Presenting and Absenting Violence

by

Gedney Harrison Barclay
Class of 2009

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in African American Studies and Theater

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2009
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .................................................................................................................3  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................5  
Introduction ....................................................................................................................6  
Chapter 1: Violence in Rituals of Inclusion and Exclusion ........................................12  
  Definitions ...................................................................................................................14  
  Lynchings: When Difference Requires Violence .......................................................17  
  Nonviolent Protests: Leopards in the Temple .............................................................28  
Chapter 2: Embodying Power With and Without Violence ........................................39  
  Definitions ...................................................................................................................40  
  Strategies of Embodiment ...........................................................................................44  
  Observer/Observed Relationship ................................................................................54  
  Generating Meaning: Symbol v. Allegory ..................................................................62  
Chapter 3: Remembering, Representing, and Reproducing Violence ......................66  
Afterword ........................................................................................................................79  
Appendix .........................................................................................................................82  
Works Cited ....................................................................................................................114
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 ............................................................................................................................82
Figure 2 ............................................................................................................................83
Figure 3 ............................................................................................................................84
Figure 4 ............................................................................................................................85
Figure 5 ............................................................................................................................86
Figure 6 ............................................................................................................................87
Figure 7 ............................................................................................................................88
Figure 8 ............................................................................................................................89
Figure 9 ............................................................................................................................90
Figure 10 .........................................................................................................................91
Figure 11 .........................................................................................................................92
Figure 12 .........................................................................................................................93
Figure 13 .........................................................................................................................94
Figure 14 .........................................................................................................................94
Figure 15 .........................................................................................................................95
Figure 16 .........................................................................................................................95
Figure 17 .........................................................................................................................96
Figure 18 .........................................................................................................................96
Figure 19 .........................................................................................................................97
Figure 20 .........................................................................................................................98
Figure 21 .........................................................................................................................99
Figure 22 .........................................................................................................................100
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the following people who made this project possible:

To Professor Claudia Tatinge Nascimento, for an invaluable mentorship that I hope will continue long after I graduate from Wesleyan. Words simply aren’t sufficient to articulate how grateful I am for your commitment to my intellectual and artistic growth.

To Professor Demetrius Eudell, for taking me to Alabama and challenging the ways I approach the history of the human.

To the entire African American Studies and Theater faculty and staff, for your unwavering support.

To all faculty and students at the Center for the Humanities, for an unbelievably generous and stimulating intellectual community. You’ve opened up my understanding of what the humanities can be.

To Professors Andy Curran and Jacob Dorman, for investing in my scholarship and allowing me to share in theirs.

To Anne Green and Adam Tinkle, for stepping in on such short notice to help my writing.

To all my friends, but particularly the gentlemen of No Face and the residents of 65 Lawn, 277 Pine, and 14 Warren: You’ve given me a home away from home.

To Annie, for all you’ve shared with me as an artist, as a scholar, and as a friend over the past eight years.

To Georgette Norman and Joanne Bland, for help with my research and your unrelenting commitment to transmitting the memories of your struggles and the struggles of your peers in the fight for freedom.

To my parents Leslie Ann Harrison and Steven Wright Barclay: For absolutely everything.
INTRODUCTION

On February 25, 1964, a crowd of over 8,000 spectators gathered in Miami Beach’s Convention Hall to watch a boxing match between Cassius Clay and Sonny Liston. The odds were heavily in Liston’s favor. As a boxer, Liston was the embodiment of brute force: born on a rural farm in Arkansas, he learned to box while in prison for charges of armed robbery. As an icon, he “was the very essence of the mythic Black Man whites fear most.”¹ Clay, on the other hand, was known more for his personality than his athleticism. Over two years before the fight actually took place, Clay began regularly harassing Liston in public: he followed Liston everywhere, from the ringside to the casino and even to Liston’s own home to provoke him to fight. At each opportunity, Clay shot out quick, snappy diatribes proclaiming his superiority in athleticism, looks, and intelligence. The press followed closely to document every one of Clay’s provocations.² Because of his dramatic antics, Clay was hardly taken seriously as a contender to Liston’s severe athletic power. As Anthony O. Edmonds put it, “Sonny Liston was an animal who would devour the young challenger.”³

From the first round, Clay’s performance in the ring defied expectations. As Charles Lemert describes it, “From the opening bell Clay took the offensive. His speed was obvious. His talk continued . . . In the third round, Clay’s barrage of left hooks opened a cut over Liston’s right eye.” Lemert points out that in the world of boxing, making Liston bleed was no small feat: “Cuts are the worst that can happen in

² Ibid., 69-71
the ring. Nothing stirs the cutter and cripples the bleeder like the flow of blood. Quite apart from the injury itself, the blood can blind the fighter, as it can the judges. There are no points for bleeding well.” Lemert continues: “[Clay's] upset seemed assured until, late in the fourth round, Clay began to wince . . . Something was burning his eyes.” Clay could not see, the pain was so great. At the end of the fourth round, he demanded his gloves be cut off so he could forfeit the fight. Just before the referee was going to call the fight for Liston, Clay’s trainer Angelo Dundee literally pushed Clay back into the ring to finish the match. Halfway through that round, Clay’s eyes cleared, and he regained control of the fight. After Clay reopened the cut on his face in the sixth round, Liston failed to rise from his corner to begin the seventh: Clay had won the match. As the Convention Hall erupted in astonishment, Clay proclaimed his triumph for the cameras and microphones clamoring around him: “I am the greatest! . . . I must be the greatest . . . I showed the world . . . Tell the world . . . I talk to God every day . . . the real God . . . I’m the King of the world . . . I shook up the world . . . I am the prettiest thing that ever lived.” Clay’s performance of identity would take on an even greater significance just a week and a half after defeating Liston. On March 6, 1964, Clay declared his faith in the Nation of Islam and took the name Muhammad Ali. In this one gesture, Ali went from being boxing’s loud-mouthed fool to an icon of black power in and outside the ring. As Charles Lemert, notes, “Muhammad Ali was treated with a contempt that made the pre-fight insult that

---

4 Lemert, Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony, 71.
5 See Lemert, Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony, 70-72.
6 Transcribed from Marc Payton, director, Muhammad Ali in Lemert, Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony, 73.
he was nothing more than a loud-mouthed brat seem mild by contrast.” America feared Ali’s athletic power in combination with his new political and religious ideologies. By bringing to his athletic puissance some of the most radical articulations of black political identity, Ali reimagined for America what it meant to be a powerful black man.

The discussion of Ali as a public figure very often centers around his dual identity as an athlete and an icon in black politics without analyzing the specificity of boxing as the venue of his emergence as a remarkably powerful black figure. While all sports entail the performance of physical power, boxing is unique in that the performance of that power must come at the expense of your opponent's body. Even in heavy contact sports like football or rugby, the object of the game may involve hurting your opponent, but pain is not the goal itself. Boxing is, by definition, a performance of violence. Approaching Ali’s fight against Sonny Liston as such a performance raises several questions about the presentation of violence in America: How are audiences prepared for ritual displays of violence? What are the modes of representing and reading the black body? How does the performance of violence construct or deconstruct identity? How does power make itself present or absent in acts of violence?

While my thesis does not directly deal with Ali’s rise as a prominent black icon, his fight with Liston and ensuing political emergence provides an excellent gateway into my analytical approach to violence and race. In my thesis, I have chosen to look closely at two types of performances that enacted a reimagination of race’s and  

---

7 Ibid., 74.
violence’s ontological statuses in American culture: the anti-black lynchings of the nadir and the nonviolent protests of the Civil Rights Movement. While the performative aspects of such historical moments are most often used to analyze the narratives of race they produced, in my thesis I will look instead at the ritual-like processes used to produce them.

In my discussion of these two historical moments, I rely on Joseph Roach’s concepts of surrogation and the performance of waste. In his *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Roach explains that

culture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can be best described by the word *surrogation*. In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric . . . Because collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds. The process requires many trials and at least as many errors. The fit cannot be exact . . . [In order to make up for the gap between the original and the surrogate,] selective memory requires public enactments of forgetting, either to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed.

Roach’s description of cultural surrogation is particularly useful because it frames cultural transmission as imaginative rather than reproductive. Roach’s study deals specifically with surrogation processes in circum-Atlantic culture, “a vortex in which commodities and cultural practices changed hands many times.”

Because Roach’s model addresses processes of cultural transmission in highly heterogeneous contexts,

---


10 Ibid., 4.
he looks specifically at situations in which the formation of a new cultural consensus often required just as much erasure of cultural norms as it did the replication of it. In order to address this erasure, cultural transmission requires a confrontation with various cultural pasts and the given circumstances of the current context in order to construct what will be remembered and reproduced in the cultural norms of the present.

In performances of surrogation, violence generates a particularly extreme relationship between the past and the present because violence is, by its very nature, the production of loss. To borrow from Roach’s terminology, violence conspicuously wastes:

violence is the performance of waste. To that definition I offer three corollaries: first, that violence is never senseless but always meaningful, because violence in human culture always serves, one way or another, to make a point; second, that all violence is excessive, because to be fully demonstrative, to make its point, it must spend things—material objects, blood, environments—. . . and third, that all violence is performative, for the simple reason that it must have an audience—even if that audience is only the victim, even if that audience is only God.

In my analysis of the presence or ostensible absence of violence in the aforementioned moments in American history, I give the majority of my focus to the applicability of Roach’s first stipulation that violence always produces meaning. I contend that, regardless of context our political alliance with either the victim or the perpetrator, violence is one of the most impactful methods not only for enacting power but also to set cultural distinctions. As Roach says, violence “both sustains the community with the comforting fiction that real borders exist and troubles it with the

---

11 Ibid., 41.
spectacle of their immolation.”¹² In this project, I compare the use of ritual elements, performance, and photography in both the protests and anti-black lynchings in order to trace the continuous renegotiation between the expenditure of black bodies and the production of meaning in American racial categories.

In my first chapter, I investigate how certain ritualized structures informed the ways in which anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests framed violence or its absence as necessary to re-establish social order. By looking specifically at rituals that attempt to mend ruptures in the social fabric, I illustrate how violence sustained the U.S.’s racialized social fissure in anti-black lynchings, while the nonviolent protests made the absence of violence visible in order to dissolve racist distinctions.

In my second chapter, I look at the specific performative elements lynchings and nonviolent protests relied on to shift the perceptions of their witnesses. By employing very different strategies of embodiment, anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests respectively erased or made conspicuous black subjectivity. In my third chapter, I discuss the function of the photograph as a modern medium of cultural transmission that has implicitly changed what Americans are willing to see. To conclude, I look to my own encounters with the histories of these events to propose ways in which modern practices collective remembering of can once again make space for performative surrogation.

¹² Ibid.
CHAPTER ONE: VIOLENCE IN RITUALS OF EXCUSLION AND INCLUSION

On the evening of April 24, 1959, a group of eight to ten white men broke into the Pearl River County Jail in Poplarville, Mississippi. They sought a black prisoner awaiting trial for allegedly raping a white woman named Mack Charles Parker. The gang entered the cell, tied Parker up, and beat his body with clubs and any other objects they could find until he was barely conscious. They then took Parker to an abandoned bridge in a neighboring town and shot him dead. After that, Parker’s murderers weighted his body with chains and threw it into the river below. Though F.B.I. founder and director J. Edgar Hoover summoned the agency’s thorough investigation into Parker’s lynching, a Pearl River County grand jury failed to indict any of the men involved. They remain untried to this day.¹³

A little less than a year later another group of men broke with Southern institutional code, once again without legal prosecution. On February 1, 1960, after a lengthy late-night discussion, four black students at North Carolina’s A&T University walked into the local Greensboro Woolworth’s branch. After purchasing a few items, the young men took seats at the white-only lunch counter. One of them ordered a cup of coffee, and they sat at the counter until the store closed a half hour later without

¹³ All of the facts and descriptions of Mack Charles Parker’s murder come from Howard Smead’s Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker. Over the course of the entire book Smead describes the entire incident beginning with the inciting crime with which Parker was charged all the way through the F.B.I. investigation and grand jury hearing. Consequently the facts provided are scattered across several chapters. See Howard Smead, Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
receiving any service. The students were neither arrested nor prosecuted for violating the segregationist codes of a business franchise.14

Though very different in form and purpose, the participants in each of the illegal demonstrations were responding to a fissure in the social structure. While both groups of men had a variety of avenues to choose from, both chose ritualized forms of civic engagement. Unlike civic actions that directly participate within U.S. institutional structures—such as voting, fundraising, or running for election—both groups created their own symbolic vocabulary to perform a desired social order and their place within it. Their creation of such symbolic vocabularies relied on the use of specific spaces, objects, and actions. In each case—the aforementioned lynching and the nonviolent protest—the presence and absence of violence took on specific symbolic functions within the ritual-like performances.15

To analyze these two historical moments in terms of their ritual-like elements, I will draw from the works of four major ritual theorists. The founding premise for my definition of ritual comes from the work of ritual and religion scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, particularly his essay “The Bare Facts of Ritual.” In order to illuminate my discussion of the role of violence or its absence in the two aforementioned moments

15 In my discussion of the presence and absence of violence, there are many aspects to both these historical moments that I will be excluding. One of the largest gaps in this thesis is the study of black resistance to anti-black violence before the Civil Rights Movement. Activists like Ida B. Wells, James Weldon Johnson, and countless others devoted their lives to challenging the kinds of racist power dynamics anti-black lynchings sought to establish. Thus the kind of black resistance to objectification that was performed in the nonviolent protests was nothing new. Quite simply, blacks did not suddenly gain agency or power over night. Rather, other changes in the social structure—much of which was brought about by black activists and grassroots organizers in between the anti-black lynching’s peak and the first nonviolent sit-in—made it possible for blacks to perform this agency and resistance publicly. In turn, their public performances of nonviolence made it possible for other structural changes. By covering only these moments I do not want to give the impression that nothing occurred in between. Rather, I want to compare them as moments in which violence’s explicit absence or presence entered the public sphere.
in American history, I will look at sacrifices and rites of passage. My discussion of sacrifice relies on René Girard’s study *Violence and the Sacred*, while my discussion of rites of passage draws from both Girard’s work as well as anthropologist Victor Turner’s *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* and ethnographer and folklorist Arthur van Gennep’s “Territorial Passage and the Classification of Rites.” Using these theories, I argue that the specific ritual-like structures used by anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests directly shaped the way in which violence gave or deprived participants the status of U.S. citizen.

