

“IN A LAKE OF FIRE”: CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF SUSAN SMITH

by

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(Under the Direction of Bryant Simon)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an attempt at a feminist reading of the Susan Smith infanticide case of 1994-1995. The various images of Susan Smith that circulated at the time of her trial reveal a subtle discursive change in the way that Americans think about the institution of motherhood. Each of these images—ideal, middle-class “mom”; racist Southern white woman; working-class, single mother; scheming adulteress; abused small-town girl; and psychological victim—is based on a gendered reading of Smith in relation to the various men in her life. This negative gendered base is, I argue, the key to understanding the enduring cultural obsession with Susan Smith. Using scholarship from many disciplines, as well as primary sources ranging from the extensive media coverage to personal interviews, I place the Susan Smith drama within the cultural context of the “backlash” and the rise of conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s. The transformation of the public representations of Smith reveals a cautious retreat from the overwhelming idealization of motherhood that characterized previous decades. I argue that a feminist analysis of this difficult case is one way of tracking changes in dominant American ideas about gender, race, and class, as refracted through the institution of motherhood.

INDEX WORDS: Infanticide, Motherhood, Feminism

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INTRODUCTION:

MAKING SENSE OF SUSAN SMITH

Sometime after eight o'clock on the night of October 25, 1994, the McCloud family of Union County, South Carolina, was startled by frantic knocking at the front door of their lakeside home. Shirley McCloud opened the door to discover a woman in her early twenties crying hysterically on the front porch. The young woman, Susan Smith—who, from that night on, would be a household name—sputtered out the horrifying information that would hold the nation spellbound for the next nine days.

“My kids!” she cried. “He’s got my kids!”

Slowly, Shirley McCloud coaxed the terrifying tale from the young mother as her son, Rick McCloud, dialed “911.” Susan told the McClouds that she had been carjacked, with her two sons, Michael, age 3, and Alex, age 14 months, safely strapped in their car seats in the back of her Mazda. Susan explained between gasps and tears how a black man jumped into the passenger seat of her car while she was stopped at a red light, telling her, “Shut up and drive or I’ll kill you.” She said she drove about ten miles before the man ordered her out of the car. She told the McClouds how she pleaded with him to let her take the children, and she repeated this story for nine days to investigators and reporters from around the country. The carjacker replied, “I don’t have time. I’ll take care of them.” Susan stood helplessly in the middle of the dark South Carolina road and screamed, “I love y’all” at the rapidly retreating Mazda.¹

For the next nine days, Susan Smith and her family—including her husband, David, from whom she was separated—communicated with the alleged carjacker and the national public

¹ Rick Bragg, “An Agonizing Search for Two Boys,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1994.

through the hundreds of television, newspaper, and magazine reporters who flocked to the tiny town of Union (population 10,000). Americans rallied behind the tragic figure of the young mother who called on God and the good will of the people to help her find her missing babies. Susan gave television and newspaper interviews daily while her neighbors combed the local woods, double-checked the locks on their doors, and hugged their children close.

The search dragged on for a week. Authorities, frustrated by the complete absence of clues despite their careful combing of Union County, increasingly focused the investigation on the Smiths and especially on Susan, the only witness to the crime. One week into the investigation, South Carolina law enforcement agents searched Susan's home amidst media rumors of inconsistencies in her story. Over the course of a few days, features on Susan Smith, the tragic young mother, transformed into dramatic exposés in which she failed polygraph tests, changed her story several times, and even flirted with state law enforcement agents on the way to interviews.² On the morning of November 3, 1994, Susan and David Smith appeared on the morning shows of all three major networks. Now on the defensive, Smith followed her familiar tears with a firm disclaimer. "I don't think that any parent could love my children more than I do, and I would never even think about doing anything that would harm them," she said, staring down millions of American viewers. "It's really painful to have the finger pointed at you when it's your children involved."³

Unlike those hopeful Americans tuning into the news every night in the fall of 1994, most of us know that this tragic tale of random kidnapping featured an appalling plot twist. Mere hours after her morning-show interview, in the company of Union County Sheriff Howard Wells,

² Bragg, "Sheriff Says Prayer and a Lie Led Susan Smith to Confess," *New York Times*, July 18, 1995.

³ Ibid.

Susan Smith confessed to double homicide. Her emotional confession detailing her drowning of her sons by letting her car roll down a boat ramp into a lake promptly and irrevocably reversed popular opinions of her. The immediate demonization of Susan Smith in the wake of her confession was diametrically opposed to the televised ideal mother that had pleaded with the nation that very morning. Within hours of her confession, she was deemed “the most hated woman in America.” This reaction was immediate and “furious,” as locals removed their yellow ribbons and replaced them with black ones.⁴ The day after her confession, a mob formed outside the Union County Courthouse, prompting the judge to cancel the bond hearing amidst shouts of “Baby-killing bitch” and “Lynch her!”⁵ Reporters quickly honed in on Smith’s checkered sexual history. Fodder for this eroticization was found in her personal interactions with men: her rocky marriage, with evidence of the illicit affairs of both parties; her recent relationship with a wealthy local man, Tom Findlay, son of her boss and known around town as “the Catch;” and repeated molestations by her stepfather in her teens and early twenties.

At the same time, however, her defense team conjured sympathy for Smith by depicting her as exploited and abused. Significantly, both legal teams focused on Smith’s relationships to various men in her life as the ultimate key to her criminal behavior. Legal and media pundits debated over these sharply bifurcated, sexual images of Smith: “Is she the selfish, manipulative, sexually exploitive woman the prosecutors see? Or is she, as the defense claims, the deeply troubled survivor of a blighted marriage and a thwarted love affair—a woman who was sexually abused as a teenager and who had attempted suicide twice before?”⁶ In these public narratives,

⁴ George Rekers, *Susan Smith: Victim or Murderer?* (Lakewood, Colorado: Glenbridge Publishing Company, 1996), 23; Nancy Gibbs and Kathy Booth, “Death and Deceit,” *Time*, November 14, 1994.

⁵ David Bruck, interview; Jerry Adler and Ginny Carroll, “Innocents Lost,” *Newsweek*, November 14, 1994; Rekers, 23.

⁶ Tom Morganthau and Ginny Carroll, “Will They Kill Susan Smith?,” *Newsweek*, July 31, 1995.

Susan Smith was either a scheming adulteress who disposed of her children to bed a rich man, or a damaged girl whose ignored cries for help resulted in that fateful car ride. The former image proved more popular in the national media, fueling news magazine polls calling for capital punishment. The latter, more sympathetic image led to a transformation in local sentiment: the widespread calls for the death penalty largely became, by the summer of 1995, local pleas for prayer and forgiveness in the form of a life sentence. Locals served as character witnesses, aiding the testimony of experts that portrayed Susan Smith as dangerously depressed. Following the airing of all of these different readings of her at the trial, Susan Smith was sentenced to life in prison.

Smith's fame did not die with her incarceration. Much to her chagrin, public discussions of the case resurface periodically. She has become the litmus test, the representative case, of violent motherhood in the United States; Susan Smith serves as the very low standard by which other mothers are judged in the media. When Darlie Routier was accused of stabbing her son in 1996 because she was unhappy with her financial situation, or when Andrea Yates drowned her five children in the throes of post-partum depression in 2001, reporters, lawyers, and "Court TV" talking heads duly trotted out the well-worn scripts and characterizations they had deployed just a few years before for Susan Smith. The prosecutorial image of the deviant mother who murders her children in order to overcome financial troubles—an image replete with sexual connotations in both the Smith and Routier cases—won the death penalty for Routier in Texas in 1997, prompting one reporter to argue that infanticide was more "criminal" than "tragic."⁷ Susan Smith, however, is used as a different sort of comparison for Andrea Yates, who is currently fighting her battle in a Texas appellate court. While some initially expressed anger similar to the

⁷ Sam Howe Verhovek, "Dallas Woman is Sentenced to Death in Murder of Son," *New York Times*, February 5, 1997.

outrage that followed Smith's confession in 1994, most media pundits and observers quickly began to refer to Andrea Yates as the template for a "truly insane" infanticidal mother, as opposed to Smith, who employed the "abuse excuse" to absolve herself of criminal responsibility.⁸

This project is an attempt at a feminist reading of the cultural responses to Susan Smith throughout the past decade. More specifically, through a close examination of the many public representations of Susan Smith, I argue that this case marked a turning point in the discourse of American motherhood. I borrow Mary Poovey's term "border case" to describe the Smith saga. According to Poovey, "border cases" are "the site of intensive debates because they [threaten] to challenge *the* opposition upon which all other oppositions claim to be based."⁹ The Smith case is one such "border case" because it challenges the gendered logic on which our culture is built. Smith destroyed many assumptions about motherhood, womanhood, race, and class, and we were forced to rework these notions in our responses to her case. In my dissertation, I examine the popular images of her chronologically in order to explain how we, as a culture, traveled from the two-dimensional discourse of mothers as either ideal or evil to a more sympathetic, although not necessarily feminist, understanding of maternal psychology and violence. Using the Susan Smith case as a bridge, I attempt to explain how popular representations of maternal infanticide shifted from "monster" to "mentally ill."

The public responds differently to cases of infanticide; these responses are not simply based on the respective details of the crimes. Examining the various responses to the Smith case, and the historical images that lent legitimacy to these responses, helps to explain why certain events

⁸ Marianne Szegedy Maszak, "Mothers and Murder," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 18, 2002.

⁹ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Work: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 12.

or people become cultural touchstones at certain times. The Smith case is often compared to that other famous legal drama of 1994-95, the O.J. Simpson trial. The racial, gender, and class dynamics of the Simpson case are no doubt familiar to most readers; these issues, in addition to his former heroic status in American culture, factored into the ubiquitous media coverage of Simpson's trial. But Susan Smith was a seemingly typical wife and mother from an anonymous mill town in South Carolina, not a sports, commercial, and film star. The Smith case garnered nearly as much press as Simpson in 1995, despite the fact that the judge did not allow cameras into the courtroom during her two-week trial. Smith was not even the only South Carolina mother on trial for infanticide that summer, yet she dominated the local, regional, and national press.¹⁰ Why did Susan Smith become *the* national story?

I argue that the Susan Smith case served as a platform for a cultural debate about American motherhood. Each of the popular representations of Susan Smith—middle-class housewife, racist white woman, single working mother, scheming adulteress, abused small-town girl, or psychological victim—is familiar, or readable, to us because of the stories they entail. Each image tells a different story about motherhood at a crucial historical point in which ideas about motherhood were changing. Each image represents a historically specific interpretation of the meanings of past events and cultural roles, particularly the changing role of motherhood.

I argue that a close examination of the various images used to explain Susan Smith reveals the beginnings of a discernible shift in the discourse of American motherhood. Smith became the biggest news story because she initially played two of our most sacred cultural roles: the ideal mother and the white woman in danger. She became even more newsworthy when her

¹⁰ Two other South Carolina women were tried for infanticide in the summer of 1995: Myra Pearson of St. Matthews was accused of bludgeoning to death her handicapped 12-year-old stepson, and Anna Mae Rita Miranda of Walterboro was accused of beating her nine-year-old daughter to death ("State Facing Summer of Child-killing Trials," *Rock Hill Herald* [SC], May 8, 1995).

confession of infanticide thoroughly attacked all of our cultural “common sense” about gender, motherhood, violence, race, and class. Initially, public responses to her case featured two-dimensional types: the ideal mother and the demon mother. But her case concluded with a more complicated image, the “mother as victim,” which opened up the discourse to more current psychological understandings of maternal violence. The trajectory of images of Susan Smith exposes the painful, ongoing process of redefining motherhood at the end of the twentieth century.

This trajectory was not seamless; in the short course of ten months, from the alleged kidnapping in October 1994 to the trial in July 1995, the images often overlapped and contradicted each other. These images were based on available cultural scripts, but they were never quite satisfactory explanations for Smith’s crimes. Author James Fallows argues that journalists love to cover scandals and disasters because they are “easy and cheap”: “You send out a crew, you point the camera at whatever has blown up, and the story tells itself.”¹¹ This was not so for Susan Smith; the story was constantly undergoing revision from almost the moment she announced that she had been carjacked. For example, the ill-fitting image of the “scheming slut” could not account for the fact that Smith was, by all accounts, an excellent mother until that fateful night at the lake. For each image to fit Susan Smith, key facts of the case had to be ignored; no single one of them could account for the entire story. Older images of womanhood (the ideal mother, the demon mother, and the racist Southern woman) had to be reformulated to account for Smith’s complicated experiences. In the months preceding Smith’s July 1995 trial, a new discourse of motherhood began to emerge in which the offending mother became both a daughter and a victim. This image was persuasive enough that Smith was given life in prison

¹¹ James Fallows: *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 144.

rather than the death penalty, and national coverage of the verdict, so angry just months before, was, for a brief period of time, generally sympathetic.

The “mother as victim” image of Smith did not completely overwhelm all previous images. The ideal “mom” and the demon mother still exist in American culture. In fact, Susan is more likely to be remembered as a monster than as a victim. The discursive change was subtle, and its acceptability was in question until Andrea Yates made her national debut in 2001. Yates’ trials represent the legal culmination of a decade of discursive change in popular, psychological, and feminist representations of motherhood that began with the Susan Smith trial. But is this new discourse a feminist understanding of motherhood? Examining the many images of Susan Smith and comparing them to the sympathetic images of Andrea Yates is one means of answering this question.

Specifically, there were six major scripts surrounding the Susan Smith case. The first was the idealized maternal image of Smith found in the national media during the first nine days of the “kidnapping” investigation. Following her confession, Smith immediately became a duplicitous, sexual deviant. Some Americans attempted to understand Smith in those intervening months along the lines of race—as a racist Southern woman whose precious white children were stolen by a generic black male criminal, or as a murderer whose white Southern womanhood would save her from the death penalty. Others chose class as their lens, positioning Smith as a working-class mother who murdered her biggest financial burdens or as a single mother struggling to provide for her family in a dying Southern industry. Many Union residents, on the other hand, expressed sympathy for Smith as a small town girl abused in their very midst. In this local narrative, Smith was both a mother and a daughter. Finally, Smith’s defense team wove a compelling script based on the sympathetic public images. At her trial, they presented Smith as a

damaged girl, a psychological victim, a desperate single mother who loved her children but increasingly found herself abandoned, broke, and helpless. This psychological image of Susan Smith paved the way for current understandings of maternal mental illness in the form of pathologies like post-partum depression and psychosis.

Each of these images makes sense of Smith in relation to cultural ideals of motherhood. Public representations of Smith were not just age-old stereotypes of womanhood; rather, they reflect the specific context of the 1990s. Many of us are familiar with Susan Faludi's famous characterization of the 1980s as a period of overwhelming "backlash" against the women's movement in the form of New Right politics and "New Traditionalist" cultural prescriptions.¹² One of the primary points of attack was motherhood; conservative forces used impossible maternal ideals to denigrate poor, single, and minority mothers, among others.¹³ The 1990s witnessed the ascendance of the conservative political rhetoric of "family values," which was code for the traditional patriarchal family that prominently featured the happily married, middle-class, stay-at-home mother. This backlash attack on maternity reached its apex at the same time that a new generation of women was starting to mother, women who had benefited from feminism even if they did not call themselves feminists. The cultural obsession with ideal, middle-class, white motherhood and the media obsession with such maternal deviants as working or welfare mothers clashed resoundingly with the actual experiences of most American mothers.

Into the midst of this dissonance walked Susan Smith, the paradoxical good mother who killed her children. By tracking the popular representations of Smith through the ten months of the national obsession with her case, we can see how the discourse of American motherhood

¹² Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991).

¹³ Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, "*Bad Mothers*": *The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 2.

subtly changed in the mid-1990s, resulting in the new maternal psychology that currently constitutes our cultural “common sense.”

Historiography and Methodology

Despite the extensive coverage and national discussion of the case, few scholars address it at all. Scholar Cheryl Harris compares the O.J. Simpson and Susan Smith trials, arguing that media portrayals of the O.J. Simpson case tended to focus exclusively on its racial dynamics. News articles repeatedly reported the racial breakdown of the jury rather than, for example, the gender breakdown, implicitly arguing that jurors made race-based decisions. Conversely, Harris argues that portrayals of the Susan Smith case focused narrowly on issues of gender, ignoring the racial dynamics of the case. Popular representations of both famous cases failed to integrate the various forces at work.¹⁴

Marouf Hasian and Lisa Flores also argue that the media coverage of the Smith case used a gendered frame, with an emphasis on the idealized concept of modern motherhood. Hasian and Flores acknowledge the existence of alternative readings of the case, but they do not analyze these alternatives, instead focusing on the dominant script of “good mother essentialism.” Barry Glassner, in his best seller *The Culture of Fear*, also reads reactions to Susan Smith as referendums on motherhood to the exclusion of other readings. Glassner briefly suggests that the angry reactions to Smith served to obscure the “larger cast of characters that gives rise to child mistreatment [through] reporting about evil mothers,” thus absolving Americans of any sense of

¹⁴ Cheryl A. Harris, “Myths of Race and Gender in the O.J. Simpson and Susan Smith Trials—Spectacles of Our Times,” *Washburn Law Journal* 35 (1995): 225-253.

collective responsibility in policies dealing with children or in the demanding cultural prescriptions of institutions like marriage and motherhood.¹⁵

Although these ideas play a role in my analysis, I argue that the diverse responses to Smith have a much broader context than the obvious ones of the criminal treatment of children, suggested by Glassner, or idealized motherhood, suggested by Harris, Hasian, and Flores. In order to understand the public representations of Susan Smith, I incorporate theoretical and factual material from a range of academic disciplines: histories of the South, especially those that pay careful attention to gender, race, and class; criminology; jurisprudence; biopsychology; media studies theory; and works of feminist theory that deal with the conflicted issues of motherhood, female violence, race, and class. From Adrienne Rich and her radical feminist cohorts of the 1970s to the more recent media studies of Susan Douglas, theories about motherhood in the second half of the twentieth century comprise the bulk of my secondary research. In addition to this secondary supporting material, I rely on a wealth of primary sources, including all of the print media and television coverage of Smith since the night she reported her children missing, the trial transcripts, the personal papers of some of the key players in her case, and extensive interviews of most of the people associated with the Susan Smith drama (including Union residents, journalists, the trial lawyers, the judge, the witnesses, local ministers, and Smith's current prison chaplain).

Cultural history provides a primary methodological model for this project. Amy Gilman Srebnick's *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* performs a similar analysis of gendered responses to crime. Srebnick analyzes the various reactions to the murder of a young woman in 1840s New York City as a window into contemporary anxieties about gender, sexuality, and

¹⁵ Marouf Hasian, Jr. and Lisa A. Flores, "Mass Mediated Representations of the Susan Smith Trials," *Howard Journal of Communication* 11 (2000): 163-178; Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 101.

class.¹⁶ My project in many ways emulates Srebnick’s analysis of the competing images surrounding this “emblematic crime.” Another scholar, Pamela Haag, addresses some famous gendered and racialized crimes—specifically, the Scottsboro and Ala Moana cases of 1931—in her study of modern liberalism. According to Haag, public narratives of these crimes illuminate connections between popular ideas about economics, politics, race, gender, and sexuality—an idea I intend to apply to Susan Smith as well.¹⁷ Ruth Feldstein, on the other hand, connects twentieth-century American liberalism to popular constructs of motherhood and race, arguing that “bad” mothers have increasingly been held responsible for all of society’s problems, as seen in, for example, Reagan’s infamous “welfare queens” and the scapegoating of working-class mothers.¹⁸ Srebnick, Haag, and Feldstein are excellent models of historical texts that address images of socially “deviant” women as a means of historicizing contemporary gender, race, class, and political dynamics.

However, my analysis differs in that I address each competing representation of Smith according to its respective source. For my purposes, the personal biases of the authors of different images of Susan are not as important as the histories of those images and how they relate to each other. In *The Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels define the concept of “agenda setting” in the media: “The news may not succeed in telling us what to think, but it does succeed in telling us what to think about.” In an essay about the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, literary critic Wahneema Lubiano explains that the journalistic emphasis on some narratives over others need not be a deliberate decision made “via conspiratorial agreement

¹⁶ Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Pamela Haag, *Consent: Sexual Rights and the Transformation of American Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

of arrangement.” Rather, “such work goes on because the media, along with other public and private entities (including institutions, churches, schools, families, and civic organizations, among others), constantly make available particular narratives and not others.”¹⁹ Americans encounter these specific narratives, or “frames,” through the constant, generally consistent use of them in the mass media. The term “coverage” (and I am certainly guilty of using it throughout this project) is essentially misleading; it encourages viewers and readers to see media reports as “windows on the world” that simply record real-time events without any human selection of which aspects to report, which to omit, which to emphasize, and which to reject.²⁰ In other words, the idea of media “coverage” encourages the ignorance of journalistic frames.

A useful methodology for deconstructing these narratives is the “frame analysis” of media studies and communications. This method examines how a person or event is “named” in the media and how that definition shapes public responses. Works using frame analysis generally do so by unpacking the biases in stories along the lines of partiality, or what is included or excluded, and structure (analyzing, for example, how journalists place conventional narrative forms and characterizations onto events). More importantly for my purposes, frame analyses can illuminate how “the public assigns responsibility for a traumatic event.”²¹ I use some of the tenets of this methodology to unpack not just the biases of media forms, but also the historical precedents of the images they deployed. Moreover, I apply this methodology more broadly to sources other

¹⁹ Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means,” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 329-330.

²⁰ Richard Gruneau and Robert A. Hackett, “The Production of TV News,” in *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction*, eds. John Downing, Ali Mohammadi, and Annabelle Srebeny-Mohammadi (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 282.

²¹ This brief description of frame analysis is taken from Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, “The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2002), 485.

than just the media, such as Union residents, African Americans who publicly responded to her racist lie, other mothers, and her lawyers, among others.

Chapter Breakdown

Susan Smith's story readily lends itself to a chronological analysis, structured around the events of the murders in October 1995, her confession, and her trial in the summer of 1995. The first "Susan" the American public came to know was the distraught mother of the first nine days following the "kidnapping." Despite inconsistencies in her story, the media generally portrayed Smith throughout those first days as a grieving mother, not the most likely suspect. In Chapter 1, "Susan Smith and the 'Mommy Myth,'" I argue that Americans believed her because the twentieth-century idealization of motherhood provided an unassailable script on which Smith could call to cover up her crime. But her story is more complicated than simply the role she was playing; by all accounts, Smith really *was* a loving mother until the day of the murders. There was absolutely no evidence of prior abuse or neglect. This makes the televised maternal role-playing even more interesting; she was, in fact, a good mother *and* a murderer.

Various feminist scholars of the past three decades have examined motherhood as a cultural institution fraught with ambivalence. Adrienne Rich and her feminist cohorts in the 1970s analyzed the content and the larger meaning of modern American ideas about motherhood through the lens of the second-wave feminist movement. Susan Faludi took on the 1980s in *Backlash* and found that cultural messages about motherhood were not universal; the fault lines of race and class were highly evident in Reagan-era pronatalism. More recently, media studies scholar Susan Douglas calls this idealization of motherhood the "mommy myth" in her work on 1990s popular culture. Each of these scholars exposes the more complicated sides of motherhood as an institution and a practice. Their work provided an alternative language that

some observers used in their more sympathetic responses to Susan Smith's confession of infanticide. Although such sympathetic responses were a distinct minority, their attempts at understanding, rather than condemning, Smith are a vital link between feminist ideas of the 1970s and more recent ideas about maternal mental illness and violence.

Scholarship on these issues—the “mommy myth,” and the interconnections between ideas about motherhood, race, and class—adds real depth to Susan Smith's seemingly facile performance as the pleading, endangered mother. Using this scholarship and the media coverage of Smith during those first nine days of the kidnapping investigation, I investigate the myth of the ideal mother, how this image evolved into the one we see of Susan Smith, how she manipulated this role, and how race and class played into maternal representations of Smith. In this chapter, I also examine the alternative responses to the case that harkened back to second-wave theories of ambivalent motherhood and how they were summarily silenced in the weeks immediately following Smith's confession.

I respectfully borrowed the title for Chapter 2, “A Hard Week to Be Black in Union,” from Cornelius Eady's 2001 book of poems about the racial dynamics of the Susan Smith case. The racial reading offered by some members of the media—that Smith's carjacking lie was yet another example of generic American racism featuring the white woman in danger of the black male criminal—never gained widespread support. Unlike the 1989 Charles Stuart case in Boston, police in Union did not indiscriminately round up African American suspects, and they were careful not to address it as a racialized case. However, some African Americans spoke out against Smith's racist lie, and they spoke of the trial in racial terms as well. These observers argued that Smith's whiteness saved her life; a black male carjacker or even a black infanticidal mother would almost certainly have gotten the death penalty in small-town South Carolina.

Jessie Jackson held a rally in Union soon after Smith's confession, and Oprah Winfrey broadcast live from Union the week after the arrest to address the racial dynamics of the case. Reports such as these reveal a concerted effort to reverse the popular and historical projection of racism onto the South, redefining the issues exposed by the Smith case as national problems.

In this chapter, the stereotypes of the endangered white woman and the criminal black male are the main characters. The criminal black man preying on white women was not just the domain of the days of lynching or even of the South. He surfaced often in the late twentieth-century media in the form of the Central Park Jogger rapists, Willie Horton, and Charles Stuart's fictitious Boston attacker, among others. In the case of Susan Smith, these racialized images were intricately connected to her status as a mother. Her lawyer explained this delicate dynamic when he said that "black babies are just not as precious" in this culture.²² Smith's whiteness, according to this view, defined her immediately as a good mother, leading Americans to rally around her despite the discrepancies in her story. It also led them to search for reasons to forgive her once she confessed. African Americans spoke out against Smith's lie, arguing that her whiteness worked in her favor at the time of the crime and at the trial. Investigating racialized representations of the Smith case reveals the historical evolution of racialized images as well as the increasing importance of maternity to those stereotypes. Critical race theory and works that examine the intersections of race and gender provide support to this argument, as do interviews of African American residents of Union, journalists, and local leaders.

In Chapter 3, "The 'Modern-Day Medea,'" I explore the demonized image of Smith following her confession to double homicide. Smith, in the media and in the minds of many Americans, represented pure evil, notably in the shape of a woman. Her "most unnatural crime" marked her as the ultimate in deviant womanhood. Accordingly, Smith was transformed from a "Madonna"

²² Bruck, interview.

to a “whore,” a familiar bifurcation in western culture. In reports, she was automatically no longer a good mother, or if she was at all maternal in news accounts, there had to be “two Susans”—the monster and the mother. This reversal was complete in the national media, which required some major undoing of what reporters had been saying about her just days earlier.

Smith’s newfound monstrosity dictated a dual focus on her sexuality and her class status as the explanations for her crime. Reporters used a classical trope, dubbing Smith a “modern-day Medea” in a strategic reference to both motherhood and sexuality (Euripides’ Medea killed her sons in revenge when her lover left her for another woman). Surely, surmised many Americans, Ms. Smith killed her boys to be with her rich boyfriend—and the police had his break-up letter to prove it. Moreover, she was actually separated from her husband; earlier reports had depicted her as the perfect wife and mother, but post-confession, apparently, she could be neither (never mind that Smith had charged her husband with adultery and not the other way around). This sexualized analysis of her behavior represented in many ways a continuation of popular ideas about female criminality. Historians, criminologists, and feminist scholars identify this trend of the sexualization of female criminals as an important way in which cultures make sense of deviant women. I have found other infanticide cases that mirror almost exactly the evolution of images of Smith from ideal middle-class mother to working-class “sexpot.” In this chapter, I discuss these well-publicized cases as possible scripts for public representations of Susan Smith. The evolution of popular and “official” discourses of female criminality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries serves as the historiographical foundation for this chapter.

In this chapter, I also address the theme of Smith’s shifting class status. In class-based narratives of her crimes, she was a single mother and mill worker struggling to keep afloat who saw her rich boyfriend as her ticket out of the working class. For some journalists, the lens of

class enabled complete demonization, seen in the “boyfriend motive” script. In these public representations, the class fluidity was chronological: just as she was no longer a wife and a mother after her confession (her husband is estranged and her children are dead), she was also automatically working class. These reporters called upon what Theodore Dreiser called the “American Tragedy” narrative in which the American quest for wealth could violently sever any ties, no matter how sacred.

For Rick Bragg of the *New York Times*, on the other hand, this lens of class allowed a kind of sympathy for Smith and, by extension, for the poverty-stricken, small-town South. Bragg, famous for his reporting as well as his later autobiographical accounts of his Deep South childhood, spun Smith’s case as a specifically Southern story, addressing questions of class, deindustrialization, Protestantism, and the inner workings of a small South Carolina town. Class clearly mattered in these accounts, but in different and sometimes contradictory ways. In Chapter 4, “Southern Gothic on Trial,” I use recent histories of the South and interviews, including a very candid one with Mr. Bragg, to link these class-based images of Smith to regional economics, politics, and gender relations.

I also place these extremely negative responses to Susan Smith within a broader context. Smith was not simply tabloid fare. She inspired a wealth of negative responses from powerful people such as Newt Gingrich and the old conservative stand-by, William F. Buckley, Jr. Smith became the reigning front-page story because images of her maternal deviance served many purposes. Gingrich incorporated her as a symbol of the “sickness” of the Democratic system, and Buckley made a similar connection in a series of *National Review* articles. Other sources omitted this overtly political slant, opting instead for classism in their exposés on Smith’s alleged crass class aspirations and linking her case to other perceived “female” problems like welfare,

abortion, and teenage motherhood—all of which are problems linked to female sexuality in popular discourse. Using the widespread negative media coverage and feminist theory, I deconstruct how these representations of Smith were related to the larger milieu of the “backlash,” “family values” politics of the 1980s and 1990s.

Chapter 5, “She Is Still Their Daughter,” is an in-depth, interview-based analysis of the local sympathy for Susan Smith during the late spring and summer of 1995. It is in this image of Susan, and in this chapter of my dissertation, that we see the discourse of motherhood beginning to change. These local sentiments were more complex than simple protection of one of their own or embarrassment at the public airing of dirty laundry. Rather, they involved issues of collective paternal authority, class guilt, politics, religious forgiveness, and the dynamics of a relatively isolated small town. The lingering national outrage at Smith in the months between her confession and her trial was not mirrored in her hometown, despite incendiary quotes by local “malcontents” to the contrary. Distinct small-town relations were at work, specifically what media studies scholar Barbara Barnett calls “the wounded community.” In this script, communities are personified by their local tragedies and scandals; their response is often to cast out the offending party.²³ My interviews with locals reveal that, on the contrary, Union overwhelmingly exhibited compassion and sympathy as a “wounded community.”

The language through which they expressed their support of Smith was Southern Protestantism; religion was the lens through which Union residents made sense of the murders, the lie, and the trial. The immediate talk of healing and forgiveness revealed a Christian image of Smith in which she was simultaneously a madonna and a sinner, a virgin and a wayward woman, a lost lamb who needed to be led back into the fold. There was—and, in some cases, still

²³ Barbara Ann Barnett, “Medea in the Media: Narrative and Myth in Print Media Coverage of Women Who Kill Their Children” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004), 28.

is—a palpable sense of guilt in the community, as if they could have prevented the tragedy. In their own words, many locals say that they allowed Smith to be continually abused by men, beginning with her stepfather in her teens. Union residents express a sort of failure of the community gender system in which they did not properly supervise a young girl who became a mother too soon (at nineteen) and cracked irrevocably after twenty-three years in their midst. Local stories about the case often conflate religion, community, and gender in an attempt to make sense of Susan Smith. In the local imagination, the evil mother Smith returned to the fold as a wayward daughter by the time of her trial. I combine feminist theory, histories of the small-town South and Southern Protestantism, and extensive interviews with Union residents in an attempt to connect Union's image of Susan Smith to the cultural context of the politics of community, "family values," and "backlash" in the 1990s.

Chapter 6, "The 23-Year Story that Led to the Water's Edge," addresses the image that Smith's lawyers, the mainstream media, and locals arrived at after shifting through the many contradictory images. At Smith's July 1995 trial, the defense team presented the complete opposite of the tabloid Medea: Susan became, before the watchful eyes of Americans, a psychologically damaged, abused little girl. This image depended upon a narrative of victimization, infantilization, and the medical pathologization of Smith's past experiences. The emphasis became not what she had done, but what had been done to her. The defense lawyers and witnesses focused simultaneously on Smith as a mother (the role the prosecution's case depended upon) and on her as a young, helpless victim of men. Each defense witness testified that Smith was a good mother and an abused daughter, girlfriend, and wife.

A trial depends on compelling stories as much as any media account, and in this chapter, I deconstruct the narrative spun by Smith's defense team. The prosecution relied on the

“boyfriend motive” scripted for it by the media coverage; their case is a part of this chapter, but my real emphasis is on how the defense team constructed the sympathetic image that won Susan life in prison. Attorneys David Bruck and Judy Clarke, both of whom granted me lengthy interviews, relied on three types of witnesses: psychology experts, community members, and religious leaders. Each of these types provided a necessary component to the “winning” image of Smith. Experts psychologized Smith, showing the jury a woman who had been abused by different men for virtually her entire life; this abuse resulted in extreme suicidal tendencies and depressive disorder. In their testimony, she was something of a “womanchild” trying desperately to mother her young sons by herself. Local witnesses aided this infantilization, narrating their guilt about this little girl who hid her pain so well from her loving but ignorant community. Religious leaders linked the language of psychology and community, echoing Union residents’ calls for religious forgiveness and arguing that capital punishment would only be further destruction wreaked on the “wounded community.”

In each of these testimonies, Smith’s former status as a “good” girl, wife, and mother aided the case against the death penalty. Feminist legal theory, criminology, and histories of crime supplement the trial transcripts, media coverage of the trial, and extensive interviews of the lawyers and witnesses for both sides in this chapter. “Agency,” in a case such as this, is a very tricky subject, but a few feminist writers since the Smith trial have suggested various ways in which the idea applies. Ultimately, this image that saved Smith reiterated traditional notions of female criminality by linking her victimization as a woman with her psychological weakness, thus erasing any possibility for Smith’s own agency (however distasteful such an idea might be in a case like this).

Susan Smith did not fade from the limelight upon her incarceration in August 1995. In Chapter 7, “From ‘Monster’ to ‘Mentally Ill,’” I discuss the collective memories of Smith of the past decade. Of the images discussed, one overwhelms public representations since the trial: the lying “monster mother” and her “boyfriend motive.” Even Rick Bragg, in my recent conversation with him, remembered her this way despite his relatively sympathetic coverage of the trial. People inevitably ask me about her boyfriend, not her abusive husband, her incestuous stepfather, or her history of depression. Susan Smith serves unequivocally as the negative template for infanticide in the media. This is not simply a popular script for making sense of feminine evil. Smith is remembered as the “scheming slut” not because of her own individual attributes, but because of the broader cultural context in which she committed this crime. The idealization of motherhood, the double standard of sexuality, class and racial dynamics, “backlash” politics, internal conflicts in feminist theory, the rise of the Christian Right and its cry of “family values,” and the legal treatment of female offenders—in short, all of the factors discussed herein—fed into a collectively negative memory of Susan Smith.

This argument applies to her staying power as well. Newspapers, magazines, and television shows periodically provide updates on Smith’s prison life, and she continues to inspire a wide range of cultural texts. People associated with the trial have written several books. Crime novelist Richard Price based his 1998 novel *Freedomland*—which was made into a movie that showed in theatres just this year—on the details of her case. An off-Broadway comedy based on the case entitled “Down the Drain” premiered to nasty reviews in 2000, briefly revitalizing media accounts. In the spring of 2004, Yates’ husband and Susan’s ex, David Smith, appeared together on “Larry King Live” to highlight the differences in their wives’ crimes. Union residents, as well, continue to struggle with Susan Smith’s legacy. In 2002, “Turn the Washpot

Down,” a play about local history, was staged in Union. One local referred to the Smith case in his review of the play when he said, “Union is always going to be known as the place where this terrible thing happened. Much as when you say Hiroshima, you think of the bomb.”²⁴

Susan Smith endured her most consistent fame since her incarceration during the 2001 and 2006 trials of Andrea Yates, who committed infanticide while suffering from postpartum depression. Yates, the suburban Houston mother who drowned her five children, is the only violent mother since Susan Smith to have so completely captured the nation’s attention. Yates was perfectly suited to the emerging new discourse of motherhood: she was white, middle-class, overtly religious, and a homemaker. She was a loving mother with a documented history of psychological problems stemming from her relationships with men (the same alleged source of Susan’s psychological traumas). Media accounts compared Yates to Smith with the goal of distinguishing between them: Smith was clearly “evil,” while Yates was certifiably “insane.” Yet the two cases have much in common: despite their different psychological symptoms, Yates’ insanity defense (which won her psychiatric care rather than life in prison in the summer of 2006) followed the script of Susan’s legal defense almost exactly.

The academic work of feminists also indicates an emerging new discourse of motherhood. The last decade has featured more books on mothering and ambivalence, most of which mention Susan’s case in some way or another, than were published during the “second wave” of the 1970s. These works place mothering within a cultural context, targeting the impossible ideals of American maternity and arguing for a redefinition of motherhood based on the actual experiences of mothers. These feminist voices are still marginalized in academia and in popular culture. But the pathology of post-partum mental illness, in the form of depression or psychosis, has gained widespread cultural acceptance. Coverage of Yates’ second and final trial in the

²⁴ Daniel S. Levy and Gail Cameron Wescott, “Our Town,” *People*, August 19, 2002.

summer of 2006 overwhelmingly expressed the new discourse of maternal mental illness, and we are in a cultural moment in which it is acceptable, even laudable, for a popular celebrity like Brooke Shields to expose her own battles with depression and violent thoughts following the birth of her first child. This is an entirely different world for mothers than the one in which Susan Smith committed her infamous crimes just over a decade ago.

This final chapter, then, explores the various public uses of Susan Smith since her trial. These uses will serve as kind of endpoint, a sort of pulse-taking of all of these various force of gender, race, and class through the lens of memories of Smith. These public representations especially compare to the sympathetic coverage of the Andrea Yates trial. I try to answer why it is that feminists could rally around Yates despite their conspicuous silence at the time of the Susan Smith trial. What does this new discourse of motherhood, as applied to infanticidal mothers, actually say about women? Should feminists be disturbed by the idea that these violent women have been shifted from one misogynist stereotype to another, from “bad” to “mad”? Through the lens of the Susan Smith case, we can begin to understand these subtle changes in the discourse of motherhood and to weigh their implications for twenty-first century feminism.

CHAPTER 1

SUSAN SMITH AND THE “MOMMY MYTH”

Things generally move pretty slowly in the rural upstate of South Carolina. On a Tuesday night in the late fall of 1994, local law enforcement certainly did not expect a crime as violent as a carjacking. Within thirty minutes of the 911 call reporting that a young mother had been attacked, computers in police departments across the country carried the news of the alleged carjacking. The rapid circulation of what little information was known primed the local print media to follow the story early the next morning. Journalists from Spartanburg arrived at daybreak to find hordes of law enforcement officers at the courthouse downtown. Only one photographer, two television cameramen, and four newspaper reporters attended Sheriff Wells’ first press conference. Within hours, that would change, as satellite trucks filled Main Street around the Union County courthouse that afternoon.²⁵

On Wednesday, 26 October 1994, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw introduced nightly news-watching Americans to Susan Smith, the distraught young mother who would soon be a household name. “A mother’s nightmare came true in South Carolina,” he told viewers solemnly, as a composite sketch of a nondescript black man materialized on the screen. The news segment “Where Are My Children?” featured the Union, South Carolina, mother who had been the victim of a carjacking less than twenty-four hours earlier. Reporter Bob Dotson informed shocked viewers that Mrs. Smith’s two young sons, Michael (age three) and Alex (age fourteen months), had been stolen with the car—the boys were strapped in the car seats in the back of Smith’s

²⁵ Gary Henderson, *Nine Days in Union: The Search for Michael and Alex Smith* (Spartanburg, SC: Honoribus Press, 1995), 11, 2, 5, 12.

Mazda at the time of the carjacking. In a press conference that day, Susan Smith tearfully described for a national audience how the carjacker jumped into the passenger side of her car and ordered her to drive. In a voiceover accompanied by a photograph of her sons, NBC quoted Smith: “I just screamed. I said, ‘What are you doing?’ He said to shut up and drive and he had a gun and he was poking it in my side, you know.” Smith sniffled as she told reporters that she pleaded for her sons as her attacker forced her out of the car: “I said, ‘I’m going to get my children before I go,’ and he said ‘No, you can’t, I don’t have time for that,’ and just sort of pushed me on out.” The frames shifted from the local police department to Susan with her husband, David Smith, to a statement by Union County Sheriff Howard Wells reassuring people that the attacker had no reason to hurt the boys. The two-minute NBC report began and ended with an extreme close-up of a police artist’s sketch of the alleged carjacker, a black man in a knit cap.²⁶

These televised images first introduced Americans to the Susan Smith case, and they have had an enormous staying power; even those who do not remember the outcome of her trial recall scenes of Smith crying for her lost boys. The television coverage of the Susan Smith saga aided the kidnapping investigation and reflected the concern of a public desperate to find the missing boys. Television reporters did not simply introduce Susan Smith to viewers; rather, they offered carefully constructed images of Susan Smith to a nation riveted by her story.

Smith herself provided the initial script with her carjacking tale: she was a victimized white mother whose children had been kidnapped by a black man. The contemporary ideal image of motherhood was an unassailable role on which Smith could call to cover up her crime and ensure public sympathy. Despite this actively duplicitous performance of motherhood, Smith was never completely in control of her public image. The media played a key role in constructing the

²⁶ *Evening News*, NBC, October 26, 1994.

“Susan” Americans were to consume. Smith, whether or not she knew it when as she formulated her carjacking story, could virtually assume public sympathy for the culturally beloved role of the white mother in danger. By playing this maternal race card, Smith provided reporters with a ready-made cultural type.

Reporters easily supplemented her story with visual images and reports that positioned her as an appropriate maternal icon, despite Smith’s admittedly poor performance and the many factual discrepancies in her carjacking tale. Journalists not only reported the facts of the case, they filled in the missing details of the Good Mother image supplied by Smith. The American media offered viewers a distinct narrative, a lens through which to view the Susan Smith case. The initial NBC report, and countless others that followed from almost every media outlet across the country, performed the necessary cultural work of placing Susan Smith within a script that modern Americans could understand. Through deliberately chosen, familiar images and voiceovers, television reporters revealed to the public what kind of a mother Susan Smith was, and therefore how to read her story.

Media studies scholars Richard Gruneau and Robert A. Hackett argue that the immediately visual nature of televised news makes detailed story-telling difficult. Television journalists and their producers compensate for this fundamental problem of the medium through the strategic use of images, which “personalize a story in ways that cannot be duplicated in print.” Sari Thomas agrees that each image on television entails a “myth,” or an accompanying but unspoken narrative, representing “any belief in a culture that is so ingrained in and pervasive among members of the society that, for the most part, what the belief asserts goes without question.”²⁷

²⁷ Gruneau and Hackett, 285; Sari Thomas, “Myths In and About Television,” in Downing et al, eds., 331.

When NBC and other media outlets offered sympathetic maternal images of Susan Smith, their agenda dovetailed with hers: both upheld dearly held cultural beliefs about motherhood.

The media, aided by Smith herself, constructed her narrative to reflect the available discourse of ideal maternity in the 1990s. Smith's national debut was characterized by a quick succession of familiar images of American motherhood. In this chapter, I do a close reading of the media coverage of Susan Smith during the first weeks of her national fame, from the alleged carjacking to the days immediately following her confession of infanticide. The images of the Smith boys, of Susan crying, and of male authorities conducting a nationwide kidnapping investigation initially drew viewers into the saga, and the accompanying newspaper coverage fleshed out the images Americans saw nightly on their television screens.²⁸ From the very beginning, journalists positioned Susan Smith within a rapid series of familiar frames, positioning her at different points along the contemporary hierarchy of motherhood. In the short course of nine days, "Susan Smith" was transformed from a white, middle-class, happily married "mom" to a single, working-class, oversexed, lying tramp who cared more for the various men in her life than for her own two sons. The problem with the images was not their familiarity; image-literate viewers knew the characters, and they knew the accompanying plots. The problem was that contemporary images of motherhood just did not seem to fit Susan Smith. Thus, reporters shuffled through them in rapid succession, trying to make sense of the mystifying mother in their midst. The few alternative voices in the media—voices that argued for a feminist reading of Smith's crimes—were a negligible part of the national conversation about Susan Smith.

²⁸ In his study of the Chicago heat wave of the mid-1990s, Eric Klinenberg argues that newspapers, because of their structure, offer more news content than televised mediums, which "allows editors to present conflicting ideas or opinions in forms that managers in other media do not make available," (Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002], 192-193). In the coverage of the Susan Smith case, newspaper coverage simply added more depth to the images presented in televised reports; "conflicting ideas" were rarely examined.

The pervasive televised image of the grieving, maternal Susan Smith tapped into complex cultural ideas about American maternity and what it necessarily entails. Susan Smith willingly stepped into the role of the Good Mother in danger, a role accompanied by culturally necessary racial and class characteristics. And it was, in fact, a role; the realities of her life as a mother did not factor into the initial coverage. In the first week of national coverage, Smith's tears and one touching home video of Michael Smith's third birthday party served as evidence of her ideal maternal behavior. It was not until after her confession that reporters sought out family, friends, and neighbors to question whether or not Smith was actually a competent mother.

Perhaps this should not be surprising; Americans, it seems, have always judged motherhood according to a distinct hierarchy of race and class.²⁹ The 1980s and 1990s featured an exaggerated idealization of white, middle-class, married, full-time motherhood, accompanied by a virulent condemnation of other types of maternity such as single or working motherhood. Media studies scholar Susan Douglas deemed this reactionary trend the “new momism”—promulgated by sources as varied as radio host Dr. Laura Schlesinger and the kidnapping cases routinely featured on *America's Most Wanted*—in which “woman” equaled “mother.” In other words, the dominant maternal discourse of the 1990s dictated that women were incomplete without children. Moreover, good mothers devoted their entire beings—body, soul, time, and mind—to their children. This “media obsession” with ideal motherhood constituted a “redomestication” campaign meant to target the embattled feminist movement and bolster the rise of the political right in the name of “family values.”³⁰ Because it mirrored the actual experiences of very few, if any, American mothers, the “new momism” was never a wholly

²⁹ Feldstein; Harris, 249.

³⁰ Douglas and Michaels, 3-4.

hegemonic discourse; there were outspoken exceptions to the rules of the “mommy myth,” including, for instance, public figures like Hillary Clinton or popular characters like Murphy Brown (both of whom were seen as “brazen,” even masculine, in the mainstream media).

Motherhood was central to the politics of the 1980s-90s attack on second-wave feminism. As Susan Faludi argued in *Backlash*, popular culture in the form of movies, television shows, news, and the fashion industry represented some of the primary fronts of the backlash, and mothers, good and bad, were a central subject.³¹ The line between popular culture and the politics of motherhood was so blurry, in fact, that Vice President Dan Quayle famously attacked a television character, “Murphy Brown,” on the grounds of motherhood. The fictional Brown incurred Quayle’s wrath by being single and pregnant, even though her fictional job more than allowed her to support children at or above middle-class standards. Brown’s working and unmarried status prompted Quayle to accuse her of eroding “family values” and “mocking fatherhood.” Ever-ready with a sound bite, Quayle also held single mothers responsible for the 1992 Los Angeles riots, arguing that the “poverty of values” that included the rising numbers of unwed mothers caused the violence.³² Of course, Dan Quayle can hardly be taken as an authoritative figure on social issues, much less motherhood, and his party lost the presidential election late that year. But the images he relied upon in his diatribe against Murphy Brown became legislated reality after the “Republican Revolution” in Congress a few years later. In national politics as well as the daily media, ideas about motherhood constituted a battleground for major issues of race, class, and gender in contemporary America.

³¹ Faludi., xviii.

³² “Dan Quayle vs. Murphy Brown,” *Time*, June 1, 1992; Harris, 250; Diane Eyer, *Motherguilt: How Our Culture Blames Mothers for What’s Wrong with Society* (New York: Times Books, 1996), xii.

This backlash context combined with an embattled feminist movement to produce an overwhelmingly conservative discourse of maternity. The reigning ideology of “compulsory motherhood”—motherhood that is the natural, not chosen, calling of women—featured a powerful Good Mother/Bad Mother dialectic.³³ Good Mothers were responsible for nurturing the youth of a healthy, productive nation. The cultural significance placed on the Good Mother had, predictably, a darker side, in which mothers who did not follow the narrow prescriptions of the ideal were deviants responsible for the moral degeneration of the nation (or at least, according to Quayle, urban violence). This “psychological police state” amounted to an overwhelming cultural myth—the “mommy myth.” Acknowledging that motherhood could be a difficult experience about which many mothers were frequently ambivalent, if not downright resentful, was a dangerous admission that could easily land a woman among the ranks of Public Enemy Number One, the deviant mother.³⁴

The media coverage of the Susan Smith case in its first nine days, when it was a carjacking/kidnapping rather than a homicide case, is an explicit example of the dialectic of the new momism. In the cultural discourse of the 1990s, there was one primary way in which to understand Susan Smith. Smith’s maternal status alone did not automatically make her sympathetic, although it did make her newsworthy.³⁵ Each image of Smith in the media was a cultural construction, not a direct reflection, which called upon a distinctly conservative discourse of motherhood and silenced other possible readings of the case. This collusion of journalism and politics need not be a deliberate conspiracy, but it does pose a challenge the idea

³³ Harris, 249.

³⁴ Douglas and Michaels, 4, 9-10, 6.

³⁵ Ruth Feldstein points out in her study of Mamie Till Bradley, the mother of Emmett Till, that “motherhood itself did not automatically confer authority,” especially when the mother in question was African American (Feldstein, 90).

of the “liberal media.” Writer Edward Herman points out that this opinion clearly ignores “how unlikely it is that institutions so firmly embedded in the corporate government world could display systematic anti-establishment bias.”³⁶ Corporate production trumped individual opinions and dictated the “mythical” images seen on the nightly news. Indeed, some journalists who covered the case have admitted to personal suspicion of Susan Smith even as they constructed ideal maternal images of her.³⁷

The hysterical, crying young Susan Smith was, it seemed at first, a Good Mother straight out of central casting. Americans wasted little time rallying behind the tearful young mother imploring the alleged kidnapper from television screens across the nation. Susan Smith knew what was required of her when she played her maternal role for cameras. She explicitly referenced the alleged “naturalness” of ideal motherhood in her most oft-quoted statement: “I was thinking last night, as a mother, it’s only a natural instinct to protect your children from any harm.”³⁸ The needs of her boys, she told concerned Americans, were physically her own. Smith told the American public that she was literally sick with worry. The grief-stricken mother was

³⁶ Edward Herman, “Media and the U.S. Political Economy,” in Downing, ed., 76. Journalist Amy Goodman, who explicitly argues for the existence of a conservative media conspiracy, points out that the variety of different media outlets obscures the fact that most of them are owned by the same handful of corporations: “Since the first Gulf War, the media have become even more homogenized--and the news more uniform and gung ho. Six huge corps now control the major US media: Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation (FOX, HarperCollins, *New York Post*, DirecTV, and 34 TV stations), GE (NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, Telemundo, Bravo, and 13 TV stations), Time Warner (AOL, CNN, Warner Bros., *Time*, and its 130 magazines), Disney (ABC, Disney Channel, ESPN, 10 TV and 29 radio stations, and Hyperion), Viacom (CBS, MTV, Nickelodeon, Paramount Pictures, Simon & Schuster, and 185 US radio stations), and Bertelsmann (Random House and its more than 100 imprints, and Gruner + Jahr and its 80 magazines)” (Amy Goodman, *The Exception to the Rulers: Exposing Oily Politicians, War Profiteers, and the Media that Love Them* [New York: Hyperion 2004], 153).

³⁷ Twila Decker-Davis, interview by author.

³⁸ Rick Bragg, “Police Say Woman Admits to Killings as Bodies of 2 Children Found Inside Her Car,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1994.

having trouble eating, because it reminded her that her boys might be hungry; “it [was] hard to be warm,” she told her children via television reporters, “because you might be cold.”³⁹

Smith had only to offer these maternal lines, and the media got right to work fleshing out the image of the Good Mother. Because of the visual nature of race in the United States, the first characteristic Americans knew about Susan Smith was her whiteness. The first two nights of television coverage featured the stark opposition of black and white.⁴⁰ On NBC, the first national network to carry the story, the dark sketch of the alleged carjacker faded into the bright feminine photograph of Susan, a plain, pale woman with an enormous white bow in her hair. Smith’s tearful description of the carjacking was followed by a shot of the most widely-circulated photograph of Michael and Alex Smith, which showed the boys together in a white wicker chair, wearing white shirts and blue overalls, in front of a white background. Union County Sheriff Howard Wells gave a brief statement, followed by video of various law enforcement officers at work on the case. The voiceover intoned, “Police in four states are looking for that man, with this mother’s children.”⁴¹ The racial code was clear: “black” stood for masculine crime, danger, and evil, while “white” stood for the law, female victimization, and innocence.

Smith’s race was a key part of the telling of her story as one of motherhood. Narratives of white mothers and their babies in danger were familiar tales of the backlash of the 1980s. Childhood danger was something of a national obsession in the 1980s, and by the 1990s, the theme had become the anchoring news peg for everything from possibly dangerous toys to

³⁹ Clif Leblan and Twila Decker, “Parents of Missing Boys Plead Again for Their Return: ‘No One Can Understand the Pain,’” *Peoria Journal Star*, November 2, 1994.

⁴⁰ *Evening News*, ABC, October 27, 1994; *Evening News*, NBC, October 26, 1994.

⁴¹ *Evening News*, NBC, October 26, 1994.

household chemicals to “stranger danger.” Kidnapping cases captured major headlines; the media attention seemingly turned these relatively rare tragedies into a full-blown modern epidemic. Reports suggested that as many as two million American children disappeared each year. Official crime statistics suggest otherwise; in 1988, for example, between two and three hundred children were kidnapped by strangers, and, of those, less than half died as a result. But, according to Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, “a small number of tragic cases became a blanket of terror thrown over us all” as trusted news anchors like Tom Brokaw did features on “Parent’s Fears” and “stranger danger,” complete with ominous shots of empty playgrounds.⁴² Significantly, the cases that received the most attention—Adam Walsh (1981), Polly Klaas (1993), and Michael and Alex Smith—always featured white families.

But these lovely white children were not alone in danger. White mothers, too, had much to fear in the late 1980s. Beginning in the early 1980s and continuing for at least a decade, the national media periodically served up reports based on “scientific” studies that argued that there was an infertility epidemic among American women who chose to pursue careers and have children later in their thirties. This perceived epidemic coupled with the so-called “birth dearth” in which “liberated” American women were choosing to have fewer or no children. The foilers of the birth dearth were, of course, Reagan’s welfare queens, or single black women, whose birth rates allegedly reached “epidemic proportions” in the 1980s. That is, troubling fertility epidemics occurred when white women chose not to have children and when black women did. The implicit racist message of these studies was subtle but clear, meant to persuade white, middle-class women to abandon their careers and start reproducing before “paupers, fools, and

⁴² Douglas and Michaels, 91-93.

foreigners” outpaced them.⁴³ *Ms. Magazine*—the glossy voice of feminism created by Gloria Steinem but taken over by Ann Summers in 1987—captured the tone of the “birth dearth” hysteria with their May 1988 “Special Mother’s Issue,” which featured a glowing, blonde mother holding her angelic, white child, with “ENDANGERED?” stamped over them.⁴⁴ Add to this cultural paranoia the specter of kidnapping and “stranger danger,” and Susan Smith and her sons constituted a very endangered species indeed.

In this context, a 23-year-old married white mother of two healthy sons was indeed a useful poster child for the conservative political program that urged women back into the home. Susan Smith, crying over her lost sons, stood in grand contrast, on the one hand, to the crassly careerist women of the 1980s who chose to have children later only to discover they were infertile and, on the other, to black single women whose supposedly skyrocketing illegitimacy rates were slowly destroying the nation. These were familiar female types to 1990s audiences, and the differences between Susan Smith and the many kinds of bad mothers need not be spelled out. Susan Smith, with the aid of strategic camera shots and the racialized context of contemporary motherhood, easily fit the role of the white Good Mother in danger in those initial days of the kidnapping investigation. The Smith drama was a morality play featuring a sympathetic maternal character that was diametrically opposed to the negative, racialized images of maternity rampaging through the media and pop culture of the early 1990s.

Class status was also a running subtext in this racialized discourse of motherhood in the 1980s. Very closely related to her “appropriate” race was Smith’s class and working status. In these first days of sympathetic coverage, reporters never mentioned Susan Smith’s full-time secretarial job, although her occupation was to take on immense significance in journalistic

⁴³ Faludi, 32-34.

⁴⁴ *Ms. Magazine*, “The Future of Mothers: The Dilemmas of the New Birth Technologies,” (May 1988).

narratives after her confession. Reporters instead focused on David Smith's job as a grocery store manager. Indeed, NBC painted an idyllic family memory of Susan visiting David at work while the boys played in the aisles.⁴⁵ The deliberate omission of Smith's working status coupled with her sobbing quotes about her boys' daily needs to produce an image of Smith as a stay-at-home, full-time mother.

Full-time mothering had ascended to dizzy heights by the 1990s. The "New Traditionalist" movement, in which women were encouraged to abandon careerism for the "mommy track," was one of the many cultural fronts of backlash politics. Launched in 1988 by *Good Housekeeping* magazine, this trend swept the media, urging women to "cocoon" at home with their children and abandon the hard-won educational and occupational rights feminists had been fighting for the last two decades.⁴⁶ This "back to the home" movement for women was not simply one among a range of equal life choices. Predictably, working mothers were the deviant counterparts to the ideal full-time mothers. Working women who sent their children to day care were courting certain danger. Physical and sexual abuse at day care centers was only the most extreme of the dangerous possibilities; attachment issues, improper socialization, and germs topped the list of problems working mothers would have to face in their children if they turned to the "Thalidomide of the '80s" for care. And it was not just the children who suffered. A high-ranking military official in the Reagan administration argued working mothers who "send their children to faceless centers rather than stay home to take care of them are weakening the moral fiber of the Nation."⁴⁷ In this anti-day care context, it is clear why the day care where the Smith

⁴⁵ *Evening News*, NBC, October 27, 1994.

⁴⁶ Faludi, 84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

boys were sorely missed did not appear in media reports until later in the investigation. A focus on her neighbor's in-home day care would reveal that Susan Smith potentially put her children in harm's way by leaving them each day to go to work.⁴⁸

In this discourse of motherhood, working mothers were thus anti-mothers. The media characterized working mothers along a spectrum ranging narrowly from pitiful to neglectful, even abusive. *Ms. Magazine* featured two articles about mothers side-by-side in their 1988 "Special Mothers Issue," and readers were clearly meant to pity, not identify with, working mothers. A professor and mother of three experienced "transcendence" at the hospital birth of her first grandchild. A glowing drawing of a grandmother, mother, and baby accompanied the piece. The following article brought readers back to stark reality with harsh, red-tinted photographs of Cherryl Bellefleur, the subject of that month's "Tracking the Dream" series. "Twice married, twice divorced," proclaimed the headline sadly, "Cherryl lives with her son Jessie in a trailer she may lose. She longs for a real house and a relationship with a good man."⁴⁹

Readers may well have felt sympathy for Cherryl, but there was no question which mother they would rather be; couched between the touching stories of two upper-middle-class mothers, Cherryl was clearly not the maternal image readers were meant to emulate. It was not just the personal narratives of mothers that defined Good Motherhood for readers. Advertisements hammered home the particular cultural dangers of being a poor working mother. A two-page Chevy ad, placed in the middle of "Cherryl's Story," featured a white mother with a baby in soft focus, imploring consumers: "Don't spend the next six years wondering if you did the right

⁴⁸ The only reporter that even talked to Judi Cathcart, the woman that ran the daycare attended by the Smith boys, during the entire investigation was Gary Henderson of the *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*. The interview ran in the October 29, 1994 edition. Unlike some of Henderson's other articles, it was not picked up by national agencies or used by other reporters (Henderson, 129-130).

⁴⁹ Kathy Dobie, "Cherryl's Story," *Ms. Magazine*, "Special Mothers' Issue," (May 1988), 42.

thing.”⁵⁰ The image was the ultimate contradiction of the stark photographs of cigarette-smoking, coffee drinking, prematurely aging Cherryl and her son Jessie in their cramped trailer. The next article in the magazine drove in the final nail of the “back-to-home” message to mothers. Under the headline “Careers and Kids,” the author asked, “Many of today’s most successful women stayed home to raise their children—Are young mothers now trying to do too much?”⁵¹

The obvious answer to the question was “yes.” In 1990s America, mothering was a full-time job, and mothers were professionals whose children took up all of their time; they had no room for other work or careers.⁵² The supposed choice of the 1980s—career vs. “mommy track”—was, according to the common sense of the 1990s, no longer an option: “The supermom of the 1980s who managed to stagger into the '90s [was] told that she just can't 'have it all' and presumably she should feel guilty for continuing to try.”⁵³ This was not simply a heavily promoted cultural prescription for maternal behavior. The legal system increasingly enforced this prescription in courts as well. One very public example was the attempt by California courts to give custody of O.J. Simpson prosecutor Marcia Clark’s two sons to her ex-husband because she was spending too much time on the “trial of the century” and too little time with her kids.⁵⁴

This attack on working mothers reached its apex in 1994 with the advent of Dr. Laura Schlesinger’s wildly popular radio talk show. Dr. Laura, as she calls herself, is best known for her tirades against working mothers (although, as her critics delight in pointing out, she is one

⁵⁰ Chevrolet Advertisement, *Ms. Magazine*, “Special Mothers’ Issue,” (May 1988), 46-47.

⁵¹ Edith Fierst, “Careers and Kids,” *Ms. Magazine*, “Special Mothers’ Issue,” (May 1988), 62.

⁵² Douglas and Michaels, 151.

⁵³ Eyer, 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

herself). She begins and ends each radio show with the refrain, “I am my kid’s mom,” and she berates callers into similarly arranging their lives around their children. Her advice centers on re-imposing retrograde “family values” on a morally bankrupt nation. The “Big-Mother-is-watching you” ethos she promotes daily on the airwaves is perhaps the front line of the “new momism.”⁵⁵ Although her popularity has waned, her enormous following in the mid-1990s certainly suggests that she began dispensing advice via the airwaves at a time when American women were experiencing real anxiety in their roles as mothers. By 1997, she was the second most popular radio show host in the nation (second only to Rush Limbaugh) and the top radio host in Canada. With an audience of 20 million viewers, weekly and monthly newsletters, two *New York Times* bestsellers, and planned expansions into the remainder of the English-speaking world, Dr. Laura was the global voice of the “new momism” in the mid- to late-1990s.⁵⁶

According to the dictates of the “new momism,” to be a Good Mother was to be a mother who did not work outside the home. Although Susan Smith had worked outside the home for many years, since her high school graduation before she had children, her occupation was not news until her confession of double homicide. The original “Susan Smith” viewed by Americans in the first week of her national fame could not have been further from the familiar maternal stereotypes of Marcia Clark, the “supermom” who tried unsuccessfully to “have it all,” or Cheryl, the working-class mother who led her son in the early-morning dark from their trailer to his day care.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Douglas and Michaels, 308-311.

⁵⁶ Craig Hamilton, “The Conscience of America,” *What Is Enlightenment? Magazine* (Fall-Winter 1997).

⁵⁷ Dobie, 44 (photograph and caption).

The class requirement of the “new momism” masked the fact that most mothers in this country could not financially afford to stay at home with their children whether they want to or not. Susan Smith’s working status was replaced in media narratives by key shots and sound bites that clearly positioned Smith as a middle-class mother who met Dr. Laura’s standards. On location in Union a few days after Susan reported her sons missing, ABC’s Mike von Fremd reported that the Smiths were “well-liked” in the small town, quoting a local woman who said Susan “came from a very good upbringing.”⁵⁸ Shots of Susan’s parents’ suburban ranch house, where the family gathered during the investigation, accompanied these reports as visual proof of the Smiths’ appropriate class status. Reporters never mentioned that this large house was the home of Susan’s much more well-to-do stepfather, or that Susan and David Smith, before their separation (which was itself not yet a part of the public narrative), actually lived in a very modest brick home on the other side of town purchased for them by her parents.

Public representations of Susan Smith’s marital status were intricately bound to representations of her class and race. Media reports consistently positioned Smith as a *wife* and mother, although it was common knowledge in Union that Susan and David Smith were in the midst of a nasty divorce on the grounds of his adultery. Susan rarely appeared before cameras without David in tow, and more often than not, they were actually touching—holding hands or physically supporting each other in front of a bank of microphones. Broadcasts in these early days showed David Smith pleading with the carjacker via television camera, but Susan Smith was never shown alone.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Evening News*, ABC, October 28, 1994.

⁵⁹ *Evening News*, NBC, October 26, 1994; *Evening News*, CBS, October 27, 1994; *Evening News*, ABC, October 27, 1994.

Because single mothers—a social group that was distinctly racially and class-coded in 1990s America—perhaps topped the list of contemporary “anti-mothers,” for reporters to depict Smith as a Good Mother, she had to appear in print and on television as the maternal half of a happily married couple. Single motherhood indicated a dysfunctional family structure in which the father—the normative leader of the household and the figure whose income allowed full-time “new momism” to flourish—was missing. According to the late twentieth-century maternal mythology, single mothers could not be Good Mothers.

Wealth did not exempt single mothers—even fictional ones like Murphy Brown—from public vitriol, but poor and black mothers were, not surprisingly, particular targets. Historian Rickie Solinger has documented how white single mothers were medically and culturally pathologized in the postwar period; the conventional wisdom about unmarried white pregnancy went from “He ruined her” to “She got herself in trouble” in a matter of years.⁶⁰ In the late twentieth century, single motherhood was not simply an individual or familial problem. Social policy, in the form of welfare, abortion, and birth control legislation, specifically targeted the mothers of “illegitimate” children in order to avert a potential national disaster.⁶¹ Policy makers attempted to enforce the traditional nuclear family with “reformed” welfare programs that tied mothers receiving assistance to their children’s fathers, regardless of the nature of their relationships. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) did not require married mothers on welfare to work, but single mothers had to work outside the home thirty hours per week in order to qualify for assistance.⁶² Dan Quayle, Murphy Brown’s nemesis,

⁶⁰ Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁶² Gwendolyn Mink, “Violating Women: Rights Abuses in the Welfare Police State,” in *Lost Ground: Welfare Reform, Poverty, and Beyond*, ed. Randy Albelda and Ann Withorn (Boston: South End Press, 2002), 95-112.

argued in his speech attacking the fictional character that “marriage is probably the best anti-poverty program of all.”⁶³ In other words, according to this conservative line of thinking, it was their single status, rather than the problems with the American welfare system or the utter lack of government-funded childcare programs, that made poor mothers a fundamental social problem and cultural target. This kind of antagonism, and even economic punishment, amounted to a policy war against mothers trying to raise their children alone. Single, poor mothers, in this classist discourse of maternity, simply could not be good mothers without the state’s aid.

Poor mothers were racialized in public consciousness as well. Although by 1994, thirty-nine percent of welfare families were white and thirty-seven percent were black, the media and official legislation consistently represented welfare and single motherhood as entwined African American problems.⁶⁴ Accusations of illegitimacy and dangerous matriarchy had explicitly surrounded African American single-mother households since at least the Moynihan report of 1965.⁶⁵ Reagan’s “welfare queens” were the 1980s counterparts to Moynihan’s matriarchs. The Reagan administration’s “welfare queens” quickly became a familiar cultural stereotype, so that by the 1990s, welfare mothers conjured the immediate image of “an African American woman in some urban ghetto with six kids by six different men.”⁶⁶ Moynihan’s pathological matriarchs and their daughters, the “welfare queens” of the 1980s-90s, were poor, black and blamed for serious social problems (namely, the degeneration of family structures and the corruption of the country’s welfare system).

⁶³ Harris, 250.

⁶⁴ Douglas and Michaels, 177, 42.

⁶⁵ Feldstein, 161.

⁶⁶ Douglas and Michaels, 176.

This racialized discourse of single motherhood effectively erased single, white, working-class mothers like Susan Smith. Through visual images and minimal but carefully placed sound bites, television reporters completed this cultural erasure, depicting Smith in the first week of national coverage of the case as a white, middle-class, married, full-time mother—in other words, Smith was implicitly situated against the single, working, black “anti-mothers” of contemporary cultural discourse. To position Susan Smith along a distinct hierarchy of race, class, and motherhood was to pit her against the various types of anti-mothers in American culture.

Although reporters actively aided Susan Smith’s performance as the Good Mother, they were not creating new ways of reading gender or motherhood at this point in the coverage. Using the initial, two-dimensional script provided by Susan Smith, reporters offered the public the character development necessary to a pre-existing narrative featuring a grieving mother as heroine. The necessary racial and class components of the character were scripted; reporters had only to fill in the details. Because Susan Smith initially represented herself as a favored cultural type, the white mother in danger, the media reflexively filled in the holes in her script. In order to be deserving of sympathetic representations in the 1990s American media, she *must* be white, middle-class, and safely within the confines of a patriarchal nuclear family, rather than alone, awaiting a divorce, and sending her children to daycare while she worked a full-time, low-paying job (even though this would have been a more realistic account of her rather difficult situation). Even though some journalists later confessed to early suspicion of Smith, expressing it without evidence would be both bad journalism and a compromise to the ongoing investigation. In the context of such impossible maternal standards, any indication of deviance in terms of class or marital status would have placed Smith among the ranks of the anti-mothers, which might well

entail criminal suspicion. Thus, in the short span of three days, an idealized, culturally familiar image of Susan Smith had taken full shape with considerably little help from Susan herself.

In fact, Smith's performance was not seamless; all of this journalistic supplementation served to obscure Smith's own words. Her paeans to motherhood notwithstanding, Smith also courted public suspicion from the outset of the investigation. In the very first national broadcast, she indicated that the alleged kidnapping might actually result in the far worse crime of murder. With an exaggerated snuffle, Susan Smith told reporters: "My big thing is, you know, they were screaming, they were crying, and I'm just so scared he lost his patience or something, you know. I don't know." This statement—so telling in retrospect—implied the unthinkable: that Smith knew, or at least felt, that her children had been harmed. Smith herself was the first to question publicly whether or not her boys were still alive. The NBC report hastened to counteract this statement, following it with firm reassurance from Union County Sheriff Howard Wells that the kidnapper's real objective was not to "hurt these children."⁶⁷ The following evening in an ABC broadcast, Smith again indicated her own "failure" as a mother, saying there was more she "could've or should've done" the night of the carjacking. Video footage of the investigative command center and the sketch of the alleged carjacker accompanied her statement, tempering any suspicious implications as well as Smith's own admission of failure to be the ideal maternal protector.⁶⁸ Less than a week later, she would cite feelings of maternal failure as one of the primary reasons that she murdered her sons.

From the outset, Smith struggled to represent herself. Despite the obvious cracks in her maternal façade, her voice was lost in the flurry of public representation. To acknowledge this

⁶⁷ *Evening News*, NBC, October 26, 1994.

⁶⁸ *Evening News*, ABC, October 27, 1994.

suspicion—to hear Susan’s subtle admissions in those first few days of the investigation—was to question the reigning common sense of new momism, which, according to Douglas and Michaels, “rendered ambivalence about having children—let alone the desire to escape from them—inconceivable” and “elevated motherhood to a state of ecstasy and all toddlers to sainthood.”⁶⁹ The contemporary discourse of motherhood required that Smith’s suspicious comments be ignored (at least by the media—investigators carefully recorded them all). Journalists and other observers easily fit Susan Smith into the familiar script of the white, middle-class, happily married Good Mother. The antiheroes, according to this discourse, were the black male criminal and, more subtly, the wide range of “bad mothers” in 1990s America. This narrative had no room for a mother who might deliberately harm her children.

After a few long days of intense national scrutiny, the fruitless investigation was clearly boring the reporters who had already begun to recycle the details of Smith’s story. The investigation dragged on for days with no new leads. In fact, there were no clues at all, only Susan’s ever-changing story of the night of the carjacking. “We do not have the car. We do not have the children. We do not have the suspect,” a visibly frustrated Sheriff Howard Wells told reporters in his evening press conference on the third day of media coverage.⁷⁰

That same evening, the national nightly news programs featured a “break” in the case—or rather, because it was not “news” to investigators or even locals, it was a break in the ideal images of Susan Smith. On October 28, 1994, three days into the investigation, all of the major media outlets “broke” the news that the Smiths, who had thus far been shown together in all reports, had actually been separated for months and had filed for divorce just weeks before the

⁶⁹ Douglas and Michaels, 164.

⁷⁰ *Evening News*, CBS, October 28, 1994. Wells gave press conferences twice daily during the nine days of the investigation (Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*, 49).

alleged carjacking. Although the Smiths' legal separation surprised many viewers, this was not new information to the reporters camped out in Union. The Smiths' separation was public record and a well-known local melodrama. According to Gary Henderson, a journalist from nearby Spartanburg, SC, who wrote a book recounting his experiences covering the case, the Smiths' estrangement was common knowledge amongst reporters. Two days into the investigation, Henderson overheard two local women discussing the Smiths' impending divorce and went to the Clerk of Court's Office to corroborate the rumor. Another journalist was already there requesting copies of the divorce papers.⁷¹

The news of the divorce unleashed a flood of suspicion and accompanying negative images of Susan Smith. That night, Smith's façade began slowly to unravel, but in order for the public to conceive the so-called "inconceivable," journalists had to dismantle the Good Mother they had so carefully built through their reports. This journalistic deconstruction featured a chronology of strategic attack points that simultaneously unpacked the ideal image and created a new, oppositional "Susan Smith" for public consumption. As in the idealized maternal construction, Susan Smith's actual behavior as a mother was not part of the journalistic narrative that turned her into an anti-mother. The new narrative leaned heavily on issues of class and sexuality. Before Smith ever admitted to harming her children, she had transformed, in public representations, into an equally familiar "anti-mother": single, working, and—perhaps most damning of all—sexually active.

Henderson's "find," which was simply corroboration of what journalists in Union already knew, spread quickly from the local to the national media. The day after his visit to the Union County Courthouse, all of the major media outlets reported on the Smiths' rocky marriage, legal

⁷¹ Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*, 28. Henderson was aware from his very first interview with the family on October 26, the day after the alleged carjacking, that the Smiths were "estranged" (Ibid, 9).

separation, and impending divorce.⁷² Members of the media had collectively withheld this information for three days, preferring instead to present the Smiths as a mutually supportive married couple. Intentional or not, this was a journalistic decision about framing: the Smiths were much more sympathetic figures if they appeared to be a stable, nuclear family. “Outing” their impending divorce three days into the national coverage made it seem as if they had somehow deceived the public about their marriage. Even worse, it provided an implicit motive to kidnapping: a possible custody battle between mother and father, as Rick Bragg suggested that day in his first piece on the case for the *New York Times*.⁷³ NBC’s Bob Dotson included in his incriminating report criminal statistics on the rarity of kidnappings and carjackings in rural areas.⁷⁴ CBS’s Randall Pinkston paired the divorce with the damning speculation that the Smiths had problems with their lie detector tests.⁷⁵ In less than two minutes, Susan Smith’s story transformed from “every mother’s nightmare” to an extremely rare, extremely suspicious occurrence.

Although most of the published reports were cautious, some reporters voiced their suspicions in private. According to a sketch artist involved in the investigation, Randall Pinkston of CBS—who was the only black national television reporter to cover the case—reportedly “egged the other network correspondents on” by asking, “All right, who’s gonna be the first to call

⁷² *Evening News*, ABC, October 28, 1994; *Evening News*, CBS, October 29, 1994; *Evening News*, NBC, October 28, 1994. ABC’s Mike von Fremd said in his report that night that the “new” information was from the local media. South Carolina journalist Gary Henderson remembers that the local and national media worked in tandem, with the national media often following the lead of local reporters (Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*, 13).

⁷³ Bragg, “Agonizing Search.” Bragg also “outed” Susan Smith as a working mother in this article, saying that she worked for a “textile company.” However, this information was not widely circulated until after her confession.

⁷⁴ *Evening News*, NBC, October 28, 1994.

⁷⁵ *Evening News*, CBS, October 28, 1994.

bullshit?”⁷⁶ By “Day 4,” as NBC titled their weekend coverage, reporters began to answer Pinkston’s challenge. Once it became clear that Susan Smith was no longer a happily married mother, she could not fit into the “new mom” frame, and the entire image began to fall apart. The focus became Susan Smith herself, and reporters openly detailed the discrepancies in her story.⁷⁷ Almost as one, print and televised media refocused their coverage. The family, the town, and law enforcement officers were no longer significant parts of the coverage. Susan Smith, alone, was the story.

The *Union Daily Times* led the attack with a morning report that Susan Smith had failed a lie-detector test, and that Mitchell Sinclair, whose house she was reportedly on the way to when she got carjacked, was not even home that night. Nor was she seen at the local Wal-Mart that evening, although she had told reporters that she had shopped there for a few hours before leaving for Sinclair’s house.⁷⁸ Although some reporters still tempered their broadcasts, pairing the increasing suspicion of Susan with kidnapping statistics that legitimated parental fears of “stranger danger,” the final words of this first day of explicit suspicion pitted the frustrating nationwide search against the embattled image of Susan Smith, the Good Mother: “There is still no evidence in this case after four days of searching—only a mother’s word.”⁷⁹ Susan Smith, in this report, was no longer “every parent” or even “every mother,” but “a mother,” and an

⁷⁶ Jeanne Boylan, *Portraits of Guilt: The Woman Who Profiles the Faces of America’s Deadliest Criminals* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2000), 174. Although the FBI called her in as a sketch artist, Boylan was only a tangential part of the investigation.

⁷⁷ “Union Mother Does Not Pass Polygraph, Sources Say,” *Greenville News* (SC), October 29, 1994.

⁷⁸ The October 29, 1994 issue of the *Union Daily Times* is missing from their archives. Maria Eftimiades cites this article in her book on the case, *Sins of the Mother: The Heartbreaking Story Behind the Susan Smith Murder Case* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1995), 84.

⁷⁹ *Evening News*, NBC, October 29, 1994.

increasingly suspicious one at that. The old tag of the collective “fear of parents everywhere” had become, in a few short days, the overwhelming public scrutiny of one parent in particular.

By Monday, October 31, a week into the investigation, all of the televised reports openly challenged Susan Smith’s story. These reports, however, did not focus on the seemingly obvious source of suspicion of the many factual discrepancies in her story of the night of the carjacking. Rather, they challenged Smith herself, attacking her public identity (which, we should remember, the media had largely helped to create). Reporters had already destroyed the image of the Smiths as a normal nuclear family by reporting on the impending divorce, but a week into the search for the boys, the clear goal of this journalistic narrative was to turn suspicion upon Susan.

Six days into the national coverage, reporters began to serve up Susan Smith’s family history as evidence of her potential pathology. As with the ideal mother image, depictions of Smith’s deviance entailed familiar and specific scripts, personalized by the visual “proof” gracing America’s television screens. A few short reports revealed that there were many proverbial skeletons in this seemingly ideal family’s closet. An NBC report featured an interview with Smith’s neighbor Dot Frost, who filled in the blanks on Smith’s dysfunctional home life. “[Frost] says their home life wasn’t always happy,” reported Bob Dotson over headshots of Susan and David Smith, who, he reminded viewers, had recently filed for divorce. “On October 7, [Susan Smith] was awarded custody of the children, a repeat of her own childhood. Susan Smith’s father, Harry Smith, killed himself one night after his divorce. Susan was then six.”⁸⁰ Again, this was strategic framing on the part of reporters; Smith’s childhood trauma was not new information, but they had refrained from reporting it for almost an entire week.

Smith’s family history served, in this instance and for many months to come, as evidence of her deviance, not as a basis for sympathy. Without ever saying the words, the report positioned

⁸⁰ *Evening News*, NBC, October 31, 1994.

Smith as a woman with a long history of family dysfunction who was possibly duping a concerned nation. Dotson ended his Halloween report by saying that people were questioning everything about the case, “even the parents”—but the extreme close-up of Susan Smith, without David, left no doubt in viewers’ minds which parent they should be questioning. It was the first time viewers had seen shots of Susan alone, without a male protector, and the effect was devastating to her public image.⁸¹

The journalistic repositioning of Susan Smith as a duplicitous single mother summarily precluded any possibility of maintaining her former Good Mother status. Smith’s plunging class status was closely related to her marital status in these reports; she went from middle-class to “mill class” virtually overnight. Scholars have long recognized the “feminization of poverty” in the United States; much of the discourse surrounding the “culture of poverty” has attributed the problem to poor mothers and especially single mothers.⁸² This framing transformed Susan Smith, the devoted wife and mother, into Susan Smith, the struggling single mother who was apparently undergoing a nasty divorce and, furthermore, had a long history of dysfunction in what had once appeared to be a secure, loving, middle-class home. A Good Mother no longer, Susan Smith was, after the reports of her impending divorce, open to any attack.

Reporters then went about the difficult work of sexualizing Susan Smith, which was not a small task, if one remembers the televised images of Smith as a plain, sweatshirt- and glasses-clad young mother whose face was puffy from crying. If the image of Susan Smith, alone, in the middle of a divorce and custody battle was not enough to make her the primary suspect, the media latched onto a new story line the following day, November 1, 1994, that cast doubt on her

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Susan Thomas, “From the Culture of Poverty to the Culture of Single Motherhood,” *Women & Politics* 14, no. 2 (September 1994), 65.

marital fidelity as well. Several networks reported that local police had begun to investigate the relationship between Smith and Mitchell Sinclair, the longtime boyfriend of her best friend and the person she said she had been on her way to visit the night of the carjacking. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* reported that Sheriff Wells, “intrigued” by Sinclair’s interview on the tabloid show *A Current Affair* a few days earlier, planned to interview him again.⁸³ Juxtaposing head shots of Susan and Sinclair, NBC reported that both had been interviewed numerous times and questioned “where they were”—together—on the night of the crime. The headshots remained on the screen while the 911 tapes, released to the public that day, played in the background. At this point, the Susan Smith on their television screens that night was a very different woman from the distraught wife and mother viewers had followed for days. She was now known to be the product of a dysfunctional home, separated from her cheating husband, possibly cheating on him with her best friend’s boyfriend, and somehow involved with this boyfriend in the disappearance of her boys.⁸⁴

Noticeably absent from these suspicious reports was any information about Susan Smith’s behavior as a mother, or any details on her relationship with her sons. The “news” that Smith was single and possibly sexually active was evidence enough of her deviance as a mother. Smith’s freefall down the social ladder, from the middle-class wife to the single woman who slept around, eliminated all vestiges of her former lofty maternal status. Reporters had only to throw a man into the mix, and the narrative revisions suddenly made cultural sense.

The hypersexual, poor, Southern woman was another familiar type. South Carolina novelist Dorothy Allison, who is from the upstate of South Carolina not far from Union, has argued that

⁸³ Chris Burrett, “Parents’ Emotional Plea to Missing Boys: ‘Be Brave, Hold on to Each Other;’ Search Continues in South Carolina Carjacking Case,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 1, 1994.

