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Relics From White Supremacy: Why Historians Need to Reevaluate Their Use of the Word “Riot” to Describe Racial Violence in the South During the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction Eras

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Relics From White Supremacy: Why Historians Need to Reevaluate Their Use of the Word “Riot” to Describe Racial Violence in the South During the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction Eras

Cover Page Footnote

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Violence and terrorism against black Americans characterized the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction eras in the United States. Historians continue to use the word “riot” to describe much of this violence despite the fact that the word “massacre” describes it more accurately. This terminological blunder is not trivial. The word “riot” carries an ambiguity thoroughly unfit for events such as the Memphis *riot* of 1866, the New Orleans *riot* of 1866, and the Atlanta *riot* of 1906. Typically, a riot has qualities of either spontaneity, mutually proportionate aggression, or legitimate grievance, though not necessarily all at once. Such traits, make it tough to identify the guilty party in a riot, and no doubt exists about the guilty parties involved in the aforementioned events. Furthermore, this misrepresentation carries social and political consequences which make its correction imperative.

Honing in on spontaneity, mutually proportionate violence, or legitimate grievance as the requisite criteria for a riot may seem arbitrary. However, consider the following examples. When James Earl Ray assassinated Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) in Memphis Tennessee 1968, violence ensued in the cities around the United States and many innocent people were harmed. Nobody who participated in the violence planned to confront the death of MLK when they did. Therefore, their violence was spontaneous, resulted from a legitimate grievance, and receives reference as a riot. Conversely, it is possible those who stormed the streets of L.A. following the acquittal of Rodney King’s assailants in 1992 had prepared to do so in the event of a not guilty verdict. However, it remains equally possible that much of the violence was spontaneous. Nevertheless, like the MLK rioters, the Rodney King rioters had a legitimate grievance in light of the historical disenfranchisement of black people which the acquittal of King’s attackers represented, and Americans typically refer to it as a riot. One may contrast these events with the Ludlow massacre of 1914 which receives its designation as such because the national guard killed

over twenty people in a tent colony of striking Colorado miners. Similar to the rioters in the previous scenarios, the Ludlow miners were oppressed and exploited at John D. Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CFIC). Had the miners likewise taken the lives of over twenty national guardsmen, it seems likely this event would have garnered designation as a riot, rather than a massacre. Moreover, it seems plausible this latter example would have received riot status *even if the national guardsmen had not taken the lives of twenty miners* because the miners had a legitimate gripe with the CFIC before the guardsmen attacked them.¹ In that case the actions of the miners would have constituted a spontaneous perpetuation of violence motivated by legitimate grievance, though the violence would not have qualified as mutual and proportionate.

Contrastingly, mutual and proportionate violence represented the only one of the aforementioned traits in the Dead Rabbits Riot of 1857.² The Dead Rabbits Riot resulted from escalating tension between the Dead Rabbit and Bowery Boy gangs of New York City. Thus, no one could call the violence spontaneous nor the grievances which caused it legitimate. Nevertheless, the event receives common reference as a riot because it consisted of mutual and proportionate violence. That mutual and proportionate violence earned the Dead Rabbits Riot its designation receives support through a comparison to the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929.³ Similar to the Dead Rabbits Riot, gangsters comprised the only casualties of the St.

¹ This is an appeal to intuition. However, it is justified through a comparison to the Rodney King riots in which innocent people also died as a result of violence motivated by legitimate grievance. Thus, it seems legitimate grievance is enough to earn an event designation as a riot.

² The Dead Rabbits Riot was a gang war between New York's Bowery Boys and Dead Rabbit gangs, famously depicted in Martin Scorsese's *The Gangs of New York*. For more information about the real history see, Joshua Brown, "Two Views of a Dead Rabbit," *Picturing United States History*, (accessed April 10, 2019). <https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/two-views-of-a-dead-rabbit/>

³ The Saint Valentine's Day Massacre was a hit carried out by Al Capone's bootlegging gang on members of George "Bugs" Marone's gang. The hit occurred at a garage on North Clark Street in Chicago.

