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Source: *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Feb., 1996), pp. 57-86

Published by: Southern Historical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2211206>

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The Appeal of Cole Blease of South Carolina: Race, Class, and Sex in the New South

By BRYANT SIMON

JOE CHILDERS WAS A WHITE SOUTHERN MILLWORKER. HE WAS DESCRIBED by a newspaper reporter as a “respectable laboring man” who enjoyed a “good reputation.”¹ On the night of March 27, 1912, Childers met Joe Brinson and Frank Whisonant, both African Americans, near the train station in Blacksburg, South Carolina, a small town in the western piedmont section of the state. For two of these men, the meeting proved tragic.

What happened that night among Brinson, Childers, and Whisonant will never be known. Depending on which account one believes, Childers either asked Brinson and Whisonant to get him a pint—or a quart—of whiskey or the two African Americans badgered the innocent white man until he finally agreed to buy liquor from them. The three men got drunk. According to Childers’s version of the story, Brinson and Whisonant challenged him to chug all of the whiskey. Fearing for his safety, he drank as much as he could as fast as he could, but he could not drain the bottle. As Childers guzzled the rust-colored rotgut—or maybe it was clear white lightning—Brinson and Whisonant taunted him; when he did not finish, they grew quarrelsome. They dragged him to a cemetery and ordered him to take off his clothes. N. W. Hardin, a local attorney, recounted what he heard happened next: “They [Brinson and Whisonant] drew their pistols, cocked them and told Childers to open his mouth, and keep it open, that if he closed it, he would be shot on the spot.” Then, according to Hardin, Brinson made Childers perform oral sex on Whisonant.

Following this consensual or coerced sexual act, or what the press dubbed the “unmentionable act”—the phrase commonly used to hint

¹ Gaffney (S.C.) *Ledger*, March 29, 1912. The *Ledger* was Blacksburg’s local paper.

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Volume LXII, No. 1, February 1996

at the rape or alleged rape of a white woman by an African American man—Childers “escaped.” He ran straight to the police station to report the attack, and the chief of police quickly arrested Brinson and Whisonant. According to Hardin and as reported in the March 29 Gaffney (South Carolina) *Ledger*, they were charged with selling liquor, highway robbery, carrying a concealed weapon, assault with a deadly weapon, and sodomy. The next day the local magistrate fined the two men twenty dollars each. Some thought that the fine, which was roughly the equivalent of three weeks’ wages for a textile worker, was too lenient. Regardless of the amount, Brinson and Whisonant had no money at all and were sent to jail.

The next morning E. D. Johnson of Blacksburg got up early and walked to the well in the center of the town square for water. Johnson discovered that the rope used to pull up the bucket was missing. Puzzled, he looked around; his eyes stopped at the stone and brick jail. The front door had been knocked down. Johnson peered inside and saw a broken padlock and an open cell. He must have known what had happened, and he ran to get the mayor. It did not take them long to find the missing rope and the missing prisoners.

“The job,” wrote a reporter in the April 2 Gaffney *Ledger*, “had been done in a most workman-like manner.” Brinson and Whisonant’s cold and limp bodies dangled from the rafters of the blacksmith shop located just behind the jail. Bound hand and foot, both victims had been gagged, one with cotton, the other with rope. The killers had not wanted them to scream.²

Word of the lynching raced through the area, but the crime did not produce unanimity. It did not bring together, in the words of the sociologist and student of southern vigilantism Arthur Raper, “plantation owners and white tenants, mill owners and textile workers.”³ Rather, the killings stirred discord and division. “Law and order,” worried the editor of the Gaffney *Ledger*, “has been flaunted” as “passions [became] inflamed and reason dethroned.” “Every good citizen,” he was

² This account of the Blacksburg lynching and reactions to it was reconstructed on the basis of N. W. Hardin to Governor Cole L. Blease, March 29, 1912, and W. W. Thomas to Blease, March 29, 1912 (telegram), both documents in Folder—Cherokee County, 1911–1913, Box 11, Cole L. Blease Papers (South Carolina Division of Archives and History, Columbia); Gaffney *Ledger*, March 29, April 2, 5, 9, 1912; and Spartanburg *Herald*, March 30, 1912. The above account relies on the Hardin letter and on newspapers, in other words, it relies on white sources. There are some minor disagreements and discrepancies in these accounts, but only minor ones. Of course, Whisonant and Brinson would probably have told a different story of the events that led up to their deaths, but they were never heard from.

³ Arthur Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill, 1939), 47.

certain, “deplored the crime.” The newsman, however, had no sympathy for the dead. “Those were two bad negroes who were lynched in Blacksburg,” he conceded. “But,” he added, “those who outraged them became worse whites.”⁴

No one, at least in public, named the “worse whites.” Speculation, however, was rampant.⁵ Many Blacksburg residents were convinced that the mob—totaling as many as a dozen or as few as six men—rode into town on horseback from the industrial towns and mill villages of Gaffney, Cherokee Falls, Hickory Grove, and King’s Mountain. Others insisted that the killers were from Blacksburg. Though questions about where the murderers lived lingered, there was little doubt about what they did for a living. “My idea,” wrote N. W. Hardin, “is that as Childers was a factory operative, the lynching was done by the operatives of the surrounding mills, trying to take care of their class.” If millworkers committed the crime, townspeople were sure where the larger blame for the murders lay. “Some of the d—d fools are already saying,” reported Hardin, “this is Bleasism.” The *Gaffney Ledger* echoed this view. “If a majority of the people of South Carolina want

⁴ *Gaffney Ledger*, April 4, 1912, (first two quoted sentences) and April 2, 1912 (last two quotations).

⁵ According to W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s typology, the Blacksburg mob would probably be classified either as a “terrorist” mob—a group that lynched for economic or moral reasons—or as a “private mob.” “Unlike terrorist mobs,” Brundage writes, private mobs “organized to punish alleged criminal offenses, including crimes of a serious nature.” See Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana and Chicago, 1993), 17–48. In his detailed, quantitative study of lynching in South Carolina, Terence R. Finnegan fails to mention the Blacksburg lynching. According to Finnegan, lynchings with sexual-psychological overtones, like this one, were not the norm. Most lynching, he argues, took place for economic or political reasons—often because of a dispute between a white landowner and an African American tenant. See Finnegan, “‘At the Hands of Parties Unknown’: Lynching in Mississippi and South Carolina, 1880–1940” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1992). Some have attributed lynching to social and economic instability in the area in which the crime took place. Obviously, industrialization, the focus of this paper, was a forceful engine of change. Nonetheless, evidence from the U.S. census does not suggest other dramatic changes in Blacksburg and Cherokee County in the first decade or so of the twentieth century. For instance, population in the area climbed steadily, but not remarkably, in the years leading up to the murders. However, between 1900 and 1910, the population of the town of Blacksburg declined by almost 13 percent. In addition, there does not seem to have been a sudden shift in the overall structure of the rural economy of the county. In 1900, 61.1 percent of the county’s residents, white and black, were tenants. The relative percent of white and African American tenants also remained about the same. By 1920 there was, it is worth noting, a slight increase in the number of African American landowners in Cherokee County. For information on population changes see *Thirteenth Census of the United States*. Vol. III: *Population. Reports by States* (Washington, 1913), 643; and *Fourteenth Census of the United States*. Vol. I: *Population. Numbers and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington, 1921), 603. For information on the economic structure of the county see *Twelfth Census of the United States*. Vol. V: *Agriculture*. Part I (Washington, 1902), 118–19; *Thirteenth Census of the United States*. Vol. VII: *Agriculture, 1909 and 1910. Reports by States, with Statistics for Counties . . .* (Washington, 1913), 508–15; and *Fourteenth Census of the United States*. Vol. VI, Part 2: *Agriculture. Report for States* (Washington, 1922), 276–77.

Bleas and Bleasism,” the editor wrote of the lynching, “they will have it in spite of those who desire law and order.”⁶

Bleasism was the term used by friends and foes alike to designate the political uprising of first-generation South Carolina millworkers. This electoral surge took its name from its standard-bearer, Coleman Livingston Bleas. “Coley,” as his loyal backers called him, had occupied the governor’s office for a little more than a year and was preparing for his re-election drive when Brinson and Whisonant were killed. Although Bleas did not play a direct role in the murders, commentators who linked him to the disorder in Blacksburg were, at least in part, right. Bleas’s racially charged, antireform campaigns and leadership style stirred up many of the same cultural, economic, and sexual anxieties that ultimately led some white working-class men to lynch African American men.

Let us for a moment speculate about what ran through the minds of the Blacksburg murderers. Despite the biracial, homoerotic overtones of the meeting at the railway station, the killers may have decided that Childers was “innocent” and that he had been “raped.” The crime seems to have symbolized something more than one evening of horror in a cemetery. The alleged or imagined rape of the millworker Joe Childers may have represented in microcosm the assaults on white manhood posed by industrialization. Even more than the rape of a white woman, the rape of this white man by another man graphically represented male millworkers’ deepest fears of emasculation. That the perpetrators were African Americans further magnified the offense. The alleged sexual attack not only erased the color line but also inverted the racial hierarchy, placing an African American man “on top,” in a position of power over a white man. A few male textile workers appear to have made a connection between how the “rape” of Childers feminized him and how industrialization stripped them of control over their own labor and that of their families and, thus, over their manhood. Some southern white wage-earning men felt that industrialization placed them in the position of women, vulnerable and dependent, powerless at home and in the public sphere.

