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Lynching's Legacy in American Culture

IN THE SUMMER OF 1901 MARK TWAIN WROTE AN ESSAY RESPONDING TO AN outbreak of racial violence in Missouri, beginning with a lynching and ending with the expulsion of some thirty black families from their homes. It was not until 1923, however, long after Twain's death, that the essay was first published, after being considerably abridged and softened by Albert Bigelow Paine (Oggel 116). "The United States of Lyncherdom" evoked some of Twain's strongest statements on American racism and colonialism—and also some of his most pronounced hesitations about speaking publicly on the racial violence defining turn-of-the-century American culture. As Terry Oggel has noted, Twain even considered writing a multi-volume history of lynching in America, but the anticipation of a hostile white public reaction gave him pause, as it did when it came to publishing the original essay, which he finally decided to withhold from publishing altogether. When the essay appeared in print two decades later, its deletions and silences, largely imposed by Paine, reflected all too accurately white reluctance to engage issues of racial violence, and especially lynching, in print. As Jean M. Lutes argues in a recent *American Literary History* essay, "Print culture in the United States has a long tradition of suppressing the news of racial violence" (460). That suppression in turn has been responsible in part for many of the suffocating silences about lynching that have shaped the nation's public memory as it emerged throughout the course of the twentieth century.

In the past nine years, though, public interest in the topic of lynching has intensified to an unprecedented degree. In 2000, antique dealer James Allen released *Without Sanctuary*, an extraordinary collection of lynching photographs he had collected from flea markets and private sellers over the course of many years, to much media and popular attention. Over the next few years, exhibitions of the same collection in New York, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and Chicago, and on line, drew hundreds

of visitors. In 2005, the US Senate, with eighty senators in support, approved a resolution that apologized to lynching victims, survivors, and their descendants for its failure to pass any of the numerous anti-lynching bills put before it in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, a number of local organizations in towns and cities across the country have initiated efforts to construct public memorials or exhibitions to commemorate the victims of lynching in their communities, including Rosewood, Florida; Monroe, Georgia; Waco, Texas; and Duluth, Minnesota.

These public efforts to remember lynching have been paralleled in the academic community. Indeed, in this same period, scholarship on lynching has seen a remarkable recrudescence. In the thirty years following World War II, no major academic work on lynching appeared, even as many scholars were paying close attention at this time to the ways in which slavery and Jim Crow segregation had constructed and shaped American race relations. It was not until the early 1980s that scholars such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Trudier Harris, and Joel Williamson broke open the topic of lynching as its own field of study, marking it as essential to any understanding of American ideas about race, violence, sex, justice, and law. Although this work was followed by several significant studies in the 1990s, this output pales in comparison to the scholarly attention lynching has received in the past nine years. Since 2000, no fewer than twelve new books have appeared on the topic of lynching, as well as numerous articles and dissertations; several more books are due out in the next few years. In 2002, in conjunction with the exhibition of *Without Sanctuary* at the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site, Emory University hosted a conference on lynching that brought together over three hundred scholars, a gathering that, as one noted historian has said, would have been "inconceivable" fifteen or twenty years earlier (Brundage, "Conclusion" 401). This present volume, bringing together scholars from a range of disciplines, both reflects and contributes to this burgeoning new field of lynching studies.

All of this recent work on lynching, both public and scholarly, represents a larger effort to activate social memory about lynching, to create a new kind of popular consciousness about America's racist and violent past in the face of what has been a profound mis-remembering of lynching. But while there might be general agreement that this new consciousness is a good thing, it does raise a number of vexing questions.

Why was lynching so understudied or mis-remembered before now? And why the seemingly sudden interest now, at this moment in history? Finally, what problems or difficulties do these attempts to memorialize lynching, to represent it, to construct histories of it, inevitably produce? That is, in order for any clear social memory on lynching to exist, the terrible and messy trauma of it all must be made somehow coherent and legible. How is that possible?

These are questions that parallel to a striking degree those raised by Holocaust scholarship over the past three decades—the curious dynamic between remembering and forgetting, of giving voice to and disavowing past wounds that seem to defy both comprehension and articulation, and in particular the ethics of responding to and articulating scenes of devastation and pain without succumbing to the lures of sensationalism and objectification. How does one go about trying to represent what initially appears beyond description, and how does one do so without reimposing upon those victims of past atrocities the utter debasement and abjection they experienced in ritualistic acts of violence and murder? Who has the right to tell their stories, and how should one respond to them? How are such stories, in the words of Toni Morrison, to “be passed on,” and how will those stories readjust our sense of the past, community, and our very sense of selfhood? To raise such questions, Moise Postone and Eric Santner argue in their introduction to *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, is to probe what they call “the nature of the *afterlife* of historical trauma” and in particular “questions of history, memory, identity, agency, and victimhood” (10).

