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Jacqueline Goldsby. *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 418 S. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-30138-9; $67.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-30137-2.

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The Cultural Logic of Lynching

Combining close textual readings and aesthetic analysis with insight into the personal experiences of individual authors, *A Spectacular Secret* strives to create a narrative history of lynching independent from traditional scholarly discourses about the economic, social, and psychological factors that contributed to the perpetuation of mob violence in American society. Building on a term popularized by Fredric Jameson, Jacqueline Goldsby contends that the lynching of African Americans increased and persisted during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because it displayed a "cultural logic" that fit with the rise of American modernity.[1] Rather than the irrational consequence of localized tensions, southern impoverishment, or racist hatred, Goldsby views mob violence as a normalized part of mainstream American society. Lynching, she argues, was a fundamentally "modern" phenomenon–a product of the abundance of mass culture, technological advancement, and the rise of corporate-monopoly capitalism (p. 4-5).

A Spectacular Secret makes an innovative contribution to the rapidly increasing body of scholarship on American lynching. By drawing together aesthetic analysis and historical inquiry, Goldsby attempts to "[read] history *out* of literary texts" to reveal the secret "life" of lynching: "its formation, meaning, and significance as a social practice" (p. 4). Using Ida B. Wells, Stephen Crane, and James Weldon Johnson as case studies, Goldsby explores how each author's choice of literary genre might reveal the function of lynching in both their texts and American society. Such an examination is useful because "lynching can be understood as an articulation of the social world's organization at any given point in time" (p. 24). Through their writings, each author captured a particular moment–a snapshot, if you will–in the evolution of American mob violence.

From these initial literary snapshots, Goldsby then redirects her analysis onto visual representations of lynching, examining how advances in photographic technology altered not only the ways in which lynching was depicted, but also how lynching images were disseminated and interpreted by their viewers. Different photographic mediums–picture cards, stereographs, snapshots, and postcards–held "distinctive aesthetic requirements" and, consequently, resulted in distinctive statements about lynching (p. 219). By reading photographs as aesthetic, rather than documentary objects, these images reveal a "*subjectively construed* interpretation of reality" imposed through formal "composition, framing, lighting, exposure, [and] angle" (pp. 220, 279). As photographic technology became more portable, cheaper, easier to use, and more widely available to both amateur and professional photographers, the number of individuals involved in the production and viewing of lynching photographs increased dramatically. These changes facilitated both a national trade in lynching postcards and private collections of lynching snapshots. Goldsby demonstrates that this process, the democratization of photographic technology, had a profound impact on our cultural memory of lynching.[2]

A Spectacular Secret begins by examining the series of antilynching pamphlets published in the United States by Wells between 1892 and 1900. Goldsby places Wells's journalism and activism within the context of changing cultural dynamics and rising social tensions at the end of the nineteenth century. Wells's career, Goldsby asserts, developed at a turning point in American culture, when the professionalization of news reporting and the increasing secularization of American society allowed

newspapers to become the primary source of truth and history production for Americans (pp. 69-70). Goldsby reveals the complexity of Wells's presentation by examining the various genres Wells parodied in her antilynching pamphlets. By adapting her message to the conventions of popular contemporary reporting styles, Wells presented her controversial arguments to her readers in a familiar, accessible format, while simultaneously revealing "how those styles–together with the professional practices that characterize them–shaped the public's knowledge of lynching" (p. 48). Although her arguments would have benefited from a more nuanced periodization, Goldsby's innovative aesthetic analysis enriches our understanding and appreciation of Wells's skill as a rhetorician and propagandist. Undergraduate instructors might find this chapter to be a useful and interesting counterpoint to Gail Bederman's seminal work on the gendered discourse of Wells's antilynching rhetoric.[3]

