Anatomy of an Untruth: The Controversy Over “Picnic” and the True Cause of Lynching

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Nearly a century of lynching and nearly five thousand mob murders within less than half a century have done an incalculable harm to American minds and particularly in those states where lynchings have been most frequent. Some of the effect can be seen in the frequency with which the phrase is heard often from the lips of normal, law abiding people in the North and West—“he ought to be strung up to a tree.”

Walter White, Rope and Faggot, 1929

On a warm September evening in the fall of 2000 I sat with students, faculty, community members and invited guests in a crammed recreation room at Delaware State University to hear a presentation by Dularon Entertainment president Ron Wallace. The standing-room-only audience was brimming with excitement. Wallace’s presentation and “research” on a thriving black business community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that existed around the turn of the century had received national attention. The story of how this prosperous community was bombed from the air and burned to the ground was even featured on NBC’s Today Show. Nearly a month before I sat in a near empty room at the Martin Luther King library to hear a lecture by a noted scholar of the Civil Rights movement. The irony of the situation weighed on me heavily.

I first became acquainted with the work of Ron Wallace in the Spring of 1996 while I was a graduate student at Howard University. An assistant professor in the history department asked me to make copies of an Internet article on Wallace’s book, Black Wallstreet for one of her classes. I recall initially being tantalized by Wallace’s description of a Black Mecca in the heart of Oklahoma but also very disturbed by the utopian portrait he created. Wallace praised the black entrepreneurship that circulated black dollars “thirty-six to one hundred times” in Black Wallstreet, without referencing the racism and segregation that created market opportunities for a few African Americans. Wallace also failed to explain how an African American community came to exist in Tulsa, forgetting that many of the blacks who wound up there had traveled the infamous Cherokee trail of tears, while others were part of the widespread migration out of the South in the decades after the Civil War seeking to escape political disfranchisement, social segregation and a lack of economic opportunity.¹

I decided to investigate the Tulsa race riot to examine the claims made by the author of the short introduction to Wallace’s piece that “one would be hard-pressed to find documentation of the incident, let alone an accurate accounting of it, in any other scholarly reference.” The author’s reference to a search made in the World Book Encyclopedia made me queasy. In less than half an hour at Howard University’s extensive Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, I located Scott Ellsworth’s 1982 book, Death in a Promised Land, which chronicles the Tulsa race riot. While acknowledging a dearth of sources on the riot itself, Ellsworth identified nearly a dozen related sources including a master’s thesis from the University of Tulsa published in 1946, an article in the Journal of Black Studies from 1972, and several scholarly books and popular articles both written at the time and in more recent years on the bombing of Black Wallstreet.
Satisfied that my conclusions about Wallace’s “scholarship” had not been premature, I also decided to investigate the author’s most fantastic claim regarding the crime of lynching. As he explained, “In my lectures I ask people if they understand where the word ‘picnic’ comes from. It was typical to have a picnic on a Friday evening in Oklahoma. The word was short for ‘pick a nigger’ to lynch. This went on every weekend in this country and it was all across the country. That’s where the term really came from.”

Having read and studied under some of the best scholars of the African American experience, I was intrigued but also amazed that I had never seen any evidence of it before. I quickly discovered that the origins of the word “picnic” dated back to before the 18th century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word was in use as early as 1748 in other European nations, specifically France and Germany, but probably not before 1800 in England. The definition provided there is of a social gathering usually out of doors in which parties contribute to a common meal. A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English, first published in 1937, identified colloquial usage of the term in the United States as “an easy or agreeable thing.” According to the dictionary’s compiler, Eric Partridge, “picnic” was most often used as its own antonym to describe a difficult or troublesome affair. Thus a hard exam would be “no picnic.” Harold Wentworth and Stuart Flexner’s Dictionary of American Slang, published in 1960, offers additional descriptions of a picnic as “a prohibited, unrestricted, uninhibited good time or pleasure.”