⁸⁴ *Evening News*, NBC, November 2, 1994.

poor women, including the women of her family, are always and already sexualized by virtue of their “white trash” status: “My cousins and I were never virgins, even when we were.”⁸⁵ The poor woman who deals equally in sex and crime has long served as the regional counterbalance to the Southern Lady icon in Southern writing. The “trashy” Slattery women of *Gone With the Wind* slept around, married up, and attempted to steal land from their genteel neighbors.⁸⁶ In Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* (1932) the monosyllabic, harelipped Ellie May virtually rapes a prostrate neighbor while her enterprising family steals his bag of turnips.⁸⁷ Add to this sexual image the widespread cultural assumption that family dysfunction—suicide, divorce, abuse, and other violence—is a primary characteristic of the lower-classes, especially in the “barbaric” South, and full-fledged suspicion of Susan Smith did not seem like such a huge leap to make, even from the dizzying heights of her ideal mother status.⁸⁸ Journalists had only to tap into existing cultural stereotypes. The discrepancies in Smith’s story were back-page news compared to the gender- and class-based images that added to the widespread, growing suspicion of Susan Smith.

The increasing refocus of media reports put the Smith family on the defensive and forced Susan to do something she reportedly did not want to do: speak for herself.⁸⁹ In a press conference on Wednesday, 2 November 1994, the family spokesperson read a message from

⁸⁵ Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (New York, NY: Dutton Books, 1995), 36.

⁸⁶ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1936).

⁸⁷ Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1932), 18.

⁸⁸ Many authors have written about the sexual, violent, backwards, “barbaric” image of the South. Most recently, James Cobb analyzes how Southern writers like Bobbie Ann Mason, Larry Brown, and Rick Bragg have unflinchingly addressed violence in their struggles with what might be a “disappearing” Southern identity. See James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁸⁹ The family spokesperson told reporters that Susan and David Smith did not have the “emotional strength” to face the media (Burritt, “Parents’ Emotional Plea”).

Susan and David Smith detailing the agony of missing their sons.⁹⁰ The grieving mother directly addressed her boys: “I want to say to my babies, your mama loves you so much. I can’t express how much you’re wanted back home. Be strong, and take care of each other. Mama and daddy will be right here waiting for you.”⁹¹ NBC paired Smith’s pleas with long camera shots of authorities searching Susan and David Smith’s small brick house, which reporters identified for the first time as the couple’s family home, as opposed to the large suburban home of her stepfather than had heretofore served as the “Smiths’ home” in news reports.⁹² There was no need for verbal speculation that Susan might be lying. The contrast between her anguish at the press conference and authorities going through her belongings indicated to viewers that Susan Smith was the sole subject of this “kidnapping” investigation.

The following day the couple appeared on all three major networks’ morning shows to do some damage control. Americans awoke to the televised image of Susan and David Smith live via satellite from her stepfather’s living room, holding hands while they addressed the negative media scrutiny. In her longest public interview during the investigation, Smith put forth her longest defense of motherhood yet:

I would like to say to whoever has my children that I constantly am praying each day that they are taking care of them and giving them the necessities that they need to survive. It’s very difficult to understand right now why anybody would want to take anybody else’s children away from them, and I find it very difficult to handle not being there for my babies. I’ve been there for them from day one, and the hardest part is not knowing, I mean just not knowing... Since day one I’ve known everything, everywhere they’ve gone, I knew where they were, and this one time there’s absolutely nothing I can do and that’s very painful.⁹³

⁹⁰ “Parents Aching to Hug Sons Again,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* (SC), November 2, 1994.

⁹¹ Les Timms III, “Mother Made Impassioned Plea on National Media Hours Before Arrest,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 4, 1994.

⁹² *Evening News*, NBC, November 2, 1994.

⁹³ *Today Show*, NBC. November 3, 1994. This was the longest interview Susan Smith has ever granted.

In this monologue (David Smith barely spoke, and appeared to be shell-shocked), Susan Smith presented herself as the ideal mother the nation had rallied around for nine days. Both parents wore pictures of their sons on their lapels. In Susan's speech, she had virtually no identity without her sons; she had been with them every moment of their lives up to that fateful night nine days earlier, and her life ended when they were taken from her. It was the longest interview she has ever given, but it had to be her best performance. The media had clearly withdrawn their support of the Good Mother image. Without the aid of accompanying media images, Smith's defensive act fell completely flat.

Hours later, Susan Smith confessed to double homicide in the company of Sheriff Howard Wells. When news spread that evening that Sheriff Wells had an announcement to make, Main Street filled with people who crowded into the areas formerly reserved for the media. "By 6 p.m. you could barely move," wrote Spartanburg newspaperman Gary Henderson. "People had pushed in from all sides. There were a few tense moments when reporters tried to reclaim space they had used for days." Henderson could not move for fear he would lose his place, and he lost contact with his newsroom in Spartanburg because "getting out of Union on a cellular telephone was impossible." Locals mingled with the 40 television cameras waiting for Wells, who did not appear until after 6:30 p.m.⁹⁴ All of the major television networks had a live feed to the press conference in front of the Union County Courthouse that evening at 5:30 p.m. A crowd of hundreds received his news, and many reported an "audible gasp" amongst the mixture of locals and reporters.⁹⁵ Smith's confession was the lead story on all three major networks that evening. Following the live announcement of her confession by Sheriff Howard Wells, Tom Brokaw

⁹⁴ Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*, 57-59.

⁹⁵ Anna Brown, "Mother Charged," *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 4, 1994.

hesitantly voiced his visible shock. His voice shaking, he reminded viewers: “She appeared just this morning grieving on national TV, saying she could not imagine how anyone might think she was a suspect.”⁹⁶

The reactions of the evening culminated in ABC’s late news show, *Nightline*, on which anchor Ted Koppel painstakingly led viewers through the search, from the original 911 call through the developing cracks in Smith’s story. Koppel focused on the palpable senses of betrayal felt by all who were taken in by the tearful young mother.

There are few stories that so completely capture the imagination and sympathy of us all as the despair that parents feel when something terrible happens to their children. It is a common bond that crosses all lines and certainly did in the case of that young couple. She was, of course, distraught, hysterical in fact—and sympathy came from all communities.⁹⁷

Koppel presented viewers with a revisionist timeline, ignoring the increasing public suspicion of Susan Smith that had anticipated her confession. For this one night, as shock turned slowly to outrage, all previous suspicion was suspended as Koppel dramatically detailed the building blocks of the image of Susan Smith, the “Good Mother.” The factual problems with Susan’s carjacking story, the implications of her pending divorce, the allegations of an affair with Mitchell Sinclair, the televised statements of African Americans who called her racist bluff, her troubled family past—the *Nightline* timeline glossed over all of these in favor of painting Susan as a dangerously talented actress playing a sanctified role and manipulating an entire nation of anxious parents and terrified children.

When Sheriff Wells announced that Susan Smith had confessed to the murder of her own children, anger quickly followed shock as the dominant public emotion. The public outrage, in many cases, required an extensive revision in which Susan became a monster wearing the mask

⁹⁶ *Evening News*, NBC, November 3, 1994.

⁹⁷ *Nightline*, ABC, November 3, 1994.

of a mother. In these narratives, Susan Smith was not just another criminal who made up a lie to disguise her crime. She became the ultimate in deviance, the most unnatural of criminals, America's favorite (for the next several months at least) scapegoat. Michael and Alex Smith, according to reporters, were America's children, and the entire nation felt the "pain of the loss of a child."⁹⁸ She had relinquished her motherhood, and thus, in media reports, it was as if Michael and Alex were hers no longer. The boys belonged to the nation; in the ultimate act of demothering, Smith's jailers did not allow her to see or read about the boys' funeral the Sunday after her confession.⁹⁹

This new narrative was not simply for dramatic effect. Certainly the revisions further justified the shock and growing anger the viewing public felt. But something else was going on here. There were two dramatically different options for reading Smith's story at this crucial moment following her confession. Susan Smith could serve as a model for the public destruction of the myth of the Good Mother. Or, Susan Smith could teach the American public a more conservative "lesson about gender," providing "a cautionary tale for and about women that reveals the fragility of the family and motherhood" in the wake of the insidious results of the second-wave feminism which included, but were not limited to, women abandoning motherhood for selfish careerism, legalized abortion, and general "declining morality."¹⁰⁰ That is, Smith could be understood as a tragic representative of the problems of the modern version of

⁹⁸ *Evening News*, CBS, November 4, 1994.

⁹⁹ *Evening News*, CBS, November 7, 1994.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, 229.

motherhood as an American institution, or she could be seen as an evil aberration, the enemy of America's bedrock of "family values."¹⁰¹

If, in fact, the public can be said to have a choice in the context of the near hegemonic discourse of the "new momism," they overwhelmingly chose the latter option.¹⁰² To view Susan Smith as a complicated individual—as both a good mother and a child murderer—would be to acknowledge the new momism as an impossible mythology that allows no room for maternal ambivalence and especially maternal violence. Americans were angry at being duped by Smith's racist lie, but the public's anger seemed to center around the issue of maternity. As one commentator put it, had the father killed the boys, the public response may well have been a "national shrug."¹⁰³ But maternal infanticide, accompanied by a nine-day performance of ideal motherhood, was simply unacceptable, and Americans searched for answers to the "incomprehensible" crime.

Smith not only betrayed the public's belief in her as an individual mother, she insidiously exposed the myth of the cult of ideal motherhood that had taken firm root since the 1970s. This case, argued one reporter, stood the "myth that there is something magical about motherhood that makes it nearly impossible for women to hurt their kids" on its head.¹⁰⁴ Sheryl McCarthy agreed

¹⁰¹ Douglas and Michaels, 167; Hasian and Flores, 163. Other frameworks for understanding her, especially the so-called "abuse excuse" of Smith's defense team, had yet to surface; Smith's sexual abuse had not leaked to the media at this point in the coverage.

¹⁰² Hasian and Flores have a similar argument about the coverage of the entire case, from the investigation to the Smith's sentencing at the trial. They argue: "...although some observers tried to use the case as a way of raising public awareness about social factors that influenced her behavior, these attempts were overwhelmed by dominant, patriarchal representations of 'motherhood' that individuated her behavior" (Ibid., 164). My argument differs from theirs in that I apply it solely to these first few weeks of media coverage, and I place it within the historical context of the "backlash," while the "patriarchy" they target is fairly ahistorical.

¹⁰³ Deborah Halter, "Susan Smith Becomes Moral Scapegoat of a Nation," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, November 13, 1994.

¹⁰⁴ Diana Griego Erwin, "Drowning of Sons Wounds Myth of Motherhood," *Sacramento Bee* (CA), November 7, 1994.

when she wrote in *Newsday* that the many calls for a “public stoning” or similar punishment were because “a mother who would kill her own children flies in the face of the Mother Love Myth.”¹⁰⁵ Smith showed an unwilling culture that beatific white motherhood was not natural, instinctive, or unavoidably biological for women with children. It was a role they could don and, even worse, utilize to cover up a horrible crime. As Susan Douglas put it, “The role of the grieving mother was simply not one you were allowed to fake.”¹⁰⁶ The role was supposed to be biologically determined; moreover, Smith had faked her class and marital status in order to legitimate her “good mother” role (there was little or no recognition of the media’s role in constructing these images). Thus, Smith’s crime was not simply against her children, or her family, or her community. It was a brutal blow to an ostensibly untouchable icon.

Despite the universalizing rhetoric that characterized the outrage at Susan Smith’s crime, the image of the perfect mother was not a timeless American idol. She was a discursive production of the 1980s backlash that had rapidly achieved iconic status by the 1990s. Most of us, if only through “Nick at Nite,” are familiar with the ideal mother images from mid-century popular culture.¹⁰⁷ This pronatalism came under attack as second-wave feminism achieved maturity in the late 1960s and 1970s. By the mid-1970s, feminist mothers such as Adrienne Rich were writing carefully and thoughtfully about motherhood. According to these women, there was nothing particularly instinctive or natural about maternity. In fact, they argued that, in their experiences, ambivalence was the primary characteristic of motherhood. These authors wrote

¹⁰⁵ Sheryl McCarthy, “We Haven’t Heard the Real Story Yet,” *Newsday*, November 7, 1994.

¹⁰⁶ Douglas and Michaels, 164.

¹⁰⁷ Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York, NY: Times Books/Random House, 1994), 51.

personal accounts of the daily experience of being a mother, at the same time taking aim at the impossible demands of patriarchal pronatalism.

As Adrienne Rich put it, in modern America, “motherhood as experience and institution” was fraught with peril. Rich, of course, loved her children, but she also wrote frankly about negative, even violent, feelings toward them. “My children cause me the most exquisite suffering,” she told readers on the very first page of her widely read *Of Woman Born* (1976).

It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these guiltless tiny beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage.¹⁰⁸

Rich’s admission of feelings of failure and unsuitability for the impossible job of ideal motherhood eerily prefigured Susan Smith’s own written confession. The first reason for Smith’s crime, according to the chronology of her written confession, was her failure as a mother: “I felt I couldn’t be a good mom anymore, but I didn’t want my children to grow up without a mom. I felt I had to end our lives to protect us all from any grief or harm.”¹⁰⁹

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich recounts discussing a local infanticide case with a group of female friends in 1975.

We talked of poetry, and also of infanticide, of the case of a local woman, the mother of eight, who had been in a severe depression since the birth of her third child, and who had recently murdered and decapitated her two youngest, on her suburban front lawn.

¹⁰⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1976), 1.

¹⁰⁹ From Smith’s written confession, reprinted in Henderson, 117. The full text of her written confession can be found online at: www.teleplex.net/shj/smith/ninedays/ssconf.html.

Some of the women in the group had written letters protesting the local media coverage of the case. According to Rich, the women felt a “direct connection with her desperation.” She wrote that “every woman in that room who had children, every poet, could identify with her.”¹¹⁰

Although Adrienne Rich represented the feminist left in the 1970s, the decade was a time during which feminists, if not the American public in general, mined maternal ambivalence with the intent of tearing down the impossible maternal prescriptions that required mothers to devote their entire beings, without complaint, to their children. Women like Rich voiced their feelings at a distinct cultural moment—in fact, it was quite possibly the only moment in the twentieth century in which there were enough cracks in the discourse of motherhood that American mothers could speak of such things, given the extreme pronatalism of the decades before and after second-wave feminism. Rich and her cohorts were literally speaking the “unspeakable” when they wrote of the darker side of maternity in modern America.

This explicit feminist politicization of motherhood occurred in a dialectical context. Feminist activism moved towards mainstream acceptability at the same time that the New Right gathered its bearings for its 1980s assault on the women’s movement. The 1970s and the 1990s were two very different decades for American mothers. Rich and her colleagues explicitly explored the complications of motherhood at precisely the only moment during the twentieth century in which the cultural discourse of maternity had room for such seditious speech, in the middle of organized and vital second-wave feminism, before the New Right got its national bearings and Reagan took office. Susan Douglas contends that voices such as Rich’s have been drowned out by what she somewhat jokingly calls the “Committee for Retrograde Antifeminist Propaganda,” or “CRAP” for short. According to the “CRAP version of history,” feminists did not attack

¹¹⁰ Rich, 4-5. In this passage, Rich is referring to the 1974 case of Joanne Michulski, a mother of eight who killed her two youngest children.

impossible icons or patriarchy itself; rather, they attacked mothers, children, and all-American “family values.”¹¹¹ But these conservative, anti-feminist forces (whose ranks included Phyllis Schlafly, Rush Limbaugh, Pat Robertson, and, of course, Dr. Laura Schlesinger) were not solely responsible for silencing and virtually erasing women like Adrienne Rich from public consciousness.

Even if women like Adrienne Rich did not speak for all American mothers, they were, at least, publishing in the 1970s; by Susan Smith’s time, there was a discernible dearth of feminist writing. Historian Ann Snitow argues that many feminists of the 1980s at least partially internalized the backlash discourse of motherhood.¹¹² Conservative attacks and internal feminist dissension on the issue of motherhood made for a very conducive environment for the “new momism” of the 1990s. But there were some voices pointing out the extreme cultural contradictions of motherhood in the feminist wilderness of the 1980s. Specifically, *The Motherhood Report* (1987), a published survey of more than one thousand American mothers, argued that, statistically speaking, “ambivalence” was the norm of motherhood rather than the exception.¹¹³ For the most part, however, feminist scholars and authors did not target the late-century “new momism” until the mid-1990s. The 1970s featured a brief opening in the discourse of motherhood that was not to return until almost the very end of the century, when the discourse of motherhood, as seen in the public representations of infanticidal women like Susan Smith, began to change.

¹¹¹ Douglas and Michaels, 30-31.

¹¹² Ann Snitow, “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading,” *Feminist Review* 40 (Spring 1992): 40.

¹¹³ Louis Genevie and Eva Margolies, *The Motherhood Report: How Women Feel About Being Mothers* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company), 409.

In fact, seeds of this change can be found in some of the coverage of Smith's confession. Because there were too few feminist analyses of motherhood from the 1980s to reference, journalists who tried to understand Smith's actions cited Adrienne Rich's characterization of motherhood as based on conflict, not harmony. One columnist argued that Susan Smith was "within the spectrum, not off the spectrum, of motherhood":

Those of us who look deeply enough at our own experience will know better. She belongs to the center, not the border. She is like a lot of other women...[She] walked up to the brink of her limitation and shook hands with it. God save her soul. She is still one of us.¹¹⁴

A small but distinct minority agreed. The national shock and outrage notwithstanding, Susan Smith was clearly "not alone with her demons" as a mother, argued one reporter, citing several other contemporary infanticide cases.¹¹⁵ One sympathetic mother contacted Reverend Robert Cato of Union after he appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* a few days after Susan's confession. She told Cato that, in the throes of what sounds like post-partum depression after the birth of her first child, she placed a pillow that she had embroidered for the baby over his face one night. She was interrupted by a knock at the door, which she later saw as divine intervention, but she understood Susan Smith's actions even though she had not gone through with it herself. She called Cato in response to the anger she heard on the *Donahue* show; one woman had said she would "pull the switch herself" to resounding audience applause. The mother told Cato, "I'm more angry at that person than I am at Susan, because I am Susan."¹¹⁶ Newspaper editors across the nation published the letters of a handful of mothers confessing similar feelings of wanting to

¹¹⁴ Donna Schaper, "Having a child is not a picnic, Susan Smith case reminds us," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 2, 1994.

¹¹⁵ Erwin, "Drowning of Sons Wounds Myth of Motherhood."

¹¹⁶ Eftimiades, 220-21.

hurt themselves or their children, or both.¹¹⁷ *Los Angeles Times* columnist Lynn Smith received so many letters from mothers expressing similar impulses that she wrote a column describing resources for these women to get help.¹¹⁸ These words, though generally ignored, were small signs of new ideas about motherhood that would seep into the culture in ensuing years.

Many reporters pointed out that, according to criminological research, Susan Smith's case was not at all atypical of infanticide. In fact, infanticide is the one violent crime far more likely to be committed by women than men.¹¹⁹ However, when it comes to the murder of one's own children, maternal culpability is statistically typical. The United States alone average 547 filicides, or the murder of one's own children, per year.¹²⁰ Susan Smith was not alone in her crime even in the state of South Carolina that year. Myra Pearson of St. Matthews, accused of bludgeoning to death her handicapped 12-year-old stepson, and Anna Mae Rita Miranda of Walterboro, accused of beating her nine-year-old daughter to death, were both awaiting trial at the time of Smith's confession. Nationally, homicide is one of the five major causes of childhood deaths, and research overwhelmingly points to mothers as the primary perpetrators. Mothers are more likely to kill than fathers, and their victims are more likely to be sons.¹²¹ Yet, although these statistics accurately describe Susan Smith, the majority of media coverage does not convey the slightest hint of this statistical typicality, and the names of Mrs. Pearson and Mrs. Miranda were unfamiliar even to most South Carolinians that year due to minimal local and no

¹¹⁷ Hasian and Flores, 172.

¹¹⁸ Lynn Smith, "Moms with Urges to Kill Give Their Side of the Story," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1994.

¹¹⁹ McCarthy, "We Haven't Heard the Real Story Yet."

¹²⁰ Anna Wilczynski, *Child Homicide* (London: Greenwich Medical Media Limited, 1997), 25.

¹²¹ "State Facing Summer of Child-killing Trials"; Coramae Richey Mann, *When Women Kill* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 70; "3 S.C. Women on Trial for Murdering Their Children," *Charleston Post and Courier* (SC), May 7, 1995.

national media coverage. Susan Smith, on the other hand, graced front pages and nightly news reports alone as the ultimate in maternal deviance.

The few articles that focused on the psychological problems of Susan's past—her father's suicide, her own suicide attempts in her teens, her medically documented history of depression, and her current difficult divorce and possible abuse by her husband—couched her crimes in collective, not individual terms. According to these few authors, if Smith was indeed a bad mother, the culture that made her feel that way, and the society that offered no means of financial or childcare support, was culpable for her criminal behavior as well.¹²² One expert argued in the *Los Angeles Times* that maternal depression was not limited to the period immediately following birth, and that mothers of toddlers exhibited rates of depression at least twice that of other women. On the other hand, maternal depression is rarely seen in “societies that are close,” in which there is a large family, community, or state support system.¹²³ The mainstream discourse of motherhood positioned Susan Smith as an inconceivable monster, but criminologists understood infanticide as a collective, institutional problem.

These reporters echoed the arguments of the few authors brave enough to address the contentious issue of motherhood in the 1990s. In the years immediately following the Susan Smith case, a spate of books targeting the oppressive ideology of motherhood were published, constituting the largest wave of feminist writing on motherhood this culture has ever experienced. Diane Eyer, for example, targeted some of the more egregious examples of “mother-blaming” in the late twentieth-century in her *Motherguilt*, arguing that the scapegoating of mothers is a convenient cover for systemic governmental problems. Moreover, Eyer argued

¹²² Hasian and Flores, 172.

¹²³ Smith, “Moms with Urges to Kill Give Their Side of Story.”

that violence against children is social violence, a collective crime perpetrated by society.¹²⁴

These authors, and the disparate feminist voices that responded publicly to Smith's confession, add up to a consistent minority discourse that attempts to understand the crime of infanticide within a cultural, historical framework. Taken together, these journalists and authors were the first to voice the new discourse of motherhood, although their words did not define it entirely, and, as we shall see in the last chapter, its current manifestation cannot be considered entirely "feminist."

The argument that Smith's actions were an understandable, although not typical, response to mothering in 1990s America quickly got lost in the cacophony of condemnation. Smith's crimes did not produce a referendum on motherhood, or even a close look at the damaged psyche that could drive a young woman to such a brink. Her sordid story was more comfortably couched as the isolated crime of an evil individual that "exposed our powerlessness and ignorance and our vulnerability to human perversion."¹²⁵

Reporters searched for evidence that would explain the contradiction of a good mother who killed her children. In fact, it was not until after Smith's confessed to drowning her boys that reporters included any information about her relationship with her sons. It was as if her confession refocused public discourse onto the actual process of mothering rather than all of the secondary racial, class, and marital characteristics of the Good Mother. In the case of Susan Smith, much to reporters' dismay, locals really had no prior evidence of the mother's evil to reveal.

¹²⁴ Eyer, *Motherguilt*, xiii.

¹²⁵ Suzanne Fields, "It's Personal Responsibility, Stupid," *Washington Times*, November 10, 1994.

The contemporary discourse of motherhood did not allow for a good, murdering mother. It was not a cultural type that existed in 1990s America; Susan Smith was deemed not just horrible, or evil, but “inconceivable,” “incomprehensible,” “unspeakable,” and “unfathomable.”¹²⁶ The media and others who tried to make sense of Susan Smith did not, at this point in the saga, try to comprehend the “incomprehensible”—there was no move to alter the reigning discourse of motherhood to account for a mother like Smith. There was no need to do so, at least not yet. The class-based, sexualized public representations of Smith just prior to her confession paved the way for new understandings. For the few weeks following Smith’s arrest, the media had a new peg, one that had not explicitly appeared in the coverage of the investigation: race. The public anger at Smith’s confession indicated the power of collective belief in the “new momism,” but Americans were also enraged that Susan Smith had duped them. Moreover, she had manipulated them with historical images of race that made her story seem more believable; by playing the white woman in danger of the black male criminal, she had ensured that many Americans would reflexively believe her story.

¹²⁶ Harrison Ranie, “A Mother, Two Kids, and the Unthinkable,” *U.S. News and World Report*, November 14, 1994; “Children: Nothing is More Important;” Erwin, “Drowning of Sons Wounds Myth of Motherhood”; Bella English, “Mothers Wonder: How?,” *Boston Globe*, November 5, 1994; Douglas and Michaels, 164.

CHAPTER 2

“A HARD WEEK TO BE BLACK IN UNION”

In an interview over a decade after Smith’s trial, NBC’s Bob Dotson, who was stationed in Union for the network’s nightly news, explained that Americans were fascinated with the Susan Smith case “because evil looks so much like us.”¹²⁷ The idea that an infanticidal mother could look so normal both intrigued and outraged Americans. But, in the immediate post-confession coverage, those who recognized that Smith might be in any way “like us” were a distinct minority. The predominant reaction was to ostracize Smith completely; she was summarily cast out as a deviant along the lines of womanhood, motherhood, race, and sexuality. The Smith case, according to one journalist, was “one of those universal moments that hit everyone in the gut,” and her confession to infanticide resulted in “the loss of our innocence.”¹²⁸ “If time had weight,” proclaimed reporter Bob Dotson the day after her confession, “this day would be crushing.”¹²⁹ Rather than be crushed by the devil in the shape of Susan Smith, Americans, almost as one, would cast her out.

The palpable anger at Susan Smith, the “monster mother” in America’s midst, was not merely reactionary scapegoating. The sense of personal betrayal in public responses made it clear that Smith had committed two crimes: the murders and the carjacking lie. Amidst shouts of “Baby-killer!,” one could also hear a lone woman shouting, “We believed you!” at Smith as she went into the courthouse for her bond hearing the day after her confession. As with the role of the

¹²⁷ Bob Dotson, interview by author, via telephone in Spartanburg, SC, November 4, 2006.

¹²⁸ English, “Mothers Wonder: How?.”

¹²⁹ *Evening News*, NBC, November 4, 1994.

ideal mother that Smith played for nine long days, there was little recognition in the published responses to Smith's confession of the public support for her other duplicitously compelling cultural role: the white woman in danger of the black male criminal. The immediate rage following her admission of infanticide was based on several factors: the brutality of the murders; the lie that drew strangers into the investigation and kept them glued to their television sets; the assault on contemporary myths of ideal motherhood. But another kind of anger reflected the complicated race relations of the 1990s. As one journalist put it, the outrage at Smith's crimes was "largely a reaction to the idea of a mother murdering her own children, but even so it was another abrasion on a sore spot already rubbed raw."¹³⁰ The wound of which he wrote was, of course, race. Smith called upon the most familiar face of criminality when she said she had been carjacked by a black man. The images of the black male criminal and the white female victim have a long and sordid history in American culture, and Susan Smith fit herself effortlessly into this tradition when she appeared on the McCloud's doorstep and uttered her infamous lie.

Some Americans, primarily African Americans, argued that Smith had deliberately called upon centuries-old stereotypes of black male criminality and white female innocence. And it was not just Susan who was to blame in this scenario; the American public, because of their willingness to believe her for over a week, was implicated in her lie as well. The racial dynamics of the Susan Smith case were an immediate source of anger for many Americans, and Susan's lie and subsequent confession were, albeit very briefly, painful vehicles for a discussion on race relations in late twentieth-century America. Many African Americans and civil rights organizations responded angrily to the case, arguing that the public's willingness to believe Smith's lie exposed the continuing power of an age-old racist stereotype. Some African American respondents lashed out at Smith for calling upon the damaging stereotypes of the

¹³⁰ Tom Teeppen, "Baby-killing Mother Plays the Race Card," *Charleston Gazette* (WV), November 8, 1994.

criminal black man and the white female victim to cover up her crimes. Others expressed little surprise, opting for a kind of weariness in which Smith's choice of a black bogeyman was unfortunately representative of the politics of the late twentieth century.

The trajectory of images in the Susan Smith case inverted the imagery process of the O.J. Simpson case, which was being tried at the same time in California. Wendy Kozol argues that the Simpson case initially made the news as a public conversation about domestic violence, feminine vulnerability, and gendered power relations. This narrative was quickly subsumed by images of race and masculinity, specifically in the form of racist white policemen and a victimized black man.¹³¹ In the coverage of the Smith case, the dominant narrative was one of gender in the form of motherhood, then, briefly, one of race, and, finally, it returned to being a story about gender. Much of the immediate post-confession media coverage of the Smith case targeted the racism inherent in the carjacking lie, but journalists, in a matter of mere days in most cases, quickly discarded this narrative for one based on gender articulated through images of class and sexuality.

Those reporters that tackled the issue of race generally did so in three ways. The initial round of editorials condemned the use of the age-old racist stereotypes, and Smith, in these reports, was something of a representative for the state of American race relations. These reports sought to initiate a national conversation about race, but this attempt was short-lived. Other articles sought to deny the importance of race, and they did so in two ways: by ostracizing Smith as a lone racist, a relic of the past, or by denying that race had anything to do with her choice of a "believable" criminal. The majority of journalists preferred the let the racial angle die a quick death, supplying sound bites from prominent African Americans who alleviated racial guilt.

¹³¹ Wendy Kozol, "Fracturing Domesticity: Media, Nationalism, and the Question of Feminist Influence," *Signs* (Spring 1995), 646.

These black leaders—including Reverend Jesse Jackson and some of Union’s ministers—argued that Smith was no stereotypical racist; she had simply chosen the first criminal image that came to mind. Of course, this argument begged the question of why a nondescript black male criminal would be the most believable for Smith’s purposes. Cynthia Tucker, in a syndicated editorial for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote of Smith’s “bitter legacy” and the nation’s failure to make her case useful. Smith’s name would stand for many things in the years to come, she argued:

“Deteriorating family structures, the loss of innocence in small-town America, infanticide. And, despite her family's forthright apology for her lie, she will also be a symbol of our failure as a nation - a failure that belongs to all of us, whether white or black or brown - to bring clear-headedness to the subject of crime and race.”¹³²

These racialized responses to Susan Smith’s confession reflected the political discourse of the 1990s deemed the “new racism” by historian Glen Feldman. Race-based politics of the old-school, Dixiecrat, George Wallace style abruptly fell out of favor, especially at the national level, after the cataclysms of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Anyone familiar with American politics at the end of the twentieth century knows that this transformation did not entail widespread liberalism on racial policies in the South or even in the nation. Rather, a complicated racial code developed, and as in the “rape myth” of lynching, the code hinged on the intertwining of race and gender. Feldman notes that the “solid” Democratic South of the Jim Crow era transformed into a “solid” Republican South that is “forcibly reformed on issues of race.” Racial violence and other forms of overt racism against African Americans are roundly condemned, although they still occurred with some frequency throughout the region and the nation. Instead, “subtle race appeals” have replaced old ones, resulting in a code of “clever and thinly disguised references to 'law and order,' welfare, quota, taxes for 'social programs,' food stamps, 'states'

¹³² Cynthia Tucker, “The Painful Legacy of Susan Smith,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (LA), November 14, 1994.

rights and local government,' urban decay, 'big government,' crime, and 'personal responsibility.'¹³³

The political rhetoric of crime and welfare featured stock racist images of violent, poor, and lazy African Americans, but gender played a key role in the code of the “new racism” as well. Conservative rhetoric at the end of the twentieth century rested firmly on a platform of “family values,” which itself was code for the traditional, white, patriarchal family structure. Rather than getting all worked up about race as they had in previous decades, the new conservatives—members of the New Christian Right as well as more mainstream Republicans—redirected their virulence, and their political clout, at gendered issues, including gay rights, abortion, welfare, and, in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Equal Rights Amendment. As Paul Harvey argues, “patriarchy has replaced race for overtly religious, Southern conservatives as the defining principle of God-ordained inequality.”¹³⁴ Once women became outright political targets, only a select few of them, like Phyllis Schlafly and the “new moms” of the 1980s, served as the vehicle for the preservation of white male patriarchy through “family values” policies. Women, white and black, who fell outside the boundaries of the narrow ideals were demonized according to this new racial and gendered code of politics. Thus, Susan Smith’s whiteness alone would not save her; the complex matrix of race, class, marital status, and motherhood had to be in place for Americans to believe her carjacking lie.

In this chapter, I explain how Smith fit into this long racist history of imaginary black male criminality and corresponding white female innocence, and then I examine the racialized

¹³³ Glen Feldman, “The Status Quo Society, the Rope of Religion, and the New Racism,” in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, ed. Glen Feldman (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 302.

¹³⁴ Paul Harvey, “Gods and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation: Racism, Racial Interchange, and Interracialism in Southern Religious History,” in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, ed. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 291

responses to her crime within the context of the “new racism.” Although most journalists either avoided or quickly discarded racial analyses, race played a role in perceptions of and responses to Susan Smith through her trial in July 1995 and even beyond. In fact, the most sophisticated racial analyses of her case came years later, in the form of literary responses to the image of the black male criminal. Like the feminist readings of Smith’s confession offered by a few brave observers, the progressive racial analysis of Smith’s carjacking lie was suppressed in the mainstream media, only to resurface years later in the form of critical literature.

From the moment of Susan Smith’s television debut, her whiteness worked in her favor. The close-ups of her pale face, framed by the large white bow in her light-brown hair, immediately indicated to image-literate Americans that she was, at least on first glance, a proper female victim. Following to the dictates of the “new racism,” journalists proceeded cautiously, identifying the carjacker carefully as a “black” or “African American” man; newspapers and televised news programs ran the composite picture without comment. There was no need to spell out the carjacker’s prominent position in America’s “culture of fear.”¹³⁵

The subtle but stark contrasts between black and white in the first reports immediately indicated that Smith was probably not among the ranks of contemporary “bad” mothers, who were clearly placed within a distinct hierarchy of race and class in the sociopolitical discourse of the late twentieth century. Toni Morrison argues that the equation “black equals poor” in one that “functions usefully if unexamined”; this was certainly true for Susan Smith, whom journalists automatically positioned as a middle-class mother.¹³⁶ As Catherine MacKinnon

¹³⁵ Barry Glassner argues in *The Culture of Fear* that “Fear mongers project onto black men precisely what slavery, poverty, educational deprivation, and discrimination have ensured that they do not have—great power and influence.” Even school shootings, which are largely perpetrated by white teenagers, have been blamed on rap music produced and performed by black men (Glassner, 121).

¹³⁶ Toni Morrison, “Introduction,” in Morrison, ed., xxi.

explains, white women are, in many ways, defined by what they are *not* in terms of race, class, and sexuality:

This creature is not poor, not battered, not raped (not really), not molested as a child, not pregnant as a teenager, not a welfare mother, and not economically exploited. She doesn't work. She is either the white man's image of her--effete, pampered, privileged, protected, flighty, and self-indulgent--or the Black man's image of her--all that, plus the 'pretty white girl' (meaning ugly as sin but regarded as the ultimate in beauty because she is white).¹³⁷

Thus, according to contemporary images, a woman's race, in relation to that of the men around her, often determined perceptions of her class and sexuality. Race also largely determined her immediate cultural currency as a mother. Generally speaking, achieving the ranks of the "new mom" required whiteness, or, as in the example of the popular character Claire Huxtable of *The Cosby Show*, blackness only in the context of the upper-middle-class American dream.¹³⁸ Even before viewers knew anything else about her, Smith's race placed her favorably within contemporary ideas about motherhood as well as within a long historical trajectory about the role of mothers in the social order.

Indeed, this racialized maternal ideology was a well-worn refrain by the 1990s. The entire second half of the twentieth century featured "mother-blaming" for social problems, particularly welfare and urban crime. Academics and politicians consistently blamed black "matriarchs" for perceived dysfunction within black family structures, most notably in John Dollard's 1937 *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*.¹³⁹ Both texts relied upon the "bad mother" image of the hypersexual black

¹³⁷ Catherine A. MacKinnon, "From Practice to Theory, or What is a White Woman Anyway?," in *Critical Race Feminism*, ed. A.K. Wing (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 196-197.

¹³⁸ Douglas and Michaels, 20.

¹³⁹ John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988 [1937]); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, ed. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967).

woman who had “too many children too early,” a problem that generally resulted in child neglect if not outright abuse.¹⁴⁰ Predictably, the root of this pressing social problem was the sexual activity of black women. For Dollard, “economic independence carrie[d] with it the usual correlate of sexual independence,” which led black women to dominate black men, become more receptive to white men, and in general “take sex more lightly altogether.”¹⁴¹ These maternal sexual deviants were, more often than not, single mothers who had either never had husbands or had run them off, and their neglect and/or abuse of their many children had come to be seen as a widespread problem by mid-century. By 1965, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan confidently blamed “black matriarchs” for the “tangle of pathology” that characterized African American families.¹⁴²

It is a short leap from Moynihan’s “matriarchs” of the 1960s to the rampant demonization of black mothers in the 1980s. According to media studies scholars Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, the most hated women of the 1980s, the drug-addled mothers responsible for the “crack baby” epidemic, were almost always coded as black in media coverage. Media reports connected the “new” social problems of crack cocaine, teen pregnancy, and a new generation of mentally impaired American children, but the mothers and babies that they showed were almost always black or Latino/a. Douglas and Michaels argue that “‘crack babies’ served as proof that poor, black, inner-city mothers were ‘she-devils,’ the grotesque opposite of caring, white, middle-class mothers.” Reports on crack mothers rarely featured white women unless the focus of the piece was on seeking help with their addictions. The message was clear: drug addiction

¹⁴⁰ Feldstein, 27, 143. Andrew Ross points out in an essay on the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas scandal that “sex is the main theme associated with poverty and with blackness” (Andrea Ross, “The Private Parts of Justice,” in Morrison, ed., 206). This theme is constantly reiterated in the code of the “new racism.”

¹⁴¹ Dollard, 153, 144.

¹⁴² Feldstein, 142.

and deviant motherhood were remediable problems for some poor white women, but not necessarily for other mothers, whose black and brown children were already doomed. By the end of the 1990s, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer predicted the emergence of a “bio-underclass, a generation of physically damaged cocaine babies whose biological inferiority is stamped at birth.”¹⁴³

The images of Michael and Alex Smith presented quite a contrast to these “crack babies” that generally made the nightly news. The most famous image of the boys was the picture that law enforcement and local volunteers copied by the thousands and distributed nationally at the outset of the investigation. In the photograph, Alex, a chubby baby, sits on Michael’s lap in a white wicker chair. Both boys are wearing white shirts, denim overalls, and big smiles. As Ron Rosenbaum pointed out in the *New York Times* months after Smith’s arrest, it was all too easy to see in this image of the Smith boys “the perfect idealized children” that most parents “never had.”¹⁴⁴

The picture of the boys in the chair together became something of a fetish associated with the case; locals and even reporters wore miniatures of the photo pinned to their lapels. This idealization of the boys aided the idealization of their mother during the investigation, but the fetishization of this image also highlighted their whiteness. Some observers argued that the American public would not have rallied to the cause of finding the boys in such large numbers if they had not been white. The outpouring of emotion, the overwhelming media coverage, and the unprecedented public participation in the search for Michael and Alex Smith rested subtly upon

¹⁴³ Douglas and Michaels, 153-157.

¹⁴⁴ Ron Rosenbaum, “Staring Into the Heart of the Heart of Darkness,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1995.

their race.¹⁴⁵ An unidentified Union man said as much on national television when Oprah Winfrey came to town the week after Smith's arrest. He argued: "Now if it had been two black children and a black man kidnapped them, hijacked them or something, the sheriff would come out and did his little job...But the news media wouldn't have been here."¹⁴⁶ David Bruck, Smith's defense attorney, later explained: "Precious, adorable, little black children in those white wicker chairs would not have seized the imagination of this majority white country in anything like the same way that Michael and Alex did."¹⁴⁷

The photo of the boys acquired even more significance after Smith's confession. When Sheriff Howard Wells announced that he had arrested Susan Smith for the murder of her children, he wore the picture of them over a yellow ribbon on his lapel.¹⁴⁸ With one exception, the photo has graced the cover of every book published about the case.¹⁴⁹ Prosecutor Tommy Pope still had the picture posted in his office over a decade after the trial.¹⁵⁰ The fetishization of this photograph allowed the public to grieve for boys they had never met, but it also functioned as a "cover story." In fact, the picture did double duty as a "cover story." It allowed Smith to play the ideal mother because it was such an iconic picture of the nation's ideal sons, and, after

¹⁴⁵ Andrea Peyser, *Mother Love, Deadly Love: The Susan Smith Murders* (New York, NY: HarperPaperbacks, 1995), 90.

¹⁴⁶ *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, ABC, November 8, 1994.

¹⁴⁷ Bruck, interview.

¹⁴⁸ *Evening News*, NBC, November 3, 1994.

¹⁴⁹ Eftimiades, *Sins of the Mother*; Gary Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*; Andrea Peyser, *Mother Love, Deadly Love*; David Smith (with Carol Calef), *Beyond All Reason: My Life with Susan Smith* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1995).

¹⁵⁰ Tommy Pope, interview.

Smith's confession, the picture encouraged a focus on Susan's manipulation of the maternal role rather than an in-depth examination of the disturbingly familiar racial dynamics of her lie.¹⁵¹

It stood to reason that these ideal white babies had an ideal white mother. Conversely, the pathetic, malnourished, drug-addled black babies on the evening news had horrible mothers. Even if they were not afflicted with a crack addiction, the African American children of the 1980s might be saddled with mothers of an equally contemptible status: the infamous "welfare queens." Johnnie Tillmon, founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization, predicted this turn of events in her famous feminist speech, "Welfare Is a Women's Issue," published in *Ms. Magazine* in 1972. "I'm a woman. I'm a black woman. I'm a poor woman," she began. "In this country, if you're any one of those things you count less as a human being. If you're all those things, you don't count at all."¹⁵² By the early 1980s, the media had picked up on Ronald Reagan's images of welfare recipients in California as "pigs at the trough" and "lazy parasites," language he honed while governor and made famous as president.¹⁵³ Reporters and politicians cast welfare in the 1980s as something that people actively chose over other lifestyles in order to "work the system" to support their deviant lifestyles. The face of these deviants, in the media and in popular imagination, was almost always black and female, thanks to the major media play given to Ronald Reagan's campaign speeches of the late 1970s. Reagan described the life of

¹⁵¹ Literary scholar Wahneema Lubiano examined the photographs associated with the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas scandal as "cover stories," or pictures that "simultaneously mask and reveal political power and its manipulations." She explained: "Cover stories cover or mask what they make invisible with an alternative presence; a presence that redirects our attention, that covers or makes absent what has to remain unseen if the *seen* is to function as the *scene* for a different drama. One story provides a cover that allows another story (or stories) to slink out of sight. Like the 'covers' of secret agents, cover stories are faces for other texts, different texts" (Lubiano, 324). An excellent example of this is the famous image of O.J. Simpson trying on the glove that "did not fit" during his trial; the "cover story" was one of a set-up by racist law enforcement officers, which masked the narrative of domestic violence that characterized the pattern of violence previously perpetrated by the accused.

¹⁵² Johnnie Tillmon, "Welfare is a Women's Issue," *Ms. Magazine*, 1972.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

such a “welfare queen” for outraged Americans who worked long hours to support their own families:

She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards, and is collecting veterans’ benefits on four deceased husbands...She’s collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash alone is over \$150,000.¹⁵⁴

Media reports on real-life welfare cheats bolstered Reagan’s image of the “welfare queen.”

Journalists recycled the few names from the late 1970s well into the early 1990s when it became difficult to locate women who were actually getting rich off of welfare.¹⁵⁵

The reality was, of course, that these famously cheating “queens” got so much press because they were the exception, not the rule. The handful of enterprising recipients recycled by the media for two decades notwithstanding, Americans, especially mothers, simply did not (and do not) get rich off of welfare. Moreover, welfare was not exclusive to African Americans. In 1991, Barbara Ehrenreich deemed welfare a “white secret,” arguing that it was “no more black than Vanilla Ice is a fair rendition of classic urban rap.” When *Time* published Ehrenreich’s article, 61 percent of welfare recipients were white.¹⁵⁶ In 1994, the year Susan Smith killed her children, the average family on welfare consisted of a mother with one name, one social security number, and two children; 39% of recipients were white, and 37% were black.¹⁵⁷ But, as literary scholar Wahneema Lubiano points out, social categories like “black women” and “welfare

¹⁵⁴ Cited in Douglas and Michaels, 185.

¹⁵⁵ Douglas and Michaels, 186.

¹⁵⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich, “Welfare: A White Secret,” *Time*, December 16, 1991.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 177. These numbers may look skewed, because African Americans were only 12% of the total population, yet they comprised over a third of welfare recipients. Barbara Ehrenreich pointed out in *Time* in 1991 that African Americans were three times as likely as whites to live below the poverty level, which meant a larger percentage of the total black population needed welfare (Ehrenreich, “Welfare: A White Secret”).

queen” are not just labels; they are “recognized by the national public as stories that describe the world in particular and politically loaded ways.”¹⁵⁸ By the end of the 1980s, “welfare queen” had clear connotations of laziness (why work when you can get rich off of welfare?), sexual excess (women had as many children as possible, often by as many men as possible, to get as many welfare checks as possible), degenerate living conditions (something of a contradiction to the idea that they were getting rich off of welfare), child abuse or at least neglect (these mothers were too busy spending their state aid on frivolous items to stay at home all day to care for their children), and, finally, blackness.

The “queens” were not alone. During the same decade, a new female character entered the growing pantheon of maternal deviants: the pregnant teenager. Over the course of the 1980s, the unwed, young mother came to have a black face in the media, and journalists and politicians easily linked her perceived sexual irresponsibility with that of the poor mothers who received federal and state aid.¹⁵⁹ By 1995, the year of Susan Smith’s trial, President Bill Clinton deemed teen motherhood America’s “most serious social problem,” and a unique bipartisan coalition ranging from Jesse Jackson to Daniel Patrick Moynihan accused these young mothers of “destroying civilization.”¹⁶⁰ The code of the “new racism” kept race carefully implicit, but it was one of the central characteristics of an image that purported to rest only on issues of class and gender. “Welfare queen” was one of the first terms coined by the new vocabulary, followed closely by the “culture of dependency,” “children raising children,” and, finally, “personal responsibility,” a term which enabled the assault on poor mothers to become legislated reality.

¹⁵⁸ Lubiano, 330.

¹⁵⁹ Douglas and Michaels, 190.

¹⁶⁰ Glassner, 90.

By the early 1990s, race, class, and single motherhood were linked firmly enough in popular discourse to have become an agreed-upon racial code. Disguising racism, sexism, and classism as economic concerns, politicians railed against working and poor mothers. These mothers were no longer simply responsible for ruining the welfare system; the fatherless, neglected children they produced were destroying the nation's cities. In the summer of 1992, as Susan Smith tried to reconcile with her husband in preparation for her second child, Vice President Dan Quayle blamed single mothers for the urban violence gracing the nightly news. He argued that the widespread problem of single mothers on welfare caused the riots that followed the Rodney King verdict. The "lawless social anarchy" that characterized the riots was, according to Quayle, "directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society." The absence of fathers and the "illegitimacy rate" in many poor families underscored how "quickly civilization [could fall] apart." Single mothers on welfare substituted their assistance checks for husbands and produced, essentially, criminals.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Where there are no mature, responsible men around to teach boys how to be good men, gangs serve in their place. In fact, gangs have become a surrogate family for much of a generation of inner-city boys...marriage is a moral issue that requires cultural consensus, and the use of social sanctions. Bearing babies irresponsibly is, simply, wrong.¹⁶¹

The message was clear: poor women who bred like rabbits to receive more welfare neglected their children, who then grew up to become the violent men who were destroying the nation's urban centers. Quayle's party was voted out of the White House just a few months later, but the images he promulgated (borrowed as they were from Ronald Reagan), and even his very language, became federal policy the year after the Susan Smith trial in the form of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

¹⁶¹ Quoted in John Fiske's *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 68-69.

Thus, televised images of Smith's whiteness were clear statements of racial, and thus class and maternal, identity; they tapped into the contemporary racial code of motherhood, aiding her performance for the cameras. Smith's whiteness was clearly related to her role as a mother, but her carjacking lie also called upon historical ideas about the relations between white women and black men. Many media consumers would have had little trouble digesting the familiar criminal blackness of the alleged carjacker, just as many of them did not initially question his white female accuser. This image of the criminal black male was one that had enjoyed wide circulation in American politics and popular culture for several generations; he was thus the perfect cover for a horrible crime.

Although it had acquired an aura of timelessness, by the end of the twentieth century, the American image of the black male rapist is primarily a product of the past century and a half. It was be easy to assume that the "black beast brute" image formed under slavery; the antebellum period was after all the time in which slaves were defined as less than human and treated, in many cases, as animals for labor and breeding. But, as historian Martha Hodes points out, the image of the black male as a dangerous sociopath, and as a particular danger to white women, was a post-emancipation invention.¹⁶² It was not until the 1880s and beyond that white people, primarily Southerners, began to make accusations, mostly false, of rape against black men. The objects of their brutal lust were always white women, and these accusations of rape served as a primary means of socioeconomic control.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

¹⁶³ No longer under the control of the white planter/owner, newly free African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era seemed to pose a unique threat to the Southern racial and social order, especially in the form of economic competition. Several sociologists link the frequency of lynchings to the decline in demand for cotton: when prices were high and Southern whites were economically content, violence against African Americans was low. When prices fell, "blacks became convenient scapegoats for mobs of whites frustrated by economic reversal" (Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1830* [Chicago: University of Illinois Press,

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the “rape myth” of lynching, in which white men avenged sexual assaults on their women by murdering the accused black men by extralegal means, seeped into the regional and national consciousness. One of the leading historians of Southern lynch law, Fitzhugh Brundage, has called the brutal practice a “ritualistic affirmation of white unity,” but, as a joint venture in the exercise of patriarchy, this “affirmation” hinged on both race and gender.¹⁶⁴ The stereotypes that justified lynching were uniquely sexualized: the white male protector, the white female virgin, and the black beast rapist. During the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, conventional white wisdom in the South lay much of the blame for lynchings on black men. That is, the imagined prevalence of uncontrollable and necessarily violent black male lust for white women led white male mobs to lynch the offenders in order to protect white women from rape.

This was not just racial vengeance or the simple protection of women from a perceived threat. The heights of brutality reached by white mobs seemed to indicate a far deeper psychological motivation, as did the sexual imagery that surrounded the violent practice. Mobs generally made no attempt to hide their identities, and often they could count on the collaboration of local law

1993], 10). Ida B. Wells-Barnett, one of the most outspoken anti-lynching activists at the turn of the century, similarly noted that a black man’s “crimes” were usually his achievements (Jacqueline Jones Royster, ed, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings* [Boston: Bedford Books, 1997], 32). Other scholars argue that lynching served primarily as a means of psychosocial control. Winthrop Jordan identifies the origins of white racism and violence as being within the white male psyche itself according to his “projection thesis.” Jordan argues that all of the negative traits attributed to black males during slavery were the very ones that white men feared in themselves: “. . . it is apparent that white men projected their own desires onto the Negroes: their own passion for Negro women was not fully acceptable to society or the self and hence not readily admissible. Sexual desires could be effectively denied and the accompanying anxiety and guilt in some measure assuaged, however, by imputing them to others. It is not we, but others, who are guilty. It is not we who lust, but they” (Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968], 152). Jordan’s “projection thesis” could apply to post-Reconstruction retrogression theory. Gail Bederman argues that the late Victorians, in their struggle to “remake manhood,” linked bodies, identities, and power by integrating socio-cultural categories of gender and race. Thus, masculinity was defined in terms of race and gender: the Victorian provider and protector was inherently white, while blackness was simultaneously pitted against the notion of being “civilized” (Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], 20, 29). In the context of the Southern code of masculine honor, it is not difficult to imagine that this late Victorian reformulation of masculinity might manifest itself in the exaggerated form of the “rape myth” of lynching.

¹⁶⁴ Brundage, 17.

enforcement.¹⁶⁵ Mobs did not simply murder; they accused, hunted, allowed female “victims” to confront the “beasts” if they were physically able, returned to the scenes of the alleged crimes or public spots to make the lynching a public spectacle, and often tortured before they executed. Crowds of white Southerners, including women, often attended the lynchings—one in Texas in 1916 reportedly drew a crowd of 15,000—while other towns ran special trains so that out-of-towners could attend.¹⁶⁶ Victims could be shot, hanged, burned alive, or ritualistically mutilated until they expired. The execution was often followed by the relic phenomenon, in which spectators collected bones, teeth, or other remaining body parts of the lynching victims.¹⁶⁷ Clearly, the “black beast” was no ordinary criminal; he was the ultimate threat to the Southern social order.

Although the symbiotic images of the white woman in danger and the black beast brute enjoyed wide currency in the nation at the turn of the century, they did not, of course, accurately reflect contemporary realities. In fact, contemporary observers and historians have pointed out that only a small percentage of African American victims of lynch mobs were actually accused of rape; the numbers vary, but most historians agree that between only one-fourth and one-sixth of black male lynching victims were even accused of rape at the time of their murders.¹⁶⁸ Frederick Douglass argued that it “strained credulity to imagine that black men had so suddenly

¹⁶⁵ James McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana University Press, 1982), 66; Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, *Lynchings and What They Mean* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, 1931), 44-45.

¹⁶⁶ Arthur Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 12-13; Ralph Ginzburg, ed., *One Hundred Years of Lynchings* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1962), 221-223.

¹⁶⁷ Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 185-189.

¹⁶⁸ Clarence A. Bacote, “Negro Proscriptions, Protests, and Proposed Solutions,” in *The Negro in the South since 1865*, ed. Charles E. Wynes (University, AL: Alabama University Press, 1965), 158. The majority of male victims were accused of murder or complicity therein.

become congenital rapists,” and many other observers agreed.¹⁶⁹ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a contemporary black activist, and Jessie Daniels Ames, the white female leader of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, were particular critics of the “rape myth” and its attendant images of the “black beast” and the innocent white “lady.”¹⁷⁰

The white patriarchal paranoia became a historical force in its own right, despite the fact that, as Wilbur Cash famously pointed out, the odds of a white woman in the South being raped by a black man were less than her odds of being struck by lightning.¹⁷¹ A body of pseudoacademic theory shrouded the image of the “black beast rapist” in a complex façade of socio-political, economic, and scientific legitimacy. “Retrogression theory” stressed the civilizing effects of slavery on those bound by the peculiar institution and the regression to bestiality that followed when black men and women were left to their own devices in society. The complicated equation of black freedom in society, the economy, and in the political arena with black intrusions into the white man’s bedroom fostered a pervasive fear of black male sexuality and a convoluted rape complex among Southern whites. One Atlanta lawmaker went so far as to propose in 1906 that

¹⁶⁹ Brundage, 46.

¹⁷⁰ Wells-Barnett was spurred to active investigation of lynchings following the murders of some Memphis acquaintances due to economic competition between white and black grocery store owners in the same neighborhood; she published a series of pamphlets and gave international talks on the practice for much of the 1890s-1910s (See Alfreda Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970], 47-52). Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in her biography of Jessie Daniel Ames, argues that the ASWPL specifically targeted white male power as the root cause of lynching: “...far from offering a shield against sexual assault, [lynching] served as a weapon of both racial and sexual terror, planting fear in women’s minds and dependency in their hearts. It thrust them into the role of personal property or sexual objects, ever threatened by black men’s lust, ever in need of white men’s protection” (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], 339-340).

¹⁷¹ Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), 117.

white “ladies” be “prohibited from riding in the front seat with black drivers because a mere ‘touching of garments’ was enough to incite the beast to immediate and wanton sexuality.”¹⁷²

The assumption that all, or at least most, African American men would, if given the opportunity, rape any white woman made interracial social relations in the South a violent powder keg of racial and sexual paranoias. Novelist Thomas Dixon helped to popularize these racial and gendered stereotypes in a series of novels that culminated in the screenplay for the first feature-length film, the wildly popular *Birth of a Nation* (1915). In his novels *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), Dixon presented his readers with carefully crafted Southern caricatures. The white knight is the protagonist of each novel, and his purpose is to guard the angelic white woman. These Southern “ladies” are “smooth, gracious, and graceful,” full of “unconscious dignity,” “subtle languor,” and “indolent grace.” Their voices are “vibrant with feeling, sweet, tender, and homelike,” and their eyes reveal a “strange pathos and haunting charm.”¹⁷³ They are innocent and in constant need of protection from the omnipresent black beast rapist, the newly freed African American who had set his sights on the white man’s land, money, and women.¹⁷⁴

Both of Dixon’s novels end with mob lynchings to avenge assaults on white women, a theme that achieved national popularity a decade later in the film *The Birth of a Nation*. Woodrow Wilson screened the film at the White House, and his telling response revealed the grim state of

¹⁷² Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, 214.

¹⁷³ Thomas Dixon, Jr., *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1970), 62, 119.

¹⁷⁴ Dixon provides a lengthy description of the “beast,” complete with a misshapen head and a stomach shaped like an “elderly monkey’s.” He is more animal than man, although his ambitions are clear: “The animal vivacity of his small eyes and the flexibility of his eyebrows, which he worked up and down rapidly with every change of countenance, expressed his eager desires” (Dixon, 248-249).

race relations, in which stereotypes served as justification for murder, in the early twentieth century: “It is like writing history with lightning. I just regret that it is all so terribly true.”¹⁷⁵

The dominant racial stereotypes and resulting theories of rape in the early twentieth century made the crime a solely interracial affair in which black men violated white women.¹⁷⁶ Langston Hughes captured the panicked slippery slope in his 1933 story, “Home.”

The movies had just let out and the crowd, passing by and seeing, objected to a Negro talking to a white woman—insulting a White Woman—attacking a WHITE woman—RAPING A WHITE WOMAN. They saw Roy remove his gloves and bow. When Miss Reese screamed after Roy had been struck, they were sure he had been making love to her. And before the story got to the rim of the crowd, Roy had been trying to rape her, right there on the main street in front of the brightly-lit windows of the drug store. Yes, he did, too! Yes, sir!¹⁷⁷

It was not just that Hughes’ fictional white crowd believed that the white woman had been raped; they clearly *wanted* it to be true, perhaps to justify violent retribution.¹⁷⁸ The “rape myth” of lynching, according to historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “can be seen as a dramatization of cultural themes, a story [white men] told themselves about the social arrangements and

¹⁷⁵ Joel Williamson, *Rage for Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 115.

¹⁷⁶ Pamela Haag points out that with black male/white female relations, consent was considered “impossible,” but when black women were involved, consent was assumed. She quotes a contemporary sociologist, Lester Ward, who explained the four laws of consent, or acceptable rape: first, “the women of any race will freely accept the men of a race which they regard as higher”; second, “the women of any race with vehemently reject the men of a race which they regard as lower than their own”; third, “the men of any race will greatly prefer women of a race which they regard as higher”; and fourth, “the men of any race, in default of women of a higher race, will be content with women of a lower race” (Haag, 143).

¹⁷⁷ Langston Hughes, “Home,” in *The Ways of White Folks* (New York: Random House, 1933), 47-48.

¹⁷⁸ William Faulkner explored this theme in *Light in August*. The crowd that gathers after the murder of a white woman collectively expresses this desire: “Among them the casual Yankees and the poor whites and even the Southerners who had lived for a while in the north, who believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime not committed by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward” (William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Vintage International, 1985), 288.

psychological strivings that lay beneath the surface” of daily life in the turn-of-the-century South.¹⁷⁹

Although this psychosexual matrix of race and rape hinged on the role of white women as victims, the image of the “white woman in danger” had distinct fault lines, namely those of class and sexuality. Historian Lisa Lindquist-Dorr points out that turn-of-the-century Virginia juries did not see all white women as suitable victims, nor did they judge all accused black men to be a priori rapists. The racist rape myth and white supremacy notwithstanding, Lindquist-Dorr found that, according to the judgments of these juries, “not all whites were equal, and not all white women were worthy of protection.” Juries weighed everything from the accused man’s relationship to the white community to the accusing woman’s family and sexual history in their decisions. In some cases, they found themselves in a quandary in which a woman with “low character” might have consented to sex, yet according to the racial panic of the time, “as a white woman, she was a victim.”¹⁸⁰

Accusing a black man of rape could be a means of power for white women in the turn-of-the-century South; by uttering just a few carefully chosen words, a white woman could set in motion the entire machinery of white patriarchy. Such accusations were never taken lightly; they could result in a lynching before trial or even before an arrest was made. But, if they made it to trial, Lindquist-Dorr found that a conviction was not inevitable. According to the evidence in court records, jurors believed that “the magnitude of the damage an assault inflicted on a woman was directly related to her place in the social order and to her position as the repository of white civilization and racial purity.” In other words, the assault of a “disreputable white woman”—as

¹⁷⁹ Hall, ““The Mind That Burns in Each Body.”

¹⁸⁰ Lisa Lindquist-Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 63.

defined by both class and sexuality—was not necessarily a defiance of the racial order, because such women did not represent the white “lady” around whom the system apparently revolved.¹⁸¹ Some white women could thus be unsuitable victims, and their attackers could be upstanding African Americans who posed no challenge to white supremacy.

Wendy Kozol argues that this question of a female victim’s “suitability” continued throughout the twentieth century. Comparing the “Central Park Jogger” case, in which a wealthy white woman was the victim, and the “Glen Ridge Rape” case, in which a mentally retarded, white, high school girl was gang-raped by her classmates, she finds that the media coverage indicated that the rape of the “brilliant investment banker” was somehow more “heinous.” The coverage suggests that, even in the wake of second-wave feminism, “certain women's bodies are more valuable than others.”¹⁸² It is this dynamic, this class-based fault line within the gendered social order, that dictated the media focus on Susan Smith’s class and her marital status. Clearly both were important components of the “new momism,” but they also had racial implications as well. If Susan Smith was a married, middle-class, housewife and mother, then she was a suitable victim; when journalists depicted her this way, she became the lead feature on local, regional, and even national news throughout the investigation. Perhaps unwittingly, the media aided her performance of motherhood, and of whiteness (specifically endangered white womanhood), by adding the necessary but unspoken element of class. When the camera showed Smith leaning heavily on the arms of various white men—her husband, the sheriff, or other law enforcement

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 81, 99, 114.

¹⁸² Kozol, 278. I have a major caution here: the perpetrators in the “Central Park Jogger” case were minorities, while in the Glen Ridge case, they were middle-class, all-American, football-playing white teenagers. This may well account for some of the discrepancies in the media coverage of the respective victims. See Bernard Lefkowitz, *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

agents—it upheld the performance of white patriarchy that historically accompanied the assault of a white woman by a black man.

Although the practice of lynching waned, the accompanying sexual stereotypes remained, and white mobs still occasionally avenged alleged attacks on white women through mid-century. In 1931, a “legal lynching,” or a speedy trial in an all-white legal system, placed Scottsboro, Alabama, on the national stage. The “Scottsboro Boys” were a group of nine African Americans who were accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama. A mob surrounded the jail the night of their arrests, but the local sheriff prevented a mob by calling in the National Guard. The “boys” went to trial shortly thereafter, and eight of the nine were found guilty. Despite the reversal of these convictions twice by the United States Supreme Court and the recanting of the charges by one of the women, the “boys” spent between six and nineteen years in prison. To white Alabama in the 1930s, they were, according to a local journalists, “beasts unfit to be called human.”¹⁸³

This “black beast” image that Smith called upon in 1994 remained a criminal icon throughout the twentieth-century. Although the heyday of lynching ended in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the “black beast rapist” enjoyed enough cultural currency in the middle decades of the century that Richard Wright wrote an acclaimed novel, *Native Son* (1940) based on the image. In the novel, Bigger Thomas, a young black man and would-be small-time criminal on the South side of Chicago, gets a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy, liberal white family whose patriarch expresses magnanimous interest in “helping the Negro.” Their daughter, Mary Dalton, and her communist boyfriend also have an interest in “the Negro,” but theirs is a thoroughly transparent, privileged kind of concern. They want to see “how Negroes live,” so Bigger, their embarrassed and angry driver, takes them to a soul food place on the South Side,

¹⁸³ James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 1-2, 11.

where they proceed to get drunk and try to talk to him about the labor movement. When it is time to take Mary home, she is so drunk Bigger must carry her up the stairs. Once in her room, he kisses her, but it is a strange kind of desire, almost as if Bigger is being forced to fulfill a social role for which he has no stomach. When her mother comes to the door, Bigger presses a pillow over Mary's mouth to protect himself, knowing full well he would be accused of rape just for being in a white girl's room. Mary suffocates, and Bigger, after disposing of the body in a particularly brutal manner, goes on the run.¹⁸⁴

Throughout the novel, the possibility of black male rape looms large, almost as a worse crime than murder. When Bigger tells his "girl" Bessie what he has done, she immediately worries that "they'll say you raped her"—an odd concern, considering he had just confessed to the worse crime of murder. Bigger is surprised; he has own definition of racial rape.

They would say he had raped her and there would be no way to prove he had not. That fact had not assumed importance in his eyes until now. He stood up, his jaws hardening. Had he raped her? Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face.¹⁸⁵

In Wright's narrative, rape was what was expected of black men, but racism, and the ubiquitous stereotypes that accompanied it in the twentieth century, was the real interracial violence.

Fifteen years after Wright published his acclaimed novel, and 24 years after Scottsboro, two white men from Money, Mississippi, murdered fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, a Chicagoan who

¹⁸⁴ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1940).

¹⁸⁵ Wright, 213-214. Bigger murders Bessie shortly after this scene in the novel. bell hooks points out that the 1980s film version of *Native Son* does not even include the murder of Bessie, a "doubly ironic" move that enhances both the misogyny and the racism of the narrative by exploiting the "expendability" of the black female body (bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 64). Claudia Brodsky Lacour argues similarly that *Native Son* functions a "story of a racial crime in which a white woman dies and a black man emerges as the victim of society," although Bigger murders Bessie, a black woman, as well (Lacour, "Doing Things with Words: 'Racism' as a Speech Act and the Undoing of Justice," in Morrison, ed., 211).

was spending the summer with his extended family, for reportedly “wolf whistling” at a white woman. The men abducted Till at gunpoint, beaten him, shot him in the skull, and disposed of his body by tying a heavy cotton gin fan to his neck and throwing him in the Tallahatchie River. Local authorities arrested and indicted the two men for murder, but all observers expected legal “whitewash,” to use *Jet* magazine’s term, and that is what they got. It took the all-white, all-male jury sixty-seven minutes to return a verdict of not guilty.¹⁸⁶ Unlike the lynchings of countless black men for the same alleged crime in earlier decades, the Till case received a lot of negative press; murdering a boy for whistling exposed for many people, especially outside the South, the lie of the myth of the “black beast” and his prey of pure Southern ladies.

Concordant with these political transformations of mid-century, the image of African American men as violent criminals went national. The beast did not disappear with the civil rights movement; in fact, the black militancy that resulted from the movement in many ways fed into racist and sexist images of African American masculinity. Eldridge Cleaver, a member of the Black Panther Party who wrote his memoir, *Soul on Ice*, while in prison, revealed that he routinely raped white women as an “insurrectionary act.” Because white women, especially in the South, were the pinnacle of the socioracial hierarchy, the ultimate white possession, raping them was a kind of guerrilla tactic aimed at white patriarchy. Like Bigger Thomas, Cleaver knew what white America expected of him as a black man, but unlike Bigger, he saw the fulfillment of the “black beast role” as a political, not just a stereotypical, act. “It delighted me that I was trampling on the white man’s law,” he wrote. “I wanted to send waves of consternation through the white race.”¹⁸⁷ He got his wish; white Americans were horrified.

¹⁸⁶ Feldstein, 86.

¹⁸⁷ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Mass Market Paperbacks, 1970).

Ronald Reagan, then the governor of California, was outraged by UC-Berkeley's invitation to Cleaver to speak on campus in the late 1960s. He warned Americans: "If Eldridge Cleaver is allowed to teach our children, they may come home one night and slit our throats."¹⁸⁸

Over a decade later, urban black males were feared enough that when four black male teenagers asked a white man on a New York subway for five dollars in 1984, he pulled out a gun and shot at all of them, paralyzing one for life. The man, Bernhard Goetz, was dubbed the "Subway Vigilante" by the tabloids, and, according to author Malcolm Gladwell, he became an urban hero, "a man who had fulfilled the secret fantasy of every New Yorker who has ever been mugged or intimidated or assaulted on the subway." At trial, the jury acquitted Goetz of both charges of assault and attempted murder.¹⁸⁹ According to much of the media coverage, Goetz had simply taken the law into his own hands and battled the black urban predator on his own terms. All Americans knew what this enemy looked like. The image of the black male criminal permeated the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s, appearing on the nightly news as well as new forms of televised entertainment such as the reality show *Cops* and legal dramas like *Law & Order* that featured the punitive state as the hero (rather than the "defense attorney hero" shows of previous decades like *Perry Mason* and *Matlock*). Media studies scholar Elayne Rapping argues that while the legal dramas at least tried to be more political correct according to the "new racism," the nightly news presented black men simply as "superpredators."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Jennifer Auther, "He Was a Symbol": Eldridge Cleaver Dies at 62," CNN, May 1, 1998. The real irony of Eldridge Cleaver is that after fulfilling white fears during his militant phase, he went on to become a born-again Christian, an anti-communist, and a Republican (Ibid).

¹⁸⁹ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000), 133-135.

¹⁹⁰ Elayne Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on Television* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 61.

A primary difference between the “black beast” at the end of the century and his rapist brothers at the beginning was that the image was often divorced from issues of sexuality, although sexual attacks were often a subtext of even nonsexual crimes. Another major difference is that the image was firmly national, rather than simply associated with the South. Although he was seen as a universal predator, and rape was no longer his sole *modus operandi*, white women in particular were advised to live in fear of the inner-city black male. As media studies scholar John Fiske points out, “the fact that the white horror of sex between a black man and a white woman cannot be spoken aloud in post-civil rights America does not mean that it has disappeared.”¹⁹¹ Wendy Kozol agrees, arguing that “the fiction of the black male perpetrator automatically sexualized a nonsexual crime.”¹⁹² Accordingly, when a black man or black men actually did attack a white woman, the event became the lead story for all the major media outlets. A case in point was the so-called “Central Park Jogger” case; this was the name given to a woman who was raped, beaten and abandoned in Central Park in 1989. The victim was a young, white investment banker; the perpetrators were young, working-class, African American and Hispanic males. Almost without exception, the young men appeared as “beasts” in the media—literally, as animals that gathered in groups to go on rape sprees known as “wilding.”¹⁹³

The image also played a controversial role in the presidential election of 1988 when Republican George H. W. Bush used it against his opponent, Michael Dukakis, then governor of Massachusetts. Bush’s platform was “tough on crime,” which essentially meant “white protection,” and the issue was Dukakis’ policy of “weekend passes” or furloughs for imprisoned

¹⁹¹ Kozol, 660.

¹⁹² Ibid, 276.

¹⁹³ Susan Fraiman, “Geometries of Race and Gender: Eve Sedgwick, Spike Lee, and Charlayne Huner-Gault,” *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 1 (March 1994).

individuals. One such individual was Willie Horton, a young black man who had been convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life. He escaped while on a weekend pass, kidnapped and assaulted a white couple, stabbed the man, and repeatedly raped his girlfriend.¹⁹⁴ An anti-Dukakis ad entitled “Bush and Dukakis on crime” featured a photo of Dukakis; the voiceover informed the public that Dukakis opposed the death penalty and allowed murderers out of prison on weekend passes. Over the menacing mug shot of Willie Horton, the narrator stated that Dukakis granted him ten furloughs. The narrator listed his crimes—murder, kidnapping, assault and, last but not least, rape— and the ad ended with the tagline, “Dukakis on crime.”¹⁹⁵ The implications were clear: a conservative vote was a vote against the “black beast.”

Although the Bush campaign vigorously denied responsibility for the ad—it was released by a partisan group that was “technically unaffiliated” with the campaign—Republican strategist Lee Atwater later apologized for it. Even so, the Republicans consistently denied that the ad and the issues surrounding it were about race. This was an issue of “crime and punishment,” with Willie Horton, the “black beast” du jour, as a primary example, regardless of his race. This argument was enabled by the coded vocabulary of the “new racism”; the silent pairing the issue of generic “crime” with the visual image of a black face allowed Republicans to deny charges of racism. The media largely complied with this denial; as Tali Mendelberg points out in a study of the ad, “the closest journalists came to condemning the Horton appeal was to label it a negative partisan tactic, not a negative racial tactic.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Tali Mendelberg, “Executing Hortons: Racial Crime in the 1988 Presidential Campaign,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 134-157.

¹⁹⁵ Video of the ad is available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgsgLXbcnRc>.

¹⁹⁶ Mendelberg, 137.

If anyone in the Bush campaign had admitted to the deliberate manipulation of the public through a racist image, they may well have courted public condemnation. According to the logic of the “new racism,” deliberate manipulation of these images was not permissible in late twentieth-century American culture. Indeed, when such a manipulation occurred, it gave white Americans an opportunity to absolve their racial guilt by condemning the offending white party. This is exactly what happened in the case of Charles Stuart, a white Boston man who claimed that he and his pregnant wife had been shot on their way home from a Lamaze class in October of 1989. His wife died in the hospital; Stuart survived to witness a months-long investigation in which the Boston police rounded up African American men all over the area, interrogating most and detaining a few. The case prompted national media coverage. Bostonians soon discovered themselves to be in the midst of a deadly crime wave, and police responded by intensifying searches and seizures.¹⁹⁷ By January 1990, almost three months after the crime, the state had a suspect that they were ready to try, only to be tipped off by Stuart’s guilt-ridden brother that the family was suspicious of Charles himself. Charles ended the city’s nightmare when he committed suicide shortly thereafter.¹⁹⁸

Stuart’s deliberate racial profiling to cover up his own violent crime was an act that did not jibe with the rules of the “new racism” and the code that carefully avoided mention of race. Accordingly, the Boston police became momentary outcasts, and several members of the force were charged with the violation of the civil rights of many of the men they had questioned and detained, including the suspect who would have been the defendant in Carol Stuart’s murder trial. However, the trials of the officers dragged on, public interest was lost, and, perhaps not

¹⁹⁷ Constance L. Hays, “Boston Agonizes Over Street Violence,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1989.

¹⁹⁸ David Mehegan, “He’s Turned the Stuart Case into Fiction,” *Boston Globe*, July 11, 2006.

surprisingly, the officers were exonerated in the end. On July 8, 1995, two days before the start of Susan Smith's trial, the last officer was cleared of official misconduct, indicating that overt racism might cause a public outcry, but it still did not result in the punishment of the perpetrators of the racist crimes.¹⁹⁹

Thus, by the early 1990s, the complicated rules of the "new racism" allowed and even encouraged stereotypical images of black deviance and criminality, but they discouraged the overt racism of the pre-civil rights movement days. It was a thin disguise; George Wallace, upon hearing the speeches of some of the Republicans of the 1990s, reportedly lamented, "You know, I should have copyrighted all of my speeches."²⁰⁰ But the "new racism" could work in the favor of some African Americans. Witness Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas' charge that his confirmation hearings, rife with rumors of sexual harassment (against a black woman--a white woman might well have been a different story), were essentially a "high-tech lynching." This "distorted image" of racial victimization sparked white guilt on both sides of the political spectrum and effectively defused the claims of the actual victim in this case, a black woman.²⁰¹ A similar distortion captured America's attention again during the O.J. Simpson trial. Subtle efforts to depict Simpson as the "black beast"—*Time* reportedly darkened their cover photo of Simpson to make him appear more menacing—were discarded as the case underwent a rapid

¹⁹⁹ Judy Rakowsky, "Jury Clears Officers in Stuart Case: Victory Claimed for Police in Handling of 1989 Probe," *Boston Globe*, July 8, 1995.

²⁰⁰ Feldman, 309.

²⁰¹ Emma Coleman Jordan, "Race, Gender, and Social Class in the Thomas Sexual Harassment Hearings," in Wing, ed., 171.

transformation. When charges of racism against the LAPD entered the trial, the entire theme shifted from sexual politics of violence to the sociolegal politics of race.²⁰²

The realities of the “new racism” at the end of the twentieth century were thus complex and often contradictory. In the early 1990s, bell hooks argued that while African Americans have made gains in sociopolitical arenas such as employment and education, “there has been little change in the area of representation.”²⁰³ When a hysterical white woman with a thick Southern accent appeared on the national nightly news claiming that a black man had stolen her children, the image of the beast was not one that had to be explained to any American. Law enforcement officials proceeded more cautiously than their forefathers in lynch mobs or even the Boston police in 1989. The media followed suit, describing him only as a “black male, 20-30 years old,” wearing a “dark blue tobaggan cap, plaid jacket, and blue jeans.”²⁰⁴ Although Sheriff Howard Wells assured the public that the carjacker had no motive to hurt the children, and that he was more likely to drop them off somewhere unharmed, Susan’s words chilled American viewers: “My big thing is, you know, they were screaming, they were crying, and I’m just scared he lost his patience or something.”²⁰⁵ Wells was right; crying children were an unnecessary burden that any carjacker would drop off immediately, but the black beast of the American imagination was fully capable of “losing his patience” with two defenseless white children.

Perhaps because the image of a black male criminal attacking a white woman seemed so natural, media outlets avoided the issue of race in the early days of the investigation. Race could

²⁰² Kozol, 646. Nikki Giovanni reportedly called the Simpson case a “Scottsboro Redux” (Abigail Thernstrom and Henry D. Felter, “From Scottsboro to Simpson,” *Public Interest* 122 [January 1, 1996]).

²⁰³ hooks, 1.

²⁰⁴ Anna Brown, “Search Widens for Carjacking Suspect,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), October 26, 1994.

²⁰⁵ *Evening News*, NBC, October 26, 1994.

remain unspoken because visual images did the necessary work: broadcasts and front pages juxtaposed bright images of the pale and crying Smiths with the dark, menacing, composite drawing of a nondescript black man in the stereotypical knit cap.²⁰⁶

As suspicion of Susan Smith grew over the nine days, Americans expressed more skepticism, and a few zeroed in on the image of the black carjacker as a particularly weak point of her story. Sheriff Wells and others pointed out that children would be a liability to a man on the run from the law, and that he would be likely to drop them off somewhere unharmed. Some local African Americans expressed suspicion of the carjacker image during the investigation. “While no one was openly critical of the generic sketch,” reported the *Boston Globe*, “some blacks here are wincing at the fast response to every wooded sighting of a black male.” A local man laughed when he told reporters that his co-workers kept commenting on his resemblance to the composite sketch.²⁰⁷ But reporters fell short of actually challenging the image of the black male criminal or even pointing out his ubiquity; to do so would have been to challenge the sacrosanct word of a white mother.

By Wednesday, November 2, 1994, when authorities released the 911 tapes in which the McClouds reported that a hysterical woman had been carjacked in their neighborhood—“And it’s a black guy, she says,” can be heard clearly on the tape, which was played on all the major networks—race was still not an angle that journalists were willing to broach in their coverage.²⁰⁸ But after Smith’s arrest, the media immediately picked up on the racial dynamics of the case. Although most were reluctant to challenge the crying words of a white mother, reporters easily

²⁰⁶ Brown, “Search Widens.”

²⁰⁷ Judy Rakowsky, “Carjacking Mystery Stuns SC Community,” *Boston Globe*, November 1, 1994.

²⁰⁸ *Evening News*, CBS, November 2, 1994.

demonized her as a racist once she confessed, generally refusing to acknowledge public complicity in Smith's lie.

Amongst the crowd that had gathered to hear Sheriff Wells announce that he had arrested Susan Smith for the murder of her own children was Gilliam Edwards, a local black man. As locals and reporters expressed their shock and sadness, Edwards publicized his racial anger. "Speak up, black people, don't be afraid," he told the African Americans who had gathered for Wells' press conference.²⁰⁹ "We don't murder people!" he shouted, exhorting the crowd to join him in his protest of the black male criminal image. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that about thirty blacks joined Edwards, "some raising their fists and shouting."²¹⁰ Maria Eftimiades, a *People* reporter who wrote one of the first books about the case, printed Edwards' diatribe in full. "It's always a black man, always a black man," he yelled to the crowd.

It's time for us to stand up like men and women and stop the whites from accusing of hideous crimes that they commit against themselves and they have committed against us for 484 years... What kind of people accuse defenseless people? We black people are totally defenseless. We shouldn't accept that no more. We got to fight back. We don't stand up for ourselves.²¹¹

Many news reports carried Edwards' comments the following day, but the attention paid to him in the media was short-lived. Reporters were more inclined to focus on the more general image of the black male criminal, but even this plotline lasted just days in most media outlets.

²⁰⁹ Chris Burritt, "'Mother Charged with Murder: The Unraveling Life of Susan Smith,'" *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 9, 1994.

²¹⁰ Chris Burritt, "Blacks See Mother's Story as Just Another Outrage," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, November 4, 1994.

²¹¹ Eftimiades, 175. Edwards continued his diatribe to Eftimiades: "No black person does something like that. We know we're ninety percent of the prison population, we been ninety percent since 1776. We know when we go down to that prison for certain crimes, we going to be taken care of. It ain't going to be tomorrow, it's going to be as soon as we get down there. One's bothering children, bothering old women, messing with the women. You going to get it, that's all. Any black guy would have to be completely out of his mind to commit such a crime. You see me? Big old black guy with two white kids? No, no" (Ibid, 94).

The night of Smith's confession, *Nightline* began with the words of an African American man from Union: "A black man has been falsely accused again. I mean, we've had problems before and this is just unfair." Later in the broadcast, anchor Ted Koppel returned to the theme. Locals were devastated that the boys had been murdered, but they were also angry at Smith's lie. One Unionite vented: "Everything that comes up that's wrong, everything that's bad, first thing they do is pick a black man as the epitome of evil." But the anger was defused as the segment on Susan Smith ended with a message of healing. Reverend Alan Raines of Union explained: "I believe that just as prayer brought us together in the last eight or nine days of looking for the hope that those boys would be returned, the same thing [will happen] as we exercise our faith day to day."²¹² Mere hours after Smith's confessions, local leaders had begun working to defuse racial tension, and most of the media collaborated, either by avoiding the issue of race altogether, or offering small reports on how the races of Union had pulled together to overcome tragedy.

The day after her arrest, Susan Smith was again the lead story on the national news. Most reports focused on the collective shock at the severing of that "most basic of instincts" between a mother and her children. But in the days immediately following Smith's confession, journalists momentarily acknowledged the racial anger, including brief interviews with local African Americans who wondered "if Union would ever again live up to its name." NBC's Jim Cummins ended his report that evening by arguing that Susan had "played to antique fears" with her racist lie. Except for the report a few days later on Smith's family's apology to Union's black community, that was the very last mention of race in the coverage of the Susan Smith case on the *NBC Evening News*.²¹³ ABC followed suit; the day after Smith's confession, Mike von

²¹² *Nightline*, ABC, November 3, 1994.

²¹³ *Evening News*, NBC, November 4, 1994.

Fremd interviewed some local African American men at a barbershop in Union. One asked plaintively: "Why were so many people prepared to believe?" Another local man warned: "If it had gone any further, it could've torn this town apart, between blacks and whites." Others nodded in assent, but von Fremd ended on a positive note: "But at Dawkins Barber Shop, they praised police; there was no wholesale rousting of black men." The report shifted to the subject of Union's small-town quaintness, and with that, it seems, the issue of race in the Susan Smith case was resolved enough for the network. It was not brought up again in ABC's coverage at all.²¹⁴

However, the *Washington Post*, also stationed at Dawkin's Barber Shop, told a different story. When Susan Smith accused a black man, "the authorities here were quick to start ransacking our community for a suspect," Vincent Dawson told the *Post* reporter. "But since she confessed, no one has rushed forward to apologize. That doesn't make for a very strong community spirit." Francine Krenshaw, another local African American, agreed: "Race relations were already bad here. Now they're going to be worse." Locals told the reporter that at least a dozen black men were questioned during the investigation, and police had gone door-to-door in black communities looking for information and suspects. "I was scared at first," Harold Browning, a local construction worker who was questioned for several hours by the police, said. "I knew I didn't do it, but people started to look at me kind of funny after that." It was, a local woman told a reporter, "a hard week to be black in Union."²¹⁵ Reverend Jesse Jackson spoke for the patrons of the barbershop when he said all local African Americans wanted was an apology.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ *Evening News*, ABC, November 4, 1994.

