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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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A Sacred Archive: Black Women and a New Grammar of Lynching Terror

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Culture & Theory

by

LaShonda R. Carter

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, Chair
Professor Bridget R. Cooks
Associate Professor Jessica Millward
Professor Frank B. Wilderson, III
Distinguished Professor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

2022

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DEDICATION

To
My Mom,
You are the smartest person I know. Every day I hope to be more like you.

To
My Father
I wish you were here. You would love this.

To
My Jordan, My Son
It has been the best, most challenging, most exciting journey. You make me!

To
Tiffany Willoughby-Herard
For reminding me not to run, and of trees and their long memories and long witnessing.

To
My Family, Chosen Family, and Friends
For holding me, praying for me, caring for me, and supporting me.

To
Canady "My Favorite" Larry
For giving me everything.

To
Those who have gone before me and carry this work
I stand on your shoulders and sing at the top of my voice, knowing that you will make sure that I am seen and heard. Hummingbirds do fly.

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Carter, LaShonda, and Willoughby-Herard, Tiffany. "What Kind of Mother is She? From Margaret Garner to Rosa Lee Ingram to Mamie Till to the Murder of Korryn Gaines." *Theory & Event,* 21, no. 1 (2018): 88-105.

Millward, Jessica, Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, LaShonda Carter, Krystal Tribbett, and Ella Turenne. "Part Typewriter, Part Divination: A Black Feminist Approach to Black Digital Archives and Preserving the Papers of the Campaign to Bring Mumia Home." *The Journal of Intersectionality* 5, no. 1 (2021): 53–69.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Sacred Archive: Black Women and a New Grammar of Lynching Terror

By

LaShonda R. Carter

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture & Theory

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Professor Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, Chair

This dissertation examines the limitations of the current lynching lexicon using a rhetorical and linguistic analysis and focusing on Black women to read the lasting effect of lynching violence. I demonstrate that centering Black women in our analysis of lynching disrupt how lynching is theorized both temporally and spatially, on the one hand, and disrupts the language and type of speech used to describe lynching as a social process on the other. I study the occurrences of Black women's appearance in lynching language and our cultural memory while examining Black women's foreclosure from some iterations of memory. Threaded through and grounding each chapter is an interrogation and critique of the sociocultural status of *womanhood*, particularly when the terms are qualified by the signifiers "Black" or "white." Moreover, while the project will necessarily interrogate the anti-black violence of institutional archives, cultural memory, and lynching grammar, subsequently expanding them, the essential work here is to excavate the stakes of the social category of the woman and the concept of womanhood. I argue that the social category of "woman" and the assumptions about womanhood are racialized gender terms constructed through oppressive patriarchy, which subsumes women under the oppressive

regime of white male dominance. Finally, the research formulates a grammar of lynching that expands lynching's lexicon to include Black women as survivors, witnesses, knowledge producers, and carriers of memory in the wake of lynching violence. Through this rhetorical and ontological critical theory project, I bring greater attention to how lynching is memorialized in public memory, which is a largely un-studied site of the production and reproduction of the meaning of lynching, and Black women survivors of lynching as the unseen authors of meaning-making about the nature and lasting effects of lynching violence. The project aims to challenge assumptions about racialized and sexualized anti-black violence.

INTRODUCTION

"I begin at a place where language ends and where new utterances must begin."
Tiffany Lethabo King, 2013[1]

"If trees could talk, I wonder what they'd say. . .If trees would talk, I wonder what they'd tell me."
Nikki Giovanni, 1976[2]

My project begins with a riddle that I composed at a critical stage in my evolution in the study of lynching as a social and cultural phenomenon, practice, and site of the production of meaning about Blackness and Black bodies.

> *Plant fibers twist and turn, opposing one another's directions; in their opposition lay my strength and balance; three strands bind our fates. Dexterous extremities manipulate my purpose. I am a powerful object, evoking fear and promoting hate. I long for the necks of unseen prey, Anxious for the deadly embrace—smoldering air of sickly-sweet scents dances between the honda and coils of me. I kiss my prize gently, constricting to the point of strain. The sacrificed relinquishes his will under my nuzzle. What am I?*

LaShonda Carter, 2013[3]

I. Introduction and Background

The work we do on Black positionality and Black lived experiences in a racial paradigm sutured by Black death and suffering is a terrifying confrontation with the reality that we are all, in some fashion, trafficking in Black death. Black death is passed among scholars in their academic pursuits; it is the foundation of Black organizing and community building; it is the conclusion we attempt to evade in respectability and social uplift practices. That we traffic in Black death does not mean our work is less than generative. On the contrary, our trafficking can and does generate new knowledge, new modes of exchange and survival,

[1] Tiffany Jeannette King, "In the Clearing" (PhD Diss., University of Maryland, College Park. 2013), 1.
[2] "Alabama Poem," Spotify, track 5 on Nikki Giovanni, *The Reason I Like Chocolate,* Folkways Records, 1976. Spotify Audio.
[3] LaShonda Carter, "Enchanted Objects Riddle Assignment," (English 101W: *Enchanted Objects*, UC Irvine, 2013)

and new systems of thought and analysis. This is where I locate my work on Black women and lynching. Because as poet and essayist Audre Lorde (1984) asserts, "within the war, we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not—I am not only a casualty, I am a warrior."[4] Here Lorde evokes the realization that though Black women suffer tremendous losses to violence, we are also resolved to continue to strive for something akin to survival, love, kinship, and happiness.

The riddle that begins this introduction chapter affirms my status as both casualty and warrior. I, too, am waging war against the social order that organized itself in and through my Black flesh, and that, to me, is the warrior spirit that Lorde is theorizing. I do not mean to suggest that Black people will not suffer (or die) in their fight against gendered/racial violence, and I do not contend it will generate social recognition of our humanity; it simply means that you still get up and fight.

As a graduate student, I am frequently asked what I am working on in my doctoral program. I reply that my work interrogates lynching's "afterlife"[5]—the social, familial, and community residue—through the Black female perspective and experience. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Hartman (2007) writes:

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of Black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory but because Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery--skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.[6]

Hartman describes the consequence of slavery as a signifying phenomenon that structures Black life and death with no clear resolution. Following Hartman, I center Black women in

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[4] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984), 41.

[5] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your Mother,* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 2007), 6.

[6] Hartman, *Lose your Mother,* 6.

the lynching experience because I argue that lynching violence—a racialized, gendered violence that is a structuring tool of torture in and of the afterlife of slavery that is used to suture Black life to life imperiled and devalued—also has an afterlife.

The general response from non-Black people to my subject matter and my answer about the afterlife operations of lynching is "doesn't that make you angry (or some variation)?" and "how did you decide to study that?" The first question I generally ignore because, as Baldwin states, "to be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time"[7] Being in "a rage" can manifest as that warrior spirit that Lorde points us to, illuminating the bad faith logic that grounds those questions. Existing just under the surface of "why do you study this" and "doesn't that make you angry," and other queries like it is what author Robin DiAngelo (2018) calls "white fragility." It is a protected social environment, insulated from race-based stress—"a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerant, triggering a range of defensive move, e.g., outward displays of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt" re-instantiating white racial equilibrium.[8] It is a central machination of American color-blind politics' hesitation to address, redress, and complete erasure of this country's racial past, present, and future. It is concealed by a discourse of national "healing" sans confrontation; and "healing" while Black people remain imperiled. It asks, "Why are you bringing this up? Why do we have to talk about this ugly thing in the past? Why can't we discuss what feels good?"

Nevertheless, what feels good for civil society and its allies and agents has proven dangerous, if not deadly, for Black women, children, and men. The study of lynching makes

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[7] James Baldwin, et. Al, "The Negro in American Culture," *CrossCurrents* Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer 1961): 205.

[8] Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 54.

the danger abundantly clear. The study of lynching compels me to be keenly aware of my strengths and determinations and to confront my specific vulnerability as a Black woman in an anti-black, sexually violent society. I confront the knowledge of having a child whose safety I cannot ensure from anti-black, gendered, heteronormative hate and violence and of occupying a "sometimes feminized" social status that should protect me but does not. Moreover, it makes me keenly aware that, like other Black women, I still get up and face it.

I begin this work reflecting on the visceral reaction I can recall having when I first saw Diana Ross singing "Strange Fruit" in the film *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972).[9] I disclose that, though my 6-year-old self did not understand the lyrics, there was something affective about how she sang that song that has stayed with me over the years. I then follow it by explaining that throughout my academic life, the theme of lynching has been reoccurring and that it seems to be the direction my intellectual path leads me. On occasion, I tell the questioners the impact that reading "Going to Meet the Man"[10] (1965) had on me during my time at Cerritos College and the problematic reproduction of violence that my feminist studies research project on the lynching women in the U.S. performed. I allude to the riddle that prefaces this section and discuss the signifying properties of the noose in our history. Versions of this are my stock responses, which seem to appease people's horror and misguided guilt about my work.

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[9] *Lady sings the Blues* is a 1972 biographical film about Billie Holiday starring Diana Ross. The song *Strange Fruit* was written and composed by Abel Meeropol (Lewis Allan) about anti-black lynchings in the south. Billie Holiday recorded it in 1939.

[10] James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man," In *Going to Meet the Man: Stories*, (New York: Dial Press,) 1965. This is the story of a white deputy sheriff—Jesse—in a southern town who is experiencing impotency while attempting to be intimate with his wife. In his frustration, he imagines things he could do to Black women, which produces several old memories. He eventually recalls a well-attending lynching from his childhood where he watches a Black man be castrated and burned alive. After the lynching, the white crowd sits around the charred remains and had a picnic. These memories allow him to achieve an erection and have sex with his wife, Grace.

What I tend to leave unsaid and the truth of my journey is that I have stopped "running from lynching" because it is what I am called to do. I am hunted, nurtured, lulled to sleep, and stricken with insomnia by the women and children who lived and those who did not. I am a part of that afterlife (and my dream life, in particular, is a watchful and wakeful manifestation of that relationship), and it seems that those women and children are holding me accountable to recognize the words that they may not have gotten to say; and are requiring me to examine them and to share them in my life and my work. I dream of lives lost. I recognize their call upon my life as a challenge to recognize Black women as a sacred archive and a deep reservoir of our stories. The accurate answers lay in my history, in my racialized gendered trauma. The accurate answers lay in the sexual terrorization of Black flesh too young to know or comprehend. They lay in my expressive practices and critical approach to being both a warrior and casualty, including witnessing through a critical and critical voice. From the riddle in the preface of this chapter to cultural, literary, film, oral history, and archival historical analysis derives the following original poem titled "The Answers:"

The Answers

They lay awake, in the wake[11] and dreams.
They "pace the floor"[12] of my un/memories or re/memories
or both.
The answers lay in my womb song,
as a generational vessel of Black life and Black death.
They lay in the gifts from my mother and her mother and hers before that.
They carry my irrational dreams and rational nightmares.
They are the kinship bonds between them and me and you.

[11] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake,* (Durham, Duke University Press), 2016.

[12] Etheridge Knight's poem, "The Idea of Ancestry," considers the complexities of African American family bond, of life and death, and of historicity. And though I was not intentionally citing this poem, the familiar language suggests that we were both responding to a similar ancestral calling. Etheridge Knight, "The Idea of Ancestry," in *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986).

They are me
They are sacred

II. "A Sacred Archive"

Western monotheistic perception of "the sacred" are sites that have been consecrated as such by the formal church. Sacredness represents Christ's blood and body and signifies and celebrates his sacrifice. These are sites for deification or anointed vessels that unite believers to deities. Religion is a system of practices and beliefs around deities and/or sacrosanct objects, principles, or locations. These beliefs and practices bridge communities based on concepts of morality and constitute inviolable rules. While religious discourse persists in rationales of White supremacy, racism, and racial violence, particularly in lynching violence, in this dissertation, the term sacred is doing more subversive work.

The contextualization of Black women as sacred archives is undergirded by the notion that Black women are foundational to the material, cultural, and spiritual lives of Black people. Black women, here, are not intended to serve as a supernatural force or entity for deification. On the contrary, this dissertation's work is to expose the real-world impact of lynching violence on Black people. There is no intention of leaning into the stereotypical trope of the *strong black woman* who endures and prevails sans feelings or needs for assistance. That trope renders Black women as unidimensional sans complexity or capacity. The foundational Black woman theorized here is the result of and in conversation with paradigmatic anti-black violence. She is manufactured out of necessity. As such, she is present in all her fullness and capability, though intruded upon by anti-black violence, writ large, and anti-black lynching violence more specifically.

The term sacred signals the indigenous conceptualization of *sacred* meaning, "something spiritually alive, culturally essential, or simply deserving of respect." (sacredland.org).[13] Because of the prevalence of anti-black violence, Black women shoulder the burden of carrying the material, cultural, and spiritual memory of Black people through generations. As such, this dissertation aims to center Black women in interrogating the social effect of anti-black lynching violence. The oeuvre of written and artistic scholarship that focuses on lynching violence from the late 1800s to the present privileges the production of racial terrorism as the modus operandi of lynching, as a modality that disproportionately affects Black men. While the statistical evidence supports this view and leads to scholarship that calls us to engage with questions that seek accountability for the systematic murder of Black men, as they are, in fact, the direct victims of lynching at disproportionate rates, we would be remiss to gloss over how lynching violence, in its historical and contemporary manifestations, has also had multivalent impacts on the lives of Black women. Current research confirms that the lynchings of Black women make up about one-hundred-fifty of the documented 3,446 cases of lynching violence in the United States between 1882-1968.[14] While both sets of figures are on the conservative end in comparison to what is likely the actual number of lynchings,

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[13] "What Is a Sacred Site?" Sacred Land. The Sacred Land Film Project. Accessed November 11, 2022. https://sacredland.org/tools-for-action/ .

[14] Henrietta Vinton Davis, "Recorded Cases of Black Female Lynching Victims 1886-1957," *Henrietta Vinton Davis's Weblog*, July 22, 2009. https://henriettavintondavis.wordpress.com/2009/07/22/recorded/. See Also: "'The Anti-Lynching Crusaders: The Lynching of Women,' [1922]." *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*. Accessed March 23, 2017. http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/lynch/doc7.htm. Though the concern of this project is not an enumeration that indexes an expansion of the written accounts of lynched victims in the United States, I recognize the historical significance of such accounts that seeks to "right" the legacies of violence and the historical experiences of Black people. My dominant questions focus, more specifically, on the meanings and conditions of existences that are a consequence of the "afterlife" of lynching violence.

with such a significant gender imbalance, it would ostensibly suggest that an analysis of lynching violence against Black men would be the most generative entry point through which to engage this history. Without diminishing the significance of the scholarship that focuses on lynching as racial terror against Black communities via Black men's bodies, this research focuses on theorizing the afterlife of lynching violence. Centering Black women—a figure foreclosed from lynching history—enables new articulations of the impact of lynching violence.

Through close interrogation of lynching violence as racial terror with tentacles that reach beyond the moment of the lynching event and its community-building project of the white participants, lynching violence is revealed as a critical mechanism for ordering society. By centering on Black women and expanding theorizations about the impact of lynching, *A Sacred Archive* provides an account of lynching that upends dominant readings. This work on lynching's cultural impact illuminates the transgenerational legacy of lynching violence in Black families and communities. This method of reading lynching violence offers a temporal and spatial shift—a re-articulation of lynching history—that is a more nuanced engagement of lynching violence, lynch victims, racial terror and its impact on Black family and the Black community, and by extension, we can engage critiques of contemporary state-sanctioned legal lynching.

Naming Black women as sacred archives signals the need for Black women-centered discourse of lynching theory is essential. This archive and its archivists[15] add a new system and structure of language about lynching violence because they are repositories of

[15] See Jessica Millward, et. al, "Part Typewriter, Part Divination," *Journal of Intersectionality*, 5, no. 1 (2021) for thinking about the work of Black women to create space for meaning-making.

memories, reliable witnesses, and historians. Engaging Black women as spiritually alive, culturally necessary resources opens space to reading the silences and erasures of lynching history; to critique the social status of womanhood; it thinks critically about the psychological effect of lynching violence and the modalities of survival deployed; it analyzes rage as a means of meaning-making and knowledge production. As interlocutors of lynching history, Black women's engagement is both first-person perspectives, through her direct experiences of lynching, and the third person omnipresent because of the knowledge she must carry. As such, Black women produce a new grammar for understanding and conceptualizing lynching violence.

On Archival Memory

In 2005, Clarissa T. Sligh commemorated the 50th anniversary of the 1954 U. S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*[16] decision by documenting her family's school integration. What is telling about Sligh's sharing of her family history of confronting school segregation and racism is how she positions her mother, Ethel Mozelle Thompson, as an activist and provocateur in this critical historical moment of integration. At the center of Ethel Thompson's history, the "event that changed her family" was the lynching of Ethel's twelve-year-old brother, Council Jordan, on August 15, 1923, in South Carolina. Sligh writes that if you are to understand her mother (and, by extension, their family history), you have to examine this violent event when Mozelle Jordan,[17] age ten, witnessed the dumping of her brother's body and cradled his lifeless, broken and bruised

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[16] *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* is a landmark 1954 Supreme court case that ruled racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional.

[17] Clarissa T. Sligh. *It Wasn't Little Rock / Clarissa Sligh.* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 2005). According to Sligh, Mozelle Ethel Jordan began going by her middle name Ethel, sometime after her brother's death in 1923.

body with the noose still secured around his neck, in her lap. After the burial of their son, Irene and George Jordan returned to work in the sharecropping fields. Sligh writes, "Each day before leaving the yard, the grief-stricken parents placed their sons Oscar [age eight] and Crawford [age six] into separate burlap sacks. The bags were tied shut and hung from trees. The parents were taking no chances that the boys might wander away from the farm. To protect them from their older brothers' fate, the boys were hung in sacks. Hung to protects them. Hung in trees" (Sligh, 2005)[18].

Sligh's account of her family's history with lynching violence offers us a lens into the afterlife of lynching. It is the point of entry from which she centers the family history and what follows. It is marked by additional losses and the evolution of Ethel Thompson's confrontation with her fear of racial violence and her drive to fight for [their] American democracy. Though Sligh positions the lynching death of her uncle as a pivotal and defining moment for her family, the family's story is not finalized there. Trafficking in Black death for the Sligh generates a space for telling the story of her family's history. She uses it to offer us a glimpse into how that violence shaped their journey, from the "protective" hanging in burlap sacks of the two remaining sons of Irene and George to Ethel Thompson's pursuit of education for herself and her children. Sligh and her mother, Ms. Thompson, serve as a sacred archive offering material evidence of the generational impact lynching violence has had on the family. Their family narrative disrupts normative lynching history because the victims are often divorced from interiority and kinship bonds.

As a consequence of their telling, lynching memory cannot continue to perpetuate further violence against this victim. In the Sligh case study, Council Jordan, though a victim

[18] Sligh, *It Wasn't Little Rock.*

of a lynching, is not divorced from his family. His life had meaning, he was loved, and his death had real-world impacts on his family and the directions their lives took. To account for lynching violence fully, we must step back from the lynching scene to bear witness and gauge the magnitude of lynching violence.

Redefining Lynching

This research seeks to trouble and expand our current modes of thinking and defining lynching. Christopher Waldrep's "Word and Deed: The Language of Lynching, 1820-1953" is a comprehensive study of the evolution of lynching rhetoric in the United States from 1820 to 1953. He asserts that a paradox exists in "the word lynching." It can both "be a powerful vehicle in the hands of a skilled polemicist," on the one hand, while also being inept to "reproduce the reality it tries to describe" on the other.[19] Waldrep's work "presents a history, not of lynching violence but of the discursive politics, narrative strategies, and rhetorical devices used to denounce and promote" the violence practice.[20] He finds that depending on the audience and their needs, the definition of lynching shifts spatially and temporally. The term "lynching" became popularized in the media in 1835 after the citizens of Vicksburg, Mississippi, "hanged five gamblers," making it a pivotal moment for lynching rhetoric. The language of lynching is picked up in the media and is also utilized by abolitionists to construct arguments about the violence of the South, in effect racializing the term. Southern news media used the trope of the rape of white women as a rhetorical device to justify lynching violence because, as Waldrep argues, they found

[19] Christopher Waldrep, "Word and Deed," In *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History*. (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 229.
[20] Waldrep, *"Word,"* 229.

that Northerners would be more accepting of lynching if the rape of white women were the cause.

