

Torn to pieces: the *Baltimore Sun* and the case of George Scott

Johan Galtung, the famous peace theorist and long-standing head of the Peace Research Institute at the University of Oslo, defines violence as “the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual,” or the extent to which one’s physical and psychological condition is hindered or reduced from its fullest potential (168). In his view, violence can be perpetrated on two levels, personally or structurally. The former appears more explicitly, the violence between individuals, but the latter can sometimes seem as “natural as the air around us” (173). He also makes the distinction between manifest and latent violence. Manifest violence is tangibly observable, whereas latent violence is the possibility or threat of violence, when the level of actual realization can decrease quickly without warning (172). In any type of violence, there is an influence relation between a perpetrator, or what Galtung calls the subject, and a victim, also called the object, although the clarity of these roles often varies (169). Within the context of the Jim Crow era in the American south, the constant latent threat of manifest harm was most strongly and violently exemplified in the practice of lynching (Smith 71). In this latent structural violence, the perpetrators, white men, saw hanging and sometimes burning as the punishment for the alleged sex crimes against white women by the victims, black men (Powdermaker 52). The Jim Crow era occurred roughly between the United States Supreme Court cases of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896 to *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, both of which concerned the separate but equal clause that provided the legal justification for a racially segregated and unequal society (Tafari). Lynching posed a constant danger to the incarcerated George Scott (alias William Lee), a seventeen-year-old boy who incited hysteria when he allegedly assaulted and raped two white women, Lily Barnes and Frances Powell, on the evening of June 10th, 1906 in Kingston, Maryland, a small town situated in Somerset County on the Eastern Coast shared by Maryland and Virginia (“William Lee ” 1). Public outrage over the next two months before his legal

execution by the state of Maryland began immediately and grew consistently, as white Maryland citizens coordinated large-scale efforts to lynch Scott and prevent him from standing trial due to the violent nature of his alleged crime and despite his young age (2-3). Notably, the State governments made extra effort to preserve the right of execution as the sole dominion of the state, not the right of mob will. Featuring prominently in the national discourse, the *Baltimore Sun*, an established and successful newspaper owned by a prejudiced white family which actively voiced the dominant views of white society, was based in the city where the trial took place and extensively covered the issue (Williams 55; Farrar 226). In its coverage of the crime, capture, holding, indictment, trial, and execution of George Scott in the summer of 1906, the *Baltimore Sun* perpetuated, through sensational descriptions and baseless conjecture that revealed its racial bias, the latent structurally violent threat of lynching and the white sentiments on which it relied, ultimately transforming Scott from a complex human being into a perfect stereotype of the black man as a criminal.

In the context of the racial tensions of the Jim Crow era in Maryland, the details of George Scott's case provoked a particularly strong reaction. After his alleged assault on June 10th, seventeen-year-old Scott escaped to Cape Charles, Virginia where he was subsequently caught. The next day, due to an immediate threat of lynching that would persist until his execution, Scott was protected by the local militia from a mob of 25 armed members of Somerset County ("William Lee" 1). At the time of the capture, he was known in the media by his alias as William Lee, and his real name would not be released until his execution (3). George Scott's alleged crime took the Eastern Coast of Maryland by storm, and so the Governor extradited him from Virginia to be transported to Baltimore in the interest of avoiding a lynching. Mistaken Somerset County residents expected his return to the county upon his extradition, and angry white citizens, in addition to waiting in mobs at train stops all along the Eastern Shore, stormed his Grand Jury

hearing in the county in a crowd of over two thousand (2). Following a three hour trial in which he was given no defense, the court sentenced Scott to death by hanging, and in twenty days he was extradited to a remote island within the jurisdiction of Somerset County in order to avoid any threat of a lynch mob (3).

The *Sun* perpetuated and exacerbated the societal threat of lynching in its coverage of the initial alleged crime of George Scott through unfounded speculation and by aggressively sensationalizing the events with provocative and racist descriptions of Scott, both strategies of which demonstrated the paper's aggressive racial bias. Featuring a front-page article, the *Sun* projected undeniable guilt onto Scott the very morning after his alleged assault. Entitled "VICTIMS OF A NEGRO," a phrasing that insinuated a lack of surprise, the article dramatically described the nature of the incident based solely on the testimony of the two white victims. It portrayed a "fiendish brute" with a "long knife in one hand and a pistol in the other" who threatened that he would "cut their throats from ear to ear" if they refused his demands (par. 2-5). The objective circumstances of Scott's condition were unimportant; the *Sun*'s graphic description propagated the white societal view of the black man as a threat and a menace. Further indication of the *Sun*'s racial bias, the article also described him as being considered a "strange" and "bad negro," which were further baseless presumptions of his character without any supportive evidence (par. 4). The *Sun* perpetuated lynch mob justice by graphically and emotionally interpreting the testimony of the victims as the truth of the incident and projecting guilt and an evil personality onto Lee before he was even caught.

