

Race, Truth, and Reconciliation in the United States

Reflections on Desmond Tutu's Proposal

Will Gravely, University of Denver

Abstract

Desmond Tutu's suggestion that U. S. society should have a truth and reconciliation process about its racist past prompts this investigation into historical scholarship on racial violence. The lynchings of Zachariah Walker (1911) and of Willie Earle (1947) reveal different regional memories which deny or acknowledge the past. By contrast Wilmington, NC in 1998 re-collected a white supremacist coup (1898) in ways that were transformational for the present. The essay points to legacies of racial violence in hate crimes, in backlash against affirmative action and in continued racialization of citizenship and the census.

Introduction

The paradigm of race is the antithesis of freedom. It locks white people in a morally and ethically indefensible position they must preserve by force. Fosters a myth of superiority they must act out; dictates to them whom they should love and hate. Since it sanctions and reinforces the idea that some people are born better than others, have an innate right, even duty, to seize from others what they want, the paradigm of race is destructive to anyone not white, and ultimately also self-destructive for whites. A racist disposition towards nonwhites, because it hardens the heart and rationalizes extremes of selfishness and brutality, inevitably reappears in the way whites regard and treat other whites. The pervasive violence in our society - from domestic abuse to economic exploitation to capital punishment to punitive expeditionary wars - is rooted in the paradigm of race.

African-American novelist John Edgar Wideman

Sometimes, murder does its best work in memory, after the fact. Terror lives on, continuing to serve its purpose long after the violence that gave rise to it ends.

White historian Glenda Gilmore

[1] There is no current nor has there ever been an initiative within the United States to equal what the new South African society has experienced in its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings. Those findings entailed actions on requests for amnesty on the one hand and for compensation on the other. Fresh from that ordeal and reflecting on its meaning that brought forth his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, retired South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu has observed, after spending some extended time in this country, that the United States needs some similar confrontation with its racist past.

[2] Rejecting both the option of national amnesia and the historical model of Nuremberg, the South African solution, ideologically grounded in the concept of Ubuntu - the notion that my humanity is inextricably caught up in yours or that we are persons only through other persons - defined and thus limited the investigation of violence inflicted during the period between 1960

and 1994. To qualify the violence had to be politically motivated. An applicant for amnesty had to make full disclosure of all the facts related to the offense and the rule of proportionality - that the means were proportional to the objective - had to be observed. There was no requirement for remorse. The goal was restorative not retributive justice. Victims on the other hand were deprived of their usual right to criminal charges or to civil damages in the courts in exchange for their participation. The government assumed responsibility for making some symbolic reparation to them and that task is still incomplete. Where cases were already in the judicial docket, they could not participate in the TRC process. The most important of these was the Steve Biko murder investigation.

[3] Despite all these constraints what occurred was a societal process invoking spiritual and therapeutic resources in a collective sense to get through the pain of the hearings and to find some peace on the other side. Beyond the big names, it was the little people who wanted and got some relief - that the lie they had been told was reversed and they finally knew what really happened to their loved one; or that they found out where the body was buried so that they could bring closure to their grief; or that they discovered who really did the dirty work against their relative or friend. One woman, Mrs. Nombuyiselo Mhlauli, for example, wondered about what they did with her husband's (Sicelo's) hand which the authorities cut off. The answer was that it was preserved and displayed in the police station in Port Elizabeth (Tutu: 148-49).

[4] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was also a process involving one of the guiding institutions of the society - the religious communities - and their role in its deliberations. The final report is a thorough though still incomplete account of the complex interplay of the "faith communities" with the former apartheid regime, dating from the rise to power of the National Party in 1948. Reminiscent of what historians of the Third Reich discovered about the religious communities of Germany during the Nazi regime, the Commission identified South Africa's faith communities simultaneously as "agents of," "victims of," and "opponents of oppression." At the same time it expressed the hope that these same religious traditions could be important in healing from their racist and colonialist past, in rebuilding relationships and in creating more just societal, economic, and political structures (TRC website [<http://www.truth.org.za>]; Harris).

[5] There were also hearings with a specific focus on women which had great power and great pain within them (Tutu: dedication and 229-30; Krog: 233-50). As those involved recognized at the end, some people may have gone away more traumatized than before, and the rehabilitation process in terms of counseling and other assistance fell short (Tutu: 233). Tutu felt as if he particularly failed to get through to former President P. T. Botha, and that he only had partial success with Mrs. Winnie Mandela. To hold the process together he courageously faced up to a charge against one commissioner and saw it through to the lie that it was. In the end Tutu also refused to bend to the African National Congress which wanted the TRC to delete passages in the report having to do with their testimonies. He understood what some African National Congress leaders did not - that the integrity of their politics depended on the neutrality of the commission. Antjie Krog - an Afrikaner woman poet who supervised the radio broadcasts of the hearings of the TRC - has summarized Tutu's role as part of her reflections about what the grueling experience was like and what Tutu meant to people like herself doing the media coverage. She writes:

Week after week, voice after voice, account after account. It is not so much the deaths, and the names of the dead, but the web of infinite sorrow woven around them. It keeps on coming and coming. A wide, barren, disconsolate landscape

where the horizon keeps on dropping away. And this is how we often end up at the daily press conferences - bewildered and close to tears at the feet of Archbishop Tutu. By the end of four weeks, they are no longer press conferences. He caresses us with pieces of hope and humanity. We ask fewer and fewer critical questions (Krog: 45).

