

The Most American Place on Earth: National Identity as Reflected in Southern Racial Violence

by Guy Lancaster

Reviewed in this essay:

Ecologies of Harm: Rhetorics of Violence in the United States. By Megan Eatman. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 173, acknowledgments, works cited, index. \$29.95, paper)

Remembering the Memphis Massacre: An American Story. Edited by Beverly Greene Bond and Susan Eva O'Donovan. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020. Pp. v–xiv + 216, list of illustrations, foreword by Gregory P. Downs, acknowledgments, author's note, contributors, index. \$27.95, paper)

Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter: African American History and Representation. Edited by Andrew Dix and Peter Templeton. (New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xiii + 215, list of figures, acknowledgments, notes on contributors, index. \$29.95, paper)

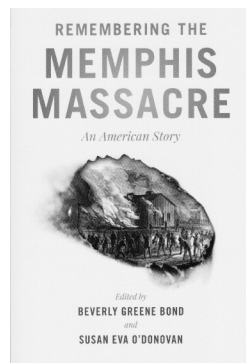
Following the deadly August 2017 white supremacist march on Charlottesville, Virginia, in support of local Confederate monuments, the *Washington Post* ran a story on the national prevalence of such memorials, observing that one out of every twelve Confederate monuments was in a state that fought for the Union. These include such states as Illinois, New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and even California. Even more surprising (or dismaying) are the sites bearing Confederate names located in states that did not even exist during the Civil War, such as the Robert E. Lee Campground situated within Boise National Park in Idaho, a

state which joined the Union in 1890, or a full twenty-five years following Appomattox. One would think that, having proven themselves victorious against Southern rebels and the cause for which they fought (i.e. slavery), Union states would have been loath to commemorate the legacy of their opponents in that “late unpleasantness.” After all, there are no public monuments honoring the Kaiser’s armies or the troops of Imperial Japan on American soil.

But lest we, in contrast, take as natural the existence of Confederate monuments within those states that were part of the former Confederacy, consider the following. Arkansas initially voted down secession from the Union. In the Ozark and Ouachita mountains of the state were many men who opposed secession and either fought Confederate forces informally as guerrillas or joined Unionist regiments—in fact, Arkansas contributed more troops to the cause of the Union than any other Confederate state save Tennessee. Moreover, as they succeeded in freeing themselves from the clutches of slavery, many black men joined the United States Colored Troops, and Arkansas was no exception. In fact, black Union regiments are credited with participation in twenty-nine military engagements in Arkansas. All of this rather indicates that the prevalence of Confederate monuments within a state like Arkansas distorts the more complicated historical record of a place that did formally join the Confederacy.

Much has been written about how the South lost the military conflict but ended up

winning the cultural conflict, and how Civil War monuments have functioned as symbols of the national unity of white Americans at the expense of people of color, whose existence was written out of Civil War historiography for so long. But the symbolic landscape was not the only means by which national reunification was achieved. In fact, these monuments and memorials obscure a broader history of violence that underpinned the American experiment growing out of the fires of Reconstruction. Or as Carole Emberton writes in her chapter in *Remembering the Memphis Massacre*, “Instead of setting the South apart from the broader sweep of American nationalism that emerged after the Civil War, the violent words and actions of white southerners placed them firmly within it,” with violent spectacles like the Memphis and Colfax massacres watering “the seeds of white supremacy not only in the South but also throughout the entire nation” (pp. 166, 167). Indeed, while the violence possessed immediate utility in stamping out black political mobilization, “southern violence also possessed a performative function that was less than straightforward,” allowing “white men to perform their revolutionary heritage and appeal to broader American sensibilities about the necessity of fighting to demonstrate one’s worthiness as a citizen” (p. 170). According to Emberton, the fact that so much of this violence was carried out in public only served to demonstrate its legitimacy—after all, only criminals act under cover of darkness or masks—and connect it to the vigilante traditions of the American Revolution.



