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SOUTHERN CHANGES



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"Return to Sender" Confronting Lynching and Our Haunted Landscapes

By Mark Auslander

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Last year, 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 near 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, until 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," 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.

I found myself thinking of these conversations last winter, as Emory University held a series of public forums around the question of lynching photographs. As has been widely reported, James Allen and John Littlefield have placed their collection of photographs and postcards of lynching and racial violence, primarily taken between 1880 and 1920, on long-term loan in Emory's Special Collections. These images have been published in the extraordinary book, *Without Sanctuary*, displayed on the web (www.withoutsanctuary.com), and exhibited in New York City and in Pittsburgh. Yet the images had never been displayed in a large-scale exhibition in the American South.

Should the photographs be displayed here, and if so, how? These questions were debated in public sessions on the Emory campus and at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American History and Culture, and by a University task force of faculty, students, and staff members. Many noted that the images were initially produced and

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circulated as instruments of terror; dismembered, horrifically dismembered bodies were carefully posed, often surrounded by smiling, triumphant crowds. Would exhibiting these images of unspeakably violent death occasion a kind of pornographic voyeurism? Would modern onlookers, in effect, occupy the same position as the gleeful onlookers in the pictures? Would an exhibition inadvertently reduce those killed, nearly all of them African American, to passive, pitiful objects of morbid curiosity? Or, as many maintained, would seeing these images finally force thousands of viewers to confront a historical truth that they had never before truly grasped, that lynching was not an occasional aberration, but was rather a mass phenomenon, a pervasive spectacle of violence, an inescapable chapter in the American story?

In the middle of one of these forums, 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 a different trajectory, to mark them, in effect, "return to sender"?

The phrase, "return to sender," has stayed with me ever since. No exhibition or project can, or should, erase James or Daniel's memories, or the memories of thousands of others haunted by the echoes of America's long undeclared war against persons of color. Yet might new initiatives, in museums or other public spaces, help us collectively confront our inner demons and move us beyond the timeless repetition of trauma? Might there be ways to take these lingering specters and mark them, once and for all, "return to sender"?

It was in this spirit last year that a group of us at Emory began to work closely with our partners in a nearby organization, 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--especially rites marking cycles of death and the regeneration of life--have bound together villages, communities, and nations. It is moving to watch such ritual practices emerging at this historical juncture, across the country at the grassroots level, as diverse persons and families seek new ways to meet on common ground.

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Over the course of spring 2000, we began to plan for a collaborative workshop that would bring together representatives of the many different community organizations around the nation doing comparable work, seeking to bring out the truth about lynching and "re-member" their local communities. Funded by a grant from the Georgia Humanities Council, the workshop was cosponsored by the MFMC, Emory University's Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life (MARIAL) and the Auburn Avenue Research Library. We held the program, "Lifting the Veil of Silence: A Workshop on Racial Violence and Reconciliation" at Auburn Avenue on October 24-25, 2001.

For two days, representatives of nine different community organizations shared their stories. We heard in painful detail narratives of mass violence in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida in which entire communities had been devastated in the early 20th century. We learned new details of the killings in Chattanooga, Tennessee; Duluth, Minnesota; Monroe, Georgia; Ocoee, Florida; Orangeburg, South Carolina; Price, Utah; and Wilmington, North Carolina. In plenary and in small break-out sessions we pondered and debated the causes, meanings, and legacies of these events. What does it mean to tell the truth, and who, if anyone, owns the "rights" to these stories? Who is accountable for these crimes and what forms should accountability take? Is reconciliation

possible without justice, in the absence of prosecution or formal judicial inquiry? What form would a South African-style "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" take in Georgia? How might the historical analysis of lynching productively inform current activism around issues of incarceration, the death penalty, poverty, and racial violence?

Again and again, we returned to the problem of what Toni Morrison has termed "re-memory," the imaginative work of telling stories that had seemed lost, and in so doing, of re-creating moral and community bonds long frayed. What kinds of memorials are the most fitting to those killed in such terrible ways? How do we honor the victims without reducing them, and by extension all oppressed persons and communities, to the status of mere objects of pity? How do we move beyond simply re-affirming the relations of power, terror, and domination that were reflected by, and reproduced through, the initial acts of lynching? How, in short, do we make things different?

For Joseph Jordan, curator of the current exhibition of the Allen-Littlefield lynching photographs at the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site (open May 1-December 31, 2002) the answer lies in giving voice to those whose voices were so long ignored. He opened the workshop by reading from the testimony of James Cameron, who narrowly survived a lynching in 1930. "How did I act when it came time for me to die?" he read. With those startling words, the line between distant victim and audience member was suddenly blurred. Such language breaks down the abstraction of statistical enumeration. Some of us were reminded of a rabbi's commentary on September 11: it wasn't five thousand people who died in the World Trade Center. It was one person, five thousand times.

For activists from Duluth, Minnesota, commemorating the 1920 killings of three young circus workers by a crowd of five thousand persons, the answer lies in mass, collective action. The photographs of the lynched Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie are among the most haunting in the *Without Sanctuary* collection. Two youths, their shirts stripped off, are trussed from either

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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? African-American artists and poets have long noted parallels between lynching and Golgotha. (In Gwendolyn Brooks' words, "The lariat lynch-wish I deplored/The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.") Recently, scholars such as Orlando Patterson and Donald Mathews have argued that lynchings 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.

The enduring power of these nightmarish images has posed a special challenge for the modern activists in Duluth. 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.

This summer, on the anniversary of the 1920 lynching, the Duluth organizers plan to turn the tables even more thoroughly. Ten thousand persons--twice the numbers who participated in the killing--will gather on the spot of the murder for a collective memorial. The photographs of that event, I expect, will be worth seeing.

On the final day of our workshop in October we held a modest memorial ritual of our own. 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 MFMC and students from the college where I teach quietly read the names of the 488 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, 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 wonders. "Who knows what they'll get up to?"

Recently, 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 with which we have to work. I take some comfort from the thought that the exhibition of lynching photographs opened in Atlanta, capital of the "New South," on May 1st, of all days. Mayday. Once an ancient rite 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"?

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