Race Context in the United States

[6] In the U. S. there have been presidential and congressional commissions to address issues of race as part of urban social crises in the twentieth century. There has been a recent effort at a national dialogue on race chaired by the distinguished historian John Hope Franklin. Racial violence has been judicially addressed on a case by case basis. Those moves, of course, do not add up to the same kind of societal process as has occurred in South Africa. The absence of such a process is occasionally dramatized by efforts in Congress to discuss reparations and apologies for slavery. The era in this country's past which might most parallel the South African experience, despite distinct differences in context, would be after the end of slavery during Reconstruction. In that era, legal efforts to curb Ku Klux Klan violence, especially in South Carolina, and hearings within the Freedmen's Bureau incorporated stories of repression and resistance from African-American freedpeople and their white allies which might remind the contemporary reader of the South African process (Stagg; Williams). In the end, however, those federal courts and agencies, like the federal troops which undergirded the biracial Republican legislatures across the South, proved impotent before the reassertion of white supremacy in the counter-revolution of the so-called redeemers. The violent restoration of white rule ended Reconstruction as a national, not merely sectional, effort to implement the antebellum black inspired abolitionist vision of a racially egalitarian society. It would take another two generations before sufficient attention would be directed against white supremacy nationally and always especially in the South.

[7] In place of a comprehensive nation-wide truth and reconciliation initiative, what has taken place in the American context has been much more episodic, in part because such efforts to revisit the past are haunted by the forces of denial and forgetfulness. Occasionally in the press a story emerges about a move to redress past injustice as in 1992 when Clinton Adams confessed to the FBI that as a ten year old boy he saw a white mob murder four black people at Moore's Ford near Monroe in Walton County, Georgia in 1946 (*Denver Post* 1992; Moore's Ford Lynching website [<http://www.cviog.uga.edu/Projects/gainfo/gahistmarkers/mooresfordhistmarker.htm>]). In another instance on April 4, 1998, 88-year old Matthew Gilmour organized an interfaith (Baptist, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, and Mormon) ceremony for a "Day of Reconciliation" for the Price, Utah community to remember the injustice of the lynching of African-American coal miner, Robert Marshall in 1925 (*Denver Post*, 1998; Sells). More recently, Emily Yellin, a writer for the *The New York Times*, reported a legal ruling which cleared lynching victim Ed Johnson in Chattanooga, Tennessee of a rape charge 94 years ago. Triggered by the historical detective work of two white professionals - local lawyer LeRoy Phillips, Jr. and a local legal affairs reporter Mark Curriden (now with the *Dallas Morning News*) - Judge Douglas A. Meyers set aside Johnson's conviction about which the U. S. Supreme Court in 1906 had had sufficient doubt so as to stay his scheduled execution. To circumvent the Court's ruling, a mob of white men took Johnson from his jail cell, marched him through the city's streets and hanged him from the Walnut Street Bridge before riddling his body with bullets. Their resistance provoked the only criminal trial in the history of the U. S. Supreme Court of the

Chattanooga sheriff, several other law enforcement officials, and others members of the lynching party. Phillips and Curriden had the assistance of Rev. Paul McDaniel, a local black clergyman and former county commissioner, to bring the request before the court (Yellin).

[8] Such legal recourse, demonstrated in the events captured in the book and the film, "Ghosts of Mississippi," sometimes has brought a particular case, here of the racist-initiated assassination of Medgar Evers, to a conclusion (Vollers; Nossiter). Something similar occurred in the single conviction in the Birmingham church bombing case of 1963, made successful by the courageous testimony of the late Elizabeth Cobbs/Petric Smith, whose book *Long Time Coming* unveiled the stages that led to the imprisonment of her uncle. Frank Sikora's *Until Justice Rolls Down* in 1991 recounts some of the same stories. Spike Lee's film, "Four Little Girls," certainly has widely dramatized the perception that much in that case lies unresolved and unrevealed.¹ In the fall of 1999 news reports indicated that Cobbs/Smith's appeal in her book to indict others in that conspiracy may yet occur. On May 16, 2000 an Alabama grand jury brought indictments against the two of the four suspects from 1963 who are still living - Thomas Blanton, Jr. and Bobby Frank Cherry (*Denver Post* 1999; Southern Poverty Law Center: 48). A report on National Public Radio in November 2000 indicates that the state of Mississippi is now committed to prosecuting for murder some of the surviving defendants in the 1964 slaying of the three civil rights workers - the story dramatized in the book and film, "Mississippi Burning."

[9] More often, especially for cases which date back behind the modern civil rights era, the detective work by historians (like Phillips and Curriden in the Ed Johnson case) provide the only contemporary access to buried stories about racial oppression, especially around dramatic events such as lynchings or the political violence in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898 which was afterwards misinterpreted as a racial riot and blamed on the African-American community. Even within the historical profession, however, the forces of denial and of professional distance from such topics as lynching have often prevailed especially in mainstream textbooks and monographs. As an example, one only needs to read the recent essay by the distinguished white southern historian Joel Williamson and the conflicting responses of the seven critical readers published with it.²

[10] If Williamson's discussion was focused according to one of his critics (Blight) on showing "in retrospect how American historians didn't or couldn't see lynching in their developing visions of the past," there is some evidence that changes are in the wind within and without the historical profession. *Without Sanctuary*, the photographic exhibit of pictures of lynchings which opened in New York in January 2000 and whose impact has expanded through the publication

¹ Other films which come to mind in this context are John Singleton's "Rosewood" (about the all black Florida community which was destroyed and its inhabitants scattered or killed in 1923) and in video for teaching purposes Lee Wun Wah's "The Color of Fear" (by a Chinese-American filmmaker whose mother was murdered by an African-American and who organized a group of men from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to spend a weekend together talking frankly about racism). A play entitled "Minstrel Show" based on the Omaha, Nebraska lynching of Willie Brown in 1919 was touring the country in the fall of 2000 (see *Denver Post* 2000).

