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In the Bloody Hands of Hatred

The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America, Christopher Waldrep, Palgrave/Macmillan: 264 pp., \$35

At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America, Philip Dray, The Modern Library: 530 pp., \$14.95 paper

A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America, James H. Madison, Palgrave: 204 pp., \$24.95

Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America, Laura Wexler, Scribner: 272 pp., \$24

A Death in Texas: A Story of Race, Murder, and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption, Dina Temple-Raston, Henry Holt: 318 pp., \$15 paper

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In November 1933, two men who had just confessed to the kidnapping and murder of a young department store heir were dragged from a county jail and hanged until dead from tree limbs in a nearby city park. Local newspaper coverage detailing the kidnapping victim's death had inflamed angry citizens, who battered down the jail door, beat the sheriff and several deputies and dragged the two men to the park, where their deaths were witnessed by a crowd of thousands. "Like angry dogs, men of the mob leaped up and tore off the trousers" from one of the two corpses, while others used a burning newspaper to set fire to the dead man's coat and shirt.

The next day, the state's governor praised the mob's handiwork as "a fine lesson for the whole nation" and promised that "if any one is arrested for the good job I'll pardon them all." He welcomed the two deaths as a stark warning to other criminals -- "They'll learn they can't kidnap in this state" -- and said he was tempted to release other convicted kidnappers into the hands of "those fine, patriotic San Jose citizens who know how to handle such a situation."

That's right, San Jose, and the enthusiastic governor was California's James Rolph Jr., not some Deep South monarch from Mississippi, Alabama or Georgia. And the two dead men, like their victim, were white.

That deadly mob attack on the Santa Clara County Jail helps illuminate exactly how surprising and complicated America's history of lynching actually is. "The Many Faces of Judge Lynch," an insightful and impressive new study by San Francisco State University historian Christopher Waldrep, traces the phenomenon back to its earliest American roots. "The word lynching," he explains, "entered the national lexicon after an 1835 Vicksburg, Mississippi riot" in which both the victims and the perpetrators were white. But the state where lynching was most popular in pre-Civil War America was not Mississippi but California, where the word took on the meaning of "an act of violence sanctioned, endorsed, or carried out by the neighborhood or

community outside the law." As Waldrep stresses repeatedly, "community approval" was "the essence of lynching" as 19th century Americans understood the word, and most of them -- like Rolph decades later -- welcomed such extra-legal punishment as an expression of popular sovereignty when law enforcement seemed delinquent or the criminal courts deficient.

San Francisco was the lynching capital of America prior to the Civil War, as vigilante action against suspected criminals created a "pervasive and long lasting" public acceptance. After the Civil War, Waldrep surprisingly reports, "the word lynching appears only rarely in the extensive record of Reconstruction violence" that Southern whites utilized against the region's newly freed slaves. Waldrep notes that the tumultuous character of Southern life between 1865 and the late 1870s, when no real sense of "community" existed, explains "why racial violence in the Reconstruction era was not called lynching" in contemporaneous accounts.

What's more, Waldrep adds, during the 1870s "few of the killings contemporaneously called lynchings" in Southern newspapers featured African American victims. Only in the early and mid-1880s, as segregationist white dominance firmly took hold, did "lynchings" increasingly and then predominantly target black male victims.

From the mid-1880s up through the 1910s, lynchings that attracted huge crowds became an almost common feature of Southern life. As Waldrep carefully explains, "only in the 1890s did black opponents of lynching succeed in making the practice seem almost exclusively racial," a success that transformed the word itself into "a synonym for racially motivated killing."

Philip Dray's compendious "At the Hands of Persons Unknown" begins its account in the 1880s, but Dray's approach explicitly contradicts Waldrep's argument that "it is a mistake to conceive of lynching as only racial." In contrast, Dray contends that lynching was "but a symptom of a much larger malady. Lynching was simply the most sensational manifestation of an animosity for black people."

Dray emphasizes what he terms "Southern spectacle lynchings," where crowds of thousands witnessed the torture, hanging and burning of black victims and then sought souvenirs as remembrances of the event. Such souvenirs often took the form of postcard photographs of the corpses hanging from a tree while a convivial crowd posed for the photo shoot. Other, more highly prized souvenirs were far more grotesque, as crowd members competed for swaths of clothing, pieces of rope and bones or other parts of the victim's very body. After one such lynching in Georgia in 1899, the Atlanta Constitution reported how "persons were seen walking through the streets carrying bones in their hands."

