

LYNCHING AND RACIAL VIOLENCE: HISTORIES & LEGACIES REPORT FROM A CONFERENCE

Between the end of Reconstruction (mid-1870s) and World War II, there were some 3,500 documented incidents of lynching and mob violence against African Americans, most of them in the South. The victims, mostly men, were not only hung, but often also tortured, their bodies displayed publicly and/or dismembered for grisly souvenirs. Sometimes these men had been convicted of a crime, sometimes only accused, and sometimes even acquitted, but the real point was to terrorize the communities in which African Americans lived. Although the participants in the mob rarely hid their identities, few were ever arrested, let alone punished for their crimes; in fact, according to police reports, grand jury investigations, and newspaper accounts, the African American victims met their fates “at the hands of parties unknown.”

Starting in the 1890s, African Americans in the North and South, and their white allies, built an anti-lynching movement which used diverse strategies to confront these outrages. They used not only petitions, letter-writing, marches, and rallies, but also plays, songs, visual art, films, and cartoons to assert the humanity of the victims, educate the public about the scope of the problem, and pressure politicians to pass a federal anti-lynching law. While this movement ebbed and flowed and never did achieve its legislative goal, it became an important current within the “river,” as historian Vincent Harding has called it of the freedom struggle.

The anti-lynching movement confronted not only the violent acts that became known as “lynching,” but also images of those acts which sought to lionize the mob and dehumanize their victims. Often, an enterprising photographer or, as time went on and technology allowed, an amateur in possession of a Kodak or a Brownie camera,

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documented the events. Photographs of lynching “parties” reveal that members of the mob or audience often posed with the corpses of their victims, in a sort of trophy shot akin to those of successful hunters and fishermen. In some cases, these macabre photographs were hawked from home to home and town to town, a way for the photographers to make money and for whites who could not be present to participate vicariously in the expression of power the pictures represented. On occasion, the photos were turned into postcards which could be mailed to friends and relatives in distant locations. In these ways, these lynching photographs themselves served as an important element in the maintenance of a racial hierarchy that asserted that all whites deserved to stand above all blacks. After viewing one such photograph in 1935, composer and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson remarked that lynching was a “problem of saving black America’s body and white America’s soul.”

In the 1980s, James Allen, a white southerner sympathetic to the struggle against racism, began to collect these photographs and postcards while making his rounds of antique and junk shops, flea markets, and private dealers across the South. The images captured the horrible history of lynchings in trees, bridges, and towers, and atop bonfires. He also purchased posed shots of the mobs, their members staring unabashedly into the camera’s lens. As Allen’s collection grew, the idea of exhibiting the images publicly occurred to him, and, in 1999, they made their first appearance in a small museum in New York City – thirty-odd worn snapshots and postcards, collectively titled “Without Sanctuary.” Viewers had to get close to see the images, and they had to stand close to each other. Waiting lines circled the block, even in cold, wintry weather. The exhibit

eventually transferred to the New York Historical Society, where a collection of anti-lynching movement tracts, posters, and materials from the 1890s through the 1930s were added, with notebooks provided for viewers to record their thoughts and emotions. With supplementary essays by Allen, Congressman John Lewis, cultural critic Hilton Als, and historian Leon Litwack, a book – *WITHOUT SANCTUARY: LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPHY IN AMERICA* -- was published using Allen's collection.

The photographs have been every bit as controversial as the exhibit has been popular. Some critics warned of the risk of victimizing the victims once again, this time by showing their painful images, and of the danger of creating a new pornography of violence and torture. Other critics suggested that the photographs encouraged viewers to adopt the gaze of mob participants, to identify with the evil-doers. There was also the possibility that white supremacist groups would themselves celebrate the lynchings and appropriate the images to post on their websites (they have done so). And then there were people who argued that the images were just too horrific to be viewed or that their display might generate racial hostilities where “progress” had been made. On the other hand, there were also scholars, activists, and curators who were interested in displaying the exhibit, and they called for it to tour museums and universities.

