Introduction

James Allen, an Atlanta-based antiques collector, debuted *Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen* at the Ruth Horowitz Gallery in Manhattan in January 2000. The exhibit displayed sixty photographs and postcards of lynchings that primarily depicted white-on-black lynch mob violence. It created an immediate buzz. People waited for hours in long lines to view the collection, which led the gallery to issue two hundred tickets per day. At least five thousand people viewed the exhibit before it closed. Subsequently, James Allen renamed the exhibit *Without Sanctuary* and redisplayed the photographs at the New York Historical Society between March 14 and October 1, 2000, during which time more than fifty thousand people viewed the collection. From there, it was exhibited in Pittsburg, Atlanta, and even at the Sorbonne in Paris. Altogether, between 2000 and 2009, *Without Sanctuary* was exhibited eight times. Even though Allen and museum curators modified or changed some aspects at each new site, the exhibition set attendance records for the host museums. Based upon the exhibit's popularity, Twin Palms Press published ninety-eight of Allen's lynching photos and postcards in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* in late 2000. Since publication, it has sold over sixty thousand copies. Thus, perhaps more than any other individual in the past two decades, James Allen has inserted the history of lynching into mainstream consciousness.

The *Without Sanctuary* exhibition and book showcase the most familiar images of American lynching – images of white lynchers surrounding a lynched black body. Contrary to the original intent of

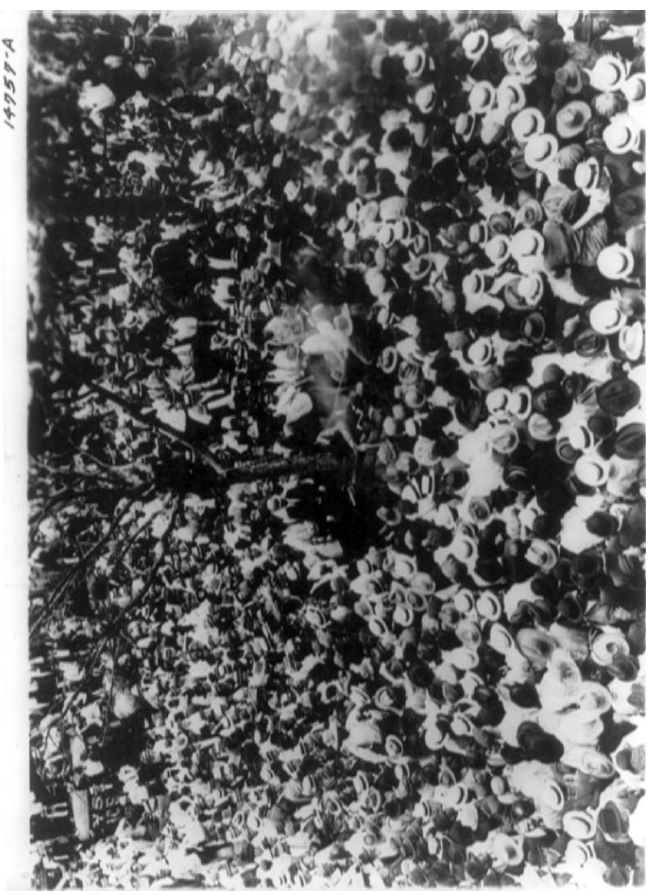

FIGURE 1 Onlookers at the Jesse Washington Lynching. "Large crowd watching the lynching of Jesse Washington, 18-year-old African American, in Waco, Texas, May 15, 1916."
Source: Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division; visual materials from the NAACP Records, lot 13093, no. 33.