² Williamson (1252 n. 36) cited several influential studies of lynching up to 1997, but he missed referencing a number of additional works on individual lynchings, including the works by Downey and Hyser, McGovern, Smead, Whitfield, Tolney and Beck, and Howard. Williamson also neglected to include in his historiographical survey a number of Jewish, African-American, and leftist historians who had, in fact, kept the issue of lynching central to their work, so that his understanding of who American historians are must itself, as several critics noticed, be questioned.

and distribution of the exhibit catalog, provides a searing visual experience of the racist violence which consistently marked the American and not just southern landscape, occurring without significant redress and embracing the most mundane forms of acceptance of these brutal and sickening events. The exhibit especially features the phenomenon of having lynching photographs engraved as picture post cards and sent to friends and relatives (Allen *et al.*). In the face of this sort of white American version of what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil” in referring to Nazism and the Holocaust, the failure to have a federal anti-lynching law until the civil rights acts in the 1960s is given a dramatically different reading. Of course, passing the law without implementing it would have been its own cynical concession to the dominance of white supremacy. A case in point: of the forty killings listed on the National Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama at the headquarters of the Southern Poverty Law Center, only two in the 1960s resulted in first-degree murder convictions (the deaths of Vernon Dahmer in 1966 and of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968) while for another five victims there were successful federal conspiracy (though not murder) convictions. Another six cases among the forty martyrs have been resurrected in the past decade beyond the Birmingham church bombing case mentioned above (Southern Poverty Law Center: 43).

[11] The most recent historical work on lynchings and racial violence, dating after Williamson’s 1997 essay, includes an internet project headed by Eliza Steelwater of Bloomington, Indiana and Elizabeth Hines of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington to document U. S. lynchings. This inventory will bring together the old source collections by the NAACP and by the staff at Tuskegee with new efforts to identify previously undocumented vigilante based killings. We now have a study of the racial violence in Columbia, Tennessee in 1946 (O’Brien); a biography of NAACP activist, Harry Moore, killed in a bombing attack on Christmas Day, 1951, including an analysis of why the case was never resolved (Green); an anthology addressing lynching in the South (Brundage); a remarkable article on the drama of lynching (Fuoss); and a collection of plays on lynching by American women (Perkins and Stephens), appropriately invoking Billie Holliday, Josh White, the anti-lynching novel by Lillian Smith, and the author of the ballad by that name, Abel Meeropol.³ And we will before long have a revisionist work on the Emmett Till lynching (Wilcots). Whether all of these studies, and recent hate-crime murders which invite historical comparisons, begin to add up to a contemporary cultural confrontation with lynching in American society and a more realistic appraisal of the meanings of lynching in U. S. historical scholarship, only time will tell.

[12] Obviously historical work can be carried on from the ivory tower without consciously seeking to transform the public perception of a phenomenon like lynching, especially when the scholarship does not really engage the particular communities affected by the violence - communities where people remember, communities where people tell and retell multiple stories about the traumatic events, communities tied to places where the deaths occurred. For the heart of this paper I want to recount three historical events which are not unlike stories which were told before the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but they come from the U. S. past. I skip around in time from 1911-12 to 1947 and then back to 1898 but all with an eye to how the particular historical event has been dealt with or ignored. Perhaps it would be best to ask the reader to suspend time, to consider the stories without regard to how long ago they occurred and thus to allow for the possibility summed up in William Faulkner’s famous quotation: “The

³ The anti-lynching song itself is the subject of the long essay by David Margolick.

past is not dead, it is not even past.” I have considered the possibility that what I am demonstrating here might have pedagogical relevance as a process which could involve students in group research projects and let them struggle to find their own models about how justice might be satisfied in each instance. In these three stories as always I am interested both in how particular religious communities and representatives responded to racist violence, but also I am concerned in a Durkheimian sense or as another take on the civil religions of the U. S. à la Robert Bellah over how the collective itself, the entire society, repressed or faced up to the consequences of racist violence.

[13] In each story a different kind of outcome emerges in this regard. Two are historical examples of the lynching of African-Americans - of Zachariah Walker in Coatesville, Pennsylvania in 1911 and of Willie Earle in Pickens and Greenville, South Carolina in 1947. The final example will recount what the Wilmington, North Carolina community undertook in 1998 to commemorate the events of the white supremacist take-over of the city a century earlier in a way that was transformational in the present.

The Lynching of Zachariah Walker, the Witness of John Jay Chapman, and the Rationalization of Terror

[14] As the South African TRC process confirmed, there are examples of individuals who assume responsibility for their own communities and bear witness to the truth. They thus open up the first possible steps toward identifying injustice, which is the initial stage toward any reconciliation or healing. A prominent historical incident of this sort earlier in the past century is the story of a white New Yorker, John Jay Chapman, and it takes us back to 1911 and 1912. In mid-August 1912 Chapman journeyed to southeastern Pennsylvania, to the steel-town of Coatesville in Chester County, in order to hold a Saturday morning [August 16] prayer meeting in a rented hall, The Nagel Building, “in memory of the tragedy of August 13, 1911.” His ad in *The Coatesville Record* of August 15 invited the community of about twelve thousand to note as the order for the service “Silent and aural prayer: Reading from the Scriptures: Brief Address by John Jay Chapman,” and his notice concluded with the plea, “O Lord receive my prayer” (Barzun: vi).

[15] The tragedy which Chapman was memorializing was the lynching and death by burning of Zachariah Walker, who was taken from the Coatesville Hospital where he had undergone surgery for self-inflicted wounds suffered as he was taken into police custody for the fatal shooting of Edgar Rice, a security officer for Worth Brothers Steel Company. Bound to his bed and guarded by an officer outside his room, Walker was abducted about 9:00 PM on Sunday evening just as church services let out. About two dozen leaders of the white mob which included onlookers numbering more than two thousand dragged him about a half mile, built a pyre out of a split rail fence, and prepared to throw Walker onto it. Claiming he killed Rice out of self-defense - a probability verified by the recent historians Dennis B. Downey and Raymond M. Hyser in their reconstruction of the events - Walker pled, “Don’t give me no crooked death just because I’m not white.” Undeterred, the mob’s leaders threw him into the fire, and even though Walker managed to raise himself out of the fire, they threw him back in, not once but twice (Downey and Hyser: 15-17, 34-38, 140).