The Waldrep chapter argues five justifications for lynching: (1) popular sovereignty; (2) the individual evil of the lynched victim; (3) the inadequacies of the legal system; (4) the rationality of the lyncher in his restoration of law and order; and (5) lynching is both a necessary and effective tool of dissuading criminal acts.[21] The definition of lynching, however, has shifted over time. Waldrep argues that though there is no way to document "the depth of extralegal violence in America fully," "[l]ynching must be understood as a discourse, a new label attached to particular incidents abstracted from a larger, hidden reality. . .The history of lynching is a narrative of contested language and discursive politics [and] a powerful symbol of American politics."[22] This research seeks to take up the mantle of Waldrep's call to address the rhetorical dangers of the language of lynching, particularly the misnomer of the term "extralegal." Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*[23] (1986) work challenges us to (re)consider the power of language. He argues that language is the most critical aspect of imperial conquest and is at the heart of social justice and social liberation struggles. The choice of language and its usage is central to how one comes to know themselves and the world around them, their relation to their natural and social environments, and the global idea of themselves and the entire universe. He argues that the bullet is a weapon to ensure physical subjugation, but language is the tool to secure spiritual subjugation. Language has a dual character; it is a method of communication (thereby connecting the disconnected) and a carrier of culture

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[21] Waldrep, "Word," 232-233.
[22] Waldrep, "Word," 250.
[23] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, (London: Portsmouth, N.H.: J. Currey; Heinemann, 1986).

(an organizing force as a community, as means of life, as a collective memory back, a purveyor of history and tradition, a conduit of futures. Decolonizing language calls for a rediscovery of the self, legacy, struggle, and history. This theorization of language inspires the following questions: What does the legacy of lynching as language and as practice carry across space and time? What would it mean to decolonize the language of lynching is to create a grammar of the violence that moves us beyond the individual instances of lynching? How does that help us to think about the long history of lynching violence in the United States? An effective response means grappling with the limitations of the short-hand definitions of lynching. It is a definition that cannot account for the distinction between the lynching of white people versus the practices of anti-black lynching and the practice of "over-kill"[24] on Black bodies. Disentangling the more extended history and accounting for the shift in violence also allows us the engage in lynchings afterlife by writing dominant narrations. Therefore, decolonizing the language of lynching allows us to expand definitions of lynching victims; and utilize lynching to secure white womanhood as a social categorization. In effect, we can take seriously thinking of lynching and Black women.

Definitions of lynching violence often utilize the term "extralegal." The Oxford English Dictionary defines extralega1 as an adjective meaning "beyond the province of law; not regulated by law." (OED, Extralegal)[25] By definition, the description of lynching violence as "extralegal" functions as an erasure of its usage in developing the nation's scene

[24] By "overkill," I am alluding to the mechanism of murder that is used on a lynching victim: shooting, hanging, mutilation, stabbing, burning. . .I am left to wonder if a Black body can be killed dead enough in the white imagination. Lynching archives relate, time and again, overkill, where the victim's body is not simply murdered but mutilated for the enjoyment of the murders and the white witnesses.

[25] "extra-legal, n.1". OED Online. November 2022. Oxford University Press. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67077?redirectedFrom=extralegal#eid4867235

of law and order and its national identity with the practice of lynching. Both James Elbert Cutler's investigative study, *Lynch-Law (1905),* and Howell Colston Featherston's article (1900), "The Origin and History of Lynch Law," are central to how I think the nascent justice system in conversation with what Jaqueline Goldsby (2006) calls "the cultural logic of lynching."[26] Cutler and Featherston use historical cases, newspapers, and folklore to uncover the most accurate origin and history of the term and practice of lynch law in the American colonies. A few consistent threads through both works is the connection to the Lynch family, notably Charles Lynch, in Virginia to the practice of summary punishment for *lawless offenders* and that the practice and naming are particular of lynching in America that is not mirrored in Europe. Each gives a full accounting of some folklore about lynching and the Lynch family of Virginia. Noteworthy in both scholars' accounts of Charles Lynch is that this practice of summary justice is, at its roots, connected to the legal system. They note that while illegal, Judge Lynch and his groups' actions were legally deemed *justifiable* and subject to indemnity. The state gives them a license to act as judge, jury, and executioner. Considering how the lynching of Black people does not constitute murder in the social imaginary, this historical link to legal pardoning is significant. Though early summary punishments did not generally involve executions, the legal precedent established for Lynch and his group is indicative of a cultural logic that lays the groundwork for the "lynched by person's unknown" practice in later years. The state's response and involvement in lynching play out in and through legal exoneration (through

[26] James Elbert Cutler, *Lynch-Law*, (New York, London, and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905).; Howell Colston Featherston, "The Origin and History of Lynch Law," ed. Horace Williams Fuller, (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1900), 150-158.; Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 6.

declarations of the law and lack of prosecution); mock courts; geographically (courtyards and legal buildings), jailers' participation; state officials in the mob. To argue that lynching is an extralegal practice of violence that goes beyond the reach of the state is a complete mischaracterization of the practice of lynching. Goldsby's work situates the analysis of lynching within the legal system and as a routine of national life and citizenship through her theorization of lynching as a cultural logic. Rhetorically, she defines lynching or "anti-black mob murders as a networked, systemic phenomenon indicative of trends in national culture. . .that challenge the prevailing definitions of lynchings oppressive functions and cultural effects:"[27]

> The 'cultural logic' of lynching enables it to emerge and persist throughout the modern era because *its violence 'fit' within broader national cultural developments*. This synchronicity captures why I refer to lynching as 'spectacular': the violence made certain cultural developments and tensions visible for Americans to confront. On the other hand, because *lynching's violence was so unspeakably brutal—and crucially*, since the lives and bodies of African American people were negligible concerns for the country for so long a time—*cultural logic also describes how were have disavowed lynching's normative relations to modernism's history over the last century*.[28] (Goldsby, emphasis mine).

Lynching practices imbricated into the development of U. S. national identity. Goldsby asserts that "by the nineteenth century, there was nothing *extra*legal about the mob murders of African Americans" is instructive in understanding best lynching's function in producing western modernity (Goldsby, 2006,18). Anti-black lynching violence maintains the national coherence project through Black suffering and death. The grotesque nature of anti-black violence cannot, therefore, constitute murder. The Oxford English Dictionary

[27] Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 5-6.
[28] Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 6.

defines *murder* as "the deliberate and unlawful killing of a human being, esp. in a premeditated manner; (Law) criminal homicide with malice aforethought (occasionally more fully willful murder)."[29] In the laws regarding lynching, killing Black adults and children had not been criminalized until the passing of The Emmett Till Antilynching Act of 2022 on March 29, 2022. There have been very few legal prosecutions and convictions for killing Black people in the instances of visual evidence (lynching photographs and other memorabilia). The victims were often kidnapped from police custody by known community members. Such that when Goldsby asserts that lynching photographs—the primary tool of analysis for scholars and artists working on lynching—"are atrocious given the depiction of violent excess, of moral boundaries, destroyed, of lives unjustly and cruelly ended," take pause.[30] In lynching violence, as with much other anti-black violence, there is no enunciation of collective grief or mourning comparable to the response to violence against the dominant society. Until recently, there had been no legal recourse, no legislation that deems the lynching of Black men, women, and children to be unjust or cruel. If lynching is, in fact, a cultural logic, the terms "excess, moral boundaries, unjust, and cruelly" capture the desired response, one that incorporates anti-black violence into public discourse.

The Oxford English dictionary defines *lynching* as a transitive verb meaning "To inflict extralegal summary punishment on (an alleged or convicted offender), (in early use) often by whipping, tarring and feathering, etc.; lynch law n.—the practice of inflicting summary punishment on an alleged or convicted offended, (originally) by a self-constituted

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[29] "murder, n.1." OED Online. Oxford University Press. November 2022. https://www.oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=murder&_searchBtn=Search

[30] Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 221.

court of having no legal authority, or (later chiefly) as perpetrated by a mob."[31] This definition assumes legal authority in the terms "condemn," "punish" and sentence." A new definition of anti-black lynching should account for the instability and changeability of the term's meaning over time that Waldrep demonstrates. Its definition should encompass the cultural logic theory that Goldsby's work demonstrates and attend to the involvement of the legal system. Influenced by Joy James' (2002) [32] definition of lynching, my working definition of lynching: *a ritualized barbaric practice of racialized and gendered terror, a tool in and of the afterlife of slavery, used to suture Black life to lives imperiled and devalued. It is a juridically sanctioned sexual(izing) attack on Black life, with shifting implementations across space and time and implications that reach beyond the moment of violence into the intimate lives of Black people.*

III. <u>Chapter Summaries</u>

"A Sacred Archive" theorized lynching violence within Ida. B. Wells Barnett's framing of lynching as "our country's nation's crime" during her January 1900 speech in Chicago, Il.[33] She asserts that anti-black lynching violence:

> is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an "unwritten law"

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[31] "*lynching.* n.1" OED Online. *Oxford University Press*. November 2022. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/111639?rskey=E4ZUuA&result=1#eid; "*lynching law.* n.1." OED Online. Oxford University Press. November 2022. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/111643#eid38766856

[32] James defines lynching as: "a barbaric form of collective punishment meted out against black communities to ensure white dominance. Ritualized murders of black Americans were rationalized by the mythology of black rapists obsessed with white females. Sexual realities. . .which inverted the interracial sexual violence of the era. The sexual politicians of lynching grossly exaggerated the likelihood of black male assaults on white females while ignoring the widespread prevalence of white male sexual assaults against black females." Joy James, *Shadowboxing*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 47.

[33] Ida B. Wells, "Speech on Lynch Law in America," (speech, Chicago, Illinois, January 1900), *Civil Rights and Conflict in the United States: Selected Speeches* (Lit2Go Edition). Retrieved November 12, 2022, from https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/185/civil-rights-and-conflict-in-the-united-states-selected-speeches/4375/speech-on-lynch-law-in-america-given-by-ida-b-wells-in-chicago-illinois-january-1900/

> that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal.[34]

Wells' assertion resists dominant lynching memory because it disavows the claim that lynching is a reactive and irrational practice. Lynching in the United States is calculated, planned, and essential to the methodologies of ordering society. Further, is implicates the law, where traditional lynching memory articulates lynching as extralegal. Wells's assertions that lynching is an *unwritten law* suggest that the violence is situated and hidden in the law, not on the periphery. The historiography of lynching violence posits lynching as critical to the nation's making and the conceptualization of the citizen.

This project extends the earliest projects of Black Studies by shifting the analysis of lynching to racialized gender violence against Black women. Black women and girls have been victims of lynchings, witnesses of lynchings, antilynching activists and organizers, and carriers of memory and community knowledge. As such, analyzing lynching violence through the lens of Black women engenders new inquiries and exposes new data. In the following chapters, this research seeks to take seriously Black women as sacred archives whose experiences of lynching terror will shift the grammar of lynching.

Chapter one, "The Wife, the Mother, or the Black Women: Defining Womanhood through the Lynching Photograph," joins other scholarly interrogations[35] of the genre of lynching photography in the United States—its meaning, ramifications, and historical

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[34] Wells, "Speech on Lynch Law."

[35] Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle,* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2009); James Allen, et. al., *Without Sanctuary,* (Santa Fe, N.M: Twin Palms, 2000); Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith. *Lynching Photographs,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); David Marriot, *On Black Men*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

significance—as a meaning-making medium. Scholars have analogized the lynching photograph as a visual reproduction of racialized violence used to terrorize Black communities and a visual affirmation of White supremacy. This chapter examines the lynching photograph to inquire about what constitutes a lynching photograph and how it illuminates the necessity of and proximity to racial terror for Black women compared to White women. Three non-traditional depictions of lynching violence—or lynching photographs in a Black vernacular—serve as the cultural object of analysis to interrogate the protection of 'womanhood' in this country?" By reading photographer Marion Palfi's 1949, *Wife of a Lynch Victim;* visual artist Kerry James Marshall's 2002 print, *Heirlooms and Accessories*; and the 1955 David Johnson photo of Mamie Till Mobley grieving by her son's open casket,[36] I interrogate the status of white womanhood as manifested in and through lynching violence; the erasure of Black women's trauma and suffering, and the suturing of white women to their status as women through that violence; and the reclamation of space and memory that Black women, like Mamie Till-Mobley, make in the wake of lynching violence. The mass-circulation of lynching photographs both illuminates the limitation of access to the status of womanhood and the protections that it is designated to afford, on the one hand, while simultaneously exposing the very nature of the status of "womanhood" as inherently violent toward Black women on the other hand.

[36] Marion Palfi, *Wife of a Lynch Victim*, 1949, Gelatin Silver Print, Overall, Primary Support: 13 7/8 x 11 in. (35.3 x 27.9 cm) Image: 13 9/16 x 10 9/16 in. (34.4 x 26.9 cm), Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents. http://ccp-emuseum.catnet.arizona.edu/view/objects/asitem/People@1732/990/title-asc?t:state:flow=62995627-bcd2-4a0e-a6e5-026c12124b7a; Kerry James Marshall, Heirlooms & Accessories, 2002, Three ink-jet prints on paper in wooden artist's frames with rhinestones, 57 x 54 ¼ x 3 in. The Studio Museum in Harlem, https://studiomuseum.org/collection-item/heirlooms-accessories.

This chapter uses lynching photographs to read and critique how lynching photography is symbolic of the social ordering of heteronormative gender categories as captured through the lens of lynching violence. It introduces non-traditional lynching photography that I have coined "lynching photographs in a Black Vernacular." I theorized the linguistic and the visual as coterminous modes of meaning-making. Furthermore, finally, I read the new photos, alongside traditional lynching photography, to continue my theorization about the anti-black gender violence required to define, articulate, and maintain the social status of womanhood. Under regimes of lynching violence, we see white women borrow the power of the patriarchy to define and demand their place within the social order. I argue that her ability to *be* a woman is made possible by her position against and power over the non-women.

The second chapter, "Lynching Memory and Storytelling at the Intersection of Cognitive Dissonance and Psychic Detachment," centers on memory, witnessing, and retelling questions. More specifically, it interrogates how we remember lynching history and the tensions inherent in our efforts at (re)membering Emmett Louis Till (1941-1955) as an entry for thinking about the violent paradox of remembering the lives of lynched victims. As a case study, interrogating the method and structure of retelling offers greater insight into the problems inherent in storytelling when anti-black violence interrupts the possibility of resolution. The chapter outlines the quandary of beginnings and the fundamental problem in how we remember and honor the life of Emmett L. Till; it engages efforts at subversive and oppositional memory through the legacy of Mamie Till Mobley and seeks to theorize the antagonism of redress and remember when the subject of memory is a victim of anti-black racist violence. Finally, it theorizes why neither Carolyn

Bryant nor Mamie Till can help us redress (resolve, end, change) the subjection of Black people to violence and death, on the one hand. And yet the genuine psychic necessity of these stories on the other.

This chapter considers—arguably the most socially coveted claim to womanhood—the mother's status. Motherhood is the iteration of womanhood taken for granted as central to a woman's duties (and desire) and heralded as a woman's highest order of her identity. In this chapter, I interrogate Carolyn Bryant's—(read: woman, white, vulnerable, honest, trustworthy)—ability to articulate an identity for Emmett Till that even his mother's almost half-century of asserting different could not destabilize. I assert that Bryant's status as a woman supersedes Till-Mobley's status as a mother. Taking up the arguments outlined in the two previous chapters, I expose the impossibility of Black motherhood.

The final chapter is "Intimacy of Knowledge at the Black Kitchen Table: A Black Woman's Rage and Witness in Gwendolyn Brooks' "Ballad of Pearl May Lee,"[37] which interrogates the utility of rage and the intimacy of knowledge. Gwendolyn Brooks' provocative 1945 poem relates the story of a figure often erased from the study of lynching, Black women survivors, and witnesses. I read Brooks' poem as a metonym for lynching as a social process of the erasure of Black women's psychic rage and that rage as a site of knowledge production. Brooks' narrator, Pearl May Lee, tells a caustic tale of her brutalized memories from witnessing her lover Sammy's lynching. Sammy is lynched because he was falsely accused of "rape" after he had a consensual tryst with his conquest, a white woman.

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[37] Gwendolyn Brooks, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," in *A Street in Bronzeville*, (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1945).

In her telling, Pearl May Lee relates sentiments that are discomforting, distressing, and full of rage. This chapter theorizes the concept of the intimacy of knowledge in/at the Black Kitchen as introduced and forwarded by Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin during a 1961 discussion between them, Langston Hughes, Alfred Kazin, and Emile Capouya Nat Hentoff for WBAI-FM radio in New York.[38] The chapter argues that through the engagement of Black women's rage, we gain access to the full capaciousness of their intimacy of knowledge about anti-black lynching and all forms of anti-black violence that impact Black people's social status.

[38] Baldwin, et. al. "The Negro in American Culture."

Chapter One: The Wife, The Mother, or The Black Woman: Defining womanhood through the Lynching Photograph

Abstract

"The Wife, the Mother, or the Black Women" joins other scholarly interrogations[39] of the genre of lynching photography in the United States—its meaning, ramifications, and historical significance. Scholars have analogized the lynching photograph as a visual reproduction of racialized violence used to terrorize Black communities and a visual affirmation of White supremacy. This chapter examines what constitutes a lynching photograph and how this medium illuminates the necessity of and proximity to racial terror for Black women compared to White women. Three non-traditional depictions of lynching violence— Palfi's 1949, *Wife of a Lynched Victim;* Marshall's 2002 print, *Heirlooms and Accessories*; and the David Johnson photo of Mamie Till Mobley grieving by her son's open casket--serve as cultural objects that interrogate the production of 'womanhood' in this country. The images perform how representations of lynching violence naturalize the Whiteness of Womanhood by suturing White women's bodies to their identities as women. At the same time, this violence erases Black women's trauma and suffering and obstructs Black women's reclamation of space and memory in the wake of lynching violence. Mass-circulated lynching photographs do the work of defining womanhood as a category that excludes Black women. By illuminating Black women's exclusion from this identification and the presumed protections it affords, these cultural objects expose a second violence

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[39] Wood, Amy Louise. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2009); Allen, James, ed. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. (Santa Fe, N.M: Twin Palms, 2000); Apel, Dora, and Shawn Michelle Smith. *Lynching Photographs,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Gonzales-Day, Ken. *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); David S. Marriott, *On Black Men*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

against Black women: stripping them of their communal identities and their existential personhood. The images reveal that the concept of "womanhood" is inherently violent toward Black women.

I. Framing the Lynching Photograph

However, the image enters \ its force remains within \ my eyes
Audre Lorde, 1997[40]

The Black Female became the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty and was relegated to the lowest position on the scale of human development.
Evelynn Hammonds, 1999 [41]

On September 15, 1955, *Jet* Magazine published photos of fourteen-year-old Emmett Luis Till's mutilated and murdered body – arguably the most iconic and widely viewed lynching photograph.[42] Photographer David Jackson took the photos at A. A. Rayner Funeral Home in Chicago at the behest of Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett Till's mother. Till-Mobley chose to make the photos public because she understood the power of *sight* in creating and controlling narrative. Her understanding of visual power aligned with cultural theorist Richard Dyer's assertion that "sight has been a privileged sense in Western culture since the Middle Ages, and since the mid-nineteenth century, the photographic media have become central and authoritative means of knowledge, thought, and feeling."[43] As such, the photograph became Till-Mobley's rhetorical, epistemological tool. The photographs of her tortured son opened up a space for the public to bear witness to the violence they implicitly

[40] Audre Lorde, "Afterimages," in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 339.

[41] Evelynn Hammonds, "2.3 Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality," in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 95.

[42] *Jet*, Vol. 8, no. 19, September 15, 1955, 8.

[43] Dyer, Richard. *White*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), xiii.

supported. Till-Mobley rationalized that the public "would not be able to visualize what had happened unless they were allowed to *see* the results of what had happened. They had to *see,*" she said, "what I had *seen.* The whole nation had to *bear witness* to this."[44] The photograph of Till's murdered body was more than haunting; for his mother, it also served as a reckoning for a country that had "avert[ed its] eyes for far too long, turning away from the reality" of anti-black violence.