²¹⁵ This woman is quoted in Cornelius Eady's poem about the case, "Next of Kin." Eady writes of the men the police questioned during the investigation: "The black man in town/ They thought looked like me,/ Without the dreamed-up cap/ And wardrobe./ The police have him now./ He sits in a small room./ They turn him this way/ and that./ He'll cool there for hours./ How do you think he feels?/ I whisper *we're innocent*/ Into his ears./ He looks so much like me,/ We could be brothers./ Already, folks/ May have their doubts:/ He's poor enough./ Where has he

Charles Sennott of the *Boston Globe* mined local racial anger in his immediate post confession coverage, as well. He wrote that when Smith first reported the carjacking, “police cruisers rolled into the Monarch Mills neighborhood,” drifting “slowly past the knots of black men hanging out on the front porches and side streets of the town's oldest black community, which straddles the railroad tracks on the outskirts of town.” The police questioned many local black men, prompting some African American teenagers to tear down the “crude” composite sketches hanging all over downtown Union.²¹⁷ On *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Samuel Vanderpool described the humiliating experience of the police coming to his parents’ house to question him because he resembled the composite sketch.²¹⁸ For many African Americans, Smith’s confession was not the “worst possible outcome”; according to the *Boston Globe*, “the worst-case scenario in their minds would have been for an innocent black man to be convicted of the crime and executed amid national hysteria.”²¹⁹

been?/ He has his needs./ What do they know?/ Neighbors call him *quiet*,/ A new knot of stress/ On the tongue./ It’s been a hard week/ To be black in Union, S.C./ A black woman tells a reporter./ The whites aren’t civil./ They look at you and then/ Reach over and lock/ Their doors./ Now he is it./ Susan has lent me/ His cheekbones./ His gait./ For a while/ He is as close as/ They’ll ever get” (Cornelius Eady, *Brutal Imagination: Poems* [New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2001], 39-40).

²¹⁶ Gary Lee, “Black Residents Angered by Reactions to False Story,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 1994.

²¹⁷ Charles Sennott, “Case Confirms Some Fears of Racism in SC Town,” *Boston Globe*, November 6, 1994.

²¹⁸ Samuel Vanderpool, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, November 8, 1994. Vanderpool told Winfrey that the police did not “pick him up,” but coming to his family’s home was enough: “I wasn’t picked up. The cops came to my mother’s house—my father’s house to come get me, you know what I’m saying? Before this happened right here, I been—felt pressured—racial pressures or whatever against the police department and everything. But when they came to my house looking for me for this right here, that right there was preposterous. It made me feel like they disrespected my family, they disrespected me, they disrespected me as a human being” (Ibid).

²¹⁹ “The Kidnapping of Trust,” *Boston Globe*, November 5, 1994. Cynthia Tucker of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* argued that Smith’s confession struck a different “chord” with African Americans, who may have even felt relief. “Black experience has taught that black men can be accused of - sometimes executed for - crimes they did not commit,” and this may well have been the outcome if Smith had not confessed (Cynthia Tucker, “Hysteria Slows Search for Any Lasting Solutions,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 11, 1994).

Although these local men did not join Gilliam Edwards on the streets of Union to protest the public's willingness to believe Smith's lie, they agreed with his opinions about the state of local race relations. Reverend McElroy Hughes was the president of the local chapter of the NAACP at the time of the Smith case, and, like Edwards, he was ready with the sound bites as soon as Susan confessed. Also like Edwards, Hughes' depiction of conflicted race relations in Union had a shelf life of about one day in media coverage. He says that very few reporters approached him, even those that were producing segments on race. "People want to say nice things, and they want to hear nice stories" about race, according to Hughes, and the stories he had to tell did not have happy endings.²²⁰

Hughes, who was born in Union but lived in the Northeast for much of his adult life, returned to his hometown in 1988 to dedicate himself to the uplift of the local African American population. Union County, he argues, is one of the poorest counties per capita in the state, and "poverty breeds ignorance, which breeds other things," resulting in an underground racism in Union.²²¹ According to Hughes, black and white children attended the same schools, but most of the teachers and administrators were white. Until the 1990s, a black man "minding his own business" on a downtown street was likely to be arrested for loitering; unemployment rates were higher and average annual salaries lower among African Americans. "This town is cursed," he told *New York Post* reporter Andrea Peyser. "It will remain cursed until we create a situation in which the black man is equal."²²²

²²⁰ McElroy Hughes, interview by author, Union, SC, July 16, 2006.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Peyser, 88-90.

Hughes believes that “racism is like an illness—it has to be addressed openly,” and that is what he has done through his church in Union since his return. In the basement of his brick church, on a side street in downtown Union, Hughes has crafted what he called his “Black History Museum,” an eclectic assortment of information about African and African American history. His museum pieces are not artifacts; rather, they are magazine articles, poster images, maps, and photographs of famous events in African American history. There is no order to the pieces; the famous illustration of African slaves packed below decks on ships on the Middle Passage hangs next to a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Nobel Peace Prize. The purpose, he says, is to educate local African Americans about their ancestors’ cultural contributions and to revise the “whitewashed” historical narrative that children learn in local schools. Yet in Union, he is “shunned”; the city has continuously tried to close his soup kitchen—“thirty minutes of prayer, thirty minutes of soup”—citing a permit problem, and only one class from a local middle school has visited his basement museum.

Of Susan, Reverend Hughes says she is the “symptom, not the cause.” She is, in fact, “a clone—society made her like they did.” Smith was “crucified” in the media, and the tragedy, rather than bringing people together in their grief, exposed the divisions between the races.²²³ He acknowledged the long history of the black male criminal image. Growing up in Union, he was taught that black men did not have the liberty to “look a white woman in the eyes” for fear of accusations of attempted rape. This dynamic had changed somewhat (his evidence for that was our interview), but he characterized the subtle racism of the late twentieth-century as “regress,” not progress.²²⁴

²²³ In an interesting slip of the tongue, Reverend A.L. Brackette accidentally called Susan’s confession her “crucifixion” (A.L. Brackette, interview).

²²⁴ Hughes, interview.

Some journalists agreed, challenging the teleology of racial progress through their coverage of the Smith case. According to a West Virginia reporter, the white South's fear of slave revolt in the nineteenth century was not far removed from the urban myth of the late-twentieth century in which a black man hid in shopping mall parking lots in American cities, waiting for the white consumers' return, whereupon he would "immobilize" them with a knife and steal their packages and their car.²²⁵ Another argued that, although Sheriff Wells and his team of investigators skillfully avoided accusing any random black men in Union County, the widespread white belief in Susan's lie could have easily turned into a mob mentality if the case had not been handled properly.²²⁶ One editorialist directly challenged the American public, arguing that the continuing cultural power of the black male criminal image is in direct proportion to Americans' willingness to believe in his existence.²²⁷ A Louisiana journalist compared the case to both Charles Stuart and Willie Horton, arguing that Americans "have a blind spot when it comes to white criminals" that enables them to believe in the enduring image of the black male criminal.²²⁸ Journalists across the nation referenced the Charles Stuart case, a comparison that worked in two ways: it made the racist thought-crime of the "black beast" image a national problem, not just a Southern one, but it also pinpointed individual scapegoats like Stuart and Smith, absolving media consumers of any racial guilt of their own.²²⁹

²²⁵ Teepen, "Baby-killing Mother Plays the Race Card."

²²⁶ Jan Glidewell, "Racial Hoax Shows Our Inner Bias," *St. Petersburg Times* (FL), November 20, 1994.

²²⁷ "Susan Smith's Betrayal," *Washington Times*, November 6, 1994.

²²⁸ Edward Pratt, "Please Find Another Scapegoat," *Advocate* (LA), November 14, 1994. Cynthia Tucker of the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out that while the majority of American believe that blacks committed more crimes than whites, whites actually commit 54% of the nation's crimes (Tucker, "Susan Smith's Bitter Legacy").

²²⁹ Ibid; Glidewell, "Racial Hoax Shows Our Inner Bias"; "Significant Contrast," *Augusta Chronicle* (GA), November 14, 1994; Adam Pertman, "Mother Held in SC Killings" *Boston Globe*, November 4, 1994; "Susan

Most major newspaper, magazines, and televised news programs offered a stock editorial or two on the historical image of the black male criminal, and then they focused on Susan Smith herself, never to return to the racial dynamics of her case. CBS was the only major media outlet to use Susan Smith's false accusation repeatedly as a means of exploring race relations in the 1990s. Two weeks after her confession, the CBS *Evening News* featured crime and racial profiling in their "Eye on America" segment. Connie Chung introduced the piece, titled "Crime: Blaming Blacks," by citing a "string of cases around the country in which whites have attempted to blame imaginary blacks for a crime." The segment featured sound bites from author Shelby Steele, Harvard's Henry Louis Gates, and civil rights attorney Morris Dees. Each man condemned the "painful logic" of Smith's invention of a black male criminal. "It can't be overlooked because it's part of a historical pattern," argued Gates. "Blacks have been used as scapegoats in this country from the first day that we got here." Her "decision to play the race card" was completely unsurprising, according to Dees: "She was a white woman that had this fear of black men that may have been engendered by Bush's Willie Horton ad or the activities of the KKK or politicians." To those images, reporter Dana King added the "nightly parade of young black men in handcuffs" on television.²³⁰ In other words, Susan Smith deliberately called upon a familiar criminal image that she had been socialized, as a white woman in twentieth-century America, to fear above all others.

CBS picked up their accusatory racial angle again in January of 1995, when prosecutor Tommy Pope announced that he would seek the death penalty against Smith. Randall Pinkston, live from Union once again, reported that "for many, the anger and outrage have cooled," but not

Smith's Betrayal," *Washington Times*, November 6, 1994; Adler and Carroll, "Innocents Lost"; Pamela Warrick, "Exposing the Big Lie," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1995.

²³⁰ *Nightly News*, CBS, November 17, 1994.

for some of Union's African Americans. Pinkston interviewed one black man who believed Smith should be executed for her "unthinkable crime," and a black woman who believed she should get life in prison, "so she has to think about those kids every day." He rounded out the local sentiments with an unidentified white man, who argued that Smith should not get the death penalty because she was clearly "out of control."²³¹

Even in late May, as both side prepared for trial and other media outlets had wholly dropped the race angle, CBS persisted. Dan Rather challenged the public about their role in the case, reporting that when the black carjacker "proved not to exist, some people had to wonder about their willingness to imagine the worst about black men." He continued: "For African Americans, especially the men, it's a familiar and depressing role." CBS was the only network to connect Smith's image of the carjacker to the larger problem of social and legal relations between blacks and whites across the country. Butch Graves of *Black Enterprise* magazine told Rather that "white women flinch" when he gets on an elevator. Rather cited the "disproportionate" amount of African American men arrested and convicted of crimes, linking it to the "societal belief that all black males are criminals." But for all the attention the network paid to the "raw wound" of race in 1990s America, CBS failed to issue a real challenge to the American public in the end. The problem, Rather concluded lamely, was "striking a balance between the preservation of public safety and the preservation of public dignity."²³²

With the exception of CBS, the media focus on racism as a social problem that had plagued Americans since slavery was, in most cases, short-lived. In general, when they did so at all, journalists and other observers approached the racial angle from one of three ways: they praised Sheriff Wells and local law enforcement; they ostracized Susan Smith as a lone racist; or they

²³¹ *Evening News*, CBS, January 15, 1995.

²³² *Evening News*, CBS, May 24, 1995.

argued that her carjacking lie had nothing to do with race. Many reporters chose to broach the issue of race from the much more positive angle of Sheriff Wells' expert handling of the investigation. Wells and his team questioned suspects cautiously and professionally, and Wells single-handedly solved the case when he coaxed a confession out of Susan Smith after nine long days of lies. Unlike the Boston police over five years earlier, local and state law enforcement did not indiscriminately round up African American men for questioning, and those they did question were, without exception, released within a few hours. According to one Florida journalist, Sheriff Wells had "learned the lessons of the 1989 Boston case" of Charles Stuart. In this report and others, Wells was anointed the hero of a case in which there were few heroic figures: "If there is a bright spot in the entire sordid mess, it is that the case fell under the jurisdiction of a modern southern lawman with impeccable credentials whose actions and words were carefully crafted to do everything possible to solve the murders while doing everything he could to control what could have been a violent situation."²³³

This heroic narrative was a popular one for several days after Smith's arrest. The *Boston Globe* was one of the only media outlets to acknowledge that, although law enforcement authorities did not target African Americans in their investigation, the "psychological fallout" from Smith's accusation—and America's willingness to believe her—was the same.²³⁴ Perhaps the Boston paper was the only one to recognize this because Bostonians were all too aware that

²³³ Glidewell, "Racial Hoax Shows Our Inner Bias"; "Significant Contrast," *Augusta Chronicle* (GA), November 15, 1994; Burritt, "Blacks See Mother's Story as Just Another Outrage"; "Smith's Allegation Angers Black Mother," *Greensboro News & Record* (NC), November 16, 1994; "Stereotyping, Black and White," *Times-Picayune* (LA), November 9, 1994; "Saving Grace in Smith Tragedy," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 9, 1994. The *Union Daily Times* reported that Wells received "mountains of mail" commending him on his professionalism conducting what could have been a controversial investigation (Anna Brown, "Sheriff Getting Mountain of Mail Concerning Case," *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 17, 1994).

²³⁴ "The Kidnapping of Trust," *Boston Globe*, November 5, 1994.

not a single police officer was found guilty of civil rights violations in the trials that followed Charles Stuart's suicide.

Most media outlets acknowledged that Smith's alleged carjacker was a familiar image; as Richard Lacayo put it in *Time* magazine the week after her arrest, Susan had only to "reach for available nightmares" to cover up her crime. The physical characteristics of the alleged carjacker—the "stranger in the shadows"—would have come to Smith naturally, perhaps subconsciously. "Susan Smith knew what a kidnapper should look like," Lacayo explained.

He should be a remorseless stranger with a gun. But the essential part of the picture -- the touch she must have counted on to arouse the primal sympathies of her neighbors and to cut short any doubts -- was his race. The suspect had to be a black man. Better still, a black man in a knit cap, a bit of hip-hop wardrobe that can be as menacing in some minds as a buccaneer's eye patch. Wasn't that everyone's most familiar image of the murderous criminal?²³⁵

Although the caption underneath the accompanying photo informed readers that the "sketch of Smith's 'attacker' says a lot about our fears," Lacayo's final argument served to absolve Americans, especially white Americans, of racial guilt. He referenced the Stuart case as a turning point; by the 1990s, law enforcement officials were less quick to believe a white accuser. The message was that no guilt was necessary, because times had changed, and racism had an individual face. Susan Smith was a lone racist relic of the past, not a racist representative of the present: "The ploy of the dark-faced stranger works only when those around you share your worst assumptions. And this time, in this case, enough people were prepared to recognize that the face of the killer could be hers."²³⁶ Newspaper readers agreed. One North Carolina woman wrote that seeing the entire "black race as a suspect" was just as wrong as seeing all white Americans as racists and "[making] them all Susan Smiths." She concluded: "The world will

²³⁵ Richard Lacayo, "Stranger in the Shadows," *Time*, November 14, 1994.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

never see peace until people are treated on an individual basis.”²³⁷ Racism was the sickness of the corrupt few rather than a sociocultural problem.

Wendy Kozol argues in her study of the O.J. Simpson case that the media’s primary role is to “neutralize and absorb dissent.” Journalists do so by relying on the concepts of “individuation and autonomy”; in other words, the media, with the complicity of the majority of Unionites who granted interviews, positioned Susan Smith as a lone, renegade racist in the post-civil rights South.²³⁸ One unidentified local woman argued on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that Smith had done to the nation what the “black beast” purportedly did to the white women of the South. In response to Winfrey’s contention that Susan “used us” by manipulating the media, she argued that Smith had gone further than that--she had “raped” the nation: “That is took the rape of our nation for her to get on the media and swear and beg and plead for somebody to bring her children back. She raped our nation of their justice.”²³⁹

Positioning Smith as a lone racist at least acknowledged that race played a role in the case. The week after Susan’s confession, Susan’s brother Scottie Smith gave a press conference to apologize to Union’s black community. The family was sorry not that Smith had told a racist lie, but that anyone would see the lie as racist. “It is disturbing to us to think that anyone would ever think that this was a racial issue,” Smith’s brother told the waiting reporters.²⁴⁰ He continued: “Had there been a white man, a purple man, a blue man, on that corner that night, that would have been the description Susan used... We hope that you won’t believe any of the rumors that

²³⁷ “Accused Woman is an Affront to Many,” *News & Record* (NC), November 11, 1994.

²³⁸ Kozol, 664.

²³⁹ *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, ABC, November 8, 1994.

²⁴⁰ *Evening News*, NBC, November 8, 1994.

this was a racial issue.”²⁴¹ Even so, it was an apology that much of black America appreciated. William Raspberry, a syndicated columnist for the *Washington Post*, thanked Smith for his apology, arguing that it was necessary because when Susan accused a black man of a violent crime, she essentially accused black *men*.²⁴² Journalist William Cooper agreed when he addressed the first line of his article to Scottie Smith: “Apology accepted.”²⁴³ Another reporter called the apology a “positive turn” in the case, but the “twinge” of racial guilt felt by American whites when Smith confessed was nothing compared to the “anger and betrayal” felt by American blacks.²⁴⁴ It was a tempered apology, but most observers accepted it.

A related media tactic, one that was backed by many African American religious leaders, was to inform the public that race was not a factor at all in Smith’s choice of attacker. The racial dynamics that had so angered people were, according to this line of thinking, the product of another time that had been recycled for the purpose of sensationalism. When Reverend Jesse Jackson publicly condemned Smith’s choice of a black male criminal, a Tennessee reporter retorted that his accusations were relics of a bygone era of American racism. “I know where Jackson is coming from,” he wrote. “If the sheriff had drawled, “Well, well. Looks like we got another case of nigras steppin’ out of line heah. You dep’ties go out and find me a boy, and we’ll have this thing wrapped up ‘fore suppah,” people of every race would have gone through the ceiling. Justifiably.”²⁴⁵ Other journalists referenced the New York case of Tawana Brawley, the

²⁴¹ Linda Russell, *My Daughter, Susan Smith* (Brentwood, TN: Authors’ Book Nook Publishing, 2000), 251.

²⁴² William Raspberry, “Apology Eases Pain of False Accusation,” *Tampa Tribune* (FL), November 10, 1994.

²⁴³ William Cooper, “Black Men Who Know Themselves Won’t Be Afraid,” *Palm Beach Post* (FL), November 10, 1994.

²⁴⁴ Bill Maxwell, “Black Self-Preservation,” *St. Petersburg Times* (FL), November 13, 1994.

²⁴⁵ Sam Venable, “Rev. Jesse Jackson Should Hush, Leave Union, SC, Alone,” *Knoxville News-Sentinel* (TN), November 13, 1994.

African American woman who told authorities that she had been raped by a group of white men in 1984, only to confess later that she had spent the week with her boyfriend.²⁴⁶ Apparently, Brawley nullified the racism of Smith, serving as proof that both races lie about each other and that Smith's case had nothing to do with a deeper history or current cultural problem. Racism was the problem of a few "morally warped" individuals, not a persistent social issue that had not been remedied by the civil rights movement.²⁴⁷

Another popular angle that erased race as a theme in the case was a victim-centered narrative, often told from a maternal point of view. As Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels point out in *The Mommy Myth*, post-confession coverage of the Susan Smith case ironically featured black mothers as good mothers, a direct contradiction of the images of black motherhood that generally graced the nightly news. "It was cold and dark and [the Smith boys] had to be out there by themselves, drowning," cried one African American mother to a reporter.²⁴⁸ "This is not a black-white thing," another sorrowful black mother told a reporter. "This is babies."²⁴⁹ Chris Burritt, writing for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, put this same local mother's words in a different context, writing that she shouted them at the crowd of African Americans who had gathered around Gilliam Edwards to protest racism following Wells' announcement of Smith's arrest.²⁵⁰ Gary Henderson, a journalist from nearby Spartanburg, SC, echoed the sentiments of one of his sources. Edna Meadow, an African American grandmother from Union, told him it was "not a

²⁴⁶ "Stereotyping, Black and White," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, November 9, 1994.

²⁴⁷ Venable, "Rev. Jesse Jackson Should Hush."

²⁴⁸ Douglas and Michaels, 165.

²⁴⁹ Teepen, "Baby-Killing Mother Plays the Race Card."

²⁵⁰ Burritt, "Blacks See Mother's Story as Just Another Outrage."

race thing.” “It’s about how those pitiful babies left the world,” she cried the day before Michael and Alex’s funeral.²⁵¹ Americans and especially Union residents grieved over the boys, but the media tactic of positioning black mothers as good mothers served as a means of defusing the racial tensions surrounding Smith’s confession.

Many observers argued that Susan Smith simply chose an image that she thought would make the most credible cover-up for her crime. ““I do not believe that young lady would have concocted that story if she didn't think it was the most believable [scenario],” argued U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, a black South Carolina Democrat.²⁵² Reverend Tom Currie of Union echoed this opinion when he explained that Smith chose a black man as her imaginary attacker because, “at the time, carjackers were minorities.”²⁵³ The problem with excusing Smith’s racist lie as a simple character choice is that it begs the question of why, indeed, a black man in a knit cap would be seen as the most “believable” attacker of a Southern white woman on a lonely rural road. As Helan Page pointed out in *American Anthropologist*, Smith’s lie simply underscored the “racial knowledge” of the “plausibility” of black male criminality that she had “internalized.”²⁵⁴

This argument about that Smith’s choice of criminal was not at all racialized was especially popular among local leaders in Union. Don Wilder, the editor of the *Union Daily Times*, argued to *Editor and Publisher* that Susan simply chose a “someone exactly opposite her” on which to blame her crime. He continued: “If she were living in a community where there was Chinese or

²⁵¹ Gary Henderson, interview by author, Spartanburg, SC, November 3, 2006; Henderson, “‘Hideous’ Scene Ended Ordeal,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* (SC), November 5, 1994.

²⁵² “Family Apologizes to Union Blacks for Smith’s False Claim,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 9, 1994.

²⁵³ Tom Currie, interview.

²⁵⁴ Helan E. Page, “Black Male Imagery and Media Containment of African American Men,” *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 1 (March 1997), 101.

Hispanics, she might well have chosen a Chinese, the exact opposite of what she is.”²⁵⁵

Reverend Bob Cato agreed that local racial dynamics helped to determined Smith’s lie.

Monarch, the small mill-town just a few miles outside of Union where Smith said she had been carjacked, was a community of “good, quality mill people,” and there “were few blacks living there.” Smith “did not want to hurt anyone,” especially the white people of Monarch that she likely knew or could even have been related to, so she invented a black attacker. “It did not have so much to do with race as community,” Cato concluded. Cato was part of the coalition of popular local ministers who set about defusing racial tension within the community almost as soon as Smith confessed. With the exception of McElroy Hughes, they genuinely believed that Smith’s lie was not racially motivated. According to Reverend Bob Cato, journalists and their sources that depicted the case as one about race were “unlearned people” who were “looking for a story.”²⁵⁶

Reverend A.L. Brackette, the prominent African American minister of Union’s First Baptist Church, did not believe that Susan Smith was a racist, although he clearly saw the potential for racial tension following her confession and the exposure of her lie. The evening of Smith’s confession, as Gilliam Edwards attempted to rally local blacks against Smith’s racist lie, other Unionites directed reporters to Brackette to dispel the aura of racism hanging over downtown.²⁵⁷ “We’re trying to encourage people not to even think that way,” he told the *Union Daily Times* the night of Smith’s arrest. “I want to point out the fact of the good relationship the black and

²⁵⁵ Larry Timbs, “To Print or Not to Print an Alleged Victim’s Claims”, *Editor and Publisher* 127, no. 51 (December 17, 1994). Wilder explained that they did not print the composite sketch because the attacker was black, saying that if Smith had blamed a “pointed-ear Vulcan,” they would have run that information if it would help find the children (Ibid.).

²⁵⁶ Bob Cato, interview.

²⁵⁷ Brackette, interview.

white have here in this community.”²⁵⁸ The reverend’s initial sound bites made him the de facto voice of black Union County, a role that resulted in a slew of interviews in local, regional, and national media outlets. By November 5, two days after Smith’s confession, Brackette had already planned a church forum for “citizens to voice their feelings on the case;” he explained that Susan’s lie “had made some blacks angry.” The meetings were meant to help Unionites “pull together as citizens and work for the good of Union,” tending to racial wounds that may have been reopened by Smith’s lie.²⁵⁹

The Sunday after Smith’s confession, the day of the boys’ funeral, Brackette’s sermon was broadcast worldwide on CNN. He received letters from as far as China commending him on his Christian response to Smith’s crimes. Brackette was instrumental in the many special church services and open meetings held in Union throughout the winter, spring, and summer, gatherings that emphasized a message of healing and community across racial lines. An old friend of Jesse Jackson’s, Reverend Brackette helped organize the famous minister’s visit to Union.²⁶⁰ Some local leaders expressed the fear that Jackson would stir up racial tensions. As one minister put it, “We just didn’t know if it was the preacher or the politician who was coming to town.”²⁶¹ The preacher, not the politician, came, and his was a message of healing. Jackson deemed the murders a “human, not a racial tragedy,” and local ministers agree that his visits to a group of local leaders and to Union High School, where he had an audience of almost 1500 students,

²⁵⁸ Charles Warner, “Mother’s Actions Not Seen as Racially Motivated,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 4, 1994.

²⁵⁹ Anna Brown, “Forum Planned for Citizens to Voice Feelings on Case,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 5, 1994.

²⁶⁰ Brackette, interview.

²⁶¹ Currie, interview.

helped to defuse racial tension.²⁶² Revered Brackette argued on *The Sally Jessie Raphael Show* that the investigation actually brought Union's races closer together in their search for, and later grief over, the Smith boys.²⁶³ The overwhelming message from local leaders, and the primary narrative in the media, was one of healing and of races grieving together.

Union residents, or at least those that granted interviews, seemed to agree with the ministers' official assessments of race relations in Union. Just after Wells' announcement, Unionites took down the yellow ribbons that had covered Main Street, replacing them with black and white ones in commemoration of the boys and perhaps in a silent gesture of healing across racial lines.²⁶⁴ Union County's historian, Dr. Allan Charles, argues that there has always been a "genuine friendliness between the races" in Union. Race plays a negligible role in Charles' official *Narrative History of Union County, SC*, and when it does appear, Charles offers a harmonious narrative of black-white relations. "Much has been made of the lynching of blacks, especially for the crime of raping white women," he wrote in the county's only official history. "But either there was very little lynching done in Union County or the newspapers refused to report it." In fact, the Union newspaper explicitly condemned lynching during the Jim Crow era, "with possibly the exception of rape."²⁶⁵

This exception notwithstanding, this was surely a moderate view on race in the South Carolina upstate in the early twentieth century, considering that the "Negrophobic" governor and senator Ben Tillman was from nearby Edgefield and the state witnessed the lynchings of at least

²⁶² Ibid; Brackette, interview.

²⁶³ Eftimiades, 223.

²⁶⁴ *Evening News*, CBS, November 3, 1994.

²⁶⁵ Allan Charles, *The Narrative History of Union County, SC*, 3rd edition, (Greenville, SC: A PRESS Printing Company, 1997), 319.

seventeen African Americans in 1898 alone, many of them in the upstate.²⁶⁶ Dr. Charles still finds Union to be moderate, though not liberal, on the issue of race. The only modern racism Charles could pinpoint in Union in the 1990s was the racial ostracization of those who “mixed,” or had sexual relations with, those outside their own race. Betraying his own biases, he explained that the “lower elements of white women” sometimes “took up with” black men, which resulted in them getting “cast out of the white community.” Union as a whole, however, was a “poster child for integration”: the races were equal in education, employment, and government. Union also has a “black bourgeoisie,” which was, for Charles, apparently proof of equal access to opportunity.²⁶⁷

Not everyone agreed with the assessment of the county’s only official historian. Andrea Peyser, the *New York Post* reporter who produced the first book on the case just a few months after Smith’s arrest, argued that the “relations between the races” in Union were “pretty similar to the relations between the sexes—It all depends on whom you ask.” She described a cluster of trees on a rural highway in Union County that included an “infamous tree”; she explained, “Every Southern town has its infamous trees.” David Smith’s mother remembered that when her family moved to Union in 1972, “people told me that was where they hanged black men if they tried to date a white woman...I got the impression it wasn’t a whole long time since those trees were used.”²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Fox Butterfield, *All God’s Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1995), 49, 56.

²⁶⁷ Allen Charles, interview by author, Union, SC, November 2, 2006. Mac Johnson, formerly of the Union County Chamber of Commerce, agreed that “mixed couples” existed in Union, but the “taboo” against it was probably only amongst the “older crowd” (Peyser, 84).

²⁶⁸ Peyser, 83-84.

Peyser wrote of a Union that “just a generation removed from segregation.” It was a small-town Southern culture in which “Susan faced sharp criticism when she briefly dated a black student” in high school.²⁶⁹ Marty Keenan, owner of a local barber shop, recalled the 1952 incident in which a black man, who was leaving a store with his arms full of packages, “‘brushed up’ against a white woman,” and was imprisoned for years for the contact. Even more recently, in 1993, a white woman had reported being mugged by a black man in Union, but rumors abounded within the black community that she had concocted the story to hide her gambling problem.²⁷⁰ In the 1990s, interracial couples freely strolled the downtown streets beneath the Confederate flags that adorned the local pawnshop, some houses, and many car antennae. Even if overt racism had largely disappeared, statistics supported systemic discrimination. In a county that was approximately one-third African American, the average annual income for a white Unionite in 1989 was \$10, 939. For black Unionites, it was \$6,711. Five years later, when Smith made the national news with her carjacking lie, the county’s total unemployment rate hovered at 7.3 percent. For local African Americans, it was 10 percent.²⁷¹

Nevertheless, in the wake of the Smith case, many locals argued that race relations were simply never a problem in Union. Kevin Kingsmore, who attended Union High School with Susan, offered the evidence that his high school class was “half black,” they had an African American principal at the time, and he never witnessed any racial tension, much less violence. Locals “lived pretty much in harmony,” although there were some “crazies” that tried to make it

²⁶⁹ There is no evidence that Susan Smith received such “criticism” regarding any boyfriends in high school.

²⁷⁰ Peyser, 83-84.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 89.

into a racial story.²⁷² Michael Roberts, who served as a juror during the trial, agreed; the races generally had to get along for such a small community to function.²⁷³ According to others, the search for the boys brought the races together. “We were all lied to, and we all searched together,” said Phil Hobbs of Union’s WBCU radio station.²⁷⁴ Locals generally agreed that the racial angle was a product of the sensation-hungry media that was searching for controversy. The evidence of local racism came from “crazies,” “people we didn’t know,” “malcontents,” “rabble-rousers,” and “fringe folks.”²⁷⁵ Torance Inman of the Union County Chamber of Commerce acknowledges that there were and are racists in Union, “but they pretty much keep to themselves.” He claims that no Unionites were surprised when Gilliam Edwards tried to rally the crowd after Wells’ announcement of Smith’s arrest. “He’s a self-professed Muslim, Nation of Islam, very radical,” Inman said, a slight smile on his face. “He’s going to show up for everything.” McElroy Hughes he simply deemed “eccentric.” According to Inman, both men are part of a small minority of local African Americans who are “inherently distrustful of white people.”²⁷⁶ Those locals who cried racism after Smith’s confession were not at all representative of Union, according to county officials.

Union’s vision of itself was rarely challenged, and within two weeks of Smith’s arrest, with the exception of CBS, race fell out of the coverage altogether. Even as the trial approached and the preparations of both sides were daily national news, race was not a factor. But some argued that race played a silent role in the trial; according to this argument, Susan Smith would never

²⁷² Kevin Kingsmore, interview by author, Moore, SC, November 3, 2006.

²⁷³ Michael Roberts, interview by author, Buffalo, SC, November 4, 2006.

²⁷⁴ Phil Hobbs, interview by author, Charleston, SC, November 16, 2006.

²⁷⁵ Kingsmore, interview; Hobbs, interview; Currie, interview; Thom White, interview.

²⁷⁶ Torance Inman, interview.

get the death penalty based on her race. Conversely, if a black male carjacker had actually murdered the Smith boys, he would most certainly get the death penalty.²⁷⁷ Moreover, if a black mother had committed the crime, she would surely have been executed, according to this line of thinking. Smith's attorney David Bruck cautioned against this logic: "People who say that forget that if she had been black, so would her children have been black," and black children are simply not as "precious" in American culture.²⁷⁸ Race lingered around the margins of the trial, and the prosecution tried at key moments to ignite the racial indignation of the jury, which was made up of seven whites and five blacks.

Indeed, the racial issue had become so diffuse in public responses to the case that it hardly factored into coverage of the trial even though the prosecution made Susan's lie a fundamental part of their strategy in the "guilt phase" of the trial.²⁷⁹ Their focus, however, was more on Smith's maternal façade than the racial dynamics of her lie.²⁸⁰ Race factored into the trial coverage on only two evenings out of the two-week trial. CBS reported on July 27, 1995 that the defense "tackled race" through the testimony of an African American prison guard who told the

²⁷⁷ In response to my initial question about the racial dynamics of the case, Rick Bragg replied flatly, "I think if it had been a black carjacker, he would have died by now...He would have made it to trial. Howard Wells would have made sure he'd made it to trial, and Howard Wells would have presided over the security that would have prevented anything from happening...It would have been a quick trial, and he would have died by now" (Rick Bragg, interview).

²⁷⁸ Bruck, interview. Andrea Peyser wrote in her book on the case: "The one matter relating to the investigation that most troubled the town's black population had nothing to do with the police, but with the smug outsiders who descended from up North. If the missing boys were black, some residents wondered, would the national media have considered the case such big news?" (Peyser, 90).

²⁷⁹ In their opening statement, the prosecutors focused on the carjacking lie and Smith's nine-day performance as much as the actual murders (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 2387).

²⁸⁰ Assistant solicitor Keith Giese did reference the O.J. Simpson trial when he told the court that Smith's trial would not resemble Simpson's at all, but he did not mean that the case would not become all about race; he meant to reassure jurors that the Smith trial would not drag on for months (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 2396).

courtroom of Smith's sincere apology for her racist lie.²⁸¹ On the last day of the trial, NBC quoted Tommy Pope, who tried to play to racial anger one last time in his closing statement of the guilt phase. He addressed the jury directly: "For nine days, she was telling us it was a black man." He paused for dramatic effect. "*The black man was her.*"²⁸² Otherwise, the racial angle of the Smith case was a null story by the summer of 1995. Other images had acquired immense significance in explanations of this young woman's crime, eclipsing race, as well as allowing Americans to bury the painful subject safely under the code of the "new racism."

This rapid retreat from even the most generic racial theorizing was very much in keeping with the acceptable public discourse of the day in which race had been largely replaced by gendered representations. Moral assertions about sexuality and class had become, in 1990s America, a kind of code for arguments about race. The primary example is, of course, the political battles over welfare reform in the mid-1990s, which were actually debates over the alleged sexual behavior of women, usually African American women, on public assistance. The images and languages were sexual—overbreeding mothers feeding off of the state—yet, as Janet Jacobsen has argued, this "moral language about sexuality enabled the formation of public policy with distinctly racial effects directed primarily at poor women."²⁸³ Andrew Ross argues in an essay about Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas that sex has been associated with blackness for years, but even when issues of race are not present, class, specifically the "presence of the poor," almost

²⁸¹ *Evening News*, CBS, July 27, 1995. Felicia Mungo, a guard at the correctional facility that originally housed Smith, told the court: "When Susan first came, she—which in talking, she would say sorry, apologize for the insinuation of what—accusing of—the black man that was accused and making up a description of him. She would apologize" (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 4832).

²⁸² *Evening News*, NBC, July 22, 1995.

²⁸³ Janet R. Jakobsen, "'He Has Wronged America and Women': Clinton's Sexual Conservatism," in *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest*, eds. Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), 300.

always introduces the subject of sexuality.²⁸⁴ Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that after Smith's class status fell and her confession destroyed any semblance of ideal motherhood, the images that the public turned to to explain her deviance began to revolve around sexuality long after the "black beast" exited the stage.

Lisa Lindquist-Dorr points out in her study of rape cases in Virginia in the first half of the twentieth century that Scottsboro, "in which the accuser's whiteness overrode any consideration of her gender, sexual history, or class status," became the paradigmatic case for interracial rape in the South. Yet, Lindquist-Dorr argues, the Scottsboro case was more complicated than the "rape myth" model suggests. Indeed, the guilty verdicts for the "boys" were thrown out because of the judges' "willingness" to "question the victims' characters." That is, the "compromised characters" of the accusing women were more significant than the race of the accused men in the final series of legal analyses; this revision sparked a national movement to exonerate the "Scottsboro Boys."²⁸⁵ Similarly, as race rapidly retreated from the media coverage of the Susan Smith case, reports on Smith—who played accuser and accused, or victim and perpetrator, all within the short course of nine days—refocused on her "compromised character" through images of class and sexuality.

In the Susan Smith case, images of sexuality and class quickly replaced all but the most superficial discussions of the racial implications of the case. In this case, sex and class replaced race not to disguise racism, as in the case of the 1996 welfare reforms, but rather to avoid a real discussion of its workings in 1990s America—the kind of racism that allowed a poor actress like Susan Smith to blame a black man in the first place, and for the nation to rally around her as an ideal mother in the second. As we shall see in the next chapter, the "code" remained—when

²⁸⁴ Ross, 206.

²⁸⁵ Lindquist-Dorr, 2-3.

journalists or public officials referred to Susan Smith as a young, poor, sexually active mother, the ever-popular image of “welfare queens” or “teenage mothers” could not have been far from viewers’ minds. But the sexualization of Susan Smith solved many of the narrative problems in the story: it eclipsed whiteness and modern white racism as focal points, it allowed further demonization of Smith based on the previous suggestions of her sexual misbehavior and tenuous class status, and, perhaps most importantly for journalists, it provided a motive for Smith’s actions.

The disappearance of the racial angle from the media did not go unnoticed by media consumers, particularly African Americans. In fact, the racial dynamics of the Smith case became the subject of two acclaimed works in the ensuing years, Cornelius Eady’s *Brutal Imagination*, a book of poems, and Richard Price’s *Freedomland*, a popular novel that became a not-so-popular film in 2006.²⁸⁶ But at the time, race was a fleeting narrative through which to understand Susan Smith. Derrick Jackson of the *Boston Globe* pointed out that after Smith’s confession, she received “media treatment no African American murderer could expect.” But race was, with few exceptions, no longer a part of this coverage. Jackson continued: “All we hear now is, ‘Woe is me, I wanted to be rich.’”²⁸⁷ Jackson wrote this just a few days after Smith’s confession, but his article was prescient; this was the image of Susan Smith that rapidly replaced all others in the months between her arrest and her trial.

²⁸⁶ Eady, *Brutal Imagination*; Richard Price, *Freedomland* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998); Joe, Roth, dir., *Freedomland*, Revolution Studios, 2006.

²⁸⁷ Derrick Z. Jackson, “Victims of Stereotypes: Susan Smith’s Other Crime,” *Boston Globe*, November 9, 1994.

CHAPTER 3

THE “MODERN-DAY MEDEA”

As journalists and other observers shuffled through racial images and then discarded them very quickly in the days immediately following Smith’s arrest, other images of Susan Smith were under construction. Racial arguments simply could not explain the primary question of motive, or why Susan Smith killed her sons. The public confusion after Susan Smith confessed to the murders of her sons was widespread enough that it became a news story in and of itself. Appalled reporters constantly repeated that the murders were “unspeakable,” “unimaginably evil,” “unthinkable,” and “unfathomable.”²⁸⁸ Shock combined with rage to produce sensational headlines and sound bites. “I hope she fries in the electric chair,” argued one woman, echoing the sentiments of many who felt personally betrayed by Smith’s revelation. “Hell’s too good for her,” added another as she flipped through *People* magazine’s postconfession reports.²⁸⁹ Journalists documented the widespread public anger, and they fueled it further as they set about the task of explaining Smith’s motive. Immediately after Sheriff Wells announced that Smith had confessed, television journalists began to sift through various images of feminine evil until they found one that seemed to fit the crime. The print media was not far behind.

Although most reports focused on the shock and anger, some reporters tried to argue for Smith’s criminological typicality in the wake of her confession. They rightly noted that

²⁸⁸ “A Saving Grace in Smith Tragedy,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 9, 1994; Daniel Maier-Katkin, “Infanticide By Mothers is a Common Form of Homicide,” *Greensboro News & Record* (NC), November 27, 1994; Harrison Ranie, “A Mother, Two Kids, and the Unthinkable,” *U.S. News and World Report*, November 14, 1994; “Children: Nothing Is More Important.”

²⁸⁹ Halter, “Susan Smith Becomes the Moral Scapegoat.” Smith’s crimes met two of the criteria for capital punishment: there was more than one victim, and they were both children (Pope, interview).

infanticide and especially filicide (the murder of one's own children) are quite common, enough so that law enforcement officers are trained to suspect the parents first when children are murdered or go missing.²⁹⁰ The United States has the second-highest child homicide rate in the world, and the FBI estimates an average of over 500 filicides annually.²⁹¹ Editors duly printed these statistics, but the numbers did not mitigate the rage directed at Susan Smith. To view her as a statistic, and to see any criminal mother as remotely representative of anything except deviance, was perhaps too close to an indictment of the "new momism."²⁹² As *Time* explained, suspicion of the crying mother certainly "required too complex a calculation to suspend pity and suspect a plot."²⁹³

In some instances, infanticide statistics were used to demonize Smith even more thoroughly. Although most reporters managed to avoid outright misogyny, one reader used Smith's statistical typicality as evidence that women were "the most vicious" creatures on the planet.²⁹⁴ The

²⁹⁰ Halter, "Susan Smith Becomes the Moral Scapegoat of a Nation;" Danie Maier-Katkin, "Infanticide by Mothers is a Common Form of Homicide;" Gibbs and Booth, "Death and Deceit."

²⁹¹ Mann, 70; Anna Wilczynski, 25. There is a "general agreement" that these figures do not begin to represent the extent of filicide because of underreporting/detection of child abuse; the real figure may be between three to seven times higher (Wilczynski, 23, 36).

²⁹² Criminologists Cheryl Meyer and Michelle Oberman argue that maternal infanticide may be seen as a response to the societal construction of and constraints upon mothering...not a random, unpredictable crime. Instead, it is deeply embedded in and is a reflection of the societies in which it occurs...reflection of the norms governing motherhood" (Meyer and Oberman, *Mothers Who Kill Their Children: Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the "Prom Mom"* [New York: New York University Press, 2001], 2).

²⁹³ Gibbs and Booth, "Death and Deceit."

²⁹⁴ Jacquelyn Rose Minot penned the letter to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* entitled "Women the Most Vicious" in which she argued: "Re Susan Smith and the Smith murders: I am less than amused by the event than I am by the nation's reaction to another revelation of infanticide. The most appalling aspect to the story is that society feigns shock and disbelief that Smith would murder her children. There's really nothing unnatural, shocking or new about this most recent occurrence beyond the fact that Smith so successfully duped an entire nation for nine days. Women, the female animal, always have been and will continue to be singularly the most vicious, predatory, lethal and unemotional creatures that inhabit the earth" ("Women the Most Vicious," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, November 27, 1994). A corollary to this age-old argument is the "backlash" argument first postulated by criminologist Freda Adler, who blamed second-wave feminism for a supposed rise in female criminality: "The forces behind equal employment opportunity, women's liberation movements, and even public-health problems like lung cancer and heart disease have been causing and reflecting a steady erosion of the social and psychological differences which

statistics did nothing to mitigate the anger at Smith because it was not only her crime of infanticide that confused and angered the American public. The lie and the murders together amounted to an assault on ideal motherhood, and this perhaps explains some of the palpable rage. Journalists, especially those who work in the print medium, present the world to us in narratives, so a story had to be formed out of the tragic details. Thus, the media trotted out a succession of familiar stereotypes of perverted femininity to explain Smith's crime. In doing so, they succeeded in making the "monster mother" understandable, if no less monstrous.

National and local journalists worked in tandem, and, almost without exception, they quickly came up with another explanatory narrative of the crime based on Smith's alleged sexual behaviors. Within hours of her confession, journalists across the country had begun to construct a makeshift image of Smith as a working-class tramp who killed her children to salvage a romance. By the end of the weekend after her Thursday confession, the image had taken full shape. Unlike the images of the "Good Mother" and the "white woman in danger," however, this class- and sexuality-based image of "Susan the scheming slut" had remarkable staying power. In this chapter, I examine how journalists, politicians, and media consumers told the story of Susan Smith as one about sexuality, violence, and class according to the logic of the "boyfriend motive," or the carefully constructed narrative in which Susan Smith murdered her sons to be with a wealthy local man who did not want children. This narrative transformed Smith's crime from the "incomprehensible" act of an aberrant mother to the representative crime

have traditionally separated men from women. It would be natural to expect parallel developments in female criminality...as the position of women approximates the position of men, so does the frequency and type of their criminal activity" (quoted in Craig J. Forsyth, Shelley B. Roberts, and Robert Gramling, "The Putative Problem of Female Crime," in *Female Criminality: The State of the Art*, ed. Concetta C. Culliver [New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1993], 24-25. It should be noted that there has been no rise in female crime in the late twentieth century; female perpetrators have accounted for approximately 15% of all violent crimes throughout recorded history (Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1996], 3).

of a familiar female deviant, placing her within a recognizable “backlash” framework of sex- and class-based maternal evil.

After Susan Smith’s arrest, the media outpaced their own rapid image construction of those first nine days. One local reporter described the creation of the narrative of the Smith case as an almost organic process. “A story this big has a life of its own,” he told me, a hint of nostalgia in his voice. “It has as much life as anything alive. It moves and you just hang on.” Journalists swarmed over Union “like ants” in the days following Smith’s confession, searching for new leads that would explain the fatal twist in the story.²⁹⁵ Although Smith’s story was initially told and understood as one about motherhood, the news that she was a murderer necessarily sent reporters scrambling for a new narrative. Smith’s surprise arrest necessitated extensive revisions in the coverage of the case. Although her confession spawned widespread shock, black anger, and white guilt, these images and emotions did not begin to clarify the seeming contradictions of the initial ideal images of Smith nor of maternal infanticide in general. Even the cracks that had developed in Smith’s façade as the investigation dragged on did not explain why she would kill her children. As observers expressed confusion and outrage, journalists searched for scripts that would dispel the dissonance between the murdering “monster mom” and the “Good Mother” Americans had rallied behind for so many days.

In some ways, the post-confession revision of Susan Smith, or what I call the “boyfriend motive,” represented the culmination of the successively negative images of Susan Smith that surfaced during the investigation. After Smith’s arrest, sexuality and class rapidly transformed from subtle undertones to *the* explanatory factors of the case. Smith became an anti-mother with her confession; consequently, the narrative focus shifted dramatically to sexuality and class. This strategic discursive shift shielded the “new momism” and the “new racism” from the direct

²⁹⁵ Henderson, interview.

challenges posed by a white, middle-class, young mother who killed her children in cold blood. The “boyfriend motive” and its attendant image of Susan Smith as a working-class, “boy crazy” single mother required no revisions of current ideas about womanhood, sexuality, class, or violence. This image explained the apparent enigma of Susan Smith in a way that others did not, and it pulled attention away from more complicated readings by calling upon familiar scripts of deviant womanhood. These scripts, drawn from popular culture, criminal history, literature, and film, made Smith a familiar figure of derision rather than an “incomprehensible” monster. This familiarity positioned Susan Smith as a national scapegoat for various social ills, and New Right forces from anti-abortion activists to aspiring Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich used her accordingly.

Although most reports initially focused on the public outrage following Smith’s confession, many journalists seemed to recover from their shock fairly quickly. Within hours (or, in some cases, moments) of her confession, the media offered the public a new image of Smith. She became a devil in the dangerous shape of a normal, small-town girl. Though reporters spoke in the somber tones of tragedy, even the mainstream media dipped into the realm of tabloid journalism in their attempts to explain Susan Smith. “Nobody admits it's exciting, of course,” wrote Bob Herbert for the *New York Times*. “Nobody would dare say it was entertaining. But when Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey decide to set up shop in Strom Thurmond country, you know there's something titillating going on. Sex, lies and infanticide in Union, S.C.”²⁹⁶ Like the O.J. Simpson case in California, which was in the process of jury selection at the time, the Smith case quickly took the form of both tragedy and sensation in the public imagination.

²⁹⁶ Bob Herbert, “The Ugliest of Stories, with Coverage to Match,” *Tampa Tribune* (FL), November 13, 1994.

In direct contrast to the “we never believed her” tone, which subtly worked to absolve both reporters and readers of the guilt of buying into a racial stereotype, journalists touting the “boyfriend motive” used the alternative approach that Smith was a dangerously talented actress who had tricked the nation. In her study of pop cultural images of feminine evil at the end of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Wurtzel argues that “the only female role more entrancing than the darkly, distraughtly bad is the small town sweetheart who drips sugar and saccharine for all the world to see but is in fact full of lust and evil (which are one and the same in woman) and malice and bad thoughts in her secret, sinful Jungian life.”²⁹⁷ This dual-natured female version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde almost always hinged on combined motifs of sex and violence. In the Susan Smith case, the media offered the predictable trope of the mask to explain the contradiction between the affectless “monster” Americans saw being led to the courthouse for her bond hearing and the crying mother who had pleaded with the alleged kidnapper on national television just days before. Smith thus wore the mask of a mother, a mask that effectively covered her “heart of darkness.”²⁹⁸

It was a useful motif, because one of the major problems with the post-confession coverage of the Smith case was the fact that no one, not even her estranged husband, could furnish any proof that this “monster” had ever actually behaved badly as a mother, or at all. Neighbors cited the many pictures Susan had taken of her sons and the parties she hosted for them.²⁹⁹ “She was

²⁹⁷ Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998), 4.

²⁹⁸ Eliabeth Kastor, “The Worst Fears, the Worse Reality: For Parents, Murder Case Strikes at Heart of Darkness,” *Washington Post*, November 5, 1994.

²⁹⁹ Elizabeth Simpson, “Susan Smith Case Awakens Fear of the Enemy Within,” *Virginian-Pilot*, November 13, 1994. *People* reporter Maria Eftimiades recounted Susan’s paeans to motherhood in her diary after Michael’s birth in 1991: “I was so happy. I had given birth to the most beautiful boy in the world. When he was put in my arms for the very first time, I forgot all about my other pains. He really lifted my spirits and touched my heart” (Eftimiades, 45).

perfect,” a local woman told Newsweek. “You’ve got your bad girls at high school and you’ve got your good girls. She was your good girl.” The reporter detailed the visual and behavioral evidence of Smith’s alleged “goodness”: “She dressed well, in clothes that were considered on the preppy side (a denim miniskirt and pink polo shirt in one yearbook picture), and didn’t smoke or drink.”³⁰⁰ As one scholar later explained, “Susan’s normality was and still is the main scandal.”

She’s typical. An All-American girl out of a Norman Rockwell drawing, with an Edward Hopper undertone. Between Winn-Dixie supermarket [where her husband worked] and Wal-Mart [Susan’s alibi for much of the night of her sons’ disappearance], Union, South Carolina, on route 49, sounds like Middletown. Too middle to be true... The “friendliest senior” of eighty-nine in Union High School marries, already pregnant, a similarly popular senior. They both work at Winn-Dixie, and make just above forty thousand a year. And they have two kids.³⁰¹

This image of the mask consoled readers and viewers that Susan Smith was not proof that the idolized “Good Mother” could also be a bad mother, or the “girl next door” could deliberately commit violent crimes. Rather, her nine-day public performance of maternity was a fraud; she was a bad mother who played the “Good Mother” for the cameras to get away with murder. The young woman who had made excellent grades and volunteered with the Special Olympics in high school just five years before must have had “another side” to be able to do such a thing to her children.³⁰² Smith was not a depressed mother who had been driven to the brink of sanity;

³⁰⁰ Adler and Carroll, “Innocents Lost.”

³⁰¹ Contardo Calligaris, “Susan Smith, a Modern Mother: Reflections on the Destiny of Children at the End of Childhood,” *Critical Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (October 1997).

³⁰² *Evening News*, NBC, November 5, 1994.

rather, her deceptive mask of maternity violently hid a woman even her husband “never really knew.”³⁰³

The public quest for motive, then, was a search for previous evidence of this other side. Many articles cited her troubled family history, especially her father’s suicide and her impending divorce, as factors that contributed to Susan’s own alleged mental instability. Union residents who had known Susan Smith for all of her twenty-three years sought for motive as well. “I’ve seen her with those babies,” sobbed a local business owner to *New York Times* reporter Rick Bragg. “She came from a good family. I don’t understand any of this.”³⁰⁴ Locals simply could not understand what would drive this mother, whom they all knew as a “sweet girl,” to murder. Bragg wrote of their utter confusion, acknowledging from past reporting experience that public scandals were often accompanied by “shock and a certain amount of revisionist history,” making the perpetrator seem less sinister, “somehow more pure,” than they really were.³⁰⁵ But in Susan’s case, there was “absolutely nothing in public record or in the minds of people here that even hints at a capacity for murder.”

To the people of Union who grew up with Mrs. Smith, who remember tying ribbons in her hair when she was a little girl, who enjoyed her smile—everyone talks about the smile—it is as if there are two Susans. They ask over and over about what caused her to kill her own children, but nothing, to many people, will ever explain how this woman, who seemed to be a perfect mother and so hard-working and devout, could do such a thing.³⁰⁶

Susan Smith’s mask of decency, it seemed, had been fatally flawless.

³⁰³ *Evening News*, CBS, November 15, 1994. Andrea Peyser organized her entire book about the Smith case around the mask motif: Susan’s “friendly mask she plastered on for neighbors all but disappeared” the night she became a murderer, while Union’s friendly small-town “mask” hid a Peyton Place-like trove of dysfunction (Peyser, 2, 16).

³⁰⁴ Rick Bragg, “Mother of ‘Carjacked’ Boys Held in Their Deaths,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1994.

³⁰⁵ Rick Bragg, “Life of a Mother Accused of Killing Offers No Clues,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1994.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

The “two Susans” enabled the new narrative of the “boyfriend motive” in the wake of Smith’s confession. Smith’s dangerously split personality explained her crimes neatly; her mask tidied up the much messier narrative of the white, middle-class, good mother who killed her children. Rather than exploring the complicated problems presented by maternal infanticide, the mainstream media offered instead an age-old bifurcation: if Susan Smith was not the madonna the public had rallied behind for over a week, she must, then, be the whore, with attendant class characteristics.

The mask motif worked well as an initial news peg, but journalists had to assemble the disparate facts into an explanatory narrative to keep consumers’ interest. The new narrative centered on the depraved details of what lay beneath Smith’s deceptive mask of married, middle-class motherhood. As Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels point out, the answer to the question on everyone’s lips—“How could she?”—was almost exclusively about Smith’s own behaviors, rather than “an honest assessment of the conditions under which so many women mother in the United States.”³⁰⁷ Smith’s statistical typicality as a female criminal and words of support from other mothers across the nation did not at all figure into the image that quickly formed to explain her motives to murder. Rather, Smith was compared to a host of other kinds of mother defined as “deviant” according to the 1990s “new momism.”

The first of these comparisons was predictable. Just seconds after showing live footage of Sheriff Wells announcing Smith’s arrest, CBS reporters scooped their competitors by calling upon a familiarly violent image that would explain Smith’s horrible crime. A spokesperson from the National Center for Missing and Abducted Children told CBS’s Randall Pinkston that infanticide often occurred in one of two contexts. Usually, he argues, such violence results from

³⁰⁷ Douglas and Michaels, 167.

an attempt “to cover abuse or it’s for emotional reasons—someone who has a romantic interest and the other partner is not interested in the child, or revenge, or conflict.”³⁰⁸ Perhaps unwittingly, this expert had scripted the two images of Smith that would dominate the news over the coming months. Like the mask motif, the framework of child abuse rendered the idea of maternal infanticide legible. Susan Smith was different from other violent mothers only because her consistent abuse turned fatal. Other reporters quickly jumped to this conclusion as well. In the days immediately following Smith’s confession, the answer to the pressing question of motive was often followed by national child abuse statistics.³⁰⁹ “How could she do it?” asked a reporter for *The Washington Post* the day after Smith’s arrest. She listed child abuse statistics, arguing that while Smith’s actions clearly were not “understandable on the level of logic,” the murders were “the extreme version of something we do understand, which is child abuse.”³¹⁰

There was a crucial flaw in this model of motive: no one who knew Susan Smith could furnish any evidence of prior abuse towards her boys. In fact, her family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances consistently supplied sound bites about what a good mother Smith had always been. But the template of the abusive mother made cultural sense; it “solved” the case by slotting Smith into a familiar subset of bad mothers. In lieu of actual evidence of abuse in Smith’s past, reporters simply referenced other cases, using experts and national statistics for

³⁰⁸ *Evening News*, CBS, November 3, 1994.

³⁰⁹ Feminist criminologists argue that this is a misguided approach to understanding female crime: “Whenever a woman commits murder, particularly if she is accused of murdering a family member, people immediately ask, ‘How could she do that?’ Given the enormous costs of being born female, that may well be the wrong question. The real question, as a review of the history of women’s crimes illustrates, is not why women murder but why so few murder” (Meda Chesney-Lind, *The Female Offender: Girls, Women, and Crime* [Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997], 97). Ann Jones, who wrote the definitive text on female murderers, also situates women’s violent crimes within the context of patriarchy when she argues that “the same social and legal deprivations that compel some women to feminism push others to homicide” (Jones, 12). It should be noted that her discussion of infanticide is very limited.

³¹⁰ Kastor, “The Worst Fears, the Worse Reality.”

validity. Reporters interviewed various experts who seemed unable to differentiate between the two crimes of child abuse and infanticide, arguing that abusive and homicidal parents share the general problem of “having no control.” NBC informed viewers that her crime had “raised lots of questions about young mothers and stress.”³¹¹ The media focus on “younger moms with money worries” encouraged the public to view Susan Smith as a familiar deviant, and the reports clearly connected Smith’s perceived lower-class status with violence.

In these reports, infanticide was the end of the dangerously slippery slope of child abuse, the result of single mothers’ inability to manage outside stressors, namely their finances and/or their boyfriends. Violence against children seemed connected to three major identifying characteristics: the young age of the offending mother, her financial worries, and, to put it bluntly, her sex life. Child abuse and child homicide were not problems that should concern all parents; they were individual problems of young, broke—read “unfit”—mothers like Susan Smith.

In this case as in others, the image of the “abusive mother” represented the media trend of “pseudodangers,” coined by author Barry Glassner, which involve the “use of poignant anecdotes in place of scientific evidence, the christening of isolated incidents as trends, depictions of entire categories of people as innately dangerous.”³¹² To be sure, mothers did and do abuse their children; at issue here is not their existence, but the way in which certain kinds of mothers were publicly represented and discussed. The cultural focus on these kinds of mothers in the early 1990s was part and parcel of the “backlash,” meant to further demonize mothers who did not fit into the impossible ideal as well as obscure the very real problems of absent

³¹¹ *Evening News*, NBC, November 18, 1994.

³¹² Glassner, 208. Glassner argues that the “pseudodanger” of child abuse lets society off the hook by assuring the public that “it is not so much social policies or collective responsibility that endanger many children in this country but an overabundance of infanticidal women” (Glassner, 101).

fatherhood, intimate partner violence, and impending slashes in welfare to single mothers, to name a few. The label of “abusive mother” had specific connotations of sex and class; these details remained unspoken, but the code was clear in reports alleging that Susan Smith abused her sons.

Media consumers are necessarily image-literate, and this was a familiar image by the end of the twentieth century. Although violence is generally depicted as a male phenomenon, the fearsome figure of the abusive mother was a notable pop cultural exception in the twentieth century. Perhaps the most famous of the abusive mothers were the “moms” described by Philip Wylie in his 1942 *Generation of Vipers*. Much like Susan Smith in post-confession media coverage, “Mom,” according to Wylie, was a uniquely “American creation” whose allegedly unconditional love for her sons thinly masked her own power-hungry narcissism.³¹³ Beware of the overprotectiveness of American mothers, Wylie warned his readers: “The spectacle of the female devouring her young in the firm belief that it is for their own good is too old in men’s legends to be overlooked by any but the most flimsily constructed society.”³¹⁴ Motherhood, in Wylie’s characterization, was an institution fraught with peril for America’s children, especially her sons.

Although Wylie’s Freudian, castrating “moms” were implicitly white, mid-century “mother-blaming” overwhelmingly targeted African American mothers. The most famous example is the Moynihan report, and the good senator’s language remained in wide circulation for decades. When Vice President Quayle targeted poor mothers in Los Angeles in his condemnation of the Rodney King riots in the early 1990s, the race of these mothers remained unspoken in his speech,

³¹³ Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1942), 197.

³¹⁴ *Ibid*, 198.

but the racial code of the language of welfare was well known. Lest he sound like a racist, Quayle went on to target the popular television show *Murphy Brown*, on which the title character, an unmarried, wealthy, white woman, had recently given birth.

It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has *Murphy Brown*—a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman—mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another “lifestyle choice.”³¹⁵

Quayle's attack on mothers received plenty of negative press, and one scholar argued that in the media's portrayal of the debate, “Murphy won,” which indicates that there were challenges to the “new momism”—or at least to Republicanism of the Reagan/Bush/Quayle variety—in the 1990s.³¹⁶ But single and poor mothers on welfare surely lost this battle. Quayle's images, even his actual language, became legislative reality in the form of the welfare reforms of 1995.³¹⁷

Quayle enjoyed support from the conservative media, and, not surprisingly, Rush Limbaugh was the pundit who explicitly connected the *Murphy Brown* debate with the violent subtext of single motherhood. In his defense of Quayle, Limbaugh argued that *Murphy Brown*—a fictional television character—was abusive, and her son would turn out just like the gangsters perpetrating

³¹⁵ Ibid, 69.

³¹⁶ John Fiske argues that the *Murphy Brown* controversy did not win Clinton the presidency, but it served as a “relay station”: “It drew in the already circulating discourse of ‘family values,’ boosted its strength, directed it slightly leftward, and sent it back into circulation again” (Fiske, 24). The press coverage was overwhelmingly in the fictional mother's favor; *Time* magazine ran a cover story on the argument with Candice Bergen, the actress who played *Murphy Brown*, on the cover wearing a large lapel button that read “*Murphy Brown* for President” (Ibid, 63).

³¹⁷ *Murphy Brown* was not the only white woman targeted as a bad mother. “Mother-blaming” often transcended class as well as race, and white, single, working mothers on welfare struggled with the mid-1990s welfare “reforms” just like any other mothers on assistance. But the most famous pop cultural example of a “bad mother” is a white, wealth celebrity: Faye Dunaway's unforgettable portrayal of Joan Crawford in the 1981 film *Mommie Dearest* (directed by Frank Perry, Paramount Pictures, 1981). The film's primary subject is Crawford's alleged abuse of her adopted children, and its timing is telling: Dunaway's Crawford was careerist, narcissistic, and more interested in men and her career than in her children. In other words, she was the anti-“new mom,” a perfect “backlash” feminist, although the film, of course, never uses that term. Like the “welfare queens” who starred periodically in political discourse, “*Mommie Dearest*” was selfish, sexual, and out of control, and the favored targets of her rages were her children. Both served as cautionary tales to the average American mothers who avidly consumed this “mother-blaming” discourse through seemingly innocuous pop cultural outlets.

the riots. On his television show, he informed viewers that Brown did not even know how to hold her baby, much less raise it. “Look at her, where’s the nearest trash can, what can I do with this thing?” Limbaugh railed in voiceover as he showed a clip from *Murphy Brown*. “Look at the poor baby’s arms, that baby can’t possibly be loved and be happy...Murphy, if you don’t, if you don’t start handling that kid right you’re going to end up with a serial murderer on your hands.”³¹⁸ Like her poor sisters in Los Angeles, without a husband, Murphy Brown was destined to raise a fatherless criminal; gender, sexuality, and marital status placed her among the ranks of maternal deviants in conservative eyes, regardless of class or race.

Thus, the linking of Susan Smith with the social problem of abusive motherhood was no accident, and it was a damagingly familiar image with specific socioeconomic connotations. By the mid-1990s, Katha Pollitt of *The Nation* lamented that single mothers were the “demons of the moment, blamed for everything from crime to the deficit,” and this stereotype was built upon a discernible subtext of sex and abuse.³¹⁹ The perceived problem with single and/or divorced mothers was that they both raised “the same specter of women out of men’s control.”³²⁰ Both single motherhood and child abuse had come to be seen as “national emergencies,” despite the fact that the most likely abusers in the home have always been men.³²¹ Without men in the household to serve as providers and protectors, it seems, there was always the possibility of maternal sexual misbehavior and intrafamilial violence.

³¹⁸ Quoted in Fiske, 28.

³¹⁹ Katha Pollitt, “Subject to Debate,” *The Nation*, March 27, 1995, 408.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Glassner, 38. Andrea Peyser argues that in Union, “the most dangerous place for women and children is in the home.” In 1994, by the time Smith killed her sons, Union County had recorded sixty-two incidents of domestic violence, and the county’s last two homicides were related to domestic violence as well: one woman was later acquitted of killing her abusive husband, and one man was convicted of killing his wife in a “religious rage” (Peyser, 83).

According to this cultural logic, the “abusive mother” script in the Smith case seemed almost overdetermined despite the utter lack of evidence. Smith was not only a confessed child-murderer; according to more recent coverage, she had the class characteristics of a stereotypical “bad mother” in 1990s America. She was the product of a dysfunctional home. She was a working mother in the middle of a messy divorce whose past low-paying jobs included working in a grocery store and a textile mill. Because reporters could furnish no evidence of child abuse in this case, they trotted out national statistics and other cases to buttress the argument that Susan Smith was an abusive mother. They consistently linked abuse statistics to class, arguing that “poverty” and “money troubles” often motivate maternal violence.³²² “Susan Smith, the child abuser,” was a working-class “anti-madonna” among the ranks of pregnant teens and welfare queens.³²³

Through strategically placed statistics, expert sound bites, and comparisons to other abuse cases, the national media briefly but convincingly recast Susan Smith as an abusive mother. In fact, another representative “unfit” mother made headlines just days before Susan Smith’s national debut. Although her name is one that most Americans do not remember, 24-year-old Pauline Zile made headlines when she told authorities that her 7-year-old daughter Christina had been kidnapped from a restroom at a shopping center in Florida just three days before Susan Smith alleged that she had been carjacked. For five days, Zile appeared on the nightly news hysterically clutching one of her daughter’s dolls, pleading with the kidnapper through the television cameras. Zile addressed her daughter directly, telling her not to be scared and to try to

³²² Van Biema and Kamlani, “Parents Who Kill,” *Time*, November 15, 1994. CBS reporter Randall Pinkston mentioned Pauline Zile and Clover Boykin, a California teenager who had confessed to strangling her five-month-old son to death the weekend before Smith confessed (*Evening News*, CBS, November 3, 1994).

³²³ Douglas and Michaels, 20.

find a way to call if she could.³²⁴ A drastically different narrative emerged when, in the course of a routine search, police discovered blood in Zile's apartment. Pauline's husband confessed to beating the child to death in Pauline's presence some six weeks earlier. Together the couple had dumped the body behind a local K-Mart. Only seventeen hours before Susan Smith confessed to murder, Pauline Zile and her husband were charged with murder and aggravated child abuse in Florida.³²⁵

Pauline Zile's case disappeared from the national media after the offending parents were indicted. As soon as the couple confessed, Pauline became an unfortunately familiar figure. There was nothing to make sense of; physical abuse that escalates into murder is horrifying, but it is an act that Americans understand, especially when the violence occurs within a working-class family. In Zile's case, her husband committed the actual violence, although she clearly participated in the disposal of the body and the subsequent kidnapping cover-up. Even though Christina died at her stepfather's hands (reports were quick to point out that he was her second husband and not Christina's biological father), Pauline Zile was "crucified in the media as the epitome of a bad mother," according to legal scholar Rebecca Schernitzski.³²⁶ Reports detailed her history of delinquent motherhood, starting with her "teenage pregnancy" and "hasty marriage" to Christina's father, which was quickly followed by her abandonment of her child

³²⁴ Michelle S. Jacobs, "Requiring Battered Women Die: Murder Liability for Mothers Under Failure to Protect Statutes," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 88, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 579-660.

³²⁵ Van Biema and Kamlani, "Parents Who Kill"; "Susan Smith's Betrayal"; Don Melvin, "Parents as Killers a Familiar Refrain in Recent Years," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 4, 1994.

³²⁶ Carolyn Fretz and Christine Walker, "Girl, 7, Abducted from Flea Market," *Palm Beach Post* (FL), October 24, 1994. Reports also noted that Pauline and her husband had only recently gotten custody of Christina, who had been living with her grandmother in Maryland (Val Ellicott, Eliot Kleinberg and Carolyn Fretz, "Abuse Suspected in Missing Girl's Home," *Palm Beach Post* (FL), October 26, 1994); Rebecca Ann Schernitzski, "What Kind of Mother Are You? The Relationship Between Motherhood, Battered Woman Syndrome and Missouri Law," *Journal of the Missouri Bar* 56, no. 1 (January-February, 2000).

with his family when the relationship fell apart.³²⁷ According to journalists, this history of promiscuity and child neglect fatally repeated itself when Zile “chose her husband over her daughter and did nothing as her first-born died suffering a final beating.”³²⁸

Although the press rarely mentioned it, there were many indicators that Pauline Zile was a battered woman.³²⁹ Compared to the months of tabloid and front-page exposes of Susan Smith, the media paid little attention to Zile, perhaps because seeing a mother who harmed her children as a victim herself was not something the American public was prepared to do in the fall of 1994. Although second-wave feminism successfully publicized and politicized the problem of intimate partner violence, the mainstream media has consistently portrayed it as a “private” problem, and reports generally served to reify patriarchal family ideals by protecting “male power from the threat posed by the exposure of these crimes.”³³⁰

Moreover, the gendered “double standard” of parenthood meant that mothers were expected to protect their children from harm, even in situations in which they were abused as well.³³¹ Mothers with abusive partners were often held individually responsible for their partners’ crimes

³²⁷ Carolyn Fretz, “Couple Had Tried to Forget Troubles,” *Palm Beach Post* (FL), October 28, 1994.

³²⁸ Quoted in Schernitzski.

³²⁹ Ibid; Kim Folstad, “No Pity for Pauline,” *Palm Beach Post* (FL), August 28, 2002. Although no mention was made of this in the media or the trial, Pauline Zile could also have been suffering from postpartum depression in addition to being abused as well. The month of Christina’s murder, Pauline had given birth to her fourth child, which she put up for adoption (Val Ellicott, Eliot Kleinberg and Carolyn Fretz, “Abuse Suspected in Missing Girl’s Home,” *Palm Beach Post* (FL), October 26, 1994).

³³⁰ Kozol, 646-667.

³³¹ Jacobs points out the in cases in which mothers commit fatal child abuse, the fathers in the households are not held legally accountable. The “new momism” thus denies intimate partner violence, along with many other social problems and constraints on modern motherhood, and holds individual “deviant mothers” responsible: “Societal views of mothers, children and violence, combined with gendered legal assumptions, contribute to an environment which is hostile to claims of a defense for battered mothers” (Jacobs, “Requiring Battered Women Die”).

against their children.³³² Pauline Zile was charged with first-degree murder, the same charge her husband received, for “failure to protect” her daughter.³³³ In fact, Battered Woman Syndrome represents a serious challenge to the logic of failure to protect laws, which are based on the idea that “parents have a legal duty to aid and reasonably protect their children from harm.” When abused women are held liable for violence committed by their partners under these laws, their convictions essentially “revictimize” them while upholding sexist cultural standards of patriarchal power, nuclear family structures, the “new momism,” and “invisible” fatherhood.³³⁴ The underlying logic of this kind of public representation and legal treatment of abusive mothers is the essence of the “boyfriend motive”: women like Pauline Zile and Susan Smith chose their men over their children, and they should be punished accordingly.³³⁵

Susan Smith was even more of an open target than mothers like Pauline Zile because she could not blame a violent husband or “absent fatherhood” (another apparent “national

³³² There was little discussion of Zile’s abuse at the hands of her husband, and the words “Battered Woman Syndrome” (BWS) were not uttered in the press despite anecdotal evidence. Although Zile’s lawyer called her a “victim of John Zile” just like Christina, the tone of articles that mention evidence of this abuse was skeptical (Val Ellicott and Jenny Staletovich, “Lawyer Claims Mother Victim Like Daughter,” *Palm Beach Post* (FL), November 1, 1994). Even if her lawyers had used BWS as a defense or at least a mitigating factor, it is likely that Pauline Zile would still have been convicted under the “failure to protect” statute. Judges often deem evidence of BWS inadmissible in case in which the accused is charged with a failure to protect, and it can even work against the mother when prosecutors argue that “her abuse at the batterer’s hands ought to have alerted her to the batterer’s tendency to violence” (Jeanne A. Fugate, “Who’s Failing Whom? A Critical Look at Failure-to-Protect Laws,” *New York University Law Review* 76, no. 1 (19 March 2001): 280).

³³³ Jacobs, “Requiring Battered Women Die.”

³³⁴ Schernitzski, “What Kind of Mother Are You?.”

³³⁵ There are plenty of examples of battered women who have been prosecuted under “failure to protect” legislation with little or no regard for their own victim status. One particularly egregious example is that of Janice Loch, a Minnesota woman found guilty of aiding and abetting her ex-boyfriend in the rape of her 11-year-old daughter. Loch had instructed her daughter to “lie still” during the rape so as to avoid further injury and told her son to stay out of the room so that he might remain unharmed. The prosecutor argued that Loch took an “active role” in the abuse of her daughter (Schernitzski).

emergency”) for the desperation that led her to the lake that night.³³⁶ As reporters trotted out abuse statistics in lieu of actual evidence, it became clear that the demonic, abusive image of Susan Smith had a sympathetic male counterpart: David Smith, the grieving father and ultimate victim of the offending woman.

Indeed, the lower Susan’s status fell in the public eye, the higher David’s rose. The story line of David as a victim gained currency with the extensive coverage of Michael and Alex’s funeral on Sunday, November 6, 1994, just three days after Susan’s confession. The funeral received unprecedented media coverage. All South Carolina television stations suspended regular programming to simulcast it, as did the 24-hour cable news station, CNN.³³⁷ Television cameras from across the nation recorded Smith’s anguished cries and moans as he buried his sons.³³⁸ Sympathy cards flooded the local post office, many simply addressed to “David Smith, Union, SC.”³³⁹ Some observers suggested that the tragedy might have been avoided if the court had just awarded this poor father custody of his sons in the weeks before the murders. The judge in the mid-October custody case, according to one letter writer, based his decision on the apparently insignificant detail that David was having an affair, “overlooking the fact that Mr. Smith was visiting his children nearly every day because he missed them and he loved them.”³⁴⁰ Ideal

³³⁶ Dan Quayle maintained that his real target was not single mothers but absent fathers, and the idea of forcing a nuclear family structure played a large role in the welfare reforms passed while Smith awaited trial. As Fiske argues, “The problem is that Murphy Brown, as a woman-mother, does not have a man” (Fiske, 39).

³³⁷ Brackette, interview.

³³⁸ Shelley Levitt and Don Sider, “Portrait of a Killer,” *People*, November 21, 1994. It would prove difficult to forget the photographs of a distraught David Smith being led from the church to the cemetery; this picture, like the one of his sons seated together in a wicker chair that was used in the initial search and the close-up of his tearstained wife that graced the cover of *Time* magazine the week after her confession, is one of the enduring images of the case (Susan Smith appeared on the cover of *Time* accompanied by the headline, “How Could She Do It?” on November 14, 1994 (image available online at <http://www.crimeraint.com/wp-content/uploads/2006/09/susan%20smith.jpg>).

³³⁹ Elizabeth Gleick and Lisa H. Towle, “It Did Happen Here,” *Time*, December 19, 1994.

³⁴⁰ Letter to the Editor, “Fathers Should Have Equal Rights,” *The Advocate* (LA), November 19, 1994.

fatherhood and deviant motherhood became the story du jour. For a few weeks at least, David Smith was an unwilling media star alongside his ex-wife once she confessed to murder.

David Smith was inarguably one of the foremost victims of Smith's crimes; by all accounts, he loved his sons and planned to be a constant presence in their lives even after the divorce was final. But the public representation of him as the quintessential grieving father was a complete reversal from the suspicion the media had turned upon him just days earlier. In light of Smith's confession, David Smith was automatically an ideal father, not the philandering husband the public had known during the investigation. This journalistic repositioning was based solely on his role in the familiar narrative as the innocent man duped by the evil woman. In fact, David Smith was not an ideal father or husband, and Susan Smith's defense team would later cite his errant behavior as a contributing factor to the extreme depression that led Susan to kill her children.³⁴¹ In fact, as in the case of Pauline Zile, there was a wealth of anecdotal evidence of emotional and, at times, physical abuse. Friends of Susan Smith described a volatile relationship featuring public fights, multiple separations, and David Smith's long-standing extramarital affair. David himself admitted to various forms of abuse, including fights over the children, blatant adultery, and at least one instance in which he hit Susan, dragged her to the front porch, and "dumped her there in a heap."³⁴²

In his book, written hastily in the months between the murders and the trial, David Smith candidly described the evolution of their relationship, which began as "just catting around"—he was, after all, engaged to another woman when he started dating Susan Vaughan in 1990—but

³⁴¹ David Smith admitted to feeling some guilt about his behavior. Although he does not blame himself for the tragedy, he asks in the "Personal Note" that precedes his book: "There are some things I regret now, a lot of behavior that looking back seems pretty immature. Could it be that somehow what Susan did was a product of all that catting around and foolishness and lying?" (Smith, 8).

³⁴²Ibid, 94.

promptly became more serious when Susan discovered she was pregnant.³⁴³ Predictably, marital bliss did not follow their “shotgun wedding.” They separated for the first time after just a year of marriage, but they tried to work it out when Susan got pregnant again in 1992. David’s decision to “walk the straight and narrow” to make their marriage work for the children “crumbled” when he met the woman who would later become his second wife.³⁴⁴ The marriage disintegrated quickly, although they tried to repair it several times.

After Susan asked David for a divorce in July of 1994, he launched a campaign to prove that she, too, have been having an affair (although records indicate that Susan’s relationships occurred during their informal separations). His girlfriend became his private investigator, following Susan when David could not. David went through Susan’s things when she was not around, although she was suspicious enough to request that the phone company check her home phone lines for a wiretap just a few days before the murders. The snooping worked; David hit paydirt in mid-October when he found a break-up letter from Susan’s boyfriend in her purse while she was sleeping, and he had his girlfriend make copies of it immediately on the copier at her church.³⁴⁵

Almost exactly one month later, Katie Couric interviewed David Smith on NBC’s *Dateline* to help viewers understand the haunting question: “How could she do it? How could Susan Smith kill her own children?” Between tears, David Smith flatly denied any allegations of maternal abuse. “Susan, she was great, she really was,” he told NBC’s Katie Couric before a watchful

³⁴³ David blamed Susan for her own pregnancy, arguing that “because one of the men Susan was with before [David] had a medical problem that made it impossible for women to get pregnant...Susan was not used to taking precautions, and, in the heat of the moment, I went along” (Ibid, 48).

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 107.

³⁴⁵ Smith, 143-144.

nation. “She was a very dedicated, devoted mother to the children.”³⁴⁶ David Smith, recast as the ideal father and ultimate victim, was thus responsible for quelling the media rumors that Susan Smith was an abusive mother. There were several ironies at work here. First, allegations of abuse were to resurface in the summer 1995 trial—with Susan Smith herself as the victim and David as one of the perpetrators. Second, although abusive mothers are certainly no heroes in our culture, they are at least familiar monsters. Violent rage that becomes homicidal is horrible enough, but it more understandable than the “cold calculation” Smith’s crime and subsequent performance of grieving motherhood seemed to require.³⁴⁷ Finally, even though David went to great lengths on *Dateline* to defend Susan as a mother, he had also produced the “smoking gun” of a new, more enduring negative image of Susan when he turned the break-up letter over to authorities during the investigation.³⁴⁸ With this letter, Susan Smith’s sexuality, which had previously played a fairly subtle role in public representations, acquired sudden salience in explanations of her motive to murder.

The “scheming slut” image of the “boyfriend motive” extended the implicit sexual logic of the single abusive mother script, which was summarily abandoned after David’s *Dateline* interview. Smith was now sexually suspect: “From reports that Susan Vaughan [Smith’s maiden name] was pregnant with son Michael when she wed David three years ago to the recent separation from her estranged husband and the alleged extramarital affairs, Mrs. Smith lived

³⁴⁶Quoted from *Dateline on Evening News*, NBC, November 15, 1994.

³⁴⁷ Nancy Gibbs and Kathy Booth explained in *Time*: “All anyone wanted to know was how she could possibly have done it. What person watching -- and parents from the President on down couldn't turn their eyes away -- had not felt the sleep-depriving, soul-splitting pressures of parenting and worried about their own capacity for violence? But this was not the typical child murder, the experts rushed to explain, not an outburst of uncontrollable rage turned accidentally fatal. This was cold calculation” (“Death and Deceit”).

³⁴⁸ *Time* reported that Tom Findlay also turned over a copy of the letter during the initial investigation (Gibbs and Booth, “Death and Deceit”).

what appeared to be a lie.”³⁴⁹ The “lie” that Smith apparently lived may not have been an elaborate cover for child abuse, but the media simultaneously offered another plausible analysis of her motive to murder. Susan Smith became, in public representations, a newly single mother who murdered her children to be with a man who was not ready for a family.

Two of the major ingredients of this new image, sexuality and class, had been an undertone of the media coverage since before Smith’s confession. Journalists had lowered Smith’s class status and elevated her sexual behavior as suspicions about her carjacking story began to circulate. The collective focus on the image of Susan as a lower class, working, single mother with a checkered family history thus provided some momentum, as did later reports positioning Smith as an abusive mother with “money troubles” and a possible love interest. In the public imagination, this was a “movie of the week”-worthy drama starring Susan Smith as the poor mother who drowned her sons to pursue a financially promising romance. Within hours of Smith’s tearful confession, she had transformed from a “young mother” to a “twenty-three year old secretary,” a “mill girl” with a poor estranged husband and a wealthy boyfriend.³⁵⁰ Post-confession public representations of Susan Smith hinged upon this new character, resulting in the sexualized narrative of the “boyfriend motive.”

Although the break-up letter seemingly legitimized the public sexualization of Susan Smith, the cultural script for this image has a long history. Criminologists have viewed women who violently violate the boundaries of the law as inherently sexual beings for centuries, and the advent of the new science of psychology at the end of the nineteenth century ushered in a new era of locating women’s criminal natures in their sexuality. By the beginning of the twentieth

³⁴⁹ Les Timms III, “Mother Made Impassioned Plea on National Media Hours Before Arrest,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 4, 1994.

