

Building Peace in America

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Chapter 11

Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in Maryland: From Narrative Change to Racial Healing

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On April 12, 2015, eighty-eight years after the lynching of Matthew Williams in Salisbury on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Baltimore native Freddie Gray was arrested and thrown into the back of a police van. Seven days later, he would be pronounced dead after 80 percent of his spine had been severed from his body.¹ Nameless vigilantes did not perpetrate such a violent act, but those who were sworn to protect and serve, Baltimore City police officers. Gray was one of 102 unarmed African Americans who were victims of what many describe as "modern-day lynchings" by police officers that year;² in 1915, 100 years prior, there were fifty-six documented cases of lynchings in the United States.³

These same facts that compelled me to examine the history of lynching were recognized by President Obama when he signed the Emmett Till Civil Rights Crimes Reauthorization Act calling on federal law enforcement agencies to prosecute civil rights violations that occurred before 1980, including violent ones by mobs. Emmett Till is the best-known lynching victim in American history, but he was just one of the thousands of black men and women brutally tortured and murdered after emancipation.

Described by Barbara Jeanne Fields as the "Middle Ground," Maryland's unique position as a border state further complicates traditional perspectives toward racial violence.⁴ In spite of Maryland being located on the northern periphery of the southern United States, next door to our nation's capital, it has historically maintained a distinctly southern and racial identity. Although a good deal of research has been done on race lynching in the American South, this scholarship has often attempted to examine race lynching in America through the optics of legality and justice, or based on states that registered the highest numbers of lynchings. Because Maryland is documented

as having only forty-three lynchings, it has been neglected as a topic of study.⁵ Yet lynch law continued to prevail in Maryland until the first half of the twentieth century.

The image that is often presented in historical conceptualizations of race lynching in America is almost solely rooted in the Deep South; in fact, such historical perspectives place a hyperemphasis on the areas that registered the highest number of lynching incidents. Like the “numbers game” in historical scholarship surrounding the transatlantic slave trade, where the quantification and abstractions of black bodies overshadowed the humanity of the millions of enslaved Africans, there is another “numbers game” that has threatened to quantify the scores of black lives that were taken as a result of race lynching in America.⁶ For the most part, with only a few exceptions, such a narrative was informed, if not shaped, by the archival records in the Tuskegee Institute (University) database “Lynching: By State and By Race.” Phillip Dray references the Tuskegee records as he begins his text *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, stating, “In 1892 the archives records 162 black Americans put to death outside the bounds of law, chiefly in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Kentucky.”⁷ Albeit foundational, this monumental compilation of statistics cannot be the prototypical source by which we seek to capture the history of this cultural phenomenon.

Using Maryland as a case study, this chapter complicates historical memory associated with racial terror lynching in the United States. The goal of this chapter is to uncover useful frameworks that will aid communities in confronting the legacy of lynching and assist them as they make attempts to move from narrative change to racial healing, reconciliation, or some form of justice. The analysis below focuses on considering the utility of the frameworks developed by Sherrilyn A. Ifill and Dr. Gail Christopher in supporting the existing efforts of state, local, and national coalitions dedicated to examining the legacy of racial terror lynching in the United States. To conclude, this chapter seeks to answer the question, What do the stories of the over 4,000 victims of racial terror lynching in the United States tell us about what some have described as “modern-day lynchings”?

CREATING A TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION FOR LYNCHING

Since the early 2000s, scholars have been exploring how critical reflections could be made, specifically as it relates to confronting the legacy of “racial terror lynching” in the United States. The earliest contribution dedicated to both narrative change and racial reconciliation surrounding lynching came in Sherrilyn A. Ifill’s groundbreaking study, “Creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Lynching.”⁸ Her wider known book project dwarfs this earlier

publication that she would produce four years later, *On the Court House Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-First Century*.⁹ Nonetheless, Ifill's earlier work that introduced scholars, activists, and practitioners to the idea of establishing a truth and reconciliation commission focused solely on confronting the legacy of racial violence in the United States.