**Definitions**

I would like to begin by connecting J.Z. Smith’s definition of ritual with René Girard’s concept of “undifferentiation.” As I alluded to earlier, rituals are governed by the desire for an idealized world that cannot ever wholly manifest itself in daily life but that can nonetheless be recalled and aspired to. According to J.Z. Smith, they are “a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.”16 Ritual serves to reconcile an uncontrollable reality with an imagined one by performing the perfected ideal in a controlled environment. Because rituals stem are an extradaily enactment of how things should be, they are often designed to mend a break in the social order in an attempt to restore it. René Girard refers to the fracture in the social structure as “undifferentiation.”17 According

---

17 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 64. Girard never directly states that the loss of difference he discusses in the following quotation is the same as “undifferentiation.” Rather, part way through his
to Girard, “[o]rder, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; the loss of them gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats.” Undifferentiation then, unleashes an unchecked violence and disorder into the community, or what Girard calls “the contagion of violence.” The function of the corresponding ritual is to expel the violence by re-enacting and reaffirming social difference. Most often, this process is inextricably bound to redefining the social position of select ritual participant(s), and restores the social order only by making the position of the participant(s) within that order distinct and stable.

Though both sacrifices and rites of passage address the loss of difference, their relationship to the participants is oppositional. While sacrifices aim to expel the subject of the ritual, rites of passage attempt their incorporation. In order to restore social order, sacrifice conflates the threat to the society with a single body—that of the sacrificial victim—then it eliminates it. Girard describes this process as “a deliberate act of collective substitution . . . [in which] all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within a community . . . are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice.” In other words, before the sacrifice occurs, the victim becomes synonymous with the violent contagion. As a result, by eliminating that victim, ritual sacrifice kills social unrest. Rites of passage, on the other hand, locate the threat in the potential failure to reincorporate the participant, not within her. According to Arthur van Gennep, the goal of a rite of work he begins to use this term to refer to instances in which social distinctions become threatened or dissolve completely.

18 Ibid., 49.
19 Ibid., 30.
20 Ibid., 7, 7, 8.
passage is “to insure a change of condition or a passage from one magico-religious or secular group to another.”

Examples of this include bat mitzvahs, marriage ceremonies, and even funerals. As Girard points out, a change in social category requires losing one social status before being able to acquire the second. Consequently, a rite of passage attempts to check the same threat of undifferentiation as sacrifice does. Girard reminds us that “[t]he slightest tear in the social fabric can spoil the whole garment if not properly attended to.”

To tend to the potential unraveling of the entire social structure, the rite of passage guides the initiate through three sub-rites: “rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation.” The rite of incorporation is key, for it invests the ritual subject with a symbolic meaning that sacrifices do not. For while rites of passage attempt to restore both the structure and the status of the individual in passage, in the logic of the ritual sacrifice the two cannot coexist. As a result, though both sacrifices and rites of passage aim to defend a society from the same threat, the former requires violence while the latter does not.

Both anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests responded to socio-historical moments in which the category of U.S. citizen was in flux. In order to re-establish their social power and status as a U.S. citizen, white lynch mobs and nonviolent protesters constructed ritual-like performances that mapped out very divergent correlations between violence and social difference. In anti-black lynchings the performance of social difference required the enactment of both the black victim’s social status as well as the white mob’s, performing the former as powerless to imbue

---

22 Girard, Violence and the Sacred, 281.
23 Gennep, "Territorial Passage and the Classification of Rites," 530.
the latter with greater social power. Because they had two ritual subjects then—perpetrator and victim—anti-black lynchings borrowed from the structures of both sacrifice and rites of passage. Nonviolent protests, on the other hand, recalled only the structures of rites of passage because they worked specifically to re-establish the black citizens’ status. Consequently, anti-black lynchings enacted a social order in which violence was absolutely necessary, while nonviolent protests performed a social structure that actively erased violence from its processes.

**Lynching: When Difference Requires Violence**

While the origins of American racism remain elusive, the racialized social structure that gave rise to anti-black lynchings has its roots in Reconstruction after the American Civil War. As John Hope Franklin has argued, the federal government offered “no active political support and no federal officials who were willing to enforce the constitutional amendments and laws that protected [blacks].” Consequently, Southern whites were able to rebuild a society that looked very much like the one they had before the war. Franklin points out that the South “bathed itself in glorious memories and retained much that was a part of the past.” Because laws protecting blacks were not enforced, in “communities where the black population was numerically dominant, the machinery to maintain its due subordination was strengthened . . . In every social relationship African Americans were kept at a ‘safe distance.’” Soon after the end of the Civil War, local legislators in the South worked fervently to undo as many of Reconstruction’s reforms as possible.

---

25 Ibid., 213.
26 Ibid., 216, 17.
Despite such institutional efforts however, the reestablishment of the antebellum social structure was not total and never could be. While whites in the South could pass innumerable laws to disempower black citizens—disenfranchising them, barring them from political office, and keeping them in the lowest economic caste—local law could not undo one key result of the constitutional amendments of the Civil War: white people could not legally subject black people to violence, except if one could prove that they were criminal. In the antebellum South, white political power was directly invested in disempowering black citizens. Consequently, when blacks gained legal citizenship and political agency the white citizen’s power to inflict violence on them was taken away. Anti-black lynchings emerged as rites of passage that sought to close the gap between the social status white Southerners desired and the status designated them by the law. While van Gennep looked at rites of passages of individuals from one social status to another, lynchings performed rites of passage to signify a return to the racist power structure of the mythologized antebellum Southern past. In order to justify the illegal execution of a U.S. citizen, white mobs needed to make the black victim appear as a criminal. To direct the focus of the ritual to the victim, anti-black lynchings used sacrificial symbols to mark the victim as a violent contagion and the violence of the mob as necessary to the restoration of the social order. Lynch mobs masked their rite of passage as a sacrifice in order to make the

27 According to the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Taken from Kenneth L. Karst Leanord W. Levy, and Dennis J. Mahoney, ed., Encyclopedia of the American Constitution (New York: Macmillan, 1986). In Charles W. Chestnutt, The Marrow of Tradition, ed. Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002).
victim the focus of the ritual-like performance and obscure their own criminal culpability.28

One of the most important steps in performatively and socially constructing lynchings as a necessary sacrifice was the selection of the victim. In the overwhelming majority of lynching cases in the American South the victim met two criteria: the first was that he was black, and the second was that he was accused of violating some sort of cultural code. Data from numerous sources indicate that the overwhelming majority of lynch victims in the South during the nadir were black—in some states like Mississippi and Georgia the percentage of black victims ranged as high as 88 and 89 percent.29 In the majority of lynchings the victim’s transgression was the murder or rape of a white person.30 As W. Fitzhugh Brundage points out, “the pathology of lynchings was neither random nor entirely irrational. As a rule, lynchings were not spontaneous acts against convenient blacks. Whites almost always believed that mobs punished real transgressions.”31 In keeping with Girard’s crisis of undifferentiation, both raping or murdering a white citizen represented a major breach of a black person’s prescribed social, sexual, and legal behavior. A black person capable of such transgressions thereby posed a threat to the security of the entire

28 Though anti-black lynchings took various forms, for my discussion of ritual and performance I will be focusing on public mass mob lynchings. As W. Fitzhugh Brundage points out, “[n]o single model of lynching can describe adequately the great difference in size, organization, and motivation that distinguished mobs; there were small terrorist mobs intent on intimidating black sharecroppers, and huge mobs seeking vengeance against alleged criminals” (W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 19.) Brundage goes on to name four main types of lynchings: terrorist mobs, private mobs, posses, and mass mobs. In this paper I will be discussing only mass public lynchings, and the meanings generated by them. For more information on the different organizational strategies of lynch mobs, see Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930, 17-48.
30 Ibid., 174.
31 Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930, 49.
white community. It should be noted that because most mobs kidnapped their victim before he ever had a chance to appear in a court of law, the victim’s actual culpability was usually never confirmed and actually irrelevant to their murder. The accusation alone was usually sufficient to create popular belief in a real violent threat that needed to be met immediately with violent punishment.  

After the victim was chosen, the white mob began the lynching with certain actions that served the same function as the first phase of van Gennep’s rite of passage: the separation phase. In his expansion of van Gennep’s tripartite ritual theory, anthropologist Victor Turner asserts that the separation phase “includes symbolic behavior . . . which represents the detachment of the ritual subjects . . . from their previous social statuses.” In most anti-black lynchings, the lynch mobs detached both themselves and the victim from the law by kidnapping the victim from local government’s custody. For the white mob, the disassociation from their social status gave them greater power than they had within the social structure. For the black victim, the loss of legal protection meant a loss of social status and the power of a legal citizen. In the separation phase, the shift in judicial and penal power from the law to the mob made it possible for the white mob to participate in the central action of their transitional phase: violence against the black victim.

In anti-black lynchings, the transitional or liminal phase facilitated a twofold transformation: that of the victim and that of the mob. I will first address the

---

32 This assertion is extrapolated from several readings on lynch mobs processes, particularly in Brundage. For a more extensive discussion of the correlation between the lynch victim’s alleged crime and his execution, see Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*, 49-85.


34 Brundage notes that the overwhelming majority of anti-black lynching victims were taken at the very least from the custody of law officers, and almost half of them were taken from prison. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*, 39.
transformation of the victim. In most anti-black lynchings, the transitional phase consisted of taking the victim to the site of his alleged crime, forcing him to confess—most often by means of torture—and executing him by hanging and or gunfire. 

The performative aspects of the violence employed in torturing and executing the victim were crucial in establishing him as a criminal whose sacrifice was necessary for to protect the mob’s community. In conjunction with choice of place and confession, violence evoked the illusion of the victim’s criminalization and transformed his apparently innocent body into a sacrificial one. The various performative, symbolic, and ritual-like actions used to transform the black victim are well demonstrated in the lynching of Sam Hose in 1899.

Hose was apprehended by a white mob after he had been accused of murdering his white boss and raping his boss’ wife. After Hose confessed to murdering his boss but claimed innocence regarding the man’s wife, the mob tore the clothes from Hose’s body, and wound a chain around his neck attaching him to a large pine tree. They then cut off his ears and his fingers one by one, and Hose “was quickly deprived of other portions of his anatomy.” The mob then proceeded to pour kerosene at the foot of the tree that had been piled with dry wood and bramble, and light Hose on fire. At one point Hose managed to break free of his chains and walk away from the flames, but was quickly pushed back in. After he had died, his body was cut into pieces, including his heart and his liver. The severed body parts and pieces of the incinerated tree and chains were claimed by the crowd as souvenirs. 

By combining the scene of the crime, the victim’s confession, and his extensive physical torture into a single

---

display, the white mob forced Hose to perform criminality. What Girard referred to as “all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within a community” became physically inseparable from Hose’s body, so that his execution was symbolically consistent with a ritual sacrifice.

While the violence of anti-black lynchings transformed the black victim into a violent contagion, it imbued white social status with unchecked political power that was uncharacteristic of white status as stipulated by the law. Turner argues that while “[s]harp symbolic inversion of social attributes may characterize separation . . . blurring and merging of distinctions may characterize liminality.” In anti-black lynchings, violence against the victim obfuscated the dominant conception of white identity and behavior. By engaging in behavior that was normally considered monstrous, uncivilized, and criminal, the mob thrust white social status into a temporary state of liminality. During their violent transitional phase, the white mob could not be considered citizens, criminals, or agents of justice; rather they temporarily occupied a symbolic status situated between all three. As Turner points out, liminality “can generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living . . . which are capable of influencing the behavior of those in mainstream social and political roles . . . in the direction of radical change.”37 The violence of anti-black lynchings proposed such an alternative model for white citizenship, one in which physical power over black bodies was permitted. As Turner’s statement suggests is possible, the kind of violent power that made the white mob’s status temporarily

37 Turner, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play, 33.
liminal during the lynching’s transitional phase later became a normalized attribute of white Southern status in the final phase of incorporation.

After the victim’s death, the coroner’s jury conducted after the lynchings most commonly served as the incorporative phase of the mob’s rite of passage. This procedure secured both the impunity of the white mob and reaffirmed the black victim’s criminal status. According to Turner, the incorporation phase “includes symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subjects to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society.”

Coroner’s juries investigations enacted the symbolic expiation of guilt for any members of the white mob. In the aftermath of anti-black lynchings, the political power of white citizens and the lack of rights of the black community were symbolically performed not by a specific action, but by the absence of one. According to Brundage, “[t]he typical finding of these juries [was] that the victim came to his death at the hands of ‘unknown parties.’ . . . [E]ven when the witnesses mentioned specific names, juries, which in many instances included men who had participated in the lynching, either exonerated the community of all involvement in the lynching or else openly applauded the mob violence.”

