible" violent event in the deterioration of race relations in the South (26). Carter's editorial also provides a list of other violent incidents, many of which are absent from other histories. He details the failure of local law enforcement, blaming southern sheriffs. Waldron writes that Carter feared that the White Citizens' Councils and the violence they wrought could lead to a second Civil War (266). More problematically, Carter's article avoids names, addressing victims and perpetrators only by race ("a Negro," "three whites," etc.). Carter insisted that change would and must come from within white Mississippi. He championed gradual integration and criticized the NAACP and federal involvement in local affairs. These are moderate views, that, under the gaze of history, stand firmly in the way of the classical Civil Rights movement.

As noted, the topicality of events referenced in *Crisis in the Deep South* suggests that Wilbur was writing very quickly, without the benefit of hindsight or the ability to fully recognize the gravity of the social change underway. The script seems to offer real-time reactions to violence of the era and serves as a valuable document of the era. Less well-remembered incidents like the murders of Mississippi voting rights activists George Washington Lee in May 1955 and Lamar Smith in September are addressed in the screenplay. Wilbur attempts to illustrate local circumstances railing against racial moderation in small town Deep South. After 1956, these would prove prophetic, as public demonstrations of massive resistance to integration gave way to more organized forms of violent retribution.

Instead of conventional heroes, Wilbur's screenplay offers a surplus of martyrs: Amos Cato, Rev. George T. Lee, "Emmet [*sic*] Till," Gabe the newspaper truck driver, and finally, Chris Mason. Wilbur seems to intuitively anticipate the necessity of a martyr to change the prevailing social order in the South, but this is somewhat more complicated. Throughout, black sacrifice serves to rescue whites. This is a melodramatic formulation as old as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Wilbur's screenplay cannot escape the racial chasm created by a patrician white sympathy that still objectifies African Americans as victims while affording them no voice.

Crisis in the Deep South is less like the lynching films discussed by Robert Jackson than a crime thriller or southern gothic film like *The Story of Temple Drake*. The real victim of racial violence is not properly a character in the film. The screenplay only features "Emmet [*sic*] Till" at his abduction and as a mangled corpse. As written, these Till scenes would have called for hundreds of extras and involved multiple new locations (family shack, river, courthouse, town).

The sequence appears almost as a digression from the main narrative. It appears for its melodramatic impact—as the apogee of Manichean good and evil—and as such this real history is a prop for a fictional story about a white family.

In Chris Mason's final editorial, the only hope for change is deferred through a generational, regional appeal to "youth of the South." History would prove more complex. Recent work in southern history by Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter tracks the ways in which the politics of massive resistance found a voice in a new conservatism, reshaping national political affiliations and transforming the region.

As I have suggested, Wilbur's screenplay is best characterized as a racist indictment of southern racist violence. By inventing benevolent white heroes of the African American Freedom struggle and creating African American characters whose only agency seems to be in the service of the white children (melodramatic virtue incarnate), *Crisis in the Deep South* embodies a racist worldview that is in many ways quieter, harder to decipher and broader in scope than the terrorist violence that the film indicts. This may be a limitation of the melodramatic form as an agent for progressive causes. Film scholar Linda Williams cautions,

> Melodrama does not always move [...] toward a new future; very often it moves to restore some semblance of a lost past. To this degree melodrama can be considered as an inherently conservative and backward-looking form even as it progressively tackles basic problems of social inequity. (2001 36)

If *Crisis in the Deep South* follows the evolution of the Civil Rights movement immediately after *Brown*, by looking exclusively within the white community the screenplay limits its ability to deliver any sort of satisfying resolution. The Mason family appear almost exclusively to react to local circumstances as they modify their allegiance to white supremacy over increasing violence, and they are brutally punished for it. For a more satisfying resolution to the crises in the Deep South of the classical Civil Rights era, one has to look elsewhere. Linda Williams observes, "[i]f there was no fictional black and white melodrama with anything like the galvanizing appeal of the civil rights movement, that is because this struggle was itself a galvanizing racial melodrama beside which mere fiction seems to pale" (2001 220). However, Williams is discussing the story of the classical Civil Rights era, the one that ends triumphantly with the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act. In many ways, American society is still waiting for resolution.

Conclusion: Beyond *Crisis*

Crane Wilbur could not have known that he was entering complicated territory that melodrama could not resolve. One can only speculate as to why *Crisis the Deep South* was not made. There is no shortage of complicating factors. The situation surrounding Emmett Till's murder and its aftermath cannot help but point to a larger injustice that Hollywood cinema simply avoided well into the 1960s. The anti-communist purges of the McCarthy era made racial politics difficult to address within a film industry that still traded in racist representations of racial others.

Wilbur's direction in the screenplay to not present any of the African American witnesses at the Emmett Till trial as comic characters speaks to endemic racial prejudice in the screen portrayal of African Americans in Hollywood films. As African Americans lacked full rights as citizens, they also lacked full realizations as film characters in classical Hollywood films. Niambi Carter's observation that, "blacks were not a core constituent of the white legal community, other whites were," also applies to the dominant mode of Hollywood filmmaking (371).

As it is, *Crisis in the Deep South* stands as a fascinating document and reaction to the events it alludes to, while serving as a powerful illustration of the limited frame available to a seasoned white male filmmaker for processing these events. It seems to be no coincidence that the generational shift within Hollywood and film institutions in the later sixties coincided with the emergence of films that attempted to address Civil Rights themes like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Columbia, 1967) and *In the Heat of the Night* (United Artists, 1967).

Beginning with the widely circulated photograph of Emmett Till taken at his last Christmas and the horrific photographs of his mangled body at his open-casket funeral in Chicago, Till has left a profound impact on popular culture. However, in their respective works on the subject, Philip C. Kolin, Harriet Pollak and Christopher Metress find that Till's story was more often expressed in documentary, journalism, literature, music and art, and not in fiction cinema. Till's story was also told in a number of American television documentary programs, including series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987-1990), the PBS installment of the American Experience series *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003) and *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till* (2005).[37]

[37] A small independent production company called Wake Drama has released a number of

Figure 3.6—Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market as it appeared in 1955, photographed by Ed Clark for *Life* magazine.

Commemorative work related to Emmett Till has moved more slowly. In 1991, a Chicago street was renamed Emmett Till Road on what would have been his 50th birthday ("Chicago Renames Seventy-First St."). The address listed as Till's last residence by journalists at the time of the trial at 6427 South Saint Lawrence avenue in Chicago's Woodlawn neighbourhood, remains a private residence that sold for a surprisingly low $23,500 in 2010 (Great Street Properties, Inc.). Significant efforts have occurred over the last decade, especially

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productions about Till on stage and in the short films—*Wolf Call* (2010), *Money 1955: The Emmett Till Murder Trial* (2013) and *The Wheeler Parker Story* (2014)—and the feature film *DAR HE: The Lynching of Emmett Till* (2012) directed by Rob Underhill. All feature African American writer and performer Mike Wiley playing all roles, white and black, in the Till Story. Trailers appear online, but the films have only been screened at film festivals (Underhill).

after the death of his mother Mamie Till-Bradley in 2003. Largely in response to questions raised by the documentary films and a *60 Minutes* investigation into the true number of participants in Till's murder, the case was reopened and Till's body exhumed in 2005 (Davey and Ruethling). Under the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act of 2007, sponsored by civil rights leader Georgia Representative John Lewis, the U.S. Justice Department reopened unsolved cases from the Civil Rights era. Till's original casket was donated to the Smithsonian in 2009 (Callard). It will be on display at the National Museum of African American History and Culture set to open in September 2016.

Tallahatchie County formally apologized to the Till family in 2007, initiating serious commemorative work on the part of local authorities in cooperation with the Emmett Till Memory Project who are working to preserve this history in hopes of healing racial divisions the unresolved crime has left in the community. In March 2015, the Sumner courthouse, where the trial that failed to provide justice for Till was held, became neighbour to the Emmett Till Interpretive Center in small storefront office. Open weekdays from 8 to 5, the center's mission is to use the story of Emmett Till to promote racial reconciliation and social justice into the twenty-first century ("Till Memory Project Sites"). The center also maintains a website and Facebook page. After years of neglect, the building that housed Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market in Money, Mississippi, is in ruins. Tours pass by, but it is still a remote, largely rural location—as of September 2016, Google's Street View had only passed by once in 2009. The state placed historical markers near the site in 2011, and the Till Memory Project plans to restore the site.

Invoking Walter Benjamin, scholar Rebecca Mark suggests that Till's murder was one of the "dangerous moments that flash up in the memory of our culture" (124). Despite the efforts outlined, Hollywood cinema of the 1950s and 1960s failed to address this moment or Till's murder directly. Indeed, it is only now as the generation that witnessed the tragedy of Emmett Till passes on that significant commemorative work has begun. A 2013 controversy stemming from a profoundly insensitive lyric by Lil' Wayne—wherein the rapper claimed he would "beat that pussy up like Emmett Till"—upset Till's family and cost the rapper a sponsorship deal.[38] Wayne's subsequent promise to "not use or reference Emmett Till or the Till family in his music," proved to be an inadequate apology and was rejected by Till's surviving family. The

[38] The incident was widely reported in media; see Andrews, Blistein and Hogan.

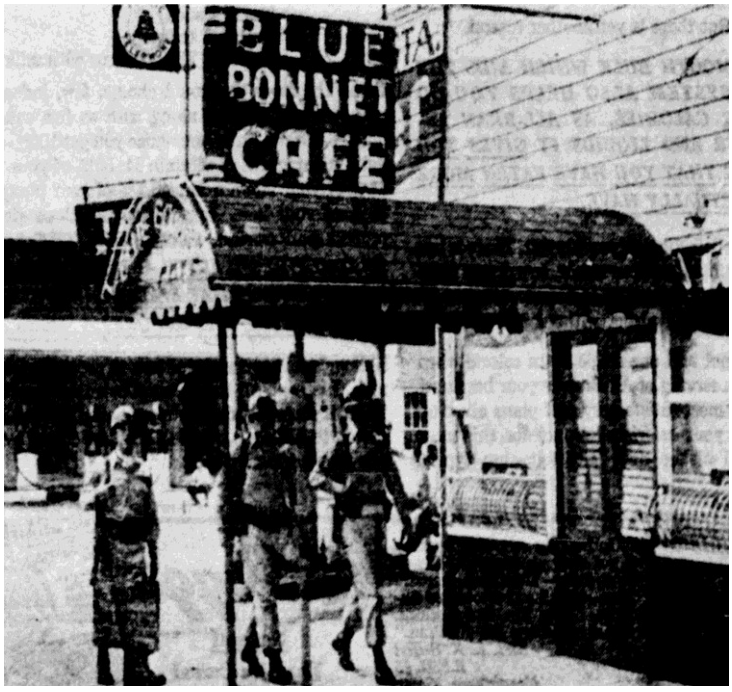
incident seems to suggest the importance of continuing to educate and contextualize Till's story for future generations (Blistein). Work by the Emmett Till Memory Project is an encouraging beginning. Revisiting lost artifacts of mass culture from this era such as Crane Wilbur's *Crisis in the Deep South* screenplay deepens our understanding of the relationship between Hollywood and the post-*Brown* Civil Rights movement.

Chapter IV: Phenix City, Alabama and the story of *The Phenix City Story*

Introduction

In Phenix City, Alabama, the sensational 18 June, 1954 assassination of the crime-fighting state Attorney General-elect Albert Patterson was quickly followed by an influx of reporters from national magazines and newspapers from all across the country. These journalists reconstructed a complex history of vice and crime in Phenix City and catalogued the extensive cleanup under qualified Martial rule administered by the Alabama National Guard from 22 July, 1954 to 17 January, 1955. Guardsmen relieved all local police of their duty, raided and closed illegal establishments, and patrolled the streets. A little over a year after the assassination, *The Phenix City Story*—a city crime exposé film distributed by Allied Artists and filmed entirely on location featuring participation of locals—emerged out of the national fascination with the wide-open southern town. The film crafts a melodramatic narrative of corruption and reform that purports to show how, in the words of the film's prologue, "democracy had asserted itself over a very real dictatorship." Though the film presents the events as a cautionary tale to any city, the nature of this criminal "dictatorship" was distinctly rural and southern in specific ways. A considerable box office success for its producers, *The Phenix City Story* was also a triumph of public relations. A tale written by the victors, the film elevated John Patterson, son of the murdered man as a well as a veteran and attorney, to a major player in Alabama politics.

Where the previous chapter concerned the murder of Emmett Till and the contemporaneous Hollywood film project about it that failed to be made, this chapter will look at a similar film from the era. In this chapter, my aim is to provide a thorough introduction to the circumstances that existed in Phenix City for much of the first half of the twentieth century leading up to the Patterson assassination (much longer if you are given to believe the more sensational accounts of the region's innate corruptibility) and illustrate how a Hollywood film made by ambitious independent producers sought to exploit those historical events in a crime melodrama. Understanding both *The Phenix City Story* and the events it purports to dramatize requires knowledge of the local history of crime, economic deprivation in the region and race relations dating back to the Great Depression.



Figures 4.1 & 4.2— Guardsmen on patrol during Martial rule in front of the shuttered Blue Bonnet Café, where the ”B-girls, prostitutes and show girls” were tattooed on the inside of their lower lip (Strickland and Wortsman 44, Steigenthaler, “Sins...” 31). (Left) Madge Bernice Harper heading to testify about allegations she burned another woman, one of the comparatively minor crimes addressed by the Grand Jury (Steigenthaler, “Why...” 24).

The film’s treatment of these themes not only makes it stand apart from many other urban confidential crime films of the time, but renders it an important artifact of the transition of postwar southern society. The real Phenix City story was shaped by a number of interconnected forces: a local legal system rooted in the cronyism of southern white supremacy confronting changes within postwar American life while negotiating layers of federal, state and municipal authority, coupled with the increased visibility and connectedness due to a Cold War-readied transportation infrastructure and changing news and media landscapes. All of these forces that would transform the South seemed to come to a head in the time between the events the film depicts and its release.

Drawing upon contemporary print coverage of the events in Phenix City, as well as retrospective histories, this chapter will sketch the story of the criminal enterprise in Phenix City and its abrupt downfall as is broadly understood. Then, by looking closely at the film *The Phenix City Story*, I will summarize and analyse how the film presents and adapts this history as melodramatic spectacle, paying close attention to issues of crime and its economic causes.

The film’s treatment of race as well as the hidden history that seems to inform the film’s

racial melodrama will be addressed in much greater detail and expanded upon in a subsequent chapter. So, too, will consideration of *The Phenix City Story*'s role in shaping history, through the fate of John Patterson, and the town's complex relationship with both its own history and the film.

History of the vice rackets in Phenix City, Alabama

A border town of around 23,000 by 1954, Phenix City is across the Chattahoochee River from the more prosperous city of Columbus, Georgia, and Fort Benning. This section will outline the sensational history of bootleg liquor, gambling and violence dating back to its earliest settlement—when it was a "disreputable" riverside "locality referred to [as] Sodom" (Cherry 197).[39] Phenix City's history involves a number of colourful individuals and it can be difficult to keep track of the names, as many Christian names repeat. Also, as it deals with crime and corruptions, there is also an understandable tendency toward sensationalism and prevarication. Newspaper headlines about the cleanup, like "Alabama Slams Door on Vice City's 125 Yrs of Sin," reflect the way in which outsiders essentialize the criminal activity in Phenix City (Manly 4). In fact, while bootlegging and violence had always existed, the criminal conspiracy emerged out of a long period, and the corruption was a result of two major factors: the decline in agriculture and onset of the Great Depression, which limited other business opportunities; and the constant proximity to new soldiers at Fort Benning. At its peak, Phenix City's nightlife was in many ways separate from the experience of day to day life in the church going town, while slot machines, illegal lotteries, and the economic benefits of criminal activity were tolerated. John Patterson recalls, "As a boy, I would spend my leisure time playing the slot machines with no sense of wrongdoing," adding that they could be found in grocery and drug stores, even the Post Office, and some were "equipped with wooden stools for those too short to reach the lever" (Patterson and Bisher 60).

A relatively isolated borderland, the region had attracted a lawless element for much of its history. The area was the site of one of the final battles of the Civil War, and following nineteenth century local historian Rev. F. L. Cherry, the *Chicago Tribune* called it a "notorious

[39] The area had gone by a number of names in its history, including Girard, Alabama, which merged with its close neighbour Phenix City, taking the latter's name during a 1923 clean-up effort.

resort for evil-doers in the Civil war" (Manly 4). As the region developed, moonshining and manufacture of alcohol and gambling became the central economic activity in Phenix City, and the presence of undesirables by reputation or fact drove riverfront industry to Columbus.

Following Alabama's adoption of prohibition in 1915, major raids on illegal alcohol occurred in 1916 and 1923, but the effects were short lived. Russell County Sheriff Pal M. Daniel (Sr.) was impeached, and the mayor and board of aldermen resigned (Barnes 6-8). Both World Wars changed Phenix City, which sits across the Chattahoochee River from Columbus and Fort Benning, Georgia (opened in 1918). During World War II, the town grew considerably. The influx of soldiers to Fort Benning—which housed as many as 100,000 soldiers during World War II—ensured steady business for the vice industry (Hodges A1). Though Fort Benning's population dropped to 40,000 around 1954, it remained the largest infantry training base in the country.

Seven months prior to U.S. entry into World War II, *Time* magazine noted an "alarming increase of venereal disease" at Fort Benning, and quoted a commanding officer's message that Columbus and Phenix City must "run out the tarts" ("New Army" 18). General George S. Patton, stationed at Fort Benning in 1940, threatened to level the offending strip of Phenix City with tanks, and Secretary of War Henry Stimson called Phenix City "the wickedest city in America" (Strickland and Wortsman 199; Barnes 17-18).[40] In November 1946, the *Chicago Tribune*, with wry understatement, described Phenix City as a "resort town for Fort Benning soldiers" in a story about a postwar cleanup movement in the town ("Alabama City Orders…" 1). Conservative thinker William F. Buckley's experience was typical of soldiers on leave—he and a fellow soldier had spent a weekend in Phenix City, "in the arms of [prostitutes] Rosita and Sally on twin beds, abandoning, after much thought and discreet planning and beer consumed,

[40] The Patton story about the tank has taken on the stuff of folk legend around Phenix City, with some people, especially online, believing that some version of this actually occurred. The 1984 Lorimar Productions and Universal film *Tank* with James Garner, filmed at Fort Benning, and features a scene of a rogue tank destroying a corrupt police building, seemingly to be inspired by this myth. Fort Benning also served as the location for John Wayne's anti-communist Vietnam film *The Green Berets* (Batjac, 1968), with parts of surrounding rural Georgia doubling on screen for Vietnam.

their virginity" (118).[41]

The success of alcohol and gambling came at a price as Phenix City had to depend on Columbus for essentials like name brand goods, new car dealerships, and services like libraries or hotels (Cater 25-26). In 1939, *Time* magazine reported, "if you want to read a book in Phenix City, you must either borrow one or go across the Chattahoochee River to Columbus, Ga. Phenix City has no bookstore. It has no library either" ("Cheap Books" 63). By 1954, "[o]f the estimated 13,000 jobholders in Phenix City, approximately 10,000 work across the river in Columbus because there is no major industry in the Alabama town to support them" ("And Meanwhile…" 1). So tied to Columbus and Fort Benning was Phenix City that when Alabama adopted Central Standard Time, in October 1941, *Film Daily* reports that Phenix City remained on Eastern Standard Time so as to "keep pace with its twin city, Columbus" ("All Out of Step, But—" 11). Having "no daily papers, only two weeklies," Phenix Citizens read Columbus' two papers ("Alabama City Orders…" 1).

Economically dominated by Columbus, with a steady stream of soldiers with money to spend and its border location already providing the shield of jurisdictional ambiguity, Phenix City was also located off the pathway between larger southern cities of Atlanta and New Orleans—both established entertainment Meccas. Though remote, with the nearest interstate some 30 miles away for many years (Grimes 215), Phenix City became a rougher part of a larger entertainment network that—like many of the cities addressed in the Kefauver hearings into organized crime like Miami, Florida and later Las Vegas, Nevada—involved a relationship between entertainment venues and enterprising criminals, here, career gamblers and bootleggers. However, this being Depression-era Alabama, as Douglass Cater noted in the pages of *The Reporter*, "[t]here was nothing swank about sin in Phenix City" (25). The entertainment venues were segregated juke joints, honky tonks and small cafés with dice rooms or sometimes mattresses in the back. In 1947, tabloid reporter N. K. Perlow described what looked like a western frontier town:

[41] Buckley's anecdote, published in his 2004 literary autobiography, indicates the way in which stories of soldiers' debauchery in Phenix City had kept in the shadows.

> On entering Phenix City across one of two bridges linking it to Columbus, one gets the impression that he suddenly has come into an ancient frontier city—right out of a Zane Gray [*sic*] western thriller.[42]
>
> Cafés honky-tonks and pool halls line both sides of the street. The buildings are low, two-story affairs, many of them made of wood and badly in need of both paint and repair. To me it looked like a mushroom town built after the Civil War which never tried to keep up with American civilization. Hitching posts dot the street in the business section. (1947 22)

From 1933 to 1948, Phenix City was insolvent ("Phenix City to End Era of Receivership" 3). Facing bankruptcy, Homer D. Cobb, city commissioner from 1931 and mayor from 1944 to his sudden death in 1950, "decided the financial salvation of the city lay in opening even wider the doors of an already wide-open town for the purposes of obtaining revenue" (Perry 1147).[43] "A barber with a pleasant personality and a reputation as a churchman" who conducted city business in shirtsleeves out of his barber shop, Cobb brokered a compromise with local gamblers and other criminal operations that would allow them to operate (Patterson and Bisher 64). The city adopted a system of "fines and forfeitures" wherein city police and the county sheriff's office collected money through raids to finance city government (Coulter 410; Strickland and Wortsman 26). With the nightclubs and honky tonks concentrated around the riverfront on Dillingham and 14th streets, near Phenix City's African American neighbourhood, and on the outskirts of town, and activities generally confined to a night time economy, for ordinary Phenix Citizens the arrangement allowed residents to enjoy the benefits of solvency and lower taxes.

In the town's official history from 1976, Harold Coulter names a few "comparatively innocuous incidents"—including the presence of undercover agents from the state looking to entrap bootleggers around 1928 and the growing presence of slot machines afterwards—as some of "the first indications I had of what really occurred in Phenix City" until World War II (408). After the war, he writes:

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[42] In a 1955 follow-up story, Perlow uses the more cinematic reference, describing "a frontier town, recreated for a Grade B western movie" (1955 21).

[43] City governance was administered by an elected commission (made up of 5 and later 3 members) including the mayor.

> Phenix City was a 'wide-open' town. Night Clubs, honky-tonks, and joints were everywhere. Rows of sophisticated slot machines could be seen from the street, in some areas. It was known that no-limit gambling was available in numerous places; beautiful young women, baby-faced, curvaceous and charming, with bulging bosoms and swaggering hips, were much in evidence in most of the better "restaurants" and clubs. Their job was to act as a sales stimulator for the bar—they were later referred to as B-girls or bar-girls—they were not prostitutes, though some of them later joined their ranks. (During the '54 clean-up, some of the bar-girls insisted to the end that they were still virgins). Prostitutes roamed the streets in broad daylight as well as at night plying the oldest trade. Many of them would dress up on Sunday and go to church and pay their tithe as any good Christian should, and apparently felt comfortable doing it. (408)

In the late 1940s, Mayor Cobb was able to convince the editor of the *Columbus Ledger* "that Phenix City—with no industries, no chain stores, no mercantile outlets—could not survive without the rackets," enlisting the tacit support of the paper for a time (qtd. in Page 27-28). Elsewhere, the town largely evaded closer scrutiny. Incredibly, the town was "cited as an outstanding example" of a town that had cooperated with military brass to clean-up vice in a 1942 story on alcohol in the Army ("Report on…" 9). However, by 1948, Mayor Cobb "began to lose the iron-clad grip he had over the town" (Coulter 411). A political machine in partnership with local gambling figures controlled local elections and the jury system (ensuring many crimes, including murder, would go unpunished). Officials allegedly participated actively in vice and criminal enterprises. In 1946, brothers Hoyt and Grady "Snooks" Shepherd had been accused of murdering Columbus distiller Fayette (Fate) Leeburn by gunshot "in a private dice room at a Phenix City night club where some 50 persons had gathered to celebrate the re-election of Elmer Reese to the city commission" (Perlow 1947 7). After hiring a bevy of local attorneys, including Albert Patterson, the brothers were acquitted. A relative of Clyde Yarbrough, Hoyt Shepherd's partner in a lottery run out of the Yarbrough Café, served on the jury. Immediately thereafter Shepherd and Clyde Yarbrough contributed $35,000 each to the building of the town's first modern hospital, and Shepherd's primary business partner, Jimmie Matthews, added another $10,000 (7).

At the opening ceremonies for the hospital, which had been paid for by a generous contribution of $80,000 from racket bosses, Mayor Cobb told his friend Harold Coulter that "the

courthouse is taking over the town" (411). After Mayor Cobb's sudden death two years later, there was a power vacuum that prompted a rivalry between the courthouse—run by circuit solicitor Arch Ferrell and home to county sheriff's department—and the city police department (Strickland and Wortsman 26).[44] In 1951, City Commissioner Roy Greene privately told local anti-vice crusaders that as much as three-fifths of the city's budget came from gambling and prostitution (Davis 252). In 1954, Chamber of Commerce manager Alton V. Foster "estimated that 75 per cent of the income of the city government comes either directly or indirectly from the 'rackets'" ("And Meanwhile…" 1).

While Cobb had reportedly shied away from prostitution, or at least kept it to a minimum (the industry always existed in Phenix City and its environs), during the war, mobile 'houses' of prostitution—canvas covered pickup trucks coordinated with cab drivers by radio—sprang up. Later investigations affirmed that between 1945 and 1954, over a thousand prostitutes operated in Phenix City, grossing between $1-2 million a year (Strickland and Wortsman 32, 98). Deputy Sheriff Albert Fuller regularly collected payoffs totalling nearly half of profits from Cliff's Fish Camp—a combined catfish restaurant and bawdy house ("2 Tell of Huge Vice Earnings…" 5). Local law enforcement participated in a "white slavery" racket, coercing young girls fresh from the country into prostitution by charging them with vagrancy and forcing them to work off their debts (Barnes 148). Girls at the Blue Bonnet Café were tattooed inside their lower lips as a mark of ownership (Strickland and Wortsman 44).

Into this atmosphere, a group of concerned and mostly religious citizens, organized as the Russell (County) Betterment Association (RBA) to campaign for serious reform. A secret organization, Albert Patterson, Howard Pennington, Hugh Bentley and Hugh Britton would be the RBA's most visible members. Located in the Bible Belt, Phenix City was also a religious community, with "more churches per capita than many towns in this land" with 31 white churches and 13 black churches in 1954, or a church for every 450 residents (Slocum 35; Wortsman and Strickland 181). Meanwhile, changes in the federal tax structure resulting from Kefauver reforms, prompted Shepherd and Matthews to announce their retirement in 1951 (Slocum 34-36).