Mr. Allen, scholars at Emory University in Atlanta, staff at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic Site in Atlanta, the U.S. National Park Service (which manages the King site), and Atlanta community leaders explored bringing the exhibit to that city, thereby displaying it in the South for the first time. Under the direction of an African American curator, Joseph F. Jordan, the planning group engaged the local community in a series of

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forums that led to a well-rounded program based at the King Historic Site, itself in the heart of Atlanta's black community. A respectful -- one might even say sacred -- space was prepared for the display. Mr. Jordan installed a soundscape featuring versions of Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit," various 1930s blues songs, and the sound of crickets. He posted names and details about the lives of the victims and limited the number of photos on display, so that viewers might remember the deaths and lives of individuals who had been murdered in this way. Jordan also chose to include additional materials from the anti-lynching movement in order to emphasize that African Americans had resisted white terror and to include images and stories of Jewish and Italian victims, and northern as well as southern incidents. Notebooks were provided, as in New York, for viewers to express their thoughts and feelings. Of course, the core of the exhibit remained those damned, damning, and damnable little black and white pictures. They're still there, their power undiminished; 130,000 people have viewed them at the King Center.

The exhibit planners opened the exhibit's run in May 2002 with a religious ceremony, consecrating the memory of the victims and honoring their descendants. They organized a film and lecture series to bring additional information to the community and serve as the bases for more discussions. The planners held events in Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dr. King and his father had preached. They reached out to community groups in other cities where there had been lynchings and incidents of racial violence -- Rosewood, Florida; Moore's Ford, Georgia; Wilmington, North Carolina; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and, yes, even Duluth, Minnesota -- in order to support efforts to identify and mark graves,

establish public memorials, and influence school curricula in those locations. The planners also collaborated with the Emory University Theater Department and Professor Yvonne Singh to create a performance piece, “LynchP*n,” which highlighted the mixed, complex, and even contradictory emotions that swept viewers of the exhibit. This production provided yet another opportunity for reflection and discussion.

In early October 2002, Emory University hosted a conference entitled “Lynching and Racial Violence: Histories and Legacies,” which attracted more than 200 scholars (including me), from undergraduate and graduate students, to young professors and senior scholars from every imaginable academic field – history, sociology, political science, law, English, art, theater, music, religious studies, and philosophy – and 121 institutions – community colleges, private liberal arts colleges, and public research universities. There were also many community activists, not only from Atlanta but also from communities around the country, who have made their top priority the memorialization of places of racial violence. The keynote speaker was Professor David Levering Lewis of Rutgers University, the author of nine books and the recipient of two Pulitzer prizes (for each volume of his biography of W.E.B. DuBois) and a MacArthur “genius” award. Other prominent participants included: the former counsel to Anita Hill, Emma Coleman Jordan, who is now Professor of Law at Georgetown University; former associate editor of the NEGRO DIGEST, Dr. Richard Long, a highly respected member of the Emory faculty; former Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver, now a law professor at Emory, and former Black Panther Elaine Brown, now a community organizer and writer

in California. The lynch mobs could never have anticipated that someday such brainpower and passion would be loosed in response to the pain they had inflicted.

The conference organizers clustered the presenters into twenty-five panels, which met three or four at a time. The ground they covered was breathtaking. Papers offered detailed accounts of more than twenty specific incidents, analysis of the role of the legal system and government authorities in tolerating if not facilitating lynchings, critical evaluations of the efforts of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Adam Clayton Powell, and other African American leaders to confront lynching, consideration of the roles played by music, drama, film, poetry, fiction, and painting in efforts to educate and influence public opinion, assessments of forms of African American resistance, including armed self-defense, civil disobedience, electoral politics, law suits, and migration out of the South, and complex interpretations of the photographs themselves as historical documents. Each session not only provided well-conceived presentations but also provoked lively exchanges with the audiences. Conversations begun in question-and-answer sessions carried over to the lunch and dinner tables, while the information and insights revealed in any one session were also linked to those which emerged in other sessions. There was enough intellectual energy and heartfelt passion being generated to raise the roof of the conference center.

Some ideas divided conference participants, while others were expressed as critiques of long-standing historical assumptions. Yet others broke new ground altogether, calling attention to areas of analysis which had long been in the shadows. Enough soil was plowed to give participants new ideas about how to make use of those difficult

photographs in classrooms, new questions to bring into research, and new inspiration to bring into community work.

