Review of LYNCHING IN THE WEST and A SPECTACULAR SECRET

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syncratic literary styles that enabled them to avoid the homogenization and conformity endemic to it.

Although his discussion of O’Connor could be enlarged, Hoberek’s readings of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1958) are stunning. I have only one quibble with Hoberek’s indisputably important contribution to postwar criticism. His brief mention of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963) seems like a missed opportunity to discuss the postwar alienation of middle-class women laborers and the economic, corporate contexts of the feminist movement. Nonetheless, Hoberek’s book is a distinguished achievement.

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Studies of lynching have proliferated dramatically in the past twenty years as scholars remain committed to understanding this painful history and its many legacies. Recent monographs from Ken Gonzales-Day and Jacqueline Goldsby represent the range of insights currently emerging.

Gonzales-Day suggests that a false black-white binary has oversimplified lynching scholarship and its findings. The tendency to set explorations of the topic after the Civil War has led to characterizations of lynching as an antiblack phenomenon that was practically nonexistent in the western United States. By tracing the violence back to 1850, Gonzales-Day troubles the assumption that California was governed by “frontier justice” that had little to do with race and existed only in the absence of formal legal systems. Violence in the West was indeed motivated by racism, with many victims being Latino/a, American Indian, or Chinese. This history, he insists, has been obscured by inherited methodologies and imprecise racial labels. For example, newspaper reporters and early historians used “Mexican” to mark class, race, national origin, or all three; and scholars driven by a black-white binary have not sought clarification. Meanwhile, the hatred evident in the use of derogatory terms such as “greaser” has been treated as insignificant, allowed to fade from national memory. Thus, traditional conceptions of lynching history help California’s pristine landscape to conceal its many “hang trees.”

As an artist and art professor, Gonzales-Day culls material that will expand the study of lynching. The book’s fifty-four illustrations and photographs,
some created by the author, challenge us to recognize that images featuring black victims of mobs have been the most widely circulated, but they do not represent the scope of the violence. This study also makes a contribution with its three appendixes. All known California lynchings and summary executions are listed in the first appendix, and the second appendix lists legal and military executions; both tables offer much more specificity than previously available about each victim’s race. Appendix 3 accounts for the few pardons issued in the state. This new material is valuable, but readers may be frustrated by the book’s overall presentation of ideas. A new subheading appears every couple of pages, sometimes more frequently, giving the prose a disjointed quality.

Goldsby’s *A Spectacular Secret* focuses on lynching’s postbellum incarnation but avoids creating simplistic binary oppositions because it is so carefully conceived, theorized, and executed. Through elegant, clear, yet multilayered analysis, Goldsby traces the workings of what she calls lynching’s “cultural logic.” She argues that the violence went unchecked because it played a key role in ushering the nation into modernity, but the mob’s practices encouraged Americans of all races to deny or ignore lynching’s connection to national “progress.” Indeed, because “disavowal” characterizes Americans’ relationship to the truth about racial violence, literary analysis is invaluable. “Precisely because the work of literature is to imagine what we otherwise cannot know and say about our lives,” Goldsby asserts, “genres and their representational conventions leave rich and surprising evidence of authors’ perceptions of lynching’s violence” (42, 33). Illuminating the meanings embedded in generic form, this study engages everything from fictional sketches and poetry to sound recordings of lynch victims that became street corner entertainment. Still, three writers receive the most sustained attention.

Goldsby dedicates a chapter each to the journalism career of Ida B. Wells-Barnett; Stephen Crane’s early writing, especially his 1898 novella *The Monster*; and James Weldon Johnson’s novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published anonymously in 1912 and reissued under his name in 1927. Even scholars familiar with these authors will be surprised by much of what Goldsby shares, because she has uncovered new details about each writer’s encounters with mob violence—details that they sometimes worked to keep secret. The chapter devoted to lynching photographs offers fresh insights as Goldsby examines their formal composition and the “camera work” that produced it. The conclusion is equally substantial, working through, for example, the implications of her earlier suggestion that we must turn to the concept of the sublime in our attempt to understand lynching’s legacy.

This brief description is misleading, though, because *A Spectacular Secret* analyzes an impressive range of material. For instance, Goldsby bolsters her readings of lynching photographs by also analyzing pictures memorializing Civil War casualties, Kodak’s various marketing campaigns, the manufacturing processes that encouraged amateur postcard production, and the careers of both black and white lynching photographers. Author-centered chapters
are equally rich, considering relevant social, political, and emotional dynamics and tracing each individual’s journey toward becoming an artist. Thus, while other studies of Wells-Barnett have noted the rhetorical power of her journalism, Goldsby portrays her as a writer learning her craft but motivated by lynching to “parody” the profession’s most effective news writing forms. Further, Wells-Barnett emerges as a black woman attuned to the new freedoms that the turn of the century had brought as well as the responsibilities, desires, and anxieties accompanying them. Similarly, Goldsby captures Crane’s relationship to corporate capitalism by examining the terms of his contract with publisher S. S. McClure and his correspondence with his brother, from whom he borrowed money. Goldsby’s readers will find the connections she establishes between Crane’s financial situation, mob violence, and the narration of *The Monster* astonishing but quite convincing. The same will be true of the lines drawn between the narrative structure of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the privileging of realism in American literature, and the consolidation of mass cultural production.

The depth of Goldsby’s analysis is matched only by the breadth of material engaged, but she clearly hopes that the comprehensiveness of her work will impress upon readers that there is more to consider. Gonzales-Day would surely agree with Goldsby’s declaration: “What we think we know about lynching is so small, too small, to do justice to the lives lost . . .” (307).

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Ever since *The Black Atlantic* appeared in 1994, scholars of what has since become known as the field of African diaspora studies have labored to put flesh on its skeletal framework. Without question, Paul Gilroy’s exploration of how the Atlantic slave trade shaped the protest politics and cultural production of African-descended peoples opened up a vast conceptual space. Over the last decade, however, scholars have critiqued and supplemented Gilroy’s ideas by exploring the interconnections between the United States, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa.

Two recent books join this effort, offering in the case of *At Home in Diaspora* an analysis of how exiled writers in Europe narrate home, and in *Demonic Grounds* a consideration of black, female cultural production in the United