

The Frontier of Race in Mimetic Theory

American Lynchings and Racial Violence

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René Girard stands as one of the most fascinating figures in the study of violence and religion. As a thinker, theorist, and theologian, his contribution to literary and cultural theory is indicative of his profound ability to see beyond societal phenomena into the very mechanizations of human existence. Historians, economists, philosophers, psychologists, and even neuroscientists have followed Girard's lead and stepped into the waters of mimetic theory in order to surf the waves of such concepts as desire, imitation, and violence. Yet amid the number of articles, monographs, and anthologies produced by Girard and his colleagues in the Academy, only a few scholars have struck out further into the open seas of mimetic theory to explore the deep depths of violence when channeled by human constructs of race and ethnicity. The works of Cheryl Kirk-Duggan (1994, 2001),¹ Diana Culbertson (1993),² Martha Reineke (1993),³ Theophus Smith (1994),⁴ and Fred Smith (1999)⁵ represent some of the first attempts. Their excellent scholarship taps the surface of the often-hidden layers of mimetic rivalry in modern-day forms of scapegoating. Building upon their arguments, this article presents both a call and deeper engagement of mimetic theory within the context of race. Starting the conversation where

René Girard left off, the two questions driving this analysis are: (1) What does mimetic theory have to say about the African American⁶ experience of lynching? (2) What does the history of lynching in North America have to say to the study of mimetic theory?

These questions present challenging inquiries to the historiography of mimetic theory, which has heretofore taken only a glance at race as a category of analysis. The fact that race has been almost absent in treatises of mimetic theory is quite remarkable, given that Girard's work involved the study of contentious binaries, subjugation, and scapegoating—taxonomies that speak directly to the ideological mechanisms of anti-black racism and terrorism in America. In short, race has remained an unexplored territory in Girard's own work. This fact is further surprising given that Girard spent many years in America, some of which were lived in North Carolina during the 1950s—a place where Girard first experienced the “completely segregated and quite conservative”⁷ feel of Jim Crow culture during his short time at Duke University (1952–1953).

Born on Christmas day in 1923 in Avignon, France, Girard was not unacquainted with the harshness of life that accompanied the violence and oppression of America's racialized landscape. Growing up in France, Girard, his four other siblings, and his parents experienced the occupation of Nazi German troops. The latter part of his school years was spent as a “provincial student in [a] wartime city among German officers, Nazi functionaries, and, to a greater or lesser extent, a collaborating population.”⁸

His experiences in France caused him to once remark that “occupied Paris had paralyzed me.”⁹ Girard noted that he was “not affected the way [he] should have been.” Cynthia Haven's detailed biography, *Evolution of Desire*, intimates that Girard was often “affectless” in his “reaction to events around him, as if he were puzzling over his own detached nature.”¹⁰ Haven even wondered whether Girard, when experiencing or confronting lived oppression, “simply was not feeling what he expected to be feeling, or as other claimed to have felt.”¹¹ “Affectlessness” perhaps explains why when living in America, he saw racial violence but did not fully attend to it.

For example, when Girard spent a year in North Carolina in the early 1950s, he stated, “You can smell the lynching.”¹² Such a statement was indicative of the number of lynchings that occurred in the South almost weekly in states like Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana. According to lynching scholars Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck,

Although mobs murdered almost 300 white men and women, the vast majority—almost 2,500—of lynch victims were African-Americans. Of these black victims,

94 percent died in the hands of white lynch mobs. The scale of this carnage means that, on the average, a black man, woman, or child was murdered nearly once a week, every week, between 1882 and 1930 by a hate-driven white mob. As staggering as the lynching toll was, it vastly understates the total volume of violence aimed towards African-American citizens of the South.¹³

In North Carolina, Girard commented that while that region wasn't the worst area in the South, he could feel the "racial malaise that always hung" not just over North Carolina, but the entire country of America.¹⁴ Yet he never wrote about race and the violent malaise that permeated around the black scapegoats of America.

America in the 1950s, with its segregated public spaces of the Jim Crow South, its openly discussed fears of miscegenation resounding through public waiting rooms, and its visceral descriptions of lynchings that often lined the front page of local newspapers constituted an uncharted venue of racial violence for Girard. With more than sixty African Americans reported lynched in North Carolina between the years 1865 and 1900,¹⁵ Girard entered a context fraught with the historical legacies of a racial violence that held the white supremacist social order in place. Haven's biography even noted that "He [Girard] would not only have known about Jim Crow laws, but he would have had to cooperate with them."¹⁶ Yet while Girard admitted that his experience of racism and Jim Crow culture became of primary importance to him, his writings never fully explored the violent scapegoating of black males.¹⁷

My first point is that it was in America, more so than anywhere else, that Girard first began to see the surrogate/scapegoat mechanism in full play. I further argue that the anti-black violence and racism Girard experienced in North Carolina would have enabled him to further frame his arguments around the surrogate/scapegoat mechanism by looking at America's ultimate scapegoat—the persecuted black male. As if reflecting back almost twenty years after his experience in North Carolina, Girard wrote in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*: "I am sure that in the southern United States there is a connection between the perpetuation of lynching and the obsession with the Peeping Tom that, until recent years, remained quite striking for any visitor."¹⁸ According to Jean-Michel Oughourlian, Girard had said point blank: "When I am speaking about scapegoats, I know what the hell I'm talking about."¹⁹ For Girard, then, his experiences with racial violence were "absolutely pivotal."²⁰

And yet we turn our eyes back to the fact that the scholar who studied the origins of the "all" coming against the "one" rarely engaged the experiences of the scapegoats within his own community. His prolific scholarship of

work mostly ignored race as a substantial category of analysis within mimetic theory.

In all fairness to Girard, I am not making the claim that Girard ignored racism completely in his scholarship. What I am arguing is that Girard gave a cursory glance to the complexities of America's racial context with regard to scapegoating. In this respect, I contend that mimetic rivalry within societies that are reified with the microaggressions of prejudice and the macro assaults of systemic racism make the mechanisms of mimetic theory contextually specific. When race, racism, and power are the social–historical contexts of mimetic violence, desire, and sacrifice, rivalry is at first racialized and therefore functions as the outer coating of mimetic rivalry, which often “occludes or obfuscates the other layers of enmity present within a mimetic cycle.” Clearly, from the biography by Cynthia Haven to the numerous interviews that Girard gave over his life span, lynching—particularly of black males in the American South—was a resonant reality in Girard's thinking. This point is crucial and leads me to two assertions: (1) In order to fully understand the depths of mimetic theory, we must recognize that race and racism in America made up the organizing context by which Girard formed his theory; and (2) mimetic theory must be addressed in connection with race whenever it is identified within the American context.²¹

I further argue that Girard, despite his limited attention to the atrocities perpetrated against people of color in America, would have found the most prominent form of contagious violence in the lynching of black folks. Such a discovery, I believe, became the fertile ground in which he could germinate the concept, language, and ideology of violence. I also believe that Girard *may have* discovered mimetic theory, first, through the *lynching of black males* in America before he articulated his theory through the writings of Freud, Greek tragedies, and the stories in French novels.

