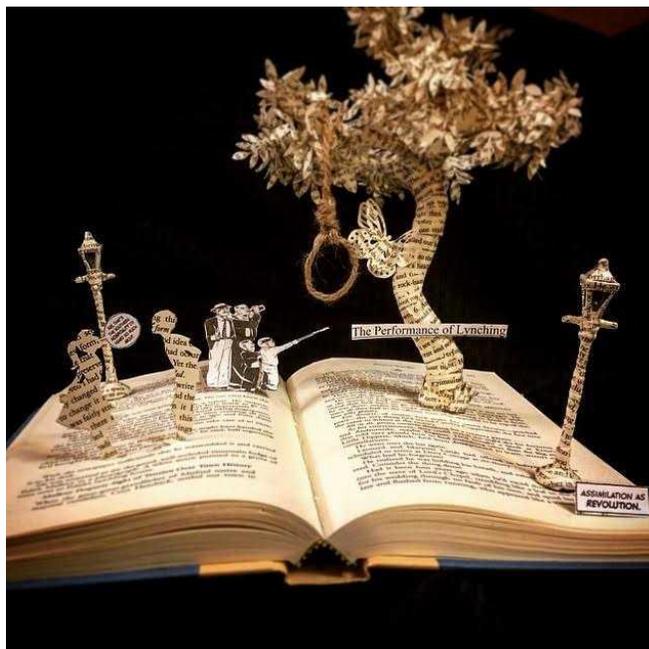


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Anti-Racist Pedagogy In and Against Lynching Culture

by Jennifer Denise Ryan-Bryant



PERFORMANCE OF LYNCHING NO. 1 AND 2, HEATHER GIBSON COOK

When I first envisioned and designed my fall 2016 graduate seminar, *The Literature of Lynching*, I did not imagine that it would take place during one of the most negative campaign seasons in U.S. history, nor that a candidate whose policies oppose the course's foundational principles would be elected during the eleventh week of the semester. Initially, I had been motivated to teach this course by both the literary representations of lynching published since the Civil War and the ongoing, everyday racist violence perpetrated against people of color in America. I had been struck in particular by the upswell of activism and protest that followed Trayvon Martin's 2012 murder. This type of widespread social engagement was first articulated through the dynamic legacies of such movements as Civil Rights and Black Power, and it continues in the work of current groups like Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name, which react today against civil and criminal injustice. My colleagues and I often discussed the social and political similarities between the 2010s and the 1960s; I hoped to capture some of that impetus toward change in a course that had only recently been added to our English master's program, *Literature and Social Justice*. Other members of my department had previously covered topics such as Black British literature, magical realism, and the American Indian Movement in this course; I planned to draw upon my own background in African-American studies in creating a class that would identify the literature's activist potential while engaging seriously with its forms and its critical contexts.

Over the past few years, my students at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels had become increasingly interested in studying the points at which our classroom conversations resonate with real-world issues, or even translate into tangible action. I set out, therefore, to design a course in which the literature we were studying not only emerged in reaction to recurring racial injustice but also motivated its readers to participate in protest and resistance. I knew that I needed to prepare carefully for those moments in class when students wanted to discuss their own positions as potential victims or targets of violence. In spite of the three majors and four minor programs that we offer, our English Department attracts a fairly homogeneous population. My class ultimately contained twelve graduate students, including four students of color, but that kind of diversity is a relatively rare occurrence in our department, particularly at the graduate level. As a white, heterosexual professional woman, I occupy a subject-position that contrasted directly with many of the students in this class. Several of the students in this graduate seminar were the first members of their families to attend college, let alone graduate school; in addition to racial and ethnic differences, we held some dissimilar religious views and possessed a range of different professional backgrounds. I planned, therefore, to frame our course goals and discussions using the vocabulary and communication strategies central to anti-racist pedagogy that speak to people occupying a variety of subject-positions.

