

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a piece of aged, yellowed paper with visible creases and texture. The paper is partially covered by dark, dense foliage and vines, particularly on the left and bottom edges. The overall tone is somber and historical.

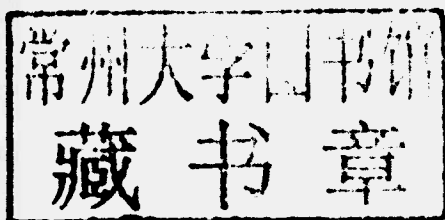
Mary Turner

and the Memory of Lynching

JULIE BUCKNER ARMSTRONG

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For it is better to speak

remembering

we were never meant to survive

Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival"

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No writer ever makes a book alone. Even though sometimes one has to be very selfish to bring a project to completion, or one feels very lonely when working on such a difficult subject as lynching, the writer's network of support extends quite far.

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Introduction

In May 1918 a week of mob violence following a white farmer's murder spread over two Georgia counties, Brooks and Lowndes, and claimed at least eleven African American lives. One of the victims, Mary Turner, was eight months pregnant. After learning that Turner planned to press charges against mob members for lynching her husband, Hayes, the men captured her from the Quitman home where she was hiding and took her to a bridge overlooking the Little River. There a crowd of several hundred watched the mob hang her upside down, shoot her, set her on fire, remove her fetus, and stomp the unborn child into the ground.

Surprisingly, reactions to the incident varied. The *Savannah Morning News* reported events matter-of-factly: "the people in their indignant mood took exception to her remarks as well as her attitude and took her to the river where she was hanged." A letter to the *Augusta Chronicle* cried out, "Where are the grand juries? Where are the petit juries? Where are the sheriffs? Where is our public opinion? Is it dead? . . . God in heaven have mercy upon us!"¹ A month after the lynchings the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sent its new assistant secretary, Walter White, to investigate. White submitted a copy

of his report with a list of mob members' names to Georgia's governor, Hugh M. Dorsey. For the rest of the year, the NAACP struggled to have the men prosecuted. Dorsey did not cooperate, and attempts at federal intervention also failed. Iowa Senator William S. Kenyon showed some interest in forming an investigative subcommittee, but the case could not proceed without eyewitness cooperation. No one was willing to testify. Mob members and their supporters had cowed an already traumatized local community into a silence that would remain a palpable tension for almost ninety years.²

The story might have been forgotten had Walter White not also published a version of his report in the NAACP's magazine, the *Crisis*, in September 1918. Before White, no one had reported publicly that Mary Turner was pregnant. His article, "The Work of a Mob," initiated the process of constructing this case as a key event in African American cultural memory. The Anti-Lynching Crusaders, an NAACP affiliate, used Turner's story as a centerpiece of their fundraising efforts to support the 1922 Dyer Bill, which tried unsuccessfully to make lynching a federal crime. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) and the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) also cited Turner's story in their antilynching pamphlets. Artists and writers responded as well, most of them drawing upon White's *Crisis* account. Meta Warrick Fuller sculpted *In Memory of Mary Turner: A Silent Protest against Mob Violence* (1919). Angelina Weld Grimké published the short story "Goldie" (1920). Carrie Williams Clifford included a poem, "Little Mother," in her collection *The Widening Light* (1922). The year 1923 saw publication of two texts that remain well known today: Anne Spencer's poem "White Things" and the "Kabnis" section of Jean Toomer's modernist classic, *Cane*. After this early peak, Turner faded from the spotlight as other lynching stories captured national attention. Her memory never completely disappeared, however. More recently, artist Frieda High Tesfagiorgis painted *Hidden Memories* (1985), and writer Honorée Fanonne Jeffers published a short story, "If You Get There Before I Do" (2005), as well as a poem, "dirty south moon" (2007), all of which reference Turner. Tributes appear regularly via Web sites, Internet discussion groups, and online videos. The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, includes a striking commemoration of Hayes and Mary Turner among its many historical figures. Outside specific responses, the incident began entering the realm of metaphor and

urban legend the moment it happened. Its imagery informs scenes of violence against black women and communities in Oscar Micheaux's film *Within Our Gates* (1919), selected notebook sketches from Kara Walker's *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* (1997), and annual reenactments of the 1946 lynchings at the Moore's Ford Bridge near Monroe, Georgia. Back in Brooks and Lowndes counties, a limited, mostly private oral history always existed, but local residents rarely acknowledged the story publicly until a group called the Mary Turner Project commemorated the lynchings in 2009 and put up an official historical marker in 2010.