³⁵⁰ “Crowd at Court Jeers Murder Suspect,” *Charleston Gazette* (WV), November 5, 1994.

century, the idea that “sensual women were likely to be criminals,” and vice versa, had become a criminological truism.³⁵¹ A related model of female criminality is the “mad or bad” dyad in which a deviant woman is either “evil”—a generally sexual image that westerners have been familiar with since the biblical Eve—or “insane,” a label that locates criminal behavior in the perceived mental instability of women.³⁵² The “mad or bad,” or “nuts or sluts,” binary defines the targeted woman in one of two negative ways: she is either afflicted by a uniquely feminine mental illness, or she is a whore using her sexuality as a destructive tool of power.³⁵³

Although Smith’s July 1995 trial witnessed the ascendance of the “mad” analysis of her behavior, in the days and weeks immediately following her confession, Susan Smith was clearly “bad” in public discourse. This kind of popular representation of a criminal woman was not just an archaic criminological icon. The sexual, “bad” Susan Smith reflected female images from Hollywood, tabloids, the nightly news, and made-for-television movies that hark back to this well-worn script of desperate women who kill to keep their men.³⁵⁴ According to media studies scholar Barbara Barnett, American popular culture at the end of the twentieth century featured two options for female characters: they were either mute, passive victims—“wives and waifs”—or they were passionate, violent criminals—“whores and witches.”³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ Jones, 10, 113.

³⁵² Allison Morris and Anna Wilczynski, “Rocking the Cradle: Mothers Who Kill Their Children,” in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation*, ed. Helen Birch (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 198-217; Meyer and Oberman, 68.

³⁵³ “Nuts or sluts” has been used as a defense of *male* behavior to discredit a female accuser as either crazy or promiscuous, often in sexual harassment cases. This usage surfaced most prominently in the 1990s in the sexual harassment case against then-president Bill Clinton (Patricia Ireland, “NOW Calls on Clinton to Foreswear ‘Nuts or Sluts’ Defense, Work with Congress to Strengthen Women’s Rights Laws,” National Organization of Women Press Release, February 29, 1999, <http://www.now.org/press/02-99/02-25-99.html>).

³⁵⁴ Helen Birch, “Myra Hindley and the Iconography of Evil,” in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation*, ed. Birch (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 32-61.

³⁵⁵ Barnett, 4.

More specifically, the image of a mother who literally sacrificed her children for a romantic relationship had made national headlines in two widely publicized maternal infanticide cases in the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, two of America's most popular crime writers, Mary Higgins Clark and Ann Rule, employed the two pop cultural images of women as passive victim and sexual criminal (respectively) in bestsellers based on these famous infanticide cases. The popularity of these books—*Where Are the Children?* by Higgins Clark and *Small Sacrifices* by Rule—inspired film versions of the same titles, ensuring that this bifurcation of womanhood in maternal infanticide cases was widely disseminated in American popular culture in the last few decades of the twentieth century.

Newspapers and tabloids had employed the narrative to explain infanticide cases since at least the mid-1960s. When Mrs. Alice Crimmins, a working-class New York mother, reported her two children kidnapped from her Queens apartment in the dead of night in 1965, authorities were immediately suspicious. Despite the broken window screen in the children's bedroom, which indicated that someone had at least tried to get in from the outside, and the "buggy" underneath the window that the intruder likely used to enter the room, Mrs. Crimmins was charged with murder. Although she consistently maintained her innocence and the evidence against her was vague and circumstantial, Crimmins was tried three times for the murder of her two young children and was a news staple for over a decade.³⁵⁶

Mrs. Crimmins' separation from her abusive husband combined with her job working long hours and her sexual activity to paint a lurid picture. Although most acquaintances knew her as a shy woman, the media seized upon the prosecutorial image of Crimmins as a "strident" and "rebellious housewife" whose pancake makeup, tight slacks, and "little black book" full of men's

³⁵⁶ Kenneth Gross, *The Alice Crimmins Case* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975).

names provided all the evidence necessary to convict her. Rumors of numerous boyfriends, including one with shadowy mob connections, provided the most damning evidence.³⁵⁷ *Front Page Detective* dubbed Crimmins the “Sexpot on Trial,” and the name stuck. According to the tabloid media, Crimmins was representative of modern feminism: she was “an erring wife, a Circe, an amoral woman whose many affairs appear symptomatic of America’s Sex Revolution.”³⁵⁸ Evidence at the crime scene pointed to a break-in and abduction, but the district attorney’s tactic of “connecting her sex life with [the children’s] deaths” enjoyed consistent legal success.³⁵⁹ Inevitably referred to as an “ex-cocktail waitress,” Crimmins was found guilty of manslaughter in three separate trials.³⁶⁰

Much like Susan Smith a few decades later, Crimmins’ name was “synonymous with tabloid sensation” for over a decade.³⁶¹ After a brief respite from fame during which she served her prison sentence, Crimmins resurfaced in the media when it was reported that she had married a wealthy suitor. Photos of her aboard her new husband’s yacht accompanied headlines announcing her parole in 1977.³⁶² Her case inspired two true-crime books, two novels, two plays, and three films, one of which starred Tuesday Weld “at her most glamorous and

³⁵⁷ Gross, 19, 33.

³⁵⁸ “‘Sexpot’ on Trial,” CourtTV’s Crime Library, http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/family/crimmins/8.html.

³⁵⁹ Gross, 255.

³⁶⁰ “‘Sexpot’ on Trial,” CourtTV’s Crime Library, http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/family/crimmins/8.html.

³⁶¹ “Genesis of a Sensation,” CourtTV’s Crime Library, http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/family/crimmins/1.html.

³⁶² “Shock and Aftermath,” CourtTV’s Crime Library, http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/family/crimmins/15.html.

vulnerable” as Alice Crimmins.³⁶³ Mary Higgins Clark launched her career as a mystery writer with her 1975 fictionalization of the case, *Where Are the Children?*. Clark notably challenged the dominant “Sexpot on Trial” narrative, choosing instead to portray the mother as “defenseless,” “pliable,” and literally mute after her children’s disappearance.³⁶⁴ This passivity clearly connotes her innocence, and this image endured in the movie version of the same title. Despite Clark’s popular attempt to balance out the negative image of Crimmins with the opposite extreme, Crimmins’ place in popular imagination was firmly secured. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, she was a tabloid mainstay whose alleged maternal deviance was outweighed only by her sexual “crimes.”

Five years after Alice Grace (nee Crimmins) disappeared into the sunset on her new husband’s yacht, yet another allegedly infanticidal “Sexpot on Trial” captured national headlines. Ann Rule achieved bestselling status for the eighth time with her account of the 1983 Diane Downs case. Downs, a recent divorcee, claimed that she and her three children were shot in the course of a carjacking by a “bushy-haired stranger” on a rural road one dark night in Oregon. One of her children died from the wounds, but Downs herself suffered only a superficial wound on the arm. Although Downs, like Crimmins, consistently maintained her innocence, the media and, later, Ann Rule followed the prosecution’s line of attack, charging that Downs shot her three children in cold blood to be with a former lover. As in the Crimmins case, Downs’ sexuality was a key issue in her trial. Like the Smith case a decade later, Downs’ defense team countered with

³⁶³ “Genesis of a Sensation,” *CourtTV’s Crime Library*, http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/family/crimmins/1.html. The books include: Kenneth Gross’ *The Alice Crimmins Case*; George Capozzi, Jr.’s *Ordeal By Trial* (New York, NY: Walker & Company, 1972); Dorothy Uhnak’s *The Investigation* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1978); and Mary Higgins Clark’s *Where Are the Children?* (New York, NY: Mass Market Paperbacks, 1992). The plays are: John Guare, *The Landscape of the Body* (2003) and Neal Bell, *Two Small Bodies* (1980). The films are: *A Question of Guilt* (Polygram Video, 1978); *Where Are the Children?* (Columbia Pictures, 1986); and *Two Small Bodies*, based on the play (1993).

³⁶⁴ Clark, 77.

evidence that she was a good mother trying to overcome childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father, an abusive marriage, and resulting depression. Media accounts and trial testimony focused on her sexual behaviors, from Downs' questionable role as a surrogate mother to her extramarital affairs to her volatile, post-divorce relationship with a married co-worker. This affair served as the "smoking gun" in the investigation; law enforcement officials believed the Diane shot her children in a desperate attempt to win back his affections.³⁶⁵

Most of the evidence against Downs was circumstantial, with one major exception: one of her remaining children, after months of counseling (or coaching, according to the defense), positively identified her on the witness stand as the shooter.³⁶⁶ The jury found Downs guilty on all counts of assault, attempted murder, and murder, and the judge sentenced her to life in prison plus fifty years for the illegal use of a firearm.³⁶⁷ Downs' incarceration was not the end of her fame; she made national headlines again in 1987 when she briefly escaped from prison. Authorities discovered her at the home of a fellow inmate's husband, where she claimed that she was searching for her children's murderer. That same year, Ann Rule published her book on the case to rave reviews and even better sales. Downs surfaced periodically in the media over the next few years. In 1988, she appeared live via satellite on the popular *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Winfrey focused on Downs' alleged violence and her sexuality:

In addition to being accused of shooting your three children, you were always sleeping with everyone else's husband, always preferred married men... You

³⁶⁵ Ann Rule, *Small Sacrifices* (New York, NY: Signet Books, 1987).

³⁶⁶ There was speculation that Downs' daughter, who was unable to speak for months after the attack due to the trauma, was coached by the prosecution to identify her mother as her shooter because they had no other suspects and no other concrete evidence. In a very strange twist of events, when the jury found Downs guilty and she went to prison, the prosecutor and his wife adopted her remaining children (Rule, *Small Sacrifices*).

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

befriend an inmate, you escape from prison and you go move in with the inmate's husband ... You look like the girl next door, but the girl next door looks like she's turned bad.”³⁶⁸

The media revived the story again when an Oregon file clerk came forth with the startling information that he had fallen in love with Downs after her appearance on *Oprah* and was in the process of hatching yet another elaborate escape plan with her.³⁶⁹

Rule’s bestselling book on the case inspired a 1989 television miniseries—“*Part Fatal Attraction, Part Mommie Dearest*” —complete with a drunken, leather-clad Farrah Fawcett as the offending mother, which prompted another wave of media coverage.³⁷⁰ Notably absent from the coverage was any indication of her trial defense, which detailed Downs’ troubled childhood and her subsequent diagnoses of at least three different personality disorders.³⁷¹ Her sexual behavior and the “boyfriend motive” are what people remember most about Oregon’s most famous murderess. The *Weekly World News*, a grocery-store aisle tabloid, featured a full-page picture of her on the cover accompanied by the screaming headline: “*Kids Cramped Her Style...So the Fiendish Mom Shot Them.*”³⁷² Even now, the most thorough account of her case besides Rule’s book is titled “*Diane Downs: Her Children Got In the Way of Her Love.*”³⁷³

³⁶⁸ “Diane Downs,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, September 26, 1988.

³⁶⁹ Phil Stanford, “Diane Downs’ Love Slave,” *Portland Tribune* (OR), 2005.

³⁷⁰ S. Bryan Hickox, prod. *Small Sacrifices*, Anchor Bay Entertainment, Inc., 1989). The film was nominated for several awards, including three Emmys and two Golden Globes, and it won a Peabody (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098352/awards>).

³⁷¹ After her incarceration, a doctor diagnosed Downs with Histrionic, Antisocial, and Narcissistic Personality Disorders (Rule, *Small Sacrifices*, 440).

³⁷² Rule, *Small Sacrifices*, 439.

³⁷³ The site is “The Crime Library,” run by the popular cable television station CourtTV (<http://www.crimelibrary.com/fillicide/downs/>).

Reporters never cited these infamous cases in their coverage of the Susan Smith case. In fact, few referenced any other maternal infanticide cases at all. Again, Smith's statistical typicality worked against her; comparing Smith to other mothers might provoke a direct challenge to the contemporary discourse of ideal motherhood.³⁷⁴ However, the narrative fit, and headlines were readily recycled as reporters quickly began to apply the "boyfriend motive" to Smith's crimes. Given her confession, it is perhaps not surprising that the demonization of Susan Smith was even more thorough than that of Crimmins or Downs, who consistently maintained their innocence throughout their trials and incarcerations.

The construction of this new image of Susan Smith was, like the other images of her that circulated in those first few weeks, swift. Moments after the announcement of Smith's confession, the President of the National Center for Missing Children suggested the two alternate narratives of abuse and romance.³⁷⁵ Although he apparently thought he was just citing a statistical probability, this expert was the first to suggest romance as a possible criminal motive. This theory quickly acquired a life of its own. Within hours of this CBS report, CNN unofficially broke the story of the "boyfriend motive," quoting anonymous sources who reported that authorities had discovered the "smoking gun" late in the afternoon the day before her confession. Authorities searching Smith's home allegedly found a "Dear Jane" letter from a boyfriend

³⁷⁴ Explicitly avoiding mention of historical precedents also worked to support the image of Smith as singularly evil. In her study of media coverage of domestic violence cases, Wendy Kozol finds that the media consistently "discovers" the crime with new sensational cases. She asks: "Why do so many news reporters have trouble remembering cases that received national attention such as those of Francine Hughes in 1977, Lisa Steinberg in 1988, or Elizabeth Morgan in the late 1980s?" (Kozol, 650). The same could be asked of the Susan Smith case. As we shall see, she became something of a cultural benchmark in the way that Downs or Crimmins never did; much of the coverage of the Andrea Yates case of 2001, for instance, mentions Susan Smith as a template for maternal infanticide.

³⁷⁵ *Evening News*, CBS, November 3, 1994.

“saying he wanted to be with her but ‘did not want any kids around.’”³⁷⁶ CNN’s “scoop” ensured that almost all media outlets covering the story would feature the sinister new character of the boyfriend in their coverage within twenty-four hours of Smith’s arrest.

The “smoking gun,” of course, did not “solve” the question of motive, despite media reports to the contrary. The letter had been in authorities’ possession since David Smith had turned over his copy during the investigation. Moreover, it listed several reasons why Susan’s boyfriend wanted to end their relationship, including different class “backgrounds.” Nevertheless, the letter immediately became the focus of reports, and media outlets from *Hard Copy* to the *New York Times* quoted the lines in which Susan’s ex-boyfriend explained that he was not ready for the responsibility of children.³⁷⁷

According to media scholars, a story’s mythic quality, or its basic structure in terms of plot and characters, often has a greater impact on its audience than the actual details of the event being covered.³⁷⁸ In the case of Susan Smith, the explanatory power of the “boyfriend motive” mattered more than the actual details, most of which were unknown in those early days just after her arrest. For some reporters assigned to the Smith drama, the unspecified identity of the “boyfriend” did not keep him from making front-page news the day after Smith’s confession. Although Don Melvin of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* began his coverage that day by

³⁷⁶ “Crowd at Court Hearing Jeers Murder Suspect.”

³⁷⁷ The paragraph in the letter devoted to Smith’s children reads: “Susan, I can really fall for you. You have so many endearing qualities about you, and I think that you are a terrific person. But like I have told you before, there are some things about you that aren’t suited for me, and yes, I am speaking about your children. I’m sure that your kids are good kids, but it really wouldn’t matter how good they may be. The fact is, I just don’t want children. These feelings may change one day, but I doubt it. With all of the crazy, mixed-up things that take place in this world today, I just don’t have the desire to bring another life into it. And I don’t want to be responsible for anyone else’s children, either. But I am very thankful that there are people like you who are not so selfish as I am, and you don’t mind bearing the responsibility of children. If everyone thought the way I do, our species would eventually become extinct” (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 2685). Findlay issued a statement the day after Smith’s arrest saying that he never intimated to Susan that her children were the only obstacles to their relationship.

³⁷⁸ Alan O’Connor, “Culture and Communication,” in Downing et al, eds., 35.

cautioning that no one could be certain of Smith's motive, the headline, "Mom's New Love Often Tied to Child Killings," said it all. In Melvin's report, an expert source explained that the family dynamic shifts dramatically when "you get a new fella entering the picture," especially for young, recently divorced mothers like Susan Smith. Smith was excited about her new love, who was, according to Melvin's source, none other than Mitchell Sinclair, the man she had reportedly been on the way to visit the night of the murders. Her children were the only obstacles to this budding romance.

Smith and her husband, David, filed for divorce in September, and some experts say parents can harm their children to save a marriage. But the head of a national children's organization said the motive more often is a desire to attract a new husband. Smith was on her way to visit a boyfriend when she reported the children abducted. WXIA/Channel 11 reported that a source close to the police investigation said the motive may have been Smith's obsession with Mitchell Sinclair. Sources said Sinclair had professed his love for Smith but did not want "a ready-made family."³⁷⁹

Unfortunately for reporters like Melvin who believed their anonymous sources, this turned out to be some very specific misinformation—Mitchell Sinclair was never Smith's boyfriend.

However, it was the existence of a boyfriend, and not his actual identity, that mattered for narrative purposes.

Other reporters proceeded more cautiously, speculating about the mystery man but providing few details. The *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, a large local newspaper, featured Smith's confession on its front page on November 4, 1994, the day after her arrest and the morning of her bond hearing. The reporter listed the two characteristics of the "boyfriend" that were to become increasingly salient in public understandings of the crime: he was allegedly "wealthy" and

³⁷⁹ Don Melvin, "A Mom's New Love Often Tied to Child Killings," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 4, 1994. And it was not just "new loves" that sparked infanticide; Melvin detailed the case of Martha Ann Johnson who allegedly murdered her four children over the course of five years to "get her husband to return" after fights.

“didn’t want the children.”³⁸⁰ By the following night, CBS’s Randall Pinkston had discarded the speculative tone of the previous evening’s broadcast, soberly telling viewers that Smith’s motive for her unspeakable crime was “a man who wanted her but not her children.”³⁸¹ Two days after Smith’s confession, the information leak was complete, caution was thrown to the wind, and the boyfriend was openly named. He was Tom Findlay, and he could not have been more perfectly scripted for his role in the Smith drama.

At the time of the murders, Susan Smith worked as a secretary at Conso Products, the largest textile mill in Union County. The owner, J. Cary Findlay, bought the mill on the edge of Union in the mid-1980s to supplement his \$25 million-a-year business—“The World’s Largest Manufacturer of Decorative Trim,” at least according to the sign in front of the Union mill.³⁸² He never could have imagined the role his family would play in one of the most infamous cases of the late twentieth-century. His son, Tom Findlay, “the handsome scion of what [was] considered the county’s richest family,” was in his late twenties, balding, and immensely popular with the eligible bachelorettes of Union. He was also Susan Smith’s ex-boyfriend and, allegedly, her motive to murder. Locally, the Findlay estate, an enormous eighteenth-century plantation home on the outskirts of Union, was known as “the Castle.”³⁸³ Tom Findlay, who lived in a sizable guesthouse on his father’s property, was “the Catch” of Union County, according to the *Boston Globe*. The entire tiny town of Union separated Smith’s neighborhood, where she and David shared a small brick home paid for by her parents, from the Findlay estate, a sprawling

³⁸⁰ Gary Henderson and Reginald Fields, “Mother Confesses to Two Boys’ Deaths,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* (SC), November 4, 1994.

³⁸¹ *Evening News*, CBS, November 4, 1994.

³⁸² Charles, 452b.

³⁸³ Hughes, interview.

stone mansion on a hill overlooking a small river and the thick forests that made up much of the county. As Smith drove from “her small ranch-style house through the stone and wrought-iron gates of the Findlay estate, where Thomas lived in a guest house and was famous for ‘hot tub parties,’” she allegedly dreamed of a life with Findlay in London, where his father was building another Conso plant.³⁸⁴

With the appearance of Tom Findlay, class aspirations joined sexuality as Smith’s fundamental motives to murder. In the cases of Alice Crimmins and Diane Downs, their sexual histories and extramarital affairs served as evidence that contradicted their roles as good mothers. In Smith’s case, her alleged affair combined with the downgrading of her class status to explain why a mother would harm her children. The media juxtaposed Smith’s near-poverty—clearly an exaggeration, and an image that thoroughly contradicted the middle-class narrative of motherhood that had circulated just a few days before—with her ex-boyfriend’s enormous wealth. It seemed inconsequential that Susan Smith only devoted one line out of her two-page confession to her failed romance. “I was in love with someone very much, but he didn’t love me,” she wrote amidst admissions of feelings of failure as a mother, suicidal tendencies, and severe depression. Similarly, Findlay devoted one paragraph out of ten to Smith’s children in his break-up letter. Although Findlay’s “Dear Jane” missive heavily emphasized their different backgrounds, the most oft-quoted line of the letter addressed Smith’s children: “There are some things about you that aren’t suited for me, and yes, I am speaking about your kids... the fact is, I just don’t want children.”³⁸⁵ Numerous narratives could have been formed out of the facts of the case, but the media overwhelmingly chose the “boyfriend motive.” Smith had used sex to access

³⁸⁴ Charles M. Sennott, “Bid to Climb Social Ladder Seen in Smith’s Fall to Despair,” *Boston Globe*, November 8, 1994.

³⁸⁵ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2684.

Findlay's wealth, but though he wanted her, he was not ready for children. Therefore, according to the narrative, she did away with her sons in order to achieve the fairy tale and move into the "Castle."

Although the relatively recent cases of Alice Crimmins and Diane Downs provided easy scripts for maternal infanticide, journalists often turned to older cultural texts to explain the Smith drama. It was perhaps inevitable that reporters would begin to refer to Susan Smith as a "modern-day Medea" in reference to the ancient tale of betrayal and infanticide. It was, *Newsweek* pointed out, our longstanding cultural prototype of "how much evil can lurk in even a mother's heart -- something we've known for 2,300 years."³⁸⁶ Reporters solemnly quoted Euripides: "No cowardice, not tender memories. Forget that you once loved them, that of your body they were born. For one short day, forget your children; afterwards, weep: Though you kill them, they were your beloved sons."³⁸⁷

The media molded the plot to fit their narratives of the Smith drama, using the popular image of Medea rather than Euripides' actual archetype as their model. The fictional Medea slew her two sons upon learning that their father Jason planned to remarry and exile her without her children. Although Medea is commonly depicted as murdering her sons out of revenge, to hurt the cheating Jason, the violence in the play stemmed from maternal desperation as much as marital anger. Medea explicitly killed her sons to save them the pain of motherlessness, an impulse that Susan Smith confessed to as well in her written statement. Criminologists of infanticide call this common form of maternal violence "secondary altruistic infanticide," which

³⁸⁶ Adler and Carroll, "Innocents Lost."

³⁸⁷ Gibbs and Booth, "Death and Deceit."

is characterized by the mother's suicidal tendencies and her fear that her children will suffer without her.³⁸⁸

Although the media and the prosecution focused overwhelmingly on the one line that mentioned a failed romance, the rest of Smith's two-page written confession reads like a primer on secondary altruistic infanticide. Smith described depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, confusion, and, perhaps most importantly, a general feeling of "failure to measure up to society's standards of 'good mothers.'"³⁸⁹

When I left my home on Tuesday, October 25, I was very emotionally distraught . I didn't want to live anymore! I felt like things could never get any worse...As I rode and rode and rode, I felt even more anxiety coming upon me about not wanting to live anymore. I felt I couldn't be a good mom anymore but I didn't want my children to grow up without a mom. I felt I had to end our lives to protect us all from any grief or harm.³⁹⁰

Like Susan, Medea fit the criminological model: she was suicidal over the thought of banishment from her sons and worried about their welfare in her absence. Material considerations mattered little to her; she was not at all swayed by Jason's offer of money to ease her exile. For Medea, "sorrow," not revenge or romantic jealousy, was "the real cause/ Of death and disasters and families destroyed."³⁹¹ The play features western culture's archetypal

³⁸⁸ Wilczynski argues that for the maternal infanticide cases involving suicidal thoughts in her study, "most of the cases (10 out of 12) were perceived by the parents as involving some element of altruism--that is, the parents perceived the killing as being in their children's best interests. In these 'altruistic' cases, there was no evidence of hostility towards the victim, and it appeared that the parents wanted to kill themselves but could not face 'leaving their dependents behind, defenceless and unprotected (in their view) to face the world alone.' The child was seen as a dependent of and extension of the offender, without a separate personality or independent right to life. As noted in prior research, the perpetrators in these altruistic 'extended suicide' filicides also tended to have strong religious views, particularly of Catholicism" (Wilczynski, 93).

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 56.

³⁹⁰ From Smith's written confession. In her study, Wilczynski reported that about one-third of her sample of infanticidal mothers had prior suicide attempts (Smith had attempted suicide twice in her teens) and over three-fifths had clinical depression, which Susan Smith had been diagnosed with in her teens (Wilczynski, 82).

³⁹¹ Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1963), 23. Throughout the play, Medea anguishes over her sons, not her straying husband: "My misery is my own heart, which will not relent./ All was for

infanticide, but it is a tragedy in which Jason, not Medea, was both the adulterer and the seeker of a wealthier partner.

According to criminologist Anna Wilczynski, however, Medea has become the model for “retaliation killings” motivated by sexual jealousy in which the “anger towards another person has allegedly been displaced onto the child.”³⁹² Although criminologists have found that “sexual jealousy or rejection” is very rarely the motive in child murder by women, this popular version of Medea has become the “prototype,” as seen in popularity of “spurned women who kill” movies like *Fatal Attraction* and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*.³⁹³ In their coverage of the Susan Smith drama, the media took similar liberties with the Greek classic. Reporters completely decentered the motive to murder; instead of concern for her children, anger at her husband, and fear of exile, the “modern-day Medea’s” story revolved solely around sex and class. One reporter argued that, like Medea herself, the class-climbing Smith possibly had no guilt on her conscience.³⁹⁴ A family lawyer summed up the image for the *Washington Post*. “Medea kills following rejection,” she explained the week after Smith’s arrest.³⁹⁵ Reports ignored Smith’s relationship with her sons and focused instead on her extramarital romance. Journalists continually misused the ancient tragedy and recast Susan as the “modern-day Medea

nothing, then--these years of rearing you,/ My care, my aching weariness, and the wild pains/ when you were born...Parted from you,/ My life will be all pain and anguish. You will not/ Look at your mother any more with those dear eyes” (Euripides, 49).

³⁹² Wilczynski, 45.

³⁹³ Ibid, 45-47. Researchers have found that sexual jealousy and rejection are more likely to be motives for male perpetrators (Ibid). Daniel Maier-Katkin, then dean of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University, argued that although the “witch-like character” of Medea got all the press, mothers driven to infanticide by the strains of unjust social conditions are more common characters” in literature and in reality (Maier-Katkin, “Infanticide by Mothers is a Common Form of Homicide”).

³⁹⁴ Kastor, “The Worst Fears, the Worse Reality,”

³⁹⁵ Abigail Trafford, “The Medea Syndrome,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 1994.

in the person of a 23-year-old mill girl” who was “not the first woman to choose a man over a child...It happens all the time.”³⁹⁶

Although they referenced Medea, reporters had actually combined two cultural references into one composite image of Smith as the sexual, social-climbing criminal. Ancient Greece may have provided an archetype for infanticide, but modern American literature featured its own model for Smith’s crime. One reporter described the screaming mob that awaited Susan Smith outside the Union County Courthouse the day after her confession as a “scene worthy of a Theodore Dreiser novel.”³⁹⁷ In fact, the “boyfriend motive,” with its combination of sex, class, and violence, almost perfectly fit the script of what American novelist Theodore Dreiser deemed the classic American homicide. These crimes, explained Dreiser in a 1935 interview, were the result of the national obsession with upward social mobility.

It seemed to spring from the fact that almost every young person was possessed of an ingrown ambition to be somebody financially and socially...In short, the general mental mood of America was directed toward escape from any form of poverty... We bred the fortune hunter de luxe.³⁹⁸

For several decades, Dreiser was interested in real-life examples of the desire by young Americans to “obtain wealth quickly by marriage,” often at great cost and occasionally through violent means.³⁹⁹

Dreiser deemed the crimes “American Tragedy” murders, and he fictionalized one such famous case in his 1925 novel of the same name.⁴⁰⁰ After much consideration, Dreiser chose as

³⁹⁶ Mary McGrory, “We’re Not Talking Crime, More Like Raw Evil,” *Charleston Gazette (WV)*, November 9, 1994.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Quoted in Nancy McIlvaine Donovan, “Susan Smith: An ‘American Tragedy’ Narrative Retold,” *Dreiser Studies* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2003), 58.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 59.

his subject the 1906 Gillette/Brown murder case in which, according to the media and the prosecution, “an ambitious young man killed ‘Miss Poor’ to marry ‘Miss Rich.’”⁴⁰¹ Although there were some problems with this narrative—there was no evidence that Chester Gillette was even really dating two women at once, for example—this class-climbing motive served the purposes of the press and the prosecution well.⁴⁰² In Dreiser’s novel, young Clyde murders his working-class, pregnant girlfriend Roberta in order to marry into the wealthy Finchley family, a status he clearly feels is his birthright. Indeed, class climbing served as his defense. The crime, his lawyers argued, was one of passion—for wealth, not women. Clyde allegedly suffered from “a ‘brain storm’—a temporary aberration due to love and an illusion of grandeur aroused in Clyde by Sondra Finchley and the threatened disruption by Roberta of all his dreams and plans.”⁴⁰³

Dreiser’s intention was to indict the capitalist corruption that caused Americans to be obsessed with attaining wealth at any cost. As one scholar put it, it was not just Chester Gillette on trial, but “the American dream.”⁴⁰⁴ Although the novel was widely read and brought Dreiser much critical acclaim, its real widespread dissemination came via film in 1931. *An American Tragedy* was one of the first American “talkies,” and in it, the class differences between the two main characters are even more exaggerated than in its literary form. Dreiser was understandably disappointed by the finished product, as were many of the people involved in the actual case in

⁴⁰⁰ Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (New York, NY: Signet Classics, 1964). Dreiser considered several other cases, even writing the draft of a novel about one, before he settled on the Gillette/Brown case. See Craig Brandon, *Murder in the Adirondacks: An American Tragedy Revisited* (Utica, NY: North Country Books, 1986), 332-335.

⁴⁰¹ Donovan, 59.

⁴⁰² Brandon, 142-172.

⁴⁰³ Dreiser, 607.

⁴⁰⁴ Brandon, 336.

1906. In an attempt to right the wrongs of the first film, Dreiser consented to another cinematic version of his novel, and *A Place in the Sun* debuted to rave reviews in 1951. Starring Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, and Shelley Winters, the film featured starker class differences, and the “poor pregnant factory girl” was hardly a sympathetic character in the context of the 1950s. The film was wildly popular with audiences and critics, and it won several Academy Awards. These movies were about punishing a criminal rather than an “indictment of America’s false standards.”⁴⁰⁵ Dreiser’s message was lost.

Although the original “American Tragedy” case featured an offending man, the narrative, as it has replayed over and over in American culture throughout the twentieth century, has featured social-climbing criminals of both sexes. The phrase has come to refer to any murder in which a “‘tie that binds’ is severed for the sake of upward mobility.”⁴⁰⁶ Dreiser’s model featured the “woman in danger” plotline familiar to any television viewer or moviegoer, but public representations of cases as “American Tragedies” have often featured violent women who kill a loved one to bed a wealthy man. Significantly, when a woman is cast as the violent criminal, sexual obsessions seem to play as much a role as class desires. Indeed, sex in Hollywood often leads a woman to a life of crime—witness the leather-clad, wild-haired, careerist Alex as she stalks her lover’s family in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), or the nurturing instincts of the nanny Claire as she tries to kill her employer and steal her husband in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992).⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 351-361. The film distortion of Dreiser’s narrative circulates still: Woody Allen’s *Match Point* (2006) was simply the movie version of *An American Tragedy* reset in London (Woody Allen, director, *Match Point*, BBC Productions, 2006). The story is apparently still quite popular; the film was nominated for several awards and was Allen’s first in decades to make a profit.

⁴⁰⁶ Donovan, 59.

⁴⁰⁷ Faludi, 112-123; Douglas and Michaels, 263-264. Even in Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise*, the character of Thelma is the voiceless victim of her irate husband and a barroom rapist at the beginning of the film. She

Journalists assigned to the Susan Smith case perhaps unwittingly paid homage to this narrative tradition. They relied heavily on Dreiser's script and repeatedly referred to the Smith murders as an "American Tragedy."⁴⁰⁸ Although front-page articles and cover stories trafficked widely in lurid (and often questionable) details, the end result of using the phrase to describe Susan Smith was to provide an overarching framework that sparked immediate, if subconscious, recognition in media consumers. With the advent of the quintessentially American (at least according to Dreiser) "boyfriend motive," Susan Smith became a representative female criminal rather than an incomprehensible monster.

It took less than a week after Smith's confession for class, violence, and sex to complete the shocking portrait of Susan Smith in almost every media outlet, from tabloids to the nation's papers of record. A newly single mother who brought home a little over one thousand dollars, plus \$115 from David in child support, each month, Smith reportedly "sacrificed" her sons for a "deluded dream of wealth, love, and status."⁴⁰⁹ Under the headline "Bid to Climb Social Ladder Seen in Smith's Fall to Despair," the *Boston Globe* reported that the murders were the result of her "desperation to jump from the listing boat of the working class." According to the report, Susan Smith lived "somewhere between the two worlds" of the "working-class and the white collar," and her relationship with Findlay was her ticket out of this socioeconomic limbo.⁴¹⁰ The

undergoes a revolution after having a steamy hotel-room tryst with an itinerant cowboy who robs her blind. From then on, though Thelma is never depicted as evil, she becomes a criminal, robbing liquor stores and, with Louise, blowing up the semi belonging to a harassing trucker. Despite its feminist credentials, sex, in this film, leads to crime (Ridley Scott, director, *Thelma and Louise*, MGM, 1991).

⁴⁰⁸ "American Tragedy: How Could She Have Done It?," *Roanoke Times* (VA), November 9, 1994.

⁴⁰⁹ Levitt and Sider, "Portrait of a Killer." *Time* magazine did the math: She took home \$1,096 a month, but her \$344 mortgage, \$300 in daycare -- plus car payments, utilities and other costs -- added up to \$1,284. She still owed money to the doctor who delivered Alex 14 months ago" (Gibbs and Booth, "Death and Deceit").

⁴¹⁰ Charles Sennott, "Bid to Climb Social Ladder Seen in Smith's Fall to Despair," *Boston Globe*, November 8, 1994.

week after Smith's confession, a popular news magazine featured in its centerfold an extreme close-up of Susan's tearful face opposite a map of Tom Findlay's father's estate, with the hot tub where Susan had allegedly cavorted circled in red.⁴¹¹ Within days of her confession, Susan Smith had become a single mother "on the fringe" of the working class, with only "two hundred dollars in her bank account" who saw Tom Findlay as a representative of "life beyond Union County." She murdered her children to replicate her mother's successful social climbing and "marry up."⁴¹²

Though cultural precedents for this image abounded, there was some actual, if flimsy, evidence for it as well. The break-up letter did, after all, cite Susan's children as an obstacle, and she confessed to being heartbroken over a recent break-up in her written confession. It may seem that focusing on Smith's relationships and sexual history was an inevitable part of building a case against her. But the law did not require the prosecution to prove motive; moreover, Smith's crimes were not remotely sexual in nature. Assuming the inevitability of this narrative ignores the real work involved in sexualizing Susan Smith. With this sexualization came a set of specific class associations. Feminist Leora Tanenbaum explains:

Regardless of her family's actual economic status, the 'slut' is thought to be 'low-class' and 'trampy,' the kind of girl who wears gobs of makeup and whose voluptuous curves threaten to explode the fabric of her tight clothes. She lacks the polish of the 'good girl,' who keeps her sexuality reigned in and discreet (beneath a blazer, a belt, some nude pantyhose), and who will no doubt marry a nice middle-class man and raise a nice middle-class family. The 'slut' is thought to be a girl without a future.⁴¹³

⁴¹¹ Marc Peyser and Carla Koehl, "No Vacancy," *Newsweek*, July 10, 1995.

⁴¹² "Smith Case Reveals Dark Side of Union," *Charleston Post & Courier* (SC), January 1, 1995.

⁴¹³ Leora Tanenbaum, *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 1999), xvi.

Those who saw Smith on the news and in the many pictures of her released to the press after her confession surely remember a normal, even plain, young woman who wore little make-up and dressed very conservatively.⁴¹⁴ There was simply no visual evidence to indicate that Smith was a “slut” according to our widely accepted, if seldom explicitly articulated, definition. In other words, Susan did not resemble Farrah Fawcett as the infanticidal Diane Downs, pining for her ex in black leather and big hair singing raucously to “Hungry Like a Wolf.”⁴¹⁵

Magazine exposes featuring Findlay’s hot tub alongside his break-up letter thus stood in for actual photographs of Smith when none could be produced in which she appeared to be sexually suggestive in any way. To overcome this lack of visual “evidence” of her deviant sexuality, the media leaned heavily on these various cultural scripts to do this work for them. Although Susan Smith achieved national fame by claiming that her boys had been kidnapped and then confessing to murder, the sensational, sexy angle is what kept her in the news in ensuing months. Like Amy Fisher before her and Aileen Wuornos a few years later, Smith became, in public representations, a “sex kitten in the slammer.”⁴¹⁶

Indeed, sexualization and subsequent moralizing played a key role in official politics at the end of the twentieth century. The one-track focus on the “boyfriend motive,” with its attendant trappings of single motherhood, sexuality, class, and violence, amounted to an argument that Susan Smith was an evil representative, a national problem, was not some lone feminine aberration. As we saw in the ill-fated abusive image of Smith, her case seemed to expose the

⁴¹⁴ Elizabeth Wurtzel argues similarly in her discussion of the Amy Fisher case: “You see, Amy is not, I don’t think, one of those girls who would inevitably become a sex object, a wild thing. She was apparently shy--all the news accounts seem to agree on these few facts--and she was not one to play with alcohol or drugs. But more to the point--and I feel like somebody needs to say this--she was no great beauty” (Wurtzel, 114).

⁴¹⁵ *Small Sacrifices* (film). In fact, Diane Downs herself did not resemble this image.

⁴¹⁶ Wurtzel, 3.

roots of various social “emergencies.” The combination of sex and class in the “boyfriend motive” provided fodder for the pathologization of nonnormative motherhood that has been a “staple” of American politics since the middle of the twentieth century.⁴¹⁷ The conservative attacks on specific groups of mothers—single mothers, working mothers, “welfare queens”—generally took the form of positioning them not just as deviant mothers, but as *nonmothers*. These were not just mothers in need of reform; in this political discourse, these were women who never should have had children at all. The problem, in other words, was not just their styles of mothering, or socioeconomic constraints on their maternal behavior; it was the women themselves. According to this line of thinking, mothers themselves were to blame for poverty, crime, and violence, among other things.

In the weeks following Smith’s confession, in public images, she slowly became less “incomprehensible” and more representative—not of mothers, but of lower class, sexually active women. These representations of Smith barely mentioned her children at all. The apparent problem was clearly the violence that she inflicted, but in these narratives it was also the perceived sexuality and class desires of the working mother. Conservatives in 1990s America easily donned the mantle of accuser, using “Susan Smith,” now shorthand for female evil, as the representative of various perceived social problems.

As the rumors flew and the media searched for ways to make the ultimate “inconceivable” crime of maternal infanticide conceivable in the immediate wake of Smith’s confession, at least one group knew exactly what to make of Smith’s alleged sexual misbehavior. Anti-abortion, or “pro-life,” groups responded angrily to the case, arguing that infanticide and abortion were interchangeable. Many media outlets added fuel to this “pro-life” fire when they erroneously

⁴¹⁷ Feldstein, 169.

reported that Susan Smith had an abortion in her teens and married David Smith when she discovered she was pregnant so as to avoid having another one.⁴¹⁸

Under the headline “Abortion, Lost Lover Seen Spurring Mother’s Actions,” *The Boston Globe* listed several contributing factors to Smith’s disturbed mental state, including the “sudden departure” to London of her “wealthy boyfriend” (which did not happen until after Smith’s confession) and “an abortion she had as a teen-ager which deeply depressed her” (there is no evidence that Smith ever had an abortion). Although the reporter quoted a law enforcement official who cautioned that “no single factor” caused Smith to commit murder, the report leaned heavily on a few of Smith’s own behaviors as explanation. Her recent break-up with Tom Findlay represented the “culmination” of a tragic life, although some tragedies apparently affected Smith more than others: “If the suicide of her father, Harry Vaughan, had traumatized her, she never showed it. She did become profoundly depressed in her senior year after undergoing an abortion...A law enforcement official said that Smith brought up the abortion during her confession to the murders.”⁴¹⁹ The message was clear: any depression that Smith suffered was based on her own sexual misconduct, not on external traumas beyond her control.

This was not just a case of journalists baiting readers with controversial headlines, dubious facts from anonymous sources, and sexual innuendo. One editor argued that we could not blame Susan Smith for being confused by such an “ambiguous society” that “supports mothers as they

⁴¹⁸ Eftimiades, 38.

⁴¹⁹ Charles M. Sennott, “SC Tragedy Has Roots in Troubled Life: Abortion, Lost Lover Spurred Mother’s Actions,” *Boston Globe*, November 6, 1994. False information with dubious sources abounded in these first few weeks of coverage. The most sensational example was probably the *Newsweek* report that Susan Smith watched her sons struggle as her car sank (Adler and Carroll, “Innocents Lost”). Smith’s lawyer, David Bruck, was tipped off about this article before it was published and tried to run interference to no avail; *Newsweek* simply printed his protest alongside the misinformation (Bruck, interview).

decide whether to allow their children to live.”⁴²⁰ Readers across the nation agreed in letters comparing abortion and infanticide, asking why the American public was not similarly outraged by every abortion.⁴²¹ In a sarcastic missive entitled “Feminists Must Unite Behind Susan Smith,” a North Carolina man wrote: “Even if her children were inconvenient to her and her new boyfriend, she has the right to choose when she has children... Her estranged husband has no right to imply that he should have been asked to consent to the murder of his children - that would have been an invasion of her sacred right to privacy.” He concluded: “It was a long, hard fight obtaining the inalienable right to tell a woman that it's OK to kill your children; we must not go back on 20 years of progress.”⁴²² The placing of blame for social problems on feminism—or, in this case, incredibly, blaming feminism for Susan Smith—was a characteristic of the “backlash” against the liberal gains of the mid-century social movements. Conservative observers easily targeted Susan as yet another reason to chip away at abortion rights, a trend which gained momentum in the mid-1990s.⁴²³

Undergirding much of the pro-life rhetoric is a fundamentally misogynist view of sexually active women. Even the popular line of favoring abortion only in cases of rape and incest rested upon the idea that only women who are forced to have sex should not have to suffer the consequences. Women who have sex willingly and get pregnant are, according to this line of thinking, already deviant *before* they decide whether or not to abort. In a 1983 essay, feminist

⁴²⁰ “Death and the Mother’s Choice,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, November 17, 1994.

⁴²¹ “Tell Us What You Think: TV Turned Tragedy into Ratings Circus” (Letters to Editor), *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 17, 1994; Horton, “Death and the Mother’s Choice”; David Kirk, “Why Doesn’t Nation Mourn for Those Aborted?” (Letter to the Editor), *News and Record* (NC), November 19, 1994; Judy House, “Anti-Abortion Advocates Should Redirect Energies” (Letter to the Editor), *News and Record* (NC), November 20, 1994.

⁴²² Chris Elder Liberty, “Feminists Must Unite Behind Susan Smith” (Letter to the Editor), *News and Record* (NC), November 11, 1994.

⁴²³ William Saletan has documented this slow but steady erosion of rights in his *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

journalist Ellen Willis (“EW”) imagined the following conversation with a “Right-to-Lifer” (“RTL”).

RTL: If a woman chooses to have sex, she should be willing to take the consequences. We must all be responsible for our actions.

EW: Men have sex, without having to ‘take the consequences.’

RTL: You can’t help that—it’s biology.

EW: You don’t think a woman has as much right as a man to enjoy sex? Without living in fear that one slip will transform her life?

RTL: She has no right to selfish pleasure at the expense of the unborn.

Although public debate generally rests on ideas about “life” and murder, Willis concluded that “the nitty-gritty issue in the abortion debate is not life, but sex.”⁴²⁴ Over a decade after Willis imagined this conversation, sex was still the key issue. Susan Smith became a target of anti-abortion activists not because she had ever actually had an abortion, but because, according to the logic of the “boyfriend motive,” she had murdered her children for a sexual relationship, which, in the pro-life discourse, was essentially the same thing.

In this rhetoric, moralizing and sexualization—the refrain of the 1990s—again went hand in hand, with Susan Smith serving as the new central scapegoat.⁴²⁵ The Clinton era enjoyed a reputation of liberalism, especially sexual liberalism, as seen in the increasing sexualization of popular culture and, most famously, the president’s own indiscretions. Conservatives cried that President Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky was evidence of “a new sexual freedom” resulting from the social movements of the 1960s. But feminists have countered this argument, citing a long history of powerful white male infidelity with “subordinate” women. In other words, all that moralizing about Clinton and Lewinsky masked the fact that their affair adhered

⁴²⁴ Ellen Willis, “Abortion: Is a Woman a Person?,” in Snitow et al, ed., 473.

⁴²⁵ Lance Morrow, “Yin and Yang, Sleaze and Moralizing,” *Time*, December 26, 1994. To illustrate this pairing, Morrow points out that while the nation was obsessed with the lurid tales of Susan Smith, O.J. Simpson, and *Pulp Fiction*, the bestselling book for the entire year was William J. Bennett’s *The Book of Virtues*.

to the traditional privileges of patriarchal power that men of all political slants enjoyed throughout history.⁴²⁶

The charges of his critics notwithstanding, Clinton was no champion of sexual liberation for women or men, and his supposed feminist credentials were severely compromised by his policies. In the 1990s, he supported the welfare reforms authored by the Republican Congress. The primary difference between Clinton and Reagan's views of welfare recipients was that Clinton believed they could be "reformed" through self-improvement, while Reagan espoused a "morality play" in which "poor people were simply immoral."⁴²⁷ Indeed, according to historian Ruth Feldstein, the conservative narrative of the 1990s had liberal mid-century roots:

As liberals began to abandon a psychosocial narrative of citizenship that wed political and psychological health to maternal behavior, conservatives increasingly adopted this narrative as their own. Maternal failure, social and emotional pathology, and damaged citizens became the mantra for anti-welfare, anti-civil rights, and anti-feminist postures... Ironically, over the last twenty years liberalism's ideological cast-offs have become a pillar of the individualism upon which a bipartisan conservative consensus now rests. African American "welfare queens," working white moms, and other icons of mother-blaming certainly persist into the turn of a new century.⁴²⁸

By the end of the century, the idea that poor women's sexuality lay at the root of the nation's socioeconomic problems enjoyed bipartisan support, and mothers were a prime policy target.

In this context of "mother-blaming," Susan Smith almost effortlessly became a part of the official politics of sex, motherhood, and economics. Newt Gingrich, the U.S. Representative of a conservative suburban Atlanta district, became a household name in 1994-1995 as one of the

⁴²⁶ Jakobsen, "He Has Wronged America and Women." Jakobsen argues: "That all of Washington was shocked and appalled that a powerful white man entered into a sexual liaison with a woman not his wife and much his junior in terms of age and power seems disingenuous at best... Why was everyone so surprised to find out on August 17 what no one apparently knew before—that a powerful man had dallied with a much younger woman?" (305-306).

⁴²⁷ Ibid, 305.

⁴²⁸ Feldstein, 169.

primary authors of the major welfare reforms. Gingrich became the Speaker of the House the week after Smith's confession during the "revolutionary" Republican takeover of Congress, and at least one of his campaign speeches featured an explicit attack on Susan Smith. In November of 1994, the GOP needed to win 40 seats to rule Congress, and the South was a "major battleground" in the election.⁴²⁹ The weekend after Susan's November 3 confession, politicians stumped furiously across the region. At a party in Buckhead, a wealthy section of Atlanta, on the day before the elections (three days after Smith's arrest), Gingrich made what he characterized as some "offhand" comments. Susan Smith, he argued, was an example of "what's wrong with America." He explained: "How a mother could kill her two children, 14 months and 3 years, in hopes that her boyfriend would like her, is just a sign of how sick the system is."⁴³⁰ He continued: "I can capture everything [Republicans] are trying to do in a sense by referring to this weekend's unbelievable tragedy in South Carolina, to getting at the root causes of the decay in our society."⁴³¹ In other words, according to Gingrich, Democrats were responsible for creating the environment that allowed social "decay" in the form of Susan Smith. In case that message was unclear, Gingrich concluded: "I think people want change, and the only way to get change is to vote Republican."⁴³²

In a rather hostile interview with Tom Brokaw the following evening, Gingrich stood his ground. He dodged Brokaw's observation that the Smith family of South Carolina were people

⁴²⁹ *Evening News*, NBC, November 7, 1994.

⁴³⁰ Richard Whitt, "Gingrich Fires Back Over His Susan Smith Remarks," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 19, 1994.

⁴³¹ *Evening News*, NBC, November 7, 1994.

⁴³² "American Tragedy: How Could She Have Done It?."

who “embraced his philosophy” of social conservatism and “family values.”⁴³³ In fact, Susan’s stepfather was a member of the Christian Coalition and the Republican Party of South Carolina, had actively campaigned for Pat Robertson for president six years earlier, and had run unsuccessfully as a Republican for state representative.⁴³⁴ Union County in general, and Susan Smith’s family in particular, embodied the conservative family ideal in the 1990s. Ignoring these inconvenient details, Gingrich extended Susan Smith’s symbolic significance even further: “I do believe there is a direct connection between the general acceptance of violence, the general acceptance of brutality, the general decline of civility in this society, and the patterns of the counterculture when Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society began in the late ‘60s.”⁴³⁵

Leaving aside the fact that the conservative, small-town, church-going Smith family could probably not be any less “countercultural,” the connections Gingrich made between the Great Society of the 1960s, the Republican political philosophy of the 1990s, and the popular negative images of Susan Smith are telling. A key part of the famous Republican’s 1994 “Contract with America” was the “Personal Responsibility Act,” a title that paid explicit homage to Quayle’s language in his tirade against *Murphy Brown*. In addition to a general decrease in spending on welfare programs, the act denied the extension of aid to teen mothers and to women who had additional children while on welfare.⁴³⁶ A large part of the “Contract” was specifically aimed at blaming poor, single mothers for contemporary social problems. As Diane Eyer has argued,

⁴³³ *Evening News*, NBC, November 7, 1994.

⁴³⁴ Linda Russell, *My Daughter, Susan Smith* (Brentwood, TN: Author’s Book Nook, 2000).

⁴³⁵ *Evening News*, NBC, November 7, 1994.

⁴³⁶ The full text of the “Contract with America” is available on the U.S. House of Representatives website at www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html.

“behind all the venom currently directed at 'welfare mothers' is an agenda that posits all renegade mothers as the cause of our social problems.”⁴³⁷

According to the logic of the reforms, welfare mothers were “renegade” because they were single. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) rewarded married mothers on welfare while punishing women without husbands. A majority of the provisions of the reforms specifically targeted poor women’s sexuality, and especially their reproductive rights. The new welfare system, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), required paternity establishment, child support enforcement, and at least thirty hours of work outside the home per week of unmarried mothers on welfare. Married mothers, on the other hand, did not have to meet any of these requirements to qualify for assistance. Some states provided cash incentives to TANF mothers who married; others established “family caps” that prohibited unmarried women who had more children while on welfare from receiving more state assistance. The federal TANF program offered “illegitimacy bonuses” to some states that reduced the number of births out of wedlock, denied assistance to unmarried teen mothers, and, apparently in compensation, funded abstinence-only sexual education programs.⁴³⁸ Here, then, was the Reaganite image of “welfare queens” made into legislated reality. The logic behind these reforms was that controlling poor women’s sexuality and reproductive capabilities was the solution to the socioeconomic problems described by Dan Quayle in his famous diatribe against Murphy Brown just a few years earlier.

Mothers like Susan Smith were thus already targets, whether or not they committed crimes, because of their before working-class, single status and alleged sexual misbehaviors. Gingrich did not need to spell out these connections in his incendiary campaign speeches. According to

⁴³⁷ Eyer, 14.

⁴³⁸ Mink, 95-112.

historian Glen Feldman, Gingrich “perfected the art of the ‘new racism,’” and, in his comments about Susan Smith, he personified both the new racially coded vocabulary and the misogynist, classist—indeed, we could just call it “anti-social movement”—posturing of the “backlash.” By referencing a boyfriend, “counterculture,” and the welfare state (in the form of Johnson’s Great Society) in an interview about the Smith case, Gingrich subtly characterized Susan as one of the infamous “welfare queens.” In other words, even though Smith’s whiteness may have initially misled people, she was an oversexed, lower-class single mother whose abuse of the welfare system was outweighed only by her violent crimes, which were, according to Newt’s historical model, products of the same corrupt democratic system.

Never mind, apparently, that Susan Smith had never been on welfare, or that she had been raised in a socially and politically conservative, middle-class household. One columnist turned Gingrich’s logic on its head, arguing that Smith could just as easily be blamed on Republicans: “After all, the mother's description of the phantom kidnapper was of a black man, recalling the Willie Horton image that Republicans used as an icon to exploit fears of crime...And perhaps if a bit more government help had been available to the mother - family counseling, parenting classes - tragedy might have been avoided.”⁴³⁹ Although journalists routinely ridiculed Gingrich’s linking of Smith with politics, he did win the election two days after his comments, and newspaper editors published plenty of letters from supportive constituents. One reader argued: “How different is killing innocent babies through abortion than what Susan Smith did?...

⁴³⁹ “American Tragedy.” Frank Rich of *The New York Times* echoed this sentiment in an article about depression: “If the Democrats had wanted to play this form of political hardball, they could have pointed out, as Tom Brokaw did in a tough interview with Mr. Gingrich, that Ms. Smith was the product of exactly the sort of society that is idealized in Republican boilerplate: a hard-working churchgoer who belonged to the National Honor Society in high school, didn't smoke or drink and lived in a small, virtually crime-free town whose slogan is ‘The City of Hospitality.’ All of which could be used to argue that conservative family values made her do it,” (Rich, “The Mother Next Door,” *New York Times*, November 13, 1994).

Gingrich was right about the Union case.”⁴⁴⁰ It was a telling conclusion: the root cause of the Smith tragedy, abortion, and welfare was, according to conservative rhetoric, unrestrained maternal desires. Another reader defended Gingrich, explaining the direct link between welfare and crime: “It is this Great Society that has produced teenagers who throw Molotov cocktails through windows in Atlanta and 11- year-old children who drop a 5-year-old child from a 14th-story window in Chicago.”⁴⁴¹

Gingrich’s message thus became a running mantra in conservative editorials over the next few weeks. One writer targeted the welfare system, comparing Susan Smith to parents who “brought children into the world, were intrigued with them for a few weeks or months, then ignored or abused them and wished them away,” and so turned to the all-too-generous social services system to absolve themselves of responsibility.⁴⁴² The few people who voiced alternative opinions—their arguments targeted the lack of government programs that might help mothers under emotional and/or financial stress—were generally met with ridicule. In an editorial sarcastically entitled “Susan Smith: For Want of a Government Program,” columnist Richard Grenier explicitly attacked experts that had tried to put Smith’s crimes in perspective. A spokeswoman for the National Center to Prevent Child Abuse suggested that, as a stressed-out, broke, young, single mother of two, Susan Smith could have benefited from some socioeconomic and cultural support, and it may have even prevented the murders. Grenier’s derision is almost audible in his article; his solution is a federal program to counsel mothers and a “National Fund for Counseling the Lovelorn.” He suggested that First Lady Hillary Clinton could head a “new

⁴⁴⁰ Dr. Win Pound, “TV Turned Tragedy into Ratings Circus,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 17, 1994.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Jo-Ann Clegg, “Susan Smith Should Pay Dearly: Unfit Parents Should Take Heed,” *Virginia Beach Beacon* (VA), November 11, 1994.

task force” for the “National Fund for Enraged Mothers,” although “with Republicans now controlling both houses of Congress, funding might be a problem.”⁴⁴³ Journalists followed Gingrich’s lead in explicitly using the popular negative image of Susan Smith based on class and sexuality to identify mothers as a fundamental social problem.

Underlying all of this scapegoating is the fundamental cultural assumption, evident since the advent of “republican motherhood” in the wake of the American Revolution, that there is a direct connection between maternal behavior and the future of the nation.⁴⁴⁴ In the 1990s, this assumption translated into the popular discourse and the political actions in the guise of welfare reforms, that blamed poor mothers, rather than the system, for continued poverty, crime, and the oft-bemoaned disintegration of “family values.” After Smith confessed to killing her sons and lying about it for nine days, the public turned on her, and she became a demon apparently like no other. This demonization was part and parcel of the “new momism” and of the “mother-blaming” that has been fundamental to popular culture and politics for the past century, from tabloid infanticide trials to fictional characters to federal policies. Deviant mothers—defined loosely as poor, minority, single, or otherwise outside of the narrow ideal—were just as necessary a part of the “new momism” as were their allegedly perfect white, middle-class, married sisters.⁴⁴⁵

By positioning Susan Smith as one of these anti-mothers, the media, politicians, and much of the American public made Susan Smith a representative of nationwide political problems like child abuse, reproductive rights, and the welfare system. The image of Smith that defined the

⁴⁴³ Richard Grenier, “Susan Smith: For Want of a Government Program,” *Washington Times*, November 4, 1994.

⁴⁴⁴ Douglas and Michaels, 10; Feldstein, 7-9; Linda K. Kerber, “The Republican Mother and the Woman Citizen: Contradictions and Choices in Revolutionary America,” in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, eds. Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron deHart (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 119-127.

⁴⁴⁵ Douglas and Michaels, 3.

“boyfriend motive” had a long history, and she was the perfect scapegoat for these various social problems in the conservative, “backlash” 1990s. In the days and weeks following Susan Smith’s confession, her story was about sex and class, because this image rendered her understandable according to the contemporary, “backlash” discourse of motherhood and nation. In a way, the “boyfriend motive” brought Smith back into the fold; it transformed her overnight from an “incomprehensible monster” to a recognizable representative of feminine evil.

This is the image of Susan Smith that most Americans seem to remember best, perhaps because it achieved such complete media saturation that the prosecutor used it as his sole strategy in the trial several months later. But additional images of Susan Smith coexisted in the public imagination in the months between her confession and her trial, images that deviated from the dominant narrative of motherhood and gestured toward more complicated alternative readings.

CHAPTER 4

“SOUTHERN GOTHIC ON TRIAL”

The cultural codes used to explain Susan Smith in the immediate aftermath of her confession—abusive, single, oversexed, poor—strategically hid the fact that everyone in her hometown remembered Smith as a good mother. Neighbors cited the many pictures Susan had taken of her sons and the parties she hosted for them.⁴⁴⁶ Even the members of the angry mob that heckled Smith as she came to and from the courtroom for her bond hearing could not have predicted her crimes based on her flawless maternal history, a fact which undoubtedly increased their shock, rage, and sense of personal betrayal. These feelings both enabled and fed into the images of Smith as representative of national social problems.

Some members of the media, however, saw the case as regionally representative. That is, they saw Susan Smith as the main character in a fundamentally Southern drama. Some journalists used “Southern Gothic” stereotypes, while others—notably, Rick Bragg of the *New York Times*—narrowed the regional perspective even further to focus on the socioeconomics of a stereotypical Southern mill town. In this chapter, I explore the depictions of the Smith case as a quintessentially Southern drama, a process that invoked many of the class-based stereotypes associated with the “boyfriend motive” and with popular ideas about the South as a distinctive region. These images of Susan Smith placed her within the context of broad regional economic changes. There was more than one “South” in these depictions. The regional scapegoating in much of the national media was a superficial representation, but some journalists offered other

⁴⁴⁶ Elizabeth Simpson, “Susan Smith Case Awakens Fear of the Enemy Within,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, November 13, 1994.

options for reading the Smith case as specifically Southern. Although the “boyfriend motive” was a distinct component of these new images of Susan, this regional perspective helped to plant the seeds of an alternative discourse of motherhood by the time of her trial. The images of Smith examined thus far indicated past and contemporary readings of motherhood. The images we will examine of Smith from this point forward gesture toward future redefinitions of maternity in the twenty-first century.

After her confession, many reporters spoke of the “two Susans,” or the idea that Smith was a monster wearing the convincing disguise of a mother. Underneath this mask lay a host of personal problems, primarily rooted in Smith’s troubled family history. Susan Smith’s history of depression, her father’s suicide when she was six years old, and evidence of her own suicide attempts dating back a decade made splashy headlines. But the best fodder came from her sexual history, and no details were spared. About three weeks after her confession, the Union newspaper broke the shocking news that Smith’s stepfather, a prominent local businessman and politician, had molested Susan repeatedly when she was in her teens.⁴⁴⁷ As in the case of Smith’s impending divorce, the national media followed local journalists’ lead on the news of the molestation, and it soon made the nightly news. Although the other troubles in Susan Smith’s past—her father’s suicide, her own depression and suicide attempts, and her impending divorce—were public knowledge, journalists presented each detail as if it had been a closely guarded secret until Smith confessed. According to the mask motif in the media coverage, the murder of the Smith boys exposed all of these secrets; what had more or less been public knowledge in Union for years played out in the media as the sordid spilling of closeted skeletons.

⁴⁴⁷ “Report: Susan Smith Reported Stepfather for Sexual Molestation,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 28, 1994.

The plot became one of cause and effect as each detail of Smith's past was presented as a determining factor in her later deviance.

The media narrative in which dysfunction foreshadowed deviance contradicted local knowledge of Smith's past, which had not enabled anyone who actually knew her to predict the later violence. Union residents collectively displayed earnest confusion in interviews following Smith's confession. "I've seen her with those babies," sobbed a local business owner. "She came from a good family. I don't understand any of this."⁴⁴⁸ Unionites simply could not understand what would drive this mother, whom they all knew as a "sweet girl," to murder.

It was not just Susan Smith who wore the dangerously compelling mask. Many journalists predictably referenced *Peyton Place*, the best-selling 1950s American novel about the idyllic small town teeming with dysfunction.⁴⁴⁹ Reporters extended the trope to the entire South and to Union itself; the case became the quintessential example of modern Southern Gothic. It is difficult to define but, as Hal Crowther wrote in the *Oxford American* nearly two years after Susan Smith killed her children, Americans "know Gothic when we see it."⁴⁵⁰ In fact, Crowther's piece was just one in an entire issue of the magazine devoted to the question, "Is the South Still Gothic?" Historical examples include such proof of Southern "benightedness" as slavery, lynchings, the Scopes "monkey" trial of 1925, and the more recent murder of basketball star Michael Jordan's father as he napped in his car just seventy-odd miles from the New South metropolis of Charlotte, North Carolina.⁴⁵¹ But Southern Gothic is not characterized wholly by a

⁴⁴⁸ Bragg, "Mother of 'Carjacked' Boys Held."

⁴⁴⁹ Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* (New York, NY: Julian Messner, Inc., 1956).

⁴⁵⁰ Hal Crowther, "Cathedrals of Kudzu," *Oxford American*, October/November 1996, 12.

⁴⁵¹ Fred Hobson, "The History of the Southern Gothic Sensibility," *Oxford American*, October/November 1996, 16-17.

preoccupation with race. Class and gender have been major themes in Gothic literature since at least the early works of William Faulkner, the so-called father of the genre. Hal Crowther points out that Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor "took the show out of town and away from the big house," focusing on working-class whites rather than the stereotypical Southern gentry of the *Gone With the Wind* variety.⁴⁵² Writers like Rick Bragg, Dorothy Allison, and Larry Brown continued this tradition, derided as "Redneck" or "Welfare Gothic" by some critics, into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.⁴⁵³ Class is a running subtext in their works, and according to historian James Cobb, they "do not flinch in their portrayals of the homicidal violence, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and other wounds that their characters inflict on each other."⁴⁵⁴

The various writers of the 1996 issue of the *Oxford American* devoted to the question of Southern distinctiveness offered a laundry list of images that contributed to the "Gothic" quality of the region. Editor Marc Smirnoff argued in favor of the "Ghost Theory," or the idea that Southerners believe in, and a majority has even seen, ghosts. Florence King, the "Failed Southern Lady," offered a word association game to conjure regional Gothic images, including "attic, darkness, moon, alligators (if applicable), swamp, rape, murder, incest." She also offered the apocryphal image of the "TOCWDITC," or "The Old Colored Woman Down In the Country" who performed abortions with a sterile twig. King had heard this story from the women of her family in Washington, DC, but she realized in college at Ole Miss that every woman from the nation's capital to the Gulf Coast had a TOCWDITC story. It was a tale that could not exist in other areas of the country. "Back-alley," illegal abortions happened

⁴⁵² Crowther, 13.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Cobb, 256.

everywhere, King argued, but “only we [Southerners] would feel compelled to bring in oddly virginal items like green twigs and dew, transform the abortionist into a combination of Druid priestess and Teutonic forest queen, and move the whole business into a sylvan glade.”⁴⁵⁵

Hal Crowther adds to these images the “toxic vapor” of “violence and defeat” that followed the Civil War, “gloomy” architecture with “neglected” back rooms and overgrown yards, “white trash” settings of “pickup trucks and mobile homes, the run-down apartment buildings, and the four-room cabins packed with dogs and children..” He quotes Larry Brown’s “A Roadside Resurrection”: “The world is a strange place and in it lie things of another nature, a bent order, and beyond a certain point there are no rules to make men mind.” This, Crowther declares, must surely be the “Gothic Declaration of Independence.”⁴⁵⁶ Contemporary scholars, then, found “Southern Gothic” in these menacing settings rife with the haunted past, decay, and a subtext of sex and violence.

It was perhaps inevitable that journalists would fit Smith so easily into the Gothic pantheon. The Smith drama was a tabloid’s dream, rife as it was with sex, violence, public outrage, and family secrets. Small-town Southern gentility, hospitality, and religiosity were, in these accounts, facades behind which lurked Gothic violence, depravity, and lust. Sensationalism was not limited to the tabloids; every media outlet from the *National Inquirer* to the *New York Times* featured the case as a scandal, not simply a tragedy. *Newsweek* deemed it a tale worthy of both *Geraldo*—perhaps the ultimate representation in the mid-1990s of voyeuristic tabloid culture in the United States—and William Faulkner, the heralded progenitor of Southern Gothic

⁴⁵⁵ Marc Smirnoff, “The Ghost Theory,” *Oxford American*, October/November 1996, 4; Florence King, “In the Dark,” *Oxford American*, October/November 1996, 10-11.

⁴⁵⁶ Hal Crowther, “Cathedrals of Kudzu,” *Oxford American*, October/November 1996, 12-13.

literature.⁴⁵⁷ Susan Smith, in these narratives, was the villainess in a classic Southern Gothic tale of sex, violence, and innocence betrayed.

In these accounts, there were two Unions to match the “two Susans.” One Union played the role of the close-knit, small town duped by the evil woman—Eden to Smith’s seductive Eve. Journalists seized on the Southern kitsch of Union, one of “those communities that is as much family as it is town,” where “people are tied together by marriage, church and Friday night football games.”⁴⁵⁸ One reporter argued: “People live in Union County to get away from stories like this. On Sunday evenings, the streets are nearly deserted because almost everyone is in church. Crime usually means a missing stereo, and deputies know the handful of people in the county jail by their first names and the first names of their mamas and daddies.”⁴⁵⁹

Other journalists leaned heavily on the *Peyton Place* theme that small-town America was, in reality, a den of disguised dysfunction. Like a “pentimento on a Norman Rockwell canvas,” Union’s veneer hardly disguised its dirty secrets: “The Winn Dixie hides guilty lovers; the fine Christian home harbors a child molester; the 6 year-old posing for a picture in her red dress is going to bury her father; the diaper bag and baby’s bottle are evidence of first-degree murder.”⁴⁶⁰ In these depictions, Susan Smith and Union were parallels: like the offending woman, Union wore a mask of decency that hid a community rife with racial, sexual, and class conflict. As media studies scholar Barbara Barnett put it, these accounts featured “the Southern belle with a

⁴⁵⁷ Marc Peyser and Ginny Carroll, “Southern Gothic on Trial,” *Newsweek*, July 17, 1995.

⁴⁵⁸ *Evening News*, NBC, November 4, 1994; Chris Burritt, “MOTHER CHARGED WITH MURDER: The unraveling life of Susan Smith; She felt world disintegrating,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 6, 1994.

⁴⁵⁹ Bragg, “Life of a Mother.”

⁴⁶⁰ Tamara Jones, “From the Smith Trial, a Town’s Secrets Emerge,” *Washington Post*, July 30, 1995.

sweet face and an evil heart, the perfect family with a closet full of horrendous dark secrets, the small town that seemed quiet but was teeming with scandal.”⁴⁶¹

Some journalists presented the mask as a specifically Southern phenomenon. Reporters argued that Southern politesse shielded Susan Smith from immediate detection: “The conventions of small-town life in the South place a premium on niceness, which turns out to be not very useful in predicting whether a person is capable of murder.”⁴⁶² Smith’s reported “niceness” apparently fooled everyone, and the conventions of the small-town South kept neighbors from acknowledging, much less intervening in, the family’s troubles. The idea that violent criminals wear masks that prevent “normal” citizens from predicting their deviant behavior is a popular one, as is the image of small towns (or, in the second half of the twentieth century, the suburbs) that seem quaint but are actually riven with scandal. News reports, films, novels, true-crime books, and even entire television series have been organized around this compelling image of the mask (see, for instance, the enormously popular series *Desperate Housewives* or virtually all of writer Ann Rule’s library).⁴⁶³ But the image of the mask also applies to the South specifically. The idea that the deceptive pastoral setting is, in reality, peopled with monsters has been a staple of mainstream media coverage of the region. According

⁴⁶¹Barnett, 90.

⁴⁶² Adler and Carroll, “Innocents Lost.”

⁴⁶³ See, for example, Ann Rule’s bestseller about serial killer Ted Bundy, which often mentions his considerable charm (*The Stranger Beside Me* [New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc, 1980]) or her more recent work on Debora Green, the doctor accused of murdering her own children in a house fire (*Bitter Harvest* [New York, NY: Pocket Star Books, 1997]). In the latter, Rule explicitly uses the trope of the mask to convince readers that Green was infanticidal: “What was going on behind Debora’s façade of an unattractive, abandoned, anxious child was a secret, a secret so completely masked that [her friend] did not even realize it” (*Bitter Harvest*, 153). The enormously popular sitcom *Desperate Housewives* is organized entirely around the idea that the perfect American suburb is peopled by misfits and even murderers (*Desperate Housewives*, ABC).

to literary scholar Patricia Yaeger, its role is that of a scapegoat as well as an entertainer: “The South enacts horror; the North consumes it.”⁴⁶⁴

Following this long and popular tradition, Andrea Peyser organized *Mother Love, Deadly Love*, one of the first books published about Susan Smith (it hit stands before Smith even went to trial) around the image of the mask. Readers meet Smith as she pulled out of the driveway that fateful night with her sons strapped safely in the backseat of her Mazda. The “mother’s capable hands” and “smiling face” disappeared on the second page as Smith contemplated the task at hand.

As she pulled out of the driveway, Susan’s carefully glued-on expression quickly dissolved. The patient smile she kept on hand for her children contorted into something unrecognizable. The friendly mask she plastered on for the neighbors all but disappeared.⁴⁶⁵

Susan’s “perfected” smile hid “the demons raging within.”⁴⁶⁶ According to Peyser, evil lived undetected in Union for twenty-three years, disguised as “a well-adjusted neighbor, loving wife and daughter, and nurturing mother.”⁴⁶⁷

Smith’s shocking confession rocked the town, leading the media to speculate that there was dysfunction under Union’s “Mayberry” surface, just as there was evil lurking beneath Susan’s smile. According to the conventional image of small towns, things like that just “don’t happen in Union,” the “200-year-old mill town with a huge sign on Main Street welcoming visitors to THE CITY OF HOSPITALITY.” *Time* magazine reported that crime was rare in the tiny town where people welcomed strangers and never locked their doors. “It’s a boringly God-fearing,

⁴⁶⁴ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 70.

⁴⁶⁵ Peyser, 2.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

law-abiding place," one local told the reporters. "The worst thing that happens here is like the song: Bubba shot the jukebox 'cause he didn't like the song."⁴⁶⁸ In Andrea Peyser's book, Union wore its own version of Smith's "glued-on expression." On the surface, it seemed like a classic small Southern town, its streets lined with "brick cottages that have housed generations of textile workers," its "front porches filled to capacity, awash with iced tea and talk." Neighbors chatted in the parking lot of the "shiny, new supermarket," the "one concession to progress" in this "modern-day Mayberry." Union, in this account, was not simply backwards; residents embraced their existence outside the inexorable march of progress. They "liked it that way," wrote Peyser, because the town's "secrets are safe."⁴⁶⁹ For, in this town that "could be used to illustrate an encyclopedia listing for 'family values,' ... even the tidiest shutters and friendliest smiles can disguise trouble."⁴⁷⁰ Susan's "double life" mirrored the elaborate mask worn by her entire hometown. One local allegedly joked that Union should change its nickname from "City of Hospitality" to "City of Adultery."⁴⁷¹

This image of the mask linked these two disparate Souths, urging media consumers to see the negative images, rather than the carefully arranged facades, as the true essence of Susan Smith—and, by extension, of Union and the entire region. Passages like these offered readers two Souths: the pastoral and the grotesque. The "Mayberry" exterior brought to mind the fairy tales of *Steel Magnolias* (1989) and *Forrest Gump* (1994), which debuted in theaters just five months

⁴⁶⁸ Gibbs and Booth, "Death and Deceit."

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 14-15.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, 14.

before the Smith murders.⁴⁷² But in the mainstream media, the grotesque, Gothic South, with its seedy underbelly of poverty, sex, and violence, seethed within the crumbling Union mansions and the mill houses encircling them—images that recalled the violent rednecks of films like *Deliverance* and *Cape Fear*.⁴⁷³ The Gothic South featured jarring dichotomies: Union’s grove of alleged “lynching trees” bloomed brightly every spring, trailers and tract housing lined the road leading to the Findlay “castle,” a white mother from a good family murdered her two young sons in cold blood. Andrea Peyser captured this bifurcation in a chapter called “Placid Surfaces” in which she described John D. Long Lake, where Susan Smith drowned her sons. By day, she wrote, its “tranquil,” smooth surface reflects pine trees and sunshine, but its calmness was deceptive:

Dip below the serene exterior. Reach beneath the calm surface. John D. Long Lake is not what you might expect. The temperature is far colder than the lake's superficial beauty might suggest. Invisible to the land dweller, catfish, that ugly staple of Southern cuisine, swim in large, hungry numbers...John D. Long Lake is the perfect mirror. Like Union, it takes care to conceal what lurks within.⁴⁷⁴

Peyser easily called upon stark, bipolar images of the Gothic South in her tabloid bestseller.

Southern Gothic sensibility is an offshoot of the idea of Southern distinctiveness. A related issue is whether or not this cultural distinction still exists, or the question of the so-called “Americanization” of the South in the twentieth-century. Historically, there have been several major differences between the South and other regions: slavery, a “colonial” economy, poverty, low rates of education, and a general one-party political rule. The advent of modernity in the South prompted the search for Southern distinctiveness, and historians generally settled upon

⁴⁷² Herbert Ross, director, *Steel Magnolias*, Rastar Films, 1989; Robert Zemeckis, director, *Forrest Gump*, Paramount Pictures, 1994.

⁴⁷³ John Boorman, *Deliverance*, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1972; Martin Scorsese, *Cape Fear*, Amblin Entertainment, 1991.

⁴⁷⁴ Peyser, 16.

four primary sources: a “dedication to white supremacy, a peculiar climate, a decidedly un-American historical experience, and...a ‘unique culture of the folk,’ rooted in life on the land.”⁴⁷⁵ The academic debate has raged for decades, and many historians argue that ideas about Southern differences reflect national prejudices rather than regional essences. Historian C. Vann Woodward argued that the idea of Southern distinctiveness allowed the region to serve as a “deflector of national guilt” and “a scapegoat for a stricken conscience.”⁴⁷⁶ Howard Zinn agreed, concluding during the height of the Civil Rights Movement that the South differed from the rest of the nation only by degree, and Americans ignored this essential sameness at their peril: “[The South] has simply taken the national genes and done the most with them...and it may be important ...for the rest of the nation to understand that it stands by not as an administering doctor but as the next patient in line.”⁴⁷⁷

Almost a decade later, John Egerton described the “Americanization of the South” and the “Southernization of America” as a sort of trading of vices in which the South became more urban, less racist, and more affluent, while the North had begun to exhibit “many of the attitudes that once were thought to be the exclusive possession of white Southerners.”⁴⁷⁸ Two decades later, Peter Applebome agreed with this idea of the “Southernization,” citing, among other things, the unique configuration of Southerners in positions of national political power in the

⁴⁷⁵ Cobb, 2.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, 217.

⁴⁷⁷ Cited in Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York, NY: Times Books, 1996), 12.

⁴⁷⁸ John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 19.

mid-1990s.⁴⁷⁹ Cultural trends like the national popularity of NASCAR and country music reflect the late twentieth-century mainstreaming of “redneck” culture. The postwar economic reversal and subsequent population boom resulted in a kind of “no south,” transforming the poor, violent South into desirable property that was “successful, optimistic, prosperous, and bland.”⁴⁸⁰

This problematization of the alleged roots of regional identity has done little to combat the popular stereotypes of the South. On the one hand, there are the enduring film images featuring “big houses, brunswick stew, and banjo pickers” (or, in the case of *Steel Magnolias*, big hair, armadillo cakes, and zydeco).⁴⁸¹ On the other, there is the barbaric South of *Cape Fear* and *Mississippi Burning* in which class and racial tensions result in violence and social chaos. The Gothic South generally eclipses the “moonlight and magnolias” South in the media and the popular imagination. And this does not just apply to cultural texts or regional history. As James Cobb points out in his recent study of Southern identity, racial violence across the nation consistently conjures images of the South. In 1986, for example, New York mayor Ed Koch argued that the fatal beating of a man in Howard Beach was the kind of thing that happened only in the “Deep South.”⁴⁸² Scholars agree that although the South may not be a distinctive region, images of its distinctiveness often serve a scapegoating function, more often than not based on ideas about race, class, and gender. In the mid-1990s, Florence King wrote in the *Oxford*

American: “I can only conclude that the question of whether the South is still Gothic is beside

⁴⁷⁹ Applebome, 8. By 1996, the President, Vice-President, Speaker of the House, House Majority Leader, House Majority Whip, and Republican Party Chairman were all from the South.

⁴⁸⁰ Cobb, 231, 236. In their recent publications on Atlanta and Charlotte, respectively, historians Kevin Kruse and Matt Lassiter argue that the racial dynamics in the South reflect, rather than contradict, the dynamics of race on a national scale. See Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NK: Princeton University Press, 2005) and Matt Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴⁸¹ Cobb, 231.

⁴⁸² *Ibid*, 322.

the point. There are enough people who want it to be to turn self-fulfilling prophecies into a land-office business.”⁴⁸³

The South has never had a monopoly on the grotesque in American culture, even though popular regional literary output at the end of the twentieth century still tended toward the poor (Rick Bragg), the dysfunctional (Dorothy Allison), and the downright violent (Larry Brown).⁴⁸⁴ Fred Hobson wrote that the region “doesn’t have all the crazies, and it never did,” but it did have something else, something that modernization would never change: writers with “a greater capacity for seeing beneath surfaces, for imagining and depicting evil.”⁴⁸⁵ Hobson’s depiction of the Southern imagination reads like a primer on the trope of the mask in media coverage of the Smith case. His estimation of the unique visionary “capacity” of Southern writers certainly confirmed how many national reporters imagined the South in the winter of 1994. Reporters for *Time* magazine depicted a tranquil small town whose citizens idled on the “courthouse steps and in the popular Palmetto restaurant and on front porches shaded by magnolia trees.” But their talk was anything but idle; just a week before Christmas, the town’s minds were on “Smith’s long-held secrets.”⁴⁸⁶ On the eve of the trial, *Newsweek* featured the glaring headline “Southern Gothic on Trial.” The article listed the tawdry, tabloid details of the case. “Party to enough infidelities and suicides to make Faulkner--and Geraldo--proud, she’s a Southern Gothic come to life,” wrote the reporters.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸³ Florence King, “In the Dark,” *Oxford American*, October/November 1996, 10.

⁴⁸⁴ Allison and Bragg are discussed herein in great detail. Larry Brown and Barry Hannah are considered to be the representatives of modern Southern Gothic; their novels offer “grotesques” of all classes, in both “backwaters” and in “suburbs and country clubs and the like” (Hobson, 18).

⁴⁸⁵ Hobson, 19.

⁴⁸⁶ Gleick and Towle, “It Did Happen Here.”

⁴⁸⁷ Peyser and Carroll, “Southern Gothic on Trial.”

When journalists depicted the Smith case as a stereotypically Southern story, they were subtly, if not deliberately, arguing for Southern distinctiveness—and not the down-home, good-time, *Hee-Haw* kind.⁴⁸⁸ Female characters have always played integral roles in these kinds of Southern Gothic narratives. W. J. Cash famously targeted the “downright gyneolatry” that characterized the white South’s obsession with its women (and masked the rampant abuse of black women). This protection racket and the attendant rape myth of lynching, in which black men were brutally murdered in order to protect white women from their alleged sexual advances, was highly publicized in popular literature and films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*.⁴⁸⁹ And yet Scarlett O’Hara, for whom at least one fictional black character was lynched, was no delicate Southern flower. Much like the “scheming slut” Susan Smith, she was, essentially, a “gold-digger” who married for money. In addition to being a bad wife, she was a poor mother; when her children appeared at all in the novel, she scolded and ignored them and occasionally wished they had never been born. Indeed, they were such a burden to her that two of them did not even make the cut for the enormously popular film version. From the moment of publication, it seems, the public has never grown tired of Scarlett’s famous narcissism; a 1970 musical and a 1991 unauthorized sequel to *Gone With the Wind* bear her first name, and an authorized sequel was published in the fall of 2007.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁸ *Hee Haw* was a popular television show in the 1970s that featured people dressed up as Southern farmers, in overalls and exaggerated accents, telling corny jokes and singing bad songs (*Hee Haw*, created by Frank Peppiatt, 1969-1992).

⁴⁸⁹ D.W. Griffith, director, *Birth of a Nation*, David W. Griffith Corp., 1915; Victor Fleming, director, *Gone With the Wind*, Selznick International Pictures, 1939.

⁴⁹⁰ Alexandra Ripley, *Scarlett* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 1992). The second sequel, *Rhett Butler’s People* by Donald McCaig, hit bookstands in November 2007 (New York: St. Martin’s, 2007). Scarlett fares somewhat better in McCaig’s portrayal than in *Gone With the Wind*. McCaig hardly addresses the issue of motherhood at all; indeed, the most devoted mother in the novel appears to be the madam, Belle Watling. Scarlett is a better wife to Rhett than she had been with her previous husbands, and, in the end, they finally become a happily married, mature couple (see the final chapter, “Tomorrow is Another Day,” 492-498).

