

SYMPOSIUM

Concealing Martial Violence

Brittany Farr

In this essay, I turn to the example of the 1919 Elaine Massacre—the deadliest incident of anti-Black violence in U.S. history—in order to better understand how its economically motivated, state-sanctioned, and brutally indiscriminate violence were nearly erased from history. I find that white journalists, military officials, as well as the Governor of Arkansas himself, drew upon long-standing race-based fears in their characterizations of what took place in Elaine. In so doing, they were able to simultaneously glorify and obfuscate the anti-Black violence, as well as further protect the property and economic interests of the white residents who had putatively been “under threat.” The scale of the violence in Elaine and the near totality of its erasure from the official record make the Elaine Massacre a chilling example of what Lindsay Schakenbach Regele has described as “martial capitalism”: the use of concealed military violence to wrest economic resources away from marginalized communities and *toward* their white counterparts.

Keywords: race, US 20th, labor relations

On September 30, 1919, a group of white men opened fire into a meeting of the local sharecropper and tenant farmers’ union in Phillips County, Arkansas. Two days later, six hundred National Guard soldiers arrived on the scene prepared to “quell disorder” and “protect lives and property.”¹ Ostensibly, the governor had requested federal aid in order to prevent a “wholesale massacre of whites and blacks alike.”² Instead, after the National Guard arrived, the violence only worsened. Now known as the Elaine Massacre, the brutal and indiscriminate killing that occurred between September 30 and October 7 remains one of the worst instances of anti-Black violence in U.S. history.³

1. Major Robert O. Poage, “Report to Military Intelligence Division, Washington, D.C.” included in Desmarais, “Military Intelligence Reports on Arkansas Riots: 1919–1920,” 180.

2. Governor Charles H. Brough, “Letter to Hon. Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War,” included in Desmarais, “Military Intelligence Reports,” 189.

3. For more detailed descriptions of the violent acts that took place, see Woodruff, *American Congo*, 74–109.

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The Elaine Massacre and its aftermath are a poignant example of what Lindsay Schakenbach Regele terms “martial capitalism” in her article in this issue. Under martial capitalism, private citizens and public officials work in tandem to wrest economic resources and opportunity away from those deemed “other”—that is, those who are non-white—in order to bestow these same resources and opportunities upon those deemed worthy: namely, “manly, honor-bound” white patriarchs.⁴ Importantly, this “aggressive pursuit of personal gain” is accompanied by “concealed military power.”⁵ Rather than full-blown war, violence is smaller-scale and shrouded in the language of honor.

So too, in the Elaine Massacre.

According to one of the massacre’s descendants—retired teacher and pastor Anthony Davis—his grandmother watched the bodies of the dead get “hailed into trucks” and “stacked up like logs.”⁶ Indeed, it is hard to overstate the horror of the violence that occurred. Nevertheless, as with other instances of martial capitalist actions, the “extreme brutality was veiled behind the illusion of minimal, honorable military engagement.”⁷ For example, in one of the governor’s official reports, he described the eight days of anti-Black violence as “race disturbances” and celebrated that they had been “nipped in the bud” thanks to the federal troop’s “prompt, [and patriotic] action.”⁸

How could “bodies being stacked up like logs” be represented as mere “race disturbances” that had been “nipped in the bud”? How could such extreme violence be nearly erased from the historical record? Answering these questions, engaging with the memory work that representations of violence perform, can help us to better understand the simultaneous erasure and glorification of public–private economic violence that is characteristic of martial capitalism.⁹ In that spirit, this comment explores some of the representational mechanisms that recast the brutal violence of the Elaine Massacre as something proportional, necessary, and palatable.