Both the silences and the responses make this a compelling tale, one that encapsulates the complex, contradictory ways people remember and represent racial violence in America. From the moment that she dared to mention justice for her husband's death, Turner disrupted traditional lynching narratives. Her act of talking back, and the price that she paid for it, continue to resonate today. Turner is one of countless black women whose stories have received insufficient attention in a history of racial violence that for too long has been triangulated between white men, black men, and white women. As this case shows, black women played multiple roles: as victims, as loved ones left behind, and as those who fought back using grassroots, institutional, and artistic forms of resistance. Turner's story illustrates what can – and cannot – be said about lynching. The incident defies conventional ways of portraying mob violence, posing aesthetic and sometimes personal challenges for artists and writers. In the creative responses, form and language fracture, and images of silence and voice, blindness and sight prevail – demonstrating how a pregnant black woman killed for speaking out pushes the boundaries of artistic expression. Local silence about the 1918 lynchings also reveals as much as it conceals. Despite its long absence from official public memory, the legacy of racial violence in southern Georgia remains a tangible presence – one that seems obvious to many African Americans, yet one to which many whites seem oblivious. Finally, the diverse range of material about the 1918 incident, alongside the local silences, offers a valuable, yet underutilized, resource for the study of lynching. The first wave of activists, artists, and writers who memorialized Turner's death did so at a key moment: lynching violence reached a new high after World War I, but the antilynching effort gained new momentum throughout the 1920s. These early responses show the successes

and failures of troops on the ground level of what James Weldon Johnson called the battle to save “black America’s body and white America’s soul.”³ More contemporary responses mark another important shift in the way people remember and talk about lynching, with the growing movement toward racial reconciliation. As individuals, communities, and the nation consider the necessity of confronting, seeking justice for, and healing past wounds of racial violence, stories like Turner’s show how difficult that process can be.

An Education in Race

I know that difficulty firsthand. I learned about the 1918 incident while teaching at Valdosta State University (VSU) in Lowndes County. While preparing to attend a 1998 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Institute on Teaching the Civil Rights Movement, I read about Mary Turner in Leon Litwack’s history of Jim Crow brutality, *Trouble in Mind*.⁴ Lynching history was not part of my formal education, and being white, I had not sought to learn it on my own. Litwack’s book compelled me to know more. One rarely hears stories about female mob victims or women killed so brutally for speaking out, and my academic interests in women’s studies and civil rights (I’m a native of Birmingham, Alabama) propelled me toward such buried histories of oppression and resistance. This one also happened close to my new home, twenty-two miles to be exact. My husband, Tom, and I had recently moved to the area from the Northeast (a lucky-to-be-employed academic couple in a tight job market), and we were eager to learn all we could about local history, culture, and environment. “No, not where the onions come from,” we kept telling friends and family. “That’s Vidalia.” Valdosta intrigued us, with its water tower proudly proclaiming, “Southern Charm . . . Not Gone with the Wind.” Both the place and the people are indeed charming. The VSU campus is architecturally consistent in a neo-Spanish mission style, with a wide sabal palm-lined avenue leading to its stucco and barrel tile-roofed main building, West Hall, where we both taught in the English Department. We found a renovated 1920s bungalow, a pale yellow house surrounded by pink azaleas, two blocks east of campus, a quaint neighborhood of long-leaf pine, magnolia, and pecan. I read Litwack’s book and others for the institute while sitting on the porch swing

and drinking sweet iced tea. The art teacher who lived around the corner gave a wave and a “howdy neighbor” every time he passed by. Tom and I have never had people care as much about our social and spiritual lives as the folks in Valdosta. Colleagues made sure that we had potlucks, happy hours, and dinner parties to attend each weekend, and everyone from VSU staff to neighbors to bank clerks asked if we had found a church home.

