Overview Essay

64 years after his death and 14 years after the first memorial, Emmett Till’s lynching memorial was vandalized by a group of students from the University of Mississippi during the Summer of 2019. Their accompanying Instagram photo in front of the bullet ridden sign takes a stance in the current contestations of memory and memorials, the devaluation of black life (even in death), and white supremacy. They claim a lineage linked to a long-buried American sin—a foundation of terror rooted in the modern.¹ The incident points to a larger history of lynching and to lynching as a site of memory oft erased in American history.

What historians refer to as the “nadir” of American race relations marked a period of backlash after emancipation and its fleeting freedoms. Violence, legal disenfranchisement through Jim Crow, and lynching were widespread. As Amy Louise Wood notes, lynching and the spectacle of it constituted a way to consolidate white identity and reinforce a white supremacist social order that seemed to be crumbling before whites’ very eyes.² Lynching was an orchestrated spectacle whose effects reverberated across the American landscape. Between 1900 and 1931, the Tuskegee Institute documented 1,886 lynchings throughout the country.³ The spectacle of lynching was more than just individual instances of brutality, they conveyed specific messages to white and Black spectators about their respective places in society.

In the years leading up to Booker T. Washington’s article, “A Protest Against the Burning and Lynching of Negroes,” in the Birmingham Age-Herald in 1904, 225 Black people were lynched in Alabama according to NAACP records from 1889-1918.⁴ Washington’s article was part of an ongoing crusade against lynching, that had picked up speed and fervor with the work of Ida B. Wells. Among the 225 lynched during this time, Bunk Richardson of Gadsden, Alabama was particularly memorable for the widely circulated photo of his lynched body and news coverage throughout the United States. The image of Richardson’s body still exists today, striking to folks who have seen it in online databases, but little is known about the man himself. Richardson’s spectacularized dead body—the ways in which he is yet unknown—speaks to the layers of silence around lynching and the violence that obscures lynching victims’ existence outside of the event.

We do not know how many Black people were lynched at the hands of white mobs nor do we know how many narrowly escaped. The memories of lynching in the collective as well as

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⁴ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918. New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969,
those told by historians tend to “[render] all but a few victims anonymous, secondary subjects in larger narratives that prioritize understanding violence, the perpetrators of violence and their apologists or institutionalized and armed resistance to it…many avoid victims’ and witnesses’ representations of suffering…”

This chapter engages various sources to highlight the efforts of local Black voices—in particular the work of The Alabama Citizen, an African American newspaper published in Tuscaloosa—in lynching memory.

Symbols and photographs of lynching—the noose and the white sheets—have power and meaning. The ingrained terror combined with erasure leave little room for the processing or acknowledgement of trauma or agency. It creates a break between past and present wherein the victim is further violable—but never recoverable—and the perpetrators are unknown. It renders white supremacy invisible. Commemoration and African American memory of lynching, then, serve as important methods of counter-memory that not only honor the dead but refute and rebel against the silences that white supremacist terror demands. The Alabama Citizen and its contextualization provide a way to look at how local African American memory was paramount to reckoning with Black Americans’ status as victims, witnesses, and constructors of lynching memory in ways that challenged and indicted how white supremacist structures functioned while working within their confines.

Guiding Questions

How do we unearth the complexities of lives in the shadow of and always subject to “extrajudicial” mob violence? What do the documents tell us about how African Americans envisioned justice? How did they address issues of justice and violence in the materials they wrote and published? What can attention to language and the arrangement of articles on the page tell us about the construction of narratives? What part does local memory play in combatting certain narratives and conveying dignity? What might local African American memory offer to our understanding of lynching?

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**Suggested Readings**


1. Af fluent White Southerners Discuss Lynching and the Social Order

Excerpt from the Race Problems of the South Conference Program & Proceedings. In the schedule of sessions with themes, lynching gets its own session. The questions being asked about the Negro in the social order make it clear, in ways that the collective imagination often ignores, that lynching was a problem of hierarchy, of place and placing/controlling the Black body within space, and not a simple crime of passion as we might conceive of it. Lynching was debated as a method of control, painted as a condition of the lawlessness that emancipation and enfranchisement had created and as a moral issue that degraded the white community.

The Negro in Relation to The Social Order. –Is the Negro to remain as a permanent element in Southern life? Is there antipathy to the Negro in the South? If so, is it industrial or racial, or both? Is race antipathy a curse, or a blessing to both races? How far has the agitation of the question of “social equality” increased difficulties, and resulted to the disadvantage of both races? Is the crime of rape increasing decreasing in the South? Is lynching an effective remedy? If not, why not? Are there adequate legal penalties for the offences often punished by lynching? How can the legal provisions for the punishment of crimes against women be improved? What is the effect of lynching, as a remedy, on the public mind—of the whites?—of the blacks? Has the increased severity of mob penalties tended to the greater security of the home?