Valentine's Day Massacre. Thus, again, no one would call the violence spontaneous or resulting from legitimate grievance. However, only one side suffered casualties. Therefore, because of its other similarities to the Dead Rabbits Riot it stands to reason that the lopsided casualties of the Saint Valentine's Day violence earned it its status as a massacre.

These examples seem to support the claim that spontaneity, legitimate grievance, and or mutually proportionate aggression capture the preponderance of traits the word “riot” connotes. However, they hardly constitute a complete argument for the etymology of the word “riot.” Moreover, this paper aims to show how people have misused the term “riot.” Therefore, establishing its definition through reference to conventional use proves insufficient. Yet, attributing these qualities to the word “riot” makes sense because the anti-black newspapers who first covered the *riot* in Memphis appealed to these very traits in their attempts to obscure the violence. For example, *The Memphis Daily Avalanche* claimed the *riot* escalated because black union soldiers began “firing at every white person they could see,” and commended the Memphis police for “the gallant conduct they exhibited in enforcing the majesty of the law when the messengers of death were hurled at them on all sides.”⁴ Thus, they presented a facade of *legitimate grievance* through claiming black Memphians *spontaneously* instigated the violence. Hence, the event was spontaneous, there was mutual violence, and that mutual violence resulted from a legitimate grievance, according to the *Avalanche*, because the “negroes [sic]” were out of control. Similarly, the *Memphis Argus* claimed the event amounted to a “negro[sic] riot ,” intending to convey the same message as the *Avalanche*.⁵ Therefore, these newspapers knowingly misused the word “riot” by their own standards which conform to the notions of the word asserted

⁴ “The Law Outraged by Negroes,” *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, May 2, 1866.

⁵ Qtd. in Marius Carriere, “An Irresponsible Press: Memphis Newspapers and the 1866 Riot,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 60, No.1 (Spring 2001), 9.

in this paper. With that established, recent social and political trends make this misuse of the term an error which cannot go uncorrected any longer.

During the last decade, racial tensions in the United States have risen to heights not seen since the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, black and white Americans' views of the problem differ greatly. For example, 84 percent of black Americans feel racial discrimination holds black people back. Only 54 percent of white people agree. Likewise, 82 percent of black Americans feel they receive unfair treatment in the workplace, compared to just 44 percent of white Americans, and 74 percent of blacks feel banks treat them less fairly, compared to just 38 percent of white Americans. Lastly, 72 percent of black people in science, technology, engineering and math fields (STEM), feel racial discrimination plays a large part in black under-representation in those fields, and an overwhelming majority feel they have experienced racial slights in the workplace.⁶ That such distrust exists in the fields most capable of reducing economic inequality is troubling, and marks a continued conflict between black Americans and the American scientific establishment. Historically, the latter has not only seen fit to dub black people genetically inferior but permitted itself to perform gruesome experiments on black people. This trend is extensive and disturbing, ranging from James Marion Sims' experiments on female slaves in the 1840s and 50s to the ongoing coercion of impoverished black people into harmful medical tests for financial compensation.⁷

⁶ Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown, Kiana Cox, "Race in America 2019," *Pew Research Center*, April 9, 2019, accessed via pewresearchcenter.org (April 10, 2019); Monica Anderson, "Black STEM Employees Perceive a Range of Race Related Slights and Inequities at Work," *Pew Research Center*, January 10, 2018, accessed via pewresearchcenter.org (January 30, 2019).

⁷ James Marion Sims is known as the Godfather of Gynecology, and remains revered. Many of his statues still stand. For more information on Sims and experimentation on black people, see Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), chp. 1.

The frightening history of coerced or forced experimentation on black people and the attempts to obscure it stand far from an anomaly.⁸ Several conventional American historical narratives simply wash the perspectives of black people from the record. For example, many Americans are familiar with Paul Revere's depiction of the Boston Massacre, but few know that in Thomas Paine's original, a black man named Crispus Attucks stood at the center of the painting, not to mention the real event. Similarly, many Americans know of the Reconstruction era in American history. Yet, many have been misled to believe the United States abandoned Reconstruction because it was failing.⁹ Likewise, until recently, historians dismissed Thomas Jefferson's affair with Sally Hemings as a conspiracy theory. This denial aimed to preserve the myth of a benevolent patriarchy which looked after all its citizens. Thus, it represented a denial that white supremacy constituted a founding principle of the United States, rather than a fringe phenomenon of the states which eventually formed the Confederacy.