Structures of Violence

To understand a world in which an atrocity like the Elaine Massacre is possible, one must first appreciate the role of violence in the post-slavery South. Chattel slavery may have ended with the Civil War, but slavery’s violence did not. The private violence of slave plantations was instead transmuted into coercive free labor contracts, chain gangs, and harsh “discipline” from violent employers.¹⁰ Landlords and overseers regularly assaulted farmers under the guise of discipline, used violence and death threats to coerce people into working longer hours, and forcefully expropriated crops and evicted tenants. This rampant labor violence was due in part to farming contracts that provided landlords—and not the farmers working for them—with the

4. Schakenbach Regele, “A Brief History,” 4.

5. Schakenbach Regele, “A Brief History,” 4.

6. Yachot, “We Want Our Land Back.”

7. Schakenbach-Regele, “A Brief History,” 4.

8. Brough, “Report,” included in Desmarais, “Military Intelligence Reports,” 189–190.

9. Similar questions about the politics of memory have been pursued by scholars within the interdisciplinary field of memory studies since at least the 1980s. Sturken, “Memory, Consumerism and Media,” 73.

10. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 115–117.

majority of the legal rights and remedies. When combined with a criminal legal system that had little interest in protecting Black Americans from white violence, these agricultural contracts helped to create an environment wherein a landlord could violently attack or steal from one of the farmers on his land, and that farmer would have little, if any, legal recourse.¹¹

Indeed, these hostile conditions were a driving force for the Black farmers in Phillips County, who organized and hired an attorney to represent their interests. Like many sharecroppers and tenant farmers across the south, the Black farmers in Elaine understood that successfully being seen and heard in court was an uphill battle. In addition to the anti-Black biases held by the majority of judges, jurors, and attorneys, the laws of sharecropping and tenancy made much of the violence that the farmers experienced legally illegible. This meant that getting a judge or jury to agree that the violence happened might not be enough to prove that the violence in question constituted a legal harm, which would have been necessary to win a case.¹² What is more, winning was no protection from further violence.

That legal action might provoke further violence was well known among Blacks and whites alike. In many oral history interviews, Black sharecroppers explained that you “never talked back to” whites, because doing so could get you killed.¹³ For their part, some white landlords and overseers freely admitted to a penchant for violent reprisals. For example, during a deposition, one Texas overseer volunteered that he would “feel like killing ... a nigger that would sue [him].”¹⁴ That someone would advertise a willingness to commit anti-Black violence in a legal proceeding speaks to a culture where such violence regularly went undeterred and unpunished. And in fact, as numerous historians have demonstrated, many (if not most) white perpetrators of anti-Black violence faced few consequences. Tellingly, in the wake of the Elaine Massacre, the only white person that the local authorities arrested was the white attorney for the Black farmers’ union, Ulysses S. Bratton. This was true even though whites had beaten, shot, tortured, and set fire to an unknown number of Black women, men, and children over the course of the massacre’s three days.

Such was the unequal landscape upon which Black farmers in Phillips County were organizing. It was a landscape where climbing the agricultural ladder was never really possible. Negotiating with one’s employer was a nonstarter. Private litigation, if it even reached the courtroom, would not be enough. And Black people had been lynched for being too economically successful.¹⁵

In spite of these circumstances, union members were organizing for a better future. What local newspapers would later describe as a “plot” and an “uprising” was in reality an attempt by Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers to unionize and receive fair pay for their crops and labor. Receiving fair pay would have had transformative economic consequences. Their hope

11. Farr, “Breach by Violence,” 674.

12. Farr, “Breach by Violence,” 728.

13. William Gordon, oral history interview by John Egerton, January 19, 1991, interview A-0364, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.

14. *Yarbrough v. Brookins*, 294 S.W. 900, 903 (Tex. Ct. Civ. App. 1927).