2. Black Man Nearly-lynched, Shoots to Protect

Often, we do not think about those who had close calls with lynching and narrowly escaped. Their stories become invisible for some of the reasons noted in the overview essay as well as the difficulty of narrating trauma in the aftermath of white terror. This source details the case of a man nearly-lynched who shot a white man in self-defense. Note the “safety” of the jail and the ways the white newspaper uses the docile slave narrative to discuss him.

The negro, Henderson Tunstall whose successful escape from lynching at the hands of the Blount county mob as told in yesterday’s Age-Herald, spent yesterday in quiet and safety within the walls of the Jefferson county jail “where mobs break not through and Lynch.”

Yesterday afternoon Assistant County Physician dressed the negro’s wounds, which have been unattended since last Friday. There were four ugly wounds in one of his hands and arms, and from one of them a 44-calibre bullet was extracted. It had penetrated deeply into the flesh and and flattened itself against the bone. This little memento of the tragedy is now in the hands of the negro’s attorneys. They will use it as evidence

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Tunstall repeated yesterday what he had said before; that he had shot Judge Hamilton last Friday in self-defense…While he was still standing in the door one or more of the three white men fired on him, severely injuring his arm. He claims that all of his family were in the house at the time,
including a number of young children and he was compelled to protect himself and them. Accordingly, he emptied a shotgun into the crowd and after he found he had hurt someone, he ran off into the woods.

Tunstall is over 50 years old, and came originally from Hall county, where he was a slave of the Tunstall family in that section. In Blount county he is said to have always been a very orderly, quiet negro, though his children have given him a lot of trouble.


3. Tuskegee’s Map of Terror

Tuskegee Institute Research Data rendered visible through locations on a map of lynchings throughout the U.S. A visual of the racial violence that Black people were reckoning with and that contextualizes Booker T. Washington’s article in the Birmingham-Age Herald and the pervasiveness of white mob violence. There are dots indicating lynching throughout the states and mapped by county, but the dots are so concentrated in the Deep South that it is hard to see the counties, outlines, and state borders in some places. The violence blackens the landscape.
4. Jones Lynching Acquitted Despite Victim Testimony, Widow Sues County

This excerpt deals with the lynching of veteran John C. Jones in Louisiana who, along with his cousin Albert “Sonny Man” Harris, was taken from his jail cell. In emphasizing the Black relatives affected by the case, The Alabama Citizen made clear the efforts of victims and witnesses to seek justice even when odds were slim and violent retribution could be expected. By keeping Black voices central in the story, they allowed for the remembrance of those involved and the trauma they encountered, rather than losing all victims in the spectacular violence of the lynching itself:

…The petition was filed by Attorney A.P. Tureaud of New Orleans for Mrs. Jones in behalf of herself and her 5-year old daughter, Myrtis Ann.

Mrs. Jones, now a resident of California, charged that Oscar H. Haynes, Sr., was duly elected and qualified sheriff of Webster Parish on or about August 7, 1946 when her husband Corporal John C. Jones, was in legal custody of the sheriff and was incarcerated in the Parish jail at Minden, La. And that it was the duty of the sheriff to provide for the safe-keeping and protection of prisoners or persons accused of crime placed in his custody.

…

In her petition, Mrs. Jones charged that Haynes failed in his duty to safely keep and protect Jones and by reason of his failure became liable to her and her minor daughter for the death of their husband and father. Haynes is a resident of Minden Louisiana.

The lynching of John C. Jones caused nationwide protest last year after NAACP investigators learned full details of how he and his 17-year old cousin, Albert “Sonny Man” Harris, had been seized on the threshold of the Minden jail and taken by a dozen or more unmasked white men in automobiles to a densely-wooded section between Minden and Cotton Valley known as Dorcheat Bayou. Jones and Harris were suspected of spying on a white woman.

Harris was flogged unmercifully and was left for dead; Jones’ mutilated body was found the next day, however, Harris who had feigned death, fled from the town and after a cross-country chase, finally made his way to the NAACP office in New York.

Arrested in connection with the lynching…all were indicted and brought to trial in United States District Court here on February 24, 1947. At the close of the trial, which lasted almost a week, the five men were acquitted, despite the fact that the youth they had flogged and left for dead identified them as mob members.

Feeling against Mrs. Jones, widow of the lynched man, caused her to leave her home in Cotton Valley and move…

Connected with the other cases in the National News Roundup of that day, the editors placed justice for their innocent “youths” in Tuscaloosa in conversation with the plight of other Southern children being granted stays of execution or appealing for them. The conversations show a devotion to Black life—even guilty Black lives—under a system in which Black bodies were already criminalized and thus at risk from the justice system as well as white mob violence. These stories were juxtaposed with others featuring Black triumph and excellence.

