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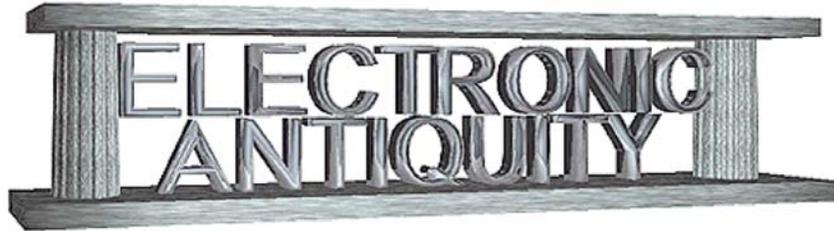
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## **GOING BY THE TREES: DEATH AND REGENERATION IN GEORGIA'S HAUNTED LANDSCAPES**

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Several years ago, I took a walk in the woods with a friend, an African American man in his fifties whom I will call “James.” We had been seeking traces of an old slave cemetery, in which James had good reason to believe some of his ancestors were buried. Deep in the forest, he pointed out an old, gnarled oak that he was convinced marked the outer boundary of the graveyard. Finding this aged landmark was a relief, but a few minutes later, as we started back down the path, James paused, and commented on the tree in different, more somber tones:

That tree'll talk to you if stand out here in the dark. You'll hear that Negro crying out to you, man. Can't you hear?...Shoot. Look at that tree man. That's an ugly tree. You never see limbs like that nowadays. That tree was bred for it. They just threw the rope up and pulled it up. Like this here, they just bring 'em here, hang em and throw 'em down in that pit. Shoot. You think that tree don't know? Look at them limbs here. You don't see limbs growing down like that. There been some dead folk here.

The same tree that moments earlier had positively revealed to him one set of buried secrets, about an honored slave cemetery, becomes a dark, ominous figure, hinting at nocturnal lynching parties.

A few weeks later, I found myself in conversation with another friend, a man in his eighties whom I will call “Daniel.” He recalled a moment nearly eight decades earlier, when he was a six-year-old African

American boy in a small Georgia community. On a bridge on the edge of town, while running an errand Saturday evening for his mother, he found himself surrounded by scores of hooded men robed in white, some atop white draped horses, all carrying flaming torches. He remembered his mother's frequent admonition: if you run from the Klan, you will die, they will shoot you down. Daniel froze, not even breathing. "I knew that moment I was dead, I was dead." But then a vaguely familiar voice from one of the masked figures, cackled, "Best get your black ass home, boy!" He ran home and held his mother all night long. "All my life," he says, "I've looked into the face of every white man in this county, in the store, at work, on the street. I ask myself, 'Is this him? Is this the man who saved my life and who left me half dead inside for years?' He haunts me still."

These episodes are stark reminders that for many, the landscapes of Georgia, like many others across the nation, remain "haunted" ones, stalked by the remembered specters of racial violence, oppression and hatred. As Martha, an elderly woman in Macon once told me, "every tree has a story." These stories are often layered, ambivalently, with oscillating associations of profound belonging and horrific exclusion. The same tree that might summon up nostalgic memories of root-working or important moments in family history may also, moments later, trigger recollections of slavery, Klan rallies, or lynching. A face glimpsed in a store might one moment look benevolent, the next moment sinister.

For those influenced by the intellectual traditions of psychoanalysis, to speak of a person or a landscape as "haunted" is to imply that they are caught up in unresolved contradictions, in enduring traumas that cannot be neatly classified as belonging to the "past." There are, to be sure, degrees of haunting. Some communities, families, and persons were vastly more traumatized than others, and some remain significantly more vulnerable to racial violence than others. Yet I would argue that the peculiar intimacy of systematic racialized violence in America, so often perpetrated by neighbor against neighbor, has rendered all of us, to some extent, "haunted," all stalked by the specters of the nation's under-acknowledged histories of terror within.