Recent scholarship on lynching and gender relations in the New South suggests that by murdering Joe Brinson and Frank Whisonant, the Blacksburg killers sought to reassert their manhood.⁷ The same

⁶ N. W. Hardin to Gov. Cole L. Bleas, March 29, 1912; and Gaffney *Ledger*, April 2, 1912.

⁷ See for examples Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘The Mind That Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York, 1983), 328–49; Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, 1979); Gail

fierce determination to uphold white supremacy and patriarchy that led to the Blacksburg lynching was the driving force behind Cole Blease's electoral appeal. The same sexual and psychological anxieties that drew the lynch mob to the jail that spring night in 1912 brought many more men to the polls a few months later to vote for Blease. Middle-class South Carolinians—professionals and members of the emerging commercial elite—also connected the lynching in Cherokee County with Blease's political success. Both, they argued, stemmed from the collapse of "law and order" in the mill villages and demonstrated the need for reform.⁸

Southern historians have often identified white supremacy as the unifying thread of the New South. This was supposedly the one social principle that all white southerners agreed on.⁹ Yet, by the spring of 1912, most middle-class South Carolinians regarded lynching as a menacing signal of working-class disorder, not as a bright emblem of a unified community's resolve to defend white supremacy at any cost. Clearly, white southerners in the early part of the twentieth century were not of a single mind—not socially, not politically, and not even with regard to maintaining racial order.

However, for all their apparent "southernness," the anxieties that produced Bleasism and the Blacksburg lynching were not confined to South Carolina or, for that matter, to the American South. Across the United States and indeed the globe, the reconfiguration of production landscapes—the shift from fields to factories—jarred gender relations. Industrialization triggered an almost universal crisis of male identity. In South Carolina, the crisis of masculinity among first-generation mill hands aggravated race and gender relations and eventually spilled over into politics, dividing the state along class lines.¹⁰

Bederman, "'Civilization,' the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Antilynching Campaign (1892–94)," *Radical History Review*, No. 52 (Winter 1992), 5–30; Nancy MacLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism," *Journal of American History*, LXXVIII (December 1991), 917–48; and Laura F. Edwards, "Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction, and the Extension of Patriarchy in Granville County, North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, LXVIII (July 1991), 237–60.

⁸ The growing divide between millworkers and the town classes has been explored by David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880–1920* (Baton Rouge, 1982). Many middle-class South Carolinians equated Bleasism with anarchy and lawlessness. See, for examples Joel F. Dowling to Blease, March 23, 1912, Folder–Greenville County, 1911–1913, Box 17, M. A. Moseley to Blease, March 15, 1912, Folder–Spartanburg County, 1912–1913, Box 34, and W. P. Caskey to Blease, March 23, 1912, Folder–Lancaster County, 1912, Box 21, all in Blease Papers.

⁹ For an excellent survey of the literature on postbellum southern politics and its emphasis on race see Numan V. Bartley, "In Search of the New South: Southern Politics After Reconstruction," *Reviews in American History*, X (December 1982), 151–63.

¹⁰ For work on the crisis of masculinity in the South see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York and Oxford, 1984); and Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South*,

South Carolina's turn-of-the-century mill-building crusade and white supremacy campaigns set the stage for Cole Blease's political emergence. In 1880 there were just over a dozen mills in South Carolina. Twenty years later, the number of textile factories had jumped to 115; in 1920 there were 184. As the mills of South Carolina multiplied, the labor force changed as well. At first, the mills employed mostly widowed women and their children, but as the industry grew and the rural economy stagnated, more and more men took jobs in the factories. As early as 1910, more than 60 percent of all millworkers were men.¹¹ Meanwhile, unlike other southern states, South Carolina did not disenfranchise poor white males, including propertyless millworkers, when, in 1895, it prohibited African Americans from voting in the all-important Democratic party primary.¹² By 1914, in fact, nearly one out of every seven Palmetto State Democrats lived in a mill village.¹³

1865–1920 (Chapel Hill and London, 1990). See also Michael S. Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," in Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (Boston, 1987), 121–53; Peter N. Stearns, *Be A Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York and London, 1979); and Louise A. Tilly, "Connections," *American Historical Review*, XCIX (February 1994), 1–20.

¹¹ For figures on mill building see Ernest McPherson Lander Jr., *A History of South Carolina, 1865–1960* (Chapel Hill, 1960), 83. See also Steve Shapiro, "The Growth of the Textile Industry in South Carolina, 1919–1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1972), 13–28. For figures on the number of male workers in the factories for the years 1850 to 1890 see *Report on Manufacturing Industries in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*. Part III: *Selected Industries* (Washington, 1895), 188–89; for figures on male workers in 1900 see *Occupations at the Twelfth Census, Special Reports* (Washington, 1904), 385; and for the percentage of men in the textile mill workforce in 1910 see *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1910*. Vol IV: *Population, 1910: Occupational Statistics* (Washington, 1914), 516–17.

¹² For discussions of the white supremacy campaign in South Carolina see George Brown Tindall, "The Campaign for the Disfranchisement of Negroes in South Carolina," *Journal of Southern History*, LV (May 1949), 212–34; V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1949), 548; J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven and London, 1974), 50 and 84–91; and Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York and Oxford, 1992), 285–87. For debates about disfranchisement in the South as a whole see C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (3d rev. ed., New York, 1974; originally published in 1955) as well as Ayers, *Promise of the New South*; and Kousser, *Shaping of Southern Politics*. See also Howard N. Rabinowitz, "More Than the Woodward Thesis: Assessing *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*," and C. Vann Woodward, "Strange Career Critics: Long May They Persevere," *Journal of American History*, LXXV (December 1988), 842–68.

¹³ This figure for the number of mill hands who were eligible to vote was calculated by dividing the number of adult male workers in 1914 by the approximate number of white men over the age of 21—in other words the only eligible voters—in the state in 1914. This latter figure is an extrapolation. In order to derive this number, I calculated the difference between the number of men over 21 in 1910 and in 1920; then I divided this figure by 10 and multiplied it by 4. Finally, I added this number to the census figures from 1910 and arrived at an approximation of the number of white men over 21 in the state in 1914. For information on the number of textile workers see *1914 Census of Manufactures*. Vol. I: *Reports by States* (Washington, 1914), 1414. For figures on voting-age males see *Thirteenth Census of the United States*. Vol. III: *Population. Reports by States* (Washington, 1913), 635–58; and the *Fourteenth Census of the United States*.

Although Blease's mentor, the quasi-Populist leader of the state's disfranchising forces, Benjamin R. ("Pitchfork Ben") Tillman, had little use for industrial laborers—he once referred to them as that "damned factory class"—Cole Blease himself recognized the electoral harvest to be reaped in the textile communities.¹⁴ As soon as Blease turned away from a career in law toward one in politics, he focused his attention on the mill hills around his hometown of Newberry. He spent time in village drugstores, in front of company stores, and at roadhouses, and he joined the clubs, fraternal organizations, and brotherhoods that textile workers belonged to. Sometime early in this century it was said, and no one disputed it, that Blease knew more mill hands by name than anyone else in the state.¹⁵ He turned this familiarity into votes. In 1890 he was elected to represent Newberry County in the General Assembly. Twice, in 1910 and 1912, Blease triumphed in the governor's race. On several other occasions he won enough votes to earn a spot in the statewide second primary or run-off elections for governor. In all of these contests, mill hands made up the bulk of Blease's support.¹⁶

Male textile workers did not just cast their ballots for Blease, they seemed devoted to him. When he stumped for votes on the mill hills, poking fun at elites and shouting the slogans of white supremacy, huge crowds greeted him with "tornado[es] of shrieks, yells, and whistles." Mill families named their children after Blease and hung his picture over their mantels. Laborers sang songs and wrote verses about their

Vol. III: *Population. Composition and Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, 1922), 923–27. On the numbers of voters in the mill villages of South Carolina in 1929 see also David L. Carlton, "The State and the Worker in the South: A Lesson from South Carolina," in David R. Chesnut and Clyde N. Wilson, eds., *The Meaning of South Carolina History: Essays in Honor of George C. Rogers, Jr.* (Columbia, 1991), 188, 198n8.

¹⁴ For the Tillman quote see Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge, 1944), 485.

¹⁵ A careful study of Blease's correspondence suggests that he belonged to or had close ties to the following organizations: the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Improved Order of Red Men, Loyal Order of Moose, Knights of Pythias, Protective Order of Elks, Woodmen of the World, and possibly even the Ku Klux Klan. On Blease and his extensive contacts consult Marjorie A. Potwin, *Cotton Mill People of the Piedmont: A Study in Social Change* (rpt., New York, 1968; originally published 1928), 32, 45, and 98.