Upon his capture and holding, the *Sun* wantonly speculated about and hyperbolized aspects of the lynch mobs, their efforts, and the emotions of and claims made by Scott. While Scott was held in jail in Eastville, Virginia to be identified by the victim Lily Barnes, a June 14th article's subhead read "Virginia Soldiers Protect Negro Brute From Wrath Of Mob"

(“GUARDED BY TROOPS...”). These words had the immediate effect of simultaneously demonizing Scott and emphasizing the anger of the mob. The *Sun* further predicted that if the mob “had been allowed to identify the prisoner there is no doubt that he would have been lynched on the spot” (par. 4). In a separate article written a day later about his condition in lieu of the mob threats, they speculated due to his appearance that he was “probably not more than 20,” and, despite a lack of birth records any verifiable evidence, ignored his claim that he was 17 years old (par. 9-10). This oversight strengthened the *Sun*’s racist portrayal of Scott as the embodiment of evil. On the 14th, the day after his confession and transport to Baltimore, the *Sun* sensationalized the size of the mistaken mobs who expected to see Scott arrive back in Somerset, vividly describing the Eastern Shore towns as “alive with people from all directions” with “large numbers of people gathered,” and selectively quoted one of the “leading” and undoubtedly white citizens of region as saying “it is doubtful...that the fact that the negro is to be hanged will prevent the people who are worked up over this terrible affair from resorting to lynch law” (“LEE TO BE TRIED...” par. 6-10). In this instance, the *Sun* concurrently valorized this white man’s opinion, which represented the white interests in the structurally violent status quo against black people, and ventured without evidence the lynch mobs’ attitudes of righteous obstinacy and anger. Alternately, the *Sun*’s coverage of the capture and transport of Scott avoided attempts to cast doubt on any details of the case which might portray Scott as less guilty. Evidence of the *Sun*’s racial bias, these articles instead repeatedly and descriptively cast an image of evilness, inhumanity, and guilt onto Scott despite his age. He was the victim of a structurally violent system in which he was guilty until proven guilty. The *Sun* imposed its racial bias by upholding the actions of the mobs and the white men that comprised them through sensationalism and speculation.

The *Sun* continued in its appeal to the white status quo and perpetuation of the structural violence of lynching in its coverage of the Grand Jury indictment and trial of George Scott, demonstrating its racial prejudice by using dramatic imagery and unverifiable conjecture on the same subjects of the lynch mobs, white people, and Scott. In the coverage of Scott's indictment, on June 20th the *Sun* focused the lynch mob's outrage at Scott's absence. The *Sun*'s exaggerated heading and subheading encapsulated its tactics: "MOB IS CHEATED: People Would Have Torn Him To Pieces Had An Attempt Been Made To Take Him Into The County." The heading's descriptive characterization of the mob's inability to lynch Scott as "cheating" made evident the *Sun*'s legitimization of lynching, which the subheading further glorified with the phrase "Would Have Torn Him To Pieces," which hyperbolically projected a violently malicious intent onto the lynch mobs ("MOB IS CHEATED..."). A few days later, the manipulative tactics of the *Sun*'s coverage Scott's trial in Baltimore was best encapsulated by the paper's quotes and portrayal of Robert Barnes, husband of the victim Lily Barnes. In the piece written about the trial, the *Sun* conjectured the lynch mobs by quoting his prediction that "the crowd down home" would "burn" Scott because "hanging's too good" and his opinion that they would "never let the authorities carry out the sentence" ("LEE'S FATE IN DOUBT" par. 21-23). The *Sun*'s use of Barnes' unfounded speculation, which proved to be false due to the efforts of state leadership, perpetuated lynching fervor even when an execution was imminent. The article then proceeded to embellish his testimony to the court, depicting Barnes as making a "deep impression on all who heard" him and noting his "admirable self-control" as he "glared at the prisoner and clenched his hands" (par. 32). The *Sun* portrayed this white man, who would hours later argue for burning a black human being, as a strong, proud, and courageous individual. The *Sun* continued to use Barnes' testimony to demonize Lee. Barnes, in testifying about coming home to find his the victims in a state of panic and fear, stated that "All my wife could say was "A nigger! A

nigger!””” (par. 33). Here, as the *Sun* dramatized Barnes’ statement to the white public, the entire African American demographic was implicated in Scott’s crime through the use of a degrading racial slur. In the view of the *Sun*, which represented the views of the victims of the crime and the structurally violent white society of the Jim Crow era, such behavior was instinctual to and to be expected of black people. This evocatively described presumption perpetuated the latent structural violence of lynching. The *Sun* also intentionally understated his lack of defense in order to diminish the unfairness and emphasize the decision of the trial. Only one sentence in the very last paragraph of its long editorial, the piece stated that Scott’s attorney “said he had no defense and no argument and was ready for sentence” (par. 40). The massive and sensationalist imbalance of focus and sympathies of the *Sun*’s coverage, demonstrated by its strategies of speculation and sensationalism, served as a way to appeal and uphold the actions and feelings of the white status quo, demonize Scott as an example of white expectations of black men, and ultimately uphold the structurally violent threat of lynching.