Several commentators have recently argued that lynchings, especially in the American South, were often organized around the logic of ritual sacrifice and expiation; overtly or implicitly, the killers sought communion through the blood of the offered scapegoat. I would also like us to consider the possibility that the varied efforts underway across the

nation to confront this long repressed legacy of domestic terrorism are in some respects also organized in terms comparable to those of the ancient Mysteries, esoteric ritual efforts to move back and forth across the boundaries of life and death, the visible and the invisible, the human and the non-human, in the hope of regenerating personal and collective vitality. These efforts range from storytelling in churches to community activism in local cemeteries, from museum exhibitions of old lynching photographs to new artistic work, from revived blues songs to new musical performances. Many of these initiatives, as it happens, revolve around trees, and the “strange fruit” they continue to bear.

Later I will return to artist Kevin Sipp’s extraordinary sculptural meditation on the legacies of lynching, a transformed bottle tree from which hang the spirits of the victims of lynching (figure 1, below). Yet, as I gaze at this haunting installation, I am reminded of another Georgia African American artist’s strange encounter with a tree of death and life. The vernacular artist Winfred Rembert recounts in detail his story of surviving an attempted lynching in South Georgia three decades ago. At this center of his complex spoken narrative, repeatedly represented in painted leather artwork, is a scene of a mysterious, beautiful grove. After overpowering a sheriff who was beating him in a jail cell, he fled and was recaptured by the state police. The police locked him in the trunk of a car and drove him through the night until daybreak. He recalls that as the trunk was open he saw a beautiful forested glade beside a quiet pond. At the center of the meadow were six trees; and from each tree hung a noose. “I knew this was the place, where so many others had been taken. Finally, it was my turn.” Mr. Rembert was stripped naked and hung upside down by his feet from the central noose. The sheriff he had beaten (and whose gun he had stolen) approached him with a knife, grabbed his penis and held the knife against his scrotum. Like so many victims of lynching, Mr. Rembert knew, he was about to be castrated before being hanged and burned, his remains then dumped into the beautiful lake. “Right then, I knew I was an animal, just a hog, all trussed up. He was gonna’ cut me up and slaughter me.”

But at that moment another person stepped forward. “All I could see of this man was his wingtip shoes. And he told the sheriff to stop right there. “You’ve made a right mess of it. Just cut that nigger down. We’ll make an example of him.” As in Daniel’s story, Winfred never saw the face of his ambiguous savior; he was cut down, sentenced to twenty-seven years on a chain gang. After his sentence was commuted he moved north and began, in time, to paint images of life in South Georgia on

leatherworked backgrounds. Among the most common motifs in his work are trees and wingtip shoes.

There have been considerable arguments among scholars and critics about the literal veracity of Mr. Rembert's story, which, like those of any good storyteller, changes a bit in interesting ways each time he recounts it. I've been struck by the passion of some of the denunciations he's engendered, even (especially) among those deeply committed to historical truth-telling about lynching in America. A close colleague, who also works on narratives of lynching, told his students that the story just sounded too composed, too perfect to be true, and that they should just ignore it.

These critiques are understandable yet in a sense, I would suggest, they miss the point: in our post-Holocaust world, there are three vital genres of narrative: fiction, non-fiction, and witnessing. Witnessing as a narrative form has its own kinds of truth, which cannot be easily disentangled from the poetics of ritual action. In some respects, Winfred's story, as he has shaped and reshaped it in his marvelous renditions, is one of the oldest stories of all: he was a man, then he was an animal. "I was just a hog." And then, he was a man again. He was, for all intents and purposes, dead, in a secret place (a place that at some level he always known about, yet hoped never to see. ) And then he was reborn. Are these not the classic progressions of Mystery? Note the transformation of human into animal and back into human, the cyclical passage back and forth between life and death, between darkness and light, and final the attainment of prophetic vision. The motif of being enclosed within the car trunk and then released repeats itself in his stories of his many subsequent trials inside the sweat box in the state penitentiary. Again and again, he had to dance when the white prison guards said to him, "dance, nigger, dance." As punishment, he was confined to the small box, too small to stand up or lie down in. "It got to the point", he recalls, "that I'd just walk back over to the sweat box and demand to be let back in. "Finally, one day the warden said, no, I'm not gonna let you back in there. It doesn't do you no good." At that moment, Winfred recalls, "the walls of my prison just fell away. They couldn't do nothin' to me no more." Out of these repeated symbolic enactments of death and sacrifice, new life and new vision are gained and made concrete in his paintings.