I hoped that pursuing anti-racist pedagogy would help me to moderate productive discussions and to promote an

atmosphere of progressive, unbiased thinking in both classroom conversations and students' written work. As Kyoko Kishimoto understands this approach, it constitutes "an organizing effort for institutional and social change that is much broader than teaching in the classroom," including "(1) incorporating the topics of race and inequality into course content, (2) teaching from an anti-racist pedagogical approach, and (3) anti-racist organizing within the campus and linking our efforts to the surrounding community" (1-2). Anti-racist scholars are often influenced by the tenets of critical race theory, which not only examines the ways in which racist beliefs are integral to national and social power structures but also fosters critical analyses of racism in every aspect of society. In other words, critical race theory asks us to rethink socially conditioned beliefs and the unfounded assumptions about race that our educational background has established (Kishimoto 2-3). Both Kishimoto and Priya Kandaswamy emphasize that self-reflection is a key element of such pedagogy; analysis of one's strategies and motivations while teaching is an ongoing process to which one must return again and again in order to work effectively (Kishimoto 4-5; Kandaswamy 11). Kandaswamy also warns of the dangers of relying upon discourses of colorblindness and multiculturalism, which in academic contexts seek to demonstrate that racism no longer exists, that there is no need for critical conversations about race—or, by extension, for courses on racial identities and ethnic literatures (7). Like Kishimoto, Kandaswamy calls for analyses of existing power structures with the goal of challenging so-called liberal concepts like individualism and tolerance, in addition to calling into question the more obviously racist elements of society (11). Anne E. Wagner also suggests that practitioners of anti-racist pedagogy develop proficiency in "conflict resolution" and that they pay close attention to the processes of teaching, rather than focusing on the course's end result (263). Maintaining an openness about the course's content and encouraging students to challenge normative belief systems are pedagogical strategies in line with standpoint theory, another useful approach to critical analysis in the anti-racist classroom (Wagner 264).

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In developing class lectures and activities, therefore, I drew on the tenets of both critical race theory and standpoint theory. I chose lynching as the topic around which to organize our readings and discussions because it is an act of violence that, although it occurs in several countries and may have originated as early as the seventeenth century (Brundage 3), reflects the persistence of historical inequities in the United States and continues to occur because of institutionalized prejudices. Several of my

students in earlier courses had already made connections in casual conversation between recent instances of public aggression and the American history of violence against ethnic minorities. After considering the many hostile acts against innocent citizens that had taken place just in the past two years, I decided that my course would conceptualize lynching as both a historical phenomenon and an immediate danger. Though it is most notoriously associated with the postbellum United States, the persistence of lynching underlines the basic social inequalities that remain in spite of neoliberal practices associated with keywords like “multiculturalism” and “diversity.” As W. Fitzhugh Brundage points out, a combination of factors produced the social conditions that fostered lynching, including the end of the Civil War, the full emancipation of formerly enslaved African Americans, the persistence of white supremacist beliefs, and the gradual withdrawal of federal troops and legislative oversight from the South in the 1870s (6-7). These factors have continued to influence American social attitudes in significant ways; I wanted my course to identify and analyze the roots of modern prejudices before turning to the possibilities of social resistance.

## The Literature of Lynching

American literature, whether consciously or not, registers and reacts to these kinds of social tensions in its attempts to describe the real contours of everyday life. All national literatures are shaped by their citizens’ beliefs and actions; in the United States, as in many other countries, our literature is “complicit in the fabrication of racism” but also reflects countless instances in which “literature exploded and undermined” such beliefs (Morrison 16). However, American literature is distinguished from other Western and non-Western literatures more specifically by what Toni Morrison has called “an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American,” which is produced by the omnipresent fact of slavery and constitutes a key element of the country’s strategies for representing itself in writing (38-39). Instances of lynching, it seemed to me as I planned this course, recur throughout postbellum American literature because they are motivated by a racism that originated during slavery and, although these instances are clearly criminal acts, they often manage to evade legal justice. Like the appearance of the Ku Klux Klan in 1866, lynchings represent an identifiable social phenomenon that reacts to Emancipation, experiences regular peaks and declines in activity, and flourishes through white-supremacist values. Linda D. Chavers defines lynching as “the use of terror and threat” in the course of “a mortally violent act” (1383); Frankie Bailey notes that such acts constitute “extralegal violence carried out by a mob,” and they generally involve

both vigilante activity and ritualistic behavior (1049). Lynching thus comprises physical, psychological, economic, and even geographical dimensions. The peculiarly high concentration of lynchings on American soil may be due in part to the country’s size, its diverse landscapes, its relative youth, the number of territorial battles fought here before its founding, and a population first composed of Native inhabitants, immigrants, colonial settlers, and slaves. However, the country’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade, beginning from the establishment of the first New England colonies in the seventeenth century, directly determined the laws and social attitudes that have continued to enable racist violence. The country’s unequal distribution of resources and political power, coupled with a government that refused to condemn slavery in its constitutive documents, stimulated a racist subculture that produced and continues to produce acts of lynching. After considering these factors, which are often subsumed into other concerns in general national histories,

I decided that my class would address the broad social and historical contexts that fostered lynching as well as the literature that attempted to condemn and oppose it.

