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# Book Review: *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*

by Ersula J. Ore

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At the heart of Ersula Ore's *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity* is the powerful argument that lynching in America functions rhetorically as a violent performance of white identity, a communal, multimodal, and shared affirmation of that white identity's civic supremacy, and a terroristic vehicle for policing the boundaries of American citizenship as "for whites only." Ore demonstrates that these dynamics are not relegated to a "long ago history" committed by "persons unknown" subsequently erased by modern racial progress. Rather Ore shows how lynching's rhetoric persists in the ongoing, extralegal killing of Black people by white or whiteness-performing citizens; Trayvon Martin's killing being one of the most high-profile and along with Mike Brown's killing catalytic for our current era. Despite the fact that such killings when enacted are extralegal or extrajudicial, Ore shows how—like Reconstruction era lynchings—the state frequently validates them after the fact, rendering them functionally "legal" by way of jury acquittals or refusals to prosecute. This is one of the many ways via her analysis of the material rhetorical practices surrounding historical lynchings that Ore links the modern killing of Black people by citizens and state actors to the historical practice of lynching particularly at its most violent in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries.

Ore's argument is devastating given how precisely she is able to illustrate the detailed resonance between, as in her key example, Zimmerman's killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Roy Bryant's and J. W. Milam's lynching of Emmitt Till in 1955. In the wake of Zimmerman's acquittal by a nearly all-white jury, commentators and even high-profile celebrities like Oprah, Harry Belafonte, and Angela Bassett made the connection between Martin and Till which in turn prompted sharp, indignant responses from many—often white—commentators. Critics vociferously insisted the Martin case was different because Zimmerman was seeking to protect life and property in his quasi-official capacity as neighborhood watch captain. Reading lynching rhetorically, from its origins in Charles Lynch's extrajudicial court during the American Revolution in conjunction with the development of the American Constitutional order, Ore reveals the inanity of such critics' apologetics. Surveilling, policing, and stalking under the auspices of protecting (white) life and property always in some form or fashion preceded lynching as an act of rhetorical disidentification with the Black individual—the "division" that Burke noted was the corollary of his concept of identification. Ore illustrates how attempts to narrow the definition of lynching such that functionally it could only ever refer to past (however unfortunate) events was an unoriginal argument, made from the outset by those resisting the fierce, righteous advocacy of anti-lynching activists. Given Senator Rand Paul's recent (2020) filibuster of the hate crime legislation named for Emmett Till because he believed its definition

of lynching would include “altercations resulting in a cut, abrasion, bruise, or any other injury no matter how temporary,” Ore’s work shows with searing precision why this history is a “past not yet passed.”

Additionally, Ore establishes the way “symbolic” lynching most notably of effigies of Senator and then (two-term) President Barack Obama, performs the same core function as their historical counterparts— marking white citizenship and representative leadership as “whites-only” spaces. They are no less menacing, functionally epideictic, and thus socially pedagogical (per Ore’s argument in chapter 2) for being “symbolic.” Obama’s successor is absent from and unnamed in Ore’s book, but her silence constructs, I would propose, an enthymeme, with an unspoken premise—that the context that gave the symbolic lynching of Obama meaning also gave rise to the political and very material attempts to dismantle his legacy in the subsequent administration.

While the bulk of Ore’s work involves showing how American society, its laws, and its discourse sets the stage for lynching-as-white-identity-maintenance, she also demonstrates how anti-lynching activists engaged then and now in unflinching and multimodal ways with the material reality of lynching and the artifacts that circulated around these killings.

In chapter 2, Ore also shows how activist individuals and communities across the nation resisted the argument for white supremacy made in the act of lynching. Activists countered political cartoons that reinforced “black beast” imagery with their own artistic renditions of lynching photographs, changes made that rhetorically highlighted truths embedded in the original photographs. Activists highlighted the hypocrisy inherent in claiming America as a democracy that respected the rule of law and hard work by highlighting the chaos and torture edited out of the supposed calm, stately ethos of lynching photographs that circulated among white folks as part of their racial identity maintenance. Recounting the horrific details of Mamie Till-Mobley’s well-known decision to defy state officials in insisting that Emmett Till’s casket be opened, Ore demonstrates that this act—making his mutilated body publicly visible—was itself a profound, material and public counter-rhetoric to the purportedly ordered, legally sanctioned “decency” of the white majority and state officials.