Even in their written reports, coroner’s juries always referred to the murderers as citizens, not as criminals. For example, one jury in Early

---

38 According to Black’s Law Dictionary, a coroner’s jury is “a jury summoned by a coroner to investigate the cause of death” (“Jury,” in Black’s Law Dictionary, ed. Bryan A. Garner (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 2004), 873.) According to West’s Encyclopedia of American Law, coroners hold inquests “to gather evidence that may be used by the police in their exploration of a violent or suspicious death and the subsequent prosecution of a person if death ensued from a criminal act. An inquest is not a trial but rather a criminal proceeding of a preliminary, investigatory nature. It is not a criminal prosecution but may result in the discovery of facts justifying one” (“Coroner,” in West’s Encyclopedia of American Law, ed. Jeffrey Lehman and Shirelle Phelphs (Farmington Hills: The Gale Group, Inc., 2004), 3:209.)
40 Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930, 44.
County Georgia concluded in 1884 that lynch victim Aaron Coachman had been killed by “citizens of Early County, who rose in mass and indignation.” Another jury in Clay County, Georgia ruled that victim “Dan Buck having confessed the crime of an attempt to rape a respectable white girl . . . the citizens rose up en masse and killed him.”\textsuperscript{41} Not infrequently, the media and the community further supported the legal validation of the mob’s actions through the exaggeration of the victim’s criminal reputation. For example, after Sam Hose’s murder, “[p]reviously unexplained murders, rapes, and thefts from all corners of the state began to be identified as the work of Hose, and his inconspicuous life as a farmhand was recast as a life of brutal crimes and wandering.”\textsuperscript{42} Such outbreaks of violence demonstrate that the dominant social and legal structures accepted and even encouraged the lynch mob’s alternative models of white behavior. Covertly supported by the legal system, the right to commit violence against black bodies that had been enacted in the liminal phase of the lynchings became a normalized if not expected attribute of white Southern identity.

The ritual-like enactments of black and white identity that were generated by anti-black lynchings had three broader effects on Southern society: 1) they contributed to and sustained the myth of whites peoples’ inherent virtue; 2) they helped construct and maintain the myth of inherent black criminality; 3) they equated violence against black bodies with the restoration of order so that it became an intrinsically justified

\textsuperscript{41} Early County News (Blakely), Aug 7, 1884; Atlanta Constitution, July 1, 1891 in Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930, 44.
\textsuperscript{42} Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930, 83.
and righteous act. Like J.Z. Smith’s ritual, anti-black lynchings ritualized a racial hierarchy that was “recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.”

Few primary sources better demonstrate the tremendous influence of anti-black lynchings over dominant narratives of white virtue and black criminality than the writings of Ray Stannard Baker. In an attempt to understand the cause of anti-black lynchings, Baker traveled to Statesboro, Georgia in 1905 shortly after two black men had been burned alive. After staying in the town a short time, Baker was astonished to discern that Statesboro was according to him, “a healthy, temperate, progressive, American town—a country city, self-respecting, ambitious, with a good future before it—the splendid future of the New South.” Baker determined that the cause of the lynchings lay not in any tendency towards violence or discord within the white community, but in what he called “the floating negro”:

[O]ne of the first things to impress a visitor in the South is the fact that there are two very distinct kinds of negroes. The first of these is the self-respecting, resident negro. On the other hand, one finds everywhere large numbers of the so-called ‘worthless negroes,’ who float from town to town, doing rough work, having no permanent place of abode, not known to the white population generally…I found that this floating, worthless negro caused most of the trouble. He prowls the roads by day and night; he steals; he makes it unsafe for women to travel alone.

In his study, Baker applies his experience in one town to the entirety of Southern society. Most importantly, he ends his discussion with the following statement: “I do not know where in this country to-day there can be found a healthier or more patriotic growth of the civic consciousness than in the more progressive cities of the South.”

---

43 Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," 480.
45 Ibid., 185, 86.
46 Ibid., 186.
Baker study valorized white Southern culture by reinforcing the myth of the “floating negro.”

Baker’s testimony shows that even though whites enacted violence against blacks so frequently and publicly, anti-black lynchings inverted the perception of this dynamic: they transformed violent Southern whites into peaceful and innocent, and black victims of a terrorist regime into violent criminals. Very regularly this fierce belief in black criminality led to anti-black violence outside the structure of a lynching. Brundage remarks that very often “[a] lynching could become the pretext for a reign of terror. In the aftermath of the lynching of two blacks for the rape of a white girl in Forsyth County, Georgia, white tenant farmers used violence and intimidation to drive virtually every black from both Forsyth and Dawson counties.”47 Indeed, unprovoked violence against blacks became a normalized aspect of Southern life. As one civil rights protester explained, “[whites] could kill you in the street and no one was doing anything.”48 Another black Savannah resident explained “[b]rutality is an everyday thing and when it happens it is usually so tragic that one cannot help but remember. If a Negro isn’t killed, his head is beaten so that he might just as well be dead.”49 When activists and ordinary citizens contested anti-black violence during the nadir, the response of the surrounding white community was very often a violent one.50 Anti-black lynchings positioned anti-black violence in general

50 One of the better known examples of a violent response to challenging lynching and its ideological premises is the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 began in response to the publications of Alexander Manly, the black editor of Wilmington, North Carolina’s *Daily Record*. In it, Manly refuted the claims of famous white supremacist Rebecca Latimer Felton who felt that lynchings were necessary “to
within a matrix of socially and legally acceptable responses to any number of disputes or conflicts.

Anti-black lynchings co-constructed and bolstered a profound social, cultural, and physical schism between whites and blacks in the South now known as Jim Crow segregation. W.E.B. Du Bois remarked in his *The Souls of Black Folk* that “[i]n the most cultured sections and cities of the South the Negroes are a segregated servile caste, with restricted rights and privileges. Before the courts, both in law and custom, they stand on a different and peculiar basis. And the result of all this is lawlessness and crime.” Jim Crow segregation had a pronouncedly repressive effect on black behavior in the public sphere, for the threat of violence for even small infractions was so prevalent. In 1955, 14 year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped and lynched for whistling at a white female clerk at a local grocery store in Money, MS. During his funeral, his mother insisted on leaving his casket open both for friends and family as well as the press. Images and reports of his murder made national headlines for weeks as the trial of his murderers concluded in a speedy acquittal.

Till’s murder marked a turning point in the role of anti-black violence in the American social structure. Rather than being perceived as a criminal, Till became a martyr of black freedom struggles, and was in fact restored in the public eye to a state of innocence. The response to Till’s murder made public two aspects of Southern

---

protect woman’s dearest possession from drunken, raving human beasts” (Rebecca Latimer Felton, "Letter to the *Atlanta Constitution*," in *The Marrow of Tradition*, ed. Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 411.) Manly wrote that “our experience among poor white people in the country teaches us that women of that race are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men than are the white men with colored women” (Alexander Manly, "Editorial," in *The Marrow of Tradition*, ed. Nancy Bentley and Susan Gunning (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 407.) This claim was so inflammatory that the white community of Wilmington organized to violently overthrow an upcoming local election by use of force. Several local blacks were killed, and Manly’s office was razed to the ground.

society in 1955: First, the ritualized violent methods of social control that arose out of Reconstruction were still considered acceptable and effective almost one hundred years later. Black bodies were still inherently criminal, and the virtue of white society was as a result indubitable and in need of protection. As such, physical violence against blacks was a justifiable way of protecting the power of white southerners, as demonstrated by the acquittal of Till’s murderers in spite of that national attention garnered by the press. Secondly, the response to Till’s murder as well as recent black activism indicated that the racist ideologies and social structures upheld by anti-black lynchings could nonetheless be destabilized. More importantly, they were about to face a massive disruption.

**Nonviolent Protests: Leopards in the Temple**

On the eve of the Civil Rights Movement, the cultural climate of the Southern United States was strikingly similar to that of Reconstruction. As Thomas E. Watson noted in his essay “The Negro Question, “the end of the [Civil War] brought changed relations and changed feelings. Heated antagonisms produced mutual distrust and dislike—ready, at any accident of unusual provocation on either side, to break out into passionate and bloody conflict.” Though Watson was describing the aftermath of Emancipation, his words accurately describe the South’s situation in the early 1950s. In both periods, significant legislative reform had given rise to political, social, and economic agitation surrounding the issue of black rights. Between 1954 and 1957, the federal government set three new legal precedents for United States racial relations: Brown v. Board ruled against segregation in public schools in 1954, the

---

federal district court ruled segregated buses in Alabama were unconstitutional in 1956, and the first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction was passed in 1957. It was also during those same years that Emmett Till, Willie Edwards Jr., John Earl Reese, Lamar Smith, and Rev. George Lee were all murdered for either aiding in black freedom activism or for minor social transgressions. To recall Girard’s theoretical frame, the nation’s racial distinctions faced a crisis of undifferentiation and, as in the case of anti-black lynchings, U.S. citizens responded by creating illegal rites of passage to establish a new social order. The main difference was that this time, the perpetration of violence was not a component of the ritualized new social script.

Primarily because nonviolent protests often arose as a response to the unequal segregation of public spaces, the separation phase of nonviolent protests was much more deliberately a public performance than the ritual-like enactments of anti-black lynchings. Almost every nonviolent protest began when the protesters entered a public space from which they were prohibited, be it a cafeteria, a bus station, or a public street. As Turner notes, the symbolic actions of the separation phase serve to invert the participants’ social status and very often accompany a physical change in location: “The passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in time and space, a geographical movement from one place to another.” Specifically it is the function of the “first phase of separation [to] clearly demarcate[s] sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time.” In the march from Selma to Montgomery, protesters poured out onto U.S. Highway 80 and blocked the highway from use by cars. During the Freedom Rides of 1960, a racially

---

54 Ibid., 24.
mixed group of protesters took seats that were reserved for whites only. In the Greensboro sit-ins described at the beginning of this chapter, the four college students sat down at a lunch counter reserved for whites, thereby violating southern society’s black behavioral code. The nonviolent protesters’ occupation of spaces previously denied them announced that such segregated public space as it was ordinarily configured in a segregated society was about to be unsettled. Moreover, their occupation of a white-controlled space inverted their normative social status by physically placing black citizens in a white citizen’s position of power.

Like the anti-black lynch mob, the nonviolent protesters’ actions during the transitional phase of their rite of passage sought to blur distinctions between the illegal and the just. The protesters attempted to confuse and contest their symbolic association with violent aggression by embodying opposing qualities: they positioned themselves as peaceful, respectable, Christian citizens. In his book *Stride Towards Freedom*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked that his fellow activists “protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love . . . and you will inject new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.”55 It is noteworthy that many protests made extensive use of performative elements such as song, prayer, clapping, and chanting to grab public attention, while others achieved the same goal by employing sheer silence and passivity.

The protesters’ performance contrasted markedly with the way they were treated by both law enforcement and citizens. In response to the demonstrations, white onlookers antagonized the protesters in various ways: protesters were beaten, ignored,

---

verbally accosted, hosed down, spit on, arrested, and imprisoned by white citizens and law enforcement alike. The contrast between the protesters’ performance of citizen’s rights and the way in which whites abused their bodies placed them in between two oppositional social statuses: criminals and citizens. More importantly, the fierce reaction of white onlookers illustrates white Southerners’ resistance to letting go of their power and how it directly depended on the reaffirmation of black powerlessness. Thus when black protesters publicly performed equal political power, they destabilized white supremacy and placed the social status of white racists in a liminal state as well.

The use of song in nonviolent protests is one of the clearest demonstrations of the blurring of the protesters’ social status. In many ways, the singing in nonviolent protests served the same role mob violence occupied in anti-black lynchings. In anti-black lynchings, mob violence imbued the white mob with a sense of agency that transcended legal restrictions. In nonviolent protests, singing as a community very often served to strengthen the protesters’ sense of collective purpose when whites’ assertion of power was at its height. According to protester Bruce Hartford, “through the singing and the sense of solidarity we made a kind of psychological barrier between us and the mob. Somehow we made such a wall of strength that they couldn’t physically push through it to hit us with their sticks. It wasn’t visual, but you could almost see our singing and our unity pushing them back.”  

In effect, singing gave the protesters a unified political body, granting them a collective agency that protected them from any outside attempts by either the law or white citizens to

---

compromise their performance. As Cordell Reagon remembers, “‘You know you are . . . going to get . . . beaten, you know you might even get killed, but the sound, the power of the community, was watching over you and keeping you safe.’”

Though both served to bolster each group with a sense of collective agency, anti-black violence relied on taking power away from another person while the singing of the nonviolent protests did not.

I now want to look more closely at the absence and presence of violence in the transitional phase of nonviolent protests. By their very design, nonviolent protests demanded that the participants ostensibly exclude violent aggression from their ritual-like performances of black citizenship. As the first modern Civil Rights organization to rely on nonviolent direct action, the Congress for Racial Equality was one of the first to outline nonviolent strategies. They divided the power of the nonviolent protest into three components: “(1) the power of active goodwill and non-retaliation; (2) the power of public opinion against injustice; (3) the power of refusing to be a party to injustice, as illustrated by the boycott or strike.”

However, the absence of violence in the protesters behavior soon became most conspicuous when they were attacked by white onlookers. In such instances, white violence against deliberately nonviolent blacks effectively reversed the symbols of the anti-black lynchings by disassociating violence from black bodies and locating it instead within white bodies. But though violence during nonviolent protests proved very powerful in inciting social and legislative changes, many protesters expressed anxieties over how it compromised their performance of agency. As Franz Kafka implies in his parable

57 Ibid.
“Leopards in the Temple,” spontaneous deviations from the ritual structure have the potential to become a normalized part of it: “Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally, it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes a part of the ceremony.”\textsuperscript{59} In much the same way, white violence became an expected part of the transitional phase in the nonviolent protests.

Nonviolent protests' increased reliance of nonviolent protests on white violence is articulated prominently in the strategies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In her essay “The Provocation of Violence: A Civil Rights Tactic?” Jan Howard argues that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. implies the provocation of violence as a goal in his statement regarding the marches in Selma, AL in 1965. He states that:

The goal of the demonstrations in Selma, as elsewhere, is to dramatize the existence of injustice and to bring about the presence of justice . . . Long years of experience indicate to us that Negroes can achieve this goal when four things occur:

1. Nonviolent demonstrators go into the streets to exercise their constitutional rights.
2. Racists resist by unleashing violence against them.
3. Americans of conscience in the name of decency demand federal intervention and legislation
4. The Administration, under mass pressure, initiates measures of immediate intervention and remedial legislation.\textsuperscript{60}

Unlike CORE, King explicitly links the demonstration of injustice to the enactment of violence. In many ways, his four events parallel the structure of the rite of passage,

with the racist violence occupying the transitional phase: first, the protests enter a prohibited public sphere while performing their equal citizenship; then, they are beaten publicly by white aggressors; finally, in both the third and fourth phase, the American legal process takes the necessary steps towards officiating their status as equal citizens. The SCLC echoed this sentiment in their actions as well as in their prose. When the response to nonviolent protests in Albany was not met with much public aggression, King moved his team to Birmingham in order to provoke the infamously brutal police chief Bull Connor to violence. Violence had become such an integral part of nonviolent protests that when it did not happen the protesters often felt ineffective. Howard describes the second attempt to march in Selma as failure: “When you turn the other cheek and nobody bothers to slap it, it’s hard to believe you are a threat to anyone . . . I am suggesting we are consciously and unconsciously drawn towards violence because violence pays dividends for the movement.” As Howard indicates, protesters and activists often perceived the presence of white violence in the transitional phase of the nonviolent protests to be necessary to their effective ascension into full U.S. citizenship.