Although Scarlett's apparent abuse of men, children, and money has been referred to as "pluck" or "gumption"—in other words, the "steel" part of the "magnolia" stereotype—there are darker female characters that more accurately foreshadow the Southern Gothic depiction of Susan Smith. William Faulkner, the Southern literary icon most commonly invoked in media coverage of the Smith case, offered readers a host a gendered Southern stereotypes throughout his literary career.⁴⁹¹ William Ferris, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, compared "the hidden lives now exposed in Union County to those found in Faulkner and Welty, with their sense of fate being driven by something malevolent and unseen."⁴⁹²

The comparison was accurate; the grand old gentleman of Southern literature offered at least two female characters that clearly foreshadowed the "Susan Smith" of the "boyfriend motive." *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's most acclaimed novel, features four narrators, each of whom exhibits an unhealthy preoccupation with the downfall of the female character Caddy Compson.⁴⁹³ The Compsons are a dying breed, and they cling to the trappings of their former wealth and status although it is apparent that the South has changed without them. Their daughter Caddy seals their fate with her promiscuity. She is a sexual suspect from the start, even when she is just a young girl seen through the eyes of her mentally retarded brother Benjy. While playing with her brothers in the creek near their home, she slips and gets her dress wet. Despite the protests of her brothers, she removes it to let it dry, and then she slips into the creek

⁴⁹¹ Jones, "From the Smith Trial, a Town's Secrets Emerge."

⁴⁹² Ibid. See also Jesse J. Holland, "Smith trial: 'It's like...TV,'" *Rock Hill Herald* (SC), July 24, 1995.

⁴⁹³ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York, NY: Random House, 1929).

even further, becoming “all wet and muddy behind.”⁴⁹⁴ Even the fictional idiot savant knows that Caddy’s muddy drawers foreshadowed her unmarried pregnancy and subsequent marriage to a man who is not the father. Quentin Compson’s unhealthy obsession with his sister’s purity—an obsession which culminated in a false confession to his father that *he* was the father of Caddy’s unborn child—results in his suicide, which completes the family’s torturously slow fall down the social ladder from the Old South to the New. This script for New South womanhood hinges upon a feminine mask that hid promiscuity, incest, and resulting violence.

With his next novel, Faulkner outdid himself, producing a Southern female character who went from debutante to prostitute in the short course of just a few days. In *Sanctuary*—the “most horrific tale” Faulkner could imagine—an Ole Miss co-ed is the victim of a brutal rape in the classic Southern Gothic setting: an overgrown, crumbling plantation crawling with misfits and evildoers.⁴⁹⁵ Although she seems to be a stereotypically empty, privileged young Southern woman, it becomes clear to readers early on that Temple Drake is no angel. By the time she is raped by the criminal Popeye, who is described throughout the novel as vaguely “black,” readers know that her name is “written on that lavatory wall” by some of the boys she has dated. The writing on the wall is prophetic: Temple, while displaying little or no agency of her own, seems to embrace her newfound sexuality as a captive in a Memphis whorehouse, replacing her emptiness with evil. Although the ambiguous ending hints that she is a pathetic figure, “sullen and discontented and sad” and once again under the complete control of her father, her words in

⁴⁹⁴ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 21.

⁴⁹⁵ William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (New York: Random House, 1931). The old house is also a clichéd image of the Old South in Faulkner novels, representing natural ruin and lost wealth: “The house was a gutted ruin rising gaunt and stark out of a grove of unpruned cedar trees. It was a landmark, known as the Old Frenchman Place, built before the Civil War; a plantation house set in the middle of a tract of land: of cotton fields and gardens and lawns long since gone back to jungle, which the people of the neighborhood had been pulling down piecemeal for firewood for fifty years or digging with secret and sporadic optimism for the gold which the builder was reputed to have buried somewhere about the place when Grant came through the county on his Vicksburg campaign” (Ibid, 18).

a later novel confirm what many early critics suspected: Temple Drake had it coming. Indeed, as Faulkner explained in *Requiem for a Nun*, the sequel that was published twenty years later, her real crime was not that she was “held prisoner in a whorehouse,” but that she “loved it.”⁴⁹⁶

Drake was not only a deliberately sexual being—taboo for any proper Southern belle.; she is, in the sequel, an indifferent mother who plans to abandon her infant daughter to run away with a man who reminds her of her “sporting” days in Memphis. Temple’s plan to abandon her children is foiled by her nanny Nancy, an African American woman who was a former prostitute herself. Although Temple repeatedly refers to her as a “nigger dope-fiend whore,” Nancy is, in the end, a tragic maternal figure that murders Temple’s infant rather than see her abandoned. During the fateful scene in which Nancy confronts Temple, who is literally on the way out the door to elope with her boyfriend, Temple offers Nancy money, but the nanny’s only concern is for the baby:

Of course you can’t leave her. Not with nobody. You can’t no more leave a six-months-old baby with nobody while you run away from your husband with another man, than you can take a six-months-old baby with you on that trip. That’s what I’m talking about. So maybe you’ll just leave it in there in that cradle; it’ll cry for a while, but it’s too little to cry very loud and so maybe won’t nobody hear it and come meddling...Or maybe taking her with you will be just as easy...Then you can drop it into a garbage can and no more trouble to you or anybody”⁴⁹⁷

By the end of her career in fiction, Temple’s nanny and her infant daughter were dead; although it was not by her hand, the final scenes of *Requiem for a Nun* indicate that she was to blame.

Temple Drake was a worthy Southern script for Susan Smith, not just because of her promiscuity, but also because of her fatal choice of romance over motherhood.

⁴⁹⁶ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York, NY: Chatto and Windus, 1953), 64. In the sequel, Temple’s uncle argues with her husband—the very man who left her to get raped at the old plantation in *Sanctuary*—about Temple’s “crime”: “Is that what you can never forgive her for?—not for having been the instrument creating that moment in your life which you can never recall nor forget nor explain nor condone nor even stop thinking about, but because she herself didn’t suffer, but on the contrary, even liked it—that month or whatever it was like the episode in the old movie of the white girl held prisoner in the cave by the Bedouin prince?” (Ibid, 64-65).

⁴⁹⁷ (Ibid, 157-158).

In fact, the depression years were banner ones for negative stereotypes of Southern women that became instant classics. The year after *Sanctuary* was published to great sales and horrified reviews, Erskine Caldwell produced his own, poor white brand of Southern Gothic with *Tobacco Road* (1932). On the very first page, readers meet all manner of “trashy” Southern Gothic stereotypes. The novel opens with the poverty-stricken Lester family scattered around their dirt yard, hungrily eyeing the bag of turnips held by an in-law. The enterprising family uses sex to steal the turnips: the women in the family hold the man down while the harelipped Ellie May jumps him, and the male Lesters steal the turnips as they have sex in the front yard. The man leaves Ellie May sweating and covered in dirt, with her dress hiked up and ants crawling all over her. As she sleeps, her brother, in a gesture of either tenderness or disgust, covers her harelip with her arm, but he does not fix her dress. Just a few pages later, readers learn that the only thing protecting Ellie May from incest with her father, who routinely raped his other daughters, is her harelip, allegedly given to her “by God” to protect from her family’s sinful ways.⁴⁹⁸

To critics’ expressed horror, Caldwell’s works, like Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, sold very well on the mass market, and a hit Broadway play based on *Tobacco Road* boosted sales as well as stereotypes. Favorable reviews praised his “social realism,” predictably mistaking Southern grotesque for regional realities.⁴⁹⁹ This confirmed Flannery O’Connor’s famous statement of 1960, when she wrote “anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.”⁵⁰⁰

Decades later, O’Connor’s words remained apt. Although many of the cultural trappings of the

⁴⁹⁸ Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*.

⁴⁹⁹ Wayne Mixon, *The People’s Writer: Erskine Caldwell and the South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995).

⁵⁰⁰ Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” 1960 (available online at www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/grotesque.html).

South have gone mainstream—witness country music or NASCAR, and Southern evangelicalism is firmly ensconced in the White House—popular representations of the South are still distinctly bipolar. Americans are familiar with the funny “bumpkin” humor of *The Beverly Hillbillies* or Jeff Foxworthy’s “you know you’re a redneck if...” jokes. And the Gothic still has credence in Hollywood and in the media, perhaps because the South is still useful as a cultural scapegoat for the nation.

Yet the cultural scripts for Southern women at the end of the twentieth century were more complicated than this generic bipolarity might indicate. For many decades, certain Southern women writers have been challenging regional stereotypes through the inversion of gender conventions. Some authors offer female grotesque figures as a means of exploding the mythical Southern lady, who was the imagined base of the entire Southern socioracial order.⁵⁰¹ According to literary scholar Patricia Yaeger, these fictional female characters attack the socially-constructed regional identity at its gendered core: “[They] work toward a massive category confusion in which the common classifications of southern life no longer make sense, in which the condensation and displacement of political contradictions onto the white female body no longer take place in secret but, instead, get held up for scrutiny.”⁵⁰²

These texts—created about, by, and often for women—were subtly feminist, or at least revolutionary in their mythologies of gender. It is startlingly transgressive when a female Southern character, especially a supposed white “lady,” commits or causes an act of violence.

⁵⁰¹ Scholars have long lamented the continued existence of the “Southern Lady” icon. See Mary Frederickson, “‘Sassing Fate’: Women Workers in the Twentieth Century South,” in *Taking Off the White Gloves: Southern Women and Women Historians*, eds. Michele Gillespie and Catherine Clinton (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 15.

⁵⁰² Patricia Yaeger, “Beyond the Hummingbird: Southern Women Writers and the Southern Gargantua,” in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 294.

Like Susan Smith's confession, in which the supposedly normal mother revealed untold despair and capacity for violence, these authors tell stories "about beauty ravaged into bestiality, about the eruption of monstrosity in a climate where one least expects it."⁵⁰³ These are not simple, traditional cautionary tales about the evil that lies within women, nor are they typical examples of the Gothic genre. Rather, they work towards destroying old stereotypes and creating alternative categorizations for Southern women. The anonymous narrator of Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby*, tells the "apocryphal tale" of the white, aristocratic female body in the form of a beautiful young water-skier who is literally destroyed when she loses her balance and lands in a "writhing, tangled mass of water moccasins."⁵⁰⁴ The privileged lady ideal is literally devoured by snakes, rendering her both a relic and a Medusa-like, perhaps even predatory figure—literally the exact opposite of what well-to-do white women are "supposed to be" in the modern South.

These authors used the fictional female body to represent the South as well as to destroy regional stereotypes of gender. Scholars of Southern literature suggest that images of Southern women "have traditionally served as texts upon which regional identity is inscribed," both in cultural texts and in historical images (the rape myth of lynching is perhaps the most egregious example).⁵⁰⁵ Ideologies of gender "haunt the region's bodies" through cultural texts, providing historical scripts for contemporary manifestations of regional identity.⁵⁰⁶ Through the fictional destruction of gendered stereotypes, Southern women writers provide new cultural scripts of

⁵⁰³ Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*.

⁵⁰⁴ Ellen Douglas, *Can't Quit You, Baby* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 130.

⁵⁰⁵ Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones, "Rethinking the South through Gender," in Jones and Donaldson, 13.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

woman- and motherhood. The 1990s were a particularly fruitful decade in the production of Southern female characters. Although viewers loved the sweet Southern dream that was *Steel Magnolias* (1989), a series of bestsellers offered a subtle new discourse of Southern motherhood that bridged the contemporary divide between “good” and “bad” women. These texts use traditional Gothic images—sex, violence, poverty, incest, racism—but they escape the traditional bifurcated stereotypes of Southern womanhood.

A native of Greenville, South Carolina—a mill town northwest of Union—Dorothy Allison received immediate acclaim with her semi-autobiographical *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992). The *New York Times* devoted an entire page to George Garrett’s review of the novel, which he deemed “simply stunning, about as close to flawless as any reader could hope for.”⁵⁰⁷ Although Allison claimed that her real autobiography “would have been a lot meaner,” *Bastard* is a raw coming-of-age tale in which the narrator, a young “bastard” girl known to everyone as “Bone,” undergoes various forms of physical abuse, including molestation at the hands of her stepfather while her mother is in the hospital delivering a stillborn child.⁵⁰⁸

The novel revolves around the themes of motherhood, sexuality, class, and violence. Allison knowingly exploits stereotypes of class as Bone muses upon the cultural trappings of being “trash” in the modern South. Specifically, the men drink, fight, and dominate their families, while the women, despite a down-home air of nurturance, allow violence to flourish in their modest households. In the end, Bone’s mother abandons her, leaving town with her pedophilic and incestuous husband, but not before she procures for her daughter a “clean” birth certificate

⁵⁰⁷ George Garrett, “No Wonder People Got Crazy as They Grew Up,” *New York Times*.

⁵⁰⁸ Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1992).

that is not labeled “Bastard.”⁵⁰⁹ Allison’s is no simple morality tale; child abandonment is not uncomplicated evidence of utter maternal failure. Indeed, in the final scene, Bone knows that she has lost her mother, that they “were new people” that “didn’t know each other anymore.”

Yet her mother professes love to the end:

“It’s all right, baby. You just cry. You just go on and cry.” Her hands touched me gently, lifted, and came back down as if she were afraid she might hurt me but couldn’t keep from reaching for me again. “You’re my own baby girl. I’m not gonna let you go.”⁵¹⁰

Bone’s mother hugs her once more, and then hands her the “clean” birth certificate that no longer bears the label “Bastard.” Bone feels empty, lost, and abandoned, but she views her mother in an almost detached, adult way. She is not simply selfishly relinquishing motherhood. According to Bone, her actions are part of the long saga of her experiences as a poor Southern woman.

Who had Mama been, what had she wanted to be or do before I was born? Once I was born, her hopes had turned, and I had climbed up her life like a flower reaching for the sun. Fourteen and terrified, fifteen and a mother, just past twenty-one when she married Glen. Her life had folded into mine. What would I be like when I was fifteen, twenty, thirty? Would I be as strong as she had been, as hungry for love, as desperate, determined, and ashamed?⁵¹¹

Bone’s mother does not follow the typical scripts of Southern motherhood. She is not one of the nurturing hens of *Steel Magnolias*, nor is she an indifferent mother who discarded her children to pursue her sexual desires like Temple Drake or, according to the “boyfriend motive,” Susan Smith. The relationship between Bone and her mother is a complicated vision of motherhood in which maternal love accompanied child abandonment.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, 307.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, 309.

Although *Bastard* tells a complex story about motherhood, sexuality is an altogether different matter. For the women of this novel, sex was fraught with peril according to the double standard of sexuality experienced by all women, regardless of class. Allison explained in an essay that the molestation, as well as her mother's experiences as the mother of a "bastard" in a small Southern town, taught her what the rest of the world already seemed to know from Erskine Caldwell's "caricatures." She wrote: "Sex was dangerous, a trap, trashy as drinking whiskey in a paper cup or telling dirty stories in a loud whisper. Sex was a sure sign of having nothing better to hope for."⁵¹² This view of sex hinged on gender and on class: although a "good girl" could fall quickly due to her own sexual activity (or public suspicion of it), poor Southern women had nowhere to fall because they were seen as always and already sexual. Allison explained of her Greenville, South Carolina, childhood, "My cousins and I were never virgins, even when we were."⁵¹³ The combination of class, sex, violence, and motherhood could easily feed into popular stereotypes of the barbaric, Gothic South.⁵¹⁴ Yet Allison challenges the double standard of sexuality and its close relationship to issues of class and motherhood. Bone's mother is a loving one who had an illegitimate daughter, married an abusive man, and, in the end, chose a man over her child. Although it is, of course, not a particularly enviable relationship, the

⁵¹² Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994), 15, 153.

⁵¹³ Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, 36.

⁵¹⁴ Allison fictionalized her own experiences for *Bastard*. Her memories are slightly different from the novel: "When I was 5, Mama married the man she lived with until she died. Within the first year of their marriage, Mama miscarried, and while we waited out in the hospital parking lot, my stepfather molested me for the first time, something he continued to do until I was past 13. When I was 8 or so, Mama took us away to a motel after my stepfather beat me so badly it caused a family scandal, but we returned after 2 weeks. Mama told me that she really had no choice: she could not support us alone. When I was 11 I told one of my cousins that my stepfather was molesting me. Mama packed up my sisters and me and took us away for a few days, but again, my stepfather swore he would stop, and again we were back after a few weeks. I stopped talking for a while, and I have only vague memories of the next 2 years" (Allison, *Skin*, 18).

mother-daughter relationship at the center of Allison's novel provides a complex alternative script of maternity to the "new momism" of the 1990s.

Allison was not the only Southern female author to profit from confessions about her traumatic childhood in the 1990s. In 1995, just two months before Susan Smith went to trial, Mary Karr published *The Liar's Club*, a memoir of her Texas childhood.⁵¹⁵ As in *Bastard*, the narrator is a sort of classic Southern tomboy reminiscent of *To Kill a Mockingbird's* Scout. Unlike in Harper Lee's novel, in which the father figure looms large, the key relationships in most Southern women's publications at the end of the century were with other women. In *The Liar's Club*, Karr's mother was pursued by greater demons than the sacrificing mother in *Bastard*; she had a severe drinking problem and apparent mental illness that manifested itself in violent rages and hallucinations. The demons plaguing her stemmed from her maternal experiences: as a young mother, she had her first two children taken from her, and the resulting despair led her to alcohol abuse and severe depression. Decades later, she described the feeling to her grown daughter Mary, comparing her depression to a "hole" inside of her that eventually swallowed her whole.⁵¹⁶

Well into adulthood, Karr's "sharpest memory," retold in painstaking detail, is of the pinnacle of her mother's despair as she stormed into her daughters' bedroom one night, tore up their room without ever actually touching the girls, and then called the family doctor to report, "I just killed them both. Both of them. I've stabbed them both to death."⁵¹⁷ To Karr, however, her violent hallucinations were not indisputable evidence of her deviance as a mother. Rather, they were a

⁵¹⁵ Mary Karr, *The Liars' Club*, (New York, NY: Viking, 1995).

⁵¹⁶ Ibid, 318.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, 157. Indeed, the book opens with the immediate aftermath of her mother's breakdown, in which the sheriff comforts one daughter while the doctor examines the other for injuries inflicted by their delusional mother (Ibid, 3-5).

post-traumatic symptom of losing her two firstborn; in other words, extreme mother love drove her to fantasies of infanticide. Here again was the paradox of entwined maternal love and abuse—a complicated and uncomfortable corrective to popular visions of motherhood in the late twentieth century that, according to bestseller lists, the public consumed with gusto.

Indeed, perhaps the most widely disseminated cultural representation of Southern women in the 1990s was Rebecca Wells' series of bestsellers about the so-called "Ya-Ya Sisterhood," an eclectic collection of seemingly stereotypical Louisiana matriarchs that readers follow through girlhood, marriage, and motherhood. Stereotypes abound; fathers are more or less absent breadwinners, and the sweet "Ya-Ya" who is easily shocked and prefers to think "pretty pink and blue thoughts" is balanced out by the spicy Cajun "Ya-Ya" who prefers nudity and bastardized French. But not all of the women are caricatures. Vivi, the mother of the main character and primary narrator, is a complex study in Southern motherhood. Again, we see the paradox of simultaneous mother-love and abuse, but in *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Wells' novel-cum-movie that spawned "Ya-Ya" groups across the nation, readers get a heavy dose of the travails of motherhood at midcentury as well.

Although at the time it was a "problem that had no name," Vivi displays symptoms of what readers would, just a decade later, readily identify as postpartum depression. In the mid- to late 1950s, Vivi had four children under the age of four, a husband who frequently hid out at his fish camp unreachable by phone, and the overwhelming feeling that she "could not take it any longer." Her desperation led her to abandon her family at one point, drink heavily through most of the decade, and beat all four of her children savagely in a hallucinatory fit that landed her in a private hospital.⁵¹⁸ Many of the descriptions of Vivi in the novel sound much like the media

⁵¹⁸ Rebecca Wells, *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 302.

descriptions of the “two Susans”: Vivi is “full of light” and “full of dark,” or full of both “ferocity” and “beauty” like a “hurricane”—“and you never know where she’ll strike down.”⁵¹⁹ But Vivi is no simple Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde figure. She is both a good and a bad mother; in the end, she is presented as a decent, if troubled, mother.

To be sure, Wells gives her character an out—Vivi is under the influence of prescription drugs when she beats her children “to get the devil out,” which suggests that one could blame the drugs and not depression induced by the pressures of motherhood, for her violent behavior. But the major force that moves the story, the primary question of the novel, concerns the factors that led Vivi to become the paradox of the loving, abusive mother. The dark, psychological forces that led Vivi to the abuse of her children were not that different from those presented in Susan Smith’s defense: a cold mother, an abusive father, an absent husband, and a history of depression. Here, then, was an alternative script of motherhood, couched as Southern but consumed voraciously by a nation of readers (and in 2002, filmgoers) that could bridge the cavernous cultural divide between “good” and “bad” mothers in 1990s America.⁵²⁰

Like the characters of O’Connor and Welty before them, these Southern female characters of the 1990s subtly served as contradictions to imagined cultural divides, particularly the insidious bifurcation of motherhood that characterized the “new momism.” In many ways, Susan Smith was like these fictional creations: because the idea of a white, middle-class, murdering mother was so culturally “incomprehensible,” her case thoroughly contradicted contemporary notions of motherhood, violence, gender, race, and class. As in the case of her fictional sisters, these

⁵¹⁹ Ibid, 81, 338.

⁵²⁰ Callie Khouri, director, *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, All Girl Productions, 2002. The “Ya-Yas” became a minor cultural phenomenon, spawning reading groups and actual “Ya-Ya” groups of women who get together socially and support charitable causes. The groups exist all over the country even now, a decade after the publication of the book (see www.ya-ya.com).

contradictions could have ushered in a reevaluation of conventional categories. However, most public representations of Susan Smith in the days, weeks, and months following her confession were not explorations of these categorical complications. The categories were reconfigured, but not challenged. Race and motherhood faded from public representations as class and gender, specifically in the form of female sexuality, gained salience in public narratives of this crime.

As in the alternative voices of other mothers, heard in letters, editorials, and published articles in the wake of Smith's confession, the more complicated script of Southern woman- and motherhood had no place in popular understandings of the Susan Smith case. Susan Smith was perhaps an unprecedented real-life representative of stereotypical Southern Gothic in female form. The general journalistic "Southern Gothic" was more like the "New South Gothic" of Mississippi novelist Larry Brown, whose most famous female character, Fay, a naïve but tough working-class teenager, sleeps her way through Mississippi, leaving bodies, angry women, and broken hearts in her wake.⁵²¹ Brown's character was certainly more of the "white trash," extremely poor South, a class that Smith never really belonged to except perhaps in her very early childhood. Yet Smith's class status shifted according to the narrator; she could be middle-class or poverty-stricken according to different media accounts.

The notable exception to this Gothic narrative was Rick Bragg's coverage for the *New York Times*. Bragg was the journalist who immediately and unwaveringly saw the Smith case through a Southern lens, a perspective that will come as no surprise to his devoted readers. Although Bragg reported on all of the same lurid details, his accounts did not offer readers the generic, monstrous South of the more sensationalized Gothic coverage. Rather, according to Bragg, the real story behind the Susan Smith drama was that of the deindustrializing South at the end of the

⁵²¹ Larry Brown, *Fay* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2001).

twentieth century. Although he later argued that this case “could have played out in Pennsylvania, and it could have played out in Missouri, or the Midwest, or the Pacific Northwest,” in his published articles, Bragg understood Susan Smith within the context of the small Southern community that raised her.⁵²² For Bragg, Union was not a generic small town. It was a textile town dealing with the daily effects of the slow disappearance of the mills. Susan was not the “belle” with a black heart; she was a woman who wavered precariously between the working and middle classes in a rigidly stratified, economically depressed, small-town society. Bragg’s Southern slant flavored all of his reports, which appeared daily in the nation’s paper of record.

The South that Bragg documented in his reports from Union was not the timeless, stereotypical South of the “Gothic” coverage dominating national news magazines in the winter of 1994-1995. It was not the upscale, conservative South of Newt Gingrich’s Cobb County, nor was it the poverty-stricken rural South struggling to eke a living out of the tired land. It was a South that got little national press, but was well known to academics and its own inhabitants. The South of Bragg’s memory, and the South of his coverage, was the industrialized South that had slowly been declining throughout the twentieth century. The construction of the textile mills had an enormous effect on the agricultural South: they were the “prodigal son of Southern culture,” the “bedrock” of the New South economy, “the opening wedge of industrialization” that drew people from the land and spawned mill-based villages virtually overnight.⁵²³

⁵²² He continued: “It could have played out the same. In the Pacific Northwest, they might have shifted the minority, you know. ‘Southern Gothic’ in that the mill town culture of the South certainly played into this, and Southern that—were we any quicker to believe here that a black man was the killer of the children? I don’t know. Were we any quicker here than we would have been in part of Massachusetts? New York? Iowa? I don’t think so. But it was a Southern story in the way that Southern literature is written, in a gothic, dark, florid, salacious way” (Rick Bragg, interview by author, New Orleans, LA, July 27, 2005).

⁵²³ George Waldrep, *Southern Workers and the Search for Community* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 12; Mimi Conway, *Rise, Gonna Rise: A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers* (Garden City, NY: Anchor

According to their inhabitants and to the academics who have carefully documented their experiences, mill villages had their own culture, society, and politics, all of which were thrown into turmoil by the long, slow deindustrialization that characterized the last decades of the twentieth century.

In some ways, Bragg was right: Union was a representative textile belt community. In fact, Union's official historian argues that the county is "so average as to constitute a virtual 'microcosm of the macrocosm'--embodying in its history the complex currents which make up the great stream of Southern history."⁵²⁴ Although the tiny town preexisted its textile mills by over a century, the mills, which began construction in the early 1890s, brought unprecedented prosperity to Union and changed its demographic and social make-up entirely. The construction of the textile mills marked the end of the agricultural era and inaugurated an "industrial-agricultural era," as well as a pronounced rural-urban split, within a few short years.⁵²⁵ In Union County, the story of industrialization did not involve an influx of Northern capital as it did in many other Southern towns. The Union County mills were the brainchild of Thomas Cary Duncan, Union's "pioneer capitalist," and a team of local businessmen who "wanted to see their town pull itself up by its bootstraps."⁵²⁶

Between 1893 and 1900, five mills were constructed in Union County. The Union Mill, in downtown Union, was the first to go into production, followed closely by the nearby Lockhart mill. In 1896, Union Mill Number Two opened its doors, billing itself as the "largest in the

Press, 1979), 10; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), xvii.

⁵²⁴ Charles, x.

⁵²⁵ Ibid, 311. Prior to the mills, there were a few small industries in Union County that employed "less than a dozen people each."

⁵²⁶ Ibid, 298-299.

South,” and in 1900, mills opened in Buffalo and Monarch, each a few miles outside of Union proper. The Union Mill featured a large tower clock around which the mill workers, who lived in the identical houses dotting the “mill hill” downtown, arranged their lives, while the Lockhart, Buffalo, and Monarch mills spawned their own villages of workers. The rapid industrialization had a snowball effect, resulting in the construction of railroads, especially between mills, and attracting other industries such as knitting mills.⁵²⁷

By 1907, the mills in Union County consumed more than three times the cotton that local farmers could produce, and this productivity and growth reflected the population boom that changed Union irrevocably at the turn of the twentieth century. Union County had the second-highest population growth rate in the state in the 1890s, and almost all of the people streaming into town went to work for the mills. Union’s experience reflected the experiences of much of the burgeoning Southern textile belt, which spanned the Piedmont regions of Virginia, the Carolinas, northern Georgia, and Alabama, with the largest concentration of mills clustered around the upstate South Carolina-North Carolina border.⁵²⁸ And the workers in the Union mills were, in the aggregate, identical to textile laborers across the region. The influx of white farm laborers reversed the racial demographics of the county by 1920, which had had a black majority since the mid-nineteenth century.⁵²⁹ The new citizens of Union County came from the less prosperous rural regions as well as from across the state line; North Carolina’s Haywood County, on the Tennessee border, peopled an entire street of Buffalo Mill’s village.⁵³⁰ Within a decade of

⁵²⁷ Ibid, 298-306.

⁵²⁸ Hall et al provide a detailed map of the spindles per county in 1929 (xxvi).

⁵²⁹ Charles, 306, 390.

⁵³⁰ Inman, interview. Inman’s ancestors came from Haywood County to work in the mills, and he grew up on Haywood Street in Buffalo.

the mills' constructions, over four thousand people lived in the villages surrounding the five mills.⁵³¹ The burgeoning textile industry was not a boon to the entire community, however; African Americans were not employed in the mills until the second half of the century. Union County's historian explains that "experiments with black labor always failed in South Carolina."⁵³² Thus, white privilege characterized the brief textile boom of the early twentieth century. White capitalists profited from the mills, and white laborers from the rural areas of the South toiled in them.⁵³³

Because they came from similar rural backgrounds and they lived and worked in very close proximity, textile mill workers made up something of a Southern subculture, and Union County's workers were no exception. Indeed, scholars "discovered" mill culture at mid-century, sparking an academic debate about mill owner control and worker agency in the intimate context of mill villages.⁵³⁴ Generally speaking, until the groundbreaking *Like a Family* (1987), which was based on over two hundred interviews, mill workers were viewed as something of a "pitiable

⁵³¹ Approximately 92% of workers in the Textile Belt lived in the mill villages at the turn of the twentieth century (Hall et al, 114).

⁵³² Charles, 302. Although some mills hired African Americans, generally speaking, textiles were a "white domain," and the worst work in the mills went to black men (Hall et al, 66). A large part of the community play "Turn the Washpot Down," which was based on oral history and written and performed by locals at the end of the twentieth century, featured the integration of the textile mills (Jules Corriere, "Turn the Washpot Down," Community Performance, Inc., 2002).

⁵³³ See Timothy Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

⁵³⁴ Jacqueline Hall and a team of researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill challenged the prevailing vision of mill communities as completely controlled by owner and management paternalism with an expansive oral history. They found that although the villages were "marked by sharp inequalities in power," there was a high degree of worker agency that culminated in the waves of strikes in the late 1910s and early 1930s (Hall et al, xxiii). In a more recent work, Waldrep argues for a kind of worker agency with constraints: "True autonomy is a historical and social phantom. Very little in daily life is truly autonomous. We relate to friends and loved ones, neighbors and enemies, employers, employees, and government through a nest of contingencies and constraints. Some are self-created and self-enforced, others are willed from outside one's immediate sphere. All aspiration emerges from structures of confinement and constraint but never entirely leaves the enclosure of contingency. Even under the most favorable circumstances, men and women never achieve the pristine state that autonomy presents" (Waldrep, 5-6). Waldrep's argument had wide applications, but it is probably the best resolution to the question of worker agency in the context of the Southern textile economy.

social type,” to quote W.J. Cash.⁵³⁵ Their isolation reportedly bred distinctiveness. One anthropologist argued in the 1950s that the culture of mill workers was even more “encapsulated” than those of African Americans in the Jim Crow South because the latter had more interaction with the regional white elites.⁵³⁶ According to this characterization, mill workers were the “rough element”⁵³⁷—less educated, dirtier, more criminally inclined, promiscuous, and just generally cruder than the townspeople surrounding them—an image that comprised the epithet “linthead,” which referred to the cotton lint that often stuck to workers long after their shifts were over.⁵³⁸ Mill workers, as well, knew they were different. In the words of historian Bryant Simon, “most mill people saw themselves not as farmers who temporarily lost their way, but as millhands, members of the largest occupational group of the southern working class.”⁵³⁹

⁵³⁵ Hall et al, xvi. Cash described mill workers in great detail: “By 1900, the cotton-mill worker was a pretty distinct physical type in the South; a type in some respects inferior to even that of the old poor-white, which in general had been his to begin with. A dead-white skin, a sunken chest, and stooping shoulders were the earmarks of the breed. Chinless faces, microcephalic foreheads, rabbit teeth, goggling dead-fish eyes, rickety limbs, and stunted bodies abounded—over and beyond the limit of their prevalence in the countryside. The women were characteristically stringy-haired and limp of breast at twenty, and shrunken hags at thirty or forty” (Cash, 204).

⁵³⁶ J.K. Morland, *Millways of Kent* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), ix. Journalist Mimi Conway similarly argued, “the mill villages, like the plantations of the Old South, were worlds unto themselves” (Conway, 15).

⁵³⁷ Hall et al, 164.

⁵³⁸ Morland, 99, 69, 80. Morland and his field researchers found that townspeople generally found mill workers to be “improvident, unambitious, poorly educated, unclean, and on a lower moral level” (174). Mill workers were also seen as more conservatively Christian, more evangelical, and more inclined to interpret the Bible literally, a characteristic discussed more in the next chapter (Morland, 131; Hall et al, 175). The strikes of the 1920s featured a new image of the mill worker as violent, resulting in calls for reform to rescue the region from this “troubling social type” (Hall et al, 229).

⁵³⁹ Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.

Scholars of the 1980s formed something of a “minor cottage industry” out of the study of Southern mill workers in an attempt to combat this stereotype.⁵⁴⁰ As in most cultures, “the textile South’s homogeneity holds up only when viewed from the outside.”⁵⁴¹ Yet this image of mill workers held sway in the region throughout much of the twentieth century, and its primary manifestation was through classism. Sociologist J. K. Morland found in his fieldwork that the representative mill town was an “aristocratic” one that “gloried in its past” and relegated mill workers to the lowest rungs of society (although the bottom of the ladder was always reserved for the majority of African Americans in the segregated South).⁵⁴² Morland argued that the construction of mills altered social relations throughout the Textile Belt as mill workers emerged as their own distinct class. The finding that “those involved think of themselves as different” was his primary evidence of the new class stratification.⁵⁴³ Jacquelyn Hall and others argue that mill workers felt an increasing sense of class solidarity based on a shared experience of economic exploitation, especially during the full-scale textile depression of the 1920s.⁵⁴⁴

The academic debate reflected the social realities in Union. As in other Southern towns with a newly industrial economic base, Union “townies” reportedly snubbed the “lintheads” of the emerging “factory class.” The official historian of Union County recalls that his father’s family, who were “artisans and farmers, looked down on his mother's people on the 'mill hill,' the village of Union Mill, even though the mill workers had indoor plumbing and electricity while his

⁵⁴⁰ Hall et al, 366, note 8.

⁵⁴¹ Waldrep, 64. One of the primary arguments of Hall’s *Like a Family* is that mill workers were not homogeneous by virtue of their shared work and lifestyles, because they “carried the cultural baggage of the countryside with them” (Hall et al 32). “The gradual accumulation of shared experiences and group identity” fostered community and even had political consequences in the form of mass strikes in the 1930s (Hall et al, 139-140).

⁵⁴² Morland, 12, 174.

⁵⁴³ Ibid, 174.

⁵⁴⁴ Hall et al, 353.

father's people had to use outdoor wells and kerosene lamps."⁵⁴⁵ Conflicts between mill and town could be very tense. Historian David Carlton recounts one such incident in 1900 in the mill village surrounding Union Cotton. Fears of new medical science led local mill workers to resist smallpox vaccination administered by the town's doctor. Some workers were arrested for refusing the vaccine, and others soon formed a mob who expressed "fear for their lives" as well as protests against the incarceration of resisters. The town eventually gave up, and smallpox raged on. The local doctor lamented, "We hope to stamp it out if the people will allow us to vaccinate them."⁵⁴⁶ In Union as in much of the upstate, the townspeople saw the millhands as dirty, uneducated, and possibly dangerous. Their disdain belied the fact that the local economy relied heavily on textile production within just a few years of the mills' construction. The county's well being rested almost solely on the labor of the "lintheads" throughout most of the twentieth century.

The post-World War I wave of strikes and the general textile depression of the 1920 foretold the economic crash of 1929. In Union County, as in other areas in the South, the many years of "stretch-out" resulted in a period of severe labor unrest in the early 1930s.⁵⁴⁷ Union County textile workers complained of "deplorable living conditions" and the "stretch-out system," and, although there was no real violence in the area, local mills were not immune to the widespread strike wave. "Wildcat" strikes shut down a few of the county mills in 1929, part of a larger movement encompassing upstate South Carolina and Spartanburg, Greenville, and Anderson in

⁵⁴⁵ Charles, 312.

⁵⁴⁶ David Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 156-157.

⁵⁴⁷ In many mills, workers won key labor concessions during World War I, and they fought to keep them in peacetime by means of a wave of strikes in 1919. The 1920s, characterized by increased mechanization, decreased employment, and the influx of Northern capital, were a bad time for textile laborers. The economic depression and poor laboring conditions fostered a new wave of strikes in the period between 1929 and 1934 (Hall et al, 190-212).

particular. In 1934, management had closed all of the mills in the county to avoid the violence experienced across the region during the general textile strike. The “labor problem” reared its ugly head for the last time in the spring of 1935, when an “alleged union sympathizer” shot a supervisor in the card room at Monarch Mill, prompting President Roosevelt to send “federal mediators” in to investigate. The local sheriff, “wishing no outside interference,” arrested the federal officials, and “Union’s labor problem again simmered down, not to flare up thereafter.”⁵⁴⁸

According to Union’s official historian, “the era of paternalism in the mill villages was coming to an end” all over the South by the 1940s, and Union County followed this trend.⁵⁴⁹ Although the local mills continued to flourish in the postwar period, the sales of the “monotonous” mill houses to their occupants heralded the end of the intimate relationship between the factory laborers’ home and work lives.⁵⁵⁰ Although many workers continued to live in the housing surrounding the mills, the age of the close-knit, “isolated” mill village that provided everything from recreation to groceries to medical care was over by midcentury. The “company stores” closed, and the company money, called “boogaloos” in Union, became historical relics.⁵⁵¹ As cars became more affordable to the masses, people no longer had to work

⁵⁴⁸ Charles, 404-407. Half a million workers participated in the 22-day general strike, prompting the imposition of martial law. In the end, sixteen people had been killed and hundreds were wounded (Conway; Hall et al, 345-353). Waldrep argues that it has historically been so difficult to unionize workers in the South because of a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder bred by the general strike: “The disillusionment, frustration, and, ultimately, fear spawned in the wake of the General Strike became so pervasive in the textile South that workers were able to pass on the package, like an inheritable disease, to their children and grandchildren” (Waldrep, 110).

⁵⁴⁹ Charles, 427.

⁵⁵⁰ Charles, 312; Douglas Flammig, *Creating the Modern South: Millhands and Managers in Dalton, Georgia, 1884-1984* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), Chapter 12.

⁵⁵¹ The Union County Museum has “boogaloos” on display, and many people in Union have told me they still have some of the now-worthless coins, handed down from parents and grandparents (Union County Museum, 127 West Main Street, Union, SC). The local production company, spawned by the community play “Turn the Washpot

at the mill closest to their homes—“people who lived in Buffalo could work in Monarch and vice versa.”⁵⁵²

Although the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the closing of textile mills across the region, the influx of new capital and the general growth of Union County also provided mill workers with more occupational options, a trend reflected across the South as capitalists began to recognize the region’s attractiveness in terms of cheap labor, land, and climate.⁵⁵³ In the mid-1950s, Cone Mills built a textile printing and finishing plant on the Broad River in Union County near Carlisle, and in 1959, Conso Fastener—later the employer of Susan Smith—built a sixty-thousand square foot plant on the Union bypass between Union and Buffalo.⁵⁵⁴ In the 1960s, Milliken built a plant a few miles outside of Union on Highway 49, the pine-tree lined highway on which Susan Smith was allegedly carjacked, and Ace Sweater constructed a knitting mill just outside of town.⁵⁵⁵ Mill communities in the county had dispersed somewhat, but a separate culture of “millhands” still thrived. While other areas of the former Textile Belt had wisely diversified by the 1970s, Union County’s economy was still 94% “textile-related.”⁵⁵⁶

Down” in 2001, calls itself “Boogaloo Productions” in honor of the local dependence on the mills (See www.boogaloobroadcasting.com).

⁵⁵² Charles, 427.

⁵⁵³ Flamming documents the widespread mill closings and the resulting “collapse of community” among mill workers (Flamming, Chapter 14, “Shutdown in the Sunbelt,” 307-322). Bartley documents the increasing rural-urban split in the South and the “disruption of rural folk cultures” as more and more people abandoned the land (Numan Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), Chapter 4, especially 123. Kevin Phillips famously deemed the rediscovered South the “Sunbelt” in 1969, and the economic reversal seemed to feature both “southern progress” and “northern decline” (Cobb, 217).

⁵⁵⁴ Charles, 427.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 433.

⁵⁵⁶ The neighboring counties of Chester and York had dropped to 82% and 72% textile-dependent, respectively, by 1970 (*Ibid*, 434).

This dependence on one industry was to have dire consequences for the county, and the resulting textile depression and late-century international migration of textile-related production hit Union hard. Despite the “almost continuous industrial development” of the two decades following World War II, the older local mills employed less and less people as companies relocated their productions overseas. According to historian Allan Charles, although the county welcomed new industries in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly pulpwood, Union was “having to run to stand still, as the ground was being cut from beneath its feet” with the long, slow deaths of the old mills.⁵⁵⁷ The recession of the 1970s combined with the depression in American textiles to hurt Union worse than the rest of the nation and even the rest of the state.⁵⁵⁸ Like other small towns across the region, Union’s commerce recentered itself around the first “big-box” store on the by-pass, hurting downtown retailers even as the unemployment rate for factory workers soared. Although Union had enjoyed the convenience of a bypass around downtown since the mid-1950s, it was not “until the advent of the Wal-Mart complex over thirty years later” that businesses began their mass migration from downtown and from the other ends of the bypass.⁵⁵⁹

The “Wal-Martization” of small-town America had come to Union in the 1980s and was still proceeding unabated by the fall of 1994. The relocation of the majority of Union’s commercial activity from downtown added to the small town’s “sleepy” feel, and by the mid-1990s, the empty spaces and boarded up windows downtown had the same aura of decay as Faulkner’s fictional mansions. The international corporations and huge interstates that graced other upstate counties generally bypassed Union altogether. Several mills closed within a decade of each

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid, 435.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, 436. Torance Inman of the Union Chamber of Commerce downplayed the extent of the economic depression caused by the closings of the mills, arguing that it was part of the “national recession” and that the 1990s were actually much harder on the county’s economy (Inman, interview).

⁵⁵⁹ Charles, 452e.

other, resulting in a loss of over two thousand jobs.⁵⁶⁰ By century's end, only around two thousand residents, less than seven percent of the county population, worked in the mills.⁵⁶¹ In a county in which over fifty percent of the population was employable, these closings meant an unemployment rate in the double digits. According to Torance Inman of the Union Chamber of Commerce, "for years, people thought a cloud was hanging over Union, but it's no different from any other manufacturing community. If you put all your marbles in one sock, and that sock gets a hole in it, you're going to suffer."⁵⁶²

In the mid-90s, there were over twenty empty storefronts on Main Street in Union, and the population declined noticeably. The "Wal-Martization" that has occurred in Union was, as in so many other small towns, inevitable and probably irreversible. The four-lane bypass that was built around town in the 1950s—named after Thomas J. Duncan, Union's pioneer industrialist who was largely responsible for building the mills—was, according to many downtown merchants, "a huge error," because "it diverted people around downtown."⁵⁶³ It took business away from the town center and relocated it to the various strip malls ringing Union. The most prosperous strip mall has consistently been the one anchored by Wal-Mart, which built its first store in Union in the early 1980s. When Wal-Mart built a large new complex in 1989 to replace the old one on the other side of town, many businesses, including the Winn Dixie grocery store where David and Susan Smith worked, followed, resulting in the birth of a new commercial

⁵⁶⁰ The job loss was as follows: Buffalo Mills (500 people), Union Mills (425), and Conso (numbers unavailable). The total number of jobs lost in a decade was 2068 (Inman, interview).

⁵⁶¹ http://www.city-data.com/business2/econ-Union_County-SC.html.

⁵⁶² Inman, interview.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

area—“the likes of which Union has never known”—and the slow death of the old one (which had previously been the new one when businesses originally relocated from downtown).⁵⁶⁴

Despite the migration of and depression within the industry, Union’s continued dependence on textiles meant that the class stratification between mill and town lingered far longer than any real, separate mill culture or community. Numan Bartley argues in *The New South* that the “disruption of mill communities was a gradual process,” and in Union County, the process was decades long, lasting till the end of the twentieth century. Unionites express a sense of community based on shared labor experiences even now. In interviews, they often refer to other locals as a “Conso woman” or a “Monarch man.”⁵⁶⁵ The continued dependence on textiles also meant that Union County suffered far worse than other communities in the years of combined nationwide recession and the outsourcing of American textiles, for there was nothing to fall back on economically. The general recession experienced by the entire nation in the 1970s hurt Union especially, but the “crunch really hit” in the 1990s, when most of the county’s mills either closed or cut back, unemployment soared, and over twenty-four storefronts stood empty on Union’s Main Street.⁵⁶⁶

Susan Smith came of age in this world of severe local depression and the lingering social relations of mill and town. Andrea Peyser, the *New York Post* columnist turned author, described the economic depression of the 1970s as a stereotypically Southern Gothic context for Smith’s life and crimes. In Peyser’s *Mother Love, Deadly Love*, the dying textile mills represent the prosperous past and a dismal future. Like the Old Frenchman Place in Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*,

⁵⁶⁴ Charles, 452e.

⁵⁶⁵ Inman, interview; Roberts, interview.

⁵⁶⁶ Inman, interview.

crumbling mansions indicated the evil within. The “grand estates of the mill owners,” which Peyser likens to former plantations that “thrived on slave labor,” were slowly disintegrating amidst a sea of “vacant and forlorn” mill houses. The mansions that were “going to seed” mirrored the experiences of the mill workers who had been “thrown into the wilderness” by recent plant closures.⁵⁶⁷ Here was the Gothic South at its eerie best, the sagging proof of Union’s former prosperity devolving inexorably toward ruin.

Although Susan Smith’s class status shifted depending upon the tone of the report, young Susan did experience a taste of life at each level of the social hierarchy in Union. Her mother, Linda Russell, left home at the age of sixteen to have a baby with her boyfriend, Harry Vaughan. They married young and Linda bore him two sons in quick succession. Just before her second son, Scotty, was born, the Vaughans moved out of Harry’s parents house and into an apartment in Union’s small row of public housing downtown. For the broke, teenaged couple, the apartment represented progress. “I was proud of that apartment,” Linda later wrote. “We had two cribs, an old bedroom set, a hand-me-down sofa, a kitchen table, and TV.” Her parents helped them buy a washer and dryer. Both Harry and Linda worked; she went to a local textile mill every day, while Harry bounced around jobs, including night watchman, millhand, and the fire department. His drinking was a source of conflict, as was his jealousy, and Linda left with the children several times in the 1960s.

In 1971, during a period of reconciliation in which the family lived in a cramped apartment in public housing, Linda gave birth to Susan. During this time, Harry’s alcohol consumption reached addict levels, and his resulting depression made him extremely dependent on Linda. They fought constantly. Psychologists who were studying the family in order to understand the

⁵⁶⁷ Peyser, 16-17.

developmental disability of Michael, the oldest son, deemed Linda and Harry's relationship the equivalent of "psychological warfare."

When Susan was almost four years old, Linda left her father. Harry terrorized her, coming in and out of her house at will, following her to and from work, and calling her to threaten suicide. After one such incident, Harry killed himself. Young Susan was devastated. Less than a year later, Linda began dating Beverly Russell, the owner of a local appliance store and nephew of a former governor. An avid churchgoer and staunch "family values" Republican, Russell could not have been more different from the hard-drinking, often unemployed Harry. After their marriage, Linda and her children moved into Russell's house in Mount Vernon Estates, a neighborhood David Smith called an "uppity subdivision" on the edge of Union.⁵⁶⁸ Linda worked for Bev at his appliance store and supported the family while he pursued his political interests.

Young Susan's life changed dramatically when her mother "married up," as the papers put it in the coverage of her case decades later. During high school, she made plans to continue her education; she and her brother Scotty were the first of their family to have the luxury of considering college. Susan worked part-time at the local grocery store in her teens, but she always saw that as a temporary, after-school job. Her family was solidly middle-class, and she set her sights on higher education. She went to the Union branch of the University of South Carolina for one year, but she quit school to work full-time so she could buy a car. She worked the third shift at a textile mill and part-time at the Winn Dixie, where she met and began to date David Smith. With her earnings she bought the burgundy Mazda. Her parents did not approve of David Smith. He explained that he was not "exactly Linda's dream for her daughter. She

⁵⁶⁸ Smith, 19.

wanted somebody else for Susan, not me, but somebody with a college education, making \$40,000 or \$60,000 a year."⁵⁶⁹

Susan's plans to return to USC-Union dissolved in the winter of 1991 when she discovered she was pregnant. She and David married, and their relationship was tumultuous from the start. They lived with his grandmother until Beverly Russell loaned them money to buy the small brick house on Toney Road, a modest neighborhood of tract housing just outside Union. Most of their neighbors worked in the local mills at Conso, just a few miles down the highway, or in Buffalo, a mill town that bordered Union. David Smith later wrote that the small house was never really "home" for Susan, who spent a lot of time at her stepfather's ranch house across town. In retrospect, as he tried to make sense of the murders, David Smith saw class as one of the biggest conflicts in their marriage. "No matter how much work and love I put into our home, it would still be a tin-roofed country shack," he wrote. "Susan thought she saw the life she'd lead there: she would be out in the yard barefoot, a kid on her hip, picking collards for dinner. *Uh-uh*, Susan thought. *Not me.*"⁵⁷⁰

After the birth of their second child, Susan, too, went to work at the Conso plant, first as a millhand, then as a secretary. There, she met Tom Findlay, the "gentleman" who lived in his father's sprawling mansion south of town.⁵⁷¹ To get to the Findlay estate from Toney Road, Susan Smith had to drive through the poor neighborhoods that dotted the highway outside of Union, past the Conso plant that was the source of Findlay's wealth, through a few miles of thick

⁵⁶⁹ Smith, 51.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid, 71.

⁵⁷¹ All of the background on Linda Russell and Susan's childhood is from Russell, 22-37, 73-96.

woods, and into the massive stone and iron gates that separated the “castle” from the rest of Union.

These, then, were Susan’s various experiences of class by the fall of 1994 when she violently traded her children for wealth (according to the “boyfriend motive”). Perhaps the only journalist who really captured what class was like in the dying mill town of Union was Rick Bragg, the Alabama boy who gave the nation a taste of the South in his coverage for the *New York Times*. When Rick Bragg used this context, his point was not to draw readers into a stereotypical South, but to describe for them the realities of class and region in twentieth-century America. In fact, it was the economic reality of his own childhood, as he made clear in *All Over But the Shoutin’*, his bestselling memoir published to rave reviews two years after the Susan Smith trial.⁵⁷² Bragg’s South was gritty and poverty-stricken, but family and community tempered the harshness of the region: “Yet the grimness of it faded for a while, at dinner on the ground at the Protestant churches, where people sat on the springtime grass and ate potato salad and sipped sweet tea from an aluminum tub with a huge block of ice floating in it,” or at “family reunions where the men barbecued twenty-four hours straight and the women took turns holding babies and balancing plates on their knees, trying to keep the grease from soaking through on the one good dress they had.”⁵⁷³

Bragg’s South was not one simply of idyllic small-towns, hard religion, and family reunions. For him, it was also a region characterized by decay. Bragg’s South was disappearing, leaving only strip malls, barren fields, and abandoned mills.

When I was a teenager, I watched it shudder and gasp and finally begin to die,
the pines clear-cut into huge patches of muddy wasteland and the character of the

⁵⁷² Rick Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin’* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

⁵⁷³ Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, 5.

little towns murdered by generic subdivisions and generic fast-food restaurants. The South I was born in was eulogized by pay-as-you-pray TV preachers, enclosed in a coffin of light blue aluminum siding and laid to rest in a polyester suit, from Wal-Mart.⁵⁷⁴

The South of his childhood disappeared as quickly as the field labor that was snatched from workers' hands by mechanical pickers.⁵⁷⁵ Bragg watched "Southernness become a fashion," as camouflage became appropriate attire and "Hank Williams and his elegant western suits gave way to pretty boys in ridiculous Rodeo Drive leather chaps."⁵⁷⁶ In his writing, Bragg expressed real concern about the disappearance of an authentic Southern accent, and this accent was the defining characteristic of his reporting on the Susan Smith case.⁵⁷⁷

The stories that Rick Bragg told about the South—in his memoirs, in his Susan Smith coverage, and in many features during his tenure at the Atlanta bureau of *The New York Times*—consistently revolve around class. Although he later expressed dismay at the ways that "people tried to make sense of" Smith's crimes, Bragg offered his own distinctly Southern version of the case.⁵⁷⁸ Through his accounts, readers became acquainted with the "boyfriend motive," but it was not the sensational, sexualized version of it seen in other national coverage. The issues of motherhood, womanhood, sexuality, and violence that characterized the "boyfriend motive" were, for Bragg, best understood through the lens of class. By virtue of experience, Bragg was something of an expert what it meant to be wealthy, middle-class, or "poor white trash" in the

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, 74.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁷⁷ In *Ava's Man*, the sequel to *All Over But the Shoutin'*, Bragg complained of a South "that has become so homogenized, so bland, that middle school children in Atlanta make fun of people who sound Southern" (Bragg, *Ava's Man* [New York: Knopf, 2001], 18).

⁵⁷⁸ Bragg began his interview with me by shaking his head and saying, "You know, it's one of those awful, ugly, sad things. It shouldn't make any sense at all; I mean, it shouldn't make sense at all. And the fact that people try to make sense of it..." (Bragg, interview).

modern South. He compared himself to Susan, stating bluntly that she “didn’t grow up poor like I grew up poor.” He explained that if a woman “dripping in diamonds” sat down next to him at a restaurant, he might not covet the actual jewels, but he “would know class resentment.”⁵⁷⁹ Hard labor and poverty, not moonlight and magnolias, characterized his South: “My parents grew up in the 1940s and 1950s in the poor, upland South, a million miles from the Mississippi Delta and the Black Belt and the jasmine-scented verandas of what most people came to know as the Old South.”⁵⁸⁰

Bragg knew well the kind of class desires he saw in Susan Smith. He hated covering Smith’s story, because of “its hopelessness,” but also because a part of him “understood her, the desire to be something else.”⁵⁸¹ He had experienced this desire early in his childhood, at a charity Christmas party thrown for the poor children in his town by a local fraternity.

They were Southerners like me, but completely different. I remember thinking that it would be very, very nice to be their kind instead. And I remember thinking that no, that will never happen. We were part of it, part of that night, because we were poor and because we were children...But you simply outgrow your invitation to that better world, as your childhood races away from you. You reach the age, ultimately, when that barrier slams down hard again between you and them, and the rest of the nice, solid, decent middle class. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad, if it was a wall of iron instead of glass.⁵⁸²

Bragg was aware of the meaning of class differences before he even knew what to call it. His “first taste of the gentry, the old-money white Southerners who ran things” was his first-grade teacher, an “aristocrat” who, true to form, “treated the rest of the South like beggars with muddy

⁵⁷⁹ Bragg, interview.

⁵⁸⁰ Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, 4.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid*, 287.

⁵⁸² *Ibid*, 98.

feet who were about to track up their white shag carpeting.”⁵⁸³ Moments like this littered his experiences. His teenaged girlfriend broke it off because, like Susan Smith and Tom Findlay (according to Findlay’s break-up letter), they were “too different.” He wrote: “It would never work, she said... She made it sound like she was the lady of the manor lamenting her romance with the garbage man.”⁵⁸⁴

The “boyfriend motive” was, to Bragg, a story that could only be set in the South, and the tiny mill town of Union was the perfect stage. Bragg’s great-grandparents came of age in the “tightly packed mill villages where the sturdy little houses, all exactly the same but all with a real front porch, seemed so much better than anything they had ever lived in before.”⁵⁸⁵ Much like the mills in the textile belt, the fields “were the center of my family’s life, even though they never owned” them.⁵⁸⁶ Bragg called the Smith case “American gothic” in his autobiography, but his stories were based on his own vision of the region, showing the “small-town, mill town South in its worst possible light.”⁵⁸⁷ Bragg’s coverage of the Smith case fits him within the tradition of Southern Gothic literature, but the combination of class and gender in his presentation of the “boyfriend motive” indicates an alternative reading to the more traditional, bifurcated Gothic rendering.

Bragg wrote his family’s history because it was not one that he could “go look up in a book,” because “poor people in the South do not make many historical registers unless we knock some

⁵⁸³ Ibid, 55.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid, 106.

⁵⁸⁵ Bragg, *Ava’s Man*, 50.

⁵⁸⁶ Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, 33.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid, 283.

rich man off his horse.”⁵⁸⁸ By trying to pass through the “wall of glass” that separated classes in the South, Susan Smith defied the odds, making the historical registers as well as the nightly news. Although issues of motherhood and race guaranteed her initial national coverage, the key to the story, in Bragg’s estimation, was the class desire that motivated Smith’s crimes. Because he “knew the dialects” and “had the cotton mills in [his] blood,” Bragg’s coverage for *The New York Times* was consumed by millions who relied on him to translate the South for the nation.⁵⁸⁹

The Southern story Bragg told initially was not about motherhood, race, sex, or feminine evil; rather, it revolved around Union’s specific economic history and social relations. Union was representative of the region and of Bragg’s own vision of the South. He painted for readers nationwide the picture of an idyllic Southern community, but it was not a town untouched by time. The death throes of the textile economy and the resulting economic depression played a key role in his depictions. It was a classic community in terms of regional characteristics such as family and religion, but it was also part of the disappearing South.

In Bragg’s articles, violence and poverty accompanied this decay. In fact, he reported, prior to Smith’s infamous carjacking lie, “the biggest headlines in this verdant corner of the South came from layoffs at the textile mills.”⁵⁹⁰ The Smith murders bridged the classes as well as the races in Union; locals combed the woods together, searching for the boys, and they grieved together as well: “Men who do not even own a tie sat in pews with judges, and doctors and mill

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, xvi.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid, 283. Although no one that I have talked to in Union remembers specifically speaking to Bragg—so many of them spoke to numerous members of the media that they have lost track—he did, in many ways, speak their language. While other nationally syndicated journalists might complain of the lack of accommodations in Union, Bragg felt at home there: “I’d always rather be in a small town to cover a story. And I didn’t chafe over being in a small town the way that some reporters did. You don’t need 15 places to eat; you just need two good ones, where you can change up. I liked the cheeseburger at Gene’s Fine Foods, and the Kentucky Fried Chicken was fine with me, you know” (Bragg, interview).

⁵⁹⁰ Bragg, “In a Trial as Theater, Sideshow Tires Town,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1995.

workers stared with wet eyes at a single tiny coffin shared by two little boys.”⁵⁹¹ Like his colleagues, Bragg searched for motive in his writing, arguing “there has been unhappiness” in Smith’s life, and that unhappiness was based on almost solely on economic dynamics. Her mother, he told readers two days after her confession, was raised in the neighboring “mill village” of Buffalo, and married Susan’s father, a “blue-collar worker.” Susan and her mother were “rescued from poverty” by her stepfather, Beverly Russell, who owned a local business. Smith’s high school career was reportedly low-key; she was “well-behaved” and in the National Honor Society. She did not go to college, which, Bragg argued, was “not unusual in small Southern towns where the prospect of leaving home, even for a little while, is distasteful if not frightening.” She chose instead to work and later attend a few classes at USC-Union. Bragg reported that Smith married her “high-school sweetheart,” David Smith, and that she “worked her way up” to an office job at a local mill. Bragg depicted an ideal young Southern couple that went out for Friday-night burgers at the local greasy spoon and attended a local Methodist church on Sunday mornings.⁵⁹²

“She was clean,” a local restaurateur told Bragg. “Almost everybody’s got a little dirt on them, but she was clean.”⁵⁹³ The picture of the perfect couple was, of course, deceptive; in the same report, Bragg informed readers that the marriage lasted under three years. Although other reporters used the “boyfriend motive” to position Smith as the ultimate in feminine evil, for Bragg, the key to understanding Susan’s life—her childhood, her marriage, her affair, and her crime—was class. He dismissed the idea that Smith was depressed over her failing marriage,

⁵⁹¹ Bragg, “Prayers and Tears for 2 South Carolina Boys,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1995.

⁵⁹² Bragg, “Life of a Mother.”

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

lobbying instead for financial motivations: the frustration resulting from the “rigors of raising a family on \$16,000 a year” and the prospects of a wealthy boyfriend who did not want children. Bragg also rejected the idea that “the mother had gone mad,” arguing that the “most credible” evidence turned up by investigators was “romance, or at least the desire for one.”⁵⁹⁴ Tom Findlay represented to Susan “the crown prince of a town of 10,000 people, most of them just one paycheck ahead of poverty.” David Smith worked at the Winn Dixie, and Susan worked as a \$6.10-an-hour secretary at the Findlay family’s mill.⁵⁹⁵ “How compelling, to be invited to the Big House,” Bragg wrote in his memoir.⁵⁹⁶ According to his accounts, Susan’s own history had taught her what was to be gained from such a relationship. Her well-off stepfather had saved her mother from a life of drudgery in Union’s public housing following her mill worker father’s suicide in the late 1970s.⁵⁹⁷ And Conso, it seemed, could serve the same purpose in her community; it was a model of health amongst the smattering of dying mills around the county.⁵⁹⁸ Like the company his father owned, Tom Findlay represented prosperity, an escape from the economic depression gripping the county, and a chance to be someone else entirely.

For Bragg, this story was not about gender, although it came to play a role in his coverage of the trial several months later. In his memoir, Rick Bragg argued that he knew what it was like to be Susan, and to taste, but not attain, the trappings of wealth. “Someone should have told her how hard it is to fight your way from one side of the tracks to the other,” he wrote later of his

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Sennott, “Bid to Climb Social Ladder Seen in Smith’s Fall to Despair.”

⁵⁹⁶ Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, 284.

⁵⁹⁷ Russell, 23.

⁵⁹⁸ Although Conso Fasteners had been located on the town’s by-pass since 1959, J. Cary Findlay bought and revamped the plant in 1987, making it “one of the county’s greatest success stories” of the 1980s (Charles, 452b).

experiences with the case. “Someone should have told her that just because they invite you into a dark room, that doesn’t mean they’ll take you to the dance.”⁵⁹⁹ In his accounts, the point of the “boyfriend motive” was not Smith’s deviant sexuality or even motherhood. Rather, her behaviors were based upon a material hunger well known to anyone who grew up poor in the South.

In his coverage, Bragg expanded the narrow focus of the “boyfriend motive” as it appeared in other media outlets. In other accounts, the few lines in Tom Findlay’s break-up letter that mentioned Smith’s children served as damning evidence of her motive to murder. Bragg, on the other hand, focused on the lengthier paragraphs that addressed the couple’s different backgrounds. His regional version of the “boyfriend motive” relied upon relations of both class and gender. According to Bragg, Tom Findlay, the “mill owner’s son” who invited Susan to the “Big House” for “hot tub parties,” broke up with Smith for two reasons: “in part because of her children, and in part because their worlds were just too different.”⁶⁰⁰ In his letter of October 17, 1994, one week before Smith reported that her children had been kidnapped in the course of a carjacking, Tom Findlay explained:

Even though you think we have much in common, we are vastly different. We have been raised in two totally different environments, and therefore, think totally different. That’s not to say that I was raised better than you or vice versa, it just means that we come from two different backgrounds.⁶⁰¹

Findlay wrote that he was not ready for the responsibility of children—the famous line that inaugurated the “boyfriend motive”—but he hastened to add that their “differences go beyond

⁵⁹⁹ Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, 283.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 282, 283.

⁶⁰¹ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2683.

the children issue—we are just two totally different people.” Indeed, Smith’s children were concrete evidence of their class differences.

Susan, because you got pregnant and married at such an early age, you missed out on much of your youth. I mean, one minute you were a kid, and the next minute you were having kids. Because I come from a place where everyone had the desire and the money to go to college, having the responsibility of children at such a young age is beyond my comprehension.⁶⁰²

The socioeconomic gulf between Susan’s world and Tom’s—in Bragg’s words, “he was a child of privilege, she a child of a mill worker who committed suicide when his wife left him”—was the key to understanding the supposedly incomprehensible crime by explaining motive and placing the drama within a regional context in one fell swoop.⁶⁰³

Over the course of the winter and spring of 1995, the narrative of Susan Smith in the national media changed, as did Rick Bragg’s version of her story. As winter turned to spring and both sides prepared for the summer trial, more and more details about Susan Smith’s past leaked into the press. Speculation abounded that Smith’s defense team would offer an insanity defense based on her history of depression. Bragg reportedly let Unionites dictate the tone of his coverage. He wrote that Smith’s “elaborate hoax,” in which she “punctuat[ed] her lies with tears,” made for a public that was very skeptical of an insanity plea in the weeks after her confession. When he asked locals what they thought of Smith’s assertion in her written confession that she had planned to kill herself as well as her children, “in the restaurants and parking lots of Union, people laugh outright at that assertion, calling it just one more lie, and an absurd one.”⁶⁰⁴ In other words, to many people, the nine-day lie was evidence that Smith knew

⁶⁰² *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2685.

⁶⁰³ Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin’*, 284.

⁶⁰⁴ Bragg, “Insanity Plea Expected in Boys’ Drownings,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1994.

that her actions were wrong at the time of the crime, which was all it took to meet the legal definition of sanity.

Over the next few months, however, the image of Susan the murderous gold-digger transformed into a more troubling picture of family dysfunction, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Bragg fit these details into his own Southern version of Smith's life. According to his early accounts, even Smith's alleged depression had both sexual and financial roots. Her suicide attempt in high school, he reported the week after her arrest, was precipitated by a break-up with a boyfriend, perhaps foreshadowing the more recent violence following the dissolution of her affair with Findlay: "People close to the 23-year-old Mrs. Smith said she had been depressed by financial trouble, the break-up of her marriage, and her failed relationship with the son of a wealthy mill owner, who said he was not ready for romance with a woman with two children." It was thus greed, not desperation, which motivated her actions. Bragg acknowledged evidence of clinical depression, mentioning past suicide attempts and Smith's sense that "her world was falling apart" in her written confession. But he rejected this psychological motive to murder, quoting "friends" who said "she was not too depressed to go to an aerobics class the night before she is said to have drowned her children." Susan Smith, in Bragg's coverage of the winter of 1994, was the class-climbing, mill town daughter who would do anything to get her hands on the riches of the mill owner.⁶⁰⁵

Lest the subtle changes in the tone of the mainstream media cause readers pity the poverty-stricken young mother, Bragg hastened to assure them that Smith's work at the mill coupled with her child-support from David was, "in a mill town in the Deep South," solidly "middle-class."⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

Moreover, in Bragg's experiences and later depictions of the South, class was closely related to gender, particularly motherhood. Class, according to his mythology of motherhood, should not temper maternal behavior. In his memoirs, Bragg idolizes his mother as a down-home nurturer who sacrificed so that her children might succeed where she had not. His mother was not "some steel magnolia thrust into poverty by a sorry man." She had always been poor, and since her own mother "would just forget to eat supper if there wasn't enough to go around," she did the same for Rick and his brother.⁶⁰⁷

During his first week in Union, after several days of an intensive investigation that produced absolutely no clues, Bragg's "momma" surprised him with a phone call.

She had long since caught on to the kind of stories I was drawn to, or ordered to, and asked me if I had been 'to that bad thing in South Carolina.' She asked me if I believed the momma had killed those babies, and I asked her why she asked me that. But before she could answer, I suddenly knew.

"Momma," I said, "if it was us, when we were little, and a man had shoved a gun in your face and told you to get out of the car without us, what would you have done?"

"I would be dead," she said. "He would have had to have shot me."⁶⁰⁸

Bragg's mother is almost saintlike in his account; according to his vision of regional motherhood, poor Southern women like his mother cherished their children as the only precious things they had ever had.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁷ Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin'*, 25.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 281.

⁶⁰⁹ Rick Bragg, *Ava's Man*. Bragg wrote many pages about the sacrifices of his "momma," a woman who "went eighteen years without a new dress so that her sons could have school clothes, who picked cotton in other people's fields and ironed other people's clothes and cleaned the mess in other people's houses, so that her children didn't have to live on welfare alone, so that one of them could climb up her backbone and escape the poverty and hopelessness that ringed them, free and clean" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*, xii). His mother told a reporter who had come to interview her after the publication of *All Over But the Shoutin'*: "I didn't even have a doll. But he was mine. He belonged to me," (*Ava's Man*, 15). She also told the reporter that in her old age, she just tottered around the house "trying not to fall off the pedestal" on which Bragg had placed her (*Ibid*, 14).

Bragg's version of Susan Smith as representative of the depressed South culminated in his coverage of the July 1995 trial. He spent his longest stretch in Union during that summer, one of the hottest he remembers, and he sweated it out in the courtroom every day of the trial.⁶¹⁰ The media circus that had descended upon the small town during the investigation and stayed to cover the local reactions to Smith's confession returned, en masse and then some, to Union for Smith's July trial. By this time, observers across the country knew many more sensational details. Whispers about Beverly Russell's sexual misconduct with his own stepdaughter, the one he had reportedly "rescued from poverty," were now daily headlines, and the media suspected that the ever-lengthening list of psychological traumas in Smith's past had amounted to an insanity defense.

These traumas—depression, suicidal tendencies, molestation, and divorce—had slowly, over the course of the winter and spring of 1995, begun to challenge the evil, sexual image of Smith central to the widely-promulgated "boyfriend motive." Bragg described the opposing sides for readers, falling back on his theme of the "two Susans." Her defense team, he wrote on the eve of jury selection, would offer the court a "victim of destructive relationships and influences since she was born, swept helplessly through life like a cork down a quick-moving creek." The prosecution, on the other hand, saw Smith as a "scheming monster" who "lied to her hometown and the entire world for nine days" and killed her sons "in hopes of reclaiming a lover."⁶¹¹

Although his previous coverage indicated that Bragg was more inclined to believe the "boyfriend motive," the articles he produced upon his return to Union to cover the trial had a more muted tone. That summer, after almost nine months of reporting on the case, the emerging

⁶¹⁰ Bragg, interview.

⁶¹¹ Bragg, "Mother Who Killed: Loss, Betrayal, and a Search for a Fairy Tale," *New York Times*, July 9, 1995.

details of Smith's past combined with Bragg's time among locals to produce a different kind of narrative. The trial was Bragg's longest stint in the small town, and he divided his nights between a local motel and an office the paper rented above a "machine shop" downtown and his days between the packed courtroom and the shopping centers and parking lots of Union, where he gathered local sentiments. Bragg stayed in town for a few weeks, "battling the ants" and the record heat of July in upstate South Carolina.⁶¹² He never wavered from presenting the story as a specifically Southern tale, but as he spent more time with locals and heard their testimony, Bragg began to devote more space in his accounts to the defense's version of Smith. Indeed, in the course of one month, spanning jury selection to the days after the final sentencing, Bragg exhibited a distinct change in his coverage. In the end, he acknowledged the more sympathetic, local version of events, even if he never seemed completely sold on the defense's model of psychological victimization. His experience living in Union began to dictate a subtle change in his coverage.

Although his first headline of the trial—"Mother Who Killed: Loss, Betrayal, and the Search for a Fairy Tale"—only further fleshed out his Southern version of the "boyfriend motive," Bragg was well aware of the dilemma posed by the "two Susans."⁶¹³ He often referred to Smith's "dual persona" and her "split personality."⁶¹⁴ In his first article on the actual trial, written just before jury selection had begun, Bragg acknowledged her depression, but its roots, according to his narrative, were based on class. The alleged "sadness" in her past stemmed from her sexual relationships and the recent dissolution of her marriage. But it was her relationship

⁶¹² Bragg, interview.

⁶¹³ Bragg, "Mother Who Killed."

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

with Tom Findlay and his “7000-square-foot” mansion that represented the “fairy tale life” to Susan, “who earned just over minimum wage.” Smith’s depression was evidence of a “dark side,” not psychological victimization or sexual exploitation. Sources who had reportedly “known her for years” told Bragg that Susan Smith was “manipulative and deceitful and capable of ending her capable of ending her children’s lives to improve her own.” These sources described affairs with various co-workers at the Winn Dixie where she worked before the textile mill. Bragg described Smith’s stepfather’s molestation in detail, but he hastened to add that Susan later “said she was a willing participant” and that Bev Russell’s friends said “that he was lured into the relationship.”⁶¹⁵

In Bragg’s narrative, her stepfather, Beverly Russell, served the role that Smith allegedly hoped that Tom Findlay would someday: Russell gave her money, bought her “fashionable clothes,” and let her move into their “comfortable subdivision” when “she refused to live in” the house David had fixed up for them.⁶¹⁶ Their marriage was “shaky,” which was, according to Bragg’s sources, Susan’s fault, because she “seemed unhappy being the wife of a grocery store worker.” According to David’s stepmother, “Nothing was good enough” for Susan. Although Susan was the one who originally filed for divorce on the grounds of David’s infidelity, and even David admits in his book that he was the first to pursue an extramarital affair, in Bragg’s lengthy article, Susan’s promiscuity caused the end of her marriage. Her behavior also brought an end to her affair with Tom Findlay, who was “not ready to be a father” and disapproved of Smith

⁶¹⁵ Ibid. Bragg offered readers a bullet-point list of Smith’s deviance. The first two items on the list detailed her sexual history: “She had an affair with a co-worker of her husband, Mr. Smith, _____ a manager at a Union grocery. She had had an affair with the same man before she was married, when she was trying to make another lover, a 40-year-old man, jealous. When Mr. Findlay broke up with her just days before she killed her children, she told him she had slept with his father, J. Cary Findlay. Later, she said she had made that up.” The final item on the list was her carjacking lie (Ibid).

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

kissing another man at a party “when they were nude in his hot tub.” Smith’s sexual deviance and class desires thus led her to John D. Long Lake, which “is not on the way to anywhere.” According to Bragg, it is “where people go with a purpose”—his dramatic way of indicating premeditation.⁶¹⁷ “Class will make you do things,” Bragg later said of the case. “Love, jealousy, poverty, desperation...I think there was a desperation in her born of a lot of sadnesses that were brought upon her.” He continued: “She wanted to be something else, have something better, and I think that is why she killed her babies.” Bragg also rejected racial arguments about the case: “Class, not race, killed the children. She was smart enough to know to tell a lie that people would be quicker to believe. The race didn’t kill the babies. Class did. That’s just all there is to it. She didn’t kill them because she was abused. She killed them because she thought about having something better.”⁶¹⁸

In the media coverage, the boys became, in Bragg’s words, “sickeningly inconsequential.” Although he later said he centered his coverage on the “two dead babies,” Bragg, like the other reporters sweating in the courtroom, devoted thousands of words of trial coverage to Smith’s own motivations.⁶¹⁹ But it was not just Susan that concerned him. Bragg later acknowledged that the difficulty of covering the trial came from the community.

You know, you would interview people at the—I think it was a Wal-Mart, I’m not sure, but you’d interview people in parking lots of grocery stores, you know. And we had—we would—once the trial started, then the dynamic of the town became, was pulled into the courtroom—became a part of the testimony. And it was very much like covering—and this sounds cold-hearted, but it’s almost like covering a sporting event. You sit in the bleachers, and everything is played out before you. And the social dynamic of the town was drawn into the courtroom in that fashion.

⁶¹⁷ Bragg, “Mother Who Killed.”

⁶¹⁸ Bragg, interview.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

I've always liked covering trials, but I did not like covering that one, because it was just awful. Awful to sit through, awful to hear...⁶²⁰

Although Bragg reports never wavering from his belief in his Southern version of the “boyfriend motive”—in fact, in an interview a full decade after the trial, he said that although “the prosecution’s theories about the motivation behind the crime were ugly to hear,” they “made perfect sense” to him—the time he spent with the traumatized citizens of the tiny town of Union had a tempering effect on his coverage.⁶²¹ The skeptical headlines of his articles belied his tone. Swayed by the words of locals, Bragg was beginning to discard the “boyfriend motive.”

By early July 1995, Bragg’s focus on the small community of Union produced a different version of the case in which local anger had cooled and few people wanted Smith to die for her crimes. In fact, after two “arduous” days of jury selection, only five jurors had been seated. Bragg argued that “it was increasingly clear that it would be difficult to find 12 people in this close-knit community who will send a woman to die in the electric chair.” The collective rage that prompted “grandmothers” to call for “Mrs. Smith’s public execution” had faded as locals “remembered that Susan Smith is one of them.”⁶²² Bragg quoted various experts who believed that Smith’s community would not sentence her to death, and after five full days of jury selection, he reported that “the sentiments of many residents shifted from hatred to a weary sadness.”⁶²³

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² Bragg, “Prayers and Tears”; Rick Bragg, “Keeping Mother’s Trial in Hometown Could Be Crucial,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 1995. By the third day of jury selection, Bragg reported that “over half” of the potential jury pool said “either that they could not put anyone to death or that they would have a hard time living with it if they did” (Bragg, “Smith Trials Stalls on Questions about Book Deal,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1995).

⁶²³ Bragg, “In South Carolina, a Mother’s Defense, and Life, Could Hinge on Choices,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1995.

Bragg's later sentiments about Smith's motivations mirrored his initial coverage, but his coverage of the trial reveals a discernible shift in his portrayal of Smith and her motives. His experiences living amongst the people of Union helped to dictate this change in his coverage. A decade later, Bragg tried to explain the fundamental changes in his tone: "I had to weigh [each side], and the stories were filled with quotes from her defense lawyers... Talking about it after the fact is—you know, it's always easy to talk about. When you're writing it above the machine shop in Union, South Carolina, and you're fighting off ants, it's different."⁶²⁴ In fact, in an article in the *New York Times* that winter, just a few days after Tommy Pope announced his decision to seek the death penalty, Bragg wrote about capital punishment, and he perhaps unwittingly indicated why his change in tone may have occurred. In January of 1995, Bragg explored the question of why Susan Smith faced capital punishment and O.J. Simpson, the star of the other sensational trial du jour, did not. He explained that attorneys are guided by the "mirror theory," in which the relationship between the defendant and his or her community made all the difference. "To make a death-penalty case forcefully, prosecutors still have to pursue a strategy not entirely unlike those of race-baiting prosecutors in the past," Bragg argued. "They have to transform a client from one of 'us,' a member of the human community, to one of 'them,' the predators who would destroy it."⁶²⁵

In the winter of 1995, this looked far more difficult to do with Simpson, a well-known and well-liked football and film star, because he was, according to one expert, "like a member of the family, so much a part of American life." Smith, Bragg wrote, appeared to be far more predatory, because she was "a mill worker accused of drowning her babies," and because she

⁶²⁴ Bragg, interview.

⁶²⁵ Bragg, "O.J. Simpson and Susan Smith: Two Crimes, Two Punishments," *New York Times*, January 22, 1995.

tried to cover up her crimes with lies.⁶²⁶ Yet six months later, at the time of Smith’s trial, the “mirror theory” had proved the opposite: Susan Smith, who had once been cast out as evil incarnate, had become again a part of the fabric of her community, who pleaded for leniency on her behalf. Although he never fully relinquished his initial belief in the “boyfriend motive,” in some ways, Bragg, by virtue of his own Southernness and his parking-lot interviews, served as something of a mirror, and a mouthpiece, for the community.⁶²⁷ Bragg’s experiences growing up in Alabama indicated to him the truth of the “boyfriend motive,” but his experiences in Union for three weeks during a summer of record heat and little rain resulted in small changes in his narrative—changes that indicated the local opinions of Susan Smith to the nation in a Southern voice that could not be heard in other national media outlets.

On the eve of the trial, Bragg’s focus had shifted often from Smith to the community that had raised her and would, in the ensuing weeks, judge the value of her life. The jury had been selected, and it was finally time for the courtroom drama and renewed sensational media coverage. The town had been dreading it for nine months, although locals would be relieved that the end was drawing near; as Bragg put it, “it’s all over but the shoutin,’” a phrase he would famously reuse as the title of his memoir a year later.⁶²⁸ Bragg devoted considerable space to Smith’s defense, based as it was on her troubled psychological history of depression, suicidal tendencies, and abuse at the hands of various men.⁶²⁹ His reporting on the “boyfriend motive,” so key to his early understanding of the case, had, by the trial date, none of the zeal of the

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ In the article, Bragg quoted a pro-death penalty law professor who thought seeking it in the Smith case was foolish. “Public opinion is against Mrs. Smith now,” he told Bragg, “but it will shift in her favor” (Ibid).

⁶²⁸ Bragg, “A Small Town in the South Prepares to Try a Neighbor,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1995.

⁶²⁹ Bragg, “Smith Defense Portrays a Life of ‘Chaos.’”

prosecution. Bragg covered the day of Tom Findlay's testimony in great detail, telling readers that Findlay, "a baldish, average-looking man" from Alabama, was from an "affluent Birmingham suburb where teenagers often get their driver's licenses and their first BMW at the same time." But this material description accompanied his sympathetic testimony. Bragg reported that Findlay did not believe that Smith would kill her children to be with him. "They were her world," he told the court.⁶³⁰ In his coverage on this and other long days in the courtroom, Bragg focused more and more on Smith's mental state, and "long history of deep depression" that seemed to contradict the crass, class-based reading of the "boyfriend motive." He quoted FBI agent Pete Logan, who said that Smith's "genuine" remorse was "the greatest" he had seen in his thirty-five years of law enforcement.⁶³¹

Just a few days into the trial, Bragg addressed the dueling psychiatric testimonies concerning Smith's carjacking lie: "What would seem to be a sign of selfishness, of cold-blooded behavior, was instead a sign of the 23-year-old Mrs. Smith's desperate need to be liked, a need that manifested itself in the months before the killings in a series of sexual encounters with some of the most unlikely people, her lawyers tried to show today." Although Bragg ends this article with prosecutor Tommy Pope's assertion Smith "knew right from wrong" and was thus not legally insane, Bragg devoted the bulk of his coverage that day to the psychiatrist hired by the defense to prove that Smith was mentally ill at the time of the murders.⁶³²

The transformation in Bragg's tone was not overwhelming, and it was not seamless; the "boyfriend motive" still undergirded much of his coverage. The day that David Smith testified,

⁶³⁰ Rick Bragg, "Smith Jury Hears of 2 Little Bodies, and a Letter, in a Lake," *New York Times*, July 20, 1995; Rick Bragg, "Psychiatrist for Susan Smith's Defense Tells of a Woman Desperate to Be Liked."

⁶³¹ Rick Bragg, "Mother Was Remorseful," *New York Times*, July 21, 1995.

⁶³² Bragg, "Psychiatrist for Smith's Defense Tells of a Woman Desperate to Be Liked," *New York Times*, July 22, 1995.

Bragg relied heavily upon the stock narrative, ending his article with David’s testimony that Susan had asked him if Tom Findlay could come visit her during the kidnapping investigation.⁶³³ By all accounts, David’s testimony was the most emotional of the trial—spectators, jurors, and attorneys wept openly, prompting Judge William Howard to call a recess—and many media outlets featured a return to the “boyfriend motive” as part of their public display of sympathy for the anguished father.⁶³⁴ But the David Smith of the trial coverage was not the same distraught father that the public remembered weeping over his boys’ single coffin. Bragg listed David’s physical abuse of Susan in which he, by his own admission, “chased,” “tackled,” and “dragged her out of bed and onto the porch” on separate occasions.⁶³⁵ Few reporters, including Bragg, failed to mention Smith’s lucrative book deal for a memoir of his life with Susan that arrived in bookstores the week of his appearance on the witness stand, implying to readers and viewers that the grieving father had, like the media that had overtaken Union, capitalized on the tragedy when he “pocketed some \$20,000.”⁶³⁶ David Bruck, Smith’s lead defense attorney, declined to cross examine David Smith, a strategic move that won points for the defense even as every heart in the courtroom went out to the father.⁶³⁷

Bragg’s sympathy for Susan Smith never equaled that of many of the locals he interviewed during his weeks in Union, but it did represent a fundamental change from his coverage of the previous fall and winter. The initial “two Susans” of his accounts shifted from the mask motif—the evil mother playing the role of the good daughter, wife, and mother—to a different kind of

⁶³³ Bragg, “Father Testifies.”