### **Lynching as Sacrifice: White and African American Imagery**

I wish to emphasize that the sacrificial logic of many of these stories of lynching is not solely a poetic interpolation of the victims. Sociologist Orlando Patterson has persuasively argued that lynchings in America comprised a horrific form of sacrificial violence perpetrated against African Americans, and to a lesser extent, against Jews, by the white majority.<sup>1</sup> The polluted body of the Other is horrifically violated and ritually killed, so that the sins of the killers may be expiated and the collective body of the sacrificers might be regenerated. Patterson notes that as in sacrificial rites elsewhere, lynchings in many instances were centered upon acts of literal or symbolic cannibalism: fingers, knuckles, cooked pieces of liver and heart were sold or kept as keepsakes. The smell of the burning of living victims was at times compared by white witnesses to a “barbecue,” and many perpetrators and audience members reported leaving the scene of a lynching “hungry.”

In this regard, the hundreds of thousand of lynching photographic postcards sold throughout the United States initially reproduced this sacrificial vignette and offered the thousands (perhaps millions?) of whites who obtained these images a measure of the perverse imputed grace of the original sacrificial act. Even the composition of the photographs at times recalls the scenario of sacrifice. Consider the now famous photographs of the 1920 killings of three young African American circus workers by a crowd of five thousand persons in downtown Duluth, Minnesota. These images of the lynched Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie are among the most haunting in the published collection of lynching photographs, *Without Sanctuary*.<sup>2</sup> Two youths, their shirts stripped off, are trussed from either side of a lamp-post. A third young victim lies prone at their feet. An exultant white crowd surrounds them. The parallels in composition to classic images of the Crucifixion almost defy understanding; even the ribs of one youth are visible, a dark shadow at their base. At some unconscious level, did the photographer understand that he was complicit in another Calvary?

To be sure, African American artists and poets have long noted parallels between lynching and Golgotha. In Gwendolyn Brooks’ words,

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<sup>1</sup> Patterson 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Allen *et al.* 2000.

“The lariat lynch-wish I deplored/The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.”<sup>3</sup>  
A number of anti-lynching editorial cartoons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicted the face of Christ superimposed over that of the lynching victim. Winfred Rembert’s most famous work, a lynching triptych now displayed in the Yale Museum of Art, centers on a line of three trees, from which hang African American men. At the base of a fourth tree, a mother figure, a latter day Mary, weeps and pleads for her son’s life.

### **Trees and Memory in Afro-Atlantic Worlds**

Yet for all of this pervasive Christological imagery, Other dynamics inform African American understandings of trees and related landscape sites associated with death and loss. To tease out these dynamics, I turn to conversations I have had in a specific rural Georgia community an hour’s drive from Atlanta, conversations in which speakers routinely link trees, cemeteries, kinship and labor. As we shall see, there are striking gendered differences in the arboreal imagery used by speakers. For women, cemetery trees tend to be potent signifiers of family continuity and regeneration. Men, in contrast, tend towards more ambivalent representations, emphasizing trees’ redemptive and violent associations.

A number of these conversations have occurred within the four-acre town cemetery, divided between historically “white” and “black” sections. Like many Georgia graveyards, this cemetery has long been a political flash-point. Since the mid 1960s, a wealthy all-white foundation has cared for the white half of the graveyard, drawing on public funds covertly funneled to it by the white-majority city council. The city government has tended to ignore the historically African American two acres of the cemetery, which contain many graves dating back to the 1840s and 1850s, when nearly all of the town’s African American residents were held in slavery. For decades, the white cemetery’s lawns have been neatly mowed, its marble headstones carefully mapped and lovingly restored. In contrast, the adjacent African American sections became densely overgrown, with many plots inaccessible to living family members.

In 1990, disaster struck the oldest section of the African American cemetery. An unscrupulous pulpwood dealer “cleared” the pine forest

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<sup>3</sup> [Wright 2001](#): 467.

that had grown up over this one-acre site. Backhoes buried, displaced or fractured scores of headstones, and disturbed hundreds of graves.