In the backdrop of this publication was the murder of an unarmed black woman at the hands of the police, Kendra James, twenty-one, who was shot in the head by a police officer in Portland, Oregon, on May 5, 2003; and the murders of Amadou Diallo, twenty-two (1999) and LaTanya Haggerty, twenty-six (1999) just four years prior.¹⁰ In the shadow of these modern-day forms of lynching, Ifill argued that "given the power of lynching as a tool for white supremacy and its important role in shaping relationships between and within black and white communities in towns throughout the United States, efforts should be made to uncover and dismantle the legacy of lynching."¹¹

Inspired by the work of Ifill, Dr. Nicholas M. Creary, Will Swartz, and Maryland State delegate Joseline Peña-Melnyk (D-Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties), Maryland communities maybe a little closer to confronting the legacy of lynching. HB 307 was officially signed by Maryland governor Larry Hogan on Thursday, March 18, 2019, establishing the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission (MLTRC). MLTRC is the nation's first statewide truth- and reconciliation-style commission dedicated to investigating racial terror lynchings in the state of Maryland and to address their prevailing legacy.

The preamble of the Bill states that at "least 40 African Americans were lynched in Maryland between 1854 and 1933, by white mobs acted with impunity."¹² While the Bill is groundbreaking and a part of the first steps in confronting the legacy of race lynching in Maryland, in only recognizing the crimes against humanity, we run the risk of suggesting that catharsis is akin to retributive justice. Indeed, the risk is mostly the result of our failure to understand the meaning of reconciliation, specifically in the way that it was described in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC). The South African TRC's conceptualization of reconciliation leaned more toward restorative justice. However, such an approach is hard to swallow when you consider the visible impact that these crimes still have on communities throughout Maryland.¹³ This is further complicated in considering Ifill's broader goal of dismantling the "legacy of lynching."

DISMANTLING THE "LEGACY OF LYNCHING"

Indeed, this approach to addressing the legacy of lynching is significant as it speaks to the problem at hand—what is America to do with "lynching," the historical practice, and its modern forms? As a result of practitioners such

as Ifill and Bryan Stevenson, scholars and activists have begun to try and answer this inconvenient question. These varying approaches seek to understand how the historical practice of lynching and its historical forms impact our understanding of a society that continues to devalue and dehumanize the black body. Indeed, the tracking of society's tolerance of lynching less than 100 years ago to a society that continues to tolerate the shooting of unarmed black men and women at the hand of the law enforcement offices speaks to the importance of understanding this history.

Other approaches take a more pessimistic approach based on an understanding of lynching as a by-product of the flawed system of American democracy that is arguably built on the oppression of black peoples. Christine Sharpe sheds light on such approaches arguing,

The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on. And that it is the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live concerning this requirement for our death. What kinds of possibilities for rupture might be opened up? What happens when we proceed as if we know this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we to attempt to speak, for instance, an "I" or a "we" who know, an "I" or a "we" who care.¹⁴

Sharpe's argument represents the approach rooted in the collective memories shaped by the relentless murder and terrorization of black citizens in the United States.

Too often, such terms are evoked without understanding the actual meaning; as such "dismantle"—to strip off or remove (that which covers),¹⁵ whereas "legacy" is defined as "to give or leave" anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor.¹⁶ As such, Sharpe's approach does not focus specifically on the individual actors behind the lynchings, but rather the role and responsibility of both local and state institutions that often "promoted, condoned," and/or "tolerated lynching."¹⁷ Ifill proposed that local TRC-style commissions be developed to confront the legacy of lynching locally throughout the United States, providing community members with the opportunity to the legacy of racism within their community. The goal, as Ifill sees it, is to enable black and white communities to engage in conversations about race.

Four years later in *On the Courthouse Lawn*, Ifill combines both theory and practice in exploring the utility of such a commission following her discovery of two of Maryland's most famous lynchings during the 1930s: the lynching of Matthew Williams (1931) and the lynching of George Armwood (1931). Within this study, Ifill examines the silence within the Eastern Shore community, specifically as it relates to confronting the legacy

of racial violence and the impact that it has had on both the black and white communities.