Goldsby also explores the relationship between Crane's 1898 novella, *The Monster*, and the 1892 lynching of Robert Lewis in Port Jervis, New York. Hoping to satisfy his creditors by producing a work of substantial length, Crane turned to the tragic events from his childhood home for inspiration. Crane's reproduction of the Port Jervis lynching in *The Monster*, however, shifted the focus of attention away from the violence of the lynching onto the moral dilemma of the white protagonist. Goldsby argues that Crane transformed Lewis's violent death at the hands of the mob into the disfiguration and ostracism of Henry Johnson because "the violence of lynching was too real for white Americans to understand" (p. 159). In order to produce a more commercially viable story, Crane therefore minimized the importance of violence against African Americans. Goldsby uses Crane's work and life experiences to explore how "the moral economy of corporate-monopoly capitalism," with its exploitative labor practices, "hardened the hearts of white Americans" towards the suffering of black victims of mob violence (p. 132). The success of Crane's participation in commercial publication relied in part on his support of the disavowal and conscious forgetting of lynching's violence. It was economic abundance, Goldsby concludes, not scarcity, that "produced the apathy necessary for lynching to thrive" at the end of the nineteenth century (p. 163).

For her final case study, Goldsby turns her attention to Johnson's anonymously published 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Through its focus on repeated illustrations of production, reproduction, and consumption, Johnson's novel, Goldsby concludes, locates "lynching's deadly, dominating impulses" within "the consolidation of mass cultural production in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America" (p. 169). Working to establish "a history broad enough to redefine lynching as a practice of racial domination" (p. 3), Goldsby connects Johnson's professional disappointment in the consular service to his brutal beating by a troop of National Guardsmen, arguing that both traumatic events represented "near-death encounters" at the hands of the federal government which profoundly shaped the vision of lynching Johnson articulated (pp. 168, 177-178).

Although Goldsby employs this dramatic comparison effectively in an analysis of Johnson's personal development, this tactic remains problematic when viewed within the broader context of *A Spectacular Secret*. Goldsby invokes a metaphorical link between race prejudice and lynching with a complex rhetorical history, however this line of reasoning separates the violence of lynching from its physicality (pp. 177, 294).[4] In much the same way that Goldsby argues Crane's narrative cultivated reader's indifference to the suffering of black victims of mob violence by "rendering the violence done to the black protagonist as incidental to the text" (p. 139), placing racial discrimination on the same level as mortal peril diminishes the horror and terrorism of lynching's violence.

Goldsby anticipates such criticism (p. 177), but her choice to pursue this argument underscores one of the critical problems facing lynching scholarship: the lack of a comprehensive model of lynching. For the purposes of her investigation, Goldsby confines her analysis of lynching to antiblack mob violence and social oppression (pp. 4-5, 11). Although her assertions that white and black victims of mob violence were not always subjected to the same levels of brutality are correct (pp. 16-17), this does not mean that only acts of mob violence directed towards African Americans fit the progression of American modernity. Rather than dismissing white victims as unrepresentative of lynching in the twentieth century (pp. 36, 256), Goldsby could have explored some intriguing questions. Why did the lynching of whites persist in the face of such widely accepted beliefs that lynching specifically targeted black men? And how did the persistent cultural memory of lynching as "frontier justice" perpetuate the lynching of African Americans? By defining lynching solely as an act of racist oppression, *A Spectacular Secret* falls short of revealing the full story of lynching's "cultural logic."

Overall, Goldsby's aesthetic analysis has raised important questions about the role of lynching in American society and made a valuable contribution to existing scholarship on lynching. Although it offers an innovative perspective on the history of lynching, *A Spectacular Secret* remains at its heart a work of literary criticism. Considering its length and heavy reliance on cultural and literary theory, *A Spectacular Secret* would be unsuitable for most undergraduate history courses. Nevertheless, selected chapters might make interesting additions to advanced undergraduate seminars. *A Spectacular Secret* would be more appropriate for graduate level courses, where students would be better equipped to engage effectively with Goldsby's nuanced arguments.

Notes

[1]. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[2]. Because many of the images discussed in *A Spectacular Secret* were not reprinted in the text, it would be helpful to refer to James Allen's work while reading Goldsby's interpretation. James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000).

[3]. Gail Bederman, "Civilization, the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Antilynching Campaign (1892-94)," *Radical History Review* 52 (winter 1992): 5-30.

[4]. For examinations of lynching rhetoric and metaphor, see Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); and Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

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