

"Scottsboro

Christ is a Nigger,
Beaten and black--

Mary is His Mother
Mammy of the South,
Silence your Mouth.

God's His Father--
White Master above
Grant us your love.

Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the Cross
Of the South-

---Langston Hughes- 1931

Introduction

The words of Langston Hughes precede Billy Holiday's strained lyrics of black bodies hanging from southern trees. Both capture the essence of southern culture and violence at the turn of the twentieth century. The Jim Crow South, as it revolved around acts of lynching, capitulated in a blended manifestation of secular and sacred realities. Faith, fear, and murder were processes of worship and salvation in southern psyches that engaged in this brand of fruit picking. Religion was the thread and fabric that wove together the varying streams of racial hatred, southern pride, and cultural othering. As such, these events were iconic symbols of white domination and vehicles of white solace that were publicly displayed, high and lifted up, against the backdrop of southern skies. As public theatres, black bodies hung on southern trees as the most poignant reflections of Rene Girard's surrogate mechanism. The surrogate mechanism reared its essence in the depths of southern religious culture and the broader reality of racial formations.

Using mimetic theory as a tool, by which to deconstruct the ways in which race, violence, and oppression, became the underlying themes surrounding historical acts of racial violence, this paper addresses the realities of lynching in the American South during the early 20th century. Here, the lynching of black bodies is used as a window in exploring the larger realities of the surrogate mechanism in American society, and the various processes it created in structuring concepts of the other. ¹

¹ "Crime Quickly Avenged", *Monroe Journal*, 7 July 1903, African American Files-Lynching, Monroe Local History Archives, Monroe, NC .

This work also joins the perspectives of Rene Girard with revisionists arguments surrounding Jurgen Habermas' *public sphere* assertions and Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham's conception of the *metalanguage of race*. The juxtaposition of Girardian concepts with the theoretical frameworks of critical race scholars, lends itself to a new interdisciplinary strategy in understanding the nature of race relations and racial formation within the American context. The inclusion of analyzes around the surrogate mechanism, mimesis, and the social construction of race speaks to a relatively un-mined field in the scholarship of Girardian theory as well as that of African American and African studies.²

While acknowledging the path-breaking works of Cheryl Ann Kirk-Duggan's *Violence and Theology*, Fred Smith's piece on "Black on Black Violence-Intrammediation", and even Donald G. Matthew's telling piece titled, *The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice*, where he attempts a cursory application of Girardian theory; scholars on both sides of the black-white paradigm, have by-in-large ignored or either been vaguely distracted by the potential of Rene Girard to speak to the issue of race and racism within modern societies. This short monograph is an attempt to begin a larger dialogue among scholars on both sides of the Atlantic to redress Rene Girard in light of the racial inequities running rampant with the institutional frameworks of our culture. My paper then, presents a humble attempt to push and rally the academy to the investigation of these issues and to offer a somewhat sadly rich starting point---that of the black experience of suffering in America. The following questions driving my roadmap of inquiry, are raised in this context to be shared, and hopefully addressed by my fellow colleagues within COV&R and Imatitio.

- 1) What does Rene Girard have to say to the African American Experience?
- 2) What does the African American have say to Rene Girard?
- 3) What do both the African American experience as well as other minority groups reveal about the nature of racism, racial formation, and venues of violence within American society?

² Nancy Frazier, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy". *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990): 56-80.; Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race", *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 17., no.2, (Winter, 1992), 255.;

- 4) What does Rene Girard tell us about gender and gender constructs when he is put in conversation not only with critical race theorist, but with womanist scholars who study the theological responses to oppression by women of color?
- 5) Another question that this paper will not have time to fully consider in this context is: What does the history of lynching have to say about the ways in which American Christianity has realized the risen Christ figure in praxis and in supposed solidarity with others within/without the faith? Scholar James Cone argues that "no human Christian can correctly understand the full theological meaning of the American Christ without identifying his image with the re-crucified black body hanging from a lynch tree."³ For Cone, the scandal of the cross is the lynching tree. Lynching for Cone, is argued to be a symbol for white people's crucifixion of black people. And in turn, black people have in his perspective have become Christ figures to white society, especially when they are displayed as victims of the lynching tree. Cone's words are provocative and invite further investigations into the symbiotic relationship between the cross and black bodies hung from southern trees. Clearly, Cone's word's invite others to take another look at the strange fruit of American racial violence.

I believe the answer to some of these question lies within our understanding and study of the surrogate mechanism, and the processes of racial construction and 'othering' in America and in Europe.