As I worked on designing my course over the summer, three key questions that would undergird our class investigations emerged: Why have writers of the literature of lynching tended to work within certain specific literary genres? Why have women consistently acted at the forefront of anti-lynching campaigns? How can we translate our analyses of this literature and its contexts into concrete social action? Part of the answer to all three questions lay in the semester’s first readings: a selection of essays from Ida B. Wells, an

anti-lynching activist and journalist whose work bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though Wells became a teacher at a young age and had to earn her education piecemeal while she was caring for her younger siblings, she remained optimistic about her career in public service in Memphis; she began writing for two weekly church newspapers while she was teaching high school and, in 1889, became editor and co-owner of the Memphis *Free Speech and Headlight*, a black newspaper (Bay xxiii). It was not until 1892, when three successful black grocers, one of whom was a close friend, were lynched in Memphis that Wells found her belief in the country’s progress toward social improvement shaken. She wrote an editorial denouncing the lynchers’ actions, received threats against her life and her newspaper business, and ended up moving to Chicago, where she lived for the rest of her life (Bay xxv-xxvi).



PORTRAIT OF IDA B. WELLS, 1891

As a result of her experiences in 1892, Wells became the most important activist against lynching and voice for the victims of racist violence that our country has ever known. She wrote seven major pamphlets arguing against lynching, including the famous *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895), as well as many newspaper columns, editorials, and essays, and she regularly spoke at political gatherings and meetings of various social organizations. Wells set the stage for the writers and activists who would come after her by challenging the conventional boundaries of gender and race and by establishing nonfiction essays, newspaper articles, and editorial columns as vehicles for social justice. After spending three weeks reading her essays, my students and I used Wells's work as a touchstone for our conversations over the rest of the semester; we returned again and again to the confluence of form, message, and social position in her writings as a means of understanding the motivations that underlay the class's other texts. These conversations set the tone for the course overall and helped me to understand the goals that the students themselves came to define: to gain as comprehensive a sense as possible of both the history of lynching and the nature of anti-lynching activism in the United States since the Civil War, and to identify some material ways in which our studies could prepare us to participate in such activism. As we worked toward these goals, I encouraged the class to reflect on our methods of analysis and to reexamine our motivations for seeking not only knowledge but also social justice.

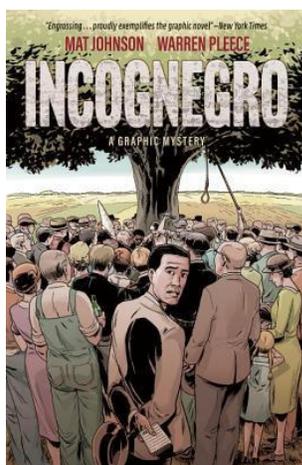
## Identifying the Message: *Incognegro*

Before I could reach a point of true social engagement with my students, however, I had to define the course's academic goals. As a graduate literature seminar, the class needed to offer an intensive grounding in my chosen subject along with opportunities for students to survey the field as a whole and to add their own scholarly interventions. At the same time, I wanted to make our studies socially meaningful and responsive to our immediate political context. I decided, therefore, to combine a chronologically organized survey of literature about lynching with critical readings on contemporary incidents and social-justice organizations. Our readings began with Wells and ended with poetry written in the 2010s; we discussed Wells's and Charles Chesnutt's contributions to the NAACP, Civil-Rights responses to Emmett Till's murder, and today's activist movements, among many others. In an effort to tie our work in the classroom to other disciplines' concerns and to American social attitudes, I gave my students some creative assignments, beyond the usual response and research papers, and encouraged them to seek out evidence of both publicly unacknowledged racial violence and anti-racist activism. These nonstandard assignments included visiting a campus art exhibition on the Scottsboro Nine,

online investigations into relevant current events, and an exercise in "talking back" to Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's graphic novel *Incognegro* (2009), which tells a fictionalized version of NAACP executive secretary Walter White's attempts to publish the names of people who attended lynchings in the South while passing as a white journalist.