As I have listened to African American residents try to characterize the nearly indescribable pain this episode caused them and their families, I've been struck by subtle yet persistent differences in women's and men's accounts. One middle-age African American woman, whose father's grave had been destroyed, was confined to bed for three weeks, an experience she later likened to "going to my deathbed." Nowadays, she speaks of driving to work each morning past the nearly empty meadow of the old cemetery, in a wistful tone: "I guess I just miss the trees. I used to know those trees, you know."

While participating in a restoration and documentation projects in this cemetery, I often heard women speak in similar terms about the absence of the trees. I recall, in particular, a conversation with an African American woman in her seventies, Mrs. Anna Neumann, the community's informal authority on the cemetery. She led a group of us through the grassy field, punctuated by occasional shattered headstones and unmarked patches of sunken ground. As well as she could, she recalled for us the location of the destroyed gravesites: "My aunt, Altheria, she's right here. Over there, that's the plot of our neighbor family, old Mr. Jim Benton and Miss Sadie, you remember, I told you all about them." But then Mrs. Neumann stopped in mid-sentence, her arm half raised, and said softly, "I can't, I just can't remember where they're buried. I used to be going by the trees, you know, I went by the trees."

For Mrs. Neumann, trees evoke proper family remembrance and continuity, signaling productive linkages to ascendant generations. Cemetery trees, in particular, remind her of her mother, mother's sisters, grandmothers and great-aunts, the women who taught her how to "go by the trees" in finding gravesites. Like many other women in the community, she often refers to respected, deceased female relatives as people who "really knew the trees," meaning either that they were root-workers (traditional healers) or that they could find their way to gravesites by reading the landscape.

In this connection, it is striking that at a recent "Family Day Celebration" at the local black Methodist church, the program featured a cover drawn by one of Anna's cousins, Laura. The cover depicted a large oak tree containing fourteen branches springing from a common root, each branch bearing the name of one of the fourteen African American families of the town, who are all inter-related through multiple bonds of affinity and filiation. Anna approvingly told me in church as she stared

intensely at the cover: “That tree says it all. We’re all just tied up together here. Can’t go talking about one family’s roots without running into another branch of some other family!”

In contrast, men’s references to trees in comparable contexts tend to deploy more traumatic imagery of violation and dismemberment. William Arnold, an African American man in his sixties, recalled the 1990 clear-cut:

That morning, when I saw all the trees gone, and the earth torn open like that, it was as if we were back there, you know. Everything we got, the houses, the cars, all that ‘progress,’ doesn’t mean anything. Can you tell me what’s changed, since those days, you tell me? You think it matters if they don’t have manacles and whips and aren’t selling families apart anymore? Right now, right now, every tree that’s gone, that ‘s every black family in town, with a hole in its heart.

Suggestively, men sometimes relate the problem of cemetery trees to fraught memories of their fathers. Consider the case of Alan Teller, a local politician in his sixties who has long agitated for the restoration of the black cemetery. He has maintained that as much as possible, trees in the more recent parts of the black cemetery should be pruned or taken down. “It is terrible the old trees were mowed down in the old section, I know that as well as well as anyone, but now we just need to clear things out, open things up.... Let’s clear out all these trees and brush...so these plots can all be out in the light, for every family. Why, you can’t even get to my father’s grave this way.”

One day, as he and I worked together to clear foliage from his father’s and grandfather’s graves, Alan spoke explicitly of his father, who died twenty years earlier at the age of ninety-two:

He never told me anything about our family history, no matter how hard I tried. Proud man, would never say a single word about slavery. That’s what we ‘came up from,’ you know, that’s how they thought then. Except right before he died, he told me something, for the first and only time. He told that his father, my grandfather, had been born and grew up in slavery just here in this county, and that he and his full brother Robert came off the old Nelson place. But my

grandfather hated old man Nelson so he took the name Teller. But Robert kept the name Nelson. So all these Nelsons buried here (gesturing the adjacent graves) they are all my cousins. But I only found that out from my father at the end.

Looking into the thick patch of trees that still covered this section of the cemetery, Alan softly murmured, "So many secrets, you know, so many secrets."

A little later, I once again heard references to fathers and dark secrets at the site of a cemetery, this time from James Lawrence, with whom this paper began. As I've mentioned, James had taken me on a long hike through forested land owned by the county, to show me a heavily wooded site that he believes is a slave cemetery. He's convinced his mother's ancestors, held in slavery on the old Thompson plantation, are buried in unmarked graves under "these old trees." The old plantation is an especially fraught site for James, as he is a direct descendant of the white master, Dr. John Thompson, who had several children by one of his slave mistresses.

