

H-Net Reviews

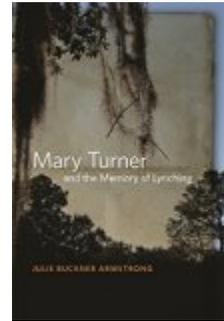
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julie Buckner Armstrong. *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. 264 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3765-4; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3766-1.

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In 1918, Mary Turner, an African American woman eight months pregnant, was lynched by a mob near Valdosta, Georgia. Her stomach was cut open, and her fetus fell to the ground, making two cries before being stomped to death. Turner's "crime" was her intention to press charges against those responsible for the lynching of her husband, Hayes Turner. After an African American man's murder of his abusive white employer and the related shooting of the employer's pregnant wife, a posse formed to hunt for the murderer and his accomplices. In the ensuing rampage of violence, at least eleven African Americans, including the murderer and the Turners, died in Brooks and Lowndes counties, Georgia, and many other black residents fled their homes.

Julie Buckner Armstrong's excellent study, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*, spotlights Turner's death at a time in the South when lynching was far from uncommon. According to a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) report, 3,224 men and 61 women were lynched in the United States between 1889 and 1919, with most murders taking place in the South. The abandoning by African Americans of their homes and communities where racial violence took place was not unusual either, as the recent documentaries *African American Lives 2* and *Banished* (both 2007) make viscerally clear.

Mainly men were victims of lynching, and, as a consequence, they continue to receive the most attention from scholars and the public. Women are commonly seen as figures with explanatory power, who help us understand whatever can be understood of the horrific, grisly, and seemingly irrational phenomenon of lynching:

lynchers justified their actions by accusing, usually falsely, their black male victims of raping virginal white women. Pioneering and current works on lynching have necessarily complicated this simplistic view. W. Fitzhugh Brundage's groundbreaking study *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (1993), for instance, showed how motivations for lynching varied across time and place. His book helped lead to an explosion of studies on lynching, and his subsequent scholarship on historical memory helped fuel widespread interest in that topic as well.

Armstrong contributes to the already rich and expansive fields of study on lynching and historical memory by providing a fresh, textured study of the lynching of a woman, Mary Turner, and how her death has been remembered over time. An English professor at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, Armstrong deftly uses key historical scholarship, documentary evidence, artistic representations, her own autobiography, psychoanalysis, and current social justice efforts to make sense of her subject.

Armstrong begins her study with an extensive account of the Brooks and Lowndes lynchings, and she effectively analyzes their relationship to the World War I context. Her analysis of public discourse is particularly good because, after all, language shapes our realities and our perceptions of reality. It is well known among historians that World War I generated an upsurge in black activism. As Armstrong reveals, whites and blacks opposed to lynching argued that the crime betrayed the country's democratic ideals, undermining the war's stated goal of "making the world safe for democracy." Armstrong fur-

ther shows how the fear-mongering faced by German Americans applied to African Americans as well, paralleling how African American civil rights activists were later charged with communism during the Cold War. White Georgians falsely accused African Americans of collaborating with the Germans. Walter White, who investigated the Georgia lynchings on behalf of the national office of the NAACP, dispelled this rumor in a report.

The infamous 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan and portrayed black men as “black beast rapists,” played in Georgia the same weekend as the height of the Brooks and Lowndes lynchings. Although no direct evidence links the film with the violence, Armstrong points out that the film contributed to the social mindset that condoned the lynchings (p. 27). A purpose of her book, in fact, is to illuminate past stereotypes and their pernicious effects in order to help us better understand present stereotypes and their impact. “One does not have to dig very deeply into U.S. popular culture today to see that images and rhetoric supporting racial violence continue to influence American thinking about race today,” she writes. “Stories about abducted and assaulted white females make immediate headlines, while stories about similarly imperiled black females rarely do” (p. 22). Indeed, associations of Africans Americans with criminality help explain this disparity, which has been brought to light in recent years by news reports, the Black and Missing Persons Foundation, and the TV One show *Find Our Missing*. Despite the victories of the civil rights movement, racial discrimination and racist attitudes remain major social problems. Scholarship such as Armstrong’s can help us illuminate ongoing racial injustices at a time in which colorblind rhetoric and reverse discrimination ideas are powerful, and racism and discrimination are not as apparent as they were in the Jim Crow South.