¹⁶ For election returns see Frank E. Jordan Jr., *The Primary State: A History of the Democratic Party in South Carolina, 1876–1962* (Columbia, n.d.), 25–30. See also the *Columbia State*, August 30, 1906, August 29, 1908, August 31, 1912, August 27, 1914, and September 13, 1916. David Carlton's sophisticated quantitative research suggests a strong correlation between the number of millworkers in a district and the vote in favor of Blease. Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 215–20 and 273–75. Qualitative evidence also suggests a similar relationship. Blease supporters regularly reported that Blease was running well in the mill villages. S. M. Smith to Blease, n.d., Box 14, Folder—Edgefield County, 1911–1913, J. L. Harris to Blease, May 14, 1912, Box 36, Folder—Union County, 1911–1913, and Joshua W. Ansley, February 28, 1911, Box 4, Folder—Anderson County, 1911–1913, Blease Papers.

electoral favorite son. "If you want a good chicken," an upcountry poet was heard to say, "fry him in grease. If you want a good governor get Cole Blease." When a reporter asked a textile worker why he supported Blease, the man snapped, "I know I ain't goin' to vote for no aristocrat." Another mill hand once hollered: "Coley, I'd vote fer you even if you was to steal my mule tonight."¹⁷

The allegiance of millworkers to Cole Blease has baffled historians. Because he promoted white supremacy, derided national unions, rejected child labor restrictions, and lambasted compulsory school legislation, scholars have accused him of having "no program for the benefit of the factory workers" and of being nothing more than "a feather-legged demagogue." His detractors have contended that the reform polices Blease opposed could have freed the workers from the mill village's prison of poverty and that, even so, male textile laborers acted as pawns of their captors and squandered their votes on a racist, do-nothing politician. How, historians have wondered, could such perplexing behavior be explained? Ignorance and false consciousness were the answers most often given. V. O. Key argued in 1949 that poor whites were uneducated and rabidly racist and responded more to hollow appeals to white supremacy than to positive economic initiatives and well-intentioned social programs. A quarter of a century later, J. Morgan Kousser depicted Blease as a demagogue who "yelled so stridently" about African Americans that white laborers could not hear the anti-working-class message hidden underneath his racist tirades. For these two scholars and most other southern historians, the only legitimate form of class politics in the New South was biracial politics along the lines of Populism; if poor whites had better understood their world, they would not have allowed the artificial issue of race to disrupt the so-called natural alliance of southern have-nots—black and white—across the color line.¹⁸

¹⁷ I. A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880–1914* (Baton Rouge and London, 1989), 269; Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 2 (first quotation); story related to me by long-time South Carolina resident and noted genealogist Brent H. Holcomb (doggerel); David Duncan Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History, 1520–1948* (Chapel Hill, 1951), 656 (quotation from textile worker); Osta L. Warr, "Mr. Blease of South Carolina," *American Mercury*, XVI (January 1929), 29 (last quotation). For additional verses see J. A. Wilson to Blease, March 3, 1911, Folder—Greenwood County, 1911–1913, Box 19, and Hilrey Sanford to Blease, n.d., Folder—Anderson County, 1912, Box 3, Blease Papers.

¹⁸ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 250 (first quotation); Warr, "Mr. Blease of South Carolina," 29 (second quotation); Key, *Southern Politics*, 130, 143–45; and Kousser, *Shaping of Southern Politics*, 236. For other views on Blease see Cash, *Mind of the South*, 250–59; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 486–504, 536–49; Clarence N. Stone, "Bleaiseism and the 1912 Election in South Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XL (Winter 1963), 54–74; and Daniel W. Hollis, "Cole L. Blease and the Senatorial Campaign of 1924,"

In 1982 David L. Carlton reinterpreted Bleasism. Rather than measuring the electoral behavior of South Carolina workers against the ideal of biracial class collaboration and finding it wanting, Carlton contextualized this political surge. He maintained that Bleasism, unfolding against the rapid industrialization of the South Carolina up-country, represented the politicization of cultural and social tensions between mill and town or, in other words, the rational, albeit sometimes unsavory, response of tradition-bound white southerners to the forces of modernization.¹⁹

According to Carlton, the “builders of a new state” preached to their fellow South Carolinians a gospel of regional renewal through mill building. Converting people to this creed required convincing them that industrialization would not lead the region down the road to ruin. Promoters promised “that a combination of the social controls of ‘cotton mill paternalism’ and the operatives’ ‘Anglo-Saxon’ virtues would spare South Carolina the turmoil and class enmities of northern and British cities.”²⁰ This faith in social harmony quickly faded. Well before the close of South Carolina’s factory-building spree, many city and town dwellers concluded that, instead of being a civilizing influence on the rural-born workers, the mill villages were breeding grounds of disorder. Church and club meetings buzzed with warnings about the “cotton mill problem.” They fretted about whiskey drinking, pool playing, prostitution, cock fighting, and gambling in the mill villages. Middle-class South Carolinians blamed poor white parents—not industrialization—for village lawlessness. Drunk and lazy, dirty and uneducated, mothers and fathers from the mills, it was charged, inculcated their innocent children with principles that could possibly distort the New South dream of prosperity into an ugly reality of disorder. Through public health programs, child labor restrictions, and compulsory school attendance legislation, reformers sought to uplift the children of the millworkers by intervening in their upbringing and

Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association (1978), 53–68. To date, there is not a full-length biography of Blease. Perhaps this is because Blease’s personal papers have not been found. There are nonetheless two unpublished accounts of different aspects of Blease’s political career. Consult Ronald Burnside, “The Governorship of Coleman Livingston Blease of South Carolina, 1911–1915” (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1963); and Anthony Barry Miller, “Coleman Livingston Blease” (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, 1971). The Blease historiography is summarized in Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 221–23.

¹⁹ Carlton, *Mill and Town*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84. See also Carlton, “‘Builders of a New State’—The Town Classes and Early Industrialization of South Carolina, 1880–1907,” in Walter J. Fraser Jr. and Winfred B. Moore Jr., eds., *From the Old South to the New: Essays on the Transitional South* (Westport, Conn., 1981), 43–62. For the classic view of mill men as regional saviors refer to Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South* (Baltimore, 1921).

teaching them the virtues of law and order, discipline and deference, sobriety and thrift. Furthermore, some reformers suggested that suffrage be limited to those white men who had already learned these lessons. Voting restrictions and interventionist reforms, David Carlton has argued, were the essence of South Carolina Progressivism.²¹

Carlton has shown that mill laborers resisted the progressive impulse. Consider the example of child labor legislation. Millworkers opposed these measures. Why would parents want their children to be permitted to work long hours in a steamy lint-filled factory? Money, Carlton explained, was part of the answer. Because of the southern textile industry's traditionally low wages, cotton mill families could not survive on one or even two paychecks. Quite often, children's wages prevented a family from falling into poverty. Workers also rejected middle-class reforms for ideological reasons. "Bleuse's supporters," Carlton wrote, "were spiritual, if not intellectual, heirs of an older America whose citizens viewed all concentrations of power as dangerous, and all government bureaucracies as corrupt and self-interested." Mill hands opposed progressive reforms and interpreted them as attacks on traditional notions of independence. Like English Luddites, South Carolina workers were, in Carlton's view, at war with the modern world, and they voted for Bleuse because he vowed "to wreck the social machinery being created by the middle classes."²²

To be sure, Carlton has advanced the understanding of Bleasism. Nevertheless, the question of why workers opposed reform and voted in favor of Cole Bleuse deserves another look, one that takes into account Carlton's work along with the insights of feminism and gender studies of the last ten years. By reexamining the origins of the political insurgency of first-generation South Carolina millworkers, this time through the overlapping lenses of sexuality, gender, race, and class, a more complicated picture emerges. Race alone was not the

²¹ Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 132 (quoted phrase). For additional information and interpretations of Progressivism in South Carolina see Mary Katherine Davis Cann, "The Morning After: South Carolina in the Jazz Age" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1984); Sandra Corley Mitchell, "Conservative Reform: South Carolina's Progressive Movement, 1915-1929" (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1979); Doyle W. Boggs, "John Patrick Grace and the Politics of Reform in South Carolina, 1900-1931" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1977); John Samuel Lupold, "The Nature of South Carolina Progressives, 1914-1916" (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1968); and Robert Milton Burts, *Richard Irvine Manning and the Progressive Movement in South Carolina* (Columbia, 1974). For a review of southern Progressivism refer to George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 219-84; Dewey W. Grantham, "The Contours of Southern Progressivism," *American Historical Review*, LXXXVI (December 1981), 1035-59; and William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill and London, 1992).

²² Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 224 and 225.

stuff of the politics of South Carolina textile laborers; neither were notions of traditional independence nor the passions of antimodernism. Instead, as the grisly Blacksburg lynching suggested, the attitudes of workers combined race, class, and gender concerns. Workers' attitudes reflected private concerns about parental authority as well as public qualms about the actions of elected officials and self-appointed reformers. To male mill hands, politics was about power—in other words, about patriarchy and suffrage, economic autonomy and white supremacy. The public and private, therefore, were never as far apart for workers as they have been for historians. After gender and sexuality, personal anxieties and public fears, race and class are all incorporated into the analysis of wage laborers' motives for backing Blease, the result is a conceptual framework that reveals the political and social divide separating white working-class men from other white men in the New South.²³ South Carolina's new generation of industrial workers were certainly committed to independence, as Carlton has argued, but to most white men this meant more than living unencumbered from the modernizing state. Instead, their concepts of independence were interwoven with ideas about citizenship, race, economic autonomy, and masculinity. These ideas, moreover, were not static; rather, they shifted with changes in politics and the economy.