During the hike, James spoke positively of the forest trees, explaining that the trees had guided him to this spot a year earlier, when he had searched on horseback for this long-lost graveyard. "Look at those," he said to me as he pointed to two large sycamores, "I look at trees when I see 'em like that." "Why is it important to look at trees?" I asked. He explained, "'Cause that's a different age tree, that's a different age tree. You know, I'm looking at the terrain. Whenever you see things, you know how you see things? You see a chimney out there, they leave a big old tree out there." Finally, we came to a large, gnarled oak, with long twisted limbs radiating out from several interconnected trunks: "See that tree? Its different from anything," said James. This tree, he explained triumphantly, had "told" him that he'd finally found the lost cemetery.

But a few minutes later, after we had emerged from the deep cemetery grove, James began to berate this same old oak, in the terms quoted above. Still staring at the tree, James began to speak of his difficult relationship with his late father, a conservative businessman and politician, who, like Alan's father, had always refused to speak of "old-time" family history, especially "going back to slavery times." Thinking on this, and still looking at the great oak, James reflected on his own deep confusion, a year earlier, when he first learned there was a cemetery on "Thompson" land:

I thought to myself, amazing, this here was our property, it belonged to us Thompsons. But then when I came out here, and looked at all this deep in the woods, I realized, wait, you're a fool, this wasn't our property. We was the property. (laughs) I got myself confused with him!

The "him" in this statement is his ancestor, Dr. Thompson, the white master who fathered James' enslaved great grandfather. The old tree, both admired and feared, seems to be imbued with the complex presence of both the black and the white father figure, a composite entity that is simultaneously an impediment to proper family memory and a disturbing link to remembered traumas of the past.

I recently returned to Alan Teller's house. He once again reflected on his father's refusal to talk about the family's time in slavery, a period that holds increasing fascination for Alan. "My father was a great man, a great man in so many respects, but why did he have to deny all that history, all our history?" At that moment, Alan's wife Elizabeth gently interrupted him. "They were just protecting us, that's the way it was." She told me a vivid childhood memory, of walking in downtown Atlanta with her mother in the 1940s:

We passed a beautiful little park, with a fence around it. With green grass and a beautiful tree in the middle, with a bench right there under the shade. I said, "momma, let's go sit under that tree, please, momma." And she said no, no, I don't like that, I don't like those people, and we need the exercise, let's keep walking. She never ever told me about segregation, can you believe that? She was angry deep down, I know now, but she never showed it. We just had to figure out the rules on our own. You know, somehow, looking at that tree, right then, I just knew it, I understood. But my mother never said anything, and neither did I. That's the way it was.

Elizabeth paused, and smiled at me. "But I still think of that tree, sometimes, how beautiful it was."

At the time, I was puzzled by the elegiac, almost nostalgic, tone in which Elizabeth told me this story of an early glimpse into the strange world of Jim Crow. Why, I wondered, did she conclude this tale with a

fond memory of the forbidden tree? And why is this tree, such a potent sign of exclusion and oppression, remembered with such a wistful smile?

It is hard not to think of Genesis and of its fenced off garden, centered on a tree of knowledge that is forever associated with exclusion and life after the Fall. Yet Elizabeth remembers this tree with affection, suffused as it is with her mother's strength and the precious, ephemeral qualities of childhood remembrance. Like her mother, the tree bequeathed her the knowledge that made her the person that she is, a black woman proud of her people's history.

At one level, Elizabeth's remembered tree seems profoundly different from her husband's trees, the trees that deny him access to his father's gravesite. It surely seems a far cry from James' phantasmagoric vision of the lynching tree, or from the logged trees in the cemetery that, for William, left "a hole in the heart" of every black family.