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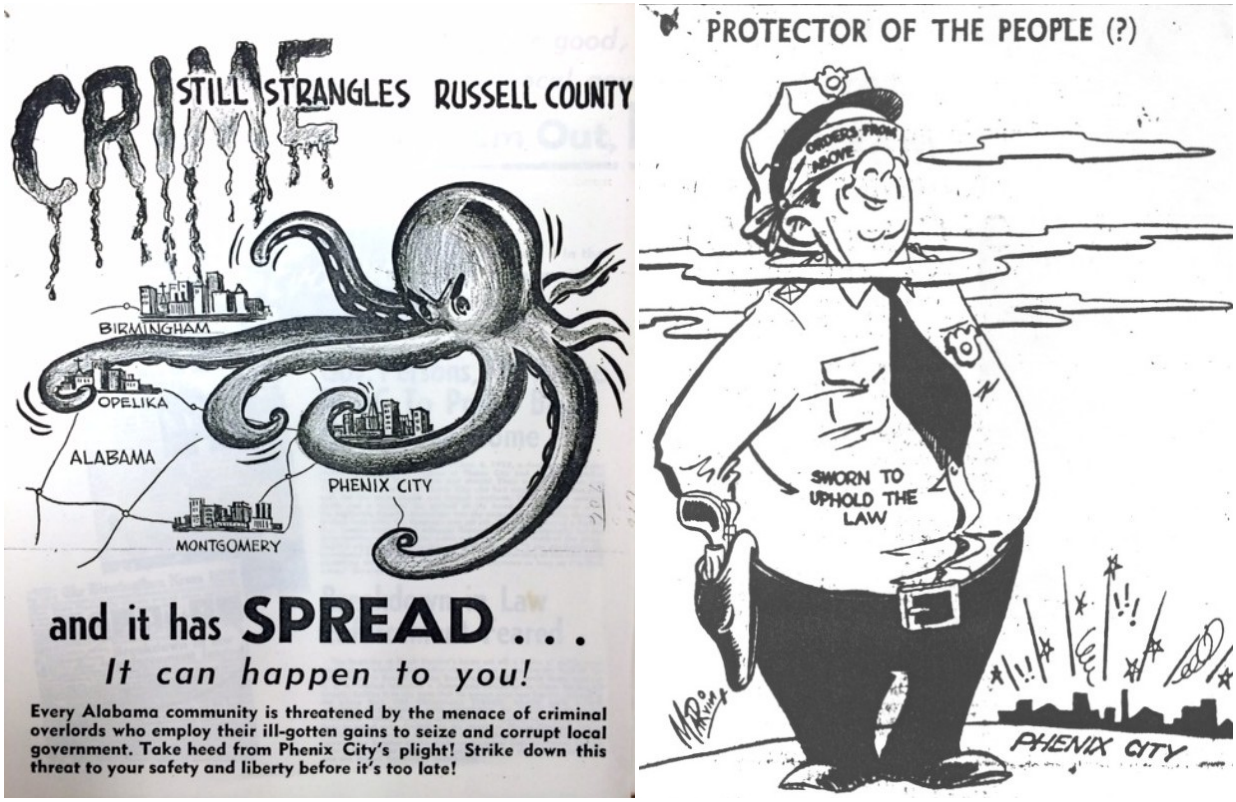
[44] The hospital became Cobb Memorial Hospital. Facing funding trouble throughout the 1990s, it was abandoned in 2001 and demolished in 2012.

Around this time, violence in the town escalated. The home of RBA president Hugh Bentley was destroyed by dynamite on 9 January, 1952. Though no one was seriously hurt, 16-year-old Hughbo Bentley, asleep in bed, was thrown clear into the yard (Slocum 36). Soon after, the office of RBA attorney Albert Patterson was set afire. RBA members Hugh Bentley, son Hughbo, and Hugh Britton, along with Columbus reporters Ray Jenkins and Tom Sellers, were openly beaten in the streets in front of police officers while trying to monitor the general election on 6 May, 1952. Anne Robertson's pictures of the violence were widely reproduced (and recreated in *The Phenix City Story*).



Figures 4.3 & 4.4— (Right) Flier distributed Russell Betterment Association (RBA) shows organized crime as octopus reaching all across the state (Columbus State University Archives). (Left) "Protector of the People" editorial cartoon from the front page of the *Columbus Ledger* 31 June 1954 "Protector of the People." (Columbus Public Library Phenix City file).

In 1952, votes were purchased for $10 each and taxis delivered prostitutes to polling places. The *Columbus Ledger* quoted Arch Ferrell, Jr., circuit solicitor (a position akin to district attorney), jokingly greeting a pre-election crowd, "Fellow murderers, gangsters, rapists, and prostitutes, particularly you prostitutes" (qtd. in McLean 91). As head of the Russell County courthouse, the politically ambitious Ferrell was among the most powerful people in Phenix

City.


Figures 4.5 & 4.6— Albert L. Patterson (1894-1954) and John M. Patterson (1921-) as they appeared circa 1954. *The Phenix City: Then and Now* pressbook (Columbus Public Library Phenix City file).

The assassination of Albert Patterson and the cleanup

In 1954, RBA attorney Albert Patterson ran for state Attorney General on the promise to clean up Phenix City. Birmingham reporter Ed Strickland stumbled upon fraud involving Arch Ferrell and sitting Attorney General Silas Coma "Si" Garrett "changing 1's into 7's and 0's to 6's" in vote totals from the run-off election (Cater 22; Grady 28).[45] Despite the attempt to steal

[45] Even before this, two incumbent state representatives who lost their seats in the 4 May, 1954 Democratic primary filed a grievance with the state Democratic party about voting in the Phenix City area, charging "malconduct, fraud, or corruption on the part of inspectors, clerks, markers, returning officers, boards of canvassers or other persons in the conduct of said election in various and sundry boxes, precincts and voting places in said Russell County" ("Russell Vote Fraud..." 1). In suspicious a move less than week after these allegations, authorities in Phenix City charged a young painter with buying votes for the accusers. Russell Chief Deputy Sheriff Albert Fuller claimed the painted had "admitted the charge after being confronted with affidavits signed by

the election, Patterson won both the 4 May democratic primary and its 1 June runoff (tantamount to election in the solidly Democratic Alabama).[46] By Thursday, 17 June, Patterson had told friends he intended to testify before a Birmingham grand jury investigating the voter fraud on Monday. That night, Patterson made the dramatic pronouncement that he had "only a 100-to-1 chance of ever being sworn in as attorney general" to a Phenix City church group (Thomas 1; "Albert L. Patterson Killed..." 1).

Around nine the evening of Friday the 18th, after finishing "thank you" notes to campaign supporters, Albert Patterson was shot three times—once in the mouth as though to symbolically silence him—while entering his car in the small parking lot next to the Coulter building where he kept his office. Patterson staggered to front of the building and fell dead in front of Stewart's readymade dress shop. The assassination took place on a busy Friday night mere blocks from the honky-tonks he had vowed to clean up. A large crowd leaving an action-adventure double feature of *Paratrooper* (Columbia, 1953) and *Back to God's Country* (Universal International, 1953) at the nearby Palace Theatre at 9:18 PM poured out onto the scene (Grady 43). Hearing the news from a neighbour, Patterson's son John raced to the scene—of which Deputy Sheriff Albert Fuller had already taken control—and then to Cobb Memorial hospital where he found Sheriff Matthews and a visibly drunk Arch Ferrell with his father's body (Trest 134). Many observed that Deputy Fuller's gun was not in its holster.

Governor Gordon Persons had been watching a movie in Montgomery during the murder (Grady 60-61). The governor called the *Columbus Enquirer* to ask if Phenix City was quiet ("Cook Sees Mystery Man Flee Scene" 6). It is worth stressing that the Governor of Alabama had to call a neighbouring state to get information about Phenix City. Persons was aware of the lawlessness in Phenix City. RBA members had frequently petitioned Persons and he visited

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persons the deputy declined to identify" ("Phenix City Painter…" 1).

[46] Since Reconstruction, Alabama had effectively been a one-party state with state primaries serving as de facto elections. This was true of much of the South until resistance to civil rights reforms set the stage for the growth of the Republican Party in the region, with its appeals to states rights beginning with the Barry Goldwater's national campaign in 1964 and growing steadily through Ronald Reagan's 1980 election.

Hugh Bentley's house after it had been dynamited two years earlier. To maintain order, Governor Persons called General Walter J. "Crack" Hanna asking him to rush to Phenix City with uniformed guardsmen (Barnes 192; Grady 61-62). Fifty-two-year-old Hanna's military career began with multiple attempts to enlist while underage during World War I. Hanna was one of the richest men in the state from his successful steel business—the core industry of the "New South" city of Birmingham, Alabama, which was over a dozen times larger than Phenix City.

The next day the assassination was front page news internationally, with the *Chicago Tribune* immediately connecting the assassination to Patterson's "Man Against Crime" stance and the vote-fraud charges ("Alabama Vice Crusader…" 1, 5). Hanna's uniformed guardsmen patrolled the streets aiding local police and enforcing order. A *Columbus Enquirer* reporter noted that an "air of horror pervades [*the*] Phenix City atmosphere" as "legitimate trade was almost at a standstill" (Greenberg 1). Florence, Alabama, reporter Leroy Simms cautioned that the assassination "seems likely to start another clean up campaign in this neon-lighted fun spot which, in the past has shed such drives like a duck does water" (1). RBA president Howard Pennington called for Martial law ("RBA Leader Tells..." 7, Thomas 1-2). Newspapers also started revealing details of the town's "garishly-lighted gambling dens" ("Alabama Murder Calls…" 88). After Governor Persons arrived by plane, he ordered the honky tonks closed and called this the "end of the line" for Phenix City ("PC Orders Honky Tonks..." 1).

Nearly a month of chaos followed. Sitting State Attorney General Si Garrett, a member of a still-prominent Alabama family who appeared to have a sound political future, personally took charge of the investigation. He was aided by Joe Smelley (chief investigator of the Alabama Department of Public Safety), Arch Ferrell and Mayor Elmer Reese, while Sheriff Ralph Matthews, Deputy Sheriff Albert Fuller and Police Chief Pal M. Daniel, "remained in charge of official efforts to apprehend the man who fired three bullets into Patterson" ("Calls Troops…" 1). On the 4th of July, Deputy Fuller suffered spinal fractures from a "horseback riding" accident, that was said to be the result of a severe beating from 6-foot-4 night police chief Willis M. "Buddy" Jowers, who was also nephew of Mayor Reese (Grady 109, Trest 152, R.F. Allen 52). The "amazing hulk" Jowers fled the city, hiding out in neighbouring states for six months (Trest 152). Prostitutes also fled, and those who crossed the river were then chased out of Columbus ("And Meanwhile…" 1). Gangsters like Clarence O. "Head" Revel, a career

criminal who ran a safecracking ring out of Phenix City, would remain a fugitive until June of 1956 (Grady 224; "Charges Against…" 3).[47]

Figure 4.7—Guardsmen take Deputy Albert Fuller into custody. Fuller is in his bathrobe and was said to be self-medicating due to spinal injuries sustained after a "fall from a horse."

Reading initial news coverage, one can trace the mounting political pressure being put on the governor for more drastic action. Most early press accounts feature the murdered man's son, John Patterson, voicing his anger, calling for a clean-up and finally on 21 June, announcing his "availability as a candidate to replace his father in the November elections ("3 Held…" 30). The Columbus papers editorialized support for clean-up, embraced the guard's presence, endorsed

[47] Revel reappeared on the second anniversary of Patterson's murder in dramatic fashion—he "drove up to the County Jail and honked his horn until the jailer opened the gate" (Grady 224). Revel eventually hired two New York private detectives to clear himself of any involvement in the assassination. He had financed his flight from authorities with a multi-state bank robbery campaign. His history criminal activity spans from the 1930s into the 1970s. Revel had been arrested in 1940 for masterminding an illegal immigration ring out of Cuba and Florida (Dresser 19).

John Patterson (who won the nomination without opposition in July), and called for martial law ("A Dastardly Attack..." 1; "Patterson's Son," 6). The *Washington Post and Times Herald* and other papers around the country followed ("Gamblers Above the Law" 10). Meanwhile, the magazine the *Christian Century* blamed Fort Benning for the "moral corruption" of Phenix City ("Behind the Alabama…" 813).

Added to this pressure, due to term limits in the one-party state, Governor Persons was a lame duck who would leave office in January. He had largely ignored the situation in Phenix City for much of his term. Everyone knew who his successor would be: six-foot-eight-inch populist "Big" Jim Folsom, a larger than life figure in Alabama politics, who was frequently subject to allegations of corruption and cronyism. Also known as "Kissing Jim" for his habit of kissing women at public events, Folsom was a lifelong anti-prohibitionist or "wet" politician, whose personal taste for alcohol is still renowned (Windham). Folsom's previous administration (1947-1951) had ignored or permitted the operation of the Phenix City syndicates.

Meanwhile, the situation in Phenix City remained tense. Despite Attorney General Garrett's declaration of "the most intensive manhunt in Alabama since I took office in 1953" ("Vice Mecca Cleanup" 3), few witnesses came forward. Skepticism and outrage pervades local coverage. Less than a week after the murder, John Patterson traveled to Washington, D.C., in hopes of getting help from the FBI, but J. Edgar Hoover would not see him. While there, he told reporters that the people leading the investigation were the "most logical suspects" in his father's murder (Trest 143). That same day, Si Garrett, a heavy drinker prone to bouts of depression, abruptly checked into a Texas mental hospital, leaving the investigation to an assistant ("Garrett's Assistant…" 1). At a vote fraud hearing before the murder, RBA president Pennington had accused Arch Ferrell of running the Phenix City machine, and by the end of the following week Garrett's replacement removed Ferrell from the murder inquiry ("Life and Death…" 1). Garrett and Ferrell were last seen at a drunken meal with reporters at Columbus' Ralston hotel.

Ashamed of these developments, some residents proposed changing the town's name to Patterson or Pattersonville ("Patterson Favored… 4). By mid-July 1954, Hugh Bentley of the RBA received "a mysterious telephone call" explaining "that if he went to a certain phone booth, he would find a package." The "stack of more than 200 records" contained illegally wiretapped recordings of Hoyt Shepherd operating his illegal business and talking to government officials in

Alabama and other states ("Who Tapped…" 4). While of dubious juridical value for trial, RBA transcripts of the recordings were released to the media and revealed details of the scope of corruption. Yet still no progress had been made on the murder investigation, and General Hanna remained suspicious of local law enforcement and mistrustful of state and federal agencies that had failed to address the problem in the past (Fox 1).[48]

At precisely 4:30 PM CST (5:30 PM EST) on 22 July, 1954, in "an action without precedent in the 20th century for an American city and county," under direct order of Governor Persons, the modest town of Phenix City became the "first municipality in Alabama history to have its entire law enforcement machinery taken over by the National Guard," placing the town under a state "of qualified martial rule" (Grimes 229; "Alabama: Capture of Phenix City" 19; "Honest Jury…" 1). In a dramatic scene, under heavy rain, about 150 armed Alabama National Guardsmen entered the Russell County Courthouse and relieved long-serving Sheriff Ralph Matthews and his deputies of their duties. Hanna then repeated the task for the benefit of the police force at city hall and again for spectators and press gathered outside (McLean 39; Grady 120).[49] Soon thereafter, "[f]lying squads of National Guardsmen in full battle dress began raiding Phenix City's gambling dens" ("State Guard Raids…" M3).

Mayor Elmer E. Reese protested that he did not "see any reason for placing the area under martial rule" adding that "(t)his was one of the quietest places in Alabama" ("Honest Jury to Act…" 10). By the end of the month, Reese was "routed from his hotel bed by military officers and hustled back to Phenix City on charges of wilful neglect of duty" ("Bar 2 Nominees…" 5). In August, Arch Ferrell was jailed for public drunkenness. Before a crowd of

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[48] Hanna believed in the intractable corruption of the town, as he later recalled, "[o]ver 130 years ago Phenix City was called Sodom, a town made of renegade whites and it has been continuously lawless and violent since that time" (Fox 1). The Birmingham steel millionaire's comments about higher corruption finally aroused FBI interest (Robey 1-5).

[49] A newspaper photographer captured the stout 55-year-old Phenix City police chief Pal M. Daniel as he left a closed-door conference after his removal flanked by armed guardsman. In short-sleeves, thick frame glasses and a broad-brimmed hat, Daniel appears the picture of the southern sheriff. Daniel's father had been the chief of police who was removed during the 1917 prohibition raids.

reporters, Ferrell bizarrely denied involvement in the killing, saying, "I'm tough and mean; nobody knows that better than I. I'm not a religious fellow, never have been, but this thing is making me wish I were [... b]ut no matter what anybody says, I didn't kill Patterson. I just couldn't kill a man" (Cater 23).

Though the FBI kept opened a file on the assassination and situation in Phenix City beginning three days after the Patterson's murder and the agency offered support to investigators by way of use of its crime labs, the qualified Martial rule was imposed at the state level by the order of the outgoing governor. In a 21 June memo to FBI Associate Director Clyde Tolson, J. Edgar Hoover wrote "the only jurisdiction I could see would be in an Interstate Fugitive from Justice case," explaining that Governor Persons had informed him it was a dispute between "two political factions" the Betterment Association and the "gambling element" (Hoover).

In the tense atmosphere, the Guard assisted with the everyday business of law enforcement, which could take a turn for the bizarre. In one report, "A huge posse, including armed National Guardsmen, searched a rural area [...] for a young man who raped a 20-year-old mother while threatening to kill her child" ("Posse Seeks…" 15). The man was said to be "wearing a polka dot dress over rolled-up blue jeans."

By the time the Guard left in January of 1955 at the end of the Persons administration, a special grand jury had issued 749 indictments against 152 people for violations of 46 different statutes—30 of whom went to trial (Cater 23; R.F. Allen 55). Only one of those was acquitted. National Guardsmen uncovered 28 murders in the past ten years that had not even seen an indictment (Goheen 28). In December 1954, Deputy Sheriff Fuller, Circuit Solicitor Ferrell, and Attorney General Garrett were indicted for the Patterson murder. Fuller was tried, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison, but he would only serve 8 years. Ferrell was acquitted and resumed a legal career in 1969. Garrett, who had suffered a broken back in a 1955 car accident and had been in and out of mental facilities, evaded prosecution ("Silas Garrett Surrenders…" 8).

On the whole, the flurry of legal developments under the National Guard failed to provide definite resolution to any aspect of the Patterson murder. Author Alan Grady maintains that Patterson's murder was never actually solved, and to this day a group of enthusiastic Phenix Citizens continue to investigate the murder. Nearly 20 years later, John Patterson similarly voiced concerns that the crime was unresolved ("Patterson Still Checks…" 11). In the 2007 television documentary *In the Wake of the Assassins*, reporter Ray Jenkins presents the theory

that the murder was an impulsive act. Deputy Albert Fuller and solicitor Arch Ferrell had confronted Patterson in the alley about voter fraud case. When Patterson refused to back down, Ferrell, who was noted for being quick to anger, grabbed Fuller's pistol from its holster and shot Patterson four times.

Toward *The Phenix City Story*

With Buddy Jowers and Head Revel still on the lamb, Ferrell and Garrett evading justice, and Phenix City facing massive deficits without revenue from the rackets, by the time of the film, the success of the clean-up still seemed nebulous and tenuous. As a result, the arrival of the troops in July 1954 is where the Allied Artists film *The Phenix City Story* ends. By fall 1954, national magazine coverage detailed the excesses of Phenix City criminal activity in anticipation of the trials of Fuller and Ferrell (both in early 1955). While waiting to assume office in his father's place, John Patterson published his story, "I'll Get the Gangs That Killed My Father" in the November 1954 *Saturday Evening Post*. Written with the assistance of Furman Bisher, Patterson's story hits many of the same beats as other Phenix City coverage does: emphasizing the long history of crime in the area, using the metaphor of an octopus's tentacles to describe the syndicate's reach and detailing his father's life and the RBA's formation. However, in the article, Patterson lays claim to "The Old Man's" legacy. He describes finding a quotation attributed to eighteenth-century Irish conservative thinker Edmund Burke: "[t]he only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing" (60). The film would quote this and generally reflect the paranoid tenor of the press coverage.

<u>"Short Cut"</u>

On Monday, 6 December, 1954, the first attempt to dramatise the events in Phenix City aired on CBS-TV, as the Westinghouse program *Studio One* presented "Short Cut," starring Jackie Gleason as a Patterson-like reformer called Sam Wheeler. The show appears to be lost, but *Variety* offers this plot summary:

> Gleeson's Wheeler was a man who will do anything, and make any alliance to achieve his political ends. He was a 'strongman' cast in a minor political role in a corrupt and venal town. He achieves the first step with his election as state senator who is assigned the job of cleaning up the town. One item signifying that he means to go higher was a brief but significant sequence in which he tried the governor's chair for size. However,

> support from elements of the 'outs' seeking to reinstate their hooks into the gravy train led to his assassination. ("Tele-Follow Up…"30).

A not-so "thinly-disguised story of a Phenix City (Ala.) setup" written by Carey Wilbur (no relation to Crane Wilbur), the title of the live broadcast was changed at the last minute from "Peacock City" ("Tele-Follow Up…"30; Wordless 61). In the program, Wheeler is murdered by a fellow reformer. Broadcast days before Fuller and Ferrell's shocking arrests, the play seems to have melded the Phenix City situation with the plot of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (novel 1946, Columbia film, 1949)—settling on the corruption of the do-gooders themselves instead of the forces they tried to oust. Consequently, RBA founder Hugh Bentley filed a million-dollar lawsuit against "CBS, Westinghouse and the Columbus and Birmingham CBS outlets for the play, which he said, portrayed him as the murderer of Albert Patterson" ("Copies of Bentley…" 15; Wordless 61). The lawsuit garnered considerable attention and became a matter of Alabama honour. Hugh Bentley was represented by lieutenant governor (and future U.S. Senator) James B. Allen of Gadsden and State Representative Roberts Brown of Opelika.

As the "Short Cut" situation demonstrates, Phenix Citizens were sensitive about how they were portrayed in national media. When in March of 1955, after much delay, Alabama Journalists Edwin Strickland and Gene Wortsman published *Phenix City: The Wickedest City in America*, the definitive account of the vice rackets and clean-up. *Variety* reported that many Alabama shops refused to carry it (Wordless 61). Based not only on their independent field reporting, "but also [*on*] the sensational yet supposedly confidential results of the National Guard's investigation of Phenix City's vice establishments and the gangsters who ran them," the 284-page book is incredibly detailed. In addition to crimes already listed, it outlines an abortion and illegal adoption ("baby selling") ring that involved long-serving city councillor Dr. Seth Floyd and his wife (Strickland and Wortsman 98-103; McLean 110). The book closes offering "Mr. and Mrs. America [...] a few simple tests which will show you whether your own city might be slipping into the quagmire of crime and political corruption" (Grady 230; Strickland and Wortsman 283-284).

Locating *The Phenix City Story*

Around August 1954, screenwriter Crane Wilbur was in town gathering research for a feature film (Thompson 101; Pryor 24). Wilbur's final shooting script, with additional

contribution from Dan Mainwaring, was reportedly ready by Christmas 1954 (Berns 6). Director Phil Karlson and producer David Diamond attended Fuller's winter 1955 trial in Birmingham (Fischler 12). By April, director Phil Karlson and cast were on location in Phenix City, conducting all filming in a tense atmosphere, amid death threats and under the protection of armed guards (Woodless 61). In May, Allied Artists sent reporter Clete Roberts to the South to film interviews with Ed Strickland, Hugh Bentley (whose "home was dynamited"),[50] Hugh Britton, Quinnie Kelly ("Yeah, I carry a gun"), and ("a great southern lady") Albert Patterson's widow, Agnes. These interviews appear in the film's documentary prologue.

The optional newsreel documentary "Eye Witness Report from Phenix City" was offered to exhibitors who were free to screen it prior to the film (Brog. 13). The screenwriters and director do not seem to have been involved. Screenwriter Dan Mainwaring objected to it, saying, "[t]hat was done after I was gone, I never did like that [...] It didn't fit with the picture" (Porfirio 151). However, most reviewers make reference to this documentary, and it seems to have guided reception of the film as a fact-based docudrama. It also soberly grounds the action of the film. Early reports suggest a more fantastical and exploitative opening. A month before filming began, director Phil Karlson hailed that, "[t]he script is great [...] We open on the tombstone of the lawyer. His son's voice tells how he vows to catch the killers and clean up Phenix City" (Mosby 19). Karlson boasted of restaging the Patterson assassination after finding a young eyewitness to the murder who had not previously come forward and who came out of the crowd *during* filming (Higham 13).[51] Karlson even claimed that the actor portraying Albert Patterson,

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[50] All quotations, including song lyrics, are my own transcriptions from the film's soundtrack.

[51] Aside from several errors in Karlson's interview—that John Patterson was personally "prosecuting" the trials and that the revelation "nailed the killers"—Karlson's claim that a new witness came forward during April to May 1955 filming seems unlikely. This would have been during the trial of circuit solicitor Arch Ferrell, which lasted from 18 April to 4 May, 1955. State murder witnesses, with the exception of Johnny Frank Griffin, who was himself murdered on 2 December, 1954, had all already been accounted for and even testified. Cab driver Bill Littleton testified in February, as did his fiancée Mrs. Virginia Lange—a "shapely waitress" at the Blue Goose Café—who contradicted Littleton's account. Labourer Cecil Padgett, 30, testified in February and March, as did cab driver James Ray Taylor, 40 ("Waitress Refutes…" 7). The best

John McIntyre, wore the dead man's clothes.

The film convincingly employs many tropes that seem to derive from documentary filmmaking—primarily through the documentary prologue made up of interviews, narration, montages, as well as by filming exclusively on location and using local townspeople on screen. Throughout the film establishes a somewhat slippery relationship to its real life subject through a range of means borrowed more from exploitation filmmaking ballyhoo (which I will address in greater detail below).

For all its meticulous attention to detail in restaging the assassination, the Allied Artist film *The Phenix City Story* does not hold to the same journalistic ethos as Strickland and Wortsman. Steven Lipkin notes docudramas present a problem of classification and tend to elude scholars—"[a]s works of persuasive power, docudramas ride the fence between narrative and documentary, blending the strategies of both, belonging wholly to neither" (x). As such, *The Phenix City Story*'s plot takes great liberties with history, inventing characters and situations that viewers familiar with the case would find farfetched. During its run in the state's capitol, Montgomery columnist Joe Azbell wrote, "'The Phenix City Story' is worth seeing just to get an idea of what Hollywood can do to a story [...] it is the Hollywood version with John Patterson, now attorney general, as the hero of the movie" (10A). Dramatic scenes that might have General Hanna's takeover of the Phenix City's courthouse and city hall are nowhere to be found in the film. Instead, *The Phenix City Story* offers an impressionistic and selective approach to the history of Phenix City and its clean-up. The result convincingly blends fact-based fiction with more melodramatic elements.