Ifill's scholarship and activism would inform the work of Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." Ironically, this first report failed to document racial terror lynchings outside of the former Confederate states. Shortly thereafter, a third edition was published that features states left out in the first study, including Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, and West Virginia. The research compiled for these publications would be used in the development and curation of EJI's National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which officially opened on April 26, 2018.¹⁸ In addition to the research products and the museum, EJI has developed Community Remembrance Projects (CRPs) for local, state, and community leaders to get involved in the process of recognizing the victims of racial terror lynching by erecting historical markers and collecting soil from lynching sites. EJI's work has inspired scholars and activists throughout the nation, including those in states outside of the "deep south."

TRUTH, RACIAL HEALING, AND TRANSFORMATION

Over the last few years, "narrative change" has been a buzzword that has been used and overused by practitioners and scholars alike. In spite of the evoking of the word, there have been very few scholars who have attempted to provide working definitions of narrative change. Brett Davidson argues that "narrative change work rests on the premise that reality is socially constructed through narrative, and that to bring about change in the world we need to pay attention to how this takes place."¹⁹

Gail Christopher's *Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation* (TRHT) framework provides a useful guideline for communities that seek to move from Truth to Transformation. Like Ifill, Christopher is leaning on the existing foundations laid out by South Africa's TRC, in addition to the American-themed TRC's that emerged as a result of the rise in racial tension throughout the United States. One distinct difference between the traditional model and Christopher's adaptation is how she approaches both truths and a specific focus on what she defines as "racial healing" rather than reconciliation.

As it relates to the truth portion of the framework, she presents "narrative change" as the first element of the TRHT framework, where the central goal is to "to create a more complete and accurate narrative that will help people understand how racial hierarchy has been embedded in our society."²⁰ This approach is to be implemented through all media, including "literature,

museum exhibits, parks, places of worship, schools, magazines, newspapers, music, art, theater, television shows, movies, radio programs, games, and social media.”²¹

Among the more prominent activists adamant in calling for narrative change are leaders such as Bryan Stevenson, who argues that “we are talking about history because we have to change the narrative.”²² However, a question that practitioners have struggled to answer is how does “narrative change” take place? Indeed, the legacy museum and the national memorial for peace and justice represent some of the most successful examples of narrative change implemented within museums. However, EJI’s work must be considered within the historical context of lesser-known museums and institutions that have historically addressed lynching, including the National Great Blacks and Wax Museum (Baltimore, MD), America’s Black Holocaust Museum (Milwaukee WI), and the Lillie Carroll Jackson Civil Rights Museum (Baltimore, MD).

In speaking with educators, who have been inspired by the work of EJI and existing museums, they are struggling with questions surrounding what curriculum will look like that confronts the legacy of lynching. Based on the traumatic nature of the history of lynching, teachers are concerned at what age should students be exposed to this history. It is, however, worth noting that attempts have been made to provide curriculum for secondary students.

Most recently, EJI and Teaching Tolerance produced one of the most exhaustive collections of lesson plans that support educators who wish to teach the legacy of lynching in the United States.²³ However, these lesson plans are designed for high school students, and more scaffolding is needed for the lesson plans to be implemented successfully. In the past, states such as Maryland have attempted to develop lesson plans for educators that build on the history of lynching. Ironically, they have been discontinued. In speaking with middle school teachers, it is clear that they see a need for narrative change within their curriculum. However, the majority of the resources provided concerning the legacy of racism are designed for high school students and beyond. Historian Diana Ramey Berry speaks to this dilemma upon reflecting on her visit to EJI’s legacy museum this past year:

Is there any good way to teach children about lynching? After attending the opening of a powerful new memorial and museum, which together explore some of the most painful aspects of American history, I wondered about the prospect of returning there with my 12-year-old son. My husband and I wanted him to learn everything about America’s past—not just the good parts—and we knew most of this material would not appear in his middle-school curriculum.²⁴