This leads us to the use of the word “lynching” throughout Girard's most seminal works. From *Violence and the Sacred*²² and continuing through *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*,²³ *The Scapegoat*²⁴, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*,²⁵ and others,²⁶ Girard used the term “lynching” to describe the culmination of mimetic rivalry and its production of ritual violence. Beginning with some of his earliest works, such as *Violence and the Sacred* (1972, 1977), the word “lynching” is used twice within Girard's main text and twice within his footnotes.²⁷ By the time *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1978, 1987) is printed, Girard has increased his usage of the word by ten, with more than fourteen references to the term “lynching.” In *The Scapegoat* (1982, 1986), “lynching” is documented in only four instances, but in the publication of *I See Satan*

Fall like Lightning (1999, 2001), Girard applies the term thirteen times. By 2003, Girard's use of the word has almost tripled in "The Mimetic Theory of Religion: An Outline" in Paul Gifford, David Archard, Trevor A. Hart, and Nigel Rapport's edited volume *2000 Years and Beyond: Faith, Identity, and the "Common Era."*²⁸ Writing the terms "lynch," "lynched," and "lynching" more than *fifty* times in the article, Girard's conceptualization of mimetic theory appears firmly anchored in the language and imagery of lynching.²⁹ Girard's predisposition toward the term "lynching" as a language and model of the violent culmination of mimesis begs for further investigation. For he contends "mimetic theory . . . reaffirms the enigmatic nature of sacrifice and sees its universality as rooted in . . . the unanimous *lynching* [emphasis mine] of real victims—something produced spontaneously in disturbed communities, where it serves to restore peace."³⁰

In essence, all of these references to and citations of "lynching" in Girard's works speak volumes. His most noted references to American forms of lynching in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* reveal his candid focus on the United States' "perpetuation of lynching,"³¹ which he found quite striking. In fact, twenty-one years later, Girard was still thinking about American forms of lynching when he acknowledged that the core of his theory could only be fully captured in what he understands as a violent practice endemic to the United States. Writing in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard posits that the "French language does not have a proper term to designate this sudden, convulsive violence, this pure crowd phenomenon. The word that comes most readily to the lips is an Americanism, 'lynching.'"³² It is this term, with all of its historical baggage that Girard never adequately addresses, and that he uses to illuminate the ways in which the surrogate/scapegoating mechanism culminates around the death of a sacrificial victim. What Girard does not discuss is the multifaceted layers of enmity that exist within the mimetic mechanism when functioning within racialized cultures. Racialized cultures tend to reify the capacity for violence within religion, making it a constitutive element of the religion itself and societal morality. As scholar Jon Pahl notes: "Girard never addresses violence and religion in American culture and consequently does not recognize the hybrid forms of religious violence as they have emerged in civil and cultural religions."³³

And herein lies the fullness of my argument: If Girard posits that "creative lynching remain highly visible in many religious systems, as distant from each other in time and space as pre-Socratic Greece from Aboriginal Australia at the end of the nineteenth century,"³⁴ then the African American experience of anti-black terrorism as well as the racialized experiences of other people of color in the world offer fertile ground in which scholars can unearth the depths of

mimetic theory. The deeper challenge of my argument is to also awaken those who study mimetic theory to the ways in which the concept of “lynching” has been *understudied and disconnected from* the social–historical contexts of racial and ethnic oppression. If mimetic theory is to have substantiative “boots on the ground,” then studies in mimetic theory must look to how mimetic violence, desire, and sacrifice are played out in modern societies that are still plagued with racial, ethnic, and religious violence. America, with its endemic racial and ethnic terrorism, is not alone. Every continent in the world is or has been tormented by the realities of prejudice and ethnic and/or religious violence. Such a hiatus in the treatment of what I consider one of the core conceptualizations in mimetic theory has robbed Girardian thinkers of part of their utilitarian aims of bettering the world around them. The indirect avoidance of *race and ethnic discrimination* as an ideological construct has limited the salience of mimetic theory in the world and thereby thwarted more conversations of positive mimesis in eradicating racial difference.

I hope, by this point in my argument, to spark an impetus among Girardian thinkers to search out the fissures of “lynching,” not just in literary myths, Greek tragedies, and philosophical treatises, but in the lived world around them, by attending to the real-life *surrogate/scapegoats* that populate the altars of mimetic rivalry within their specific spheres of influence. In short, I am asking my fellow Girardian thinkers to give heed to the scapegoats within their midst, the ones they read about in their local newspapers as well as those they see trampled upon in their respective communities.

To this end, what follows is my attempt to demonstrate what an analysis of mimetic theory may look like when paying attention to the real-time scapegoats in our midst. Since my training as a religious studies scholar and historian lies in the history of African Americans, I am engaging the concept of race and race-making within the triangular paradigm of mimetic theory. Here, I am referring to Girard’s understanding of triangular desire where the subject imitates the desire of the model, which compulsorily leads to rivalry, mimetic doubling with its attendant escalation, thereby resulting in a homologous society that falls prey to the scapegoat mechanism. The triangular desire resident in mimetic theory takes on nuance when placed in the social–historical contexts of America where the black bodies of African Americans are scripted as rivals. While this study does not have the breadth by which to address the triple jeopardies of race, class, and gender that mark African American women as particular kinds of scapegoats, it is important to note that black males more so than black women were overwhelmingly identified as rivals in America, which made them the primarily fruit hung from lynching trees.

As race in America has historically been focused primarily upon the bodies of African Americans, black males have constituted the ultimate “other” by which predominantly white North American societies represented catastrophic threats to the white supremacist social order. Lynching became the means for eradicating this threat. Therefore, my starting point for this analysis begins with Girard’s most salient concept in mimetic theory—*lynching*. In short, I am using American forms of *lynching* to explicate the ways in which Girard used lynching as part of this theoretical construct of mimetic theory. In doing so, I seek to *investigate the racial constructs embedded in American forms of scapegoating*—a road not properly traveled by Girard himself.

THE HISTORY OF LYNCHING AND VIOLENCE IN NORTH AMERICA

It is important here to briefly explore the history of lynching in the United States, which ironically began in North Carolina. According to historian Albert Matthew, “complaints about desperadoes were heard in the back woods of the Carolinas as early as 1752, and between 1767 and 1771 occurred a movement [of men who called themselves] Regulators.”³⁵ Regulators considered themselves self-appointed ministers of justice who meted out punishment to abusive husbands, wayward wives, and supporters of the English rule. Whipping and on occasion acts of “tar and feathering” were common practices of punishment for illegal actions. However, it was not until 1812 that we actually hear the term “lynch law,” which could include anything from banishment, to immolation, to hanging, for any person deemed subversive, regardless of race, class, or gender.³⁶

Lynch law was almost always connected with lynch mobs—transformed “regulators” from the antebellum period—who now took the law into their own hands. These mobs ranged from small groups of five to large groups of as many as one hundred and even into the thousands. Many of them consisted of local townspeople, with the majority of the participants being men. However, in larger gatherings, where crowds could reach into the thousands, women and children could also be numbered among the mob. Though many historians note that there was a decline in the practice of lynch law between 1820 and 1830, the practice was revived with a vengeance after the Civil War. After 1865, lynch law practices began to spread throughout the United States, carrying with them more severe and even brutal punishment measures.³⁷ And while the majority of victims of lynch mobs were persons of African descent, Asians, Jews, Italians, Hispanics, Syrians, and white women were also targets of this kind of persecution racial terrorism. Black people constituted the largest ethnic group to

hang from lynching trees in America. Historical records note that between the years 1882 and 1968, more than 4,742 African Americans were reported lynched throughout the South.³⁸ These numbers give no account of the lynching of African Americans that took place during the race riots of the early twentieth century.