Yet all these trees have much in common. For both men and women, trees are evocative sites of what DuBois termed "double consciousness."<sup>4</sup> Staring at the gnarled oak, James recalls that he initially thought of himself as the owner of "the property" on which he stood, only to realize that his people "were the property." Elizabeth remembers the tree in the city park as catalyzing her coming to consciousness of segregation. In DuBois' sense, the tree causes her to glimpse "life beyond the veil." Significantly, in all these cases, the tree image evokes the figure of a same-sex parent, a parent who exemplifies the era and consciousness of Jim Crow, with whom, paradoxically, the child simultaneously identifies and is distanced from.

Why should trees be so "good to think with" about the paradoxical predicament of seeing oneself simultaneously within and outside of mainstream society, of being like and unlike a muted parent? In part, this is due to trees' general capacity, long noted by anthropologists, to dramatize or encapsulate paradox. Human-like in appearance, yet manifestly neither human nor animal, they lend themselves to meditations on the fluid boundaries between human and non-human, self and non-self, the conventional world and the world beyond. Beginning as seeds and growing to much greater sizes and ages than human mortals, massive trees may evoke the mysteries of the passage of generations as well as psychosocial ruptures across familial histories.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> DuBois 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Feeley-Harnik 1991; Rival 1998.

Beyond this, the tree's capacity to exemplify the core paradox of double consciousness for African Americans may in part be related to the reproductive cycle and double structure of these special plants. The sedentary tree may grow to triumphant heights far from where its seed originated, and the visible branch system above ground is mirrored by a hidden root system below. Hence the polyvalent appropriateness of Alex Haley's 1977 title, *Roots*. In the wake of a long history of traumatic mobility – spanning the Middle Passage, the forced rupture of enslaved families, and the Great Migration – trees are permanently rooted to the earth. Faced by a mainstream society that has long denied the depth and breadth of African American historical presence, the “roots” metaphor evokes an enduring, hidden reality under-the-surface. The tree thus functions as a complex switch-point between that which is visible to the wider (white) world and the special status of life on the “other side” of the color bar. (One thinks of the famous image of the chokecherry tree beaten into the back of Sethe in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*; in one sense the tree is invisible to Sethe and visible only to the white girl Amy, but in a deeper sense the tree's significance can only be grasped in light of African American historical experience.)

This dense arboreal imagery is only deepened by a long history of transformed African symbolic forms in the New World, ranging from bottle trees to funerary saplings.<sup>6</sup> In many African societies, trees are understood as residences of the spirits of the dead. As many central African BaKongo put it, the forest is the village of the dead and the trees are their houses. None of my Georgia informants have ever stated things quite this way but the underlying sense that the dead are co-present with trees is, in many respects, taken for granted. Consider, for instance, the visceral horror expressed by older African American women at the thought of chopping down any cemetery trees, even sick or dying trees. Or recall James' assertion that the gnarled oak will “talk to you” at night, conveying the cries of the black men who died hanging from its twisted branches, brutally killed on the very land that they had so long worked by white men who were, secretly, their own kin.

At their best, then, trees evoke uncorrupted domains, of secret knowledge of history and genealogy, of long-term ritual symbolism linked to the wider Afro-Atlantic world, of the non-alienated capacity to work one's own piece of land, and of a hidden, truer self. Yet, these alternate forms of selfhood bound up with trees are extraordinarily

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson 1983; Vlach 1990; Gomez 1998.

fragile and vulnerable; the tree can easily be transmuted into a signifier of the dismembered self, deprived of the capacity to produce oneself through one's own free labor.



Keven Sipp. "We are the Children of Strange Fruit Spirits," 2000.



Kevin Sipp. "Strange Fruit Hanging From the Tree of Life: Meditation on G. Bruno (From Strange Fruit Series)," 2003.

Consider, for example, sculptor Keven Sipp's striking recent piece, "We are the Children of Strange Fruit Spirits." The piece incorporates an upright forked tree branch, from which the artist has hung multiple burned out light bulbs, encased in various materials. Belts of cowrie shells circle the tree's trunk. From a speaker incorporated into the sculpted tree multiple versions of Abel Meerpool's song "Strange Fruit" reverberate. The song alternates with a poem by the artist that gives voice to the reborn spirits of lynched persons, who now run in gangs. Unable to trust, unable to find a way home, their troubled souls linger between worlds, caught in cycles of self-destructive violence.



Kevin Sipp. "Strange Fruit," Upper Detail.