In its final coverage of Scott’s leave from Baltimore to Somerset County to be executed, the *Sun* applied a culmination of its previous descriptive and racially prejudiced speculations in order to perpetuate the latent threat of lynching, maintaining its gross manipulation of his name, age, and personality in order to strengthen their violent depiction of Lee. This article was the only effort in the *Sun*’s comprehensive coverage made to indicate Scott’s real name. Amid graphic and nearly gleeful descriptions of his grief, in which the *Sun* speculated that the “crestfallen negro” who “did not confess his fear” would collapse “before the rope was placed about his neck,” George Scott’s actual name sat for the first and only time beneath a prison photo of him staring ahead of the camera with a slight grimace and a stony expression (“LEE GOES TO BE HANGED...” par. 4-6). Below, the *Sun* made its only attempt to correct its presumptuous use of Scott’s alias: “GEORGE SCOTT, ALIAS WM. LEE.” The paper’s unwillingness to use Scott’s

real name, which was confirmed on his death certificate, upheld the structurally violent threat of lynching in that it demonstrated the lack of importance of Scott's real identity beyond his wrongdoing and his race ("William Lee" 3). By exclusively using Scott's alias, William Lee, the *Sun* made his identity his crime, allowing the paper to transform the nuanced reality of George Scott as a human being into the monolithic image of the black man as a criminal. Like the *Sun*'s earlier strategy of baselessly arguing that Lee was older than his real age of seventeen, the *Sun* manipulated Scott's individuality through speculation and sensationalist description into the ideal object of oppression in order to justify the latent structural violence of lynching as a mechanism for white control and dominance over black people.

A day later, in one of its last articles that covered the details of his execution, the *Sun* drew upon its tried and true strategies and graphically reported final speculations on his character, effectively sympathized with the white crowd, and provided a surrogate for its readership to lynch mob justice, all of which cemented the paper's final justifications and enforcements of the latent structural violence of lynching. In a front-page piece that was the last of its coverage, with his identity as Lee firmly within the realm of the mythical, the *Sun* summed up all of its previous speculations of Scott's character as a cold-blooded killer, noting that Scott "met death with that stolid indifference which has characterized him" ("LEE GETS JUSTICE..." par. 3). In projecting an aura of indifference towards death onto him, the *Sun* ended its assurances to its audience by implying that the practice of lynching was less violent and more defensible when done to black men, the inhuman objects. The paper also glorified the excitement of the white crowd at his death, as the article explained that "as soon as the rope was taken from Lee's neck the bystanders began to ask...for a piece of it" until the presiding Sheriff found he "had given away about 15 feet of the rope" (par. 21). By colorfully describing the white crowd's reaction, the *Sun* condoned their excitement at seeing the lynching of a black alleged rapist, even if it was not by their hands.

Perpetuating the latent threat of lynching further, because the *Sun* was unable to idealize the anger of lynch mobs as it had in its previous coverage, it instead went into graphic detail on nearly every aspect of his death. Intensely recounting every step of the execution process, from his “solemn” surveillance as he “began to weep” at the “scene on the shore” on the remote island, to his “drawing up of his knees once or twice” and his “spasmodic twitch of his chest” as he hung by his neck from the scaffold, the *Sun* provided its white readership with a substitute for the satisfaction of lynch mob justice (par. 18). This substitution allowed white people to feel the same sense of dominance in their role as perpetrators as they would have if Lynch Law had been instituted. Ultimately, the *Sun*’s final coverage used descriptive imagery to idealize the emotions and sentiments of the frenzied white citizens and provide a surrogate to lynch mob justice for the white readership, both strategies of which perpetuated the latent structural violence of lynch law during the Jim Crow era in Maryland.

In every component of its coverage of the case of George Scott, the *Sun* idealized and justified the structurally violent system of Lynch Law in Jim Crow era Maryland through the use of ignorant, baseless conjecture about and prejudiced, provocative description of Scott’s criminal persona, William Lee, and the angry white perpetrators who fervently desired to lynch him. The *Sun*’s manipulative strategies appealed to its white audience by regurgitating the vitriolic prejudice that white people of the time felt towards black people. Scott’s story in many ways brings to light the history behind the present. The methods through which the *Sun* perpetuated the structurally violent system of lynching in many ways provides a historical introduction to the contemporary media portrayal of black men as objects of fear and criminality (Patton and Yule 865-866). As in the *Sun*’s coverage of Scott, the contemporary mainstream media in the United States all too often manipulates the identities of black men into the prejudiced stereotypes perceived by the dominant white culture in the structurally violent society (Patton and Yule 866;

Page 99). The *Sun*'s coverage of George Scott's story sheds light on the very real historical precedents that laid the foundation for the contemporary race problems existing today.

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