According to historian Amy Louise Wood, “Lynching stood at the center of a long tradition of American vigilantism.”³⁹ For Wood, “lynching, even in photography and film, produc[es] a sense of superiority and solidarity among otherwise different white southerners.”⁴⁰ The work of James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack in their groundbreaking pictography of lynching, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, concurs with Wood’s analysis, as she further argued that lynchings operated as theatrical performances of morality and justice, with some acts done literally inside local town theatres where admission was charged.⁴¹ In some instances, even newspapers and journalists published the events beforehand in order to gain a bigger audience.⁴²

The spectacle of lynching certainly operated as a pervasive form of entertainment for many white Americans during the early twentieth century. Images of lynch victims flooded American households in the “forms of ghostly sepia and grim black-and-white snapshots, cabinet cards, and postcards.”⁴³ Postcards of lynchings were extremely popular and were sent through the U.S. Postal Service to family members as holiday cards. In 1915, for example, a postcard sent by a person named Joe to his mother held a picture of the charred torso of William Stanley with the following words on the back: “This is the barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it your sone, Joe.”⁴⁴

The multiplicity of lynching acts that have been documented in newspapers also provides abundant proof that lynchings were often front-page headlines designed to bring in more readers, providing “unmediated access to the horrors of lynching.” Such displays of communal violence afforded “visual proof of the celebratory nature with which white southerners attended and accepted public spectacles of torture and death.”⁴⁵ Lynching spectacles in America were continually supported by a culture that condoned the gruesome practice. Further, lynchings reflected the racial power that enforced the subjugation of African Americans before and after the Civil War—from the horrors of slavery to deprivations of sharecropping, from convict labor to mass incarceration, from massacres of entire black towns (e.g., East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1918; and Rosewood, Florida, in 1923) to black disenfranchisement. This culture has been referred to by historians as Jim Crow. Coined after the exaggerated characteristics of a white minstrel player in blackface named T. D. Rice,⁴⁶ segregation codes that

demanded African Americans give deference to whites in a number of social interactions became known as Jim Crow Law.⁴⁷ These laws ensured distinctions between African Americans and Euro-Americans, further demonizing black folks and aggrandizing white folks' saintliness. Such laws made African Americans easily identifiable scapegoats in America's white supremacist social order. Examples of Jim Crow laws even went as far as laying out the proper etiquette for African Americans when in the presence of white people:

1. Could not offer his/her hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it implied being socially equal.
2. African American men could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a white woman because it was not acceptable for him to touch a white woman.
3. African Americans were not allowed to eat in the presence of white people and if this was allowed, whites were to be served first, and often a partition was to be placed between them.
4. African American men were never permitted to offer to light the cigarette of a white female.
5. African Americans were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public.
6. African Americans were introduced to whites, never whites to other blacks.
7. Whites never used courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am) of respect when referring to African Americans.
8. African Americans had to use courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Sir, or Ma'am) when referring to whites, and could be arrested in some cases for calling a white person by their first name.
9. African Americans always had to ride in the back of a car driven by a white person
10. White motorists always had the right-of-way at all intersections.⁴⁸

Jim Crow etiquette laws also demanded psychological deference in conversations between African Americans and whites in terms of the following rules:

1. Never asserting or even intimate that a white person is lying.
2. Blaming dishonorable intentions to a white person.
3. Never regarding that a white person is from an inferior class.

4. Never asserting superior knowledge or intelligence to a white person.
5. Never insulting a white person.
6. Never laugh derisively at a white person.
7. Never comment upon the appearance of a white female.⁴⁹

Jim Crow laws and the psychological dispositions these laws invoked within the minds of white Americans reveal how black bodies were “identified as victims for persecution because they [bore] the signs of the victim”—the cultural and physical differences in terms of social caste (based on their former enslaved status in America) and skin color—all of which reflect “the stereotypes of accusation.”⁵⁰ Therefore, the aforementioned etiquette laws were not only designed to substantiate difference between blacks and whites; these laws had the added consequence of creating an ever-present “stereotype of crisis”⁵¹ in the minds of white society about black people, so much so that African Americans were automatically under the suspicion of crimes—violent, sexual, and even religious—which were perceived by white hegemonic society to be attacks on the very foundations of their cultural order, their family, and the hierarchical differences that had sustained their social order.⁵² Here, Jim Crow laws functioned as legally enforced codes of “stereotypical accusation[s]” against black people, and the white communities that enforced these laws understood African Americans as beings who had the power to eclipse the status quo of their culture.

In short, the humanity of African Americans had to be morphed in some way by white supremacist society in order to justify their victimization. As Fred Smith argues, “African Americans’ skin color marks them as a true caste-like minority (scapegoats), and, at the same time, a *model of desire* for a nation that simultaneously despises them as bearers of their own negative identities as white Americans.”⁵³ Orlando Patterson mirrors this tragic aspect of African American skin color and more specifically the plight of African American males in this regard. He writes, “The Afro-American male—the image of his body and the stereotypes of his behavior, stereotypes which, tragically, are increasingly self-fulfilling—has come to play a new role in American culture: that of an archetypal Dionysian counterweight to the Apollonian impulses of America’s overworked, post-industrial civilization.” He further declares that “Afro-American men are being ensnared, with consequences wonderfully cathartic for the audience of the wider culture, but disastrous for those playing this cultural role.”⁵⁴

With African American men as the chosen scapegoat for the multiplicity of American Southerners’ anxieties and fears, it’s no wonder that lynching scholar

Cynthia Skove Nevels argues that the reason [behind] so many lynchings of African Americans could not be limited to one single explanation. For Nevels,

Lynching was about economics. It had strong political overtones. There were psychosexual aspects, social repercussions, [and] cultural meanings. It had religious significance, and it was about gender. And always, the immediate reason behind any single lynching was simple contingency: a lethal combination of specific social, political, economic, or religious factors that on a particular day in a particular place exploded into horrific violence.⁵⁵

In America, and in particular the South, many of these rationales were wedded to theological justifications within America's predominant religion—Christianity. Christian praxis and theology, whether within Catholic or Protestant circles, was embedded with a monstrous imagining of African Americans that deemed them heathen threats to society that had to be eradicated. In the American South, for example, where the Bible was still the most authoritative source, African Americans remained the “cursed descendants of Ham” and therefore had to be controlled for the welfare of the community. According to white supremacist justifications of Genesis 9:20–27, the “Curse of Ham” was the mark of black/brown skin. These attributes of black bodies were disseminated globally throughout larger Europe and America in popular newsprints and even in church catechism.⁵⁶ In short, the very bodies of African Americans became living narratives of sin, evil, and crime, which served to threaten not just white hegemony but the holiness of Christian culture. Such religion-based arguments of African American inferiority and monstrousness reflect how white supremacy colored Christian doctrines and justified violence against people of color.

Historian W. J. Cash, despite his “masculine ambience—not to mention his incorrigible intellectual white [privilege],”⁵⁷ picks up this point when he described elements of the South's Christianity as “primitive,” “frenzied,” and incorporating “blood sacrifice.”⁵⁸ For historian Donald G. Mathews, these three elements clouded the doctrines of Southern Christianity and operated as a religious stronghold within Southern religious rationality.⁵⁹ Such violent threads within Southern Christianity were indicative of a culture that embraced “violence and warfare . . . [as] integral parts of life, . . . dignity and manhood.”⁶⁰ In Orlando Patterson's words, “the chase, the gun, the horse, and warfare were all glorified, along with a fighting spirit that informed all social relations, [which became] so ingrained . . . [within] . . . the culture of honor and violence in the Old South that it persists right down to the present.”⁶¹

Thus, the remnants of slaveholding Christianity reached far into the twentieth century and created a gospel that displaced black bodies and black skin into a system of violence. This kind of religious displacement of African Americans within white supremacist society was also tied to white sexual fears. Racial-religious depictions of African American men, in particular, were associated with sexual crimes. Depicted as a demonized form of masculinity, African Americans males were assigned the *brute* image. In the decades after the Civil War, black men were cast as sex-crazed animals, consumed with lust for the bodies of white females. Writing in 1893, Charles H. Smith wrote, “A bad Negro is the most horrible creature upon the earth, the most brutal and merciless.”⁶² Even a postcard sent in 1902 from Savannah, Georgia, which had the charred torso of an African American male on the front of it, read: “Warning. The answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to black brutes who would attack the womanhood of the south.”⁶³ By 1912, former governor of Georgia William J. Northern noted that he was “amazed to find scores and hundreds of men who believed the Negro to be a brute, without responsibility to God, and his slaughter nothing more than the killing of a dog.”⁶⁴ The narratives behind the brute image also objectified white women and even essentialized their femininity to symbolize the whole South.

