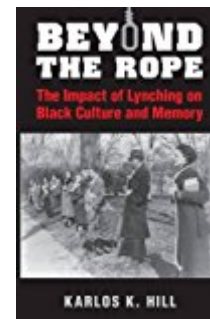


Karlos Hill. *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory.*
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Our common understanding of lynching violence in the United States tends to be limited in scope. When people visualize lynching, they generally think about the rope and faggot, black male bodies swinging from trees, with white mobs looking on. There has been an increasing amount of literature over the past several years that helps to illuminate and bring to center those who have typically been overlooked in the dialogue around lynching, including female victims and Mexican lynching victims in the western United States. Hill's new work *Beyond the Rope* continues this necessary expansion of the history of lynching by analyzing the ways in which black people participated in, responded to, wrote about, and remember lynching. If lynching has traditionally been presented through the "white gaze," *Beyond the Rope* intentionally and effectively takes up the topic of lynching from the perspective of the "black gaze."

Black vigilantism might seem oxymoronic, but African American lynchers were responsible for the execution of 148 black people between

1882 and 1930. The 54 black-on-black lynchings that took place in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas are the focus of Hill's interest in the first chapter of his book, where he draws important distinctions between the motives of black lynchers and those of their white counterparts. While whites often argued that the courts did not act quickly enough, African Americans believed that the criminal justice system failed to respond vigorously, if it responded at all, in cases where blacks were victimized by other blacks. In Hill's construction, black vigilantes exercised community justice in a more authentic way than whites who blamed lynching on a dysfunctional criminal justice system. "[W]hites lynched," Hill writes, "because they fundamentally disagreed with *how* the legal system adjudicated crimes, whereas black vigilantes lynched because they believed the criminal justice system *ignored* criminal activity committed against blacks" (p. 30; emphasis in the original). However, Hill points out that with the increasing racialization of lynching by the end of the 1880s—as reflected in the increasing pro-

portion of black people dying at the hands of white lynch mobs—black leaders in particular began to denounce black participation in lynching as a potential encouragement to white vigilantes. Hill’s detailed investigation of black vigilantism is an important but often overlooked niche within the lynching record in the United States.

In his second chapter, entitled “Resisting Lynching,” Hill analyzes the ways that black journalists and writers crafted stories of lynching to serve various purposes, dependent upon the audience and the goals. Hill describes these as victimization narratives, “which stressed what *white lynchers did* to black lynch victims,” and consoling narratives, which “emphasized what *black lynch victims did* in response to white lynch mob violence” (p. 68; emphasis in original). In the attempted lynching of Steve Green and the actually lynching of Henry Lowery in the early 1920s, both from Arkansas, advocates for the black men—like antilynching advocate Ida B. Wells, Edward H. Wright, an African American attorney in Chicago, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—rejected the traditional “black beast” narrative popularized in the white press. Instead, they maintained that Green and Lowery were victims of vigilante violence and the corruption of due process in the criminal justice system. Hill recounts how black communities in Arkansas and Illinois took direct action to protect potential lynch victims, while recasting the narratives of these incidents as examples of white aggression and black death.

Hill continues his exploration of the victimization and consoling narratives by analyzing Ida B. Wells’s *Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1900), Sutton Griggs Jr.’s *The Hindered Hand; Or The Reign of the Repressionist* (1905); and Richard Wright’s collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938). These writers use the power of their storytelling to emphasize the bravery of would-be lynching victims. In these works, Hill points out, the authors’ “portrayals of lynching and the

lynched black body revolve around demonstrating black agency through the tortuous choices black characters were compelled to make in the face of white violence” (p. 101). Hill’s investigation of black memory of lynching continues this line of investigation by mining the oral histories from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s Behind the Veil Oral History Project, and highlighting the ways that African Americans have used the power of memory to reinterpret lynching incidents as consoling narratives. This is a significant point and adds to a growing body of work which highlights the role of memory, history, and lynching in the South.[1] In Hill’s construction, both black fiction writers and members of communities where lynching took place possess the ability to construct consoling narratives in their imaginations and memories to preserve the dignity of black lynching victims, real or imagined.

Taken as a whole, *Beyond the Rope* itself serves as a much-needed consoling narrative within the canon of lynching violence in the United States. Hill’s work expands the connection between black men and lynching beyond victimhood, instead presenting them as being as armed and as dangerous as their white counterparts. The incidents Hill presents vivify black men who exercised armed self-defense, both individually and communally, even to the extent of extralegal violence. Additionally, he elevates stories of communities that cooperated to evade, outmaneuver, and outwit lynch mobs, and even successfully leverage the legal system in their favor. The black people Hill writes about were more than just victims; they were bold and savvy in applying their agency to preserve black life in the face of racial violence. All of these points make *Beyond the Rope* an important and necessary counternarrative in the area of lynching studies.

Note

[1]. Bruce Baker, “Under the Rope: Lynching and Memory in Laurens County, South Carolina” in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memo-*

ry, and *Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Julie Buckner Armstrong, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

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