My students' responses to *Incognegro* included a piece of book art that depicted two witnesses reacting to a hanged man, a podcast, two poems, a blog post, an opinion column, a letter to the editor, and a word collage, among others. In part because this book was among our last readings in the course, they felt more empowered to analyze its message and translate it into a meaningful real-world context. By this point, they had studied the literature of lynching through essays, plays, poetry, novels for both younger and adult readers, and website posts; each of their responses to Johnson and Pleece's work took a form to which they felt a personal connection, whether it grew out of jobs they had held or followed from more private experiences. Each piece of work engaged with visual and thematic aspects of the novel—such as passing, colorism, white-supremacist politics, black-and-white images, and facial similarities among characters—in order to highlight the contradictions inherent to a society whose official institutions enable the lynching of its citizens. This assignment worked well at the end of the semester because the class had read several texts documenting the statistical history of lynching in the United States and had considered how this history's literary representation changes with its transformation through several different genres and narratives. One student, an African-American woman in her early fifties, noted that the graphic novel, on which she had written a more traditional response paper, allowed her to consider several definitions of individual identity, including mistaken identities, the experience of belonging to more than one geographical region at once, identities shared by two or more people, concealed racial identities, secret identities, and reaffirmed public identities.

One of my white female students, who identifies first as a mom and a social activist, wrote a blog post that draws parallels between the 1920s context of Johnson and Pleece's novel and the political conservatism of the 2010s. Another of my white students, a man in his early thirties, wrote an opinion column in the style of Ida B. Wells that analyzed a public statement of white supremacy that a Buffalo resident had recently made. He offered a reading of *Incognegro* as a possible corrective to the popular attitudes that support acts like this one. Finally, one of the course's quietest students, a black woman in her early twenties, observed that the process of writing a poem, in which the speaker is "searching for a melanin deep enough to cry in / Yet shallow enough to stand in," empowered her to explore her anxieties about her own dark skin and racial heritage. Overall, though I believe my students appreciated this opportunity to approach their studies in a more creative manner than usual, they admitted the difficulty of both



MAT JOHNSON AND WARREN PLEECE'S GRAPHIC NOVEL *INCOGNEGRO* (2009)

sharing their private views and seeing the vulnerability that this exercise exposed in others.

In part because I anticipated the challenges that looking at lynching would pose, this text was the only visual representation that we studied. I had made the decision while planning the course not to include photographs, art exhibits, or films about lynching victims or the crimes' perpetrators. I wanted to make race and inequality our central topics, as Kishimoto advocates, but I did not want to replicate the power structures that support inequality—that make it a spectacle rather than working to end it. Thus, I spent some time before we read *Incognegro* preparing the class to encounter a lynching face-to-face, not "in the flesh" per se, but as a series of pictures in which mute bodies confront the viewer-reader directly.

Our discussion of the novel's visual elements, and the time we spent considering whether we would be complicit in the voyeurism that has accompanied acts of lynching, helped me to understand something else that the course had accomplished—something that I had not anticipated while designing the curriculum. My students and I learned that we prioritized voice and text over body and picture in our analyses of the literature of lynching. This realization does not diminish the importance of the bodily suffering that motivates and defines lynching, nor does it assume that people's physical bodies play less than a central role in their day-to-day experiences of the world. Rather, it points to our focus on the personal and cultural traits that define individual victims of lynching, the social factors that support racist violence, and the varied arguments that anti-lynching activists have constructed. We wanted to concentrate on texts that put forward analyzable, measurable content rather than speculating about the symbolic resonance of a photograph whose subject was preserved in part because he or she could no longer speak. Several of my students mentioned lynching scenes that appear in popular films or TV shows, suggesting that these moments are meant to signal a particular set of social circumstances to viewers, rather than functioning as a more substantial critique of racist attitudes or a failed justice system. They also noted that the history of lynching photographs, which were often circulated as souvenirs or reproduced as postcards that "record the race-color-caste solidarity and lethal 'superiority' of the white community" (Apel 47), renders the appearance of lynching pictures in aesthetic or scholarly contexts always already suspect. Viewing such photographs might put both the author/artist and the viewer in danger of acting from the same vantage-point as the original mob. After some conversation, we decided as a group that we wanted to continue to limit our visual texts to the reproductions of lynching scenes that Warren Pleece drew for *Incognegro*. We also agreed consciously to maintain an awareness of the voices that lynching silenced, to seek them out even as we could not avoid seeing their violated bodies in the pages of the graphic novel.

