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Campus Campaigns against Reproductive Autonomy: The Canadian Centre for Bioethical Reform Campus Genocide Awareness Project as Propaganda for Fetal Rights

By Carol Williams with conceptual input from Don Gill

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Introduction

In October of 2013 and 2014, the University of Lethbridge campus community was subjected to a [visual spectacle staged by the Centre for Canadian Bioethical Reform or CCBR](#). CCBR is a subsidiary, or branch plant, of the California-based [Centre for Bio Ethical Reform or CBR](#). These organizations are pyramid-like businesses who present themselves as concerned civil rights advocates working on behalf of fetal autonomy and other “traditional values.” Employing a range of carefully-crafted campaign strategies, and citing civil rights precedent, their political conservatism is not entirely transparent. Yet, political endorsements to “reform” civil society and policy are evident on their respective websites. For example, Mark Penninga, of the Lethbridge based Association of Reformed Political Action [writes](#):

...we need a visionary strategy to open the eyes of Canadians to the evil that is being hidden behind the language of “choice.” CCBR’s efforts are an important component of that strategy. For the political arm of the pro-life movement to be effective, Canada needs these educational efforts.

The organization’s social conservatism contends that “liberal” values and perspectives including tolerance for same-sex relations and marriage, and “abortion, sexual liberation, pornography, new reproductive technologies and euthanasia . . . endanger the status of the traditional family” (Snow 2014, 154). As online endorsements clarify, CCBR strives for formal political change. The graphic display campaigns as witnessed at the University of Lethbridge signify a move by social conservatives to strategically [rebrand themselves as advocates of human and reproductive rights](#)

While the CCBR displays and websites simplify the rivalry between liberal and socially conservative concepts of the individual, family, and public order, both liberals and social conservatives have, in fact, utilized litigation as a means to mobilize public opinion on moral issues (Snow cites Lessard 2002, 237 in Snow 2014, 156). Following the 1982 introduction of Canada’s Charter

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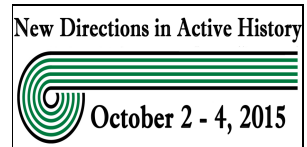
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Figure 1 Genocide Awareness Project, University of Lethbridge. Photograph by Don Gill. October 2014.

of Rights and Freedoms, litigation was adopted by “interest groups” because political leadership tends to avoid decisive action on “morally sensitive issues.” The courts’ importance has therefore risen in tandem with political preference towards “judicial mediation” regarding “moral disputes” (Snow 2014, 154; 160). As Petchesky observed in 1987, the “anti-abortion movement made a conscious strategic shift from religious discourse and authorities to medicotechnical ones [to conceptually

frame arguments for fetal viability and autonomy], in its efforts to win over the courts, the legislatures, and popular hearts and minds.” Paternal-medical “experts” like Bernard Nathanson— impresario and anti-abortion crusader— were recruited to legitimate a visual and moral text that granted the fetus a “public presence.” Nathanson’s visual exposition, popularized in the broadcast of the video, *The Silent Scream* (1985), explained how the “science of fetology” allowed spectators to “witness an abortion—“from the victim’s vantage point.”” Thus mass culture became “the vehicle for this [tactical] shift” rather than the medical profession although medical discourse served as authority (Petchesky 1987, 264-265). And so, as Petchesky convincingly argued, *The Silent Scream* resided in the “realm of cultural representation rather than of medical evidence” with the film’s moral and political imperative being “to induce individual women to abstain from having abortions and to persuade officials and judges to force them to do so” (267).

The CCBR/CBR displays and websites repeat this imperative with purposeful assertions for fetal autonomy and maternal disembodiment against “liberal” affirmations of women’s reproductive autonomy and rights to accessible reproductive health services (Snow, 2014, 160-161; sa Farney 2009). This perspective is similarly evident in 1980s and 90s “pro-life” and “pro-family” conservatism of Western Canadian groups such as the Alberta Women of Worth (later the Alberta Federation of Women United for Families or AFWUC). The AFWUF emphasized “the virtues and efficacy of the heterosexual nuclear family,” opposing the inclusion of same sex couples within the legal definition of marriage (Anderson and Hartford 2001, 38). Such groups reportedly influenced the political dispositions of conservative elites and parties (the Canadian Alliance, its predecessor, the Reform Party and the current, Conservatives) for “family values” who conceive abortion as wrong under most or all circumstances including pregnancies occurring from non-consensual sex or violent rape; and the disapproval of women’s independence and non-heterosexual or non-nuclear, family formations(ibid).