Historians' denial of the Jefferson-Hemings affair was not unique in its intention nor its malicious motive. In each of the aforementioned examples, historians' obfuscations were deliberate. Moreover, entire schools of historical thought have devoted themselves to this obscurantist project. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Confederate sympathizer and Reconstruction historian William Archibald Dunning's influence became widespread and his work received unbridled praise and admiration from fellow historians.¹⁰

⁸ Washington notes the attempts to censor her work on page two.

⁹ For summary of how schools in the south obscured the successes of Reconstruction see James Loewen, *Teaching What Really Happened* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁰ For more information about the Dunning school of history and Dunning himself, See Tommy Song, "William Archibald Dunning: Father of Historiographic Racism Columbia's Legacy of Academic Jim Crow," *Columbia University and Slavery*, (accessed April 9, 2019).

<https://columbiaandslavery.columbia.edu/content/william-archibald-dunning-father-historiographic-racism-columbias-legacy-academic-jim-crow>

With this in mind, it stands no surprise that white people and black people have different views on the obstacles facing black people in America today. Presuming that this difference in perception does not result exclusively from white people's conscious bigotry, ignorance, willful or otherwise, offers the best explanation for the disparity. People cannot understand what they are not aware of. Thus, the obfuscation of white supremacy's role in history presents two problems. On one hand, it allows white people to remain ignorant of history and current reality of black people's struggles. Hence, it reduces white people's sense of compassion for their black peers. On the other hand, black people continue to have their struggles ignored, and their distrust of their white peers and American institutions persists. Together, these two factors reduce white and black Americans' capacity for trust in one another. Furthermore, for American democracy to function for all its citizens, trust is essential. Use of the word "riot" to describe the racial violence of the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction eras is not exclusively responsible for this problem, nor will correcting it fix the problem outright. Nevertheless, it represents one of many necessary steps in the right direction.

With that said the reverse is also true. The misterming of these events alone cannot account for the whitewashing of American history, but it played an integral role. During the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction eras, widespread propagation and acceptance of anti-black violence allowed white perpetrators to publicly lie without the threat of repercussions. With little and often no fear of retribution, anti-black whites stood free to shape historical narratives in a manner which suited their bias. Even subtle alterations in terminology helped them color events to support their views of the world. Thus, historians researching events from this time period must take extra precaution to weed out these relics of white supremacy to avoid propagating a racially biased historical narrative. Using the Memphis race *riot* of 1866 as a case study, this paper aims to show

that this use of the word “riot” constitutes one of these relics. Furthermore, through comparison to similar events such as the alleged riots in Atlanta, and New Orleans this paper will suggest that the word “riot” in these cases and others require similar re-evaluation.

On the first of May, 1866, about 100 black Union soldiers gathered on South Street in Memphis. According to the Congressional Select Committee Report on the event, one bystander claimed they were not making any trouble, but the bulk of the evidence suggested “their behavior was riotous and disorderly.”¹¹ However, given the social climate of Memphis at the time, what spectators perceived as “riotous and disorderly” may simply have been public boisterousness that made white Memphians uncomfortable. Regardless, Memphis police arrested two of the soldiers. A bystander, who was also a soldier, realized one of the arresting officers had cruelly beaten him without cause a week prior. In response, the soldiers who had witnessed the beating started shouting and firing their pistols into the air. Thinking the shots aimed at them, the police retaliated, and a firefight ensued. One officer and one soldier died in the skirmish. Following this, the two groups separated, gathered reinforcements, and exchanged fire again with no confirmed casualties.¹²

If this constituted the extent of the event, “riot” might describe it accurately. However, following this exchange the soldiers returned to their fort the police went to town to gather further reinforcements. Then, at around ten o’clock that night the police returned with about two hundred men. When they saw the troops had returned to their fort and no one remained to resist them, the

¹¹ *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, Report, *The Special Committee of the House Charged with an Investigation into All Matters Connected with the Riots at Memphis*, which took place on the First Days of May, 1866, Elihu B. Washburne, Chairmen, (Miami, FL, 1969; [1866]), 7. Hereafter cited as *Riots and Massacres*

¹² See *Ibid*, 7.

mob began a massacre of the black community in Memphis. When they finished two days later, they had killed at least 46 innocent black people.