Trauma theory has helped scholars like Postone and Santner articulate some of those questions, and theorists like Dominick LaCapra have led the way in trying to provide answers to many of the most troubling questions awaiting those who would breach silences about cultural wounds and seemingly unimaginable atrocities. Confronting those troubling pasts often precipitates, Postone and Santner argue, something like a crisis of representation, “what we might call paradigm shifts,” they note, “or breakthroughs in modes of representation and response” (10). Indeed, if one defines cultural trauma, as Ron Eyerman does, as a “massive disruption” representing “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric,” healing that wound necessitates a struggle over how to render comprehensible the story of that

wounding—the pain that is inflicted, its impact upon the victim, and the allocation of responsibility (3). Charting such struggles, LaCapra argues, requires a certain distancing in coming to terms with a wounded past and assimilating it into the narrative of memory—but also a sensitivity to the dangers of that distancing. To undertake a narrative of a trauma defying comprehension and narrative assimilation is to risk replicating acts of victimization and dehumanization accompanying and defining that trauma. It is all too easy, LaCapra warns—and here he is joined by many of the contributors to this issue—to overlook our own faint but unmistakable complicity, through distancing and objectification, in our consumption of Holocaust stories, in our scrutiny of graphic lynching photographs, or even in our pronounced tendency to render suffering trivial with narratives designed to achieve harmony or redemption through “the suffering of others” (218).

The essays in this volume all reflect upon these questions and contribute answers to them. This volume draws together scholars and writers who are primarily interested in the ways in which lynching—its rituals and performance, its violence and terror, its impact and aftermath—came to be expressed and represented in American academic, religious, literary, media, and visual life. They also consider all the tangled implications and consequences when various Americans have tried to make sense of lynching or willfully ignored it, when they have memorialized it or mis-remembered it.

Here we use the term “mis-remember” deliberately, rather than “forget,” despite the fact that, before this recent onslaught of interest, there appears to have been a profound social amnesia about lynching in this country. Most of the college students we have taught come to class with a foundational understanding of the history of slavery and a passing knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement but remain sadly ignorant of lynching or even the breadth and intensity of Jim Crow segregation and its effects. Moreover, after witnessing *Without Sanctuary*, all too many viewers expressed on line, at public forums, and in visitor books a deep sense of shock and surprise that Americans had perpetuated such gross and horrific acts of racist violence with impunity, as if they had no prior awareness of lynching at all. Nevertheless, as Jonathon Markowitz has recently posited, lynching has long served as a primary “lens” through which Americans have conceptualized or seen “contemporary race relations and racial spectacles” (7), from Bernard Goetz’s subway

vigilantism in the 1980s to the Rodney King beating to, most recently, the Duke Lacrosse rape charges. Lynching, in this sense, has served as a vivid metaphor or what Markowitz calls the “most easily recognizable symbol” of racism and racial injustice, most infamously evoked when Clarence Thomas referred to his confirmation hearing as a “high tech lynching.” What’s more, sadly and shockingly, lynching in symbolic form is still all too often used to harass and intimidate African Americans in schools and workplaces around the country. As Dora Apel has shown, the EEOC has in recent years fielded an appalling number of lawsuits in which employers have hung or displayed a hangman’s noose as a “chilling form of harassment meant to prevent labor protest and ‘keep blacks in their place’” (471).

Yet, although lynching continues to permeate public understandings of race and racial violence, most Americans do not have any real or comprehensive understanding of lynching’s history, as these examples make evident. The term is potent enough to cause a visceral reaction in both black and white Americans alike, but its use is riddled with all sorts of misconceptions and mythologies. It is remarkable, for instance, that when comedian Michael Richards exploded a few years ago in a racist rant directed at several African American hecklers in his audience, the discussion in the media afterwards focused on his repeated use of the word “nigger” but ignored almost entirely his misbegotten reference to lynching. When Richards wanted to assert authority over his black hecklers, when he wanted to level the most shocking and hurtful racist insult he could, he went directly to an image of lynching, even before he unleashed the forbidden word “nigger.” Yet, most commentators either did not understand the reference or they chose to overlook it. Just as disturbing, if not more, was the tasteless comparison a number of opinion-makers and bloggers made last year between lynching and the rape charges leveled at three Duke University lacrosse players. For some, the unfounded prosecution of these men constituted “lynching without the rope,” as one CNN talk show host claimed, when, of course, these men had full recourse to due process under the law and more than adequate legal representation.¹