[16] Unbeknownst to Chapman, a week prior to this horrendous event on the last night of the Harvest Festival, an itinerant African-American preacher named Prophet Andrew Jones had predicted in a sermon during a week long revival in the Tabernacle Baptist Church that “a great

misfortune was about to fall on the town.” Claiming that he had foretold other events like the Johnstown Pennsylvania flood, a Baltimore fire, and the San Francisco earthquake, the Prophet was not more specific in his prediction. But he counseled his congregation “to remember that the meek *shall* inherit the earth” and that local blacks ought “make no attempt at violence although they would be sorely tested” (Barzun: 1, 9 n.10)

[17] Chapman was horrified by the news stories about Walker’s death at the time “and,” he wrote later, “as the anniversary came round” he felt “forced . . . to do something. I felt as if the whole country would be different if any one man did something in penance, and so I went to Coatesville” (Barzun: vi). Not a clergyman, Chapman was a writer on political and reform topics, and an essayist about literary figures and issues. We do not know what scriptures he used or the content of his prayer. We do know that his audience was small - only three people, his friend Edith Martin from New York, an older unnamed black woman visitor from Boston who had been linked with the anti-slavery cause, and a local man whom he considered a spy “finding out what was up” (Barzun: viii). His brief address, widely circulated afterwards in several publications including *Harper’s Weekly*, *Literary Digest*, and even in the local Coatesville paper, was a witness against the barbarity of lynching in the U. S., which was averaging during this period more than six a month, mostly in the South (Downey and Hyser: 118-119, 124 n. 48, 125).

[18] Chapman came, he explained, “not for the purpose of condemning” what he called “one of the most dreadful crimes in history.” Rather he called the meeting “to repent of our share in it.” He wanted most to explain what happened to him a year earlier as he experienced the shock

when I read in the newspapers of August 14, a year ago, about the burning alive of a human being, and of how a few desperate, fiend-minded men had been permitted to torture a man chained to an iron bedstead, burning alive, thrust back by pitchforks when he struggled out of it, while around about stood hundreds of well-dressed American citizens, both from the vicinity and from afar, coming on foot and in wagons, assembling on telephone call, as if by magic, silent, whether from terror or indifference, fascinated and impotent, hundreds of persons watching this awful sight and making no attempt to stay the wickedness, and no one man among them all who was inspired to risk his life in an attempt to stop it, no one man in the name of Christ, of humanity, of government! (Barzun: 255)

The event, Chapman concluded, gave him “a glimpse into the unconscious soul of this country,” making it necessary for him to say “I have seen death in the heart of this people” (Barzun: 255-56). His homily found no cure in “theories about the race problem, no statistics, legislation, or mere educational endeavor” to measure up to “the lack which that day revealed in the American people.” To counter this death energy, Chapman appealed to his three auditors and his readers:

Whatever life itself is, that thing must be replenished in us. The opposite of hate is love, the opposite of cold is heat; what we need is the love of God and reverence for human nature. For one moment I knew that I had seen our true need. . . . And I became filled with one idea, that I must not forget what I had seen, and that I must do something to remember it. . . . And I am here to-day chiefly that I may remember that vision. It seems fitting to come to this town where the crime occurred and hold a prayer-meeting, so that our hearts may be turned to God through whom mercy may flow into us (Barzun: 256).

[19] Chapman interpreted the burning death of Zachariah Walker in a context larger than the present and broader than its local setting in Coatesville. "It is the wickedness of all America and of three hundred years - the wickedness of the slave trade," he exclaimed. "All of us are tintured by it. No special place, no special persons are to blame. A nation cannot practice a course of inhuman crime for three hundred years and then suddenly throw off the effects of it." Insisting that the national events were also part "of the personal history of each one of us," and refusing to permit exemptions that disallowed personal involvement with something so far in the past, Chapman countered, "We are still looking on" (Barzun: 257). In a memorable line, he moved to his conclusion: "With the great disease (slavery) came the climax (the war), and after the climax gradually began the cure, and in the process of the cure comes the knowledge of what the evil was" (Barzun: 257-58). The need as part of the cure, he insisted, was "new life," for "books and resolutions will not save us, but only such disposition in our hearts and souls as will enable the new life, love, force, hope, virtue, which surround us always, to enter into us." Each one, he concluded, must discover that for oneself though it does not come from self-effort "but must wait till God gives it to [a person]." The impulse, ultimately, was "to come here to-day to testify to this truth." That commitment lay behind the prayer-meeting as "the occasion [which] looks back on three centuries and embraces a hemisphere" leading to the larger truth which "touches all ages and affects every soul in the world" (Barzun: 258).

[20] The general community of Coatesville has never publicly commemorated this event with repentance and a determination to transform the horrible memory. Beginning almost immediately from the gruesome ritual of collecting relics from the lynching including parts of Walker's burned corpse to the determination by the local populace not to convict any of the defendants arrested and tried in the case through the spring of 1912, the mood was otherwise. Rationalization and denial had set in. In February 1913 in a regional periodical called *Cresset Magazine* published in Chester County, Wayne Morris justified what had happened by saying, "There are potential lynchers in every community in the United States, to say nothing of the rest of the world. Given the conditions as they existed in Coatesville . . . of August 13, 1911, and Zack Walker would have been lynched anywhere in the United States" (Downey and Hyser: 38-39, 125-26, 147, 153-54).

[21] Although there has been some discussion in the Pennsylvania Historical Markers Board of dedicating a historical plaque about the lynching, interest in the idea has come from outside Coatesville and nothing has been done. There is no marker to Walker's death in that region, not even for a gravesite, nor surviving recollections among African-American interviewees about any funeral for Walker. Prophet Jones disappears from the historical record (Dennis Downey, private communication). That the event has been reconstructed at all was the result of the writings of Chapman and the joint effort of the two historians, Downey and Hyser, who discovered they were researching the same story. They decided to collaborate on a book instead of competing with each other. In it, they conclude: "The shroud of anonymity that protected the participants in the lynching from public exposure also cloaked this episode from its inception and would be in place long after Walker's charred remains had been discarded" (Downey and Hyser: xii, 154).