But as a native southerner, I remained skeptical. Experience has taught me the thin line between big smiles and bared teeth. Tom and I tried to dismiss what disconcerted us: the Confederate “Southern Cross” on the Georgia flag, reports from students of segregated dormitories and high-school proms, far too many subdivisions named “Plantation,” and people who referred to our block (near a black neighborhood and hotels that lodged migrant workers) as “dangerous” and “the other side of the tracks.” Litwack’s book confirmed my worst suspicions and a gothic sensibility weaned on William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. Here was the quintessential small southern town with the dirty little secret. Because I perceived myself to be insulated from that secret – as an outsider, a white person, and as a reader who saw the place as “other,” a literary cliché – I thought that doing some basic research would be easy. I had dipped into Litwack’s nightmarish historical chronicle enough to satisfy a morbid curiosity, then backed away when the book became distasteful or threatened my emotional detachment. I assumed that I could do the same with Mary Turner’s story. Naively, then, upon my return from the NEH institute, I set out to discover what happened in May 1918.

My first stop was the VSU library, where the helpful archivist turned up nothing but the fact that the *Valdosta Times* (now the *Valdosta Daily Times*) for that summer, and that summer only, was destroyed in a fire. She did not know the details. The Lowndes County Historical Museum claimed at the time to have no information on local lynchings. The director said that to his knowledge the area never had one. Shortly afterward, a VSU colleague told me that the museum had a small cache of lynching photographs. A couple of years later, a more accommodating director showed me the photos. They are too grainy to make out any details and appear to be much earlier than 1918. Their origins are unclear. The same director put me in touch with a community historian who rattled off details about every event in the county’s past except for this one, which he claimed never to have heard of. The most I could coax from

him were directions to a rumored “hanging tree” outside of town, where his father told him that “bizarre things” had happened, but he could not elaborate.

I hit the same brick wall at the Brooks County Historical Museum. Located in Quitman (the county seat and another charming small southern town), the museum sits across from a white Greek Revival courthouse built, a brochure told me, during the “War Between the States.” I marched through the museum’s doors, met the welcoming white-haired volunteer, and declared, “I’m here to find information about the pregnant woman who was lynched back in 1918.” For a few seconds we stood in silence, matching each other southern-lady smile for southern-lady smile. The blue of her irises turned a deep gray as she replied that such a thing seemed impossible to imagine. She told me that the museum did not have the kind of information that I sought, and she walked me through their collection of maps, pictures of historic homes, quilts from yesteryear, and other celebratory memorabilia. Pausing in front of some faded photographs of town fathers, she told me that no lynchings had ever happened in Brooks County. One of her ancestors had been sheriff in 1918, she said, and he was a kind man who always treated blacks fairly. I was certain that she was hiding something: what her blue-to-gray eyes revealed was the moment of rupture between my question and everything she grew up believing about Brooks County, Georgia.

Her approach to historical memory was unfamiliar, almost unrecognizable to me, a child of Birmingham. During the 1960s our racial sin made the nightly news, and we’ve been forced to wrestle with it openly ever since. I’m used to negotiating complete strangers’ misguided statements, usually made in fake southern accents, about my hometown and its history. It’s the Quentin Compson effect, named from the questions Shreve asked his roommate in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*: “What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all.”⁵ In this case, quite the opposite of Faulkner’s novel, everyone refused to “Tell about the South.” Even the local technology maintained a stony silence about the past: the microfilm machine at the Brooks County Public Library broke down when I tried to spool through copies of the 1918 *Quitman Free Press*. In fact, the initial research on this project made me feel like a conspiracy theorist. No book, no person, no record of official local history that I could find would yield information about the incident that Litwack described in *Trouble in Mind*. I began to