That the word “massacre” better describes this event than the word “riot” is certain. A review of the evidence illustrates that none of the aforementioned criteria for a riot: spontaneity, legitimate grievance, nor mutual and proportionate violence, characterized the Memphis *riot*. While the massacre contained an element of reactionism, the bulk of testimonies the select committee took do not suggest spontaneity. Rather, white Memphians eager to instantiate their sense of racial superiority were looking for an excuse to initiate a conflict. Following the end of the skirmish with the black troops, the Memphis police could have retired for the night as the troops did. That they instead gathered extra forces to commence a violent assault on innocent and defenseless black Memphians illustrates their yearning to assert their sense of racial superiority through violence. Moreover, according to the testimony of John E. Mollar, former Confederate rebels and their sympathizers in Memphis had undertaken continual efforts to instigate a riot since Christmas. Mollar claimed many of the same men who participated in the massacre in May had begun to speak affirmatively of a black rebellion in order to goad black soldiers to violence. On one occasion, Mollar overheard a former confederate soldier tell a black soldier “You’re what saved the country, and you ought to have just as much privileges as white men; if they do not give it to you, you ought to take them...”¹³ Furthermore, those who orchestrated the mob made no efforts to shroud the premeditation of their violence. For example, town leader John Pendergast told black Memphian Cynthia Townsend “I am the man who fetched this mob out here and they will do just what I tell them.”¹⁴ Another black eyewitness named Henry Porter claimed members

¹³ Ibid, 87.

¹⁴ Ibid, 163.

of the mob went into Pendergast's grocery store to reconvene and load their weapons.¹⁵ That Pendergast stocked his grocery store with ammunition suggests that Pendergast not only led the mob that day, but that he had *planned* to lead such a mob.

The work of Memphis' white-owned and controlled newspapers also evidenced the town's yearning to exact violence against blacks. According to the Select Committee's findings, the Memphis press played an influential role in instigating the violence. The Committee based its findings largely on the testimony of a Reverend Tade. According to Reverend Tade, the *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, which stood as the most anti-black of all the newspapers in Memphis, "most truly" represented "the sentiments and opinions of the mass of the people."¹⁶ Thus, many white Memphians were primed for an attack against the city's blacks. When a firefight broke out between the black soldiers and the police, anti-black Memphians had an excuse to justify their terrorism of blacks in Memphis.¹⁷

Second, excepting the initial brush up between the soldiers and the police, mutual aggression played no role in the event. According to the testimony of Captain Thomas J. Dornin, the black soldiers, who constituted the only body of blacks in any position to retaliate, exercised total self-restraint: "There is no number of white soldiers that I ever saw that could be held in such subjugation as they were when their houses were being burned as theirs were."¹⁸ This in the face of some of the cruelest acts imaginable. Assailants set blacks people's homes ablaze and forced women at gunpoint to remain inside as the homes burned to the ground. Fortunately, at least some

¹⁵ See *Ibid*, 167.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁷ Virtually all accounts of the event are consistent on the point that the black soldiers fired the shots (albeit into the air) which initiated the firefight with the Memphis police. However, given the social climate of the time, it stands to reason that the inverse could have been true.

¹⁸ *Riots and Massacres*, 32.

of the women escaped. In addition to the property damages, which proved numerous, a mob of whites brutally raped Frances Thompson, Lucy Smith, Lucy Tibbs, Harriet Armour, and Rebecca Anne Bloom.¹⁹

Furthermore, throughout the duration of this massacre not a single white casualty was recorded. The two whites who died did so in the initial skirmish between the police and the black troops, and both due to friendly fire. The white mob, however, killed 46 black people, wounded 70 to 80 more, raped the aforementioned five women, robbed more than a 100 people, and burned to the ground four churches, 12 schools and 91 houses in the black community.²⁰ Thus, the violence and casualties suffered were one sided, and the word “riot” does not describe them accurately.