The Lynching of Willie Earle: History and Memory in South Carolina

[22] Until I recovered in psychotherapy in 1981 the repressed memories of the last racial lynching in my home state of South Carolina, the killing of Willie Earle in 1947, I did not have

any conscious adult recollection of this event from my childhood. In the middle of my eighth year before daybreak on February 17 Earle was abducted from the Pickens County Jail five blocks from my house and taken across the county line in Greenville where he was stabbed and shot in the face. The lynching party drove within fifty yards of where I was sleeping and not much further from the home of Sheriff Waymon Mauldin next door. Thirty-one white men, twenty six of whom confessed their complicity in the lynching, were charged and tried, but after a celebrated trial covered for *The New Yorker* magazine by British writer, Rebecca West, no one was convicted. Those and related events have been the focus of an ongoing research project whose intentions have been to tell long buried truths, to assess alongside the obvious breaches of justice the damage to the souls of individuals and communities, and to bring healing and reconciliation, where possible.

[23] Three things I have done with this project coincide with the intention of this paper. First, I came to know Tessie Earle Robinson, the mother of the lynching victim, in 1982, and visiting with her a half dozen times over the next nine years was an important dimension of my work. With the help of research assistants, Paul Strom and Lila Stevens Waite, we were able to dispel the misinformation which her family had been given - for example, that Willie Earle had been castrated and hanged from a tree rather than stabbed, though not castrated, and shot to death. We were able particularly at a symposium about this lynching at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina in 1990 to tell the audience one alternative story of what had happened in Mrs. Robinson's family and with her son. She denied that her son had come to see her in a taxicab as the official story has it, saying that he had come on a bus and thus inferring that he could not have been the assailant of a taxi driver, Thomas Watson Brown, who later died from his injuries. That attack was the trigger for Brown's cab driver colleagues to take the law into their own hands.

[24] Second, in 1987 I was able to take Tessie Earle Robinson back for the first time in forty years to her first son's unmarked gravesite in 1987 during the anniversary week of those painful events. She had been interested that I had had a conversation with her pastor, Rev. J. B. Bailey, who had conducted her son's funeral at the New Hope Baptist Church in Liberty. In 1997, six years after she had died in a nursing home in California, I was able to mark, with the assistance of Eloise Earle of Clemson, South Carolina, the gravesite with words we thought she would have approved of: "Beloved Son, Willie Earle, 1925-1947." Following the outcome of the trial in 1947 Tessie Earle traveled to New York to speak at the National Negro Freedom Day rally and to make contact with the national office of the NAACP whose lawyers aided her in suing the two counties. She was successful in forcing Greenville County to pay the minimum \$2000 indemnity, though its distribution was blocked in court until 1956 (Gravely 1997b).

[25] Third, I edited and published a sermon, which I heard as a seven-year-old preached by the white Methodist minister in Pickens condemning the lynching. Hawley Lynn had kept its typed text for thirty-four years when I visited him and asked about the piece. He had edited it and published it under a different title in 1950 in *The Christian Century Pulpit* without any historical context. When I republished it in its original form as delivered in March, 1947 before the Grace Methodist Church congregation, I set it and Lynn's life in context, and I included for this issue of *Methodist History* in January 1997, Lynn's composition "A Prayer for the Sin of Lynching," which appeared in *The Southern Christian Advocate* on March 6, 1947 and in the local weekly *Pickens Sentinel* newspaper.

[26] Part of that context was the initiative, which Hawley Lynn took to call the Pickens community to a meeting at the local high school three days after Earle's death and adopt a resolution condemning the lynching. The meeting occurred and my father was one of the persons who attended, but sentiment that evening from people in another part of the county prevailed. They told the story of the last lynching in the county in July 1912 of a young black man only seventeen years old named Brooks Gordon. His killing was not listed in the NAACP or Tuskegee records but last year I added it to the Internet compilation by Steelwater and Hines mentioned earlier. The anti-protest speakers used its retelling thirty years later as a way to put down any effort to condemn the lynching of Willie Earle. The protest meeting adjourned, but this defeat of his initiative did not prevent Hawley Lynn from speaking out and trying to get the community to face the truth in his sermon and prayer (Gravelly 1997a). In that regard he was like John Jay Chapman, but from within the community and close to the event.

[27] Beyond my individual contacts in the process to reconstruct the stories around Earle's death, the single collective effort to engage the past around the lynching was the Furman University symposium in November 1990 attended by 175 persons, including some surviving family members of the lynchers as well as other persons connected to or interested in the event. Organized by university faculty A. V. Huff, Jr. and Judith Bainbridge and funded in part by the South Carolina Council for the Humanities, it featured an afternoon session with an opening talk by Greenville native and University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) historian, George B. Tindall on post-World War II race relations in the South. Lawyer Schaefer B. Kendrick spoke next on White Greenville in 1947, followed by educator Samuel L. Zimmerman, Sr. on Black Greenville in that year. African-American Judge Merl Code read selections I had discovered from the Negro press of 1947 responding to the lynching and the trial verdict - passages from Langston Hughes, Albert Hinton, and Benjamin Mays. A local actress and native of Scotland dramatized portions of the Rebecca West essay, "Opera at Greenville." A chronology of the major developments in the story was the presentation by Nancy Vance Ashmore Cooper of the Institute for Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina (Columbia) and daughter of the solicitor and later congressman, Robert Ashmore, who prosecuted the case in 1947. Following dinner for the presenters and the audience, an evening session included then poet laureate of South Carolina, Bennie Lee Sinclair (who died in May, 2000), author of the then forthcoming mystery novel, *The Lynching*, and my own presentation summarizing my research project and my oral history interviewing activities to try to get at the inner history of these events. The evening concluded when Furman professor Bart Dredge read the two paragraphs from the first presidential report on civil rights from 1947 "To Secure These Rights" which had analyzed this lynching. Huff (an ordained minister) offered a closing prayer.

