


Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940 (New Directions in Southern Studies)

By Amy Louise Wood

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Lynch mobs in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America exacted horrifying public torture and mutilation on their victims. In *Lynching and Spectacle*, Amy Wood explains what it meant for white Americans to perform and witness these sadistic spectacles and how lynching played a role in establishing and affirming white supremacy. Lynching, Wood argues, overlapped with a variety of cultural practices and performances, both traditional and modern, including public executions, religious rituals, photography, and cinema, all which encouraged the horrific violence and gave it social acceptability. However, she also shows how the national dissemination of lynching images ultimately fueled the momentum of the antilynching movement and the decline of the practice. Using a wide range of sources, including photos, newspaper reports, pro- and antilynching pamphlets, early films, and local city and church records, Wood reconfigures our understanding of lynching's relationship to modern life.

Wood expounds on the critical role lynching spectacles played in establishing and affirming white supremacy at the turn of the century, particularly in towns and cities experiencing great social instability and change. She also shows how the national dissemination of lynching images fueled the momentum of the antilynching movement and ultimately led to the decline of lynching. By examining lynching spectacles alongside both traditional and modern practices and within both local and national contexts, Wood reconfigures our understanding of lynching's relationship to modern life.

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Editorial Review

Review

An engaging treatment of the 'spectacle of lynching.'--*The Alabama Review*

This insightful exploration of lynching's cultural power is a groundbreaking addition to a growing body of scholarship focused on racial violence. . . . Essential.--*Choice*

[An] insightful study. . . . Her research is impressive, Wood's conclusions are measured and well-documented, and . . . her prose is crisp and clear.--*Journal of Illinois History*

Serves as a potent reminder that racial violence was not only condoned but enthusiastically supported by huge numbers of white Americans.--*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*

Adds an important chapter to a branch of scholarship that must remain as fluid, and sometimes uncertain, as its subject. . . . Wood, in choosing a ritualized form of violence and a unique set of sources through which to examine it, has made both a wise and creative choice, which has yielded a rich and troubling history.--*Southern Cultures*

The public nature of lynching receives heavily researched and imaginative treatment in Wood's readable analysis.--*Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

Should be required reading for all studying racial violence in the South. . . . Wood is admirably balanced in assessing her evidence and placing it in perspective. . . . In evidence, argument, context, and writing, this is an impressive study that will inspire future scholarship and will offer teachers a rich set of contexts to enliven their discussions of race in the era of lynching.--*American Historical Review*

Insightful. . . . One of the work's greatest strengths is the interplay between local and national contexts. . . . An excellent example of how visual culture and theory can enhance historical research without obscuring the argument. . . . Recommended for historians interested in how race and violence worked together to shape popular culture, and vice versa.--*Indiana Magazine of History*

This thoughtful and amply illustrated monograph shows how photography served first to cast atrocity as civility and subsequently undermined the practice of lynching by reconstructing what had become folk custom as, instead, an outrage.--*Arkansas Historical Quarterly*

Wood deserves praise for synthesizing the expansive body of scholarship on lynching while offering an insightful cultural analysis of southern white sadism.--*North Carolina Historical Review*

Expands our understanding of lynching. . . . Wood's most important contribution is her well-informed discussion of the impact of photography and film on lynching's rise and demise.--*Georgia Historical Quarterly*

This study incorporates a tremendous amount of information and provides a thorough understanding of lynching as spectacle, which will be of interest to scholars of American religion, the South, and American Studies.--*Journal of Southern Religion*

The freshness of approach provides a unique perspective and contributes to several fields of study. . . . Wood thinks clearly, demonstrates an impressive range of research skills, and writes well. . . . Offers the best account to date of the American film industry's disturbingly cozy appropriation of lynching in its early decades. . . . [Wood] provides so much primary source material and interpretive aplomb that her narrative rarely wavers in its originality or self-reliance.--*Journal of Southern History*

[A] thoughtful, well-researched study. . . . Wood has established the centrality of visual media to the formation of racial identities and the perpetuation of a related culture of lynching more cogently and elaborately than any previous writer. . . . Provocative and lucid. . . . A significant contribution to our understanding of race and racial violence in American history.--*Southern Quarterly*

The scholar interested in southern culture will find the book rewarding." --*Journal of Mississippi History*

Wood's effective contribution refines our understanding of the relationship between lynching and culture. . . . Compelling and insightful. . . . A well-executed book that should be read by all who are interested in the cultural relations of lynching.--*Journal of American History*

Wood succeeds admirably. . . . One of the most enlightening studies of lynching produced in recent

years.--*Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies*

Review

Lynching and Spectacle is a work of both impressive analysis and serious historical craft that makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of the American South and violence there. Combining attention to place, time, and context with an acute sensitivity to cultural expression, ranging from photography and film to journalism, Wood has written the most mature, finely grained, and insightful study of the culture of lynching available.--W. Fitzhugh Brundage, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

From the Inside Flap

Wood explains what it meant for white Americans to perform and witness sadistic spectacles of lynching and how lynching played a role in establishing and affirming white supremacy. She also reveals how the national dissemination of lynching images ultimately fueled the momentum of the antilynching movement and the decline of the practice.

Users Review

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