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In the realm of American and African American historical literature, rare pieces have unravelled the complex fabric of racial brutality with the equivalent seriousness and scholarly precision as Charles L. Chavis Jr.'s masterwork, "The Silent Shore." Chavis's opus, delving meticulously into the lynching of Matthew Williams in Salisbury, Maryland, in 1931, is far beyond a mere retelling of a singular, distressing incident. Instead, it emerges as a deep contemplation on the wider socio-political forces that have influenced, and still influence, the racial terrain of America.

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## **Abstract**

In the realm of American and African American historical literature, rare pieces have unravelled the complex fabric of racial brutality with the equivalent seriousness and scholarly precision as Charles L. Chavis Jr.'s masterwork, "The Silent Shore." Chavis's opus, delving meticulously into the lynching of Matthew Williams in Salisbury, Maryland, in 1931, is far beyond a mere retelling of a singular, distressing incident. Instead, it emerges as a deep contemplation on the wider socio-political forces that have influenced, and still influence, the racial terrain of America.



In the annals of American and African American historiography, few works have elucidated the intricate tapestry of racial violence with the same gravitas and scholarly rigour as Charles L. Chavis Jr.'s magnum opus, "The Silent Shore." This book, a meticulous excavation of the 1931 lynching of Matthew Williams in Salisbury, Maryland, is not merely a recount of a singular, harrowing event. Instead, it stands as a profound meditation on the broader sociopolitical dynamics that have shaped, and continue to shape, the American racial landscape.

Chavis's narrative, a magisterial tapestry of historical inquiry, is anchored in his exhaustive exploration of undisclosed documents. With a historian's precision and a storyteller's finesse, he seamlessly integrates these archival findings into a riveting chronicle that transcends mere recounting. This act of archival resurrection does more than merely spotlight the chilling orchestration of lynchings; it unveils the intricate web of complicity and silence. This pervasive conspiracy, a silent accord among the masses, effectively shielded the perpetrators, ensuring they remained untouched and unaccountable to the very tenets of justice they so brazenly flouted.

The book's framework stands as a testament to Chavis's scholarly acumen. *Part 1* offers an intimate portrait of Matthew Williams, contextualizing his life within the broader socio-cultural milieu of his time. Hence, Chavis masterfully intertwines the personal, societal, and political dimensions of a dark chapter in Maryland's history. The narrative commences with a heartfelt introduction to Matthew Williams, where Chavis sketches a vivid portrait of his life, family, and community, grounding the reader in the unfolding personal tragedy. This intimate portrayal seamlessly transitions into the chilling events of Williams' lynching, capturing not only the crime but also the palpable racial animosity of the Eastern Shore, culminating in a public spectacle of violence. The narrative then shifts to a broader political landscape, detailing Governor Ritchie's symbolic confrontation with "Judge Lynch." This confrontation underscores the tension between institutional authority and mob lawlessness while delving into the pervasive politics of anti-Black racism in Maryland and beyond.

In *Part 2*, Chavis transitions from the audacious endeavours of a former prizefighter-turned-private investigator, whose perilous mission to infiltrate the mob behind the lynching is rendered with suspenseful precision, to the murkier realms of societal complicity. He delves into the profound conspiracy of silence, highlighting the blurred boundaries between truth and deception and the intricate web that shielded the perpetrators. This exploration culminates in a scathing critique of



Maryland's justice system, branding its inability to address the lynching as a dark blemish on the state's history.

The very fabric of justice, which ought to be woven with threads of fairness, impartiality, and diligence, appeared frayed and tattered in the face of this atrocity. The lynching, as Chavis astutely highlights, was not an isolated incident but a manifestation of a deeper malaise—a pervasive conspiracy of silence that shielded the malefactors. This tacit agreement, a silent accord among the community and the powers that be, effectively imbalanced the scales of justice.

One must question how a state, which prides itself on its democratic ideals and the rule of law, allowed such a blatant miscarriage of justice. As Chavis's research suggests, the answer lies in the intricate web of complicity, prejudice, and inertia that permeated Maryland's institutions at the time. The title "Maryland's Disgrace" is not mere hyperbole; it is a scathing indictment of a system that failed one of its own.

In an era where racial justice and systemic reform discourse is more pertinent than ever, Maryland's oversight is a stark reminder of the urgent need for introspection and rectification. As we navigate the complexities of our present, Chavis's work implores us to confront our past, urging us to ensure that such blemishes on the tapestry of our history are not merely acknowledged but actively redressed.

In the *latter Part* of "The Silent Shore," Charles L. Chavis Jr. casts a discerning eye on what he terms "A Blot on the Tapestry of the Free State." Maryland, often referred to as the "Free State," finds itself under scrutiny for its historical and systemic failures to address racial violence, particularly the lynching of Matthew Williams. This book section, aptly titled "Confronting the Legacy of Anti-Black Violence in the Age of Fracture," delves deep into the societal and institutional complicity that allowed such heinous acts to persist.

Chavis's exploration begins with starkly examining the Eastern Shore's "overwhelming physical and psychological violence." This region, marred by intense racial animosity, becomes emblematic of the broader issues plaguing Maryland. The case of George Armwood, another victim of racial violence, further underscores the state's inability to protect its Black citizens or bring their perpetrators to justice.

The narrative then shifts to a broader perspective, analyzing the silence and, in some instances, the outright complicity of local and state police in these acts of racial terror. Chavis suggests that such systemic failures made these institutions as



culpable as the mobs they allowed to operate with impunity. The proposed legislation of the 1920s, which sought federal prosecution for those involved in lynchings and acknowledged the silence or complicity of local authorities, serves as a testament to the national recognition of these systemic failures.

However, as Chavis poignantly highlights, the true challenge lies in acknowledging these dark stories and actively confronting and redressing them. The legacy of anti-Black violence, deeply woven into the fabric of the Free State, demands a collective commitment to social, legal, educational, and economic reform. As Chavis articulates, it requires an America that is "rooted not in a 'belief in a racial hierarchy' but in acknowledging and protecting the humanity in all people" (p. 236).

In an era marked by racial, political, and social fractures, Chavis's work stands as a clarion call. It implores Maryland, and by extension, the nation, to confront its past, to acknowledge the blemishes on its historical tapestry, and to work diligently towards a more just and inclusive future.

Furthermore, Chavis's prose, while undeniably erudite, remains accessible. He strikes a delicate balance, ensuring his work resonates with the academic cognoscenti and the lay reader. His ability to juxtapose Maryland's dual heritage—its southern lineage marinated in the bitter brew of slavery and white supremacy against its robust tradition of Black activism—is nothing short of masterful.

The inclusion of an afterword by Tracey "Jeannie" Jones, a living relative of Matthew Williams, infuses the narrative with a poignant authenticity, bridging the chasm between historical abstraction and personal memory.

In summation, "The Silent Shore" is a tour de force in the realm of historical scholarship related to lynching violence in the United States. Chavis's work is not just an academic endeavour; it is a clarion call, urging us to confront the spectres of our past and to chart a course toward a more unbiased and equitable future. In an era where the discourse on racial violence and systemic discrimination is more pertinent than ever, this book stands as an indispensable beacon, illuminating the path forward.



## About the Author

Giovanni Santoro, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in the History of the Americas at the Turin University, Italy.