The federal accommodation of “pro-life” or “pro-family” perspectives, arising from these cultural and political regional alliances, finds concrete expression in backbench Conservative MP Stephen Woodworth’s 2012 motion to re-examine the status of the “fetus as well as in the persistent “pro-life” lobby against the termination of early pregnancies with pharmaceuticals such as mifepristone (or, RU-486) which has been approved throughout Europe and recommended by the World Health Organization. Approval for medical abortion remains [contentious in Canada](#). Fortunately, in response to Woodworth, the Canadian Medical Association affirmed support for the section of the Criminal Code that declares a fetus a human being at the moment of birth rather than at conception (Kirkey, 2012) and characterized Woodworth’s motion as the “recriminalization, not only of abortion, but any form of contraception” urging CMA delegates to “recognize that women must retain their full and complete rights” (ibid).

CCBR’s advocacy for increased regulation of a woman’s reproductive capacity, and thus her autonomy is variously navigated: politically via support for private members bills or motions; within collaborations with community clubs and organizations (inclusive of churches); via the judicial system; and, perhaps less visibly, by the support for bureaucratic restraints against access to reproductive services. Access varies by region and tiered by location, class status or privilege with urban women having better access than rural; wealthier women better access than poor as the longstanding struggles in P.E.I. and New Brunswick demonstrate.

Sheilah on The king in a car park:
Digging up Richard III

 H i s t o r i

« Se battre en Flandre. Gaz. Boue. Mémoire » et goupillon. Retour sur le centenaire de la Grande Guerre au Musée Canadien de la Guerre *Pascal Scallon-Chouinard*

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CBR is at the forefront of this barrier approach against access to abortion lobbying for the need for more than one medical professional's approval; for extended waiting periods; and the expectation of parental or spousal consent for any form of abortion or birth control. Executive Director, Greg Cunningham earned his credentials in state and Supreme Court legal battles that sought to impose barriers against abortion. A former two-term (1979-1982) Republican in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Cunningham was "a prime sponsor" of Pennsylvania's Abortion Control Act. [Litigated before the U.S. Supreme Court](#), the Act sought to subordinate women by the control and consent of guardians whether that be medical practitioners; husbands or, in the case of minors, parents. Women seeking abortion were perceived as incapable of making autonomous decisions therefore necessarily subjected to aggressive measures of control. Furthermore, married women seeking abortions were compelled to inform their husbands (except in medical emergencies). While [Casey v Planned Parenthood](#), successfully argued the Act was in violation of Roe v. Wade, "the Supreme Court's decision ultimately granted increased states' rights to "protect" women's health and to control the termination of "viable fetuses" and significant ground was lost.

Linked in name, values, and tactics, the Canadian-based CBR replicates the U.S. mandate to proselytize and legislate against reproductive autonomy in favour of fetal rights and personhood. CCBR's Executive Director, Stephanie Gray launched her "pro-life" career in the 1990s at the University of British Columbia sealing her medico-ethical authority with [certification in Health Care Ethics from the U.S. National Bioethics Centre](#). The objective of this certification is "to train those engaged in the health care ministry, and other interested individuals, to effectively represent the Church's moral teaching in their various institutions" (The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, accessed 30 August 2014). Issued by Catholic Bishops in 2009, the Directives emphasize the "sanctity of life." Noteworthy, too, is that CCBR's speaker outreach campaign, featuring the charismatic Gray, pointedly speaks to rural and small school and clubs across North America. The intimacy of rural life proves isolating for those who seek non-judgemental guidance on reproductive health. By all reports, physicians in rural and small communities, like Lethbridge and its surrounding agricultural-based communities are reluctant to provide birth control information or other services. Intimidation and fear prevails resulting in reduced access to services for women in Southern Alberta. While clinically-based sexual health clinics work against this fear mongering towards ideological neutrality on behalf of public health, privatized "pro-life" organizations, including commercial ultrasound businesses that employ fetal imaging as a "weapon of intimidation against women seeking abortions," are openly zealous (Petchesky 277). [Lethbridge & District Pro-Life](#) typifies this regional conservatism by proclaiming support for "the inherent value of human life from conception until natural death." Given this context, CCBR anticipates a receptive audience among Southern Albertans.