In the absence of spontaneity or mutually proportionate aggression, the word “riot” implies legitimate grievance. Examples of such riots include the 1968 riots in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the riot which followed the beating of Rodney King. That the perpetrators of the Memphis massacre of 1866 lacked a legitimate grievance goes without saying. Moreover, whether intentional or not, historians’ use of the word “riot” to describe the Memphis massacre of 1866 suggests a continuity between this event and the ones mentioned above. This suggestion evidences blacks’ marginalization in history and may read as proof of historians’ tacit acceptance of past adherents to white supremacy’s narratives which skewed the facts to justify anti-black violence. This holds especially true for historians such as University of Connecticut’s Altina Waller who has emphasized causes for the massacre other than race. Nevertheless, with the

¹⁹ Ibid, 32; See Ibid, 13-15.

²⁰ See Ibid, 7-8; See Kevin R. Hardwick, " ‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln Is Dead and Damned’: Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 1 (Fall 1993), 109.

exception of Steven A. Ashe's *A Massacre in Memphis: The Riot that Shook the Nation*, all studies on the event to date refer to it exclusively as a riot.²¹

The propaganda tactics of the race mongering Memphis press which tried to obscure the event at the time illustrate this misterming is not a trivial difference. In the immediate aftermath of the first string of murders on the morning of May 2, the *Memphis Argus*, which served as a propaganda machine for the Confederacy during the Civil War, claimed the events in question amounted to a “negro riot [sic].”²² Similarly, the *Memphis Daily Avalanche* published an article titled “Law Outraged by Negroes” in which they claimed the violence ensued because the black troops began “firing at every white person they could see.”²³ In fact, a review of thirty one publications which covered the event nationwide revealed a strong correlation between the word “riot” and a misrepresentation of events. Of those thirty one publications, nineteen referred to the event as a riot. Of those nineteen, only four gave balanced portrayals of the event, and all four went on to clarify that what they had initially referred to as a riot really constituted a massacre. Of the twelve publications which referred to the event as a massacre, only one misrepresented the event.²⁴

²¹ See Altina L. Waller, Community Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866, *Journal of Social History* 18, No. 2 (Winter 1984); See Steven A. Ashe, *A Massacre in Memphis: The Race Riot That Shook the Nation One Year after the Civil War*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

²² See J. M. Keating and O.F. Vedder, *The History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee* Vol. 1, (Syracuse, NY: Mason & Co., 1888) 562-63; Qtd. in Marius Carriere, “An Irresponsible Press: Memphis Newspapers and the 1866 Riot,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 60, no.1 (Spring 2001), 9.

²³ “The Law Outraged by Negroes,” *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, May 2, 1866.

²⁴ See bibliography for list of newspapers. Selections were made based on whether or not the article covered the event in any detail. Some articles were excluded for lack of detail. An article in a newspaper that misrepresented the event is not necessarily a condemnation of that publisher as biased as some were merely reprinting articles from other publications. Furthermore, some newspapers such as the *Commercial Advertiser* in New York released both an accurate portrayal of events and one informed by the narrative of the press in Memphis.

This begs the question: why have historians adopted the terminology of past adherents to white supremacy who attempted to obscure the reality of the situation? Given that most of these works accurately portray the events and condemn the racism of the Memphis press, the answer is almost certainly not that they are subscribers to white supremacy themselves.²⁵ It seems more likely the case that historians have simply referred to the event as it is most commonly known. The first modern analysis of the event, conducted by Jack D.L. Holmes, referred to the event as a riot. Similarly, the Select Committee's report on the event, which remains the most widely utilized primary source on the subject, is titled *Memphis Riots and Massacres*.²⁶ Nevertheless, the event's common reference as a riot may result from the fact that the first publishers to cover the event were the anti-black press in Memphis. The fact that historians use the same term to describe the event as the known supremacists of the past constitutes a clear oversight. Moreover, it propagates a white supremacist perspective of American history which keeps white people ignorant and black people skeptical.