[28] The symposium more than 43 years later was the closest thing to a collective effort at reconciliation in Greenville in terms of assessing the meaning of the lynching of Willie Earle. Its organizers gathered sixty-nine evaluations from the audience, provided for dissemination of the entire event on video-tape, and had a story with two of the presentations reprinted in the South Carolina Historical Society publication, *Carologue*. Those essays join the growing list of individual writings, which give variable interpretive readings to the developments of 1947. Local newspaper reporters (William L. Davey and Bill Morris) provided in 1962 and 1972 their retrospectives on anniversaries of the event. A resident in Greenville in 1947, Nancy Roberts published a ghost story about the murder in 1983. A Methodist preacher and now Duke University Chaplain Will Willimon theologized about the tragedy in his 1985 book *Sighing for Eden*. And Sinclair, whose mother worked in the Greenville County courthouse at the time of the

killing, brought out her mystery novel in 1992, though it had very little direct relevance to the actual historical case. University of Alabama historian Kari Frederickson broke the silence of *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* on the Earle lynching in an essay in 1997, and more recently she has presented at the Southern Historical Association on the class issues involved in the case - a topic that University of Georgia historian Bryant Simon is also researching.

[29] My oral history interviewees have expanded the versions of what happened and what it all meant, including at least three more alternative stories about the deaths of Brown and Earle distinct from the official account. Residents of Markley Street in Greenville near where Earle had lived never believed he was Brown's assailant. As a protest after the May 1947 verdict freeing the cab drivers in the lynching party, the black community of Greenville boycotted all the taxi companies which had any of the defendants on their payrolls. Before long African-American cab companies were in business to serve the riders from their own community. Several of the key leaders in the Progressive Democratic Party of South Carolina (organized in 1944 to challenge the all-white delegations to the national Democratic conventions) considered the Earle lynching as an important impetus to rally black voters and increase political activism. Their chances were enhanced when the federal courts sided with George Elmore in the case against the white primary in South Carolina in June 1947.

[30] The lynching of Willie Earle inevitably has an unresolved dimension at its center and multiple memories attest to that sense. For more than fifteen years, until March 2001, the FBI guarded its summary file from my full access to the data. The county library in Greenville at the time of the 1990 symposium reported that its clippings file on the case was checked out on the average of once every two days. All the lynchers save one have died, and he refuses to be interviewed. But the public struggle honestly to engage the events of 1947 goes on. Jeff Sumerel and John Sexton, filmmakers for Spontaneous Productions and natives of Greenville, have a script entitled "Lynch" which is due to be made into a film about the impact of the trial on the friendship between two women (Richardson-Moore).

The 1998 Centennial Commemoration of Racial Violence in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898⁴

[31] By contrast to Coatesville but taking the reappropriation of the past several steps further than in Greenville in 1990, the community of Wilmington, North Carolina in November, 1998 developed and produced a major anti-racist event - the centennial recollection of a white supremacist political coup and violence resulting in the death of an undetermined number of African-Americans. In doing so they modeled ways to ritualize and transform misinterpretations of events and misrepresentations of facts which consistently accompany racist violence. What was traditionally called a racial riot, blamed on the black community in local and national media in 1898 and perpetuated thereafter by white interpreters of the event, has been renamed for what it was. Simply put in the words of an anonymous black woman writing to President William McKinley, "There was not any rioting, simply the strong slaying the weak" (quoted in Gilmore: 88).

[32] With broad corporate sponsorship (more than fifty companies, political and voluntary associations) and nearly 130 individual contributors for the events, the 1898 Centennial

⁴ I am indebted to professor Vincent Harding (Ilf School of Theology) who directed me to the original website for the Wilmington project and lent me a set of documents coming out of the 1998 events.

Foundation scheduled a ceremony of remembrance and rededication, a foundation banquet and a commemorative drama, "No More Sorrow to Arise." The University of North Carolina at Wilmington and the State Department of Archives and History co-sponsored three weeks earlier a symposium on the 1898 racial violence, out of which has come *Democracy Betrayed*, a volume of papers by scholars invited to present their work (Cecelski and Tyson). An 1898 Memorial and Centennial Park is underway near where the violence occurred a century ago. The events in the fall of 1998 culminated a yearlong community-wide series of interracial dialogues, which the Reconciliation Committee designed.

[33] A handsome program of events in November and a newspaper entitled *The Centennial Record* were published and distributed. In it the poetry of winners of a competition for elementary and for middle school children appeared (*Centennial Record*: 19). Local Rabbi Robert Waxman alluded to his own tradition's practice of Passover when declaring "Every generation of citizens of Wilmington must remember the events and we must retell the story every November. When we tell of the past, we learn from the past and move forward into the future" (*Centennial Record*: 9). From the Muslim community Imam Abdul Rahman Shareef added: "This year of commemoration has given me a genuine opportunity to express and witness the uniqueness of diversity. . . . I pray Allah (Almighty God) will bless abundantly those who initiated, planned and supported this 1898 Commemoration" (*Centennial Record*: 29). A number of Christian ministers and lay people, black and white, gave similar statements of support generally or at the foundation banquet as they had done alongside Jewish, Muslim, and Bahai representatives in the community interracial dialogue meetings.

[34] Misnamed for years as a "North Carolina Race War" and publicized as such in the national media, the 1898 conflict was sparked by the restoration to white supremacist government under the Democratic Party at the November 8 election. Where there had been forty black justices of the peace in New Hanover County in 1897, a county treasurer, recorder of deeds, coroner, and assistant sheriff and in Wilmington three alderman, two all-black fire companies, and numerous black policemen, mail carriers, and health inspectors, the election was a referendum against those offices being held by any African-Americans (Prather: 16-17). The Democratic victory resulted from a meticulously planned white supremacist campaign modeled after similar efforts in South Carolina and featuring its leader, Benjamin Tillman, as a speaker in the Tar Heel state in October (Prather: 22-29). After their victory white Democrats were impatient that the new white officers would not be sworn in until the following spring. The day after the election they called a public meeting to take over the county and the town immediately. They adopted a "White Man's Declaration of Independence," which was presented by twenty-five white leaders to the black community. In it black office holding was declared unnatural, preferential hiring of blacks was to be stopped, the local black newspaper *The Daily Record* was to cease publication, and its editor and Presbyterian Sunday School teacher, Alex Manly, forced to leave town. Black leaders crafted a carefully worded response and mailed it, but before the letter could arrive and any negotiations emerge, a white mob destroyed the newspaper office and put a bounty on Manly's head. From those events the so-called riot began, in which violence and destruction reigned. In the black neighborhoods homes and churches were damaged, businesses torched, and lives seared by the hysteria (*Centennial Record*: 10-11).

