
Lynched Bodies: Politics of Power and Dissent in Spectacles of Violence

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Abstract

Lynching is best understood as a form of popular justice and extra-legal punishment through spectacular acts of violence directed at the body of the perpetrator. The crowd is the operative organ in lynching, and, as Canetti rightly points out, the behavior of the crowd needs to be analysed in the light of the working of hunting packs. As hunting packs are united by the prey, lynching crowds have a distinct prey in mind. It is important to delve deeper into the politics of constructing certain humans as prey, as capable of being hunted. Though my point of entry in this paper would be through incidents of black lynching in the United States under Jim Crow, their representation in photographs and literature, particularly in Baldwin's short story, *Going to Meet the Man*, I would attempt, here, to shed light on the larger politics of spectacular violence, which is central to acts of lynching across the world. The focus of my paper would be on the political construction of specific bodies as having less value and hence, deserving to be killed or dispensed with, as well as on the spectacles of violence like the lynched body, lynching photographs and narrative descriptions, and the role played by them in the establishment and perpetuation of power structures as well as in offering a voice of resistance against them.

Keywords: Spectacles of violence; race; lynching; biopolitics; resistance

Chamayou writes, "In lynching, human packs appear as the agents of popular vengeance, an immanent form of "justice" that is exercised contrary to the judicial institution, in a system of action entirely foreign to the legal system and law... But if the state's authority was flouted, that was nonetheless done with the state's complicity... The practice was in fact tolerated, since it remained largely unpunished...- an impunity that amounts to a license to murder".

Lynching is best understood as a form of popular justice and extra-legal punishment through spectacular acts of violence directed at the body of the perpetrator. The crowd is the

operative organ in lynching, and, as Canetti rightly points out, the behavior of the crowd needs to be analysed in the light of the working of hunting packs. As hunting packs are united by the prey, lynching crowds have a distinct prey in mind. It is important to delve deeper into the politics of constructing certain humans as prey, as capable of being hunted. Chamayou reminds us that "technologies of predation [are] indispensable for the establishment and reproduction of relationships of domination". His conception of power as a cynegetic force is useful in understanding the politics of lynching. Though my point of entry in this paper would be through incidents of black lynching in the United States under Jim Crow, their representation in photographs and literature, particularly in Baldwin's short story, *Going to Meet the Man*, I would attempt, here, to shed light on the larger politics of spectacular violence, which is central to acts of lynching across the world. The focus of my paper would be on the political construction of specific bodies as having less value and hence, deserving to be killed or dispensed with, as well as on the spectacles of violence like the lynched body, lynching photographs and narrative descriptions, and the role played by them in the establishment and perpetuation of power structures as well as in offering a voice of resistance against them.

Lynching as Manhunt

Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* describes in gory detail an incident of lynching that the white protagonist, Jesse, witnessed as a young boy, but this violent event is normalized and even transformed into a scene of jubilation by invoking it with an undertone of public entertainment. The gathering of a large crowd at the scene of lynching, the spectacular torture, dismemberment, and burning of the black body, the clamorous uproar of the crowd at the sight of that spectacle of violence indicate its close affinity with hunting packs. Conetti writes:

To explore the origins of the behavior of crowds we have to start from the pack ... The pack wants its prey; it wants its blood and its death ... it urges itself on with its joint clamour, and the importance of this noise, in which the voices of all the individual creatures unite, should not be underrated. It can swell and diminish, but it is persistent; it contains the attack. The prey, when it is finally captured and killed, is eaten by the whole pack together. Every member is customarily allowed a share; even among animals the rudiments of a distribution pack can be found (94-97).

