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DISMEMBERING THE LYNCH MOB

Intersecting Narratives of Disability, Race, and Sexual Menace

Late in September 2003, in the small town of Linden, Texas, four young white men assaulted Billy Ray Johnson, a cognitively impaired African American man who had lived within the community for over forty years. As a result of the attack, Johnson sustained a brain hemorrhage that left him in a coma for a week, and his injuries ultimately led to his confinement in a nursing home. Even presented with such stark and undeniable facts, jurors recommended suspended sentences and probation for his assailants in lieu of jail time. Unsatisfied with the jury's decisions, the judge imposed additional penalties, but ultimately none of the men spent more than sixty days in jail. Johnson's beating and ensuing court case generated national attention and was rightly condemned by family spokespersons, the NAACP, and the media as a bleak reminder of enduring racial injustice in the region.[1] Shifting the focus slightly from the undeniable racism involved, I invoke this story to open a discussion of the complications inherent in interpreting race *with* disability—complications that, I argue in this chapter, are inextricable from the deeply enmeshed histories of racist and ableist violence in the United States. Focusing on the early twentieth century, this chapter closely examines discourses surrounding white-on-black lynching and the eugenic cas-

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tration of cognitively disabled men. I argue that these seemingly distinct historical practices are in actuality profoundly interconnected; in illuminating their relationship to each other, I seek to demonstrate how reading race and disability as interrelated, dynamic processes can inform our understanding of both past and present violence.

Witnesses' statements make it clear that the assault on Johnson was motivated by racism *and* ableism. On September 27, John Owens, Dallas Stone, James Hicks, and Christopher Amox picked Johnson up as he was walking along a road, brought him to a rural party, plied him with liquor, and then taunted him to dance and perform for their amusement. Witnesses said Johnson was subjected to myriad "racial slurs" and harassed by threats that the KKK might come for him. Johnson's cognitive impairment was also exploited for the crowd's pleasure. He was encouraged to reach into the fire to retrieve a burning log, apparently to flaunt his difficulty in discerning between safe and dangerous acts. By the end of the night, the abuse escalated; Amox hit Johnson so hard he was immediately knocked out. The men then loaded him into their truck, drove him a few miles, and threw Johnson's unconscious body on the ground next to a public dump, on top of a nest of stinging fire ants. He was left there for hours, until Hicks called the police to report seeing a man who had "passed out on the ground" (Witt, "Old South" 18).

Local authorities used Johnson's disability to downplay the racial nature of the attack against him. For example, Malcolm Bales, from the Cass County U.S. attorney's office, stated: "This was a bunch of guys who were mean-spirited and cruel, and they abused a black man who was retarded." While admitting that the offense was "terrible," Bales didn't think it should "give rise to a federal civil rights case" (Witt, "Old South" 18). Bales draws upon the widespread cultural understanding of disability as personal misfortune in order to position the act as a juvenile schoolyard taunting rather than a hate crime. That is, he attempts to defuse what he sees as the more volatile, divisive, and political issue of race by invoking the seemingly medical and individual issue of impairment. In this rhetorical maneuver, he relies upon a shared, cross-racial tolerance of disability prejudice to deflect accusations of racism.

Perhaps because this strategy has been effective, the media coverage and the NAACP's responses were couched primarily in racial terms. Johnson's disability was portrayed as accentuating the cruelty of a racially motivated crime but was not treated as itself affording a crucial lens of analysis. Lennard Davis makes a similar observation about the brutal murder of James Byrd Jr., which occurred

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a few years earlier in Jasper, Texas. The conviction of two white supremacist co-conspirators in 1999 marked the case as a racial hate crime, comparable to lynchings in the early part of the twentieth century.[2] Davis points out that while Byrd's racial identity was highly publicized, the fact that he was disabled—arthritic and prone to seizures—was hardly mentioned in the press (*Bending* 145–46). Davis reads this as evidence of widespread ableism in U.S. society and of an unwillingness to seriously consider disability discrimination as embedded within or connected to racially motivated attacks: "Whenever race and disability come together . . . ethnicity tends to be considered so much the 'stronger' category that disability disappears altogether" (*Bending* 147). Davis's point about media inattention to disability oppression is important. Yet his assertion—which entails a hierarchical rather than an intersectional analysis of race and disability—is complicated by the media coverage of the attack against Johnson, whose cognitive impairment, rather than "disappearing," has been repeatedly invoked. This invoking, however, has not referenced questions about how his disability contributed to his being targeted, or how the assault against him connects to a long history of violence against people with disabilities. As a result, the public discourse around these events has been truncated and one-dimensional.