The City Confidential Cycle and the film industry in the mid-1950s

The Phenix City Story is perhaps the best remembered of a number of urban confidential crime thrillers that closely followed the Kefauver hearings that uncovered "evidence of municipal corruption and the influence of organized crime on city governments" (Straw 1997 118). Will Straw traces the term "confidential" as it circulates from pulp exposés beginning with journalists Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer's city confidential books to a series of city confidential

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contender for Karlson's description of "a young feller, about 18 or 19" who "came up and said, 'Mr. Karlson, that isn't the way it was'" is Jimmy Kirkland, who was first to reach Patterson's body, already known to investigators and recreates his role in the film.

films that "mark the passage of film noir to new cycles of cinematic exploitation" (1997 115-116). The urban confidential cycle appeared in the later part of era retrospectively classed as *film noir* by French cinéphiles and film scholars, which in many accounts, including Paul Schrader's oft-cited "Notes on Film Noir," roughly dates from 1941 to 1958. Straw notes that Lait and Mortimer claimed that Senator Estes Kefauver's investigations into urban crime syndicates had been influenced by their 1948 book *New York Confidential: The Lowdown on Its Bright Life*.[52] A more direct descendant was the infamous *Confidential* magazine (1952-1978) and its brand of exposé celebrity journalism. *The Captive City* directed by Robert Wise (United Artists, 1951) is the earliest film in the cycle.[53]

The arrival of the cycle also coincided with an era of Southern (sub)urban development that southern historian C. Vann Woodward termed "the Bulldozer Revolution." Though Michael Lassiter and Kevin Kruse caution that "[t]he Bulldozer Revolution […] was fully a national phenomenon," its impact on the South generated much attention and anxiety (695). David Goldfield reports that in 1930, only 3 in 10 southerners lived in urban spaces; by 1960, the South had become an urban region with one-half of its population living in moderately sized towns or cities (1982 143). At the same time, the urban southern population increased by 156%, compared to the national rate of 82%. Most of this growth occurred in the 1950s.

Film scholar Vivian Sobchack sought to "locate and ground that heterogeneous and ambiguous cinematic grouping called film noir in its contemporaneous social context," and in the transient "spaces of social dislocation, isolation and existential alienation" of wartime and

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[52] After the Phenix City cleanup was underway, a "grieved" Kefauver penned a letter to the pulp magazine *Headquarter Detective* praising Patterson as "a man who has done so much toward building a stronger America" and noted that "the corrupt situation in Phenix City came to the attention of the committee (investigating crime) several times" ("Sen. Kefauver Lauds Patterson… 1).

[53] Will Straw has uncovered promotional efforts for *The Captive City* on the part of Montreal reformers. In these reformers' "embarrassing audacity, in seeking to attach [*themselves*] to an American film cycle that would return none of this recognition," Straw notes that the reform group "simultaneously demeaned itself by clutching onto one of the least consecrated or monumental examples of that cycle" (2008 22).

postwar America (129, 155). The city confidential films diverge from this in that they emphasize location over dislocation and transience, while retaining a noirish gloom and paranoia. However, many of the American crime films of the 1950s set in Southern cities coalesce around ports, waterways and borders—cultivating a sense that the city is vulnerable and permeable at its limits which provide points of entry for criminal activity. Tellingly, unlike many films noir, where children typically do not feature in the adult world of its transient spaces of the nightclubs, hotels and bus stations, in the southern city confidential films, home and family life are wholly integrated with the civic corruption of the urban confidential films—*The Phenix City Story* stages this effectively. The films of this cycle focus on uncovering and exposing criminal aberrations within geographically specific locations. Images of criminal syndicates as cancers or octopus tentacles abound (see figure 4.3).

Columbia's *The Mob* (1951), a noirish crime melodrama anticipates the city confidential cycle's embrace of authority in exposing the workings of multi-state criminal syndicates. In that film, after accidentally letting a gangland murderer go free, a cop (Broderick Crawford) goes undercover posing as a New Orleans dockworker to expose the criminal rackets in another port city. After befriending a fellow dockworker (Richard Kiley) in his rooming house, the officer's brazen manner runs afoul of a middle-level hood (Ernest Borgnine) and his thugs. The film's climax involves demonstrating new police technology, showing the workings of a tracking device. Further, his friend is revealed to be an undercover FBI man also investigating the rackets—thus restoring local police and federal authority over the problem.

The city confidential films aligned themselves with law enforcement—representatives of which, typically local politicians, would often appear in the films in prologues or even in small roles. Films in the cycle traded on the profile of the Kefauver hearings, riding the waning crest of film noir while drawing upon conventions of the gangster film, which itself was coming back into fashion in the 1950s. Some films were ripped from the headlines like *Damn Citizen* (Universal, 1958), about Col. Francis C. Grevemberg's efforts to clean up the Louisiana State police.[54] Other films were fictionally derived from the general Kefauver-mania. *New Orleans*

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[54] *Damn Citizen* is notable both for its score by Henry Mancini and its screenplay written by Stirling Silliphant, who later wrote the enduring crime melodrama of southern racism *In the Heat of the Night*.

Uncensored and *The Houston Story* were both pure fiction made with the cooperation of local city officials about law enforcement busting up rackets by William Castle for Sam Katzman at Columbia in 1955 and 1956. The same studio made *The Miami Story* (1954) and *Miami Exposé* (1956), featuring Senator George A. Smathers and Miami Mayor Randy Christmas, respectively.

The often stilted and solemn appearance of actual state and municipal officials on screen is one of the many perverse pleasures of the urban confidential films. This participation is odd in that the films' narratives are about how rotten the towns were until only just recently—often framed by the paranoid fear that without constant supervision things could easily fall apart. The desperate and melodramatic battle against corruption in the films' narratives lent a sense of an urban grit that countered southern stereotypes of backwardness, on the one hand, and aristocratic charm, on the other. The South, which had lagged behind the rest of the country in urban development for nearly a century, appears on screen through the urban language of film noir. The films can be read in continuity with other longstanding efforts rooted in the social and industrial projects of the New Deal to elevate and more fully integrate the South into an idea of American national identity.

The urban confidential films owe as much to their origin in smaller Hollywood studios that were struggling to gain a foothold in a changing film industry as to the Sunbelt boosterism of the southern political leaders they often featured. As film scholar Thomas Doherty explains, "[f]or the motion picture industry, the 1950s were a frightening decade" (2002 7), with the 1948 Paramount Decree, television, and the suburbs fundamentally changing the way the film industry did business. Peter Lev argues that in the 1950s Hollywood studios could no longer depend on audiences to show up for just any film. Studios turned to package films, placing creative control firmly in the hands of independent producers. Independent producers, whose power (alongside talent and agents) steadily grew as the influence of television continued to reshape the entertainment industry, looked to go big or go broke, financing huge blockbuster projects like the Biblical epics of the 1950s (Lev 2). Some independent producers earned more than studio executives, who no longer served as film producers, but as corporate executives. "Jungle" Sam Katzman was merely one of many independent producers able to capitalize on this power shift. Samuel Bischoff and his producing partner David Diamond sought to do the same.

At the lower end of the film business, the changing power structure offered new challenges and opportunities. Poverty Row studios like Republic and Monogram had been

"founded to serve low-income neighborhoods and rural USA after the double feature redefined exhibition in the middle 1930s" (Gomery 2005 167). Though "[a]s late as 1954, 70 percent of the nation's theatres still operated double-features;" the "first casualty" of a growing blockbuster mentality by the major studios in 1950s was that the studio-made B-picture (supporting feature films) ceased to exist (Lev 25). Katzman, Bischoff, Diamond and a host of others rushed to fill the gap. Double-features were most popular with small neighbourhood theatres—"nabes," in the vernacular of the trade magazines—and independent rural theatres, and these exhibitors had greater freedom to book from independents, many of whom had worked in the exploitation film industry.

Eric Schaeffer explains that in the 1920s and 1930s exploitation filmmaking developed in opposition to and in competition with the mainstream Hollywood film industry, but this competition was waged on a regional or even local basis, with exploitation filmmakers travelling from town to town over long periods of time like a carnival, remodeling an individual film to suit local censorship demands or other considerations. The filmmakers often exploited a socially taboo ideological field and filled the void left by the classical Hollywood cinema. However, as the twentieth century progressed, "the barriers that had been erected between high and low were, ever so slowly, becoming more permeable" (Schaeffer 40). By the fifties, "'exploitation' refer[ed] both to the advertising and promotion that entice an audience into a theatre and to the way the movie then endears itself to [its] audience" (Doherty 2002 2).

Increasingly, exploitation tactics entered the unstable motion picture industry, particularly at its margins (2002 14). Just as Eric Schaeffer maintains that earlier exploitation films "were fueled by moral panics" and that "two of the hallmarks of progressivism—exposé and education—were at the heart of" the classical exploitation film of the 1930s (1999 41, 25), films of the 1950s adapted these strategies for a broader audience. Producers like Katzman favoured an exploitation strategy that dated back to the earliest days of cinema which took "advantage of the transitory public curiosity about a current event [to] reap maximum publicity value from newspapers' continued coverage of the original" (Doherty 2002 56). Doherty also argues that this pattern of topical exploitation and imitation formed the basis for the rock'n'roll movie cycle. The sensational public reaction to "Rock Around the Clock" in the juvenile delinquent social problem film *The Blackboard Jungle* (MGM, 1955) begat *Rock Around the Clock* (Columbia, 1956), which was itself modelled on Clover's 1955 juvenile delinquent film

Teen-Age Crime Wave (56-57). However, as Schaefer contends, "spectacle was the most important component of exploitation films, and issues of continuity, narrative, and logic were a secondary concern" (1999 68).

An important effect of 1950s mainstream exploitation is in the way these films served to relax the Production Code. Even as audiences skewed younger by the end of the decade with the rise of rock'n'roll and Sci-Fi films, motion picture companies used exploitation tactics to court a mainstream adult audience by tackling controversial subject matter (e.g., the child sexuality in Warner Bros.' *Baby Doll*), pushing past boundaries of screen violence and sexuality (homosexuality in British import *Room at the Top*), and outright challenging the Production Code Administration (in 1953 and 1956, United Artists released Otto Preminger's *The Moon Is Blue* and *The Man With the Golden Arm* without a seals from the PCA). As such, Allied Artists emerged in 1947 as wholly owned subsidiary of Monogram to tap into this adult market. The relaxed code and big budget exploitation films coincided with increased screen representation of the twentieth century South—and not its staid antebellum cousin of the *Gone with the Wind* variety. Melodramas by Elia Kazan and Tennessee Williams ably exploited the well-trod stereotype that southerners are more lascivious and sensual than their northern counterparts—leading to a boom in contemporary southern films.

The Phenix City Story **(Allied Artists 1955)**

History as spectacle: Close reading the Phenix City Story

The Phenix City Story was the first of a new arrangement that independent producers Samuel Bischoff and David Diamond had struck up with Allied Artists. Prior to release AA expressed confidence that the film would be its greatest success to date (Allen "Studio Size-ups" 10). However, earlier reports about *The Phenix City Story* suggested a very different film. Bischoff promised that the film would be in Technicolor and CinemaScope, suggesting a prestigious blockbuster and not the noirish crime melodrama the film became (Allen 10).[55] Carrying the generic title, "Wide Open Town," the film was supposed to exploit the star power

[55] Though a few Technicolor Cinemascope crime melodramas like the 1955 films *Bad Day at Black Rock* (MGM) or *Violent Saturday* (20th Century Fox) were shot on location—Lone Pine, California, and beautiful Bisbee, Arizona, respectively—none of the city confidential films were shot in colour.

of Glenn Ford, Edward G. Robinson and George Raft, with Crane Wilbur both writing and directing (Allen 13; Pryor 24).[56] Made quickly and relatively cheaply for $350,000, the finished film drew upon the talents of New York stage and television actors, with behind-the-camera made up of industry veterans like director Phil Karlson and screenwriters Wilbur and Daniel Mainwaring ("Product Boost Due…" 16).[57] Even without big budget extravagances and name-draw talent, the film would become "the company's biggest money maker" (L. Coulter 16).

Figures 4.8 & 4.9—Actual B-girl Bonnie Lou Sharper testifying about the B-girl racket (Seigenthaler, "Sins..." 9). B-girls would entice male visitors into buying watered down drinks at inflated prices. Though she had only a small role in the film, chanteuse Meg Myles appears in most promotional material for the film, as in this newspaper ad in the 25 September 1955 *Montgomery Advertiser-Journal*.

Motion Picture Daily hailed *The Phenix City Story* as "a picture which will rate in importance as a box office attraction with such contemporaries as 'On The Waterfront' and 'The Blackboard Jungle' [*and whose e*]xploitation opportunities are unlimited" (Berns 1). Many critics emphasized message-driven readings of the film that blurred the lines between film and

[56] Wilbur was the nephew of Tyrone Power, Sr., whose father, an Irish actor, journeyed the area that would become Phenix City in 1833, which he says locals called "Sodom." The elder Power's reminiscences about the "minions o' the moon, outlaws [...] [g]amblers and other desperate men" he found there are cited by many Phenix City sources (Grady 1; Griffin 22-23).

[57] William Boddy reports "Mainwaring worked on the project with director Don Siegel before Siegel left the film due to a salary dispute" while Wilbur had done all of the on-location research.

history. However, as *Variety* observed, "Vice, Southern style" receives "the exposé treatment in" *The Phenix City Story* and the institutional context discussed above helps to explain both the film's success and its infidelity to the history it portrays (Brog. 6).

"Ripped from the headlines," the adult crime melodrama offers recreations of actual events distilled into a series of discrete spectacles. Spectacle abounds: with the documentary prelude, disclaimer, credits appearing over a collage of the covers of national magazines laid out as if on the nation's coffee table, narration over a montage explaining Phenix City history and a teasing performance by Meg Myles of the "Phenix City Blues," a full twenty minutes of screen time—or, twenty per cent of the total running time—elapse before the film proper begins. Eric Schaeffer notes "most exploitation films began with a square-up, a prefatory statement about the social or moral ills the film claimed to combat" and uses *The Phenix City Story* as a later example (69).

In the voice-over immediately after *The Phenix City Story*'s opening titles, John Patterson (voiced by actor Richard Kiley) advises viewers about the economics of Phenix City:

> You wouldn't think to look at it that [*Phenix City's*] income from one industry alone was $100 million a year [...] An industry run by men I went to school with. Their fathers ran it and their fathers' fathers before them. An industry that made Phenix City the most vicious town in the United States. That industry was *VICE*!

Explicitly this is what *The Phenix City Story* is about: the collapse of a tyrannical criminal economic enterprise under the weight of popular political resistance from a select few of the town's citizenry. From this introduction, the film's central tension is rooted in a failing regional economy: the moral drama between honest work—of which there is very little—and the only work on offer in a southern community characterized by inequality and limited economic horizons. All of this appears in the collected press coverage of Phenix City: one reporter had noted, "[a]side from a small fertilizer plant and a karolin firm, the town had only one industry—vice." (Burton 6-1).

The narration provides a bridge between the fictional crime film and the pseudo-documentary tone of the pre-credit sequence. Rather than focus on the ongoing tenuous transition of power away from the criminal enterprise to an industrial base that would allow the region to share in national postwar economic prosperity, the film traces how the town arrived at its uncertain present. Amid the sensationalism of its subject matter (and in its representation of

violence, sexuality and sin), the film grounds its argument about the events in Phenix City, Alabama, in the cause and effect logic of the lurid economies of its underground vice industries.

On the word "VICE!," the strain of the horns from the film's original song blare. With the exception of some women hanging off of soldiers in the background, in the film, Meg Myles and the song serve as the only analogue of Phenix City's "bad old days" of illegal liquor and easy women ("Sawdust trail…" 47). Despite her minor role, "vivacious and curvaceous" chanteuse and pin-up Meg Myles was featured as an attraction all herself—personally touring nightclubs alongside the film in Chicago, Montreal, and other cities around the time of its release (Herman 7; Holmes 18; Barris 27). Posters and print advertising campaigns for the film liberally used Myles' image. *Variety* similarly objectifies her, reporting that the "title tune cleffed by Harold Spina is given a sex pitch by the incredibly busty Meg Myles" (Brog. 13). Interestingly, though it was attended by a host of local dignitaries, most of the *Phenix-Girard Journal*'s coverage of the film's gala premiere was about "the flame-haired" Myles, who also made a series of promotional appearances around town ("Gala Premiere..." 1).

The "Phenix City Blues" is written as a sort of back-and-forth between Myles cooing "I love your, your ever-lovin', lovin' arms" in a slow tempo and strident verses that are sung in unison by the all-male band and reflect upon the Phenix City vice set-up in the past tense. The band barks in one verse: "Tell me, tell me have you heard the news? / You can't go sinnin' there no more they put a big fat padlock on the door, so you can lose those Phenix City Blues." Performed with Myles slinking through a crowd of uniformed men while removing elbow length gloves—a hint of the stripteasers who worked at nightclubs like Ma Beachie's—the sequence invites audiences to both imagine Phenix City's illicit past with the foreknowledge that it no longer exists.

Though infamous for its prostitution and gambling, violent spectacle dominates the celluloid Phenix City and a mood of menacing foreboding immediately supersedes the gaiety of the song. As *Variety* observes, "[t]here's quite a bit of violence in the footage. Maybe it didn't always happen exactly as shown in the film, but the record book shows parallel violence did occur, so there's some dramatic justification for the emphasis in the script" (Brog. 13).

In the fifties, Phil Karlson directed a number of taut dark violent crime and action melodramas like *Kansas City Confidential* (United Artists, 1952), *99 River Street* (United Artists, 1953) and *5 Against the House* (Columbia 1955). In *The Phenix City Story*, the fictional

characters exist to absorb melodramatic violence and allow us to bear witness to these events.

Figure 4.10—Collage of images from *The Phenix City Story* showing (clockwise), the film's title over a collage of national magazine coverage, a recreation of Albert Patterson's campaign office, the fictional Ellie Rhodes fleeing the scene of the assassination, Albert Patterson in his car moments after the gun is fired, and the shocking death of Zeke Ward's daughter.

Economic conflict as romantic conflict

"Place your bets, boys!"—spoken by Cassie (Jean Carson), the house manager of the backroom at a sleazy honky-tonk called the Poppy Club—is the first dialogue heard in the film after the song. The camera follows Cassie as she surveys the densely-packed gaming room. It is

a grim environment. There's none of the glamour and lights of modern Las Vegas-style casinos. Bluesy piano music plays as men, mostly soldiers in uniform, slouch over gaming tables.

Cassie zeroes in on Fred Gage (Biff McGuire) sitting at a gaming table helmed by Ellie Rhodes (Kathryn Grant), who stands out wearing a conservative dark dress. "Ed Gage's boy," as Cassie calls him, is not gambling. From across the bar, Cassie points out "young Gage" to the club's bouncer Clem Wilson (John Larch in his film debut). The camera stays with Wilson's tense stare at the couple.

Money and Ellie's job are causing trouble between them. We learn that working for the club's owner Rhett Tanner, Ellie makes two hundred dollars a week and she explains that "the way things are at home, we can't get along for less." Fred counters that he is going to make fifty dollars a week working in the Patterson's law office once he finishes law school and passes the bar. When he suggests that the place might not be around for too much longer, Ellie tells Fred, "nobody's ever doing anything about [Phenix City], there's too much profit."

Just then, a customer complains, "the cards are marked!" The camera returns to Clem Wilson, whose intensity simmers over as he leaps into action, and he and another man beat the customer. Fred starts up, but Ellie cautions him, "stay out of it; you want to wind up in the river?" In a wide low angle shot from across the street, we see Wilson and the other man drop the customer out in front of the Poppy Club. Surprisingly, it appears to be broad daylight outside, and people passing by do not even seem to react.

Fred tries to persuade Ellie to leave with him, but a soldier has sat down to gamble, and they part at an impasse. As Fred leaves the club, African American janitor Zeke Ward (James Edwards), under the guise of asking for matches, warns him that, "Mr. Tanner might not take too kindly to Ed Gage's boy being around." Police arrive and rather than help the ejected customer, they load him into a squad car and drive off.

The first proper scene introduces the basic dramatic forces of the gamblers and the people who oppose them, but as in the relationship between Ellie and Fred, things are complicated. Importantly, Ellie and Fred are fictional constructs with no counterpart to the Patterson murder or Phenix City clean-up. Ellie Rhodes and Fred Gage are the star crossed lovers of classical Hollywood clichés. She tells the serviceman that she and Fred had gone to kindergarten together—aligning their relationship with something wholesome and innocent. However, the couple's conversation is framed by Clem Wilson's surveillance, and as a crisis for the gambling

house, casting a menacing pall on the young couple.

Money stands in the way of the young couple's happiness, and as per the economic thesis of the film—that the town's only industry is vice—Ellie Rhodes is supporting her family the only way that she can. Fred Gage has chosen another, less remunerative, path—practicing law with Albert Patterson. Cassie and Zeke Ward both mention his father, Ed Gage, who later is revealed to be a (fictional) member of the RBA. Ellie's job as a dealer is itself a softer version of the jobs available to women in Phenix City. According to Strickland and Wortsman and numerous magazine exposés, women in Phenix City dives, like the fictional Poppy Club, most often worked as B-girls—women hired by the club to get men drunk and lure them into the backroom where they could lose their money—as well as strippers and prostitutes. Prostitution mostly occurred outside of town, in remote honky tonks, and in reality was a form of sexual slavery (Barnes 248).[58]

Fred and Ellie also exist for one melodramatic purpose: to die. Their deaths provide melodramatic spectacle and propel the narrative forward while serving as an emblem of the violence of Phenix City even as the film departs from actual events. Janitor Zeke Ward, another fictional character introduced in these scenes will also be crucial to this melodrama. Like Ellie Rhodes, whose "bright eyes" are "always watching," according to later narration, Zeke Ward can observe and understand the goings on in the Poppy Club.

Melodramatic Heroes and Villains

The next scene finds Rhett Tanner (Edward Andrews) at his desk, toying with the idea of racing turtles for money. Informed of the fracas, Tanner blithely saunters through the club and the garage behind it, where he receives a message from someone named Jeb that "a meeting" is happening tonight. The camera follows his long journey over to pay a visit to Albert Patterson. As he walks the busy streets, he meets two actual Phenix Citizens, both of whom receive screen credit: "Girly Joint proprietress" Ma Beachie and James E. Seymour of Seymour's Ready-to-

[58] In addition to the many country girls coerced into prostitution by local law enforcement, at Cliff's Fish Camp "girls were kept virtual prisoners from the 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. work shift" ("2 Tell of..." 5). At least 500 and as many as 1000 prostitutes were operating in Phenix City in 1954, in what the National Guard investigation estimates was a two million dollar a year industry (McGlasson 12; Strickland and Wortsman 32, 98).

Wear dress shop in the Coulter Building ("Sawdust trail… 47"). The busy street is filled with uniformed men accompanied by women in evening dresses. Both the traveling shot and cameos work to firmly locate the docudrama, taking full advantage of the location shooting, while positioning its villains within the community and its institutions: Tanner even pays the parking meter before he and Seymour talk about a sermon he had missed. The leisurely pace of these early scenes grounds the action in the mundane detail of small town life and heightens the threat of violence lurking beneath small town civility.

The gangsters of Phenix City do not fit the stereotype of the ethnic city types like James Cagney's fast-talking, Yiddish-speaking Irish-American in *The Public Enemy*, or Edward G. Robinson's "Rico" in *Little Caesar* (both Warner Bros., 1931), or East Coast Italian-American Mafioso as established by testimony during the Kefauver hearings. Described by reviewers as "an idiotic killer" and "moronic bouncer" (Brog 13; Soanes 22), John Larch's Clem Wilson is a tough lower class southern type who wears a cowboy hat over checkered short-sleeved shirts and he is frequently seen chewing on toothpick. Georgia-born Edward Andrews—the only southerner of the principal cast—plays Rhett Tanner with a soft-spokenness and bemused air that ingratiates him to townspeople. His first name's association with *Gone with the Wind* alludes to cinematic southerness. The pressbook describes him as "a fictitious character, vice leader and instigator of the Patterson murder" (*Phenix City: Then and Now* 2). It was the 39-year-old theatre actor's first film. While Rhett Tanner and Clem Wilson perform crimes attributed to Phenix City gambler Hoyt Shepherd and deputy sheriff Albert Fuller, similarities are vague.[59]

Rhett Tanner visits Albert Patterson to find out if he has gone in with the RBA reformers. At this point, Patterson is not interested in joining either side. Leaving, Tanner runs into RBA member Hugh Britton (George Mitchell) and his son, and ambiguously threatens them ("that's a nice looking boy you got there"). Both of the RBA's Hughs—Bentley and Britton—had appeared in the film's documentary prologue and reappear played by actors as fictional characters in the film. Their efforts against the vice industry are greatly diminished in the film in service of focusing on the father-son heroics of the Pattersons.

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[59] Unlike Rhett Tanner, Hoyt Shepherd was cooperative with investigators into Patterson's murder and arranged a clandestine meeting in a secluded wooded area with the governor's special counsel MacDonald Gallion to provide information about Albert Fuller (Trest 151-152).

In the film, while the people behind the vice industry have been established from the first scene and its ill effects have been foreshadowed, Albert Patterson and other characters are blind to the melodrama in which they participate. Albert next meets son John and his family at the airport. The younger Patterson (Richard Kiley) arrives in uniform, returning from Germany where was he prosecuting "war criminals who deserved prosecuting."[60] "The war" itself is referenced as the paradigm of a clear melodramatic conflict between good and evil—which no doubt would have purchase with the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who passed through both Fort Benning and Phenix City.

The Pattersons occupy three different positions in the film. Albert is resigned to how Phenix City "always has been" and wants to stay out of any conflict. John is similarly unaware of how bad things have become and believes most of the activity is confined to 14th street, which they drive past on their way to the Patterson home. There, he promises his wife, Mary Jo, "way up here you won't even know that 14th street exists." She is afraid and disgusted by Phenix City and only wants to leave, causing strain in their marriage. The film offers a conversion narrative, in which events compel characters to the cause of the RBA.

The RBA reformers are inaccurately characterized as a poor vigilante group who intend to meet gangster force with force (Albert explains, "Mob violence even in the hands of decent people solves nothing"). Ed Gage (Truman Smith) and Hugh Britton arrive at the Patterson home to invite Albert to the RBA meeting. Albert declines, but the men offer to drive John downtown so he can buy baby oil. Small details and delicate staging emphasize the mounting danger: when Gage goes for his pipe, he pulls a gun out of his pocket and sets it down on the Pattersons' patio furniture.

When the reformers attempt to park in between the Coulter Building and the Elite Café, Clem Wilson and other thuggish types attack the group while a beat cop stands by looking on.

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[60] While the film compresses the action, these expository scenes accurately present fact. Albert Patterson had represented gangsters in prominent murder and divorce trials. He also served as a state senator with the support of the Phenix City machine, before losing their support in a subsequent election. John Patterson was back and forth between his father's law practice in Phenix City and distinguished service in World War II, Korea and as an Army JAG lawyer in Germany (Howard, Trest).

This is the film's first echo of the 1952 Election Day beatings. John Patterson intervenes, only to be manhandled by the policeman as the assailants flee unpunished. Patterson recognizes Clem Wilson from his schooldays and heads for the Poppy Club, as the soundtrack swells with the "Phenix City Blues" again in the background.