⁶³⁴ Elizabeth Gleick and Lisa H. Towle, “No Casting of Stones,” *Time*, August 7, 1995.

⁶³⁵ Bragg, “Father Testifies.”

⁶³⁶ *Evening News*, CBS, July 25, 1995; Bragg, “Father Testifies.”

⁶³⁷ Bragg, “Father Testifies.”

“two Susans.” In his report on Smith’s sentencing, Bragg wrote that many locals were still “not sure which of the two Susan Smiths killed the boys that night,” and the two images he spoke of were those of the prosecution and the defense, rather than the stereotypical bifurcation of madonna and whore seen in the coverage of Smith’s confession. Thus, the image of the mentally ill mother subtly crept into and altered his tone, although Bragg clearly never believed that the murders had actually been a thwarted suicide attempt.⁶³⁸

The “boyfriend motive” notwithstanding, Bragg’s focus on the people of Union came to determine the softer tone of his coverage. He portrayed the small community that raised Susan Smith as typically Southern in his accounts, but Smith had become less representative of the class dynamics of the region and more a picture of a mentally unstable young girl, an image that much of the town embraced, as we will see in the next chapter. Bragg duly published locals’ protests against the tabloid representations of the town as “Sin City,” arguing that the “real Union” was “somewhere in between the one the tabloids drool over and the pastoral image of the Chamber of Commerce.” The “real Union” was the mill town Bragg had introduced readers to with his initial coverage of the investigation, a place where “most people earn their living with their hands” in the mills. It was a religious community in which “church is the center of life.” He wrote: “On Sunday mornings you can throw a rock down the middle of Main Street and not hit so much as a dog.”⁶³⁹ Bragg clung to the idea of the “two Susans,” arguing that though the town was relieved when the trial ended, they were “still not sure which of the two Susan Smiths killed the boys that night.”⁶⁴⁰ His narrative was still Southern, but it was a different kind of

⁶³⁸ Bragg, “Carolina Jury Rejects Execution for Women Who Drowned Sons,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1995.

⁶³⁹ Bragg, “Union, SC, Is Left a Town Torn Asunder,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1995.

⁶⁴⁰ Bragg, “Carolina Jury Rejects Execution.”

South. Bragg focused on class, but he also began to focus on the various father figures of the case, especially Beverly Russell and Sheriff Howard Wells.

Indeed, other journalists seemed to follow Bragg's lead in expressing a kind of muted sympathy for Susan Smith by focusing on her media- and tragedy-weary neighbors. In a solemn voice backed by church bells, over an aerial shot of a sunlit church steeple, NBC's Bob Dotson explained: "In a small town with one hundred and thirty churches, people tend to be forgiving."⁶⁴¹ The change in tone was not just journalistic boredom with the story—witnesses added new details to both sides of the story every single day in the courtroom. Maybe it was guilt, a result of the media's complete colonization of Union and absolute disregard for locals' privacy. At any rate, over the course of the three-week trial, most major media outlets began to focus more on the psychological evidence presented in Smith's defense than on the salacious tidbits that supported the "boyfriend motive."⁶⁴² In fact, when a witness testified that Susan's Mazda had been pulled out of the lake with virtually all of the vestiges of her life as a wife and mother in it, including her wedding dress and albums in the trunk, a few journalists mentioned it only briefly, and most ignored it, even though it was previously unreported and perfect fodder for the "boyfriend motive."⁶⁴³ Many reporters preferred to focus on the transformation in the sentiments of the town. "Sympathy for Smith now rivals anger" in Union, reported *MacLean's*, and in some cases, anger had been redirected at David Smith, who had "capitalized on the

⁶⁴¹ *Evening News*, NBC, July 9, 1995.

⁶⁴² A notable exception to this trend was *NBC Evening News*; reporter Bob Dotson read the line from Findlay's break-up letter about Smith's children verbatim as the words were written on the screen in one report, and two days later, the program featured a headshot line-up, *Brady Bunch*-style, of Smith's former lovers—David Smith, Beverly Russell, Tom Findlay, and Cary Findlay—superimposed over a sketch artist's rendering of the courtroom (*Evening News*, NBC, July 19, 1995 and July 21, 1995).

⁶⁴³ Molly McDonough, "Jurors find Smith guilty of murders," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* (SC), July 23, 1995.

tragedy” with a book that hit stands the day he testified.⁶⁴⁴ The old narratives used to explain Smith’s crimes had, it seems, been exhausted, and a new narrative was forming.

By the end of July, the jurors had agreed upon the sentence of life in prison and trudged wearily home to front yards filled with reporters. For their last segments on the trial, television reporters recycled the well-worn details of the small-town façade and its “down-home dirty laundry.”⁶⁴⁵ But Rick Bragg chose to focus on the mood of the town rather than on the reactions of key players. He detailed the collective sigh of relief in the small community that had graciously hosted hundreds of voracious journalists during the hottest weeks of the Southern summer.

When some lined up for biscuits and gravy and the Quincy’s steakhouse breakfast buffet today, a group of gray-haired churchwomen at one big table went almost an hour without mentioning the name Susan Smith. Others streamed in and out of Wal-Mart, the unofficial gathering place for people of all colors, or wet their fishing lines in John D. Long Lake, the scene of the crime, where a permanent stone monument to the children is planned.⁶⁴⁶

Although Bragg now expresses a wholehearted belief in his original, Southern version of the “boyfriend motive,” by the end of the trial his accounts told a different story about a traumatized community that embraced their best-known criminal. Bragg’s interviews with Unionites revealed a different side of the story, and it was not, as many experts and journalists assumed, a case of forgiveness just because Smith was one of their own.

The local version of the case flavored Rick Bragg’s final Union article for the *New York Times*, which featured an interview with Sheriff Howard Wells the week after Smith’s trial. Wells is many things in this account: a local leader, a national hero for solving the crime, an

⁶⁴⁴ Joe Chidley and Twila Decker, “I Have Put My Faith in God,” *MacLean’s*, July 31, 1995. David Smith reportedly received a \$27,000 advance for *Beyond All Reason: My Life with Susan Smith* (Ibid).

⁶⁴⁵ *Evening News*, NBC, July 28, 1995.

⁶⁴⁶ Bragg, “Susan Smith Verdict Brings Relief to Town.”

impeccable, by-the-book lawman. But he is also an ideal father—the kind of protector that Susan Smith never had. Bragg described for readers how Wells—the “killer’s only confidant”—played the role of confessor to Susan Smith when she finally broke down after nine long days of lies. He “held her and prayed with her,” and then he “tricked her with a small lie of his own.” Wells lied that the intersection where Smith had allegedly been carjacked had actually been under police surveillance; the carjacking thus could not have occurred as Smith had reported. Smith duly burst into tears and told him what she had done. Wells’ “lie and a prayer” captured a killer and ended the nationwide manhunt, making him a national hero and a model for other law enforcement officials.⁶⁴⁷

When he spoke publicly of Smith’s confession, Wells described a delicate parallel investigation in which officers searched for the alleged carjacker while simultaneously turning their suspicion on the family and especially on Susan Smith, the only “witness” to the crime. A bond developed between the “weeping mother and a doubting sheriff.” Although the media offered a host of other images, Wells told Bragg that he was aware of Smith’s mental fragility from the very beginning.

Mr. Wells says he has no doubt that he and other investigators walked a tightrope with Mrs. Smith’s mental state and that as the inquiry closed around her, she planned to kill herself. For nine days she lived in a hell of her own making, surrounded by weeping, doting relatives she had betrayed in the worst way. “She had no one to turn to,” he said.

So although he was her hunter, he also became the person she could lean on, rely on, trust.⁶⁴⁸

It was a role he served in the community, as well. Locals told Bragg that they liked Wells because he was “one of them.” He had worked in the mills with people like Susan Smith’s

⁶⁴⁷ Rick Bragg, “Sheriff Says Prayer and a Lie Led Susan Smith to Confess,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1995.

⁶⁴⁸ Bragg, “A Killer’s Only Confidant.”

father, but he had bridged mill and town by serving as a law enforcement officer, as well. Bragg clearly admired his multifaceted role in Union's society: "He knows what it feels like to work eight hours a day in the nerve-straining clatter and roar of the textile mills that dominate Union's economy," and he had worked as a deputy and a wildlife officer before being elected sheriff.

According to Bragg, Wells was a figurative father, if not a literal one. The Wells were godparents to the children of friends and neighbors, including Scotty Smith's children, because they had none of their own. "The Smith case," wrote Bragg, "pitted a man who wants children against a woman who threw hers away." Although Wells felt guilty about the lie he told Susan to elicit her confession, he did not regret it, and he believed she would have killed herself if he had not taken such measures. Throughout the investigation and the trial, Wells was protective of Susan Smith, often shielding her from the waiting media cameras with his own jacket.⁶⁴⁹

Although he was the man who caught her, Wells did not want Susan Smith to die for her crimes; in fact, he stated publicly that a plea bargain "might be best for the county," to save locals the pain, expense, and national scrutiny of a trial.⁶⁵⁰ Wells believed a trial would be damaging to Union, and he personally asked the prosecutor to avoid it after Pope announced his decision to seek the death penalty. He later explained: "I am a mirror image of the people I represent. Government leaders, professional people, people from all walks of life, clergy... You have a person who had confessed, who is willing to plead guilty, so why go through with it? It will be

⁶⁴⁹ Bragg, "Life of a Mother."

⁶⁵⁰ Anna Brown, "Solicitor Planned to Announce Decision Today," *Union Daily Times* (SC), January 16, 1995.

bad for this community.”⁶⁵¹ The good sheriff spoke for his community, and many observers clearly admired his role in the case.⁶⁵²

By the end of his three-week stint among locals, Rick Bragg had rendered Union and the major characters of the Smith drama legible to many of the nation’s readers, painting a story of the not-so-pastoral, deindustrializing South rife with class tension. He spoke in the idiom of the South, and although he believed the core of the “boyfriend motive”—that Smith killed her sons to land a rich boyfriend—he offered what he saw as a realistic alternative plotline to the more sensational, “Southern Gothic” portrayals gracing newsstands across the country. But in Union, the characters that peopled Bragg’s accounts had a very different view of the drama unfolding in their midst. Indeed, Unionites depicted the case in terms of a failure of the paternal authority of the various fathers in the case—Susan’s suicidal biological father, her abusive stepfather, her philandering husband, and the local leaders who should have protected her from these abusive male figures. Union’s response to the Smith case by the time of the trial seemed to be a making of amends, a final attempt by the town fathers to protect a young girl whom they had so consistently failed in the past.

⁶⁵¹ Charles L. Warner, “Sheriff looks back at Smith investigation,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), August 3, 1995.

⁶⁵² Bragg later told me: “You know, I covered atrocities in Haiti and militant Islamic fundamentalists in central Asia. I covered the bombing of the Oklahoma City Murrow Building. You know, all I did was cover sadness for a very long time. So much so that I’ll never do it again. That was the single most concentrated, methodical, manipulated sadness I’d ever been a part of. And people kept saying, reporters kept saying, there aren’t any heroes in this. Well, there was one: Howard Wells. Howard Wells was a hero” (Bragg, interview).

CHAPTER 5

“SHE IS STILL THEIR DAUGHTER”

When they watched the coverage of the Susan Smith case, Union residents did not recognize the image reflecting back at them from the small screen. To them, the Smith case was not a Southern story of the Gothic variety or Bragg’s narrative of the economically depressed, deindustrializing mill town. To them, it was not a story about race, sexuality, class, or region. Union was not representative of American small towns in the vein of *Peyton Place*, nor was it a regional representative of the death throes of the textile belt. It did not provide a telling example of the state of race relations at the end of the twentieth century, nor were its citizens practicing generic Southern racism or classism.

When locals spoke of the Smith case, and when they speak of it now, the story they tell is one of community. Specifically, theirs is a story about the failures of paternal authority and the system of community supervision in their close-knit, God-fearing small town. “Community,” in this case, meant not just the social dynamics of the tiny town of Union. It also rested heavily upon Union’s vision of itself as an American ideal—an image directly opposed to the *Peyton Place* exposes and the “Gothic” dying mill town. This ideal self-image involved explicit notions of racial and class harmony and economic prosperity as well as a subtle gender hierarchy. Union, according to its outspoken locals, followed the lead of its town fathers—namely, the sheriff and local ministers. The leaders of this imagined community saw themselves as paternal protectors. When a twenty-three year-old woman—referred to by many locals as a “girl”—

committed a heinous crime in their very midst, the leaders of the community presented themselves as fathers who had utterly failed one of their dependent daughters.

To Unionites, the story was not just about the tragedy of the Smith boys; it was a larger tragedy encompassing Susan Smith's life as well. The community system rested upon paternal authority—within the households, at the pulpit, and in the local government. The various traumas that Smith suffered in the past—depression, suicide attempts, sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, emotional and occasional physical abuse by her husband—added up, in the local imagination, to a failure of this community system. This story told by locals in the media, at the trial, and in interviews over a decade later amounted to an alternative narrative, one that did not call upon the preexisting images of woman- or motherhood gracing front pages and the nightly news. Indeed, theirs was an oppositional script; instead of a narrative about a mother and her sons, Unionites told a story about a daughter and her relationship to the community. Although the media emphasized the psychological testimony at the trial as the key to the sentence of life in prison, this community image is a primary reason why jurors spared Susan Smith's life.

Surprisingly, it was NBC—the network that consistently provided the most sensationalized television coverage throughout the trial—that best encapsulated Union's perspective in the immediate aftermath of the trial. Although the headline, for good measure or just lack of a better descriptor, called the case “Southern Gothic” one final time, Bob Dotson reported that it was more than just guilt over the airing of its secrets, or the simple knee-jerk protection of one of its own citizens, that kept the tiny town of Union from sentencing Susan Smith to death. Union might never be the same again, because the community had failed to protect the children in their midst—and they meant Susan Smith, not just her sons: “For a month its secrets were broadcast

in unflinching graphic detail, the town's problems laid bare, and worst of all, in this close-knit village where most everyone is related, no one kept Susan Smith from being sexually abused as a child."⁶⁵³

To many Unionites, then, this was not some stereotypical story of the South—not the depressed, deindustrializing South of Bragg's coverage and certainly not the "Gothic" South of the more sensational headlines. To them, this was a story about their community, and specifically about the fatal failure of the system of community supervision. This failure allowed Susan Smith to be victimized repeatedly in the past, a series of abuses that eventually pushed her to the breaking point. Over the course of the nine months between Smith's arrest and her trial, she had transformed from a nationally representative image—of motherhood, race, and feminine evil—to a regionally representative one—of Southern "distinctiveness" and Gothic barbarism and, in Bragg's accounts, of class relations in the modern South. At the local level, however, Smith's story was told as one about the inner workings of power in their community. Race and class played a minimal role in their version of the drama. Rather, Unionites saw the case through the lens of local politics, religion, and, ultimately, gender dynamics. In the community that raised her, images of Susan Smith had shifted irrevocably. She was transformed from a young mother into an abused daughter. This image was a key point in the transformation of the discourse of American motherhood. The positive dissemination of this image by some members of the media indicated the beginnings of a subtle change that would affect the outcome of the Susan Smith trial and become even more apparent in public discussions of motherhood over the course of the following decade.

This new image of Smith was in line with the town's official vision of itself. According to Union's Chamber of Commerce, the empty downtown of boarded-up storefronts and "For Sale"

⁶⁵³ *Evening News*, NBC, July 31, 1995.

signs did not necessarily indicate the kind of decay depicted by Rick Bragg. Although the 1990s were years of intense transition from a textile-dependent economy, the changes were part of a natural economic evolution that will eventually have positive results, according to Union's biggest cheerleaders at the Chamber. At the end of the century, downtown enjoyed revitalization, due to a grant of one million dollars and some serious campaigning by the Chamber of Commerce. Although the "Mom and Pop" stores suffered, strip malls had become an intrinsic part of Union's economic culture, and downtown merchants had learned to work around the problem, cutting down the empty stores to eight within a decade of the Smith trial.⁶⁵⁴ Wal-Mart, of course, prospered, and the corporation is planning to build a "superstore" in Union in the near future.⁶⁵⁵

According to city officials, Union is uniquely geographically situated to attract industry and people. Pulpwood has been big business since the early 1980s, and Union has the potential to achieve great prosperity because of its proximity to several different urban areas and the interstates that lead to them. The windfall, unfortunately, has yet to occur, but Unionites are optimistic, and they are not the only ones, if the slow influx of international corporations snaking across the county line is any indication. During the same decade in which Union lost so many jobs, a select few international corporations built facilities within the county, although not in Union proper. Disney built a distribution center outside of town on the highway to Spartanburg, and both Dollar General and Timken ("the world's largest manufacturer of tapered roller bearings and mechanical seamless steel tubing"), built facilities there in the late 1990s.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵⁴ Inman, interview.

⁶⁵⁵ Planners originally scoped out seventy acres on Toney Road, where Susan and David Smith lived unhappily for a brief stint before their final separation, but then they found the ideal location for a Super Wal-Mart: the former site of Conso. (Inman, interview).

⁶⁵⁶ That is, according to their website (www.timken.com).

Although these corporations decided against locating within Union's existing industrial parks, and admittedly "it would have been nice if Disney was closer" to town, the plants are some of the first signs of life in the pine trees once you cross the county line headed into Union.⁶⁵⁷

Three major interstates divide upstate South Carolina: I-26, which goes through Columbia on the way from Charleston to Atlanta, to the south and southwest; I-85 to the north, which goes through Charlotte and Spartanburg on the way to Atlanta; and I-77 to the east, which funnels drivers from Charlotte to Columbia in under an hour and a half. The interstates have been an economic boon to the small towns that dot them, and they have made full-fledged, upscale suburbs out of former mill towns like Rock Hill, which is just across the state line from Charlotte. But Union is a good half-hour from any of these major arteries. The closest they can claim is the "four-lane," which is what everyone calls Highway 176; it was widened in 1984, providing a vital artery to Spartanburg, the closest city at about 25 miles away.⁶⁵⁸ But "Union is not the middle of nowhere, it's the middle of the triangle," said Torance Inman, holding his fingers up in a triangle to illustrate the three interstates. "It's in the middle of everything."⁶⁵⁹

Thus, the community did not see itself—at least not officially—as a dying mill town; Union imagined itself as an attractive area with a lot of potential. According to many locals, their lovely little town was not rife with racial tension or representative of any social problems. Many Unionites vociferously voiced their disagreements with the media coverage of their beloved hometown. Many locals argued that the "malcontents" who portrayed Union negatively in the

⁶⁵⁷ Inman, interview. Union County is also home to two plastics plants (Sonoco Products and Paragon Plastics), one chemical plant (Union Color and Chemical), two large metal plants (Torrington Company and Webb Forging), as well as several older, smaller operations (Charles, 452c).

⁶⁵⁸ Charles, 444. Spartanburg has an urban population of about 40,000 (www.cityofspartanburg.org).

⁶⁵⁹ Inman, interview.

media were on the “fringes” of their insular society.⁶⁶⁰ “The national media always came back in and talked to people we didn’t know,” said Phil Hobbs, the former program director for WBCU, Union’s AM radio station. “They made Union look bad in a lot of ways.”⁶⁶¹ To them, the mask motif, and the idea that Union’s sweet façade had been ripped off by Susan to reveal the carefully hidden demons within, was pure sensationalism meant to sell more papers and gain more viewers.

At the same time, some locals agreed with the positive media portrayals of Union as an idyllic small town. In many ways, Union is a friendly hamlet straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Phil Hobbs echoed the sentiments of many when he told me, “You won’t find a better, church-going, giving community.”⁶⁶² It is the kind of town that prints wedding invitations, not just announcements, in the local paper.⁶⁶³ It is the kind of town in which the citizens might have resented the intense media scrutiny, but they still brought the journalists snacks, including homemade cookies, to make their stay more comfortable.⁶⁶⁴ And yes, Union is the kind of town that takes care of its own. To many locals, their “most famous and important citizen” was not an infanticidal mother but a mentally retarded man named Bill Brown. For over sixty years, Union nurtured Bill Brown, who had the “I.Q. of a 4-year-old” and no living relatives. Brown never wanted for anything because he “could easily claim most of the citizens in the county as his family.” He became an integral part of the community, “something that does not happen”

⁶⁶⁰ Thom White, interview.

⁶⁶¹ Hobbs, interview.

⁶⁶² Ibid.

⁶⁶³ *Union Daily Times*, May 5, 1995.

⁶⁶⁴ Ann Currie explained that the people who took refreshments to the media “weren’t trying to get interviewed,” it was just that the journalists were all “so hot and sweaty, and they wanted them to feel welcome” (Ann Currie, interview).

elsewhere. “Many like him are shipped out and forgotten. He represented what makes Union special,” argued his biographer, the local journalist Ralph Greer.⁶⁶⁵

The mythology surrounding Bill Brown is perhaps the best example of Union’s vision of itself. Brown grew up in downtown Union and was a fixture on Main Street for several decades. He had a “vivid imagination” and became, in his own mind and with the help of locals, a “ball player, politician, National Guardsman, musician, weather forecaster, judge, jury boy,” and “insurance salesman.”⁶⁶⁶ Brown helped pick potential jurors’ names out of a hat for the Clerk of Court, wrote up receipts for “insurance” that he sold to people on Main Street for a dollar, and famously did the weather report for WBCU. In a 1991 profile of Brown for the *Charlotte Observer*, readers learned that he had “had the run of Main Street for 25 years”:

If the phone rings in Al Smith’s jewelry store, Bill Brown answers it. If Al Moore steps away from his barber chair, Bill Brown steps up with a cob. And when it’s time for the weather report on WBCU Radio, Bill Brown borrows the microphone and announces, “This is Bill Brown saying ‘Sunshine, sunshine, sunshine.’”⁶⁶⁷

Brown could be seen at all public events and functions in Union and he rode in the lead car with the sheriff or the mayor at town parades.⁶⁶⁸

When Unionites talk about how they treated Bill Brown, they do so in the explicit language of paternal community authority. According to Brown’s biographer, Union took excellent care of its “favored son.” When he complained of the heat in his apartment, Carlisle Henderson, Union’s long-time radio host, “got on the radio and told everybody that Bill was about to burn up

⁶⁶⁵ Ralph Greer, *Sunshine, Sunshine, Sunshine: A True-Life Story About an Extraordinary Man* (Union, SC: Jack’s Red Socks Publishing Company, 2001), 134, 24.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁶⁷ Elizabeth Leland, “This is My Town,” *Charlotte Observer* (NC), July 7, 1991. The story took up half of the front page and two interior pages and was accompanied by eleven photos and a map showing Brown’s downtown itinerary (Greer, 128).

⁶⁶⁸ Greer, 100, 123, 195.

and needed an air conditioner.” They raised the money quickly and installed a new window unit for Bill. When his caretaker died, a neighbor took Bill in, and he lived with her for years until his health became so bad he had to relocate to a retirement center. When friends discovered that his social security would not cover the expenses of his retirement home, they held a fundraiser at the radio station. They collected around \$16,000, twice the goal amount, in just a few hours.⁶⁶⁹

Brown’s comfortable existence in Union amazed a visitor from Cincinnati whose brother suffered from the same condition. He told a local councilman that his family basically kept his brother in one room, and “when they carried him outside they had to put a leash on him like he was an animal.” The man later wrote that “Union touched his heart forever by their treatment of Bill.” Newspaper readers across the South knew about Union’s relationship with Bill Brown from the profile in the *Charlotte Observer*, which the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* also carried.⁶⁷⁰ In fact, the profile of Union led one businessman to buy the local radio station; he saw the article and immediately had a “good feeling and impression about the town.” The vice president of Webb Forging Company claimed that one of the reasons they had relocated to Union was because the town’s treatment of Bill Brown. Journalist Anna Brown wrote in his obituary in the *Union Daily Times* that Bill was “Union’s adopted son,” and Phil Hobbs, the former manager of the local radio station, said that Brown “represented everything that is good about Union.”⁶⁷¹

This small town that raised a man with mental retardation to think that he could be anything, including a judge and a policeman, is the very definition of an ideal community, according to locals. Although Unionites are proud of the care they took of Bill Brown for six decades, they do not see it as an extraordinary or uncharacteristic gesture. This self-perspective is key to

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid, 105, 76, 151.

⁶⁷⁰ Elizabeth Leland, “This is My Town,” *Charlotte Observer* (NC), July 7, 1991.

⁶⁷¹ Greer, 77, 99, 107, 24.

understanding how Union viewed the Susan Smith case. To them, it was not about race, sexuality, or class.. To them, it was about how the community had failed to protect and care for a fragile woman in their midst, a failure that led to the deaths of two innocent boys.

Union would much rather be known for Bill Brown than for Susan Smith, but when Susan Smith reported that she had been carjacked, the entire community sprung into action. Unionites thus knew immediately, from police scanners, neighbors, middle-of-the night phone calls, and the local eleven o'clock news (the story did not make the national news until the following morning). Kevin Kingsmore, a former classmate of Susan's who grew up in Union, saw the report on the local news that night, just a few hours after Smith had appeared on the McCloud's front porch crying for her children. He stayed awake all night, wondering what he could do, and the next morning he went straight to Sheriff Wells' office. He obtained a copy of the composite drawing of the alleged carjacker, printed thousands of them at the print shop where he worked, and distributed the fliers widely.⁶⁷² Just a few days later, they were all over the South and had been spotted as far away as Illinois.⁶⁷³

Other locals pulled off similar feats of organization, arranging for groups to comb sections of the thick local woods and the nearby Sumter National Forest, which takes up much of the rural county, on foot, with dogs, and on horseback. Some people took vacation days from the mills to search for the boys, while others spent their spare time at work poring over maps of the county, trying to figure out where a desperate criminal might dump two crying children.⁶⁷⁴ By the morning of October 27, about thirty-six hours after the alleged abduction, downtown business

⁶⁷² Kingsmore, interview.

⁶⁷³ Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*, 14.

⁶⁷⁴ Roberts, interview; Inman, interview.

owners had attached yellow ribbons to each of their front doors, and a Union High School senior had tied ribbons to each of the 32 holly trees along Main Street. By Halloween, a relationship had developed between the press and locals; journalists handed out candy to trick-or-treating children while Unionites brought chicken and biscuits to the media for lunch.⁶⁷⁵

A week into the clueless investigation, journalists were searching for ways to re-energize the flagging story, suspicions were flying, and locals had clammed up, offering “No comment” where they had once granted interviews.⁶⁷⁶ On November 3, the day of Susan Smith’s confession, Union’s ministers had scheduled a prayer meeting for 5:30 p.m. outside the sheriff’s office on Main Street, which meant that a lot of people—members of the press and Union citizens—were milling around downtown late that afternoon. Wells’ announcement that Susan Smith had been arrested produced an audible gasp from the silent crowd.⁶⁷⁷ Unionites expressed simultaneous emotions of shock, grief, rage, and betrayal. Smith had not just lied to the nation; she had lied to her neighbors. Although many people later said they had suspected Smith from the start, locals seem to have truly believed her until she confessed.⁶⁷⁸

Anger is an understandable reaction in a case like this, in which the community became so thoroughly involved in the search for boys who had been murdered nine days earlier. Media studies scholar Barbara Barnett argues that the media coverage of Union in the days and weeks

⁶⁷⁵ Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*, 26-27, 38.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁷⁷ Wells’ announcement was as follows: “Susan Smith has been arrested and will be charged with two counts of murder in connection with the deaths of her children, Michael, 3, and Alexander, 14 months. The vehicle, a 1990 Mazda, was driven by Smith was located late Thursday afternoon in Lake John D. Long near Union. Two bodies were found in the vehicle’s back seat. Identities are pending an autopsy. Charges against Smith will be signed by Union County Sheriff Howard Wells. Sixteenth Circuit Solicitor Thomas Pope said Thursday a bond hearing will be held Friday at 10 a.m. at the Moss Justice Center in York before Circuit Judge Henry Floyd. Smith is incarcerated at an undisclosed location” (Henderson, *Nine Days in Union*, 59).

⁶⁷⁸ Brackette, interview; Charles, interview; Kingsmore, interview.

following Smith's arrest followed the script of the "wounded community." This script leans heavily on the Biblical narrative of Eden, in which an offending woman destroys paradise.⁶⁷⁹ Susan Smith, according to the "wounded community" script, was the evil, sexual Eve to Union's perfectly innocent Eden (as opposed to the mask motif, which featured Smith as almost representative of the hidden evils of her hometown). This script of the betrayed town became such a staple of media coverage in the days immediately following Smith's confession that it became a media subject itself. "Presented to the nation as a town of innocents shocked by a horrible crime," wrote Charles Sennott for the *Boston Globe*, "Union was supposed to resemble Newt Gingrich's America, a place of family values and Christian fellowship."⁶⁸⁰ In this stock story, the small, sleepy, Southern town of Union had to cast out this devil in the shape of a woman in order to heal their wounds and restore order.

In accordance with the "wounded community" script, journalists eagerly covered the local anger in the wake of Smith's confession. The reaction was immediate and "furious," as locals removed their yellow ribbons and replaced them with black ones.⁶⁸¹ The mob that awaited Susan at the courthouse when she arrived in police custody for her bond hearing made local, state, regional, and national news. The judge cancelled her bond hearing amidst shouts of "Baby-killing bitch" and "Lynch her!"⁶⁸² Local reporters, like the national media, reminded readers that Smith was not just a murderer, she was a liar that had fooled them all for nine days as they searched in vain for her stolen sons. Suddenly, the "seemingly honest words of a grieving mother rang hollow," and everything about the perpetrator of this "most shocking and blood-

⁶⁷⁹ Barnett, 88.

⁶⁸⁰ Charles M. Sennott, "Southern Secrets: Dark Side is Emerging in Town Where Mother Confessed to Killing Sons," *Boston Globe*, December 28, 1994.

⁶⁸¹ Rekers, 23; Gibbs and Booth, "Death and Deceit."

⁶⁸² Bruck, interview; Adler and Carroll, "Innocents Lost"; Rekers, 23.

curdling crimes” was suspect: “From reports that Susan Vaughan [Smith’s maiden name] was pregnant with son Michael when she wed David three years ago to the recent separation from her estranged husband and the alleged extramarital affairs, Mrs. Smith lived what appeared to be a lie.”⁶⁸³ The *Union Daily Times* duly covered the crowd that “screamed insults” at Smith as she arrived at the courthouse in police custody for her bond hearing the day after her confession.⁶⁸⁴ Locals felt personally betrayed, not just by Smith’s carjacking lie, but also by the idea that such a monster could live amongst them unnoticed for twenty-three years.

The calls for Old Testament justice that rang throughout the Union of media portrayals belied the fact that the rage on Main Street faded quickly. After the initial shock of the confession, locals “got organized and started to take care of one another.”⁶⁸⁵ The people who had known Smith all her life had to make sense of the dissonance between the “monster” in the media and the mother they thought they knew. Acquaintances remembered a “quiet smart woman who enjoyed working with handicapped children, not the type of woman who would drown her own children.” Classmates and teachers recalled that she was voted “friendliest” in her 1989 class at Union High School and that she was a member of several academic and civic-oriented clubs.⁶⁸⁶ No one could furnish evidence of Smith’s capacity to murder, and everyone wondered what could drive this loving mother to murder.

Although the racial tensions still lingered, for the most part, beneath the surface, words of hurt and rage turned to Christian messages of healing and forgiveness fairly quickly at the local

⁶⁸³ Les Timms III, “Mother Made Impassioned Plea on National Media Hours Before Arrest,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 4, 1994.

⁶⁸⁴ Anna Brown, “Mrs. Smith Waives Bond,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 5, 1994.

⁶⁸⁵ Tom Currie, interview.

⁶⁸⁶ Anna Brown, “Who Is Susan Smith? Friends, Former Teachers Remember Her as a Quiet, Smart Woman,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 8, 1994.

level. According to popular local radio personality Carlisle Henderson, the Smith drama was a kind of test case. “This town needed revival,” he argued. “We’ve taken each other for granted, we’re not visiting our neighbors, everyone’s in such a hurry. God may be saying, ‘Wake up, Union.’ God could be trying to tell us something.”⁶⁸⁷ God was not the only one; local leaders took to the airwaves immediately. The day that Smith confessed, Reverend Allen Raines, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Union, stopped by the local A.M. radio station, where his Henderson, his locally famous parishioner, worked as a disc jockey and host of the daily gospel hour. Raines closed his message with a prayer, and the Reverend A.L. Brackette followed him on the show.⁶⁸⁸ The three men decided that Union would need a frequent public forum to discuss the case in coming weeks. Local churches thus began to hold open meetings for citizens to “voice their feelings on the case,” and they continued to hold public services for the community until the end of the trial in late July.⁶⁸⁹

In direct contrast to the angry crowds cursing Smith on the national news, local journalists emphasized the pleas for mercy from prominent locals from the outset. William Holcombe, the Union County Coroner who knew better than anyone the extent of Smith’s crimes as he examined the waterlogged bodies of her sons, asked his neighbors to seek “God’s help, guidance, and love,” and to realize that “Michael and Alex have drawn us closer together not only as a community but as a state and a nation.”⁶⁹⁰ The local paper printed many of the thousands of letters to the editor about the case in a special section called “Many Share Their Feelings.”

⁶⁸⁷ Eftimiades, 240-241.

⁶⁸⁸ Reverend Allen Raines, interview via letter, August 12, 2005.

⁶⁸⁹ Anna Brown, “Forum Planned for Citizens to Voice Feelings on Case,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 5, 1994.

⁶⁹⁰ Anna Brown, “Mother Charged,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 4, 1994.

Observers from as far away as British Columbia wrote the *Union Daily Times* editor to commend the town on the way its citizens pulled together in a time of crisis. Many sought comfort from the belief that Michael and Alex Smith were in Heaven, a belief that Susan Smith herself expressed in her written confession.⁶⁹¹ In Heaven, according to one local poet, “There will be no tears/ No sorrow or despair,/ There is only joy/ And lots of children there.”⁶⁹²

Sympathetic readers couched their condolences in religious language, even, incredibly, in poems addressed to God written from the perspectives of the “angels,” Smith’s slain sons.⁶⁹³ Most letter writers expressed confusion and even anger at Smith’s actions, but they all agreed that the community participation in the investigation was admirable. Others pleaded for this kind of unity to continue: “We as a community and nation need to come together in unity and not to be divided. We need to pray for the families as well as Susan...May God have mercy on Susan’s soul.”⁶⁹⁴ Another reader compared Smith to the Biblical Moses, arguing that God forgave him for murder and he “went on to do might works for the Lord.” He asked others not to try to guess “God’s plan” for Susan, concluding: “Don’t let the devil use you to hinder your life or hers, forgive and love and support her growth. Don’t love the sin, but for God’s sake love the sinner.”⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹¹ In her confession on November 3, 1994, Smith wrote: “My children, Michael and Alex, are with our Heavenly Father now, and I know that they will never be hurt again. As a mom, that means more than words could ever say” (full text available online at <http://www.teleplex.net/shj/smith/ninedays/ssconf.html>).

⁶⁹² “Many Share Their Feelings,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 12, 1994.

⁶⁹³ “Many Share Their Feelings,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 8, 1994. One of the poems written from the boys’ perspective began: “Hello, God, I’m Michael Smith and Alex here’s my brother./We’ve come home to you Dear Father, because we have no mother” (Ibid).

⁶⁹⁴ “Many Share Their Feelings,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 7, 1994. Another woman wrote: “I say to the families that it’s a tragic loss, but the one thing that will help meal and you too is knowing that they are with the Lord. Yes, two perfect, precious little angels and they are surely in a better place than we are” (Ibid).

⁶⁹⁵ “Many Share Their Feelings,” *Union Daily Times*, November 12, 1994.

Within days of Smith's confession, then, certain Unionites were already asking for understanding as their neighbors tried to make sense of this supposedly incomprehensible crime. Moments after Sheriff Wells announced the arrest, locals were concerned with the implications of Smith's confession for their community, and initial pleas for sympathy were, in many ways, attempts to protect their imagined community from the real racial rifts between townspeople. Protection thus factored into Union's response to the Smith case in two ways: initially locals wanted to protect themselves from negative press and the realities of social tensions. Over the course of the winter of 1995, however, they began to indicate a kind of collective guilt over the consistent abuse of Susan Smith, a guilt that could be resolved by protecting her—and, by extension, the small community—from another death in the form of capital punishment.

This early sympathy was couched in terms of Christian forgiveness, which should not be surprising in a town named for a "pioneer church" in which several different congregations who could not afford their own structures worshipped.⁶⁹⁶ In fact, it is Union's religiosity, more so than its race or class relations, that identifies the community as distinctly "Southern." Union, like so many other areas in the South, has undergone change in the past few decades: a partial loss of small town culture due to late twentieth-century phenomena like the migration of industry, particularly textiles, overseas, and the "Wal-Martization" that relocated much of the town's commerce to its outer edges. But one major continuity is the heavy sociocultural influence of Protestantism, particularly the Baptist and Methodist faiths. This is characteristic of the region; according to historian Beth Barton Schweiger, religion has long served as "a shorthand for Southern exceptionalism."⁶⁹⁷ Of all of the popular images of the South as

⁶⁹⁶ Charles, xi.

⁶⁹⁷ Beth Barton Schweiger, "Max Weber in Mount Airy; or, Revivals and Social Theory in the Early South," in Schweiger and Mathews, ed., 32.

distinctive, it is religion—characterized by “its evangelical piety, its emotional fervor, its highly personal moral orientation”—that truly seems to set it apart from other regions.⁶⁹⁸ This trend only increased in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of powerful religious-political entities like the Moral Majority, the New Christian Right, and the Christian Coalition.⁶⁹⁹

Samuel S. Hill, one of the foremost scholars of Southern religion, identified a “Christ-and-culture” regional blend; one cannot understand the one without the other.⁷⁰⁰ The unique combination of a regional culture characterized by Christianity and a history of white supremacy, widespread poverty, military occupation, and slavery has led to a “Christ-haunted,” to use Flannery O’Connor’s oft-quoted term, South in which one is hard pressed to find a “Southerner who doesn’t believe in original sin.” William H. Willimon, a scholar who struggles with the dueling identities of “Southerner” and “Christian,” argues that “a Southerner can be many things, but he or she ought not to be innocent--too many bodies, too much blood for that.” He recalls being told, “You know your hands are dirty. You know you were conceived in sin. You’re a Southerner.”⁷⁰¹

Although Unionites might not have such an acute and constant sense of history, they clearly prayed according to the same theology. Unionites, like other Southerners, prefer “sin and crucifixion” to “worship and incarnation.” According to Samuel Hill, regional religious teachings in the “are centered in the themes of man’s depravity, Christ’s atoning death, and the

⁶⁹⁸ Wade Clark Roof, “Southern Protestantism: New Challenges, New Possibilities,” in *The Changing Shape of Protestantism in the South*, eds. Marion D. Aldridge and Kevin Lewis (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 11.

⁶⁹⁹ Samuel S. Hill, “Religion and Politics in the South,” in *Religion in the South*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985).

⁷⁰⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁰¹ William H. Willimon, “On Being a Southerner and a Christian at the Same Time,” in Aldridge and Lewis, 33, 32.

assurance of salvation."⁷⁰² The firm belief in original sin and in the salvation of forgiveness determined how locals responded to the Smith case. The Monday after Smith's Thursday confession, local ministers held an interdenominational "Community Service To Help Us Experience God's Healing," where Reverend Currie preached a sermon tellingly titled, "We Are All In the Same Leaky Boat."⁷⁰³ He told the Bible story in which Peter asked Jesus how often he had to forgive a repeat sinner. Jesus told him he must forgive that person "70 times 7, which is another way of saying there is no limit to forgiveness." Currie concluded: "Since you are dependent upon mercy, then you had better practice mercy," and it was clear to everyone in the room, although her name had not yet been uttered, that he was talking about Susan Smith.⁷⁰⁴ Just days after Susan's confession, town leaders reminded the community that each of them were sinners deserving of Christian forgiveness.

This immediate positioning of Susan Smith as a lamb lost to her flock, rather than a wayward woman or an insensate monster, was in keeping with the "Christ-centered" southern theology described by scholars. But it was a compelling image according to the gendered logic of regional religion, as well. Certain sects of Protestants, especially the fundamental varieties found in the South, are known for preaching about proper gender roles, namely, that a "woman should be subordinate to all men in society, be obedient to her husband, take a subservient and silent role in the church, and keep to hearth and home, devoting herself to her children." Billy Graham, one of the foremost southern religious icons of the twentieth century, declared in 1970 in the *Ladies' Home Journal*: "The biological assignment was basic and simple: Eve was to be

⁷⁰² Samuel S. Hill Jr., ed., *Religion and the Solid South* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), 20.

⁷⁰³ Notes from "A Community Service to Help Us Experience God's Healing," from the personal papers of Reverend Tom Currie, Carthage, NC.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

the child-bearer, and Adam was to be the bread winner...wife, mother, homemaker--this is the appointed destiny of real womanhood."⁷⁰⁵ Scholars caution that women's participation in a male-dominated religion does not necessarily entail female oppression; historically, women have used churches and religious works as a springboard to public activism and even power. Indeed, women have relied upon their conservative religious beliefs to help maintain traditional gender hierarchies.⁷⁰⁶ But the fact remains that although women, across time and space, generally outnumber men in church membership, church leadership has always been overwhelmingly male.⁷⁰⁷ The gender dynamic had changed in many churches by the 1990s, but, generally speaking, Southern Protestantism remained a stronghold of traditional patriarchy. Thus, Smith's gender worked in her favor at the local level. It was not difficult to view her as a pathetic, lost lamb in need of protection within a theology in which women were often seen as weak and easily tempted.

However, the traditional gender logic of southern Protestantism did not determine how all local religious leaders responded to Susan Smith. Some of them also seemed to understand her actions within the feminist terms of maternal psychology. On Sunday, November 6, just three days after Susan Smith confessed to lying to the world and murdering her two sons, ministers

⁷⁰⁵ Nancy Hardesty, "From Religion to Spirituality: Southern Women In and Out of Church," in Aldridge and Lewis, 70.

⁷⁰⁶ A documented historical example of this was the women of the Ku Klux Klan of the early twentieth century. Women served as "the eyes and ears" of the Klan, often pressuring Klansmen to punish women who stepped out of traditional roles. Glenn Feldman argues that they linked the different hierarchies that undergirded southern society: "It was this religious-based system of conservative mores that often served as the crucial bridge between white supremacy, class hierarchy, paternalism, and ethnic homogeneity, a moral status quo that interlocked the pillars of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity into a mutually supportive foundation on which Southern society itself rested. For the majority of white Southerners, this critical moral link made the race, class, gender, and ethnic status quos seem God-ordained, granting both the orthodoxies and their protectors an exalted status, and girding the whole system in an almost impregnable way against fundamental change" (Glenn Feldman, "Home and Hearth: Women, the Klan, Conservative Religion, and Traditional Family Values," in Feldman, 60).

⁷⁰⁷ Lynn Lyerly, "Women and Southern Religion," in Schweiger and Mathews, 248.

across Union hastily rewrote sermons to fit the volatile mood of the town. Reverend Tom Currie of Union's First Presbyterian Church opened the morning service with a prayer for the Smith boys, for the local people that had scoured the community in vain for them, and for Susan Smith, "the mother who has done this horrible thing." He concluded: "What she has to live with is more than any of us imagine bearing through life." Reverend Currie pleaded with his parishioners to live "by faith, and not emotions." No one in the hushed church could guess Smith's motives, but Currie asked them to pray for her "especially". He explained: "What she did was unconscionable, unimaginable, unjustifiable—but I know Susan Smith as others do. None of those who know her would describe her as a mean cruel person. I truly believe that what she did was not a sick act done by an evil person, but an evil act done by a sick person."⁷⁰⁸

Reverend A.L. Brackette, a prominent local African American minister and then-president of the local ministerial alliance, echoed Currie's assessment when he told the Biblical story of King Solomon in which he was confronted by two women claiming to be the mother of the same child. The king threatened to split the baby in half to resolve the dispute. The first woman prepared to accept the solution, while the second mother cried out that he must give the child to the first to spare its life. Solomon knew then that the second woman was the real mother. Brackette told this story to illustrate that "there must be something wrong with a mother like that," by which he meant that Smith was ill, just as the first mother in the Bible story must have been.⁷⁰⁹

Another local minister couched Smith's crimes in terms of the very real difficulties facing young mothers. Reverend Robert Cato, who had counseled Susan and her family during the investigation and had harbored doubts about her innocence during the investigation, appeared on

⁷⁰⁸ Notes from sermon, Sunday, November 6, 1995, from the personal papers of Reverend Tom Currie, Carthage, NC.

⁷⁰⁹ Brackette, interview.

the *Phil Donahue Show* the week after Smith's confession.⁷¹⁰ He declined the interview three times before he decided to do it. He gave in eventually, worried that if he did not, "there [would] be nobody to tell what God would want."⁷¹¹ With the blessing of Susan's family, Cato spoke to the nation—or at least to daytime television watchers—about Christian forgiveness. He reported being contacted by "hundreds" of other sympathetic mothers in the weeks following his appearance. He told me, "Mothers would just call me and confess because I was the only Cato in the phone book."⁷¹²

Cato recalled one such mother who called him late at night from Utah and told him the story of her depression following the birth of her first son. She tried unsuccessfully to overcome the depression; instead, she found herself standing over her son one night holding a pillow she had embroidered for his crib. As he cried, she placed the pillow over his face, and held it there long enough that he began to resist. She was startled by the ringing of the doorbell, and went downstairs to find that it was a man at the wrong house. She directed him to his intended destination, and she later believed that he had been sent to her by God to protect her son from her uncontrollable depressive urges. An angry *Donahue* audience member calling for the death penalty had prompted her to call Reverend Cato. She told him, "I'm more angry at that person than I am at Susan, because I am Susan."⁷¹³ This mother was not alone. Cato received phone calls from all time zones and several continents, from parents expressing sympathy and

⁷¹⁰ Susan Smith and her family actually came to Cato's home for counseling and to escape the media a week into the investigation. There were so many people they ran out of chairs. Susan sat on the floor, "rocking back and forth" and "crying out, 'Where are my babies?'" Cato had a premonition that night that Susan knew more than she was telling. "Nobody knows what happened that night in my living room," he told me. "That night, before I went to bed, I said, 'Honey, something's not right'" (Cato, interview).

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Eftimiades, 220-21; Cato, interview.

understanding based on the shared experience of motherhood.⁷¹⁴ He begged them to seek help and, like the woman whose son's life was saved by a mistaken visitor, to reach out to their local pastor or a Christian therapist.⁷¹⁵ Cato, for one, saw a very real connection between issues of motherhood, religion, and violence in Susan Smith's actions.

Nevertheless, Reverend Cato's unique understanding of Smith's crimes, informed as it was by both Christianity and the nascent psychology of postpartum depression, was not the dominant Christian perspective on the case. Like the few letters and columns of other sympathetic mothers that were published after Susan confessed, Cato's voice was drowned out by a more general understanding of Christian forgiveness.⁷¹⁶ In this narrative, Smith's motive—which Cato understood to be postpartum depression—mattered less than cleansing Susan, and her community, of her sins. One *Union Daily Times* reader wrote: “You know God forgave us of our sins and he will forgive her or anyone else of their sins if they asked and repent and believe.”⁷¹⁷ According to the Protestant ethos of Union, Smith was not an incomprehensible maternal monster but an egregious sinner who needed, with their help, to seek God's forgiveness. Religious leaders tried to put Smith's crimes in perspective, positioning her as a “lost lamb” whose horrible crimes were a tragic source of unity for her neighbors. Reverend A.L. Brackette received letters from all over the country from people who said they were “so angry at Susan they couldn't pray” until they saw one of his prayers broadcast on CNN.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁴ Cato, interview. He received calls from as far away as Australia and many from within the United States.

⁷¹⁵ Eftimiades, 221.

⁷¹⁶ Reverend Cato is currently working on a book about the many women he spoke to during the Smith case. He plans to approach postpartum depression from a “pastoral perspective” in the text, which is tentatively titled *The Other Mother Called Today* (Cato, interview).

⁷¹⁷ “Many Share Their Feelings,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 8, 1994.

⁷¹⁸ Brackette, interview.

These community fathers, many of whom knew Susan Smith personally and had counseled her during the alleged “kidnapping investigation,” spearheaded the effort to defuse the community’s anger and begin the healing. Their approach worked. Radio host Carlisle Henderson, the informal spokesperson for Union, characterized the softening of local reactions from violence to compassion for a national news magazine: “The very same people who were calling into the show a few weeks ago yelling ‘Kill her!’ or suggesting that she be dragged down the street are now calling in to say, ‘Well, hang on, let’s pray for her.’”⁷¹⁹ Throughout the winter of 1994-1995, Union churches continued to hold interracial, open services to “promote continued cooperation between the races.”⁷²⁰ By the end of the trial, over thirty local churches were involved in the open meetings.⁷²¹

Locals united again in their opposition to the death penalty after prosecuting attorney Tommy Pope made his announcement in mid-January. The alliance of local ministers personally wrote Pope a letter asking him not to seek the death penalty against Susan Smith, arguing that the “community had already suffered enough.” Reverend Jessie Jackson, on his visit to town shortly after Smith’s confession, made the same request; he believed that mental illness had to be the motive, even before the various traumas in Smith’s past became public knowledge.⁷²² Tim Cannon of Jonesville, a small community of about one thousand people in Union County, wrote to the *Rock Hill Herald* that Smith’s “fate should be left to God.” He quoted the Bible: “Judge

⁷¹⁹ Eftimiades, 240.

⁷²⁰ Anna Brown, “Union Minister Stays Calm Under National Spotlight,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), March 25, 1995.

⁷²¹ Raines, interview.

⁷²² Brackette, interview.

not lest you be judged.”⁷²³ Others characterized the decision as one that would just bring more pain and unwanted media attention to the town, and as a “slap in the face of the community.”⁷²⁴

This was not a simple matter of small town residents trying to protect one of their neighbors in the face of outside scrutiny, although Smith’s defense attorney acknowledged that localism played a role: “It’s just that if you’re told that Beelzebub had assumed human flesh 3000 miles away, you might think, well who knows? Maybe he did. But if you’re told that Beelzebub has lived among you for the past 23 years and nobody noticed, you’re more likely to be skeptical and to apply common sense to that.”⁷²⁵ But that was not all that was going on in this case. The sin-and-forgiveness “Christ-haunted” theology of Union combined with the breaking news of the traumas in her past to produce an image of Smith as not just a lost lamb, but also as a childlike victim. Indeed, at the age of 23, it was not difficult for Unionites to see Smith as their daughter, and an abused one at that. Religion and the community’s vision of itself fused to produce a pathetic Susan in need of paternal protection.

Although some of the traumas in Susan Smith’s past were well known—everyone knew her father had killed himself when she was young, for example—others were not, and as the details emerged, locals began to see the young criminal in a new light. The emerging details of Smith’s past meant that the media turned its harsh attention on a new figure: her stepfather, Beverly Russell. On November 28, 1994, a little over three weeks after Smith’s confession, the local paper broke the story that would help script the way that Union responded to her case. A published report alleged that Smith’s stepfather molested Susan when she was in her teens and

⁷²³ Associated Press, “Sympathy for Smith,” *Rock Hill Herald* (SC), January 13, 1995.

⁷²⁴ Kingsmore, interview.

⁷²⁵ Bruck, interview.

that Smith had a history of suicide attempts dating back a decade.⁷²⁶ This was no idle gossip; local law enforcement as well as the high school guidance counselor confirmed the reports. Beverly Russell, Susan's stepfather, was a prominent local business owner, tax consultant, former chairman of the Union County Republican Party, state Republican executive committeeman, and a member of the advisory board of the Christian Coalition.⁷²⁷ The nephew of former governor Donald Russell, Russell was a conservative activist and aspiring politician. He had run unsuccessfully for state representative in 1986, and he had campaigned for Pat Robertson's presidential bid in 1989 and David Beasley's gubernatorial campaign in 1994.⁷²⁸ His religious piety was also well-known. David Smith, Susan's estranged husband, joked that his family used to call Beverly "Thank you, Jesus" behind his back.⁷²⁹

Russell's faith informed his political activism, and this close connection mirrored the dynamics of religion and politics across the South in the late twentieth century. The ascendance of the conservative and often religious "family values" rhetoric in the 1990s represented the culmination of a decades-long thematic shift within the GOP. The historic shift from a "solid" Democratic South to a "solid" Republican South at mid-century turned on the issue of race. A slow but mass exodus from the Democratic Party accompanied the forced reform of race relations in the region. As the "status quo" of race relations—i.e., white supremacy—became an unacceptable political platform after Civil Rights Movement, conservative politicians turned to

⁷²⁶ "Report: Susan Smith Reported Stepfather for Sexual Molestation," *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 28, 1994.

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

⁷²⁸ Anna Brown, "Abuse Allegations Surprise Friends," *Union Daily Times* (SC), February 21, 1995. Apparently, Russell was molesting Susan the entire time he was campaigning for Robertson (Anna Brown, "Report Details Molestation Allegations," *Union Daily Times* (SC), April 1, 1995).

⁷²⁹ Smith, 40.

other traditional forms of social hierarchies as their major themes. This “updated defense of gendered hierarchies” replaced the old hierarchies of race, although subtle racist appeals undergirded “family values” politics in the form of what Glenn Feldman called “the new racism.”⁷³⁰

Conservative Protestantism was very much a part of this shift “from Silent Majority to Moral Majority.” Indeed, the transformation was due in no small measure to religious-political organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention, Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, and Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition.⁷³¹ In the 1980s under Ronald Reagan, Christian organizations began to wield considerable political power, almost “singlehandedly stopping” the Equal Rights Amendment, among other things.⁷³² Moreover, the language of conservatism was couched in religion. Historian Glenn Feldman argues that charges of “immorality” had largely replaced race baiting in political battles: “It is no longer socially acceptable in the South to call a political opponent a 'nigger lover.' It is acceptable, even commonplace and shrewd, to paint political opponents as moral reprobates, of flawed character, inferior values, suspect religious orientation, and questionable integrity.”⁷³³

The new “family values” rested upon traditional hierarchies of gender, race, and class, and politicians found new strength in extremist conservative approaches to women’s rights, reproductive rights, homosexuality, sexual education and welfare, to say nothing of tax cuts for the wealthy and “preemptive war.” In 1982, a group of historians described the platform of the

⁷³⁰ Paul Harvey, “Religion, Race, and the Right in the South, 1945-1990,” in Feldman, 101.

⁷³¹ Donald Wildmon, “The American Family Association and the Theology of Media Activism,” in Feldman, 237; James L. Guth, “Southern Baptist Clergy, the Christian Right, and Political Activism in the South,” in Feldman, 194; Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, “The Christian Right in Virginia Politics,” in Feldman, 259.

⁷³² Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-1988* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 93.

⁷³³ Feldman, in Feldman, 302.

youthful New Religious Political Right: “(a) happy nuclear families; (b) clear sex roles; (c) family and church in charge of all important social processes; (d) government which exists to provide defense against enemies and to punish evil; (e) the nation's recognition of the sovereignty of God.”⁷³⁴ These politics enjoyed great popularity in the South, where traditional religion and patriarchy reigned supreme even after Second Wave feminism. Glen Feldman explains “the South has long been a bastion of patriarchy--white male control over households and society resources, and white male loci of power. Sex, gender, and family relations have been principally defined in the region in the most narrow and male-dominated terms.”⁷³⁵

By the 1990s, the GOP was sweeping the South. The week after Susan Smith confessed to murdering her children, unprecedented numbers of Republicans won offices across the region.⁷³⁶ The trend was mirrored in Union County when voters elected their first Republican state representative in 124 years, while Republican senator Bob Inglis, three GOP incumbents at the state level, and the Republican candidates for governor and attorney general carried the county. Although the Democratic representative and some Democrats at the county level maintained their seats, the results meant that, “for the first time since Reconstruction, Union County [was] a two-party county.”⁷³⁷ Union County was in the process of making the slow transition that characterized the political landscape of the late twentieth-century South: “solid” Democratic

⁷³⁴ Samuel S. Hill and Dennis E. Owen, *The New Religious Political Right in America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), 18. The authors also wrongly predicted that the New Right was not a not a “movement that is likely to alter the basic course of American life” (Ibid, 10).

⁷³⁵ Feldman, in Feldman, 323.

⁷³⁶ Charles S. Bullock III and Mark C. Smith, “The Religious Right and Electoral Politics in the South,” in Feldman, 222.

⁷³⁷ Charles L. Warner, “Union County Voters Could Determine S.C.’s Political Future,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), January 14, 1995.

Union County was joining the GOP. Charles Warner of the *Union Daily Times* believed his county was poised on the precipice of a monumental political shift:

...it can be said that Union County, now open to the GOP but still anchored by deep Democratic roots, is, perhaps even more importantly, a symbol of what is going on in many of the small rural counties of South Carolina. They, like Union County, remained loyal to the Democratic Party even as that party moved away from them on political, economic, and cultural issues. Even as the Republicans adopted positions on these issues more in tune with the beliefs of the people of these counties they continued to support the Democratic Party out of tradition. The loyalties of these counties, including Union's, are now in limbo, poised between a Democratic past and a possible Republican future.⁷³⁸

Warner essentially predicted the future of local, state, and regional politics, and his hometown was representative of a realignment that was decades in the making.

At the local level, however, at least one powerful Republican head would roll that year: that of Beverly Russell, who, after the allegations were made public, resigned all political posts, agreed to a divorce, and, after the trial, left town. Unionites were shocked by the news of sexual misconduct on the part of one of their most pious and prominent citizens. The Union County Family Court documents were released to the local media in February 1995, and local reports detailed the physical abuse that had begun almost eight years earlier.⁷³⁹ Records indicate that on March 8, 1988, Russell fondled and kissed Susan upon returning from posting "Pat Robertson for President" fliers around town.⁷⁴⁰ Linda Russell never pressed charges on behalf of her daughter.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

⁷³⁹ Anna Brown, "Court Records Show Russell Abused Smith," *Union Daily Times* (SC), February 20, 1995. The report revealed that "Russell, now 47, physically abused Mrs. Smith when she was 16 by fondling her breasts, participating in open-mouthed kissing with her and by putting her hands on him in and about his genital area" (Ibid). The only error in this report was Susan's age; she was 15 when the abuse began. Susan told her guidance counselor that she often pretended to be asleep in hopes that he would stop. (Anna Brown, "Report details molestation allegations," *Union Daily Times* (SC), April 1, 1995).

⁷⁴⁰ Anna Brown, "Report details molestation allegations." Pat Robertson was the head of the Christian Coalition who ran unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination in 1988; a *Time* magazine poll showed that only 26% of Republican voters supported him at the height of his campaign (Bruce, vii). It is interesting that Russell supported him, given that Robertson famously addressed the issue of infanticide just two years before the Smith murders: "The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement

Even after Social Services intervened and the family attended mandatory counseling, the abuse continued.

The news rocked Union. According to the *Union Daily Times*, in 1988, when the abuse began, Susan was a “popular junior” at the local high school and Russell was a “respected self-employed Union appliance store owner,, who just two years before had made a run for the House of Representatives while serving as chairman of the Union County Republican Party.” Locals told the media that “they had a hard time believing a man they’ve known and admired for years would molest anyone, much less his wife’s daughter,” until the unsealed court documents confirmed the allegations. Local journalists linked Smith’s teenaged suicide attempts to the abuse she was suffering at home. A former friend of Susan’s told the *Union Daily Times*: “She never told me she was molested, but there was a time when she was out of school because she had overdosed, and there were rumors that her stepfather had molested her.”⁷⁴¹

This new vision of the Russell family unfolded slowly as locals discovered that the Social Services file on the molestation was sealed, which was unusual—but it seemed even more so when it was discovered that the Department of Social Services file was missing, as was all evidence of the charges, including the Rolodex card with the family’s name on it.⁷⁴² Speculation abounded that Russell had used his influence to destroy the documents so as not to damage his

that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians” (quoted from a 1992 fundraising letter, <http://www.gymell.com/doc/pat.html>).

⁷⁴¹ Anna Brown, “Abuse Allegations Surprise Friends,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), February 21, 1995.

⁷⁴² “Smith Court Documents Sealed,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), December 1, 1994. The “case of the missing file” prompted an inconclusive State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) investigation (Anna Brown, “Report Details Molestation Allegations,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), April 1, 1995; Associated Press, “Probe of Missing Susan Smith Files Finds ‘Nothing Remarkable,’” *Union Daily Times*, June 20, 1995). Russell resigned from his position on the executive committee of the Union County Republican Party before Smith’s murder trial (Charles L. Warner, “GOP To Pick Russell Replacement,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 15, 1994.

future political career.⁷⁴³ Finally, in late April, Russell issued a statement saying that he was ashamed of and responsible for his behavior and that he was seeking professional help.⁷⁴⁴ A few weeks later, he formally resigned from his position on the executive committee of the state Republican Party.⁷⁴⁵

Although the national media, like the prosecution at the trial several months later, generally included the molestation in the list of Smith's sexual dalliances (even, in some instances, referring to it as an "affair"), Union residents understood this sensational detail very differently. Local journalists positioned Susan Smith in relation to different men in her life, but their story was not the "boyfriend motive" and its attendant sexual deviance. In the local narrative, the community allowed Susan Smith to be abused by a powerful man, and he was not the only culprit. Although a select few knew about Russell's sexual abuse of Susan, her troubled relationship with her estranged husband was an open secret.⁷⁴⁶ Bluntly put, David was "known for his shenanigans," and his extramarital affair was public knowledge around town.⁷⁴⁷ Everyone felt sorry for his loss, but, according to a local lawyer, "a lot of the 'poor David' was not just the fact that he had lost his children, but that he had lost opportunities with his children

⁷⁴³ Russell, 66.

⁷⁴⁴ Associated Press, "Report: Smith, Stepfather Had Affair Through Last Year," *Union Daily Times* (SC), April 24, 1995.

⁷⁴⁵ Warner, "GOP to Pick Russell replacement."

⁷⁴⁶ Although a few locals told the *Union Daily Times* that there had been rumors of Russell's abuse while Susan was in high school, for the most part, only her immediate family, including David, and her counselors, including Reverend Tom Currie, knew the details (Tom Currie, interview). In fact, the confidential knowledge posed something of a problem for Currie later on when Beverly Russell was proposed for Rotary Club membership: "When he was proposed for membership, I was in a quandary, because I had known about some of the problems at home, but I knew it in confidence and was not able to share that and really just had to sit on my hands and hope all that had gotten straightened out. And then, I couldn't stand up and say, you know, I think don't think we ought to receive him into membership, and they said why, and I said because you know he had at least in the past molested his stepdaughter" (Currie, interview).

⁷⁴⁷ Cato, interview.

while they were alive—I mean, I think most people *knew that*.” To many Unionites, he was “not the epitome of the fine father,” regardless of what the media said.⁷⁴⁸

In early May, the court granted David Smith a divorce from his wife on the grounds of her adultery with Tom Findlay, although the original papers had been filed by Susan on the grounds of David’s long-standing affair with the woman who would soon become his second wife. Susan Smith’s divorce attorney told the *Union Daily Times* that he could have proven David’s extramarital affair, but Susan’s family had asked him to let the divorce proceed quietly, without argument.⁷⁴⁹ The local media also printed parts of Tom Findlay’s deposition, which revealed that David Smith had repeatedly harassed Susan Smith during their separation, hidden in her house when she was home, and threatened Findlay with physical harm when he caught the two in a telephone conversation.⁷⁵⁰ Locals began to speculate that the defense might argue that Susan was “sexually abused by her husband.”⁷⁵¹

The public sympathy for David Smith, the grieving father, was slowly dissolving, especially after the *Union Daily Times* reported that he was working on a book about his life with Susan. In June 1995, his attorney announced that David would make the rounds of television interviews—Barbara Walters, Katie Couric, Phil Donahue, and Larry King—in August plugging his new book, tentatively titled *Ultimate Betrayal: The Untold Story of Susan and David Smith*.⁷⁵² David Bruck immediately filed a brief with the court requesting the pertinent information of any

⁷⁴⁸ Thom White, interview.

⁷⁴⁹ Anna Brown, “David Smith granted divorce from his wife,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 5, 1995.

⁷⁵⁰ Anna Brown, “Deposition Detailed Pair’s Relationship,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 5, 1995.

⁷⁵¹ Anna Brown, “Report: Defense May Claim Smith Sexually Abused by Husband,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 19, 1995.

⁷⁵² Anna Brown, “David Smith Will Promote Book on Summer Television Interviews,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), June 14, 1995.

potential witness set to benefit financially from the case.⁷⁵³ Smith's editor then issued a statement retorting that David Smith was writing the book "to heal himself," not to "profit off his son's deaths." According to his editor, Smith's support for the death penalty had "nothing to do with a six-figure advance Smith shared with co-writers or the prospect of a trial that could spur sales." The book's publication was planned to coincide with the verdict at the trial. David Bruck argued that the enormous media attention, as well as books like David Smith's, "hampered any possible plea bargains"—a position that subtly pitted the media and David Smith against Susan Smith's defense team and the community who did not relish the burden of the trial.⁷⁵⁴ David's book offended Union's vision of itself on several levels by inviting national scrutiny yet again and by admitting, for all the world to read, that the community had allowed Smith to be abused repeatedly for years.

In keeping with the Protestant visions of paternal authority, Unionites began to position Susan against the backdrop of a series of father figures. Russell, the abusive stepfather, and David, the straying husband, held down the negative end of that spectrum, while the respected town fathers—Sheriff Howard Wells and almost all of the local ministers—served as the avengers of the wounded community. Uniting on the basis of community and Christianity, these paternal authorities offered their protection to Susan Smith, who had begun to look less like an offending woman and more like a damaged girl.

The first father figure in the case was, predictably, Union County Sheriff Howard W. Wells. Locals know Wells as a "by-the-book," efficient policeman. Before he was elected sheriff, he was a game warden. According to local attorney Thom White, "He's the only game warden I've

⁷⁵³ Anna Brown, "Book, Movie Deals Focus of Defense," *Union Daily Times* (SC), June 20, 1995.

⁷⁵⁴ Associated Press, "Editor: David Smith Writing Book 'to Heal Himself,'" *Union Daily Times* (SC), June 23, 1995.

ever known who could stay in the woods all day long, you know, tramping around in the woods or whatever, come out of the woods his hair would still be perfectly in place and his uniform perfectly creased.” Wells was “the antithesis of a redneck Southern sheriff.” He had animal trophies mounted on his walls, but he also “finished at the top of his class in the F.B.I. Academy’s training course.” The sheriff had a gun collection, but he also quoted “Supreme Court decisions off the top of his head.”⁷⁵⁵ Thom White joked that Wells would “give his mother a ticket,” and that quality made him the perfect lawman to handle an investigation that could have easily inflamed local emotions and especially racial tensions.⁷⁵⁶ Wells won the election for county sheriff by a slim margin of 23 votes; locals seem to have been swayed to vote for him by a local radio host who argued that Union needed a sheriff that communicated well in case something big ever happened in Union.⁷⁵⁷ The editorial, it seems, was prophetic.

People wrote from all over the country to praise Wells for his expert handling of the case; he personally reported receiving over one thousand letters congratulating him, and the *Union Daily Times* printed dozens more.⁷⁵⁸ Wells received a personal phone call from President Clinton commending him on his work, and he later won the Palmetto Award, South Carolina’s highest honor for a law enforcement officer.⁷⁵⁹ He was later approached by movie people to tell his “heroic” story.⁷⁶⁰ Citizens expressed their gratitude that local police did not indiscriminately

⁷⁵⁵ Bragg, “A Killer’s Only Confidant.”

⁷⁵⁶ Thom White, interview.

⁷⁵⁷ Tom Currie, interview.

⁷⁵⁸ Anna Brown, “Sheriff Getting Mountains of Mail Concerning Case,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 17, 1994; “Many Share Their Feelings,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), November 7-8, 1994.

⁷⁵⁹ Brown, “Sheriff Getting Mountains of Mail Concerning Case.”

⁷⁶⁰ Wells reported signed the exclusive contract for a story of his life and his role in the case to “insure that Union County benefits from any movie that is made about the Susan Smith case and to insure that it does not show the

round up African American men for interrogation, as Boston police did in the infamous Charles Stuart case just a few years earlier. They also thanked him for his careful manipulation of and professionalism in dealings with the media.

But the real focus of praise was Wells' careful manipulation of Susan Smith herself. Wells, in these depictions, was not just a sheriff doing his job; he was a father figure to Smith, protecting her from the waiting cameras while urging her to tell the truth. Once she confessed, like a good father, he provided discipline, but her arrest and incarceration occurred under his cautious watch. Wells stepped into the roles played poorly by Beverly Russell and David Smith, and he restored order to the role of paternal authority that they had abused and corrupted. In fact, he already served a fatherly role in Susan's extended family: he was the godfather to her older brother's two children.⁷⁶¹

Indeed, Wells was the first prominent Unionite to speak out against the death penalty. Many locals followed Wells' lead in using the media to urge prosecutor Tommy Pope to accept a plea bargain and avoid a trial. An editorial in the *State*, the major newspaper of the state capital of Columbia, argued that it might be impossible to find "12 unbiased jurors [who] will agree to put such a pathetic defendant to death, despite the horror she has wrought."⁷⁶² The Union paper, as well, featured editorials about the impending trial. The editor argued on behalf of his neighbors that "the case should be pleaded out with Ms. Smith receiving a life sentence and Union County spared the media circus of a long trial."⁷⁶³ Union County residents wrote letters to prosecutor

community in a bad light" (Charles L. Warner, "Wells Signs Contract with Movie Producer," *Union Daily Times* (SC), August 3, 1995).

⁷⁶¹ Russell, 13.

⁷⁶² "Smith Trial Will Lay Waste to Time, Money and Justice," *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 23, 1995.

⁷⁶³ "Let's Get Smith Trial Over with as Soon as Possible," *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 30, 1995.

Tommy Pope asking him to reconsider his decision to seek the death penalty throughout the winter and spring of 1995.⁷⁶⁴

Although the prosecutor ignored their pleas and proceeded with the trial, Union residents did not go blindly into the imminent “media circus.” The Smith case prompted self-examination among her friends and neighbors, but it also provided an opportunity for some deliberate self-presentation, and on a national stage at that. By the summer of 1995, just weeks before the courtroom drama that was expected to rival that of O.J. Simpson for national attention, Union residents were extremely aware of how they were being portrayed in the media. Local leaders offered “media training” to everyone, not just Union’s regular spokespeople, to help them deal with the unprecedented, international scrutiny. Union had its scars from the media presence during the investigation, and locals were meticulous in their preparation for their encore on the national stage.

In the weeks leading up to the trial, city administrators and local ministers planned a series of open meetings to discuss the “potential problems of the Smith trial.” Unionites were well aware of their town’s role as a “wounded community.” A crisis expert explained: “We want to talk to people on the issue at hand—how to keep the community from being further victimized by this situation.”⁷⁶⁵ “This situation” meant, of course, the media presence. Media experts warned Unionites that they, as the subjects, had to remember that they were “portraying the community.”

⁷⁶⁴ Pope, interview. He saw the letters as a strategy of Smith’s defense team: “The defense used that as a tactic really to keep me extremely busy, because they amped up the letter-writing campaign, and the calls, that kind of thing. Because, to the best of my ability, kind of like when you wrote me, I’m a public servant, I’m’ll make time for the public, you know. And I’m going to return all my phone calls, and anyway so...man, they swamped me with them. You had people calling and—oh, I got threatening letters, and it was really you know worldwide, really, you know, stuff from all over the board.” Then he compared his decision to a “Far Side” cartoon in which the devil is poking a man with a pitchfork yelling at him to choose one of two doors, which are labeled “Damned if you do” and “Damned if you don’t.” Although the ultimate decision rested with him, Pope told me that if David had not supported the death penalty, it might not have been a capital case (Ibid).

⁷⁶⁵ Anna Brown, “Community to Discuss Problems of Smith Trial,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 31, 1995.

The key to dealing with journalists was “anticipation.” A media expert told the crowd that gathered in the auditorium at USC-Union in early June that their experiences with the media during the trial might be very different from their experiences during the investigation: “Last time the media was here for a long period of time, a vast majority were working with you [to find the children]...Now they will be looking for a different story and may drive wedges between you to get that story.” Because the media thrives on competition, representatives from a Greenville public relations firm told locals, “you don’t want to pick an argument with CBS, because that will only make Union look bad...They live by competition, and they will stay on the story.”⁷⁶⁶ Locals united defensively against the impending media onslaught. This unity fostered community and gave Unionites the opportunity to uniformly present their idealized vision of their town to the media.

Experts from the hired P.R. firm filmed interviews with city council members, ministers, and city administrators, and then they critiqued each interviewee on his or her performance. They urged everyone to be as prepared for the cameras as Sheriff Wells had been during the investigation, and they circulated tip and fact sheets around the community to help individuals deal with reporters.⁷⁶⁷ Ann Currie, the wife of Reverend Tom Currie and an employee at Conso with Susan at the time of the murders, said the primary message of the training was “know what you want to say before the interview begins, and then don’t pay attention to the questions. Say what you want to say.”⁷⁶⁸

⁷⁶⁶ Carolyn Farr, “OSAP Meeting Prepares Community for Smith Trial,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), June 30, 1995.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁸ Ann Currie, interview.

By the July 1995 trial, then, locals were media savvy, and the views they presented of their hometown, and the images they offered of Susan herself, were careful and deliberate. To that end, Reverend Tom Currie wrote about the “Good things about Union” for the local paper less than one week before the start of the Smith trial. He included in his list the town’s new recreation center, the hospital and Drug and Alcohol Abuse Treatment Center, the schools, and, of course, the churches. He cited the “friendly atmosphere” in downtown businesses, where store clerks help him pick out presents for his wife, bank tellers ask after his parishioners, and gas station attendants kid him about never washing his truck.⁷⁶⁹ Union residents used the media wisely, depicting Union as the quintessential American small town, avoiding the rampant images of sexual, racial, and class tension that characterized other accounts.

Although many predicted that the Smith trial would put the county in debt, some residents even prepared themselves to profit off of the presence of the media; after all, the networks, newspapers, and magazines had been making money off of them for nine months. One enterprising Union man set up a concessions van in front of the courthouse, offering hot coffee in the mornings, hot dogs at noon, and cold Cokes in the evenings. Others rented living or office space to journalists—a profitable venture in a town with only 117 hotel rooms. Some homeowners rented their houses to the media for as much as \$3000 a week, an exorbitant amount in a nontourist area. A downtown shoe storeowner rented his front room to three different media organizations and was considering branching out into concessions. “Hell,” he told the *Union Daily Times*, “It seems like I’m doing everything else.” Reporters were the primary consumers;

⁷⁶⁹ Tom Currie, “Good Things about Union,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 5, 1995.

some locals condemned this crass profiteering.⁷⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the shocked residents who were surprised, even flattered, to be interviewed by journalists in October had learned how to use the overwhelming media presence to their advantage by July.

The entrepreneurs who looked forward to profiting from the trial were in the minority; most residents dreaded the jury selection date of July 10. Residents feared that the judge's decision to ban cameras from the courtroom would encourage journalists to focus their gaze on the community. Two days before jury selection began, the editor of the *Union Daily Times* warned and comforted the reading public:

Union County, a community known for its friendliness, will have that capacity for friendliness tested in the weeks ahead as people from different parts of the country (and the world) with different attitudes and agendas make our county their temporary home. There will be times during these, the hottest weeks of the year, when tempers will be short and patience in even shorter supply. However, Union County has been tested before by war, Reconstruction, Depression, social change, and, since last year, a tragedy that touched the world and still it has remained a community whose greatest virtues have been its friendliness, charity and faith.⁷⁷¹

He concluded by quoting the Bible, reassuring the good people of Union County that “this too shall pass.”⁷⁷²

Union pleaded publicly, through letters to the solicitor, letters to the editor, and weekly editorials, for a plea deal, right up to the beginning of the trial. On Sunday, July 9, 1995, locals prayed in houses of worship all over Union County for a swift end to the ordeal. A member of Union Baptist Church believed her pastor when he said that “the Lord will take his own vengeance, so we don't need to try.” Reverend A.L. Brackette of St. Paul Baptist Church led his

⁷⁷⁰Anna Brown, “Union Homeowners Plan to Cash in on Media Horde,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), June 15, 1995; “How Will Tax Increase Affect Potential Jurors in Smith Trial?,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), June 9, 1995; Jesse J. Holland, “Union Residents Ready to Make Big Bucks Off Trial,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 7, 1995.

⁷⁷¹“Union County Will Be Tested in Weeks Ahead,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 8, 1995.

⁷⁷² *Ibid.*

parishioners in a prayer for a plea bargain, “because that will help the town and the families heal faster.” He continued: “That’s what this trial should be about: a sense of closure and healing for the family and the town.”⁷⁷³ Jury selection began, as Judge Howard had said it would at the second hearing in January, on July 10, 1995. The front page of the *Union Daily Times* had the major headlines: “Jury selection begins in Smith case;” “Ms. Smith ready to die, pastor says;” “Union churches plan Monday night services;” and “Media takes over Main Street.”⁷⁷⁴ That morning, Reverend Mark Long, who had counseled Smith extensively in prison, told the media: “She made a profession of faith and turned her life over to the Lord. She had hardened her heart to the Lord, but she sought forgiveness from the church and the Lord and she knows it has been granted.”⁷⁷⁵ Although the national media mostly ignored Long, local and regional papers quoted him extensively. Smith’s hometown was in a forgiving mood on the eve of the so-called “Trial of the Century in the Carolinas.”⁷⁷⁶ The tears in the fabric of the community could be mended through forgiveness. Union would be absolved of the guilt of not saving Smith’s sons if they could, instead, finally save Susan Smith.

In the interdenominational Monday night meetings that began in July, religious leaders stressed four themes: “Our unity in Christ; Our responsibility to care for one another; Our trust in God to heal our wounds; and Our faith that nothing can separate us from God’s love.”⁷⁷⁷ At the

⁷⁷³ Associated Press, “Minister: Smith is Forgiven,” *Charleston Post & Courier* (SC), July 10, 1995.

⁷⁷⁴ Anna Brown, “Jury Selection Begins in Smith Case,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 10, 1995; Jesse J. Holland, “Ms. Smith Ready to Die, Pastor Says,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 10, 1995; Charles L. Warner, “Union Churches Plan Monday Night Services,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 10, 1995; Anna Brown, “Media Takes Over Main Street,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 10, 1995.

⁷⁷⁵ Associated Press, “Minister: Smith is Forgiven.”

⁷⁷⁶ It was also called “O.J. East” (Brown, “Media takes over Main Street”).

⁷⁷⁷ Warner, “Union Churches Plan Monday Night Services.” The services were interdenominational and included pastors from the local Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches. A pair of ministers led each service from different churches. The July 10 service featured Revs. Brackette and Currie of St. Paul Baptist

first meeting, after the first day of jury selection, Reverend Tom Currie welcomed everyone, including the media, and explained the purpose of the gathering: “We are like someone who was struck by lightning and the odds on that happening to anyone are astronomical, and yet beginning today, we have been struck by lightning a second time as we are forced to relive what happened in the fall and face strong emotions again—all this under intense media scrutiny.” He reminded attendees again that they were “all in this boat together,” asked them to “pray for our brothers and sisters,” and assured them that “God will bring good out of even the most evil situation.”⁷⁷⁸

The following morning, the editor of the *Union Daily Times* wrote that it was “fitting that our churches, the houses of a God who cared enough about the human race to sacrifice his only son, are reminding us of our responsibility.”⁷⁷⁹ At the next week’s meeting, ministers from local Methodist and Baptist churches reminded the group of the message Currie had offered just a few days after Smith’s confession: “One man died for everyone—that puts us all in the same boat.”⁷⁸⁰ When CNN’s *TalkBack Live* came to Union to gauge local opinions, they found that most locals wanted to forgive Smith based on their “Christian faith.” Through the television cameras, Union’s mayor asked the nation: “We are a forgiving people and if we can’t have a forgiving spirit and forgive, how can we expect to be healed?”⁷⁸¹ Unionites were all too aware of the intense media scrutiny, and they offered national journalists a vision of Union as a Christian

and First Presbyterian Churches; the July 17 service featured Revs. Calhoun and Heustess of Corinth Baptist and Duncan Acres United Methodist Churches; the July 24 service featured Revs. Raines and Pearson of First Baptist Church and Church of the Nativity (Episcopal); and the final service on July 31, 1995, featured Revs. Harris and Farr of St. Augustine Catholic and New Bethel Baptist Churches. Two other services were scheduled for August 7 and August 14, but they were cancelled when the trial ended earlier than expected (“Ministers and Churches Sponsoring Community Worship Services,” from the personal papers of Reverend Tom Currie, Carthage, NC).

⁷⁷⁸ Notes from Community Worship Service, July 10, 1995, Currie papers.

⁷⁷⁹ “Church Services Remind Us to Care for Each Other,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 11, 1995.

⁷⁸⁰ Notes from “A Community Service of Worship,” St. Paul Baptist Church, July 17, 1995, Currie, papers.

⁷⁸¹ Charles L. Warner, “Many at ‘Talkback’ Forgive Smith,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 22, 1995.

community that would meet weekly to pray for their infamous murderess, who was, according to the local minister who baptized her in prison, prepared to die for her sins.

After one week of jury selection, the attorneys for both sides had finally chosen the twelve men and women who would decide Susan Smith's fate. Although judges in South Carolina generally question the potential jurors Judge Howard allowed each attorney to ask the jurors specific questions because it was a capital case. He remembers that David Bruck questioned each juror first about his or her opinion on the death penalty, and, depending on the answer, he made his questions more personal. If they said they did not believe in it in any circumstance, for example, he gave them different scenarios: a violent madman, or a mentally ill person, or a family member who killed in a heat of passion. The potential jurors showed with each scenario that they could consider capital punishment on a case-by-case basis. In this manner, Bruck seated several jurors who originally said they did not believe in the death penalty at all, statements that would normally have caused Tommy Pope to strike them immediately.⁷⁸²

The men and women who were to gauge the weight of Smith's crimes included three white women, one of whom had been sexually abused as a teenager. Another had worked at the daycare that young Susan Smith attended as a child. There were five white men on the jury; one was a Rush Limbaugh fan, one used to work with David Smith, another used to date Linda Russell, Smith's mother, and yet another had a brother who had been found not guilty of murder by reason of insanity. Four black men served on the jury. Each said he could be impartial despite Smith's racist lie, although one reported fearing that, as a black man, he might "be

⁷⁸² Howard, interview.

accused” during the investigation.⁷⁸³ All told, nine men and three women, eight whites and four African Americans, would judge Susan Smith.

