

**Constructing Clementine:
Murder, Trauma, and the (Un)making of Community in the Rural South, 1900-1930**

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The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represent a period of unprecedented growth in American history. Demographically, technologically, and geographically, the country experienced massive shifts in quality of life, not all of which were well received. One of the most popular measures of progress—the railroad—linked urban centers and rural towns from coast to coast, fostering a sense of national interconnectedness. A beacon of innovation and promise, the railroad symbolized transformation in American society. Yet in the 1900s and 1910s, the Southern Pacific Railroad in particular carried more than domestic wares and products for market. Indeed, in southeastern Texas and southwestern Louisiana, the railroad became one of the most readily identifiable threads connecting a series of gruesome murders.

Yet more than the railroad marked these crimes. Committed in the name of religion, the slaughter of entire families with axes and occasional knives rocked local communities to the core. Questions of blood-letting rituals, satanic cults, racial purity, and forms of atonement clouded crime scenes. Detectives and police investigated the murders using early-twentieth-century forensic methods, but a single culprit eluded their searches. In the end, a young black woman became the most readily associated individual with the murders. Though a coerced confession led to her life sentence for “murder without capital punishment,” the slaughters continued while she was behind bars.

Centered on this murderous rampage from 1909 to 1912, “Constructing Clementine” contextualizes violent and traumatic crime in the early-twentieth-century American South. It is both a regional investigation of sustained terror in poor black communities as seen through the lens of a single person, and an invitation to complicate themes in black women’s history. It provides a cultural and social history of the rural black South amidst national trends towards Northern and urban

migration. It is not an attempt to prove guilt or innocence. It is not a psychological study of motive. Instead, it offers a geographically distinct framework for discussing transformations in black life during the early twentieth century, revealing more than a story of maddening mayhem. By highlighting the tension between the repetitiveness and exceptionalness of the murders, this project asks larger questions about community normalcy, inter- and intraracial violence, and the role of trauma in everyday life.

While scholarly treatment of the murders has been virtually untouched, popular narratives of the crimes dispute the number of individuals killed, the specific violent episodes which fit into the framework, and the religious impetuses employed. Debate surrounding whether it would be conceivably possible for a single person to kill an entire family at once has led to numerous propositions about who else was involved and how the murders actually took place. Despite these differing opinions, the overarching reality that black families were being attacked in southeastern Texas and southwestern Louisiana for more than three years drives the utility of this project. At the same moment in which lynching was perceived as both a real threat to black communities and a literal manifestation of white supremacy, this rampage complicates ideas about physical harm, religious violence, and the parameters of social norms.

Ultimately, the historical significance of these murders paints an alternate, if not more sinister, vision of Southern black communities in the middle of the Great Migration. “Constructing Clementine” uses the specific details of a series of gruesome murders to uncover the quotidian experiences of poor black communities in turn-of-the-century America. It looks at how the cultural and social realities of everyday life—religion, industry, neighborhood, family, and poverty—undergirded community responses to the crimes.