While the description of the reactions of the crowd in the story reinstate Conetti's claim, the idea of eating/consuming the prey is symbolically represented in their plunder of the dismembered body parts as souvenirs. In the story, after a man castrates the body, the crowd rushes forward, "tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones,

howling and cursing” (1760). Both Chamayou and Conetti draw our attention to the sense of pleasure associated with such hunts, and it is evoked in the story through the clamour of the crowd as well as through the rhetoric of jokes and the celebratory atmosphere of a picnic. Alongside pleasure, we have a rhetoric of justice. The black man has been accused of raping a white woman, and lynching is therefore seen as an act of righteousness, to punish the perpetrator and maintain social order. Sexualization of the narrative, and invocation of the idea of order, exposes the interlink between the political and the sexual, between racism and patriarchy, between the public and the private. In Wood’s words, “The figure of the black rapist struck at the heart of the matter- that black autonomy not only diminished white men’s authority over African-Americans but threatened their dominion over their own households and women. Lynching was thus more than a white prerogative; it was a patriarchal duty through which white men restored their patriarchal dominance” (7). By emphasizing upon this accusation of rape, Baldwin, in his story, successfully draws our attention to the political aspect of such killings. Neither in the story nor in reality were such accusations investigated for truth. Implicit in such indication is the suggestion that these accusations are a disguise to perpetuate the history of violence. Behind such an impulse, is “a constant and multiform disrespect for the life of the dominated” (Chamayou). Further, the inaction on the part of the state to punish the people carrying out such acts of lynching raise suspicions about the status of these acts as extra-legal, as against the authority of the state. The question of the state’s indirect support for such acts is raised. In the next section, I, therefore, focus upon how lynching, as an instance of a modern manhunt, constructs the relationship of the hunter and the prey, as well as how it reflects the working of modern sovereign power.

Death Dealing in Lynching: Dialogue Between Sovereignty and Biopolitics

In the introduction to his book, *Manhunt*, Chamayou writes, “The history of manhunting is thus not only a history of the techniques of tracking and capture but also of the procedures of exclusion, of lines of demarcation drawn within the human community in order to define the humans who can be hunted”. Having discussed lynching within the framework of manhunt, it is important to understand the dynamics of power operating within it. The quoted lines denote the idea of division as well as the politics of defining who can be killed. Manhunts like lynching require an enemy/prey to operate, and the violence inherent in such acts is always physical, a violence that is directed at the body of the prey. This focalization of power on the body is a remarkable aspect of biopolitics. According to Foucault, “Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power ... [which] consists in making live and letting

die" (247). With the confluence of politics, science, medicine and law, a rhetoric of cure, well-being and betterment comes to the foreground. The construction of the prey involves a process of othering, whereby a part of the human species/community is established as a threat, as contagion, as ailment to the health of the entire community/society at large. This is done by taking recourse to pseudo- scientific and juridico-medical- discourses. Chamayou draws our attention to how the prey has to be dehumanized and animalized for a manhunt to occur, and how this process involves a "zoologizing of social relations". It is to such acts of killing carried out in the name of protection that Agamben refers to when he writes, "biopolitical program showed its thanatopolitical face" (150). In the context of black lynching in America, it is useful to see the social perception of the black body as monstrous, as overtly sexualized, as a source of pollution, further substantiated by pseudo-scientific theory of races to define their inferiority, in the light of biopolitics.

Agamben is of the opinion that "The fundamental biopolitical structure of modernity [is based on] the decision on the value (or nonvalue) of life as such" (137). Since it is clearly the white supremacist state that decides upon and constructs the nonvalue of black lives as lives that can be killed without the commission of homicide, we find that the crowd is indeed reflective of the sovereign power of the state. It is as if the state extends its power to the people who go on hunting black bodies. This complicity between the state and the crowd is further highlighted by the refusal of the state to take any action against the people who participate in lynching. The blacks in America, with their slave inheritance and contested citizenship rights, may be said to be akin to the figure of 'homo sacer' that Agamben talks about- it is the figure of 'man', of 'bare life' as opposed to the figure of the citizen who is the carrier of political rights. The rebellion of the blacks in the story, their demands for equal rights, and the torture perpetrated on the body of the black civil rights leader attest to such a reading. When seen in the light of the politicization of human bodies, the lynching of blacks and the resultant inaction on the part of the state does not seem out of place. After all, under the operation of such biopolitical power, those bodies may be killed because they have no rights at all which may be violated by their murder.

