



Gender and Lynching

The Politics of Memory

Edited by
Evelyn M. Simien

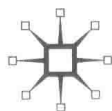


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Evelyn M. Simien

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GENDER AND LYNCHING

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For my son, Roman Marcellus
I love you very much, unconditionally.

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Introduction

Evelyn M. Simien

*Mister, you ought to've heard the nigger wench howl!*¹

The conventional approach to (or master narrative of) American civil rights history has focused almost exclusively on Black male victimhood during the era of lynching, encompassing nearly five decades from 1880–1930. Rather than broaden and deepen our understanding of racial discrimination, however, such an approach often simplifies and distorts the more complex and devastating history of lynching in the United States.² Indeed, both academic and popular discussions of lynching are dominated by a static, fixed understanding of deprivation that is principally racially based. Far less common is an association of the era with a richer, more nuanced understanding of deprivation that is critical of hierarchal relationships determined by interlocking systems of oppression—namely, racism and sexism.

Although the ritual of lynching claimed many lives, *Gender and Lynching* is not so much about Black female victimhood as it is about reclaiming the life stories of African American women via public remembrance, oral history, and community narratives. This book examines the musical, theatrical, literary, photographic, and artistic representations of women and lynching that involved either black-white audiences or coalitions between black and white women against lynching. This volume also recognizes the efforts of individual African American women as well as those of institutional actors such as the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to properly document and spotlight lynching. In doing so, the essays that follow reveal the unique ways in which African American women's victimization at the hands of angry mobs and their participation in anti-lynching campaigns alter our popular understanding of lynching in the United States.

Rather than sidestep or avoid some of the most vexing or controversial issues inherent in civil rights history, this introduction will explore how scholars of lynching have typically ignored the ways in which African American women experienced racial-sexual violence in the South, where at least 150 women were lynched between 1880 and 1965. In fact, the overwhelming majority of these cases involving African American female victims—that is, 130 in total—occurred before 1930.³ For the most part, historians who write about lynching address the practice as it occurred during the post-Reconstruction era and when it was geographically limited to the South: the primary targets were African American men, and the punishment inflicted resulted in death to the victims. It is therefore essential that we re-conceptualize such extralegal violence as both gendered and racialized for the purpose of writing a corrective history that accounts for ways in which African American women have been erased from the extant literature on lynching. To date, African American women have suffered racial-sexual violence without explosively emerging as the most gripping examples of hate crimes, even as stories of extraordinarily heinous offenses against African American men—from Emmett Till to James Byrd, Jr.—have left an indelible mark on civil rights history.

Public memory, created by newspaper accounts and oral testimony, has remembered lynch victims who were African American and female in specific ways, featuring both racial and sexual terms. Described as “fiends,” “assassins,” “prostitutes,” and “negress brutes,” African American women lived under the shadow of assumption that, by virtue of their race, they were so morally deprived and violent that they seemed as dangerous as their male counterparts. Their rape and torture were ideologically sanctioned to enforce white supremacy. Mary Turner was eight months pregnant when a mob of several hundred men and women murdered her in Valdosta, Georgia. The Associated Press reported that she had made “unwise remarks” and “flew into a rage” about the lynching of her husband, Hayes, insisting that she would press charges against the men responsible. Her death in May of 1918 prompted a widespread, multifaceted response that continues to evolve today. Laura Nelson confessed to shooting a sheriff to protect her son, L.W. The officer was searching her cabin for stolen goods as part of a meat pilfering investigation. Members of a mob seized Laura along with her son, and both were lynched in Okemah, Oklahoma, in May of 1911—however, not before Laura had been raped by several men. Their bodies were hung from a bridge for hundreds to view.⁴ To the extent that Turner and Nelson are symbolically

represented among other masculine narratives of lynching, it is as tragic characters or “collateral victims” whose supportive efforts were aimed at defending the men in their lives. Such deaths, however, were not incidental. They were essential to maintain white supremacy, as a form of punishment for defying the social order.