In my small attempt to redress the role of mimesis and the surrogate mechanism within racial constructs, the history of lynching has been a provocative doorway to enter. Creating conversations between Girardian scholars and Critical Race Theorists lends itself to exploring the multilayered realities structuring race and racism in America. Looking at what Rene Girard posits as the root of violent behavior in communities, is a way to begin this conversation. Here, distinction serves as the rallying appoint against differentiation in society that can ultimately result in violence.

³ James Cone "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree" (Ingersoll Lecture, Harvard Divinity School, October 19, 2006).

Mimetic Theory and the Surrogate Mechanism

Within the process of memesis and the evolution of the scapegoating, Girard lays out the concept of "stereotypes of crisis" which is recognized as the first stereotype of persecution. Whatever the nature of the crisis, Girard argues that it causes culture to be eclipsed and less differentiated. For Girard this cultural eclipse is social in its existential function. He writes, "But, rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which cost them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons. The suspects are accused of a particular category of crimes."⁴

These stereotypes of persecution are bound to particular kinds of accusations, which aid in confirming suspicion of the selected other. Violent crimes, sexual crimes, and religious crimes are seen as detrimental to the established norm, and within those families, and hierarchical differences, which are foundational to the social order's existence.

Race, Religion, and Lynching in the American South through Girard

Applying Girard's concepts of persecution to the culture of the Jim Crow South, and the lynching of black bodies, reveal how violent crimes and sexual crimes are the most prominent formations functioning in the southern mind toward black bodies during the early twentieth century. In particular, black males and the color of blackness was first demonized through passages from the book of Genesis which equated black skin, and black bodies as inherently evil, murderous, and cursed--hence known as the curse of Cain. Genesis 9:20-27 deepened the negative connotation of blackness with sexual crimes—hence the curse of Ham.⁵ One never knows what fully took place between Noah and Ham, but the image of nakedness displayed in the narrative lends itself to the concept of sexuality being connected with the sinful act, which invokes the curse.

White southern Christians, armed with mythic narratives of Girardian defined stereotypes of persecutions, ascribed to black bodies the notions of crimes that were

⁴ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 14-15.

⁵ Gen 9: 20-27 and Gen. 4: 19-24, New International Version

divinely sanctioned by their Christian texts. Indeed, the distinctiveness of black bodies over against white bodies is quite drastic and easily identifiable. In Girardian terms, black bodies and the people who lived therein were "those people whom it is most criminal to attack, either in the absolute sense or in reference to the individual committing the act." If blackness was the mark of a Cannanite or Hamitic curse, then the very site of blackness as it covered African bodies became living narratives of crime and societal threats to the social order of white southern society. Indeed, with the Hamitic curse and its image of some level of sexuality driving within the Girardian paradigm of persecution, sexual crimes with its implication of rape, incest, and bestiality was embedded in the psyche construction of blackness and became as Girard argues as, "the ones most frequently invoked because they transgressed the miscegenistic taboos of southern society which was the overall stabilizing force in differentiation between the races in the Jim Crow south."⁶

For Girard, "the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole society. The stereotypical accusation justifies and facilitates this belief by ostensibly acting the role of mediator."⁷

If we take this aspect of Girard's argument to the black body hanging on the tree, the stereotypical accusation that acted the role of mediator was the mythic image of black brute in southern psyche. Here, the perceived sexual lust of the black male for the white woman struck at the heart and head of southern culture. Miscegenation-- with its threat of interracial mixing would destroy the hierarchies of difference from the inside out, southern supremacist communities would lose their most prominent claim to power--- their whiteness which was systematically defined over against blackness. Miscegenation was a sexual crime in the minds of white southerners that could "begin the destruction of difference within their own sphere." The loss of whiteness was for the American southerner akin to death.

Therefore, sexuality between the races must be demonized, had to be demonized, in order to preserve the status quo in southern culture. African peoples in the American

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 20-21.

south were living examples of the impure elements that corrupted society by their mythological blackness. And yes blackness was mythological and it was polarizing. Black bodies were, by their very presence, an impetus for white southern cohesion. Blackness was terrifying to the southern white supremacist mind because it revealed the "truth" of white southern society---that white dominant culture was fragility, unstable and could easily be destroyed.

By the turn of the twentieth century, white southern culture had been shook to its core by the legacies of the Civil War, and the psychological destruction of their hierarchical positions over black slaves. Facing the freedom of newly freed blacks, and the added domination of white northern politics that deprived them of the foundation which constituted their society, that being the black body, white southerners operated in what I argue as a Nietzschean resentment against the imperatives of Radical Reconstructionists and the newly reconstituted Republican government. Here, the original oppressor, the U.S. government realized in the enforced mandates of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, was protected by remnants of the Union Army. Unable to take revenge upon the original perpetrator of humiliation, white southern democrats and frustrated ex-confederate soldiers targeted the newly freed black as the object of their contentions.