To South Carolina upcountry yeomen, who were the most likely ancestors of mill men and Blease backers, independence meant, above all else, political equality. Decades before the Nullification Crisis of 1832, planters and yeomen had reached an accord. They agreed to make slavery the law of the land and to scrap all but the most minimal property qualifications for voting, thereby enfranchising the vast majority of white men. Race and sex, not class, fixed the boundaries of citizenship. At the same time, ideas about suffrage and exclusion took on ideological dimensions that stretched far beyond the public arena of electoral politics. To be independent was to have the right to vote or, in other words, to be white and male. Those who could not vote were deemed to be dependent and unmanly. In antebellum South Car-

²³ Stephanie McCurry has looked at the intersection between the public and the private in antebellum South Carolina. See McCurry, "The Two Faces of Republicanism: Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of American History*, LXXVIII (March 1992), 1245–64. For other examples of mixing the public and private in the analysis of the South see Martha Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War," *Journal of Sexuality*, III (January 1993), 402–17; and Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York and Oxford, 1994). Joan Wallach Scott has framed this whole question about links between the public and private quite broadly. See Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working Class History*, XXXI (Spring 1987), 1–13.

olina, African Americans and women made up the bulk of the state's adult "dependents," and self-serving white men argued that nature determined the rigid divide between voters and nonvoters, independents and dependents. White men were enfranchised because of their God-given superiority over childlike slaves and frail, emotional women. Domination in the political realm justified domination of women and children at home and African Americans in all aspects of life. White male notions of independence, therefore, were based not only on the right of all white men to vote but also on patriarchal control over the affairs of the household.²⁴

However, claims about the natural superiority of white men failed to ease the fears of some yeomen about losing their basic political rights. Poor whites, in fact, did not completely trust wealthy planters, especially those who lived in grand style in the lowcountry, and indicated distrust of these men by calling them "aristocrats." *Aristocrats* was defined as *antidemocrats*—people who might, at any time, try to curtail the suffrage rights of ordinary people. Moreover, as Lacy K. Ford has explained, living day in and day out near enslaved people of African descent intensified yeomen's "fear[s] of submission and dependence." White male South Carolinians were unwilling to be reduced to the racialized and feminized status of dependents, so they clung to the right to vote, or to what one democrat called "the only true badge of the freeman."²⁵

Antebellum notions about independence, masculinity, and suffrage were also enmeshed with ideas about control over the household and

²⁴ For a discussion of the naturalization of difference see Gail Bederman, "'Civilization,' the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness," 4–30. For observation on the links between household power and public authority see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London, 1988).

²⁵ For a discussion of the larger meaning of suffrage see Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation," *Journal of American History*, LXXXI (September 1994), 442–43 (last quoted phrase on p. 443). On the ideology of race see Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York and Oxford, 1982), 143–77. See also recent literature on the construction of "whiteness." David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York, 1991); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*. Volume One: *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London and New York, 1994); and Andrew Neather, "'Whiteness' and the Politics of Working-Class History," *Radical History Review*, 61 (Winter 1995), 190–96. On the fears of white yeomen in South Carolina see Lacy K. Ford Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860* (New York and Oxford, 1988), 138–41 (quoted phrase on p. 138). For more on the yeomanry see also Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," *Agricultural History*, XLIX (April 1975), 331–42; J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge and London, 1978); and J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Liberty and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Conn., 1985).

the economy. Before the Civil War, according to Lacy Ford, South Carolina yeomen adhered to the doctrines of “an inherited ‘country-republican’ ideology.” Independence, in this view, was based on the pillars of political equality, economic autonomy, and patriarchal control over the public and private affairs of the household. Along with the vote, the surest guarantee of personal independence was a political economy based on “widespread ownership of productive property.” If yeomen had assets—principally land, draft animals, farm implements, and a house—the aristocrats could not dictate to them. Divorced from the means of production, white men, whether they had the right to vote or not, could easily be reduced to dependency—that is, placed under the control of others and in the same position as women, children, and, worse yet, slaves. In such a position, they would no longer be independent and entitled to dominate. Under these conditions, the wealthiest and most aristocratic members of society might wrest from yeomen the social and political privileges of whiteness.²⁶

Emancipation threw the intellectual universe of white yeomen into chaos. At that point, suffrage—that coveted distinction of independence and masculinity—was defined by sex alone. Not only did Reconstruction mark the end, however temporarily, of the white monopoly on public power, but it also challenged prevailing ideas about white manhood. In this confusing new environment, some wealthy whites—so-called aristocrats—courted the votes of African Americans, implicitly acknowledging the manhood of ex-slaves.²⁷ Other whites, some rich, some poor, seemed unable to think about suffrage without also thinking about interracial sex.²⁸ Freedmen, they believed, saw political equality as a license to assault white women. White men responded with fury, especially after the Republican party abandoned its Reconstruction policies in 1877. Intimidation at the polls, ballot box stuffing, late-night lynching, and the devious eight-box law were all designed by South Carolina Democrats to rob African Americans of the right to vote and to emasculate them in the process. Yet, neither subterfuge nor violence worked, at least not entirely. African American men continued to vote well into the 1890s. Finally, in 1895, South Car-

²⁶ Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, 49–51 (both quoted phrases on p. 50) and 99–144. Nancy MacLean makes a similar argument about how the petite bourgeoisie of the South felt about the increased concentration of capital after World War I. See MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 23–26.

²⁷ See Ben Tillman’s attacks on the aristocracy in Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 70–71.

²⁸ For more on sexual tensions and Reconstruction see Hodes, “Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics,” 402–17; and Edwards, “Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction, and the Extension of Patriarchy,” 237–60.

olina adopted a new constitution that all but eliminated voting by black men in the state. Suffrage was once again defined by race and sex, and most white men over the age of twenty-one were entitled to vote.²⁹

While the new constitution affirmed the political privileges of whiteness and maleness, the economic world of the yeomen was under attack. Beginning as early as the 1850s, the railroad crept into the South Carolina upcountry, bringing with it the possibilities and pitfalls of the market economy. Growing inequality, widely fluctuating cotton prices, and falling rates of property ownership among yeomen followed. Poor and middling farmers, nonetheless, held on to the “country-republican” vision of independence, but the changing relationships of production forced some shifts in this ideology.³⁰

Whereas antebellum notions of independence rested on propertied independence, in the postbellum era ideas about independence depended increasingly on notions of control over others and on personal autonomy. No matter how much the market economy encroached on their lives, most plain white folks either held on to a small parcel of land or worked as free tenants. Either way, they owned and/or controlled the means of production and worked free from the supervision of others. White husbands and fathers continued to insist that they were the boss and that their wives and children should follow their commands. While women and children made vital contributions to the household economy, cooking and sewing, picking and hoeing, the cash crop—the source of family wealth—was the responsibility of the husband and father. Men were in charge of producing cotton for money, determining what to plant, how to allocate labor resources, and when to move. In the market-driven world of the New South, money, more than land or anything else, was the nexus of power. By defining their economic activities as those associated with money, men reasserted their control over the household in a changing world, even as they lost ownership of land.³¹ As the propertied economic indepen-

²⁹ On the South Carolina constitution of 1895 see Kousser, *Shaping of Southern Politics*, 50 and 84–91; Lander, *History of South Carolina*, 40–41; Tindall, “Campaign for the Disfranchisement,” 228–29; and Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, Chap. 20.

³⁰ Lacy K. Ford, “Rednecks and Merchants: Economic Development and Social Tensions in the South Carolina Upcountry, 1865–1900,” *Journal of American History*, LXXI (September 1984), 294–318; and Ford, “Yeoman Farmers in the South Carolina Upcountry: Changing Production Patterns in the Late Antebellum Era,” *Agricultural History*, LX (Fall 1986), 17–37. See also Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York and Oxford, 1983).

³¹ See Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 202–7. Nancy MacLean also discusses control over the household and cash tenants. See *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 36. So too does Douglas Flamming in *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884–1984* (Chapel Hill and London, 1992), 14–15.

dence of poor whites slipped away, men also seem to have placed added stress on the privileges of whiteness and the virtues of patriarchy—of male control over dependent women and children. Plain folks insisted, perhaps more than ever before, that women, wealthy whites, and African Americans recognize their whiteness. It seemed that they interpreted any slight as a slap at their manhood, and they responded sometimes violently and sometimes politically. White supremacy, personal autonomy, and the control of dependents in public and private—these were the values of independence that poor white men brought with them from the countryside to the cotton mill world of South Carolina at the turn of the century.

Mill village life and labor challenged male conceptions of independence. Tending looms and operating carding machines stripped men of control of their own time and labor. The boss in the rural household now worked to the relentless rhythms of machines and to the angry bark of the foreman. Some even compared the factory regime to slavery. “They are trying to treat the help more like slaves than free people,” protested T. V. Blair of Pelzer, South Carolina. S. E. Arthur of Langley added: “We do not have more showing than the negroes in slavery time.” Mill hands deployed the metaphor of slavery to protest against the conditions in the mills and to articulate their fears about their growing dependence on the will of others. Without control over their own labor, male workers must have worried, as they had in the past, that maintaining their authority over others would be difficult.³²

Wages, if they had been high enough to support the entire family, might have provided some men with a sense of compensation for their dwindling control.³³ Few mill men, however, earned enough to feed and clothe their families. Therefore, children and wives took up what southern mill hands revealingly labeled “public work”—that is, paid labor. Though fathers often disciplined their children on the shop

³² T. V. Blair to Cole Blease, November 30, 1914, Folder—Anderson County, 1914, Box 5, and S. E. Arthur to Blease, January 19, 1914, Folder—Aiken County, 1914, Box 3, both in Blease Papers. See also Eric Foner’s discussion of wage slavery in *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York and Oxford, 1980), 59–63; and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York and London, 1991). Nancy MacLean makes a similar point about declining authority in *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 24.

