

"Lynchings," in a South Carolina Church



"The universal condemnation of the murders at the Emanuel AME Church and Dylann Roof's quick capture by the combined efforts of local, state and federal police is a world away from what President Obama recalled as 'a dark part of our history.' Today the system and philosophy of institutionalized racism identified by Dr. King no longer exists."

The Wall Street Journal Editorial Board
"The Charleston Shooting" June 18, 2015ⁱ

THE ACADEMY AWARDSⁱⁱ

This year I had decided not to watch the Academy Awards broadcast on television. It was for the reason I had witnessed last year.

When I had become gravely ill during the month of February last year, it was somewhat ironic that I was able to watch the Academy Awards on television (The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences), of which Cheryl Boone Isaacs, a black woman, is President. I usually don't watch these events because I have no relation or appreciation of what or who these people are.

The event then was hosted by Neil Patrick Harris, an actor, who is consider white (This year it was hosted by Chris Rock, who is consider black.).

I noted among some of the opening remarks made by Neil Patrick Harris, one was the supposed "Freudian Slip," or misspeak of *"Tonight we honor Hollywood's best and whitest — sorry, brightest,"* in reference to all twenty acting nominations (including supporting acting roles) going to white actors and actresses. This then had happened only one other time during the last twenty years of Academy Awards nominations, and would happen again this year. There was racism within the Academy, I thought.

I did hold out some small hope, to a degree, a sort of "wait for it" attitude, that this was merely a meaningless joke made by Neil Patrick Harris. I wanted to believe that the Academy had actually progressed beyond what was actually going on in the real world known as the United States of America.

Then, what on first glance looked almost like an emotionally moving tribute to black film-making, a memorializing of the events that occurred in 1965 as depicted in the film "Selma" culminating in the crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge - an achievement of sorts, appeared more a token gesture of acknowledgment of almost credible film-making in the vein of "good, for a black film," offered complimentarily by the well-to-do people of the Caucasian race; much like the attitude of patrons of a country club stating proudly that there are blacks within their premises, only for the observer to realize these black people are those who came in through the back door, as the help, no less.

This remark then was not just an anomalous statement made to elicit laughter. It was uttered as a sort of humorous nudge at the Academy for something that was literally clearly visible for all to see. They were getting away with it. The Academy was honoring only white actors.

To me, there was no way to mitigate this sad fact as displayed by the Academy of Motion Pictures, of this so-called non-existent racial diversity as equality while they were paying homage to the film, “Selma,” in the current midst of so much fantasized sentiment toward the false thought of “look how far we’ve come,” in contrast to the strides made by the white population. This disparity, starkly apparent, is not a so-called “glitch on the computer screen.” It is a disappointing microscopic and selective view of a prevalent thought, most probably, only in the United States and nowhere else, about its people that most members of the Academy hold. These people of the Academy, it should be known, not coincidentally mostly wealthy, and mostly white, have little reason to believe otherwise.

This was a tribute to the film “Selma.” And what I ended up thinking, while tears were being shed by members of the audience, and hands were coming together from same, in apparent appreciation of what the film “Selma” meant, was “Is that it?” Just one film – “Selma?” nominated for virtually nothing (I apologize. The song, “Glory,” won for “Best Original Song.”) I told my wife sitting next to me while we were watching the Academy Awards, that there cannot be only one film like this if there were racial equality. But disappointingly, on this presentation there wasn’t another.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENTⁱⁱⁱ

What many of us saw last year during the 2014 presentation of the Academy Awards was the appreciation of the film “12 Years a Slave.” In this case, it turned out fortunately, accidentally (?), to be more than just a grand token “black” film of last year, as it was awarded the Academy Award prize for Best Picture.

What was honest about that film (done by Britons) is that it showed the viewing audience a little more than just a passing glance at one of the most wicked atrocities ever conceived by human beings inflicted upon another human being simply in the guise of an arbitrary “protecting the white woman” gesture, among many other imagined reasons. That is the act of lynching.

What was shown on the big screen was actor Chiwetel Ejiofor, as Solomon Northrop, struggling to breathe while propping himself up on his toes with a rope tied at one end to a tree limb and the other wrapped around his neck. This was the movie’s disturbing “lynch” scene. And it was not a pleasant thing to watch.