15. One such victim was acclaimed author Richard Wright’s uncle, Silas Wright. Yachot, “We Want Our Land Back.”

was poignantly encapsulated by the password used to gain entrance to union meetings. “We just begun.”¹⁶

Disjunctive Scenes of Violence

Train loads of soldiers come in here. The train would just pull along and they just be shootin’ out the windows goin’ “Pow” “Pow” “Pow” ... on each side of the railroad. Steady going....
They killed so many people.¹⁷

—Clara Martin, witness to the Elaine Massacre in 1919, interviewed in 1983

The [Blacks] had been told that the army was comin’ in to protect them, and they were looking for them. And the train went out of Helena down toward Elaine, and just before it got to Elaine, they must have killed a hundred [Blacks], right there” (racial slurs omitted).¹⁸

—John Elvis Miller, Phillips County prosecutor in 1919, interviewed in 1975

Federal troops have [the] situation under control ... order appears to have been restored at Elaine.¹⁹

—*Arkansas Gazette*, October 3, 1919, two days after troops’ arrival

Officially, the Arkansas state legislature has acknowledged that between 100 and 237 Black people were murdered during the Elaine Massacre.²⁰ Another estimate puts the death toll at 856.²¹ According to James White, the director of the Elaine Legacy Center, however, “The oral history of mass grave locations, bodies buried in the Mississippi or burned, would put the number of dead in the thousands.”²²

These dramatically different estimates of the death toll provide a window into how disjunctive the white and Black accounts of the 1919 massacre really were. White descriptions of the violence—in news articles, the governor’s statements, and the military’s reports—

16. Wilson, *We Have Just Begun*.

17. Oral history interview with Clara Martin, witness to Elaine Massacre in 1919, interviewed in 1983, audio included in Wilson, *We Have Just Begun*.

18. Oral history interview with John Elvis Miller, Phillips County Prosecutor in 1919, interviewed in 1975, audio included in Wilson, *We Have Just Begun*.

19. Associated Press, “Federal Troops Have Situation Under Control.”

20. Senate Concurrent Resolution to Commemorate the Ninety-Fourth Anniversary of the United States Supreme Court Ruling in *Moore v. Dempsey*,” 91st General Assembly (Ark. 2017), <https://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/Bills/Document?type=pdf&chamber=SCR&source=Bills&bill=6&ddBienniumSession=2017%2F2017R>.

21. This number comes from Louis Sharpe Dunaway, a respected white journalist who wrote for the *Arkansas Gazette*. Describing the massacre in his autobiography, Dunaway wrote that the National Guard “left a path strewn with orphans and widows and... shot them down in cold blood without any reason or excuse—thus manifesting a blood thirstiness without any parallel disclosed in the history of civilization.” It is worth noting that Dunaway wrote this even though he believed that the Black farmers had been plotting an insurrection. L. S. (Sharpe) Dunaway, *What a Preacher Saw Through a Key-hole in Arkansas* (Little Rock, AR: Parke-Harper Publishing Company, 1925) 103–104, as quoted in Woodruff, *American Congo*, 87.

22. Yachot, “We Want Our Land Back.”

contrasted sharply with the experiences described by Black victims, reported by Black journalists, and captured in oral history interviews with witnesses and their descendants.²³

For Schakenbach Regele, disjunctive accounts of violence are characteristic of martial capitalism. Within its political economy the “concealed military power” shaping economic opportunities is only concealed from those benefiting from this military power. From the perspective of the property-owning, white men receiving its benefits, martial violence was an “invisible hand” that “smoothed and prepared” the road to economic opportunity.²⁴ For those subjected to martial violence, however, the opposite was true. The quite visible hand violently appropriated wealth, foreclosed economic opportunities, and retrenched preexisting racial and economic hierarchies.