Kevin Sipp. "Strange Fruit," Lower Detail.

None of these trees, ultimately, stands alone. Collectively, they inhabit and help constitute a shared psychic terrain, an enduring landscape that still bears the traces of slavery and its ambiguous legacies.

### **Towards Regeneration: Ritual Inversion in Contemporary Anti-Lynching Activism**

How, amidst these haunted landscapes of long under-acknowledged trauma, do persons and communities begin to reconstitute themselves, to move beyond cycles of denial, anguish and retribution? Artistic initiatives such as Kevin Sipp's that grapple physically with the legacies of pain embedded in tree forms are highly suggestive: iconic representations of loss and liminality, composed of the media of terror, they hold the promise of new homes, new sanctuary, new covenants.

Present-day activists from Duluth, Minnesota, commemorating the 1920 killings of the three young African American men, have recently been facing challenges posed by the enduring power of the nightmarish images of the murder victims. At first, they planned to commemorate the 1920 event through an image of a lamppost, to be used on posters and T-shirts. Yet, to some, the icon seemed too much like the old photographs; even the stark lines of the curved lamppost conjured up the traces of the desecrated bodies. A local artist finally hit upon an ingenious solution: the new image depicts the silhouetted figures of the three young men, standing straight and tall, backlit by the glow of a distant light source. In a subtle fashion, the street-lamp has been transformed from an instrument of terror to something else: the light of historical truth, perhaps, or even the ultimate promise of redemption. Images surely haunt us. Yet they also, in quiet ways, may help to heal us.

Rituals of inversion have also been developed by a community organization in Georgia. "The Moore's Ford Memorial Committee" (MFMC), a group formed in the mid-1990s to publicize and commemorate the killing in July 1946 of four young African Americans, including one returning serviceman, near Monroe, Georgia. Since its founding the MFMC has demonstrated a remarkable ability to bring together varied constituencies, across lines of race and class, to work on projects of memorialization and social justice. As an anthropologist who studies ritual I've been especially fascinated by the work the MFMC has done in cleaning and restoring the cemeteries in which the victims of the Moore's Ford killings had been buried in unmarked graves. Community attempts to mark the graves with permanent markers were repeatedly sabotaged by Klan members. In James Allen's memorable phrase, even in death the victims were "without sanctuary."

In this context, the work of restoring cemeteries strikes me as especially important. One night in the summer of 1946 a group of men

gathered to commit an unspeakable crime, riddling the bodies of their young victims with hundreds of bullet holes. Now, on successive weekends, a group of people from varied backgrounds gathered to participate in the hard, physical labor of restoring hallowed ground. In a quiet fashion they sought to honor that which had been dishonored, to sanctify those long denied sanctuary. In the words of one MFMC activist, “sweat-producing labor is soul-cleansing labor.” If the bodies of the dead had been physically “dis-membered” by the murderers, then the modern cemetery work sought to “re-member” those who were lost, and by extension to “re-member” or reconstitute a shattered community. Since time immemorial, rituals marking cycles of death and the regeneration of life have bound together villages, communities and nations. It is moving and fascinating to watch such ritual practices emerging at this historical juncture, across the country at the grass roots level, as diverse persons and families seek new ways to meet on common ground.

In certain respects, recent exhibition projects of lynching photographs can be said to be informed by comparable logics of ritual inversion. In 2000-01, as Emory and Atlanta communities debated the wisdom of mounting such an exhibition here in Atlanta, a young woman rose to speak. She had been of two minds about the show, she acknowledged. She knew that these images, many of them photographic postcards, had been sent through the mail in part to sow terror in the hearts of African Americans who might glimpse them. There was always the risk that displaying these pictures might again inflict pain and fear on some viewers. Yet, she mused, doesn't this exhibition offer us the opportunity to re-direct these images, to circulate them along different trajectory, to mark them, in effect, “return to sender”?