But the cruelty of Reconstruction-era violence was another component of its performative function. Events such as the Memphis and Colfax massacres “were not dismissed as the

work of ‘ruffians’ from other states or even as regrettable lapses in control of otherwise good men. Rather, they represented important messages about the nature of politics and the problem of black freedom” (p. 171). As noted above, white unity in the antebellum South could not necessarily be taken for granted. Many whites opposed secession even if they did not concern themselves with the fate of slaves, and their opposition could take the form of warfare. Likewise, in the Reconstruction South, white unity was far from a given; too often for the comfort of elites, class stood at the forefront of many people’s sense of collective identity, and cross-racial fusion politics and third-party protest movements threatened elite power. Thus did “violent assaults on freedpeople and their white allies” bring “white supremacy into being, not the other way around” (p. 173). And as Reconstruction wore on, the cause of white supremacy became more and more a national goal or vision, for white supremacy was never solely a preoccupation with skin tone; instead, it reflected a particularly American manifestation of the Great Chain of Being, establishing a permanent and natural order and rendering as heretical any efforts to raise oneself or another to any higher point on the ladder. As Emberton writes, “The South’s Redemption had tapped into a strain of revolutionary romanticism and disillusionment with the federal government that coalesced in the centennial year [1876] to highlight the centrality of violence to American national identity. Americans were a people at war—with the indigenous people of the continent, the labor movement, immigrants and racial ‘others,’ and a growing host of enemies within, but white southerners were no longer among them” (pp. 175–176).

Scholars beyond the field of history have come to the conclusion that violence is “constitutive,” that, as Megan Eatman writes, it “shapes the identities of victims and participants. Violence clarifies the division of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ We are just and strong, they are dangerous and deviant. Violence is thus not an inter-

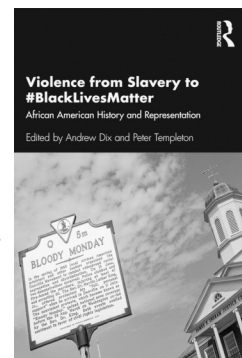
action between discrete individuals, but a process that creates both subjects” (p. 2). This is true even if—or, rather, especially if—such violence seems so excessive as to be ineffective, to risk the very conditions one publicly aims to establish. Many justified lynching or massacres as enforcing a respect for the rule of law, even as these mobs, apparently paradoxically, violated the rule of law by condemning and taking the life of a person or persons outside the judicial system, not to mention the brutality these events displayed, including mutilation or torture that could span hours. But regarding such violence as potentially paradoxical is to ignore the reality that “organized public violence in the United States almost uniformly maintains dominant identities perceived to be at risk: white, masculine, Southern, ‘American.’” It is to ignore the broader “rhetorical ecology produced by practices of direct, structural, and cultural violence,” an ecology that, in ways mirroring the reality of a biological ecosystem, “is hospitable to only certain identities and practices” (p. 9).

At the present moment, there is perhaps a greater public willingness in the United States to entertain exploration of the structures of racism and their historical roots. The word “lynching” has been employed by many, in a non-metaphorical manner, to describe the February 23, 2020, killing of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. Likewise, the increasing scrutiny of police violence, especially against African Americans, and especially following the May 25, 2020, murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, has drawn greater public discussion about the historical origins of policing and the impunity with which black bodies were often regulated and punished. As Emberton notes in her chapter in *Remembering the Memphis Massacre*, “While local militias and slave patrols regulated enslaved people’s movements throughout the backcountry, some of the nation’s first police forces in southern cities like Charleston and New Orleans patrolled the line between slavery and freedom” (p. 168). Like-

wise, Andrew Dix writes in his introduction to *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter*: “The near-total immunity of slaveholders from prosecution for murderous violence against slaves they owned, for example, is replicated in the high degree of invulnerability from legal or even professional sanction enjoyed by police officers who have been involved recently in African American fatalities” (p. 2).

Of course, some will object that a direct line cannot be drawn from the slave patrols of times past and the police of present day, from the lynchings that rocked the South after Reconstruction to seemingly random acts of vigilantism that still occur. However, this is where Eatman’s idea of a rhetorical ecology of violence serves such an important purpose and allows us to make these connections. After all, biological ecosystems do not exist in a state of homeostasis. They evolve throughout time as the conditions that created and maintain them change and as the organisms contained within themselves undergo evolution. But we can, with careful work, see similar creatures occupying similar roles within these ecosystems throughout time. It is not that the police themselves are necessarily directly descended from the slave patrols of yore. However, with the outlawing of slavery, and thus the formal disbandment of slave patrols, there was an ecological niche that went unoccupied—specifically, a niche for the formal and violent enforcement of white supremacy and the regulation of black bodies. Emerging police systems were able to fill this niche.

