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A Lynching in North Carolina

On the day that I find out one of my family members was lynched by 150 white men, one thought is uppermost in my mind: To the man who took the time to count the perpetrators, I would first like to say thank you for being so thorough, and I hope that at some point in the years after the lynching you thought about other things you might have done in those long moments before two black men were hanged from a tree before your eyes.

One of my ancestors was lynched by members of the Ku Klux Klan in 1881. This is the lynching I know about because of a series of news articles detailing the “facts.” I try not to think about the possible others I know nothing about at all. I know the history of racial violence in America, and lynch law is an important part of that history, so why was I so galvanized by news of my family being touched intimately by this very same history? Perhaps it was because of my own recent, twenty-first century involvement with Klan semiotics. There was the incident the previous spring semester when, while teaching in a college classroom in the South, I’d been forced to request security excuse a student from the room for exhibiting the Confederate flag during class after I’d asked and he’d refused to put it away. As he was walked out of the classroom and down the hall, he continued to explain that he was not a racist. I tried not to hear

security responding, “We know, we know,” convincing myself that they were just trying to talk him down and that I should not read it as their weighing in with an opinion on the issue. Then there was also the incident that had taken place the previous summer when I’d been invited to attend a tour of a Confederate cemetery on another college campus. After steeling myself against the mental image of a crusty old Confederate soldier reaching through the cemetery dirt to grab my black ankle as I sashayed past his headstone, I politely declined. Why would anyone imagine that a black woman would want to walk among the tombstones of people who had fought to keep her ancestors enslaved?

Many people don’t realize that the Ku Klux Klan was established by ex-Confederate soldiers who needed to change their tactics for subjugating blacks after the Civil War did not result in secession from the Union. These disgruntled rebel soldiers decided to continue to wage their own war beneath a hood and under the banner of the Confederate flag. When I see a Confederate flag today, that’s the heritage that I realize is being claimed and celebrated. So, after I received the news about my ancestor, it was not like looking back through the annals of history, it was more like looking across at a parallel history that continues to unfold upon the foundation of those Confederate stars and bars.

I have my high school locker neighbor to thank for indirectly educating me about the basics of historical lynchings. One Halloween he decided to dress as a KKK clansman and wore a white hood and robe with a knotted rope slung over his shoulder to our small Massachusetts high school. If not for seeing him that day, a walking synecdoche for black death, I might have believed lynching a historical anomaly. At home I was taught that *not all white people will want to be friends with you*. This was my parents’ way of teaching black self-preservation in the racially hostile environment of our small New England town. They knew we would face racism,

but they did not want to call it out by name unless we had experienced it already. Instead, they hid their message in a coded phrase about friendship. Even though I knew my locker mate might not be my friend, he smiled at me everyday and said hello. Then one day he came to school dressed as a clansman while smiling and saying hello. Still, it was years before I was able to translate the phrase *not all white people will want to be friends with you* into you must be careful because a smile can be a prelude to death as easily as an expression of joy. Yes, as a young black girl living in America, I was taught to look for oppression or suppressed violence behind a smile. Sometimes I would look so hard my fellow white classmates would accuse me of staring.

What I noticed initially as I read the newspaper articles detailing the North Carolina lynching deaths of my ancestor Estes Hairston and his companion, Ed Lindsey, is how the typeset words are a model of Jim Crow-era rhetoric. The stock phrase "*both [men] charged with rape,*" is a well-worn refrain. This was the accusation frequently employed to justify the taking of a black life because of the explosive image it raised in the white male imagination: a cringing and weeping white woman beneath the hands and body of a depraved black man. Too often, during my scouring of historical records, I encountered this charge leveled against black men because it was a convenient lie that justified any level of violence perpetrated on the black body. So much so that based on the degree of violence against black people in post-Reconstruction America, a black man was more likely to soil his pants at the sight of white woman than be aroused by her. Which was, of course, the whole point of lynching; it was meant to terrorize and intimidate black men who sought to establish themselves and exert their newly-minted Constitutional civil rights after the Civil War. The article also pointed out the act of robbery: "*were taken from the jail and hanged about four miles from that place.*" In small rural towns, everything is close by--the jailhouse and the nearest lynch tree. Black bodies were stolen and

brought to America for servitude, and centuries later emancipation still did not keep them from being stolen from the jailhouse and killed by an angry mob. Finally, the witnesses described, so large in number, were not present to quietly denounce the crime: “*About one hundred and fifty [white] men were engaged in the transaction.*” The jeering crowd was another hallmark of lynch law. There was safety in numbers. When men, women, and children gathered for a lynching, they could feel comforted by the fact that their neighbors believed as they did that the violence they would all soon witness was justified. As an aside, the reporter absolves the criminals of the crime: “*we regret that this mode has to be resorted to in order to avenge wrong.*” This final newspaper statement, the feigned regret, serves to humanize the killers, but certainly not their victims.

Estes and Ed were held for seven months before being abducted from prison. The timeframe alone was meant to protect and preserve their lives for a fair trial that never took place. The events described and the catalyst for them could easily have sprung from African American journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s *The Red Record*, her important treatise on lynch history published in 1895. The murder of the two black men took place in 1881, a time period prior to the turn-of-the century which was considered the nadir of African American postbellum race struggle. The Southern violence of these years led to the Great Migration of blacks fleeing the racial violence of the South for the relative safety of the North.