The presence of white violence in the protests played a significant role in the black community's reincorporation into American society as equal citizens. The

---

63 Discussing the impact of the nonviolent protests is also complicated by the fact that they were part of a larger matrix of tactics aimed at changing the definition of U.S. citizenship. Voter registration drives, boycotts, coalition-building, civil and criminal law cases, were all integral parts of the movement’s efforts. By limiting my discussion only to the protests I do not in any way mean to minimize the impact of these other efforts. I am studying only how the meanings generated in these ritual-like performances were reflected in shifts in the larger U.S. social structure, not identifying them as the sole cause for those shifts.
kind of “symbolic phenomena and actions which represent the return of the subjects to their new, relatively stable, well-defined position in the total society” described by Turner came for the nonviolent protesters through legislative reform. Usually this legislative initiative took place only after an outburst of anti-black violence and rarely after a protest that met with more a peaceful white response. The summer after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public bus terminals, an interracial group of protesters from the activist group CORE met with firebombs, clubs, and police beatings when they attempted to sit in previously segregated buses. When the Justice Department first intervened, their efforts were minimal. Instead of ensuring enforcement of desegregationist laws, Attorney General Robert Kennedy merely called the local authorities in Jackson, MS—the Freedom Rides’ next stop—to request that the protesters be arrested without excessive force. It was only after the violence continued and increased that the Attorney General sought funding from the ICC to support consistent and long-term enforcement of desegregation in the South.64

In Birmingham, AL, just one month after local police and firemen attacked student protesters with hoses, clubs, and dogs, President Kennedy gave a national address in which he asked “the Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments.”65 The proposed bill, later known as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed just over a year after Kennedy’s address. On March 7 of 1965—or what is now called "Bloody Sunday”—a group of protesters in Selma, AL

64 Lawson, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Nation," 22.
attempted to march down U.S. Highway 180 to Montgomery in order to demand protest the violent enforcement of black disenfranchisement. After state and local police beat them back into the town of Selma, President Johnson sent federal troops to protect the marchers; he also catalyzed the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which occurred just five short months after the marcher’s violent encounter with the police force.66 Like Kafka’s leopards and the ceremony they invaded and transformed, both the protesters’ attackers and the federal government made violence a necessary part of the black community’s rite of passage to equal citizenship. The federal government’s action seemed to imply that if black protesters wanted the full rights of citizenship, they would have to suffer for them.

While some protesters accepted violence as a condition for their rite of passage, many also rejected it. Those who sought other methods of protest and activism felt that the though the provocation of violence resulted in significant legislative changes, it also had major detrimental effects on the Movement’s long term goals. As Jan Howard asserts,

I am not suggesting that the nonviolence of white segregationists always pays dividends for the movement . . . The brutalizing of whites arouses much more attention and anger than the brutalizing of Negroes. Violence which rallies national sentiment behind the movement can tear a local community apart and freeze positions, so that it becomes even more difficult to win localized demands. Even on a national level, a given type of violence seems to pay diminishing returns. Tear gas in Selma outraged the nation, but only three weeks later smoke bombs in Camden went practically unnoticed.67

Because they found nonviolence ineffective, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee began to tend away from nonviolent demonstrations as an activism tactic. Emily Stoper notes that “[a]s time passed, the law officers and other white citizens of

66 See Lawson, “Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Nation,” 31-3.
the Southern states realized this and they stopped cooperating. They learned to beat up civil rights workers only indoors and while no one was looking. This made it much more difficult for SNCC to use persecution as a unifying, community-building force.”  

As a result of evolving responses to nonviolent direct action, SNCC “stopped sponsoring regular workshops on nonviolent philosophy and techniques” in 1961.  

The shift in SNCC’s tactics indicates that while nonviolent protests succeeded in changing the legal status of the black citizen, participants in the movement had to pursue additional methods of activism and community organizing in order to make their reincorporation into the U.S. social structure as equal citizens more complete.

In both nonviolent protests and anti-black lynchings, violence had a very tangible, immediate effect on the official policies of the U.S. government. As a ritualized action, violence gives a definitive illusion of complete transformation through the irreversible and physical destruction of a human body. Conversely, nonviolent actions in ritual give no such consistent and concrete demonstration of their own efficacy—except when juxtaposed with violence. In this chapter, I have touched on some examples of how this divergence in the reception between violence and nonviolence corresponds to the more performative actions in both events in question: the protesters’ performance of dignity and peacefulness, the white mob’s enactment of power through violence, and song as a ritual action that performs a certain collective agency. In each of these instances, the performative elements used to present violence or nonviolence had very specific effects on the relationship between

68 Emily Stoper, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1989), 28.
69 Ibid.
the observer and the observed. In my next chapter I turn to the methodologies of performance studies in order to better understand how these performative elements functioned within the ritual-like structures of both the anti-black lynchings and the nonviolent protests.
CHAPTER TWO: EMBODYING POWER WITH AND WITHOUT VIOLENCE

In the previous chapter, I looked at anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests as ritualized processes in order to explain how the explicit presence or absence of violence can transform the socio-political status of those who suffer, inflict, and witness it. In addition to their ritual-like structures, both the aforementioned events used select performative elements to frame violence and shape its impact on their participants. In this chapter I interrogate how the performative elements of anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests changed the modes of presence of the “performers”—the black victim and the nonviolent protesters—and the modes of perception of the spectators—the white mob and the protests’ onlookers.

To analyze the performative qualities of violence and nonviolence, I will draw on the works of four theorists. Though their disciplines differ, each attempts to address how performance, violence, or a combination of the two can alter the perceptions of their witnesses. Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* outline the political relationships between violence and power. Though both focus primarily on the context of torture, their descriptions of pain as a particular political tool is applicable to anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests. I have complemented their discussions of the politics of pain with two works that focus on the intersections between politics and performance: Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance* and Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked: the politics of performance*. Both Phelan and Fischer-Lichte look at performance as a dynamic negotiation of power between the spectator and the performer that compliments
Foucault and Scarry's discussion of power and pain. The work of these four theorists ground my elaboration of how the presence or absence of violence affects the distribution of political power between the observer and the observed in both anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests. In both ritual-like performances, violence and the absence of it radically transferred power by making the black body suddenly conspicuous. In anti-black lynchings, violence transferred political power to the white mob by calling attention to the victim as a body only, while nonviolent protests used the absence of violence to call attention to their embodied performance of their own subjective agency.

**Definitions**

I will begin my discussion of violence's performative attributes by establishing a basic theoretical framework for analyzing performances. Specifically, I will propose a vocabulary for discussing the performer's modes of presence and the spectators' modes of perception. My analysis of the performer's modes of presence is based on Fischer-Lichte's dualistic description of the human body: “[h]umans have bodies, which they manipulate and instrumentalize just like any other object. At the same time, they are their bodies, they are body-subjects.”  

Fischer-Lichte describes these two modes of presence as semiotic and phenomenal, respectively. In the theater, different performative strategies have arisen to navigate the performer-body’s tension between the two simultaneous modes of presence. The processes the performer uses to navigate that tension is what I will refer to from now on as modes of embodiment. In the history of Western theatre, modes of embodiment have generally privileged

---

70 Ibid., 76.
one of two modes of theatrical presence over the other. Beginning in the eighteenth
century, the goal of the Western actor was to embody his character, or to “create the
certitude of an unreal character [by] mak[ing] himself unreal, reconfiguring the reality
of his body as an analogue and thus opening the possibility for the fictional character
to emerge.”\textsuperscript{71} In other words, embodying a fictional identity emphasized the
performing-body’s ability to signify another entity over the actor’s ability to act for
and as himself. The better the actor’s semiotic presence eclipsed his phenomenal
presence, the more effective the embodiment.

Conversely, Fischer-Lichte contends that in the 1960s artistic movements began to
explore the inseparability of the performer’s modes of presence. Because previous
theatrical movements had placed such attention on the actor’s semiotic presence, this
new exploration primarily dealt with the ways in which artists could call attention to
the actor’s phenomenal presence, or the actor’s “bodily being-in-the-world.”\textsuperscript{72} Unlike
the first kind of embodiment, in which actors place their body at the service of the
role and mask their phenomenal body behind a semiotic system, in this second kind
of embodiment “the two-world [body/mind] theory as the basis of the old
embodiment concept becomes obsolete. The actor no longer lends his body to an
exclusively mental process but makes the mind appear through the body, thus
granting the body agency.”\textsuperscript{73} In all of Fischer-Lichte’s examples, calling attention to
the actor’s phenomenal body does not eliminate an awareness of their semiotic body,
but rather causes a shift in the spectator towards perceiving both at once by

\textsuperscript{71} W. Iser, ”Akte Des Fingierens Oder Was Ist Das Fiktive Im Fiktionalen Text?,” in Funktionen Des
Fiktiven, ed. D. Heinrich and W. Iser (Munich: Fink, 1983), 145. in Fischer-Lichte, The
Transformative Power of Performance, 79.
\textsuperscript{72} Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power of Performance, 82.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 82.
perceiving the performer as an “embodied mind.”\textsuperscript{74} In the “embodied mind” scenario, the actor’s mind is what the body does: mind and body are one and the same. While I find Fischer-Lichte’s terminology useful, I would like to propose a slightly different term for the purposes of this paper. Specifically, I want to reconfigure the term so that it connotes the actor’s power over her body. The conflation of the performer’s phenomenal and semiotic body marks the union of the actor’s actions with her own subjectivity. Rather than the performer's body serving the expression of someone else's script, it instead enacts her individual will. I refer to this phenomenon as embodied agency, and the person experiencing it as an embodied subject.\textsuperscript{75}

When the performer appears onstage as an embodied subject, it has a profound effect on the perceptions of the spectators. Just as the performer simultaneously has two modes of presence, the spectators have two corresponding modes of perception: the presentational and the representational. In the same way that the performer-body’s presence always contains qualities of the phenomenal and semiotic, Fischer-Lichte points out that the perceptual modes of “presence” and “representation” are also inseparable:

In aesthetic theories, ‘presence’ and ‘representation’ were long considered oppositional concepts, wherein presence was equated with immediacy and seen as the experience of opulence and completeness, as authenticity. Representation, in turn, belonged to the grand narratives, exerting an authoritative controlling mechanism . . . [However,] such an absolute opposition between ‘presence’ and ‘representation is not sustainable. Both presence and the dramatic character are brought forth through specific

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 83
\textsuperscript{75} It is important to note here that while people behave as embodied subjects most of the time in everyday life, we do not usually perceive them as such. Rather we typically perceive them as either semiotically present or phenomenally present. The emergence of embodied agency in performance then, is when this becomes especially apparent. As Fischer-Lichte says, in performance “[t]he commonplace appears transfigured and becomes conspicuous.” Fischer-Lichte, \textit{The Transformative Power of Performance}, 166.
processes of embodiment. Each character is bound to the specific corporeality of the actor who engenders it.

In the theater, spectators that read the performance for its narrative and meaning rely on the representational mode of perception. Audiences that watch the performance more as a series of actual events (as is often the case in circuses for example) instead use a presentational mode of perception. These modes of perception correspond to the performer's modes of presence such that the representation-oriented spectator reads the performer-body as semiotic, while the presence-oriented spectator perceives the performer-body as phenomenal. Consequently, when the performer appears as an embodied subject and her two modes of presence are inseparable, the spectator experiences a “perceptual multistability” in which he “shifts between the [perceptual] orders of presence and representation.” The spectator is forced to see the performer neither as merely a material body nor as a series of signs, but a person whose semiotic and phenomenal body work as one to serve the enactment and expression of her will.

The moments when performances blur the perceptual binaries of the spectators parallel moments in ritual when social distinctions become liminal. Just as rites of passage and sacrifices temporarily destabilize the social status of the initiates, certain kinds of performance destabilize the processes by which spectators perceive and interpret the performer's body. Similar to its role in certain ritual structures, violence has a very particular effect on the victim's modes of presence, and consequently has a tremendous impact on the ways in which its witnesses perceive the victim's body. In my analysis of violence's effect on the presence and perceptions of the aggressors, witnesses and victims, I will look at three performative attributes of anti-black

76 Ibid.
lynnings and nonviolent protests: the participants' strategies of embodiment, the relationship between the observer and the observed, and the ensuing reconfiguration of the relationship between the black body and the meaning attributed to it.

**Strategies of Embodiment**

As Fischer-Lichte points out, in the same performance the actor’s body can “function as the object, subject, material, and source of symbolic construction, as well as the product of cultural inscriptions.” However, the human body does not fall into these functions arbitrarily or randomly; instead the various roles the body takes on are usually consciously constructed and (in)scripted. As I will demonstrate, the violence exhibited in anti-black lynchings inscribed on the victim’s body an utter lack of agency, thereby generating the illusion of absolute white power. Nonviolent protests were pivotal in overturning the worldview performed by anti-black violence because they used equally powerful performative strategies of embodiment to make the protesters’ political and personal agency conspicuous.