Armstrong spends much of her book exploring how Turner’s lynching has been remembered across three time periods. First, she focuses on the creative representations by three African American females of the lynching and the activism of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders in the years immediately following Turner’s death. Meta Warrick’s sculpture *In Memory of Mary Turner: A Silent Protest against Lynching* (1919), Angelina Weld Grimke’s short story “Goldie” (1920), and Carrie William Clifford’s poem “Little Mother” (1922) held up Turner’s maternal status, as did a pamphlet produced by the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, a group of African American and white women formed in 1922 to unite women

against lynching. Collectively, these artists and activists “broke the silence that mobs lynched women” (p. 72) and demonstrated “how deeply lynching violated domestic spaces” (p. 73). Understudied except for Grimke, these women courageously opposed lynching when one woman’s voice had been silenced for doing so, and they politically mobilized when most eligible African Americans were disenfranchised and most women were just gaining the right to vote. Exploring their work “as valuable sites of memory marks an essential step in the process of reconstructing the roles black women played in the history of lynching,” Armstrong writes (pp. 74-75).

In the 1920s and 1930s, activists and artists constructed lynching as a national trauma, Armstrong reveals. As Turner’s lynching became more removed in time, her story was usually told in vague terms that omitted her name. Writings of the NAACP, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and the Communist Party USA used her account to argue that lynching not only hurt African Americans but also all Americans because it signified an environment of lawlessness; this argument played a key role in the decline of lynching that occurred by the 1930s. African American artists, including filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, poet Anne Spencer, and author Jean Toomer, portrayed lynching as leading to social fragmentation. Although Armstrong is limited by not always being able to connect the death of Turner to these artistic works directly, her analysis of these activist and creative forms of protest shows how the imagery of a lynched pregnant woman played a role in the antilynching movement of these years.

As lynching became remembered and gendered as male, Turner’s story was easily forgotten. Not until the 1970s did her story reemerge into public discourse, Armstrong writes, with the reissuing of antilynching works of the late 1910s and 1920s and the feminist movement’s emphasis on recovering women’s historical experiences. Since the 1980s, the image of the lynched pregnant woman has appeared in artwork, literature, historical reenactments, and public memorials.

Armstrong details the contemporary representation of the Turner lynching by the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. Located in a working-class African American neighborhood, the museum was started in 1983 and created the first public memorial to the Turner lynching six years later. The display graphically depicts the deaths of Turner and her husband and challenges viewers to move beyond their disgust and revulsion to recognize racial injustice today

and to do something about it. A nearby display portrays the ravages of drug and alcohol abuse and imprisonment on African Americans and includes the caption “Now We Lynch Ourselves.”

Here, Armstrong could have pushed her analysis further. She could have analyzed how the persistence of racism connects with current problems of African Americans instead of just mentioning how the “Now We Lynch Ourselves” display criticizes today’s African Americans. Housing and employment discrimination, racist attitudes and stereotypes, and the legacy of slavery and the Jim Crow system are among the factors that help explain why African Americans remain in a socially unequal position compared to whites. Such a discussion would have directly connected to and built on her earlier comments about the ill effects of stereotypes of African Americans in today’s culture.

Armstrong ends her book by analyzing the erection of a historical marker in Valdosta, Georgia, about the lynching of Mary Turner; a local racial reconciliation group spearheaded the memorial. Armstrong spotlights the growing presence of racial reconciliation groups in

communities across the country in the last ten years. (In fact, the day that I began drafting this review, I received a postcard about a new book by Jack Shuler titled *Blood and Bone: Truth and Reconciliation in a Southern Town*. Focused on Orangeburg, South Carolina, it looks at the dialogue of local blacks and whites about the state highway patrolmen’s murder of three young black men and injury of twenty-eight others at a civil rights protest in 1968.) These conversations about race and the ongoing creation of African American-focused historical markers and memorials, which counter the pervasive Confederate-themed ones across the South, show increasing awareness and acknowledgement of racial problems in the past and their legacy today.

In *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*, Armstrong impressively reviews how the lynching of Mary Turner has been remembered over time and analyzes its contemporary significance. Just as the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum pushes its visitors to use their disgust at lynching to compel them to serve as a current voice for racial justice, Armstrong’s account challenges its readers to think about lynching not just as an archaic act but also as a reminder to tackle injustice today.

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