¹Glenn Beck, “The Glenn Beck Show,” January 15, 2007. For a transcript, see www.transcript.cnn.com. Cartoonist Doug Marlette similarly penned a cartoon that depicted a lynching rope hanging from a tree, labeled “for whites only,” with the Duke chapel in the background. The caption read “New South Affirmative Action.” Reprinted

It is as if lynching haunts our social memories, but we are reluctant to grasp it or hold it carefully up for view. In this sense, lynching perhaps acts less like a lens and more like a prism, since our perception through it is multiple and refracted, and it can obfuscate as much as it clarifies. These examples underscore the necessity for a clear and accurate social historical memory of lynching, so that, at the very least, the term is less susceptible to manipulation or willful distortion, a distortion that does a further disservice to the thousands of victims who suffered at the hands of lynch mobs in this country. Yet, as many of these essays reveal, the construction of such a memory is wrought with friction. Historical memory is rarely uniformly collective or consensual; it entails many voices, many ideological agendas, and many contests over whose story gets represented and remembered, and how.²

The definition and meaning of lynching, of course, has never been static. As historian Christopher Waldrep has shown in *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, what exactly constituted a lynching not only changed over time but has been the source of considerable political contestation and debate. In fact, the history of lynching is inseparable from the history of its rhetoric and representation. The ways in which various groups or constituencies defined, discussed, and imagined it had everything to do with whether they deemed it socially legitimate or illegitimate, or treated it as a local inevitability or a national crime. Today, we can never know what exactly happened at a lynching or understand the full depth and range of experience, as our only access to this past is through its representation in news accounts, descriptive narratives, or photographs, all of which provide only limited and ideologically-charged perspectives.

in the University of North Carolina *Daily Tar Heel* (April 20, 2006).

²We use the term "historical memory" to refer to memories that groups or individuals might have of events in the past that they themselves never experienced firsthand. These memories are, of course, always "social memories" in the sense that they are inevitably formed and transmitted through social structures and institutions. Social theorist Maurice Halbwachs was the first to coin the term "collective memory" to consider the ways in which private recollections were altered through the public framing of those reflections, a concept that historians have appropriated to reflect upon how people learn and understand the past. "Collective historical memory," however, suggests a uniform and consensual form of remembering, while the term "social historical memory" leaves open the possibility for variation, resistances, and counter-memories. See Halbwachs, Davis and Starn, Thelan, Burke.

We do know, however, that most Americans at the turn of the last century understood lynching as a form of white supremacist violence, perpetrated largely in the South, through which whites punished African American men accused of crimes against whites. Mass spectacle lynchings, in which crowds of white spectators watched as men were not only hanged but tortured and mutilated and sometimes riddled with bullets or burned alive, received the most public attention. But most lynchings were quieter, less sensational affairs, though still brutal and often public. As the work of a number of scholars has recently made evident, African American men were not the only victims of lynching, as mobs also attacked white men, Native Americans, Latinos, Chinese, and other immigrants, as well as African American women. Lynching was also not an entirely Southern phenomenon. Finally, we must not forget that lynching operated alongside other forms of racist violence and terror—personal assaults, rape, and murders—that were intended to subjugate African Americans and that, although less sensational than lynching, were equally traumatic to black families.³

Nevertheless, between lynching's peak years from 1880 to 1940, an estimated ninety percent of lynchings took place in former slave states, and about ninety percent of the lynchings there were committed by white mobs against African American men. In these years, white mobs lynched over three thousand African American men in the South. Historians largely agree that this phenomenal surge in mob violence, particularly in the 1890s, was a reaction to the racial and social upheaval that Emancipation and Reconstruction had wrought. Lynching was a form of terror that asserted white power and domination against the threat of black enfranchisement and economic autonomy. It also ensured and constructed white solidarity across class and geographic divisions at a time when Southern society was teeming with all sorts of class tension and social disruption. The vast growth of towns and cities and the rise of industry in this period brought whites and blacks into new kinds of labor arrangements and new forms of social mixing that upset traditional racial and social hierarchies. White Southerners felt their anxieties about these larger changes in terms of fears about crime and vice; that is, they

³For the lynching of groups other than African American men, see, for example, Carrigan and Webb, Jew, and Feimster. For studies of lynching outside the South, see Madison, Gonzales-Day, Pfeifer, and Barrow. On the impact of other forms of racist violence, see Williams.

imagined that depraved African American men, now freed from their traditional subservience, would literally attack them or, more specifically, their women. In short, amid this new social landscape, these Southerners believed that their moral and physical integrity was at stake.