It was during the “Without Sanctuary” exhibit in New York City in the 1990s that I first learned about the postcards that were generated to commemorate the practice of lynching. I remember waiting in line at the New York Historical Society along with a crush of other people of all races to view the historical memorabilia. The space was small, so those in attendance shuffled along as politely as they could in order to have a few minutes to glimpse the horrific

images of dead and distorted black bodies. A keyword search of the title will still bring up an online version of images from the exhibit. The muted, sepia tones of early photography remain powerful. The states the cards hailed from are numerous and include California, Texas, Georgia, Oklahoma, Kansas, Alabama, Minnesota, Indiana, Montana, Kentucky, Nebraska, Illinois, Tennessee, Florida, West Virginia, Ohio, Missouri, and Louisiana. The years covered are lengthy, ranging from 1878-1960.

For me, these photographs represented a different kind of souvenir. Previously, I had only heard of the hair, fingers, toes, ears, and genitalia of hanged black men being squirreled away as keepsakes after lynchings. These postcards were something new. As I moved through the exhibit, I thought about the many cities I had traveled to on holidays, purchasing postcards of local sites to send to friends and family to share my joyful experiences and give them insight into my embrasure of a world larger than myself. Now, standing before yellowed postcards of tortured black men, I could not wrap my mind around the level of depravity necessary for someone to gloat over a disfigured body and share that as an endearing moment in their life. Simultaneously, the thought struck me that a person could only do this if they thought of blacks as inhuman and something only to be prized in death. In these photographs, the black body became a staged hunting trophy with the great white hunters after the kill.

It is one of the ironies of history that the perpetrators of violence are never able to avoid gloating over what they consider their would-be victories. For example, often after watching French filmmaker Alain Resnais's Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog* in class, my students will ask where all of this archival film footage of the Holocaust came from. I will then explain that, along with the newsreels taken by Allied forces during the liberation of the camps, the Nazis kept very careful records. They indicted themselves, and these indictments were of course

corroborated by living witnesses. Similarly, the trophy photographs commemorating fetishistic lynch murders became another record of the diabolic public executions of black men.

How does the history of lynching affect black people? I cannot speak for all black people everywhere, but the effects are often unpredictable. James Byrd was lynched in Jasper, Texas in 1998. He was offered a ride by three white men on that day, and instead of taking him to where he wanted to go, they chained him to the back of their pickup truck and dragged his body until he was decapitated. It is difficult to describe feral hate to people who have not experienced it. You see, James Byrd knew at least one of his killers. I was haunted by the smile that he was probably offered with that ride; the gleaming white teeth and parted lips a well-disguised rictus of venom. As I read about his death, I relived each moment in my imagination. The brutal beating that turned him into a compliant body. The heavy rattle of chains that brought him back to consciousness as he realized what was going to happen. The revving of the truck's engine followed by the whoop of rebel yells. The first jerk of pain when the chains tightened and his body scraped the road as the truck accelerated and spewed a blast of exhaust into his face. I relived each moment so that he did not have to die alone. Empathy made me a witness to the loss of a human being, not the monster his murderers had made him out to be in their own skewed imaginations.

One of my first published short stories was about a girl who engaged in regular conversations with a tree to partake of its wisdom. The tree's name was Tall Tales. As a kid, I remember hugging trees and imagining I could make my arms long enough to stretch across the width of a tree trunk. I was fascinated by maples, oaks, birches, and evergreens. I can still feel the corrugated bark under my fingertips as I hid behind trees playing hide-and-seek with

neighborhood children in my youth. I can even recall the resin-scented sap that would ooze from pine trees and was too thick to dislodge with a stick. I can only imagine how far removed from this consideration of trees were the members of lynch mobs bent on finding low, sturdy branches to defile the bodies of black men.

When I first read Harlem Renaissance writer Countee Cullen's *The Black Christ*, a book-length poem about lynching, I immediately understood the power of serving as a witness for the dead and the necessary commitment to social justice. Reflecting on the work of this kindred literary spirit governed my own decision to preface my first poem about lynching with an epigraph from Cullen's work:

I shoved him in a closet set
Against the wall. This would but let
Him breathe two minutes more, or three,
Before they dragged him out to be
Queer fruit upon some outraged tree.

My poem on lynching was written years before I found out about my relative Estes's murder in 1881. It was written as I was being a good student of history. It was a creative acknowledgement of those who had lived through the nascent, violent phases of black civil rights in America; the witnesses who knew that the end of slavery in America was going to come with a price that would be exacted long after the last soldier was removed from the Civil War battlefield.

After reading my poem and one of the news articles on the lynching of a member of my family alongside one another, I realized that I had written an elegy for my own tortured ancestor years before I even knew his name. In retrospect, the poem was an answer to his prayer to survive that went unanswered that night, when the only other black man in attendance was the one who was hanged alongside him.

Dying By the Rood

I can only wonder what it was like
a man, a tree, and history.
After fear comes a determined resignation.
Just ask anyone who has given birth,
said goodbye to a lover too soon,
finally accepted the creep of old age,
or seen life flash before them
in a heart-stopping moment.

I can only imagine that final stretch
pale palm raised to ask for help,
praying that God would call out one
among these white faces
to raise his voice and say
*Naw boys, y'all go on home now,
we're not going to do this tonight.*
And you would accept the apology,
allow the rope to slip over your head
and drop from your wrists,
head home for supper like nothing had
ever happened, wiping the blood from
your shattered face with a grateful sleeve.

Instead, the slow creep of grim acceptance
that your name was not Isaac
and there would be no ram
in the bush to make
this executioner's noose pass over you.

With no voice left, your mind alone screams
that you'd never even looked
at that white woman.
Would never
touch another woman period
if you could only walk away.

Still, something compels you to look up.
Maybe if your eyes could only reach heaven
that man after the order of Melchizedek
would hear your prayer
and release this last breath stuck
in your lungs, keep your bound knuckles
from scraping this tree.