The most pronounced crime of the black brute was rape and the creation of a mixed-raced child, often referred to as a “mongrel.” Here was a crime assigned to African American males that wholly eliminated difference in terms of who had access and control over white women’s bodies, and thereby the racial makeup of their offspring. Black skin—especially that of black males—automatically signified sexual deviance in the South, which embodied white society’s fear of African American sexuality. According to Patterson: “Even before the South’s defeat in war and its Reconstruction, the Afro-American had acquired a special role in its honorific culture of violence, as the ‘domestic enemy’ who should be feared and watched.”⁶⁵ Supporting his claim, Patterson cited the words of a South Carolinian in 1822, declaring

Let it never be forgotten, that our Negroes are freely the JACOBINS of the country; that they are the ANARCHISTS and the DOMESTIC ENEMY: the COMMON ENEMY OF CIVILIZED SOCIETY, and the BARBARIANS WHO WOULD, IF THEY COULD, BECOME THE DESTROYERS OF OUR RACE. (uppercase in original)⁶⁶

This South Carolinian’s sentiments capture a mindset of white Southerners that was contagious, spreading way beyond America’s southern borders into the

farthest regions of the North and lasting well into the twentieth century. The lynching of George White in Wilmington, Delaware in 1903 is indicative of this worldview and will serve as a case study analysis of the ways in which mimetic theory can help us understand the nuances of rivalry and sacrificial violence when reified by race. It is into this historical backdrop that I bring René Girard's language of lynching and his concept of mimetic theory.

THE LYNCHING OF GEORGE WHITE

It is speculated that George White, born four years after the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, grew up as a slave in Delaware. The details of his birth and early childhood remain shrouded in the culture of American slavery, where the names of African Americans were not always recorded by census takers before the Civil War. Twenty-six years later, we find him listed as part of the household of a white man name George White in Wilmington, Delaware, on June 15, 1880. The fact that we find an African American male with the same surname as the white male head of household listed in the 1880 Federal Census implies that George White may have been a former slave on his master's farm. In 1880, the African American George White is described as a servant and laborer on the farm of the Caucasian George White, along with five other African Americans who work as laborers: Emma Boulden, 23 years old, cook; George Dallas, 24 years old, laborer; John Frisby, 36 years old, laborer; Robinson Hill, 18 years old, laborer; and Samuel Wright, 19 years old, laborer. All six African Americans are listed as servants in the household of the Caucasian George White, along with his wife Eliza and their two children, Fannie and George A., in 1880.⁶⁷

By the turn of the twentieth century, the African American George White would be forty-six years old and still living in Wilmington, Delaware, as laborer. He would live three more years in Wilmington before he would find himself the main subject of Wilmington's Olivet Presbyterian Church Sunday sermon given by the Reverend Robert Arthur Elwood on the morning of June 21, 1903.

Described as a "firebrand, with conservative theological and political leanings," Rev. Elwood was known for writing Christian tracts with titles like "Corruption in the State of Delaware" and declaring state governments as oppressive systems that violated the statutes of the American Constitution. Elwood became the minister of Olivet Presbyterian Church in 1901. Despite never completing his studies at Cedarville College in Ohio, First Reformed Presbyterian Seminary in Philadelphia, and Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey, Rev. Elwood was finally ordained in 1899. His short tenure in

Absecon, New Jersey, led him to accept a call to pastor Wilmington's Olivet Presbyterian Church, ministering there from 1901 to 1905.⁶⁸

His provocative sermon on the evening of June 21, 1903, would blame the state government of Delaware and the "honorable Judges" of the land for the delay in White's trial. The crime alleged against George White, and the main topic of Rev. Elwood's sermon that day, was rape. White was accused of raping and killing Helen Bishop, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a well-known school superintendent in Wilmington, Delaware.⁶⁹ Elwood's sermon laid out the gory details to his Presbyterian congregation while White sat in a nearby jail cell. With the sermon title "Should the Murderer of Helen Bishop Be Lynched?," Elwood shocked and provoked his parishioners by waving "over his head [the] blood-stained leaves from the thicket in which Helen Bishop was killed."⁷⁰ Elwood's words called his congregation to bloodthirst:

Tonight he [White] is in jail with armed guards parading about for his protection, waiting until the middle of September. Is that speedy? Is that even constitutional? O honorable Judges, call the court, establish a precedent, and the girls of this State, the wives of the homes and the mothers of our firesides, and our beloved sisters will not be sorry, and neither will you. And honorable Judges, if you do not hear and heed these appeals that [the] prisoner should be taken out and lynched, then let me say to you, with full realization of the responsibility of my words, even as Nathan said to King David of old after his soldiers had killed Uriah, "Thou art the man." So I would say to you. The responsibility for lynching would be yours of delaying the execution of the law.⁷¹

Declaring that both the accused and the Wilmington community were denied the right to a speedy trial, Elwood's declarations further invoked I Corinthians 13:9 and references to the Sixth Amendment, admonishing his congregation that the "citizens of the state should arise in their might and execute the criminal, and thus uphold the majesty of the law."⁷²

Elwood's sermon, instead of inspiring brotherly love and forgiveness, invoked a mob spirit among his congregants that caused them to leave the church meeting "livid with passion,"⁷³ a passion that would erupt two days later, on the morning of Tuesday, June 23, 1903.

On that morning, the violent sentiments of Olivet's Presbyterian parishioners had spilled over into their community and spread like wildfire into their neighboring towns, creating a mob of over five thousand men, women, and children. This mob stormed the jailhouse, despite a declaration from the chief of police that he would kill "the first man that [came] into corridor" of the jail.

Even after the chief fired warning shots, the mob pushed their way into White's jail cell. Amid the curses and cheers from the mob, records note that even the police chief succumbed to the violence by urging the crowd to "hang him; don't hit him, burn him at the stake."⁷⁴ As White was taken by the mob, the larger crowd that gathered in anticipation of his death "became almost unmanageable at the first glimpse of [White] and sought to tear him limb from limb."⁷⁵ In the hands of the mob, White was taken "toward the spot on which Helen Bishop had been murdered" and "burned at the stake."⁷⁶ His body, still smoldering, was subject to members of the mob "hurl[ing] more wood to keep the fires going . . . while boys and girls snatched pieces of fuel (fingers, toes, and White's foot) from the fire as souvenirs of the mob's violence."⁷⁷

Public response to White's death was a mixture of outrage and support. The *New York Times* published a number of editorials concerning White's lynching, with many letters claiming the right of local citizens to hold just as much power as state governments in executing punishment and establishing justice, particularly in cases where a "speedy" trial was not evident or on the horizon. For example, an editorial published in the *New York Times* by S.H.B. on White's lynching stated: "It was this delay of justice which wore out the patience of the mob that represented and so nearly comprised the community without any delay. . . . Undoubtedly the action of the Delawareans . . . betokened a deep distrust of the administration of 'justice according to law.'"⁷⁸ Another editorial written by W.S.G. declared: "So long as the community entertains the contempt which it now has for the ordinary administration of criminal law, so long will lynch law receive but half-hearted reprobation in the minds even of the best men; and so long will it challenge their approval when applied as it was applied in the case of the Wilmington tragedy."⁷⁹

What is fascinating about the aforementioned editorials is that each respondent understood the act of lynching as a by-product of parochial white communal powerlessness in the face of a powerful state government that had the unlimited ability to carry out justice and punishment in its own time and manner—a power the local populace did not wield. And even more intriguing is how each editorialist proclaimed this sense of powerlessness within the mob's mentality and violent actions.