In reading Ellsworth’s book and previewing some of his sources I found no definition of picnic in the context that Ron Wallace used it. After discussing it with several of my colleagues I have come to the conclusion that “picnic,” like many other terms, was likely used by some as a code word for lynching. However, no sooner had my own investigation ended than Wallace’s definition began to take on a life of its own. Students in my classes, friends, colleagues and countless e-mails on the Internet spread what was essentially an untruth to what seemed like an endless stream of believers. A friend at the Smithsonian confided in me that, at one point, she was fielding several calls a day about the article since Wallace claimed that he had done his research at the African American archives of the Smithsonian. No such archives exist. Another colleague shared his experience with an irate group of students who balked when he explained that Wallace was mistaken. The same professor overheard two students protesting his explanation by exclaiming, “What does he know?...It was on the Internet.”

TO PROTECT CITIZENS AGAINST LYNCHING

HEARING
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SIXTY-FIFTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION
ON
H. R. 11279
Serial 66

STATEMENTS OF MAJ. J. E. SPINGARN AND CAPT. GEORGE S. HORNBLOWER

JUNE 6, 1918

WASHINGTON
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

Courtesy of Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Manuscript Division, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
The irony of Wallace’s article is that he could have made the exact same point without attributing the term “picnic” to lynching. If, for example, he had said that many lynchings had a picnic-like atmosphere he would have been sustained by the existing scholarship. Furthermore, in blaming the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) for the Tulsa riot, Wallace ignores the fact that most acts of violence carried out against blacks in the decades leading up to the 1921 incident, when Black Tulsa was burned to the ground, were not perpetrated by Klansman, but by ordinary citizens. The Klan itself was revitalized shortly before the disaster, but most evidence identifies the roots of the riot in the atmosphere of hate permeating the white community. Lynching became such an epidemic that even the crime’s chief apologist, Thomas Nelson Page, blamed the violent outbreaks on the majority of moral and upstanding whites driven to acts of violence by the crime of “ravishing,” black males raping white women.

Mary Church Terrell, however, deflated Page’s argument by pointing out that less than one fourth of the persons who were lynched were accused of the crime of rape. She also pointed to the numerous women and children who were lynched to rebut the charge of rape as the primary reason for mob attacks against blacks. In her response to Page, Terrell offered her own ideas about the causes of lynching. First, she pointed to racial hatred, which she defined as “the hatred of a stronger people toward a weaker who were once held as slaves.” Next she identified an atmosphere of lawlessness that she explained was more prevalent in the South where she noted nine-tenths of the lynchings had occurred. Terrell’s writings support the observation that the intense violence toward blacks such as the type that struck Black Tulsa in 1921, predated the revival of the KKK by at least three decades. At one point in her 1904 response to Page, she refers to the white supremacist organization in the past tense, citing that most lynch mobs called upon “the same spirit of intolerance and hatred . . . which called into being the Ku Klux Klan and which prompted more recent exhibitions of hostility toward the Negro . . .”.

This is not as much a defense of the Klan as a call for people to view the violence against African Americans in a much wider context. The Ku Klux Klan was not responsible for all of the violence against African Americans. An atmosphere of hate within the larger white community however was. Nowhere is evidence for this more apparent than in lynching accounts for that period.

In 1969, historian Arthur Raper provided a critical distinction between lynching and other manifestations of gang violence in his book _The Tragedy of Lynching_. For Raper the “deaths from race riots in Atlanta, Chicago, Tulsa, and other places” defied classification as gang murders because of the spontaneity in which they erupted:

As popularly defined, a chief distinction between a lynching and a gang murder is that, whereas the later is premeditated and carried out by a few people in conspired secrecy from constituted authorities, the former is spontaneous and carried out in a public fashion with scores, hundreds, and not uncommonly thousands of eye witnesses. Gang murders—like other murderers—operate in secrecy to evade the law; lynchers operate in the open and publicly defy the law.

Despite the fact that violent attacks were not carried out by acknowledged groups does not mean that they were not well organized. There is sufficient evidence to challenge the assertion that most lynchings were spontaneous occurrences. Lynchers who publicly
defied the law also understood that those charged with carrying out the law would be somewhat sympathetic or could be intimidated into delivering the will of the murderous majority. What ultimately made lynching possible, from Jesse Washington to Emmett Till, was the racial hostility of the white community. Fear was the primary motivating factor. It allowed, for example, good “Christians” to join a hate group or participate in violence without the slightest remorse or contradiction of their moral code. The organized nature of many lynch mobs underscores the function of community in the crime. As Raper observed “One lynching in a community seems to provide an opportunity for all so inclined to share in it, whether through taking an active part in it or through the vicarious participation of justifying or condoning it.”