³³ On wage scales see Gavin Wright, “Cheap Labor and Southern Textiles before 1880,” *Journal of Economic History*, XXXIX (September 1979), 655–80; and Kathy L. McHugh, *Mill Family: The Labor System in the Southern Cotton Textile Industry, 1880–1915* (New York and Oxford, 1988). On southern mill men and their fears of declining patriarchy see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall *et al.*, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill and London, 1987), 152–53. See also a discussion of wages and masculinity in other settings and contexts in Margaret Hobbs, “Rethinking Antifeminism in the 1930s: Gender Crisis or Workplace Justice? A Response to Alice Kessler-Harris,” *Gender and History*, V (Spring 1993), 4–15.

floor, scolding those who misbehaved and urging slackers to work harder, they no doubt knew that the real authority rested with the foreman and the mill owner, men who were more powerful than they were.³⁴ Male mill hands familiar with the dynamics of the shop floor also knew that some supervisors used their power over hiring and firing to intimidate female workers sexually, which heightened the anxieties of fathers and husbands. Yet these men also understood that if they accused the supervisors of harassing their wives and daughters they risked losing their own jobs, and an unemployed worker was even less of a man than an underpaid one.³⁵

The participation of dependents in the paid labor force realigned the balance of power within the family. Feeling enfranchised by their contributions to the household economy, working wives and children periodically challenged their husbands and fathers over the disposition of their wages. Sons and daughters, in particular, often demanded the right to spend part of their earnings on whatever they wanted.³⁶ How they spent their wages was also an issue in the family. Across the urban South in the first decades of the twentieth century, young workers, especially women, shaped a new heterosexual aesthetic. Cigarettes, bobbed hair, and shorter skirts were evidence of this trend. A refraction of the new city sensibilities quickly reached the mill hills. Some mill girls purchased the latest styles, went out with their friends, male and female, on Saturday nights, and skipped church on Sunday. Much more than their cousins back on the farms, young millworkers expressed themselves as independent and autonomous individuals culturally at odds with their fathers.³⁷

³⁴ For discussion of masculinity and the workplace see MacLean, "Leo Frank Case Reconsidered," 917–48; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Private Eyes, Public Women: Images of Class and Sex in the Urban South, Atlanta, Georgia, 1913–1915," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), 243–72.

³⁵ On sexual harassment on the shop floor in the textile mills see Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South*, 329–30; and Gary M. Fink, "Efficiency and Control: Labor Espionage in Southern Textiles," in Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville, 1991), 25. For examples from a later period about a longtime supervisor who was well known for harassing young female employees see J. H. Palmer to Kamanow, September 11, 1935, J.L. Harding, "Preliminary Report of the Limestone Mill," June 20, 1935, and Roland Hill *et al.*, to W. C. Hamrick, n.d., all three documents in File—Limestone Mill, Box 75, Series 402, Records of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), Record Group 9 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

³⁶ On the disposition of wages and family tensions see Hall *et al.*, *Like a Family*, 62–63. Douglas Flamming has argued that southern women millworkers kept more of their wages than northern women millworkers. See Flamming, "Daughters, Dollars, and Domesticity: Family Wages and Female Autonomy in American Textiles, Evidence from the Federal Survey of 1908," Humanities Working Paper #153, California Institute of Technology (Spring 1992).

³⁷ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 31–33; Hall *et al.*, *Like a Family*, 257; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *Journal of American History*, LXXIII (September 1986), 354–82; and Hall, "O. Delight Smith's Pro-

While white mill men worried about their growing dependence and declining authority, all around them it seemed that African Americans were becoming more and more economically independent and assertive. To be sure, jobs inside the textile mills of South Carolina were reserved for whites, but African Americans made strides elsewhere. Between 1890 and 1910, for example, the number of black landowners in the Palmetto State steadily inched upward.³⁸ African Americans also registered other kinds of financial gains. Take the case of Archie Green of Walhalla, a town with a couple of textile mills in upcountry Oconee County. In 1915 Green, who was rumored to be the illegitimate grandson of John C. Calhoun, owned livestock, a small truck, and a neat house just across the tracks from Walhalla's main street. Local white officials praised Green's skills as a firefighter and rewarded him with a slew of municipal jobs. At one time, in fact, Green was in charge of a crew of white sanitation and street workers. When Green was accused some years later of sexually assaulting a Walhalla white woman who worked at a local mill, prominent whites rushed to his defense. Rather than punishing Green, they chastised the white woman, charging her with promiscuity.³⁹

The doctrine of white supremacy, declared a Bleasite newspaper editor in 1917, "demanded that the LOWEST white man in the social scale is above the negro who stands HIGHEST by the same measurement."⁴⁰ But middle-class whites seemed to be turning away from this creed. At the same time that these uptown white men defended the character of African American men like Green, they disparaged working-class white men. Beginning as early as 1890, middle-class South Carolinians attacked the character of male laborers, questioning their worthiness as white men and patriarchs. The press portrayed "mill daddies" as "lazy, good-for-nothing wife beater[s] . . . and drunkard[s]." A Spartanburg journalist warned about "strong, hearty men . . . with several children, who move to a mill and strut around and form

gressive Era: Labor, Feminism, and Reform in the Urban South," in Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock, eds., *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* (Urbana and Chicago, 1993), 166–98. For northern examples see Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago and London, 1988); and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986).

³⁸ In 1890 African Americans owned only 11.2 percent of the farms in South Carolina; twenty years later, the proportion reached 31.7 percent. See Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 514. In his 1913 annual address to the legislature, Blease noted with alarm the growing number of African American landowners in the state. Burnside, "Governorship of Coleman Livingston Blease," 236–37.

³⁹ For the story of Archie Green see Finnegan, "'At the Hands of Parties Unknown,'" 301–5.

⁴⁰ Quote from William Beard, the Bleasite editor of the Abbeville *Scimitar*, *ibid.*, 173.

secret societies and talk big while their children support the family.” “They say,” the reporter added, “some of them spend one tenth of their children’s earnings for whiskey.” Shifting the burden of labor to their children, “cotton mill drone[s],” as some referred to mill fathers, sat around all day doing nothing. Occasionally, men of this sort left their seats in front of the company store and trudged off to the mill, not to tend looms, but to deliver lunch to their hard-working offspring. Before the machines started to whirl again, these “tin-bucket toter[s]” were back to swapping lies and taking their turn at the bottle. Though these ugly portraits of mill fathers twisted the truth, they nonetheless impressed reform-minded residents of South Carolina.⁴¹

“The character of part of the voting population has changed in recent years,” remarked a South Carolina editor soon after the turn of the century, and not for the better, he probably meant. The group that most alarmed him and many other middle-class South Carolinians was the so-called unruly element among the mill hands. Reformers believed that they could take care of the children but wondered what could be done about the adults. Initially, a few spoke quietly of restricting the vote, of limiting the suffrage rights of the propertyless and illiterate, at least until they could be properly civilized. The emergence of Bleasism added urgency to this talk. For many, Cole Blease’s electoral success—he finished a close second in the 1908 governor’s race—confirmed what they had long suspected: that the poor unthinking multitude was ruled by the baser impulses rather than by reason and civility.⁴² Bleasism, charged a Baptist minister, marked the “emergence of the Southern underworld.” He added that it oozed from the sinister “whispers on the night corners in mill yards and at the crossroads.”⁴³ The only way to stop Blease and to protect law and order,

⁴¹ Characterizations of mill hands can be found in Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South*, 130–32 (first quoted phrase occurs on all three pages); and Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 208 (second quotation), 195 (quotations from Spartanburg journalist and all remaining quotations), and 205. Alabama town folks looked at industrial laborers through very similar lenses. See Wayne Flynt, *Poor But Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., and London, 1989), 107–9 and 233. The same could be said of North Carolina elites. See Holland Thompson, *From the Cotton Field to the Cotton Mill: A Study of the Industrial Transition in North Carolina* (New York and London, 1906), 116; Jennings J. Rhyne, *Some Southern Cotton Mill Workers and Their Villages* (Chapel Hill, 1930), 85; and Douglas P. De Natale, “Bynum: The Coming of Mill Village Life to a North Carolina County” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1985), 325–27. For Georgia see LeeAnn Whites, “The De Graffenried Controversy: Class, Race, and Gender in the New South,” *Journal of Southern History*, LIV (August 1988), 449–78.

⁴² On suffrage restriction see Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 225–27 (quotation on p. 226) and 229–31; and Miller, “Coleman Livingston Blease,” 99–100.

⁴³ Reverend John White from the *Golden Age*, January 2, 1913, Folder—Anderson County, 1913, Box 3, Blease Papers. Blease supporters dutifully reported to the governor what they said about him: W. P. Caskey to Blease, March 23, 1912, Folder—Lancaster County, 1912, Box 21,

many argued, was to erase the names of his strongest supporters—illiterate and propertyless white men—from the voting rolls. Limiting suffrage would enable the “best” people of South Carolina to join together to reform the region without having to pander to the enfranchised “unruly element[s].” It was predicted that South Carolina would quickly become more modern and more efficient if society’s most enlightened members were the only people permitted to vote. By pushing for voting restrictions, middle-class reformers seemed to be calling for a wholesale renegotiation of white supremacy, hinting that bourgeois values, as well as race, should be the prerequisites for citizenship.⁴⁴

The passions of the unthinking multitude alarmed middle-class women as well as men. The wives and daughters of the state’s professional and commercial elite joined with schoolteachers and welfare workers to push for compulsory education, mandatory medical inspections, child labor restrictions, and prohibition. Many female reformers also advocated women’s suffrage. Few, however, were radical democrats; instead they constructed a class-based appeal for the vote. They asked why uneducated white men with little financial stake in the system should be allowed to vote while well-informed white women did not have the franchise. In place of white male democracy, they proposed a sort of oligarchy of the best white people. Clearly, many white South Carolina suffragists had in mind a system of suffrage based on class and race, regardless of sex. Women’s suffrage, if it fit this description, would destabilize sexual roles, making some working-class white men dependent on some middle-class white women in the public realm.⁴⁵

For first-generation white workers, assaults on their independence and manhood seemed to be coming from every direction. Each mill hand dealt with the confusion of industrialization, low wages, waning parental authority, the growing assertiveness of women, middle-class

and Joel F. Dowling to Blease, March 23, 1912, Folder—Greenville, 1911–1913, Box 17, both in Blease Papers.