Although temperatures soared to nearly one hundred degrees on July 18, 1995, people flocked to the Union County Courthouse. Although many locals tried, it was difficult to avoid the trial; the media literally took over downtown. Twenty-five broadcasting scaffolds lined Main Street, and the satellite vans stretched down the hill in either direction. News affiliates filled all the formerly empty storefronts downtown. Reporters came from as far away as Japan.⁷⁸⁴ Ironically, Judge Howard’s ban on cameras in the courtroom may have led to more journalists coming to Union. One CBS news director explained: “There were 50 seats allotted to the media, and because there were going to be cameras in the courtroom, reporters could sit outside and watch from one of the offices that were set up. Now, you have to be physically present to report, and that makes seats more valuable.”⁷⁸⁵ The result was chaos. Almost overnight, “it looked like the fair had come to town,” said Phil Hobbs, a local radio announcer, of the mass of satellite trucks, scaffolding, and wires.⁷⁸⁶ In the space that is now the Union County Museum, journalists constructed a sea of makeshift cubicles out of “2 X 4s,” connected by miles of cable to their viewing public. USC-Union professor Allan Charles recalls walking up the hill on Main Street at lunchtime and seeing a line of well-dressed people standing in front of the courthouse talking

⁷⁸³ “Jurors Selected for Susan Smith Trial,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 18, 1995.

⁷⁸⁴ Dr. Allan Charles of USC-Union showed me his interview and picture in a Japanese magazine; to this day, he does not know what the article says because he cannot read the language (Charles, interview).

⁷⁸⁵ Brown, “Media takes over Main Street.” The judge’s decision to prohibit cameras, based on a motion filed by the defense, may have contributed to the lack of sympathy the media initially felt toward the defense in the trial (Brown, interview).

⁷⁸⁶ Hobbs, interview.

to themselves. It was not until he saw the cameras pointed at them from across the street that he realized they were all reporters doing trial updates for the noon news broadcasts.⁷⁸⁷

By the first day of the trial, Union was immersed in the dreaded “media circus,” but residents were well prepared to deal with the media and with the courtroom drama, which was expected to last about a month. Trials in South Carolina are divided into two phases: the guilt phase, in which the jury determines guilt or innocence based on the evidence presented by the opposing sides, and the sentencing phase, in which the jury decides which punishment will accompany their verdict. Susan Smith confessed in no uncertain terms to her crime; although she pleaded “not guilty,” a guilty verdict in the first phase was more or less a foregone conclusion.⁷⁸⁸ The real battle for the defense team was against capital punishment. That is, they were not fighting necessarily to exonerate Smith of the charges; rather, they just wanted to save her life. This legal strategy mirrored the sentiments of Union residents, expressed in interviews, through the media, and in their public prayers at each weekly community meeting and in regular church services.

David Bruck and Judy Clarke wisely approached the case from two different perspectives. One perspective was psychological, based on the slippery legal concept of the mentally ill defense. This strategy rested upon the testimony of official witnesses—law enforcement officers and psychology experts. The second involved using community spokespeople to tell the story of Smith’s life, beginning long before she ever drove her sons to the edge of John D. Long Lake. These local witnesses humanized Susan, but they also infantilized her, making her seem more like a pitiful, neglected girl than a scheming, criminal woman. These depictions of the defendant as childlike moved the testimony further and further away from issues of motherhood and the “incomprehensible” crime of infanticide to the more sympathetic issues of Smith’s traumatic

⁷⁸⁷ Charles, interview.

⁷⁸⁸ Bruck, interview.

childhood and resulting mental illness in the form of clinical depression. When locals took the stand in her defense, many argued that Susan had always been an excellent mother, but the most consistent image they spoke of was that of a troubled girl. Beverly Russell brought home this message when took the stand on the last day and spoke before the rapt audience of his neighbors one last time. Finally, a series of local ministers testified on behalf of the community, making the ultimate plea for salvation. The salvation they spoke of was for the entire town of Union, not just for Susan.

In fact, even some of the local witnesses called to the stand by the prosecution portrayed Susan in a light more favorable to the defense. As the man who singlehandedly broke the case, Sheriff Wells was meant to be a star witness for the state when he took the stand on July 18. Even in direct examination by the prosecution, Wells was clearly sympathetic to Susan, and everyone in the courtroom knew that he had publicly spoken out against the death penalty for Smith. Wells described a pathetic, pitiable Susan as she confessed to her horrifying crime. In response to his lie, Wells said on the stand, “Susan became quiet. She dropped her head, and then she looked back up at me and asked if I would pray with her.” Susan put her hands in Wells’, prayed with him, and burst into hysterical tears. Wells told the crowded courtroom that he prayed aloud that “all things would be revealed in time,” then he told Susan quietly, “It’s time.”⁷⁸⁹ Smith blurted out “My children are not all right,” and she asked for Wells’ gun in a last desperate suicidal gesture. In the sole company of Sheriff Wells, Susan’s words came tumbling out, faster even than she could write them down, detailing how she had wanted to die and wished to save her beloved children the pain of motherlessness by “ending [their] lives together.”⁷⁹⁰ She

⁷⁸⁹ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2504-05.

⁷⁹⁰ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2519.

told Wells that “she had never felt so low in her life,” that she was “depressed,” and that she’d intended “to go down that ramp with her children.” Sobbing on the floor of the interview room, she looked, Wells testified, “like a child praying at bedtime.”⁷⁹¹

Bruck challenged the “boyfriend motive” promulgated by the prosecution when he asked Wells to read Smith’s entire written confession. To the end, Susan professed maternal love:

As I rode and rode and rode, I felt even more anxiety coming upon me about not wanting to live. I felt I couldn’t be a good mom anymore but I didn’t want my children to grow up without a mom. I felt I had to end our lives to protect us all from any grief and harm. I had never felt so lonely and so sad in my entire life...I never meant to hurt them!! I am sorry for what has happened and I know that I need some help...My children, Michael and Alex, are with our Heavenly Father now and I know that they will never be hurt again. As a mom, that means more than words could ever say.⁷⁹²

Wells, the town’s most respected lawman, depicted for the court a remorseful, childlike woman who believed her children were better off in heaven. Although he was not asked about it on the stand, Wells later told Rick Bragg that he felt “sorry for [Smith], and is disgusted by the men who used her and in their own ways contributed to the tragedy.”⁷⁹³ Without ever delving into Susan’s past beyond the nine days of the investigation, Wells established the image of Susan that would dominate local testimony.

Bruck promised the court that he would lead them through the “twenty-three year story that led to the water’s edge,” and throughout the trial, local witnesses filled in the gaps of Susan Smith’s life, going as far back as her relationship with her biological father, who killed himself when she was only six. Iris Rogers, an insurance agent in Union, recalled that she “found Susan to be sad” and “unhappy and scared at times,” even though she had known her only between the

⁷⁹¹ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2516.

⁷⁹² *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2544-45. The underlining is Susan’s from her original written confession of November 3, 1994.

⁷⁹³ Bragg, “A Killer’s Only Confidant.”

ages of three and six. In fact, the last time she had seen Susan before she took the witness stand was the night her father committed suicide. That night, Susan's mother Linda had called and asked if Susan could spend the night at the Rogers' home. Susan spent the night, and the next day Iris Rogers dropped her off at home. Unbeknownst to her, Susan's father had shot himself the night before, and when she dropped young Susan off, no one else was home. Six-year-old Susan waited in the house alone for her mother, who returned later with the news that her father was dead. Mrs. Rogers had no way of knowing about the family tragedy, but she clearly felt guilty about her responsibilities as Susan's temporary caretaker.⁷⁹⁴

Although Rogers' short time on the stand did not make the national news, it made quite an impression on Union County. Over a decade later, locals remembered her brief testimony about young Susan being left alone the day her father died in their lists of the traumas Smith suffered throughout her lifetime.⁷⁹⁵ In the local imagination, Susan Smith had been in need of protection since at least that night in 1978. A former teacher described her as childlike and suicidal during several of her school years. A high school counselor testified that he "always thought she was depressed," and called her teenaged suicide attempts a "cry for help."⁷⁹⁶ It was a cry the community fatally failed to answer.

This kind of testimony did not keep the jury from finding Smith guilty of homicide as expected on July 22, and on the next day, the sentencing phase began. In such life-or-death capital cases, the court allows the jury to hear so-called "victim impact" statements in which various family members or friends affected by the crime express their opinions on the death

⁷⁹⁴ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3452-3461.

⁷⁹⁵ Inman, interview.

⁷⁹⁶ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3476, 3233, 3231.

penalty.⁷⁹⁷ Tommy Pope sporadically attempted to refocus the trial on Michael and Alex Smith, the victims. The prosecution relied heavily on victim impact statements to humanize the emotionless forensic evidence and make the case for capital punishment. Their most powerful witness was David Smith, who wept openly as he spoke of his relationship with his sons. Tommy Pope began with his marriage to Susan. “There were problems,” David admitted, “but it wasn’t totally awful.” They had fights like most couples over money and sex, and there were some instances of violence between them. Their love for the children maintained their relationship through violence and infidelity. David, frequently pausing to weep on the witness stand, showed the jury “tear-smudged” pictures of their two little boys, and sadly told them all of the things they would not get to do together because of Susan. “All my hopes, all my dreams that I had planned for the rest of my life came to an end that day,” he sobbed. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do without my kids.”⁷⁹⁸

David cried throughout his testimony, prompting the judge to call for a recess. Bruck kindly (and cleverly) did not cross-examine him or ask him about the lucrative deal for his book, which hit the stands that very day.⁷⁹⁹ There were many tears in the courtroom that day. One female

⁷⁹⁷ Not surprisingly given the context of the rise of the New Right and the “backlash,” the final decades of the twentieth century witnessed a shift from the pop cultural “attorney-hero” of shows like *Matlock* to the heroic policemen and prosecutors of shows like *Law & Order*. This televised trend mirrored a new “law and order” sensibility in courtrooms as state legislatures raised mandatory minimum sentences and began to inaugurate conservative punishments such as the “three strikes” rules. In the “victim-centered” legal world of the 1990s, these impact statements were meant to give a voice to the victims and, more subtly, mete out revenge for violent crimes. By the mid-90s, 36 states used the “language of victims’ right” in their constitutions (Elayne Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV* [New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003]); Ahmed A. White, “The Juridical Structure Of Habitual Offender Laws And The Jurisprudence Of Authoritarian Social Control,” *University of Toledo Law Review* 37 (2006).

⁷⁹⁸ “Notes from Union,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* (SC), July 27, 1995.

⁷⁹⁹ *Evening News*, CBS, 25 July 1995. David Smith’s book deal was an issue for the case during jury selection; Judge Howard ruled that the defense team could indeed use the amount of money Smith received from the deal to mitigate his victim impact statement (Rick Bragg, “Smith Trial Stalls on Questions about Book Deal,” *New York Times*, 14 July 1995).

juror reportedly wept, and Susan shed tears as she “rocked in her attorney’s arms.” David’s words set the somber tone for the entire day of testimony. As Susan, “still in tears, was led from the courtroom, she paused next to his chair and croaked, ‘I’m sorry.’”⁸⁰⁰

David Smith was by far the most emotionally compelling witness the prosecution put on the stand, and his victim impact statement, in which he affirmed his support for the death penalty, carried great weight in the courtroom and in the media. But after the prosecution rested their case in the sentencing phase, a curious thing happened in the hot, packed courtroom. The identity of the “victims” slowly began to broaden. One aspect that makes infanticide and intra-familial violence different from other crimes is the fact that the family of the murderer and the family of the victims are one and the same.⁸⁰¹ In the Smith case, teasing out these legal identities was even messier; “victims” came to mean everyone from both sides of the family to the entire community. The idea of the “impact” of the crime also broadened to encompass Susan’s original crime as well as her possible death at the hands of the state. Legally, it is called “mitigation” when community members took the stand in Susan’s defense to argue that her death would only further wound the embattled town. In Smith’s trial, the mitigation presented by Smith’s defense team was a plea not just for Susan, but also for the town. The prosecutorial concept of “victim impact” became a defense of the entire town of Union, SC. According to these local witnesses, it was not just Susan who was in need of protection. The death penalty would further injure the community that had already undergone so much. Unionites felt collective guilt for not helping Susan at critical points in her life, for not realizing the depth of her depression until it was too late. One by one, they testified in defense of their community, most of them shedding tears as they begged the jury to spare Susan’s life.

⁸⁰⁰ *Evening News*, NBC, 25 July 1995.

⁸⁰¹ Bruck, interview.

The defense began their long list of friends and family with Scotty Vaughan, Susan's older brother. Vaughan testified that Susan was an excellent mother who "never lost her temper with her sons," but she was also a self-destructive woman who "did not know what she was doing" the night of the murders.⁸⁰² He told the courtroom he had wrestled with the question of "why" for months. He could only conclude that "the Susan [he] knew was not at that lake."⁸⁰³ He asked the jury to spare her life, arguing that "to send two thousand volts of electricity through her in the name of justice" would devastate what was left of their family.⁸⁰⁴ Brother and sister both shed tears in the courtroom, and they could not look at each throughout Scotty's emotional testimony.⁸⁰⁵

Bruck proceeded with a series of close friends and family members who testified to their love for Michael, Alex, and Susan Smith. These witnesses made it clear that by sparing Susan's life, the jury would also spare Union additional pain, shame, and media attention. Tomi Vaughan, Susan's paternal aunt, spoke for many others when she begged the jury to spare Susan's life for her family's sake.

Because the sweet, gentle girl with the smile from ear to ear for everybody was not the person who could commit such an act. She's as far removed as the north pole is to the south pole from a person who could do something like this... We are just an ordinary family. We have had everything hung out in front of the whole world to examine about us. We love the Lord and we love our family, and Susan is our family. We could not bear to lose her.⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰² *Evening News*, CBS, July 26, 1995.

⁸⁰³ Bragg, "Smith Defense Portrays a Life of 'Chaos.'"

⁸⁰⁴ Paul Schwartzman, *Daily News* (NY), July 27, 1995.

⁸⁰⁵ *Evening News*, CBS, July 26, 1995.

⁸⁰⁶ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4768-69.

These forthright pleas from members of Smith's family made Susan seem very much a part of the community to which the jurors also belonged. According to the "wounded community" narrative, locals might have taken the opportunity of the trial to ostracize, or exorcise, Susan. Yet as defense witnesses, they did the opposite, making her an integral part of the fabric of the community rather than the perverse aberration portrayed by the prosecution.

Kay Dillard, the high school math teacher who also served as something of a maternal figure to Smith in her teens, followed Vaughan to the stand.⁸⁰⁷ Bruck peppered Dillard with by-now familiar questions about Smith's depression, suicidal tendencies, and her enduring love for her children. Dillard explicitly linked the expert witnesses' psychological conclusions with her own relationship with Susan.

I do love Susan, I do... I listened to [one of the psychiatrists who testified], and I think—I appreciated what what he said about the fact that you can't—with hindsight we can see these things, but he didn't put the blame on anybody for not doing it, anything about it... If Susan dies, I think that a part of me will die with her. And in my mind I can rationalize that—I really had no idea at the time how deep her depression was. But in my heart I would have to live the rest of my life wishing that I had done this or I had done that that may have prevented [the murders].⁸⁰⁸

Dillard cried on the stand as she testified to her own sense of culpability in the crime.

The defense team introduced the local religious leaders through the testimony of Felicia Mungo, a guard at the prison where Smith was held while awaiting trial. Mungo testified that Smith was on suicide watch and that she often asked guards if they thought she would get to "go see her children" in Heaven if she were to kill herself. She told the court that she saw remorse in Smith, "in her eyes, in her emotions," when the guards checked on her every fifteen minutes and in the surveillance camera images of her that they monitored constantly. Smith often kneeled

⁸⁰⁷ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4699.

⁸⁰⁸ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4709-4710.

and cried silently to herself. Mungo reported that she spent much of her time trying to atone for her sins: “When we go up there or when she doesn’t know we are looking at her, she’s usually reading her Bible. She’s kneeling on her knees. She’s in her cell kneeling reading her Bible.”⁸⁰⁹

This moving image of Smith beseeching God in her barren cell laid the groundwork for the last three witnesses in the trial. Reverend Tom Currie, Susan’s former pastor and an occasional editorialist in defense of Union throughout the winter and spring of 1995, counseled Susan after her junior year in high school about her molestation, and again in the months before the murders about her marital problems. Reverend Currie told the court that the molestation by her stepfather set Susan up for a lifetime of abusive relationships with men. Smith, he said, was not at all “manipulative”; she was simply looking for the love that she did not get from her biological father or her abusive stepfather.⁸¹⁰ She found that love with her sons, who were the “only bright spot” in her failing marriage. Currie argued that the murders, committed by a woman who was desperately struggling to be a “good” daughter, wife, and mother represented the “loss of innocence of our community.” If more death came in the form of capital punishment, the community could never heal. He detailed how he and a group of downtown ministers had polled the community for their responses to Tommy Pope’s decision to seek the death penalty. Together, they had written a letter to Pope, asking him to spare Union the “trauma” of a trial, and Reverend Currie had personally written two more letters to the prosecutor begging him to reconsider. Currie identified Reverend Brackette, an African American minister who had accompanied him to the trial for moral support that day, as one of the others who signed the letter to Pope. This same group of ministers organized the open prayer meetings, to urge people

⁸⁰⁹ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4827-4837.

⁸¹⁰ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4869.

to take advantage of their “spiritual resources” and “to try and get us to pull together as a community.”⁸¹¹

David Bruck asked Reverend Currie to characterize the effect capital punishment might have on the community. Pope objected, arguing that it was “improper” to ask the jury to consider the effect of their verdict on the community. The judge allowed the question. Currie answered on behalf of the entire town:

I think more than anything this community needs a closure. We need to be able to be able to bring this thing to an end, the hurting in all the different ways. And there are a lot of different emotions. And most of the emotions that were there in the fall [are] here now, we need to bring those to an end. It’s my belief that if Susan gets the death penalty, this will not happen, because this thing is going to drag on.⁸¹²

He characterized the death penalty as “more vengeance than justice” and as an assault on all of Union.⁸¹³ Currie linked all of Union to Susan’s troubled past and her ultimate fate; he implied that the jurors’ sentence would be imposed on the entire community.

Currie had been speaking to the community about forgiveness for nine long months, and when he stepped down from the witness stand, Beverly Russell took his place to ask his neighbors for that most difficult kind of mercy—for Susan and for himself. Russell spoke of Susan’s battle with depression and suicidal tendencies, and he echoed other witnesses when he argued that the death penalty had a larger target than suicidal Susan: it was “a threat to [this] community.” Russell compellingly played the role of tragic villain when he explicitly took some of the blame for the murders by linking them to his molestation of Susan. If there was any doubt about the veracity of the sexual misconduct charges against Beverly Russell, he erased it with his

⁸¹¹ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4857.

⁸¹² *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4858, 4860.

⁸¹³ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4858, 4860-61.

tearful testimony at the trial. He described the act in Biblical terms, arguing tearfully that the town was reaping the tragedy that he had sowed years before. On the stand, Russell read aloud a letter he had written to Susan in prison on Father's Day, a few weeks before her trial began. In it, he took the responsibility for Susan's crimes.

I must tell you how sorry I am for letting you down as a father. I had responsibilities to you in which I utterly failed. Many say this failure had nothing with October 25th [the day Susan killed her sons]. But I believe differently. Of course had I known at the time what the result of my sin would be, I would have mustered the strength to behave according to my responsibilities...When I came into the family, you leaned on me and looked to me for support and love...To see unfolding before our eyes the principal of reaping and sowing...I want you to know that you don't have all the guilt in this tragedy.

Russell argued that the death penalty was no threat to the suicidal Susan, who was searching for "a way that she could go to heaven with Michael and Alex." Rather, the "death penalty [was] a threat to our community," to the tiny town of Union that had failed to protect Susan Smith from powerful men like Beverly Russell.⁸¹⁴ The positioning of Susan Smith as a victimized little girl allowed this depiction of the cycle of sins: Russell sinned against her, and she sinned against her sons. Both had sinned against the community. But the jury could stop the cycle and save the community by sparing her life.

Finally, the defense questioned Reverend Toni White, a chaplain from a neighboring town who counseled Susan in prison in the months before her trial. A diagnosed manic-depressive herself, White connected the experts' analyses to her own and Susan's experiences. Reverend White, who served as Susan's prison chaplain, told the court that Smith was, in many respects, still a child: "The thing that strikes you about Susan is that she is very childlike, although she is certainly a woman. But she has a certain vulnerability about her...What I find is that she herself is very easily manipulated." She testified that Susan felt extremely remorseful about the murders,

⁸¹⁴ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4858-4886.

and echoed Reverend Currie's charge that capital punishment would just cause more pain for the community. Susan was a person with potential, a person who "might have a long way to go, but she has very much to offer." The death penalty, according to White, would be misguided revenge: "We can't bring Michael and Alex back, but we don't have to take another life to cause more pain."⁸¹⁵ Reverend White testified on the last day of the trial, insuring that these images of childhood trauma and maternal love lingered in the minds of the jurors.

Along with the other ministers, White tied together the many themes of the defense: victimization by the men in Susan's life, the expert medicalization of her experiences, community guilt for her troubled past, and the necessity of future community "protection" of this wounded girl in the form of a life sentence. Each minister had individual connections to Susan Smith, and they were all representatives of the larger community. But more importantly, the ministers were spokespeople for the proper Christian response to Smith. The defense team shrewdly put Reverends Currie and White on the stand on the last day of testimony. They spoke on behalf of their religion, and of course they spoke for Susan, but they also helped to convince the jury that saving Smith's life would mean salvation for their community.

In his closing arguments, in a voice so quiet that the jury complained of not being able to hear him, defense attorney David Bruck used the images provided to him by the people of Union to make the case for the defense. His lengthy summation rested upon the idea of Christian forgiveness and community responsibility for this fatally lost young woman in their midst. Although the judge would not allow Bruck to tell the jury how a death sentence for Susan would weigh on him personally, he nevertheless spoke the language of the community.⁸¹⁶ He argued

⁸¹⁵ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4913-4917.

⁸¹⁶ Near the outset of his statement, Bruck told the jury about the difficulty of his job: "And I'm going to sit down and I'm going to think, oh, I forgot to tell them that. I forgot to tell them this. And I have to tell you that if Susan

that God was already punishing Smith for her sins: “This young woman is in the lake of fire. That is the remorse, the grief, the shame she feels. And it’s not going to go away any time soon. That is her punishment if you show her what is sometimes called mercy.” He took the jury back through the chronology of Susan’s life, replete with family suicide, depression, incest, and abuse at the hands of her husband. Susan was, according to this narrative, “so dependent on her mother, just like a little kid.”⁸¹⁷

In a few minutes, Bruck argued, the jury would judge the fate of this suffering young woman, and when they did, he wanted them to know they were not the first to attempt such a judgment. Referencing the Bible upon which they had all sworn, Bruck told the story recorded by “a court reporter named John” and the “death penalty proceeding in the Gospel.” Jesus confronted a crowd, waiting with stones in hand, who had gathered to kill an adulterous woman. Despite their clamor, and the fact that she was indeed guilty of adultery, John stopped them with the words: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast the stone at her.” Bruck told the jury that these people, who dispersed at John’s words and left the woman unharmed, must have wondered if they had done the right thing by following their hearts. “In other words,” Bruck concluded, “each of you have a stone.”⁸¹⁸ The choice the jury was to make, then, was between heeding the angry crowds and stoning the offending woman, or listening to Jesus and taking responsibility for the young woman who had been abused repeatedly in their midst.

should be sentenced to death, I will carry that with me for—“ The judge interrupted him: “No, counsel, that’s not appropriate argument, sir” (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 5031].

⁸¹⁷ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 5037, 5072.

⁸¹⁸ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 5081-5086. Although Bruck himself downplays his use of Christian language in the trial, Tommy Pope does not; in his next capital case, he filed a motion to suppress the use of Biblical references in the courtroom (Pope, interview).

Bruck asked the jury to extend to Susan the community protection they had failed to provide in the past.

And despite everything that you've heard, I'm going to ask you to watch over Susan too. She doesn't know that she can go to the people who care about her. That, as you heard, is part of what is wrong with her. That is part of her illness. She said in her confession, "I never felt so lonely and so sad in my entire life." Her judgment is impaired, but yours is not. So this time you go to her.

She will be all alone again soon...She will be all alone soon to resume her awful, awful struggle with suicide. Just do this for her. Don't leave her just yet. Stay with her just a little while. Watch over her.⁸¹⁹

With these words—the last spoken in the courtroom before the sentencing—the defense offered the compelling vision of an abused daughter, not a violent mother.

The jury's sentence of life in prison, delivered after only two and a half hours of deliberation, and their later statements to the press, revealed just how convinced they were by this defensive characterization of Smith.⁸²⁰ Jurors later explained that one man had initially leaned toward a sentence of death, which surprised some locals who felt certain all along that the jury would save Susan's life for the community's sake.⁸²¹ Even with one holdout, it only took one vote for the jury to reach a unanimous decision.⁸²² The other eleven jurors talked him out of it and convinced him that life in prison would be harder for Susan than the death penalty, while another death due to capital punishment would be incredibly difficult on the already-burdened community.⁸²³

Judge Howard thanked the jury, telling them that the "community [was] proud of you." "Under

⁸¹⁹ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 5093.

⁸²⁰ John Heilprin, "Smith Gets Life in Prison; Jurors Explain Verdict," *Charleston Post and Courier* (SC), July 29, 1995. It should be noted that Susan Smith did not enter a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity; her carjacking lie made it nearly impossible to argue that she did not know the difference between right and wrong at the time of the crime. Although she was found guilty, the sentence of life in prison can be seen as a "win" for the defense because they successfully avoided the death penalty (Bruck, interview; Pope).

⁸²¹ Kingsmore, interview.

⁸²² Heilprin, "Smith Gets Life in Prison; Jurors Explain Verdict."

⁸²³ Robert, interview.

our system,” he told them, “the jury becomes not just the fact finders but the soul searchers, if you will, of the community.”⁸²⁴ When he sentenced Susan Smith to life in prison a few minutes later, “thunder rolled outside and rain poured as a summer storm cloud passed over,” perhaps signaling a fresh start for the wounded community and its infamous daughter.⁸²⁵

There was also the palpable sense of community culpability to consider. Jurors reportedly did not “feel sorry” for Smith, but they did seem to agree that the “mistreatment by her stepfather, Beverly Russell, and others” played a role in her crimes. “I just feel really bad for Susan Smith because of the way that she's been treated, the way that men used her,” a juror told the *Rock Hill Herald*.⁸²⁶ Juror Michael Roberts, a productions manager at a local textile plant, compared Susan’s role in Union’s self-image to a parent-child relationship, saying simply, “It’s a reflection on the parents when the kid goes wrong.”⁸²⁷ He told the *Charleston Post & Courier*: “If anybody hears a cry for help from somebody young, they need to take it seriously...She had asked for help, but nobody knew the seriousness of it.”⁸²⁸ Over a decade later, the spokesperson for the Union County Chamber of Commerce agreed: “Had it not been for what the jury perceived as the failure of the system as a young person, Susan would have gotten the death penalty.”⁸²⁹ Some locals argued that Smith’s abusers should have been the ones on trial. Dot Frost of Union placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of a society that did not extend aid to

⁸²⁴ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 5137-5138.

⁸²⁵ Anna Brown, “Jury Spares Smith’s Life,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), July 28, 1995.

⁸²⁶ Associated Press, “Jurors spare Smith because of tragic life,” *Rock Hill Herald* (SC), July 30, 1995.

⁸²⁷ Robert, interview.

⁸²⁸ Heilprin, “Smith gets life in prison; Jurors explain verdict.”

⁸²⁹ Inman, interview.

the troubled teenager: “They should go get the ones that hurt her—and they hurt her like hell.”⁸³⁰

The following Sunday, Reverend Tom Currie reiterated Bruck’s closing argument, inviting the innocent among his parishioners to cast the fabled stones.⁸³¹ No one did. To Union, the Susan Smith drama had transformed from the sickening case of an evil mother to the troubling story of an abused daughter during the nine months between the murders and the trial. This local script was not based on the popular images in the media, nor was it based on contemporary ideas about womanhood, motherhood, or female criminality. Rather, Unionites provided their own narrative, one based on a failure of their close-knit, Christian community. Their narrative was more about fathers and daughters than it was about mothers and sons. Although it was ultimately a jury of her neighbors that saved her life, this local script never became a part of the mainstream media coverage. But their image of Smith as a traumatized girl was nonetheless a key component of how the nation would come to understand Susan Smith through the course of her three-week trial. This local version of Smith informed the other important image of her at her trial: the mentally ill mother. This final image called upon the controversial legal script of psychological victimization, and it made it possible to imagine a new future discourse of American motherhood in which maternal filicide, within certain parameters, was comprehensible.

⁸³⁰ “Smith’s Mental State Next Issue,” *Charleston Post and Courier*, July 24, 1995.

⁸³¹ Jesse J. Holland, “Union Prays for Strength to Forgive,” *Rock Hill Herald* (SC), July 31, 1995.

CHAPTER 6

“THE TWENTY-THREE YEAR STORY THAT LED TO THE WATER’S EDGE”

The night before jury selection was set to begin in the Susan Smith trial, reporter Bob Dotson for NBC’s *Evening News* asked, in a voiceover backed by church bells: “In a town with 130 churches, people tend to be forgiving—but who can forget?”⁸³² The video montage moved slowly from church steeples to Smith’s tearful plea to the “kidnapper” in late October, eventually pausing on the setting sun over the now-serene John D. Long Lake in which her children drowned. The screen showed Smith’s waterlogged Mazda being towed in slow motion from the water as the reporter posed the key question of the upcoming trial: “Was she crazy or merely calculating?” Was this trial, he asked, about Smith’s “desperate bid to win the love of [ex-boyfriend] Tom Findlay” or evidence that she was “so troubled by a long history of sexual abuse that she didn’t know right from wrong?”⁸³³

The various public representations of Susan Smith in the nine months preceding her trial could not wholly account for the contradictions between her life as a good daughter, wife, and mother and her subsequent criminal behavior. The simplest way to make sense of Susan Smith was through the mask motif, or the “two Susans” of Rick Bragg’s early coverage for the *New York Times*. The thoroughly demonized Susan that relied on stereotypes of sexuality, class, and region called upon historical scripts of deviant womanhood, but it did little to explain motive to the people who had known Smith her entire life. Although Union’s sympathetic image of Susan Smith as a damaged daughter was by no means the dominant one by the time of her trial, some

⁸³² *Evening News*, NBC, July 9, 1995.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*

major media outlets had started to soften their representations of Smith by the summer of 1995. To be sure, the evil images of Smith still graced some headlines. *Newsweek* reported after her trial that sixty-five percent of readers believed that Susan Smith should have received the death penalty for her crimes.⁸³⁴ The state capitalized on the staying power of the “scheming slut” image when prosecutors Tommy Pope and Keith Giese used the “boyfriend motive” as their primary prosecutorial strategy in the guilt phase of the trial.

But by the summer of 1995, a distinct change had occurred in public representations of Susan Smith. Although most reports were often more sensational than sympathetic, the victimized image of Susan Smith slowly worked its way into the national media throughout the winter of 1995 as both sides prepared for the July trial. By early spring, *People* magazine reporters detailed a virtual reversal in “the court of public opinion,” arguing that Smith’s family was no longer alone “in seeing Susan as tragically, suddenly, caught in the grip of some terrible impulse.”⁸³⁵ By the time of her trial, although polls showed that some still clamored for the death penalty, the evil, Medea image of Susan was primarily the province of the tabloid media. The emerging details of Smith’s past, and especially her resulting psychological problems, had become routine national headlines. With the advent of this version of Smith, a new icon worked its way into the pantheon of maternal images: the mentally ill mother. It is an image with which cultural consumers of the twenty-first century are very familiar, but in 1995, the image was in the process of formulation and thus incredibly controversial. In this chapter, I examine this final “Susan,” an image that rejected pre-existing scripts of motherhood and gestured toward future readings of maternal violence.

⁸³⁴ Tom Morganthau, Vern E. Smith, “Condemned to Life,” *Newsweek*, August 7, 1995.

⁸³⁵ Bill Hewitt and Gail Cameron Westcott, “Tears of Hate, Tears of Pity,” *People*, March 13, 1995.

This image of Susan Smith as mentally ill did not come out of nowhere. Certain details about her childhood—depression, suicidal tendencies, sexual abuse—leaked into the media throughout the spring of 1995, causing even those locals who were less forgiving than others to feel sympathy for the murdering mother. This trend occurred in the national media as well, although it was subtle and did not become a dominant narrative until the middle of Smith’s trial. Sympathy for Susan Smith relied heavily upon Union’s image of her. In order to see Smith as a victim, observers and especially jurors first had to see her as a vulnerable girl rather than a calculating woman. Smith’s defense team wisely positioned themselves as defenders of the community, and they supplemented local testimony with expert psychological arguments that legitimated the local vision of Smith.

This expert positioning of Smith was a legal strategy that would not have been likely to work in previous decades. A unique combination of factors determined the outcome of the Susan Smith trial. The inadequacy of the various images of Susan Smith meant that journalists and observers were still trying to come up with one that made sense of her life and crimes even by the time of her trial, nine months after the murders. At the same time, in direct opposition to the rise of mainstream political conservatism, a new legal discourse was developing that called for leniency in punishments of psychologically disturbed individuals. Media studies scholar Elayne Rapping argues that this trend was a result of the progressive movements of the 1960s as well as feminist and critical race theories. Derided as the “abuse excuse” by some, this new discourse achieved legal and national fame with the murder trials of Eric and Lyle Menendez in the early 1990s. Rapping argues that this new psycholegal discourse arose just as a new, conservative,

“law and order” mentality set in that called for harsher criminal punishments, ensuring the rapid demise of the “abuse excuse.”⁸³⁶

However, in cases of maternal infanticide, the trend seems to be just the opposite. In the mid-1990s, feminists and scholars were beginning to reformulate their critiques of motherhood as an institution to combat the pernicious effects of the “new momism.” This scholarly trend developed slowly until the late 1990s, when the texts began to constitute a distinct subgenre of feminist and academic literature. Criminologists in particular took on the issue of maternal crime, infusing it with feminist theories about the patriarchal context of mothering and the lack of social support for American mothers. These factors combined in the trial of Susan Smith to result in a kind of maternal compromise featuring Smith as the mentally ill mother. This image represented progress over some of the representations examined thus far, but it was not exactly a feminist victory. Rather, it was a compromise. This image relied upon Union’s own infantilized vision of Smith as well as paternalistic scholarly models of female criminality. Even so, the new “Susan Smith” that characterized her trial, and the media coverage of it, indicated nascent changes in the developing discourse of motherhood that allowed for the existence of a formerly contradictory female role: good mothers who killed their children.

By the summer of 1995, Union residents, for the most part, expressed a sort of empathy for Susan Smith, the little girl they had always known. Culturally and geographically speaking, it seems that the sympathetic folks of Union may have been voicing a minority opinion. *People* magazine prefaced a prominent local’s plea for mercy with the results of a nationwide survey showing that two-thirds of those polled favored capital punishment for Smith. Psychiatrist Seymour Halleck referenced this majority opinion when he explained why he testified in Smith’s defense: “I was very worried that she would get the death penalty...the country is in a very mean

⁸³⁶ Elayne Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on Television* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 9.

mood right now.”⁸³⁷ Reporters often noted the wide gap between local and national reactions to Susan Smith in the winter and spring of 1995.

By the eve of her trial, however, the media presented “two Susans” of a different kind. National headlines insured that questions of Smith’s character stayed in the minds of the American public through the early summer of 1995. The evil, Medea image of Susan—“the most famous murderess since Lizzie Borden”—beckoned from the tabloid racks grocery store aisles across the nation.⁸³⁸ Technicolor, multi-page exposés entitled “Sex, Betrayal, and Murder” and “Baby Killer Smith’s X-Rated Secret Life” offered a crazed, sexualized version of Smith’s life and crime.⁸³⁹ The mainstream media, however, had tempered their sensational reports of previous months. By the beginning of jury selection in early July, NBC reported that “Smith looked more like a parson’s wife than a confessed killer who drowned her kids.”⁸⁴⁰ Rick Bragg depicted Smith as “pale, listless, and dependent” on anti-depressants, and he questioned whether a woman “so self-destructive [was] mentally ready to be tried.”⁸⁴¹ This new dichotomy of images reflected exactly the “mad or bad,” or “nuts or sluts,” dyad of female criminality: Smith was either afflicted by a uniquely female illness, or she was a whore using her sexuality as a destructive tool of power.

⁸³⁷ Bill Hendrick, “The Susan Smith Case: Depression may be Tragedy’s Real Culprit,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 29, 1995.

⁸³⁸ Bill Hewitt and Gail Cameron Wescott, “Tears of Hate, Tears of Pity.” *People*, March 13, 1995; Rheta Grimsley Johnson, “Considering and Crossing Thin Lines in Union, SC,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 30, 1995.

⁸³⁹ Elizabeth Gleick and Lisa H. Towle, “Sex, Betrayal, and Murder,” *Time*, July 17, 1995; Associated Press, “Tabloids Having a Field Day,” *Charleston Post and Courier* (SC), July 18, 1995.

⁸⁴⁰ *Evening News*, NBC, July 15, 1995.

⁸⁴¹ Rick Bragg, “Judge Rules Susan Smith is Fit for Trial on Murder Charges,” *New York Times*, July 12, 1995.

The Smith trial, like most others, hinged not on disputed evidence, but on the strength of the opposing stories. Media studies professor Barbara Barnett points out that journalists use narratives to "confer significance by explaining the link between causes and effects" and to piece together seemingly unrelated facts.⁸⁴² The narratives presented by the two sides in a legal case work in much the same way. "Each trial is a drama in its own right," writes Harvard Law professor Charles Nesson, "a morality play watched by a public audience."⁸⁴³ The two sides in a legal case offer plots—such as the story of Smith's life leading up to the murders of her sons—that can be told in drastically different ways depending on the "values and interests of the narrator."⁸⁴⁴ The cautionary tales set forth in court cases feature crucial elements of narrative with which we are all familiar: stock characters, a plot that features a disruption and eventual restoration of order, and a moral. But in legal battles, there are always two parallel narratives, based on the prosecution and the defense strategies, that utilize the same facts to arrive at opposite conclusions. At Smith's trial, the defense team did not directly challenge the facts of the prosecution's case. Rather, they emphasized different facts about Susan Smith's life that preceded that fateful night at the lake by many years.

But David Bruck did more than offer a different narrative. He performed a crucial role in the courtroom and in the community. The comparison of trials to a staged performance is not a new concept; lawyers have used this language for decades, if not centuries. In the case of Susan Smith, many of the characters played familiar roles. In courtrooms, writes journalist Janet Malcolm, "Platonic ideals" reign. "All is clear, etched, one thing or another."⁸⁴⁵ Criminologists

⁸⁴² Barnett, 54..

⁸⁴³ Quoted in Jonathan Harr's *A Civil Action* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 236.

⁸⁴⁴ Barnett, 18.

⁸⁴⁵ Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 149.

recognize this world of extremes in infanticide cases, arguing that “when a woman kills her child, she is either a ‘good’ mother and woman deserving of sympathy, or a ‘bad’ woman to be punished.”⁸⁴⁶ Susan Smith’s role in the courtroom drama was scripted for her: she played the two roles of the prosecution’s social deviant (the sexpot murderess) and the defense’s damaged girl (the daughter, wife, and mother who suffered continuous abuse). Smith was not even required to perform these roles on her own. Because she did not testify in her own defense or speak to the press at all, every witness who took the stand literally spoke for—or even, when her letters were read to the court, *as*— Susan Smith.

The primary question was which attorney would function as the voice of the community. Neither of the lead counsels was from Union. Both were seen as outsiders, even though Tommy Pope grew up in Rock Hill in nearby York County, and David Bruck had lived in South Carolina for almost two decades at the time of the Smith trial. Thus, neither of them could be seen as automatically speaking for the community in the way that someone like Howard Wells could.

In his ongoing Southern narrative for the *New York Times*, Rick Bragg introduced readers to the most ardent proponent of the “boyfriend motive,” the local prosecutor, Tommy Pope. The courtroom battle would not just be between competing images of Susan Smith, Bragg argued. This case pitted Smith’s defense attorney, “a polished, soft-spoken, Ivy League lawyer” with the local prosecutor (called “solicitors” in South Carolina), who was “plain-spoken” and, at 32, the youngest county solicitor in the state. Bragg depicted defense attorney David Bruck as a “Canadian-born liberal and a Harvard man who protested against the war in Vietnam, just the kind of person many people here love to hate.”⁸⁴⁷ Bruck was originally a Canadian, but he had

⁸⁴⁶ Wilczynski, 132.

⁸⁴⁷ Bragg, “A Small Town in the South Prepares to Try a Neighbor,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1995.

practiced law in Columbia, South Carolina, for many years by the time of the Smith case. He had been active in the anti-Viet Nam war movement, and in law school he served as a public defender. After graduating, he had devoted his career since his 1975 graduation from the University of South Carolina Law School to providing legal help to the “defenseless.” The United States Supreme Court had just allowed the reinstatement of the death penalty, and Bruck decided to open a practice dedicated solely to capital defense. He thought it would be a temporary job. He explained: “I sort of thought a couple years and a few good swift kicks and the United States would get back on the same track as the rest of the democratic world and get rid of [the death penalty].”⁸⁴⁸

Capital punishment was still legal twenty years later, when Bruck got an early morning phone call the day after Susan’s arrest. The call came from Beverly Russell’s attorney, who had worked with Bruck in the past and had represented Russell on the molestation charges made by Susan. He had tried to call Bruck the previous evening, but the media jammed all of the phone lines after Wells announced Smith’s confession. Russell’s lawyer knew that the sexual abuse would come out in the trial and that it would be a conflict of interest if he represented Susan, so he called Bruck. Bruck drove to Union as fast as he could from Columbia, arriving at her bond hearing in jeans and unmatched socks. At the courthouse on Main Street, Bruck encountered a “mob scene” that looked like a “made-for-TV movie.”⁸⁴⁹ Perhaps he did not know immediately what character he would play in the drama, but it was not long after his first day of involvement that he donned the role of protector.

⁸⁴⁸ Bruck, interview.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid.

In the nation's paper of record, Rick Bragg contrasted this "Yankee" with the local boy Tommy Pope, the son of a longtime sheriff of nearby York County, himself a former law enforcement officer whose "friendliness seems genuine" but was outmatched by his stubbornness.⁸⁵⁰ Pope was elected to the position of county solicitor in the fall of 1992, and his domain was all of York County, just south of the North Carolina line near Charlotte, and Union County to the west. He, too, had attended the University of South Carolina Law School, and in the six or so years between his admission to the bar and his election as solicitor, he did legal work at the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED) in Columbia. His father was a longtime respected sheriff of York County, and Pope emulated him. He describes himself as young and ambitious at the time of the Smith trial. He was thirty-one years old when he tried his first death penalty case. Pope dispelled rumors that he was too young for the job when he won the trial. He described his legal role in York and Union Counties as similar to that of a "police officer or a soldier" performing services for the public by upholding the system.⁸⁵¹

Although he was only from one county away, Tommy Pope was not considered a local in Union. In fact, his only familiarity with the small town was through playing Union High School in football (Pope played for Rock Hill High), through a few contacts in SLED, and through his campaign efforts in the county. In fact, when Pope ran, he ran as a Republican, even though he described his voting base as "Old South Democrats." On the campaign trail, he met with the Republican Party in Union, chaired by none other than Beverly Russell, who pledged his support for the man who would later seek the death penalty against his daughter. Pope was so unfamiliar with the families of Union that when he tried to visit David Smith the weekend after Susan's arrest to introduce himself as the prosecutor, he went to Russell's house mistakenly. It was an

⁸⁵⁰ Bragg, "A Small Town in the South Prepares to Try a Neighbor."

⁸⁵¹ Pope, interview.

awkward moment in which Russell had to give the self-described “potential executioner” directions across town to David’s apartment.⁸⁵² Despite Bragg’s depiction, Pope was no insider, and the role of legal representative of the community in the Smith case was up for grabs.

In many ways, then, the contest in this case was over which attorney could capture the community’s vision of Susan Smith and use it to their advantage. If Tommy Pope had maintained a focus on the Smith boys themselves, he may well have been seen as the community’s avenger according to the script of the “wounded community.” Although the state’s case centered on the boys at key moments, their primary point of attack was on Smith’s character, notably through the strategy of the “boyfriend motive.” In fact, the state’s duty was not to prove motive, but only to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Susan Smith committed her actions with “malice aforethought,” a type of criminal premeditation that, in South Carolina, requires only a few seconds to be formulated.⁸⁵³ The prosecution’s focus on Smith’s character and on her mental state certainly stirred public emotions, but it also urged jurors and observers to consider motive very carefully. By the time of her trial, most Americans knew of the allegations of abuse in Smith’s past, and this information determined the outcome of her trial.

David Bruck, Smith’s lead defense attorney, consistently presented himself as a father figure, a protector of unstable Susan as well as the small community of Union.⁸⁵⁴ Bruck’s frequent references to Smith as a defenseless little girl underscored this position. He also played the role

⁸⁵² Pope, interview.

⁸⁵³ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁴ Rapping identifies the figure of the paternal lawyer, the “white, middle-class, straight male authority” that “declaws” his criminal client, as a stock character of television movies (Rapping, “The Movie of the Week,” 99). Rapping analyzes the movie “The Burning Bed,” about Francine Hughes, who murdered her husband and claimed “battered wives’ syndrome.” An alternative example is the prosecutor in the Diane Downs’ case (discussed in Chapter 2); in this case, he was the protector of her living children rather than the wayward woman. In fact, he adopted the children after she was sentenced to life in prison—the ultimate fulfillment of the “paternal lawyer” role. See Ann Rule, *Small Sacrifices: A True Story of Passion and Murder*.

of the community protector, shielding jurors and observers from detailed forensic testimony in the courtroom by objecting repeatedly, and by questioning numerous local witnesses who argued that capital punishment would further damage their embattled community.

Bruck and Pope's characters in this legal drama can thus be defined by their relation to the community—avenger, or the exorcist of demons, versus protector, or the restorer of peace. In the journalistic “wounded community” plotline, small towns like Union are “portrayed as key characters” who are appalled that the murders happened in their midst and who are personally “injured” by the offending mother's actions. The restoration of order in these communities involves a process of self-healing which usually entailed “castigation” of the offending mother.⁸⁵⁵

Tommy Pope could have made his entire case about the murdered boys; instead, his focus on Susan Smith and her possible motives followed the “wounded community” narrative, with its central character of an evil woman, to the letter. Pope's mode of castigation required that the jury denounce Susan Smith and sentence her to death. David Bruck, on the other hand, rewrote the “wounded community” narrative according to the images of failed paternal authority offered by locals. In the defense strategy, Susan Smith was one of Union's own daughters, one whose abuse led to the tragedy that injured the entire community. Healing thus involved sparing her life and moving on, for the sake of the town, the family, and, of course, Susan herself. The testimonies of local witnesses—supporting characters in the legal drama—were crucial to this notion of collective victimization and healing.

The defense's expert testimony legitimated this local vision of Smith as an abused girl for a wider national audience. Because Smith lied on national television for nine days and then explicitly confessed to murder, David Bruck decided not to risk an insanity plea. Instead, he and

⁸⁵⁵ Barnett, 78.

his legal team chose the much murkier plea of “not guilty” by reason of mental illness. This is an ill-defined concept in the law, but it is easier to prove than insanity, in which the defendant is unable to differentiate between right and wrong at the time of the crime. Mentally ill defendants need only to prove that they had some form of undiagnosed psychological disorder at the time of the crimes. Bruck explains that most capital cases involve a focus on the defendant’s mental state, and “every capital case requires the defense team to do a very thorough investigation of the person’s life story.” Although capital cases do not necessarily entail insanity or mentally ill pleas, Bruck knew from the moment he met Susan that this would be his approach. In his very first meeting with her, Bruck found Susan to be “out of it,” “dissociated,” and “inappropriately” calm, so much so that “she wouldn’t have struck you as at all inappropriate but for the fact that she had just confessed to killing and drowning her two children.” Those signs that Bruck saw immediately as evidence of mental illness alternatively served as proof for Tommy Pope that Smith was cool, calm, and calculating.⁸⁵⁶

David Bruck and Judy Clarke were careful to avoid using the legal term “insane” in favor of describing Smith with the much more vague concept of “mental illness.” Their case got an unexpected boost when the results of Smith’s state-mandated mental evaluation were leaked. Although the judge imposed a gag order on the results, South Carolina’s largest newspaper reported in late May that the State Mental Health Department determined that Susan Smith was not insane. However, this did not mean that she was psychologically stable. According to the *Union Daily Times*, state doctors diagnosed Smith with “severe depression, which could have

⁸⁵⁶ To this day, Pope believes Smith rationally orchestrated her own defense. He argues that she could cry on command in the courtroom, which she only did in the presence of the jury, and that she has been known to be sexually coercive in prison (Pope, interview).

played a role in causing her to kill” her sons.⁸⁵⁷ On the first day of the trial, NBC’s Tom Brokaw underscored this distinction. He opened the broadcast with the question, “Is she criminally responsible or mentally ill?” These opposing options, continued reporter Bob Dotson from Union, depended upon the jury’s image of Smith. “Why did she do it?” he asked as the screen showed Susan Smith crying and rocking in the backseat of an unmarked police car. “Was it a failed love affair, as the prosecution contends, or a failed suicide, as the defense will try to prove?”⁸⁵⁸

The trial of Susan Smith lasted almost three weeks, from July 10-28, 1995. The first two phases of the trial—jury selection and the guilt phase—lasted for approximately one week each. The sentencing phase, following the guilty verdict of 24 July, was made up of four days of testimony and arguments. The jury of nine men and three women delivered a unanimous sentence of life imprisonment on 28 July.⁸⁵⁹ All were Union residents who, NBC speculated, could “relate to [Smith’s] problems and may be less likely to execute her.”⁸⁶⁰ The prosecution hoped exactly the opposite: that the jurors’ familiarity with Smith, and especially with her two

⁸⁵⁷ Associated Press, “Report: Susan Smith Not Insane,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 25, 1995. Pope credits the defense team with the leak; he argues that if he had given the information to the press, he would have made the case for sanity more clearly—in his words, “I would have crafted it better” (Pope, interview). Bruck does not know who leaked the information, and the reporter, Twila Decker, never revealed her source. In fact, she was jailed briefly for refusing to reveal her source, citing a 1993 state shield law meant to protect reporters who wish to keep their sources confidential (Robert Tanner, “Smith Case May Also Be First Test of State’s Shield Law,” *Union Daily Times* (SC), May 27, 1995. Decker considers the judge’s rulings to be extreme: “I think the judge did over react. At that point in the case, there were constant leaks. Judge Howard was trying to avoid having another O.J. Simpson case on his hands. He wanted to reign in the media. It worked, although it did create added drama around the case. I really think the finding, that Smith was not insane and that she was able to stand trial, should have not have been sealed to begin with” (Twila Decker-Davis, interview by author). Incidentally, Decker argues that the national media followed the lead of her paper, *The State*, and she was engaged to Rick Bragg at the time (Decker, interview; Bragg, interview).

⁸⁵⁸ *Evening News*, NBC, July 18, 1995.

⁸⁵⁹ Molly McDonough, “Bruck Argues Too Few Women are on Panel,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* (SC), July 16, 1995. Tommy Pope accused defense attorney David Bruck of laying the groundwork for an appeal by arguing that there were too few women on the jury and it was thus unrepresentative of the community.

⁸⁶⁰ *Evening News*, NBC, July 15, 1995.

young sons, would fuel their outrage and build the case for capital punishment. Despite media speculation to the contrary, the defense had not considered requesting a change of venue; each side hoped that the dynamics of the tightly knit community would serve their case. Indeed, Bruck succeeded in seating the wife of a former police chief who babysat Susan as a child. But it was not just community, but the dynamics of the various traumas in Smith's past that would ultimately work in her favor. One male juror had experienced the suicide of his father; a woman on the jury had a daughter who had been sexually abused.⁸⁶¹ At least three others knew someone who had attempted suicide in the past, and over half had family members in therapy.⁸⁶² From the outset, Bruck and his defense team knew that it would be possible to convince these locals that Smith's traumas had resulted in a kind of mental illness.

After six days of jury selection, locals and reporters turned out in droves for the long-awaited reckoning in the Union courthouse. Tuesday, July 18, 1995, dawned hot and humid like so many other Southern summer days, yet crowds thronged the streets of downtown Union, anticipating the beginning of the public judgment of Susan Smith. Pope's opening statement for the prosecution seemed to promise the anticipated soap opera. Although they were not required by the court to present a motive for the murders, Pope and his legal team depicted Smith as a manipulative, sex-crazed single mother who saw her children as obstacles in her social-climbing bid to bed the richest bachelor in town—an image the media had been bombarding Americans with since Smith's confession eight months earlier. The prosecution team focused on the perceived promiscuity in Smith's past as well as the nine long days of lies in which she begged

⁸⁶¹ Ibid.

⁸⁶² *Evening News*, NBC, July 22, 1995.

the nation to find her missing babies.⁸⁶³ This approach put Smith on trial as much for her sexual history and her dishonesty as for the crime of double homicide.

“For nine days, Susan Smith looked this country in the eye and lied,” began assistant district attorney Keith Giese in his opening statement, angrily pointing to Smith, who was crying quietly at the defense table.⁸⁶⁴ The “stumbling block” to Smith’s relationship with her boss’s son was “her children—the children are the obstacle,” and thus her motive to murder.⁸⁶⁵ This pairing of the two tropes of uncontrolled female sexuality and manipulation of the sacred maternal role effectively depicted Susan Smith as a broad social threat. Although in subsequent interviews they mentioned the historical precedents, the prosecuting attorneys in the Smith case followed the “sexpot on trial” script of both the Alice Crimmins case of 1965 and the Diane Downs case of 1983. Once Pope and Giese, with ample help from the media, established this well-worn “boyfriend motive,” it was not difficult for them to depict Smith as promiscuous in all of her relationships with men, including, most distastefully, her molestation by her stepfather at the age of fifteen. This image of “femininity perverted,” of Susan as a kind of sexual criminal, served the prosecutors by painting her as a deceitful, sexual danger to the entire community, thus making the case for capital punishment.⁸⁶⁶

“It is sadness that brings us together,” countered assistant defense attorney Judy Clarke in her opening statement for the defense. Clarke began by stating unequivocally that Susan Smith shouldered all of the blame for the murders. The real question in the case was what kind of

⁸⁶³ It should be noted that Susan Smith did not invent this method of criminal cover-up. Criminology studies indicate that infanticidal parents often initially report their children’s disappearance as a kidnapping. Parents are, in fact, the most likely perpetrators in any crime involving a child (Wilczynski, 32).

⁸⁶⁴ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2387; *Evening News*, NBC, July 18, 1995.

⁸⁶⁵ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2394.

⁸⁶⁶ Helen Birch, “If Looks Could Kill: Myra Hindley and the Iconography of Evil,” *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 34.

traumas would place this former “good girl” in such an awful position. In order for the jurors to judge motive, the defense had to take them back “well before the night of October 25, 1994” to Susan’s troubled past. Instead of focusing on the crime itself and the nine days of lies that followed it, Clarke argued that the “turmoil, distress, and confusion” of Susan’s life originated with her biological parents’ tumultuous relationship and her father’s suicide when she was six years old. By her teens, Susan “was already a sort of the walking wounded,” laying the groundwork for the later tragedy.⁸⁶⁷

Clarke did not avoid Giese’s primary point of attack: she explicitly targeted Susan’s carjacking lie, acknowledging the widespread sense that with this deception, Susan Smith had personally betrayed untold numbers of horrified Americans. Susan’s lie was “unforgivable” but it was also, according to the defense, very “childlike,” representing the knee-jerk reaction of a “young mother [who] could not deal with the horror of what she had done.”⁸⁶⁸ The source of this incomprehensible behavior was the “mental illness” that led Smith directly to the water’s edge that brisk October night. Clarke characterized the murders as part of a “failed suicide” plot, listing the various factors which were to serve as primary evidence for this defense: her father’s suicide when Susan was six, repeated molestation by her stepfather since the age of fifteen, and two former suicide attempts in her teens.⁸⁶⁹

This trial, then, was not about Smith’s sexual dalliances or obsessions. “Use your common sense,” Clarke urged the jurors. “It was not a boyfriend...Suicide is why we are here.”⁸⁷⁰ Clarke

⁸⁶⁷ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2401.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 2400.

⁸⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 2401.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 2402-03.

ended her powerful appeal to the jurors' emotions with dual images of Smith as both angelically maternal and fatally unstable.

The one critical thing you will learn about in this case is who those children were. They were the light of her life. They were the center of her life. They were the sunshine in her life. They were her heart. They were everything to Susan Smith. She snapped. Everyone has a breaking point. Susan broke where many of us might bend, but I think through the evidence you will see why.⁸⁷¹

This opening statement for the defense set the tone for the case: instead of evil, Bruck and Clarke presented tragedy; instead of a manipulative girlfriend, they unveiled a mentally ill mother; instead of a scheming woman, they showed jurors a troubled girl.

The state proceeded with their witnesses that afternoon. After first questioning the woman who discovered Smith crying on her front porch immediately following the murders, assistant district attorney Keith Giese called the highly respected Union County Sheriff Howard Wells, to the stand. Although he was something of a star witness for the prosecution, his testimony can be characterized as adversarial at best. Indeed, Pope said that “the back of [his] neck was on fire” as Wells spoke; the sheriff’s entire narrative of the investigation and confession supported the defense’s characterization of Susan. Wells depicted Smith as childlike, fragile, depressed, and dangerously suicidal. At one point she asked for his gun so that she kill herself and join her sons.⁸⁷²

For the prosecuting team, Smith’s suicidal tendencies were further evidence of her cold calculation following the murders of her sons. Author Patricia Pearson argues that “suicide is a social script that [homicidal women] can follow before they strike, to formulate intent, and after

⁸⁷¹ Ibid, 2404.

⁸⁷² Ibid, 2506.

the deed, to provide a rationale.”⁸⁷³ Pope agreed. According to the prosecution, Smith’s attempts were “suicidal gestures” meant to get attention, particularly the attention of the men in her life. Although Pope and many outside observers consistently dismissed Smith’s suicidality as contrived, suicidal ideation is actually quite typical in infanticidal mothers. Criminologists confirm that many mothers who kill express a warped sense of what is best for their children. Suicidal mothers in many cases practice “altruistic infanticide” in which the “child was seen as a dependent of and extension of the offender, without a separate personality or independent right to life.”⁸⁷⁴ These “extended suicide” infanticides often feature no evidence of hostility or prior child abuse, and these mothers overwhelmingly express “strong religious views”—in other words, they think they are sparing their children further pain by sending them to heaven.⁸⁷⁵ Wells, perhaps the most authoritative voice in his community at the time, indicated to jurors and the media crowding the gallery of the courtroom that Smith’s suicidality was a very real factor in her crimes.

After a series of law enforcement officers who testified about the investigation, the witness many observers, and especially the tabloids, had been waiting for took the stand. Late on the second day of the trial Tom Findlay, Susan’s ex-boyfriend and the so-called “Catch” of Union, was sworn in. In a case focused very much on Smith’s sexual behavior, Findlay constituted the one-man motive for murder. Amidst Bruck’s numerous objections, Pope dragged detail after

⁸⁷³ Patricia Pearson, *When She Was Bad: Violent Women and the Myth of Innocence* (New York: Viking Press, 1997), 44.

⁸⁷⁴ Wilczynski, 93. Criminologists in the 1970s developed a typology of motive that included “altruism” along with “acutely psychotic,” “unwanted child,” “accidental,” and “spouse revenge.” See Meyer and Oberman, 20, for an extended explanation of this typology. Toni Morrison made altruistic infanticide famous in her award-winning *Beloved*; she modeled the infanticidal mother Sethe after Margaret Garner, the escaped slave who murdered her child rather than see her returned to slavery. Sethe explains her crime in terms of her daughter’s best interests: “I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. She had to be safe, and I put her where she would be.” See Morrison’s *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 100.

⁸⁷⁵ Wilczynski, 93.

sordid detail out of Findlay on the stand.⁸⁷⁶ Pope asked Findlay to read aloud his infamous break-up letter to Susan, which listed, among many other issues, her children as one reason they could not continue their relationship.

...there are some things about you that aren't suited for me, and yes, I am speaking about your children. I'm sure that your kids are good kids, but it really wouldn't matter how good they may be. The fact is, I just don't want children...With all of the crazy, mixed-up things that take place in this world today, I just don't have the desire to bring another life into it. And I don't want to be responsible for anyone else's children either.⁸⁷⁷

The prosecutor emphasized Smith's seeming obsession with Findlay. He also implied that Smith frequented a local bar (the only one in town) and slept around. In fact, Smith had told Findlay the day of the murders that she had also slept with his father, who was her boss (although she also told him later that day that she had "made up the entire story" about Cary Findlay).⁸⁷⁸ These crucial challenges to Smith's "good girl" status seemed to negate any of Findlay's other reasons for ending his relationship with Susan.

Bruck, in his cross-examination, carefully went back over the parts of Findlay's testimony that Pope had purposefully ignored. Countering the image of Susan as a gold-digger, Bruck established that she had never asked Findlay for money, that she was fearful of her sometimes-violent husband, and that there were "multiple reasons for their break-up." In Findlay's estimation, Smith was also a good mother. He told Bruck that Susan loved her children—"her kids were her world"—but he had also noticed on the afternoon of the murders that Susan was

⁸⁷⁶ These details, which anyone familiar with the media coverage may remember, included the allegations Susan had said in the past that she wished she had "waited to have a family," that she was charged with adultery because of their relationship (even though David had had a serious girlfriend of several months at the time of their separation), and that she had attended hot tub parties featuring drunkenness, nudity, and adultery on the grounds of Findlay's father's mansion (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 2665-71).

⁸⁷⁷ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2684. The *Charleston Post and Courier* printed the entire text of the letter on the front page the following day ("Two Different Environments," *Charleston Post and Courier* (SC), July 20, 1995).

⁸⁷⁸ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2697-99.

“acting suicidal.”⁸⁷⁹ Bruck ended his questioning by asking Findlay to tell about the night of the boys’ disappearance. Findlay told the hushed courtroom that when he got the late-night phone call asking if he had heard the news about Susan Smith, he immediately thought, “Oh, my God, she’s killed herself...oh, no, I thought, she had taken her life.”⁸⁸⁰

In effect, by encouraging Findlay to depict a suicidal and depressed Smith, Bruck defused a potentially damning prosecution witness. The media did not acknowledge the developing psychological image of Smith. Reporters focused instead on instead on the more familiar character of the woman scorned in their reports that evening. Over close-ups of Findlay’s break-up letter to Smith, the NBC reporter quoted a “legal expert” who argued dryly that “a failed love affair is no excuse” for criminal behavior. The report ended with the false, but sensational, promise: “Ahead, more testimony from friends who heard Susan wonder aloud what life might be like without her children.”⁸⁸¹ Bruck’s defensive picture of a damaged, victimized girl was slowly taking shape, but the media did not buy it just yet.

After completing the narrative of Susan’s failed relationship with her boss’ son, Pope moved on to the more gruesome details of the murders. He called to the stand the diver who discovered the boys’ bodies in the car at the bottom of John D. Long Lake, the crime scene analyst who examined the Mazda after it was pulled from the water, and the forensic pathologist who performed the autopsies on the boys. Again, Pope tried to go through the shocking physical details of the murders, but Bruck quickly objected.⁸⁸² The soft-spoken defense attorney appeared to be protecting locals and jurors from the unnecessary information that had screamed from front

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid, 2738-44.

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid, 2747.

⁸⁸¹ *Evening News*, NBC, July 19, 1995.

⁸⁸² *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2896.

pages for eight months. His calm manner and his obvious disgust at the prosecution's taste for bloody details positioned him as the voice of decency amidst the angry clamor of the prosecution and the media circus lined along Main Street.

On the morning of the third day of the trial, July 20, 1995, the State surprised the court by resting their case in the guilt phase. This abrupt ending was primarily due to the judge's prohibition against presenting the more grisly forensic evidence against Smith.⁸⁸³ The defense team, obviously taken aback, did not even have all of their witnesses at the courthouse yet, and Bruck made a halfhearted move for acquittal on the grounds that the State had not proven Smith's "malice" to a sufficient degree.⁸⁸⁴ The move was denied.

The defense proceeded with their witnesses, beginning with Pete Logan, the SLED officer who spent the most time with Susan during the course of the kidnapping investigation. Through Logan, assistant defense attorney Judy Clarke carefully established Susan's victimhood through a series of questions about David Smith, who had until this moment been known to the American public primarily as the duped and grieving father. David Smith, father of the murdered boys, was most certainly a victim in this case, but, as locals were well aware, he was not the perfect husband described in the media. Logan's testimony revealed that David showed up randomly at Susan's house to demand sex, and would storm off angrily if she refused. Susan confided to Logan her fear that David's jealousy had led him to place a tap on her phone, a fear that Southern Bell employees later confirmed.⁸⁸⁵ Logan also testified that Susan had filed for divorce in

⁸⁸³ Judge Howard did not allow Pope to show the court pictures of the bodies after the car was pulled from the lake, and he did not allow testimony about the extent of their decay because "the images were so terrible they would be prejudicial" (Rick Bragg, "Mother Was Remorseful, Witness Says," *New York Times*, July 21, 1995).

⁸⁸⁴ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2907.

⁸⁸⁵ Two Southern Bell employees testified later that day; Susan had indeed requested a check for a tap on her phone on 24 October 1994, the day before the murders. No tap was found (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 3010-19).

August of 1994 when, after four years of fighting and separations, she found out about David's longstanding affair with a Winn Dixie co-worker.⁸⁸⁶ This fact may well have surprised public observers who had been consuming dramatic exposés, complete with maps showing the location of the infamous hot tub, about the “cheating” Susan and the rich man for whom she had forsaken her poor husband (and, by vicious extension, her children as well). Logan added the image of the abused “Susan” to the “childlike,” hysterical woman described by Wells. The defense was slowly constructing a new “Susan” out of the community's image of her as a damaged daughter and the expert depiction of her as psychologically traumatized by the men in her life.

The first of several key psychological experts, Carol Allison, a behaviorist who worked for the local branch of the FBI, testified that afternoon. Allison rejected the image of Smith as a coldly calculating criminal. She found Susan to be “completely genuine” and the epitome of remorse the day of her confession. Allison echoed Wells' description of Susan as “childlike” the day of the confession. Indeed, the federal agent found herself playing an unexpected role: “I was a mother at times. She had collapsed in my lap. Sobbing uncontrollably, telling me what had happened to her children at her own hands, what she had done to them.”⁸⁸⁷ Smith, according to observers Wells, Logan, and Allison, was simultaneously a loving mother, a hurt child, and a suicidal depressive the afternoon of her confession.

Allison set the stage for the testimony of Dr. Arlene Andrews, a social worker from the University of South Carolina who testified later that afternoon. Andrews, at the request of David Bruck, performed a “social assessment” of Smith in which she examined her personal and family history as a means of understanding Susan's present state of mind. Dr. Andrews found a

⁸⁸⁶ Ibid, 2994-97.

⁸⁸⁷ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3038.

surprising amount of clinical depression in Smith's family tree. By "depression," she did not simply mean "getting the blues or being depressed...this person had depression to the point that they had to seek the help of a medical doctor or a psychiatrist."⁸⁸⁸ Susan's maternal grandfather, paternal aunt, father, mother, and older brother had all been treated for depression in the past, an estimate of familial mental illness Andrews deemed "conservative," implying that the family was even more troubled than her complicated genealogical chart indicated.⁸⁸⁹

Dr. Andrews then turned to Susan herself, characterizing her suicide attempts as "childlike" but very serious.⁸⁹⁰ According to Andrews, Smith's dysfunctional relationships to both of her fathers caused her teenaged suicide attempts. She linked the first attempt, in which Susan tried to overdose on aspirin at the age of 13, to her biological father's suicide and to what a former teacher called Susan's "obsession with the notion of suicide" in her early teens.⁸⁹¹ Andrews linked Smith's second attempt, another overdose, with the molestation by her stepfather. The doctor dismissed Pope's insinuation that because Susan took aspirin rather than something stronger that the attempt was more a "suicidal gesture," arguing that the staff of the ICU and the Psychology Unit at the local hospital took her very seriously.⁸⁹² Pope maintained his primary mode of attack on Susan's sexual past, questioning Andrews about Susan's affair with an older, married man at Winn Dixie as well as her molestation—or, as Pope called it, her "affair with Bev Russell."⁸⁹³ Pope implied that these "suicidal gestures" were desperate attempts to keep the

⁸⁸⁸ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3086.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 3096.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 3105.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid*, 3120-21.

⁸⁹² *Ibid*, 3128-3129, 3136.

⁸⁹³ *Ibid*, 3138, 3143.

attentions of several men, not actual death wishes. The doctor refused to budge on this issue under Pope's pressure. His persistent, narrow focus on "suicidal gestures" only succeeded in allowing Dr. Andrews to reiterate the seriousness of Susan's suicidality.⁸⁹⁴

The tone was set appropriately for the testimony of Dr. Seymour Halleck, a renowned forensic psychiatrist who was to be on the stand the entire next day. Dr. Halleck's psychological assessment of Susan—replete with low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, extreme dependence, sexual exploitation, personality and mood disorders, dissociation, and possible auditory hallucinations—provided the court with convincing, if confusing, evidence of Smith's mental instability grounded in authoritative medical language. Dr. Halleck integrated his medical analysis with a timeline of Susan's experiences going back to her early childhood. Her formative years were characterized by her parents' tumultuous, sometimes violent relationship, Halleck argued.

They [Susan's parents] did not have a lot in common. They very quickly began to have arguments about sex. They very quickly began to have arguments about almost everything. And the counselors worked with them, and described them as constantly bickering, constantly at one another, constantly trying to put one another down, and not being helpful to one another...it also become apparent that things escalated to the point where Harry became increasingly violent, both threatening to hurt Linda and threatening to kill himself...Linda began to fear for her own safety. She often would not go anywhere without taking one of the children with her for protection.⁸⁹⁵

⁸⁹⁴ In fact, Pope's overzealous attack on the seriousness of Smith's previous suicide attempts led to an unexpected move for mistrial from David Bruck on the morning of July 21, 1995. In his questioning of Dr. Andrews, Pope quoted a former counselor as saying that Susan was not really suicidal or depressed, and that "you can't kill yourself taking Aspirin." Bruck argued that the prosecution had withheld information from interviews because he had not been informed of this statement, which would be grounds for a mistrial. Judge Howard denied the motion, but allowed Bruck to bring in a new witness, the former counselor in question. Under oath, the counselor flatly denied questioning the seriousness of Susan's overdose attempts, characterizing them as "a cry for help" from a very "troubled" girl (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 3134, 3229-31).

⁸⁹⁵ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3289.

Halleck argued that, like his daughter, Susan's father learned to mask his own problems, enabling later tragedy.

Much like Susan Smith, he had the capacity to look good when around other people. And much like Susan Smith, his very, very serious disturbance was not sensed by many people, except those who were very close to him...everything indicates that Susan was the apple of his eye. And there are frequent references in some of the comments of people that Susan would light up when she was near her father...this was a child who was very close to her father.⁸⁹⁶

After Harry Vaughan shot himself shortly after his divorce from Linda, the family explained to young Susan that "her father was in heaven, and Susan did that one time make a remark, said she wanted to be in heaven with her father, even back then."⁸⁹⁷ Bruck paused after this statement from Halleck, letting the reference to Susan's written confession, in which she expressed relief that her sons are with their "Heavenly Father," sink into the consciousness of the courtroom on its own.⁸⁹⁸ According to this profession by young Susan, suicide was an acceptable option because it led to paradise.

Dr. Halleck skipped from Harry's suicide to Susan's attempt on her own life at the age of 13. Attacking Pope's assertions that her overdoses were the mere games of an attention-starved teenager, Halleck argued: "If Susan Smith had walked into my emergency room at the age of 13 with this history, she either would have been immediately hospitalized, or a very intensive treatment program would have been arranged."⁸⁹⁹ This lack of treatment, Halleck implied, was one in a long series of possible moments in which Susan's family could have aggressively sought help for her and potentially derailed the depression that led her to homicide. Bruck moved the

⁸⁹⁶ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3292.

⁸⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 3297.

⁸⁹⁸ The entire text of Smith's confession can be found in the trial transcripts (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 2544).

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 3299.

questioning to her molestation by her stepfather a few years later. Halleck informed the court that many victims of incest try to mitigate the trauma of their experiences by redefining the abuse as an “affair.” Susan’s other very typical response was to blame herself for what had happened. Again, the family missed a crucial opportunity to help Susan: “I perceived the impression that the people who were involved in this seemed to be more concerned with holding the family together than protecting Susan.”⁹⁰⁰ Smith’s second suicide attempt, following an argument with her much-older lover at the age of 18, landed her in the hospital, where they induced vomiting to rid her body of a few dozen aspirin. Afterwards, she was “very eager to cover up this event and not make very much of it.”⁹⁰¹

This pattern of troubled behavior indicated key aspects about Susan’s everyday behavior, according to Dr. Halleck. Her loyalty to her family—even her stepfather, who was the source of much of her teenaged trauma—made Susan hide her pain with smiles.

She has this incredible need to please. She tries very hard to make everybody feel better. And she works at it very well...she is always trying to put people at ease and make them feel better. And it’s very hard to get underneath to who Susan Smith really is and what she’s really experiencing.⁹⁰²

Bruck gently steered Halleck in the direction of Susan’s doomed marriage to David Smith.

Halleck narrated a downward spiral in which Susan became “seriously depressed” after she and David separated for the final time just two months before the murders.

She sees herself as a single mother without much money. She is subject to David coming in and out of the house at random, at will, even though there was an official separation. David often comes and insists on having sex, which she complies with, but is in no way a consenting partner. She does not enjoy it. She is worried about her sexual activity, which is at this point beginning to increase.⁹⁰³

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid, 3301-02, 3304.

⁹⁰¹ Ibid, 3313.

⁹⁰² Ibid, 3315.

Halleck put Susan's sexual relationships at the time of the murders in the context of her desperation and confusion following her separation from her husband.

One of the things I haven't mentioned about Susan yet is that what is pervasive in her history is a fear of being alone. That comes through from early childhood. I interviewed Susan's mother Linda and she described this in great detail. From earliest childhood, on, Susan has been somebody who has needed some stimulation, needed somebody around. The fact that she was involved with a lot of people sexually at this point looks like a desperate searching for somebody to deal with the loneliness that she perceived was coming when she was going to break up with David.⁹⁰⁴

Susan told Halleck that she "thought about suicide just about every day" in the late summer and early fall of 1994, but that she tried "especially hard in the community to put up a pretense or façade of being okay."⁹⁰⁵

Finally, Bruck walked Halleck through October 25, 1994, the night of the murders. That day at work, Susan approached Tom Findlay and confided to him that she had slept with his father. Findlay's calm reaction seemed to upset Smith; several co-workers, including Findlay, saw her crying at work that day. Susan left work, made dinner for the boys, and called her mother to tell her they were coming over later that evening. At this time, Halleck argued, "Susan [was] frantic." She feared losing her marriage with David and the friendship of Tom Findlay (by that date their sexual relationship had already ended), and she and the children cried together, alone in the home she had shared with her husband.⁹⁰⁶ She left with the boys, driving "aimlessly" through the quiet town into the countryside surrounding Union. Crying incessantly, Susan was shaking, biting her nails, and thinking of suicide as she drove through the dark night. She

⁹⁰³ Ibid, 3321.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid, 3322. At the time of the crimes, it appears that Susan had been recently sexually active with a least four men: David Smith, Tom Findlay, Cary Findlay (Tom's father and Susan's boss) on one occasion, and Beverly Russell (her stepfather) on two occasions.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid, 3323, 3330.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid, 3336.

reached a bridge and contemplated flinging herself and the boys into the Broad River, but she decided against it and kept driving. Inevitably, she reached the turn-off to John D. Long Lake. During this time, according to Halleck, Susan felt that she “had to die” and she did not want her children to suffer without a mother. She connected this fear to her own fatherless childhood and to the conflict between David and her own mother. Halleck emphasized Smith’s “strong religious convictions,” arguing that, cliché or not, she “firmly believed the children would go to heaven.”⁹⁰⁷

Bruck asked Halleck about Susan’s much-discussed carjacking lie—the public moral failure for which she also seemed to be on trial. Susan’s vague answers to Halleck in their counseling sessions indicated to him that she had “dissociated” at the time of the murders: she had blocked out her memory of the children, the car, and the lake, but “as she was running up the hill [from the lake], she was making up a story.”⁹⁰⁸ Susan’s lie, Halleck argued, was another kind of nightmare to which she was bound, a “very sensitive and very romantic and gripping story” that had unintended cultural resonance.⁹⁰⁹ The carjacking lie was another manifestation of her mental illness rather than an intentionally vicious deception. Even in his personal interviews with Smith, she had not tried to gain his sympathy; she consistently “portrayed herself as a bad person, an evil person” to Dr. Halleck.⁹¹⁰ Bruck ended his questioning with Halleck’s assessment of Susan’s current mental state, which Halleck unequivocally characterized as “suicidal” and “depressed.”⁹¹¹

⁹⁰⁷ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3340.

⁹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 3342-43.

⁹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 3425.

⁹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3346.

⁹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3349.

Pope's focused his questions on cross-examination on the doctor's definition of insanity, much as he had questioned Dr. Andrews' ideas about suicidality the previous day. Perhaps sensing that this line of attack was getting him nowhere with the jury, the prosecutor moved on to Susan's sexual history. Honing in on the molestation, Pope tried to paint a picture of Susan as a teenaged seductress. Stating first that he did not "condone" Beverly Russell's actions, Pope asked why Susan might blame herself for the incest. He implied that Susan crawled into Russell's lap at the age of almost sixteen, thus precipitating the event. Moreover, Pope seemed to find sixteen years old practical adulthood (although South Carolina law defined it as eighteen years old); his evidence was Susan's characterization of the abuse as an "affair."⁹¹² Dr. Halleck refused to take this bait, focusing instead on Smith's delicate personality and need to please others at all costs. Pope's tactic at this point was to capitalize on the most famous image of Susan Smith, but he miscalculated. It was not the image that most locals believed by the time of the trial. Pope led the court through the carjacking lie once more, and handed the witness back over to Bruck for his redirect examination.

Bruck followed Pope's lead and questioned Halleck about Susan's sexuality. Susan's sexual activity, according to Halleck, was a direct result of "her early abuse experiences and partly related to her wish to please."

...It's very interesting that in almost all of her relationships she gives gifts to men. She can hardly recall a time that any man has given her anything. She was extremely reluctant to ever ask a man to do anything for her sexually. Most of the time she felt just awful after sex, often cried after sex.⁹¹³

Smith's sexual behavior was evidence of her "severe dependent personality disorder," not proof that she was the scheming murderess depicted by the prosecution. That night, NBC subtly sided

⁹¹² Ibid, 3383-3386.

⁹¹³ Ibid, 3436-37.

with the defense in their sexualized portrayal of Susan Smith. Bob Dotson described Smith's "failed suicide" attempt as she drove around the night of October 25, 1994. The "graphic defense testimony" included details about "David Smith coming in and out of the house, demanding sex." Television screens across the nation showed headshots of David Smith, Beverly Russell, and Tom and Cary Findlay lined up over a courtroom sketch of Smith looking blank and prim. Dotson concluded, "She seems much older and heavier than when she was arrested, not a cunning killer."⁹¹⁴

Dr. Halleck, through his dense testimony, described a very sick, abused woman, and the media immediately disseminated this new image. Halleck positioned Susan within the dominant discourse on infanticide in the contemporary United States. Historians of infanticide argue that prior to the twentieth century infanticide was viewed as an act of desperation based on socioeconomic circumstances, committed most often by exploited slave or servant women. At the end of the nineteenth century, the new science of psychology advanced the "medical model" of behavior and with it a new focus on the deviant female body. Historical precedents for this model of deviant female behavior are found in the discourses surrounding "female problems" like premenstrual syndrome, post-partum depression, menopause, or the Victorian hysteria epidemic (literally, "womb disease").⁹¹⁵ This psychological focus on the gendered body, promoted most famously by Freud, has been codified in legal understandings of child murder over the course of the twentieth century. Historians of infanticide argue that biological arguments about female criminal behavior generally indicate an "official," legal belief that all

⁹¹⁴ *Evening News*, NBC, July 21, 1995.

⁹¹⁵ Many historians discuss this idea. See, for example: Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973) and *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1978); and Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

women have the potential for insanity.⁹¹⁶ According to Halleck's testimony, Susan Smith killed not because she was a dangerous social deviant, but because she was hysterical, depressed, and "out of control"—perhaps a more palatable image to many Americans that locates female nature in her unique biopsychology.

Moreover, this psychological version of Smith's crimes fit into the new criminal discourse of the 1990s. This new "Susan" amounted to a counternarrative that did not so much challenge the facts presented by the prosecution as emphasize other facts of her experience altogether. Elayne Rapping, a scholar of televised legal dramas (both real and fictional), first discovered the existence of this legal "narrative battleground" while watching the televised trial of the Menendez brothers, who murdered their parents in California in 1989. The defense team in the case challenged the prosecution's personal attack on the brothers as spoiled brats or "bad seeds."

...the defense—in the persons of two impressive female attorneys—managed, without really challenging 'the facts' of the prosecution case, to present a wholly different narrative, this one based on a whole *different* set of relevant facts (the evidence of child abuse) and an oppositional set of ideas about gender and generational violence within the patriarchal family (ideas feminists made public)...The defense did this by masterfully reorganizing jury *perceptions* not only of what facts might be in question in the case but of what narratives and assumptions about the patriarchal family the jury should be using to gauge the guilt of the defendants.⁹¹⁷

Rapping explains that "the Menendez defense centered largely on issues of emotional, physical, and sexual child abuse by a brutally authoritarian patriarch," showing a clear indebtedness to "issues of gender, race, family dysfunction and abuse, gay rights, and other issues politicized by the sixties' social movements." Their defense team created a "counternarrative" in which the

⁹¹⁶ Allison Morris and Anna Wilczynski, "Rocking the Cradle: Mothers Who Kill Their Children," in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation*, ed. Helen Birch (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 215.

⁹¹⁷ Elayne Rapping, "The Movie of the Week: Law, Narrativity, and Gender in Prime Time," in *Feminism Media, and the Law*, ed. Martha Fineman and Martha McCluskey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 96.

perpetrators were also the victims—of the very people they killed. Their first trial ended with a hung jury, split precisely along gender lines in which women sympathized with the allegedly abused boys. Rapping argued that those who did not watch the trial on television were “outraged” that the boys were not found guilty, but those who did watch it, “especially women and college students--came to see a situation that looked very diff from the one they had originally assumed--once the issue of sexual abuse became a central theme.”⁹¹⁸ Essentially, this was the strategy of the “battered women’s defense” that gained fame in the 1980s with the trial of Francine Hughes of *The Burning Bed* fame.⁹¹⁹

This intricate process of the “reorganization of jury perceptions” similarly played a critical role in the Susan Smith trial. The prosecution did not venture very far beyond the day that Smith reported being carjacked, except to delve into her sexual history in the months leading up to her crimes. Smith’s defense team, on the other hand, emphasized facts of her life stretching all the way back to the age of six, when her father killed herself; this lengthier narrative made her crimes the endpoint of a very long history of abuse and depression rather than the rash violence of a spurned woman. For the Menendez brothers, the strategy ultimately did not work. In their second trial, the boys were found guilty and they remain in prison today. But the use of this “counternarrative” in their famous, televised trial resulted in unprecedented public debating of a new legal strategy.

Rapping argues that the strategy did not work for the Menendez brothers because of its timing. In the 1990s, she charts the rise of a new “law and order” discourse that called for harsher criminal punishments centered on a heroic, protector role of the state (as represented by

⁹¹⁸ Rapping, *Law and Justice*, 113-116.