FIGURE 2 Close-Up of Jesse Washington's Mutilated Body. "Charred corpse of Jesse Washington after lynching, Waco, Texas, May 15, 1916." *Source:* Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division; visual materials from the NAACP Records, lot 13093, no. 35.

lynching photographs, *Without Sanctuary* employs these images for the purpose of perpetuating a victimization narrative of the lynched black body. This narrative hinges upon highlighting white brutality against blacks. Rhetorically, *Without Sanctuary* aims to elicit contemporary audiences' outrage, sympathy for black lynch victims and their families, and reprobation for whites who participated in, witnessed, and condoned these brutal murders. It is an important and necessary narrative that has its roots in the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) four-decade quest for a federal antilynching law during the first half of the twentieth century. However, although the victimization narrative presented in *Without Sanctuary* is important and perhaps most familiar to contemporaries, it is in fact only one among many black-authored narratives that have chronicled lynching. In what follows, I will identify, describe, and historicize the victimization narrative as well as less familiar, but nonetheless significant, black-authored narratives of lynching.

Specifically, this book traces the evolution of black-authored narratives of the lynched black body from the 1880s to the 1990s by examining lynching narratives found in mainstream newspapers, the African American press, African American literature, and oral history interviews of African Americans. I define "lynching narratives" as both fictional and nonfictional stories in which lynching is central to the story's plot. In particular, this book illustrates how black Americans developed narratives of the lynched black body in response to the dramatic rise in white-on-black lynching and the emergence of the black beast rapist discourse in the late 1880s and early 1890s. *Beyond the Rope* emphasizes how black-authored lynching narratives sought to shape black attitudes toward the lynched black body. To be clear, the lynched black body is not employed here as a metaphor or some other abstraction. Rather, "the lynched black body" refers to actual flesh-and-blood or fictionalized black Americans who were executed by a lynch mob for an alleged offense. When lynched black bodies enter narrative discourse, they become a rhetorical instrument that attempts to convey specific meanings to specific audiences for specific purposes.[1]

[1] James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2007), 3. For frameworks for understanding rhetorical approaches to narrative, see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of

In tracing how narratives of the lynched black body changed over time, *Beyond the Rope* argues that the lynched black body in the black cultural imagination is best understood as a floating signifier that could be fashioned for varying rhetorical purposes, depending upon the circumstances of the times. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall employed the term "floating signifier" to explain how "there is nothing solid or permanent to the meaning of race." According to Hall, race is a floating signifier "because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation." Consequently, *race* can be "made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time."[2] Understanding the lynched black body as a floating signifier is important because it reveals that black perspectives toward black lynch victims have ranged from viewing black vigilantism against other African Americans as warranted to framing black victims of white lynch mob violence as hapless victims or the subjects of what I refer to as "victimization narratives" of the lynched black body. Alternatively, black Americans have portrayed black victims of white lynch mob violence as exemplars of heroic manhood in what I refer to more broadly as "consoling narratives" of the lynched black body. In bringing to light the various ways in which black Americans have portrayed black lynch victims in lynching narratives, my aim is to demonstrate that black attitudes toward the lynched black body have been fluid and contingent rather than one-dimensional and static.

In *Beyond the Rope*, I am not suggesting that victimization narratives or consoling narratives of the lynched black body

California Press, 1988); James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Techniques, Audiences, Ethics, and Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1996); Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1999); Walter Fisher, "Narration, Knowledge, and the Possibility of Wisdom," in *Rethinking Knowledge: Reflections across the Disciplines*, eds. Robert F. Goodman and Walter Fisher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 1–21; and Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990).

[2] Stuart Hall, "Race, the Floating Signifier," https://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/407/transcript_407.pdf; see also Jeffery Mehlman, "The 'Floating Signifier': From Levi-Strauss to Lacan," *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 10–37.

necessarily reflect how black Americans thought about particular black lynch victims. Rather, I am arguing that black-authored lynching narratives reveal how black antilynching activists, black writers, and African Americans more broadly sought to construct a particular vision of black lynch victims for specific rhetorical purposes. For instance, while acknowledging that lynchings were painful, ugly stories, black Americans sought to make lynching narratives redemptive ones. Black writers such as Sutton Griggs and Richard Wright constructed lynching narratives in ways that highlighted black agency even though the ultimate outcome of these lynching narratives was the death of black bodies at the hands of white lynchers. More specifically, the redemptive power of consoling narratives of the lynched black body lies in the ability of these narratives to be an effective counterpoint to the humiliation and helplessness that the white supremacist version of the dehumanized lynched black body sought to inspire.