⁴⁴ For the two short quotations see Link, *Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, 183; and Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 226; see also *ibid.*, 3–4 and 226–27.

⁴⁵ For information on reform and suffrage in South Carolina see Antoinette Elizabeth Taylor, “South Carolina and the Enfranchisement of Women: The Early Years,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, LXXVII (April 1976), 115–26; Taylor, “South Carolina and the Enfranchisement of Women: The Later Years,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, LXXX (October 1979), 298–310; Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York and Oxford, 1993), 110, and Link, *Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, 183–98. See also Joe L. Dubbert, “Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis,” in Elizabeth H. Pleck and Joseph H. Pleck, eds., *The American Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980), 303–20.

hostility, and African American progress in his own way. Some gave up on the mill and returned to the countryside.⁴⁶ Others drank too much, and a few probably deserted their families.⁴⁷ A small number took out their frustrations on their wives and children. Domestic violence, as Christine Stansell has pointed out in another context, was not simply a reaction against dwindling status in the workplace but also a brutal “attempt to recapture and enforce . . . masculine authority.”⁴⁸ Violence was not confined to the household; during the first two decades of the twentieth century mill hands, along with white men and a few women from every side of town, assembled in lynch mobs. They killed African Americans who, they believed, wanted to wipe away the color line and undermine white masculinity.⁴⁹ Others spoke out for shorter working hours and higher pay, and a few joined trade unions and went out on strike.⁵⁰ Many, armed as they were with the vote, turned to politics—or, perhaps more accurately, politicians turned to them. The most famous of these politicians was Cole Blease.

In nearly a biennial ritual, between 1906 and 1916 textile workers went to the polls and voted for Cole Blease as a rock solid block.⁵¹ Blease brought male mill hands to the polls in record numbers because he honed a political message that gave public voice to their gathering resentments. He spoke to their concerns and frustrations in ways that made sense to them. He was, in the words of the Greenville journalist and long-time Blease-watcher, James C. Derieux, their “mouthpiece,”

⁴⁶ For examples of men who wanted to leave the mill villages because they worried about their dwindling control over their families see Hall *et al.*, *Like a Family*, 152.

⁴⁷ On drinking in the mill village see for instance, B. E. Wilkins to Blease, July 11, 1911, Folder—Spartanburg County, 1911, Box 32, and J. R. Dean to Blease, November 11, 1911, Folder—Spartanburg County, 1911, Box 33, both in Blease Papers. On desertion as well as drinking see Hall *et al.*, *Like a Family*, 165–68.

⁴⁸ Stories of violence can be found in James Taylor Brice, “The Use of Executive Clemency Under Coleman Livingston Blease, Governor of South Carolina, 1911–1915” (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1965), 12; Hall *et al.*, *Like a Family*, 162 and 166–67; and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986), 76–83 (quotation on p. 78).

⁴⁹ For accounts of lynching in South Carolina during these years see Jack Simpson Mullins, “Lynching in South Carolina, 1900–1914” (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1961); Susan Page Garris, “The Decline of Lynching in South Carolina, 1915–1947” (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1973); and Finnegan, “‘At the Hands of Parties Unknown’.”

⁵⁰ For workers’ views on wages, hours, and unions see J. T. Blassingame to Blease, June 19, 1914, Folder—Greenville County, 1914, Box 19, and C. P. Lackey to Blease, December 29, 1913, Folder—Spartanburg County, 1913, Box 34, both in Blease Papers. See also Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South*, 542–46; and Melton A. McLaurin, “Early Labor Union Organizational Efforts in South Carolina Cotton Mills, 1880–1905,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, LXXII (January 1971), 44–59.

⁵¹ For a brief overview of these primaries consult Jordan, *Primary State*, 25–26. See also the *Columbia State*, August 30, 1906, and August 29, 1908. For quantitative analysis of Blease’s support on the mill hills see Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 215–21 and 273–75.

articulating their “unexpressed emotions, ambitions, and disgruntlements”⁵² Like the Blacksburg lynching and yeomen’s notions of independence, Blease’s rhetoric fused issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and state power.

Blease turned politics into theater, entertaining his audiences with guile and humor. However, there was always a point to Blease’s antics. Usually it was to mock and belittle his opponents, while building up himself and his followers. Lowcountry elites and middle-class South Carolinians, the reformers in particular, rather than the factory owners, caught the brunt of Blease’s verbal blitzes. He was not impressed by their college degrees, big words, or their claims to selflessness; instead he dismissed them as “intellectuals,” “fool theorists,” “wise-looking old fossils,” and members of the “holier than thou crowd.” With a grin and wink he regularly stood on the stump and made light of the rule of law—that cardinal tenet of bourgeois ideology—by admitting to drinking boot-legged whiskey every now and then. Each time he made this confession, his opponents tagged him as an ominous threat to law and order. Cole answered their forecasts of doom with charges of hypocrisy. “Why, I saw men up here last summer,” he quipped in his 1913 inaugural address, “hollering, ‘Law and Order,’ yelling for ‘Law and Order,’ and ‘We must redeem South Carolina.’” “I saw some of those same people down here at the State Fair drinking liquor and mixing it with coca-cola and betting on horses.” “Who,” Blease asked, “is going to redeem them?” The crowd chuckled.⁵³

When he was not jabbing his opponents with pointed jokes, Blease smacked them with male bravado. He portrayed his opponents as unmanly “cowards,” “belly crawlers,” “pap-suckers,” “nigger lovers,” “molly-coddles,” and “very small m[e]n.”⁵⁴ Blease was especially

⁵² James C. Derieux, “Crawling Toward the Promised Land,” *Survey*, XLVIII (April 29, 1922), 178.

⁵³ Miller, “Coleman Livingston Blease,” 136 (first quotation) and 65 (third quotation); W. H. Newbold to Blease, June 6, 1912, Folder—Chester County, 1911–1912, Box 11, Blease Papers (second quotation); Blease to William Woodward Dixon, May 24, 1912, Folder—Fairfield County, 1911–1912, Box 15, Blease Papers (fourth quotation); and South Carolina General Assembly, *House Journal*, 1913, p. 158 (quotations from the inaugural address). On Blease’s drinking see Blease to J. W. Ashely, April 21, 1913, Folder—Anderson County, 1913, Box 4, Blease Papers. For his response to law and order advocates see Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 248–49.

⁵⁴ For the phrases that Blease used to characterize his opponents see Burnside, “Governorship of Coleman Livingston Blease,” 294 and 274; Miller, “Coleman Livingston Blease,” 136 and 65; and A. H. Walker to Blease, February 10, 1912, Folder—Anderson County, 1912, Box 2, Blease Papers. For examples of Blease labeling his opponents see Blease to J. C. Wilborn, June 6, 1912, Folder—Chester County, 1911–1912, Box 11, Blease to Charles H. Henry, November 10, 1911, Folder—Spartanburg County, 1911, Box 33, and Blease to W. P. Beard, June 1, 1914, Folder—Abbeville County, 1914, Box 1, all three in Blease Papers; Wallace, *South Carolina*, 656; and Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 1–4.

scornful of women reformers and suffragists. He accused them of neglecting their homes and children so they could run around the state “‘doing society’, playing cards for prizes, etc.” A supporter of Blease complained that female reformers wanted “to give us their dresses for our pants.” Blease agreed. He opposed women’s suffrage, hinting that the right to vote—to enter the public realm—might unsex women and lead to the unraveling of the social fabric. Women, Blease advised, should spend their time aiding “good men” rather than agitating for “drastic reforms.”⁵⁵

Aristocrats was one of Blease’s favorite terms for his enemies.⁵⁶ By tagging his opponents as aristocrats, Blease tapped into a tradition of anti-elitism among the plain folk of South Carolina that stretched back to the antebellum era. Before and after the Civil War, *aristocrat* served as the pejorative term for wealthy lowcountry planters and their children who either wanted to restrict the suffrage rights of yeomen or entered into an unholy alliance with African Americans to blunt the political power of poor whites. “The fight I have tried to make and am making,” Blease said of his battle against suffrage restrictions, “is to keep my friends in a position where they will not be oppressed, and to prevent a return to rule of the old aristocracy.”⁵⁷

At the same time, the image of the aristocrat conjured up gendered and class connotations. Blease’s supporters had a clear image of how an aristocrat looked, sounded, and acted. Aristocrats were effete, wealthy men—dandies dressed in silk shirts and top hats with soft hands and coifed hair. Unlike real men, aristocrats did not work; instead they relied on others, typically their fathers, to provide for them. Also unlike real men, they lacked self-discipline: they drank, they smoked, they gambled, and they skipped church. Their thirst for excess extended to sex: they were insatiable, debauched, and without

⁵⁵ Blease quoted in Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 239 and 238; and his supporter quoted in Link, *Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, 189; see also Burnside, “Governorship of Coleman Livingston Blease,” 99–100; Miller, “Coleman Livingston Blease,” 136; Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, 25–37; MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 30–31; and Dubbert, “Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis.”

⁵⁶ Miller, “Coleman Livingston Blease,” 61, 113, and 135–36; and clipping from the Seneca *Tri-County Harpoon*, circa 1913, Folder—Anderson County, 1913, Box 4, Blease Papers.

