Jena: A Missed Opportunity for Healing

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by Sheldon H. Laskin

Southern trees bear strange fruit, 
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, 
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, 
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Strange Fruit
Abel Meeropol (1937)*

On November 1, 1892, John Hastings, a black man accused of murder in Catahoula Parish, Louisiana was lynched, along with his son and daughter. Other officially documented lynchings in Catahoula Parish include the following:
- June 25, 1903, Lamb Whitley, black, accused of murderous assault.
- July 16, 1908, Miller and Sam Gaines and Albert Godlin, black. The Gaines were accused of arson and Mr. Godlin of inciting arson.

Some or all of these seven lynchings may have occurred in what is currently La Salle Parish because in 1910, western Catahoula Parish broke off and became the newly formed La Salle Parish, the parish seat of which is Jena.

Thanks to the blogosphere, black radio, and Amy Goodman—and no thanks to the mainstream media—the basic facts of the Jena 6 case are now generally well-known. After black students sat under a tree at Jena High School typically used by white students, three nooses were hung from the tree. When the school board reversed the principal’s decision to expel the white students who hung the nooses, a series of escalating interracial fights culminated in six black students being arrested and charged with the attempted murder of a white student who was healthy enough to attend a social function the same night of the incident. No comparable charges have been filed against any white students, notwithstanding a prior

*Writing under the pseudonym Lewis Allan, Abel Meeropol (1903-1986) wrote the poem "Strange Fruit," which was recorded by Billie Holiday. Meeropol and his wife Anne adopted Michael and Robert Rosenberg following the execution of their parents, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, in 1953.
assault on a black student who attempted to attend an all-white party and an assault at gunpoint on three blacks. In the latter case, one of the blacks has been charged with assaulting the whites and stealing the gun, even though the blacks promptly reported the incident to the police, claiming self-defense.

The Jena case, with its potent evocation of the South's long history of terrorism by lynching combined with a racist prosecutor bent on over-charging blacks while ignoring white-on-black violence, has struck a deep chord in the black community, leading to the largest series of nationwide civil rights marches and protests since the 1960s. But what has been ignored in the controversy is that the school board officials, from the beginning, missed a unique opportunity to use this sad case as a vehicle to educate the white high school students of Jena to the legacy of lynching and discrimination against blacks for which the South—and the nation as a whole—is responsible. Had the Jena school officials reacted with compassion and sensitivity to the discovery of the nooses, perhaps the case could have been a springboard to the repentance and atonement necessary to move forward from that legacy and achieve a meaningful reconciliation between the races.

Perhaps the Jena school officials, instead of expelling or suspending the guilty white students, could have assigned them a research project on the history and effects of lynching in Louisiana. Part of that assignment could have included interviewing relatives of Lee and David Blackman, brothers of an alleged murderer, last of the thirty-three documented lynching victims in the six parishes that border La Salle Parish, who were killed in Rapides Parish, southwest of La Salle Parish, on June 2, 1928. Finally, the students could have been required to report on their findings at an interracial community meeting, at which further dialogue on the issue could perhaps have taken place.

The purpose of the student assignment would not have been to make local whites wallow in guilt. Indeed, of the approximately 400 documented lynchings that took place in Louisiana between 1878 and 1946 none appear to have taken place in present-day La Salle Parish, with the possible exception of the seven Catahoula Parish lynchings described in this article, the last of which occurred two years before La Salle Parish was established. Had the school officials assigned Professor Michael Pfeifer's Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947 to the white students as part of the assignment, they would have learned that lynchings rarely occurred in the Louisiana north central upcountry, including La Salle Parish. Lynchings were not used in the white majority upcountry to control a black labor force, as was the case in the cotton-rich Red River Delta and Ouachita River Valley, where blacks were in the majority. Rather, when lynchings occurred in the upcountry, they largely resulted from clashes between poor whites and poor blacks in a marginal cotton economy. This research could have given the students an appreciation of the class and economic bases of lynching, perhaps helping them to understand that lynching was as much a means of misdirecting poor white dissatisfaction with their economic lot as it was a means of controlling blacks.

In addition, the students could legitimately have explored what positive local factors may have contributed to the absence of lynching; perhaps the local churches or respected parish elders may have fostered an ethos that lynching was not acceptable. For all the record shows, an abhorrence of lynching might have been a reason that La Salle Parish broke off from Catahoula Parish. Should this have proven to be the case, the Jena case could have been a vehicle for fostering local pride, rather than the shame Jena residents must now be feeling.