Our class discussion of *Incognegro* helped to consolidate in many ways the concerns about racial identity and social representation that we had been pursuing throughout the semester. Though the novel's story is set in the 1920s, Johnson and Pleece make reference to today's

fears about interracial conflict through both the book's cover design and the biographical notes that bookend the main story. The cover resembles the front page of a newspaper, with the book's title serving as the newspaper's masthead and quotes from three reviewers providing the typeset text. This page is dominated by a large photograph of a light-skinned black man wearing a fedora and gazing to his left, as though his attention has been drawn by something far outside the frame. Half of his face is shadowed, reflecting the themes of deception and revelation that motivate the narrative. Johnson also includes an "Author's Note" before Part I of the novel, where he describes growing up as "a black boy who looked white." As a result, he sometimes "fantasiz[ed] . . . about living in another time, another situation, where my ethnic appearance would be an asset instead of a burden" (4). This introduction thus prepares readers to approach the novel with modern social conflicts and prejudices in mind; its early-twentieth-century setting comments on the types of situations that we still face today.

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Our conversations about *Incognegro* also allowed us to consider three themes we had been studying all semester in light of both their historical and their more immediate implications: the burdens (and advantages) of accurate representation, the illogical persistence of racist violence, and witnesses' responsibility to act on social injustice. While we had examined these issues during our discussions of all of the other texts, this visual medium encouraged us to confront in new ways our own anxieties about how lynching shapes literature. Representation is a concern, for instance, that motivates discussion in any course whose literature centers on personal identity traits and social issues. My students noted that every author we read, from Ida B. Wells to Louise Erdrich, was careful to describe lynching in accurate terms that not only captured its physically traumatic elements but also underscored the human decisions that made the crime possible. At the same time, however, the fact that these descriptions appeared in text only, with no accompanying illustrations, meant that understanding the true extent of the damage that lynching victims suffered and their identities as individual human beings was limited by the scope of readers' own imaginations. Before we read *Incognegro*, my students discussed whether or not to view some of the thousands of lynching photographs that are available online and through exhibitions like antiques dealer James Allen's *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in*

*America*, which has been available in museums across the country but can also be seen on Allen's dedicated website and in a book published by Twin Palms Publishers ([withoutsanctuary.org](http://withoutsanctuary.org)). Would we risk effacing the victims' individual identities and reinforcing the institutional structures that had condemned them if we looked at these kinds of representations? I explained that I had decided not to show such images in class or include them on our course website to preserve victims' privacy and personhood, but also to avoid any potential trauma that might occur for members of the class when confronted with evidence of painful death. However, I emphasized, students should feel free to make their own decisions about what to view when not in class. After we had had this conversation, I wanted to make sure that students were prepared to view the images in *Incognegro*, which are drawn by hand but inspired by real-life scenes. We also had to consider what the potential advantages would be of looking at the faces and bodies of these victims—whether there would be a way to honor lives that had been lost to this specific brand of social violence by letting go of our own inhibitions and seeking out evidence of their lives' impact. My students argued that while we had been careful to approach our subject with respect throughout the semester, we needed to acknowledge the subjects of lynching as people and to look at them that way, not turn away from their visual representations as though they were really objects created by lynchers themselves.

The title page of *Incognegro*, actually a splash page that spans two facing pages, introduces readers to the ambivalent nature of representation. The title itself appears on the bottom of the left page, while the right-hand page features a group of spectators turned toward an as-yet unseen spectacle. They are all light-skinned; one holds a bottle of liquor and is chatting animatedly with his neighbor. The only person turned away from the object of their gazes is the man we soon recognize as Zane Pinchback, the main character, a black man who is passing as white in order to record the names of the people participating in this lynching. The book's next image, printed on a right-hand page with the left-hand page a solid black, is the lynching itself: a young man clad only in pants torn off at the knees stands on a crate, the noose already secured around his neck, while several white men point at him, brandish clubs, gesture angrily, and drink from various bottles. Though the figure of the victim almost disappears among all the other men drawn on the page, the enormous tree from which he is about to be hanged and the lynching rope, drawn tightly at an acute angle by a man in the picture's background, guide our eyes to his face. Zane's narration of the scene appears in four text bubbles at the top; he notes that "Between 1889 and 1918, 2,522 negroes were murdered by lynch mobs in America. That we know of. Now, since the beginning of the '30s, most of the white papers don't even consider it news. To them, another nigger dead is not a story. So my job is to make it one. That's all" (Johnson 7). This text points to several dimensions of representational accuracy that we had already considered in class. Zane cites statistics that demonstrate not only the unspeakable scope of lynching activity but also individuals' and organizations' persistent efforts to record and stop it. He notes the normalization of

lynchings within the conservative atmosphere of Jim Crow America and the press's role in preserving the status quo. Finally, the racist epithet that he includes reflects the casual hatred that in this period functioned to dehumanize African Americans. The book thus confronts its readers with the material experience of lynching as well as the social contexts that have enabled it.