In theater studies, processes of embodiment are most commonly discussed as ways to address the distance between the actor and her character. As was mentioned earlier, performances typically navigate this distance by emphasizing either the actor's phenomenal or semiotic modes of presence. In the 1960s avant-garde movement that Fischer-Lichte discusses, theatre artists sought to investigate strategies for calling the spectators’ attention to the actor's phenomenal presence so as to induce perceptual multistability. Fischer-Lichte identifies the four most prominent strategies for emphasizing the phenomenal body as follows (though for my discussion of anti-black

---

lynchings and nonviolent protests, I will look only at the latter three): “first, reversing the relationship between the performer and their role; second, emphasizing and exhibiting the individual performer-body; third, highlighting the performer-body’s fragility, vulnerability, and shortcomings; and fourth, cross-casting.” Though these strategies as Fischer-Lichte discusses them were used by the performer to change their mode of presence, in public acts of violence these strategies are used by the aggressor to change the modes of presence of the victim. In the specific case of anti-black lynchings, the white mob both exhibited the victim's body and highlighted its vulnerability in order to force him to embody white supremacist ideologies.

As Elaine Scarry points out, pain cannot be shared or exteriorized through language because “unlike any other state of consciousness . . . [it] has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language.” If a person's semiotic presence is delineated by their ability to “manipulate and instrumentalize [one's body] just like any other object,” pain negates the semiotic presence of the person experiencing it by robbing him of the ability to use his body as an instrument of his own expression. By losing the capacity for self-articulation, the person in pain is unable to make their subjective agency manifest: “as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and subject.” A person in pain is unable to do anything else than simply be a body in pain, and is as a result reduced to sheer phenomenal presence. The difference

---

78 Ibid.
80 Fischer-Lichte, The Transformative Power of Performance, 76.
between pain and violence, then, is that while pain on its own is not of or for anything, violence is the production of the victim's pain for the aggressor. Rather than embodying his own will, the victim of public violence is forced to embody meaning that is generated by another.

The victim’s loss of control over his semiotic presence has a direct effect on the political power of the witnesses, perpetrators, and victims. In the aforementioned lynchings as well as in other historical cases, causing pain in another in the public eye directly translates to political power. As Foucault points out, public execution “is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular.” 82 The political body—of a prince, a government, or any other regime—“seizes upon the body of the condemned man and displays it marked, beaten, broken . . . to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign.” 83 As Scarry indicates, the greater the disparity between the performative qualities of the victim and those of the executioner or mob, the more visible the impression of political power will be. In contrast to the intense phenomenal presence of the victim’s pain, “the torturer ‘has’ nothing: he has only an absence, the absence of pain . . . Across this set of inversions pain becomes power . . . : the larger the prisoner’s pain (the smaller the prisoner’s world and therefore, by comparison) the larger the torturer’s world.” 84 Scarry’s schema of world and pain corresponds directly to the dynamics of embodiment described by Fischer-Lichte: the greater the pain of the victim the more

---

83 Ibid., 49.
84 Ibid., 37.
he presents a pure phenomenal presence without any semiotic presence—a body devoid of subjective agency. The more the victim appears as a powerless body, the greater the sovereign power’s ability to inscribe meaning on him.

In anti-black lynchings, the white mob employed violence to disembody agency from the black victim’s body. They accomplished this both by causing the victim extensive amounts of pain and mutilating and disfiguring the body after death. When Jesse Washington was lynched in what is now known as the “Waco Horror,” the mob began to attack him as they marched him to their final destination, “tearing the clothes from his body, stabbing him with knives, and battering him with bricks, clubs, and shovels.”\textsuperscript{85} Though these acts alone could have killed Washington, the mob continued to inflict violence on their semiconscious victim—pain, not death, was their objective. The mob then placed Washington upon a pile of dry wood and covered in coal oil. Subsequently, they wrapped a chain around his neck, threw it over a tree branch, and pulled him into the air. After his death, members of the mob cut off his fingers, ears, and toes. Following such horrific acts of mutilation and dismemberment, a crowd of an estimated 10,000 eagerly looked on as the mob lit the pile of wood beneath Washington’s body.\textsuperscript{86} According to one source, “[p]eople pressed forward, each eager to be the first to light the fire . . . such a demonstration as of people gone mad was never heard before.”\textsuperscript{87} Another black lynching victim in Kansas at the turn of the century was “struck . . . with fists, hammers and blunt weapons,” after which the mob engaged in “the saturating of his body with kerosene

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.: 527.
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Waco Times-Herald}, (May 15, 1916). (quotations);
oil and the burning of his person at the stake.” In both these examples, the mob transformed the victim from a human being to sheer flesh through the display of pain and physical destruction. The disassociation between the victim’s subjectivity and his body was only augmented after death, as mobs very often would hang a sign on the body of the victim. One sign read “Please Do Not Wake Him”; another advertised a tobacco merchant’s wares. The inscription of words on victim’s body only further demonstrated the power of the white mob to attribute whatever meaning they desired to the victim’s body. By highlighting the victim’s phenomenal presence and expropriating his semiotic presence through physical violence, the anti-black lynch mob reduced the victim’s body to a material object of their own manipulation and possession.

While anti-black lynchings employed only strategies of exhibiting and highlighting the victim’s body’s vulnerability, in nonviolent protests embodied agency was combined with cross-racial casting to make the protesters’ subjectivity more conspicuous than their physical degradation. Though widely divergent in intent and form from its uses in theater, the protesters’ use of cross-casting proved so effective for altering the onlookers' perceptions because it called attention to the undeniable disparity between the black citizen and her social role. In her description of cross-casting Fischer-Lichte describes part of a performance in which a woman cast as a male character appeared in a “netted leotard that highlighted her unmistakably feminine body” while still displaying traditionally masculine

behavior.\textsuperscript{89} Fischer-Lichte remarks that the contrast between the actor's physical appearance and performative traits created “an irrevocable divergence between the undeniably female body and the unmistakably male behavior that marked the fictional character [the actor was portraying].”\textsuperscript{90} In this theatrical example, cross-casting called attention to the disparity between the character the actor represented with her semiotic body and her biological phenotype. In nonviolent protests, these strategies were used to a slightly more specific effect: whereas the performance described above attempted to show the gap between the woman’s male behavior and her essentialized female body as absolute, nonviolent protests attempted to change the social script by publicly showing the disparity between the protesters’ embodied agency and the subordinate social role white supremacy forced them to occupy in American society.

The undeniable effects of embodied agency and socio-political cross-casting in the protests are well-represented in the testimonies of Civil Rights Activists. In an interview with Charles Payne, Bob Moses describes a phenomenon of “emergence” in the movement that very closely resembles the embodiment process of actor/role reversal. Moses finds that involvement in the Movement demonstrated to its workers that they could be a different kind of person and occupy a social status that differed from the one to which they were accustomed. They prepared themselves for that new social status, or what Moses specifically calls a “role,” by participating in the movement. According to Moses, these roles were different from those ordinarily recognized, or “credentialized” by society: “Someone who comes out of either a major educational institution or certain kind of church institutions gets credentialized

\textsuperscript{89} Fischer-Lichte, \textit{The Transformative Power of Performance}, 87.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 88.
and part of what the institution does is make them feel like they have the ability and
the right and the know-how to play certain roles.” 91 Moses found that the Movement
provided an alternative and fertile environment for rehearsing such social
transformations. During his time in Mississippi, Moses saw “people begin to emerge,
to feel power and act in power and to actually play a very different role than they
have been playing…they haven’t been otherwise credentialized, going off to school,
going off to some other institution to do this stuff. It’s the force of the Movement.” 92
Oftentimes, a protester's emergence as an embodied subject occurred during the
nonviolent protests themselves. Bernice Reagon describes when she was asked to
sing during a meeting. She explains: “The voice I have now I got the first time I sang
in a movement meeting, after I got out of jail. I did the song, ‘Over My Head I See
Freedom in the Air,’ but I had never heard that voice before. I had never been that me
before. And once I became that me, I have never let that me go.” 93 Through singing,
Reagon took control over her own self-expression and more wholly embodied her
own agency. By performing with embodied agency, the protesters’ enactment of their
citizenship made it incontestably present and real to onlookers.

In truth, the phenomenon Moses and Reagon noticed was not simply one in which
social roles changed, but one in which blacks’ embodiment of agency moved to the
public sphere. Before the Civil Rights Movement, many blacks articulated feelings
compelled to behave a certain way in front of whites for fear of violent retaliation.

91 Bob and Charles Payne Moses, “‘This Transformation of People’: An Interview with Bob Moses,” in
Debating the Civil Rights Movement: 1945-1968, ed. James T. Patterson Charles M. Payne Steven F.
92 Ibid.
93 Reed, The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of
Seattle, 33.
White supremacist society demanded and expected black southerners to embody a kind of *dramatis personae* and employ their semiotic presence for the sole purpose of representing this subaltern “character” for the white gaze. As Fischer-Lichte says, this kind of relationship between role and actor “transform[s] their bodies into a ‘text’ consisting of signs for the emotions and mental states that build a character.”

Similar to the divide between the dramatic character the actor represents in the theater and her daily life offstage, the lives of black people in the South before the Civil Rights Movement was fractured between the person they represented to whites in the public sphere and the person they presented in their daily private lives. As Du Bois remarked in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “it makes little difference . . . to the South, what the Negro thinks or dreams or wills . . . when he does come to think and will and do for himself . . . then the part he plays will . . . be . . . words and thoughts he has been taught to lisp in his race-childhood.”

Du Bois’ “learned lisp” refers to the performance of certain roles whites had violently forced blacks to enact for centuries. The efficacy of the performance of a white-conceived black identity relied on de-emphasizing black people’s bodily-being-in-the-world. As Fischer-Lichte points out, if an audience’s “attention was diverted to the actors’ phenomenal body, it would ‘invariably destroy the illusion.’” When Civil Rights protesters sat at white lunch counters, marched against the direct gubernatorial orders and law enforcement prohibitions, and sang and prayed on public buses, their performance shattered whites’ illusory perception of black people created by segregation. By bringing the

---

performance of embodied agency they had previously reserved for private, all black spaces to public enactment, nonviolent protests shattered white autonomy over the performance of racial identity in the public sphere.

While the process of embodied agency helped transform how protesters perceived themselves, it was only in conjunction with the process of cross-casting that they affected the witnesses’ perception of the protesters. According to Diane Nash, “there was born a new awareness of himself as an individual. There was also born, on the part of whites, a new understanding and awareness of the Negro as a person to be considered and respected.” In many cases, cross-casting manifested in the infliction of violence against the protesters. In a collection of personal writings called Down the Line, protester and community organizer Bayard Rustin describes his experience during a nonviolent protest. While riding a segregated bus he was beaten in front of other bus riders. Though Rustin was being treated as an object, he continued to behave as a peaceful first-class citizen to perform the role of a black person with political and person agency:

Four policemen got into the bus, consulted shortly with the driver, and came up to my seat . . . ‘I believe I had a right to sit here,’ I said quietly. ‘If I sit in the back of the bus I am depriving that child—’ I pointed to a little white child of five or six—‘of the knowledge that there is injustice here, which I believe is his right to know. It is my sincere conviction that the power of love in the world is the greatest power existing. If you have a greater power, my friend, you may move me.’ . . . As I would not move, they began to beat me about the head and shoulders, and I shortly found myself knocked to the floor. Then they dragged me out of the bus and continued to kick and beat me. Knowing that if I tried to get up or protect myself in the first heat of their anger they would construe it as an attempt to resist and beat me down again, I forced myself to be still and wait for their kicks, one after another. Then I stood up, spreading out my arms parallel to the ground, and said, “There is no need to

beat me. I am not resisting you.’ At this three white men, obviously Southerners by their speech, got out of the bus and remonstrated with the police . . . During the thirteen-mile ride to town they called me to every conceivable name and said anything they could think of to incite me to violence . . . The man on the other side gave me a kick. A moment later I happened to catch the eye of the young policeman in the front seat. He looked away very quickly, and I took renewed courage from the realization that he could not meet my eyes because he was aware of the injustice being done.”

Rustin’s performance clearly attempted to present someone whose will was embodied in his actions and words. Before the policemen actually attempted to harm his body, Rustin used language and a performance of measured, thoughtful, and regulated behavior in order to demonstrate the complete union of the beliefs he espoused and his actions. After the police officers began to beat Rustin, he refused to resist the blows or to show any signs of pain. Rustin disabled the forced embodiment of white supremacist power by making his physical pain invisible. Instead, he persisted in his own performance of an ordinary citizen trying to ride the bus and cooperate with the law.

Rustin’s protest points to the relationship between cross-racial casting and violence's role in nonviolent protests. The disparity between the police officer’s brutal treatment of Rusin and his peaceful behavior made his embodied agency all the more conspicuous to onlookers. The persistence of his peaceful performance had very clear and tangible effects in those witnessing the episode. Rustin himself identifies the contrast between his nonviolent behavior and the violent impatience of the police as the cause for select whites’ intervention on his behalf. Such tangible shifts in the behavior of the onlooker also occurred during anti-black lynchings, but because

lynchings brought very different qualities of the human body to the forefront, their impact on spectator behavior differed significantly. In anti-black lynchings the spectators were almost uniformly provoked to join in the executioner’s actions and aid in the display of public violence. In contrast, witnesses of nonviolent protests were provoked to a variety of responses: to inflict violence, to prevent it, and to join the protest or the movement. I now turn my attention to how these strategies of embodiment correspond to various shifts in spectator/actor behavior.

**Observer/observed relationship**

Because live performance requires the bodily co-presence of the artist and the public, it is an aesthetic medium in which the spectator can affect the qualities of the art she is witnessing. Instead of a unidirectional exchange in which one party generates a product and the other receives it—such as paintings or a musical recording—performance relies on what Fischer-Lichte calls an “autopoietic feedback loop.” In such a model, the relationship between the spectators and the actors is co-effective. Consequently, when a change in the performer’s presence causes a shift in how the spectators perceive the actors, this also shifts the way they perceive themselves. Specifically, highlighting the performer’s phenomenal body makes the “spectators sense that the actor is present in an unusually intense way, granting them in turn an intense sensation of themselves as present.” As a result, the spectator becomes aware of the autopoietic feedback loop and their ability to participate in it.