Figures 4.11, 4.12 & 4.13—RBA members Hugh Bentley, son Hughbo, and Hugh Britton and several journalists were beaten outside a polling station during the 6 May, 1952 election. *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* photographer Anne Robertson was on hand and two of her photographs are Fig. 4.11 and 4.12. Fig. 4.13 shows a production still shows one of the recreations of the beating used in a montage in *The Phenix City Story*.

Patterson meets Fred Gage out front and tells him his dad was attacked. Inside the club, Patterson and Clem Wilson get into a rousing fistfight in the dice room, as Rhett Tanner, Cassie and Zeke Ward look on and soldiers cheer. Much of the action is framed from low angle shots under a gambling table. At one point, felled by a punch from Patterson, Wilson crashes through the table on top of the camera. Wilson stumbles to his feet and pulls out a blackjack, but Zeke trips him with his broom. Bloodied, Patterson leaves with Zeke Ward in Fred Gage's car. They drive across the 10th Avenue bridge and let Zeke Ward off at his home, promising to help him find new work.

One of the things *The Phenix City Story* does incredibly effectively is reducing the action to a few key locations, chiefly, the Poppy Club on 14th Street (a fictional club built up for the film), the Patterson family home on Pine Tree Drive and Zeke Ward's modest home by the 10th Avenue bridge.[61] While the landscape is not specifically urban, the volume of people and traffic on the streets both day and night does not suggest a sleepy small town. At night, the dark, neon-lit streets suggest the vocabulary of films noir and urban crime. The beating of the RBA men marks the parking lot between the Coulter Building and the Elite Café on 5th Avenue—the site

[61] Even today, many of these locations remain easy to find in Phenix City.

of Albert Patterson's murder—as a space of violence. The film will return to these locations again and again.

After the fight, Patterson brings his father to that night's RBA meeting, which is taking place at the Gunter Insurance Agency next to the Elite Café. Initially, the RBA of the film are a vigilante group intent on fighting fire with fire. John Patterson persuades them to try appealing to the "intelligence and decency of the voters in this state" through the ballot box by running his father for Attorney General. He makes a rousing speech quoting the maxim about "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Albert Patterson resists the idea and leaves, suggesting they could all get killed. (The film exaggerates the younger Patterson's enthusiasm and involvement in the RBA. When the real John Patterson returned from Germany, his father was already campaigning for Attorney General).

The next morning, the film cuts to Rhett Tanner arriving at the Phenix City Athletic Club, Steam Baths and Body Conditioning. Again, the action proceeds in mundane detail. Tanner sees a holster and gun hanging in the dressing rooms—implying a policeman is present. He enters the steam room filled with four middle-aged white men in towels and slippers, sweating under a few lamps. The steam bath at the Columbus YMCA did feature in the murder investigation, as Albert Fuller claims he was there about four hours before the murder (Grady 38), but in the film this is expanded and the steam room serves as an important location—the image of the 'smoke'-filled backroom where the villains conspire. Here a crew (Jim, Harry and Jeb) assemble to plan their next action. Jeb Bassett (Allen Nourse), who had been at the RBA meeting, informs on his friends, telling the gangsters what transpired at the RBA meeting. Barton, the policeman (played by an uncredited Arthur Tell), and Tanner are upset by the news that the Pattersons attended. Tanner plots that the men should "give him the full test." This threat cues ominous music and a montage of furtive glances from each of the men in the steam room. Barton then exits.

"The Full Test"

After Barton leaves the music continues over shots of a car near where they had dropped Zeke off the night before. A little African American girl is skipping across the 10th Avenue bridge. Framed from a low angle approximating the girl's height, Clem Wilson suddenly appears and asks, "ain't you Zeke Ward's kid?" Wilson's question provides narrative motivation for what otherwise appears to be senseless racial violence. He abducts her. The film abruptly cuts away from a downward angle shot of the little girl frantically screaming and slapping

Wilson (nearly cinematically assuming his point of view) to a low angle wide shot of a car wildly swerving down a suburban street tossing a body (rather obviously a dummy in the little girl's dress) out of the car and onto the lawn of the Patterson family where two Patterson children, a boy and a baby girl in a crib, are playing. In a single shot, the camera abruptly pans as the body falls from the car to Patterson children's reaction.

The film immediately cuts away from this to the car driving erratically through a suburban neighbourhood. Fred and Ed Gage happen to be parked in a driveway, as though just arriving home. The car knocks over their trash can and then hits a teenage boy on a bicycle. The elder Gage goes to check on the boy (the results of which we will never learn), while Fred pursues the car. The film cuts from Ed Gage running after the boy to a horrific image of Zeke Ward's little girl, laying the ground with her eyes wide open and blood around her head. From this low angle, the camera pans over to the Patterson house, where the boy is crying, "[t]here on the lawn, Mommy. There it is, there it is." John and Albert emerge and investigate; finding that pinned to the girl's body is a note in block text reading, "THIS WILL HAPPEN TO YOUR KIDS TOO." John asks, "who is she?" and Albert responds, "she's Zeke's baby."

If the motivation appears bizarre—a black janitor's daughter is killed as a warning to the family of white reformers, the film seems to suggest that no one—black or white—is safe in this path of destruction brought on by Tanner and gang. The issues this scene introduces for racial melodrama and the experience of the fictional African American Ward family in the film will be discussed in much greater detail in the next chapter. Understanding the film will require us to suspend the moral outrage at the film's casual racism that we as modern viewers absolutely should feel and accept this rationale as justification for the murder within the film, where it is met with shock and horror.

In this scene, the war with gangsters has come home. Back inside the Patterson house, the children are still crying, and Mary Jo is screaming and packing a bag. John calls the police and tries to console Mary Jo. They argue, he tells her, "there's a war on, I can't run away."

"The violent drama of "America's wickedest city"...and how it was smashed!"[62]

This event—the "full test" of the Phenix City mob—sets off a chain of violent events that

[62] Tag line from a newspaper ad featured in the *Montgomery Advertiser* ("The Phenix City Story Starts TODAY," 7B).

accelerates the film's plot. The violence of this scene, seemingly too sensational to be ignored, is quickly supplanted. The film again cuts away to Fred Gage's pursuit of the runaway car. Within the world of the film there does not seem to be any expectation that anyone will be punished for killing Zeke Ward's daughter. The action merely proceeds from here in a torrent of quick action, occasionally presented in a montage under narration.

Literary scholar Peter Brooks famously argued that melodrama is "the drama of a recognition"—making "virtue visible and acknowledged" (27). In adventure stories, Brooks adds that the recognition "must be the stuff of a heightened drama" (6). For film scholar Linda Williams, "[m]elodrama involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of 'too late' and 'in the nick of time'" (1998: 69). The action of the film repeatedly and relentlessly exposes villainy while placing sympathetic characters in peril.

Fred Gage finds the car in the parking garage behind the Poppy Club. He sees blood on its fender and investigates the interior, but he is suddenly pistol whipped by Clem Wilson. Ed Gage and Ellie Rhodes go to City Hall and Police Headquarters in hopes of finding him. The officer on duty, the same fat officer on the phone, informs them that they have found the boy "laying in a ditch, just outside of town." At Cobb Memorial Hospital (sign displayed), they meet a hospital worker, again played by a local non-actor, who asks where they want the body sent, suddenly interrupting herself without pause to say, "oh, I'm terribly sorry—forgive me—I thought you knew, you see… he was dead on arrival." A trial results in the acquittal of Fred's murderer, Clem Wilson.

The film presents melodramatic virtue much less dogmatically than it does its villains. As in the western genre, virtue reveals itself both in the everyday humanity and decency the characters demonstrate through their actions and in the way its heroes begrudgingly accept the task of righteousness. The central melodrama of the film's first half is in the conversion of Albert Patterson to the cause of defeating the mob. It is only when justice fails for both Zeke Ward's daughter and Fred Gage during this trial scene—a staple of southern films—that Albert Patterson finally decides to run for Attorney General. Narration, from the character of John Patterson, explains, "The decision had been made. From herein it was war." At this point, the film shifts its attention to the acceleration of that war.

A montage details examples of violence and intimidation that met the campaign for the Attorney General's office. Many of these short scenes were ideal for location filming—showing

Albert and John Patterson making speeches before large crowds of locals. Real violence is restaged in the Albert Patterson office fire, and, for the second time in the film, the election beatings of 1952. The RBA's Hugh Bentley (played by actor Otto Hulett) makes a speech in front of WDAK-TV cameras.[63] The film cuts to the Bentley children watching him on TV, while a man outside lights a stick of dynamite and a cheap imitation of the explosion follows. John Patterson makes a fictional rousing speech at night on 14th Street:

> So now you can blame yourselves for gambling, prostitution, dope peddling, rape. Men, women and children murdered. Offices burned and homes bombed. And where does this happen? In some dictatorship across the sea? No! It's right here, in your town. In our Alabama, our America. Did I say your town? Well, that's a laugh. Phenix City is owned, body and soul, by Tanner, Jenkins, Drew and the rest of the mob.

He calls out the film's fictional gangsters by name (Tanner, Jenkins, Drew, Clem Wilson and Rupe) as they watch the speech from outside of the Poppy Club. The events of election day 1954 feature in another montage with provocative women talking to men outside polling stations, a man drunk on the ground, physical intimidation as thugs trip voters and another man blocking voters from entering the voting area while the police office play cards.

The film then returns to the steam room where Tanner, Barton and other men are reading the election returns announcing Patterson's victory. Tanner reminds the crew that Patterson "hasn't been sworn in yet." Again, the steam room portends violence.

Seeing suspicious activity at the Poppy Club, Ellie Rhodes phones to warn Albert Patterson. John catches Albert hanging up the phone, but his father does not tell him about the warning. John asks about his statement to a "'ladies' club last night" where "you said you didn't believe you stood a chance in a hundred to be sworn in" (a quote from the real Albert Patterson under the same circumstances). Albert brushes it off, asking, "Oh, did I say that? It's just that they looked so darn pleased with themselves." He leaves.

Back at the Poppy Club, Ellie's "bright eyes" observe the mob scrambling around the club. Just as Jeb Bassett, the RBA traitor tells them, "it's got to happen tonight," Ellie is caught

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[63] WDAK has been a Columbus, Georgia, radio station since 1940. It began broadcasting as a television station in 1953 for a number of years, until it sold its television interest. Today, it mostly programs syndicated right-wing talk radio.

by Cassie. She flees, seeking Albert Patterson. From a phone booth, she calls, but reaches John.

A dissolve shows a wide shot of a man in silhouette waiting, leaning on a parking meter in front of the Coulter building. Albert Patterson exits and the man follows him. Ellie arrives just across the street. In a heavily shadowed shot of the parking lot from Ellie's point of view, another man approaches Patterson as he gets in his car and quickly three gunshots are fired (in fact, four shots were fired, one missed). The film intercuts between Ellie as she runs across the street, directly toward the camera and a tight shot of Patterson seated in the car. The first gunshot is fired in a close-up of Albert Patterson's stunned expression, then the films to cuts to a close-up of Ellie's horrified reaction, before returning back to Patterson in the car receiving the last of the bullets and finally, Ellie screaming as she realizes what is happening. The soundtrack is silent, but for the sounds of Ellie's footsteps until the gunshots. Ellie runs and the men flee back into the alley, but one silhouette is recognizable as Clem Wilson. Blood drips from Patterson's mouth in a long shot from a low angle, and he staggers to the sidewalk falling on the curb in front of Seymour's dress shop.[64] Jimmy Kirkland, an actual witness and the first person to reach the body, recreates his role, asking, "Hey! That's Mr. Patterson, who shot you Mr. Patterson? Who shot you?" The camera cuts to a wide angle that echoes the point of view of a famous press photograph taken from further south on 5th avenue.[65]

This mostly faithful recreation of the assassination of Albert Patterson observes many of the pertinent legal details while being framed within the fictional point of view of Ellie Rhodes. These scenes around the assassinations are joined with soft dissolves whereas the violence intercuts sharply between close-ups.[66] As before with the girl deposited at the Patterson's house, the action of the film shifts away from this real violence to follow fictional narrative threads, as

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[64] The documentary *In the Wake of the Assassins* will intercut these shots with interview footage of Ray Jenkins presentation of the theory that Ferrell used Fuller's gun to kill Patterson.

[65] The image is widely reproduced in retrospective coverage of the events and graces the dust jacket Margaret Ann Barnes's book *The Tragedy and the Triumph of Phenix City, Alabama*.

[66] These dissolves are significant and sparse. In an interview, co-screenwriter Dan Mainwaring explains that his draft of the script had included many dissolves, but for "the same reason the [French] new wave didn't use dissolves"—they were expensive at $75 each—producer Bischoff cut them out (Porfirio 150-151).

both heroes and villains search for Ellie Rhodes. From the crowd shot, the film dissolves to Rhett Tanner in a shadowy office on the phone telling someone on the other end to find her. Next, John Patterson reacts to news of his father's murder from Ed Gage. They go to the funeral parlor, where a huge crowd (again made up of real Phenix Citizens) has assembled. Out front, Britton, Bentley and the RBA men are fired up talking about violent retribution.[67] RBA traitor Jeb Bassett arrives late. Hugh Bentley, quite unlike the mild-mannered Columbus sporting goods salesman and Sunday school instructor seen in the film's documentary prologue, bellows "the only law the Phenix City mob respects comes out of the muzzle of a gun." John Patterson leaves the funeral home and calms the mob, saying, "the days of the vigilantes are over, my dad said that. What we need now is the good opinion of decent people all over this state, but we won't get it with riots and bloodshed." He is interrupted by a phone call from Ellie Rhodes. He tells Jeb, she's "at Zeke Ward's place." Jeb immediately calls Rhett.

Again the soundtrack goes quiet. Patterson parks and runs across the 10th Avenue bridge.[68] The lights are off when Patterson enters Zeke's home. The lights abruptly turn on and and Tanner's men attack him. Zeke and his wife Helen (played by Helen Martin) have already been beaten and restrained. Zeke intervenes as Patterson fights Clem Wilson. He breaks a chair over the other thug. Zeke directs John to the back porch cellar, where he finds Ellie Rhodes is already dead. Leaving through a side door, he happens to catch Rhett Tanner outside. Tanner reaches for a gun, but Patterson leaps at him. The film cuts back inside where Zeke is about to club Clem Wilson to death with a rifle. His wife screams and stops him.

Outside, Patterson and Tanner tumble toward the creek. Tanner confesses to Ellie's murder but denies killing Albert Patterson. Zeke comes into the creek to dissuade John Patterson from killing Tanner by telling him how his wife had just stopped him from killing Clem Wilson. Zeke makes a long speech while restraining Patterson, telling him his wife had said, "we've been

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[67] In September 1954, a mid-western journalist observed: "Hugh Britton is no coward, but he's a sensible man. That's why he held a gun on this reporter while he was being interviewed. That's why he keeps a gun handy whenever he's talking to any stranger, or walking along the Phenix City streets" (Burton 6-1).

[68] In Phenix City, efforts are underway to preserve the 10th Avenue bridge, with supporters citing its appearance in the film.

fighting against things like this. All our lives we been fighting against people taking the law into their own hands." The film cuts to a close-up of Zeke Ward cradling a bloody and frenzied Patterson who seems to realize what he is saying. As the music swells, they carry Tanner out of the river and Patterson thanks Zeke.

Figure 4.14—Production still showing John Patterson discovering that he is too late to save Ellie Rhodes.

Patterson walks through the crowd on his way back to the funeral parlor and in quick succession punches the traitor Jeb Bassett and grabs the telephone: "get me the state capitol, it's an emergency!" With phone in hand, he calls for the person on the other end to "send us out," referring to martial law, soliciting the townspeople's cheers of support. The film's final montage shows the arrival of the National Guard as a full scale military invasion into vice hot spots and gambling dens. Slot machines and "the devices that cheated them" are smashed and burned in a field. Images of the bonfire dissolves to a shot of a car filled with men in hats turning the corner

in a suburban neighbourhood under the narration, "but how long would it last? The evil men who had ruled our lives for so long were still out there. Waiting their moment to come back." Here the film dissolves through a door of the Attorney General's office to reveal the narrator of the film has been the film's John Patterson all along. The camera tracks in on actor Richard Kiley as he continues, "the people of Alabama elected me attorney general in my father's place with two sacred duties to perform: to seek out and bring to justice the murderers of my father and to keep the gambling hells of Phenix City firmly closed forever. With God's help, I shall not fail." "The End" appears over the same collage of magazines from the opening titles.

Conclusion

The film is an uneasy combination of action melodrama and the actual history of Phenix City. The film has an unusual ending: an invitation to mob violence gives way to a personal vengeance mission, which is diffused only by the intervention of an African American man who has also lost a family member. The hero returns after showing mercy for the villain to incite the mob—still plenty warmed up—to uncharacteristically embrace the intervention of the state, followed by a montage of state violence against the gambling empire. This intervention offers only a tenuous resolution, at best. Finally, Patterson's election provides continuity with his father's promise and resolves the collective action of the RBA by legitimizing it by enshrining it within state office. The mob scene outside the funeral home seems to resemble the kind of scene Alabama Governor Gordon Persons feared might develop in Phenix City when he dispatched General Hanna there on learning of the assassination, but no such mob formed. The film seems to offer the emotional energy behind the formation of a lynch mob without the lynching and without addressing the history of mob violence and vigilantism in the South and the racial dynamics typically involved. Further, countering the oft-noted southern spirit of independence and tradition of states' rights, the invasion of the National Guard is celebrated as bringing a benevolent force of the state, and they are celebrated like the cavalry of the frontier myth.[69]

[69] This is a far cry from the role the Alabama National Guard would play later in American history. According to Brigadier General Richard F. Allen, the men of the Alabama Air and Army National Guard (which was segregated until the Kennedy administration) had participated in every significant American military action from the War of 1812 through present day adventures in the Middle East. The Guard played decisive roles in Cold War American politics

Melodrama can reveal social inequity, but suggesting change is more challenging. Linda Williams explains, "[m]elodrama does not always move [...] toward a new future; very often it moves to restore some semblance of a lost past. To this degree melodrama can be considered as an inherently conservative and backward-looking form even as it progressively tackles basic problems of social inequity" (2001 36). This is what happens at the end of the film. In the press coverage of the clean-up and even historical retrospectives, many voices echo reporter Douglass Cater's view that "[t]he discouraging thing about Phenix City is that it has no proud traditions to hark back to" (25). These accounts paint Phenix City as a town whose very primordial existence was tainted dating to its earliest history. In reality, as Patterson would tell reporter Ray Jenkins on the twentieth anniversary of his father's assassination, "[a]nytime you have a state border situation and a big military base, you have the necessary elements for the kind of thing that's happened in Phenix City" (1974 18). Indeed, military base towns like Aiken, South Carolina, and areas near state borders between dry and wet counties like the Mississippi-Tennessee State Line area absorbed much of Phenix City's prostitution and liquor trade.

No one expected the film to effect change within the community. By the time the movie began filming in April 1955, the National Guard were gone, the trial of Patterson's accused murderers was underway and two of Phenix City's most visible crime figures, Hoyt Shepherd and his partner Jimmie Matthews, were already out of prison having paid their fines and served their time ("Shepherd, Matthews Walk…" 2). Shortly before the film's premiere, disgraced Sheriff Ralph Matthews bought a local steak house ("Ralph Mathews, Jr...." 1).

Many locals believed that Phenix City needed to manage its image as well as its future and the film was used to serve those interests, putting the past into the past tense. The film's 19 July, 1955 premiere was a grand event. With much ballyhoo, Allied Artists scheduled the premiere to occur simultaneously on four screens in three states: the Palace Theatre—mere steps from the crime scene; the Phenix City Drive-in; Columbus' Georgian theatre; and at the Woods

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in the years following Phenix City's reformation: members of Alabama's Air National Guard would be surreptitiously loaned out to the CIA by Governor John M. Patterson to invade Cuba in the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 (four of these pilots would be killed by Cuban forces). Perhaps most importantly, Patterson's successor, George Wallace, would call in the Alabama Army National Guard to prevent the integration of the University of Alabama in 1964.

in Chicago ("Set Premiere…" 3; "'Phenix City' in 4-House Bow" 25). Sounding more like a charity event than a film premiere, *Motion Picture Daily* reported "all of the proceeds from the world premieres [*would go*] into a fund to continue the fight to keep this city free of crime and vice" ("Atty. Gen. Praises…" 10). AA also announced a special advance screening for "members of the Senate and House of Representatives and some top officials of the Federal law enforcement agencies" in Washington ("Solons to See…" 3). These screenings sold the film's social value as a message picture. Like many southern cities, Phenix City was fighting to win industry. Local cooperation in the making of *The Phenix City Story* came at a price. Local interests attempted to use the film to promote the Sunbelt zeitgeist.

Phenix City: Then and Now, an illustrated 24-page brochure, was produced by Bischoff Enterprises and Allied Artists in cooperation with the Phenix City-Russell County Chamber of Commerce (PCRCCC), and distributed at these screening. It offers a guide for reading the film. Crime shown in the film has the education value of exposing its workings. The PCRCCC declares:

> By the medium of this film, and the addition of the brochure it has made possible for Phenix City to tell its story in proper manner: namely, a frank appraisal of its former condition, but equally important the fact that the community has made tremendous strides toward a new life and future filled that is bright indeed. (22)

In fact, while half of the brochure promotes the film, the second half prominently features the PCRCCC message. In it, points of civic pride from schools to new zoning laws and a favourable tax rate are stressed as an appeal for industry in this "City of Destiny" that is the "center or focal point of an expanding economy in the very heart of the New South" (17, 21). The last page contains a letter from the PCRCCC addressed "Dear Movie Patron" and boasting, "the new Phenix City [...] is a wholesome community, a progressive one, a good place for new business and industry and a fine place to call home" (22).

The brochure makes no mention of segregation and gives no indication of Phenix City's African American community. Zeke Ward and his family are not pictured among the many stills from the film. A year before Patterson's assassination, an Oregon journalist had visited the Phenix City-Columbus area and told his readers,

> I'm convinced that cities like Columbus are leading the South out of its Erskine Caldwell phase. The people I talked to were, up to the race question, as modern and liberal as

> you'd find anywhere in the North or West. Even on the touchy race issue they seemed determined to work their problem out and to end segregation 'someday.' (Frazier 10)

Setting aside the writer's condescending tone toward the South, the passage illustrates the faith many outside the region had in the urban development of "the Bulldozer Revolution." It is certain, that viewed over a long period of time, there is some truth in what the writer proposes about the benefits of urban development. As the third largest city in the more prosperous state—journalist Ray Jenkins once called Phenix City as "almost a colonial possession of Columbus" (Hodges A1)—the urbanism represented by the Georgia city promised to offer alternatives to the poverty depicted by Erskine Caldwell while urban development enabled African Americans to assemble and organize effective resistance to racist southern institutions. However, the process would be long, violent and much more complex. The next chapter will revisit *The Phenix City Story* and more closely explore the racial discourse that parallels the film's story of urban corruption and renewal.

Chapter V: Reading *The Phenix City Story* in southern history

Introduction

Looking back in 2011, Millard Grimes, a journalist who covered the 1954 National Guard cleanup of Phenix City for the *Columbus Ledger*, wrote, "I am always surprised that the "Phenix City Story" is not better remembered today, because its drama and impact rivaled the "Gunfight at the OK Corral" and other infamous crime stories. [...] Although the movie took liberties with the facts, its impact proved far-reaching." In the years since the clean up, Phenix City has had a complex relationship to both its own history and the 1955 Allied Artists film that recounted a difficult and often shameful history. When filming began, director Phil Karlson told a reporter, "There are some rough people left in the town who don't want this picture made" (Mosby 19). It was widely reported that all of the crew had bodyguards. Little had changed by the 1990s, as author Margaret Anne Barnes told reporters that "relatives of the gamblers and gangsters didn't want this [history] brought back up" said Barnes (Boston 2JM).[70]

Only recently has the town begun to commemorate this history—and, as I will argue, *The Phenix City Story* plays an important role in these commemorative regimes. The previous chapter offered a close reading of *The Phenix City Story* as a part of the urban confidential cycle. This chapter will examine in greater detail the specific historical forces that shaped both the criminal enterprises in Phenix City and their presentation in *The Phenix City Story*. Animated by the virtual simultaneity of the seminal May 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which called for an end to segregation and the assassination of Albert Patterson in June, *The Phenix City Story* seems to try to traffic in some sort of racial discourse tied up with its southern location. Though race and the hallmarks of segregation are visible in the film, and despite being integral to the film's plot and its invented material, the theme is never directly addressed and seems to have passed without notice in the South. However, understanding the stakes of the film's muddy racial discourse requires historical investigation.

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[70] As recently as my visit in 2009, while doing research in the Columbus library I was politely told by a person who preferred to remain anonymous that "some of the people involved were still around and that [I] should be careful who [I] talk to about this stuff."

Figure 5.1— Wearing sunglasses, a witness testifies before the special Grand Jury into illegal activities in Phenix City. The original handwritten caption only indicates the name Jared Harris, and is date stamped 30 June, 1954. Even after the hearings and its 749 indictments, many mysteries remain. I was unable to find any further information about Harris. (Discarded press photo, *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer,* from the author's personal collection)

In many ways, the year that passed between the assassination of Albert Patterson and the premiere of *The Phenix City Story* brought about widespread changes in all areas of American popular culture, and, throughout that culture, southern topics and themes were very much coming to the forefront. In April 1955, Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* had just opened on Broadway and the theme from the television sensation *Davy Crockett* was in the pop charts. While rock and roll as a national phenomenon had yet to materialize and Elvis Presley was still a purely southern phenomenon, this would change before *The Phenix City Story* came out at the end of summer 1955. As such, the film captures a moment in time that did not last long. Historian Pete Daniel surveys this era as a series of "lost revolutions"—a series of failed

opportunities to bring about radical change democratically, forcing a handful of courageous individuals, black and white, to fight for reform.

Drawing on a larger history of southern poverty and underdevelopment, magazine accounts of the Phenix City cleanup emphasized the ways in which white Phenix Citizens viewed the cleanup in terms of their right to share in the full benefits of American citizenship at a moment of post-war prosperity. Cold War rhetoric of tyranny and civil liberties was as important to national press coverage of the real Phenix City story as it was to the concerned locals who had formed the clandestine anti-crime group the Russell (County) Betterment Association (RBA), which campaigned to reveal the influence of the crime syndicates in their hometown. This postwar prosperity and rhetoric of liberty over tyrannical forces did not extend to all citizens. While *The Phenix City Story* was playing around the state in September 1955, Phenix City's school board—on which Albert Patterson had served for 15 years—resisted early attempts to comply with the *Brown* decision, turning "down a petition filed [...] by 15 Negro parents asking admission of Negro pupils to white schools" ("Phenix School Board…" 7B). However "progressive" and urban its boosters wanted to appear, in the 1950s, Phenix City remained tied to the peculiar limitations of the age in the South.

At the same time, national and regional ideas about race relations were changing. White southern reaction to *Brown* was still taking shape as filming began in April 1955. Though both white resistance and early Civil Rights activism had begun, the situation was not as dramatic as it would become in a matter of months. The August 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi occurred in between the summer premiere and autumn general release of *The Phenix City Story*. The close of the trial of Till's murderers was front page news as the film opened in Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama, in late September 1955. Co-screenwriter Crane Wilbur seems to have taken these developments to heart (his next project, an unproduced screenplay about the Till murder, was to have been very similar to *The Phenix City Story* and is addressed in detail in Chapter 3).