In an effort to contribute to a more multidimensional approach, I argue for the importance of reading disability and race together—not as equal or competing, but as dynamic social and discursive processes that inform each other. In doing so, I propose that both the nature of the attack on Johnson and the interpretations surrounding it gesture back to historical narratives interweaving race, disability, and masculinity. Investigating these nodes of cultural meaning, I turn to the early decades of the twentieth century to look at two specific, racially charged, and disability-saturated cultural narratives: those surrounding racialized lynching and eugenic sterilization. To illuminate these rhetorical relationships, I read historic practices against literary figurations, paying particular attention to representations, in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*, of the presumed sexual threat of cognitively disabled men during this time period. These representations, I argue, support and are supported by the era's racist discourses around lynching.

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HISTORICAL NARRATIVES OF DISABILITY, RACE, AND MENACING MASCULINITIES

In the early decades of the twentieth century, white apologists for racial violence invoked the sexual threat of a mythic black rapist to justify and normalize the brutal torture, murder, and bodily destruction that came to define white-on-black lynching.[3] During this same period, eugenicists constructed cognitively disabled men as social menaces and sexual predators. Increased media attention to this putatively growing sexual threat (assumed to be directed against the sanctity of white womanhood) worked to promote public acceptance of institutionalization, surgical castration, and sterilization. Although the ritualized violence of lynching differed in form and overt purpose from the institutionalized violence of surgical sterilization, the intertwining narratives of rape and the extreme corporeal punishments enacted upon black and disabled bodies share important similarities. I suggest that even as racist mob violence and surgical sterilization followed distinct historical trajectories, the ubiquitous presence of lynching in the public imagination during the period from 1890 to 1940 may have informed and helped naturalize the rationale used to support medical castration and asexualization. Conversely, eugenic narratives of pervasive and uncontrollable sexual deviance among "feebleminded" classes likely bolstered the culture's conflation of sexual "perversion" with the highly racialized category of cognitive inferiority, providing scientific language to describe the sexual "deviance" and purported aggression of African American males.

In her compelling study connecting the histories of sexuality and race, Siobhan Somerville argues that the rhetorical formations of "whiteness" and "blackness" in the early twentieth century were deeply intertwined with emerging conceptualizations of homosexuality. Her work resists making simple analogies between sexual orientation and racial identity, instead focusing on how these "discourses had varying degrees of power to shape cultural understandings of bodies" during this period (9). While Somerville is cautious about equating these discursive practices, her analysis demonstrates that the emerging field of sexology was deeply underwritten by racist discourse and in turn illustrates the ways in which nonnormative sexualities were racialized. In a similar vein, I suggest that although the discourses of race and disability were distinct, they functioned fluidly and were often employed to undergird one another. Eugenics, of course, has been widely recognized and critiqued as a racialized and racist discourse, as well as an ableist one. Examining the racism and ableism of eugenics together

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makes it possible to glimpse some of the ways in which the discourse of race was intensified by a growing intolerance toward disability during this era.

While the manifestations of disability and race oppression differed significantly during the era I am discussing, they are governed by a shared political logic. In her book *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*, Lisa Duggan's juxtaposition of lynching narratives at the turn of the twentieth century with a highly publicized lesbian love murder in Memphis provides an interesting methodological frame for the link I am developing between eugenic narratives of abnormal sexuality and the rape stories used to mobilize racist mob violence. Duggan suggests that the melodramatic public discourse around the black rapist and the homicidal lesbian positioned these nonnormative subjects as particular threats to white masculinity and the sanctity of the white middle-class home. Duggan's intent is not to imply equivalence between the (rare) lesbian love murder and (all-too-common) racialized lynching as social practices, but rather to explore how the historical linking of interracial and homosexual sexuality with violence effectively controlled public discourse. As Duggan states, "narrative technologies of sex and violence have been deployed to privatize and marginalize populations, political projects, and cultural concerns in the United States, promoting the substitution of moral pedagogy for public debate" (3). She points out that both narratives constructed an erotic triangle of power in which either the black rapist or lesbian lover disrupted both white patriarchy and the normative white heterosexual union. Like Duggan's lesbian murderess, the "black rapist" and the sexually aggressive "moron" represented tangible threats to the sanctity of white domesticity. White men, through their control of new media, the legal system, and cultural justifications of lynching, cast themselves as chivalrous heroes who rescued "their" women and families by eliminating these menaces.[4]