The Genocide Awareness Project

Social conservative fantasies of the traditional family; paternalistic desires to restrict women's access to abortion; and the application of medico technical discourse to re-imagine the fetus as autonomous (countered by mother as peripheral)—opens the door for the mobile, lavishly-produced, professionally-mounted and visually-jarring graphic display the CCBR/CBR calls the Genocide Awareness Project (hereafter, the *GAP*, figure 1 & 2). The visual strategies, and photographic choices, employed in the *GAP* harmonize with CCBR/CBR's political ambitions.

With intention to shock these images guarantee a reaction. Recently, the CCBR has extended their shock tactics beyond campus by direct marketing doorknob flyers to households where the graphics are unavoidable. Claimed to be "the backbone of CBR's various public, abortion-education projects, *GAP* postcards, pamphlets, and stills of "bloodied flesh and body parts" are [recommended as educational resources for classroom and lesson plans](#). The



Figure 2 Genocide Awareness Campaign October 2014.

CCBR/CBR sustain well-maintained internet presences in order to market these “resources” and rationalize their perspectives. But the website additionally documents the organization’s “rights”-based challenges: on the street with those who opposing, by challenges brought into court, and with provocative attempts to bring their cause to the print and broadcast media. [The following justifies their graphic provocations:](#)

Photograph Don Gill.

There is no doubt that it is painful for post-abortive women to see abortion imagery, but the imagery is merely a *trigger* to the *trauma* of abortion. And post-abortive women say they face many kinds of triggers that remind them of their abortions: seeing an infant or pregnant woman, or hearing a sound similar to the suction machine, or being reminded of the anniversary of their abortions. Everyone of course recognizes that it makes no sense to eliminate these reminders because it is abortion that causes the trauma, not the triggers.

The above statement charges women who have abortions as exclusively responsible for victimizing the “fetus,” they are, moreover, oblivious to the self-imposed “trauma” of abortion and, further, those who seek them are not only incomprehensive of the implications of such actions but willfully self-deceptive or irresponsible. The “fetus” is alternatively represented as “innocent.”

Visual isolation of the fetus and the movement for fetal rights

How precisely does the *GAP* use of specific photographs reproduce socially conservative or morally judgemental ideology? Visual culture theorist Susan Sontag described the ideological “work” performed by depictions of “atrocities” as giving “rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge” (Sontag 2003, 13). Without question, the *GAP* purposefully shocks and distresses; with a larger aim being to conceptually erode “liberal” visions of reproductive autonomy and to resurrect oppositions between a woman’s rights and those of the fetus. This proposition, as above in the CCBR justification for graphic imagery, conceives women as potentially threatening to their fetuses. In the *GAP* displays, the fetus, detached from the pregnant body or uterus, is representationally isolated—autonomous and free floating—whereas the pregnant woman is entirely absent (Petchesky). This visual construction rationalizes the appropriation of “civil rights” rhetoric. The implication is the fetus is autonomous yet vulnerable and needy of protection by *non-maternal* guardianship, in other words by other, state configurations of power and control.



Figure 3 Lennart Nilsson cover *Life* Magazine 30 April 1965 accessed 27 Oct 2014

Snapshots of bloodied, moistened tissue and undetermined physical miniaturized body parts mobilize the spectator’s distress in part because “pro-life” activisms, and new technologies such as ultrasound, have effectively reconceived the fetus as distinct from the maternal body. The public, in turn, have internalized these representational cues of the “aborted fetus” and little prompting is required. As Petchesky noted in 1987, the “cumulative impact of a decade of fetal images—on billboards, in shopping center malls, in science fiction blockbusters like *2001: A Space Odyssey*... the “fetal form” is familiar accepted to the degree that “not even most feminists question its authenticity”(268).