The Phenix City Story's position as a national mass media text about regional events in a semi-urban setting makes it an extremely useful and important artifact of an era characterized by uncertainty, paranoia and possibility in the American South. This chapter explores *The Phenix City Story's* treatment of race as well the broader history that seems to inform the film's racial melodrama. I will also consider the film's role in shaping history, through the fate of the film's

real life hero, John Patterson, who ultimately used his quest for the highest office in the state to exploit the tense racial moment for short-term political gain.

The nation's No. 1 economic problem

Long before the Montgomery bus boycott of 1 December, 1955 to 20 December, 1956 brought the Civil Rights movement to national attention, the largest problem in the American South was seen to be poverty and lack of economic development. The Second World War and the post-war suburbanization radically changed the region—disproportionately drawing new military contracts and accelerating the dislocation and development that had swept the region since the decline of agriculture with its increased mechanization, which resulted in another wave in the Great Migration of African American labourers away from southern states. This was one of many iterations of the idea of the "savage," "problem" or "benighted" South, a concept which Fred Hobson argues only declined by the 1980s, but whose decline Jacquelyn Dowd Hall ties to the rise of conservatism and its bracketing off of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s (Tindall 1964; Hobson 1985; Hall 2005).

In a widely reproduced statement delivered on 5 July, 1938 to members of the Conference on Economic Conditions in the South, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt branded "the South […] the nation's No. 1 economic problem" (Stark 1). Intended for an elite audience made up of influential economists and business and political leaders from 13 southern states ("the South" was understood to include the 11 ex-Confederate states plus Kentucky and Oklahoma),[71] the written statement began with an appeal for national unity. For FDR, a regional problem was "the nation's problem not merely the South's [...] For we have an economic unbalance in the nation as a whole, due to this very condition of the South. It is an unbalance that can and must be righted, for the sake of the south and of the nation." While Roosevelt refrains from blame or "going into the long history of how this situation came to be—the long and ironic history of the despoiling of this truly American section of the country's population," he strongly suggests that part of the problem was "the paradox" of economic disparity—the

[71] Curiously, public knowledge of FDR's statement and its numbered epigram is due to theft: when the meeting broke for lunch, a reporter snatched a copy of the statement from the conference room and within days newspapers throughout the country had printed it, and the pronouncement met some controversy (David 122).

South is "one of the wealthiest sections" of the nation while being "at the same time the poorest." Recalling the designation of "public enemy No. 1"—then used by the press and adopted by the FBI—down to its numero sign, FDR's term posits that complex problems are reducible to hierarchal order and can be remedied through systematic action, while suggesting structural connections between the problems of economic strife and criminal activity.[72]

The collapse of the Ritz Café

Just three months prior to FDR's pronouncement that the South was the nation's "No. 1 economic problem," around 1 PM on 21 April, 1938, the Ritz Café in Phenix City, Alabama, collapsed killing 24 and injuring 83. A portion of the brick building—which had a crudely added second story—gave way only the day before, injuring another 10 (Strickland and Wortsman 69). *Columbus Enquirer* reporter John Jenks called the disaster "the worst thing I ever saw" and notes that "moaning and screaming" and "begging for help" could be heard from inside the ruins ("Sixteen die…" 1).[73] Jenks applauds the interstate rescue effort composed of "firemen and policemen from [*nearby*] Columbus [*Georgia*] and Phenix City, soldiers from Fort Benning, and volunteers" and notes the casualties—men and women—were "all negroes" ("Roof Collapses…" 14).

Indeed, a number of details are frequently missing from newspaper accounts of this tragedy. For instance, contemporary and even historical accounts sometimes fail to mention the racial uniformity of the dead and injured. At the time, no one attempted to explain why so many people were gathered in the small building in the first place. Jenks only offers that, "[t]he Ritz Café is a licensed liquor store." Jenks' explanation that, "[t]here are two sections of the Café

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[72] The impoverished South of the 1930s spawned or offered temporary sanctuary to a number of the FBI's "public enemies" and "most wanted" of the era: George "Machine Gun" Kelly was captured in Memphis, Tennessee; Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were Texas born and traveled a network of southern and Midwestern states and ultimately were killed in Louisiana; and "Ma" Barker and her gang died in an FBI raid on their hideout near Lake Weir in Florida.

[73] A press photograph from the scene shows bodies literally piled in the rubble. The image was on display at a Phenix City CVS Pharmacy managed by local collector Jim Cannon; an image of it can be seen on Jan Page's website <http://www.angelfire.com/weird2/georgia/page5.html>. Film footage of the incident exists and appears in the documentary *In the Wake of the Assassins*.

building, one for whites, one for negroes" and "[i]t was the negro section that was wrecked" is the only trace of segregation and its underlying system of inequality, coercion and exploitation. The tragedy does offer a powerful practical illustration of the inequality in the "separate but equal" doctrine. Phenix City officials promised an investigation, a grand jury was called, and lawsuits were filed naming the "operators of a business in the building," but ultimately no one would be punished and further answers would take decades to emerge ("Grand Jury Inquiry Into Collapse Called" 8; Strickland and Wortsman 69).

The lack of additional information, the national press' dependence on accounts from Columbus, Georgia papers, and lack of any consequences speak to the degree to which Phenix City handled its own affairs. It was not widely reported that the "Café" was a "bug house" home to the Old Reliable Lottery—an illegal lottery run by a trio of respected local white gamblers: John "Hoyt" Shepherd, Jimmie Matthews, and Clyde Yarbrough.[74] Illegal lotteries were immensely popular in African American and Spanish-speaking communities, where they were known colloquially as "the bug" or a number of other names, such as "the numbers," "the bond," "bolita," "bread and butter," "the wheel," and "the night roll" (Strickland and Wortsman 53). In Phenix City, "bug writers" would allow patrons to bet any amount on any three numbers, which were most commonly derived from a series of digits taken "from the stock and bond quotations from the New York Stock Exchange each afternoon" with drawings held daily, five days a week (54). The collapse of the Ritz Café had been caused by the large number of people crowded inside the small building waiting to hear the day's results. That more than 100 lottery players crowded into in the shoddy structure in spite of the fact that there had been injured only the day before the tragedy in a separate incident, speaks to "the bug's" popularity. The catastrophe of the Ritz Café owed to larger local circumstances that existed in Phenix City for much of its history up to 1954. While its collapse does not feature in *The Phenix City Story*, this tragedy was the most visible indication in national media of the intersection between widespread illegal activity,

[74] The UP wire service carried mention of the lottery, but this appeared in one of dozens of press reports: "Lottery tickets were found in the pockets of the dead. It was reported that lottery drawings were held there in the afternoons." ("Wreckage Is Combed..." 1).

poverty, and racial inequality in the southern town.

The Phenix City Story's "Shocking scene"

What the *Oakland Tribune* called "[t]he wanton murder of a Negro child" is central to *The Phenix City Story*'s treatment of race (Soanes 22). It is the first on-screen death in the film and it initiates a series of abuses designed to inspire moral outrage at the excesses of the Phenix City mob. However, every time the violence of the film risks becoming too racially charged (in the girl's murder and Zeke's attempted revenge) the film abruptly shifts its focus to acts of white-on-white violence, and then those actions are resolved, leaving black life to exist off-screen. Fred Gage's scene turns into a protracted sequence of chase and rescue, the hallmark of melodramatic action. Interestingly, the scenes surrounding the little girl's murder were the first filmed. According to the Columbus *Ledger* on 2 April, 1955, the scene involving Fred Gage pursuing the car to the parking lot of the Poppy Club, actually the Pure Oil Service Station on Broad and 14th Streets, was among the first scenes shot (Greenberg 5). The *Ledger* explains, "this scene takes place after he follows a car which knocked a boy off a bicycle and he himself 'gets slapped' just after he identifies it as belonging to a notorious racketeer." There is no mention of Zeke Ward's little girl (who does not have a name), which suggests that the filmmakers were being coy about the content of these scenes with Phenix City and Columbus locals.[75] Film critic and Alabama native Jonathan Rosenbaum noted "the dead child—a black girl, to be precise— tossed onto a lawn" had not "actually happened," though he adds, "whoever worked the racial angle into the script knew what he was doing and was even somewhat prescient about it" (139, 143).

Racial Violence in Phenix City, Alabama

Incredibly, the shocking scene of the girl's murder does very closely suggest a real

[75] Scenes in the basement of the Pure Oil Service Station (likely used for the steam room in the film where the villains scheme), and the Phenix City police station, where the desk officer casually uses the "N-word" were also mentioned in the article as having been filmed early. In the film, these scenes surround the scene of the little girl's murder. Interestingly, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reports that actor James Edwards returned to Hollywood in mid-May, which suggests that his scenes were among the last filmed ("Edwards had armed guard..." 30).

incident that had occurred in Phenix City in 1935. In a report about Ku Klux Klan activity in Russell County, Alabama, the *Baltimore Afro American*, a leading black newspaper, included the story of a girl in Sugartown, a black section of Phenix City, who was brutally beaten after Klansmen abducted her. The *Afro American* writes, "about daybreak, a mysterious car appeared in a white residential section and the girl was thrown upon the sidewalk. An examination revealed her condition as serious from a terrific beating with a thick belt" ("Yallerhammers…" 10). While this girl narrowly survived, the unusual detail about the girl's being tossed from a moving car into a white residential area is entirely too similar to what is presented in the film.[76]

The incident speaks to a difficult and underreported aspect of Phenix City history. Throughout years of research on *The Phenix City Story*, the criminal activity and clean-up in Phenix City, and general life in Alabama and the rest of the South in the twentieth century, I kept stumbling upon a great deal of disturbing information about African American life in the border town. Racial violence was an important feature of the tyranny of gangster rule in Phenix City. Predatory illegal lotteries and other illicit services catering to African Americans, including gambling, liquor, and prostitution in segregated facilities, were controlled by white gangsters (Howard 14). As indicated in the 1938 collapse of the Ritz Café, race mattered and the loss of African American lives did not find justice.

The Ku Klux Klan in Phenix City

Much evidence suggests that Phenix City, Alabama, was home to much Klan activity from the 1920s until 1949. The period of Phenix City's compromise with local criminal enterprise and the consolidation of the Phenix City machine (roughly 1938-1940) seems to coincide with a period of heightened racial violence and intimidation. Historian Glenn Feldman's study of the Klan in Alabama from 1915 to 1949 includes numerous references to Phenix City, finding that corpses "turned up regularly" in shallow graves on the banks of a creek and robed Klansmen made nightly raids through Phenix City's black neighborhoods known as Sugartown, Punkin Bottom, Silk Shirt Alley, and Stillwell's Quarters in the 1930s and 1940s

[76] Scenarists Crane Wilbur and Dan Mainwaring died in 1973 and 1977, and director Phil Karlson in 1985—to my knowledge no one involved has ever spoken of the 1935 incident, nor of the scene in the film.

(265; Howard 14).[77] A resident from the 1920s recalls nightly cross burnings on Ku Klux Hill that could be seen for miles (Barbee 5). Patterson biographer Gene Howard writes,

> In addition to [*Phenix City's*] perversions of justice, local law enforcement and city officials were members of the Ku Klux Klan. Locals remembered that the Klan held annual torch light parades through Phenix City to intimidate local blacks. Robed Klansmen walked or rode on the fenders of slowly moving cars; they were so easily recognizable under their sheets that people along the parade route called them by name. The parades always concluded with a raucous rally south of town at Ku Klux Hill, where a cross was burned in the sight of the black community. (23-24)

Howard is discussing events from 1946. These claims are based entirely on oral history interviews, including interviews with John Patterson. Warren Trest, another Patterson biographer, similarly details Klan parades in cars with "white-hooded klansmen on the running boards, brandishing rifles and handguns" riding to Ku Klux Hill. John Patterson recalls, "[t]he folks in city hall were right in there with the store owners and the local toughs" (55). While no names are provided, it seems that there was considerable overlap between Phenix City's most virulent defenders of white supremacy and the architects of its criminal corruption.

References to racial violence in Phenix City appear in diverse places throughout the twentieth century. Phenix City features in a posthumously published story by *Invisible Man* author Ralph Ellison. Widely anthologized since its first publication in 1997, "A Party Down at the Square" (circa 1940) presents a first-person account by a boy from Ohio at a southern lynching in an unnamed small Alabama town. Describing the mob gathered to witness the lynching, the narrator observes, "I knew folks must have been there from Phenix City by all the cars mixed in with the wagons" (343). The cars from Phenix City remind us that lynching is a modern spectacle that was not incompatible with urban life.

For Ellison, Phenix City's racism was particularly vicious. In an autobiographical story about his time at the historically black Tuskegee University in the 1930s entitled "An

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[77] Feldman also found records that Commander of the Alabama National Guard, General "Crack" Hanna, was a prime suspect in the 1936 flogging of Alabama-born Communist and union organizer Joseph Gelders, a brutal act not directly related to the Klan (Feldman 254-257, 382).

Extravagance of Laughter," Ellison recounts an incident in which two Phenix City policemen savagely beat a Tuskegee student named Whyte simply because they took offense to the young African American man's name (167-172). Ellison writes about his classmates' lighthearted retelling of the incident and the inadequacy of their comedy to make sense of the way "power based on mere whiteness made for a deification of madness" (172). He describes Phenix City as,

> … a brawling speed-trap of a town through which it was impossible to drive either slow enough or fast enough to satisfy the demands of its traffic policemen. No one, black or white, escaped their scrutiny, but since Tuskegee students were regarded as on their way to becoming "uppity educated nigras," we were especially vulnerable. The police lay in wait for us, clocked our speed, and used any excuse to delay and harass us. (168)

As Klan activity intensified throughout Alabama following the Second World War, a statewide law against wearing a mask in public was passed following a spate of incidents by Klan splinter groups near Birmingham in June 1949 ("Drop that Mask" 23). A Georgia anti-masking law followed in February 1951 ("The Constitution Wins" 48). A Birmingham paper uncovered Klan ties in the Grand Jury and Police Department ("Hold Everything" 14). Emmett Perry and Cecil Deason, members of the special prosecuting team working on the Patterson murder, were renowned for their role in fighting state-wide Klan activity in 1949, and, in 1957, they prosecuted the perpetrators of the attack and castration of Judge Edward Aaron, a mentally challenged African American ("Prosecutors... Klan Enemies" 10).[78] According to a 1952 Associate Press story, one legacy of war service and military development in the South was that, "[t]he dynamite stick apparently is replacing the burning cross and stinging lash in the South's pattern of violence" (Price 2). The article includes the dynamiting of the Bentley family home in a list of other mostly racially-motivated bombing incidents from around the state.

Across the river, Georgia also weathered a brief post-war Klan resurgence. Covering a rally at Pine Mountain in March 1948, three young employees of the *Columbus Ledger* were kidnapped, forced to drink, drugged, then stripped and photographed arranged in a position so as to simulate homosexual acts ("Nightmare on Pine Mountain" 26). Suggesting corruption and Klan infiltration of local police, the next morning the victims were arrested and charged with

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[78] As discussed in the Emmett Till chapter, the incident is fictionally exploited in a speech by Gene Hackman's character in the 1998 film *Mississippi Burning*.

public drunkenness ("The Klan Wins" 63).

The area near the Georgia-Alabama border had a history of Klan activity and opposition to it. The *Columbus Enquirer*'s longstanding opposition to the Klan had won a Pulitzer in 1926, for its then owner/editor Julian Harris (the son of early twentieth century racial moderate and Brer Rabbit/Uncle Remus creator Joel Chandler Harris). A splinter Klan group known as the Original Southern Klans, Inc. formed in the area in 1948-1949 and even tried to start its own radio station in Phenix City. Around this time the Original Southern Klans, Inc. stormed a Russell County jury box during trial proceedings (Feldman 318). In March 1949, a small group abducted three black high-school students from Columbus, and drove them across the state line to Phenix City, where they were beaten and shot at while their captors, identifying themselves as "the Ku Kluxers," asked, "[d]on't you know this is a white man's town?" (Hall 1949 1-2). Outrage and anti-masking laws transformed the nature of racial violence, and the institution of the Klan went into decline until anger at the 1954 *Brown* decision sparked the third-wave of Klan-inspire hate groups.

<u>African American experience in Phenix City</u>

Terror characterized African Americans life in Phenix City during the run of its criminal empire. Strickland and Wortsman use an example of a fall 1953 incident of violent racist abuse to illustrate "the manner in which [*Phenix City*] police meted out justice" (2). Even as he cooperated and confessed to burglary, Otis Taff, a African American man, was so severely beaten by state Alcohol Beverage Control Board agent Ben Scroggins that city commissioner Dr. Seth Floyd had to be called to treat the man (3). Three policemen including Albert Fuller stood by watching the assault.

In addition to the charge of vote stealing in the 1954 state primary, a losing candidate charged that "all Negro voters were 'herded' to the polls in the first primary and 'forced to vote' in the presence of armed men who 'intimidated them'" in Phenix City (Thomas 1-2; "Judge Cuts Short..." 1). The 1954 election came only ten years after the *Smith v. Allwright* U.S. Supreme Court decision, which outlawed the white-only primary. Vote fraud charges were also levied in Phenix City during the 1948 primary. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that on election day, "[t]he South's new wing of the Ku Klux Klan, led by World War II veterans into this vice-ridden city, burned a fiery cross in warning to Negro citizens to stay in their place" ("Klan Warns…" 13).

Biographer Charlie Vascellaro describes a 1953 incident in which baseball legend Hank Aaron, then romantically involved with a Phenix City woman, was chased across the bridge over the Chattahoochee River to Georgia because Phenix City was "probably not the safest place for a solitary young black man to be wandering around in the Deep South late in the evening" (45-46). Debating the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on the floor of the U.S. Congress, Senator Hubert Humphrey noted that "[i]n Columbus, Georgia, there are six [hotels or motels] for dogs, and none for Negroes" (qtd. in Kuettner 125).

Other incidents of racial violence appear in the various histories of Phenix City. In one fantastic incident on 2 September, 1950, two African American men robbed a gangster's payroll of as much as $30,000. Chief Deputy Albert Fuller and another officer caught up with one of the men in an African American cemetery and shot him 13 times (Strickland and Wortsman 138-139, Barnes 98-99, Trest 105). The other died fleeing the cemetery. Both deaths were deemed justifiable and none of the money was ever recovered.

Patterson biographer Gene Howard reports that Deputy Fuller enlisted two African American safecrackers to kill Albert Patterson. He provided them an untraceable pistol from local thug Johnny Benefield, and put the men on notice. However, "the burglars got cold feet," pawned the pistol and skipped town (Howard 43-44).

There is little doubt that *The Phenix City Story* filmmakers would have been aware of the 2 December, 1954 murder of Johnny Frank Griffin, the star witness to the Patterson assassination. In what John Patterson called the sort of "fantastic coincidence that can only happen in Phenix City," Griffin was stabbed on busy 14th Street soon after he testified before the Grand Jury that he had seen Deputy Fuller with another man near the Coulter Building right before the assassination. Griffin had just testified before the special grand jury, refused protective custody, and then spent the day calling around claiming he "needed some help" and that he had "a feeling they're going to get me" ("Young Patterson Demands…" 1). A witness on the scene, a local stripteaser, claimed Griffin accosted the African American teenager, who was waiting for a bus, with a barrage of racial epithets prompting the teen to produce a knife and stab him in the throat (Strickland and Wortsman 17, Barnes 280-283, Grady 173, Howard 57, Griffin 55).[79] The teen confessed to the stabbing and apologized for killing an important witness.

[79] The 2008 book *Touched by Fire* by Frank Griffin, the abandoned son of the murdered man,

Authorities were satisfied that the killing was not connected to the Patterson case. Griffin's injuries were at first believed to be non-threatening, but he died later that night at Cobb Memorial Hospital (Griffin 58). 14th Street is one of Phenix City's two main streets. National Guardsmen were still on patrol and an entire troupe of boy scouts were also waiting at the bus stop. The teen has not been heard from since.

Figure 5.2—Workers clean the blood stain from the sidewalk in front of the Coulter Building after Albert Patterson's assassination in Phenix City, Alabama. (Alabama Dept. of Archives and History Digital Collection)

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explores the bizarre coincidence that both father and son were witness to political assassinations, as Frank Griffin was in Dallas, Texas, during the Kennedy assassination. The younger Griffin believes he may have observed Lee Harvey Oswald fleeing the scene of his subsequent murder of Officer J. D. Tippit.

Race, obfuscation and elision in Phenix City narratives

Reading accounts of bizarre incidents like the Griffin killing underlines the obfuscating tendency of the peculiar institution of southern segregation in relation to crime. Information about the African American experience in Phenix City is scattered, and the evidence is anecdotal, incomplete, or riddled with prevarications. Newspaper accounts from the time use the word "Negro" to mark and uphold racial difference. The omnipresence of the distinction marginalizes black life casting it apart from the full rights of Alabama citizenship and suggests the way that day -to-day life in the bi-racial state depended upon a form of economic exploitation. Criminal elements in Phenix City exploited these conditions.

It is important to note that during racial violence involving the KKK in 1949, the Columbus-Phenix City Ministerial Alliance, a group that included Hugh Bentley and other future RBA members in its ranks, unanimously passed a resolution asking Columbus to prohibit Klan demonstrations ("Short Stories…" 1). (As would prove to be the case with the Civil Rights movement in African American churches, religious organization in the South provided the basis for political organization.) However, Hugh Bentley and other Phenix City reformers framed their own struggle as a struggle for civil rights. The day after the Patterson assassination, Hugh Bentley called an FBI field office in Mobile to get their help, claiming that the vote fraud and murder deprived the citizens of Alabama of their civil rights, adding that "if racial unrest was sufficient reason for federal intervention, certainly" the situation in Phenix City was also worthy (Grady 72). White families of Phenix City in the public forum and *The Phenix City Story* adopt the position of an oppressed minority living under tyranny. In a piece written for *Saturday Evening Post*, John Patterson claims, "[w]e live the way the Jews lived in Nazi Germany" (Patterson and Bisher 64).

For the reformers, conditions in Phenix City denied them access to the promise of post-war middle-class American life. The town's whispered infamy brought shame to residents like Hugh Bentley, who frequently told of a 13-year-old drum majorette in his Sunday school class who came to him in tears after being chased out of a Columbus parade being called "Phenix City trash" (Jenkins 1958, 7A). The Patterson and Bisher article stresses middle-class deprivation—noting "Phenix City is probably the largest town in the South without a new-car dealership" and lacking in name brand goods (64). Other reconstructions of the situations that had existed in Phenix City in newspapers and national magazines similarly stressed the grave limitations on

freedoms enjoyed by Phenix Citizens to a shocked national readership.

Figures 5.3 & 5.4—Two press images of the crime scene from different angles, showing Deputy Albert Fuller pointing out the blood on a sidewalk after the murder of Albert Patterson on 18 June, 1954, and the crowd that gathered at the scene a short time later. (Alabama Dept. of Archives and History Digital Collection)

Not surprisingly, in these accounts, no easy parallel is drawn between the plight of Phenix Citizens and the African American freedom struggle.[80] It is my contention that the economic tyranny of the gambling syndicate and its political machine in Phenix City could not have attained the level of political control that it did were it not for the apartheid culture of segregation in twentieth century Alabama. More importantly, *The Phenix City Story* is very nearly the only place in which racial violence is connected to the Phenix City clean-up—albeit in an extremely limited way. This is something even more recent accounts and written histories of Phenix City still struggle to do as they lean heavily on press accounts from the time.

"Who cares about Zeke Ward?"

Toward the climax of *The Phenix City Story*, immediately after the Patterson assassination, Rhett Tanner barks into the telephone, "Who cares about Zeke Ward? I want Ellie

[80] There is a reference to the parallel struggle for Civil Rights in the liberal Catholic press, in magazines like *The Christian Century* which adds the situation in Phenix City, drought, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act to its survey of "Alabama's Year, One of Sorrows" (Chalker 1284-1285).

Rhodes." The gangster is unwise to ignore Ward—not only because Ellie is hiding at his home. Zeke Ward's experience runs through the entire film, and in fact proves to be crucial to its resolution. The film's racial discourse depends on the moral legibility of melodrama. The film's three African American characters—Zeke, his wife and daughter—are integral to the film's plot, and to its melodramatic logic. The emotional power of the film hinges on these characters, who, as Mark Bergman observed, are "inexplicably the only blacks in the movie," even in its very crowded street scenes (21).

In the first scene in the dramatic portion of *The Phenix City Story*, a customer who insists he has been cheated at the card table is forcibly ejected from the Poppy Club by gangland hoods while hot jazz piano storms on the soundtrack. A janitor at the Poppy Club, Ward is a fictional character introduced early in the film, who, like Ellie Rhodes, is "always watching" and able to help the film's heroes. In this first instance of violence, Zeke Ward is in the background sweeping the sidewalk outside of the club where the unhappy customer is deposited. The casting of Edwards is significant. Edwards' portrayal of a paralyzed soldier struggling with racial prejudice in the 1949 United Artists film *Home of the Brave* challenged racial stereotypes for African American actors in Hollywood and his career is dotted with ennobled roles in films like Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (United Artists, 1956). Edwards brings similar moral authority and dignity to *The Phenix City Story*, which is reinforced by his rigid posture and deliberate movements. He may be relegated to carrying a mop and broom in a Phenix City nightclub, but Edwards' presence commands attention in the film. In this early scene, the camera will linger on him long after others have left the screen. More importantly, his presence is immediately associated with moral righteousness: he offers a match and a kindly word of warning to one of the reformers who leaves the club after the fight.

Violence is chiefly the instrument of the oppressive criminal industry to keep the good people of Phenix City down. Edwards' character stands in opposition to the violence of the film, which is connected with moral outrage. The second time we see violence on screen, we see helpless older white men being beaten as they arrive to attend a clandestine meeting of Phenix City reformers. In the emotional logic of the film's melodrama, each violent altercation becomes a reaction to the one before it, inspiring the Pattersons to act by forging the opposition between good and evil and propelling the narrative forward. This frames all of the subsequent violence in the film in a melodramatic chain of cause and effect, with the merciless mob perpetrating

violence on the helpless men and women of Phenix City, whose cries are ignored by the corrupt law enforcement, all toward making the military intervention at the film's end the ultimate *deus ex machina*.

The Phenix City Story's treatment of race draws upon racial melodramas rooted in a tradition at least as old as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Linda Williams has explored this form of racial melodrama in her book *Playing the Race Card*. If melodrama struggles to make a morally legible world visible, this legibility is reductive. Film scholars like Thomas Elsaesser, Rick Altman and Ben Singer have traced various aspects of the melodramatic tradition in the masculine action genre. Building upon Peter Brooks' pioneering study *The Melodrama Imagination* and work in film studies by Christine Gledhill and others, Linda Williams conceives of melodrama as a form that stretches across media and society, driving a number of genres and, also, ways of thinking. For Williams, melodrama engages in a profoundly *moral* essentialism, organized around the spectacle of human suffering. Melodrama shows us good people suffering at the hands of evil villains. In this way, melodrama offers emotional solutions to the problems it presents.