Schakenbach Regele uses the example of the nineteenth-century U.S. Exploring Expedition to illustrate this disjuncture. During the expedition, the commander, Charles Wilkes, ordered the deaths of eighty Fijians and the destruction of two Fijian villages in order to successfully complete their planned scientific survey. When the expedition returned stateside, the violence was described as “a *justly merited punishment* meted [sic] out in some flagrant cases of unprovoked and cold blooded murder.”²⁵ In reality, the violence had been part of Wilkes’s effort to destroy the land and “compel the Fijians into submission.”²⁶ He succeeded. After the Americans’ assault, everything on the island was “utterly destroyed” and “desolate.”²⁷

The American press’s recharacterization of Wilkes’s acquisitive violence as “justly merited punishment” shares several similarities with white journalists’ descriptions of the Elaine Massacre. In Elaine, the governor and white journalists praised the federal government’s intervention as protective, honorable, and peaceable. In part, this was accomplished by casting the Black farmers as violent insurrectionists. The investigative committee that the governor had sanctioned claimed that Black farmers had been organizing as part of “well laid plans ... to put to death a dozen or more prominent white men, seize the land, and generally take control over the county.”²⁸ The Associated Press reported that the African American farmers in Elaine had been organizing for the purpose of “annihilation of all whites and seizure of their property.”²⁹

Official military reports described Black farmers as violent agitators as well. In a report to an assistant chief of staff, National Guard captain Edward Passailaigue wrote that while combing through the woods, his troops:

came upon a cabin containing about 60 white women, old men, and children. It was located near the woods in which the negroes were operating.... Their situation had been desperate. It

23. Tellingly, in an interview he gave over fifty years later in 1975, Phillips County prosecutor John Elvis Miller admitted that the white Mississippians who had joined in the violence did so “with blood in their eyes.” Miller’s perspective on the violence did not prevent him from pursuing the death penalty for the Black men who had been arrested in 1919, however. Wilson, *We Have Just Begun*.

24. Schakenbach Regele, “A Brief History,” 27.

25. “The U.S. Exploring Expedition,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 13, 1842 (emphasis added); Schakenbach Regele, “A Brief History,” 29.

26. Smith, “The Bound[less] Sea,” 729.

27. Remark made by Assistant Surgeon Silas Holmes, as quoted in Smith, “The Bound[less] Sea,” 729.

28. Associated Press, “Negroes on Trial Today at Helena,” *Arkansas Gazette*, November 3, 1919.

29. As quoted in Wells-Barnett, *The Arkansas Race Riot*, 57.

was about 2 miles from Elaine and had troops not arrived, the fate of that party would have been disastrous.³⁰

In this accounting, the troops' presence was both necessary and heroic.

In addition to characterizing Black victims as dishonorably violent—they threatened women and children, after all—these white accounts minimized the violence done to Black victims. Mass Black casualties were not reported, and those who were killed were described as “resisting arrest,” “heavily armed,” or participating in “promiscuous firing on white persons.”³¹ Across these news articles, journalists noted that the few Black men who were killed had been armed or had refused to surrender. The number of Black casualties (when not described as an “unknown” number) was always in the single digits.³² If one were to believe the white newspapers, an organized and heavily armed Black insurrection had been both narrowly avoided and resoundingly quashed.

In both historical examples—1919 Elaine and 1840 Fiji—the violence against whites was “unprovoked” and, implicitly, undeserved. And in both instances, the military response was cast as just and patriotic, rather than brutal and reckless: martial capitalism at its finest. Government and media institutions obfuscated the worst of the violence, while simultaneously justifying the unobscured violence in moralistic terms.

In Elaine, this representational disjuncture persisted long after the torture, slaughter, and fraudulent prosecutions ended. For decades, the massacre was known only as the “Elaine Race Riot.” As late as 1961—forty-two years after the massacre—a peer-reviewed journal of Arkansas history published an article that claimed that the “Elaine Race Riot” was the result of “a planned insurrection of the Negroes against the whites in that area.”³³ The article was based entirely on interviews with white residents of Phillips County. Even more rigorously researched scholarship has referred to the events in Elaine exclusively as a “riot” rather than a “massacre.”³⁴ And it was not until 2022 that the Library of Congress officially changed its subject heading for the events in 1919 from the “Elaine Race Riot” to the “Elaine Massacre.”³⁵

30. Captain Edward P. Passailaigue, “Report to Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, 3rd Division,” included in Desmarais, “Military Intelligence Reports,” 183.