Our discussions about these issues of visual representation again led my students to question why such incidents continue to occur today. They asked repeatedly what we can do to work against the social attitudes and legal loopholes that allow this type of crime to go, at times, unpunished. Even with the passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009, violent vigilante crimes that target individuals based on perceived racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, religious, or other identity take place regularly. Most states have anti-hate crime statutes; 45 of those address race, religion, and ethnicity, while only 32 address sexual orientation, 29 address gender, and 11 address transgender identity. Only 13 state anti-hate crime laws are considered "comprehensive" ("[#50States](http://www.50states.com)"). As a group, we found this information, and its representation in both textual and graphic forms, a significant motivation to act outside of the classroom.

## The Literature of Lynching as Social Impetus

My students interpreted their new knowledge about lynching as a historical and a current phenomenon as the reason they now need to take public action. Both creative assignments like the ones that *Incognegro* inspired and our everyday discussions of more conventional texts like Charles Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Annie Nathan Meyer's *Black Souls* (1932), Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *Miss Ida B. Wells* (1983), Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle* (1994), and Louise Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves* (2009), among others, guided our class toward more meaningful insight into the American histories that have been shaped by acts of lynching. As a result of our classroom focus on these histories, my students insisted upon discussing every week the regular violence and discriminatory practices that define American social relations, interpreting these events in most cases as a register of the kinds of reactionary attitudes that permeate the country's political climate. During the 2016 election season, for instance, two local colleges were vandalized with spray-painted racial slurs; a Buffalo resident erected a noose in his yard as an expression of support for the Republican presidential candidate (Besecker). My students spoke openly about the kinds of racism that they felt the campaign had empowered, condemning these and other violent acts across the country. They cited the increasing presence of protests among both affected groups and allies as evidence that the majority of Americans do not share racist views. They found the many public expressions of outrage and dissension that had been voiced since the election to be a source of optimism, as we discussed several times, and both white and black students shared their plans to

participate in upcoming protest marches and rallies. However, several of my students of color also felt in a very real sense that their ways of life were in danger. Because they were statistically more likely to be stopped by the police while driving or walking down the street, they felt vulnerable in public spaces. One student, a black man in his late twenties, expressed his belief that he was likely to be targeted for reasons similar to those that Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, and many other recent victims of racially driven violence had faced. Merely being aware that these problems existed was not enough, as the authors of our literature had also argued, to offer a solution. Instead, this student and his peers asserted that we needed to read much more, outside of the immediate purview of the course, and to talk to people in all areas of our lives about the crimes committed against people of color and the actions we can take to stop them. Essays, poems, plays, stories, and novels help to record and preserve the lives and voices that lynching steals—but live conversations, protests, rallies, meetings, petitions, and classroom sessions do the more important work of reinvigorating those lost existences and pushing those of us who are still here to fight injustice.

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Overall, I learned a great deal from both the reading and research that I did to prepare for each session and the interpretive work that we did in class together. My students grappled with difficult questions every week, asking themselves and each other what responsibility we possess to intervene in incidents of racial profiling, racist violence, bullying, and cultural prejudice. Their many questions included: What substantial political or social effects can a written document—whether fiction or nonfiction—produce? Where and how should we circulate such documents? Are there particular demographics—age, cultural or racial group, gender, religious affiliation, level of education, professional status, etc.—that would benefit most from reading and discussing this literature? How, too, they asked, do we understand what the material definition of lynching is? What cases of targeted violence qualify as lynching, and why is that qualification important? While we discussed questions like this in every class period, we generally uncovered more questions than answers, and many of our investigations could not be satisfactorily resolved. It was the process of inquiry itself that was useful, as Anne Wagner has also pointed out; through these questions, we ventured beyond our usual comfort zones in order to investigate the groups accountable for these acts of violence and the ways in which we are also complicit in them