The schema of the love triangle, which Duggan utilizes in her analysis, is also useful in developing the connections between eugenic and lynching narratives. The importance of the black rapist as the villain of the lynching story, while widely acknowledged as a white cultural fantasy, cannot be overstated. As the historian Jonathan Markovitz states, "Rape was such an integral part of white southerners' common sense understanding of lynching narratives . . . that it hardly needed to be stated explicitly" (10). In other words, the enactment of lynching implied an interracial rape, and the rape of a white woman by a black man was considered so heinous a crime that anything less than lynching would have been too mild. This imagined violation of white women also provided jus-

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tification for white men to blatantly exceed their own laws. In a widely quoted defense of lynching, the governor of South Carolina, Ben Tillman, explained that preserving white femininity made violence a moral imperative:

> The white women of the South are in a state of siege . . . some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is choked or beaten into insensibility and ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed. . . . Shall men . . . demand for [the demon] the right to have a fair trial and be punished in the regular course of justice? So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law. . . . Civilization peels off us . . . and we revert to the original savage type whose impulse . . . has always been to kill! Kill! Kill! (qtd. in Markovitz 182)

The cultural power of this narrative to incite violence was clearly demonstrated by the staggering number of lynchings carried out during this period. From 1882 to 1930, the years when historians agree the best records were kept, at least 3,220 African American men, women, and children were murdered by lynch mobs.[5] Although less than one fourth of the lynchings of African American men were in response to official charges of sexual assault (most of which were false accusations), the connection of lynching with sexual transgression was assumed. Already labeled as "demon" rapists, black male victims of lynch mobs became public spectacles through the mutilation rites of lynching. These protracted horrors often included being beaten or shot as well as all forms of torture, including castration and the cutting and parceling out of body parts to members of the crowd as souvenirs. This was followed by hanging or burning—or both. Historically, lynching has been largely thought of as a regional terror, a phenomenon largely isolated within the racial animosity of the South. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that lynching and its supporting narratives were integral to modern American cultural formation more generally.[6] Examining the ways these murders often became mass cultural events, Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that "spectacle lynchings" were products of modernization (206). In the years around the turn of the century, as white witnesses and participants began to disseminate lynching stories, share photograph postcards and pamphlets, and publicize upcoming mob executions in newspapers, the events themselves became more ritualized, and their narratives took on standardized forms. As much as the mob executions themselves, the proliferation of accounts and expansive public participation functioned to normalize lynching as an expected, and even justifiable, response to racial and sexual transgressions. In this way, each mob

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killing demonstrated and further secured the expansive regulatory reach and oppressive power of the white majority.

Jacqueline Goldsby extends this idea by suggesting that lynching actually contained a "cultural logic" very much aligned with broader national assertions of primacy and strength in the modern era. She points out, however, that the extreme violence of lynching has complicated the nation's willingness to remember "because lynching's violence was so unspeakably brutal—and crucially, since the lives and bodies of African American people were negligible concerns for the country for so long a time. . . . [We] have disavowed lynching's normative relation to modernism's history." "Lynching's 'secrecy,'" Goldsby insists, is "an historical event" (6). The unspeakable brutality made lynching both highly visible and impossible to claim. Even as white people witnessed lynching's viciousness, they also rejected it as unbelievable, unreal, and, in Goldsby's terms, "spectacular." This concurrent cultural normalization and disavowal of lynching has blurred its historical significance.

Goldsby's framing of lynching as a spectacular cultural secret enables an important historical reclamation. In addition to the extreme violence of lynching, I would suggest that the racialized sexual threat—the myth of the demon rapist—has also been crucial to the collective forgetfulness about these murders. While these staged executions were dramatically public events, the supposed sexual attack precipitating the mob's response allowed each murder to maintain an element of the private and individual. The rape narrative provided an essentially unique crime to "fit" the violent response of the lynch mob. In addition, the sexualization of the murder itself—especially in the form of castration—reinscribed the victim as sexual predator, regardless of the actual reasons behind his capture.

Robyn Wiegman suggests that the violent, ritualized castration enacted in most lynchings underscored black men's "threat to white masculine power" (14). As a disciplinary tool, castration was central to defining the power and powerlessness among the participants in this cultural drama: "that of the mythically endowed rapist, the flower of civilization (the white woman) he intended to violently pluck, and the heroic interceptor (the white male) who would restore order by thwarting the black phallic insurgence" (93). Wiegman pays particular attention to the homoerotic dynamics among members of the white mob. Paradoxically, though, despite the charged physical intimacy inherent in ritualized castration, its more potent force seems to have been its reassertion of the primacy of white heterosexuality. Moreover, the intimacy with the victim's sexual organs functioned in two additional but opposing directions: at once inscribing and ob-

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jectifying the presumed excessive sexuality of the black male on a public scale, castration also rendered the rite personal and private. This public and private function of castration mirrors what Goldsby refers to as lynching's secrecy and adds to the complicated nature of this violent history.

