Under the Shadow of the Awful Gallows-Tree: The Murder Trials of Thomas Dula and Ann Melton as a Case Study in Gender and Power in Reconstruction Era Western North Carolina

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Abstract
This is a micro-history that explores everyday life on a small scale by tracing the common, if elusive lives of Thomas Dula, Ann Melton, and Laura Foster, and the communities they lived in, to explore the culture in which they lived—and died. Reactions to the murder unleashed an outpouring of discourse embedded in broader, national debates concerning gender roles. The dominant cultural theme that emerged from the murder trials as reflected in middle-class newspapers maintained that true women did not kill and real men acted as gentlemen and defenders of women's honor. The project mines a wealth of primary source material: court documents, population censuses, and newspapers. By examining the discourse surrounding Tom Dula's execution and Ann Melton's acquittal for the murder of Laura Foster it illuminates the murder narrative as a public forum for discussing gender roles and power in 1860s America.

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