What is unique to lynching, however, is that not only is the body hunted and killed, but also made into a spectacle of torture, punishment and warning. Sovereign power, here, is therefore biopolitical as well as spectacular. The lynched body becomes a spectacle as we see in *Going to Meet the Man*, where people from the entire town gather to watch the lynching, and gaze at the lynched body as if it were an exhibit. While biopolitics operates to designate which bodies can be lynched, an investigation of spectacles of violence is necessary to arrive at an understanding of their power and function.

Lynching Spectacle

Lynching involves a ritualistic performance of violence on the body of the prey/victim. In his story, Baldwin elucidates how the black body is doused in flames numerous times, to slowly and painfully distort and burn it. He continues, "The man with the knife walked up to the hanging body. He turned and smiled again ... took the niggers privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them ... the knife flashed, first up, then down, cutting the dreadful thing away and blood came roaring down. Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands..." (1760). This performance of violence goes into the making of the lynching spectacle. According to Woods, lynching drew its cultural force from the spectacle of violence, and in order to understand its power, we should look at "other practices and forms of spectator and spectatorships prevalent at the turn of the century" (3); for instance, public executions, religious rituals and visual media. As Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish*, at the core of public executions is the idea of the visual intensity of violence as a measure of the punishment; it is the role of the spectacle to spread horror. The horror of the sovereign power is inflicted on the people through such public spectacles of torture. It conveys the message of absolute obedience and submission of the subjects. Though this mode of punishment has given way to new penal systems, it would be useful to translate the power of the lynching spectacle in terms of this definition of spectacular violence. The lynching spectacle functions to maintain a rule of terror whereby the blacks could be kept in their proper place in the social hierarchy of white America. As Chamayou writes, "beyond putting individuals to death, the goal of the hunting pack is ... its [the African Americans'] maintenance within the narrow limits of a social domination by race". Thus, the spectacular violence of lynching is representational- it represents a command of unquestioning submission to the dominated group. It also drives home the underlying solidarity and identification between the state and the crowd against the group which is constituted as, to use Chamayou's term, 'public enemy'. Thus, through the lynching spectacle, the 'thanatopolitical face' of biopolitics, and the destructive aspect of sovereign power (the right to kill) which had been pushed to the hidden zone of penal system becomes visible again. It is not just the performance of violence that constitutes the spectacle, the lynched body itself becomes a spectacle of violence. The sight of the black body marked and scarred by violence, burnt, and dismembered, also plays the same role as the lynching spectacle. The taking away of dismembered body parts as souvenirs for exhibition is another level at which the lynching

spectacle functions. What is noteworthy about these spectacles is their dehumanizing quality. The lynched body becomes a symbol, a representation of a threat; the individuality of the body, its personal history is lost. Additionally, in being hunted by the pack, they are reduced to the status of an animal. In fact, the people who carry out lynching also lose their individuated selves in the conception of the crowd.

The black body, however, does not become a spectacle for the first time during lynching. The prevalent ideas and presumptions about the black body always already function as a spectacle in the mental landscape of the whites. It is this imagery of the black body that Jesse recalls in the story- "He felt that he would ... never have to get up in the morning again and go downtown to face those faces, good Christ, they were ugly! And never have to enter the jail house again and smell that smell and hear that singing; never again feel that filthy, kinky, greasy hair under his hands, never again watch those black breasts leap against the leaping cattle prod ... they were animals ... a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every five minutes..." (1751). This sexualized, and dehumanized spectacle of the black body leads to its criminalization through the discourse of rape and the fear of miscegenation. And, we have seen earlier how this manipulation is itself an expression of the biopolitical power. Thus, the same power operates in creating the spectacle of the body as well as the spectacle of violence.