Barbara Duden dates public exposure to this type of photographic disassociation of the “fetus” from maternal embodiment with Lennart Nilsson’s

photographic essay and cover reproduced in *Life Magazine* in 1965 (figure 3). For Petchesky, the June 1962 reproduction of sequential fetal imagery in *Look* “at one day, one week, seven weeks, and so forth” from a monograph titled, *The First Nine Months of Life* was also precedent setting

in its depiction of the fetus as “solitary, dangling in the air (or its sac) with nothing to connect it to any life-support system” absent of “any reference to the pregnant woman” (Petchesky, 268). Nilsson’s photographs, *Life* claimed, displayed “the drama of life before birth” in its photographic depiction of “a living eighteen-week old fetus shown inside its amniotic sac” (Duden 1993, 11 citing *Life Magazine* April 30, 1965). But as [Life admitted some years later](#), these claims were inaccurate as fetuscopy, which by 1991 allowed entry into the amniotic cavity, remained in its early stages in 1965. As *Life* retrospectively exposed, “What most people don’t recall—or, more likely, never knew—about Nilsson’s achievement is that, in fact, many of the embryos pictured in the photo essay “had been surgically removed,” “for a variety of medical reasons”.

Thus while a deceased rather than living fetus was depicted, *Life* encouraged their readers to interpret “the substance” as something *meaningfully alive* in the context of expanding exposure to fetal revelation. In essence, the images consolidated an emergent appetite for the visual revelation of the body’s interior. Technological change—fetuscopy and sonograms—enabled viewers (and mothers and fathers), not of the medical profession, “to see more, to see things larger or smaller than the eye can grasp—to see things which have previously been off limits” (Duden 1993, 15). Thus the photographs— a commercial success— represented not so much “contraception as the beginning of life” as *Life* magazine asserted but the nurturance of a popular thirst for a vision of the fetus distinct from the uterus. New visualization technologies prepared the conceptual ground for an ideological shift necessary for the acceptance of the personification of the fetus as autonomous (Kukla 2008). This context of technological and medical development explains CBR/CCBR’s visual delivery of, and advocacy for, the disembodied ‘fetus’: the personification of the ‘fetus’ is foundational to rights litigation or legislative arguments for viability at conception. Less evident is the countering diminishment of the reproductive autonomy of women and the interrogation of maternal competence.

CCBR/CCBR’s current endeavour to shift public opinion against women’s rights tests women’s capability as mothers or potential mothers and her rights diminish with the rising celebration of “fetal rights.” In Daniels’s study of the rise of fetal rights in U.S. case law the debate about competing rights between the mother and fetus reconstructs relations between women and the state was convincingly argued, “the new politics of fetal rights focuses on the politics of pregnancy itself –on mediating and regulating what some now characterize as the *social relationship* between the pregnant woman and the fetus” (Daniels 1993, 2). Policy historian Daniel K. Williams cites fluctuating public and religious views on abortion in the United States from the 1930s to the 1980s noting that public ambivalence about the status of the fetus was realized by the US Supreme Court case’s *Roe v Wade* (1973) by which women secured autonomous rights relative to their reproductive capacities. This landmark legal ruling, as with the earlier *Griswold v Connecticut* (1965), insured a woman’s autonomous purview over her reproductive health by guaranteeing her “right to privacy and to abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy” (Williams 2013, 55).

To sway contemporary views in favour of the fetus, CCBR must metaphorically and empirically enable the vision the “fetus” as “victim” independent of, or vulnerable to, the mother. One major implication of “bioethical reform” is the reconception of the fetus as not only as having rights from the moment of conception but as potentially at harm from the mother during all stages of development. This negative counter narrative erected by the CCBR/CCBR sees women as potentially capricious by *deciding* not to mother. Feminism, too, is demonized because feminism has argued for liberal access to abortion and options beyond the traditional family.