Many of the questions we returned to over and over again as a class centered on the definition of lynching itself and the situations in which the term can or should be applied. Complicity turns out to be a major determinant in identifying a case of lynching: as Brundage notes, a host of interrelated social and economic factors have contributed to widespread incidences of lynching, including “Reconstruction, segregation, sharecropping, [and] white political hegemony” (14). Though he is discussing the immediate postbellum period in the South here, Brundage’s list translates in today’s national context to abandoned governmental attempts to address regional economic inequalities, persistent segregation within cities’ institutional and geographic infrastructures, high unemployment and underemployment numbers, and recurring evidence that white-supremacist beliefs continue to shape a significant number of social interactions and public policy decisions. The economic stresses that these factors produce can contribute to outbreaks of violence—but they are not the sole reason why lynching occurs. The social complicity necessary to imagine, condone, carry out, and, in some cases, conceal an act of lynching originates in a group or “mob” mentality that provides ready-made excuses for unconscionable violence. A mob of people who shared the belief that a person or persons had committed a crime against them might use “the pretext of punishing an alleged law-breaker or violator of local customs” by executing “their victims with little if any regard for proof of guilt or evidence of innocence.” Such executions depended upon the mob’s shared intentions to “enforce social conformity and to punish an individual,” but they also involved intentional persecution of African Americans in many cases as well as “a degree of community approval” (Brundage 18). This combination of personal views and public circumstances suggests that lynching is defined by some measure of social approbation and the collusion of at least a small group of people in the act.

Our discussions of complicity did not resolve our investigation into lynching’s social contexts; rather, this concept raised more worries about our own complicity in the circumstances that spur and enable public violence. Though I had hoped that students would finish my course with a solid grounding in at least one dimension of America’s political literature and the inspiration to combat social inequalities, they also ended the semester with a sense that their own presences as witnesses to public injustice made them responsible for ongoing problems. We could not, as a group, dispel this fear. Students discussed openly their plans to participate in future protest gatherings but also expressed worry that they would become inured to the current state of social unrest and would continue to accept the truly unacceptable. I reminded them of the diverse texts we had discussed, the creative responses we had formulated to the literature, and the serious conversations we had conducted on both theoretical terms and real-world conditions. We agreed that maintaining a conscious awareness of social justice must be our priority when moving forward.

However, in spite of our shared commitment to pursuing social justice, I encountered some standpoint issues in teaching the course. My students in many cases

had much more direct experience with racial prejudice and social violence than I did. To compensate for our dissimilar backgrounds, we worked to acknowledge and articulate the differences among us; these dialogues helped us to understand more precisely the social inequalities that produce such violence. Though we did not achieve a perfect sense of identification among all the members of the class, we found empathy for one another. We also had to process a significant influx of negative emotions that accompanied and followed the election season—discouragement, depression, and even apathy. Many people in my class were surprised by the increasingly negative ads and public conversations that filtered through the presidential campaigns. As a result, they tended to associate each new example of public violence against people of color with the political conservatism that surfaced in the course of the campaign. They also suggested during some of our class discussions that social conditions had improved so little since the time of Ida B. Wells’s own anti-lynching crusade that we could hardly expect the complete overhaul of public institutions—the government, the police, the educational system, and so on—that a real shift in social attitudes demands.

To try to counter these pessimistic assessments of our national character, I asked them to look closely at the documents published by some of the activist organizations that had emerged in the past five years, including Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name. I admitted that our citizens are experiencing a nadir in political receptivity to social change but noted as well that this low point has been accompanied by a tremendous outpouring of public activism and anti-racist organizing. As the opening statement on the Black Lives Matter site asserts, such activism can be “a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes” in order to “affirm . . . the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.” In short, BLM functions as “a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement” (*Black Lives Matter*). In discussing the foundational beliefs and guiding principles of this movement, we observed that—as we had also seen in our studies of Ida B. Wells’s work and in the many plays we had read in Kathy A. Perkins’s and Judith L. Stephens’s anthology *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by African Women* (1998)—the group had first been formed by women: Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. Their call to action, which was sparked initially by Trayvon Martin’s murder in February 2012, refuses silence and complacency, urging us instead to locate African-American lives and experiences at the center of public discourse. Thus, we concluded as a class, though incidents of targeted violence condoned by entire groups of people continue to occur, writers, activists, and community members can draw on a long history of strategies for resistance in order to make arguments on behalf of social transformation. The African American Policy Forum, which created the Say Her Name movement and writes its supporting documents, argues that a “gender-inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally” is an essential part of the “resurgent racial justice movement” (Crenshaw and Ritchie 2). Women’s voices are and have been essential to

resisting lynching, in both its postbellum and more recent forms. This fact, I argued, gives us a historical standpoint from which to advance our own radical claims in favor of social change and renders us a key part of today’s activist movements.