Spectacles of Lynching

The spectacle of lynching is not limited to the act but extends beyond that to media representations of the act. While modern modes of transport like railways brought people from the surrounding regions to witness the spectacle of violence that was lynching, modern technology and media helped circulate these spectacles far and wide. Numerous photographs of lynching were taken, many were used in post cards, and many others were sold. Before delving into the function of these photographs, it is important to acknowledge the role of technology in the production, multiplication, and dissemination of spectacles of violence. Going back to Foucault's argument about the ever-increasing march of politics into the field of science, medicine and law, we can look at lynching photographs as an intervention and extension of biopolitical power. These photographs had a similar function as spectacles of torture in public executions. They reinstated sovereign power by mobilizing an atmosphere of fear among the dominated, and by reassertion of a feeling of white supremacy and solidarity among the whites. Further, they helped forge a bond among whites across all classes. They were also functional in weaving a discourse of inferiority, dehumanization, and threat around the black body, and in generating voyeuristic pleasure through the spectacle of destruction of these bodies. Lynching photographs, therefore, become ideological tools for maintaining power and dominance. Wood writes, "Representations of lynching in photographs ... not only

replicated, in stark visual terms, the ideological force of prolynching rhetoric but also literally projected images that substantiated that rhetoric and allowed it to be continually reimagined. The remarkable mimetic quality of photography... their capacity to simulate reality with uncanny accuracy- accorded them enormous cultural influence in modern life” (9-10).

Complementing these photographs, were newspaper reports of lynching. The titles and topics under which they placed these stories of lynching point to their luridness. As Litwick points out in his essay, 'Hellnounds', newspapers reported lynching as "Negro Berbecue" (10). The 1899 lynching of Sam Hose was reported in the *Springfield Republican* as follows:

Before the torch was applied to the pyre, the negro was deprived of his ears, fingers and genital parts of his body. He pleaded pitifully for his life while the mutilation was going on, but stood the ordeal of fire with surprising fortitude. Before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits, and even the tree upon which the wretch met his face was torn up and disposed of as "souvenirs". The negro's heart was cut into several pieces, as was also his liver. Those unable to attain ghastly relics direct paid their more fortunate possessors extravagant sums for them. Small pieces of bones went for 25 cents, and a bit of liver crispy cooked sold for 10 cents (quoted in Young 630).

In this account, the victim is called a 'negro' which conjures up other spectacles of the monstrous black body, at the same time that it erases his individuality. What we have here is a spectacle of lynching without any personal identity markers of the victim, as we would in a photograph. It plays only a representational and symbolic role. To prevent any obstacle in the clear communication of their message, *Meridian*, a Mississippi newspaper, wrote: "The men who do lynching ... are not men who flout law but men who sincerely believe they have the best interest of their men and women at heart" (quoted in Litwick 20). Besides the lurid portrayal of lynching, newspapers also published invitations to attend lynching events. Literature, mainly written by whites, prevail stereotypical descriptions of blacks bodies, and describe lynching as a legitimate practice. While the readers of such representations, cannot witness lynching as a sensory experience, they consume such narratives passively; sometimes, even as modes of entertainment. The idea of voyeuristic pleasure is equally at play here. Moreover, like photographs, these narrative accounts create a new crowd of spectators who were not physically present at the lynching site, but who witness the lynching spectacle

through these representations. This new group of spectators who witness lynching through spectacles- photographic and narrative- are the consumers of commercial capitalism. Wood is of the opinion that "lynching persisted through a web of modern consumer and media practices that reproduced and commodified white supremacist violence for a large audience. In this view, these practices helped generate a national tolerance for that violence by making it appear as a natural aspect of modern life- yet another distant and thrilling spectacle that can be consumed and then overlooked" (10).

However, narratives like Baldwin's short story provide us a different perspective on the issue. Foucault has noted in *Discipline and Punish* that the public spectacle of punishment has the potential to "invert the shame inflicted on the victim to pity and glory" as well as the "turn the legal violence of the executioner into shame" (9). Hence, photographs which are the spectacles of lynching is underlined by a subversive possibility of turning the dominant ideology, which they promote, on its head. It is to an exploration of this aspect that I turn in the following section.