What these three books in concert do well is to map out the broader rhetorical ecology of violence in the United States from slavery to the present moment. As Joshua D. Rothman writes in his chapter in *Remembering the Memphis Massacre*, prognostications in the



early Republic that slavery would somehow naturally come to a gradual end are belied by the fact that slavery never stopped growing, increasing by approximately thirty percent during the 1790s alone. In addition, as the United States entered the nineteenth century, the revolutionary fervor with which the country was launched proved to be ebbing, replaced instead by a racialized backlash: “Rooted in a reaction to black people’s violent resistance to slavery, such as the Haitian Revolution in the Caribbean in the 1790s and Gabriel’s Rebellion in Virginia in 1800, this backlash led growing numbers of whites to reconsider the notion that all people were entitled to liberty simply by being human” (p. 15). Of course, this decision about the relative humanity of people of African descent was predicated a great deal upon economics. Or as Calvin Schermerhorn writes in the same anthology, “Enslaved people were second only to land in terms of total monetary worth in the United States,” and they regularly provided their owners with a form of collateral that facilitated mortgages whereby enslavers could achieve even more material wealth, perhaps even in the form of more slaves (p. 32).

But it would be a mistake to think of slavery solely in terms of economic exploitation, just as it would be a mistake to think of lynching solely in terms of crime and punishment. In her chapter in *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter*, Catherine Armstrong sifts through accounts of “slave hunts,” or the pursuit of fugitive slaves, either by their owners or by slave patrols, and finds a strong subtext in many accounts that such hunts exhibited a “zest of sport,” including the possibility that some captives were set free that they might be hunted, suggesting that participants regarded such affairs “in sporting terms and not purely as a financial transaction” (p. 28). If southerners invested in the system of slavery treated the enslaved as mere beasts, abolitionists, as Hannah-Rose Murray explores, could often fail to appreciate the full humanity of the enslaved. In

particular, abolitionists urged the formerly enslaved “to carefully relay their own experience of slavery in conjunction with other slave narratives and white abolitionist texts so as not to exceed the limits of white audience understanding” (p. 57). Southern antebellum writers, meanwhile, in such novels as *The Kentuckian in New-York* or *Guy Rivers*, were capable of acknowledging so-called “abuses,” especially through their representations of the overseer figure. According to Peter Templeton, by this trope, “the perspective is changed so that now it is not the institution of slavery itself that is cruel, but rather specific individuals,” and thus “evil is redistributed from the system itself to those few aberrant slaveholders and overseers that do not take such an active interest in promoting fairness” (p. 43). In this, too, we can see reflected certain present-day tropes surrounding the debate on police violence—with one side featuring white well-wishers focused primarily upon the tangibility of black pain and suffering, while the other side insists that such suffering is the responsibility of “a few bad apples.”

John C. Rodrigue reminds us, in his chapter in *Remembering the Memphis Massacre*, that it was never guaranteed that Union victory in the Civil War would necessarily lead to the abolition of slavery as an institution. In fact, the Lower Mississippi Valley region exhibited the variety of possibilities available when it came to the future of slavery—or lack thereof. For example, Tennessee was excluded from the Emancipation Proclamation, but even before the proclamation, the Union army had carried out the emancipation of slaves as a military strategy. Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee abolished slavery at the state level during the course of the war, while in Mississippi, it was abolished under federal authority. As Rodrigue writes, the Lower Mississippi Valley was “the crucible within which military emancipation became constitutional abolition,” given that the success of Union forces in the area in 1862 opened up an array of possibilities beyond negotiation with conservative elites eager to return to a state

akin to the antebellum status quo (p. 55). During the war, many of the newly freed flocked to cities like Memphis, places under stronger Union control, for, as Jim Downs notes, “while the countryside theoretically offered refugees the opportunity to create homes, the freedpeople still had to face Confederate guerrillas who lurked in the fields and threatened to capture them and return them to plantation slavery” (p. 71). And places like Memphis played a key role in Reconstruction “because of their concentrated and heterogeneous populations, public spaces, transportation infrastructure, and local governments charged with keeping the peace and overseeing economic development,” writes Kate Masur: “Yet those same features also made cities especially combustible, and at moments of high tension whites were prone to inflict murder and destruction on their black neighbors” (p. 77).