It was this factor that gave many lynchings a ‘picnic-like’ atmosphere. When Richard Coleman, for instance, was lynched in Kentucky for the alleged rape and murder of Mrs. James Lashbrook, the New York Times related how the crowd followed a predetermined program. Describing the participants as an orderly mob, the newspaper account detailed how the leaders met the accused at the train station, where they overtook his none-too-resistant police escorts and marched him, with a throng of hundreds in tow, to a nearby green where hundreds more had already gathered. The Times reported that women and children attended the event. It also relayed how:

In all the thousands who constituted the mob there was not a single effort to disguise identity. No man wore a mask. All the leaders of the mob are well known and there are hundreds of witnesses who can testify to their participation in the tragedy. They are the leading citizens in all lines of business and many are members of churches...⁶

The lynchings of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, and Samuel Hose in Atlanta, Georgia, had a similar atmosphere. Hose, who killed his boss in a labor dispute, was falsely accused of raping the man’s wife. The local press heralded the coming of his execution for a week before it took place. Hose was lynched on a Sunday after church services let out. In one account, two trains were needed to ferry the congregation to the sight of his execution. Similar to the Coleman case, the same account relates how “the great concourse of Christians who witnessed the tragedy scraped for hours among his ashes in the hope of finding a sufficient number of his bones to take to friends as souvenirs.” The Washington case, perhaps the most celebrated of all lynchings, underscores the widespread ambivalence necessary to allow such an event to occur. W.E.B Du Bois chronicled the event in the pages of The Crisis:

The tree where the lynching occurred was right under the Mayor’s window. Mayor Dollins was standing in the window, not concerned about what they were doing to the boy, but that the tree would be destroyed. The Chief of Police also witnessed the lynching. The names of five of the leaders of the mob are known to this Association, and can be had on application by responsible parties.⁷

Like the Coleman case, the Hose lynching took place prior to the revival of the Klan, demonstrating the level of hate already present in many communities. The Waco lynching, which took place in 1916, only a few months after the emergence of the new Klan, also demonstrates the atmosphere of hate present against African Americans. As I have argued elsewhere, this was the end result of a permissive environment and culture of violence with regard to blacks that had been present since the closing months of the Civil War.⁸ The revived 1915 KKK came along at a time when it could channel these avenues of hate. However,
it was the product and not the source of anti-black violence. While the Klan was very strong in Oklahoma as in others states in the 1920s, the reason that it won such widespread acceptance is that its message resonated with the feelings of a large number of white Americans in this era.

While Wallace points to the jealousy of whites as the discord that sealed Black Tulsa's fate, increased black migration to the region played a significant role as well. If one were to compare the Tulsa riot with other disturbances of the period, the nature of the violence becomes even more obvious. Sociologist Morris Janowitz defined the majority of racial outbursts in this period as “communal” or “contested area” riots, because they involved what he termed “a direct struggle between the residents of white and Negro areas.” Segregation created zones of interaction between the races that could not always guarantee total separation. Where segregation could not be easily accomplished, the potential for violence remained strong. Dick Rowland's accidental contact with a white girl on an elevator in downtown Tulsa, like Black bather Eugene Williams mob induced drowning in the white section of Lake Michigan reflect the pervasiveness of this problem. Economic success aside, it was the sheer presence of large numbers of Negroes in direct competition for space that inspired fear in whites in the North and West.9

A significant difference between public reactions to racially motivated violence in 1921 and today is that communities now appear to be more repentant and ashamed when such incidents occur. Nevertheless, perpetrators of racist violence still do not need to hide behind masks. In October of 1999, while the nation geared up to protest a masked Klan rally in New York, five unmasked California teenagers received suspended sentences for their part in the beating of a black Marine. Prosecutors were unable to secure a conviction after the community of Santee, California rallied behind the accused. The curious response of the father of one of the accused underscores the continuing significance of community in excusing anti-black violence. Questioned as to why his son or anyone for that matter would participate in the beating of a defenseless man while his back was turned, the father responded “Shouldn't they have a chance to vent.”