There were sharp differences of opinion about what is meant by the term “lynching.” Some, including Professor Levering Lewis, argued that a lynching must involve a mob taking the law into their own hands, killing one or more victims, and often following a ritualized procedure. Proponents of this definition also contend that most lynchings occurred between the 1870s and the 1930s. Other conference participants countered that this definition and time frame were too narrow. They preferred to use the categories “racial violence” and “domestic terrorism,” and they argued that such practices began during slavery (the uses of violence, whipping, maiming, torture, rape, punitive sales, and the like), took on the forms of community-based violence called “lynchings” in the years of Jim Crow (1870s through the 1940s), and then were assumed by the government itself as police brutality and capital punishment. These critics question the formal distinctions between legal and extra-legal violence, pointing to the presence of police officials in the lynching photos, taking note of the failure of local authorities to prosecute participants in lynchings and the unwillingness, time and again, of all three branches of the federal government (executive, legislative, and judicial) to intervene to outlaw lynching, and citing statistics that reveal the disproportionate punishment of all people of color.

Few participants contested the notion that violence has been central to the construction and maintenance of racial hierarchies in the United States. This reflected quite a change in dominant historical interpretations, which had long emphasized economic and cultural factors. Professor Fitzhugh Brundage of the University of North Carolina told a plenary

session that most historians had so downplayed violence that it would have been impossible to hold a conference like this even a decade ago. Not one scholarly book on lynching had been published between 1945 and 1975. But recent years have seen dissertations, books, and articles which probed lynchings, racial pogroms (attacks on black communities), and state-sanctioned violence, making possible a new narrative of the course of U.S. history.

This narrative was always there in the “hidden memory among blacks,” insisted Emma Coleman Jordan, but it was denied or ignored in published history, public representations, and the imaginations of whites. Here was a source of the “persistent divide” in the attitudes of blacks and whites towards the criminal justice system. Jordan cited a soon-to-be-released study by Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo which documents that 75% of blacks distrust the criminal justice system compared to only 8% of whites. Oral folklore kept the reports of murder and torture alive within African American families and communities, and today these latent memories are activated by the beating of Rodney King, the trial of O.J. Simpson, the police brutalization of Abner Louima and the shootings of Amadou Diallo in New York City and African Americans and African immigrants on the streets of Minneapolis.

Presenters insisted that if our society could come to grips with the history that lies at the heart of issues like the differences between white and black attitudes towards the police, Americans could change the ways that we understand ourselves and are perceived in the world. Emma Jordan noted that American legal scholarship has revolved around a concept that the law marks a boundary between public and private reality; the history of

lynching suggests that, much to the contrary, there are deep connections between public and private life. An earnest investigation into the causes not only of racial violence but also into its erasure from history offers us an opportunity to rethink the sources and consequences of our deepest fears. 9/11 and the events since make such a process all the more necessary, said several speakers. One quoted Vernon Jordan's remarks at the opening of the "Without Sanctuary" exhibit in May 2002 that "Black people know terror. We experience terror in America."

Many presenters offered a wide range of stories about how African Americans and their white allies resisted this terror. A variety of organizations – the NAACP, the Urban League, the Communist Party and its International Labor Defense, labor, church, and community organizations, African American newspapers – all played important roles in particular struggles in particular communities. Protests, rallies, petitions, letters, pressure on politicians, marches, and even armed self-defense were employed from time to time and from place to place, and conference papers told these stories with the passion and compelling details these efforts deserved. Many nails were driven into the coffin of the old shibboleth that African Americans had passively "accommodated" to racism.

Among the great revelations of the conference was the information provided about the ways that black and white activists had used the arts – drama, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, fiction, cartoons -- to rally opposition to racial violence. African American women played particularly prominent roles in this work. In 1916, Angelina Weld-Grimke's play "Rachel" not only exposed the impact of lynching on black families but also became the first black-written non-musical play professionally performed by black

actors. Its success inspired W.E.B. DuBois to organize a Drama Committee within the NAACP and the CRISIS and OPPORTUNITY magazines to offer annual playwriting contests. Three years later in Boston, Meta Fuller sculpted a statue of lynching victim Mary Turner as a compelling “silent protest.” Other women wrote plays, poems, and novels over the next decades, and they were joined by such men as Claude MacKay and Langston Hughes. In the mid-1930s, two art shows in New York City brought together a wide range of paintings to call public attention to efforts to pass a federal anti-lynching law. A couple of papers examined anti-lynching themes in recent African American art. Many of the presentations were accompanied by slides of photographs, paintings, fabrics, sculptures, and collages.