Through reading and re-reading lynching photography, this chapter holds that the U.S. lynching photograph from the early 1900s to the present exemplifies photographic media that is "central and authoritative" in constructing "knowledge, thought and feeling."[45] The lynching photograph is a rhetorical device that constructs a visual language that—to borrow from critical theorist David Marriott—"universalises the violence, and racism, of the lynch mob across the white community."[46] However, while this medium participates within the context of a paradigmatic anti-black grammar, it also exists outside of the vacuum of the lynching event itself. . "The Wife, the Mother, or the Black Woman" expands the narrow semantic framing of lynching photography to account for dynamics outside of the lynching event itself. In addition to normalizing the violence done to Black bodies, the lynching photo outlines gender and sexual politics across racialized lines. Through their casting of White and Black women, the photos define "womanhood" as inherently White, thereby generating an additional narrative of anti-Blackness. This visual form becomes a means by which multiple narratives of anti-Blackness interweave into a layered and textured cultural fabric.

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[44] Mamie Till-Mobley, *Death of Innocence*, (New York: One World Book, 2003), 139. Emphasis mine.
[45] Richard Dyer, *White,* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997),
[46] David Marriott. *On Black Men,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 4

II. <u>An Exhibition and Didactic Panel</u>

Pictures *are* language, vehicles of communication conveying meaning to the viewer. According to visual studies scholar Paul Wendt, they also seem to be more intuitive than words. From Wendt's perspective, "man has been communicating by pictures longer than he has been using words. With the development of photography in [the twentieth] century, we are using pictures as a means of communication to such an extent that in some areas they overshadow verbal language."[47] But what meanings does the lynching photo generate?

On the one hand, the photograph represents an event: the lynching. I define lynching through a compilation of definitions in the works of several scholars[48] who argue that lynching is a form of extrajudicial/extralegal[49] murder by mobs that primarily denotes hanging—but can, and often does, include shooting, burning, tarring, drowning, beating, rape, sexual assault, mutilation, and any number of other methods of torture. Political theorist Joy James argues that these practices help to maintain a racialized social order and racial terror against Black people. For James, lynching is "a terrorist campaign in an undeclared," and I argue unilateral, "racial war" against the "independence of free Black communities."[50]

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[47] Paul R. Wendt, "The Language of Pictures," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1956): 281.

[48] Kerry Segrave, *Lynchings of Women in the United States, (*Jefferson.: McFarland & Co., 2010); Anne P. Rice, ed. *Witnessing Lynching* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Evelyn M. Simien, ed. *Gender and Lynching* 1st ed, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[49] In my larger body of work, I seek to challenge the terms "extrajudicial" and "extralegal" because I argue that while not recognized de jure as a legal practice, the state's de facto participation in both legal and illegal lynching of Black men, women, and children debunks the arguments that seek to divorce the state from lynching violence in the United States.

[50] Joy James, *Shadowboxing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 48.

A photograph is also an event that helps mark and memorialize critical public and private moments that construct and concretize meaning. It can bridge the sight and site of memory and fold the community together without being tethered to temporal or spatial limitations. Through the photograph, which "functions as signifier of our mental images,"[51] we can create sites for knowledge building around personhood, class position, and cultural memory, to name a few. Semiotician Roland Barthes argues that the photograph has two messages. The first is the "literal reality" of the scene itself. He argues that though the photograph is not "real," the scene is "its perfect *analogon,"* which "defines the photograph."[52] It is this "denoted message," "which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of [the photograph]."[53]

As such, the lynching photograph is multifaceted: at once, an exhibit, a didactic tool, and a political manifesto. Critics tend to highlight individual facets. Historian Amy Louise Wood highlights "the ghostly sepia-toned and grim Black and white images of mobs, crowds, and victims that were taken during or just after the violence" and identifies three general types of image reproduction: "the lynching victim's hanging body, disheveled and limp, alone in the frame; large crowds of spectators, taken from a distance; and perhaps the most horrid of all, proud white men grouped together around their lifeless victim."[54] While I fervently disagree with Wood's assertion that the "*proud white men* grouped together around their lifeless victim" constitutes the most horrific of any lynching photo, her

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[51] Kaja Silverman. *The Subject of Semiotics,"* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 22.

[52] Roland Barthes. "The Photographic Message," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 196.

[53] Barthes. "The Photographic Message," 196-197.

[54] Amy Louis Wood, "Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy," *American Nineteenth Century History,* 6. no.3 (2005): 375. DOI: 10.1080/14664650500381090.

definition and photo classifications succinctly outline one of the significant problems of lynching photography: the narrow scope through which lynching photographs are defined.[55] This framing excludes a breadth of other photos that might construct alternative narratives of lynching violence, perspectives that are as critical to producing generative social critiques as those circulated in the main.

As established, the lynching photograph has been critical to examining the "meaning" of lynching violence, especially spectacular violence. However, lynching photographs are artifacts used as evidence to memorialize the participants of lynching violence and to glorify Black death. However, as Mamie Till Mobley, Marion Palfi, and Kerry James Marshall's use of photography shows us, lynching photos are also emblematic of the social and material conditions facing Black and white women in the past, as well as today. Historian and Cultural Critic Dora Apel, for instance, argues that the lynching photograph captures the contradictions embodied in "the relationship of power to helplessness, citizen to an outsider, privilege to oppression, jubilation to degradation, subjecthood to objecthood, community to outcast, pride to humiliation."[56] Cultural critic Sandy Alexandre further argues that another dynamic to be considered about lynching violence is that of the landholders and the landless. She considers Black people's fear of white retaliation because Black people accumulated wealth.[57]

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[55] Wood's assessment of the horrific nature of proud white men grouped around a lifeless victim fails to recognize the victim. All these photographs are equally horrific because Black people have been reduced to flesh and used as props to create white identity. Her assertion functions as an additional erasure of the victims.

[56] Dora Apel, "On Looking," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2003): 458. DOI:10.1353/aq.2003.0020

[57] Alexandre, Sandy. "Out," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 61, no. ½ (Winter-Spring 2008: Special Issue on Lynching and American Culture). https://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Mississippi+Quarterly/2008/January/1-p52802. Note: Seneca Village, NY, 1825-1857, was destroyed by the U.S. government to make what is now Central park; Greenwood, Oklahoma, was destroyed in 1921 by whites.

III. Lynching Photographs in a Black Vernacular

The *Jet*-published photos of Emmett Till's lynched body are a good example, as they were arguably the most influential lynching photographs ever taken. Their influence rests in the perspective they offer. They are not traditional lynching photos of the event but of Till's body in the aftermath. Moreover, they publicized with his mother's permission, a means by which Till-Mobley maintained some agency over the narrative of her son's murder. This perspective emphasizes care, community, and kinship. It shifts the gaze away from the socially privileged photos that illustrate White power's desire to define Blackness as pathology and orients the viewer toward Black grief, suffering, and survival in an anti-black society. It offers redress to the erased: the immediate family. Thus, including alternate lynching photos in the public eye engenders a copious engagement with the effects of lynching violence. Till-Mobley's perspective fundamentally shifted the power-dynamics of the photographic genre, wielding power and shame against (white) people and foregrounding the loss of a beloved family member and the mourning of Black mothers. With this new grammar of human loss and Black motherhood, a different genre emerges, a genre I call *lynching photos in a Black vernacular*.

Lynching photos in a Black vernacular are narrative forms redeployed through a Black interpretative lens that activate Black consciousness. Photos in a Black vernacular exist because of the anti-black lynching event; however, they direct the viewer away from the event itself to show that the most horrific aspect of any lynching photo is the lifeless victims. They labor as corrective tools that address the silences and erasures of the traditional lynching photograph. Black vernacular accomplishes this because—to borrow from June Jordan— it can "be achieved only by striving for incorrect Standard English" that

"equals the structure of your [Black] consciousness."[58] Like Jordan, other linguistic scholars of Black vernacular English[59] theorize it as a grammar of Black consciousness that expresses the cultural dialectic of resistance and survival for lives perpetually under threat of silence, erasure, or complete annihilation. Black vernacular is Black biopolitical discourse condemning the dynamics of white community building through anti-black destruction and asserting black being on antagonistic terms to the making of gender and womanhood. Lynching photographs in a Black vernacular, then, are at once and always an ontological declaration of a Black being, reflecting structural violence at the viewer.

This more subversive understanding of lynching photographs also lays bare the historical and contemporary exclusion of Black women from the protected status of womanhood. Moreover, it interrogates, as critical theorist Hazel Carby puts it, "the sexual ideologies that defined the ways in which white and Black women 'lived' their relation to their material conditions of existence."[60] An analysis of the narratives shaped by the lynching photograph in a Black vernacular excavates the stakes—for both Black and white women—that are imbricated in the social and material conditions of existence. One narrative told by these images is the quotidian and ubiquitous nature of violence that constitutes the concept of womanhood. Stated differently, lynching violence is a structuring form of anti-black violence that sutures race and gender to social position. The lynching photograph illuminates White Womanhood as a participating and agentic factor of lynching

[58] June Jordan, "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," *Harvard Education Review* 58, (1988): 163.

[59] For readings on Black Vernacular, see Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk*, (Boston: Mariner Books, 1994), *Talkin and Testifyin*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press,1986), *Word from the Mother,* (Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, England, UK: Routledge, 2006); H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman, *Articulate While Black* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[60] Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood,* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 17.

violence and Black women as non-existent. The second construction that constitutes the lynching photograph is the violence of erasure, silence, and forgetting that works in tandem to highlight the limitations of "womanhood" and that justifies state and vigilante violence against Black women to maintain control of the project of womanhood.

Lynching by Definition

When American political philosopher Joy James defines lynching as a "terrorist campaign" and "racial war," she gestures toward the fact that sexual politics engender this war. James maintains that:

> [L]ynching became a barbaric form of collective punishment meted out against Black communities to ensure white dominance. Ritualized murders of Black Americans were rationalized by the mythology of Black rapists obsessed with white females. Sexual realities, [however]. . . inverted the interracial sexual violence of the era . . . . The sexual politics of lynching grossly exaggerated the likelihood of Black male assaults on white females while ignoring the widespread prevalence of white male sexual assaults against Black females.[61]

James' definition is the entry through which this chapter situates its framing of lynching violence in the United States, writ large, and more directly through the (re)production of traditional lynching photographs and the photos in a Black vernacular. Her assertion makes legible the sexual politics that undergird the ritualized performances of white domination, which declares White women's virtue in need of the state and vigilante protection while simultaneously representing Black women as unrapable, unassailable, and un-grievable flesh.[62] Lynching violence can be read as a locus of both material and theoretical sites of meaning that define womanhood as white and white womanhood as virtuous. Additionally,

[61] James, *Shadowboxing,* 47.

[62] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64. https://doi.org/10.2307/464747.

the racialized sexual politics played out through narratives of lynching violence maintain the social position and pleasure of the white women lynchers. In this analysis, I demonstrate a coherent subjectivity produced by and through white women as both the alibi for lynching and as perpetrators of lynching violence.

In conversation with James, I take up the mantle of scholars such as Black feminist political scientist Evelyn Simien, African American Studies scholar Crystal Feimster, and English literary scholar Julie Buckner Armstrong. [63] They have written about the limitations of a male and masculine-centered analysis of lynching violence. Their scholarship has centered Black women in the conversation about lynching, complicating the phallocentric focus of sexual violence in lynching terrorism, allowing for a more meta-critical reading of the lynching scene as a site of knowledge production. An examination of Black women as victims of lynching has contributed to debunking the rationales about the Black male rapist and instead exposes lynching as a tool for racial terror used to concretize social positioning. As Simien argues, "If we are to fully understand lynching and the motive 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."[64] Lynching violence *as racialized-gendered* violence with differential but paradigmatic impacts on Black community subgroups throws into sharp relief the rationales for lynchings as a form of punishment for mythologies about Black sexual pathology and

[63] Simien, ed., *Gender and Lynching,* Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors,* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), Julie Buckner Armstrong. *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

[64] Simien, *Gender and Lynching,* 3.

deviance. This also allows us to consider the structures of violence that suture white womanhood to and through Black (non)womanhood.

Lynching photos in a Black vernacular expose the impact on the collective memory—through staging and the practice of naming—to shape how we understand access to womanhood as coterminous with and constituted by violent practices against Black women. The lynching photograph illuminates the necessity of and proximity to racial terror for Black women versus white women and informs how we understand womanhood through racialized violence.

Conceptually, the social category of "woman" and the term "womanhood" are circumscribed by, according to historian Barbara Welter, "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,"[65] and most pointedly, the virtue of whiteness. Hazel Carby argues, "Ideologies of white womanhood were the sites of racial and class struggle which enabled white women to negotiate their subordinated roles in relation to patriarchy and at the same time to all their class interests with men and against establishing an alliance with Black women."[66] By expanding Carby's assertions to challenge the idea that the construction of white womanhood would allow for an alliance with Black women, I unpack the essentiality of violence against Black women as constitutive of white womanhood. Its emergence is not from solidarity politics but from Black women being treated as foils to white women's development and the violent exclusion of Black women from the entire social construction. Queer theorist Matt Richardson argues, "The racist construction of gender holds Black women as the Other of white female identity, allowing

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[65] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860, *American Quarterly* 18.2 (Spring, 1966), 152.

[66] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood,* 17.

white women to explore gender categories and stretch the boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviors."[67]

Through an analysis of Marion Palfi's 1949 gelatin silver print, *Wife of a Lynched Victim* (Fig. 1), Kerry James Marshall's 2002 Inkjet print, *Heirlooms and Accessories* (Fig. 2), and the David Jonhson Jet photo of Mamie Till Mobley, I make several critical observations. First, lynching violence is a machination of structural anti-black racism that utilizes violence against Black women to prop up White womanhood. It is precisely the multilayered gendered violence of lynching that posits womanhood as antithetical to Blackness. Lynching violence levels Black women outside the social protections afforded to white women. It also attacks Black women as mothers and the potential of Black kinship. Second, the traditional lynching photograph performs whiteness and antiblackness through the violence of silence that refuses acknowledgment of Black women's suffering while articulating white women's innocence and vulnerability. In the traditional lynching photo, the White mob are agents of their lives and over the lives of the Black victim. White women have featured centrally in lynching photography, folding them into the structures of dominance and power—however temporary—over their lives.

Lynching photography in a Black vernacular is a lynching photograph that offers a counternarrative to the event of lynching violence. These photos focus the viewers' attention on the continuities of lynching violence and the post-lynching events. When viewed through a Black gaze, the lynching photograph is an essential tool of analysis to critique the construction and necessity of anti-black violence. The three lynching photos in

[67] Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limits of Black Memory*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 43.

a Black vernacular that I am drawing attention to in this chapter offer quite different yet significant perspectives of lynching violence. One is of a lone Black woman; the second is of a Black woman at a funeral. In both, the women are disconnected from the lynching scenes that catalyzed them. The third photo is of a lynching event itself and centers the viewer's attention on three white women participants to the exclusion of everything else.

Wife of a Lynched Victim, shot in 1949 by Marion Palfi, as a part of a photo documentary series capturing the aftermath of Caleb (Picky Pie) Hill, Jr's lynching in the rural enclave of Irwinton, in Wilkinson, Georgia. According to cultural studies scholar Brent M. S. Campney's investigative research, the events leading up to vigilantes lynching Caleb Hill are as follows:

> The lynching grew out of a scuffle between Hill and Sheriff George C. Hatcher during an arrest at the New Harlem Club, a black juke joint in tiny Mclntyre. According to Hatcher, Hill freed himself of his handcuffs, seized the sheriff s gun, and fired a shot that narrowly missed the officer. Hatcher wrestled Hill to the floor, gaining control over him. He took Hill to the jail in Irwinton and returned to the club to retrieve his weapon. There he learned that a black witness had pocketed the pistol during the fight in an effort to prevent him from shooting Hill. The sheriff and six officers paid the man a late-night visit. After ransacking the witness' home and beating both he and wife, Hatcher retrieved his handgun. He claimed that he then returned to his living quarters adjoining the jail and fell asleep.
>
> Within a short time, a rumor circulated that "the Sheriff had been killed at the negro club." Although the exact sequence of subsequent events remains unclear, several white men soon invaded the jail, hastened to Hill's cell, and told him, "Come on, and let's get out of here." They escorted him roughly outside and stuffed him into a waiting automobile filled with an unknown number of co-conspirators. The men then drove off into the night. "Caleb [Picky Pie] Hill, Jr., 28-year-old Negro breadwinner for a family of nine, was whisked 'mysteriously' out of jail here, beaten, shot and his body dumped two and a half miles from town," reported the *Macon News* of his disappearance and death. The following morning, two young white farmers discovered the body and walked into Irwinton to report the finding.[68]

[68] Brent M.S. Campney. "A State of Violent Contrasts," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly,* 95.2 (Summer 2011): 238-239; "Irwinton Citizens Quiet after Lynching," *Macon News,* May 31, 1949.

According to the Georgia Civil Rights: Cold Case Projects website, the Georgia Bureau of Investigations investigated and charged Dennis Lamar Purvis and Malcolm "Mack" Vivian Pierce, two white men, but the all-white grand jury refused the indictment. "The FBI investigated the case, interviewing about 165 possible witnesses, but met hostility from both the GBI and the local community. The case remains unsolved, and Hill's death certificate (where his name was spelled Calib) remains the final word: "...shot through the head by hands unknown."[69]

In the days or weeks following Hill's murder, Marion Palfi, a German-American "social documentary photographer," photographed and interviewed the citizens of Irwinton as part of her project to use the camera to address issues of racism, poverty, and human rights violations in the United States.[70] The photographic narrative essay captured the day-to-day lives of the townspeople, including images of Hill's wife and Klu Klux Klan members. While lynching narratives traditionally focus on the spectacular violence perpetrated on the Black male body without fully accounting for the victim's life or what is left behind, Palfi's 1949 still of Mrs. Hill[71] requires the viewer to think about lynching more

[69] "Caleb Hill Jr.." The Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project. Accessed November 8, 2022. https://coldcases.emory.edu/caleb-hill-jr/

[70] "Marion Palfi," *Center for Creative Photography: Online Collections,* accessed November 3, 2016. http://ccp-emuseum.catnet.arizona.edu/view/people/asitem/items@:1732 See also Maurice Berger, "A Meditation on Race, in Shades of White," *New York Times*, September 17, 2015. http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/a-meditation-on-race-in-shades-of-white/?_r=0# . Marion Palfi is a German-born artist who grew up in an upper-middle-class family. Her early years included a lucrative career in modeling and in film until she renounced her privileged status in the late 1920s or early 30s. After that time, she took up photography. In 1944, she was hired by Pavelle Laboratories to develop and retouch governmental war photographs. In the U.S., she was sponsored by the Council Against Intolerance in America. During the time, Black artist Langston Hughes is quoted as having said that Palfi works "brings us face to face with hidden realities that its surface only causes us to begin to explore." Her work has been featured in exhibitions at MoMA in Los Angeles and in the New York Photo League and Public Library.

[71] Mrs. Hill is unnamed in Palfi's title of the photograph. I was able to link the photograph to Caleb Hill because her work (including this photograph) has been discussed as art pieces in several articles, which links it back to the photo documentary that Palfi conducted on this lynching event.

broadly by capturing who and what is left behind, expanding the narrative to include the women who suffer and the loss of their family members at the hands of "persons unknown." The camera captures a full view of Mrs. Hill's face and upper body, with the picture cutting off just above her waist. Her head is slightly askew, eyes directed away from the camera. She is seated and with dispirited rounded shoulders, but by contrast, her facial expression does not allude to any outward expressions of distress. One side of her face is cast in shadow. She is adorned with a Black shirt or dress that shows wear from the day. Her hair is not unkempt. However, it is also not neatly coiffed, suggesting that she may not have had time to tidy herself before the photograph or did not care to do so.

In the lower-left corner, there appears to be white material, like a shirt, suggesting that she could be sitting next to someone. Using a method that reoccurs in many of Palfi's photographs of Black people, Mrs. Hills appears to be in a darkened, non-descript room or office, lit using only the camera flash. The photo was shot with the photographer standing off-center of Mrs. Hill, offering the viewer to take in the full gravity of her facial expression. She is framed so that the flash throws a shadow against the half-glass, half-wooden wall behind her. As cultural studies scholar Mali Collins-White alluded to in a presentation at the Underground Museum, the photo leaves the viewer with "a strong sense of ambiguity" because it obscures the multi-dimensionality of both Caleb Hill and his widow. It effectively divorces the people from the violence that informs their lives.[72] Though the exact location is unclear, the photo appears to have been taken by Palfi in an office, not a home, and the lighting appears to be from a desk lamp. This staging of Mrs. Hill's photo creates a sense of

[72] Mali Collins, "Wife of a Lynch Victim Presentation," (Presentation, the Underground Museum, Los Angeles, Ca, November 5, 2016.)

alienation and trauma because of Pallfi's choice of lighting, effect, and filter- which is essential to constructing Mrs. Hill's narrative. She simultaneously divorced from the lynching violence because of the staging and setting and eternally sutured to her husband's lynching because of the photo's title, which defines her as "Wife of a lynch victim."