Although there were over a hundred other guests at the party, when the six youths went on trial, no one would testify against them, not out of fear of reprisal, according to the host of the party who cooperated with authorities to secure a conviction, but in defense of the boys and the community's good name. In 1969, Arthur Raper observed that lynchings “seldom strike the same spot” because, after the first incident, “the best elements in the community are often shocked into a sense of responsibility for the prevention of further outbreaks; and thus a lynching tends to produce its immediate local immunity.” Raper notes that the real problem is "how to induce officials and private citizens to exercise precautions to prevent the beginning of an epidemic of lynching as they will take to stop it after its under way." What he is essentially suggesting is the need to change the permissive environment, the same problem alluded to by a reporter who asked the father of a perpetrator of racial violence in the California case “Where did your son learn to hate like this?”10

The real tragedy of the popularity and widespread acceptance of pseudo scholarship like that produced by Ron Wallace is its ability to reach a much wider audience than does the historian. The result has been a mix of fact and fiction that is highly detrimental to historical accuracy. Claims like those made by Wallace and more recently by a flood of Internet for-
wards warning that black people would lose their voting rights in the year 2007 when the Voting Rights Act of 2007 lapses, demonstrate the danger in the propagation of pseudo history. While Internet subscribers were busy pondering the fate of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in cyberspace, black voting rights were being stripped legally in the real world. Amidst discussions of pregnant chads in Florida during the election of 2000, a 1998 report by Human Rights Watch and The Sentencing Project estimated that 436,900 former felons were disenfranchised in the sunshine state. Florida is one of thirteen states that currently deny the vote to ex-offenders who have fully served their sentences. Among Florida’s African American population, the impact of the state’s disenfranchisement laws is particularly revealing: 31.2 percent of black men in Florida—more than 200,000 potential black voters—were barred from the polls. While one can clearly see the connection between this subversion of the Fifteenth Amendment and its historic precursors (e.g. the grandfather clause and the literacy test), it has barely rated a mention among those purportedly concerned about black voting rights.

They are the subject of thousands of forwards on the Internet and are accepted as fact by a black populace hungry for its history. The irony is that the history is out there. Despite Wallace’s claim that there were no books written on “Black Wallstreet” when he wrote his account in 1992, Scott Ellsworth published a book on the riot with an introduction by the dean of African American history, John Hope Franklin, in 1982. Wallace’s statement was reminiscent of Debbie Allen’s claim that she “discovered” the Amistad when literally dozens of scholars, including esteemed legal mind Constance Baker Motley, have contributed books and articles on the subject over the years.

A final example of the shallowness and self-serving nature of recent products of popular history is provided by the claims of Mario and Melvin Van Peebles that their film Panther was the result of painstaking research on the Black Panther Party when it instead reflected a celebration of the symbolism but an ignoring of the substance of the Party. While white historical films such as JFK are greeted with controversy and great discussion, the recent wave of black historical films such as Rosewood, Amistad, Malcolm X and Panther have been greeted with a general acceptance that makes one uneasy. The fact that getting these movies made is so difficult partly explains their proclaimed “legitimacy,” however as a professor of African American history I am keenly aware of the impact such projects have. When whites are portrayed as the heroes of the black struggle for freedom in the United States, such as with the white attorney or John Quincy Adams in Amistad, it trivializes the history of African Americans. In the response to the great hype about a national conversation on race inspired by the movie, Amistad, Newsweek, with a photo of the manacled Dijon Hounsou on the cover, asked “Should America apologize for slavery or just get over it?” If that is the kind of question stimulated by movies purporting to educate the nation regarding the black experience, then perhaps the movies should be scrapped and entertainers should be out pushing the volumes of research on the African American experience that fill America’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). There is a rich collection of black scholarship just waiting to be re-explored, as well as many new avenues yet to be explored. Maybe this is where we need to direct our energies this century.