In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Fischer-Lichte describes Yugoslavian performance artist Marina Abramovic’s *Lips of Thomas* in order to

---

99 Ibid., 38-9.
100 Ibid., 96.
analyze the role of violence in the autopoeitic feedback loop. Over the course of the performance, Abramovic inflicted violence against her own body in a variety of ways: she shattered a crystal glass in her hand so that it bled and used the glass to cut a five-pointed star into her stomach; she later flagellated her back until it bled, then lay on a large cross of ice underneath a radiator so that her body began to shake with chills while her stomach bled more profusely from the heat. As Fischer-Lichte describes it, “[a]fter she had held out for 30 minutes without any sign of abandoning the torture, some members of the audience . . . hastened to the blocks of ice, took hold of the artist, and covered her with coats. Then they removed her from the cross and carried her away. Thus, they ended the performance.” 101 Abramovic’s obvious physical destruction brought her phenomenal presence to the forefront, challenging the audience’s ability to read her performance as merely a series of signs or a fictional representation. As a result, she prompted the audience to see themselves not as mere onlookers, but as co-participants in the performance. Similar to Abramovic’s audience, the witnesses’ awareness of their participation in anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests operated in conjunction with how violence or its absence made the black body present.

While *Lips of Thomas* relies on an economy of exchange in which both actor and spectator voluntarily participated, anti-black lynchings generated an autopoeietic feedback loop in which only one party was allowed active engagement. What Fischer-Lichte does not note is that the audience’s intense sense of presence elicited by the emergence of an actor’s embodied agency can just as readily be elicited by the

---

101 Ibid., 12.
erasure of his agency through the exhibition of his phenomenal body. Because public violence attempts to make physical pain the most conspicuous attribute of the victim’s presence, the witness perceives not simply the potential for participation in the feedback loop but enjoys complete control over the victim's performance. This unequal power dynamic was clearly demonstrated by the extensive mutilation of the lynch victim’s body after he had died: the victim’s active participation in the performance was in many ways unnecessary to its continuation. Through the coerced performance of the victim's pain, the violence of anti-black lynchings provided the mob with a heightened sense of power and presence. As such, it gave the mob complete control over their own representation.

The white lynch mob’s extreme pursuit of self-representation indicates a fallacious though popular presumption that “[p]olitical power . . . entails the power of self-description.” However, in her work *Unmarked: the politics of performance*, Peggy Phelan contests this equation of visibility with political power, and finds the entire economy of representational exchange inherently problematic. Phelan believes that “[r]epresentation reproduces the Other as the Same . . . [It] converts the Other into the familiar grammar of the linguistic, visual, and physical body of the Same. This process of conversion is what Freud calls fetishization.” Representation then, is an attempt to make an Other a reflection of the Self. As Phelan suggests, “the desire to see is a manifestation of the desire to be seen . . . [and] all looking is an attempt to find a mirror.”

103 Ibid., 18, 25.
body to make their own political identity manifest. Most importantly, the anti-black lynching demonstrations showed that violence functions so that the spectators may see themselves. Public displays of physical violence are then only extreme examples of efforts towards representation. Anti-black lynchings also make it readily apparent that fully representing the Self through the Other is impossible, for the simple reason that they are not the same. The white aggressor could never fully demonstrate his own agency in the black victim because as much as he wanted that body to belong to him, it did not. If violence enacts the intense desire to represent the potency of the Self through the impotency of the Other, the performance of nonviolence enacts a desire to present the Self negating or subjugating the Other. As Fischer-Lichte suggests, the most effective way to destabilize representation’s unequal distribution of power between the observer and the observed is through the autopoietic feedback loop of performance.

While anti-black lynch mobs usurped the autopoietic feedback loop to give the mob of onlookers a greater sense of power, the nonviolent use the same feedback loop to distribute power equally between the protesters and the observers. By performing embodied agency, the protesters refused to represent any identity besides their own. In so doing, they refused to be a mirror for the white supremacist gaze. No other tactic they used demonstrates the efficacy of their embodiment more than their refusal to show pain or react with violence. To engage in either would have given the white segregationist gaze a visible manifestation of their own power. Unable to see their Selves through the behavior of the Other, white racist onlookers were forced to
shift their perceptions of black people to include embodied agency. Because this shift was forced upon them, their response was highly volatile and unpredictable.

Perhaps no series of protests better demonstrated the volatility of the autopoietic feedback loop better than the nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, AL in the spring of 1963. Over the course of a nonviolent protest on May 3, 1963, police, firemen, and onlookers became aware of their ability to participate and change the course of the protest. In most cases, this resulted in the outbreak of violence. When the nonviolent campaign first took hold in the city, police chief Bull Connor refused to respond with overt displays of physical harm towards the protesters. “For weeks he had kept his cool, ‘nonviolently’ arresting demonstrators, keeping vigilantes at bay.’”104 However, during a series of protests of schoolchildren in early May of 1963, Connor found his jails full and the pressure to regain power at an all-new high. On the afternoon of May 2, several groups of student protesters “emerged from [the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church] filling the air with freedom songs. . . Hand in hand the boys and girls, some as young as six, announced ‘We Shall Overcome.’ From the crowd of cheering onlookers, one woman shouted: ‘Sing, children, sing!’ Some teachers joined their pupils in the protest.”105 Though Birmingham’s law enforcement responded to the first day of demonstrations with arrests only, the protests the following day met with an exponential increase in physical force. The following afternoon two thousand school children marched across the town’s Kelly Ingram Park to meet the line of policemen that blocked their path. “‘We’re going to

105 Ibid.
walk, walk walk,’ they chanted. ‘Freedom . . . freedom . . . freedom.’”  

In part because his jails were overflowing and in part because he could not bring the demonstration to an end, Connor ordered his men to turn their fire hoses on the children. I have included below a rather lengthy description of the exchange between protesters, police officers, and bystanders because it captures in detail the wide variety of responses elicited by the protesters as well as their deliberate responses to violent provocation:

Through a loudspeaker [a police captain] ordered, ‘Disperse or you’ll get wet.’ Most kept marching. With the first blast of water, the students, aged thirteen to sixteen, covered their heads with their hands but held their ground. As the pressure increased, they dropped to their knees, then grasped each other, bonding bodies with souls to withstand the force . . . When the firemen increased the pressure to one hundred pounds so that the water sent students spinning down the street, dreadfully skinning exposed flesh, the heretofore cheering observers changed into a wrathful mob. A barrage of bricks and bottles descended on the firemen. As glass shattered nearby, Bull Connor deployed his squad of six German shepherds for crowd control . . . Two German shepherds attacked Henry Lee Shambry, ripping his trousers off and lacerating his leg. Other spectators resisted. Bricks pried up from the park sidewalk became painful missiles that bombarded the canine corps. One struck and dazed a dog. Another smacked fire chief L.H. Kirk squarely on the back . . . The ugly scene ended as officers swept through Kelly Ingram Park, dispersing the violent protesters.  

Within a single demonstration, the autopoietic feedback loop between the protesters and onlookers went through several shifts. When the protesters emerged from the church, they did so performing as embodied subjects: they were singing, chanting, and walking with a purpose that had no reference to white onlookers. Praying and singing were collective actions that black communities could and did engage in behind closed doors and away from the white gaze, but until then this kind of presence and power had been hidden in order to avoid the potential of white

106 Ibid., 267.
107 Ibid., 267-8. emphasis mine.
violence. The protesters use of actions that till that moment had been kept private demonstrated to white onlookers that their bodies existed and behaved outside the representations imposed by white supremacists.

When faced with the black protesters’ publicy embodied agency, the police could only envision two kinds of responses: imprisonment—to remove the protesters from public view—and physical violence—in an effort to dissolve the presence of the protesters’ embodied subjectivity. However, the protesters negated the police force’s “script,” by deliberately refusing either to retaliate with violence or make a spectacle of their physical pain. Rather, they confronted the physical obstacle to their collective action by doing what was necessary to protect their body without expressing their pain through words. They peaceably refused the forced embodiment of white supremacy’s role for black citizens. Because they insisted on a self-referential presence, one that posed black citizenship on their own terms, protesters managed to elicit a different sort of presence in the spectators. In contrast to anti-black lynchings, nonviolent protests revealed the autopoietic feedback loop as a potentially co-effective process. As Fischer-Lichte points out “[r]ole reversal [in which spectators can become actors] . . . opens up the possibility for collective action.”

In other words, by revealing themselves as embodied subjects—and not objects in the performance of white supremacy—the protesters implicitly invited the onlookers to participate as embodied subjects as well. As a result, they created the potential for cooperation between themselves and onlookers.

---

While the stories of Rustin and Eskew indicate that this realization can oftentimes provoke further violence, many testimonies also demonstrate that spectators were open to finding alternative modes of response that did not react with violence against black citizen’s rights. For many, witnessing a protest marked the turning point in their political consciousness. For example, Eskew describes the black bystanders in Birmingham who joined the children in protest or cheered them on. Peggy Terry, a white woman who lived in Montgomery during the bus boycott, described the moment when witnessing violence changed her worldview: “When I saw ‘em beatin’ up on Reverend King,” she explains, “something clicked…When I saw all those people beating up on him and he didn’t fight back, and didn’t cuss like I would have done, and he didn’t say anything, I was just turned upside down.”

Terry goes on to explain that after that incident, she joined CORE. On the same day she signed up, she was thrown in jail for participating in a sit-in at the Board of Education. Rustin also describes three white men who intervened on his behalf with the police: “Indeed, as one of the policemen raised his club to strike me, one of them, a little fellow, caught hold of it and said, ‘Don’t you do that!’”

Protester Diane Nash explained that very often, protests would not only incite white intervention, but sparked dialogue as well:

I think we can also see this awareness of Negro and white for each other as individuals, in the attitudes of the crowds who watched the demonstrations. In the beginning . . . there was mostly fear. However, after the violence was allowed to go on and after the police protection broke down and officers insisted on looking the other way while people were beaten, not infrequently there was a white person in the crowd who would see someone about to tear up one of the picket signs or about to hit someone, and would go up and stop

---


110 Rustin, Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin, 6.
this person and say, ‘No, no! You can’t do that.’ And often they would get into a discussion which sometimes looked constructive.\textsuperscript{111}

In each of these instances, the emergence of the protesters as embodiments of first-class U.S. citizens and subjects forced the onlookers to identify not against, not as, but \textit{with} those protesting. As a result of this co-identification, both spectators and actors used the autopoietic feedback loop to engage in collective action rather than antagonistic action.

\textbf{Generating of Meaning: Symbol v. Allegory}

In the above discussion, I looked more closely at the various spectator reactions to the nonviolent protests than I did at those to anti-black lynchings. Quite simply, in my research I have found no examples of the mob shifting to intervene and stop an anti-black lynching or of black citizens attempting to interrupt the lynching as it unfolded. Indeed, anti-black lynchings evoked much more consistent responses than nonviolent protests did. I attribute the difference in spectator reaction to the fact that while anti-black lynchings attempted to re-establish a regime of power nonviolent protests attempted to destabilize them. Typically the construction of power regimes is directly informed by the co-construction of regimes of meaning, or what Foucault calls knowledge. Foucault insists “that power produces knowledge . . . that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”\textsuperscript{112} To know something is to have power over it and vice versa. As the two historical examples in question demonstrate, the public performance of subjectivity simultaneously has the potential to destabilize

\textsuperscript{111} Nash, "Inside the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides: Testimony of a Southern Student," 140.
\textsuperscript{112} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison}, 27.
systems of meaning and power as well as to re-affirm them. Here I hope to provide a model for understanding the particular process used in both anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests to attribute different meanings to black bodies. To describe these processes, I rely on Fischer-Lichte’s discussion of symbol and allegory.\(^{113}\)

Fischer-Lichte's defines symbol and allegory in terms of their performative configuration of materiality, signifier, and signified. She asserts that performances that make phenomenal presence more conspicuous
giv[e] rise to two very different types of perception and generation of meaning . . . In the first case, the phenomenon is perceived as what it appears, i.e. in its phenomenal being, so that materiality, signifier, and signified coincide. In the second case, they markedly diverge from one another. The phenomenon is perceived as a signifier that can be linked to a diverse range of signifieds. The meaning ascribed to the phenomenon are not dependent on the subject’s will but appear in consciousness spontaneously . . . Both types of generated meanings share a common trait: they are not based on inter-subjective codes or conventionally accepted ascriptions.\(^{114}\)

In the first process of meaning production, the fusion of materiality, signifier, and signified results in a performative symbol. According to Fischer-Lichte, “[t]he symbol is conceived so as to deny a subjective participation in the act of generating meaning . . . the symbol’s meaning seems neither random nor subjective but given in the symbol itself.”\(^{115}\) In the second process, the trajectory is reversed. Rather than making materiality, signifier, and signified inseparable, allegory disassociates the three so that their relationship with each other is recognizably random and always dynamic. As Walter Benjamin argues, “[a]ny person, any object, any relationship can

---

\(^{113}\) Though Fischer-Lichte provides these words with her own definitions, she takes them from Walter Benjamin’s work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and extrapolates on the definitions of symbol and allegory he presents therein. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1998).


\(^{115}\) Ibid.
mean absolutely anything else.”\textsuperscript{116} In terms of performance, this means that “[m]ateriality, signifier, and signified diverge.”\textsuperscript{117} While most performances that call attention to the actor’s phenomenal presence oscillate between these two systems of meaning, anti-black lynchings limited the generation of meaning to the symbolical by collapsing the mutilation of the black victim (signifier) with the white citizen’s power and black victim’s criminality (signified) in the material body of the victim (materiality). Conversely, nonviolent protesters relied primarily on the allegorical by disassociating white power from their bodies through the performance of their own subjectivity and agency.