Linda Williams' alternative melodramatic tradition trades on the deployment of racial sympathy following what she calls the Tom tradition or the anti-Tom tradition—in the duelling narratives of African American suffering typified by Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its cultural progeny, and the perceived threat of the black rapist in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation* and its much longer cultural legacy. As in Stowe's novel, the Tom tradition involves recognizing the humanity of African Americans by the feeling of sympathy aroused in the spectacle of black suffering. The anti-Tom tradition reacts against the Tom tradition by mobilizing gendered white fear at the image of a black male lusting after helpless white women. For Williams, these two traditions form a powerful dialectic that melodramas of black and white in life and media from *Gone with the Wind* to the O.J. Simpson trial engage with in some way.

Violence and race are similarly intertwined in *The Phenix City Story*. The movie offers a variation on the Tom tradition in that it consistently mobilizes its black characters and their suffering to promote identification with the film's white characters. Zeke's position denies him the self-determination to act in his own interest. When Zeke Ward comes to the aid of John Patterson in the fight at the Poppy Club, he is not acting on behalf of the white hero. That

moment of seeming racial solidarity in the film is undercut by the scene that follows it in which the film reproduces the circumstances of segregation and discrimination that it would otherwise seem to condemn.

Black and White "Spaces of Innocence"

Melodrama is often concerned with domestic issues of home and family. The threat home and family are central to *The Phenix City Story*. The film presents us with two homes, belonging to the Patterson family and Zeke Ward. These are the only homes seen in the film. As John Patterson and Fred Gage drive Zeke Ward home after the fight at the Poppy Club, Zeke rides in the back of the car and duly shows gratitude and deference when the men tell him that they will find him work. Zeke's home—a modest shack—is marked by shadows and darkness. They arrive in a wide shot taken from a high angle as the car crosses a bridge that subtly marks the threshold between white and black society. It is at this threshold—this border—that it becomes clear that Zeke has a more complex off-screen life. But, typical of the film more generally, we only get a glimpse of it. The river bank and bridge signal the liminality that this space occupies. This is in sharp contrast to the quiet suburban neighbourhood where the Pattersons live, which has electric lights; we see its welcoming front door as Patterson enters the house. A slow dissolve points up the distance and difference between these domestic spaces as Fred Gage drops John Patterson at home.

For Linda Williams, the home in melodrama is a "space of innocence" (1998 65). In *The Phenix City Story*, both white and black spaces of innocence will be violated again and again by gang violence. In melodrama, the idyllic home is threatened or lost, relegated to the past. Importantly, as the voice-over informs us at the beginning of the film, Phenix City had no idyllic past to which to return. In this sequence, the film offers two images of homes that are separate but unequal in representation. Paradoxically, the dissolve between the homes also works to connect these two disparate spaces. The film will continue to forge a connection between the Pattersons and Zeke Ward's family, and both homes are ultimately connected by melodramatic violence.

This is most evident in the murder of Zeke's daughter, who does not have a name. She is abducted by Clem Wilson on the bridge near Zeke's home. The next shot shows as the speeding car deposits her body in the Patterson's yard where John and Mary Jo's children are playing. The sequence enacts the 'too late' half of the "dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of

'too late' and 'in the nick of time' that Linda Williams discusses in melodrama (1998 69). The emotional impact of the scene is undeniable—and it is at this emotional level that the act serves the film's melodrama. It is by far the most shocking and best remembered scene in the film. The *Los Angeles Times* critic noted the "killing of a little Negro girl and the tossing of her broken body on the Patterson lawn as a 'warning' is only one in a pounding succession of shocking scenes" (Scheuer D2). Still photographs of the scene appear in the September *Life* magazine photo spread "'Sin City' Sizzles Again, But On Film," under the caption, "HORRIFIED PATTERSONS examine bloodstained body of little Negro girl who is murdered and thrown on their lawn as threat to John's own children" (128). These publications recognized the image's melodramatic power without considering its implications, and again it is framed through its impact on the white family.

The racially marked threat to family in the film is especially charged within the threat of the "loss of home" that Vivian Sobchack finds in film noir (144). It cues specific sources of the larger noirish sense of anxiety and fear. For Sobchack, "the intimacy and security of home and the integrity and solidity of the home front are lost to wartime and postwar America and to those films we associate at both the core and periphery of that cinematic grouping we circumscribe as noir" (146).

The ellipsis between abduction and throwing her body from the car also objectifies her body as she becomes a grotesque warning to the Pattersons. As John Patterson calls the police, the camera returns to Zeke's daughter's body several times, and it is in this scene that we hear a police dispatcher use the N-word. In a crucial casting decision, the desk officer on the phone is played by a non-actor, very likely local, with a southern accent. After the doughy officer hangs up, he calls out, "somebody just threw a dead nigger kid on Patterson's lawn, go out and have a look." Framed from the side, this officer is in the foreground casually eating a sandwich and drinking from a cup of coffee. The desk sergeant's racism contrasts with the way the Pattersons treat African Americans (Albert calls her "Zeke's baby"). The film does not linger with this indifference, and instead returns to the Patterson house.

In *The Phenix City Story*, this moment of savage racial violence is used to mobilize sympathy for the white hero and his family—with whom the film spends a significant amount of time following their self-interested reaction and fear. More tellingly, the film simply resumes without addressing the little girl's death. The actress who plays her does not receive a film credit

(and my efforts to track her down have not yielded anything). As soon as the film introduces this incendiary image of excessive violence and racist dehumanization, it abruptly retreats to the safety of more conventional white-on-white melodramatic action in the form of both the protracted sequence of chase and rescue, and the spectacle of the white suffering in the family's reaction.

The girl's murder will hardly be addressed again in the film, until Zeke Ward finally attempts to seek his revenge, and then it goes unpunished. Her death works towards generating the moral outrage that the film will continue to exploit until its resolution. John Patterson is furious, but it is unclear whether this is over the murder of the girl or the threat it poses to his family, and the film leaves this ambiguity open-ended. The little girl's death enables *The Phenix City Story* to locate what Linda Williams would call the film's melodramatic "covert source of virtue" with her parents (2001 215). As a result, by the film's end, Zeke can offer an impassioned speech about the immorality of killing with the authority to sway the John Patterson character. When Patterson is about to kill Rhett Tanner in the river, Zeke tells him, "[i]f your father was here right now, he'd say the same thing: you can't take the law into your own hands." He denounces an eye for an eye, but only on the basis of religious piety—his wife had told him, "the Lord said not to kill: thou shalt not kill." In this way, recognition of specific African American suffering drives the film's melodrama.

Zeke's speech describes his wife stopping him from killing Clem Wilson, their daughter's killer:

> And I stood there looking at her, she was crying and all bloody where he'd beat her. And I was gonna do it anyway. But she said, "No, Zeke, no. We've been fighting against things like this. All our lives we been fighting against people taking the law into their own hands." So I—I handed her the gun. And I come out here.

The "we" here is ambiguous, but it seems to suggest—out of nowhere, bringing the film's covert racial themes to the foreground—that the fight to free Phenix City from gangster rule parallels the African American freedom struggle, but it could also imply his involvement with the RBA cause (a relatively recent development, not "all our lives").

<u>Agency and dignity</u>

Zeke Ward's experience is characterized by absolute loss—he loses his job and his child

in the name of a cause greater than himself (and whose benefits it is unclear he will be able to enjoy). The problem with making the Ward family the centre of virtue in the logic of the film's melodrama is that we do not have any access to their off-screen life or their motivations. As with the earlier scene showing Zeke's home, the real suffering of the black family is only suggested; it is relayed by Zeke to John Patterson only when Patterson is himself on the brink of murder. Worse, Zeke's appeal is justified not through personal forgiveness, but through subservience to the rule of a higher power.

This is the reason actor Sidney Poitier refused the role. Poitier, then early in his career, between roles and struggling to make ends meet in Harlem, had trouble articulating what bothered him about the role. For Poitier, rejecting the subtly undignified role of Zeke Ward—a character that did not "measure up"—proved a critical moment in the evolution of his career, and it was a story he would recall again and again in interviews for decades to come. The event is suggested in the title of his 2000 autobiography, *The Measure of a Man*. He explains,

> I read the script. I didn't like it. The part they wanted me for was a man who was a janitor for a gambling casino in Phenix City, Alabama. He was a very nice man, but there had been some kind of murder at the casino, and it was thought that this janitor might have some information that could incriminate whoever was responsible. He received threats and warnings to keep his mouth shut, so he didn't do anything, didn't say anything. Then, to augment the threat, the bad guys killed his young daughter, throwing her body on his lawn. He was enraged. He was tormented. Still, he remained passive. He didn't do shit. He left it to other people to fight his battles. [...] I rejected that part because, in my view, the characters simply didn't measure up. He didn't fight for what mattered to him most. He didn't behave with dignity. (64; 66-67)

Poitier was more vocal about his dislike for the part to an earlier biographer in 1969:

> The role was a cheat, in the context of what the film dealt with. The part was a cheat and a compromise. It was a lie, an absolute out-and-out-lie, and they used it in an uncourageous manner. It was the part of a young Negro father, during the political and criminal holocaust in Phenix City, Alabama, or Phenix City somewhere in the South. And it's an open city, gambling and corruption… This father, because he worked for somebody or did something, his daughter was killed and thrown on the lawn—a five or six-year-old girl, thrown on the lawn. And the father goes out hunting for the killer, and

> toward the end of the film, he comes across him, and he's got him in a shed and he's going to kill him. And they put in his mouth the most ugly compromise. If it were an honest change of heart the man had, it could have been beautiful because it would have shown great growth, you see. But they put in his mouth… crappy words like, 'I suddenly realize the Lord doesn't want me to do this.' (Ewers 76-77).

Poitier's description is markedly different from the character of Zeke Ward as played by James Edwards—perhaps suggesting that the part was written to be much larger than in the finished film. Without access to original drafts of the screenplay it is impossible to know if Poitier is referring to an earlier version of the script or if his memory and dislike for the role have distorted the details. In either case, it offers an important contemporaneous reading of the character and race in the film.

In her groundbreaking 1990 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison writes of the African American experience in American literature as being marked by silence and invisibility. The way the film suggests but avoids Zeke's off-screen life seems to illustrate Morrison's insight. At the film's climax, we will see John Patterson arrive at Zeke's shack to find Zeke and his wife already in tears, and Patterson races past them to catch up with the film's villain. Their suffering is secondary to the hero's pursuit of the villain. Morrison uses the term *Africanist* to describe the meaning that black has for whites. Zeke's family is a relic of American Africanist discourse. They serve as a perverse sort of fantasy of moral virtue and suffering for the whites in the film. This is a profoundly racist image that no amount of goodwill can escape. Film scholar Eric Lott, who has explored how racial exchange formed the basis of American popular culture in his 1993 book *Love and Theft*, elsewhere has indirectly and perceptively adapted Morrison's ideas to film noir. In the 1997 essay, "The Whiteness of Film Noir," Lott suggests that the dark aesthetic of film noir comments on white anxieties about changing American race relations and the decline of a national culture of white supremacy.

The treatment of race in the specific case of *The Phenix City Story* offers insight into how some white liberals in the rest of the country viewed this burgeoning struggle for Civil Rights in the South. The film's tendency to exoticize the African American experience and locate moral authority within that experience echoes what Grace Elizabeth Hale calls the "mild form of racism" in "Whites' folk romanticism" of African Americans in the folk revival movement in the

1950s and 1960s (2010 132).

At best, *The Phenix City Story* offers a slight attempt to wrest the African American experience from the shadows. A moment of racial violence is allowed to flash up, in the Benjaminian sense, within American mass culture. The fact that the results of this gesture are problematic reveals much about Hollywood's treatment of race and the limitations of even the best of intentions at the dawn of the African American freedom struggle. Most of the cast and crew of *The Phenix City Story* were not southerners; some were white liberals, working within a subgenre—the docudrama—and the urban confidential film cycle, both of which had roots in New York liberal film societies like the films of the Worker's Film and Photo league.[81] This regional impression is heightened as locals are cast throughout the film, often in positions of power like the judge and the foreman of the jury, but more often as institutional gatekeepers like the unsympathetic hospital clerk, and the casually racist police desk sergeant.

"...let things stay the way they are!"

Rhett Tanner tells Albert Patterson in their first meeting, "the trouble with a lot of people in the world today is that a lot of people don't want to let things stay the way they are!" As much as the film's villains are presented as part of the society in which they live, they are consistently revealed to be ugly and racist. The gangsters embody a regressive, violently conservative position—impeding progressive reform—and occupy an explicitly white space, site of the backroom deal. On the stand during trial concerning Fred Gage's death, Clem Wilson denies throwing the little girl's body from the car, parroting racist white southern attitudes by saying, "I got nothing against niggers as long as they behave." This is the second time we hear the offensive racial epithet. This shared vocabulary aligns racism with the larger corruption and indifference in Phenix City. John Patterson appears more sympathetic, ultimately listening to Zeke Ward. The film also insists on showing its gangsters carousing and plotting in a steam room where they are visually bathed in a sea of whiteness. The scenes are seedy and corporal, lit by a lone lamp dangling at the top centre of the frame. The policeman Barton is a sweaty red mass with a puggish face, and a mess of hair across his chest, back and upper body. There is nothing luxurious about the hedonistic setting. The scenes casually present white male power,

[81] Will Straw addressed these connections in the 2008 article, "Documentary Realism and the Post-War Left."

corrupt and violently lashing out.

The racial melodrama of *The Phenix City Story* stands as a potent reminder that while melodrama is a highly adaptable modern form that can engage pressing social problems, melodrama's inherently conservative, backward-looking orientation can undercut the impetus for social reform. The melodramatic desire for an imaginary bygone past and moral legibility invites paradox and stymies potential for radical change. Obviously, seeking emotional solutions to social problems fails to account for the complexity of human interaction. As a matter of personal honour and dignity, Sidney Poitier's comments about the role of Zeke Ward are as inspiring as they are instructive as to the limitations placed upon African American performers at this point in American popular culture—a tradition Poitier and his generation would help break. The role of Zeke Ward is limited and fails to offer any sense of black agency and leaves him subservient to this higher law. Zeke Ward is "a cheat and a compromise" who exists in the screenplay as a form of blackface and racial impersonation—existing only as a cipher for the Pattersons' moral melodrama.

"If you think the Emmett Till case was a real shocker…"

Interestingly, contemporary reviews of *The Phenix City Story* from the African American press suggest an audience hungry for James Edward's role. Though the armed protection on location applied to the whole cast and was used extensively in the promotion of the film,[82] the *Baltimore Afro-American* made a headline out of Edwards' being under guard ("Edwards had armed guard..." 30). Before the film's premiere, the same paper reported "movie fans have been wondering what kind of role James Edwards portrays" in the film and were pleased to note "[i]nstead of enacting one of the hoodlums that had made the Alabama city in real life a den of gambling racketeers, and murderers, he plays one of the good citizens" ("James Edwards' new film…" 7). Indeed, ballyhoo aside, that *The Phenix City Story* was meaningful for the African

[82] A newspaper display ad in the 1 December, 1955 issue of the *Montreal Gazette* boasts:

> We went to Phenix City, Alabama, to film this picture, under the protection of the State Militia. Some of the people you see in it actually lived through the reign of terror. Other roles had to be played by professional actors because the characters they portray are dead, or in jail, or hiding out—viciously waiting to bring mob rule back to Phenix City. ("Phenix City display ad" 12).

American community further underscores the prevalence of racist imagery in classical Hollywood films.

While many mainstream reviewers singled out Edwards' performance—"Edwards is powerful in his one big "message" scene" (Soanes 22)—none come close to the African American *Pittsburgh Courier*'s review, which describes the film almost as a proto-blacksploitation film following Zeke Ward's story. The review grants Zeke Ward more agency than the film allows. Importantly, the *Courier* critic draws a parallel that I have not encountered elsewhere: "his little girl is brutally murdered in one of the most shocking scenes in the movie. If you think the Emmett Till case was a real shocker, see 'The Phenix City Story'" (Garland 12).

Only Ellen Scott, in her 2015 book *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era*, has noted the concurrence of the Till trial and *The Phenix City Story*. Scott notes that the MPAA, then under the new management of Geoffrey Shurlock, was concerned about racial violence and epithets in Hollywood films. Scott presents the film in this context and even includes stills of "the most provocative sequence [which] showed the brutalized corpse of the daughter of a Black janitor" and suggests the compassionate dialogue between the Pattersons that follows "indicts a broader racism" (62-65). For Scott, the sequence reveals "in a minor key, an emerging civil rights narrative that the film [...] never explicitly addresses" (62-64). The image of the little girl's body being tossed from a moving car is eerily prescient about the actual violence in the South during the Civil Rights era. If it appears that the emotional power of this image tragically anticipates the murder of Emmett Till, it is because this scene and media coverage of the Till murder both participate in the same racial melodrama—a Tom narrative in which black suffering is used to mobilize white sympathy.

The Phenix City Story is exceptional for incorporating a consideration of race into the larger discussion. In fact, in a fitting footnote to the film's treatment of race, a story in the March 1956 *Confidential* magazine suggesting a "dalliance" between African American entertainer Sammy Davis, Jr. and *The Phenix City Story*'s sultry chanteuse, Meg Myles, "effectively ended her [*film*] career" in the 1950s, and she "wasn't able to land another role until 1962" (H. Scott 73).

A Southern exception?: crime and southern exceptionalism in Phenix City

An incredulous *Los Angeles Times* review posits, "[i]t is hard to believe that such conditions as depicted exist in our own country, but it is more than probable that the lid will be

blown off in other cities as time goes on besides this single southern community" (Schallert A6). Coming at a moment of convergence of the Bulldozer Revolution, the Kefauver commission and the dawn of the modern Civil Rights movement, the timing of *The Phenix City Story* is crucial to its treatment of race. Its story is shaped by these forces, even as the film fails to offer much of a solution. The situation in Phenix City was both unique in its extremes, propelled by a justice system weakened by its institutional corruption in maintenance of white supremacy and greed, and typical of criminal activity in southern cities near U.S. military bases. As much news coverage would emphasize the Southerness of Phenix City and its crimes, Patterson (and Bisher) argue that while "the mob [...] has spread its tentacles to eight or ten other counties in Alabama, and is connected with the interstate underworld in Maryland, Illinois, Georgia and Florida [...], this is a different kind of underworld than those of Chicago, Miami, New York and the metropolitan syndicates" (21, 64).

Strickland and Wortsman name a dozen cities in Alabama with wide-open gambling contemporaneous to Phenix City, although Phenix City seems to have been the largest. A 1955 scandal in Birmingham involved 12 police officers indicted for running "a full-fledged burglary ring" out of the police department (Chalker 1285). Historian James T. Sparrow's work on the wartime reputation of Norfolk, Virginia, as a vice Mecca is an apt parallel to the situation in Phenix City. Sparrow writes, "[n]o public problem was more intimately local that that of vice, and yet Norfolk's reputation in that area became a national scandal during the war" (173). The problems in Norfolk, Virginia, also underline the complex relationship between federal military development and the vice industry. Sparrow writes,

> What amplified the transformative potential of all these changes, and laid the groundwork for a new regional dynamic in which southerners led lives much more similar to those of their fellow Americans in other regions, was the growing salience of national citizenship in a polity where the federal government in times of crisis could brook little or no resistance to its priorities. […] states rights could not stand in the path of the warfare state. (184-185)

At the same time, the forces that brought about the rise and fall of the criminal enterprise in Phenix City—the war and its influx of military development, (sub)urbanization and its attendant expectations about entry into a national consumer culture—fuelled the African American freedom struggle. Even before *Brown*, in May 1953, *Time* magazine found that "signs

of Negro prosperity are everywhere," noting changes in the justice system, economic progress, and the rise of African American consumers, who "today have an annual income of $15 billion a year—almost as much as the national income of Canada" ("The U.S. Negro, 1953" 57). In December 1954, the trade journal *Broadcasting Telecasting* published an appraisal of Georgia's broadcasting industry, including Columbus, and a special text box showcased "the Negro market in Georgia" (Beatty 44). The same local forces that were "sensitive about the notoriety attained by Phenix City" were recognizing that African Americans' "economic level is climbing rapidly" (44-45). Sunbelt development in both cities would mean that "Negro housing projects [were] fast replacing slums" (45).

Conditions in Phenix City—crime, vice and racial terror—were well-known and quietly documented for decades. In addition to national reports of VD outbreaks in Phenix City ("New Army" 18), the city's increased fine for public drunkenness to match inflation ("The Cost of High Living…" 1) or wryly calling it a "resort town" for Ft. Benning soldiers ("Alabama City Orders…" 1), a reporter from the tabloid the *National Police Gazette* paid a visit to Phenix City in 1947. N.K. Perlow sensationally detailed nearly everything that would later emerge about the operations of the Phenix City machine, its compromise with city hall and law enforcement, and even named parties responsible for unsolved murders. Perlow confronted Mayor Homer Cobb with his findings, to which Cobb responded, "You're not telling me anything [...] these conditions have been the same for years and years" (1947 22). Cobb later sued for libel. The Patterson assassination propelled the story of Phenix City vice from tabloid whispers and barracks gossip into mass culture.

Representing everyday Alabama in the 1950s

In a personal retrospective about *The Phenix City Story*, film critic and Florence, Alabama, native Jonathan Rosenbaum touches upon an important idea: the unrepresentability of the everyday American South of the 1950s in Hollywood films. Rosenbaum contends that with few exceptions that actually cast southerners, Hollywood films did not resemble the world he knew. Though he grew up on the other end of the state, Rosenbaum writes, "*The Phenix City Story* looked, sounded and felt to me like Alabama in 1955, and everyone I knew in Florence who saw the picture agreed" (137). For Rosenbaum, *The Phenix City Story* records something of life in 1950s Alabama in what the film captures unfolding behind its actors on screen, who he views as carpetbaggers play acting a story of the South. With the film's relentless pace, the

actual townspeople on screen scarcely have a moment to chew scenery or pull focus.

It is important to remember the degree to which the location shooting of *The Phenix City Story* served as a structuring principle for the film. Exigencies of location filming help to explain why only the fictional Poppy Club is used and not the dozens of establishments mentioned by Strickland and Wortsman. The film's many montages were made up of discrete spectacles that served both the film and the entertainment of crowds of locals. As a result, the film offers crowd scenes, including multiple speeches and acts of public violence. For Phenix Citizens, filming was a roadshow as well as a chance to experience and perhaps even participate in the excitement of the Hollywood carnival. Prior to filming, the local weekly newspaper delighted in informing its readers that the town's new Sheriff had to write away to other towns in Alabama seeking slot machines for use in the film, as none could be found in Phenix City—in the end, machines were retrieved from the Chattahoochee River where the Guard had disposed of them ("Wanted: Slot Machines..." 1, Wordless 1). An article about the film's premiere in the *Phenix-Girard Journal* informed its readership that, "notable scenes including public beatings, nightclub scenes, featuring 'Ma' Beachie in person, political graft and general corruption in city government, play a prominent part in the movie" ("Premiere for…" 1). Residents lucky enough to have speaking roles were invited to its premiere. To this day, local screenings of *The Phenix City Story* allow long-time residents a time capsule of their town allowing contemporary views to search crowd scenes for relatives, townspeople and familiar locations.

The use of locals contributes more than local colour. By way of comparison, the Bischoff-Diamond production team made *A Bullet For Joey* (Allied Artists, 1955) set in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, but that film's few exteriors appear to be filled by second unit, if not stock footage, and barely convincing rear-projection is used extensively, alongside studio footage clearly shot in Southern Califonia. This may owe to the cost of the film's A-list stars Edward G. Robinson and George Raft, who early reports said would star in *The Phenix City Story*, along with Glenn Ford.

Rosenbaum singles out "the racist killing of a little black girl" as being "what made the film so believably Southern [... and] what made it believably contemporary" (143). Again, that scene and the larger racial melodrama into which it fits separate *The Phenix City Story* from the other city confidential films as well as from other representations of the contemporary South of the time.

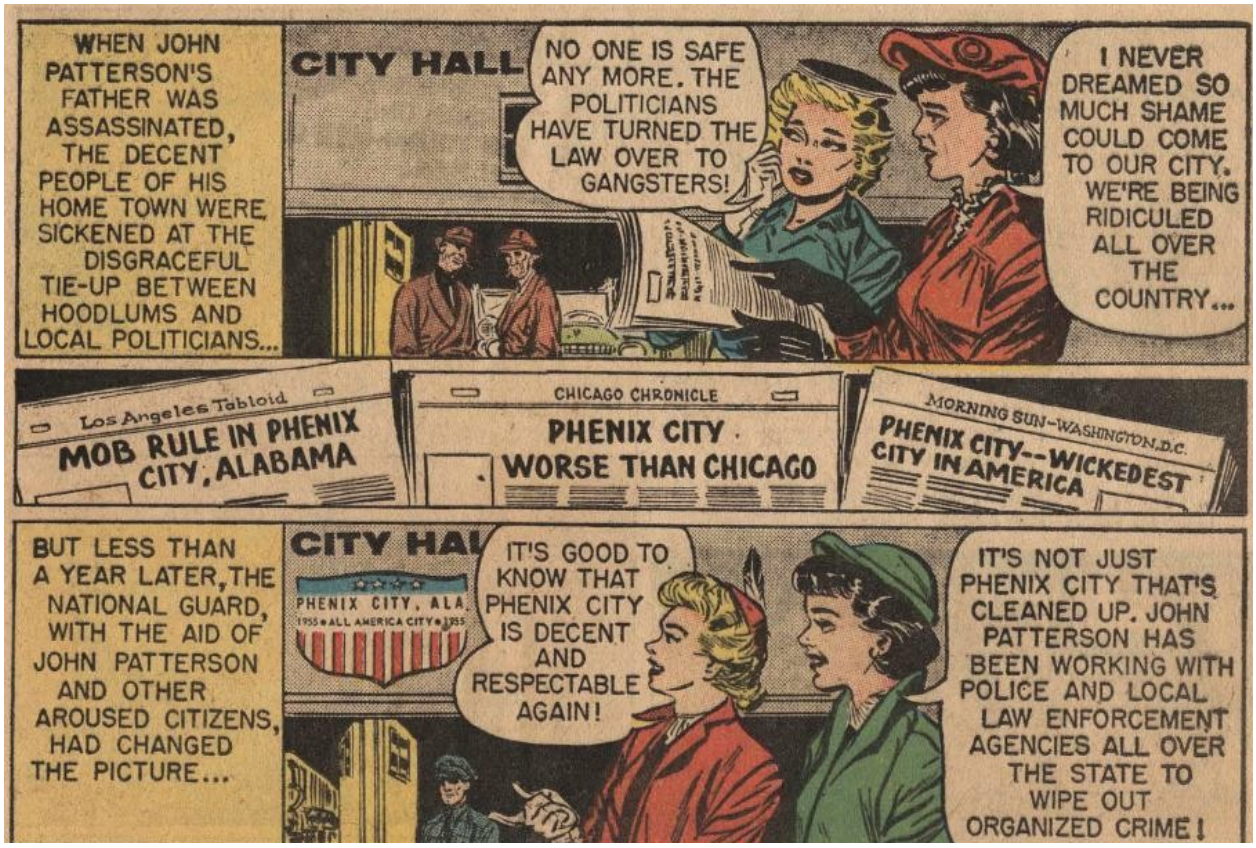

Figure 5.5—Page 3 of the 16-page *Alabama Needs John Patterson for Governor* comic book, published in 1958 by Commercial Comics Company for the Patterson Campaign. The first of its kind, the political comic represents a novel attempt to reach illiterate voters. The George Wallace campaign soon followed suit with their own comic. Unlike *The Phenix City Story*, which uses actual magazines, the comic invents fictional newspapers and headlines. (Alabama Dept. of Archives and History Digital Collection)

John Patterson, hero of *The Phenix City Story*

Lacking an idyllic past to melodramatically return to, the film offers John Patterson in office as hope for the community. Patterson's election in his father's place and his pledge to carry forward resolves *The Phenix City Story*, or rather it suspends it. The real John Patterson would leave Phenix City for Montgomery and make crime fighting and corruption a central part of his image when he took office as state Attorney General in January 1955. The timing of his political career coincides with a major shift in Alabama politics. While the fictional John Patterson could heroically call out the National Guard to impose martial law, John Patterson's actual role in the clean-up was minor, limited to speaking to the press and investigators, while waiting to assume office. Eschewing the middle-aged, church-going members of the RBA, *The*

Phenix City Story is told from the point of view of young family man John Patterson. The film helped solidify the image of John Patterson as a populist hero.