[35] At the Commemorative Ceremony of 1998, the audience participated in a program outlined under four captions: To tell the story, To honor the memory, To heal the wound, To restore the hope. A Litany in Remembrance of the Events of 1898 ("written in the hope of reconciliation")

distinguished between personal responsibility for the past, which no one alive could assume, and present stewardship for “the future our children will inherit.” The litany sought to exorcise and “name those ancient ghosts” which “the wounds of the past” project. It celebrated “the richness and variety of human colors,” and declared “your liberation is caught up in mine. We can fall divided or build together.” It concluded by recognizing that racism and prejudice cannot be eliminated all at once, but also insisting “We can tell each other the truth in love, and work toward reconciliation” (*Centennial Record*: 24).

[36] In rebuttal a century later to the “White Man’s Declaration of Independence,” the Reconciliation Committee composed “The People’s Declaration of Racial Interdependence,” which committed the signers to educate children “to the principle of racial equality and interdependence and the goal of racial harmony.” Its nine articles appealed for inclusion, condemned racist speech or behavior, sought to insure “that the history of the past be an undeniable part of the public record” and declared that the centennial was the right occasion at the right time for doing the right thing in terms of “interracial dialogue, inclusion, and reconciliation without reservation” (*Centennial Record*: 19, 21).

[37] A descendant of slaveowners and of segregationists, Dr. Anne Russell (a licensed psychotherapist) wrote the drama, “No More Sorrow To Arise” which was performed at Thallian Hall - the same spot where the “White Man’s Declaration of Independence” was first read and signed. More than a thousand people attended the original production, whose script was named from a line in one of Carrie Manly’s letters about the events of 1898. She was the wife of Alex Manly whose newspaper was destroyed by the white mob, an event now recognized by a new state monument to Manly’s courage. Their story is the essential plot of the play (*Centennial Record*: 15, 19).

Conclusion

[38] Our three stories have imbedded within them varying kinds of African American religious presence and leadership. Prophet Andrew Jones intuitively discerned an increasingly volatile situation in the steel-town of Coatesville as rural black Virginians seeking work came into an ethnically diverse but mostly “white” European-American community. His warnings perhaps saved the lives of many in his black audience and beyond as his words circulated before the lynching. The prophet read the signs of the times and made them the subject of his revival sermon.

[39] In the Willie Earle lynching story, besides the public condemnation of the lynching by black religious and political leaders in South Carolina, there was a national outcry producing telegrams, petitions, marches, rallies. The protests were often led by representatives of African-American churches. The manuscript papers of then Governor Strom Thurmond, of Judge J. Robert Martin who tried the lynchers, of Thomas Wofford one of the defense attorneys, in the NAACP archive at the Library of Congress and in the President’s Committee on Civil Rights collection at the Truman Library, document their protests on behalf of racial justice. But in the Earle story there was also the pastoral leadership of Rev. J. B. Bailey who did not let intimidators prevent his conducting the funeral service in the town where the white cab driver, Thomas Watson Brown, had been found stabbed and near death a few days before. He comforted the widow and grieving mother, Tessie Earle, and her surviving children and those who braved the threats to bury Willie Earle at Abel Baptist Church cemetery not far from his stepfather’s grave.

[40] It is clear that the Wilmington community, at the moment of the centennial of the 1898 coup, modeled in several respects what can be done collectively to turn historical recollection into an orientation for a different future. Though multi-racial and multi-faith in leadership, the project would have been unthinkable apart from vigorous African-American religious communities. African-American Christians and Muslims were present together in the planning and production. The centennial's planners integrated the academic community in its symposium and in its ongoing David Walker lecture series. They placed the 1898 event into a setting, which can continue to instruct future generations in their monument and park project. Without trying to make present-day persons responsible for the past except for how it influences the present and the future, they exemplified a communal effort at civic repentance - a theme a recent issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* explores (March 1998). In doing these things so well, the Wilmington project most fulfills the agenda, which the late German-American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once projected for meaningful historical engagement. He wrote: "We must look at the past not only because it shows us how finite we are - what creatures of our determinations, but because we are responsible agents in history, and we must study the past to free ourselves for the future" (Quoted in *Orientation*, a 1963 issue of *Motive*: 68).

[41] Some South African religious studies scholars have reflected on occasional ironic outcomes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in closing out the stories of some citizens whose experiences did not fit the parameters of the commission's mission, whose religion was not Christian like Tutu's, whose therapeutic method was rooted in traditional African cultures, or whose testimonies obviously compromised truths they refused to own up to (Cochran *et al.*). The distinguished Nigerian novelist, Wole Soyinka, has raised in his book serious questions about the requirements of justice in the South African model and of the limits of forgiveness. I recognize those limitations and their applicability to the contexts which I have been exploring. I also recognize that racism, as John Edgar Wideman reminds us, creates black on black, black on white, white on white as well as white on black violence, not to mention persons who do not fit the white/black polarity. I continue to ponder what it might indeed take for the U. S. to respond more directly and positively to Tutu's challenge. In many ways he is trying to assist us, as in his role with the Campaign for Forgiveness Research. In the end I believe that every kind of engagement we have explored and others yet to be imagined remains necessary to counter the inclination to forget and repress. The need to remember is necessary to sanity and is the first prerequisite to healing from racism, personally and socially. That is the conclusion which David Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson reach in their introduction to the anthology coming out of the Wilmington 1998 centennial:

The fact that few people have heard of the Wilmington "race riot" of 1898 or the historic experiment in interracial politics that it helped to destroy has left all of us inadequately prepared to address the racial crisis that is now so abundantly evident in American life. We all make history, to be sure, but we do not make it out of whole cloth. We must weave the future from the fabric of the past, from the patterns of aspiration and belonging that have made us. We look to Wilmington in 1898, as to all this nation's racial history, then, not to wring our hands in fruitless nostalgia of pain, but to redeem the democratic promise rooted in the living ingredients of American life (10-11).