No other performative act can produce symbolic meaning better than violence. In anti-black lynchings, the violence endured by the victim’s body demonstrated nothing beyond the torturer’s capacity to destroy and the victim’s degradation. Furthermore, the power dynamics enacted by torture were made permanent and uncontestable by the victim’s death since, after death, the body could no longer heal, fight back, or show any signs of their pain. Because it was irreversible, the victim’s death made the symbol of white power an enduring one. Violence made the lynch mob unwilling and unable to perceive the differences between the dead black body (material), the absence of black agency (signifier), and the white citizen’s power (signified). The absolute powerlessness of the dead and tortured black victim made the white supremacy he was forced to embody all the more difficult to contest.

Unlike anti-black lynchings, which presented to its spectators the power of white supremacy as definite, nonviolent protests’ active refusal to assert violent power had

\textsuperscript{116} Benjamin, \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 175 in Fischer-Lichte, \textit{The Transformative Power of Performance}, 145.
\textsuperscript{117} Fischer-Lichte, \textit{The Transformative Power of Performance}, 145.
the potential of being read as a nonstatement. Allegorical regimes of meaning prove very difficult to sustain because the allegorical seeks to underscore a constantly dynamic and indeterminate process. Because nonviolent protests deconstructed white supremacist regimes of power and knowledge, their deconstruction of meaning was transient. As Bob Moses said, nonviolent protests were an "'annealing process' in which a community is brought to a white heat, then molded while cooling." However, as Peggy Phelan points out, “there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal,” and thus the radical potential for reconfiguring human social norms may arise from “a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility.” In a similar way, nonviolent protesters refused to engage with the kind of visibility and representation that violent tactics offered, and exemplify a radical relinquishing of power. More importantly, the subsequent transformations in those who witnessed and took part in them demonstrate the potential of performance to deny representative models of human interaction and thereby deny violence.

CHAPTER THREE: REMEMBERING, REPRESENTING, AND REPRODUCING VIOLENCE

So far, I have limited my discussion of anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests to the structures and attributes that shaped the impact as live performances. However, both these ritual-like enactments were also captured by a variety of media that reached and transformed the many who did not experience those events firsthand. In this chapter I will focus specifically on the portrayal of both in photography. I have chosen photography over other media because photographs freeze a moment in time and space, rendering the image with the quality of historical accuracy. In short, photographs create the impression of retrieving the past. As Susan Sontag says, “[p]hotographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed . . . they are prized as a transparent account of reality.”120 Because of how “real” photographs make their subjects seem, they are often taken to be a complete and objective representation. By their very nature, though, photographs present a vision of the past that represents only a single point of view; in Sontag's words, “[T]o photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude.” In my analysis of the photographs of anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests I examine what of these ritual-like performances has been excluded from their images.121 Specifically, I explore how photography has directly influenced what aspects of public displays of violence are remembered and which are forgotten.

In my analysis of the photography of violence I will draw from the work of two scholars: Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others and Jacqueline Goldsby’s A

121 Ibid., 46.
**Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature.** I have chosen these specific works because both authors look at photography comprehensively, tracing the histories of the medium’s content, its technological advancements, and its circulation within and outside mainstream media. While Sontag’s work covers the subject more broadly by focusing on the photography of violence, pain, and war, Goldsby offers a more specific study of the photography of anti-black violence. These two historical discussions help me trace the ways in which photography and public displays of violence changed each other. In both the aforementioned historical moments, photography became a medium for renegotiating the relationship between the right not to be seen and the responsibility to expose. While photographs of anti-black lynchings privileged private and subjective memory, the photography of nonviolent protests sought a popular consensus. In each case, those who controlled the photography of the events also controlled what America remembered of them.

I will take a step back in history and begin with the photography of the American Civil War because it so deeply influenced all subsequent documentary photography in the U.S., particularly the photography of anti-black lynchings. Specifically, Civil War photography helped establish three particular premises for the photography of violence in America: 1) photographs must prove the reality of their subjects to those who never perceived them firsthand; 2) photographs should moralize the violence they depict; 3) both because of technological limitations and anxieties over preserving a specific conception of American identity, photographs cannot show Americans enacting violence. When the images of Matthew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and Thomas O’Sullivan were first displayed for public view in a New York museum, they
were readily accepted as faithful portrayals of the Civil War’s reality. As a reporter for *The New York Times* described it, “‘Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along our streets, he has done something very like it.’”\(^{122}\)

But photographer Alexander Gardner wanted to do more than simply make the casualties of a far away war seem more real: he wanted his photographs to give the viewers “‘a useful moral’ by showing ‘the blank horror and reality of war, in opposition to its pageantry.’”\(^{123}\) Gardner aimed to imbue his photographs of war with a moral appraisal. By photographing only the results of war and excluding war’s brutality as it unfolded, Gardner’s depiction of the war showed Americans only as victims and omitted their presence as enactors of violence. The exclusion of American soldiers enacting violence on each other speaks to the photographer’s reluctance to subject them to public critique. More broadly, the absence of combat from Civil War photography indicates that at the time when anti-black lynchings became widespread, Americans were unwilling to see themselves as violent.

In order to highlight black criminality and obscure the white mob’s culpability, anti-black lynchings photographs borrowed heavily from the compositional vocabulary of Civil War photography. Like Gardner’s images of the Civil War, anti-black lynching photographs made the victim of violence its primary focus.\(^{124}\) At the same time, images of anti-black lynching captured the victim so as to erase his

---

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 53. It should be noted however, that despite Gardner’s desire for a “blank” or objective version of reality was far less successful than was immediately apparent. Almost all of Gardner’s images, including those of the dead, were posed. He even moved corpses to more “picturesque” locations (under trees, in groves, etc) before photographing them.

\(^{124}\) For general trends in anti-black lynching photographs, refer to Figures 1-11 on pages 82-93
suffering and accentuate his physical degradation. Because nearly all of anti-black lynching photographs were taken after the victim’s death, these images omit the victim’s expressions of pain: it is rare to come across images of the victim screaming, speaking, or resisting. Rather, in the majority of anti-black lynching images his body is shown still hanging, sometimes burning or burnt, often mutilated, and scarcely clad. By excluding how the victim’s body became the way it appeared, anti-black lynching photographs reduced the black victim’s identity to his physical condition in the moment of the photographing: criminalized, powerless, and brutalized.

While the black victim was usually the photograph’s primary focus, white onlookers sometimes appeared in the image as well. Like the photography of the Civil War, anti-black lynching photography never showed white Americans actually enacting violence. Even after the hand-held camera was introduced in 1888, no lynching photographs emerged that show a white person in the process of attacking a black victim. Nonetheless, anti-black lynching photographs differ significantly from those of the Civil War in that they include live bodies alongside the dead victim(s). In about half of lynching photographs, white people are shown standing around the dead body. At the same time, the white bodies in the picture usually appear out of focus, at the periphery of the image, and are rarely touching the victim. Because the images do not document white people participating in violence, anti-

---

125 In fact, in two of the few images that show the victim alive, he is standing nude and still for the camera, surrounded by a white mob that though present is not touching him. See Figures 4-6 on pages 85-7.

126 For descriptions of photographs in which the white mob did appear, please refer to Figures 1-6, 8, and 11 on pages 82-87, 89, and 93. For those in which the victim is pictured alone, please refer to Figures 7, 9, and 10 on pages 88, 90, and 92.

black lynching photography reduces the white mob—many of whom were undoubtedly involved in the murder—to mere “onlookers.” If we return to Foucault’s assertion that public violence “seizes upon the body of the condemned man and displays it marked, beaten, broken . . . to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign,” it seems that in anti-black lynching photographs white sovereign power appeared disembodied. Instead of locating white violence and power in specific identities, anti-black lynching photographs generalized the events as “[t]he answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to black brutes who would attack the womanhood of the South.” Indeed, most white “onlookers” in anti-black lynching photographs face towards the camera with at least one among the crowd returning its gaze. In doing so, they demonstrate a comfort with being recognized that derives from the disassociation between their individual identities and the victim’s condition. By making the presence of white onlookers inconsistent and arbitrary, anti-black lynching photography made anti-black violence anonymous and white supremacist power all the more ubiquitous.

Despite the sense of confidence white mobs exude in these photographs, the secretive and private circulation of anti-black lynching photographs indicates the tenuousness of their impunity. As Jacqueline Goldsby points out in her book *A Spectacular Secret*, most “lynching photographs and postcards were sold and exchanged in localized transactions whose restricted points of access favored whites’ control over the circulation of the images.” Given the way in which Civil War photography was immediately received as an indictment of war, Southern whites’

---

129 See Figure 3 on page 84
secret reproduction of lynching postcards spoke of a lingering unwillingness to recognize violence as a part of white identity. More importantly, lynching postcards’ limited accessibility both relied on and contributed to the individualization of American processes of memory. Ownership of an anti-black lynching photograph granted the possessor to construct the meaning of his own experience subjectively. As Susan Stewart argues, “we need and desire souvenirs of events . . . whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.”

As evident in many photocard captions, the narrative of lynching photographs sought to confirm that the possessor witnessed the event while obscuring his exact involvement. A postcard of the lynching of Jesse Washington reads: “This is the barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it your son Joe.” Yet another image accompanied by the caption “Bo: pointin’ to his niga” was framed with a piece of the victim’s hair under the glass. Both the x over the first writer’s image and the hair accompanying the second postcard demonstrate a need to prove that the authors were there for the lynching; verifying their presence was a way to defend their memory of the event from doubt or scrutiny. By placing the construction of memory in the hands of individuals, the private circulation of anti-black lynching photographs further distanced those involved from their own violent actions. Anti-black lynching photographs lent white violent mobs an invisibility that helped reproduce and maintain in daily life the political power they asserted in the lynchings themselves.

---

132 See Figure 1 on page 82
133 See Figure 2 on page 83
Between the peak of anti-black lynchings and the first desegregationist sit-in, photography’s relationship to private memory, mainstream media, and violence underwent an immense transformation. Sontag finds that “in the late 1930s the profession of bearing individual witness to war and war’s atrocities with a camera was forged.” Sontag attributes the new relationship between photojournalism and violence to the rise in “large-circulation weekly magazines . . . that were entirely devoted to pictures (accompanied by brief texts keyed to the photos) and ‘picture stories’—at least four or five pictures by the same photographer trailed by a story that further dramatized the images.” In addition to making the circulation of photographs of violence public, photojournalism also redesigned the photograph’s subject and statement. Unlike the Civil War camera lens that excluded more gruesome sites from the photographs, photojournalism after the 1930s equated its duty to make public with a mission to shock with unflinching detail. Sontag posits that “[u]glifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response. For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.” Sontag thus links the impulse to shock with the desire to incriminate. While Garnder attempted only to condemn and moralize war with his photographs, modern photojournalism attempted to hold specific parties accountable for it. Such shifts in violence’s visibility had a direct effect on the decreased frequency of anti-black violence. After anti-black lynching photographs began to appear in print media in the 1930s, the enactment anti-black lynchings became less

---

134 Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 32.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 81.
and less public.\textsuperscript{137} While public lynchings had been widely reported from
Reconstruction into the 1920s, author Howard Smead observes that after the mid-
1930s, “[a]lthough lynchings continued, they declined in number and the mobs
became considerably more surreptitious. By the 1940s ritualized public executions
were a thing of the past, and lynching practically disappeared altogether during the
1950s.”\textsuperscript{138} While the gradual disappearance of anti-black lynchings was largely
influenced by photojournalism’s new political role, it was not until the lynching of
Emmett Till that photography of violence revolutionized representations of race
relations in U.S. media.

By using modern tactics of shock and indictment, the photography of Emmett
Till’s 1954 lynching wrested representative power away from white murderers.\textsuperscript{139}
Shortly after seeing her son’s corpse, Till’s mother Mamie Bradley said she wanted to
“make the world see” in brutal detail what anti-black violence had done to her son.\textsuperscript{140}
With this statement, Bradley’s decision catalyzed black peoples’ authorship over their
own photographic representation and subjected white violence to public
condemnation. Following her son’s murder, she worked with the NAACP (National
Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to bring representatives of the
\textit{Chicago Defender}, \textit{Jet}, and \textit{Ebony} magazines to publicize both Till’s funeral and the
trial of his murderers.\textsuperscript{141} Of all the images that flooded American newspapers, the

\textsuperscript{137} Goldsby notes that “though the technology for half-tone photography was perfected for American
courier newspapers and mass-market periodicals in 1899, this system . . . was not routinely deployed until the
late 1920s and 1930s in either mainstream or African American popular press coverage of lynching.”
\textsuperscript{138} Smead, \textit{Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker}, xi.
\textsuperscript{139} For all images of Emmett Till’s murder, please refer to Figures 12-20, pages 94-98
\textsuperscript{140} See Goldsby, \textit{A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature}, 295. No additional
citation provided.
\textsuperscript{141} Goldsby, \textit{A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature}, 296
image of Till’s body in his coffin remains the most influential. Because of its graphic nature, his image very much fit in with the public’s demand for “uglified” depictions of reality. In it, Till’s face appears so bloated and beaten that it is unrecognizable when compared to the photograph of Till as a boy that hung over his casket. Additionally, unlike photographs that showed the lynch victim in a noose, half-clothed, and often whipped or burned, Till’s disfigured face and bloated body were dressed in a suit and lain inside a coffin. Such discontinuity between Till’s body and the rest of his appearance directly counteracted the visual vocabulary of anti-black lynching images by replacing the associations of criminality and brutishness with indications of respectability and Christianity—ultimately, the photograph stressed its subject’s humanity. By displaying this image alongside those of Till’s funeral—and in particular those of his mother mourning his death—the photographs of Emmett Till’s lynching highlighted how much he was beloved rather than feared.