Rather than requiring local whites to wallow in guilt, the purpose of the assignment would have been threefold.

First, at the most basic level, the assignment would have been to teach the students the local history of racism and race-based violence. In Santayana's memorable phrase, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But these teenage students could hardly be expected to remember a past they did not live. The Jena school officials' abdication of their role as educators is inexcusable. Instead, the choices made by those officials inflamed the situation and further polarized the community along racial lines.

The principal of Jena High School initially expelled the white students who hung the nooses. This harshly punitive reaction naturally resulted in white resentment and defensiveness, which is demonstrated by the almost universal reaction of the white citizens of Jena, in the face of the racial symbolism of nooses hanging from Southern trees, that they are not racists and that this is not a case of racism. But then the school (continued on page 73)
rance and liberal guilt than from any all-powerful Israel lobby.

It has long been in Washington’s interest to maintain a militarily powerful and belligerent Israel dependent on the United States. Real peace could undermine such a relationship. The United States has therefore pursued a policy that attempts to bring greater stability to the region, while failing short of real peace. Washington wants a Middle East where Israel can serve a proxy role in projecting U.S. military and economic interests. This symbiosis requires suppressing challenges to American-Israeli hegemony within the region.

This also requires suppressing challenges to this policy within the United States and there is no question that the Israel Lobby plays an important role in this regard. However, this is primarily an issue of the Israel Lobby working at the behest of U.S. foreign policymakers, not U.S. foreign policymakers working at the behest of the Israel Lobby.

Unfortunately, Washington’s agenda provokes a reaction that all but precludes any kind of stable order that would enhance the long-term national security interests of the United States or Israel, much less peace or justice. U.S. policy has resulted in dividing Israelis from Arabs, although both are Semitic peoples who worship the same God, love the same land, and share a history of subjugation and oppression. The so-called peace process is not about peace but about imposing a Pax Americana. To blame the current morass in the Middle East on the Israel Lobby only exacerbates animosities and plays into the hands of the divide-and-rule tactics of those in Congress and the administration whose primary objective is ultimately not to help Israel but to advance the American Empire.

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board, in addressing the severity of the expulsions, only made the situation worse by reducing the punishment to a three-day suspension, seemingly treating the case as nothing more than a boisterous prank. By ignoring the violently racist symbolism evoked by the nooses, the Jena school officials triggered a corresponding resentment in the black community. Their decision not to confront the symbolism directly, in a sensitive, compassionate manner designed to foster reconciliation and healing, left the mutual resentment of the two communities only one outlet—violence. At the very least, treating this incident as an educational opportunity could have served to defuse tensions and avoid, or reduce, the ensuing race-based violence.

But it could have done so much more. Repentance is not possible without self-awareness of how our actions may hurt others. And self-awareness is impossible without knowledge. Providing these students an opportunity to learn the history of their forebears, however painful that history is, would have been the first step towards self-awareness.

Repentance is also not possible until we can see through the eyes of those we have hurt. And that is why I would have required the students to seek out relatives of the victims and listen to their stories. Perhaps one story would have moved one white student to see the world differently. As the Talmud teaches, “to save one life is to save the world.”

Finally, atonement is not possible without facing one’s victims. Had the students been required to report their findings to an inter racial audience, there would have been at least the possibility of a cathartic encounter with the Other. Maybe, just maybe, this could have fostered the beginnings of racial reconciliation in Jena.

The Jena school officials, at least for now, chose the wrong path. But they could still choose another path. They could call on the prosecutor to drop all charges, if both the black and the white students enter into a dialogue along the lines suggested here. They could introduce Professor Pfeifer’s book into the high school curriculum. They could admit that their initial reactions were misguided.

And they could plant a tree on the site of the old one. By cutting the tree down, the school officials hoped that the source of the controversy would be removed. But the tree was not the source of the controversy any more than were the nooses; the controversy was rooted in the souls of the students, as inheritors of generations of bias, ignorance, fear and hatred. One cannot defeat bias, ignorance, fear and hatred by removing inanimate symbols. The only way to do so is to heal the wounded soul.

Planting a tree is a universal symbol of hope for the future. By planting a new tree, to be tended and enjoyed by generations of students white and black, the school officials could demonstrate their hope for a more peaceful, loving world than the one these students have inherited.

All information on Louisiana lynchings in this article is taken from Louisiana Lynchings, 1878–1946, prepared by Michael J. Pfeifer, Associate Professor of History, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York and available at: http://academic.evergreen.edu/p/pfeifer/Louisiana.html.

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