Some presenters also offered new skills for looking at visual materials. This was particularly the case in the viewing and interpretation of the lynching photographs themselves. Viewers should not take them at face value as “documents,” several young scholars argued, but attempt to understand them as “constructions,” composed by photographers and mob participants to create certain perceptions. One of the most important of these was white racial solidarity, performed and expressed across class lines (reflected in the clothing of the members of the mobs) as well as gender and generational lines. These constructions often mirrored other forms of photographs – middle-class portraiture (again, the mob), criminal mug shots (the victims), and medical students (usually white) with cadavers (usually black) in dissecting rooms. Furthermore, the lynching photographs were often circulated along with photographs of the white victims

of the black alleged criminals, constructing and reinforcing a narrative of white innocence and black guilt.

Some presenters argued for the presence of black agency in the construction of visual images as alternatives to the lynching photographs. There were African American photographers who provided pictures of the victims' lives and families for their funerals, or of their funerals for their families afterwards, so that they might be remembered as they lived and were loved, and not just as they died. These photographs offered images of resurrection to replace the dominant ones of murder and dishonor. Presenters reported on African American newspapers' preference for hand-drawn illustrations and cartoons rather than photographs, because drawings seemed less disrespectful than photographs and hand-drawn images could offer interpretations which directed viewers' seeing. One presenter showed several cartoons that suggested that lynching was an expression of white insecurities about their own masculinity. Less graphic than photographs, drawings also defended against the danger of a voyeurism of victimized bodies. African American photographers and illustrators helped provide responses to the images of subjection conveyed in the lynching photographs.

Although the very scholarship that informed the conference had valuable political implications and can be understood as political work, the conference ended on a particularly activist note. A conference presenter from St. Joseph, Missouri, informed a break out session that the very day before the conference opened, a young Kenyan man had been found hanging from a radio tower in her city. This tower was located only three blocks from the scene of a multiple lynching in 1906 from a tower which had since been

torn down. While it was hard enough to believe our ears, we were suddenly confronted with the visual evidence of digital pictures of the young man's body. The very air seemed to be sucked out of the room. The presenter explained that the local authorities had left his body hanging for more than twelve hours, and that they had already ruled his death a suicide, over the objection of his mother. It was his mother who had encouraged the presenter to bring the pictures to us. The analytical coup-de-grace was delivered when the presenter explained that St. Joseph, Missouri, is the hometown of Attorney General John Ashcroft's hometown – the very man now in charge of “homeland security.”

Participants in that break out session, led by Emory faculty members and Elaine Brown, decided to draft a letter to Attorney General Ashcroft, calling for a federal investigation into this case of “domestic terrorism.” By 5:00 PM that afternoon, an eloquent letter had been drafted for the entire conference assembly to discuss and possibly sign. After a constructive discussion, conference participants lined up to affix their names to the letter. There were also plans laid to release the letter to the media around the country. After all, we had come from every corner of the country, and we had experience dealing with the media in our home communities. These tragic events in Missouri had provided us with an opportunity to take what we had been learning and put it to immediate use. This conference about such a difficult and painful history had contributed to scholarly and activist efforts to shape a more hopeful future.

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The photographs collected and exhibited as “Without Sanctuary” can be viewed on the internet at <http://www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary/main.html>. Potential viewers should be aware that the images are very disturbing. The website explains how to purchase the book and offers an opportunity to participate in discussions about the exhibit. Additional information can be accessed at <http://www.emory.edu/WithoutSanctuaryExhibit> and <http://www.nps.gov/withoutsanctuary>. Conference organizers, led by Professor Rudolph Byrd of the African American Studies Department at Emory University, have also announced their intent to publish a collection of the conference papers and presentations. Additional websites with information about lynching in America can be found at <http://www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/MARIAL/calendar/01-02/veil/links.html>.