⁵⁷ Blease to W. P. Beard, June 1, 1914, Folder—Abbeville County, 1914, Box 1, Blease Papers. For other examples of the language of aristocracy and the vocabulary of South Carolina politics see Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism*, 109; and clipping from the Seneca *Tri-County Harpoon*, circa 1913, Folder—Anderson County, 1913, Box 4, Blease Papers. Anti-aristocratic attacks were part and parcel of Tillmanism. See Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman*, 70–71. For more on the laborite perception of aristocrats and their sexuality see T. Fulton Gantt, *Breaking the Chains: A Story of the Present Industrial Struggle* in Mary C. Grimes, ed., *The Knights in Fiction: Two Labor Novels of the 1880s* (Urbana, 1986), 27–133.

discipline. Not even the sanctity of marriage mattered. Some, in fact, never married at all, which made suspect the sexuality of aristocratic “confirmed bachelors.”

“The best definition I know for aristocracy,” Blease said in 1913, “is some fellow who does nothing, lives on his daddy’s name and doesn’t pay his debts.” The aristocrats, Blease continued, fiddled away their nights watching decadent theater shows, yelling with delight at a foul-mouthed Yankee woman and a man dressed as “The Pink Lady.” Just below the surface of Blease’s attacks was the sly accusation that aristocrats subverted traditional gender roles. Because they placed themselves outside the boundaries of manly behavior, Blease warned, they posed a serious threat to patriarchy and white womanhood. As evidence of their deceit, Blease pointed to aristocrats’ attempts to restrict the citizenship rights of poor whites. By depriving poor white men of their independence and manhood, they encouraged black men to consider themselves once again the political and social equals of white men. This was sure to produce a frightening rerun of Reconstruction. No “pure-blooded Caucasian,” Blease asserted, would stand by and let this happen.⁵⁸

Blease offered white laborers more than antiaristocratic rhetoric. Understanding some of the frustrations of male millworkers, he vowed to safeguard their suffrage rights and to uphold the privileges of race. Blease pledged his allegiance to the creed of white supremacy. He battled to make sure that all white males over the age of twenty-one could vote in the Democratic primary regardless of their background or income. He also endorsed legislation to bar African Americans from the textile mills, notwithstanding that by 1910 almost no mills would hire blacks for jobs inside the factories. Just to make sure that people knew exactly where he stood on employment, he fired every African American notary in the state.⁵⁹ Though Blease favored

⁵⁸ Blease’s gubernatorial inaugural address, January 22, 1913, in *House Journal*, 158 (first quotation); and Miller, “Coleman Livingston Blease,” 113 and 43 (second quotation). For more on the mythology of Reconstruction in the twentieth-century South see James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1994), 52 and 114.

⁵⁹ For some of the measures supporting white supremacy that Blease endorsed see Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 243–44; Blease to J. W. D. Bolin, May 9, 1912, Folder—Cherokee County, 1911–13, Box 11, J. A. McGill to Blease, February 25, 1911, Folder—Greenville County, 1911, Box 17; J. L. Woodward to Blease, February 11, 1914, and Blease to All County Board of Registers, attached to a letter to W. D. Grist, July 7, 1913, both in Folder—Spartanburg County, 1913–14, Box 39, all in Blease Papers. On the firing of all African American notaries see Milton B. McCuen to Blease, January 20, 1912, Folder—Laurens County, 1911–1913, Box 22, Blease Papers.

state action to bolster white supremacy, he opposed virtually all progressive reforms.⁶⁰

Blease's fight against compulsory education laws was a case in point. These statutes would have required all children under the age of fourteen, or sixteen, to attend school. Blease scoffed at the reformers' humanitarian depiction of these education statutes. He portrayed these proposals instead as part of a broad campaign to reduce parental authority and to control mill people's private lives. Nature, he argued, determined that fathers and mothers, not the government, should oversee families. In opposition to a proposed compulsory education act, Blease said that cotton mill people "should be left alone . . . and allowed to manage their own affairs." "Compulsory education," he contended, "means disrupting the home, for it dethrones the authority of the parents and would place paid agents in control of the children which would destroy family government." "Of course I am opposed," he declared of a compulsory school bill on another occasion, "it comes . . . from some narrow-minded bigot who has made a failure in raising his own children . . . and now wants to attempt to raise somebody else's." Blease looked to the Bible to bolster his case. Not surprisingly he turned out to be a rather conservative theologian. He told a mill crowd: "The Bible says a great deal about obedience to parents and reverence for parents and believing in that Book and its teachings as I do, I say to the parents, for the sake of their children, our country, and for the future, keep within your own control the rearing and education of your own children." Blease's hostility toward compulsion did not mean that he opposed public education. In 1914 he called for higher pay for teachers, hiring more male instructors, improved libraries, longer school terms, and more "books, especially histories, by southern authors for southern children."⁶¹

⁶⁰ On the surface and because of its seeming antistatistism, Bleasism shared some common ground with the laborite ideology of voluntarism. While both perspectives rejected intrusive state action, voluntarism embraced trade unionism, and Bleasism eschewed it. "In its original conception," writes Michael Rogin, "the unifying theme of voluntarism was that workers could best achieve their goals by relying on their own voluntary associations. Voluntarism defended the autonomy of the international craft union against the coercive interference of the state . . . it meant opposition to alliance with any political party as well as to positive state action . . ." Rogin, "Voluntarism: The Political Functions of an Antipolitical Doctrine," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, XV (July 1962), 521–22. See also Gary M. Fink, "The Rejection of Voluntarism," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, XXVI (January 1973), 805–19; and Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, Ill., and London, 1989), 145–47.

⁶¹ Burnside, "Governorship of Coleman Livingston Blease," 255 (first quotation), 17–19 (fourth quotation on p. 18), 38 (fifth quotation), 216–17; Mitchell, "Conservative Reform," 213

Even more than compulsory education, progressive plans to mandate medical inspections of mill children provoked Blease. Proponents insisted that doctors' examinations of mill children would compensate for "the oversight of the child's environment" and would correct deformities that were "easily correctible" but were left unattended to by ignorant parents. Blease pointed to what he saw as the arrogance of the reformers, highlighting their tendency to treat mill men as less than men. "Do you not think," he asked lawmakers, "that every man in this State is able to care and has love enough for his children to care for and protect them?" "Have all the people and all classes of the people become imbeciles and children," he demanded, "that the Legislature at every turn must pass acts creating guardianships?" "Do you wish to . . . force every poor man," Blease continued, "to bow down to the whims of all the professions?"⁶²

For Blease, sex—that is to say, deviant sexuality—linked the emerging middle class of the New South to the debauched and aging aristocracy. He asked what doctors would do with the information that they obtained during the medical inspections of mill children. Would they publicize their findings? If a mill girl suffered from an embarrassing ailment would they broadcast the news and turn the examination into yet another humiliating ritual for working people? "Do not say," Blease warned, "that every young girl in the State . . . without her consent, must be forced to be examined and her physical condition certified by her physician to some school teacher, to be heralded around as public property." The most dangerous aspect of the law, according to Blease, was that it would give morally lax elites the license to sexually abuse poor white women. Some "male physicians," a correspondent wrote to Blease in 1914, "boast openly that they can seduce their female patients." One even kept a diary, a supporter told the governor, of his sexual exploits with working-class girls. "If I had a daughter," Blease proclaimed, puffing out his chest, "I would kill any doctor in South Carolina whom I would be forced to let examine her against her will and mine" On the campaign trail, he promised South Carolina fathers that he would pardon any man convicted of murdering a doctor who "violat[ed] his daughter's modesty." In a final horrific charade of politically opportunistic logic, Blease wondered

(second quotation); Warr, "Mr. Blease of South Carolina," 31 (third quotation); and Miller, "Coleman Livingston Blease," 37 and 88–89. See also Blease's gubernatorial inaugural address, January 22, 1913, *House Journal*, 1913, p. 158.

⁶² Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 236 (first two quotations); and Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South*, 383 (all other quotations).

aloud about the role of doctor's assistants, "third parties," and "negro janitors." Would physicians, he asked, permit the "unmentionable crime"—the virtual rape of a white women—by allowing voyeuristic black men to watch the medical inspections of mill girls?⁶³

Once again, Blease turned the bourgeois conception of the world on its head. Reformers viewed medical examinations as a tool for creating a modern New South. In the minds of the middle classes, doctors were asexual individuals, pillars of the community, and architects of a more orderly universe. Blease laughed at these fawning characterizations. To him, doctors had the capacity for evil. Under the guise of morality, in fact, they and their reformer allies undermined morality and defiled innocent, working-class women. Cole Blease would have none of this: he vigorously opposed the medical inspection bill and, in so doing, positioned himself as the millworkers' defender of decency, masculine honor, and white womanly virtue.

Blease tied together his assaults on elites and reformers and his appeals to white workers with the threads of race and gender. He accused the reformers of trying to place the "cotton mill men . . . on the same basis as a free negro."⁶⁴ Laws that dictated who could vote and who could not and told mill parents when their children had to go to school and when they must stay at home violated the principles of independence, white equality, and patriarchal authority. Only blacks, minors, and women, not white men, Blease maintained, should have their behavior so rigidly regulated. To put white men in the same category as women, children, or African Americans was, according to Blease, to turn the natural order of the world upside down.