The shift in how the lynch victim was photographed was only compounded by the photography of Till’s murderers. While there are no images that depict them in the act of killing Till, the photographs from the trial of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam wrenched anti-black murderers from anonymity and placed them squarely in the public eye. While many subsequent photographs showed the perpetrators of anti-black violence in a number of compromising positions—in the act of attacking a

---

142 For the famous image of Till in his coffin, please see Figure 12. For the image of people filing past his coffin to pay their respects, please see Figure 18 on page 96.
143 See Figure 13 on page 94 for the image of Mamie Bradley at her son’s coffin, in which pictures of Till while alive are also visible.
144 See Figures 15, 16, 18, and 19 on pages 95 and 96 for images of Till’s funeral and burial.
145 Please see Figure 17 on page 96.
black person, grimacing, spitting, laughing, or making lewd gestures—the most remarkable aspect of the picture of Bryant and Milam was its very existence. For the first time, the white perpetrators had faces and names. Not only were the murderers now the focus of photography of violence, they were also clearly identified for the entire nation. In exposing his murderers, the images of Till’s lynching sent the message that no one was above public scrutiny and judgment, regardless of race.

The photography of the Civil Rights Movement continued and elaborated on this message of universal justice. By highlighting white violence and black peaceful resistance, Civil Rights photographs became an invaluable tool for persuading viewers—particularly white ones—to recast their perceptions of white and black identity U.S. citizenship.\(^\text{146}\) As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed in his book *Why We Can’t Wait*, “‘[t]he brutality with which officials would have quelled the black individual . . . was caught—as a fugitive from a penitentiary is often caught—in gigantic circling spotlights. It was imprisoned in a luminous glare revealing the naked truth to the whole world.’”\(^\text{147}\) Most often, their “luminous glare” captured anti-black violence and black peaceful resistance in action. The mid-motion quality of Civil Rights photography lent its photographs a more authoritative claim on real events. By seeming to convey a comprehensive and objective viewpoint, these photographs conferred on the American public the privilege to judge the events as if they had actually been there. In a letter to the *Washington Post*, one reader describes how an

\(^{146}\) For my discussion of general trends in the photography of nonviolent protests, please refer to Figures 21-38 on pages 99-113.

image of the Birmingham protests triggered a shift in her perceptions of race. She wrote:

Now I’ve seen everything. The news photographer who took that picture of a police dog lunching at a human being has shown us in unmistakable terms how we have sunk and will surely have awakened a feeling of shame in all who have seen that picture, who have any notion of human dignity. The man being lunged at was not a criminal being tracked down to prevent his murdering other men; he was, and is, a man. If he can have a beast deliberately urged to lunge at him, then so can any man, woman, or child in the United States . . . If the United States doesn’t stand for some average decent level of human dignity, what does it stand for?

Because photographs could generate such moral certainty, they became one of the most popular articulations of the Civil Rights political agenda. Indeed, images taken by photojournalists like Danny Lyon and Charles Moore were often used as posters and pamphlets for major civil rights organizations like Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As the official photographer for SNCC, Danny Lyon had a tremendous impact on the organization’s public image. His famous photos of a policeman arresting a shouting protester later became the cover of SNCC’s photo book, *The Movement*, while his image of John Lewis and other protesters kneeling in prayer became a poster accompanied by the caption “COME LET US BUILD A NEW WORLD TOGETHER.” As Lyon put it, his “photographs . . . made under the direction of [SNCC executive secretary James] Forman and the [SNCC] office—were used to help create a public image of SNCC. They traveled all across America and even around the world.” Perhaps better than those any social movement before them, the

---

148 See Figure 23 on page 101 for the image the Hemphill is referring to.
150 See Figures 21 and 22, pages 99 and 100, respectively.
photographs of the Civil Rights Movement were used to frame reality the way the activists saw it in order to make the rest of the nation see it that way too.

Yet in every photographer’s choice of focus, angle, subject, and exposure, there lies an implied decision to leave something out of the image. Though the photography of the nonviolent protests gave the impression of being objective and all-inclusive, it also erased some of the most extreme brutality of the movement from the American collective memory. As Sontag points out, “[w]hat is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds.”

After the murder of Emmett Till, it was very rare to see a photograph of a dead black body. Because such instances demonstrated the lingering power of white supremacy, those images did not appear in national newspapers for fear of compromising the newer and more autonomous representations of black identity. In widely publicized violent moments—such as the murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Henry Schwerner—newspapers only published photographs of the crime scene, the accused, or photographs of the victim that were taken when they were alive. In many ways, keeping images of the dead private indicated an attempt to remember the victims of racist violence for how they lived, not how they died. Furthermore, the impulse towards privacy in death augmented black people’s agency over their own image. Civil Rights photographs saturated the American media with representations of black Americans’s ability to withstand and overcome violence in order to imbue their public image with agency and power. In order to construct more

---

151 Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 86.
152 See Figures 34 and 35 on pages 110 and 111 for images published in association with the murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Henry Schwerner.
egalitarian representations of black and white identity, then, Civil Rights photography omitted representations of more enduring racist inequalities.

As Sontag argues, “[t]he problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering.”

Because of modernity’s unshakeable faith in the photographic image, the photography of anti-black lynchings and the nonviolent protests have the ability to show how the participants and witnesses of these events wanted to be represented. In his description of surrogation, Joseph Roach contends that enactments of “improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin.” Though Roach is discussing the performance of identity and culture, the process of congealing that he describes very aptly applies to the photography of anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests. Whereas representations in performance die in the same moment they are born, a photograph immortalizes its subject in the instant it is taken. The photography of anti-black lynchings and nonviolent protests condenses the processes of presenting and absenting violence in collective memory down to a moment. And in that moment, the photograph compels its viewer both to remember and to forget.

---

153 Ibid., 89.
AFTERWORD

In the spring of my junior year at Wesleyan, I traveled to Alabama for a course I was taking about the Civil Rights Movement. During our one-week stay, my classmates and I visited some of the better known sites of the Movement: the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, King’s parsonage, the state capitol building, Kelly Ingram Park, and the Edmund Pettus Bridge. While in Selma, we were taken on a walking tour through the town by Joanne Bland, a woman whose participation in the movement began when she was only 8 years old. As Bland guided us through her hometown, she explained the historical significance of every building, signpost, and curbside, filling the spaces we walked through with vivid descriptions of their past: stories about her childhood in a segregated Selma, about her first Movement meeting with her grandmother, and her memories of the events surrounding the march from Selma to Montgomery. Bland’s gift for orality was so profound that our physical journey through Selma paralleled our journey through her past.

Towards the end of the tour Bland took us to a playground near the Brown Chapel AME Church where activists had gathered before marching on Bloody Sunday. She told us that we were in a bad neighborhood, and instructed us to pick up a pebble from the ground for our protection. After everyone had a pebble, she told us that we were standing on was the exact spot where John Lewis and a few other leaders from the movement had knelt in prayer before leading some 600 protesters across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, completely unaware of the police that waited for them on the other side. Bland explained that we could keep the pebble we held in our hand under one condition: whenever we saw injustice of being done, that rock would remind us
of the violent injustices on Bloody Sunday and move us to action.\textsuperscript{155} With a single
gesture, Bland demonstrated that the study of the past must inform the way we
position ourselves in the present. In keeping our pebbles, our class vowed to keep
Bland’s memories alive through our daily enactments of citizenship and humanity.

To conclude our visit to Selma, the entire class walked across the Edmund Pettus
Bridge on Highway-180 toward Montgomery, virtually marching in the steps of the
Civil Rights protesters. In walking across that bridge, I had the impression we were
enacting the memory of others. I could never fill the nonviolent protesters’ shoes and
could never come close to understanding what they endured over forty years ago on
that bridge. But through the performance of her memories, I felt that Bland had asked
me at the very least to try to imagine her past. In this way, walking across the
Edmund Pettus Bridge was our class’ performative attempt to imagine and remember
Selma’s violent history. As I arrived on the other side of the bridge, I sensed very
strongly that because of Bland’s tour, I was never going to forget a history that I had
not lived. The journey through Selma and across the bridge highlighted for me that
memories of the past live through performances in the present—how we behave today
reflects what we have chosen to forget. By asking me to remember the violence in
Selma, I believe Bland was also asking me to absent violence from my own life. As
Joseph Roach argues, “[t]o perform . . . means to bring forth, to make manifest, and to
transmit. To perform also means, though often more secretly, to reinvent.”\textsuperscript{156} Bland
showed me that the performance of the past, no matter how painful or oppressive, can

\textsuperscript{155} This moment in her tours has also been captured on film and can be seen in \textit{Never Lose Sight of Freedom}, a documentary quoted earlier in this thesis. See Selma to Montgomery National Historic

allow for a reinvention of the future and our place in it. It is my humble hope that in a much smaller way my thesis has reopened particular histories for review and reinvention, and in so doing pointed towards alternative ways of imagining violence’s place in our past, our present, and our future.
Figure 1: The lynching of Jesse Washington. May 16, 1916.157

Figure 2: The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., Image 32.
Figure 3: Lynching postcard taken in Georgia, 1902.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., Images 59, 60.
Figure 4: The lynching of Frank Embree. July 22, 1899, Fayette, Missouri. Notably one of the only images showing the victim still alive.\(^{160}\)

\(^{160}\) Ibid., Image 42
Figure 5: The lynching of Frank Embree. July 22, 1899.  

161 Ibid., Image 43.
Figure 6: The lynching of Frank Embree. July 22, 1899.\footnote{Ibid., Image 44}
Figure 7: Lynching, circa 1910, location unknown.\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., Image 98
Figure 8: The lynching of John Richards. January 12, 1916, Goldsboro, North Carolina.  

Ibid., Image 20
Figure 9: Lynching circa 1905, Trenton Georgia.\footnote{Ibid., Image 3}
Figure 10: Lynching, 1960, McDuffie County, Georgia.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., Image 19
Figure 11: The burning of Ted Smith. July 28, 1908, Greenville, Texas.167

167 Ibid., Image 22
Figure 12: Emmett Till in his casket, Rayner’s Funeral Parlor, Chicago, September, 1955. *Chicago Defender*.168

---

Figure 13: Mamie Bradley at the coffin of her son, Emmett Till. *Chicago Sun-Times* Archives.\textsuperscript{169}

Figure 14: Mamie Bradley upon the arrival of her son’s body in Chicago. (© Bettman/Corbis)\textsuperscript{170}


\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
Figure 15: The Saturday morning service for Till. The church held at least two thousand people during the service. (Chicago Sun-Times Archives)\textsuperscript{171}

Figure 16: Till’s glass-enclosed casket is walked through the streets of Chicago. (© Chicago Defender)\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
Figure 17: Roy Bryant and J.W. Milan in court with one of their lawyers. (© Chicago Defender Digital Images)\textsuperscript{173}

Figure 18: People filing past Till’s casket at the Saturday the funeral service. (Chicago Tribune Archive Photo).\textsuperscript{174}

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
Figure 19: Mamie Bradley watches as Till is buried at Burr Oak Cemetery. (© Chicago Defender Digital Images.)\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
Figure 20: Moses Wright testifies in court and identifies J.W. Milan and Roy Bryant as Till’s kidnappers. (Joe Migon)\textsuperscript{176}

Figure 21: Arrest of a protester in downtown Atlanta, GA. Winter 1963-64 (Danny Lyon)\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 81
Figure 22: Demonstration, Cairo, IL, August 1962. (Danny Lyon). U.S. Congressman John Lewis pictured second from the left. ¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 85
Figure 23: William Gadsden attacked by police dogs outside the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL. May 3, 1963. (Bill Hudson)\textsuperscript{179}

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 89.
Figure 24: Gloria Richardson facing off National Guardsmen. Cambridge, Maryland. (Fred Ward)\textsuperscript{180}

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 130.
Figure 25: Face-off between protesters and law enforcement on US Highway 80 in Selma, AL. Bloody Sunday, March 13, 1965.\textsuperscript{181}

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 178-9.
Figure 26: An officer stands over Amelia Boyton on highway 80, Bloody Sunday, 1965, Selma, AL. (Spider Martin)\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 180.
Figure 27: Amelia Boyton is helped to her feet. Selma, AL. March 7, 1965. (Spider Martin)\textsuperscript{183}

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 180.
Figure 28: Firemen turn their hoses on protesters in Birmingham, AL. May 3, 1963. (Charles Moore)\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 106.
Figure 29: Sit-in protesters at Woolworth’s lunch counter, Jackson, Mississippi. May 28, 1963 (Fred Blackwell).\textsuperscript{185}

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 69.
Figure 30: Sit-in, Raleigh, North Carolina. February 10, 1960. (United Press International).\textsuperscript{186}

Figure 31: Demonstrator is attacked with water cannons, Kelly Ingram Park. May 3, 1963. (Charles Moore)\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 78.
Figure 32: Same protester as she is attacked by the water cannons. Birmingham, AL. May 3, 1963. (Charles Moore).\textsuperscript{188}

Figure 33: SNCC photographer Clifford Vaughs is arrested by the National guard. Cambridge, Maryland. May 2, 1964. (Danny Lyon)\textsuperscript{189}

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 131.
Figure 34: The burned vehicle of James Chaney occupied by Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and himself the night of their murder. Bogue Chitto Creek, Neshoba County, MS. June 23, 1964. (Steve Schapiro). 190

190 Ibid., 152.
Figure 35: The parents of Andrew Goodman upon the arrival of their son’s body at Newark Airport. August 7, 1964. (United Press International.)

191 Ibid., 154.
Figure 36: Arraignment of twenty men on charges of conspiring to murder. Meridian, Mississippi. December 4, 1964. (Bill Reed)

Figure 37: Members of Selma Sherriff Clark’s posse prepare to confront the first Selma march. March 7, 1965. (Charles Moore)

192 Ibid., 156.
193 Ibid., 176
Figure 38: The famous march from Selma to Montgomery. March 21-25, 1965. (James Karales)\textsuperscript{194}

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 182-3
WORKS CITED

*Atlanta Constitution*, July 1, 1891

“CORE Rules for Action,” published by the Congress of Racial Inequality, New York

*Early County News* (Blakely), Aug 7, 1884


King, Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. "Behind the Selma March." *Saturday Review* April 3, 1965


"Sam Hose." *Charleston News and Courier* April 24, 1899.


SoRelle, James M. "The "Waco Horror": The Lynching of Jesse Washington."