Furthermore, events analogous to the one in Memphis which historians commonly refer to as riots may prove similarly misnamed. For instance, on July 30, 1866, a group of angry white citizens and policemen in New Orleans descended on a Constitutional Convention convened at the Mechanics Institute to discuss the enfranchisement of black males in Louisiana.²⁷ This state sponsored mob attacked the members and attendees of the convention, black and white alike, even as they attempted to surrender. One attendee of the convention named Dr. Horton stuck a white

²⁵ The only exception to this is Jack D. L. Holmes' article "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1958): 195-221. Holmes relied heavily on the racist *Memphis Daily Avalanche* for sourcing and likely had questionable motivations himself; see bibliography for list of other works on the subject.

²⁶ See, Holmes, Cover page.

²⁷ See, James G. Hollandsworth, *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2001), 2.

handkerchief out the window and shouted “Gentlemen I beseech you to stop firing; we are non-combatants. If you want to arrest us, make any arrest as you please, we are not prepared to defend ourselves.” To which a member of the mob replied, “ ‘we don’t want any prisoners; you have all got to die.’ ” Dr. Horton eventually died in the massacre.²⁸ Another attendee of the convention made a similarly bold attempt at surrender. J.D. O’Connell exposed himself to his attackers and pledged surrender if the police would protect them. An officer shook his hand and helped O’Connell remove the barricade which had previously separated attendants of the convention from the police. Instead of escorting them out, however, when the police entered the room the officer exclaimed “ ‘Now, boys, we have got them,’ ” and they began to fire.²⁹ Eventually, the mob overran the Mechanics Institute and killed the attendants of the convention. Afterward it tracked down many of the black people who successfully escaped the Mechanics Institute and killed them too.

The violence did not restrict itself to the Mechanics institute. Many white bystanders took the event as an opportunity to gun down black men in the streets. At day’s end, the massacre had claimed the deaths of forty eight men, thirty five of them black, and wounded two hundred more. Again, historians conventionally refer to this event as a riot.³⁰

²⁸ Qtd. in Donald E. Reynolds, “The New Orleans Race Riot of 1866, Reconsidered,” *Louisiana History: Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1964), 13; *ibid*, 13.

²⁹ Hollandsworth, 109; Qtd. in *ibid*, 109.

³⁰ See Hollandsworth, 121; See Hollandsworth 129; All the white men who died were attendees of the convention. The mob did not suffer any casualties; examples of studies which refer to the event as a riot include Gilles Vandal, “The Origins of the New Orleans Riot of 1866, Revisited,” *Louisiana History: Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1981), Donald E. Reynolds, “The New Orleans Race Riot of 1866, Reconsidered,” *Louisiana History: Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1964). These articles may be old, but are among the few case studies to have examined the New Orleans massacre. Similarly, encyclopedia britannica continues to refer to the event as a riot.

Another alleged riot occurred in Atlanta on September 22, 1906. Prior to the incident, Georgia newspapers such as the *News* and the *Georgian* spent months emphasizing the sexual threat which black men posed to white women, and recommended lynching as an appropriate response.³¹ On September 5, just a little over two weeks before the violence, the *Georgian* presented citizens in Atlanta with the following argument to fan the fear of interracial sex and demand the protection of White women against alleged black rapists:

“If the negro [sic] were no longer a part of our population, the women of the south would be freed from their state of siege... But under the black shadow of the fiendish passion of these ebony devils our women are as completely as slaves as if they were in bondage to a conquering foe.”³²

The propaganda tactics of publishers like the *Georgian* and the *News* had a staggering effect, and sparked a surge of white vigilantism against alleged black rapists in the months and weeks leading up to the massacre. Likewise, white demagogues including attorney and future Governor of Georgia Hoke Smith and Pulitzer-prize winning newspaperman Clark Howell tapped into the racial bigotry of white southerners to advance their political careers.³³

Finally, on the night of September 22, 1906 these tensions translated into physical violence. As the day turned to night, a crowd of angry whites gathered in downtown Atlanta and shouted “kill them,” “lynch them,” and “kill every damn nigger in sight.”³⁴ As the evening progressed,

³¹ See David Fort Godshalk, *Veiled Visions the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 36.

³² Qtd. in Godshalk, 39.