The image of the black brute rapist seized the white Southern imagination and became the primary justification for lynching. It struck at the heart of the matter: the fear that black political or social equality would somehow diminish white male independence and authority, that black equality, above all, threatened white men's dominion over their own households and women. For most white Southerners, lynching was a just and necessary retribution against an abominable crime, a means to ensure not only white supremacy and white purity but white manliness. Even as white men perpetrated the most sadistic and horrific atrocities on the bodies of black men, they insisted upon their own manly civility and self-restraint over and against the violent savagery of their black victims.

This mythology continues to resonate in the present day. Many Americans, white Americans especially, might have only a hazy comprehension, if any, of lynching's history, but they know this script of black depravity and white innocence all too well. Even as some might attempt to rewrite it or recoil against it, it is rehearsed continually in the news and popular culture. Arguably, even more than lynching itself, this story acts as the "prism" through which present-day racial conflicts or incidents are understood. A case in point is the 1994 controversy over *Time's* darkened magazine cover of O. J. Simpson's mugshot photograph, which drew heavy criticism from journalistic watchdogs and civil rights activists alike for tapping into cultural scripts of black bestiality and criminality (Gaines).

The absence of any clear and focused historical memory of lynching in this country is not accidental; rather, it stems from concerted efforts at mid-century to erase lynching from public memory, largely as a response to the successes of the anti-lynching activists such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the NAACP. At the turn of the century, white mobs sought to make their violence as public and conspicuous as possible in order to imprint the fiction of white supremacy into popular consciousness. Even the most private lynchings were made spectacular through photographs, news accounts, and other kinds of narratives that celebrated and justified the violence. Anti-lynching activists, however,

were effectively able to use the spectacle of lynching to dismantle its power. By reprinting the most sensationalistic of lynching accounts and photographs in pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines, the NAACP and the black press exposed the horror of mobs' crimes to otherwise disbelieving and skeptical audiences. In doing so, they rewrote the dominant lynching narrative, so that lynching came to represent, above all, the savagery and depravity not of black men but of white mobs. They projected lynching as an anathema to American ideals, a blight upon Americans' sense of themselves as a just and democratic nation, particularly in contrast to European fascism and totalitarianism. Activists were enormously successful in inverting pro-lynching rhetoric in this way: by the 1930s, lynching had become the most conspicuous symbol of racial injustice in America. In direct response to this popular view that lynching was a depraved and backward practice, those who had previously defended and excused lynching began to change their attitudes and behaviors. White Southerners, in particular, came to see lynching as a shameful practice that damaged their sectional reputation and undermined their New South ambitions to integrate fully into American economic and political life, even as they still wholeheartedly defended white supremacy and Jim Crow segregation. Although lynchings continued sporadically in the 1930s, they were increasingly rare; by World War II, the public torture and killing of African Americans had become untenable and indefensible.

But as lynchings became less public, so too did their most striking manifestations and representations. Communities that had previously celebrated lynching, commemorating the events in local newspapers, in photographs, stories, and songs, began to retain a sort of embarrassed silence about it. People destroyed or hid their photographs and local newspapers stopped reporting on lynchings altogether. Although many black communities preserved their own memories of racial violence, stories of lynching were deliberately omitted from local histories, museums, and other official organs of social memory. For example, Waco, Texas, experienced one of the most sensational and gruesome lynchings when, in 1916, a mob tortured and burned Jesse Washington alive before a crowd of fifteen thousand people, an event that garnered much national attention and galvanized the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign. Yet no mention is made of this or any other lynchings that were committed in Waco in published local histories, and when

interviewers from Baylor University conducted oral histories of Waco residents in the 1980s, white informants remained evasive about the lynching. "We don't like to remember the horrible things that go on," said one resident (Carrigan 194).⁴