In chapter 3 Ore traces this critical-democratic impulse to the collection of lynching photographs entitled “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America.” This collection, installed and shown at sites around the nation, was revised to include explanatory placards that helped name and frame the lives of lynching victims. The installation also often asked visitors to engage with what they saw by responding to the images and artifacts, to draw conclusions and connections to the present in their own words. Soundscapes helped stage the collection as a somber and sober memorial, inviting participants’ reflection on the connection between lynching as a violent, extralegal act that belied America’s purported democratic ideals. Ore emphasizes how memorial services, communal acts of remembrance and mourning, accompanied the installation at some sites and served to shift the public rhetorical memory from American disidentification with Black life to a somber rhetorical identification with and affirmation of that life’s place in the American democratic project. Ore also highlights how

moving the installation to different cities highlights the rhetorics of space and place—each city and state having its own history of lynching, segregation, and oppression. Ore points out early on that white citizens often deliberately conducted lynchings in the public square or near courthouses as a way to legitimate them legally and socially. “Without Sanctuary’s” spatial dimensions, the fact that the installation moved from city to city, calls each space and place to account for that city’s or region’s place in America’s violent racial history. This renders the work a direct confrontation to the historical acts of lynching themselves. It also clarifies the historical connection to modern day acts of state-sanctioned racial violence by state actors (e.g., police officers) and extralegal killings often still sanctioned after the fact (e.g., Zimmerman’s acquittal).

While every word of Ore’s book is compelling and useful for all kinds of rhetorical scholarship, most important for readers of *JOMR* likely will be her focus on the rhetorical multimodality circulating prior to, amidst, and after a lynching both by those who sought to justify the act and those who sought to resist it. Ore’s *Lynching* is a must-read for scholars and students studying rhetorics of public memory, visual rhetorics in socio-cultural identify formation or disidentification, spatial rhetorics, and the materiality of publics and counter-publics. Ore’s work opens up several lines of inquiry that might follow from her analysis. For example, in chapter 3 she discusses Wendy Wolter’s criticism of “Without Sanctuary” that the installation simply “reproduces ‘rather than interrupts’” (p. 97) the original dynamics of lynching and the relationship between the victims and those who observe them, contextualized (or not) as the event may be. Ore concedes that disruption of the violent white supremacist rhetoric inherent in lynching in any given situation is not guaranteed or inevitable. Nevertheless, if lynching functions rhetorically now as it did then with some modification, as Ore argues, then we will need collectively to find a way through both the historical memory and our present situation.

As the multimodality by which public rhetorics and public memory of lynching and violence against Black people expands to include the visual, aural, and spatial boundlessness afforded by social media networks, these questions have only intensified. Should we share videos like that of George Floyd’s death bravely filmed by then 17-year-old, Darnella Frazier and circulated endlessly online? Is watching it on Twitter an act of bearing witness or identification? Or is it—per Wolter’s critique of “Without Sanctuary” and Ore concedes is possible—a prurient reenactment of the central epideictic work of white supremacy? What available means stand at the ready to aid us in centering the question of universal democratic inclusion while disrupting white supremacy’s concern with due process, empathy, and the inscrutability of intentions asymmetrically applied to those who *take* Black life and never *those lives taken*? In *Lynching*, Ore has given us rhetorical tools well suited for conducting this work—tools for recognizing the deeply networked rhetorical materiality of lynching-as-civics-lesson. A more traditional rhetorical analysis of the blatantly bad faith logoi of today’s white supremacist political discourse may not be able to withstand such a confrontation. But Ore’s argument that lynching is essentially about who counts and whose lives matter in America coupled with her focus on the material and multimodal social, political, and cultural microphysics that create, shape, and reinforce that confrontation from generation to generation provides scholars, activists, and engaged, everyday people a way forward. This is an absolute must read.

By way of conclusion, it is appropriate to note as Ore herself does in the intensely personal preface “Death Wish” and postscript “Caught Up” the extraordinary amount of affective labor a work like *Lynching* requires. This is an affective labor specific and unique to any scholar from marginalized communities both doing the work of analyzing these phenomena with the rigor and seriousness that academia demands while also having to live under the specter of the very things they study. It is infuriating and embarrassing that this work still needs to be done at all by Dr. Ore or anyone for that matter, that this history—in no way until now secret—is still effaced, sublimated, and excused in the service of protecting white supremacy. It should not be this goddamned hard to affirm and embrace Black Lives into the American body politic. And yet here we are. Rhetoric and writing studies scholars as well as technical and professional communication scholars would do well to engage this work while also refusing to normalize what it demands of those who produce it.

—Beau Pihlaja, Texas Tech University