Take, for example, S.H.B.'s assertions when comparing White's lynching to the lynching of eleven Sicilians in New Orleans by a mob on March 14, 1891. He writes: "The case [White's lynching] recalls . . . the lynchings of the Sicilians in New Orleans. However, it may be with the mob of Wilmington, the mob at New Orleans was led by the leaders of the community [and] call[ed] themselves 'law-abiding citizens' . . . [who] took the law into their own hands only after

they had been satisfied that ‘justice according to the law’ was not to be trusted; that it was only another name for injustice.”⁸⁰

W.S.G.’s editorial on White’s lynching picks up the same sentiment, which declared:

The mob which acted in these cases are the same kind of men as the rest of us, and of the same race . . . The overmastering sense of justice within them calls for revenge—hot and quick. Those superior beings among us, whose pulses do not leap for such revenge at the pitiful story of a gentle and innocent girl pleading for life and honor in the hands of a black fiend, take the high ground . . . and tell us it is a disgrace that lynch law should be resorted to. They do not tell us, however, what is equally true, that it is a greater disgrace to the State that the administration of criminal justice throughout the country has so completely lost the confidence of the community that no one believes that crime can be effectually and speedily punished save by lynch law.⁸¹

In W.S.G.’s editorial, George White is described as a “black fiend” and an “animal in the shape of a man.”⁸² In S.H.B.’s letter to the editor, White is declared “a black wild beast whose extinction nobody can pretend to regret.”⁸³ In short, White’s skin color plus his alleged crime of rape and murder constituted a societal threat to Wilmington’s white community. Slavery and the historic proliferation of anti-black sentiment in the antebellum era, made more visceral after the Civil War because formerly enslaved black people were now able to acquire the same liberties as whites, which shook the white hegemonic social order to its core, marked George White as the choicest of scapegoats by which to vent white Delaware’s internal rivalries with the American justice system. Further, White’s masculinity deemed him as inherently animalistic, lustful, and sexually violent. These narratives automatically made him a criminal before his alleged crimes of rape and murder, which made his lynching—in the form of immolation—the means of restoring order back to Wilmington, Delaware. S.H.B., capturing the sentiments of many white privileged thinkers, saw “the mob’s work . . . as a triumph of human justice over law.”⁸⁴

Congressman John Lewis, in his co-written book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, has noted that mobs were “neither crazed fiends nor the dregs of white society, the bulk of the lynchers tended to be ordinary respectable people, few of whom had any difficulty justifying their atrocities in the name of maintaining the social and racial order and the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race.” For Lewis, mobs like the one that lynched White were meting out what they understood to be “summary justice.” Lewis even cites the words of

one Georgian who understood the mob to be “composed of our best citizens who are foremost in all works of public and private good.”⁸⁵

MIMETIC THEORY AND THE LYNCHING OF GEORGE WHITE

The fact that the lynching of George White restored order back to Wilmington is reflective of what Girard states as the “one and only perspective capable of making lynching a positive action—since it sees the victim as a real threat that must be dealt with by any means available—and this is the perspective of the lynchers themselves, the perspective of the lynchers on their own lynching.”⁸⁶

For Girard, then, “only the perspective of the lynchers and of their descendants through the ages, the religious community [or in this case the Christians of Olivet Presbyterian Church], can explain with unshakable certainty that the victim [White] is genuinely malevolent and all-powerful and ought to be destroyed—or in other words that the lynching is justified.”⁸⁷

White’s lynching, like many others in America, is more than just race prejudice; it stands as a visceral depiction of the scapegoat/surrogate mechanism when reified and complicated by race. Black bodies, and in particular black male bodies, seem to somehow heal or diffuse the internal anxieties within white privileged communities, by virtue of Caucasian people’s ability to transfer guilt symbolically unto the bodies of black folk.

My point here is that African Americans have historically been singled out by white hegemonic societies with the markers of “otherness,” which are scripted with myths of criminalization and communal offense, that is, the *black brute*. I further argue that the image of the black brute is indicative of these myths and reflects what I term as a *racialized Girardian stereotype of persecution* that is endemic to most, if not all, of America’s anti-black lynching rituals. Could it be, then, that the proliferation of lynchings from the 1880s to the mid 1900s was a result of mimetic rivalry between local states (primarily Southern) and the U.S. federal government? In other words, was lynching a result of infighting between those who supported what S.H.B. termed “human justice”⁸⁸ and those who upheld the “State Law”⁸⁹ of the federal government? Michelle Alexander’s work, *The New Jim Crow*, notes that in the years after the Civil War,

Nine Southern states adopted vagrancy laws—which essentially made it a criminal offense not to work and were applied selectively to blacks—and eight of those states enacted convict laws allowing for the hiring-out of county prisoners to plantation owners and private companies. Prisoners were forced to work for little or no pay.

[For Alexander], a “slew of federal civil rights legislation protecting the newly freed slaves was passed . . . [which] provided federal supervision of voting and authorized the president to send the army and suspend the writ of habeas corpus in districts declared to be in a state of insurrection against the federal government.”⁹⁰

Alexander’s point leads me to my next question: Could racism against black people and other nonwhite peoples be a by-product of internal rivalry between white people? Turning to mimetic theory, there is always a social crisis that creates a lack of difference between the model and the subject. In America, the Civil War created a bevy of crises on a number of levels for former Confederate communities like Delaware. Former Confederate states faced a collapsed economic and political infrastructure. Plantation owners who survived the war were suddenly destitute, local state governments were bankrupt, and many communities were grieving the loss of loved ones who had been killed in the war. Add to this the fact that four million newly freed slaves, who at one time were considered lucrative property, were now roaming free and demanding the same rights as their former masters. The U.S. federal government had modeled and instituted these changes, and many of the South’s casualties were made at the hands of the federal government’s military—the Union Army. The South was a subject and was subjected to the power of the Union Army and the government it represented. Adding insult to injury, from the perspective of Confederate states, were the four million African Americans, many of whom were black males, now able to vote and roaming free of white control—a situation that had not been allowed in white supremacist society for more than two centuries.

George White’s alleged crimes and the subsequent delay of his trial triggered all of this historical trauma for former white Confederate communities and stirred up new imaginings of African American males as threats to society. As mentioned earlier, the community of Wilmington saw White within the myth of the black *brute*—a monstrous imaging of black males created by white fears of black men free from the surveillance of white society. Such a depiction of White is reflective of what some scholars argue as an inescapable reality for African American males. According to Ralph Ellison, “It was almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice—even the ‘criminality’ implicit in the broadening of freedom itself—without summoning malignant images of black men [and women] into consciousness.”⁹¹ These worldviews were especially salient in the American South.