The course’s twelve students advanced sometimes radically dissimilar perspectives on the course’s subjects and readings; I attempted in discussions and in my responses to their written work to advocate for receptivity toward others’ viewpoints and to urge them to take cultural contexts as well as writers’ personal experiences and subject-positions into account. We did work through some conflicts in class, though everyone maintained respectful attitudes; the most memorable conflicts occurred during our discussions on both *The Marrow of Tradition* and *Incognegro*, when students argued about the motivations behind an African-American person’s decision to pass as white. Some participants took the position that passing constitutes a cowardly act, a betrayal of one’s culture and family, while others pointed out that factors such as personal choice, professional and social opportunities, and safety have impelled individuals to pass. In both discussions, we considered the importance of an insider perspective, acknowledging the fact that although every person can be an ally on behalf of social justice, only a person who lives as a member of a specific race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or other identity category can understand the ways in which that identity brings with it specific social and personal experiences. While we covered other topics in class that also generated debate, passing ended up being the subject that most noticeably divided the students, perhaps because it evokes intracultural divisions and choices that favor individuals over the community. Again, we did not manage to reconcile all of our differences by the end of the course, but I pointed out to the class that contrasting experiences of intersectionality are an essential dimension of social justice. I argued that we should emphasize these differences, rather than trying to ignore them, as we continue to figure out how citizens subject to injustice and their allies can best work together.

***The horrific recurrence of lynchings across now three centuries of American social history points to our ongoing need to put true civil rights practices in place, while the increasing visibility of these events in literature, art, the news, and social media illustrates the new wave of protesters and activists who are working to make the world better.***

## Conclusion

At the end of the semester, I asked myself two questions: Was the class a success? Is any educational endeavor a success that cannot locate an endpoint for these crimes and that finds new evidence of such crimes almost every day? Increased individual and social

awareness of the history of lynching and its present-day forms is one obvious result of taking a course like this one, even when it does not offer universally effective solutions. I encouraged my students to continue seeking out the topics we had covered in class, to introduce these materials to their friends and colleagues, and to participate in local social-justice movements. I also continued to work through the pedagogical strategies based in anti-racist thought with which I had begun the semester. One of my students, who serves as a nurses' aide at a local hospital but describes herself as a "working artist," created a gorgeous book sculpture as one of means of coming to terms with our course subjects (see Figure 1). Of the piece, she says, "The whimsical beauty intertwined with the graphic content of lynching as a performance is meant to represent the juxtaposition of romanticism and mob violence depicted in much of our reading this semester" (Email, 28 Nov. 2016). Other students continue to email me regularly to share articles about recent instances of social violence, to ask for book recommendations, and to offer more thoughts about the often painful subjects we considered in class. I believe that the course affected many of my students' lives and that our conversations still resonate with them today.

Several concluding activities and conversations near the end of the course have helped me to shape my evolving approach to anti-racist pedagogy. As a result in part of our work within the contexts that scholars like Kyoko Kishimoto, Priya Kandaswamy, and Anne Wagner have defined, my students and I sought to increase our consciousness of our own positions relative to the topics that we studied, examining our motivations in making statements about race and racism, social justice, and movements toward public change. We confronted the moments of conflict that arose in discussion and in the texts we studied, rather than turning away from them. Conflict, we found, is a necessary precursor to change, even—or especially—when it is painful and unpleasant to work through. One of the most difficult things that I had to do over the course of the semester was to come to terms with the fact that we could not solve the problems that we perceived in our readings and in the world around us. Lynching, we concluded, continues to be a phenomenon that in some ways, as Koritha Mitchell put it, we have to "live with." Recently our country witnessed Mississippi Republican representative Karl Oliver stating that lynching would be an appropriate "punishment" for Louisiana lawmakers who chose to remove Confederate monuments; on May 20, 2017, black Bowie State College student Richard Collins III was stabbed in the chest by a white University of Maryland student while standing at a bus stop. Living with brutal incidents like these does not constitute acceptance, however, nor does it preclude the social-justice work that is so fundamental to the United States of today: a country that is divided between extreme conservatism and a fervent desire for racial, sexual, and

economic equalities. The horrific recurrence of lynchings across now three centuries of American social history points to our ongoing need to put true civil rights practices in place, while the increasing visibility of these events in literature, art, the news, and social media illustrates the new wave of protesters and activists who are working to make the world better.

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