⁹¹⁹ See Donald Alexander Downs, *More Than Victims: Battered Women, the Syndrome Society, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

law enforcement officials and prosecutors).⁹²⁰ But in cases of maternal infanticide, we can chart a completely different trend, one that got national press with the Smith trial. A key difference between the use of this “abuse excuse” strategy in Smith’s defense and its use in the Menendez trials or other “battered women’s syndrome” trials was that Smith did not commit the violent act against her abusers. Her crime was inherently maternal because her children were her victims. These two issues—the perpetrator’s maternity and her own victimization—dovetailed with both other cultures’ legal definitions of maternal crimes as well as developing ideas within feminist criminology to result in a new American image: the mentally ill mother.

In fact, there were international precedents for this new image of Susan Smith. Over twenty nations around the globe recognize maternal infanticide as a distinct form of homicide deserving of different legal treatment. Cheryl Meyer and Michele Oberman argue that certain nations “medicalized” infanticide in the early twentieth century by “positing a causal relationship between pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent maternal mental disorder.” In 1922 and 1948, Great Britain recognized maternal infanticide as different from other homicides “due to the impact of pregnancy and birth upon the mother’s mental status.” According to these statutes, mothers who can prove that they suffered from a postpartum mental disorder at the time of the crime are charged with manslaughter, not murder, and they generally receive probation and psychiatric treatment rather than prison time. At least twenty-two other nations followed suit in the twentieth century.⁹²¹ The United States was not one of them; America currently has no state or federal laws that address infanticide.

⁹²⁰ Rapping, *Law and Justice*, 9.

⁹²¹ Meyer and Oberman, 10.

Indeed, the very year that Smith murdered her sons, a British woman named Caroline Beale killed her own child in New York City. *60 Minutes* said Beale's case "sparked a transatlantic furor that called into question the way American law deals with infanticide." In her home country, Beale was seen as a "tragic victim" deserving of "sympathy and a psychiatrist"; in the United States, she was a "cold-blooded monster." Beale was returned to England, where she was convicted of manslaughter; she received five years of probation and lengthy psychiatric treatment.⁹²² If she had been tried in the United States, her punishment could have ranged anywhere from probation to capital punishment.

As seen in the debates over post-partum depression and psychosis in the recent Andrea Yates trial, legal practitioners and theorists in the United States have resisted this gendered, biological model of motive. Smith's defense was not firmly based on ideas about the female body. Her youngest child was fourteen months old, which went beyond the general international criteria of postpartum effects spanning one year, and this was a strategy that was not likely to succeed in this country at any rate. Rather, Bruck and his assistants combined the two criminological trends—traditionally seeing women as weaker and less capable of agency and international precedents for maternal violence—into a composite defense based on Smith's distinctly female *psychology*. The experts in the Smith trial consistently offered a gendered reading of her psychological state in which she epitomized feminine victimhood and mental instability. Halleck's assessment of Susan indicated that her mental instability stemmed from external traumas—in each case, her mistreatment by the men in her life. There is, in fact, a long history to this defense, as seen in the earlier discussion of the scorned and desperate Medea. Scholar Ann Jones traces it to an 1872 case in which an attorney argued that a seduction by an older man traumatized his homicidal

⁹²² Wilczynski, 164.

client at the tender age of fifteen.⁹²³ Like her nineteenth-century sister in crime, the overwhelmingly masculine nature of Susan Smith's traumas positioned her as a distinctly female victim.

The expert psychological testimony used in Smith's defense rested upon a gendered analysis of the roots of her mental illness. Some feminist lawyers and scholars criticize the insanity defense as the "perfect plea," one that explains away female deviance while upholding gender hierarchies based on the presumed "mental frailty" of women.⁹²⁴ This kind of language of motive represents an absolute denial of Susan Smith's "moral agency," or responsibility for the crime.⁹²⁵ The emphasis in this defense strategy is not on what Susan *did*, but rather on *what happened to her*.⁹²⁶ That is, the defense team's image of Susan explains her behavior not in terms of her own independent behavior, but in the reactive terms of her relation to various men.⁹²⁷ This denial of agency is clear in Smith's inability to take the stand—her lawyers advised her not to, fearing she might sabotage her own defense by asking the jury to sentence her to death.⁹²⁸ Smith was voiceless and virtually invisible throughout her trial. The voices that filled this silence, and the artist sketches that took the place of cameras in the courtroom, helped to mold her image according to the prosecution and defense strategies. The expert testimony in the

⁹²³ Jones, 164.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid*, 161.

⁹²⁵ Helen Birch, "Introduction," in Birch, 4. Melissa Benn, "Body Talk: The Sexual Politics of PMT," in Birch, 165. Wilczynski argues similarly in *Child Homicide*.

⁹²⁶ Wendy Chan recognizes this defense in the cases of many women murderers in *Women, Murder, and Justice*, 91.

⁹²⁷ Deborah Rhodes argues that this strategy of understanding women through their relation to men is a fundamental part of the marginalization of women in the media (Deborah L. Rhodes, "Media Images/Feminist Issues," in *Feminism, Media, and the Law*, ed. Martha Fineman, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 12).

⁹²⁸ Rick Bragg, "In South Carolina, A Mother's Defense, and Life, Could Hinge on Choices," *New York Times*, July 16, 1995.

guilt phase of the Susan Smith trial laid important foundations that later linked Smith's crime to all of Union: because she was a damaged girl, as seen in the psychological assessments, and could not be held solely responsible for her crime, Union residents stepped in and claimed some of the blame.

Dr. Halleck established Susan's mental illness with the language and authority of a renowned medical specialist. He did not connect Smith's mental illness explicitly with her maternity, which was, according to many witnesses, the only happy aspect of her life. Rather, he, along with other witnesses, linked it to her exploitation by various men. Bruck supplemented Halleck's "psychobabble" with the very brief testimony of a few local witnesses who had known Smith for many years and had seen her depressive disorder and needy personality in action.⁹²⁹ The defense then rested their case in the guilt phase. None of this local testimony made the news that night. This suggests that Halleck's impact as an expert determined what stuck in the minds of observers as they, as well as the jurors, decided Smith's culpability that weekend. The expert testimony seemed to have quite an effect on the media. NBC's "Evening News" lined up the headshots of the men Smith had been sleeping with in the months before the murders, but they followed this damning line-up with a courtroom sketch of Susan looking prim and withdrawn. Smith, in these accounts, looked like a plain, troubled girl, her face pale and puffy above a wide, high-necked collar.⁹³⁰

That Saturday, after only five days of testimony, the attorneys delivered their closing arguments in the guilt phase. These arguments were, in many ways, revisions of their opening statements. Not surprisingly, Tommy Pope's fiery monologue received more airtime on the

⁹²⁹ These witnesses were Iris Rogers, who knew Smith as a small child and Debby Green, Smith's high school English teacher (*South Carolina v. Smith*, 3450-90).

⁹³⁰ *Evening News*, NBC, July 21, 1995.

national news that weekend. In the segment entitled, “Awaiting Her Fate,” NBC reporter Bob Dotson, who had been in Union since the beginning of the trial, quoted Pope extensively. Pope argued that the testimony showed that “those children were screaming, strapped in her car,” and the insensitive Susan “put her hands over her ears so she couldn’t hear them calling out her name.”⁹³¹ Pope’s argument was read in a voiceover accompanied by sketches of Pope, Bruck, and Susan. Again, the prosecution argued that the murders were not Smith’s only crime—there was her lie to consider, as well. Clarke repeated in her closing argument for the defense that Susan was a pathetic figure; the case, she said, was “about despair and sadness.” She reminded the jury of the expert psychological testimony they had heard only hours before on the previous day; she urged them to judge Susan Smith as sick, not evil.⁹³²

After these arguments, Judge Howard made an unexpected move: he instructed the jury that they could consider a verdict of involuntary manslaughter, which carried a much lighter sentence than the intentional double homicide verdict sought by the prosecution. He later explained that the prosecution had opened the door for the defense’s psychological testimony by focusing so heavily on Smith’s motive and mental state at the time of the crime. He wanted to avoid a mistrial and an appeal, so he offered the jury the opportunity to consider manslaughter.⁹³³ Involuntary manslaughter was a sort of middle ground; jurors could be convinced by the testimony of all the witnesses and arrive at this verdict. This option worked both ways for the defense. On the one hand, a middle ground made jurors less likely to find Smith guilty of the harsher crime. On the other, however, if the jurors were not inclined to find Smith guilty of

⁹³¹ There is no evidence that Smith heard her children screaming; this was absolutely not a part of her confession (Bruck, interview).

⁹³² *Evening News*, NBC, July 22, 1995.

⁹³³ Howard, interview.

homicide already, the middle ground option allowed them to avoid completely exculpating her—she had, after all, confessed to the crime. Bruck described the judge’s move as “pennies from heaven.” His team had, in effect, considered a guilty murder verdict a foregone conclusion—the psychological testimony was meant to effect the outcome of the sentencing, not the penalty, phase.⁹³⁴ On the other side of the courtroom, Pope saw his “prosecutorial life flash before [his] eyes.”⁹³⁵

He need not have worried. Unionites were in a forgiving mood, but they were well aware that Smith was guilty of rolling her car into John D. Long Lake. Late that day, after a little over two hours of deliberation, the jurors returned their verdict: Susan Smith was guilty of two counts of homicide, “one for each boy.”⁹³⁶ They had rejected the intermediate option of involuntary manslaughter, favoring the gruesome technical testimony of the prosecution over the in-depth psychological analyses of the defense. Reporters indicated little surprise. *Newsweek* pointed out the “ominous” body language of the jurors, who “just stared at [Smith]...It was chilling to watch how adamant they were.”⁹³⁷ The focus immediately became the death penalty, which reporters argued would be an “uphill battle” for the prosecution based on precedent: Union County jurors had never sent anyone to South Carolina’s electric chair, and the state of South Carolina had executed only two women in the past century (both in the 1940s).⁹³⁸ In fact, only one woman had been executed in the entire country since the 1960s (Velma Barfield of North Carolina in 1984), only a handful were on Death Rows in the United States, and South Carolina

⁹³⁴ Bruck, interview.

⁹³⁵ Pope, interview.

⁹³⁶ Rick Bragg, “Focus on Smith’s Lies and a Smile,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1995.

⁹³⁷ Tom Morganthau and Ginny Carroll, “Will They Kill Susan Smith?,” *Newsweek*, July 31, 1995.

⁹³⁸ *Evening News*, CBS, July 23, 1995.

jurors had only sentenced one woman to death since the early 1970s (Rebecca Smith, who was accused of murdering her husband—her sentence was commuted to life in prison on a 1994 appeal under the skilled hand of none other than David Bruck). A death penalty researcher acknowledged to the press that “a woman has to do something that’s horrible beyond belief to be sentenced to die.”⁹³⁹

This statement sums up what criminologists call the “chivalry hypothesis” in which women are perceived as receiving more lenient treatment throughout the legal process. Although the statistics might seem to support this hypothesis, there is a catch. Ann Jones, who wrote the definitive book on female murderers in the United States, argues that for “offenses traditionally considered to be ‘masculine,’” such as homicide, women often receive harsher sentences than men. The perception that women receive lenient sentences reflects the fact that they generally commit less violent crimes than men do.⁹⁴⁰

The corollary to this legal “chivalry” is the “evil woman hypothesis” in which women who step out of their proper gender roles are rewarded with harsher legal punishment than men who commit similar crimes.⁹⁴¹ As in the cases of alleged interracial rape examined by Lisa Lindquist-Dorr, conforming to gender roles appears to have some benefits in the legal process. When courts do treat women more leniently, scholars argue that the lighter sentence is often based on the “paternalistic attitudes of prosecutors and judges who strongly believe that women are the

⁹³⁹ Mona Breckinridge, “Researcher: Odds Against Death Penalty for Susan Smith,” *Rock Hill Herald*, June 28, 1995; Associated Press, “Odds of Smith Death Penalty Slight by National Standards,” *Charleston Post and Courier* (SC), June 28, 1995; Kathleen O’Shea, *Women and the Death Penalty in the United States, 1900-1998* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 350.

⁹⁴⁰ Jones, 9.

⁹⁴¹ Wilczynski, 115.

weaker sex and should be afforded protection.”⁹⁴² If, for example, the offending woman is a wife or “especially a mother,” juries almost cannot help but to consider these roles when judging her. Jurors supposedly judge evidence, but often they are actually “studying character”⁹⁴³—which explains the prosecution’s enormous interest in Susan’s sex life, which had nothing to do with her guilt or innocence. Indeed, Smith’s sentence may have had a broader social purpose; serious punishment of “fallen” women, argues one legal theorist, “has always been integral to enforcement of the boundaries of the 'good' girls' and women's place in patriarchal society.”⁹⁴⁴ Conversely, the successful portrayal of Smith as mentally ill (and thus deserving of some leniency) required that she appear to be a “morally 'pure'” woman who stayed demurely within the boundaries of proper femininity.⁹⁴⁵

Scholar Elayne Rapping argues that through arenas such as the media and the courtroom—a space that is increasingly public in the era of televised trials, twenty-four hour news coverage, and Court TV—Americans “learn and relearn the gender lessons regulate our common lives.”⁹⁴⁶ As in the televised cases Rapping studies, gender performance constituted the battleground of the final phase of the Susan Smith trial. The jury’s perceptions of her behaviors as a daughter, wife, and mother would dictate her sentence and reinscribe the gendered rules of the culture according

⁹⁴² Concetta C. Culliver, “Women and Crime: An Overview,” in Culliver, 10.

⁹⁴³ Malcolm, 42.

⁹⁴⁴ Chesney-Lind, 4. This idea surfaced repeatedly in discussions of the Andrea Yates verdict. Some observers lamented that Smith’s life sentence dictated that infanticidal mothers would never get the death penalty—a truly offensive failure of the cautionary tale (these observers obviously ignored the Darlie Routier trial—she is now on Death Row in Texas for killing her two sons in 1997). I discuss the use of Smith in discussions of later infanticides in the next chapter.

⁹⁴⁵ Meyer and Oberman, 69. The extreme disparity in the sentences of infanticidal women—ranging from outpatient psychological care to capital punishment—is most likely related to the women’s performance of “appropriate” gender roles.

⁹⁴⁶ Rapping, “The Movie of the Week,” 94

to either the prosecution or the defense. By all accounts, the penalty phase was the most difficult week of the Smith trial.

In this final phase, the prosecution put on the stand another series of technical witnesses who provided the details that made the awful crime palpable to the jurors. To these witnesses they added a key voice: that of David Smith, whose dramatic breakdown on the stand showed the courtroom the continuing pain caused by Susan's actions. David had been very public in his support of capital punishment in the months before the trial; his tell-all book, in which he wrote that he wanted Susan to receive the death penalty, hit the stands, and the best seller lists, that very day.⁹⁴⁷ Through David and the other witnesses, the prosecution sought to refocus the trial away from Smith's psychological state. Keith Giese, in his brief opening statement for the prosecution in the penalty phase, spoke about the boys.

They were helpless. They had no congenital defects. Had it not been for Ms. Smith, they were all set to live long, full lives...And to whatever poor, pitiful extent that we can, at this time, we are going to bring them for brief, fleeting moment back to life so that you can see Michael and Alex Smith, see the two little boys that were murdered...Now another area that will be looked at is the characteristics of the defendant: What kind of person can strap these two healthy babies into car seats, roll them down a ramp into the water and let them sit submerged upside down for nine days. Now, you heard a lot of testimony in the guilty phase about Susan Smith, about her father committing suicide, about her suicide attempts, about the poor Susan and how tough she had it.⁹⁴⁸

This was an expected shift in focus, given that the prosecutors needed the jury to visualize the full horror of the murders before they could send one of their own to the electric chair. The target of the prosecution in the sentencing phase became the murders and their impact, now that the lying, manipulative, murderer was officially guilty. David Smith was the witness that most

⁹⁴⁷ *Evening News*, CBS, July 25, 1995; Al Dozier, "Defense Paints Harsh Picture of David Smith," *Rock Hill Herald* (SC), July 27, 1995.

⁹⁴⁸ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3957-58.

represented this new tactic, delivering an emotional victim impact statement couched between the testimonies of SLED agents who detailed the actual events of the crime.

After losing the guilt phase of the trial, David Bruck and Judy Clarke honed their strategy in the sentencing. They kept expert testimony to a minimum, putting Dr. Andrews back on the stand briefly. Their real case now rested with the local representatives of the community that pleaded for Susan's life. This tactic made Smith's problems more real, more approachable. Her pathologies, in these testimonies, became the responsibility of the entire community. All of the men of Union who had abused Susan Smith emotionally and physically in the past, the defense implied, played a key role in this trial: "The community, as much as the jury, is trying those people, even as the outside world judges the town."⁹⁴⁹ The defense team relied on local voices of authority, supplemented by psychological experts, to make their case against the death penalty. Local witnesses built upon the foundations laid by the experts, who had molded the image of Susan as a victim of abuse and mental illness.

David Bruck took considerable time with his opening statement in the sentencing phase, delivering it in his characteristically calm manner. He began by reassuring the jurors that the defense did not question the guilty verdict of the previous weekend.

...I have told you that she does not quarrel with your verdict, but I know that you must have seen her crying when it was read. I know that you don't hold that against her. It's not that she hoped for anything different, but she is young, and those were her children, and she loved them, and this is not what she wanted for herself, and this is not what she wanted for her little boys, and it was hard for her to hear.⁹⁵⁰

By their verdict that Saturday night, the jurors decided "that she will be alone as a person can be for the rest of her life, whether her life lasts as long as God thinks it should, or whether it ends by

⁹⁴⁹ Rick Bragg, "Union, SC, is a Town Torn Asunder," *New York Times*, July 24, 1995.

⁹⁵⁰ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3963.

your decision in this courtroom this week, she will be all alone.”⁹⁵¹ The power given the jurors in this capital punishment case, Bruck implied, was the power to play God and end lives, but the question was not whether or not Susan Smith should be punished. The jurors knew by this point about Smith’s history of depression and suicidal tendencies, which were only exacerbated by her crimes, imprisonment, and trial. Smith was already being punished; as Bruck told the jurors, “her life is over and death would be a relief.”⁹⁵²

Bruck asked his listeners not to let the carjacking lie, and their own personal senses of betrayal, cloud their judgment of the tearful young woman seated before them. Echoing Dr. Halleck, he argued that the lie itself was a manifestation of her mental instability.

You are going to see the portrait of a young woman on the end of a twenty-foot diving board over an empty swimming pool, knowing that before long she’s going to have to dive in there face first on the hard concrete, but she doesn’t want to do it ... At the end of the tapes, you will see someone still lying, but with no conviction, no energy, just reciting the same increasingly unbelievable lie... It was wrong to involve this county and this country in so much turmoil and grief and hardship and hard work, all for nothing. It was made more hurtful by the fact that it involved a hurtful, hurtful racial stereotype, or a sort that has damaged our country so much already. It was wrong, and we do not make any excuse for it.⁹⁵³

To hear Smith’s lie was to glimpse her mental illness. To focus on it, as the prosecution had in the guilt phase with their poster-board calendar of the nine deceitful days, was to ignore a lifetime of psychological traumas—“the twenty-three year story that led to the water’s edge that night.”⁹⁵⁴ Bruck argued that the prosecution’s new focus in the sentencing phase—the memory

⁹⁵¹ Ibid, 3963.

⁹⁵² Ibid, 3964.

⁹⁵³ Ibid, 3966.

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid, 3974.

of Michael and Alex and their father's enormous grief—made understanding Susan Smith's past even more imperative.⁹⁵⁵

Bruck acknowledged that the Smith case, “in its very nature,” roused extreme emotions, but he urged the jurors not to act in anger. He cautioned them “that calm deliberation and reason favor life, and that rage and fury and heartbreak favor death.”⁹⁵⁶ He went on to outline their case in this phase: the defense would call Dr. Andrews again, to go over her assessment of Susan more thoroughly, and then they would turn to members of the community that had known Smith most of her life. These local testimonies, Bruck argued, were those of people who “are also victims to this crime,” because they loved the boys and they loved Susan. “Grief is not a monopoly of the prosecution's side,” he said, justifying the numerous local witnesses he would question in the coming days.⁹⁵⁷

Bruck emphasized the jury's role as judges not just in the courtroom, but, more importantly, in their close-knit community. Their verdict in the sentencing phase, even more so than in the guilt phase, was not just a judgment of Susan Smith; it was a decision that would affect all of Union. “We are going to tell you as much as we can and make sure that you know everything about what was weak about Susan, about why she broke under pressures that would only make most people bend,” Bruck explained patiently. The jury was charged with deciding “if there [was] any value in Susan,” and with making “the best decision for the family of Michael and Alex Smith; the best decision for the prosecution; the decision for Susan; and the best decision

⁹⁵⁵ Ibid, 3968.

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid, 3969.

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid, 3979.

for [their] community of Union.”⁹⁵⁸ This, then, was what the entire trial would hinge upon: would this strategic combination of local and psychological authority save Susan Smith’s life?

The state proceeded with their witnesses that afternoon, calling a series of people who underscored points already made in the guilt phase about Smith’s “strange and inappropriate” behavior during the kidnapping investigation.⁹⁵⁹ Their repetitive testimony took up the entire afternoon. It is probable that Pope just used these witnesses, who spoke primarily of Smith’s deceitfulness, to take up the afternoon so that David Smith would have the entire, uninterrupted following day for his testimony. Pope was relying solely upon victim impact statements to make his case for the death penalty. Elayne Rapping argued that there was a major shift from “defendant-centered” to “victim-centered” trials, so that, by the 1990s, the impact of the crime on its victims—defined broadly as anyone related to or familiar with the victim(s) of a violent crime—was more important to the outcome of a trial than the mentality of the perpetrator. To this end, “victim impact statements,” or prepared testimony in which friends and family members of the victim tell the jury how their lives have been negatively altered by the crime, began to take precedence in trials, especially in penalty phases. The use of these statements to make the case for harsher punishment of criminals indicates, in Rapping’s estimation, a “reactionary, even bloodthirsty,” attempt at getting revenge. Victim impact statements are generally graphic and emotional; the Smith trial was no exception.

One observer described Pope’s tactics on the eve of David Smith’s testimony: “Pope is trying very hard to make this really gruesome.” But, he added, it was clear that “the defendant was not

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid, 3980.

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid, 4047.

a gruesome person.”⁹⁶⁰ If media accounts are accurate indicators of public opinions, David’s emotional testimony may well have changed this assessment in many people’s minds. There were few dry eyes in the courtroom as David Smith described his rocky marriage and his love for his sons. Through tears, he listed many of the things he had looked forward to teaching his sons, and Pope walked him through the agony of the investigation and the revelation of Smith’s lie. Despite media speculation that the defense would attack David about his book deal—his book hit stands the day of his testimony—David Bruck wisely did not question David, whose emotional exhaustion had effected everyone in the courtroom.⁹⁶¹

The prosecution rested that afternoon. Like the prosecution’s witnesses (with the exception of David Smith), the defense witnesses covered much of the same ground as in the guilt phase with their testimony about Susan’s psychological problems and past traumas. Bruck and Clarke questioned a long series of local friends and family members who argued that Susan was a victim of abuse herself. More importantly, they positioned themselves as possible victims—of the state if it were to kill Susan Smith. These statements, uttered by community leaders ranging from teachers to Smith’s stepfather to ministers, provided the essential link between Susan, her defenders, the jurors, and the larger community to which they all felt responsible.

Feminist legal historians argue that infanticide is best understood in terms of maternal frustration with impossibly demanding gender roles and social forces that work against the independence and self-fulfillment of modern women.⁹⁶² However, the local and psychological testimonies in the Susan Smith trial do not replicate this theory of societal complicity found in

⁹⁶⁰ *Evening News*, CBS, July 24, 1995.

⁹⁶¹ *Evening News*, NBC, July 25, 1995.

⁹⁶² Jill Astbury, *Crazy for You: The Making of Women’s Madness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 29; Michelle Oberman, “A Brief History of Infanticide and the Law,” in *Infanticide: Psychosocial and Legal Perspectives on Mothers Who Kill* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc., 2003), 14.

feminist scholarship. Rather, the ideas of collective culpability and community supervision of female behavior espoused by Susan's teachers or her stepfather exemplify what Catherine MacKinnon calls "the law for women where there is no law." This law consists of informal rules that "effectively prescribe what girls can be, what the community encourages and permits in a woman, what opportunities are available, and hence what aspirations are developed," enforced by the various forces of "religion, popular culture, masculinity and femininity, everyday life."⁹⁶³

David Bruck followed the local witnesses who pleaded for mercy with Dr. David Heatherly, who, as a local doctor, represented both types of voices of authority used thus far in Smith's defense. Dr. Heatherly, unlike Drs. Andrews and Halleck, was able to introduce the court personally to Susan as a depressed teen: he was the family therapist who had treated Smith in 1987 after she came forward about her stepfather's abusive behavior. Heatherly firmly fused the troubled, sweet girl of local testimony with the medical assessments of previous testimony. Her father's suicide caused Susan to "stop growing emotionally," so that her psychological growth was stunted at the level of an eager-to-please little girl. According to Heatherly, Smith's traumatic youth and her untreated "adjustment disorder with a depressive mood" bred her unintentional criminal behavior—an opinion he carefully couched in moral, rather than medical, terms: "Susan is not an evil person...a lot of things happened that placed her in that situation."⁹⁶⁴

This "sweet," "needy" girl depicted by Heatherly was now under constant "mental observation and suicide watch" in prison, according to one of her prison guards who took the stand after Heatherly.⁹⁶⁵ Bruck's decision to follow Heatherly, who knew Susan as a very

⁹⁶³ Catherine MacKinnon, "Reflections on Law in the Everyday Life of Women," in *Law and Everyday Life*, ed. Austin Sarat and Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 112.

⁹⁶⁴ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 4812.

⁹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 4826.

troubled teen, with Officer Mungo, who knew her as a suicidal prisoner, posited a direct line of causation between these two stages of Smith's life—a connection that eclipsed her teenaged love affairs, her failed marriage, and Tom Findlay and positioned her squarely as a victim. Moreover, Mungo's testimony implied, she was a victim searching for salvation.⁹⁶⁶

The last day of the trial was devoted entirely to closing arguments. Prosecutor Tommy Pope took a cue from the defense and emphasized the jurors' roles as guardians of their community. This case, he argued, was about "choices." Susan chose to drive to the lake that night, and she chose, perhaps at the last possible second, to send her sons into the water alone. Her third choice constituted another moral violation: "She carried it even further. She chose to lie... She chose to bring us in."⁹⁶⁷ Pope appealed directly to the jury's sense of their wronged community, calling Michael and Alex "Union boys" who would never grow up to play football for Union High, or be teachers, or parents.⁹⁶⁸ He urged the jurors to act on their sense of outrage and betrayal: "So what you have to do now is speak, the twelve of you, as the voice of this community," and publicly state the value, in terms of Smith's life, of Union's lost boys.⁹⁶⁹ Pope unequivocally called on the jurors as representatives of their "wounded community" to cast out evil in the form of the woman who had destroyed their peaceful existence.⁹⁷⁰

In his closing argument, David Bruck blended moral, religious, and medical language seamlessly into a composite picture of Susan as victim. "Mothers who love their children don't just up and kill them for a passing fantasy," he argued. Susan "snapped" because her "formative

⁹⁶⁶ Ibid, 4835.

⁹⁶⁷ Ibid, 5000.

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid, 5018.

⁹⁶⁹ Ibid, 5019.

⁹⁷⁰ Barnett, 78.

environment” was “a house ruled by depression and threat of violent death and disaster.”⁹⁷¹

Bruck stated repeatedly that the issue was not whether or not Susan would be punished—she was in a living hell already.⁹⁷² He went over, and over again, the main themes of the defense—Susan as the good daughter, wife, and mother who had been victimized to the breaking point—and then he asked the jurors to take the steps to heal this wounded community. “Judy and I have watched over Susan, and now it is time to entrust her to you,” he told the jurors. Bruck asked them to “watch over” Susan’s family, with their “broken hearts,” and her former teachers, who still wonder “if there was something different they could have done.”⁹⁷³

Finally, Bruck asked the jury to consider the accused as much a part of their community as any of the witnesses. A sentence of life imprisonment was, Bruck implied, the least they could do after decades of failing Susan Smith. Their sentence of life in prison—delivered after only one vote two and a half hours of deliberation—and their later statements to the press revealed just how convinced they were by this defensive characterization of Smith.⁹⁷⁴ This result was not inevitable, or simply the product of small-town folks trying to protect one of their own. In fact, scholars find that twentieth-century Southern juries, while slightly less likely to bring charges against women (especially white women), are more punitive in their punishment of mothers who kill their children.⁹⁷⁵

The facts that swayed the jury were clearly the facts of Susan Smith’s “twenty-three year story,” not just those of the fateful day during the previous fall. In the end, the jurors believed

⁹⁷¹ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 5044, 5042.

⁹⁷² *Ibid*, 5037.

⁹⁷³ *Ibid*, 5091.

⁹⁷⁴ Heilprin, “Smith Gets Life in Prison; Jurors Explain Verdict.”

⁹⁷⁵ Mann, 137.

that Susan had “no evil in her heart, only hopelessness.”⁹⁷⁶ When they sentenced Smith to imprisonment “for the balance of her natural life,” the jury was acting not as simple “fact finders,” but as “soul searchers, if you will, of the community,” according to the judge.

Addressing the jurors directly, Judge Howard said:

I know that your hearts were torn throughout this two weeks’ emotional trial, as I think everyone’s hearts have been torn. And I want you to know on behalf of myself, and on behalf of the citizens of Union County, and of this state, and of this nation that your work is not going to be taken lightly...I know that your community is proud of you.⁹⁷⁷

As he congratulated all of the attorneys on their professionalism, Howard explained the sentencing: “I think that a part of each person in the courtroom was swayed by...the impact upon the victims”—and by “victims,” Howard meant the community, Smith’s family, and quite possibly even Smith herself.⁹⁷⁸ The sentencing in this case, the judge implied, was a representation of the people of Union County, and what they wanted was healing.

Smith’s jurors were not acting simply on criminological precedent; the most compelling images of Susan determined their decision. Jurors told reporters upon their release from sequestration that they were moved by a combination of expert and local testimony.⁹⁷⁹ A female juror told the local press that “the way that men used [Smith]” throughout her life insured the more lenient sentence.⁹⁸⁰ Robbie Christian, the only juror who had initially favored execution, was even more specific: his turning point came during Beverly Russell’s testimony. Susan

⁹⁷⁶ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 2404.

⁹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5137-5139.

⁹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5142.

⁹⁷⁹ *Evening News*, CBS, July 29, 1995.

⁹⁸⁰ Associated Press, “Jurors Spare Smith because of Tragic Life,” *Rock Hill Herald* (SC), July 30, 1995.

Smith, he argued, was not solely responsible for this crime: “[Russell] should be locked up with her,” Christian told local reporters.

This spreading of blame was not just a local sentiment; *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* asked readers to consider the troubling roles of others in this case.

How about the other mother in this case, Susan’s mother, who knew her second husband abused her daughter? What and how should we think about that mother? Do we cut her some slack because her first husband killed himself? Do we condemn her as weak, even evil, for hiding the truth and prolonging an incestuous affair? And consider the stepfather...should he be shunned or counseled, reviled or forgiven? Is the rich boyfriend blameless? Is the husband?⁹⁸¹

Susan Smith, the journalist argued, was “Everywoman who acted as no sane woman would. She was Everydaughter treated as no daughter should have been.”⁹⁸² Smith was not a deviant, aberrant mutation of the small community that had caused the rupture and trauma of the trial. Rather, she was a damaged daughter, and with their sentence, jurors reclaimed her as a member of their community. Jurors said of their sentence that “it was important that it be that way...because it showed a unity, a peace, that the town had not known in a while.”⁹⁸³ The authoritative discourse of psychology and abuse legitimated both the town’s guilt as well as its impulse to forgive and, finally, save Susan Smith.

The prosecution’s “Susan,” the attention-grabbing, murderous slut, clashed with the defense’s raped daughter, abused wife, and ideal mother. Both sides understood that Susan’s shifting relations to prescribed norms of womanhood were as important in the trial as her actual

⁹⁸¹ Rheta Grimsley Johnson, “Considering and Crossing Thin Lines in Union, SC,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 30, 1995.

⁹⁸² Ibid.

⁹⁸³ Rick Bragg, “Susan Smith Verdict Brings Relief to Town,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1995.

crime.⁹⁸⁴ An NBC reporter argued that “the trial was a gallery of images; its outcome hung on an image that stuck.” This image was that of “a killer driven to darkness by her father’s suicide and her stepfather’s sexual advances.”⁹⁸⁵ This image, moreover, was not just of Susan and her rough past; rather, it represented Union to the greater American public.

Union itself will be forever changed by the tragedy of those two little boys, and by the testimony, the down-home dirty laundry that aired daily, testimony that revealed that Susan had a string of intimate relations with some of the most powerful men in town. The fall-out from that may never heal.⁹⁸⁶

In this characterization, the trial itself was almost as traumatic for Union as the actual crime. NBC highlighted the issue of community responsibility under a sensational graphic emblazoned with “Southern Gothic.” Union, the reporter argued, may not be able to move on due to a very real sense of shame: “Worst of all, in this close-knit village, where most everyone is related, no one kept Susan Smith from being sexually abused as a child.”⁹⁸⁷ NBC captured this new image best the day after Smith’s sentencing. Bob Dotson quoted Smith’s pastor Mark Long; although the “blame could go anywhere,” he argued, “only Susan Smith was found guilty.” He detailed Susan’s new life for viewers: “Anything she could use to kill herself has been taken from her cell. She wears a paper gown, eats alone, exercises alone one hour a day out in the prison yard. Her six by four cell is not the end of this tragic story.” The end, it seems, lay in the next segment. “Now to the problem as a whole: the child abuse epidemic,” Dotson concluded, handing the segment back to anchor Brian Williams. Criminologist Anna Wilczynski cites a study that concluded that child abuse and homicides are the “ultimate consequences of the failure

⁹⁸⁴ Wendy Chan, *Women, Murder, and Justice* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 24. For a more in-depth discussion of this idea, see Anna Wilczynski, *Child Homicide*.

⁹⁸⁵ *Evening News*, NBC, July 28, 1995.

⁹⁸⁶ *Evening News*, NBC, July 28, 1995.

⁹⁸⁷ *Evening News*, NBC, July 31, 1995.

of parents, professionals and communities to care for and protect children."⁹⁸⁸ Significantly, however, the “child” in need of protection in this case was Susan Smith.

The media did not dismantle the scaffolding along Main Street immediately. Most major media outlets hovered around Union for a few days after the trial gauging local reactions. NBC’s Bob Dotson told viewers that the “small Southern town will try to recover as its most famous resident is taken away.”⁹⁸⁹ What remained to be seen, and what the press would focus on for weeks to come, was if the American public at large shared the forgiving sentiments of these legal representatives of the small Southern town.

The outcome of the Susan Smith trial rested upon a trajectory of images reaching back nine months to the night of October 25, 1994, when Susan Smith was crowned an ideal mother. The transformation over the following months was often contradictory, and ill-fitting images of Susan Smith often overlapped in the media and public responses. In the end, however, the one that saved her life was one crafted by her hometown. Unionites offered an image of Smith as a daughter abused by various men in her life whom they had failed to protect. At the trial, her defense team capitalized on this image, expert witnesses medicalized Smith, and the media disseminated the new Susan to the spellbound public. This new image itself was contradictory, calling as it did upon traditional notions of female frailty as well as more progressive ideas about the psychological workings of the criminal mind.

Elayne Rapping argues that abuse cases are “moral victories,” because they reveal the inner workings of power and discrimination based on gender, race, and class. But this victory comes with a price. “On another level,” according to Rapping, defendants in abuse cases “have allowed

⁹⁸⁸ Wilczynski, 1.

⁹⁸⁹ *Evening News*, NBC, July 28, 1995.

themselves to be defined, by the state, and victims in need of protection and rescue.”⁹⁹⁰ The trial of Susan Smith was an early example of this new discourse, and the trajectory of images surrounding her nine months of fame bridged the older, bifurcated notions of female criminality and the newer, medicalized images. Although many Americans remember the evil, “sexpot” image of Smith over that of the abused daughter, the final “Susan” at her trial was the representations of her that indicated a change in ideas about motherhood as articulated through the “border case” of infanticide.

⁹⁹⁰ Rapping, *Law and Justice*, 165-166.

CONCLUSION

FROM “MONSTER” TO “MENTALLY ILL”

Of the many images used to explain Susan Smith in the year of her national infamy—ideal mother, racist white woman, scheming slut, social-climbing mill girl, damaged daughter, and psychological victim—only one overwhelms public representations of her since her trial: the lying “monster mother” and the “boyfriend motive.” The sympathy for Susan Smith that characterized the media coverage of her trial and its immediate aftermath disappeared within weeks of her sentencing. Even Rick Bragg, in a recent interview, remembered her differently despite his sympathetic coverage of her trial. “The prosecution’s theories about the motivation behind the crime were ugly to hear,” he told me. “And I can’t say that I disagreed with them; I think they made perfect sense.”⁹⁹¹

Networks and newspapers have produced periodic, sensational updates on Smith’s life in prison in the past decade or so. Almost all of them thoroughly demonize Smith with little or no mention of the psychiatric disorders or psychological traumas cited by the expert witnesses during her trial. The media had a field day when it was disclosed that Smith had been transferred to another prison for having sex with a guard. Under the headline, “Continuing Saga of Sex, Murder & Racism: Susan Smith Is Still Scheming In Prison,” Tom Turnipseed reported for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that Susan Smith admitted to relations with a male guard when prison doctors discovered that she had contracted a sexually transmitted disease. The guard’s wife, another former inmate, sobbed to the judge at her husband’s bond hearing, “I feel like I’ve

⁹⁹¹ Bragg, interview.

been murdered too, just like those two little boys, she took my life from me.”⁹⁹² The scheming “Susan” of the “boyfriend motive” was up to her old tricks in prison, sleeping with powerful men and ruining others’ lives.

To those sympathetic to Smith, this was another instance in the long series of coercive, abusive relationships that had caused her depressive disorder and subsequent crimes in the first place.⁹⁹³ But in collective memory, Susan Smith serves as a template for feminine evil: for unrestrained, class-climbing sexuality; for white racism; and for maternal deviance. Public representations of her since her trial do not recognize the shift in images between the murders and her trial. Perhaps this is because Susan Smith graced the nightly news at the very beginning of a major transformation in the way that Americans think about motherhood. In spite of all that transpired by the time of her trial, it was still easier to think of her in the older, bifurcated terms that called upon stock images of motherhood, race, class, region, and violence. Representations of Smith thus returned summarily to the simplistic demonization that immediately followed her confession. Nevertheless, the final, medicalized image of her helped bridge the gap between these older visions of motherhood and the ones that would come to characterize the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The public representations of Susan Smith in the decade since her trial have generally taken two forms. Perhaps in compensation for the lack of debate at the time, several authors—including some prominent Unionites—have addressed the racial dynamics of the case. In two nationally recognized works—Cornelius Eady’s *Brutal Imagination* and Richard Price’s *Freedomland*—authors use the plot of the Smith case to challenge the culturally compelling

⁹⁹² Tom Turnipseed, “Continuing Saga of Sex, Murder, and Racism: Susan Smith Is Still Scheming in Prison,” *Common Dreams*, September 14, 2000, <http://www.commondreams.org/views/091400-101.htm>.

⁹⁹³ Toni White, interview.

images of the white woman in danger and the black male criminal. In the community play, *Turn the Washpot Down*, Unionites explicitly addressed the issues of race and Susan Smith through maternal and racial metaphors.

Each of these works indicates the unresolved tensions of the racial dynamics of the Smith case. In his collection of poems, Cornelius Eady targets the “brutal imaginations” of Susan Smith, Charles Stuart, and all of the Americans who automatically believed their stories of endangered whiteness. In the voice of Smith’s imaginary attacker, Eady writes repeatedly, “When called, I come/ My job is to get things done.”⁹⁹⁴ In this passage and others, he acknowledges the racist purpose of the image of the black male criminal. Smith’s choice of criminal was, in fact, natural; the black criminal image is, in Eady’s words, “a stray thought, a solution.”⁹⁹⁵ Smith, in Eady’s poems, is not a lone racist; she is an icon of American racism. Although his message was one that was largely dismissed at the time of her trial, *Brutal Imagination* relies upon the words of African Americans from Union as well as those of the imagined carjacker. Eady’s revelations did not receive a large amount of press, and much of it was negative. One reviewer opined that though it was full of “terrible truths,” Eady’s refrain was simply “repetitive.”⁹⁹⁶

Novelist Richard Price had a bit more luck when he achieved national acclaim with his 1998 novel *Freedomland*, in which he set the Susan Smith story in the housing projects of the urban northeast. In the novel, a young white mother claims she was carjacked in the African American part of the projects. She lives in the projects as well (on the “white side”), but Price does not present her as a racist. Throughout the novel, she is dissociated and disheveled; none of her

⁹⁹⁴ Eady, 14.

⁹⁹⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁹⁹⁶ Alisa Solomon, “That Sinking Feeling,” *Village Voice* (NY), January 22, 2002.

actions seem calculated. The Sheriff Wells character in Price's narrative is a black man, and he plays a protective role in the community as he slowly coaxes the truth out of the young mother. The murder of her son is not as brutal or even necessarily as deliberate as the murders of the Smith boys, but the racial implications of her lie are the same. Indeed, issues of race and class are exaggerated in Price's novel in comparison to the actual dynamics of the Smith case. Price's novel sold well, but the movie based on it was comparatively unpopular when it hit theatres in 2006.⁹⁹⁷ Either it is very difficult to use the Smith case to spark debates about race, or Americans are still unwilling to acknowledge their complicity in Smith's carjacking lie.

Indeed, the most thoughtful analysis of race in the Smith case has come from Unionites themselves in the form of a community play produced in the wake of the mill closings. When Union residents contacted Community Performance, Inc., in 2000 for help writing the play, no one knew for certain what such a thing would look like for a town like Union. It turns out that the play, composed from oral histories and interviews, was all about race and gender. Jules Corriere, the director and an outsider whose only previous experience with Union was through the Susan Smith coverage, did not know what to expect. "What I admired about Union, and still do, is that they are the first community I've worked with that decided to talk about not just the sweet wonderful times, but to be up front about where they stood on race, gender, poverty, education and lack there of," she told me.⁹⁹⁸ Although "the recent wounds [caused by Susan Smith] were still too open to touch," residents shared with her many stories about parenting, and especially about race.⁹⁹⁹ In fact, Corriere found that Union, of all the Southern communities she

⁹⁹⁷ Richard Price, *Freedomland* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998).

⁹⁹⁸ Jules Corriere, interview by author, 14 April 2005, via email, notes in author's possession.

⁹⁹⁹ Ibid.

has worked with, was “the most forthcoming about themselves and their history, in regards to racial issues.”¹⁰⁰⁰

Residents did not just give Corriere their stories; they comprised the cast of eighty-three and acted out their own shared histories.¹⁰⁰¹ They called the play “Turn the Washpot Down,” in reference to the local lore of how slaves, who were forbidden to gather together in public, met in secret and whispered their stories into a iron washpot, believing it would dampen the sounds of their voices.¹⁰⁰² In direct contrast to the story of town fathers and a damaged daughter told a half-decade earlier, and in a perhaps subconscious reckoning with Susan Smith, the stories Unionites whispered into the “washpot” were about the complex relationships between mothers and sons. The play deals with hard subjects spanning everything from the alleged “lynching tree” in town to the integration of the textile mills. Although Susan Smith came up in preliminary interviews, her story was apparently still unspeakable—perhaps it is, as the narrator indicates at the opening, “the worst kinda pain, the kind you can ’t speak.”¹⁰⁰³ Director Jules Corriere argued that Unionites “needed to disguise the Susan Smith story with a parallel story from the past,” because “recent wounds were still open to the touch.”¹⁰⁰⁴ Instead, the play features Susan Smith masked as history, based on an anonymous oral account of a neglectful mother who abused her son and sent him off to war at fifteen “to die.”¹⁰⁰⁵ The community’s story ends with this son on stage alone with the narrator, a female slave. As she softly sings a

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰¹ Linda Frye Burnham, “A More Perfect Union,” *Community Arts Network Reading Room*, 2003.

¹⁰⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰⁰³ Corriere, “Turn the Washpot Down,” (2002), 3.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Corriere, interview.

¹⁰⁰⁵ “Turn the Washpot Down,” 36.

line from “Amazing Grace,” the son speaks the last words—“I forgive you”—and the curtain closes.¹⁰⁰⁶ And with that, some Union residents attempted to heal the racial wounds that local leaders refused to admit ever existed, and they forgave Susan Smith.

Locals were, it seems, alone in this sentiment. These racialized images of Susan Smith were not the dominant images of her in the media in the years after her trial. The case of Susan Smith did not spur a national referendum on race, but it certainly troubled contemporary ideas about motherhood. In fact, the second way in which Susan Smith figures in public narratives indicates this real discursive change, although at first glance the references seem to adhere to the same old politics of the “boyfriend motive.”

When Susan Smith is dredged up in the media, the primary goal is to use her as the negative template for infanticide and, by extension, motherhood in general. Although her case helped to usher in the new image of the mentally ill mother, Smith serves as the unfavorable comparison to other infanticide cases characterized by the new discourse of “postpartum depression,” a diagnosis that became a household term at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In June 2001, a desperate Texas housewife named Andrea Pia Yates systematically drowned all five of her children in the bathtub of her suburban home. When she finished the deed, she called 911 and told the operator what she had done, sparking a media frenzy that would span her two homicide trials of 2002 and 2006. Yates was the only American mother besides Susan Smith to receive round-the-clock media treatment. The two cases represent bookends of the new discourse of maternal mental illness.

By 2001, the way that American responded to and represented infanticide had changed dramatically. Andrea Yates’ story was tragic and puzzling, but in contrast to previous infanticidal mothers such as Susan Smith, her actions did not result in widespread condemnation.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Ibid, 44.

Instead of lurid headlines and angry sound bites, readers and viewers consumed volumes of reports about a seemingly new mental illness, and it soon became clear that it was plaguing many mothers, not just the homicidal Yates. This “new” illness, postpartum depression, has come to be seen as an epidemic among new mothers.¹⁰⁰⁷ The perception of postpartum depression as a cultural problem is a new phenomenon in the United States, one that made headlines with Andrea Yates and quickly became the province of celebrity-mom confessions and Oprah Winfrey special reports. At her first trial, Yates received the same sentence as Susan Smith—she was found guilty but not given capital punishment. A second jury, however, ruled her insane and sentenced her to the care of the Texas mental health system in 2006.

This image of psychologically based maternity represents a new way of viewing infanticide in American culture. The discrepancies in legal punishments for maternal infanticide, ranging from probation to psychiatric treatment to capital punishment, caused criminologists to bemoan the “incoherent” legal treatment of the crime in the United States at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁰⁸ This problem was reflective of contemporary contradictory ideas: the incoherence of late twentieth-century American infanticide trials stemmed from cultural dissonance about motherhood. The cases of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates reveal how we, as a culture, dealt with infanticide, but they also reveal a broad change in the ways that Americans thought about motherhood.

Few mothers in the past decade have undergone the kind of cultural scrutiny that was turned

¹⁰⁰⁷ Postpartum depression is not a new problem by any means; maternity wards used to be called “weeping wards” because of the emotional new mothers they served (Rita Nunacs, *A Deeper Shade of Blue: A Woman’s Guide to Recognizing and Treating Depression in Her Childbearing Years* [New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006], 127).

¹⁰⁰⁸ Brenda Barton, “When Murdering Hand Rocks the Cradle: An Overview of America’s Incoherent Treatment of Infanticidal Mothers,” *SMU Law Review* 51 (1998). Young mothers who deny their pregnancies and commit neonaticide have received probation, on the other hand, although she maintains her innocence to this day, Darlie Routier of Texas is currently on Death Row after being convicted of killing her two sons in 1997 (Meyer and Oberman, 39-67; Sam Howe Verhovek, “Dallas Woman Is Sentenced to Death in Murder of Sons”).

upon Susan Smith and Andrea Yates. Politicians, legal scholars, psychiatrists, preachers, celebrities, and regular Americans publicly voiced their opinions on the institution in response. Mothers across the country debated the cases, while feminists renewed their assault on the idealized institution. Both groups demanded more realistic representations, and their demands were met with a discursive change.

In this dissertation, I have charted the birth pangs of this new discourse through the evolution of public representations of Susan Smith between the murders of October 1994 and the trial of 1995. In the short course of nine months, Smith went from the ideal mother to an evil “Medea” to the psychologically damaged figure that characterized her trial. The initial, negative images of Smith encapsulated the journalistic, medical, and legal treatment of infanticidal mothers before the 1990s. But the traumatized image of Susan at her trial, the one that won her life in prison, gestured toward future ideas about infanticide and prefigured public representations of Andrea Yates.

The representational transformation of violent mothers from Susan Smith to Andrea Yates reveals a slow retreat from the overwhelmingly idealized version of motherhood that characterized the 1980s and early 1990s. The deafening roar of this discourse of romanticized motherhood began to lessen in the mid-1990s, largely due to a combined assault on the impossible ideal by academic feminists and by regular American mothers. Susan Smith and Andrea Yates were thus peculiarly situated in time. The public representations of and responses to their cases reveal a distinct, if not yet overwhelming, transformation in the way Americans think about motherhood. This new perspective, of course, has not completely displaced the impossible maternal prescriptions of previous decades. By 2005, however, the “Myth of the Perfect Mother” had moved from the feminist margins to the cover of *Newsweek*, and celebrities

like Brooke Shields began to confess to the darker sides of maternal urges.¹⁰⁰⁹ A discursive space has opened for mothers in our culture. It has become acceptable, within certain parameters, to acknowledge that motherhood is difficult, that many mothers feel real ambivalence, and that some mothers cannot cope with the experience. This acknowledgment is a cultural compromise: Americans began to recognize the difficulties of motherhood, but they did so within the narrow psychological framework of postpartum depression. The discursive compromise argued that when motherhood was too hard for some women, it was their individual psychology, and not the context in which they mothered, that was to blame.

In the context of the 1990s, the psychological reading of Smith's violent violation of the "new momism" amounted to an oppositional discourse of motherhood. The expert witnesses explicitly positioned Smith as a childlike victim (which is, of course, not a very feminist proposition), but they also argued that motherhood was no easy task, especially in the context of a patriarchal system in which girls and women are abused, depressed, and often abandoned when it comes to child-rearing. Dr. Halleck described a woman who saw herself "as a single mother without much money," subject to the whims of an abusive, estranged husband as well as a range of untreated psychological disorders.¹⁰¹⁰ Smith was in many ways a "bad mother" according to the contemporary discourse—she was divorced, broke, and sexually active. Yet, during her trial, these factors combined to paint a pathetic, rather than contemptible, picture of motherhood. According to the "mad versus bad" dyad of female criminality, "nuts" was beginning to trump "sluts."

¹⁰⁰⁹ *Newsweek*, February 21, 2005.

¹⁰¹⁰ *South Carolina v. Smith*, 3321.

The timing of the Susan Smith case is immensely important; had she committed this crime in previous years, she would not have garnered nearly as much media attention.¹⁰¹¹

We have seen how public representations shifted rapidly from the “Sexpot on Trial” to the suicidally depressed young girl. But *why* did they change? The answer lies within the broader context of contemporary ideas about motherhood, which were in the beginning stages of reformulation in the early 1990s. American culture was still in the throes of the conservative “backlash,” characterized primarily by the rise of political conservatism and the patriarchal discourse of “family values.” Mothers were a primary point of attack, and images of ideal maternity were a key means of social control.

However, by the 1990s, cracks were beginning to appear in the flawless veneer of the “new momism.” American women knew well the tension between the institution, experiences, and popular images of motherhood. A 1987 survey of over one thousand mothers revealed the truth: American mothers tended to cite “ambivalence” rather than fulfillment when they spoke of their experiences of motherhood.¹⁰¹² Feminists had had enough. Ann Snitow formally reopened the conversation by responding to the “rising national babble of pronatalism in the 1980s” with her 1992 review of feminist theories of motherhood. Women, she argued, had absolutely nothing to gain from the contemporary idealization of motherhood.¹⁰¹³ In 1994, several authors in *Feminist*

¹⁰¹¹ At least three infanticidal mothers before the Smith case were found to be insane in courts of law and received lesser punishments: Ann Green of New York (Ronald Sullivan, “Jury, Citing Mother’s Condition, Absolves Her in 2 Babies’ Deaths,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1988), Sheryl Massip of California (Reuters, “Woman Clear in Son’s Killing,” *New York Times*, December 24, 1988), and Lucrezia Gentile of New York (Leonard Buder, “Judge Accepts Insanity Plea in ’88 Drowning of Infant,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1989). These mothers did not receive the same kind of overwhelming press attention that Smith and Yates did.

¹⁰¹² Genevie and Margolies, *The Motherhood Report*.

¹⁰¹³ Snitow, 32-51.

Studies heeded her call with an issue devoted to “Scenarios of the Maternal;” the authors agreed with Snitow and called for a more “rigorous” critique of the institution of motherhood.¹⁰¹⁴

Some sympathetic observers wrote in response to the Smith case, voicing their concerns about the modern institution of motherhood. These observers and journalists agreed with Snitow, although in the mid-1990s, theirs was a minority voice. These women were, so to speak, the popular voice of the nascent discursive change. But theirs were by no means the dominant voices, and the sensational, sexualized images of America’s most famous infanticidal mother resurfaced not long after Smith was transferred to prison in Columbia. Although the feminist alternative narrative was silenced, its existence reveals the real trouble that Americans had when they tried to understand Susan Smith within conventional frameworks of woman- and motherhood.

By the late-1990s, as Susan Smith adapted to her new antidepressants, took psychology classes, and learned to cope in prison, this alternative reading started to become a familiar refrain, and it spanned the academic disciplines. Psychologists, sociologists, historians, and literature scholars all chimed in, publishing text after text targeting the “cultural contradictions” of motherhood and calling for more realistic images of, as well as real socioeconomic aid for, American mothers. In 1996, psychologist Diane Eyer exposed the scapegoating of mothers for a host of perceived social problems, including the welfare system, the daycare crisis, and the “epidemic” of single motherhood. The various authors in *“Bad Mothers”’: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* picked up where Eyer left off, revealing the fault lines of race, class, and politics within the label of “bad mother.” In 1996, sociologist Sharon Hays deconstructed the “cultural contradictions” within the ideology of “intensive mothering,” arguing

¹⁰¹⁴ *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1994).

that the enormous amounts of energy that women expended trying to live up to impossible ideals gained them no power and in fact supported traditional gendered and economic modes of domination. The following year, in 1997, English professor Elaine Tuttle Hansen argued that the vibrant critique of pronatalism that characterized the feminism of the 1970s was crippled by the backlash, but that contemporary fiction picked up where feminism left off, offering some resolutions to conflicts within the maternal discourse. That same year, historian Lauri Umansky offered motherhood as the “organizing metaphor” of the Second Wave, arguing that it could still serve as a rallying point for the embattled women’s movement.¹⁰¹⁵

At the same time, criminologists began to correct the “stag effect” in their overwhelmingly male-centered field. In 1996, Coramae Richie Mann published a statistical analysis of female crime that finally debunked the backlash hypothesis that women were getting away with murder; according to her findings, the “chivalry hypothesis,” or the idea that women are treated more leniently by the justice system, was a false generalization. Ann Jones connected the two topics of female criminals and feminism most explicitly, arguing in her groundbreaking 1996 work on female murderers that “the same social and legal deprivations that compel some women to feminism push others to homicide.” Jones argued that her violent subjects were not deviant aberrations; rather they were representative women on the margins that “made plain the fabric of society.”¹⁰¹⁶ The 1990s featured a boom in feminist criminology; these texts fed off of, and into, the reformulation of motherhood.

¹⁰¹⁵ Eyer, *Motherguilt*; Ladd-Taylor and Umansky; Sharon Hayes, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), x, 165; Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminisms and the Legacies of the Sixties* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996).

¹⁰¹⁶ Meda Chesney-Lind, *The Female Offender: Girls, Women, and Crime* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), 2; Mann, *When Women Kill*; Jones, 12-14. The ideas that the female violent crime rate rose

This academic debate culminated in a complete revision of the prevailing narrative of infanticide.¹⁰¹⁷ In 2001, the year that Andrea Yates killed her children, Cheryl Meyer and Michelle Oberman published *Mothers Who Kill Their Children: Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the “Prom Mom.”* In their review of the Smith case, the authors acknowledge the “boyfriend motive,” but their real concern was the depth of Smith’s mental illness.

Would Susan Smith have had a mental illness, according to the *DSM-IV* [the APA’s guide to official diagnoses]?... Clearly, she was and had been depressed and suicidal most of her life. She was likely grappling with depression the day she killed her children and has continued to grapple with it in prison following their murder. She has been on multiple suicide watches. She would certainly meet the criteria for at least one clinical disorder, depression. However, by all accounts Susan also had some features of dependent personality disorder, including a history of an excessive need to be taken care of and fears of separation.¹⁰¹⁸

Meyer and Oberman represent the authoritative discourses of psychology and the law, respectively. Their analysis unveiled the new “official” (if not yet the popular) discourse of infanticide at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The changes in ideas about motherhood and female criminality did not represent changes in knowledge—the impossible ideals, the experiential difficulties of motherhood, maternal violence, and maternal mental illnesses were not new information. The difference was essentially discursive: medical, legal, and, eventually, cultural images of motherhood had slowly transformed into more realistic representations of the experiences of American mothers. The old ideals have not been completely destroyed, and there are still certain kinds of mothers who are

with organized feminism and that women were getting away with their crimes is attributed to Freda Adler’s *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1975).

¹⁰¹⁷ In 1997, for example, Anna Wilczynski argued that infanticide by males fit within the general framework of patriarchal power over the family, but for women “filicide [the murder of one’s own children] reflects their simultaneous position of power and powerlessness (Wilczynski, 65).

¹⁰¹⁸ Meyer and Oberman, 72.

summarily demonized in our society. The discursive results were progressive, but not revolutionary. The current discourse of motherhood represents a compromise between the feminist revisions and the “new momism,” as the public responses to the trials of Andrea Yates make clear.

In 2001, Andrea Yates violently reignited the nationwide conversation about depression and motherhood that had begun with Susan Smith seven years before. The day after the murders, Rusty Yates, Andrea’s husband, scripted what quickly became the dominant narrative of the case. Rusty informed the media of Andrea’s “postpartum depression” following the birth of their last two children. Crying and holding a portrait of his family, he assured the public that Andrea loved her children and that she was ill, not evil: “Everyone who knows her knew she loved the kids. She is a kind, gentle person. What you see here and what you saw yesterday, it's not her.”¹⁰¹⁹ The coverage of the Yates case was fundamentally different from the treatment of other cases of maternal infanticide. In direct contrast to the early coverage of the Susan Smith drama, in which the story was about the mother’s sexuality, coverage of Andrea Yates’ crime immediately focused on the mother’s psychology. Yates’ case was, from the beginning, about “a mother and her sickness.”¹⁰²⁰

When Andrea Yates killed her children, postpartum depression was not the well-known disorder that it is today. Mothers, of course, knew about it, as did healthcare professionals, but it was not the cultural phenomenon, or the “widening crisis,” that it has been perceived to be since the horrific details of the Yates case hit newsstands across the country.¹⁰²¹ Yates exhibited

¹⁰¹⁹ Pam Easton, “Women Tells Police of Methodically Killing Children,” Associated Press State and Local Wire, June 22, 2001.

¹⁰²⁰ Cary Clack, “What Could Drive a Loving Mother to Kill Her Own Children?,” *San Antonio Express-News*, June 23, 2001.

¹⁰²¹ Zondra Hughes, “Depression After Delivery: Black Mothers and the Postpartum Crisis,” *Ebony*, October 2001.

symptoms of the most severe form of postpartum mental illness, postpartum psychosis (which affects roughly one to four out of every one thousand new mothers), but her case quickly became shorthand for postpartum depression (which affects roughly one-tenth of new mothers) in the extensive media coverage of the case.¹⁰²²

The widespread sympathy for Andrea Yates and the subsequent support for her insanity defense were not inevitable. We have seen how the public tried, and virtually burned at the stake, other mothers for similar crimes. It is true that Yates did not lie as did Susan Smith, so that element of public outrage was understandably absent. Yates' immediate confession, however, is not what saved her from public culpability. If anything, the details of her crime were more graphic, and the number of her victims was greater, than in other famous infanticide cases.¹⁰²³ Yet even articles that included the gory details were generally sympathetic. Yates was, from the outset, “mad” and not “bad,” “nuts” rather than a “slut.”

Many reports depicted Yates as almost representative, a tragic spokeswoman of the hidden pathologies of motherhood. One journalist argued that “mental illness is often the backdrop of

¹⁰²² Medical professionals distinguish between three types of depression following childbirth: the “baby blues,” which are comparatively mild mood disturbances; “postpartum depression,” which shares the symptoms of other depressive disorders and is characterized only by the timing of its onset; and “postpartum psychosis,” which is a much more severe form of depressive disorder combined with psychotic symptoms like hallucinations and delusions (Nunacs, *A Deeper Shade of Blue*). Andrea Yates, who reported hearing voices and believed that the devil was directing her actions, clearly had postpartum psychosis and not just depression. Some media accounts acknowledged this important distinction between postpartum depression, which affects about 10% of new mothers (“Lowering the Rate of Postpartum Depression,” *Psychiatry* 2002, no. 523 [23 May 2002]), and postpartum psychosis, which affects only about 1-4 of every 1000 births and “can lead to suicide or infanticide” (Michele Connell, “The Postpartum Defense and Feminism: More or Less Justice for Women?,” *Case Western Law Review* 53, no. 143 [2002], 145). Ignorance on the subject of postpartum mental disturbances, however, meant that the subsequent “definitional creep,” or the unofficial widening of the relatively narrow definition of postpartum depression, went virtually unnoticed (Margaret Talbot discusses the process of “definitional creep” in diagnoses of Munchausen Syndrome By Proxy in “The Bad Mother,” *The New Yorker*, August 9, 2004).

¹⁰²³ The violent details were publicized widely—journalists did not mince words, spare details, or review the murders delicately. Few readers could forget that Yates systematically drowned all five of her children, or that she had to chase her oldest son, Noah, 7, and carry him to the bathtub. This detail is so horrifying and so unforgettable that journalists often offered it as the only detail from the crime scene. See, for example, Easton, “Mother Tells Police of Methodically Killing Children.”

this most baffling of crimes,” quoting an expert who estimated that, of the few hundred mothers who kill their children each year, roughly half of them are found to be mentally ill.¹⁰²⁴ The reporter depicted Yates’ extreme symptoms as typical of infanticide cases, which “pit sympathy against revulsion”:

A severely depressed mother, planning to commit suicide, might kill her children first to avoid traumatizing them--then face a jury after her suicide fails. Or a psychotic mother may believe that her children have been marked by the devil and must be sacrificed, or may entertain a distorted Christian hope that death will free the children's souls from earthly troubles. Yates may have been both suicidal and psychotic, and experts identify postpartum depression as a likely root cause.¹⁰²⁵

This broad definition of postpartum depression slips easily from the suicidal, altruistic model, which Susan Smith described in her written confession, to the severe, hallucinatory infanticide committed by Andrea Yates. This, then, was how the American public had come to understand infanticide at the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁰²⁶ The possibility of maternal mental illness was suddenly front-page news, with all media outlets, from the *New York Times* to the tabloids, weighing in on the “new” crisis.

The plethora of new texts on motherhood and female violence certainly affected the way the public “read” Andrea Yates, but they did not script it outright. Andrea Yates’ case, according to the dominant narrative, was not about the real difficulties of being a mother, nor was it about a good mother who just “snapped,” as in Susan’s case. Rather, the coverage of the Yates case

¹⁰²⁴ Marianne Szegedy-Maszak, “Mothers and Murder,” *U.S. News and World Report*, March 18, 2002.

¹⁰²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰²⁶ The few unsympathetic observers, like a spokeswoman for a Texas victims-rights group who argued that Yates’ status as the children’s mother should further enrage people (because “mothers are the protectors of our children”) rather than serve as a basis for sympathy, were in the minority in their references to the rapidly dying Good Mother discourse of just a few years before (Juan A. Lozano, “Many Supportive of Woman Accused of Drowning Her Five Children,” Associated Press State and Local Wire, June 23, 2001). Unlike the Susan Smith case, in which the dominant journalistic tone was one of sensationalist condemnation if not outright anger, journalists seemed to be trying to understand Andrea Yates. This widespread sympathy made Ann Coulter’s attempt to connect Yates’ crimes with feminism by using an abortion metaphor—she called the Yates children “choices,” and Yates the “late-term abortion” provider—seem half-cocked at best, and Coulter’s opinion, for once, enjoyed little press (Ann Coulter, “Stop Persecuting Andrea Yates!,” *The National Review*, September 6, 2001).

revealed a new trend: the pathologization of motherhood. The recognition that good mothers could, under certain circumstances, hurt their children was indeed a corrective to the “new momism.” Yet diagnosing Yates with a peculiarly female mental illness also made her less dangerous; she was not just any mother, she was one suffering from a grave disorder. Certain ideals of motherhood could remain intact if violent mothers like Yates were partitioned off as insane.

The “postpartum defense” is a conundrum for feminists seeking a more realistic discourse of motherhood. The difference between this defense and other insanity defenses is that the mental disorder is, of course, inextricably linked to female biology. Some argue that recognizing gender differences in this manner will result in more equal treatment of women under the law—postpartum illnesses are, by definition, female disorders, and should be viewed as mitigating factors in the courtroom. Others fear a return to more traditional definitions of female criminality that call upon the presumed instability of women based on their biological make-up.¹⁰²⁷ A related problem with the defense is that, by excusing the acts of certain kinds of mothers, it protects cultural idealization by masking the fact that motherhood can be problematic for all women.

Some observers tried to argue this point on behalf of Andrea Yates. According to this line of thinking, Yates’ psychological problems stemmed not just from her childbearing but also from her specific familial situation.¹⁰²⁸ *Newsweek* columnist Anna Quindlen called upon the “insidious cult of motherhood” as the motive for Yates’ crime. She explained that though she,

¹⁰²⁷ Connell, 143-169.

¹⁰²⁸ Andrea and Rusty Yates were Christian fundamentalists who did not believe in birth control or Andrea working outside the home once they had children. They had five children in seven years, all of whom were home schooled by Andrea (Suzanne O’Malley, *Are You There Alone? The Unspeakable Crime of Andrea Yates* (New York, NY: Pocket Star Books, 2004).

like the rest of the world, was horrified by Yates' behaviors, she understood the impulses behind them.

But there's another part of my mind, the part that remembers the end of a day in which the milk spilled phone rang one cried another hit a fever rose the medicine gone the car sputtered another cried the cable out "Sesame Street" gone all cried stomach upset full diaper no more diapers Mommy I want water Mommy my throat hurts Mommy I don't feel good. Every mother I've asked about the Yates case has the same reaction. She's appalled; she's aghast. And then she gets this look. And the look says that at some forbidden level she understands. The looks says that there are two very different kinds of horror here. There is the unimaginable idea of the killings. And then there is the entirely imaginable idea of going quietly bonkers in the house with five kids under the age of 7.¹⁰²⁹

Mothers across the country responded to Quindlen's "forbidden" admission that Yates' crime was "almost unimaginable—but not quite." One reader called it "women's dirty little secret," while others acknowledged that they, too, had suffered as new mothers, and not just from postpartum depression.¹⁰³⁰ These women reconceived postpartum depression as a problem beyond individual psychology—it was, in these responses, a pervasive female response to the enormous pressures of the "new momism."¹⁰³¹

Quindlen and her respondents placed motherhood firmly within its social and historical context. As in the coverage of the Susan Smith case, these voices were silenced in favor of others. Although many observers argued that the extreme patriarchy within the Yates home may have been a contributing factor in Yates' mental illness, most journalists, as well as Yates' lawyers, did not focus on the context in which Yates mothered. Rather, they focused on her

¹⁰²⁹ Anna Quindlen, "Playing God On No Sleep," *Newsweek*, July 2, 2001.

¹⁰³⁰ "Mail Call," *Newsweek*, July 23, 2001.

¹⁰³¹ Scholars have similarly reconceived other so-called "female maladies" like hysteria. Naomi Wolf argued that anorexia fit this model as well: "Victorian female hysteria, mysterious at the time, makes sense now that we see it in the light of the social pressures of sexual self-denial and incarceration in the home. Anorexia should be simple to understand. What hysteria was to the nineteenth-century fetish of the asexual woman locked in the home, anorexia is to the late twentieth-century fetish of the hungry woman" (Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* [New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1991], 198).

troubled mental state, arguing that she was legally insane due to recurring postpartum depression.¹⁰³² This approach dictated that the case would serve as a referendum on motherhood, but only within the specific parameters of postpartum psychology. The “new momism” was challenged but not destroyed. Rather, a new icon, the depressed mother, entered the pantheon of maternal images. Although she could be the cause of some cultural concern, as seen in the responses of Anna Quindlen and others, the depressed mother served as a compromise between the “new momism” of previous decades and the feminist reformulation of the so-called “sacred institution.”

By the time of Yates’ first trial in the winter of 2002, journalists were well versed in postpartum depressive disorders, having reported on them for eight months in the course of covering the Yates case. Media reports focused on the psychological testimony in the trial, and especially on Yates’ satanic hallucinations. One forensic psychologist testified that Yates believed that cartoon characters were telling her she was a “bad mother,” and that Satan had been telling her to kill her children for some time before she actually did it. Yates told the doctor she was guilty and she needed “to be punished.” The doctor concluded, in an oft-repeated sound bite, “Of all the patients I’ve treated for major depression with psychotic features, she was one of the sickest.”¹⁰³³

However, under Texas’ narrow insanity standards, all that mattered was whether or not Yates knew what she was doing was wrong at the time of the crime. Using this definition, the jury in her first trial rejected her insanity plea, found her guilty, and sentenced her to life in prison. A

¹⁰³² The National Organization for Women also used the Yates case as a means of publicizing postpartum depression, despite the many emails the Houston Chapter of the organization received blaming Rusty Yates for the crime (Lisa Teachey, “NOW Will Raise Funds for Yates’ Legal Defense: Spotlight Placed on Depression Issue,” *Houston Chronicle* (TX), August 24, 2001.

¹⁰³³ Anne Belli Gesalman, “A Dark State of Mind,” *Newsweek*, March 4, 2002.

public outcry ensued. The spokesman for the National Mental Health Organization deemed the verdict a “travesty”; added Yates’ brother sadly, “A sick person has been sent to prison for forty years.”¹⁰³⁴ The case was clearly not over. Three years later, the judge decided to overturn her conviction and award her a new trial on the basis of false testimony from the one expert witness who testified that Andrea Yates was sane.¹⁰³⁵ One Texas woman applauded the judge’s decision, explicitly blaming the cultural idealization of motherhood that allowed Andrea Yates to be isolated in her home with her children and her madness: “The ‘caretaker syndrome,’ which tethered her to pills, blind obedience and a selfishness that ignored her fragile mind and body, was to everyone’s advantage except her and her five children.”¹⁰³⁶ Another Houstonite echoed this opinion, arguing that “sanity [had] prevailed at last” in the form of the decision for a new trial.¹⁰³⁷

Although her trials spanned over four years, periodic updates kept Yates in the public eye as her lawyers prepared for a second trial. *People* magazine described “her private hell” on the eve of the third anniversary of the children’s deaths: Yates was rushed to the hospital, displaying symptoms of severe depression, “psychotic episodes,” and self-starvation.¹⁰³⁸ *Newsweek* reported that she spent much of her time staring “out the window of her cell” and was often

¹⁰³⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁵ Dr. Park Dietz, a well-known psychiatrist who has testified in various high-profile trials, described on the stand an episode of the popular television show *Law & Order* on which a mother drowned her children and won her case with an insanity plea. The judge overturned Yates’ conviction because this episode does not exist. Dietz’s testimony had enormous influence on the outcome of the trial; one juror wrote the judge a letter stating he was ready to vote not guilty by reason of insanity before Dietz’s testimony (George Flynn, “Judging Andrea,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 20, 2005). Dietz was actually hired by the prosecuting team in Smith’s case as well, but he never took the stand (Pope, interview).

¹⁰³⁶ Mary Alice Altorfer, “Letters,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 7, 2005.

¹⁰³⁷ Rene Karpas, “Letters,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 7, 2005.

¹⁰³⁸ “Her Private Hell,” *People*, August 9, 2004.

confused, like when she asked a visiting lawyer who was babysitting her children.¹⁰³⁹ Her doctors reported that her mindset changed daily. She was often unsure of her past, but when her medication worked, her memory was clear, triggering overwhelming memories of her crime.¹⁰⁴⁰

The intervening years between Yates' two trials for the deaths of her children witnessed the cultural ascendance of postpartum depression. Concern about the illness was no longer the province of medical or legal professionals; it became something of a celebrity cult and even a political issue. Incredibly, the popular television show *Desperate Housewives* was initially conceived as a response to the Yates trial. In the years since its 2004 debut, creator Marc Cherry has often repeated his startling inspiration for the show. While watching the coverage of the 2002 Andrea Yates trial, he reported that his mother "took her cigarette out of her mouth and said, 'I've been there.'" She explained how hard it had been for her to raise three young children while their father was in graduate school. Cherry wrote the show around the idea that a "perfectly sane, rational woman could have the life she wanted, being a wife and mother ... and still have moments of insanity."¹⁰⁴¹ Although the actual product hardly resembles its tragic inspiration, what we witnessed, on this show and other pop cultural outlets, was the slow dissemination of a more complicated psychological discourse of motherhood.¹⁰⁴²

Suddenly, in the wake of Yates' first trial, a much-needed corrective to the beatific celebrity-mother profile appeared in the form of female celebrities who revealed their own struggles with

¹⁰³⁹ Dirk Johnson and Carol Rust, "Who's Babysitting the Kids?," *Newsweek*, January 17, 2005.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Anne Belli Gesalman, "Andrea Yates Still Battling Her Demons—And Her Past," *Newsweek*, October 20, 2003.

¹⁰⁴¹ AP Wire, "Suburbia Sizzles in 'Housewives,'" September 30, 2004, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6133690/>.

¹⁰⁴² If there is a feminist message about motherhood on *Desperate Housewives*, it was offered in the character of Lynette, who, according to one columnist, showed viewers "you can be fiercely in love with your children and long to pack up the minivan and drive off" (Ellen Goodman, "Desperate Housewives, Indeed," *Boston Globe*, November 21, 2004).

maternal depression. Timing, again, was key; Marie Osmond published a book about her struggle with postpartum depression in May 2001, just weeks before the Yates murders, to little fanfare.¹⁰⁴³ The overwhelming media coverage of postpartum depression surrounding Yates' case, however, soon ensured that celebrity reports of maternal depression were front-page news. Perhaps most famous was Brooke Shields' chronicle of her own depression after the birth of her first child, complete with inner rage, failure to bond with her newborn, and suicidal thoughts.¹⁰⁴⁴ Shields' book, *Down Came the Rain: My Journey Through Postpartum Depression*, was the subject of much media attention almost as soon as it was published in May of 2005. Oprah Winfrey devoted an entire show to Shields' story that summer, and Shields got even more press when she was attacked by actor Tom Cruise for taking antidepressants to treat her depression.¹⁰⁴⁵ Media outlets from *People* magazine to the *New York Times* covered this argument, which normally would have been viewed as mere celebrity gossip.¹⁰⁴⁶ Shields seems to have set off a wave of like-minded confessions. Courtney Cox-Arquette, the television actress, and Carnie Wilson, the singer, both went public with their postpartum depression in the summer of 2005, one year before Yates' second trial.¹⁰⁴⁷

¹⁰⁴³ Marie Osmond, *Behind the Smile: My Journey Out of Postpartum Depression* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 2001).

¹⁰⁴⁴ Brooke Shields, *Down Came the Rain: My Journey Through Postpartum Depression* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2005).

¹⁰⁴⁵ The *Oprah* episode aired on June 20, 2005; edited transcripts are available online at www.oprah.com.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Jane Brody, "Don't Let Your Baby Blues Go Code Red," *New York Times*, June 7, 2005. The *New York Times* even printed Shields' response to Cruise's "rant" as an Op-Ed piece (Brooke Shields, "War of Words," *New York Times*, July 1, 2005).

¹⁰⁴⁷ Cox-Arquette spoke of her experiences on CNN's *Larry King Live*, July 22, 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0507/22/sbt.01.html>. Carnie Wilson's admissions preceded Cox-Arquette by one day ("Carnie Supports Brooke After Revealing Her Own Post-Birth Blues," www.contactmusic.com/news).

Maternal mental illness was not just a temporary pop cultural phenomenon. Volumes have been written on the subject in the past few years. Amazon.com alone currently lists over 3000 titles on the subject of postpartum depression; almost two-thirds of these, including *Postpartum Depression for Dummies*, have been published since Andrea Yates' first trial.¹⁰⁴⁸ The *Journal of the American Medical Association* issued a report about the illness in 2002 and again in 2006, deeming it a "major public health problem."¹⁰⁴⁹ At the same time, feminists and other American mothers continued writing about motherhood in general. Media studies scholars Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels published their influential study of the "new momism" in 2004, just a few months before Andrea Yates' conviction was overturned.¹⁰⁵⁰

One month after the judge ordered a new trial for Andrea Yates, *Newsweek* did a feature entitled "The Myth of the Perfect Mother: Why It Drives Women Crazy." The cover illustration depicted a glowing, serene mother holding a perfect, smiling baby. The mythical mom had eight arms, each holding something different: the baby, toys, an exercise weight, a frying pan full of bacon, a telephone, and a high-heeled shoe. The message of the image was clear, and just in case it was not, the cover also promised a column by Anna Quindlen entitled "Why Mothers Shouldn't be Martyrs."¹⁰⁵¹ Inside, readers found the feature story about "Mommy Madness," which profiled *Perfect Madness*, a new book that called for social aid to mothers in the form of

¹⁰⁴⁸ Shoshana S. Bennett and Mary Jo Codey, *Postpartum Depression for Dummies* (New York, NY: For Dummies, 2007).

¹⁰⁴⁹ Laura J. Miller, "Postpartum Depression," *JAMA* 287 (2002): 762-765; Katherine L. Wisner, Christina Chambers, and Dorothy K.Y. Sit, "Postpartum Depression: A Major Public Health Problem," *JAMA* 296 (2006): 2616-2618.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Douglas and Michaels.

¹⁰⁵¹ *Newsweek*, February 21, 2005.

family-friendly corporate policies and high-quality, affordable daycare.¹⁰⁵² By the end of the year, the new discourse of motherhood had entered the realm of politics: New Jersey legislators pondered a bill mandating that healthcare professionals provide information on postpartum depression to pregnant women and screen new mothers for the illness.¹⁰⁵³ The Good Mother had suffered a blow (albeit not a fatal one), and the acknowledgement that mothering was a difficult task that could be more stressful than fulfilling had gone mainstream.

By the beginning of Yates' second trial in the summer of 2006, postpartum depression had become a full-blown cultural phenomenon. During her second trial, Yates was not the front-page national news that she had been during her first trial. Hers was now a familiar story, and most observers expected that she would be found insane.¹⁰⁵⁴ The verdict was not a foregone conclusion, although many journalists expressed surprise when the jury deliberated for twelve hours over three days.¹⁰⁵⁵ This was far longer than in the first trial, and the questions the jurors sent out all addressed issues of mental illness.¹⁰⁵⁶ When jurors finally arrived at the unanimous decision of not guilty by reason of insanity, Harris County prosecutors blamed the new discourse of motherhood, citing "a growing public sentiment in the past five years that seemed to support

¹⁰⁵² Judith Warner "Mommy Madness," *Newsweek*, February 21, 2005.

¹⁰⁵³ The bill passed in April 2006 (American Public Health Association, "Postpartum Depression Bill Signed!," press release available online at <http://www.apha.org/membergroups/newsletters/sectionnewsletters/matern/summer06/2774.htm>).

¹⁰⁵⁴ In fact, the media saturation of the Yates case and the subsequent spotlight of postpartum depression seem to have made similar stories unnewsworthy. When Deanna Laney of east Texas stoned her three sons, killing two of them, because she "'had to' for religious reasons," she barely made the national news (Anne Belli Gesalman, "Andrea Yates Redux," *Newsweek*, May 17, 2003).

¹⁰⁵⁵ Dale Lezon, Peggy O'Hare, and Rosanna Ruiz, "Jury Finds Yates Insane, Not Guilty," *Houston Chronicle* (TX), July 26, 2006.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Peggy O'Hare and Dale Lezon, "Second Jury is Taking Longer to Reach Verdict on Yates," *Houston Chronicle* (TX), July 26, 2006.

her insanity plea.”¹⁰⁵⁷ Yates’ attorney, George Parnham, called the verdict a “watershed event in the treatment of mental illness,” and most journalists heaved a sigh of relief that justice had finally been served.¹⁰⁵⁸

The Andrea Yates case was, in many respects, a “watershed.” It represented the culmination of new ideas about motherhood that had been circulating since at least the Susan Smith case a decade before. Although popular memory prefers the more sensational version, as seen in headlines like “Monster Mom Still Enthralls Nation,” the rapid evolution of images of Smith ended with a sympathetic, psychological version of motherhood that anticipated the responses to the Andrea Yates case several years later.¹⁰⁵⁹ Smith and Yates were the subjects of such overwhelming scrutiny not just because of their crimes—mothers kill their children frequently, at the rate of roughly five hundred victims per year, but the vast majority is not considered newsworthy.¹⁰⁶⁰ For Smith and Yates, timing ensured their fame. They were uniquely situated in precisely the right historical moments to serve as a vehicles for public debates about the changing discourse of maternity.¹⁰⁶¹ In many ways, the trajectory of images of Susan Smith represents the history of motherhood in the twentieth-century United States. The image of the mentally ill mother—the image that most observers no longer apply to Smith—indicated the compromise of the near future, meant to bridge the gaping chasm between ideals of motherhood and the experiences of American mothers.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Maria Newman, “Yates Found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2006.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Ibid; Dale Lezon, Peggy O’Hare, and Rosanna Ruiz, “Yates Found Insane, Not Guilty,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 26, 2006.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Tom Turnipseed, “Continuing Saga of Sex, Murder, and Racism: Susan Smith Is Still Scheming in Prison,” *Common Dreams*, September 14, 2000, <http://www.commondreams.org/views/091400-101.htm>.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Wilczynski, 25.

¹⁰⁶¹ Timing is one of the major keys to their fame; other mothers who committed similar crimes at different times never achieved front-page, nightly-news status as did Smith and Yates.

Although American mothers in general (when they are given a public voice) and feminist mothers in particular voiced a much more radical critique of motherhood in the 1990s that went beyond the realm of abnormal maternal psychology, even this new image, albeit limited to mothers who display signs of depression, represents a subtle kind of progress from the “new momism.” The patriarchy inherent in “family values” politics is ultimately challenged by the image of a good mother who violently violates the traditional prescriptions for maternal behavior. The pathologization of new motherhood is certainly not an altogether feminist critique, and the focus on a limited diagnosis can serve to mask the everyday difficulties that all mothers face. We are still in the throes of this revision; perhaps it will stall out at this compromise. On the other hand, the dissemination of this medico-legal discourse into popular culture may well combine with the more challenging critiques of academics and other mothers to result in a discursive coup—the overthrow of that lingering mythical despot, the Good Mother. And if she is overthrown, American mothers, paradoxically, can be grateful to Susan Smith for spurring this discursive change.

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