The brute imaginary within the white hegemonic mind operated as an “oral or written testament” that, for Girard, contained all the stereotypes of

persecution.⁹² And though Girard argued that all four stereotypes of persecution did not have to exist within a given text, he did acknowledge that “all myths must have their roots in real acts of violence against real victims.”⁹³ White’s lynching embodied all four stereotypes of persecution. His lynching takes place when Delaware is in a major crisis, socially, politically, and economically—hence the first stereotype of persecution.⁹⁴ The second stereotype rests with the most pronounced crime of the black brute—rape and murder. Further, White’s masculinity and alleged sexual access to and violation of the body of Helen Bishop hit on fears of mongrelization—a crime that wholly eliminated difference in terms of who had access and control over white women’s bodies, and thereby the racial makeup of her offspring.

The blackness of White’s body was automatically codified as a sign of a crime committed or yet to be committed, in the minds of white supremacist society, both of which marked his body as scapegoat/surrogate victim. The fact that White is alleged as a “black male who actually rapes a white female” places him in the position of being the “origin and cause of all that is harmful” and as such, he “suffers . . . fantastic exaggeration.”⁹⁵ Such monstrosity resulted from historically fragmented perceptions and malleable hallucinations of African peoples during slavery that had evolved into more stable forms by 1903. The act of lynching White, which concretized these mythic perceptions, also gave Wilmington’s white society a regained sense of stability after the tumults of the Civil War, as well as a new form of morality that was entrenched in violence.⁹⁶ As Girard states, “There comes a point at which physical monstrosity and moral monstrosity merge . . . Their connections seem normal and is even suggested by language.”⁹⁷ In this respect, the black brute myth, as it was embodied by White, modeled the physical monstrosity of blackness and the moral monstrosity of African inferiority and sexual deviance, which ultimately justified White’s lynching.

The lynching of White also allowed the mob to vicariously release its anguish, frustration, and fears over issues of justice and punishment. Wilmington’s lynch mob is united around the collective annihilation of White, who for them symbolizes all their fears, including those that speak to sexual deviance. The act of lynching White also allows the Wilmington mob to gain a mythic sense of power and control over the bodies of white women in their community, their culture, and the larger world.

In this instance, White is at once demonized and made sacred in the eyes of his lynchers. He is demonized for his blackness, and through the mob’s destruction of him, his death makes Wilmington’s society safe. As Girard states,

Only the perspective of the lynchers, who have been reconciled by the very unanimity of the transference but who are unable to understand the mimetic mechanism of that reconciliation, can explain why the victim, by the end of the operation, is not only execrated but deified: the victim and not the lynchers themselves will be held responsible for the reconciliation. Deification reveals the efficacy of lynching because it can rest only on a total inability to recognize the transference of which the victim is the object, it is certainly to this unanimous transference that the community owes its reconciliation; this is why the return to peace and order is attributed to the victim.⁹⁸

White's lynching fully depicts the "efficacy of lynching" that Girard speaks to.

In Girard's book *Job: The Victim of His People*, Girard maintains that "Behind the most monstrous, the least human and the least recognizable combatants, we can see the simple country people who gather against a single adversary—inevitably one of them, whom they have come to hate. Along with the bands of warriors and the natural disasters are the creatures that are fighting for God. They gather around their victim to descend on him together."⁹⁹

Newspapers record that the five thousand people gathered around the body of George White were the "simple country people" that Girard alludes to. The blackness of White's skin along with the alleged accusation of rape and murder evoked "the tendency of all persecutors to project the monstrous results of some calamity or public or private misfortune onto some poor unfortunate who, by being infirm or a foreigner, suggests a certain affinity to the monstrous."¹⁰⁰

White's affinity to the monstrous was indicative of Girard's own reference to persecuted blacks "banished or assassinated by the community."¹⁰¹ In this vein, White's lynching flows through all four stages of the Girardian stereotype of persecution, and like other lynchings of black males, his murder stands as a prime example of triangular desire when complicated by the ways in which the efficacy of race prejudice impacts imitation, rivalry, and the climactic escalation of violence.

TRIANGULAR DESIRE AND RACISM

George White's lynching, through a mimetic theory paradigm, leads me to another question: Could it be that more lynchings happened in the South than any other area in America because old mimetic rivalries of the North and South over state rights and slavery had not been resolved but recirculated in new forms of mimetic rivalry that demanded a ready-made scapegoat—

historically preconditioned to stand out as “other” in society by the ideological justifications of slavery and the mythic narratives of African degradation? In Girardian terms, the escalation of mimetic rivalry over the arbitration of justice between the local citizenry and the U.S. government at the beginning of the twentieth century was desperate for a way to release its pent-up tensions. Local state officials—represented by Wilmington’s chief of police—and the rank-and-file citizenry—the five-thousand-member mob—were on the verge of total annihilation.

According to Margaret Denike, “One of Girard’s central arguments in the introductory chapter on ‘Sacrifice’ in *Violence and the Sacred* is that judicial systems essentially incarnate, in the form of ‘public vengeance,’ the ritualized sacrificial mechanism that is otherwise characteristic of the ‘private vengeance’ familiar to what he calls ‘primitive societies.’”¹⁰² Denike makes a key point here, for Girard’s claim that “the establishment of a judicial system—the most efficient of all curative procedures”¹⁰³ is designed to “divert . . . the spirit of revenge into other channels” is reflective of what Michelle Alexander argues as the *New Jim Crow*. For Alexander, the new forms of Jim Crow took place after the gains of the modern civil rights movements of the 1960s created major disruptions in America’s prevailing social and racial order. She writes:

Once again, in response to the major disruptions in the prevailing racial order—this time the civil right gains of the 1960s—a new system of racialized social control was created by exploiting the vulnerabilities and racial resentments of poor and working-class whites. More than 2 million people found themselves behind bars at the turn of the twenty-first century and millions more were relegated to the margins of mainstream society, banished to a political and social space not unlike Jim Crow, where discrimination in employment, housing, and access to education was perfectly legal, where they could be denied the right to vote. The system functioned relatively automatically, and the prevailing system of racial meanings, identities, and ideologies already seemed natural. Ninety percent of those admitted to prison for drug offenses in many states were black or Latino, yet the mass incarceration of communities of color was explained in race-neutral terms, an adaptation to the needs and demands of the current political climate. The New Jim Crow was born.¹⁰⁴

In light of Alexander’s assertions and Girard’s arguments, the *spirit of revenge* that is diverted into other channels within American society has primarily been directed through the country’s justice system where nonwhite peoples, and in particular black and Latino peoples, have become the scapegoats of choice. Further, Rebecca Adams has pointed out that in Girardian theory “human

institutions such as religion (ritual) and the law (taboo), arise from and are means of holding back and regulating violence.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, Jim Crow law and culture and its subsequent manifest variants in the twenty-first century, though a social and political reality, reveal not only the victimage mechanism in American society but the subjugation and often violent sacrifice of its nonwhite citizens. This reality has certainly been revealed in the anti-black terrorism and mass incarceration of African American males in the decades after the Civil War.