Dissenting Spectacles

Though people in power used mass mediated spectacles of lynching to garner support for their dominance, such dominance was overthrown by the democratic impulse of mass media. It is to be remembered that modernity, the time of the rise of mass media, was also a period characterized by a growing aversion towards pain, suffering and death (at least towards their public displays, which is reflected in Aries's book, *Western Attitudes to Death*). As a consequence, when the spectacles of lynching reached a wider audience outside the boundary of America, instead of precipitating a feeling of satisfaction and pleasure it resulted in revulsion and outrage. In the words of Woods, "Indeed, once that spectacle was disseminated nationwide ... its ideological significance and force changed altogether. The same images that had constructed and reinforced white supremacy came to have an alternate symbolic power, one that gave vitality and strength to the antilynching movement ... In short, if lynching rested on spectacle, it also fell on spectacle" (4). The same photographs were now circulated by anti-lynching activists to invoke the question of ethics, and the sense of responsibility towards raising a collective voice against such acts of mass killing and manhunt. The spectacles of lynching were now instrumental in voicing dissent against acts of spectacular violence and brutality.

Without Sanctuary is a digital archive of photographs and postcards of lynching collected by James Allen. Through this archive he memorializes the violent history of America.

In Litwick's view, Allen warns his fellow Americans against the collective amnesia of that past: "*Without Sanctuary* is a grim reminder that a part of the American past we would prefer for various reasons to forget we need very much to remember" (34). The spectacles, therefore, take on a new role here. Further, Allen introduces them as "an unearthing of crimes, of collective mass murder ... trade cards of those assisting at ritual racial killings and other acts of a mad citizenry. The communities 'best citizens lurking just outside frame'" (withoutsanctuary.org). These spectacles are functional in reversing pro-lynching rhetoric and the power dynamic, as the torch-bearers of justice- the crowd- are now metamorphosed into criminals while the former criminal- the black body or the prey- is seen as a victim demanding justice. The political purpose of this photo document is to express dissent against lynching. In the flash movie featuring these photographs, he also indicts the photographer for being a silent accomplice to such acts, for making a profit out of the misery and exploitation of so many human beings, by commercial reproduction and distribution of the photographs. By making these documents freely accessible to all through internet, he voices a poignant critique not just of individual perpetrators of lynching, but of the state institutions and power structures that thrive on such demarcations among humans, on hierarchy, and on violence. It is as much a critique of the white supremacist state as it is a critique of Capitalism.

In his book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay draws attention to this idea of critique through the concept of civic duty. According to him, the spectators of the photographs have a civic duty towards the photographed subject. In fact, he goes beyond the idea of critique to assert the agential role of the spectator in restoring the rights and dignity of the photographed. Read in this light, it can be said that *Without Sanctuary* makes a claim on the spectators to take action against the system of power that permitted such violence. His understanding of photographs is, however, not simple. The idea of the spectacle operates on two levels- the photograph is the spectacle at which the spectators gaze, as well as the spectators themselves become a spectacle under the gaze of the photographed subject. In *Going to Meet the Man*, Baldwin highlights this dual operation of gaze: "Then the dying man's eyes looked straight into Jesse's eyes- it could not have been as long as a second, but it seemed longer than a year" (1760). This momentary gaze that fixates on Jesse can be translated as a claim for the acknowledgement of the pain of the lynched body. This is in stark contrast to the indifferent gaze of the consumer-spectators of the previous section. Jesse notices that gaze but fails to acknowledge it; and it is this failure which can be said to account for his sexual and psychic dysfunction. Baldwin seems to suggest that violence of lynching will be detrimental to

both perpetrators (direct or otherwise) as well as the victims. In that momentary gaze of the lynched body, in Azoulay's idea of the gaze of the photographed subject reverberates a claim to acknowledge the pain of the other, and to rise in protest against it. These new group of conscientious spectators will form a community that actively works to resist the spectacle of power conjured by the ruling power. He writes, "The civil contract of photography that the emergence of this community exemplifies is the hypothetical, imagined arrangement regulating relations within this virtual political community. It is not dictated by the ruling power, even when this power attempts to rule and to control photography" (21).