With fetal rights distinguished from the woman whose womb, in reality, sustains the fetus, the defense *against* state or legislated measures to protect the “fetus” are weakened. In 1989, The Canadian Law Commission’s Working Paper on “Crimes against the Foetus” was criticized for this paternalism as follows: “the foetus” —personified at contraception— “enters legal discourse constructed as a unique entity with a separate legal status. This serves to situate it within an economy of displacement and detachment from the mother. Ideologically,” as Sheila Noonon continued, “this produces the reification of the foetus which masks both the material conditions of pregnancy, and women’s role within reproduction as conventionally understood . . . the . . . inextricable connectedness between mother and foetus is thereby . . . obscured” (Noonon 1989, 669-670).

With the decriminalization of abortion granted in the US by *Roe v Wade* in 1973 and in Canada by *R v Morgentaler* in 1988 the latter acknowledging that access to abortion is “fundamental to women’s health and health care,” some “pro-life” activists believe women were legislatively awarded the “choice” to terminate pregnancy at “will” or “whim.” This created, Noonan wrote, “a deliberate picture of irresponsible women who needed to be controlled by the medical profession” (Noonan, 669). Thus for some, easier access to abortion was “a product of the worst excesses of the sexual revolution and the feminist movement” with the judiciary at fault for failing to “take fetal rights into consideration and to legalize the “murder” of unborn children” (Williams 2013, 56). And, according to Daniels, fetal rights activism sits at the vortex of the epic debate over gender and citizenship by posing the question:

Does the ability carry a fetus to term necessarily change women’s relationship to the state and alter women’s standing as citizens in the liberal polity? As the fetus is animated and personified in public culture, the power of the state to regulate the behaviour of women—both pregnant and potentially pregnant—is strengthened. Women’s rights as citizens are potentially made contingent by fetal rights. They can be revoked or qualified by the state’s higher interest in the fetus (Daniels 1993, 2)

The CCBR/CBR exploits such public ambivalences and concerns for the fetus. Fetal rights is present throughout the CCBR/CBR’s graphic campaign with the organization valorizing itself in the vanguard to revoke women’s rights in order to prevent acts of “genocide” against the “unborn.” The CCBR/CBR reconceptualizes women’s human rights by framing mother and fetus as competing for rights. For that reason, CBR/ CCBR may be understood as principally arguing for the moral regulation of women by the state or other paternal agents.

Conceiving the fetus as vulnerable to genocide.

The *GAP* juxtaposes depictions of flesh and bodily references (understood as fetus) alongside culturally iconographic photographs that recollect traumatic instances of historical human tragedy and conflict. Juxtaposition readjusts the meanings of photographs with “brutal contrasts overpower[ing] any information that a more detailed, and accurate caption might provide” (Freund 1980, 166). The *GAP* elevates the “fetus” to victim status by placing the representations of disembodied human tissue next to images associated with human initiated suffering inflicted during the Holocaust as well as the vigilante lynching campaigns perpetrated against African Americans in the United States in the 1930s. Re-contextualized in this manner, the fetus is represented as another victim of genocide and as such is rendered vulnerable to annihilation.

These ahistorical juxtapositions make CCBR’s message suspect. Photographs have meaning and are rarely generic. In order to be understood, a historical photograph’s meaning is reliant on reconstruction of the context or a caption, the latter fixing a meaning. To strip an image of its specific time, people, and place and to relocate it in an alien context is to animate that photograph or image as propaganda. What remains is an image deliberately excised from historical context and receptive to whatever message the propagandist, in this case CCBR/CBR, has attached to it.

As we have seen CBR/CCBR is very strategic and purposeful in their campaign design. Lawrence Breitler’s renowned photograph of the hanging and tortured bodily remains of African American men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith was chosen to elevate the spectator’s sensation of brutality (similarly evocative but historically distinct are the holocaust images). During the 1930s lynching incident the young men were dragged by a vigilante mob from a jail cell, where they were being held on suspicion of murdering a



Figure 4 Detail. Genocide Awareness Project. Photograph by Don Gill. October 2014.

white man and raping his girlfriend (an allegation later refuted). Their lynching, by a white supremacist mob in Marion, Indiana, was witnessed on August 7 by more than 5,000 townspeople.[1] Breitler subsequently sold thousands of prints at 50 cents apiece. Postcards of lynching found a popular market.[2] How this particular photograph of a vigilante hate crime against two young men re-appeared in the GAP displays in Lethbridge warrants close interrogation. What is not explained is a justification for the careless and disrespectful appropriation of this image of hate in a manner brutally indifferent to its violent origins, or to the deceased. Nor do we learn of the ethics or permissions that might be sought from living descendants.