Turning back to the lynching of George White, what is clear here is that White’s lynching, through a Girardian lens, reveals the mechanism of race-making in racialized societies. Here, racism reveals itself as a by-product of the internal mediation within the mimetic rivalry between groups of the same race and even ethnicity. The extensive work of historian Joseph Washington, Jr., titled *Race and Religion in Early Nineteenth Century America, 1800–1850: Constitution, Conscience, and Calvinist Compromise*,¹⁰⁶ captures this point when he notes the rivalry between groups of white Euro-Americans in the early nineteenth century. Remarking that “English-race and British-ethnic slavemasters [as well as] . . . immigrant slaveowners orchestrat[ed] and arrang[ed] the development of [an] incessant de-ethnicization and deculturalization of Black African ethnicity,” Washington declared that “English race-specific Quaker-Puritan no less effectively at first than Anglican-Puritan and Calvinist-Puritan settlers initiated” the same process as their Catholic competitors toward African peoples in North America.¹⁰⁷ Washington even points out that these actions by Protestants were “consciously or unconsciously *imitat[ions]* of rival Continental Catholic powers in the New World” [emphasis mine].¹⁰⁸ For Washington, “the White race (Puritan patricians and Cavalier aristocrats) upper-class and middle class, together with the White ethnic lower-class and middle-class, separated themselves permanently from Black (as wittingly or unwittingly as these eighteenth-century Calvinists embraced fellow Dutch Afrikaner or white race-specific) African ethnics, and fundamentally arrested their development.”¹⁰⁹

In America, we can see the legacies of these actions in the ways in which white Euro-Americans chose to de-ethnicize their European heritage in order to classify themselves as white. From a Girardian standpoint, Jim Crow etiquette culture and segregation laws in America were instituted not only to maintain harmony between white people of various ethnicities that had historically been at odds with another—French, British, Irish, Germans, Italians, and so on; these racially constructed demarcations of whiteness also sustained the ideological structures of white identity in contradistinction to black people. However, these methods only served to ease these tensions and sustain white identity temporarily. Any instability in the economic, social, and political spheres of

American society—a Girardian social crisis¹¹⁰—often created fissures of these tensions that exploded into lynching rituals like that of George White where the release of internal ethnic rivalries between whites could be subsumed upon black bodies, thereby restoring the white hegemonic social order for a period.

The work of noted Girardian scholar Martha Reineke builds upon this point when she states, “Although whites may rely on acts of direct acquisition of other (e.g., slavery [and/or incarceration]) or sacrifice (e.g., lynching) to secure their identity, white subjects also take their bearings along an extended trajectory of violence.”¹¹¹ For Reineke,

This mimetic pattern of sacrifice illuminates key moments in United States history: incidents of lynching summon images of the ritual death of a scapegoat . . . That mimetic conflict fuels racism is attested to most compellingly by a concluding theme associated with mimetic theory: societies in the grip of acquisitive and sacrificial mimesis are able to set aside all knowledge of sacrifice.¹¹²

Sacrificial violence, therefore, when complicated by race-making, covers up the true enmity going on between lyncher and lyncher. It is this radical scandal of white privilege that racism covers up or as Reineke so aptly states: “the law of white privilege conceals sacrifice.”¹¹³

Reineke’s assertions that “mimetic theory helpfully illuminates persons’ subjective investments in racism” is telling. Like her, I believe that Girard’s theory, if expanded in the area of race analysis, can lend further insights to the arguments of Critical Race Theory, and can thereby awaken white society to what Charles Mills identifies as the “racial contract”—“a racial juridical system where the status of whites and non-whites is clearly demarcated, whether by law or custom.”¹¹⁴ As Margaret Denike points out, “the ‘logic of persecution’ of which Girard speaks is conditioned on what a host of recent studies in ‘implicit bias’ and ‘unconscious racism’¹¹⁵ have made clear: to see stereotypical demeanors and conduct associated with certain racial minorities as inherently ‘bad,’ however much we may consciously reject race-based discrimination and embrace the idea of universally applied equality.”¹¹⁶

More conversations are needed between mimetic theory and race. Reineke and Denike’s assertions, along with those of the aforementioned Girardian scholars who have already touched on race, need to be built upon if mimetic theory is to have further salience beyond the walls the academy. If scholar Andrew McKenna argues that in “modern democratic nations . . . subjects are subjected to one law . . . the law of violence,”¹¹⁷ then how can mimetic theory be used to study that violence as a means of eradicating it? In other words, what

would happen if more treatises on race and ethnic discrimination through a mimetic lens were produced with an eye toward creating pathways of positive mimesis in community?

CONCLUSION

In sum, it is clear that America's history of lynching black males captured for Girard the heart of the surrogate mechanism and demonstrated the processes by which collective resonances of persecutions exploded into enacted forms of white privilege–violence. Through American forms of lynching, Girard discovered the horrific imaginaries of the lynchers, the maleficence of rivalry, and the dubious monsterization of the scapegoat. Here, in the stark depiction of Billy Holiday's "strange fruit" hanging from Southern trees or immolated on street poles, Girard could see the operations of triangular desire and the mimetic transference of a society's own deviated propensities onto a surrogate victim. In America, this enactment of mimetic transference—lynching—riveted Girard's gaze and became the focal point by which he could clearly see the *modus operandi* of the generative mechanism.

Thus, racism has long been a technology of oppression and a linguistic tool of subjectivity within the mimetic cycle. It is my contention that an exploration into the structures of mimetic theory—as it is seen within the processes of racialization, anti-black terrorism, and systemic structures of racial inequality—will yield further insight into the ways in which the surrogate mechanism is in operation in America as well as the larger world. The frontier of race through the lens of mimetic theory, I believe, will continually offer new grounds within Girardian conversations around binaries, subjectivity, and violence. The works of Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Margaret Denike, Martha Reineke, Michael Battle,¹¹⁸ Fred Smith, and Theophus H. Smith have laid the groundwork for such conversations, but more is still needed.¹¹⁹

Lastly, I encourage Girardian thinkers and, in particular, the members of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) to generate more direct engagements between mimetic theory and racial formations with an eye toward dismantling discrimination and systemic racism in our world. Rebecca Adams's brilliant piece on "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text': A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire" serves as an innovative starting point from which to move toward dismantling cultural ideologies of "otherness" in the context of race.¹²⁰ Pulling analysis from her work, the historical context of lynching, along with unpacking Girard's use of the language of lynching in

mimetic theory, can lead us toward creating what Reineke argues as a way to “break open the double-bind” within violent mimesis. What insights could be gained when the arguments around positive or “loving” mimesis are placed in the context of race-making? Such conversations between mimetic theory and racial formations have the potential to create a “generative of transformation in human society, not sacrifice.”¹²¹ As someone who has personally interacted with René Girard on more than one occasion (particularly at COV&R in 2008, Riverside, CA), I had the opportunity to ask him why his work never fully addressed the experiences of African Americans or other racially/ethnically oppressed peoples. His response to my question was hopeful back in 2008. He stated that as he looked back over the length of his work, he had always desired that his arguments be applied to the problems of implicit bias and racism in the world. I am inclined to hope that many more Girardian thinkers will join me in pursuing one of Girard’s last wishes with regards to mimetic theory—exploring race as a new frontier in mimetic studies.

NOTES

1. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, “Counterpoint: Girardian Double-Bind and DuBoisian Double Consciousness,” paper given at the Colloquium of Violence and Religion, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, May 16–18, 1991; “Gender, Violence, and Transformation in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” in Mark I. Wallace and Theophus H. Smith, eds., *Curing Violence: Essays on René Girard*, (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994); and *Refiner’s Fire: A Religious Engagement with Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).
2. Diana Culbertson, “Ain’t Nobody Clean’: The Liturgy of Violence in ‘Glory,’” *Religion & Literature* 25, no. 2, Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: Conversations on Myth and Culture in Theology and Literature (1993): 35–52.
3. Martha Reineke, “Mimetic Violence and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*: Toward a Critical Consciousness of Racism,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 5 (1998): 74–97.
4. Theophus H. Smith, “King and the Black Religious Quest to Cure Racism,” in Mark I. Wallace and Theophus H. Smith, eds., *Curing Violence: Essays on René Girard* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994).
5. Fred Smith, “Black-on-Black Violence: The Intramediation of Desire and the Search for a Scapegoat,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 6 (1999): 32–43.
6. This essay uses the terms “black” and “African American” interchangeably to refer to African people transported to North America during the Atlantic Slave Trade, free people of color, as well as those born in North America, before and after the Civil War. It also uses the terms “white” and “Euro-Americans” to refer to Europeans who immigrated to North America before the American Revolution, as well as those born in North America before and after the Civil War.