Historians have a responsibility to make the story of the past more relevant so that people can easily understand its significance. As long as historians, especially of the African American experience continue to conceptualize history for the small group within the ivory tower, their writing will remain inaccessible. While we debate postmodernism, others have taken up the cause of presenting the past to a
popular audience. Their enthusiasm is appreciated, but the cost is great. On December 23, 1999, the Associated Press carried the most recent in a long list of stories about debunked "scholars." After a national controversy in which NAACP president Kweisi Mfume demanded an investigation, the Department of Defense called the book The Slaughter: An American Atrocity by Carroll Case a work of fiction. Case claimed to have uncovered evidence that twelve hundred black soldiers from the 346th Infantry Regiment at Camp Van Dorn in Mississippi were accused of mutiny and executed in 1943 by white soldiers. The author's sources included just one oral interview with a person now deceased. As a profession we are leaving the task of recording vital aspects of history to persons with good intentions but little training. While many topics in American history, such as Jeffersonian Republicanism, might be ripe for revision, the lack of attention to African American history by scholars creates the necessity in many ways of just getting the story out. As long as we ignore this responsibility we share in the blame for the perpetuation of dangerous untruths.

Notes

1 It is important to establish the presence of blacks within the state of Oklahoma from the beginning. According to Scott Ellsworth in Death in a Promised Land, blacks were among the original settlers to the area, and many came as the slaves of the Creek and Cherokee nations. Ellsworth explains that while, "the character of Native American slavery had been debated back and forth, and even though the mildest form of slavery is a far cry from freedom, one 'Creek Negro' is recorded as stating: 'I was eating out of the same pot with Indians... while they were still licking the master's boots in Texas.'" Scott Ellsworth, Death in a Promised Land. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). 19-20. For more information on black migration patterns westward in the decades after the Civil War see Spencer Crew, Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration 1915-1940. (Washington, DC: National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 1987); James Grossman, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Nell Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Rayford Logan, The Betrayal of the Negro (New York: Da Capo, Press, 1997) originally published as The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901; Joe Trotter, The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).


5 Raper, The Tragedy of Lynching, 29-30.


My own ideas about the permissive environment have developed due to my research on the FBI and the Civil Rights Movement. J Edgar Hoover and the Bureau continued a long tradition of creating an atmosphere of violence against political dissenters in general and African American freedom fighters in particular by employing the permissive environment. The government's inaction at critical junctures, such as during the Freedom rides, helped to encourage violence against demonstrators. In addition, the wiretaps, informants, phony newsletters and other dirty tricks used by the Bureau created an atmosphere of fear and distrust within the movement which often led to violence. The actions of the Bureau were rubber stamped by local, state and national officials who legitimized their efforts in the name of preserving domestic tranquility. For a fuller explanation see Yohuru R. Williams, "In the Name of the Law: The 1967 Shooting of Huey Newton and Law Enforcement's Permissive Environment," Negro History Bulletin 61, no.2 (April-June 1998), 6-18 and "Permission to Hate: Delaware, Lynching and the Culture of Violence in America," Journal of Black Studies 32, no. 1 (September 2001); Around the same time I presented my first paper detailing my own conclusions about the permissive environment a pair of sociologists, Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, were completing their own study of lynching. While they ultimately found a strong correlation between the number of lynchings and the falling market price of cotton, they also discussed the existence of a permissive environment in the South that legitimized the actions of lynch mobs. As Beck explained, "The politicians who gave glorious racist speeches didn't have to be in the mob to set the environment for violence... the editorialists and the number of preachers who never said a word against lynching and all those people who shaped public opinion have a share of the responsibility." Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck, A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). For Beck's comments concerning lynching see C. Melodie Taylor, "A Deadly Forces Underlie Lynching in the South," http://accessatlanta.com/community/groups/ugareserach/Deadly_Forces_UnderL.html


Raper, 29-30; Comments of the CBS reporter taken from “Hate on Trial,” 60 Minutes II, March 19, 1999; for a different perspective of the incident in Santee, California, see Ninette Sosa and Steven Saint, “The Politics of Race,” East County Online, March 25, 1999.

Camille Cosby, “America Taught My Son’s Killers to Hate Blacks,” USA Today, July 8, 1998, 15A.

“Massacre Claim Is a Fiction, Army Says,” Paul