Despite this reluctance on the part of many white Americans to face the worst in themselves, lynching has recently become the object of renewed public attention. The reasons for this sudden impulse to confront and remember this history warrant consideration. Certainly the resurfacing of lynching photographs, collected in *Without Sanctuary*, has done much to reawaken public consciousness about lynching. As opposed to other historical artifacts or accounts, photographs have a particular ability to create historical memories because they appear to be unmediated and objective pieces of evidence: there is an undeniability about them. For those who might not be able to fathom that this kind of atrocity could happen in America, especially because the horror of lynching challenges assumptions about what is imaginable human behavior, the photograph provides visual corroboration; it renders the incomprehensible comprehensible (Barthes 28; Zelizer 10, 84-85; Taylor). As Congressman John Lewis writes in his foreword to *Without Sanctuary*, these images "make real the hideous crimes that were committed against humanity. . . . these photographs bear witness especially since many Americans will not (don't want to) believe that such atrocities happened in America" (7).

The phrase "bear witness" implies not a passive transference of historical knowledge, but an action, a focusing of critical attention and a recognition of social responsibility on the part of the viewer. To "bear witness" entails that "we" (a collective "we" that is hailed and created in the action of witnessing) act as spectators to this atrocity and attest to its happening. The photographs are not, of course, objective, and therefore, in some sense, distanced or impartial records of torture and murder; rather, they are taken from the point of view of the perpetrators, who gather around corpses with pride and pleasure. The violent exploitation of the event is thus bound up in the photograph itself. To look at these

⁴In *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, William Carrigan juxtaposes white Wacoans' silence about lynching with black Wacoans' very active memories of it (198-206). For the ways in which white communities have been able to control the public memory of lynching over the past century, and the alternative ways in which black communities have maintained memories of lynching in private discourse, see also Baker.

images is to recognize the objectifying gaze of the perpetrators and to position ourselves in relation to that gaze, even as we may shudder at the thought of it. Precisely because we are implicated in the images' violence in this way, we are denied any aesthetic or emotional distance; instead, we are impelled to engage actively with this past, creating a historical memory of lynching through the ways we convey and transfer this visual encounter with suffering and death into the future.

Much of this recent interest in lynching, particularly scholarly interest, pre-dates the resurfacing of these photographs, however. Surely both the relative distance of this past, as well as, conversely, its relevance to the present, have much to do with it. As Halbwachs argued, social memories are continually changing to meet the needs and concerns of the present, especially to legitimize or challenge the dominant social order (40). For many, lynching has particular bearing upon how we understand and resolve contemporary problems ranging from racial disparities in the death penalty to police brutality, to hate crimes, to the torture of prisoners. Lynching testifies to the potency of racial injustice in America, an injustice that, for many, endures into the present. On the other hand, many people recognize the resonance of lynching in the present precisely because the passage of time has offered a certain amount of clarity and perspective on the past.

What's more, despite the sense that many have that lynching continues to reverberate, even persist, in the present, the public focus on lynching today has much to do with the social advancements that African Americans have made in the past half-century. As historian Fitzhugh Brundage has pointed out, "because power and access to it are central to the creation and propagation of historical memory, changes in the relative power of groups invariably have far-reaching consequences for what of the past is remembered and how it is remembered." It was not until recently that African Americans have "commanded the political power to insist on a more inclusive historical memory" and, in this instance, to ask that white Americans recognize and memorialize, bear witness to, the suffering and injustice that black Americans endured at the hands of white mobs ("Introduction" 11).

Others, however, may find themselves able to confront this history because it is, after all, safely of the past. Some white viewers of *Without Sanctuary*, for instance, expressed a deep sense of horror at the photographs but at the same time evinced a sense of relief that so much

has changed. "As a white man viewing these pictures, I cannot fathom the depth of hate it would take individuals to commit these gruesome acts," attested one viewer on the *Without Sanctuary* website. "I was horrified," wrote another. "I certainly wasn't raised with this hate and can only hope that many others weren't as well." While viewers like these acknowledged that racism in America was unconscionable, they also may have believed that it was contained within the grainy, black and white images of the past. Since they could never imagine themselves engaging in such barbarism, they could be even comforted by their own shock and disgust.