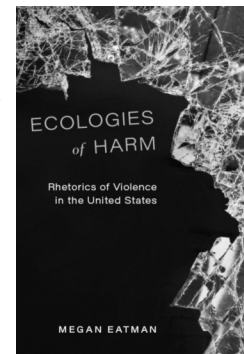
And that is what happened in Memphis on April 30, 1866. A case of verbal sparring between black soldiers recently mustered out of service and white police officers exploded into three days of violence, during which forty-six African Americans (men, women, and children) were murdered, as were two white men. Among the many atrocities perpetrated over these three days was the rape of numerous black women, women who were, according to Hannah Rosen, “attacked because of their relationship to black Union soldiers,” and as part of the white backlash to “the changed power dynamics between white men and black women themselves” (p. 109). This and so many other Reconstruction-era atrocities, Julie Saville reminds us, “should dispel any tendency to view emancipation as a state act that is complete at its enunciation,” although emancipation did provide openings for organized movements “that sought to complete or redress what state declarations had enacted or legitimated but had never fulfilled” (p. 134).

Black liberation movements were, however, resisted by white elites in many ways, including the persistent terrorism of lynching. Megan Eat-

man, in *Ecologies of Harm*, describes lynching as “anti-deliberative epideixis.” Epideictic rhetoric is classically understood as ceremonial oratory, putting the listener in the role of spectator, although recent scholarship emphasizes its role in promulgating certain social values. So how does lynching exhibit this rhetorical function? As Eatman writes,

In its fundamental excess, lynching told white Southern men that their power over Black people was limitless; anything less than murder was restrained. Lynching advocates reinforced this identity by refusing to deliberate over lynching and insisting . . . that any critique of lynching was a challenge to the core of Southernness. The resulting rhetorical ecology offered few options for contesting lynching, and even antilynching arguments often included problematic validation of the South as victim. (p. 27)

Lynch mobs or posses could murder not just those people who had yet to be charged formally with any crime, but people known to be innocent of wrongdoing whatsoever. And by doing so in public, with full impunity, such deeds drove home the nature of white supremacy by constituting a “narrative of strength and victimhood” that “formed the core of white Southern identity, concealing other possible understandings of what being a white Southerner could mean” (p. 32). Moreover, because lynching served an epideictic function, even those members of the audience who found themselves repelled by the act contributed to its meaning. As pro-lynching rhetoric circulated—in such forms as speeches, newspaper editorials, pictures and other mementos, and, most importantly, subsequent lynchings—the constitutive force of lynching became all the stronger, so that, much like slav-



ery a generation prior, it became well nigh impossible to imagine southern life without it.

Lynching's anti-deliberative nature was reflected in the refusal to debate the practice in Congress—especially through the mechanism of the filibuster—whenever opponents of mob violence tried to advance bills to stem the practice. Perhaps most notable in this effort was Arkansas's own US senator Thaddeus Caraway, who famously insisted that the goal of such legislation “was to make rape permissible, and to allow the guilty to go unpunished if that rape should be committed by a negro on a white woman in the South.” It was a ridiculous assertion, one that flew in the face of decades of research by antilynching activists, but as Eatman notes, in an analysis that bears striking similarity to our current political moment: “Caraway's acknowledgment that he has no evidence, however, suggests that the truth is not important. . . . Once Caraway has declared the bill a conspiracy, he and others who share his world view can reject any claims to the contrary as attempted cover-ups” (p. 42). Such allegations of conspiracy constituted, like lynching itself, a means by which white Southern identity could be performed—indeed, the very means by which white Southern identity becomes reified as the only legitimate southern identity. And just as bystanders, even disgusted bystanders, contributed to the meaning of the spectacle of lynching, so, too, did their counterparts at the national level, those who read and heard and witnessed with disgust but who dismissed any efforts against lynching as futile, usually by reference to their already low expectations for the behavior of (white) southerners. Thus was lynching a national spectacle.