Beyond the Rope contributes to a small but growing list of histories that examine lynching and black cultural history. Since the late 1970s, histories of lynching have primarily focused on explaining why white-on-black lynching incidents skyrocketed at the turn of the twentieth century.[3] Because white perspectives were presumed to be most important in ascertaining why whites lynched blacks, black perspectives have garnered little critical examination. In the past five years, historians have become interested in black perspectives on lynching and specifically how and why blacks crafted counternarratives to white-on-black lynch mob violence. Representative works include Christopher Waldrep's *African Americans Confront Lynching* (2009), Leigh Raiford's *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare* (2011), Koritha Mitchell's *Living with Lynching* (2011), Kidada E. Williams's *They Left Great Marks on Me* (2012), and Sandy Alexandre's *The Properties of Violence* (2012). This new scholarship on black perspectives and lynching is

[3] Representative works include Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South, Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

the natural outgrowth of earlier scholarship on black resistance. For instance, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, historians began challenging the notion that black resistance to lynching did not occur during the era of Jim Crow by documenting black organized resistance to attempted lynchings or in response to a particular lynching.[4] Over time, historians interested in the relationship between lynching and black agency have gradually shifted from examining particular episodes of black resistance to lynching and more toward charting the black antilynching discourses that gave rise to such resistance.

Although the above-mentioned literature probes black perspectives on lynching by exploring a variety of primary sources from multiple vantage points, it exclusively examines black perspectives on lynching in relationship to white-on-black lynching. Yet African Americans were not only victims of vigilante violence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – they also participated in vigilante violence. In fact, between 1882 and 1930, Southern newspapers reported approximately 148 incidents in which black vigilantes lynched African Americans for alleged criminal activity. To be clear, "black vigilantism" refers to a lynching in which a group of African American vigilantes publicly executed another African American for an alleged offense. Despite extant newspaper documentation, the history of African Americans lynching other African Americans has been largely excised from official histories and historical memory. To date, few scholars have written article-length essays on the history of black vigilantism.[5] Collectively, these works explain the similarities and differences

[4] Representative works include W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "The Roar on the Other Side of Violence," in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 271–291, and Sundiata Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration': Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894–1898," *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 5 (2000): 591–629.

[5] E. M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay, "When Race Didn't Matter: Black and White Mob Violence against Their Own Color," in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Bruce Baker, "Lynch Law Reversed: The Rape of Lula Sherman, the Lynching of Manse Waldrop, and the Debate over Lynching in the 1880s," *American Nineteenth Century History* 6 (2005); Karlos K. Hill, "Black Vigilantism: The Rise and Decline of African American Lynch Mob Activity in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1883–1923," *Journal of African American History* 95 (2010).

between black vigilantism and white vigilantism from the 1880s to the 1930s. *Beyond the Rope* contends that the history of black vigilantism is foundational to understanding the black experience of lynching. By analyzing narratives of the lynched black body that developed in response to both black vigilantism and white-on-black vigilantism, *Beyond the Rope* will more fully map the historical trajectory of black Americans' perspectives toward black lynch victims.

I analyze lynching narratives created during the peak period of lynch mob violence in America (1880–1930) as well as those created during the 1990s, when lynching had ceased to be a social problem in America. This broad time frame is necessary in order to illustrate the arc of black Americans' perspectives on black lynch victims and particularly how black-authored lynching narratives were responsive to changing historical and rhetorical contexts. In addition, I examine mainstream newspapers, black newspapers, and black literature during the peak period of white-on-black lynch mob violence. Newspapers are crucial for scholarly examinations of lynching, because they provide the most accurate and detailed descriptions of particular lynchings. Also, because newspapers consistently contained lengthy editorials about lynching, they are useful sources with which to reconstruct societal attitudes on lynching. Black newspapers are a key source for reconstructing black perspectives on lynching; they were one of the primary conduits of black public opinion as well as a primary site for challenging antiblack rationales and representations of lynching typically found in mainstream newspapers. Besides newspapers, literature was a crucial genre for the construction and dissemination of lynching narratives. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American literature was saturated with negative portrayals of black people, and especially of black lynch victims.[6] Unsurprisingly, many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American literary works meditated on the problem of lynching and its impact on black life.[7] Therefore,

[6] For a discussion of seminal works in white supremacist fiction and lynching, see Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890–1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), especially chapter 1.