31. Captain Passailaigue stated: “To the best of my knowledge about 20 negroes were killed by soldiers for refusing to halt when so ordered or for resisting arrest. In all cases, all of those negroes were armed.” Passailaigue, “Report,” included in Desmarais, “Military Intelligence Reports,” 182. The *Arkansas Democrat* stated: “Two heavily armed negroes who paraded the streets of Mellwood ... in an attempt to arouse in them [Black residents] a fight ‘fever’ were killed.” “Negroes Had Plot to Rise Against Whites, Charged,” *Arkansas Democrat*, October 2, 1919. The AP reported: The first posse to arrive in Elaine “was met by a force of armed negroes ... assembling in large numbers and [who] had begun firing on white persons.” “By the Associated Press,” *Arkansas Democrat*, October 2, 1919.

32. The *Arkansas Democrat* reported: “The casualties to date, so far as known, are three white men dead, and two others wounded, and an unknown number of negroes dead and wounded.” “Quiet at Elaine During Night, but Tension Still High,” *Arkansas Democrat*, October 2, 1919.

33. Butts and James, “The Underlying Causes of the Elaine Riot of 1919,” 95.

34. Compare, e.g., Anthony, “The Elaine Riot of 1919,” 5, and Whayne, “Low Villains and Wickedness in High Places,” 285, with Holland and Dolski, “‘A Solemn Promise Kept,’” 67: “Though traditionally referred to as a ‘Race Riot,’ what followed in Phillips County was nothing short of a massacre.”

35. Adame, “Library of Congress Changes Reference to 1919 Racial Violence to ‘Elaine Massacre,’” *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2022/apr/18/library-of-congress-changes-reference-to-1919>.

The contemporaneous white accounts of the “Elaine Race Riot” vary greatly from what can be found in contemporaneous Black sources, in oral histories, and in recent historical scholarship. Counter to the “riot” described above, these sources describe a massacre. As Ida B. Wells wrote, “Hundreds of white men were chasing and murdering every Negro they could find, driving them from their homes and stalking them in the woods and fields as men hunt wild beasts.”³⁶ According to one descendant, posse members took souvenirs from the bodies of murdered Black people—a common practice at lynchings during this time.³⁷ As historian Nan Woodruff has explained, armed white civilians and National Guard soldiers killed Black women, men, and children indiscriminately, set people and homes on fire, and desecrated bodies.

Importantly, in several different oral histories, interviewees have attributed an economic motivation to the white violence. William Quinney, an Elaine resident and descendant, said, “Our people, our families, lost a lot. Some of them lost everything.” According to Charlie McClain, whose grandfather survived the massacre, his mother would mention “them people taking daddy’s land” as well as mourn the fact that whites had “stolen our land.”³⁸ An older white member of the Elaine community, Reverend Mary Olson, has even claimed that during the massacre, whites were “in the courthouse, changing deeds while they were sending people with guns to kill them, because they had the names on the deeds.”³⁹ Of course, it is not possible to prove whether any deeds changed hands this way. But the historical accuracy of this story and others like it matters less than what they can tell us about how the Black community *experienced* the violence of the massacre. Not only was the violence understood as local whites’ retribution for union organizing; it was a mass taking. Clothes, furniture, heirlooms, homes, land, and most consequentially, a sense of economic opportunity, were rent from the Black community by the violence in Elaine.

Mobilizing an Economy of Fear

Fear opens up past histories that stick to the present.⁴⁰

—Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies”

Excavating the disjuncture between white and Black accounts of the massacre does not necessarily explain, however, how whites could so easily justify and erase such wide-scale violence. To put it differently, if martial violence operates as an “invisible hand” for some, how exactly does the hand become invisible? In Elaine, the answer has to do with how white actors were able to mobilize the southern affective economy, particularly the economy of fear.