Against this public and private dynamic of the sexual violence of lynching and its adherent cultural narrative, I want to consider the contemporaneous emergence of surgical castration as a eugenic strategy to control and sexually punish cognitively impaired men. I focus primarily upon the public rhetoric constructing previously unmarked white male bodies as sexually "deviant." While African American men were sterilized during this period, they were often caught up in different systems of control. In the South, for example, institutions devoted to the care and training of "feebleminded" individuals were strictly segregated, so African Americans with cognitive disabilities were housed in mental institutions, imprisoned, or left with families (Noll 98–103). The segregated nature of institutions was mirrored by racially distinct discursive practices. Institutional directors spent little time justifying treatment of African American inmates (which was invariably inferior to that of whites), but they did feel compelled to rationalize surgical castration and sterilization of white boys and men in their care.

Preoccupied with preserving the sanctity and strength of the white race, leading eugenicists stressed the importance of controlling the reproduction and sexuality of "feebleminded" people. They defined broad categories of inadequate classes—in addition to designations based upon physical impairments and disease—in terms of sexual promiscuity, excessive appetites, and prodigious reproduction. Walter Fernald, a leading eugenicist, argued that controlling the sexual impulses of such people should be of the highest priority: "Perhaps the chief function of these classes in America has been to demonstrate that the community is not the place for an adult imbecile . . . an adult human being, with the mind of a child and the body and passion of an adult, is a foreign body in any community" (416). Nonconforming sexuality functioned as a foundational indicator of otherness and was deployed by eugenicists to secure the public's approval of medical regulation and confinement.

In the United States, the first law permitting sterilization went into effect in Indiana in 1907; by 1921 fifteen states had laws on their books. Even before the turn of the century, arguments favoring eugenic and punitive castration were common. In 1894 a large public debate was instigated when Dr. Hoyt Pilcher, superintendent of the Asylum for Idiots and Feebleminded Youths in Winfield,

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Kansas, admitted to castrating forty-four boys in his institution. While Pilcher was publicly rebuked and removed from his position, many doctors and leading eugenicists came to his defense, and he was ultimately reinstated (Reilly 29). During this period, even though castration and sterilization were not legal, many institutional leaders took it upon themselves to pioneer such eugenic controls. Much as white lynch mobs asserted their racial privilege against African Americans, some administrators used their institutional power to move fluidly outside legal confines to enact what they perceived as correct and *correctional* measures upon the bodies entrusted to their care.

As states began enacting eugenic laws during the first decades of the twentieth century, much of the support for surgical sterilization continued to come directly from superintendents, many of whom were doctors. Martin Barr, the chief physician at the Pennsylvania Training School for Feeble-minded Children in the 1920s, was one such vocal enthusiast of sterilization. "Personally I prefer castration for the male . . . as insuring security beyond a peradventure," he stated plainly. Making a small concession to those who might consider castration to be extreme, he went on to add, "if for sentimental reasons the removal of the organs are objected to, vasectomy . . . may be substituted" (234). Medical professionals' cavalier attitudes toward massive surgical procedures did much to normalize the idea of medically regulating disabled bodies. In addition, continued public support was elicited through the promulgation of the idea that adult men with disabilities were unpredictable, foreign, and sexually dangerous.

FAULKNER'S EUGENIC VILLAIN (AND VICTIM)

To look more closely at the potency of this eugenically constructed predator, my analysis turns to literary representations of disability. Specifically, I consider how the characterizations of disabled white men seem informed not only by deterministic assumptions of sexual deviance but also by the racially inflected hypersexuality attributed to the purported villains (and inevitable victims) of lynching narratives. In order to better imagine the social mindset behind eugenic sterilization, I discuss Benjamin Compson's castration in *The Sound and the Fury*. Through Benjy's "gelding" in response to his supposed attack of a neighbor girl (263), Faulkner depicts social acceptance of eugenic thinking among the residents of Jefferson, Mississippi. After his beloved sister Caddy is exiled from the family compound, Benjy continues his daily ritual of lingering at the gate to

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