David Jackson's still of Mamie Till-Mobley grieving at her son's casket during his funeral service works slightly differently in that the mother's emotionality is the central concern. The open casket—constructed explicitly with a glass top—is lined with three photos of Till as a young boy before his mutilation and murder in Money, Mississippi, on August 28. 1955, while visiting family. In an unprecedented act of defiance, Till-Mobley insisted that the anti-black hatred in the United States be displayed for the world to witness through her son's murder. The photo shows Till-Mobley within the context of Black community. We see the faces and hands of grieving community members. She is held steady by the hands of a man standing protectively behind her while she grips the rim of Till's casket. The viewers' eyes are oriented to shift between the three photos of a young and happy Till—two depicting him alone and smiling; the third depicts him seated close to his mother in a casual embrace—and Mamie Mobley's lamentations. Jackson's photo, capturing the funeral of Emmett Till, is intended for Black publication and the diverse viewing public. As such, the focus of Mamie Mobley grieving her son situated within the church surrounded and supported by the community is subversive and intentional, but most pointedly, Black in this iteration, or *lynching photography in a Black vernacular*.

Kerry James Marshall's *Heirlooms and Accessories* uses photo effects to draw our focus to the meaning of the lynching photo by centering on white women as actors in and inheritors of lynching violence. Marshall takes the iconic Smith and Shipp lynching photo,

taken by Lawrence Henry Beitler, which captures the jubilant atmosphere of a white lynch mob during the aftermath of the August 7, 1930, the double lynching of Thomas Shipp (age eighteen) and Abram Smith (age nineteen). Smith and Shipp, along with two other young men, James Cameron and Robert Sullivan, were accused of the rape of a white woman and the murder of a white man. A crowd of over 10,000 white men and women broke into the jail in Marion, Indiana, and kidnapped and beat both Smith and Shipp using bricks, crowbars, boards, and high-heeled shoes.[73] Eventually, both bodies were hung from a large tree in front of the courthouse. Photographer Laurence Beitler was commissioned to photograph the lynching party, as was routine during these violent events. [74]

Marshall's triptych repurposes the Beitler photo to present an alternative perspective, first by fading most of the photo to a nearly-illegible whiteness, thereby giving the illusion of a highly overexposed photograph. The original is made transparent—or "whited-out"—to indicate the prevalence of white violence against Black people as a backdrop of daily life for both groups. The transparency renders the violence always already present and threatening and identifies how White people have overdetermined and unfettered access to the bodies of Black people. In addition to the blank background, each panel is framed inside a white wooden frame, drawing attention to one of the women captured in the original photograph. Each woman looks directly into the camera, showing presence and agency. In panel one, framed in what appears to be a twisted rope pendant, is the face of a woman with short-cropped, dark hair; she appears to be the youngest of the

[73] Fran Kaplan. "An Iconic Lynching in the North." America's Black Holocaust Museum. America's Black Holocaust Museum, July 6, 2021. https://www.abhmuseum.org/an-iconic-lynching-in-the-north/.

[74] Kaplan, "An Iconic Lynching in the North," *American's Black Holocaust Museum,* accessed December 5, 2016. http://abhmuseum.org/an-iconic-lynching-in-the-north/ See also: David Marriott, *On Black Men,* 1-5.

three women with lips that are slightly apart, showing her teeth. The second panel features a slightly older, short-cropped, dark-haired woman with a relaxed facial expression framed inside a more elaborately designed double-framed metal pendant. The final panel is the oldest woman, encased in what would be described as a double-pearl metal pendant. She appears impassive and is also wearing dark, short-cropped hair. Each pendant and its chain are reminiscent of Victorian jewelry. Marshall strategically laid the chains around the branches of the tree where Smith and Shipp's bodies had been hanged.

Understanding Palfi's photograph of Mr. Hill's wife to be simply a picture of a woman, who appears to be seated, in front of a wooden and glass wall or Mamie Till Mobley as a lamenting woman standing—with support—alongside a casket in a church. Alternatively, the photograph of the bodies of Smith and Shipp hanging from a tree also shows a crowd of white men and women of various ages, either looking at the camera, at the bodies, or other points within the scene. The first messages we construct are from the photograph's things, objects, and scenes. However, when we describe the photograph, we are joining the denoted message with the signifying systems of language to create the second-order message; or the connotative status of the photograph. In Jackson and Palfi's photographs, Mamie Mobley and Mrs. Hill are pictured in an attempt to connect them to narrative capacity as the designated mother and wife, respectively. The title of the Palfi piece signifies Mrs. Hill as a wife and a widow because a lynch mob murdered her husband. In Jackson's photos, we learn of Mamie as a mother made to be a vilomah[75]—mourning her

[75] Vilomah is a Sanskrit word meaning "against the natural order." Karla FC Holloway—James B. Duke Emerita professor of English and African American Studies and professor of Law at Duke University—uses the term to describe a mourning parent who has lost a child. See: Karla FC Holloway, "A Name for a Parent Whose Child has Died," *DukeToday*, May 26, 2009. https://today.duke.edu/2009/05/holloway_oped.html.

child's sudden loss. Anyone seeing these images is exposed to the violent afterimage of lynching violence and is attentive (if only for a moment) to who and what lies in its wake.

Similarly, the events of the Smith and Shipp photograph are first signified by the language of "lynched at the hands of persons unknown"—language which appears in the original photo. The viewer becomes aware that *this* is a lynching scene and that the crowd of people visible in the frame are witnesses to the murder and the actual murderers of these two Black men. James Marshall reads the Smith and Shipp lynching in a Black vernacular. As such, he adds another layer of signification, through both the visual and language, by focusing the viewer on the faces of the white female perpetrators, framing them in necklaces—or family heirlooms, and titling the piece *Heirlooms and Accessories*. The necklace not only serves as a symbol of an extended family history of violence passed from one generation to the next, like an heirloom; it also brings into sharp relief the relationship of white women to the noose. Heirlooms, by definition, are passed from one generation to the next. The viewer is now compelled to move critically between the violence of lynching and its (inter)generational legacy.

Marshall's utilization of the triptych—art structured into three panels—signals a narrative sequence that can function separately or be viewed (read) together to create temporal and spatial meaning. During the Middle Ages—classical antiquity, the medieval, and the modern period—the triptych form was often used to create altarpieces in early Christian artwork. In religion, the number three symbolizes the trinity—the father, the son, and the holy spirit—the perfect complete whole. Conversely, the three can represent Satan, the antichrist, and the false prophet. Whether Marshall is conveying the former or the latter is unclear; however, the significance of the repeating threes—the three generations of

women, the three pieces of distinct heirloom necklaces, and the triptych—in the context of lynching violence should not be understated. Christianity is commonly used to justify racialized and anti-black violence, and Lynch mobs have routinely used religious dogma, including during the commission of murders.

Of note, these images address the significance of the lynching photograph to carry memory forward, to complicate the narrative, and to claim social positioning while also forging communal and national forgetting. The Palfi and the lynching photo featured in the Marshall pieces participate in an intentional refusal of naming, but with different and lasting racialized and gendered effects. For the white women in the Smith and Shipp photograph, the silence of naming draws them further into a sisterhood of whiteness articulated by Victorian principles of chastity, purity, and respectability, a cult of true womanhood constructed in binary oppositions to supposed sexual deviance of Black women; of protected virtue.[76] The act of lynching and the circulation of the lynching photograph socially define the white female lyncher. She is affirmed in her whiteness and her position in womanhood through lynching, connecting her to personhood and community.

Additionally, during the lynching—often prompted by a claim to protect a white woman's virtue—the white female lynching folded into community and kinship through her literal proximity to friends and family, acting in her honor. The white woman is afforded general honor and integrity linked rationally to the other white women and men in the frame. So powerful is the social status of white womanhood that even those who do

[76] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence;" Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.)

not have filial kinship claims to white women have affilial ties as noble guardians of her virtue or punishable threats to it. For instance, journalist and antilynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett notes, "Humanity abhors the assailant of womanhood, and this charge upon the Negro at once placed him beyond the pale of human sympathy."[77] The accusation against Smith and Shipp was the rape of a white woman, and their subsequent torture and murder at the hands of both white men and women were justified based on the presumption of that sexual violation alone. Their degraded humanity is always already outside of any enunciation of white sympathy. The ritualistic torture, tearing and cutting away of the body parts of Black men and women alike, followed by the passing around of gruesome souvenirs such as eyeballs, hair, charred skin, and genitalia, operates much like the lynching photograph as souvenirs serving as an affirmation of and for white kinship and white community, and to confirm Black bodies' reduction to the flesh.[78] The heirlooms also concretizes white women as the sole progenitors who define and embody the status of a woman made possible through the exclusion of Black women from any iteration of womanhood.

For the White participants and audience, the social ramifications of the photograph as recorded event reinforce White community and supremacy. Amy Louis Woods argues that the white participants in the lynching photo "gather as one, pushing their bodies together, leaning forward, heads peering over shoulders, so all are in view."[79] She continues

[77] Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The Red Record* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 12.

[78] Spillers, Hortense J, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64. doi:10.2307/464747.

[79] Amy Louise Wood, "Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy." *American Nineteenth Century History* 6, no. 3 (September 2005): 382. doi:10.1080/14664650500381090.

that the lynch mob is constructed from all walks of life, "men and women, young and old,"[80] with men in suits forming a community with men clad in overalls. Critical theorist David Marriott argues that for the white lynchers and the white people to whom the souvenir is passed around, the lynching photograph is affirming of their position of power, and it allows them to fashion a self as judge, jury, and execution:

> Part of the rites (or rights) of lynching, photographs of dead Black men and their white executioners are meant to be seen. They are *public* portraits: Posed, compelling, an exhibition and narration of racist violence. Pressed up close, or drawing back, the camera lens is a means to fashion the self through the image of a dead Black man—and, sometimes, to identify with the white men and women at the scene. Spectacle, and gallery, both: a consolidation of racist community and a posture of whiteness.[81]

The white lynchers became arbitrators of Black death and, thus, claimed authority over Black people's lives regardless of their socio-economic status or gender. Lynching violence bridges white social class and white caste. Alternatively, as political theorist Tiffany Willoughby-Herard articulates it, "the project of white supremacy profoundly relies on poor whites articulating themselves as white subjects independent and innocent of meaningful social, economic and cultural linkages to Black people, and the persistent presence of upwardly mobile female strives enthusiastically deploying masculinist social regulation."[82] Marshalls' *Heirloom and Accessories* is a pictorial representation of the "filial and affilial recognition—subjectivity,"[83] or as the act of passing the privilege of white

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[81] Marriott, *On Black Men,* 6.

[82] Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, "I'll Give You Something to Cry About": The Interracial Violence of Uplift Feminism in the Carnegie Poor White Study Volume, The Mother and Daughter of the Poor Family" *South African Review of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2010): 97.

[83] Frank Wilderson. *Red, White & Black* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 333.

womanhood from one generation to the next, through her protected status, like the passing of an heirloom.

Whereas the Palfi photo and the photos of Mamie and Emmett illustrate the literal death of (gene)rationality, Marshall's triptych exposes how lynching violence authorizes transgenerational legibility to white women. Ellen C. Caldwell argues that the "accessories" of Marshall's piece are the white women: they are the accessories to the crime of lynching and are complicit witnesses to the violence against Black people.[84] They are, however, not mere accessories but *actors* involved in every aspect of the murders of Black men, women, and children. In the case of Smith and Shipp's murder, the accounts detail that women used weapons, such as the shoes off their feet, to beat and batter these two men before and as (and probably after) they were murdered. The five women pictured in the original photo do not cower helplessly behind the men as mere witnesses. They appear present and focused, staring directly at the camera and planting themselves into the scene. They are lynchers who build and maintain community on the flesh of Black people. This community building is signified in the photo by one woman romantically holding hands with a man standing behind her, encircled by several generations of other women, impassively bearing witness to and participating in the sustained and ritualized killing of Black people.
They are also directly linked to the violence through their silence, accounting for much of the justification for the violence. Those actions, coupled with intentionally not naming the perpetrators, help to normalize and affirm them as honorable women who must protect the nation against the threat of Black people. The nameless yet faced women in this, and other

[84] Ellen C. Caldwell, "Responding to Terror: The Art of Kerry James Marshall," *JSTOR Daily,* July 16, 2015. http://daily.jstor.org/art-of-kerry-james-marshall/

lynching photographs help build a particular archival silence informed by white legacy. This archival silence is signaled by the absence of their names, which disallows culpability and justice for the murdered Black men, women, and children in racialized white violence. The silence, in this case, is what archivist Rodney G.S. Carter calls an *active silence*; active silences are authorized by the archive and participate in the doing and undoing of the narrative. They are silences within erasure, dehumanization, and degradation sutured violently to Black bodies. The silence in naming the white people at lynching scenes signifies a culture of gratuitous, unimpeded violence. The declaration that these men, women, and children were lynched at the hands of persons unknown does not separate the lyncher from their humanity. While the declaration is quite literally denoting a crime, it is also erasing the culpability of the actors while staking their claim to personhood through the language of "the unknown," even as they are pictured. In this case, the silence of the unnamed women in the Palfi piece marginalizes the devastating experiences of Mr. Hill's wife and Black women generally because, as Carter argues, "[a]rchival silences result in societal memory being compromised."[85]Further, for the marginalized person, the silences are linked to "history, memory, and identity. .when the record only reflects the viewpoint of the powerful; there is a great void in the collective memory."—an obfuscation of pain, violence, and trauma. [86]

When read traditionally, without the subversive framing of the Black vernacular, Palfi's image of Mrs. Hill performs this violence. To start, the decision not to give the legal name of Mr. and Mrs. Hill perpetrates other violence. If you view the photo without

[85] Rodney G. S. Carter, "Of Things Said and UnSaid" *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), 220.
[86] Carter, "Of things Said and Unsaid," 221.

reference to the title, there is no indication of the violence brought her to that moment. In a black vernacular, Mrs. Hill is representative of a culture of silence and nameless Black women and families torn apart by racial terror. Unlike the white women in the Smith and Shipp lynching photo who actively assert their power to claim narrative, Mrs. Hill is left without context.

Moreover, with the addition of the title, which leaves her without a named personal identity but marks her for a specific social location, she and women like her are at the site of normalized trauma. Palfi's naming practices expose the pervasive yet unmarked ways that violence impacts the lives of Black women. Further, her practice of not naming or lacking thereof serves as an erasure of the trauma, foreclosing upon the possibility of social empathy for Hill and his family. In Collin-White's presentation at The Underground Museum, she noted that Mrs. Hill's facial expression is not one of shock and confusion but is more akin to resignation as a person who is at once and always in the bowels of the trauma.[87] She lacks elements constitutive of personhoods, such as kinship ties and community. Further, she cannot serve as a witness to address the violence that has shaken her life, and she does not appear as a visibly grieving wife or with any connection to the man she built a family. In effect, the Palfi photo of Mrs. Hill and Palfi's naming practices effectively articulate Mrs. Hill's status as socially dead.[88]

Mr. Hill cared for his wife, their three children, his mother and father, and two sisters. A vast community network would have been mourning Caleb Hill's murder.

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[87] Collins, "Presentation."

[88] Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1982). In his introduction to *Slavery and Social Death,* Patterson names three constitutive elements of the socially dead or the slave: the threat of gratuitous violence, natal alienation, and general dishonor.

However, the only person featured in the documentary photography is the nameless Mrs. Hill. The photo effectively isolates her from family and community in an era when racialized terror informed the lives of everyone and dramatically impacted her own through the loss of her husband, not only to her but to the larger community. Her isolation is also made more apparent because she is likely seated with someone Palfi chose not to feature in the photo. In mourning, Mrs. Hill is pictured alone, without any support system or comfort.

Mrs. Hill is also made a victim by proximity to the gratuitous violence that took her husband. Palfi names her thus as the wife of a lynched victim. Many scholars have described the constant terror and threat of white violence against Black people, including W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Koritha Mitchell, and Herbert Shapiro.[89] There are some documented cases of husbands and wives who were lynched together. The case of eight-month-pregnant Mary Turner, who verbalized her plans to press charges against the lynch mob who killed her husband, is a notable case of the lynching of a wife and murder of her unborn son. Mrs. Hills' physical constitution would suggest that the prospect of violence is not foreign to her.

Palfi's naming practices, both for Mrs. Hill and Mr. Hill, show a general disregard for the lives of these two people. Subsequent searches for Mrs. Hill's first name have also yielded no results. Neither she nor her family's names appear in any newspapers or other accounts of Hill's life and death. She is, in effect, a socially recognized nobody with no name

[89] Fitzhugh W. Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching,* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); and Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

or status outside of being the wife of a man who died sometime before the photograph was taken.

According to Marriot, the photographic image is "[m]ore than an aid to memory (though it is that too), the photograph is a part of the process, another form of racist slur which can travel through time to do its work."[90] It is part of the signifying process that makes white womanhood possible and Black Womanhood illegible. Returning to Barthes, he argues that "[t]hanks to its code of connotation the reading of the photograph is thus always historical, it depends on the reader's 'knowledge' just as though it were a matter of real language."[91] Within the libidinal economy of the United States, which begins its trumpet narrative of heroism in its conquests over the Native and on the African coast, the Black sentient being is always ontologically socially dead. White people and Black people come to know themselves through historicizing Black people as conquered and enslaved and white people as the strong, more intellectually savvy conquerors. White Womanhood, antithetical to the perceived Black female deviance and lack of womanly properties, also derives from that same narrative.

One of the challenges in beginning an analysis of lynching violence made "art," specifically an analysis that seeks to make legible the complex realities of Black life and experiences in the United States, is being able to capture and reclaim Black lives and narratives without being reductive to the dynamic and varying experiences of Black people. Blackness, for Black people, is formulated from our understanding of kinship and love within a social structure that relentlessly disavows it. I am pointing to the larger social,

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[90] Marriott, Ibid. 9.

[91] Barthes. "The Photographic Image" 206-207.

structural, and institutional racial practices of exclusion that make it impossible for Black women, as a collective group, to claim the protected social status of "woman." As much as we define ourselves through our ties and connection in our communities, Black lives are also informed and shaped by unimaginable yet unremarked violence.

Returning to the long history of lynching violence, the lynching photograph is as much a part of the generational legacy passed between white people as it is for Black people. Researcher and activist Anne P. Rice argues that "African Americans never forgot lynching."[92] She explains that in many Black families, the lynching photograph was "a rite of Passage, a common practice" used to "warn of the dangers of racism, or to memorialize" lost loved ones, or as a call to action to promote activism.[93] The lynching photograph helps generate a collective memory of that violence, and the practice of naming in these particular photos helps us understand how people fashioned racial and gendered identities through violence against Black bodies. As Frank Wilderson argues, the lynching photograph for the white participant and recipient is "the gift of filiation, the capacity to have and inherit parental 'legacies,' and as the gift of affiliation, the capacity to be recognized, and act as a community."[94]

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[92] Rice, *Witnessing Lynching*, 2.
[93] Rice. *Witnessing Lynching,* 2.
[94] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black,* 333.

Chapter Two: Lynching Memory and Storytelling at the Intersection of Cognitive Dissonance and Psychic Detachment

Abstract:

Lynching Memory and Storytelling at the Intersection of Cognitive Dissonance and Psychic Detachment centers on memory, witnessing, and retelling questions. More specifically, it interrogates how we remember lynching history and the tensions inherent in our efforts at (re)membering Emmett Louis Till (1941-1955) as an entry for thinking about the violent paradox of remembering the lives of lynched victims. As a case study, interrogating the method and structure of retelling offers greater insight into the problems inherent in storytelling when anti-Black violence interrupts the possibility of resolution. The chapter outlines the quandary of beginnings and the fundamental problem in how we remember and honors the life of Emmett L. Till; it engages efforts at subversive and oppositional memory through the legacy of Mamie Till Mobley and seeks to theorize the antagonism of redress and to remember when the subject of memory is a victim of anti-black racist violence. Finally, it theorizes why neither Carolyn Bryant nor Mamie Till can help us redress (resolve, end, change) the subjection of Black people to violence and death, on the one hand. And yet the genuine psychic necessity of these stories on the other.