Though women represent a minority of lynching victims, their stories challenge previous interpretations and dominant conceptualizations of lynching as justified protection for white women from Black male rapists. If we are to fully understand lynching and the motives behind it, scholars must begin to include analyses of African American women who were robbed of dignity, respect, and bodily integrity by a weapon of terror used to maintain a caste system that assigned inferior roles to African American men and women alike. By including women centrally within the historical narrative of lynching, we not only avoid reinforcing the rape/lynch myth (i.e., the emasculated Black man as the only visible victim) but, in doing so, also reveal a more complete understanding of this devastating social practice.

The term “lynching” evokes an image derived from a collective memory which African American men and women both share, but to which only African American men claim entitlement—i.e., a charred male figure swinging from a tree or telegraph pole amidst an angry mob. Such an image has overshadowed the equally representative experience of African American women who were similarly tortured and mutilated, as well as raped and killed, by angry mobs. Moreover, this highly stylized, one-dimensional form of representation also fails to capture contemporary forms of lynching, such as the Jena Six episode and the Megan Williams case discussed below, which critically connect the past with the present and contextualize the ongoing legacy of lynching.

In August 2006, Kenneth Purvis—an African American high school student in Jena, Louisiana—asked his principal whether Black students could sit beneath a tree that most believed was reserved for whites only at the local high school in Jena.⁵ In this case, the separation of the two races was widely accepted by the majority of teachers, parents, school administrators, and the student body. The tree marked the separation and re-inscribed the lack of social equality between the two races. Thus, it is significant that white students hung nooses from the tree on the very next morning after their African American classmates—Kenneth Purvis and his cousin Bryant Purvis—sat under the tree and violated norms of social etiquette that directly invoked Jim Crow. Three nooses were

found hanging from the tree's branches, draped in school colors.⁶ A flagrant act, it was dismissed by the local superintendent and majority white school board, which overturned the principal's original decision to expel the culprits involved and, instead, imposed suspensions on the grounds that the tree display was an innocent, youthful prank. The fact remains, however, that the noose invokes a torrid history of lynching in the United States.

Between the late 1800s and early 1900s, the reported incidents of lynching rose sharply and occurred most frequently in the southern states—namely, Georgia and Mississippi.⁷ The term “lynching” has been used to denote hanging and other types of executions carried out with inhumane cruelty by self-appointed mobs to assert the supremacy of white masculinity for a presumed offense. Such offenses included, but were not limited to, arson and poisoning, as well as burglary and self-defense.⁸ Allegations of rape involving Black male offenders and white female victims resulted in cruel and unusual punishment—specifically, castration—and figure most prominently in narrow discussions of lynching that invoke the sole image of African American men as primary targets.

The myth of the Black male rapist functioned as a means of social control as it served to regulate the behaviors of African American men and white women in relationship to each other. African American men lived under the shadow of assumption that, by virtue of their race, they were so bestial and immoral that lynching was ideologically sanctioned to enforce white supremacy. In light of the rape myth, lynching has been interpreted as a sexually perverse public performance of hegemonic masculinity spawned by both repulsion and desire between men on account of racist stereotypes that evoke envy on the part of white men for the supposed sexual potency and virile strength of Black men.⁹

As African American men had been denied the rights of manhood and the privileges of patriarchy, the violent act of lynching made it possible for white men to exhibit exaggerated masculinity before a live audience that exalted them for serving as guardians of white womanhood.¹⁰ Scholars have considered such a ritualistic practice of public emasculation and sadistic torture an extralegal means to affirm the supremacy of white masculinity and to reinforce the African American male's inferior status in the social, economic, and political structure of the United States. Lynching differed from ordinary murder or assault. The individual victim was denied due process and equal protection under law, as evidenced by mob coercion of judicial proceedings, special doctrinal rules, and the language of court opinions.¹¹

Like execution by guillotine, lynching was celebrated as a spectacular event and drew large crowds of people who tortured, burned alive, and dismembered their victims. Participants and onlookers left the scene with grisly souvenirs, mostly body parts, including genitalia. People fought each other for bits of burnt flesh, teeth, nails, and hair.¹² Photographs were taken, and postcards were mailed to friends and family. Mothers held their babies in tow, standing next to the corpse of a dead body and smiling for a photo opportunity.¹³ Such a gruesome spectacle gripped the imagination and enjoyed widespread public approval with extensive media coverage in local and national newspapers.

