Regarding the Aftermaths of Lynching

Kidada E. Williams

Dinah Kirkland was neither a lynching victim nor a famous antilynching crusader—two factors that would most likely grant her a place in the stories that lynching scholars typically tell. Although she may have led a full life beyond her appearance in archival materials, when I encountered her she was an African American mother on a mission. In 1937 her eighteen-year-old son Edward Kirkland went missing following an arrest in Ocala, Florida. Dinah wrote a letter to Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) asking him to check his investigative files for any lynching victims who resembled Edward. White responded that no one met the young man’s description but, believing the case involved a lynching, he asked members of local NAACP branches to investigate.¹

After a year of searching, Dinah wrote to White again, explaining that she had identified Edward’s remains and wanted help in bringing his killers to justice. A mother’s concern over her missing son, a need for answers, and an unwavering hope for justice emanate from her letters. Then, as quickly as she appears in the historical record, Dinah vanishes. Her entrance into and departure from lynching history archives via her correspondence opens a space for considering the families who lived with this violence.²

The current zoetrope of lynching historiography contains more images depicting lynching’s history than it did decades ago. Noticeably absent, however, is substantive analysis of how victims’ families had their lives transformed by it. I believe more lynching scholars can work on filling the spaces where victims’ lived experiences could be.

Most lynching victims were isolated from their kin in the last moments of their lives and in the histories written about them. In reality many victims were embedded in families that experienced the force of their killings and the aftershocks. Pulling from historical limbo the uncounted women, men, and children who lived through this violence, but whose stories have been unheard or underexamined, is critical to understanding the ramifications of lynching. Lynching’s history will remain incomplete until scholars reckon with people such as Dinah Kirkland.

Kidada E. Williams is an associate professor of history at Wayne State University.

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Readers may contact Williams at kidada.williams@wayne.edu.


Lynching scholars have not ignored people’s suffering from racial violence as much as the field of lynching history has not connected and thoughtfully analyzed fragmentary evidence revealing people’s lived experiences of this violence scattered across archival holdings. To truly understand lynching, historians must know as much about victims and their families as they do about perpetrators; literary, photographic, artistic, and cinematic representations of this violence; and state and institutional responses.

Not excavating the wounds caused by having a loved one killed or not examining the financial hardships and sociological injuries that flowed in the wake of a lynching presumes that readers will understand the meaning of this violence for victims’ families. Readers are more likely to focus on perpetrators or the dead, or to substitute their thoughts and reactions to lynching rather than apprehend what family members experienced. In not digging deeper, scholars of lynching render invisible the pain families endured living in a world where a loved one disappeared or was dragged screaming from their home or a jail, shot down in their yard or while tied to a tree, strung up from a tree or a lamp post, thrown over a bridge or into a river, and having little means of justice.

This 1945 lithograph by Charles White titled *Hope for the Future* places a woman and a presumably male child in the foreground and a lynching tree in the background. It reveals White’s understanding of lynching’s impact on families while leaving open to interpretation whether this family had endured the lynching of a loved one or was living in a culture where it lurked as a possibility. *Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.*
Although there are silences, the lynching archive is by no means mute. African Americans told their families and friends about lynched loved ones; they filed lawsuits and wrote letters to elected officials, newspaper editors, lawyers, journalists, and activists. Collectively, these stories form an archive of lynching victimization that awaits critical analysis.

Analyzing the aftermaths of lynching is a complex issue. To encapsulate what I think is unfinished business in the field, I will narrow my commentary by focusing on mourning, resistance, and memory.

Lynching was horrible both for what it did to the people it killed and to their surviving kin. It denied victims and their relatives the opportunity to experience a good death and likely shaped mourning practices and feelings of loss, which brings to mind many questions that historians have not considered or answered fully. How did families manage the horrors of lynching? How did they tend to the lynched dead? Were they able to recover their loved ones’ bodies and hold funerals? If so, where were those funerals held, and who presided over and attended them? If not, were the remains buried by perpetrators, the state, or turned over to medical schools? How did such practices shape families’ grieving? Scholars can answer these and related questions by treating a lynching as the end of the victim’s life and the beginning of the family’s suffering and then gathering more information by reviewing newspapers for death notices; examining cemetery records and death certificates; combing records from medical schools, ministers, and funeral directors; and conducting oral histories.

Beyond the immediacy of mourning, how did families cope after they tended to the dead? How much did lynching shift families’ sociological, economic, and psychological axes? How deep and wide did lynching faults run through family members’ lives and their subsequent histories? Survivors’ stories, as well as census records, public assistance rosters, insurance claims, and records from private physicians, prisons, and asylums for the insane are places likely to contain evidence of lynching’s toll on families and communities.

Examining how survivors coped with this violence also enables historians to address the complexities of resistance. To investigate resistance, scholars must lengthen the temporal frame typically used and include everything from what people did to avoid being victimized to the actions individuals and groups took days, months, and years after the violence occurred. Scouring newspapers and records from local courts, governments, and organizations, and from Justice Department and law firm files for evidence of the steps that families took to seek justice is a good first step.

Exploring the aftermath of lynching also allows historians to contemplate the relationship of lynching’s history to its remembrance. How did families and communities remember their lynching dead one, two, or three generations out? How were these deaths recorded in family Bibles and histories? Was a gruesome death by lynching illuminated or effaced in family omertà? Wrestling with these and other unasked questions, attempting to answer them, and rewriting the histories that are told are important tasks because the ways victims’ families remembered or forgot lynching do matter.

Even after what I call the lynching show—the wave of scholarship that, along with the traveling exhibit “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America” and accompanying publications flooded the public sphere with knowledge of this violence—I do not believe that lynching scholars’ work is finished. However, I do believe that integrating violence victims’ families’ experiences into the histories produced is essential to the work that remains.3

3 “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America,” traveling exhibition, Photographs from the Allen-Littlefield Collection (Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.). See also James Allen et al., Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Santa Fe, 2000); and Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America, http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html.