

# FROM THE EDITORS

With this issue, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* embarks on a new venture by dedicating special issues to specific themes related to African and African Diaspora arts and visual culture. This approach allows *Nka* to provide cutting edge texts and imagery that explore, in depth, the critical issues that have come to define our visual reality and imaginary. It may be useful to begin by addressing why *Nka* dedicated this inaugural special issue to a collection of essays from the proceedings of *Strange Fruit: Lynching, Visuality and Empire*, a two-day symposium on *Lynching Violence and the Politics of Representation*, held at Cornell University (March 11-12, 2006), in addition to other essays from scholars of lynching.

The history of lynching and its visual representation through photography in particular, have once again become part of the American public consciousness due in large part to the publication of James Allen's collection of images in *Without Sanctuary* (Twin Palms, 2000), and its traveling exhibition, which first appeared in New York at the Roth Horowitz Gallery and then at the New York Historical Society in 1999, and again in Atlanta at the King Center in 2002. The exhibition, its companion book, and the public reaction to both have spurred an entirely new area of scholarly inquiry that looks at lynching photographs, and their circulation and display. Recent acclaimed works, including Shawn Michele Smith's *American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton University Press, 1999), and Dora Apel's *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob* (Rutgers University Press, 2004), have delved deeply into the racial, gender and class politics of lynching photography and its historical and contemporary implications. Their works, like that of Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (1984), and the now classic work of Ida B. Wells, *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans* (1969), have pointed to the centrality of lynching to the making of whiteness and to the articulation of its privilege and wealth in American society.

The essays in this issue direct attention to lynching

as a historical event and to the extremely complex and interrelated processes of recording and representing those events, and of encountering them through different types of representations. Countless questions about the processes of human meaning-making are bound up with this subject matter. So is the question of the inextricable link between meaning-making and relations of power. The same processes through which lynching and the workings of racial violence as a fundamental aspect of the American experience have been so long marginalized and denied—because the manifestations of this violence are treated as an aberration, an accident, a triviality—are still at work and form the immediate context for discussion in the essays. In unpacking these processes we must engage historical analysis and interdisciplinary approaches transformed by new voices and previously hidden perspectives, as well as visual culture discourses and their insights on the representation and re-presentation of lynching and other forms of violence perpetrated against non-white bodies nationally and internationally.

For some the topic of lynching might seem a little temporally, if not geographically out of place, or without meaningful links to discourses in contemporary art and visual cultures. On the contrary, as the essays in this volume attest, lynching is neither something of the past, nor particularly American, although in many ways it is 'as American as apple pie.' Contemporary events in the United States and abroad, reminds us that racial violence is hardly a matter of the past, a problem of the US, or its southern part. One need only recall the recent church-burnings in Alabama, and the brutal killing of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, by a gang of three white men to know that the past is present. As lynching moves into the center of scholarly discourses, we are now aware of the link between such acts of violence and the creation and sustenance of hierarchies based on race, class and gender. Yet, as W. F. Brundage reminds us, "the extreme spectacle of lynching distracts us from the pervasiveness of violence of every form in the south."<sup>1</sup> To this it should be added that lynching was and is not a geographically bounded phenomenon particular only to the US south. Rather, as several of the essays in this issue make clear, it must be understood within the broader context of the dehumanizing and oppressive practices perpetuated in the US and globally.

The centrality of lynching to the making of American society is paralleled by colonial violence's inextricable link to the formation of empire in its his-

torical and contemporary manifestations. Hence, the comparative imperative to most of the papers included in this issue, which interrogate the interrelationship of lynching at home to torture and colonial violence in the past and presently in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay.

In the past, organizations such as the NAACP in the 1930s, called upon the international community to band together to put an end to lynching and other forms of racial violence against black and other non-white bodies. Today, works by critical theorists such as Susan Sontag, and Hazel Carby (whose essay is included in this issue) point to the connections between lynching, racial violence, and the prevalence of a culture of violence and pornography at home on the one hand, and the return of classic colonial violence and torture as they are currently being inflicted on non-white nations and people abroad on the other. It is striking how both racial privilege at home and imperial ambitions abroad continue to be justified through the logic of the 'civilizing mission' and 'law and order.' Cultural and religious differences are translated into a "clash of civilizations" and the "war on terror" to justify unprecedented and horrific acts of violence and violations of basic civil liberties. What could be more eerie than the similarity between the contestation over the legitimacy of lynching in the past, and the current debate about the legality of torture in the US Congress and among American circuits of power and law enforcement?

Visual images of lynching added a sense of immediacy to the horrors of lynching as a spectacle. As we now know, anti-lynching activists appropriated those same images, and in the process endowed them with a totally different meaning far removed from their original ones, which often sanctioned the very mob violence that inspired them. In using these images, including those of torture in Abu Ghraib, as illustrations in this issue, we are aware, as Meike Bal warns us, that "the reproduction, even in enhanced form, of ...objectionable images is a gesture of complicity, no matter how critical the text that accompanies them."<sup>2</sup> We are also aware of the risk of repeating "the racist gesture of distortion and exploitation" in the reproduction of such illustrations. But as Bal also suggests, "there are less offensive, less muddled, less ideologically and intellectually fraught ways of using illustrations in postcolonial criticism." Though difficult in the context of an art journal, we tried as much as possible to avoid aestheticizing images of lynching and torture. Hence, we consciously utilized a bare minimum

design, which kept the size and texture of the illustrations as close as possible to the original images. We also used the illustrations sparsely and placed them in close proximity to the relevant critiques that justified their usage.

As in the past, visual artists continue to be moved by the persistent public silence around lynching and torture. African American artists, including Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and Elizabeth Catlett in the 1940s and 1950s, and Carrie Mae Weems, Kerry James Marshall, Terry Adkins, Robert Gober, and Hank Willis Thomas, among many others active today, treat lynching as a subject in their works and react to its horror in powerful and creative ways. Hence, the inclusion of a sampling of representative works by these artists in a special portfolio entitled "Contemporary Art and Lynching."

It is important to note that the symposium was the product of a unique and fruitful collaboration between Cornell's Society for the Humanities, Department of Art History, and Africana Studies and Research Center, as represented by the guest editors of this issue: Brett de Bary, Cheryl Finley, and *Nka* editor Salah M. Hassan respectively. It was organized around the presence, as fellows, at the Society for the Humanities in 2005-2006 of Natasha Barnes, associate professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and James Allen, whose interests as a scholar and as a collector have converged on the issue of lynching and its visual representation. We very much appreciate James Allen's generosity in providing and granting permission to reproduce images from his valuable collection. To *Nka's* designer, Ramez Elias, and to both Amanda Gilvin and Denine Nalls-Kirby, we express our appreciation for their hard work and contributions to shaping the content and format of this special issue. Of course, our utmost gratitude goes to all the essayists and artists; without their thoughtful contributions and brilliant insights this special issue could not have been possible.

Salah M. Hassan

Brett de Bary

Cheryl Finley

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Conclusion: Reflections on Lynching Scholarship," *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 6, No. 3, September 2005, pp. 401-414.

<sup>2</sup> Meike Bal, "The Politics of Citation," *Diacritics*, 21-1, Spring 1991, pp. 25-45.