Lynching thereby constituted a form of domestic terrorism that inflicted individual harm upon the African American male and collective injury upon an entire race of people simultaneously, with the purpose of instilling fear. It served to give dramatic warning, emphasizing the fact that the iron clad system of white supremacy was not to be challenged by word, deed, or even thought.¹⁴ Lynching could therefore be understood as the ritualistic reenactment of a historically scripted and rehearsed hierarchy that oppressed the Black male victim and empowered the white assailant in the most masculine terms, using honor and chivalry as well as white female frailty as a defense for mob violence. Yet such an explanation or interpretation of lynching effectively conceals the fact that not all victims were African American men, and rape was not the leading motive. African American men, women, and children were lynched for a range of alleged crimes and social infractions—from petty theft to labor disputes over debt, credit or wages, as well as arson and murder. Thus, the designation of African American women as symbolic representatives of lynching challenges often taken-for-granted assumptions about lynching and its victims.

Today, the noose has come to symbolize an era of terror when lynching was used as a tool of oppression to maintain white supremacy. The act of hanging nooses from a tree presumably reserved for white students in Jena, Louisiana, served a similar purpose: it gave dramatic warning to African American students like Kenneth Purvis and his cousin, Bryant Purvis, who dared to resist marginalization in public spaces. The case of the Jena Six spotlights the dynamic interplay between race, crime, and punishment in the United States, invoking three salient themes: an earlier era of Jim Crow, when separate but equal accommodations were legally sanctioned by the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision; the legacy of lynching, when African American men, in particular, were punished excessively for a presumed offense without due process of the law;

and racial disparities in the US criminal justice system, whereby judges and juries imposed harsher sentences upon African American men who stood trial for crimes committed against white victims than they did upon whites.

Mychal Bell, one of the African American students involved in the Jena Six case, was initially arrested and charged with attempted second-degree murder (though this charge was later reduced to aggravated battery and conspiracy). Tried as an adult, Bell was age 16 at the time of the assault, when he and other members of the Jena Six reportedly beat their white classmate, Justin Barker, on school grounds. Accused of ambushing Barker and knocking him unconscious, Bell was convicted by an all-white jury and faced up to 22 years in prison.¹⁵ Such a charge as aggravated battery requires the use of a dangerous weapon, and District Attorney Walters argued that the shoes Bell wore and used to kick his victim (Barker) were deadly weapons. Mychal Bell's African American public defender, Blane Williams, urged him to accept a plea bargain versus going to trial. Unlike civil rights attorneys of the past—namely, Thurgood Marshall and Robert Carter—Williams was not hailed as a hero by the African American community as he failed to challenge the composition of the all-white jury pool and rested the defense's case without calling upon any witnesses or offering counter evidence.¹⁶ Fortunately, Louisiana's Third Circuit Court of Appeals overturned Bell's battery conviction as the minor had been tried as an adult.

Had District Attorney Walters had his way, however, Bell would have surely been made an example of, taught a lesson, and punished excessively for a presumed offense—i.e., a crime committed against his white classmate. In fact, Walters forewarned Bell and his accomplices of the unusually harsh punishment that awaited them upon conviction and following criminal sentencing. He is quoted as having stated that “I can be your best friend or your worst enemy . . . I can take away your lives with a stroke of my pen” in the context of a public forum on school grounds.¹⁷ Such a powerful statement served to remind the African American community in general, and African American men, in particular, of their disparate treatment in the American criminal justice system. At once, the privileges and immunities of putative first-class citizenship were trumped by the penalties and restrictions of second-class citizenship in Jena, Louisiana.

Yet, the most disappointing feature of the Jena Six case was neither the mean-spirited attacks of the local District Attorney, J. Reed Walters, nor the racial bias evident in the criminal sentencing of Mychal Bell.