TUSCALLOSA.— The lack of incriminating evidence on Willie James Croom, 22, Sylvester Croom, 20, and Jessie Edwards, 20, all arrested in connection with the brutal slaying of Miss Martha Mosley (white) of Holt, will result in their release early this week, local law enforcement officers informed representatives of the CITIZEN Monday. The three youths, picked up after clothing found in their homes was thought to have contained human blood stains were rushed to the Jefferson County jail for safe keeping. The Croom brothers, members of a well known and respected family of this county, maintained a complete ignorance of any details of the crime which was substantiated by a chemical analysis of the clothing.

Circuit Solicitor J. Monroe Ward stated that he planned to ask the governor for a reward so that the person or persons responsible for this brutal murder would be apprehended. Another drive by local citizens to raise reward funds is also being started.

Mr. Sylvester Croom, a Navy veteran of 18 months service in the hostile water of the Pacific, is attending high school under the GI Bill of Rights and was to have graduated last Friday.


6. Execute the Negro Killers

This article discusses the violence that permeated Tuscaloosa County through a particular murder case. It illustrates pushback from the community to white violence by calling attention to the devaluation and precarity of Black life. In this way, the editors of The Alabama Citizen both sought and critiqued justice.

At a preliminary trial held before the Circuit Judge W.C. Warren last Friday the Rev. James Hamlet was held without bond for first degree murder in the slaying of Monroe Washington on February 12th. At a previous trial in the City Court, Hamlet, an alleged sanctified preacher was released on a $3,000 bond it was reported. This action was not favorably received by an outraged populace in view of the known facts in the case which are as follows and undenied.
Hamlet and Washington had engaged in a fight earlier in the day; both had been arrested and released it was said on their own recognizance. Washington got in his wagon and started home. Hamlet, it is said goes home in a taxi gets his revolver and in the same taxi overtakes Washington just before he reaches home which is more than a mile from Hamlet’s home and pumps five bullets into his back as he sits in his wagon.

It is not our purpose to try this case in the newspapers, but there is growing concern over the cheapness of Negro life in Tuscaloosa County. It has almost become a sport. Anybody can take the life of any Negro or any number of Negroes with no compunction of conscience or fear of punishment. Good citizens feel that is time to call a halt.

The best way to stop this carnage is to send a few Negro killers to the electric chair.


7. Negro Editors Risk Lives Daily

*Southern Black presses like The Alabama Citizen were aware of the danger that their work posed. Despite this, they provided crucial information, commentary, and resistance against the silences that white supremacist terror and its trauma wrought. They deliberately created narratives that sought and critiqued justice, rendered victims and witnesses visible, and that testified to the resilience of Black life.*

As the nation’s Afro-American press pauses in a week of commemoration to itself for the splendid service it has done in keeping it fifteen million readers informed and for its invaluable contribution to universal democracy, our attention is vividly called to the efforts of the poorly paid and often intimidated members of the Fourth Estate residing south of the Mason-Dixon line. While we cannot and will not overlook the many flights waged by our fighting national papers to secure equal rights and opportunities for Americans of color, it is most fitting that we pay special tribute to those courageous journalists living here in the South in the midst of actual conflict. They are the ones whose pens light the way for the ten million Negroes who live here in the South where both physical and economic danger lurk for those seeking to lift the yoke of serfdom from the shoulders of the mass of the population. It is the Southern Negro editor who is placed in jail and threatened for his editorial asking for the rights of the Negro. It is the Southern editor whose life, family and home are placed in constant danger by the evil and sinister forces which stop at nothing to discourage the initiative of the people. These are the editors who risk their lives, make many sacrifices at less than starvation wages as in most instances the people for which these men are fighting refuse to support their publications. In spite of these discouraging factors, the Southern Negro press carries on.

The sacrifices made by Percy Greene of the Jackson Advocate of Jackson, Miss., who testified against Senator Bilbo in the recent Mississippi vote case investigation despite the threats made on his life is an example of the courage exhibited by the Southern Negro editors. The many daring exploits made in behalf of their people by…and many other courageous Dixie Negro
editors should not be overlooked by the people of each community. Every Negro citizen should support the local Negro paper in his community.


8. Local memory memorializes Richardson Grave

This excerpt discusses the memory of Bunk Richardson, a lynching victim in Gadsden Alabama, who received a commemorative plaque at the site of his lynching in 2016 and has received one at his gravesite as well. In this small section, the article shows the importance of community—of African American memory—in preserving the life and dignity of victims.

Burials at [Sixth Street Cemetery], sometimes known as Southern Hills, ended in the 1940s when the City of Gadsden took the neighborhood through eminent domain, and the graves were largely abandoned. In 2013 it was added to the Alabama Historic Cemeteries Register. An effort has been going on over the past three years to restore the cemetery and catalog the graves, largely through the work of Chari Bostick's Grace Heritage Foundation.

Bostick learned about the location of Richardson's grave from then-97-year-old Jack Lowe Sr., a former hardware store owner, who went up to the cemetery to confirm it. The plot will soon have a marker.

"They always used to leave quarry rocks on his grave when they came to decorate the graves," she said. "We looked for where it might be and we found it there - these big handfuls of quarry rocks. Just to make sure people would always remember where he was."