I. The Problem of Beginning: What is in a Story?

> The term storytelling has a delightful double meaning. On the one hand, it implies recounting experiences in a coherent narrative format with the perspective of an audience in mind. On the other hand, it can also connote a certain slippage from the realities of the episodes it supposedly portrays, if not a wholesale bending of the facts to create a "good story."
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> Ian McGregor and John Holms, 1999 [95]

[95] Ian McGregor and John G. Holmes, "How Storytelling Shapes Memory and Impressions of Relationship Events Over Time," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76, no. 3 (1999): 403.

Where you stand when you philosophize and theorize determines who benefits from your thinking.
Joy James, 1993 [96]

In the two preceding epigraphs—the former from psychologists Ian McGregor and John G. Holmes; the latter from political theorist Joy James—we are charged to pay attention to the quandary of where and how we begin when we re/construct a narrative. From where do we begin to tell a *coherent* narrative that remains accountable to history while attending to the relations of power that exist, particularly when power and violence precede and anticipate the subject matter? For my purposes, it challenges me to think critically about how we remember and narrativize dispossessed Black life when Black death is the socially and culturally expected and acceptable condition of Black existence. The self-fashioning narratives created to have autonomy in constructing our identities and society are intended to define who we are and how we imagine we fit into the grander schema. It is illustrative of a general desire for social coherence and recognition. When the stories, the defining narrative, are constructed in response to anti-black murders and violence, we are struck by the challenge of both finding coherence and making the events adhere to some logic, particularly when the anti-black violence is racialized lynchings. This chapter explores how our demands for coherence and recognition function to maintain the cognitive dissonance and psychic detachment necessitated by the abject subjection of Black life ever in peril. The literature on lynching has analyzed and theorized the historiography of lynching violence in the U.S. and anti-lynching movements; the geographic limitations of lynching scholarship; lynching rhetoric—including literary and

[96] James, Joy, and Ruth Farmer, eds. *Spirit, Space & Survival: African American Women in (White) Academe*. (New York: Routledge, 1993). 34.

visual representation; lynching and the state; White performativity, American belonging and lynching violence; and gender and lynching violence, with a focus on Black women victims.[97] One necessary intervention in the breadth of scholarship on lynching and lynching memory is the limited focus on the lives of the person(s) who becomes a victim of mob rule. While the scholarship has given us much to think with thematically about the structure and function of anti-black lynching violence, lynched victims and their families are often erased and marginalized because the recounting rarely positions the victim outside the violence, or the context of the lives left behind. Our memory of Emmett Till has not yielded very different results.

There exists inherent tension in the social memory and remembering of Emmett Louis Till that is illustrative of the problems inherent in lynchings memory more broadly. This chapter reads the (2017) short speculative film, "My Nephew Emmett" by Kevin Wilson, Jr.; the documented accounts of the lynching murder of Emmett Louis Till; and Mamie Till Mobley's activism to restore the memory of her son to interrogate the rhetoric

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[97] On Anti-Lynching histories and movements, see Ida B Wells, *Southern Horrors* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011); Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2003)*;* National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (Clark: The Lawbook Exchange, 2012); James Elbert Cutler, *Lynch-Law* (New York: Longsman, Green, and Co.,1905); and Richard Brown, *Strain of Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). On lynching geographies, see Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); and Michael J. Pfeifer, *Lynching Beyond Dixie* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013). On lynching rhetoric: Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006); Jonathan Markowitz*, Legacies of Lynching* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Ersula J. Ore, *Lynching* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019). On lynching and the state, see Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004); George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky 1865-1940* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Margaret Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006). On lynching, performativity, and belonging, see David Marriot, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)*;* and Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

and cultural memory of lynching. Situating the interrogation of social and cultural memory through visual and written media analysis in the accounts of Till's murder is intended to offer a more nuanced and comprehensive reading of how we account for it. As Till is remembered, the account of his life participates in a discourse of white supremacy and anti-blackness that precedes and anticipates the narrative. White supremacy and anti-blackness are coterminous social relations that make it impossible to adhere to a linear narrative structure when memorializing the victim of anti-black violence. It is a violence that is unintelligible but commonplace, shocking but not unexpected, offering stability for the white world and (instability) for the Black. I use the phrase "case study" to signal that this violence, though often structured socially as isolated incidents of bad actors, does not exist in a vacuum. This violence is constitutive and paradigm-forming.

Essential to the grammar of anti-black lynching violence is the complicated relationship between lynching events and memory, on the one hand, and memorialization and narrative, on the other. Anti-black lynching grammar is the ideological system of anti-Blackness that creates and sustains the conditions for racialized lynching violence. Within the grammar exists the organizing rationalization and justification consistent with anti-black structural and institutional violence. Anti-black lynching violence is a manifestation and machination of that ideology system. The act of remembering and memorializing Black life within the confines of paradigmatic anti-black structural violence is akin to a psychological balancing act. For Black people—the intended audience[98]—the effort to

[98] I write this inspired by the means and methods that we—black people—are always insisting on legibility, on coherence, on intelligibility, on survival. The other reality is that I write this to unpack, examine, and understand my relationship to narrative and storytelling about what I witness as a Black woman with a complex mix of social identities mapped on my body. And what it means for me to bear witness through the lens of those social identities, for me to construct a story of telling of Black life, suffering, death, and survival. I

reconnect [to] lives destroyed by anti-black violence, and to continue to exist in a world whose survival depends on Black fungibility[99], simultaneous invisibility, and hypervisibility, and death, we must perform psychological and cognitive gymnastics. Ontologically and quotidianly, Black life is perilous, existing within the constancy and immediacy of racial violence. The discourse of quotidian Black life suggests that Black people are aware of this perilousness: driving while Black, walking while Black, attending class while Black, sitting while Black, and the like. These idioms are figuratively, metaphorically, and in reality indicative of the precariousness endemic to Black life. Existence under this precarity demands some psychological detachment to persist spatially and temporally in a world sustained in and through the Black body.

Nevertheless, our commitment to the victims of anti-black violence means that we also insist on their remembrance, telling their stories, and honoring their lives. "Lynching Memory and Storytelling at the Intersection of Cognitive Dissonance and Psychic Detachment" is an interrogation of the antagonism inherent in the necessity of mental detachment and the insistence on honoring the memories of lynched victims. To further complicate the honoring and memory, with lynching violence specifically, the spectacularization of the violence—of lynched bodies—has been circulated as a way for the perpetrators to capture their acts. The need to psychically detach from our proximity to violence while also remembering the violence creates the antagonism inherent in the impossibility of telling a coherent account of anti-black lynching violence that memorializes the victim. Faced with this antagonism (to detach and to remember), the narratives

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am grappling with questions about the stakes of the stories we tell, the psychic labor in constructing a narrative about Black life and death.

[99] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjections,* (New York: Oxford University, 1997).

created to honor and memorialize lynched victims often rely on rhetorical strategies of storytelling that are intended to offer solace and redress for the impossibility.

II. *Mechanisms of Lynching Memory*

The mechanisms of lynching memory have included lynching photography, state-sanctioned memorials and site dedications, artistic renderings, and the narratives that capture and retell the accounts of violence. The lynching photograph genre is more than simply souvenirs circulated by lynchers to capture the moment. The genre serves an ideological and axiological function for white identity. It is a disciplining function when weaponized against Black communities and an oppositional and subversive function reclaimed by Black communities. The ideological and axiological function is arguably the most important, as it necessitates the secondary and tertiary uses of the photographs. Ideologically, the lynching photograph functions as scaffolding for maintaining white supremacy on the one hand. They are a means of connecting and reaffirming the concept of "white family" while simultaneously building a bridging collective white communal identity fortified by anti-black violence. The lynching photograph is widely circulated; as such, it obfuscates spatial and temporal borders symbolizing universal superior white identity. Thereby constructing and maintaining a concept of omnipotent whiteness over Blackness sans concerns over white people's socioeconomic status or class barriers. Art historian and cultural critic Dora Apel assert, "The proud gaze of the white mob is the photographs assumes a white audience that will recognize the virtue of their deed, an audience that regards the lynched blacks, not the white mob, as criminals."[100] On the other, they serve axiologically to articulate the social value—or lack thereof—of Black life. The value of white

[100] Dora Apel. "On Looking." *American Quarterly*. 55, no. 3 (September 2003). 462.

life, family, and community is predicated on the abject objection of Black life, family, and community. Rendered an axiological and ontological zero, the tortured Black bodies are fodder for the vibrancy of white life that is the proper subject of these photos.

The ideological function of lynching violence affirms white supremacy and is also a tool for terrorizing Black communities. As asserted in the previous chapter, the lynching photographic is language. They participate in a grammar—a systemic and structural articulation—of anti-black violence and white supremacy intended to signify positionality for both communities. However, Black people have also appropriated the genre as a tool for forced witness-as is the case of Mamie Till Mobley's deploying the photos of Emmett Till to force the mass public to bear witness to his murder. As such, it is deployed didactically as a discursive counternarrative, repurposing the lens to shift the gaze to reflect pervasive anti-blackness.

State-sanctioned memorials and commemorative sites dedicated to lynched victims participate in narrating or making an account of anti-black lynching violence. These commemorative sites construct and orchestrate an official public narrative, a story about the *shameful* moment of the lynching event. Apel asserts that these sites "are meant to produce historical closure for painful events in the past, resolve conflicting narratives about those events, and secure a form of durable public consensus against an uncertain future."[101] They are also meant to absolve the state's direct involvement or complicity in anti-black lynching violence. In constructing a commemorative site for memorializing lynched victims, the state constructs a persuasive rhetorical appeal about its ethos, a

[101] Dora Apel, "Memorialization and Its Discontents," in *The Mississippi Quarterly* 61, no. ½ , (Winter-Spring 2008), 218.

narrative situated in a discourse of progress from an antiquated shameful past to a more progressive and liberal future. These depictions of lynching are critical to society's efforts to tell the story of histories of lynching as well as to honor the lives of lynching victims. Through these stories that are told, lynching narratives, the victims of lynching are sutured to accounts that often dishonor their memories and completely divorce them for their connections to family and community.

Narrative vs. Storytelling

Throughout this chapter, the terms *narrative* and *storytelling* are used interchangeably. A narrative is an account—spoken, written, or visual—that depicts an event. The purpose of the narration is to tell a story in a coherent narrative that the intended audience can follow and add to the collective recall of the events. Stories are narratives told for entertainment purposes. I use the two terms interchangeably in my analysis of how we tell the story of lynching violence because anti-black lynching functions as a form of spectacular entertainment and a means of constructing a narrative or story about the respective identities—or the social position—of those involved in the violence. Such that lynching violence creates a story about blackness and whites in kind. In lynching memory, the narrative or story that is told, or the attempts made to recall and redress, does not exist in a vacuum. They are inextricably imbued with the cultural logic and social ideologies that maintain violent structures and racial hierarchies. As such, racialized lynching violence functions on several scales of abstraction.

Furthermore, the ways we recall or memorialize that violence participates at each level of abstraction by telling the story of the violence at structures of social life and death. Lynching's cultural logic traverses spatial and temporal boundaries and is bound up in

what critical literary theorist Jacqueline Goldsby describes as the "broader national cultural developments. She defines lynching's cultural logic as:

> The 'cultural logic' of lynching enables it to emerge and persist throughout the modern era because *its violence 'fit' within broader national cultural developments*. This synchronicity captures why I refer to lynching as 'spectacular': the violence made certain cultural developments and tensions visible for Americans to confront. On the other hand, because *lynching's violence was so unspeakably brutal—and crucially*, since the lives and bodies of African American people were negligible concerns for the country for so long a time—*cultural logic also describes how were have disavowed lynching's normative relations to modernism's history over the last century*.[102]

Central to the disavow is how we describe lynching in terms that render it as singular isolated events committed by a few bad actors. Much of the collective recall of lynching events hinges upon the same social values that construct a criminalized and deviant Black and a justified white. Sociocultural anthropologist James Wertsch asserts that collective memory or recall is "mediated by cultural tools that are provided by a sociocultural context."[103] As the social and cultural factors that inform racialized lynching violence in this context are anti-blackness and white supremacy, how we recall and tell the story of said violence will also be mediated and shaped in the same context. The cultural assumptions that scaffold stories of lynching violence are undergirded anti-black by social identities—brute, thug, animals—that always already overdetermine Black guilt and criminality.

III. The Problem of the Narrative: Who Frames the Story of Emmett Till

The chronology used to remember Emmett Till is fundamentally flawed at best, and at worst, it perpetuates white supremacist anti-black violence. The master narrative that

[102] Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret,* 6.

[103] James Wertsch. "Collective Memory and Narrative Templates." *Social Research* 75, no.1 (Spring 2008): 139.

recounts the events leading up to the murder of Till, even at its most critical and subversive, often repurposes the initial violence against Till because it relies upon Carolyn Bryant's account. The story of Bryant is a fiction steeping in and propped up by anti-black tropes and sentient that far proceeds Emmett and the moment in the store.

According to the official record, Emmett Louis Till, a boy of fourteen years of age, entered the store where 21-year-old Carolyn Bryant was working behind the counter. In these accounts and the various retellings, it is maintained that Emmett made some inappropriate sexual advancement—a whistle, a physical touch, or Till saying "bye baby" upon leaving the store, or a combination of all three *offenses* according to the various versions of Carolyn Bryant's accounts of that day in the store.[104] As a result of Emmett's inappropriateness and Bryant's telling, in the early morning hours of August 28, 1955, in Money, MS. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam invaded the family home of Moses Wright and his family, Emmett—a resident of Chicago—was visiting for the summer. They abducted Emmett from his Uncle's home. Bryant, Milam, and accomplices tortured and murdered Emmett. Finally, these murderers tethered his body to a cotton gin fan and tossed him into the Tallahatchie River.

Till is singularly positioned in this telling as he is divorced from his family, and his life before this event is almost completely erased. The various versions of the story often mention that he is visiting Money, MS, from Chicago, but neither accounts for the complexities of his short life nor his close ties to family and community. The story mentions he is visiting his Uncle but does little to situation him within the context of his extended

[104] I recount these various claims against Emmett Till to help frame the central arguments about culpability in this section.

family members and the community of Money. He is sutured to two prevailing ideas: first, he went into the store and committed an overtly sexual social infraction against a white woman in the South. Second, Till was lynched due to it and became one of the most famous victims of lynching in U.S. history.

Bryant's Deception

I pause here to give a brief timeline of the versions of events that Bryant recalls on the official record over the years because her accounts are the pivotal point from which we begin our remembering of Emmett Till's murder and are radically inconsistent. In doing so, this section aims to highlight the inconsistencies in her stories to show her as an unreliable witness on the one hand and destabilize her as a purveyor of history and knowledge on the other.

Bryant is interviewed by Sidney Carlton (defense lawyer for Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam) on September 2, 1955, when she makes the following claim about Till, the "boy came to candy counter & I waited on him & when I went to take the money he grabbed my hand & said how about a date and I walked away from him, and he said, 'What's the matter Baby can't you take it?" She claims that as Till walked out of the door, he said, "goodbye." At this point, she runs to retrieve her pistol from her car and rushes out to the storefront, during which time Till wolf whistles at her. She reports the incident to her husband on Friday morning. And that though she did not go to the Wright home to identify Till, he was brought to the stare in the early hours, at which time she confirmed his identity.

Her story becomes even more aggressive during her September 22, 1955, court testimony. In the testimony, the 14-year-old boy became "this nigger man" who "caught" her hand—she had extended to take money from him for the purchase of candy—in a

"strong grip" and said, "How about a date, baby?" She freed herself from his grip and headed to the back of the store. At this time, Till approached and caught her from the side at the cash register and "put his left hand on [her] waist, and he put his other hand over on the other side." In this account, he not only asks her for a date and asks if she cannot take it. He also tells her she does not need to be afraid of him, using language that she doesn't use, an unprintable word." Finally, "this other nigger" came inside the store and had to force Till outside. On leaving, he said, "goodbye." As she goes for the gun in her front seat, Till—who has been standing on the store's front porch—comes out into the road and whistles at her. That following January 24, 1956, Bryant is interviewed by *Look Magazine.* She maintained the same trial testimony but added that she had not been the first person to tell her husband about the attack. Instead, he first learned of it from a member of the black community.

Bryant's story again changed during an interview with FBI agent Dale Killinger in 2005; Bryant says she was accosted by Till and did not tell her husband for fear that harm would come to the boy. In her unpublished memoir, she claims the following account:[105]

> I looked straight at Emmett and said even stronger, 'No, it's not him.' 'You have the wrong person, it's NOT him.' All I could think was, 'Take him home, please take him home.' I was terrified for his safety. His uncle, as I later found out, begged them to just beat Emmett up there at his house, not to take him away.
> To my utter disbelief, the young man flashed me a strange smile and said, 'Yes, it was me,' or something to that effect."

[105] Several news organizations have published the various inconsistence accounts from Bryant. I have composed this section based on those articles. See Justin Gamble, "A timeline of Emmett Till's accuser's changing stories'" *CNN,* July 26, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/26/us/timeline-emmett-till-accuser-changing-stories-reaj/index.html; Jerry Mitchell, "Here's the proof against Carolyn Bryant Donham in the Emmett Till case. Is it enough to convict her?, *Boston Globe,* July 12, 2022. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/07/14/opinion/heres-proof-against-carolyn-bryant-donham-emmett-till-case-is-it-enough-convict-her/ ; Jerry Mitchell, "What did Caroly Bryant say and when?, *Clarion Ledger*, Sept. 26, 2018. https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2018/08/24/what-did-carolyn-bryant-say-and-when/1030483002/

Her most recent account was given to historian Timothy Tyson. In his 2017 book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, Tyson claims that Bryant Donham recanted her testimony, stating, “That part’s not true. . .Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him.” Her family denies the recantation happened.[106]

The inconsistencies in Bryant Donham’s accounts are, at minimum problematic. The more pressing issue about her account is that public discourse about the life and death of Emmett Luis Till is centered around how she tells the story. Her accounts function as our official record. Her story implicates Till in is murder; it grants her access to social status as a vulnerable white woman—a position that her socioeconomic status potentially disallows access—in need of protection, and it hinders any critical analysis of the gratuitous nature of anti-Black (lynching) violence. The social reliance on her overtly inconsistent and blatantly false accounts engenders epistemological inquiries about source reliability, mainly when the narrative attempts to capture the weight of anti-black violence.

In Saidiya Hartman's seminal article, "Venus in Two Acts," she declares, "I want to tell a story. . capable of retrieving what remains dormant. . .without committing further violence in my own act of narration." She continues, “It is a story predicated upon impossibility—listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives. . .Yet how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death?"[107] Hartman's challenge of retrieval and practices of listening, translating, and refashioning, should

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[106] Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2017).
[107] Saidiya Hartman. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008), 2-3.

ground the retelling of the murder of Emmett Louis Till, particularly when the terrible utterance condemned him to death are the lies told by Carolyn Bryant. Bryant's lies traverse the realm of plausibility and rely on the discourse of Black hypersexuality that has persisted in the white imaginary for more than a century. While the" wolf whistle" is corroborated by Simeon Wright, the younger cousin of Till, Bryant's utterances—the story she tells—are situated within the profound and penetrating legacies of white female vulnerability, Black male hypersexuality, Black women as deviant and insufficient mothers. He lies—rather corroborated or completely dispelled shored-up her position of vulnerability. It sutured Till to criminality, hypersexuality, and depravity. It also transported him into the murdered bodies of Black men, women, and children, whose lives were cut short by racial trauma and violence.

To be clear, Carolyn Bryant's accounts—in every iteration of her story—are the white imagination's fiction. It is a fiction from the conflicting negrophobic and negrophilic discourse that persisted in the white imaginary. To begin with, any of her accounts make Till culpable in his murder. It offers some coherence for the following events because it positions Till as a subject with agency. He is an actor who—albeit unjustly—suffers the consequences of his actions or ignorance (if you allow that, he was from the north and did not understand the ways of the south).

Moreover, either instantiation, Till is an agent of his demise. In addition, using Bryant's versions perpetuate her victimhood and carves out a space for her in the cult of true womanhood--a position in the patriarchal structure that is always already economically middle-class, racially white, and sexually pure. The social assumptions inherent in the dominant framing of Till's murder ascribes to the belief of her

vulnerability—a young woman alone in the store—who requires protection from the Black brute—a hypersexual Black man enters the store and engages in lewd and lascivious behavior. Moreover, the only way to ensure her protection is to murder the fiend.