Because the memory of lynching is so often deployed to make sense of and interpret racism and race relations in the present, it has become a highly fraught "usable past." There seems to be so much at stake in how lynching is remembered for this reason, which makes writing about or representing it particularly difficult. For instance, representing this past inevitably entails schematizing and structuring it into a discernible narrative or image. Indeed, social memories often depend on some sort of physical manifestation in order to be conveyed and sustained. That is, for the past to be grasped and remembered by large groups of people, it needs to be accessible and transferable in some sort of coherent and concrete form (Connerton 13-14; Zelizer 4-8). It is for this reason that there is often such an impulse to construct public memorials to the past and likewise why lynching photographs have done so much to activate historical memory about lynching. But doing so inevitably requires that all of the complexity and ambiguity of a past reality, which was never experienced by those in it as a single, coherent narrative, be rendered into one. This is a conundrum that all historians face, of course, but the problem is only compounded in instances of human atrocity, especially one that was as dispersed and extensive as lynching. Any efforts to memorialize this past not only face the resistance of those who would rather not "remember the horrible things that go on," but also unavoidably generate conflicts over whose story will be told, how it will be told, and who has the authority to do so.

Furthermore, because lynching was so often perpetrated through spectacle and sensationalism, any attempt to represent it risks re-engaging in that spectacle or exploiting the sensationalism once again. Those responsible for public exhibitions of lynching photographs, of course, were compelled to face this dilemma, as Bettina Carbonell

examines in this volume, but the problem exists in any attempt to narrate or convey the horror of lynching. Any public representation of lynching renders an individual's most excruciating moment—excruciating not only because he suffered physical pain, but because others watched and enjoyed that suffering publicly—public once again. It is a near impossible task to represent that moment without causing shock and sensation—that is, without sensationalizing it. But to represent or denote lynching without using direct imagery or description also risks diluting or sanitizing the atrocity and its effects (Apel).

In reviews of *Without Sanctuary*, a number of critics expressed concern not only that the various exhibits sensationalized, even aestheticized, this somber and terrible past, but that they held the black victim in permanent tableau as a desecrated other—that they, in fact, reified black victimhood. “How much does our moral revulsion change the fact that these photographs still, as their creators and original purchasers intended, present victimization as the defining characteristic of blackness?” asked historian Grace Hale in her review (990). Hale and others have contended that in placing focus on the victims of lynching, *Without Sanctuary* and other memorials to lynching, in effect, overlook the perpetrators and absolve them of responsibility. The victims, for instance, are named, while the perpetrators and spectators remain anonymous and their motivations and impulses remain unexamined; they are simply dismissed or evaded as monstrous or unimaginable (Hale 993; Austin 719-22). Yet, other scholars have concluded just the opposite, and have criticized those historians who have attended too much to the psychology and rationales of white mobs at the expense of lynching's victims. They call instead for more sustained attention to black agency and resistance and to the impact of lynching on black families, relationships, and communities. According to one scholar, “failure to do so constitutes an *academic lynching*” (Cha-Jua 593).⁵ This unfortunate charge speaks to the ways in which, when it comes to lynching, disagreements of representational or scholarly emphasis get waged over moral and political terrain.

The essays in this volume all grapple, in various ways, with precisely these kinds of conflicts about how lynching is to be remembered and represented, even as they themselves are inevitably directing public knowledge about what needs to be remembered. The first two essays

⁵For a similar, though more useful and effective critique, see Williams.

consider the ways in which the violence of lynching was, at its very making, representational and held tremendous symbolic value to white and black alike. Reprinted here, in revised form, is Donald G. Mathews's groundbreaking essay, "The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice" that posits lynching as a "blood sacrifice," a sacred rite of retributive justice and communal atonement. By placing the lynching within the context of evangelical theology and the symbolic universe of white supremacy, Mathews shows the ways in which the violence acted as a cleansing ritual, a means to expiate sin and impurity from the white community and thus to secure the purity and sanctity of that community. In doing so, he sheds new light on why mobs chose to engage in these elaborate and grotesque performances of torture, hanging, and burning.

Sandy Alexandre, for her part, examines the psychic impact of lynching photographs upon an African American sense of space and place in the American South. At a time when black property ownership was on the rise and white ownership was decreasing, lynching photographs posed scenes of literal and symbolic dispossession for whites fearful of black economic competition. Images of black bodies hanging from great heights provided whites with scenarios of black displacement and removal, and therein lay much of their effectiveness in rendering black bodies and Southern spaces as radically antithetical. The exposure and homelessness evoked in those images signaled the exclusion of African Americans from a white-defined sense of place, underscored their vulnerability in a space defined as hostile, and no doubt heightened the sense of urgency marking the departures of so many who joined the Great Migration North.