Eyewitness descriptions of white Southerners taking home human remains as mementos of a pleasurable community killing are comparable to Nazi Holocaust accounts of extermination camp perpetrators or "ordinary" Germans who refused to acknowledge what was taking place all around them. Even if the Southern crowds, like Gestapo henchmen, consciously viewed their victims as less than human, the wanton desecration of the dead seems to reach well beyond the crime-deterrence defense of lynching offered by California's Gov. Rolph.

Dray's response to this enigma emphasizes the extent to which African American lynching victims were suspected -- often on the basis of no evidence whatsoever -- of sexually assaulting Southern white women. This leads Dray to assert that lynchings themselves were "sexual events. The lynching of the alleged rapist is itself an act of rape, more specifically a gang rape." What's more, Dray says, the torture and dismemberment of lynching victims' bodies also featured sexual

retribution. "[D]irect allusions to castration were left out of most contemporary lynching accounts," Dray says, "but there can be little doubt that it was often the centerpiece of the entire lynching ritual." And without any evidentiary citations whatsoever, Dray takes his speculative analysis one step further, asserting that castration was often preceded by "appreciative touching, even stroking of the member," which at the conclusion of the event was then prized as "the ultimate souvenir."

Dray may be correct, but he offers not a single eyewitness account of any lynching to support this account. In a book of this richness a reader would like to accept some assertions on faith, but even when it comes to the core topic of spectacle lynchings, Dray fails to inspire confidence.

"At the Hands" at one juncture identifies a 1934 killing in Marianna, Fla., as "the last of the big American spectacle lynchings," but then 60 pages later says that "the last well-known spectacle lynching may have been the 1937 blowtorch killings in Duck Hill, Mississippi." And careful readers may wonder why Dray's one brief reference to "the 1942 public immolation of Cleo Wright in Sikeston, Missouri," after the victim had been "removed from jail and dragged through the streets before being put to death," fails to qualify as a "spectacle" lynching. There are also a host of smaller errors, such as identifying Strom Thurmond as a "North Carolina senator" rather than South Carolina's governor at the time.

Perhaps the single best known souvenir photograph of a "spectacle" lynching is one depicting two victims of a 1930 Marion, Ind., mob. That picture appears both on the dust jacket of Dray's book and on the cover of James H. Madison's "A Lynching in the Heartland," an impressively thorough and thoughtful account of the Marion lynching and its long municipal aftermath.

The two young black men who were dragged from the Marion jail and hanged from a tree in front of an enthusiastic crowd of 4,000 were accused of murder and rape, but the photograph of their lifeless corpses is more memorable for its portrayal of white onlookers -- women as well as men -- who seem pleased and proud of the mob's handiwork. One man in particular, posing for the photographer, points his left hand toward one of the dead in an expressly possessive gesture.

As Madison rightly notes, the "shameless faces" of the white spectators "would keep the photo alive" as "the generic lynching photograph" long after the particular individuals were all dead. It's ironic how that signature photo comes from Indiana rather than the Deep South, and Madison's rich study offers other surprises too. Marion's young white mayor, himself a member of the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People, called upon the victims' families to offer condolences. The state attorney general secured indictments against seven mob leaders and also sought to fire the county sheriff for failing to safeguard his prisoners. Indeed, within eight months Indiana adopted a new state law providing for "the immediate dismissal of any sheriff from whose jail a prisoner was lynched."

Yet in other, more crucial ways, the Marion lynching was all too typical: Most Marion whites who witnessed the assault on the jail professed not to know any of the assailants, and the first two indicted mob leaders who were brought to trial were both acquitted. Charges against the others were then dropped, and Madison's explanation directly echoes Waldrep's analysis: Most Marion whites believed that "the mob of August 7 had carried out the will of the people" in a speedier and more efficient manner than the criminal justice system.

The number of lynchings declined significantly during the 1940s, but one of the most infamous racial crimes of that decade was the execution-style murders of two young black

couples, Roger and Dorothy Malcom and George and Mae Murray Dorsey, in Walton County, Ga., in 1946. Those four killings are the subject of Laura Wexler's thoroughly researched and superbly written "Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America."