IV. *Reimaginings: Resistance Subversion Versus Mamie's Remembering*

Thinking in conversation with mother and advocate Mamie Till Mobley and director Kevin Wilson, Jr. about the problems inherent in the story of Emmett Till heinous murder, I interrogate resistance and oppositional practices for framing and shaping the memories about Emmett Till. Both perform an oppositional or counter-memory seeking to reconstitute Till into full personhood through their stories of his life beyond the moment of the lynching violence. Mamie Till Mobley performs oppositional or counter-memory throughout her life, doing advocacy work by dedicating her life to constructing her account of her son. She began with his birth and told of all the nuances of his characters. She offers alternate versions of what might have taken place in the Bryant store and the reason—if he indeed did—that Till may have whistled that day. Wilson and Mamie Till-Mobley attempt to disabuse us of this way of telling the story of lynching. Further, both draw attention to the language of lynching and the power dynamics within storytelling. And Mamie reminds us of the Black m/othering work of serving as a "repository of his memory."[108]

Subverting the Record: The Resistance in My Nephew Emmett (2017)

Kevin Wilson Jr.'s Oscar-nominated, award-winning short narrative fiction, *My Nephew Emmett* (2017), encapsulates the meaning of storytelling and some of the limitations of this history as represented in the official record and our attempts at

[108] April Jackson. "From Hymnody to Hip-Hop: Black Muslim and Black Christian Male Youth are Rhyming for a Reason and Utilizing their Mother's Wizdom—An Ethnographic Research Study," (PhD diss., Claremont School of Theology, 2019).

correction. In a round table discussion in 2019, Dr. Linette Park, Dr. Erin Gray, Dr. Bridget Cooks, and I discussed this stunning account of Emmett Till. Centering on Till in his family's home, the film participates in discourse and critique about the history of anti-Black lynching that limits how lynched victims can be articulated and remembered while also illuminating the "impossibilities in capturing [the extent of the violence] in lynching violence."[109] As Erin Gray describes, "a subtle portrait of a family on the brink of crisis,"[110] situated within the historical moment of Jim Crow propped up by anti-Black racial violence and, more specifically, anti-Black lynching. Wilson's speculative short fiction effectively maps the interiority of the Wright family dynamic and their kinship narrative. We witness Emmett within the confines of his extended family home in relation to his cousins, aunt, and uncle, Moses Wright. As Wilson, Jr. asserts, Wright is "unable to control the outcome of a horrific situation"[111] and is confronted with the impossible dilemma of protecting his immediate family versus Emmett. This version of Till adds nuance and complexity to him and the family dynamic around him

Bridget Cooks[112] draws our attention to the film's sensuality. The film's insistence on an awareness of the Black body as body, as sentient beings, not reducible to the flesh. The characters are multifaceted and intimate. Wilson masterfully illustrates the Wright home as humble but loving. The adults are present and attuned to one another and are connected and compassionate to their children and nephews. It is a visual example of Frank

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[109] Linette Park, "Colloquium on Lynching Violence and Representation: Film Screening of *My Nephew Emmett"* Roundtable. University of California, Irvine, Ca, February 22, 2019.

[110] Erin Gray, "Colloquium on Lynching Violence and Representation: Film Screening of *My Nephew Emmett"* Roundtable. University of California, Irvine, Ca, February 22, 2019.

[111] Woodstock FilmFest. "Kevin Wilson Jr. talks "My Nephew Emmett" @ WFF 2017." *YouTube* Video, 2:40. October 15, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQO9yuMWdNA

[112] Bridget R Cooks. "Colloquium on Lynching Violence and Representation: Film Screening of *My Nephew Emmett"* Roundtable. University of California, Irvine, Ca, February 22, 2019.

Wilderson's assertion that "Blacks are sentient beings who have drives and desires and suffer somatic compliance, the residual effects of trauma, much like other sentient beings."

Simply put, the film accepts, as a given, that Black people experience themselves in the world as full-feeling, thinking beings, despite a society that acts otherwise. Wilson's narrative arc insists that the audience both conceptualize and empathize with Till beyond the widespread and horrific articulation of his murder, but also in his life, his body, kinship, and connection to his family. In doing so, the film performs a counternarrative, pivoting away from what Jacqueline Goldsby calls the " cultural logic of lynching."[113] The cultural logic of lynching situates lynched victims corporally and in isolation or conterminously with white murders. Instead, the film narrativizes Emmett Luis Till within kinship—son, nephew, cousin; within the full capacity of personhood—joyful, rambunctious, clever, adventurous, unsure, fearful; a young adolescent boy; and as a victim of anti-Black violence in the deep south.

In its critique of anti-Black violence in the deep south, the film also illuminates that the family lacks the social capital to access the legal protections that family status affords other people. Wright—Emmett's uncle and the head of the household—has no recourse for protecting his family against the white invasion of Milam and Bryant. The gun against the wall near the door is a stark reminder of how white supremacy cripples and voids the ideological apparatus of the Black home and Black family as synonymous with invulnerability, security, and freedom. Wright does not pursue Bryant and Milam when they abduct 14-year-old Till and drive off. Conversely, Milam and Bryant draw upon the social capital and legal protections their white flesh affords them as they claim authority in

[113] Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret,* 6.

the Wright home. Carolyn Bryant borrows from her bank of social capital and legal protections as a family member to claim her place within the realm of protected gender and kin. Wilson's critique of how we narrativize and remember Till interrogates who has the power to tell the story of Emmett Louis Till, how Till's story is told, and the narrative itself.

Oppositional Remembering

To borrow from bell hooks' *oppositional gaze* theory, which articulates “an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire” developed from the repression of Black people’s right to the gaze.[114] hooks’ theorization focuses the Black female gaze on structures of domination because of how it constructs and defines social realities. Furthermore, oppositional looking is an interrogation and a challenge to domination that reproduces white supremacist power dynamics. It is a construction of a new, alternative reality, where the lens shifts focus and perspective to account for the lives of Black women. hooks’ oppositional looking helps me to think about the practices of both Mobley and Wilson, Jr. as oppositional remembering. They are telling a version of Emmett Luis Till that remembers him rebelliously and with care. To practice oppositional remembering in our storytelling, we must begin where Mamie Till Mobley (then Mamie Bradley) demanded that we begin. She said, "It's my opinion that the guilt starts with Mrs. Bryant."

Oppositional remembering would have us utilize Mamie Till Mobley's knowledge of her son in her attempts at remembering and re-member the broken, torn, swollen pieces of Emmett Luis Till. In the 2005 documentary, *The Untold Story of Emmett Luis Till*,[115] Till Mobley said, "I knew for two reasons that that [Bryant's testimony and the official record]

[114] bell hooks, *Black Looks*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992. 116.

[115] *The Untold Story of EMMETT LUIS TILL*, directed by Keith Beauchamp, featuring Mamie Till-Mobley, (New York: ThinkFilm) August 17, 2005.

was a lie. Number one, Emmett's speech impediment under stress would not allow him to get these things out. And number two, the respect that I had put into him for woman-kind and for mankind, he just wouldn't come off that way." To remember Till how his mother knew him is to grant him the assumption of innocence. It is to allow her to determine how we know him based on her fourteen years of intimate knowledge of her son. It is to disavow Carolyn Bryant's accounts and label her as a liar that her false statements prove her to be.

Black political theorist Tiffany Willoughby Herard asserts, "We are each other's archives. We carry each other's memories and ways of surviving. If we remember each other's names and what we learned from each other. We can help each other bear the trauma of the dead."[116] In this way, oppositional remembering functions as a tool for carrying Black community forward despite, or perhaps because, society is structured on perpetuating Black demise. To carry each other memories, to tell each other's story, is an unapologetic act of radical Black love. And yet I assert, it still is not enough.

The Impossibility of Black Relationality

Oppositional remembering is a salve, a bandage on a gunshot wound. It cannot redress in any substantive way the power of the master narrative. The way Till is remembered exposes the radical disjunction between the story his mother spent decades telling of him and his brief encounter with a white woman in a ma-and-pa store in the south.   Consequently, the disjuncture also illuminates the impossibility of Black relationality and the lack of social coherence for Black bodies.[117] Said differently, though

[116] Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, Telephone conversation, 2019.
[117] Frank B. Wilderson. III, *Red, White & Black,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

Mobley spent half a century publicly detailing an oppositional story about her son, her story does not have purchase within our collective memory. It is incapable of upending the narrative constructed by Bryant because Mobley cannot know her son, speak for her son, be her son's public voice, or occupy the status of *mother* to her son. Her ties to him are not socially coherent. Therefore, the story she tells of him does not cohere. Carolyn Bryant could know Emmett Luis Till because her life as a white woman affords her the capacity to know and of being a purveyor of that knowledge. Her social position is scaffolded by a set of assumptions that are brutalizing and lethal to Black people. As a result, Carolyn's story is an axiom, and Mamie's knowledge is lost in the interstices. Bryant's story prohibits our ability to hear Mamie Till Mobley from articulating a Black mother's story about the innocence of a Black male child.

Relationality is our kinship bonds and social connections; they do not guarantee or afford protections. That is the paradox. That is the mismatch. The discourse in society is that kinship relations mean something. Within the family dynamics, you are afforded care, love, and protection from danger. Because Black kinship is not recognized socially, our connections do not result in the same protections. That also creates dissonance. That creates another type of incongruency. It upends what the world says about the world. The reality is that you can be Mose Wright with a gun sitting next to the door, and you cannot protect your family. Black relationality does not afford anything; it is a prop or a mental narrative that we construct around it. It does not afford us the same quality of life and care that it affords white people and others of color. The reality is that you can be Korryn Gaines and be unable to protect yourself and your son. In reality, her son is injured in the state-sanctioned violent process of murdering her.

In the same way that Mamie Mobley was not recognized as an authority in her child's life, Gaines is not recognized either. Gaines cannot construct a reality. Gaines, like Till Mobley, attempts to use the public to construct alternative realities. Till Mobley through the press; Gaines through her social media platforms. Vigilantes and the state have the authority to intervene in Black families and repeatedly prove that Blackness is paradigmatically vulnerable and always violable.

V. Cognitive Dissonance and Psychic Detachment

This section interrogates how Black people attempt to reconcile the incongruity between how society views Blackness and how Black people understand themselves in the world. The incongruity of Black social positionality manifests in numerous ways. The section focuses on two of those manifestations: the incongruity between the social lack of recognition of Black relationality and our belief in our connections to family and community; and the incongruity between the master discourse about the protection and safety of denizens and the reality of Black social death, particularly Black vulnerability to anti-black violence. These incongruities, I argue, impact Black people's capacity to construct narratives about anti-black murders because the narratives lack coherence without creating some justification for the murders.

Cognitive Dissonance theory, according to social psychologist and father of cognitive dissonance theory Leon Festinger, "centers around the idea that if a person knows various things that are not psychologically consistent with one another, he will, in a variety of ways, try to make them more consistent.'[118] The lack of social recognition of Black relationality and the reality of Black people's proximity to violence and death requires engaging in

[118] Leon Festinger, "Cognitive Dissonance," in *Scientific American* 207, no. 4 (October 1962), 93.

rationalizations about Black murders that are more consistent with the dominant narrative about place and personhood. The narrative we construct, intended to honor our loved ones and tell a coherent story of their lives, must then adhere to some form of psychological consistency to orient ourselves back into our understanding of our place in society. By proximity to death, a close examination of the experiences of Black people globally, Black life is situated in a context where Black people can be and are often subjects to and victims of racialized anti-Black violence that can also lead to Black people's death. That proximity to death or the vulnerability to experience violence means there is no state protection, and no mass public outcry will respond to Black people's lives taken because of anti-Blackness. It is expected, even, and acceptable that Black people can and will die. Frequently it is in the making of someone else's reality possible. In the instance of Emmitt, Carolyn Bryant is making herself into a class of women that is both vulnerable and has authority over Black life.

After constructing a beautiful narrative that situated Till in the comforts of his extended family, Wilson, Jr. is again confronted with the reality that Black relationality does not protect the lives of Black people. Consequently, the film utilizes whistling as the catalyzing moment that ends Till's life. Existing in the metalanguage of that signification, sound, and utterance is a trace of victim-blaming. By victim blaming, I am referencing how we tell the story of Till's death. It must be noted that the murder is where most narrative locates his life tends to begin and be situated. We construct that narrative with the moment he encountered Carolyn Byrant. When we use Carolyn Bryant's lie, we blame Till for his death and ignore that he is a victim. To asseverate machinations from Emmett is to implicate and

condemn him for his murder. That is, Emmett Louis Till, a young boy of 14 years, performed some act that resulted in his murder.

Moreover, though the "specter of Carolyn Bryant" is always present because she lied, the causal agent in these accounts is Till himself. We implicate him in his death through our treatment of Bryant as a purveyor of history, and her truth is the axiom. The framing of Till's death around that actionable language appeals to and appeases the psychological disturbance Black people experienced when witnessing anti-Black violence. Psychologically, Black people labor to create a narrative that eases the cognitive dissonance and allows for reconciliation through detachment—however false.

In interrogating incongruity, I mean to think critically about the quotidian lives of Black people and how anti-blackness requires psychological distancing of incongruity. Black people's social existence is inconsistent with how we know each other and the world. So how do we know ourselves in the context of our families and communities and the reality that sometimes the world does not treat us as if we are connected to family and community? It puts me in mind Du Bois's discussion of removing the veil and developing double consciousness.[119] The world outside of Du Bois versus the existence that he has creates a dual awareness. That is a mismatch and a disjuncture between the ways we know ourselves with one another versus the way society creates anti-Black versions of ourselves. It creates incongruity in our psychic lives. Cognitively, there is a mismatch. Black mobilization around this proximity is part of Black people's desire to be recognized socially.

[119] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks,* (Toronto: Blue Heron Press, 1904).

On the one hand, Black people know themselves to be sentient, intellectual, linked beings in connection with each other. Black protest is an emanation of that experience of Blackness. Nevertheless, Black protest shows that how we see ourselves in the world does not cohere with the nation's narrative. Moreover, we can observe that the state responds to Black people's insistence that we deserve social recognition vastly different from treacherous non constitutionally protected political violence by political extremists. Black protest, though protected by the constitution, is still seen as mob rule and dangerous and unworthy of protection. White vigilantes who enter Black protests to do harm and to undermine Black political protest comes out of those public spaces alive, while Black protestors find themselves again in the condition of proximity to death. Black protests are another face of rationalizing cognitive dissonance.

Coherence is essential because those incongruencies become very apparent when faced with situations, and the contradictions and paradoxes become too much to bear. For example, in lynching violence, it is clear that Black life is always already vulnerable to white supremacy. The narratives respond to a desire to honor the lives of the people lost and the need to construct a story that helps bring balance around our Black proximity to violence. A narrative with a beginning, middle, and end helps to rationalize death with a catalyzing point and helps to stabilize an already psychically precarious existence.

Chapter Three: Intimacy of Knowledge at the Black Kitchen Table: A Black Woman's Rage and Witness in Gwendolyn Brooks' "Ballad of Pearl May Lee"

Abstract

"Intimacy of Knowledge at the Black Kitchen Table: A Black Woman's Rage and Witness in Gwendolyn Brooks' "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," which interrogates the utility of rage and the intimacy of knowledge. Gwendolyn Brooks' provocative 1945 poem relates the story of a figure often erased from the study of lynching, Black women survivors, and witnesses. I read Brooks' poem as a metonym for lynching as a social process of the erasure of Black women's psychic rage and that rage as a site of knowledge production. Brooks' narrator, Pearl May Lee, tells a caustic tale of her brutalized memories from witnessing her lover Sammy's lynching. Sammy is lynched because he was falsely accused of "rape" after he had a consensual tryst with his conquest, a white woman. In her telling, Pearl May Lee relates sentiments that are discomforting, distressing, and full of rage. This chapter theorizes the concept of the intimacy of knowledge in/at the Black Kitchen as introduced and forwarded by Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin during a 1961 discussion between them, Langston Hughes, Alfred Kazin, and Emile Capouya Nat Hentoff for WBAI-FM radio in New York.[120] The chapter argues that through the engagement of Black women's rage, we gain access to the full capaciousness of their intimacy of knowledge about anti-black lynching and all forms of anti-black violence that impact Black people's social status.

[120] Baldwin, James, Emile Capouya, Lorraine Hansberry, Nat Hentoff, Langston Hughes, and Alfred Kazin. "The Negro in American Culture." *CrossCurrents* Vol. 11, No. 3 (1961): 205-24. Accessed January 16, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24456864.

Black rage is "founded" in the operation of white supremacy, making it primarily a response to conditions that themselves incite other emotional responses, which then become interwoven with rage. That is, rage is always correlated to that which it was invoked to deflect or displace—heartbreak, fear, terror, sadness, indignation.

—Debra Thompson[121]

Well, the first difficulty is really so simple that it's usually overlooked: to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. . .Part of the rage is this: it isn't only what is happening to you, but it's what's happening all around you all of the time, in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference and ignorance of most white people in this country.

—James Baldwin[122]

I. Introduction: Rage at its Zenith

On more than a few occasions, I found myself deep in a rabbit hole while researching and writing this chapter. Each occasion resulted in a melee of new and pulsating ideas and narrative shifts about ways to locate Black women and excavate them from the interstices of lynching memory. Following lynching scholars who have historicized and written qualitative studies of lynching violence and Black women's location in it,[123]my impulse is to read lynching along other possible modes of telling, locating Black women as survivors, witnesses, and knowledge producers. The pulse that demands my attention most

[121] Debra Thompson, "An Exoneration of Black Rage," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116, no. 3, (July 2017), 466.

[122] Baldwin et. al., "The Negro in American Culture," 205.

[123] See Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings,* ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997); and Michael J. Pfeifer, "At the Hands of Parties Unknown": The State of the Field of Lynching Scholarship," in *The Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (December 2014) for early qualitative and historical accounts of lynching and lynching scholarship. See also lynching studies and histories that directly address (black) women, see Evelyn M Simien, ed., *Gender and Lynching* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011); Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Maria DeLongoria, "Strange Fruit': The Lynching of Black Women, The Case of Rosa Jefferson and Marie Scott," (PhD Diss., University of Missouri-Columbia, 2006), and Julia Buckner Armstrong, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011). Kerry Segrave lists women who have been lynched in Kerry Segrave, *Lynching of Women in the United States,* (Jefferson: McFarland $ Co., 2010).

prevalently and insists on scholarly engagement is a deep consideration of the rage of Black women in the United States through an analysis of Gwendolyn Brooks' 1945 poem "Ballad of Pearl May Lee (PML)." This chapter is an inquiry into what can be learned from a critical engagement with Black women's rage as an expression of emotion and an epistemological tool for interrogating the impact of lynching violence on Black women. Though the "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" reveals the raw possibility of Black women's rage, it is not invested in a moral appeal to justify its existence. It is a rage within a context of violence without attempting to make this emotion socially palatable. Her rages, like the rage of many other Black people, illuminates and outline the contours of intramural and external traumas that she has experienced as a Black woman in a slave/police state. In a society where (white) male rage is as dangerous as it is normalized, the myriad debates and entries in the scholarship about racialized and gendered causes and effects of rage are encouraging. I am engaging with rage scholars who theorize rage along gendered and racialized lines of capacity and capability, particularly for Black women. Positioned in diametric opposition to White Cis men's rage, Black rage tends to be depoliticized and deemed irrational. The very real and disparate responses of the state and the media to the protest for Black life in the Summer of 2020 in the aftermath of the public execution of George Floyd versus the January 6, 2021 insurrection to prevent the joint session of Congress from tallying the electoral college votes after the 2020 elections. Police responded to the movement for Black life with military-level tactics and weapons. Hundreds of Black people and allies were arrested and injured by police. Conversely, a predominantly white male crowd stormed the U.S. Capitol building, breaking barricades and windows, defiling the building with excrement, and threatening the lives of Congressional leaders, including then-vice-

president Mike Pence, and fatally attacking a Capital police officer—Brian D. Sicknick, succumbed to his injuries on January 7, 2021.[124] They were called “great people” by President Trump, and less than one hundred were arrested on January 6, 2021.