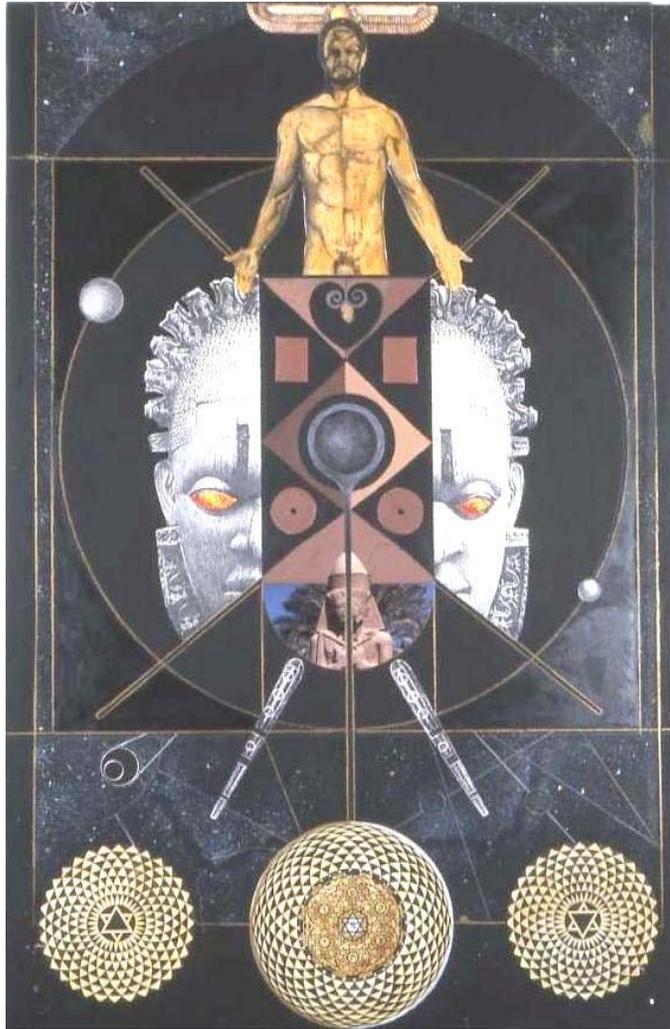
The following October a group of us held a modest memorial ritual of our own, following a workshop we had organized on lynching in downtown Atlanta. Activists and scholars from around the nation gathered on a Sunday morning by the banks of the Appalachee River, at the little crossing known as “Moore's Ford,” where George and Mae Murray Dorsey and Roger and Dorothy Malcolm were killed on July 25, 1946 by a group of white men, none of whom were ever prosecuted. One at a time, members of the memorial committee and students from the college where I teach quietly read the names of the four hundred and eighty-eight persons known to have been lynched in Georgia. Each name was precious, and yet there was a special poignancy to a phrase that recurred again and again, “Unknown Negro...Unknown Negro.”

Lynching snuffed out thousands of lives before their time, and even erased, in some instances, the identities of the dead for all time.

James Lawrence, who grew up hearing whispered stories of the Moore's Ford killings, was at church that morning and couldn't make it to the memorial service. But he heard about it from some mutual friends and has talked about it a few times since. As an "old time civil rights activist," he says he's lately been close to giving up on the current generation of young people. But gazing at photographs of the students at the ceremony he allows that there might be some hope after all. Remarking at the racial mix in the photographs, of African American, Latino, White and Asian students, he jokes, "you've got a regular U.N. there. Who knows what they'll get up to?"

A few days later, James and I took another walk in the woods. Once more, we passed that old oak. Thinking of our earlier conversation, I asked him if he found this sight disturbing. He shook his head, puzzled: "Hey, it's just a tree." Freud, I suspect, would be pleased: sometimes a tree is only a tree. Of course, many might argue that in the shadow of America's violent history against its own citizens of color, a single workshop, a single memorial service, or a single exhibition of photographs won't change anything fundamentally. Aren't these just symbols, images, ephemeral traces of light and shadow?

Yet when traversing haunted landscapes, light and shadow are, sometimes, the only things we have to work with. James took considerable comfort, the following spring, from the thought that the exhibition of lynching photographs would open in Atlanta, capital of the "New South," on May 1st, of all days. Mayday. Once an ancient rite of mystery, celebrating the land's regeneration on the day of spring's return, now dedicated internationally to the dignity of labor and to our common humanity. What better day to bring some old images of dark times out into the light, and stamp them, once and for all, "returned to sender"?



Keven Sipp. "Mystery School," 1996.

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