The next essays in this volume focus attention on the thorny implications when writers, activists, and artists have attempted to represent and bear witness to lynching's violence and its traumatic effects. Julie Armstrong's essay addresses the literary and artistic response to the horrific 1918 lynching of Mary Turner, a pregnant woman hanged, her fetus cut from her body, by a white mob in Georgia. Because Turner was female, her lynching brought considerable national attention to the atrocities white mobs were committing supposedly on behalf of white women: anti-lynching activists were able to use her story to challenge pro-lynching defenses effectively. But, because it disrupted "the conventional lynching narrative," artists and writers found it particularly difficult "to shape and make meaning" from her story, a

story that "lay beyond language, beyond sense." Armstrong focuses on the ways in which Fuller and Grimké's struggles to represent Turner's story, as black women themselves, became personally charged confrontations, which could only be reconciled through a certain kind of distanced sentimentality and "righteous discontent."

Christopher Metress examines the obstacles to representing lynching and racial injustice on television. The lynching of Till, murdered for supposedly wolf-whistling at a white woman in Money, Mississippi, in 1955, sent shock waves through the country because it happened long after the period in which lynchings were a regular occurrence in the South and at a time when black freedom struggles in the South were heating up. His death raised the specter of community-sanctioned lynchings, especially because an all-white jury acquitted his murderers and brought into stark relief for the nation the terror and injustices that blacks continued to endure in the South. Metress details Rod Serling's attempts to dramatize Till's lynching and its aftermath on the small screen in order to make that story known and understood by a wider public. Executives and sponsors, however, stymied his efforts at every turn, fearing that any faithful representation of racial oppression would alienate Southern audiences. Serling, in response, worked to tell the story of Till's murder in two different teleplays, with varying degrees of success, by "slanting it," that is, by using "oblique references and subplots" to obscure any direct references to Southern lynching and racial oppression. Metress's work not only adds to our understanding of the vexed but critical relationship between television and the civil rights movement in this period but also illuminates the larger institutional forces at work that can complicate and encumber attempts to represent and memorialize racial violence.

Similarly concerned with the difficulties of representing and memorializing Emmett Till's story is Lewis Nordan's 1993 novel *Wolf Whistle*, which Harriet Pollack analyzes. A contemporary of Emmett Till's and a native Mississippian, Nordan has acknowledged being haunted nearly his whole life by the murder, but it was not until the publication of *Wolf Whistle*, thirty-eight years after the fact, that Nordan was able to confront the story directly, and when he did he resorted to the vocabulary of comedy and magic realism to address a culture obsessed with boundaries, categories, hierarchies, and the racial status quo. Intent on telling the white version of Emmett Till's murder,

Nordan produced a novel that blurs historical fact and fictional account, merges damaged children separated by the color line, and vacillates between comedy and melancholia, and by doing so, exposes the vulnerability and uncertainty of white privilege and his own sense of complicity. The result, Pollack suggests, is a novel that resorts to postmodern interrogations of history and the past, the political uses of humor to unsettle our unexamined assumptions of self and community, and disturbing questions about the viability of genuine social transformation.

The next essays address the construction of public memories of lynching in our present time. Bettina Carbonell compares two very different exhibitions of James Allen's collection of lynching photographs that took place in New York in 2000: one, *Witness*, at the Roth Horowitz Gallery and the other, *Without Sanctuary*, at the New York Historical Society. In doing so, she interrogates the "ethics and aesthetics" involved when institutions, in exhibiting these images, attempt to make coherent and rational the disordered and chaotic nature of traumatic experience. In *Witness*, the photographs and postcards were simply hung on the gallery walls, where they were allowed to "speak for themselves," and viewers encountered them, bore witness to them, in all their "horrible excess," within the constricted space of the gallery. *Witness*, however, became the object of much public criticism for its decontextualized presentation of lynching, so when the New York Historical Society chose to exhibit the same images several months later, the curators took great care to provide explanatory context, placing the photographs within a narrative framework of lynching history and anti-lynching activism. Carbonell, though, reads these exhibitions against the grain, finding that *Without Sanctuary*, in its attempts to mediate and guide viewers' encounter with the images, ultimately "distanced and protected the viewer from the unadulterated, searing violence" of the images, allowing them "to regain their composure in the face of lawlessness." She finds more value in *Witness*, which gave the viewer "little recourse to the space beyond lynching" in its "lawless" and "largely unmitigated re-composition" of lynching trauma. Carbonell's analysis does much to shed light on the theoretical, ethical, and political stakes involved in any public memorialization and representation of atrocity.