36. Wells-Barnett, *The Arkansas Race Riot*, 11.

37. Leon F. Litwack, “Hellhounds,” 15.

38. Yachot, “We Want Our Land Back.”

39. Conversation with Rev. Mary Olson, Elaine resident, Wilson, *We Have Just Begun*.

40. Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 126.

The term “affective economy” describes the way that feelings—such as fear—circulate between people, representations, and institutions in ways that cause specific feelings to become associated with certain bodies, communities, and cultural symbols, and not others. These feelings help foster a metonymic slide, wherein disparate identities and communities become linked to one another by the power of association. Consider, for example, the economy of fear that existed in the United States after September 11. As fear circulated after the September 11 attacks, it stuck to preexisting stereotypes of Black and Brown people—as other, foreign, and aggressive—thus helping to create a “distinct category of ‘the fearsome’ in the present.”⁴¹ This category of the “fearsome” came to include anybody who appeared “Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim.” It did not matter that “terrorist” and “Muslim” were not synonymous and did not have an inherent connection to one another. As fear circulated in the post-September 11 moment, the signs began to slide into one another, until the sign of “Muslim” could evoke the fear associated with the sign “terrorist.”

A similar metonymic slide took place during and immediately after the Elaine Massacre. Specifically, the farmers’ actions became rhetorically and emotionally linked to slave uprisings. The fear of slave revolts is one of the urtexts of racial fear in the United States.⁴² By invoking the specter of slave revolts, white descriptions of the Elaine Massacre were able to “stick” antebellum fears of slave rebellions onto the post-slavery actions of Elaine’s Black farmers.

White accounts of the Elaine Massacre echoed antebellum fears about slave uprisings in four significant ways. First are references to the white population being outnumbered by the Black population. During slavery, it was well known that Blacks outnumbered whites in certain areas, and it was something that white residents feared made them vulnerable to attack and uprisings.⁴³ Similar language exists in reports to the Military Intelligence Branch about the events in Elaine. As one National Guard captain put it, “The whites in that section [of Arkansas] are outnumbered 5 to 1 and to my mind, had troops not been sent to quell the disorder, the negroes would have succeeded in carrying out their murderous plans”⁴⁴

A second resonance with historical fears of slave uprisings can be found in discussions of Black residents’ secretive planning. Many articles in white newspapers included references to secretive communications among the Black union members.⁴⁵ For example, one article reported that “negroes of the county have been organizing secretly, providing themselves with high powered rifles.”⁴⁶ In another, the article’s title read, “Negroes aroused by propaganda ... Secret meetings ... Literature discovered.”⁴⁷

References to Black Americans’ “plots” to murder whites and steal their land is a third way that reports on the violence in Elaine echoed fears of slave revolts.⁴⁸ According to a memo

41. Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 131.

42. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made*, 9.

43. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made*, 27; Wax, “‘The Great Risque We Run,’” 136.

44. Passailaigue, “Report,” included in Desmarais, “Military Intelligence Reports,” 185.

45. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made*, 4.

46. Associated Press, “Federal Troops Have Situation Under Control.”

47. Wilson, “Negroes Aroused by Propaganda.”

48. Major Eugene E. Barton, “Memo Acting Intelligence Officer, Chicago,” included in Desmarais, “Military Intelligence Reports,” 185–186; “By the Associated Press”; “Negroes Had Plot”; “Negroes Inflamed by a White Man,” *Arkansas Gazette*, October 3, 1919.

written by an intelligence officer from Camp Pike, Arkansas, the sharecropper and tenant farmers' union members may have had a "vague idea that they could take possession of the land for themselves."⁴⁹ This specific plot—white murder and land theft—was the archetype of how white enslavers imagined slave uprisings.