The typical lynching victim was male, and literary histories have typically privileged works by men, which factors helped to skew the cultural memory, as Koritha Mitchell writes in her chapter in *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter*: “It is easy to forget that women and children were lynched, and even when they were not the mob's direct targets, they were pro-

foundly affected by mob violence” (p. 89). By contrast, reading women-authored works, which typically exhibit a focus beyond the individual victim, reveals “that the political, social and cultural realities of the United States cannot be understood without viewing lynching as a decidedly domestic form of terrorism” (p. 103). But confronting lynching entails not only going beyond the singular victim, it also entails transcending temporal boundaries. Following Mitchell, Cassandra Jackson explores this idea by building upon the category of learning that Deborah Britzman calls “difficult knowledge,” or the psychic event that occurs when one encounters a representation of trauma, such as a lynching photograph. For Jackson, such encounters bring “to the fore that for African Americans difficult knowledge has the potential to cause time to collapse, making apparent the connection between white supremacist oppression of the past and its new forms in the present” (p. 107). And this ties well into an insight Eatman expresses in *Ecologies of Harm*: “The comfortable atmosphere of white supremacist violence visible in lynching photographs did not just appear; it required building and frequent reinforcement. Southern white supremacists maintained a pervasive atmosphere of racial violence in part by building the principles of lynching into everyday life” (p. 51).

This is how lynching survived. Recall our metaphor from earlier in this essay, that we must envision the practice of lynching as akin to an organism within a broader biological ecosystem. And remember that ecosystems evolve. Ani DiFranco spoke to this reality in her 1990 song “Fire”: “May their souls rest easy now that lynching is frowned upon / We've moved on to the electric chair.” Except that we have moved even further, on to lethal injection, whose “simultaneous violence and nonviolence constitutes a community that can and does ‘have it all,’” according to Eatman: “While lethal injection may not offer as obvious a display of state or community power, its perform-

ance holds the contradictions of modern capital punishment together in a relatively cohesive way, allowing communities to be both ‘tough on crime’ and merciful” (pp. 58–59). While capital punishment has long been regarded by scholars such as Michael Pfeifer and Margaret Vandiver as a continuation of the personal and structural violence of lynching, policing has only more recently attracted the same critical attention. But just as lynching was often justified in reference to crimes that drove certain (white) individuals past the point of tolerance, and often excused as the acts of those “bad apples” tarnishing the reputation of a region, so has police killing, frequently of unarmed suspects, been justified by fear or the general undesirability of the individual so murdered, and excused as the acts of those same bad apples. However, as Luvena Kopp explains in her chapter in *Violence from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter*, “to explain the killings of [Eric] Garner and others solely in terms of the racism of individual police officers or department is to overlook the crucial ways in which such killings realize the political and economic necessities of the neoliberal state wherein (poor) black lives have indeed ceased to matter” (p. 179).

Perhaps surprisingly, this returns us to the Robert E. Lee Campground located within Boise National Park in Idaho. One could well argue that such a memorial to a traitorous Confederate general exists in a northern state that only entered the Union in 1890 because we have failed to incorporate the events of Reconstruction into our broader national metanarrative. In his chapter in *Remembering the Memphis Massacre*, K. Stephen Prince points out that, “By rhetorically setting Reconstruction apart from the main currents of the nation’s history, white southern opinion makers hoped to invalidate and delegitimize the period’s legislative accomplishments” (p. 192). And they succeeded. For the presence of that Robert E. Lee Campground reveals quite clearly that it is the Civil War—and, more specifically, the Confederate initiation and prosecution of

that war—that is the true constitutive event for not just (white) southern identity, but (white) American identity at the national level. The Confederate response to that war manifested itself in further violence, including massacres such as what happened at Memphis and a century-long campaign of lynching, and so those memorials preserve and honor that, as well. Or as Megan Eatman observes, “an ecological focus posits the overlap of rhetoric and violence differently; rhetoric and violence do not just share a space, but rather *produce* a space, their combined force defining the available means of survival” (p. 138).

And thus does history repeat itself, if with modest variation. Our broader ecosystem of harm has not been sufficiently disrupted to allow for the evolution of new patterns—not just of survival, but of life more abundant than what has, up to this present moment, been permitted. ▲▼▲