Dora Apel addresses the ways in which efforts to remember and honor lynching victims through the construction of public memorials raises these same representational difficulties. She considers one of the most significant of these efforts, when a group of citizens in Duluth, Minnesota, successfully commissioned a Memorial Wall in remembrance of three African American men, who, in 1920, were hanged in the center of the city before a crowd of thousands. Apel traces the polyvalent elements that led to this memorial, which, in providing "historical closure" for the lynching and in fostering "public consensus" about the meaning of that history in a diverse and divided city, bore considerable cultural weight. In particular, the memorial had a redemptive purpose that was meant to create a public voice for African American citizens of the city and offer them a positive self-image, while also creating a narrative of events that white citizens could embrace. To do so, Apel contends, the memorial had to "cast the victims in heroic proportions," while eclipsing lynching's horrifying context of white supremacy and black subjugation. Because "the nature of black oppression, suffering and loss remains obscured in this monument," its image of lynching is a false one. "But what would be the alternative?" Apel asks. Apel uses this story to reflect upon the larger difficulties with which any memorialization of traumatic events must contend when it seeks to redeem atrocities that are by their very nature irredeemable.

Katherine Henninger, in turn, examines the continuing and highly troubling relevance of lynching narratives in globalized American culture by setting in dialogue the lynching photographs from *Without Sanctuary* with the photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq that first came to light in 2004. Like the photographs in the 2000 New York City exhibitions, the Abu Ghraib photographs put on display not just the victims of American violence but the perpetrators of that violence as well, who, like their predecessors in lynching photographs, look at the camera that captures their abuse with confidence and sly complicity, as though to underscore their bond with those who survey the photographs. If there is a difference, Henninger argues, between the images of atrocity and the project of "nation-building," both at home and abroad, it remains, chillingly enough, "in the eye of the beholder"—as it did for those early white audiences of lynching photographs and postcards who turned to representations of racial violence to define and bolster their own sense of whiteness and community.

Edwin Arnold examines the conflicting narratives and debates over the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose in Newnan, Georgia, that continue to resonate throughout our culture today. It was a lynching, Arnold notes, that "provided a narrative of race madness" at a time of mounting xenophobia, racism, and violence. Pronounced the "crime of the century" by no less a figure than journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Burnett, the lynching quickly generated conflicting and contradictory narratives by local white newspapers, an investigator hired by Chicago black activists, and a white New York newspaper editor. Those contradictions and debates continue to live on in local memories, academic scholarship, and the efforts of contemporary civic groups to bring a once-forgotten atrocity back into public memory.

This special issue of *Mississippi Quarterly* on lynching and representation in American culture concludes with an excerpt from novelist Anthony Grooms's work-in-progress focusing on the chaotic emotional interior of a white Georgia man who remembers participating in a spectacle lynching in his youth but who cannot account for that participation or for the manifold contradictions in his life that render his sense of masculinity vulnerable. The excerpt offers a disturbing glimpse into the interior life of a man who takes white privilege in Jim Crow Georgia for granted but who cannot integrate that sense of privilege with his attraction to blackness or with his own intensely felt vulnerability. It is a portrait, ultimately, of the ties that bind perpetrators of racial violence to the victims whose deaths were required to bolster both whiteness and manliness in men who felt certain of neither.

Grooms's portrait of a white man who recalls a lynching almost as an afterthought presents a somber commentary on the difficulties we continue to experience in confronting those memories and assimilating them into our cultural and personal narratives. If it is disturbing to ponder the hesitations and silences marking Twain's early attempt to take stock of the deeply embedded presence of racial violence in American culture, it is equally dismaying to contemplate contemporary appropriations and reiterations of lynching's language and imagery in venues as far-ranging as schoolyards and television talk shows, just as it is disheartening to acknowledge how easily rites of bonding and othering pioneered by turn-of-the-twentieth-century lynchings can be set in motion within the halls of an Iraqi prison. The "afterlife" of lynching—in Bettina Carbonell's vivid phrasing—suggests that the

cultural wounds left by those late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rites of violence have yet to be healed and may very well continue to resist our best efforts to incorporate them into our narratives of the past and render them finally comprehensible.

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