³³ See Godshalk, 36-38; See Godshalk, 48-51

³⁴ Qtd. in Godshalk, 90

a one sided and brutal massacre ensued. In total, the mob, which at its height numbered almost 1,000 people, killed 26 people, injured 60, and burned over 1,000 buildings in the black community to the ground. Meanwhile, Atlanta's predominantly white police force made no attempt to intervene.³⁵

These events may require a further analysis. However, at face value they seem to fall similarly short of the requisite criteria for a riot as the massacre in Memphis. In New Orleans, members of the convention received letters months in advance warning them not to attend for threat of violence. Similarly, in Atlanta white employers warned their black employees to stay away from downtown Atlanta the night of the *riot*.³⁶ Thus, neither event qualifies as spontaneous. Furthermore, the perpetrators of both events clearly lacked a legitimate grievance, and the lopsided death tolls make their one-sidedness apparent. The nature of these events and their recorded status as riots, suggests that all such events which occurred during the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction era may prove similarly mis-termed. For this reason, historians need to reinvestigate events during this time period to ensure historical accounts shaped by white supremacist ideology do not inform their own constructions of historical narratives and that the terms they use accurately portray the stories they aim to tell.

In conclusion, use of the word "riot" to describe the massacre in Memphis 1866 does not meet the criteria of refuting the relics of white supremacy littered throughout American history. The continued existence of these relics allows white people to remain complacent in their

³⁵ See Godshalk, 85-95; See Godshalk, 90; See Godshalk, 106; See "Atlanta Riot of 1906" Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 26, 2018; See Godshalk, 96; Examples of works which refer to the Atlanta massacre as a riot include Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, Rebecca Burns, *Rage in the Gate City: the Story of the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Encyclopedia Britannica also continues to refer to the Atlanta Massacre as a riot.

³⁶See Gilles Vandal, "The Origins of the New Orleans Riot of 1866, Revisited," *Louisiana History: Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 22 no. 2 (Spring 1981), 156-57; Godshalk, 85.

ignorance, while black people continue to suffer as a result of that ignorance. American democracy has always functioned, but it has not always functioned for all Americans. In order for it to do so, the histories and perspectives of all Americans must be engaged so that Americans from different backgrounds can come to understand one another and pursue well-being from a common place. Use of the word “riot” for events like the Memphis massacre of 1866, its counterparts in New Orleans, Atlanta, and presumably elsewhere diminishes the capability of white and black Americans to cultivate trust in one another. Indeed, such misterms help propagate the version of American history which, as W.E.B. Dubois put it, is not in fact history, but a “defense of the white race.”³⁷ Until white people come to understand that many of the conventional historical narratives they know are products of white supremacist ideology, trust will remain elusive, and equality in American society will continue to exist only in the historical narrative which aims to convince us it has already been achieved.

³⁷ Qtd. in Jennifer Jensen Wallach, “The Vindication of Fawn Brodie,” *Massachusetts Review* 43 no. 2 (Summer 2002), 278.

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Memphis Riots and Massacres. Report. The Special Committee of the House Charged with an Investigation into All Matters Connected with the Riots at Memphis, which took place on the First Days of May, 1866, Elihu B. Washburne, Chairmen, (Miami, FL, 1969; [1866]), 1-35.

List of publications which referred to incident as “massacre” and depicted events accurately:

“Messrs. E.B. Washburne,” *Boston Recorder*, May 18, 1866.

“The Memphis Massacre,” *Jamestown Journal*, May 18, 1866.

“From Memphis,” *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, May 5, 1866.

“Wednesday June 20, 1866,” *The Chicago Republican*, June 20, 1866.

“Washington June 19,” *Vermont Watchman*, June 29, 1866.

“The Memphis Massacre,” *Morning Oregonian*, July 24, 1866.

“The Memphis Massacre. Report of the Congressional Investigating Committee. Frightful Picture of Rebel Cruelty,” *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, July 30, 1866.

“The Memphis Massacre,” *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, July 31, 1866.

“The New Orleans Riot,” *Anamosa Eureka*, August 9, 1866.

Publications which referred to it as a massacre and misrepresented event:

“The Memphis Massacre,” *Commercial Advertiser*, June 14, 1866

List of publications which referred to event as “riot” and misrepresented event:

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“The Memphis Riot,” *The Daily Age*, May 4, 1866.

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“More About the Memphis Riot,” *Commercial Advertiser*, May 7, 1866.

“Summary of the News,” *The New Orleans Times*, May 7, 1866.

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