Perhaps this appropriation was an easy decision for the CBR/CCBRs political strategists and designers of the GAP display. Photographs of vigilante lynching, like any image of starvation or depravity from the Holocaust, *guarantee* emotion. The photograph has been ripped from “its horrific particularity” and from the people, the time or place and, as scholars have shown, in their time lynching photographs were consumed as mass entertainment not only by the vigilante mob and witnesses present at the exact moment of the event – as illustrated by the assembly below the bodies – but in the global circulation, sale and thus consumption of the imagery in the aftermath.[3] The CCBR/CBR resuscitates the horror of lynching solely for contemporary mass consumption and affect.

The question remains: how can these organizations on one hand assert that their agenda is pedagogical in purpose meant to raise consciousness on the matter of human or civil rights while on the other hand, demonstrate wanton disrespect towards those depicted, in this case two men lynched? If the images are a means to stir public consciousness about the wrongs of abortion they abuse history, and those who died at the hands of violence, by the exploitation of such images. The credibility of the CCBR’s campaign is undermined. The use of such graphics is unabashedly provocative and in no sense educational. The organizations, [as evident on the websites](#), relish strong public reaction to the spectacle, and both CBR and CCBR brag of confrontations with lawsuits, police and public adversaries.

Furthermore, while strategies of non-violence adopted from civil rights activism are expressed as motivation, this claim is offset by a history of [aggressive extremism exercised by anti-abortion activists](#) who have targeted, harassed and killed healthcare providers (Todd 2003, 353-361). This campaign of intimidation is added cause for civic concern from those communities who host these displays.

Finally, there is another threat pending. The belief that the fetus assumes “life” at the moment of conception implies ALL pharmaceutical or intrauterine devices are potentially destined for recriminalization or regulation (Williams 2013, 56). CBR’s website, for instance, explicitly calls for restrictions against pharmaceutical-based contraception (*The Pill* and *Norplant*, among others) and (using illicit video) charges *Planned Parenthood*, the worldwide health provider and educator on sexual and reproductive health that was a progressive product of 19th century feminist activism, of malpractice. Whereas, the agenda to outlaw or restrict pharmaceutical, or other forms of health care and contraception, is *not* announced in the GAP, [the website states](#), “Many forms of birth control can be classified as abortifacients since they do not always prevent fertilization and in some instances work to destroy the life of a developing child.”

Equating their campaign platform with civil rights activism [CCBR/CBR attempts to reassure their supporters](#) by asserting:

the [history of social reform](#) shows, liked reformers are rarely effective, and effective reformers—when they lived—are rarely liked. But if they managed to achieve change, isn’t it possible for pro-lifers who rock the boat to also achieve change?

Those who take up the adversarial torch to limit women’s reproductive autonomy reinforce and distribute socially conservative attitudes about women’s rights. By franchising the GAP, local student and community “pro-life” clubs harness themselves to the CCBR/CBR’s political and moral provocations to stir revenge and to insensitively tarnish women’s behaviour as too “liberal,” thoughtlessly capricious, or ethically irresponsible. CBR/CCBR’s GAP campaign,

organized in concert with student and community associates, exhibit ignorance of important structural factors of class, circumstance, age, ability, or culture that bring women to make life-changing decisions about reproductive health.

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Notes

[1] Cynthia Carr, *Our Town, a Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town and the History of White America* (Crown Publishers, NY: 2006) as reviewed in David Bradley, "Anatomy of a Murder,"

The Nation (June 12, 2006):32-36. See also essay on this specific photograph by James H. Madison at the following link:

http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/teaching/2011_06/sources/day2ex1_photo_madison.html

[2] Sf: James Allen, Hilton Als, et. al. *Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America* (Twin Palms, Santa Fe: 2000). Eighty one images with text at www.withoutsanctuary.org/main.html

[3] Amy Louise Wood, "Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy," *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol.6, No. 3 (September 2005): 373-399.

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