

BEYOND THE ROPE

**The Impact of Lynching on
Black Culture and Memory**



KARLOS K. HILL

Beyond the Rope

Beyond the Rope is an interdisciplinary study that draws on narrative theory and cultural studies methodologies to trace African Americans' changing attitudes and relationships to lynching over the twentieth century. Whereas African Americans are typically framed as victims of white lynch mob violence in both scholarly and public discourses, Karlos K. Hill reveals that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans lynched other African Americans in response to alleged criminality, and twentieth-century black writers envisaged African American lynch victims as exemplars of heroic manhood. *Beyond the Rope* illuminates the submerged histories of black vigilantism and black-authored narratives of the lynched black body in order to demonstrate that, rather than being static and one-dimensional, African American attitudes toward lynching and the lynched black evolved in response to changing social and political contexts.

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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