In this respect, the lynching of black bodies then reveals a Nietzschean resentment that is housed in the lived reality of the surrogate victim mechanism. As such, the surrogate mechanism reveals the root of southern fears and consequently how central the black body is to conceptualizations of white supremacist culture and the constructions of whiteness. Within lynching then, black bodies at the point of their crucifixion on southern trees, become scapegoating channels for white violence in order that southern society continue in its Jim Crow culture. As Girard states, "As far as we are concerned there is very little difference between Marie Antoinette's situation and that of the persecuted black male."⁸ Their desire for revenge is for a time sated by the ritual lynching of blacks.

Girard, Myth and the Social Construction of Blackness

⁸ Ibid., 21.

Myth and the process of monsterization plays a crucial part in lynchings. Again, a Girardian analysis is helpful here. Without going into too much detail, Girard proposes that a range of victim signs can be attributed to the surrogate. These signs attached to the surrogate are founded in myths, and representations of persecution. For Girard myths contain stereotypes, which can be what he terms--"monstrous." When a lack of differentiation occurs, the victim is demonized. The demonization, if you will, is imaginary yet has the power to evolve into stable forms. Key here is that Girard notes that the evolution into stable forms of perception occur only after "it is remembered in a world that has regained stability."

Building a further on this analysis, I argue that the very act of lynching perpetuates the idea of the monstrousness of blackness and black bodies in white southern psyche. Could it be that the historical ideological creation of the black brute image rests in earlier acts of black lynching—that is the act of lynching black bodies are the origins of brutish conceptualization of black humanity? If Girard claims "under the sign of the monstrous the author unites the marks that identify a victim and the stereotypical crimes without mixing them" then the black brute is both a psychological creation of sexual crime and destabilizing force of white southern culture. Here, the physical marks of blackness are perceived to be cursed, are united with an amoral disposition to destroy all that is good and right in southern society. In other words, the physical and moral monstrosity is inextricably linked, yet distinctive and can therefore constitute a double imperative to center of the black body for sacrifice. This reality serves though to further obscure the humanity of the black body--- for a monster deserves to be hung on a tree.

Clearly this argument is reinforced by the numerous depictions of black male bodies, disfigured in animalistic imagery within twentieth century advertisement and cartoons. Further, films such as W. D. Griffith's 1915 depiction of the black brute in his movie *Birth of a Nation* and Hollywoods 1933 release of *King Kong* reinforced these notions.

Critical Race Theory and Revisionist Versions of the Jurgen Habermas's Public Sphere Theory

Turning to the voices of critical race theorist like Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham and Elsa Bakley Brown, we find that Girard's arguments of persecution stereotypes and the function of myth connect with the what critical theorist on race have argued as the metalanguage of race. The surrogate mechanism also speaks to what revisionist of Habermasian theory term counter-publics. I argue that counter-publics are not only a manifestation of the surrogate mechanism in society, they are the forums or spaces in which conceptualizations of race, particularly blackness/whiteness operate as a particular kind of metalanguage---an arbitrary and illusionary signifier that lies outside of referential domain of race—a myth that disguises, suppresses, and negates its own complex interplay within the very social relations it envelops."⁹

As a psyche force, when mimetic desire, when it is in play within counter-publics, gives birth to a unique kind of public discourse; one in which American southern contexts create a metalanguage is tied to particular understandings of blackness which in their realization create moments of sacred violence, i.e. lynching. Violence is at the heart of racialization and its varied manifestations in society.

Putting Girard within conversation with revisionist views of Jurgen Habermas, and the critical race theorist such as Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham and Elsa Bakley Brown, the lynching of black bodies in the American South exposes thee intricate processes of "othering" in American History.

Moving Forward

I am hopeful that targeting and making conscious the depths and implications of lynching in America will in some form create a venue for racial healing and reconciliation. Indeed, this paper has served as a personal jumping point for my own investigation into lynching within America culture. Forthcoming work will entail exploring historical occurrences of lynching North Carolina and South Carolina through a Girardian lens. It is my hope to expose the work of Rene Girard to historians of lynching

⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race", *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 17., no.2, (Winter, 1992), 255.; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom", *Public Culture*, Vol 7. (1994), 107-146.

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and even to my colleagues in the fields of African American Studies and African Diasporic Studies. I entertain the hope that the study of Mimetic Theory will in some small way provide possible counter-mechanisms to the problem of racism in American society.