

Texan by Color

The Racialization of the Lone Star State

MICHAEL PHILLIPS

The bitterest political conflict occupying Texans for much of the period from the 1880s through the 1930s did not concern urbanization, unions, Prohibition, the post-World War I Red Scare, or the New Deal. A real battle—resulting in thousands of often harrowing deaths and injuries—raged over racial identity, over who could be considered real Texans, and over who would politically exist or suffer civic invisibility. African Americans were lynched in gruesome public spectacles, and the Texas Rangers engaged in a virtual pogrom against Mexicans and Mexican Americans in South Texas that may have claimed as many as five thousand lives.¹ Often, black-white or black-brown relations did not constitute the central front of this conflagration. Much of the struggle took place within what is today broadly considered the white community.

After the Civil War, Texas elites feared that poor and working-class blacks and whites might find common cause in changing an emerging capitalist economy that benefited few. By the early 1920s the early Texas Right justified the gap between rich and poor Anglos by attributing economic inequality within the white population to biological differences. Whites, elites claimed, were superior to blacks. Some within the ruling caste, however, were more white than others. Alleged racial inequality within the “white” community was presented as a justification for disenfranchisement. By the 1920s, members of the revived Ku Klux Klan argued that democracy was an innately Anglo-Saxon trait and that voting

rights placed in the wrong hands—those of blacks, immigrants, and poor (and therefore lesser) whites—would result not in freedom but anarchy. Inconsistently constructed on random criteria such as pigmentation, hair texture, or culture and geographic origin, race has at times been a synonym for nationality, language, religion, and even class. The number of accepted racial categories expanded or contracted in Texas between the 1880s and 1930s, based not on empirical data but on economic and political convenience.

In Texas, the idea of race became a means by which Anglo elites stifled class conflict and attempted to co-opt the working class into accepting domination by the wealthy.² A particular racial identity—whiteness—became the currency by which one could purchase at least symbolic membership in the ruling caste. Fluid and flexible, the concept of race could be manipulated, based on the needs of the ruling class, to marginalize and disempower radicals.

Creating a race hierarchy in which one gained membership in an elite caste and avoided enslavement simply based on skin color admirably served the self-interests of the wealthy and powerful before the Civil War. Millions of whites in the antebellum South lived lives of desperate poverty and had little or no political influence, yet they could claim a superior status to the black-skinned “property” that often toiled endlessly beside them. During the period between the founding of the Texas Republic in 1836 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, the state had a tiny “Mexican” population. Therefore, the racial universe consisted largely of two shades: black and white. According to the 1861 state secession convention, African American Texans “were rightfully held and regarded as an inferior and dependent race” fit only for slavery. The secession declaration did not address the status of Mexicans in the Confederate state of Texas but did declare that all whites were “entitled to equal civil and political rights.”³

With the abolition of slavery in 1865, however, racial politics became infinitely more complex. The post-Civil War Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution abolished slavery and granted citizenship rights, including the right to vote, to African American men. The caste privilege enjoyed by otherwise powerless poor whites had disappeared, and hence they had lost their assumed vested interest in the existing power structure. Elite whites feared the resentments of the white underclass and began to strip them of even the symbolic wages of whiteness. Such poor whites, without money and with diminished political power, would be seen by elites as needing new incentives to remain loyal

1920 until the end of World War II, a more flexible concept of race arose in which some disenfranchised whites could regain a measure of power by compliance with the economic and political status quo. The concept of race itself briefly faced a fierce challenge after the grim facts of the European Holocaust became public knowledge in the late 1940s, and liberal Democrats in Washington initiated a host of social welfare programs designed to correct the economic inequalities produced not by genetic inequality but by discrimination and intolerance. When these programs failed to eradicate black and brown poverty, the Right synthesized a century of racial thought and, in Texas, used pseudoscience to roll back the legislative accomplishments of the left. By 2012 everything old in Texas' racial rhetoric was new again.

Notes

1. For events in South Texas, see Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

2. The most important works on race in Texas are Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Arnolde De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821–1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘The Mind That Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 2007); and Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas, 1841–2001* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

3. Delegates of the People of Texas, “A Declaration of the Causes Which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union” (Dallas: Basye Brothers, Printer, n.d.), 4, Texas State Library, Archives Division, Austin (hereafter TSL).

4. Letter, John H. Reagan, Fort Warren, Boston Harbor, to the People of Texas, August 11, 1865, typescript copy, John H. Reagan Collection, Miscellany File 2–23/1079, John H. Reagan Letters, Folder 31, TSL.

5. “Necessary Measures to Reconstruction,” letter, John H. Reagan, Fort Houston, Palestine, Texas, to Governor J. W. Throckmorton, October 12, 1866, Jefferson Davis Reagan Collection A4674, Folder 10, Dallas Historical Society (hereafter DHS).