[42] Three specific contemporary struggles come to mind as current challenges to the democratic promise of America. First, none of us will be so isolated as not to notice the hate-crime

dimension of the legacies of racism (not to mention other forms of hate-crime) - from the Jasper, TX dragging death of James Byrd, Jr. to the nonfatal shootings at the Jewish Community Center in California in 1999 to the killings that July in Evanston, IL by racist convert Benjamin Nathaniel Smith. In 1998 the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project staffers documented 537 hate groups and chapters that were engaged in racist behavior, an increase of 13% over 1997. The next year the numbers declined to 457 as large hate groups got larger and smaller ones shrank or disappeared, while hate sites on the internet grew from 254 in 1999 to 305 early in 2000 (<http://www.splcenter.org>).

[43] The end of affirmative action programs (coming from California eastward as so much anti-immigrant, anti-public school, racist initiatives have emerged from the nineteenth century onward) without any significant collective investment to assist us to face the challenges of a multiracial, multicultural democracy is a second sign of the persistence of white supremacy and white dominance as threats to democracy. Even if some of the programs are championed by persons of color, their advocacy (as Dr. Alan Keyes' candidacy in the 2000 Republican presidential primary, who claimed that taxation is more onerous than slavery in the American past) fosters the unconscious reification of white privilege and its most prominent code-word "individualism" as the primary social value of the modern American dream.

[44] Third, despite all the efforts to overcome the long history of the racialization of citizenship, the 2000 census blends language and ethnic based categories like Hispanic or Latino with geographically based categories like Alaska Native, now lumped with American Indian and Native Hawaiian (a new addition), combined with Other Pacific Islander, but that is not equated with Asian-American. There is no category for persons with Arabic or Middle Eastern backgrounds. Black or African-American mixes the color code of the old pseudo-biological race based categories with the cultural terminology of African-American, but that does not occur for White. White is the final great unrevised symbol which forms the basis of the one-drop rule or hypodescent, identifying all people of color as nonwhite regardless of how small the ratio of other racial designators to white is. It stands alone as a color code indicator of the racial majority. Merely substituting the cultural designation European-American will not solve the problem, since David Duke has named his white supremacist organization National Organization For European-American Rights - NO FEAR - and of late has taken the anti-Semitic dimensions of his crusade to Russia.

[45] The history of "white" as a symbol of social and political identity lies not only in the early colonial American distinctions between Europeans, Christians, and White contrasting with Native Peoples, Pagans, Red and with African-peoples, Pagans, and Black, but especially with the 162 year legislative paradigm from the First Naturalization Act of 1790 through the Walter-McCarren Act of 1952 when everyone of European descent was classified as a free white person. Such a racial norm was, as black conservative opponent on affirmative action Shelby Steele conceded a decade ago, the original racial quota system in American society. By virtue of "white" numerical dominance and the social and political structures created to perpetuate that dominance, white privilege always discriminated against Asians, Latin-Americans, and Africans who wished to enter the country and apply for citizenship, not to mention which it meant for native Americans who could not even be U. S. citizens until the 1920s. The U. S. Supreme Court in the Ozawa and Thind cases (1922-23) declared one year that a Japanese-American could not become a citizen because he was not Caucasian (biological racial classification) and then the next year ruled that a Caucasian from India could not be a citizen because he was not "white"

(cultural-historical classification with meanings larger than Caucasian). Since I became conscious of the construction of “whiteness” in relation to immigration and to the formation of a “white” majority in America by reading in the new multicultural literature, it occurred to me that one might make the case, a la Bellah and civil religion, that descriptively speaking for most of American history and for most Americans the color-code signifier “white” has functioned as the primary and unconscious assumption in terms of an essential dimension of defining the “true” national identity.

[46] We are less than fifty years since the Walter-McCarren act was passed, striking the “white” category as a constituent of naturalization and automatic citizenship eligibility for European Americans. Two years later, of course, came *Brown v. Board of Education*. Put another way, we are only a little more than one generation removed from formal segregation - the closest American equivalent of apartheid with many parallels - most often identified with the South but having its origins as much in the pre-Civil War North as in the post-Civil War South to the 1950s (Litwack). Given how recently has been the successful democratic challenge against white supremacy in voting rights and in some civil rights gains, it is inevitable that there will be for a long time structural inequities, and at the personal level of human interaction a conflicted pattern of interracial relations. The need to work at both levels is obvious if what African-American writer Harlon Dalton of the Yale University Law School poses as racial healing is to occur. His musings form our final reflection on what Archbishop Tutu has invited Americans to consider.

We are loathe to confront one another about race. We are afraid of tapping into pent-up anger, frustration, resentment, and pain. Even when we are not aware of harboring such feelings ourselves, we recognize that they exist in others. Our natural tendency is to hold them in check, in hopes that they will somehow fade away. Unfortunately, they will not. Tangled emotions and inexplicable behavior are the inevitable byproducts of our nation’s unresolved racial past. Until we deal with them, we resemble peasant villagers who continue to build on the slopes of an ancient but active volcano. Or, more precisely, we are like the mountain itself: oblivious to the gurgling deep within, proud of the new life it has nurtured, and hoping against hope that history will not repeat itself. America’s sorry racial state of affairs is also like a deep and abiding wound. If left untreated, it will continue to ooze and fester (Dalton: 3).

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