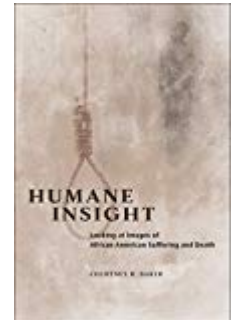


Courtney Baker. *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 160 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03948-5.



Reviewed by Patricia M. Muhammad (Independent Scholar)

Published on Jhistory (April, 2017)

Commissioned by Robert A. Rabe

The inception and legacy of American history provides a distinct narrative of race classification, discrimination, and extensive oppression. In a society where "the majority rules," these doctrines laid the foundation for chattel slavery, sharecropping as a false veil for indentured servitude, Jim Crow laws, and institutional discrimination against black Americans. As a whole, white members of the majority race heralded black Americans as the 'other' while the black collective consciousness was forced to take both passive and proactive remedial measures to combat this societal status quo.

Usage of the "other" categorization is a methodology that one can understand through critical race theory: those who have the long-standing ability to wield political power have the legitimate right to kill, maim, disenfranchise, and degrade those deemed not worthy of equal status. The false doctrine of white supremacy is interwoven in this designation in which the "other"—the black American—is not human in the sense that whites are, and after such determination they are

treated as such in American society in both the legal and social contexts.

Even during the civil rights movement, nearly a hundred years after slavery ceased, black protesters held signs that read, "I am Man" to remind the oppressive, broader society of black Americans' right to live, achieve, thrive, and be treated with equal dignity in their own pursuits of a worthy legacy that they and their progeny might enjoy.

Professor Courtney Baker's *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* outlines specific racial notions that certain whites used to justify their terrorism against the black body and discusses the duplicity of historical witnesses as well as challenges the reader's own perspectives of the black American collective's humanity.

The author, an associate professor of English at Connecticut College, achieves this through the use of critical race theory, which permeates her analysis of systemic black victimization and societal acceptance of white distinct disregard for the

black body, both in physical form and in the American social consciousness.

Baker also describes European colonists' commission of human rights violations against the then Africans and later descendants of the African Diaspora throughout institutional chattel slavery. She discusses a specific instance of slaves who lived in deplorable conditions in Louisiana, this only discovered after a suspected arson of the slavemaster's house. This one example is hardly reflective of the pain, suffering, and degradation that black Americans endured throughout American slavery, without discounting the torture their forbears experienced through the Middle Passage.

Baker focuses on the depictions of blacks' humanity through the lenses of the onlooker, the victim, the perpetrators of racist violence, and the news media. She focuses her analysis initially on the turn of the nineteenth century, then steers her attention to the post-World War II civil rights movement era.

Baker extensively analyzes the depravity with which whites lynched black Americans for sport, though, interestingly, she discusses the perspective of the perpetrator, which positioned such lynchings as indirectly righteous acts, without due regard to whether the black subject had actually committed a crime. She therefore guides the reader to understand that whites believed in the inherent evil and criminality of blacks, and thus that they had *carte blanche* to do with black bodies as they pleased.

The reader joins in, once again, as a spectator to the black body being deprived of humanity at the hands of white lynchers. One example Baker provides is an image from an exhibit collection of a man with a noose around his neck standing before his fateful journey toward his inevitable death. The black man who is about to be lynched becomes an observer of the audience during his last moments, while the spectators, both as laymen and embodied in the media that memorialized such travesties for generations thereafter, antici-

pate the pending horror. Her discussion at times become philosophical as she discusses the foreseeable contradiction of how even writing about such crimes and indignities so many decades later, makes her and the reader part of the intergenerational collective that has a lessened humane attachment to those actually lynched and links them with the time in which black Americans were systematically and overtly terrorized by the American government and the broader white society. However, Baker clarifies this observation by discussing the intent of modern onlookers, the readers. Yet, she does not acknowledge the collective black consciousness, those who seek to know their own family history and in turn how that genealogy relates to American history during this painful era as well as perceived social progress.

It is when she discusses the civil rights movement that this enlightened moment arises. As prominent members of the community shared their conflicted feelings regarding the graphic depictions of lynchings displayed in galleries and museums as part of the antilynching movement, there remained some whites who desired to remove such images from their consciousness. Similarly, the reader needs a visual image to attempt to grasp the extent of white-on-black violence as a means of maintaining white supremacy.