Roger Malcom had been arrested for stabbing his young white landlord, Barnette Hester, after Hester had sought to intervene when an angry Malcom had threatened his wife, Dorothy, with a knife. Malcom was arrested and jailed, but once it was clear that Hester would survive, Malcom was released on bond to Loy Harrison, the white landlord of Dorothy's brother George Dorsey.

But when Harrison drove home with the two couples in his car, a mob of about 20 armed white men intercepted them at the isolated Moore's Ford Bridge over the Apalachee River. According to Harrison's account, the men first dragged Roger Malcom from the car and then grabbed George Dorsey too. But when Dorothy screamed out the name of one mob member whom she recognized, the men seized Dorothy and Mae as well. While Harrison was held at gunpoint, the four young adults were dragged down toward the riverbank and shot to death in three volleys of gunfire.

Harrison later told lawmen that only after he repeatedly assured the mob's leader that he recognized no one was he set free. But once the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and then the FBI launched aggressive investigations, the lawmen quickly concluded that Harrison's story was unconvincing and that the killings looked like a "rehearsed affair." The investigators also wondered whether a Walton County deputy sheriff who had overseen Roger Malcom's release from jail had passed word to the mob. Yet even when the FBI brought dozens of Walton County whites before a federal grand jury, the result was the same as in Marion, Ind., 16 years earlier: No one admitted to knowing anything about the identities of the 20 or so killers. One leading suspect was arrested for beating a black man who testified before the grand jury, but a state court jury acquitted him.

The Moore's Ford killings, unlike the Marion pair, featured no jail break-in, no cheering crowd and no literal hanging, but in light of Waldrep's and Madison's careful analyses, they certainly merit the "lynching" label that Wexler applies. White Walton County's communitywide refusal to cooperate with the investigators, or to support any punishment for the killers, unfortunately but undeniably amounted to popular approval of four heinous murders as retaliation for Malcom's stabbing of a white man.

Dray identifies the Neshoba County, Miss., murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman in the summer of 1964 as perhaps America's final lynching. That categorization is probably correct, since some but not all of the Neshoba killers went to prison thanks only to the testimony of FBI informants rather than community cooperation by local whites.

Yet in the present day, when community assent for any racially motivated killing appears wholly absent, usage of the "lynching" label in any meaningfully accurate manner seems obsolete. Dray passingly characterizes the 1998 killing of James Byrd Jr., a black ne'er-do-well, by three young white supremacist ruffians in the East Texas town of Jasper as a "lynchlike murder," but Waldrep's characterization of the murder as "a hate crime, not a lynching" is the more thoughtful and accurate.

Dina Temple-Raston's superbly well-reported "A Death in Texas" details how white Jasper, like black Jasper, was deeply repulsed by how Byrd was dragged to death after his assailants had chained him to the rear of a pickup truck. While white Sheriff Billy Rowles emerges as the unlikely hero of Temple-Raston's account, "A Death in Texas" also details how white Jasper was even more traumatized by the onslaught of national and international press coverage that followed Byrd's death than by the killing itself.

News databases from 1998 show that within the first weeks after Byrd's killing, scores of news stories applied the "lynching" label to his murder. But these commendable books show how that usage was in error. Lynching played a significant role in American history, even before Southern white racists made it a term of infamy, but unless some present or future community gives its assent to a new era of extra-legal vigilante punishment, history books -- and not today's news pages -- are where the word "lynching" should appear.

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From The Many Faces of Judge Lynch

Ernest Withers's photography studio is at the end of a darkened hallway off Memphis's famous Beale Street. Pictures of Martin Luther King and Elvis Presley decorate the walls, as does a framed full-page newspaper article detailing Withers's experiences as one of Memphis's first black police officers. The day I came to visit, Withers roamed the room talking into a cell phone. Why do you want to talk about Emmett Till? he asked his caller. He is dead; two men were acquitted....So many others had died in incidents sometimes not even called lynchings, to be forgotten or overlooked in the first place. Why is it that no one cares about them?

It was, I thought, a good question.

MARION, IND.: Photograph of a 1930 lynching in which the victims were hanged before a crowd of 4,000. PHOTOGRAPHER: Bettmann / Corbis