On the one hand, political theorist Debra Thompson (2017) argues “that the anger expressed by dominant groups (especially heterosexual white men) is easily incorporated into political discourse, normalized a politics as usual.”[125] The Trump supporters are patriots, passionate about what they believe is an unjust election. On the other, she asserts, “white society often frames black rage as inappropriate because it explicitly challenges the pervasiveness, durability, and applicability of the American Dream, itself premised on the liberal myth of inevitable progress toward a more egalitarian society.”[126] The movement for Black life challenges the fraternal order of police and vigilante violence against Black people, which also challenges the structures of anti-black racism that is the grounding wire for democracy. Though cast as irrational and apolitical, Black rage is founded on the real threats and acts of quotidian anti-Black violence that breathe life into the dominant society.

Black rage is political. It is a disruption and rejection of the status quo; and a response to the material conditions and emotional stress of anti-black racism and the violence of those social norms.[127] As the Thompson and Baldwin epigraphs show us, conceptualizing Black rage cannot be reduced to simply a corporeal reactionary emotion that can be dismissed as irrational. Black rage, in general, and Black women’s rage, in particular, is—as

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[124] “Loss of USCP Officer Brain D. Sicknick. *United States Capitol Police* Jan. 7, 2021.
[125] Thompson, “An Exoneration of Black Rage,” 460. See also, Rebecca Solnit, “All the Rage: What a literature that embraces female anger can achieve,” *The New Republic*, September 24, 2018
[126] Thompson, “An Exoneration of Black Rage,” 459.
[127] Thompson, “An Exoneration of Black Rage,” 496. See also James Baldwin, et. “The Negro in American Culture;” Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, (New York: Picador, 2018).

Baldwin declared—Black consciousness. Furthermore, though, as Soyica Diggs Colbert describes black rage as having "outlaw status,"[128] rage scholars also contend with anti-Black violence endemic in the systems and institutions that govern our lives to understand the structural, social, legal, and political limitations of black life and citizenship in the United States. Black rage has also received considerable scholarly attention about its validity as a legal defense, as in the "Black Rage Insanity Defense.[129] I leave it to other scholars to debate the integrity of these arguments; I am interested in the utility of Black [women's] rage as a politics of emotions. I intend to have a critical engagement with Black women's rage, rage scholarship, the Longue durée of Black women's silence and silencing [both forced and voluntary], and rage's work in the archive of lynching. Black women's rage analyzes and critiques the sociopolitical world around them. It reveals the layers of interiority and the intimacy of knowing within Black community. It exposes the lasting effects of historical and contemporary racialized and gendered violence. It traverses the temporal and spatial limitations imposed by dominant society on Black women. In Brooks' Pearl May Lee, her rage, Black rage, is situated front and center, illuminating the *psychic Middle Passage* and as a repository of lynching memory

[128] Soyica Diggs Colbert, "Black Rage," *Theater* Survey 57, no. 3 (September 2016), 337.

[129] "Black-rage insanity defense is a legal strategy that exhibits environmental hardships to explain why a person commits a crime. It is a form of insanity defense taken by African American defendants charged with violent crimes against white persons. By taking such a defense, the African American defendant tries to absolve or mitigate their conduct on the basis of the years of oppression and racist hostility that persisted at the hands of white Americans. This defense was first used in the mid-1990s. "Black-Rage Insanity Defense Law and Legal Definition." *US Legal.com* https://definitions.uslegal.com/b/black-rage-insanity-defense/. See Judd F. Sneirson, "Black Rage and the Criminal Law," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 43, no. 6 (June 1995), 2251-2288; Paul Harris, *Black Rage Confronts the Law*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997.; and Tosha Yvette Foster, "From Fear to Rage," *William & Mary Law Review* 38. no. 5, (1997). 1851-1881.

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the most widely read and highly regarded American poets of the 20th century. She is the first Black author to win a Pulitzer Prize and was a consultant to the Library of Congress, an educator, a Civil Rights activist, and a poet laureate. She published thirty-six pieces of literature. *A Street in Bronzeville* was her first collection of poems, which she wrote in 1945 at the height of anti-black violence in the United States just during and after WWII. A native Chicagoan, this collection takes an intimate look at a street in the Bronzeville neighborhood from where she grew up. The volume articulates the contours of Black life in the South Side of Chicago epistemologically, psychologically, and ontologically. The collection comprises free verse, sonnets, and ballads and allows for bearing witness to the quotidian lives of Black women, men, and children in the neighborhood known as Bronzeville. The rhetoric of the anti-lynching movement relies on the ethos that U.S. democracy is founded upon equal rights and protections. The reasons and rationales used to justify lynching violence (Black people are a threat to Whites, the protections of white women) are easily disputed and unfounded, but attempt to appeal to white sentimentality by getting them to recognize Black people as human.

To describe "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" as provocative is a bit of a misnomer because the term does little to encapsulate the depth of this poem's social, emotional, and political work. The poem relays the story of a figure often erased from the study of lynching in the United States, Black women survivors and witnesses. Written at the height of lynching violence and anti-lynching abolition, the protagonist, Pearl May Lee, bears witness to her lover Sammy's lynching. Her telling of the event is raw and a matrix of emotions. Sammy, like so many before and after him, is lynched after a consensual sexual encounter with a white woman, who later falsely accuses him of rape. Pearl May Lee relates sentiments

about the events leading up to the lynching and her response to it that are discomforting, striking, and full of unfettered and unapologetic rage*.* Brooks' Pearl May Lee situates readers with a mix of emotions that throw lynching memory into stark relief and alters how we have engaged Black women within the afterlife of lynching. Pearl May Lee represents a figure often erased from the study of lynching, Black women as witnesses and knowledge purveyors. I read Brooks' poem as a metonym—a word or phrase that refers to a concept it is closely associated with—for lynching as a social process of the erasure of Black women's psychic rage from having to either be, on the one hand, silent witnesses of lynching violence or on the other hand, morally driven anti-lynching abolitionists.

One criticism of Gwendolyn Brooks' pre-1967 work is that it lacked any significant social commentary or a political posture. In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Gwendolyn Brooks responds to this criticism by declaring, "My works [from *A Street in Bronzeville* 1945 to *The Bean Eaters* 1960] express rage and focus on rage. . .I don't know if you want to include women's rage in this discussion or not. But I hope you sense real rage in 'The Ballad of Peral May Lee.". . That's all political."[130] In her response to the criticism against her, Brooks asserts the very issue at the center of the poem; Black women's rage is political, discursive, and rebellious. The phrase "real rage" underlies the history of erasure the Black women—including Brooks—experience about the power and potential of their emotions. The erasure of Black women's emotions is also a complete disavowing of the emotional labor needed to organize and maintain social justice and political organizing.

[130] Claudia Tate and Gwendolyn Brooks. "Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks," In *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Gloria Wade Gayles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 104-110.

Feminist poet and philosopher Audre Lorde argues, "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fear are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experience of our daily lives."[131] Brooks's poems are a political performance of Black psychic rage and consciousness. The political performance of Black psychic rage and consciousness are necessitated by the persistent reality of anti-black violence, like lynching. Brooks' work represents a politics of the body, a politics of emotions, and a politics of racialized gender norms. To Lorde's point, Ballad of Pearl May Lee is a practice of naming: naming anger, isolation, rejections, disappointment, and perhaps hysteria. B.J. Bolden declares that Brooks' "poetry is the sound emitted by the unfulfilled when their rage is at its zenith."[132] I take Bolden's claim seriously and propose the following modes of engagement with "Ballad of Pearl May Lee." First, if read with Brooks and Bolden about the utility of rage, the poem illuminates rage necessitated by the underpinnings of anti-black violence that motivates the actions of Sammy and his white lover. Theoretically, I investigate the labor of this poem and the function of the Black female and male bodies in lynching violence to think about the conditions of possibility for Pearl May Lee as survivor and witness. This chapter also concerns what is (re)produced through Pearl May Lee's voice and if her unapologetic rage also is generative for thinking about the "cultural logic" of lynching violence." From scholars of lynching history, Brooks' "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" is generative thinking more critically and expansively about the capaciousness of Black women's politics of emotion because it anchors unabashed truth to social critique about racialized gender violence.

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[131] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 1984), 37.

[132] B. J. Bolden, *Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945-1960*, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1999), xv.

II. Reading "Ballad of Pearl May Lee"

Methodology: Symphony of Anger at the Kitchen Table

Methodologically, this chapter does not labor to justify, rationalize, make legible, or excuse Pearl May Lee's rage and her experience of the lynching of Sammy. It is also not invested in reading her rage as an emotional politic with redemptive value,[133] nor does it needs to be redemptive to be worthy of study. Instead, the chapter is invested in is revealed when we strip down and cut away the more normative readings about Black women's emotional capacity as witnesses of the horrors of lynching violence, which would figure them as moral crusaders along the lines of Antilynching Movement women, like Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary Burnett Talbert, and Angelina Weld Grimké. All of whom, undoubtedly, experienced fury and rage but maintained a public persona that threaded through the stereotypes about Black women with care to privilege their message. By contrast, this is a study of how rage permeates this poem as raw emotion existing in, reflective of, and responding to an anti-black milieu.

In a group discussion in 1961, James Baldwin and Lorainne Hansberry participated in discussion with Emile Capouya, Nat Hentoff, Langston Hughes, and Alfred Kazin titled "The Negro in American Culture." "Intimacy of Knowledge" enters into the reading of "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" with two conceptualizations of the condition and the capaciousness of Black rage. James Baldwin articulates the first conceptualization during

[133] See scholarship on the sapphire or angry Black women trope that reduces and depoliticizes Black women's emotional affect to rudeness and hysterical anger. K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).; Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Practice, Training* 32, no. 3, (1995): 458-466.; Wendy Ashley, "The Angry Black Woman," *Social Work in Public Health* 29, no. 1 (2014): 27-34.

that 1961 conversation with Hansberry, Capouya, Hentoff, Hughes, and Kazin. The Baldwin quote, "to be a negro in this country is to be in a state of rage all the time," is widely circulated in public discourse to capture and explain the response of Black people to anti-black conditions. It is an examination of the interior struggle—existing in a condition of rage—resulting from an anti-black milieu. Pearl May Lee's account of lynching, her rage, performs labor that shifts the gaze from the external to an interior moment of what the Baldwin epigraph is describing, a quotidian rage:

> To be a Negro in this country, and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a state of rage almost all the time and in one's work. Part of the rage is this: it isn't only what's happening to you, but it's what's happening all around you all the time, in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference of most white people in this country and their ignorance. Since this is so, it's a great temptation to simplify the issues under the illusion that if you simplify them enough, people will recognize them. I think disillusion is very dangerous because, in fact, it isn't the way it works. A complex thing can't be made simple; you simply have to try to deal with it in all its complexity and hope to get that complexity across.[134]

He toggles us (the listener in 1961, the readers of the subsequent transcript, and you, the reader of this chapter) between the public and private spheres and the politics of emotion for both Black and white people. What Baldwin generously describes as white "indifference" and "ignorance" is what he knows is also white supremacy and anti-black. He describes the hostility towards and danger of Black life, which is the etymology of Black rage. Black rage cannot be simplified. It is political, it is emotional, and it is complete and complex. Black Rage is anchored by and persists through the imbrication of anti-black violence. It is encompassing and accompanying, meaning it is persistent and present even

[134] Baldwin, James, et. al. "The Negro in American Culture," 205.

in the unconscious because of the reality of anti-black violence and the perpetuation of white supremacy. It is also simultaneously rooted in the experiences of overt acts of violence and the intimacies of knowing that anti-black violence is the "always already" governing Black quotidian life.

The group conversed and debated Black Americans' plight and social position through literature. One of the limitations of white authors writing about Black people that Hansberry cites is the interpersonal lack of knowledge that the white author has about the realities of Black life and thought. More specifically, Black people's true feelings about systems of racism and racial socioeconomic violence and oppression. Drawing on two classic texts, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Carson McCullers' *Member of the Wedding* (1946), she asserts Faulkner "has never heard the nuances of hatred, of total contempt from his most devoted servant and his most beloved friend, although she means every word when she's talking to him, and will tell him profoundly intimate things. But he has never heard the truth of it." She goes on, "my point is that the intimacy of knowledge which the Negro may have of white Americans does not exist in reverse."[135] It has been essential to Black survival that Black people have an intimate understanding of the tone and texture of whiteness. In addition to the intimate physical knowledge that evolves from centuries of being in domestic or subordinate positions to white, Black people have also had to attend to the moods of dominant white society. That intimacy does not exist in reverse because it has not had to exist outside of racialized

[135] Lorraine Hansberry et. al., "The Negro in American Culture," 217.

people's survival methods in the face of white volatility. Reiterating and expounding upon Hansberry's point, Baldwin asserts:

> You can't know what I'm talking about, if you haven't been in a home with all Negroes together, if you haven't listened to Dilsey at home—who might be my mother—and heard what she says about the people she works for—and what is more important than that, not only what she says, but what she knows. And she knows much more about them than they will ever know about her, and there's a very good reason for this. Faulkner has never sat in a Negro kitchen while the Negroes were talking about him, but we have been sitting around for generations, in kitchens and everywhere else, while everybody talks about us, and this creates a very great difference. It also creates—now speaking specifically for the Negro writer—a very great advantage.[136]

For the Black, to emote openly has often resulted in violence. In the home, the space of interiority, even if only a space of pseudo-safety, Black people like Dilsey have a chance to create some semblance of honesty about their feelings. Dilsey, for Hansberry and Baldwin, represents all Black women. "Dilsey—who might be my mother—and heard what she says about the people who work for—and what is more important than that, not only what she says, but what she knows—signals two critical ideas about Black experiences with Whiteness. By drawing a connection between Dilsey and his mother, Baldwin signifies a universality of feelings and experiences among Black women in relationship to whiteness. Further, it calls attention to the intimate knowledge that Black women must undoubtedly have for white people, a kind of omnipotent knowledge as necessitated by being in constant proximity to their capacity for violence.

Audre Lordes' work on rage is the second conceptualization that this chapter thinks with to theorize the capaciousness of Black women's rage. Her works help ground my

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[136] Baldwin, "The Negro in American Culture, 217.

understanding of what Baldwin and Hanberry theorize about the intimacy of Black interior thought and feelings. Black women's stratified social identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality are violently mapped onto their bodies, intramurally and through external forces. As such, Black women are uniquely positioned in a politic of emotions. Writing on Women of color's experiences of rage, Lorde asserts:

> Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say symphony rather than cacophony because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart.[137]

Brooks's use of the poetic form names the very symphony of emotion and marginalization that Lorde describes as anger, silence, unchosen-ness, survival, being targets of hostility and violence, and being subject to abject objection. With Lorde's definition in mind, I return to Hansberry and Baldwin to theorize how Black people in general, and Black women, more specifically, organize the "symphony of anger" at—what I am distilling in the next section as "the kitchen table dialog." Brooks's use of the poetic form names the very symphony of emotion and marginalization that Lorde describes: anger, silence, unchosen-ness, survival, being targets of hostility and violence, and being subject to abject objection.

Ballad of Pearl May Lee

The poem's title, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," signals a traditional poetic genre of storytelling through verse and repetition, frequently set to music. Ballad poems can be slow and melodic love poems, comedies, or tragedies. The poem's tone and pacing help to

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[137] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," (Keynote, National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut, June 1981).

express the mood and emotion of Pearl May Lee. It is as much an interior vulnerable private unveiling of truth as a social commentary of the impact of anti-blackness and white supremacy manifest through lynching violence. The protagonist, Pearl May Lees, is an omnipresent and complex observer/actor. She witnesses the events leading up to the mob lynching—his desire for white women, his sexual encounter with a white woman, her accusation, his arrest, and subsequent lynching. As an omnipresent observer, Pearl May Lee offers a sociopolitical analysis of intramural and external racialized gendered violence.

Written a decade and a half early, Gwendolyn Brooks'1945 poem, "Ballad for Pearl May Lee,"[138] captures the Black writers' ability to articulate the complexities of Black rage that Baldwin, Hansberry, and Hughes, their white colleagues think about critically. Brooks narrativizes unapologetic Black rage through the visceral and affective response of the protagonist of the poem, Pearl May Lee, a dark-complexioned Black woman who serves as a witness—one who is both a presence and a bearer and one who can attest to and provide an account of—the lynching murder of Sammy (her former lover). Sammy has a consensual sexual affair with a white woman who weaponizes her race and gender to facilitate his murder. Pearl May Lee announces herself as a woman scorned, situated within the duality and intimacy of knowledge, as an omnipresent witness and victim.

> Then off they took you, off to the jail,
> A hundred hooting after.
> And you should have heard me at my house.[139]

[138] Gwendolyn Brooks, “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” *Socialism and Democracy* 22, no. 2, (2008): 45-48.
[139] Brooks, “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” 45.

These first three lines from the opening stanza situate the reader within the messiness, the complexity of knowing/witnessing. And, of being aware of not just what is happening to you but also knowing the profoundly extraordinary criminal acts (or indifference, as Baldwin puts it) that are going on around you—and finally, being cognizant that you, in your home, are not safe either. These first three lines foreground the disturbing and impossible complexity facing Pearl May Lee and the precarity of Black life. Pearl May Lee's account of Sammy's murder and her visceral response performs labor that shifts the gaze from the external—the public site of lynching violence—to the interior—the private affective space of sudden loss. It illuminates Lorde's assertion that Black women "have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen," Brooks's use of the poetic form charts the very symphony of emotion and marginalization that Lorde describes—anger, silence, unchosen-ness, survival, misogynoir —as well as the paradox of witnessing Black fungibility and vulnerability that Baldwin describes. It is replete with utterances that demand taking up the "kitchen table dialog" as a theory of Black truth-telling and offers a lens through which to sit with Pearl May Lee's rage, to be uncomfortable, and to serve as stewards of her anguish; to be in community communing.

The poem's first stanza performs a visual slicing into, cutting out, cutting into the interior space of Pearl May Lee. It is her anguish on display and in her kitchen, suturing her tautly to the violence of anti-black lynching, to the space of public and private victimization and witness turned to rage. In her home, in the intimate interiority that Hansberry and Baldwin describe, her figurative space of respite/her kitchen table, where the most complex, most honest, and deeply vulnerable expressions can exist, the poem performs violence in its expression of her anguish, affected through laughter that cuts deep and

leaves one bleeding. There is correlative violence between the hooting of the mob and the laughter cutting Pearl May Lee's lung. "a hundred hooting after/and you should have heard me at my house/ I cut my lungs with my laughter, /laughter/ laughter/ I cut my mungs with my laughter.[140] The psychic pleasure derived from accumulating social and cultural capital produced from killing Black people is persistent in the hooting. The hooting parallels Pearl May Lee's cutting expression of deep emotion. For the mob, the emotion is pleasure; for Pearl May Lee, it is a kind of hysteria, a horrid shrill that expresses and suppresses a deep agony. Pearl May Lee is a scorned woman whose lover slept with a white woman and is subsequently publicly executed for his *crime*. Though she may be omnipresent, she exists on the fringes of possibility for all three actors—Sammy, the white women, and the white mob, her feelings are illegible and inarticulable in the public sphere. Therefore, her cutting laughter is turned inward at the kitchen table toward the interior of hearing, learning, listening, and experiencing anti-black racial trauma.

The lynching triumvirate—White men, White women, and Black men—frames principles discourse about lynching violence to the exclusion of Black women. As the protagonist in this lynching narrative, Pearl May Lee is mapped on top of the existing assumptions about the impact of lynching violence. Traditional assumptions take the violence of the White man as a given. It does not need to be pointed out significantly and has been studied extensively. The violence committed by White women tends to be less emphasized. However, it functions to build both the White man's and White woman's cultural and political capital. As to the Black man, he is the consumed object for their gain.

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[140] Brooks, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," 45.

He is not an isolate, as he is key to the triumvirate. Taking together, this lynching violence performs both a consumptive and economic.

Pearl May Lee's presence also situates her within a community of women who bear the burden of witness and victim. She declares in stanza two, "they dragged you into a dusty cell. And a rat was in the corner./ And what was I doing? Laughing still./ Though never was a poor gal lorner."[141] "never a poor gal lorner can be read as someone who is never forlorn—to be desolate, lonely, lonesome. This, I assert, is a misread. "Never a poor gal lorner" indicates the pervasiveness of the lynching triumvirate's legacy. Lynching mobs disproportionately victimized Black men in lynching violence. The consequence of this is a community of Black women—who are also direct lynching victims—to grieve the loss of their loved ones. She is never a poor gal—never someone deserving of public sympathy and never alone in her rage. Lorde asserts, "women responding to racism means women responding to anger, the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and coopting"[142] Lee's laughter is the visceral manifestation of the triggers to which Lorde directs our attention. Pearl May Lee is betrayed by Sammy, stereotyped in society, misnamed, unprivileged, and defenseless in the face of anti-black violence. Nevertheless, she is in a community because this situation does not exist in a vacuum.