Like photographs, narrative spectacles also have an alternate function. While politically biased white narratives about lynching can be read with the purpose of critiquing it, and opening up a space for dissent, African American narratives about lynching depict a very different picture with a distinct political aim. Extending Azoulay's argument about the civic duty of spectators, we can conceptualize a responsible and ethical readership of narratives, who are endowed with the task of responding perceptibly to the representations of violence. Baldwin's story has a vivid spectacle of lynching with elaborate details of the violence and the atmosphere, but this spectacle is mobilized with the aim of firstly, showcasing the brutality that black bodies were subjected to, secondly, to create an outrage against such acts, thirdly, to draw attention to the psychic damage caused by such violence in both the whites and the blacks, and, fourthly, to expose the tensions and inhibitions behind the garb of the tone of celebration and normality. The idea of the gaze of the lynched body, the sexual dysfunction of Jesse as representation of a deeper psychic hurt inflicted by spectacular violence of lynching and race-relations, the unease of Jesse on witnessing his first lynching, the deliberate efforts of his father to maintain a normal, happy countenance on encountering the lynching (which is betrayed through his excessive sweating) are some of the unique moments of the story, which give us a deeper insight into the understanding of violence and power. Moreover, parallel to the spectacle of the lynched body, Baldwin also gives us the spectacle of the black body which refuses to submit under torture, in the figure of the civil rights activists' leader who accepts death rather than obeying Jesse's command of stopping the others from singing in protest. These images and spectacles resonate with an assertion of black power, which is often missing in the narratives of white Americans. Popova points out, in a conversation with Achebe, he asserts that art has a moral aspect and that morality entails the question of how we treat each other (brainpickings.org). The violent race relations depicted in this story can therefore be seen in that perspective as a call to stop such violence, and treat each other equally with dignity and respect.

Conclusion

From the analysis of lynching that this paper undertook, we arrive at an understanding of lynching as a systematic denial of rights and humanity to specific parts of the population. In *Globalizing Lynching History*, Berg and Wendt warns us against essentializing race as the primary driving force for lynching. Instead, they agree with Thurston that "lynching occurs whenever societies experience a rapid deterioration of political stability and legitimacy" (4). In this context, Wood's reading of lynching as a rebellion against modernity becomes enlightening. She suggests that the rapidly changing social scenario, with the influence of industrialization and urbanization, created a new world based on new values. The older values and systems of power became redundant. It called for new kinds of interrelationships and interactions between blacks and whites within the urban city space. Besides, the demand of African Americans for equal rights and citizenship were on the rise. Such a possibility threatened white supremacy, and they asserted their power in a spectacular way through lynchings. Such performance and spectacle of violence was aimed at constructing white supremacy which came under threat of modern forces (5-8).

What my paper has sought to do is, take black lynchings in America as a point of entry into a broader understanding of the politics of lynching which was prevalent in other parts like Russia, Germany and France (as indicated by Berg and Wendt), and which has returned in the contemporary times, especially in our country. Not approaching lynching strictly through the lens of race, opens up a wider picture where lynching is understood in relationship to the idea of the modern state, and the new dynamic of power that it represents. Chamayou's idea of manhunt, Foucault and Agamben's theory of biopolitics, and the overarching idea of the spectacle helps in shedding light on this relationship. The vocalization of dissent is of utmost relevance because it ruptures the garb of absolute, unshakable power of the state. The subversive potential of the lynching spectacle calls the power of the state into question, and paves the way for change in the structures of power. This, I believe, is the most significant aspect as it is not enough to just understand the operations of power in lynching, but what is of greater importance is to use that understanding to offer resistance to that power, and conceptualize ways of overturning it. Therein, lies the question of ethics in the study of violence.

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