Moreover, Christopher argues that understanding the dominant narrative is the first step to approaching narrative change specifically within local

communities. Rashad Robinson echoes Christopher's sentiments arguing, "We need to change the way we do narrative change if we are going to use the power of narrative to change the rules of the systems and institutions that shape our society, shape public behavior and thereby either fortify or attenuate injustice in our country."²⁵ As it relates to moving beyond narrative change, Christopher focuses on racial healing rather than racial reconciliation or justice with the hopes that the narratives will "foster empathy and connections that allow us to see ourselves in each other and thereby help to eliminate the emotional separation between communities."²⁶

CONCLUSION

In light of the murder of unarmed black men and women by law enforcement, it is essential to ask the question, what do the stories of the over 4,000 victims of racial terror lynching in the Untitled States tell us about what some have described as "modern-day lynchings"? Indeed, police in their official capacity shot unarmed black people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While there are many differences in geography and nature, between traditional and "modern-day" lynchings, several similarities remain consistent, specifically as it relates to the social, economic, and political vulnerability of African Americans in communities throughout the nation.

Indeed, this complicity is hauntingly relevant when considering the recent murders of Botham Jean (2018), Atatiana Jefferson (2019), and Breonna Taylor (2020), all unarmed and killed in their own homes by police officers. The killings, along with the over 4,000 lynching victims, are normative, and these souls are casualties of our democracy, represented by the state, national, and local officials whose silence has allowed the ongoing state-sanctioned "legal" and extralegal murder of black men and women.

In confronting the legacy of lynching, we must consider the historical utility of lynching. As stories of the thousands of victims tell us, lynching is an act of terror, employed to stoke fear and social control, and to police black bodies. It is rooted in dehumanization, and like slavery, it is a tool designed to maintain the racial hierarchy. In examining the legacy of lynching, it is equally essential to explore the normalization of these crimes against humanity and indeed represents the through line that gets the black body from the lynching tree to the back of a Baltimore police van. Indeed, throughout the lynching crisis in the United States, the coverage of spectacle lynching in the media was nothing new. Play-by-play commentary of spectacle lynchings has riddled millions of newspaper pages throughout the lynching crisis in the United States. Today, with the advent of social media, you don't have to wait for the Sunday paper to come; you can watch footage of these modern-day

lynchings, some even play out live for the world to see. Just ask the families of Eric Garner and Philando Castile.

These relentless, senseless killings and the failure of the American justice system to hold the murders accountable for their acts of violence signify to the world how much America values the black body. From the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin to the cheap justice handed out to officer Amber Guyger, who was sentenced to only ten years for the murder of Botham Jean, these relenting acts of systemic racial violence have traumatically shaped the identity of black citizens and communities in the United States.

NOTES

1. Bever and Ohlheiser, "Baltimore Police."
2. Work, "Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882–1968."
3. Mapping Police Violence, "2015 Police Violence Report."
4. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*.
5. "Judge Lynch's Court." Some scholars have added more to this number: see Arnold-Lourie, "A Madman's Deed—A Maniac's Hand."
6. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 3.
7. Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, iii.
8. Ifill, "Creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Lynching," 4.
9. Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn*.
10. Funke and Susman, "From Ferguson to Baton Rouge."
11. Ifill, "Creating a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Lynching," 269.
12. Ibid.
13. Tutu, "Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa Report, Volume One."
14. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 7.
15. "Dismantle, v."
16. "Legacy, v."
17. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 271.
18. "Lynching in America," 4.
19. Davidson, "The Role of Narrative Change in Influencing Policy." For an authoritative approach to narrative and conflict resolution from the field of Peace and Conflict Studies, see Sara Cobb, *Speaking of Violence* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2013). Excellent work in Narrative Studies regarding racial conflict in the United States includes James J. Donahue, Jennifer Ann Ho, and Shaun Morgan, *Narrative, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States* (Columbus: Ohio States University Press, 2017); and Lee Anne Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
20. Christopher, "Racial Equity Resource Guide," 16.
21. Ibid.
22. Stevenson, *Changing America's Racial Narrative*.

23. See “‘An Outrage’: Film Kit.” and “EJI Resources.”
24. Berry, “Why Did They Hate Us?”
25. Robinson, “Changing Our Narrative about Narrative.”
26. Christopher, “Racial Equity Resource Guide,” 16.

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