Returning to Hansberry's "the intimacy of knowledge," in the home or the kitchen, at the table, the duality of Black knowledge becomes more apparent. Knowledge is both

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[141] Brooks, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," 45.

[142] Lordes, "The Uses of Anger." 1981 Keynote NWSA convention "The Uses of Anger"

necessitated by survival strategies and is foundational for building a fraught community.[143] It is both troubled/troubling because it is founded upon and persists in anti-black racism's violent realities. The shared knowledge that Hansberry affirms folds Black women within the complexities of Black interiority. The intimacy of the home, of the kitchen, that both Hansberry and Baldwin contextualize, shifts towards foregrounding the Black private sphere; and for inspection of what that space offers in the way of knowledge production. A form of spatiality, as articulated by Foucault, can be understood as

> "[t]he space of our primary perceptions, the space of our dreams and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic: there is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark, rough, encumbered space; a space from above, of summits, or on the contrary a space from below the mud; or again a space that can be flowing like sparkling water, or space that is fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal."[144]

The kitchen table is an allegorical interior that extends Foucault's theorization into metaphorical and tangible spaces of belonging for Black life and expression. The location allows for a political investigation of Black ontology, socio-economic inequities, and anti-black violence like lynching. It is an unveiled interrogation of the pervasiveness of the anti-black milieu, its impact, and the Black response. The kitchen table is the locus of Black joy, Black love, Black pain, Black intimacy, and the site where Black expressions of rage can be most clearly articulated, and control can, by necessity, be manufactured. It is the sphere of community, in its most troubled and troubling sense, and of communing, and the collection of utterances, the symphony of agony and pain, fear and terror, rage and cutting laughter.

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[143] I use the term *fraught* to mean uneasy. Because Black community is always in conversation with anti-blackness, it is always already informed and shaped by anti-blackness. It cannot be cultivated without the interrupts of structural racism and white antagonisms.

[144] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 23.

If the first five stanzas of "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" utilize rage to interrogate the duality of bearing witness and bearing racial trauma, stanzas six through eight shift the gaze to the intimacy within Black community. Pearl May Lee's rage interrogates the intramural—internal community—violence in which anti-blackness and white supremacy manifest. Brooks complicates this anti-lynching poem by illuminating Sammy's choices, particularly his propensity toward lighter skin and whiteness. Several key points must be noted without delving too deeply into the complex issues of colorism. Borrowing from sociologist Meghan Burke, colorism can be understood as "the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin."[145] Colorism grounds standards of beauty equating desirability with proximity to whiteness. Finally, colorism impacts every racial group in society interrupted by white supremacy. In the following stanzas, Brooks outlines the impact of colorism on Sammy and Pearl May Lee.

At school, your girls were the bright little girls.
You couldn't abide dark meat.
Yellow was for to look at,
Black was for the famished to eat.
Yellow was for to look at,
Black for the famished to eat.

You grew up with bright skins on the brain,
And me in your black folks bed.
Often and often you cut me cold,
And often I wished you dead.
Often and often you cut me cold.
Often I wished you dead.

Then a white girl passed you by one day,
And, the vixen, she gave you the wink.
And your stomach got sick and your legs liquefied.
And you thought till you couldn't think.
You thought,

[145] Meghan Burke, "colorism" in *International Encyclopedia of the Socia Sciences,* 2008.

You thought,
You thought till you couldn't think.[146]

Pearl May Lee's rage is neither personally nor politically aligned with an interrogation of colorism that sutures her darker flesh to victimhood. Nor does she seem interested in reproducing the discourse that lighter to white skin is superior through society's gaze. Her rage, instead, forces Sammy to be accountable for not choosing her. In these stanzas, we read Pearl May Lee, not as unattractive as would be a traditional read of colorism. Instead, she is consumable, as flesh. Her dark is meat. Sammy, she asserts, could not "abide dark meat." Blackness, writ large, is vulnerable to mass consumption, "Black was for the famished to eat." The famished indicates extreme hungry or desire to exhaust Black flesh of everything before discarding it. Political theorist Erin Gray asserts, "in the United States, eating has informed the production of racial difference since the late eighteenth century as a way to manage crises of gender, class, and national belonging."[147] She argues that lynching violence is replete with imagery and grammar of the consumption of Black flesh. From roasting lynching victims to family picnic lunches, lynching violence draws deep metaphors with the sensuality of eating and the brutal murder of Black people. Pearl May Lee's rage draws parallels between the logics that sustains lynching violence and the logics that reproduces colorism. Pearl May Lee knows—even as Sammy does not—that while both she and Sammy can share in the intimacy of the kitchen table (read her bed), race and power means they are both inextricably subject to the whims and the well of whiteness.

[146] Brooks, Ballad of Pearl May Lee, 46.

[147] Erin Gray, "Necrophagy at the Lynching Block, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 2, no. 1 (Jan. 2015), 15.

Conversely, perhaps, Sammy's weakened stomach and liquefied legs were not only about his excitement at receiving attention from this white woman but also about his lack of power concerning her. Her whiteness meant that regardless of his action, she was in a position of power over his life. That she decided to have sex with him before accusing him of rape supports the idea that Sammy can not be conceived as anything other than a fungible, consumable object.

Much more can be theorized from engaging Pearl May Lee's anger. However, I also want to draw attention to the spatial ambiguity of the piece. One of the glaring aspects of this poem is that it does not situate the reader in the traditional Southern milieu under the poplar tree as the site of the lynching violence. "Ballad of Pearl May Lee " is a chapter in a collection of poems about people's experiences in the neighborhood of Bronzeville in Chicago. Because the poem is ambiguous about the location of the lynching, readers will not fall into popular tropes about the particularities of Southern racism. While Sammy could have been murdered in the South and pushing Pearl May Lee to seek relative safety in Chicago, reading it that way would limit the poem's reach and our analysis of anti-black violence. This geographic ambiguity effectively disrupts assumptions of safety for Black people. There is no geographic location where you can escape the certainty of anti-black violence. The notion of citizens' rights and protections for Black people cannot exist in a society where white citizens have been privileged at the expense of Black citizens.

III. In Conclusion: The Utility of Rage

Political scientist Debra Thompson's 2017 article "An Exoneration of Black Rage"[148] challenges the dominant discourse about the utility of Black rage. Through an engagement of her work, this chapter seeks to understand Black rage as capacious, complete, rational, analytical, disruptive, subversive, and above all else, a site of knowledge production. Thompson introduces some politicized emotive reactions to the entrenched racism in American society. One such reaction is public grief and mourning. Black mourning is an acceptable reaction to racism, particularly Black women mourners. Publicly, we witness mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and girlfriends lamenting their lost loved ones and appealing to public sentiment to bring justice to the victims of racial violence. Pearl May Lee does not fall into the traditional articulations of Black mourners, though I argue that mourning and grief fuel her rage and despair.

Socially acceptable emotive reactions tend to be those that are expressed in the political realm, which means that they inform, individuals and societies (policies, the rule of law, political participation, and social movements). The notion that reason and rationality are the rules of law is false. However, there is a clear distinction between what affective is socially acceptable for Black people versus White people. Thompson, using the BLM movement, unpacks some of this. She argues that "[Black] protesters express grief, anger, fury, rage, terror, and exasperation" to incidents of police murders of unarmed Black people. The mainstream response to that by white society is that Black protesters are being irrational, perceived as already dangerous and criminal, and that the emotive reactions are inappropriate.

[148] Thompson, "An Exoneration of Black Rage."

The demand is for Black people to behave in tangible and comfortable ways for the white public. Thompson calls this trading in a currency of white anxiety and fear, another way to think of it would be respectability politics to make white people, whether present or not, feel safe. Respectability politics demands that Black people conform to social norms that White people deem appropriate but are rules they are not required to adhere to. Different mandates over feeling and emotions are structured by—what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild calls—"feeling rules."[149] Feeling rules can best be understood as the emotional norms deemed appropriate for different situations. It must be noted that feeling rules are by no means neutral. They are deeply racialized and are evident in "anger politics," framing white anger as acceptable. In the political economy, white anger is normalized, authorized even. In her study "Are Some Emotions Marked 'Whites Only'? Racialized Feeling Rules in Professional Workplaces," sociologist Adia Harvey Wingfield finds that for Black participants normative feeling rules around anger did not apply to them at all, "they are not permitted to show anger under any circumstance." [150] So adherence to Black respectability politics around displays of anger while simultaneously accepting that white anger is justifiable and political is, at minimum, complicity in maintaining white domination. Alternatively, as Thompson asserts,

> the very disavowal of black rage and the tacit acceptance of white anger reveal the implicit racial character of American democracy. When expressed by African Americans to combat the injustice of police brutality, both anger and rage are viewed as incompatible, or even dangerous, to the operation of American democracy; meanwhile, the anger expressed by dominant groups (especially cis-het white men) is easily incorporated into political discourse, normalized as politics as usual.[151]

[149] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1983.

[150] Adia Harvey Wingfield, "Are Some Emotions Marked 'Whites Only'? Racialized Feeling Rules in Professional Workplaces," *Social Problems* 57, no. 2 (May 2010): 259.

[151] Thomspon. "An Exoneration of Black Rage," 460.

Through Pearl May Lee, Brooks performs a loud and resounding avowal of Black rage that is disruptive of respectability politics. Consequently, it also disrupts the assumptions that undergird the cult of true womanhood by producing an analysis of structural and intermural violence.

Black women's rage is key to opening space for a whole range of suppressed Black women's emotions and knowing, illuminating Black women's involvement in lynching as historical witnesses, and the work they do in these spaces through rage—this is a very significant part of political work. In this capacity, Black women's rage is not simply witnessing that is knowledge-producing; it is also political organizing. Black women's witnessing here is not equivalent to Hartman's "white witness of the spectacle of suffering"[152] White witnessing can slip between the "precariousness of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator."[153] Pearl May Lee's witnessing is pedagogical, a call to action to take Black women's rage seriously as *the* site of knowledge production on the structural systems that interfere with Black life.

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[152] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), *19.*

[153] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 19.

Chapter 4: Summary and Conclusion

In 2011, I first encountered the story of lynching victim Mary Turner, who, in 1918, was a 31-year-old pregnant woman. Her *crime* was speaking publicly against the lynching of her husband in Georgia. In response, a mob of white people lynched Mrs. Turner and killed her unborn fetus.[154] The brutality and heinous nature of the crime inspired questions about whom we recognize as victims of lynching violence. Why had Mary Turner's story not been more widely discussed, particularly because of the spectacularized nature of the lynching? How does the gendered female body complicate popular lynching narratives? What can be gleaned about Black women's social positioning from interrogating the silences in the lynching archive? As I read about her life, I pondered how I had been constructing lynching memory and defining lynching victims. Mary Turner is not simply a lynching victim; she is also a witness. Her efforts to find redress for her husband's murder, her desire to tell his story, and her public and unapologetic display of rage situate Turner as a sacred archive. We must read Turner's story as an account that functions not on the front covers of newspapers but in mapping the Black psyche, the positionality of Black women, the social construction of womanhood, and the impossibility of Black motherhood. The memory and history of lynching dislodged Turner's case because it destabilized national narratives of Black male vulnerability and reinforced Black female narratives of inviolability, unrapeability,[155] and silence suffering.

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[154] See Julia Buckner Armstrong, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching, (*Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2011).; and Rachel Marie-Crane Williams, *Elegy for Mary Turner,* (New York and London: Verso, 2021);

[155] Linda Adeniji, "The Unrapeable Black Woman," *SSRN* (December 12, 2015).; T. Dedean Sharpley-Whiting, "When a Black Woman Cries Rape," *Spoils of war: Women of color, cultures, and revolutions* (1997): 45-57.; William H. George and Lorraine J. Martínez, "Victim Blaming in Rape," *Spoils of War: Women of Color, Cultures, and Revolutions* (1997): 45-57.

"A Sacred Archive: Black Women and a New Grammar of Lynching Terror" interrogates limitations in the rhetoric and assumptions about lynching violence by examining the position of Black women in its historical, theoretical, and rhetorical accounts through interpretations of anti-black violence, gendered violence, and Saidiya Hartman's concept of the "afterlife." This dissertation asserts that our scholarly trafficking in Black death creates new knowledge and social critiques. This work analyzes Black women as sacred archives developing a new grammar for understanding the legacy of anti-black lynching violence. Critical linguist Geneva Smitherman asserts, "language plays a dominant role in the formation of ideology consciousness, behavior and social relations; thus, contemporary political and social theory must address the role of language in social change."[156] Thus, the locus of this project's intervention is in its critical rhetorical analysis of lynching's lexicon. It centers Black women to expand the grammar and scholarship about lynching terror, as well as to provide an account of Black women's experiences with anti-black lynching that defy the logic that the violence of lynching is isolated to the moment of the mob murder and is simply part of the country's shameful history, not in its contemporary practices. When we temporally and spatially disrupt lynching narratives, we will access more complex ways to think about lynching violence, lynch victims, racial terror, and its impact on the Black family and the Black community, and by extension, we can engage critiques of contemporary state-sanctioned legal lynching.

We are living in both the legacy of lynching violence and the contemporary threat of lynching. Historically, lynchings were a critical method of racial terror against Black people in the United States. However, the specter of lynching in this contemporary moment is

[156] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin that Talk,* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 94.

evidenced in the United States Congress passing the Emmett Till Antilynching Act on March 29, 2022, on the one hand. Conversely, we witnessed lynching as a political ploy in the 2018 midterm election rhetoric. Anti-black lynching violence has been the subject of several recent films and documentaries focusing on Black women. For example, the 2020 independent film by director Jacqueline Olive, *Always in Season,* which recounts the August 2014 mysterious death of seventeen-year-old Lennon Lacy in Bladenboro, North Carolina, gives attention to his mother, Claudia's quest for justice.[157] Furthermore, as recent as 2022, there has been a three-episode docuseries titled "Let the World See" on *Hulu*, a seven-episode limited drama series "Women of the Movement" (season 1) on *ABC*; and a feature film called "Till" directed by Chinonye Chukwu all focused on the plight, advocacy, and life of Mamie Till-Mobley, mother of Emmett Luis Till.[158] The attention to the realities of anti-black lynching violence suggests that we are socially ready to confront the reality of lynching as a modern-day phenomenon.

Because lynching victims are primarily Black men, the lynchings of women in general, and Black women, are not considered in the public imagination. However, the public record shows that a significant number of women—predominately Black—were lynched in this country. David V. Baker (2012) documents "179 confirmed cases of women and young girl murdered at the hands of mostly White terrorists from 1835 to 1965. . . [and] 57 cases of unconfirmed and factually inaccurate female lynchings," approximately one-hundred-fifty of those lynchings were Black women.[159] "A Sacred Archive" joins the

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[157] *Always in Season,* directed by Jacqueline Olive, premiered in 2019, Independent Lens on PBS. Lennon Lacy was found hanging from a swing set in an open field.

[158] "Let the World See," *Hulu*, January 2022; "Women of the Movement," *ABC,* Season 1 (January 2022); *Till,* directed by Chinonye Chukwu (Universal Pictures and United Artists Releasing, 2022),

[159] David Victor Baker, "Female Lynchings in the United States," *Race and Justice* 2, no. 4, (October 2012). 356.

existing primary and secondary scholarship that probes questions of the practices of the lynching of Black women in the United States. By engaging lynching through the lens of Black women as lynched victims and sacred archives of anti-black violence, the research has been able to interrogate the pervasiveness and impact of the practice for the entire Black community. The research has also documented that anti-black violence against one segment of the group—Black men—is mutually constituted and entangled with the violence of the other parts of the group—Black women and children. This argument is sharpening the focus on the extent of lynching violence because it considers the significant roles black women play in social reproduction and sustaining organized responses to anti-black violence in U.S. society.

Materials for Meaning-Making

This research engages understudied literary representations of lynching violence while drawing on the current and historical studies into lynching violence through both lynching memory and practices that specifically targeted Black women, as well as studies that focus on anti-Blackness, and Black female positionality. By studying lynching photography, language, and literature, the research critically engages inquiries about the legacy of lynching and Black women witnessing. A focus on the visual is generative for thinking about the reproduction of lynching memory and narrative. The lynching photograph has been critical in (re)capturing and staging the historical moment of lynching and the memorialization of said violence. Through the photograph, we share the ability, through the visual, to create sites for knowledge building around personhood, class position, and cultural memory. The research finds that alternative lynching photographs—*lynching photos in a Black Vernacular*—are a subversive tool for creating alternative

articulations of lynching violence. Marion Palfi's 1949, *Wife of a Lynched Victim;* Kerry James Marshall's 2002 print, *Heirlooms and Accessories*; and the 1955 David Johnson photo of Mamie Till Mobley grieving by her son's open casket reclaims lynching's violent memory and shifts the perspective to account for the broader legacy of lynching. I conclude that by examining Black women's erasure from lynching history and interrogating white women as self-possessed agentic figures in lynching violence, lynching photos in a Black vernacular allow theorization about the social status of womanhood.

This work is also profoundly concerned with language in constructing lynching memory. As a form of reclamation, Audre Lorde (1984) challenges us to think about the function of silence and "the transformation of silence into language."[160] Because the popular memory of lynching does not account for Black women in the same way as it does Black men, this work labors to tell the stories of Black women, the Black family, and the Black community. While it draws upon the scholarship that provides accounts of Black women who have been victims of mob violence, the research exposes silences in the scholarship on Black women who navigate lynchings' afterlife and impact on the family and community after the deaths of loved ones. I position Black women as the point of analysis to excavate the afterlife of lynching because, in the cultural imagination of lynching, Black women's stories remain in the interstitial spaces between Black men's suffering, Black community terror, and self-fashioning of white identity. As such, the research takes seriously Black women as sacred archives whose experiences of lynching terror will shift the grammar of lynching as we know it.

[160] Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 1984), 40-44.

Mamie Till Mobley worked tirelessly to create a different discourse about Emmett Till's life and legacy. She spent decades telling the story of her son as a small child and a charismatic and respectful young man. He honored his memory with a complete account of him as a boy, a child, a grandchild, a cousin, a nephew, a stepson, and a friend. However, in public discourse, Till is reduced to the scene in Bryant's store and the horrific nature of his murder. This work challenges readers to a critical interrogation and reflection on the story we tell to remember Till. I argue that oppositional retelling is not enough to trump the story that Bryant told of Till. However, it creates the conditions of possibility to think about Black female positionality and the psychic dissonance apparent in how lynching is narrativized.

This dissertation argues that Black women are a resource of knowledge production about the social, familial, and community experiences of Black people. Through an interrogation of the politics of emotion, and more specifically, the utility of Black women's rage, this research finds that anger politics are racialized and gendered. Further, it finds that anti-black lynching is a structural and organizing violence, and it is about racial power that is both systemic and cultural. Black women's rage probes lynching violence to explore the tensions inherent in bearing witness while being foreclosed from lynching memory. Black women are divorced for social and cultural articulations of lynching violence but are critical to the transgenerational scaffolding that holds the Black community and family together.

Black women's rage also allows for the troubling of the concept of witnessing. Most of the scholarship on lynching describes the crowds as witnesses. The language suggests that they are agents of violence, simply mere onlookers. However, most of the crown

‘witnessing’ lynchings were participants and members of the lynching mobs, and they would harm the victim when the opportunity arose. The language of *witness* deployed in this way is symptomatic of how language is used to mask and shape memory. However, criminality and culpability can be appropriately named through Black women's unapologetic rage.

As interdisciplinary research, “A Sacred Archive” draws from a variety of theoretical and historical primary and secondary sources to develop the following thematics: 1) the role of violent practices that went beyond hanging from trees; 2) circumscribed humanity and propping up the psyche and social status of the master class; 3) Black people’s accounts of lynching and their subversive efforts to create alternate tellings; and 4) how an analysis of the social construction of *womanhood* is overdetermined by anti-black gender violence against Black women. This work posits that Black women are a vital source of knowledge to read the abiding effects of lynching violence on the Black community.

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