Finally, there were discussions of outside agitators.⁵⁰ Much as it was easier for some whites to attribute slaves' desire to revolt to a nefarious outside influence, many white accounts of the "race riot" claimed that outsiders had actually seeded Blacks' desire to agitate. Or, in the words of Major Robert Poage of the National Guard, it was "the same old story of a bad leader, exploiting and hoodwinking the negro race for mercenary purposes."⁵¹

Taken together, these representational motifs—being outnumbered, secretive communications, murderous plots, and outside agitators—have more in common with descriptions of slave rebellions than with the actual plans of the Black farmers in Elaine. But in affective economies, factual similarity matters less than emotional resonances. And in the economy of fear that these articles and correspondence helped to produce and bolster, the fact that Blacks' economic advocacy *felt* like a threat to powerful whites' status quo was enough to associatively link union organizing to earlier threats to the racial order. Within this economy of fear, Blacks were not simply advocating for what they were owed, they were setting the stage for a violent overturning of the entire social order. If that was what one believed was at stake, then calling in the National Guard and decisively quashing the rebellion might have seemed not only necessary, but righteous. And so, with a much older and stronger fear at their backs, whites' murders of hundreds of Black men, women, and children became "veiled behind the illusion of minimal, honorable, military engagement."⁵²

Martial Capitalism's Silent Wake

There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There were only silence, quiet weeping, whispers, and fear.⁵³

—Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

Looking back now I realized that the Elaine Massacre manifested itself into a culture of Black people in Elaine who lived a silent fear.... They never again made another attempt to organize or become independent beyond the white landowner's farms. The example of what could, would and did happen was etched into memories and silence was the rule. We might not have known about the silence rule, *but we were raised by it.*⁵⁴

—Lisa Hicks, Elaine resident and descendant

49. Barton, "Memo," included in Desmarais, "Military Intelligence Reports," 185–186.

50. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made*, 4.

51. Poage, "Report," included in Desmarais, "Military Intelligence Reports," 187.

52. Schakenbach Regele, "A Brief History," 17.

53. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1944), quoted in Yachot, "We Want Our Land Back."

54. Yachot, "We Want Our Land Back" (emphasis added).

Over the course of seven days in October 1919, sheriff's posses, local residents, men from neighboring counties and states, as well as National Guard soldiers showed up in force in Phillips County to violently entrench the status quo—a status quo wherein white planters exerted economic and social control over the Black farmers upon whom they relied. The violence ensured that whatever economic opportunity existed in the region would remain in the hands of “white men with capital.”⁵⁵ In the words of a Black descendant of the massacre, “our people became poor overnight and are still poor. After 1919, there was no more wealth for African Americans here.”⁵⁶

The “honor-bound” discourse used in white reports of events helped the public-private perpetrators erase the most brutal elements of the violence from official memory.⁵⁷ In the wake of this re-membling, Black poverty appears as an immutable truth, rather than the result of deliberate violence and economic plotting. Or, to put it in Schakenbach Regele's terms, Black economic opportunity was “smoothed” away by an “invisible hand.”⁵⁸

I wonder what we might learn about martial capitalism if our inquiry began with the experiences of those who were “smoothed” away to make room for white economic opportunity, people like the Black residents of Phillips County. The perspectives of their descendants suggest that this kind of “smoothing”—meaning violence that was enacted with public-private support, glorified by the community, and largely erased from the historical record—imparts a lasting legacy of silence, one that has generational economic consequences. I suspect that there is much that we could learn about capitalism by looking at it through this lens. I hope that scholars take up Schakenbach Regele's framework and do just that, asking what martial capitalism looked and felt like to those who were subjected to its violence.

BRITTANY FARR is an assistant professor of law at NYU School of Law. She joined NYU from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, where she was a Sharswood Fellow.

Farr is a scholar of private law and race. Reflecting more than a decade of interdisciplinary training, her research draws on history, legal theory, and cultural studies to theorize how marginalized populations have availed themselves of otherwise inhospitable legal regimes. Contact information: NYU Law, 40 Washington Square S. 314G, New York, NY 10012. E-mail: bfarr@nyu.edu.

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