7. Cynthia L. Haven, *Evolution of Desire* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 65–66.
8. Haven, 28.
9. Haven, 27.
10. Haven.
11. Haven.
12. Haven, 64.
13. Tolnay and Beck also note that “Southern blacks visited the executioner in truly prodigious numbers during the ‘lynching era.’ Between 1882 and 1930, 1,977 African Americans were legally executed in ten southern states included in our study, an average of forty executions a year. During this same period, only 451 whites were legally executed.” Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), IX and 100.
14. Haven, 65
15. R. J. Ramey, ed., *Monroe Work Today Dataset Compilation (version 1)*, October 23, 2017. Archives, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL, <http://achive.tuskegee.edu> (accessed September 20, 2018), 585.
16. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 65.
17. Haven, 67.
18. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 116.
19. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 68.
20. Haven, 68.
21. This part of my analysis was captured for me in a conversation with Girardian theologian and scholar John P. Edwards in a discussion on April 2, 2020. John P. Edwards is the director of the Center of Pastoral Ministry Education and is an affiliate faculty member in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University. His latest book is *James Alison and a Girardian Theology: Conversations, Theological Reflection and Introduction* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).
22. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 1977), 84 and 100.
23. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 112–17.
24. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 31, 67–68.
25. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. with a foreword by James G. Williams (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), xii, xii, 30, 64–65, 116, 120.
26. Haven, *Evolution of Desire*, 65.
27. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 80, 95, 108n–109n, 294n. (Note: References to lynching are found in the footnotes on pages 108–109 and 294. The glossary of this text notes these pages referencing the term “lynching.”)

28. René Girard, "The Mimetic Theory of Religion: An Outline," in Paul Gifford, David Archard, Trevor A. Hart, and Nigel Rapport, eds., *2000 Years and Beyond: Faith, Identity, and the 'Common Era'* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 88–105. It should also be noted that in *Sacrifice* (2011), one of Girard's most succinct statements of the power of mimetic theory, the term is cited more than seven times; René Girard, *Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).
29. Girard, "The Mimetic Theory of Religion."
30. René Girard, "Le lynchage unanime," in *Le Sacrifice* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 2003), 7; and Girard, *Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), ix.
31. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 117.
32. Girard, *I See Satan*, 64.
33. Jon Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence* (New York, NY: New York Press, 2010), 29.
34. Girard, *Sacrifice*, 40.
35. Albert Matthews, "The Term Lynch Law," *Modern Philology* 2, no. 2 (1904), 173.
36. Matthews, 173.
37. Matthews, 173.
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52. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 15.
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60. Patterson, *Rituals of Blood*, 189–90.
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62. Charles H. Smith, “Have Negroes Too Much Liberty?” *Forum* 16 (1893): 176–81.
63. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, numbers 59 and 60.
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69. Dennis B. Downey, "The Lord's Messenger: Racial Lynching and the Church Trial of Robert Elwood," *Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997–) 79, no. 2 (2001), 136.; and "Confessed at the Stake' Cool-Headed Leaders of Mob Protected the Wilmington Slayer from Attack While He Told All About His Deed—Story of How White Was Burned to Death," *New York American*, June 24, 1903: 2.
70. R. W. Shufeldt, M.D., *The Negro: A Menace to American Civilization* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1907), 216.
71. "One Arrest Made for Delaware Lynching: Others, It is Announced, Will Be Taken Into Custody," *New York Times*, June 24, 1903, 1.
72. Downey, "The Lord's Messenger," 137.
73. Ibid.
74. "One Arrest Made for Delaware Lynching: Others, It Is Announced, Will Be Taken Into Custody," *New York Times*, June 24, 1903, 1.
75. "Confessed at the Stake," 211.
76. Shufeldt, 212.
77. Shufeldt, 213.
78. S.H.B., "The Law's Delay," *New York Times*, June 24, 1903, p8.
79. W.S.G., "Excuses Delaware Mob," *New York Times*, June 28, 1903, 8.
80. S.H.B.
81. W.S.G.
82. W.S.G.
83. S.H.B.
84. S.H.B.
85. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 19.
86. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 115.
87. Girard.
88. S.H.B., "The Law's Delay," 8
89. S.H.B.
90. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012), 28–29.
91. Ellison's essay is in response to a lecture that Stanley Edgar Hyman—who Ellison called an "old friend and intellectual sparring partner"—was preparing for at Brandeis University. Hyman's lecture would be the first of the Ludwig Lewisohn lectures at the University. Ellison took issue with Hyman's depiction of African Americans, where he argues that the black writer is heir to the human experience as articulated in black folklore and not what Hyman termed the "darker" entertainer. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1953 and 1964), 45–48.

92. For Girard, the stereotypes of persecution have four components: (1) the social and cultural crisis that creates a generalized loss of difference; (2) crimes that eliminate difference; (3) whether the identified authors of these crimes possess the marks that suggest a victim; paradoxical marks of the absence of difference; and (4) violence itself. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 24.
93. Girard, 25.
94. Socially and politically, African Americans were attempting to live up to the gains of the 13th and the 14th Amendments. Economically, they were competitors in the job market.
95. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 20–21.
96. Girard, 33.
97. Girard, 34.
98. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 116.
99. René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 24.
100. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 33–34.
101. Girard, 32.
102. Margaret Denike, “Scapegoat Racism and the Sacrificial Politics of ‘Security,’” *Journal of International Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (2015): 115.
103. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 21.
104. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 58.
105. Rebecca Adams, “Loving Mimesis and Girard’s ‘Scapegoat of the Text’: A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire,” in William M. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking* (Telford, PA: Pandor Press, 2000), 300.
106. Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Race and Religion in Early Nineteenth Century America, 1800–1850: Constitution, Conscience, and Calvinist Compromise*, Volume 39 (Two Volume Set) (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 3.
107. Washington, 3.
108. Washington, 3.
109. Washington, 3.
110. According to Girard, “Institutional collapse obliterates or telescopes hierarchical and functional differences . . . The impression of difference in a society that is not in a state of crisis is the result of real diversity and also of a system of exchange that ‘differentiates’ and therefore conceals the reciprocal elements it contains by its very culture and the nature of the exchange.” Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 13.
111. Reineke, “Mimetic Violence,” 77.
112. Reineke, 80.
113. Reineke, 80.
114. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 14.

115. See D. Kairys, "Unconsciousness Racism," *Temple Law Review* 83, no. 4, (2011): 857–66; J. Kang, "The Trojan Horses of Race," *Harvard Law Review* 118, no. 5 (2005): 1489–593; and L. H. Krieger, "The Content of Our Categories: A Cognitive Bias Approach to Discrimination and Equal Employment Opportunity," *Stanford Law Review* 46, no. 6 (1995): 1161–248.
116. Denike, 121.
117. Andrew J. McKenna, *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 147.
118. Michael Battle, *Heaven on Earth: God's Call to Community in the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).
119. Kirk-Duggan, "Counterpoint"; Kirk-Duggan, *Refiner's Fire*; Denike, "Scapegoat Racism," 111–27; Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations in Black America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994); Fred Smith, "Black-on-Black Violence: The Intramediation of Desire and the Search for a Scapegoat," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 6 (1999): 32–43.
120. Adams, 227–307.
121. Martha J. Reineke, "Transforming Intersubjective Space: From Ruthlessness to Primary Creativity and Loving Mimesis," in Vern Neufeld Redekop and Thomas Ryba, eds., *René Girard and Creative Mimesis* (New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2014), 47.

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