Baker also suggests how the framework of such depictions can deepen or distance the later generation of onlookers from the use of white space filled with just photos, commentaries, and interviews. The spectator is either forced to go beyond looking at photos to analyze her or his own humanity while questioning that of the lynchers, or simply view such depictions as art imitating life and thus avoid their primary purpose—to force the onlooker to understand moments in American history where the black body was a consistent object of white supremacy through force, degradation, oppression, and mutilation. Baker also discusses the manner in which both the dead and black survivors of Hurricane Katrina were depicted in the

media as inherent criminals. The author discusses the perceived inhumanity of blacks during this natural disaster, a time when empathy from the public and assistance from the federal government was crucial for survival.

Although Baker takes great care to provide a visual to the reader of such depravity, one of her most glaring omissions is her neglect of the black woman. Throughout most of her book the black woman is mentioned only as an attenuated lynching victim or as just another spectator in the outdoor audience of the lynching of a black man. Baker fails to examine that throughout the turn of the century, black women were similarly lynched at the hands of white men. Baker attempts to include black women as direct targets of white violence but only briefly as participants in the civil rights sit-ins, even mentioning that one black woman was assaulted and deprived of any recognition as human by white men enraged by blacks who protested the inhumane status quo. It is rather surprising that a female author would offer such a detailed examination of the black male body and not properly address the body of the black woman. She is the agent by which the black man arrives, and she too was seen as a political and social threat to white supremacy, and just as black men had their humanity snatched and hurled into the fire of blind hatred, so too did black women. This omission lends a false credence to the notion that that the black woman has no identity of her own except relative to the black man: as black writers of the Harlem Renaissance so eloquently have written, she becomes the mule of black consciousness—a supportive backbone of the black collective's continuous battle for justice and equality but rendered as merely a footnote in the history of this struggle. Unfortunately, this neglect does a disservice to the *entire* black body that has been harmed in the land of democracy. The body of the black woman remains secondary, not equal, in the black collective.

The author's linear analysis, although it includes a somewhat recent Hurricane Katrina (2005), also neglects to use critical race theory in examining how the black woman's body is perceived by certain segments of the black male collective; namely, that the black woman cannot have any autonomy, that she is forever subject to disdain and jealousy from her black male counterparts. This segment of modern black men views the black woman's body as the site where they seek to lay waste to all of their worldly woes, including self-hate and powerlessness in the midst of the descendants of white slave masters. Most prominently, this attitude of modern black men categorizing the black woman's body as the "other" is visible in their street harassment and assault of such women as a method of dominance and control, just as certain white men have done to the entire black collective, not just in recent decades but for centuries. This black male mentality adopts the white male's historical presumptions of the worthlessness of the black body, projecting it onto the body of the black woman.

Baker successfully prepares the reader to understand the intellectual contortions that white lynchers used to justify their crimes against humanity against the black body. Although the author focuses on the mentality of both the perpetrator and the victim during the era of systemic lynching of the black innocent, the book would have provided greater insight had the author explored a wider time period in which whites institutionalized the oppression of blacks throughout the slave trade and how this mentality evolved among certain whites as the norm. It also would have benefited from consideration of the self-hatred and tiers of internalized racism that still plague the black collective—the black body as a whole but also the body of the black woman. Baker also limits her examination to lynchings that occurred on the shores of America from the Jim Crow period to the early twentieth century. This omits the fact that Africans of the Diaspora and black American progeny were lynched throughout the transatlantic

slave trade. Some were lynched aboard ships for attempting to escape by jumping overboard, as a warning to their fellow human cargo of the fate they would meet should they fail to submit fully to their slavers; others who attempted no similar feat were lynched regardless during such voyages as a method of inculcating fear and total obedience. Such acts were not only violations against the physical body but a manifestation of white violence against the black collective body—a demonstration that the black collective was considered powerless and worthless. Therefore, whites became emboldened in mutilating, maiming, lynching, and otherwise killing black men, children, *and* women.

This social attitude is one of the strongest doctrines in critical race theory, that American racism is as normal as the white American majority deemed it to be, which normalized the dehumanization of the black body without cause. Baker achieves this conclusion through a thoughtful narrative that seeks not only to broaden the readers' visions of their own humanity but to access a deeper understanding of how race, lack of jurisprudential process, and bigotry was used to justify these crimes against the black body.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Patricia M. Muhammad. Review of Baker, Courtney. *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. April, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46716>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.