[7] For the best overview of African American writers and lynching, see Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynchings and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), especially chapters 2–4.

African American literature provides a useful lens through which to reconstruct how black writers sought to create a counternarrative to racist justifications for lynching as well as reimagine the meaning of black lynch victims for black audiences. Lastly, I examine oral history interviews of African Americans compiled during the 1990s by the Behind the Veil Oral History Project – the largest and most comprehensive archive of African American interviews on black life in the Jim Crow South. I utilize oral history interviews in order to access the ideas and opinions of black Americans who did not or could not lodge their perspective in print culture. Moreover, since oral histories are constructed through weaving together both public and private memories, they provide an important lens for understanding how African Americans shaped a shared narrative of lynching long after lynching ceased to be a significant social problem for black Americans.

The critical context for this book is what I refer to as "the racialization of lynching": the process by which black Americans became the primary targets of white lynch mob violence. Although difficult to pinpoint, the period in which lynching became racialized occurred approximately between the years 1886 and 1892. In 1882, the *Chicago Tribune* – and eventually other mainstream newspapers – began tabulating the number of lynchings that occurred annually, the accusations that provoked them, and the racial identity of lynch victims. The year 1886 is important because it was the first time since lynching statistics began to be compiled that the total number of recorded black lynch victims exceeded the total number of recorded white lynch victims. In 1886, 74 blacks were lynched and 64 whites were lynched. After 1886, the total recorded number of white persons lynched never surpassed the total recorded number of black persons lynched. Moreover, the year 1892 bookends this period because 161 black lynchings occurred in that year – the most black lynchings recorded in a single year in American history. In that same year, there were 69 recorded white lynchings. Of the 1,075 recorded lynch victims between 1886 and 1892, blacks accounted for 780 (or 73 percent of total lynchings), whereas 295 whites were lynched (or 27 percent of total lynchings). The extent to which blacks had become the primary targets of lynch mob violence is made more apparent when one takes into consideration that between 1882 and 1885, blacks accounted for only 36 percent of total lynch victims and whites accounted for 64 percent of total

lynch victims. Therefore, beginning in 1886 and continuing thereafter, lynch victims were typically black persons rather than white.[8]

In addition, the racialization of lynching refers to how the practice of lynching was increasingly justified in racially specific ways. As the number of black lynchings rose after 1886, racial rationalizations for lynching – and particularly the black beast rapist narrative – became prevalent. The black beast rapist narrative posited that since emancipation, black males had regressed to a primitive, bestial state. As a result, black males, unable to control their sexual lust and unrestrained by the moderating influence of slavery, began raping white women in alarming numbers. In both the North and South, white politicians and the white press trumpeted the story that, given heightened black male sexual aggression toward white women, lynching was necessary to deter black rapists. The black male rapist narrative represented an "emotional logic of lynching," which meant that only swift and sure violence unhampered by legalities could protect white women from sexual assault by black men.[9] By 1889, the association between black men and rape had become so thoroughly fused in the white imagination that many whites perceived the rape of white women as the "negro's crime."[10] In an 1894 speech entitled "Lessons of the Hour," Fredrick Douglass, the nation's foremost black spokesman, declared of this narrative, "It clouds the character of the negro with a crime most revolting, and is fitted to drive from him all sympathy and all fair play and mercy."[11] In sum, the racialization of lynching transformed lynching, which had been an extralegal form of social control, into a mechanism primarily for racial social control.

The racialization of lynching was linked to a broader political transformation in American society during the 1880s that aimed

[8] For the lynching statistics cited in this paragraph, see Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 5–6.

[9] Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," *Southern Exposure* 12 (1984): 64.

[10] Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 117.

[11] Frederick Douglass, "Lessons of the Hour," 1894, 22–23, Stone/60:26, Alfred Stone Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi, 24.