"I am no enemy of the negro but I believe in keeping him in his place at all times," Blease announced. That place, he told campaign crowds, expounding on his own crude version of the popular mythology of scientific racism, was established by the Almighty to be far below the position of any white man. According to Blease, morality—sexual morality to be precise—fixed the racial hierarchy. "The negro

⁶³ On the medical inspection bill see Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South*, 381–84 (first quotation on p. 383); Miller, "Coleman Livingston Blease," 37 and 88–89; Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 236–39 (third quotation, "third parties," and last quotation all on p. 237); J. J. Contey to Blease, March 5, 1914, Folder—Clarendon County, 1914, Box 12, Blease Papers (second quotation); Wallace, *South Carolina*, 660 (quotation from Blease on the campaign trail); Burnside, "Governorship of Coleman Livingston Blease," 216–17 ("negro janitors"); and South Carolina General Assembly, *House Journal*, 1912, pp. 1089–92. See also J. L. Darlington to Blease, n.d., Folder—Greenville County, 1911–1913, Box 18, Blease Papers. For a regional perspective on working-class resistance to medical inspections see Link, *Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, 208–11.

⁶⁴ Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 245. See also Blease to C. W. Templeton, January 12, 1914, Folder—Greenville County, 1914, Box 19, Blease Papers.

race has absolutely no standard of morality," he lectured in 1914. "They are, in that respect a class by themselves, as marital infidelity seems to be their more favorite pastime," he continued. Blease's world was immutable. He opposed spending white tax dollars on black schools. Educating a black person, he contended, would simply "ruin a good field hand, and make a bad convict."⁶⁵ He insisted that the immorality of blacks was ingrained and that black men in particular had to be watched at all times. "I tell you that it is not all quiet in South Carolina," Blease cautioned. In his imagination, "the black ape and baboon" lurked in the shadows waiting for the opportunity to rape a white woman. If this crime did take place, or even if there was a hint or a suggestion of an African American crossing the sexual color line, lynching was the only answer. Not to lynch, Blease contended, would only make other black men more brazen. To Cole Blease, then, those who joined the mobs were not disorderly or lawless; they were manly and moral. Those who questioned the principles of white equality and the need for the lynching, were, like aristocrats and doctors, effete and dangerous. They had to be stopped.⁶⁶

"Whenever the constitution of my state steps between me and the defense of the virtue of the white woman," Blease declared at the national governor's conference in 1912, "then I say to hell with the Constitution!" When it came to the defense of white women, there was a higher virtue than law and order. "The pure-blooded Caucasian will always defend the virtue of our women," Blease declared, "no matter what the cost." "If rape is committed," he continued, "death must follow!" Campaigning in 1910, he promised the crowds that he would never send out the militia to stop a lynching. "When mobs are no longer possible liberty will be dead," he averred on another occasion.

⁶⁵ Brice, "The Use of Executive Clemency" 37 (first quotation); Burnside, "Governorship of Coleman Livingston Blease," 39, 74–91 (second quotation on p. 75); *Charleston News and Courier*, August 16, 1910 (third quotation); Blease to J. W. D. Bolin, May 9, 1912, Folder—Cherokee County, 1911–1913, Box 11, and W. L. Abernathy to Blease, February 12, 1914, Folder—Chester County, 1914, Box 12, both in Blease Papers. For more on Blease's racial ideology from later period, refer to Anderson (S.C.) *Bleaze's Weekly*, May 27, 1926. For a wider context see I. A. Newby, *Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900–1930* (Baton Rouge, 1965).

⁶⁶ Warr, "Mr. Blease of South Carolina," 25–26; Burnside, "Governorship of Cole Blease," 39 and 74–91 (first quotation on p. 76); and Carlton, *Mill and Town*, 246–49 (second quotation on p. 246). Blease further elaborated on his view of lynching in Los Angeles *Sunday Times*, a clipping of which is attached to a letter from W. O. Grist to Blease, January 1, 1913, Folder—York County, 1913–1914, Box 38, Blease Papers. Blease was not alone in his view of lynching. See Fitz McMaster, a newspaperman, to H. Brown of New York, June 18, 1930, Fitz Hugh McMaster Papers (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia).

Sometimes after a lynching, Blease celebrated the savage murder in public with a bizarre death dance. Through his grotesque gestures, he invited his audience to participate vicariously in the spectacle of vigilante justice.⁶⁷

When white men joined lynch mobs and cheered Blease's ritual dances, they not only asserted their power over African Americans but also their control over their own homes and families. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and Gail Bederman have argued, "by constructing black men as 'natural' rapists and by resolutely and bravely avenging the (alleged) rape of pure white womanhood, Southern white men constructed themselves as ideal men: 'patriarchs, avengers, righteous protectors'."⁶⁸ Blease spoke to the multiple meanings of lynching. In the summer of 1913 a supporter informed the governor of an alleged rape in Laurens. "The brute," he went on to explain, was captured and "tried before an honest jury." "It was not a mob," the supporter assured the state's chief executive, "but a crowd of determined men anxious to have justice meted out to one never more deserving of its fruits." "You did like men and defended your neighbors and put their black bodies under ground," Blease told the members of the Laurens County lynch mob, which according to reports included "many of the 'cotton mill boys' of Laurens Cotton Mill." He praised these criminals as well for "their defense of the white womanhood of our state—our mothers and our sisters."⁶⁹

The Blacksburg lynching of Brinson and Whisonant described earlier took place fifteen months before the murders in Laurens. Both events demonstrated that sexual tensions, class issues, and vigilante justice were always tied together in the New South. Millworkers in each case took to the streets to defend their manhood and their white-

⁶⁷ After Blease made this statement at the governors's conference, the national press picked up the story and editorial pages buzzed with Blease's words. Miller, "Coleman Livingston Blease," 38, 43 (second quotation), 57, 59–60 (first quotation); and New York *Times*, August 27, 1915 (third quotation).

⁶⁸ Bederman, "'Civilization,' the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness," 13 (Bederman's paraphrase of Hall). On the broader meaning of lynching in the twentieth-century South see Williamson, *Crucible of Race*, 183–89; Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body,'" 328–49; Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*; MacLean, "Leo Frank Case Reconsidered," 917–48; and Edwards, "Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction, and the Extension of Patriarchy," 237–60.

⁶⁹ John M. Cannon to Blease, August 12, 1913, Blease to John M. Cannon, August 13, 1913, and Blease to W. T. Crews, August 18, 1913, all three in Folder—Laurens County, 1913, Box 22, Blease Papers; and Carlton, *Mill and Town*, pp. 247–48 (last quotation on p. 247). In an interesting side note, it appears that several of the workers who participated in the murder were fired, and they protested to Blease. See Albert E. Sloan *et al.* to Blease, August 21, 1913, Folder—Laurens County, 1913, Box 22, Blease Papers.

ness. With regard to the Blacksburg lynching, some people believed that in Cherokee County blacks not only lay in wait to ravage white women but they also assaulted white men like Joe Childers. These same men must have been worried about the fate of white womanhood, white manhood, and white supremacy if white men could not protect even themselves from black sexual predators. Male laborers in Blacksburg emphatically answered these doubts. They asserted their masculinity by murdering two black men for allegedly sexually humiliating a white millworker and thus all white millworkers. In the anxious world of the industrializing New South, interracial sexual contact of any kind—even if it was a homosexual act—that became public knowledge could easily threaten white independence and white manhood.⁷⁰ Though Blease did not dance for, or even condone, each and every lynching—and he did not comment on events in Blacksburg—he nonetheless understood why some poor white men executed black men, and these white men and thousands like them repaid him for his understanding with their votes.

But only some understood Blease this way. Clearly in the early part of the twentieth century, white South Carolinians were divided on questions of race, class, gender, and even lynching. These divisions eventually seeped into the political arena, fracturing the electorate into two rival camps: Bleasites and anti-Bleasites. Blease's message sounded different to each audience. Middle-class contemporaries detected nothing of substance in Blease's critique of society but the dissonant chords of demagoguery and disorder, lawlessness and anarchy. Male millworkers, on the other hand, interpreted Blease's rhetoric and actions to be a defense of their manhood against the forces of industrialization and the reform agenda of the Progressives. By voicing laborers' discontents and abusing those who demeaned them, Blease provided workers with a way to strike out at their perceived oppressors. Casting their ballots for Cole Blease, textile workers pressed their claims of patriarchal privilege and equality with all white men and asserted in the strongest language available to them that the economic and socially mighty did not control everything. "Even though Coley don't ever do a durn thing for us poor fellows," declared an Aiken laborer summing up the views of many of his millworker

⁷⁰ On the idea that in the New South lynching must follow all sexual contacts between whites and blacks see the arguments in the Scottsboro case presented in Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge, 1969); Hodes, "Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics," 416–17; and Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Philadelphia, 1960).

neighbors, "he does at least promise us somethin', and that's more than any of the others do."⁷¹

Blease rode to power on the backs of poor whites, especially mill hands like Joe Childers and the man quoted above. Once in office, he did almost nothing to enhance workers' material status, but his success at the polls, like the lynching in Blacksburg, exposes the discontents and aspirations of South Carolina's first generation of male textile laborers. These white men feared that their control over their families was dwindling and that their masculinity was under attack. Blease politicized them along class lines, but his mobilization produced a misogynist, racist, nonradical, and antireform version of class politics. He directed the ire of male workers against the middle classes not against the mill bosses, and he aroused them to safeguard their manhood by blocking progressive changes, not by proposing reforms. Another politician might have urged workers to organize trade unions or called for child labor legislation linked to minimum wage statutes, but no one in South Carolina, at least not before the Great Depression, was heard articulating these positions. If there had been such a voice, Cole Blease's celebrations of white manhood and his harangues against African Americans, progressive reformers, and aristocrats drowned it out.

⁷¹ Derieux, "Crawling Toward the Promised Land," 178; and Warr, "Mr. Blease of South Carolina," 25–32 (quotation on p. 29).