Screenwriter Daniel Mainwaring explained that the film's hopeful "message [...] turned out wrong, however, because in real life the guy we made a hero, John Patterson, he turned out to be a bastard. He was one of the worst racists around" (Porfirio 150). In the wake of the *Brown* decision, Patterson joined a congress of influential Southern politicians who sought to delay the inevitable tide of desegregation. As attorney general, Patterson initiated the first legal challenge to the *Brown* decision when the state of Alabama sued the United States government. Patterson understood the political capital of race baiting. Patterson's campaign in the 1958 governor's race "linked crime, corruption, and desegregation by arguing that 'outside agitators'—gangsters and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—were pouring money into the state to stop him" (Grafton and Permaloff). Patterson embraced "the always reliable segregation issue," treating it as an extension of his law and order brand, and he exploited Southern racial prejudice to the point that he received the unsolicited endorsement of the United Klans of Alabama (Howard 115). His election as the youngest governor in Alabama history was greeted by *Time* magazine as a "Victory for Extremists" (19). As Governor, Patterson narrowly avoided loss of life in 1961 as the Freedom Riders passed through Alabama.

The stakes of moderation in Alabama politics had changed after *Brown*. Patterson's predecessor as Attorney General, Si Garrett, was a liberal moderate who opposed the faction that would become the vocal minority of states righters behind massive resistance to integration (Cater 23). Though Albert Patterson was a racial moderate, who actively sought African American votes, he made the support of segregation part of his platform and had served 15 years on the Phenix City school board. His opponent, Lee Porter, campaigned promising to appoint Si Garrett as special assistant attorney general handling segregation cases ("Elect Albert L. Patterson…" 5, Howard 41). The man John Patterson succeeded in the governor's mansion, "Big" Jim Folsom, was also a racial moderate, who would find himself increasingly isolated during his last term. Folsom's former protégé George Wallace outdid Patterson's courtship with extremism for political ends later in the 1960s. Joseph Crespino cautions that being against white extremism "was not to be for integration, at least not immediately" (2007 35). In recent years, Patterson's biographers and documentarians present his decisions in these areas unblinkingly, as those of a man caught up in the tide of history at a complex moment (Howard

225). Patterson himself is accepting of whatever blame is due him and expresses regret about not working harder to bring African Americans into Alabama politics (Trest 440).

Figures 5.6 & 5.7—Images of interracial protest against Governor John Patterson's handling of Civil Rights issues, circa 1959-1963. (Alabama Dept. of Archives and History Digital Collection)

One cannot overstate the degree to which *The Phenix City Story* helped to shape John Patterson's reputation as successor to his father's crusade against crime and launch his own political career. The powerful melodramatic narrative prompted his main competition in the 1958 race—a young and up-until-then racial moderate George Wallace—to remark, "I'm running against a man whose father was assassinated. How'm I supposed to follow an act like that?" (qtd. in MacLean 147).[83] A Patterson aide explained, "[t]he movie was taken at face value by the public [...] [p]eople thought the story was completely authentic, so it became the bible about Phenix City" (Howard 71). Patterson framed his campaign as a continuation of the action in the film. He was early in Alabama politics to adopt television advertising, hiring a pair of media advisers who organized South Newsreels, a political advertising service that would submit 30 to 60 second campaign spots as news items to Alabama TV stations who were hungry for content (115). He also produced a comic book that visually retold his story.

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[83] For a concise, critical history of John Patterson's career, see the *Mobile Register* article on his retirement ("Patterson closing…"). George Wallace once labelled Patterson a "'do-nothing, know-nothing, invisible candidate' who courted the Ku Klux Klan" (Bunch F10). In 1979, Wallace appointed his former rival to the State Court of Criminal Appeals, where he served as a judge until 1996.

Figure 5.8—Press photo featuring the editor's original cropping marks that shows the raising of 'All-America City' flag, dated 11 February, 1956. (Discarded press photo, Columbus-Ledger Enquirer, from the author's personal collection)

All-America City

Patterson was only the most visible of the people to profit from their association with the Phenix City clean-up. RBA president Howard Pennington became mayor of Lynn Haven, Florida. Alabama journalists Edwin Strickland and Gene Wortsman traded their experience on the Phenix City beat for greener political pastures. Strickland, who appeared in the documentary prologue to *The Phenix City Story*, worked in a variety of conservative states' rights and anti-communist organizations in Alabama well into the 1970s. Wortsman turned to national politics, publishing *The New Frontier Joke Book* in late 1963, an ill-timed book of jokes about the Kennedy administration. Most journalists associated with the story, particularly Columbus reporters like Ray Jenkins, who eventually worked in the Carter administration and was published in the *New York Times*, similarly benefited. Local coverage by the *Columbus Ledger* and *Sunday Ledger-Enquirer* were awarded the Pulitzer Prize in the category of Public Service, alongside other southern dignitaries including Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner.[84]

Phenix City itself was honoured as one of eleven "All-America Cities" in January 1956. The honor came with a profile in *Look* magazine and a local television broadcast of the ceremonies and parade which featured Governor Folsom and John Patterson. The award was the fruit of work by the Committee of 200, a new local civic organization who sought to "advertise the now cleaned-up sin city to the nation" ("Phenix City Is About…" 15).

Introduced as a "businessman, good citizen and hero of the vice cleanup in Phenix City," RBA member Hugh Bentley was honoured on NBC's *This Is Your Life* with Ralph Edwards on Sunday, 14 May, 1958. The program retold the entire Phenix City story, with surprise guests including sons Hughbo and Truman Bentley, RBA colleague Hugh Britton, president of the RBA's Ladies Auxiliary Hilda Coulter, RBA president Howard Pennington, and state Attorney General John Patterson. As part of the program, Bentley was awarded an array of prizes tailored to the comforts of middle-class American life: a 1958 Edsel Citation two-door sedan, a power

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[84] In the film's documentary prologue, Clete Roberts mentions that the Pulitzer "prompted [him] as a reporter" to travel to "learn the truth about Phenix City." The *National Police Gazette* fought back in a piece entitled, "How Phoney Is the Pulitzer Prize Award?" rehashing N.K. Perlow's 1947 exposé and surveying the Columbus paper's earlier support of Mayor Cobb in his lawsuit against the tabloid.

tool workshop with circular saw, a gold charm bracelet from Marshalls of New York for his wife, a Bell & Howell projector and 16mm sound film of the program and a party that night in his honour at a Hollywood hotel.

Patterson's surprise appearance on *This Is Your Life* was controversial as he was still campaigning for the run-off election in the governor's race two weeks later. It was at the party in Hugh Bentley's honor after this TV taping that Patterson first received a call from a reporter asking Patterson to comment on the Ku Klux Klan's endorsement of his campaign (Trest 237-239). Imperial Wizard of the United Klans of America (UKA) Robert Shelton's vocal support for Patterson proved to be a scandal, especially as Patterson denied knowing Shelton, but Shelton produced a hand-signed (form) letter from the candidate which was enough to cause a scandal. The incident pushed racism and the defence of white supremacy to the fore of the campaign.

The problem of memory

As Phenix City embraced new industry and development it was eager to forget its past. Arch Ferrell was reinstated by the Alabama bar association in 1969. In 1974, John Patterson remarked that "the old crowd, the ones who opposed the clean-up and who long for the good old days, are some of the hardest workers and biggest contributors to state campaigns" and remain powerful in Phenix City and state politics (Jenkins 1974 18). Shame about Phenix City's past was a frequent theme in stories about the new Phenix City. For many years the only book on Phenix City history available to residents was newspaper columnist and local historian Harold Coulter's 1976 *A People Courageous*, which devotes very little time to the period within living memory (McLean 173). Coulter is defensive about Mayor Cobb's system of fines and forfeitures and skips the clean-up entirely, writing:

> The clean-up of 1954 has been hashed and rehashed so many times that it will not be included here. One of the remarkable things about it is that many of our leading citizens, some of those who have contributed millions of dollars to help build the "new" Phenix City, are the self-same citizens who helped to make it what it was in the "old" Phenix City. I have written the story of that period of our history but I have no intention of publishing it during my lifetime. No good purpose, that I know about, could be served by so doing. (414)

The history of "that period" to which Coulter alludes has not been published.

The Phenix City Story likewise had a troubled relationship with Phenix City. The film is a complicated artifact. While it was shot locally, features locals and tells a story deeply important to Phenix Citizens, the locals had little control over how that story was told. In addition to the location company being subjected to threats, harassments and a temporary injunction to halt production, the wife of missing fugitive Head Revel, who lived in a "neat white bungalow on Pine Tree Drive" three doors away from the Patterson home, posted "numerous signs [...] about the property saying "No photographs allowed" (Scheuer D2; "'Phenix City Story' Movie…" 12C).[85] When *The Phenix City Story* was broadcast on local television in 1968, city commissioner Don Bailey complained to the *Columbus Enquirer*, "[t]hat old movie of the old Phenix City shouldn't have been allowed to be taken in Phenix City. I guess they just didn't know that it would be shown over and over" (qtd. in McLean 158). It would take decades for Phenix City to begin to reconcile with its past.

As reporter Ray Jenkins remembers, with the passing of time, the Phenix City narrative was largely forgotten in the turbulence of the Civil Rights era (Frought). While in the governor's office, John Patterson erected a marble statue of his father on the state capitol grounds in Montgomery. Aside from the song "Phoenix City" (sic), released by country recording artist Freddie Hart and the Heartbeats in 1974,[86] and a handful of retrospective news articles, it seemed all but forgotten. *The Phenix City Story* became a cult film among cineastes, with Martin Scorsese among its more vocal admirers, but it was not released on home video until 2010, and then only as part of a film noir boxed set.[87]

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[85] On the same property around 1:30 AM on 30 January, 1948, "Head" Revel's wife Nora shot and wounded Mabel Yarbrough, wife of gambler Clyde Yarbrough, when she found that Mabel had driven her husband home (Barnes 87).

[86] A sample verse: "Gambling houses and some pleasure places on both sides of the street / The soldiers came from Fort Benning, Georgia / to this playground of retreat." Another very different record of the same title, an influential proto-ska instrumental, seemingly inspired by Phenix City, by Rolando Alphonso & the Skatalites appeared around 1966. It also misspells the town's name.

[87] Martin Scorsese includes a clip of the film's shocking murder of the little girl in the 2000 documentary *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*. In a list prepared for the website *The Daily Beast* in 2010, Scorsese writes of the film,

Phenix City did not really begin to think seriously about commemoration until the 1990s. With her publishers eager to reproduce the success of her award winning 1976 book *Murder in Coweta County* and its 1983 TV movie adaptation starring Johnny Cash and Andy Griffith, Alabama author Margaret Anne Barnes published a detailed account of the Phenix City criminal empire leading up through the Fuller and Ferrell trials (O'Briant 2E). Barnes' *The Tragedy and the Triumph of Phenix City, Alabama* was published by Mercer University Press in 1998. The book signalled a renewed interest in Phenix City. The town took great pride when a local team won the 1999 Little League World Series, capturing national headlines. Drawing on archival research and new interviews, Alan Grady's *When Good Men Do Nothing: The Assassination of Albert Patterson*, published by the University of Alabama Press in 2003, was an important step forward as it endeavoured to undo, rewrite or complete the history represented in other sources. A number of documentaries produced for local public broadcasting affiliates around the South followed, including *Up From The Ashes: The Rebirth of Phenix City* (2001), *Phenix City Confidential* (2004), *John Patterson: In the Wake of Assassins* (2007) and *Something Wicked in Russell County* (2011). Four books covering Phenix City were published in 2008, including *Wicked City* by Ace Atkins, a fictionalized crime novel set before and after the assassination; two political biographies of John Patterson by Gene Howard and Warren Trest; and Frank Griffin's *Touched By Fire: One Man's Road from Alabama to Dallas, 1954 to 1963*. The Phenix City entry in the nostalgic *Images of America* series devotes only 9 of its 127 pages to the town's ignominy (Lyles 113-122).

Into these commemorative regimes, *The Phenix City Story* has been called upon to stand in for the actual events: Margaret Anne Barnes's otherwise meticulously researched book reproduces an image of actor John McIntire that is mislabelled as being the real Albert Patterson,[88] and many of the TV documentaries poach scenes from the film as "historical re-enactments" of the actual events.

> A completely unsentimental picture by Phil Karlson that closely follows the true story of wholesale corruption, intimidation, racism, and terrifying brutality in the once-notorious town of Phenix City, Alabama—where it was shot on location… in 10 days! Fast, furious, and unflinching.

[88] Jonathan Rosenbaum also notes this confusion (141).

The Columbus Museum hosted an exhibit titled "Heroes, Villains, and Ordinary Folks: Phenix City in the 1950s" in 2005 and 2006, and a week-long series of programs entitled "Phenix City: The Legend and the Legacy" in April 2008. The later program revisited the history of its neighbour's shady past, complete with screenings of *The Phenix City Story*. At the time, the event was proudly listed in the events section of the Phenix City website.

Since 2006, a memorial plaque marks the spot where Albert Patterson fell. At this moment, the fate of the Coulter Building is uncertain. A new historical walking tour is among the first signs that Phenix City might be interested in capitalizing on its history for a tourist industry ("Russell County Convention…"). For many years, Jim Cannon, a local collector, hosted an informal museum inside his Phenix City CVS pharmacy (Scroggins). Cannon also allowed photographs from his collection to be displayed in "The Phenix City Story Museum" in a room at an antique store in Columbus. Grey-market DVDs of *The Phenix City Story* were on sale at both locations as late as 2009. Numerous screenings of the film have taken place in Phenix City and Columbus over the last dozen years. In 2013, newly elected to the city council, Cannon outlined plans to establish a non-profit to run a museum of the town's history (Owen).[89]

Conclusion

Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino caution against embracing the problematic myth of a retrograde South versus a progressive North: "[t]he most insightful observers of southern history have always insisted that the region is inseparable from the nation, that the South is not the antithesis of a progressive America but, rather, has operated as a mirror that reveals its fundamental values and practices" (2010 7). In the fall of 1954, a Tennessee journalist who authored a long survey of the situation in Phenix City and its cleanup observed, "I was amazed at how little difference there is in Phenix City and a hundred similar towns I have visited—now that the lid is on […] I am convinced that what happened there could easily happen in many another city under similar conditions" (Seigenthaler, "Sins…" 2).

Both of these passages point out the importance of understanding local history in dialogue with both the circumstances that shaped it as well the need to interrogate the history of

[89] The growth of the internet seems to have also fueled interest. In addition to a secret Facebook group, one website collects stories about Phenix City from paratroopers who trained at Fort Benning ("Paratrooper Stories...").

what happened in Phenix City more deeply. For many years, Phenix Citizens were deeply invested in breaking with the shameful past and fallout from the assassination. Even today, the temptation to emphasize the mental association with the phoenix of Greek mythology, which rose from the ashes of its former self, proves alluring. However, Phenix City's name actually derives from the town's economic domination by its neighbour. It was named for the Eagle and Phenix Cotton Mill in Columbus, Georgia—a nineteenth century industrial textile mill and major employer for Phenix Citizen. Incidentally, today, the Eagle and Phenix Mill is long closed, and the Eagle and Phenix Condominiums, which promise "historic riverfront living," have risen in their place.

To ignore or sensationalize Phenix City's criminal past without considering the unpleasant circumstances that shaped and perpetuated it would be reductive and risks both stigmatizing the consequences of economic deprivation and simplifying a complex racial history. The need to understand and contextualize this history and its representation is all the more crucial as modern Phenix City comes to terms with its past and seeks to memorialize it. *The Phenix City Story*'s role in this larger commemorative project is instructive not only as an artifact of the feel of life in the Alabama town in the 1950s, but for the visceral way in which it illustrates the dynamics of the extraordinary circumstances it depicts.

The best histories of the Phenix City clean-up—by journalists Strickland and Wortsman, author Margaret Barnes and local historian Alan Grady—are invested in exploring Phenix City's past to different ends. Strickland and Wortsman were Alabama journalists trading in a sensational exposé and reproduced much of what the National Guard uncovered, Margaret Barnes was an author searching for a sensational southern true crime story, and Grady investigates the assassination of Attorney General nominee Albert Patterson. John Patterson biographers Howard and Trest offer important insight into black life in Phenix City primarily as a prelude to Patterson's later governance. My concern is that in much of the work that has been done on both *The Phenix City Story* (Allied Artists, 1955) and the historical events that inspired it, there is a tendency to overstate its sensational elements or redemption narrative to the detriment of the larger historical forces and the cultural circumstances such as class, poverty, segregation and racial violence that enabled such crime to flourish there in the first place.

Figure 5.9—Commemorative plaque marking the exact spot where Albert Patterson fell in front of the Coulter Building, circa May 2009. (Photo by Diane Hedges)

The way that *The Phenix City Story* interprets a troubled local history of one town in the Deep South and, however naively, acknowledges the role of race in that history, is important among both Hollywood films of the era and histories of the South and nation more generally. The film occupies an important position as a mass media text in which the widespread corruption in Phenix City serves as a particular moment in a larger story of American society's struggle to recognize its own widespread social inequity and racial discrimination. Looking at *The Phenix City Story* in dialogue with the history it portrays has much to contribute to both the memory of these events as well our understanding of this moment in American history.

Conclusion

'Thank God… that historically did not happen'

Returning from a commercial break on a 2 March, 2015 broadcast of the Columbus, Georgia, NBC affiliate WJTZ's morning program, *The Dee Armstrong Show* showed the scene from *The Phenix City Story* in which a young African American girl is abducted and her body deposited next to the home of the Alabama Attorney General as his children play on the front lawn. Local historian Alan Grady and Phenix City resident Deborah Oresteen were guests on the show to promote a sixtieth anniversary screening of *The Phenix City Story* at the public library in Columbus.[90] Reacting to the scene, the host exclaimed, "thank God [...] that historically did not happen!" Oresteen agreed that it had not, and noted that it was very controversial in its day. Further, she remembered being upset by the scene when she saw the film as a child at a local drive-in. The discussion then quickly turned to the issue of redemption in the larger history of the Phenix City cleanup.

While the events in the scene, strictly speaking, 'historically did not happen' to the Patterson family, they reflected a pattern of racial violence and intimidation integral to the history of the town as the scene recreated a separate 1935 instance of racial violence in the town. This example illustrates one of the many frustrations of local history and commemorative regimes. Designating something as 'historic' or even 'important' does not necessarily require the historical context necessary for understanding. The above situation recalls Fredric Jameson's oft-cited maxims, "History is what hurts," and "History can be apprehended only through its effects" (102). Asking questions about affect—about who is hurting and why (i.e., why the scene from *The Phenix City Story* is upsetting)—offers an entrée to cultural history. The immediacy and emotionality of motion pictures—even if taken in fragmentary form on breakfast television—have the ability to re-present history in a way that can open dialogues and forge connections with the past.

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[90] Through my loose association with the group online, I had been invited to attend the screening and present something of my work on *The Phenix City Story*, but unfortunately was unable to do so. I prepared a handout providing information about the film and my research written for a general audience to go in my place.

Figure 6.1—*The Phenix City Story* Museum, hosted in the International Antiques & Flea Market in Columbus, Georgia, as it appeared in May 2009. It has since closed. The crowded walls are the fruit of Jim Cannon's collection. At centre is the Italian poster for the film. Recent local efforts seek to bring together such collections for public view in the form of a museum. (Photo by Gareth Hedges)

Crime melodrama, Commemoration and the Southern Imaginary

The last decade has seen much promising scholarship on the southern imaginary including work by Barker and McKee, Karen L. Cox, and others. The considerable efforts of Lassiter and Crespino to dismantle the myth of southern exceptionalism have created opportunities for future work to more closely examine the material legacy of that myth in national culture, as well as explore the persistence of a deeply felt attachment to the idea within American history, culture and commemorative praxis. The myth of southern exceptionalism is driven by a complex melodramatic narrative inexorably linked to the racial history of the United States.

In these pages, I have made efforts to precisely locate *Crisis in the Deep South* and *The*

Phenix City Story within discourses in American history and culture, as well as film studies and the history of media industries and institutions. Looking closely at these crime melodramas provides a focal point for addressing the social conflicts that characterized the South in the postwar era. Though both texts failed to transcend what Linda Williams called the Tom and anti-Tom narratives of racial melodrama, engaging their moral dimension recovers a conversation that implicates American popular culture in the long racial history of the American South. Revisiting these attempts to moralize actual southern crimes and integrating them into ongoing commemorative work seizes upon an opportunity to more deeply understand the social change of the 1950s in the South as a part of a national story. These film projects have value to the historical understanding of these events and a broader history.

A Southern cycle of sensation

Crisis in the Deep South and *The Phenix City Story* were part of a southern cycle of sensation in the middle 1950s that was concerned with the immediate problem of crime and violence and invested in ideas about remaking the region in terms of a changing postwar national culture. In *Crisis in the Deep South*, this resolution explicitly involved embracing a patrician spirit of racial tolerance and acceptance—a task that is predicated on the tragic martyrdom of its white newspaper editor hero. In *The Phenix City Story*, the situation is more paranoid. Defeating the Phenix City mob in film and correcting the circumstances that allowed it to flourish are left uncertain, relegated to a state of continued vigilance against the mob. *The Phenix City Story*'s racial melodrama provokes an ambiguous association with the African American freedom struggle in ways that seem to recognize the role of race in reshaping the South the film presents. It is worth observing again that only the actual townspeople and the film's villains use the "N-word."

The generic conventions of crime melodrama in both cases do not efface the origin of both cases in southern society. Neither film project contains an extended meditation on southern Confederate heritage or the legacy of slavery as they are set in a contemporary South in a state of crisis, and concerned with the resolution of immediate problems. In this way, they both are looking forward—from the vantage point of a critical and tense moment in American race relations. As I have demonstrated, the characteristics of the underlying social circumstances responsible for the murders of both Albert Patterson and Emmett Till were distinctly southern—by-products of different forms of corruption that flourished in the biracialism and stark poverty

of the American South in the first half of the twentieth century.

These issues of crime, race, class and the American South continue to circulate in popular culture. By the end of the 1960s, they were taken up by youth and countercultural movements; by the 1970s, the trend had been subsumed by an ambiguously reactionary strand of hicksploitation films.

Bonnie and Clyde

In the years after their death in May 1934, with the newsreel film that documented outlaws death still in circulation, the mothers of the actual Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow embarked on a speaking tour of Vaudeville houses. These are among several early attempts to exploit the outlaws in show business. Twelve years after *The Phenix City Story*, the Warner Bros. gangster film *Bonnie and Clyde* was a milestone of "New Hollywood" cinema. Shot on location in East Texas, *Bonnie and Clyde* emphasizes broader themes of youthful rebellion against an oppressive social order in an effort to humanize the bank robbers, who are ultimately slaughtered in a famously brutal sequence. *Bonnie and Clyde* ushered in an era of mainstream Hollywood films that courted a youth sensibility, as well as a series of fugitive couple films.[91] Written by lovers of the French New Wave and despised by the old guard in Hollywood like studio boss Jack Warner, *Bonnie and Clyde* was embraced as countercultural and became a focal point in a battle over screen violence waged by film critics.[92] The film's production history and reception highlight the conflict between these elements of the film industry—a conflict that

[91] Pauline Kael's career-defining review of the 1967 *Bonnie and Clyde*, written when she was a freelancer, secured her a job at *The New Yorker* and set the tone for aligning the film with a new youth sensibility (who had a new attitude toward screen violence). Directed by Arthur Penn, the film has come to be viewed as a defining text of the "New Hollywood," an era well-documented by popular and academic histories, including Mark Harris's *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008) and in Paul Monaco's entry in the History of the American Cinema series, *The Sixties, 1960-1969* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001: 184-186).

[92] The 1967 film closely resembles the teenage-gangster film *The Bonnie Parker Story*, released by American International Pictures in 1958. Mary E. Strunk offers an extended discussion of the cinematic legacy of the outlaws in her book *Wanted Women*.

would carry over into subsequent films and texts about the outlaws.

The conflict around the film circles southern themes as the film draws upon southern locations and racial stereotypes to ground its generational and aesthetic challenge. Though African American characters in the film wear overalls and barely speak, the film is actually structured by the African American gaze, as the first time we see the couple together a man on a porch watches them pass, and the closing shot shows two poor African American sharecroppers running toward the outlaws' car framed by its side window. This was only a slight embellishment of the historical record as the pair was among the first to arrive at the scene of the ambush that killed Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker. The film also famously features a scene in which the outlaws share an ambiguous moment of anti-authoritarian violence with a black sharecropper.

Figures 6.2, 6.3, 6.4 & 6.5—The African American gaze in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Warner Bros., 1967). Top row: from early in the film, the man in the overalls turns his head as Bonnie Parker walks by, and toward the end of the film, immediately after the outlaws are killed the two sharecroppers stop to look. Bottom row: the outlaws encourage another sharecropped to fire upon a house repossessed by the bank.

As Allison Graham suggests, the film's conflict between Bonnie Parker (Faye Dunaway) and Blanche, the wife of Clyde Barrow's brother Buck (Gene Hackman), is a overlaid with issues of class, 'white trash' and southern identity, as Bonnie aspires to a more glamour life

influenced by her film fan magazines. Estelle Parsons won an Academy Award for the role of Blanche.

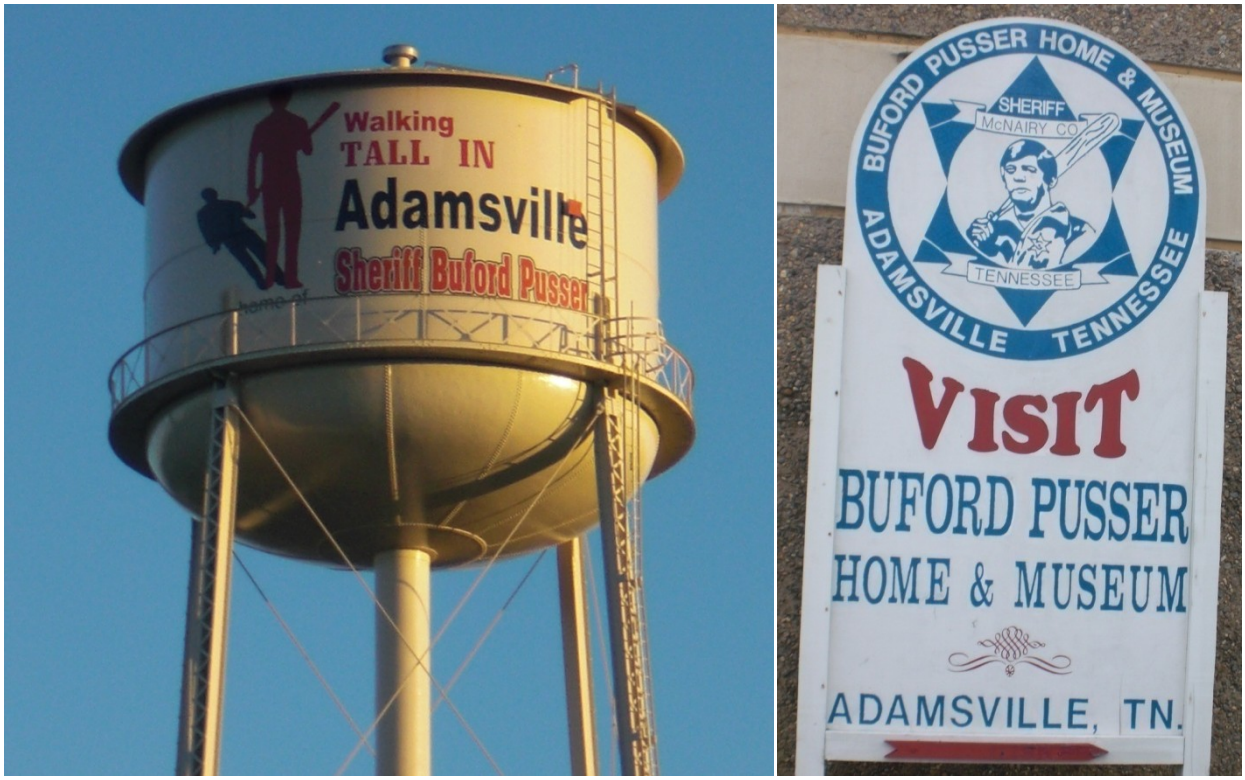
Buford Pusser and *Walking Tall*

In 1973, an unconventional box office success whose business depended upon limited runs in small theaters and drive-ins, the independently produced *Walking Tall* heroically recounts a Tennessee sheriff's battle with the gambling and vice elements along the state line. In *Walking Tall*, Actor's Studio-trained Joe Don Baker plays Buford Pusser, who, after being beaten and left for dead in a gambling den along the Tennessee-Mississippi state line, takes the law into his own hands, becoming sheriff in order to wage war against the criminal gang and the corrupt law enforcement who enable them. Produced on location in Tennessee, by veterans of the Hollywood studio system's defunct 'B-movie' units and Poverty Row studios, the film proved a phenomenon after nearly a year in release touring smaller markets, reprising the critical battles about screen violence and ideological content that had been raised by *Bonnie and Clyde* and other violent films of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By coincidence, the real Buford Pusser and his wife were attacked in a vicious early morning ambush on the very day that the Warner's *Bonnie and Clyde* film premiered at the Montreal Film Festival, the 12th of August, 1967. Pusser's wife Pauline was killed and Pusser was shot in the jaw. In the film the ambush scene visually echoes the violence of the stylized ambush in *Bonnie and Clyde*, while closing off some of the radical possibilities of the earlier film—Pusser lives to fight and avenge his wife's death.

The film critic from the *Baltimore Sun* was not alone in observing that "[t]he only reason to see "Walking Tall" is the fact that, buried somewhere beneath all the blood and brutality, is a true story" (Gardner B1). The fascination with Buford Pusser was such that Pusser toured promoting the film, and even announced plans to star in a sequel to be titled *Buford* at a press conference on the very day that he was killed in one-car collision. The film's success prompted two lower-budget sequels, a TV-movie remake, a 1981 NBC television series, and then a 2004 remake and direct-to-video sequels to that remake. Bo Svenson, a Swedish-born actor, was quickly hired to replace Pusser and the sequel was marketed with a banner quotation attributed to Pusser: "If anything happens to me I want to be sure you finish telling my story."

Walking Tall was directed by *The Phenix City Story* director Phil Karlson.[93] Phenix City madam Fannie Bell Chance was from Corinth, Mississippi, near the Tennessee-Mississippi state line area that Sheriff Pusser patrolled. She and other figures fleeing the Phenix City cleanup returned to the state line. James Earl Ray, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassin, had been a petty thief and bank robber also said to have sought sanctuary in the area. Another low level state line gangster Carl Douglas "Towhead" White originated from the area adjoining the region in Mississippi where Emmett Till was murdered.



Figures 6.6 & 6.7—Branding around Adamsville, Tennessee. The water tower carries a *Walking Tall*-inspired likeness of the town's favourite son, Sheriff Buford Pusser (left). The tower rises above the Buford Pusser Memorial Park, home to the annual Buford Pusser Festival and blocks away the Buford Pusser Home and Museum at 342 Pusser Street. Directions to the park carry this more lifelike but no-less dynamic logo (right). (Photos by Gareth Hedges)

Some of *Walking Tall*'s success owes to its giving voice to a form of nostalgia that appealed to white *ressentiment*, while rewriting (or re-deploying) older tropes about the South as

[93] At the Columbus library on 24 May 2016, the Phenix City history group hosted a screening of *Walking Tall* and discussion of continuities between Phenix City and Buford Pusser's story.

a (white) society shaped by tragedy and loss for the post-Civil Rights era.[94] Many film critics labelled the film as politically "conservative."[95] Pauline Kael's laudatory 1973 *New Yorker* review received *Walking Tall* as a new western. It is this image that the local commemorative regimes trade upon.

Figures 6.8 & 6.9—The wildly successful second promotional campaign for *Walking Tall* used this image of Baker as Pusser in a protective embrace of his wife (right)—an image that adheres to conservative notions of family and gender and visually echoes the famous image of the countercultural couple from the Woodstock music festival that graces the 1970 album *Woodstock: Music from the Original Soundtrack and More*.

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[94] In a 2008 essay titled "Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics," Joel Olson argues that *ressentiment*, a concept borrowed from Nietzsche, is a form of deep resentment overlaid with a desire for revenge and observable throughout white America following the changes of the Civil Rights era. Olson argues that the period marked by the transition from unquestioned white standing to white normalization, wherein white identity is viewed as the social norm thereby preserving structures of white privilege, nonetheless was begrudged and perceived as a loss of standing (708-710).

[95] Numerous popular film critics at the time referred to the film as "conservative" or noted its place within Richard Nixon's Silent American, and Peter Biskind argued that it appealed to nostalgia for the 1950s. Strangely, Pauline Kael, who had famously labelled the definite vigilante cop film *Dirty Harry* a "fascist" film, did not share this assessment.

Though Sheriff Buford Pusser told journalists at a Toronto press stop that he was against intermarriage because it was against his religion (Rasky E10), and his home and museum still features an autographed record from avowed segregationist Governor Lester Maddox, *Walking Tall* makes much of the fact that Pusser was among the first in Tennessee to appoint an African American deputy. Signs in the park named for Pusser, where the annual festival in his honour is held, boast compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The festival is devoted to honouring law enforcement officers as well as the legendary sheriff, and it is an important part of the local economy. In 2009, the festival's officer of the year was Arizona's controversial Sheriff Joe Arpaio. The career and commemorative regime centered around Sheriff Buford Pusser offers a rich avenue for developing issues addressed in this dissertation into the present day. During *Walking Tall*'s release, film critic Peter Biskind's review outlined connections to *The Phenix City Story* and other crime melodramas of the 1950s, demonstrating the cyclical nature of eruptions of interest in themes. Iterations of these cycles of sensation correspond to the cyclical nature of social and cultural change more generally. There is much more to be learned about the intersections of race, crime and law enforcement, and southern history. Looking at how these issues circulate in popular culture can open a window on the present and the future.

Continuing Tensions

In Memphis, Tennessee, the legendary Sun Studios, home to the early rock'n'roll, country and blues recordings of Ike Turner, Little Junior Parker, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, Jerry Lee Lewis and others, is just across the street from Nathan Bedford Forrest Park. The park's namesake—a slave trader, confederate hero and original grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan—is interred there and his likeness has sat astride a massive equestrian statue since 1905. During my 2009 visit, I naively found it surprising that this strident symbol of white supremacy presided so closely over the history of racial exchange at the root of Sun Records.

In July 2015, the Memphis City Council initiated legal procedures to remove both Forrest's likeness and his mortal remains from the Memphis Park (Yellin). In a city whose population is majority African American, the issue sparked anger. That effort has been delayed by resistance from a group calling themselves the Sons of the Confederate Veterans (Alexander). During summer 2015, the statue was vandalized with "Black Lives Matter" graffiti and Forrest's grave was desecrated (Taylor and Suriani). Extremes in this battle pitted the slogans

"Confederate Lives Matter" against "Black Lives Matter" (Yellin). These tensions illustrate the ways in which southern history continues to actively inform issues attached to memory, race, and law enforcement.

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Cape Fear. Dir. J. Lee Thompson. Perf. Robert Mitchum, Gregory Peck, Martin Balsam, Polly Bergen. Music Bernard Herrmann. Universal International, 1962. Film.

Cape Fear. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Robert De Niro, Nick Nolte, Juliette Lewis, Jessica Lange, Joe Don Baker, Robert Mitchum, Gregory Peck, Martin Balsam. Music Elmer Bernstein. DOP. Freddie Francis. Universal Pictures, 1991. Film.

Capote.Dir. Bennett Miller. Perf. Philip Seymour Hoffman, Catherine Keener, Bruce Greenwood. United Artists/Sony Pictures Classics, 2005. Film.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Dir. Richard Brooks. Perf. Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman, Burl Ives, Judith Anderson. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1958. Film.

Coquette. Dir. Sam Taylor. Perf. Mary Pickford, Johnny Mack Brown. United Artists, 1929. Film.

Cool Hand Luke. Dir. Stuart Rosenberg. Perf. Paul Newman, George Kennedy, Lou Antonio, Clifton James, Luke Askew and Strother Martin. Warner Bros., 1967. Film.

Crossfire. Dir. Edward Dymtryk. Perf. Robert Young, Robert Mitchum, Robert Ryan. RKO, 1947. Film.

The Declaration of Independence. Dir. Crane Wilbur. Perf. John Litel, Ted Osborne, Rosella Towne. Warner Bros., 1938. Film.

The Defiant Ones. Dir. Stanley Kramer. Perf. Tony Curtis, Sidney Poitier, Theodore Bikel, Lon Chaney, Jr., and Claude Akins. United Artists, 1958. Film.

Deliverance. Dir. John Boorman. Perf. Jon Voight, Burt Reynolds, Ned Beatty. Warner Bros., 1972. Film.

Easy Rider. Dir. Dennis Hopper. Perf. Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Jack Nicholson. Columbia, 1969. Film.

Every Which Way But Loose. Dir. James Fargo. Perf. Clint Eastwood, Sondra Locke, Geoffrey Lewis, Ruth Gordon. Warner Bros., 1978. Film.

Eyes on the Prize. Public Broadcasting Service. 1987-1990. Television series.

Gentleman's Agreement. Dir. Elia Kazan. Perf.Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire, John Garfield. 20th Century Fox, 1947. Film.

Ghosts of Mississippi. Dir. Rob Reiner. Perf. Alec Baldwin, Whoopi Goldberg, James Woods. Columbia Pictures, 1996. Film.

Giant. Dir. George Stevens. Perf. Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, James Dean. Warner Bros., 1956. Film.

Girl With an Itch. Dir. Ronald V. Ashcroft. Perf. Kathy Marlowe, Robert Armstrong, Robert Clarke. Don-Tru Company, 1958. Film.

God's Little Acre. Dir. Anthony Mann. Perf. Robert Ryan, Tina Louise, Aldo Ray, Buddy Hackett, Jack Lord, Vic Morrow. Music Elmer Bernstein. United Artists, 1958. Film.

Gone with the Wind. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Thomas Mitchell. Selznick International Pictures / MGM, 1939. Film.

The Green Beret. Dir. John Wayne, Ray Kellogg, Mervyn LeRoy. Perf. John Wayne, David Janssen, Aldo Ray, Jack Soo, George Takei. Batjac Productions, Warner Bros-Seven Arts, 1968. Film

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. Dir. Stanley Kramer. Perf. Spencer Tracy, Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn. Columbia, 1967. Film.

Gun Crazy. Dir. Joseph H. Lewis. Writ. Dalton Trumbo, MacKinlay Kantor. Perf. Peggy Cummins, John Dall. King Brothers Productions/UA, 1950. Film.

He Walked By Night. Dir. Alfred L. Werker, Anthony Mann (uncredited). Writ. John C. Higgins, Crane Wilbur. Perf. Richard Basehart, Scott Brady, Roy Roberts, Jack Webb. Bryan Foy Productions/Eagle-Lion Films, 1948. Film.

Heart of Dixie. Dir. Martin Davidson. Perf. Ally Sheedy, Virginia Madsen, Phoebe Cates, Treat Williams. Orion, 1989. Film.

Home of the Brave. Dir. Mark Robson. Perf. Jeff Corey, James Edwards, Lloyd Bridges. UA, 1949. Film.

Hot Summer Night. Dir. David Friedkin. Perf. Leslie Nielsen, Colleen Miller, Edward Andrews. MGM, 1957. Film.

The House on Telegraph Hill. Dir. Robert Wise Perf. Richard Basehart, Valentina Cortese, William Lundigan. 20th Century Fox, 1951. Film.

I Am a Fugitive from the Chain Gang. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Perf. Paul Muni, Glenda Farrell, Helen Vinson. Warner Bros., 1932. Film.

I Am an American. Dir. Crane Wilbur. Writ. Crane Wilbur. Perf. Humphrey Bogart, Gary Gray, Gordon Hart. Warner Bros., 1944. Film.

I Spit on your Grave (AKA *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*). Dir. Michel Gast. Perf. Christian Marquand, Antonella Lualdi, Fernand Ledoux. Audubon, 1959. Film.

I Was a Communist for the FBI. Dir. Gordon Douglas. Writ. Crane Wilbur. Perf. Frank Lovejoy, Dorothy Hart, Philip Carey. Warner Bros. 1951. Film.

In Search Of Buford Pusser. Jerry Skinner. CreateSpace, 2009. DVD.

In the Heat of the Night. Dir. Norman Jewison. Perf. Sidney Poitier, Rod Steiger, Warren Oates, Lee Grant. Writ. Stirling Silliphant. Cine. Haskell Wexler, ASC. Music. Quincy Jones. The Mirisch Corporation/United Artists, 1967. Film.

In the Wake of the Assassins. Dir. Robert Clem, and Alan Hostetter. Feat. John Patterson, Ray Jenkins, Bob Ingram. Waterfront Pictures, 2007. Video.

Infamous. Dir. Douglas McGrath. Perf. Toby Jones, Sandra Bullock, Daniel Craig, Peter Bogdanovich, Jeff Daniels. Arclight Films/Warner Independent Pictures, 2006. Film.

Inherit the Wind. Prod. & Dir. Stanley Kramer. Perf. Spencer Tracy, Fredric March, Gene Kelly, Dick York, Harry Morgan. United Artists, 1960. Film.

The Intruder. Dir. Roger Corman. Perf. William Shatner, Frank Maxwell, Jeanne Cooper. Writ. Charles Beaumont. Pathé-America Distrib.Co., 1962. Film.

Intruder in the Dust. Dir. Clarence Brown. Perf. David Brian, Claude Jarman, Jr., Juano Hernández. MGM. 1948. Film.

Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison. Dir. Crane Wilbur. Writ. Crane Wilbur. Perf. Steve Cochran, David Brian, Philip Carey. Warner Bros., 1951. Film.

It Happened in Springfield. Dir. Crane Wilbur. Perf. Warren Douglas, Andrea King, Charles Drake. Warner Bros., 1945. Film.

It's A Joke Son! Dir. Benjamin Stoloff. Perf. Kenny Delmar, Una Merkel, June Lockhart. Monogram, 1947. Film.

Jesse James' Women. Dir. Don "Red" Barry. Perf. Don "Red" Barry, Peggie Castle. A. Lloyd Royal and Panorama Pictures, 1954. Film.

Juke Girl. Dir. Curtis Bernhardt. Perf. ann Sheridan, Ronald Reagan, Richard Whorf. Warner Bros., 1942). Film.

Kansas City Confidential. Dir. Phil Karlson. Perf. John Payne, Coleen Gray, Preston Foster. UA, 1952. Film.

The Killing. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Sterling Hayden, Coleen Gray, Vince Edwards. UA, 1956. Film.

King Kong. Dir. Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack. Perf. Fay Wray, Robert Armstrong, Bruce Cabot. RKO, 1933. Film.

Little Caesar. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Perf. Edward G. Robinson, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Glenda Farrell. Warner Bros., 1931. Film.

Lost Boundaries. Dir. Alfred L. Werker. Perf. Beatrice Pearson, Mel Ferrer, Susan Douglas Rubes. Louis de Rochemont, 1949. Film.

Louisiana Hussy. Dir. Lee Sholem, William Rowland. Perf. Nan Peterson, Robert Richards, Peter Coe. Howco International Pictures, 1959. Film.

The Man With the Golden Arm. Dir. Otto Preminger. Perf. Frank Sinatra, Kim Novak, Eleanor Parker. United Artists, 1955. Film.

Maniac. Dir. Dwain Esper. Perf. William Woods, Horace B. Carpenter. Roadshow Attractions, 1934. Film.

Mandinga. Dir. Mario Pinzauti. Perf. Antonio Gismondo, Serafino Profumo, Maria Rosaria. Riuzzi. S.E.F.I. Cinematografica, 1976. Film.

Mandingo. Dir. Richard Fleischer. Perf. James Mason, Susan George, Perry King, Ken Norton. Paramount, 1975. Film.

Midnight Cowboy. Dir. John Schlesinger. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Jon Voight, Sylvia Miles. MGM, 1969. Film.

Mississippi Burning. Dir. Alan Parker. Perf. Gene Hackman, Willem Dafoe. Orion Pictures, 1988. Film.

The Monroe Doctrine. Dir. Crane Wilbur. Perf. Grant Mitchell, Charles Waldron, James Stephenson. Warner Bros., 1939. Film.

The Moon Is Blue. Dir. Otto Preminger. Perf. William Holden, David Niven, Maggie McNamara. UA, 1953. Film.

"The Murder of Emmett Till." *The American Experience*. Dir. Stanley Nelson. Perf. Andre Braugher, Pat Antici, Oudie Brown. Firelight Media, WGHB, 2003. Television.

New Orleans Uncensored.Dir. William Castle. Perf. Arthur Franz, Beverly Garland and Helene Stanton. Columbia Pictures, 1955. Film.

The Night of the Hunter. Dir. Charles Laughton. Perf. Robert Mitchum, Shelley Winters, Lillian

Gish, Billy Chapin, Peter Graves. United Artists, 1955. Film.

No Way Out. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Perf. Richard Widmark, Linda Darnell, Stephen McNally. 20th Century Fox, 1950. Film.

The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde. Dir. Larry Buchanan. Perf. Burl Ives, Jo Enterentree, Lucky Mosley. Dal-Art Films/Larry Buchanan Productions, 1968.

The Ox-Bow Incident. Dir. William A. Wellman. Perf. Henry Fonda, Dana Andrews. 20th Century Fox, 1943. Film.

Paratrooper. Dir. Terence Young. Perf. Alan Ladd, Leo Genn, Susan Stephen. Columbia, 1953. Film.

Phenix City Confidential. Kim Bauldree and S E. Burns. Gainesville, Fla: WUFT-TV, 2004. Video.

The Phenix City Story. Dir. Phil Karlson. Perf. John McIntire, Richard Kiley, Kathryn Grant, Edward Andrews, James Edwards. Allied Artists, 1955. Film.

Pinky. Dir. Elia Kazan. Perf. Jeanne Crain. Ethel Barrymore. Ethel Waters. 20th Century Fox, 1949. Film.

The Public Enemy. Dir. William A. Wellman. Perf. James Cagney, Jean Harlow, Edward Woods. Warner Bros,. 1931. Film.

A Real American Hero (AKA *Hard Stick*). Dir. Lou Antonio. Perf. Brian Dennehy, Ed Call, Forrest Tucker, Brian Kerwin, Ken Howard, and W.O. Smith. Bing Crosby Productions/Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), 1978. TV Movie.

The Reconstruction of Asa Carter. Dir. Mario Ricci. With Frederick Burger, Dan T. Carter, Ken Forman. Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2010. Film.

Road Gang. Dir. Louis King. Perf. Donald Woods, Kay Linaker, Carlyle Moore Jr. Warner Bros., 1936. Film.

Rock Around the Clock. Dir. Fred F. Sears. Perf. Bill Haley and the Comets, The Platters, Ernie Freeman Combo. Columbia, 1956. Film.

Room at the Top. Dir. Jack Clayton. Perf. Laurence Harvey, Simone Signoret, Heather Sears. British Lion Films, 1959. Film.

*"*Something Wicked in Russell County.*"* *The Alabama Stories* series. With Lori Cummings, Julian Elmore and Chris Renegar. Alabama Public Television. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University, 2011. Video.

Sons of the Plains. Dir. Crane Wilbur. Writ. Lois Kennedy, Crane Wilbur. Perf. Billy Mauch, Robert J. Mauch, Russell Simpson. Warner Bros., 1938. Film.

So Red the Rose. Dir. King Vidor. Perf. Margaret Sullavan, Walter Connolly, Randolph Scott. Paramount, 1935. Film.

Storm Warning. Dir. Stuart Heisler. Perf. Ginger Rogers Ronald Reagan, Doris Day. Warner Bros.,1951. Film.

The Story of Temple Drake. Dir. Stephen Roberts. Perf. Miriam Hopkins, Jack La Rue, William Gargan. Paramount Pictures, 1933. Film.

Tank. Dir. Marvin J. Chomsky. Perf. James Garner, Shirley Jones, C. Thomas Howell. Music. Lalo Schifrin. Lorimar Productions/Universal, 1984. Film.

Teen-Age Crime Wave. Dir. Fred F. Sears. Perf. Tommy Cook, Molly McCart, Sue England. Clover, 1955. Film.

They Won't Forget. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Perf. Claude Rains, Gloria Dickson, Edward Norris. Warner Bros., 1937. Film.

They Live by Night. Dir. Nicholas Ray. Perf. Cathy O'Donnell, Farley Granger, Howard Da Silva. RKO, 1948. Film.

Thieves Like Us. Dir. Robert Altman. Perf. Keith Carradine, Shelley Duvall, Louise Fletcher, Tom Skerritt. UA, 1974. Film.

Thunder Road. Dir Arthur Ripley. Perf. Robert Mitchum, Gene Barry, Jacques Aubuchon. UA, 1958. Film.

A Time to Kill. Dir. Joel Schumacher. Perf. Sandra Bullock, Samuel L. Jackson, Matthew McConaughey, Kevin Spacey, Oliver Platt, Charles S. Dutton, Ashley Judd, Patrick McGoohan, Donald Sutherland. Warner Bros., 1996. Film.

To Kill A Mockingbird. Dir. Robert Mulligan. Perf. Gregory Peck, John Megna, Frank Overton. Universal, 1962. Film.

Tomorrow's Children. Dir. Crane Wilbur. Perf. Diane Sinclair, Donald Douglas, John Preston. Bryan Foy Prod., 1934. Film.

Uncle Tom's Cabin. Dir. Harry A. Pollard. Perf. Margarita Fischer, Arthur Edmund Carewe, George Siegmann. Universal Pictures, 1927. Film.

The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till. Dir. Keith Beauchamp. With Mamie Till, Wheeler Parker, Simeon Wright. Till Freedom Come Productions, 2005. Film.

Up From The Ashes: The Rebirth of Phenix City. The Alabama Experience series. Max Shores and David Duff. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University, 2001. Video.

Violent Saturday. Dir. Richard Fleischer. Perf. Victor Mature, Richard Egan, Stephen McNally. 20th Century Fox, 1955. Film.

Walk East on Beacon! Dir. Alfred L. Werker. Prod. Louis De Rochemont. Writ. J. Edgar Hoover (source article), Laurence Heath, Emmett Murphy. Perf. George Murphy, Finlay Currie, Virginia Gilmore. Columbia Pictures, 1952. Film.

Walking Tall. Dir. Phil Karlson. Perf. Joe Don Baker, Elizabeth Hartman, Noah Beery, Jr., Lurene Tuttle, Brenda Benét, Ed Call, Gene Evans, Bruce Glover, Felton Perry, and Leif Garrett. Bing Crosby Productions/Cinerama, 1973. Film.

Walking Tall, Part 2. (AKA *Part 2: Walking Tall; The Legend of the Lawman*).Dir. Earl Bellamy. Perf. Bo Svenson, Bruce Glover, Noah Beery, Jr., Lurene Tuttle, Richard Jaeckel, Luke Askew, John Davis Chandler, Robert DoQui, and Leif Garrett. Bing Crosby Productions/American International Pictures, 1975. Film

Walking Tall: The Final Chapter. (AKA The *Final Chapter: Walking Tall*). Dir. Jack Starrett. Perf. Bo Svenson, Forrest Tucker, Lurene Tuttle, Bruce Glover, and Leif Garrett. Bing Crosby Productions/American International Pictures, 1977. Film

Walking Tall (NBC TV series, 7 episodes). Prod. Mel Swope. Perf. Bo Svenson, Walter Barnes. Columbia Pictures Television, NBC, 1981. DVD.

Walking Tall. Dir. Kevin Bray. Perf. Dwane "The Rock" Johnson, and Johnny Knoxville. MGM, 2004. Film.

Walking Tall: The Payback. Dir. Tripp Reed. Perf. Kevin Sorbo. Sony Pictures, 2007. DVD.
Walking Tall: Lone Justice. Dir. Tripp Reed. Perf. Kevin Sorbo. Sony Pictures, 2007. DVD.

Walking with a Legend: Memories of Sheriff Buford Pusser. Dwana Pusser, Jack Coffman, Deputy James Robertson. 2005. DVD.

White Lightning. Dir. Joseph Sargent. Perf. Burt Reynolds, Ned Beatty, Bo Hopkins. United Artists, 1973. Film.

White Line Fever. Dir. Jonathan Kaplan. Perf. Jan-Michael Vincent, Kay Lenz, Slim Pickens, L. Q. Jones, Don Porter, R. G. Armstrong, Dick Miller. Columbia, 1975. Film.

Wild River. Dir. Elia Kazan. Perf. Montgomery Clift, Lee Remick, Jo Van Fleet. 20th Century-

Fox, 1960. Film.

You Only Live Once. Dir. Fritz Lang. Prod. Walter Wanger. Perf. Sylvia Sidney, Henry Fonda, Barton MacLane. United Artists, 1937. Film.