Unfortunately, however, it showed merely a passing glimpse and no more, of what “lynching” was actually about. There is much more to lynching than just a person being hung with rope, from a tree limb. During the time of when Solomon Northrop was held captive the reality was that lynching was much more, in scale, severity and meaning.

THE SINS OF THE FATHER^{iv}

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, I asked myself why the nailing of a person’s hands and feet to a wooden cross, a crucifix, so to speak, was considered by the Romans of the day as the most expedient method of executing a person. I searched for an answer and what I found was a description. The truth lay in an explanation provided by Wikipedia^v. *“Crucifixion was often performed to terrorize and dissuade its witnesses from perpetrating particularly heinous crimes. Victims were left on display after death as warnings to others who might attempt dissent. Crucifixion was usually intended to provide a death that was particularly slow, painful (hence the term excruciating, literally “out of crucifying”), gruesome, humiliating, and public, using whatever means were most expedient for that goal.”*

Now contrast that with “lynching” as also described by Wikipedia^{vi}: “Lynching is an extrajudicial punishment by an informal group. It is most often used to characterize informal public executions by a mob, often by hanging, in order to punish an alleged transgressor, or to intimidate a minority group.”

Then comparatively, this sounds almost benign. But, aside from the provided explanations, is it really?

If the answer is no, therein lies the fallacy of the explanation as willfully being intentionally mitigated, as having intangible descriptors substituted for actual physical facts solely to minimize the severity of the lynching act as described. “Informal public executions by a mob,” replaces “a death that was particularly slow, painful, gruesome, humiliating, and public.” Less malice is attributed to lynching than to crucifying.

Consider however, the incident of the execution of a black man named Jesse Washington, in Texas on the date of May 15, 1916, accused of raping and bludgeoning a white woman named Lucy Fryer. A general accounting of what happened after a jury in Waco, Texas found Washington guilty was this:

“Just as the judge was to pronounce a death sentence, about 1,500 angry spectators jamming the courtroom **pounced** on Washington. They hurried him down the stairs at the rear of the courthouse, where a crowd of about 400 persons waited in the alley. A **chain was thrown around Washington’s neck**, and he was **dragged** toward the City Hall, where another group of vigilantes had gathered to build a bonfire.

“Upon reaching the city hall grounds, the leaders of the mob threw their victim onto a pile of dry-goods boxes under a tree and **poured coal oil over his body**. The chain around Washington’s neck was thrown over a limb of the tree, and **several men joined to jerk him into the air** before lowering his body onto the pile of combustibles and igniting a fire. Two hours later several men placed the burned corpse in a cloth bag and pulled the bundle behind an automobile to Robinson, where they hung the sack from a pole in front of a blacksmith’s shop for public viewing. Later that afternoon constable Les Stegall retrieved the remains and turned them over to a Waco undertaker for burial.”^{vii}

This accounting of a lynching is apparently much more brutal than the description given by Wikipedia of what a lynching is purported to be.

Furthermore, during this modern time, it has become more confusing and inexplicable to exactly attribute any direct understood circumstance of those past days to the current and infrequent existence of lynching, since much has seemingly changed from during the time in history when the act was quite surprisingly common. Too, according to U.S. government statistics, the act of “lynching” officially declined appreciatively between the years of 1964 to 1968 when major civil rights movements were in force, civil rights laws were passed and the death penalty became a viable solution to those who engaged in the ritualistic act of lynching.

But, the cognitive outgrowth of this seemingly apparent and precipitous banishment of lynching occurring in this day and age, lead presumptively to unanswered questions. And answers, when provided, have necessarily become routine and dismissive. There are current incidents that undeniably bear more than a noticeable resemblance to some of the horrific acts of lynching that had taken place during the early part of America’s 20th Century. And yet the explanations provided for the occurrence of these more recent incidents seem only to trivialize or make a mockery of the contradictory circumstances that are in evidence at each seemingly similar incident to lynching that are ruled as something else.

...WILL BE VISITED UPON THE CHILDREN

What of the recent incident of a black man, a convicted murderer, Otis Byrd, from Port Gibson, Mississippi, whose body was found hanging nearby from a tree limb several hundred yards away from his home? If you go back one hundred years, you will see that all the rationale of a racially-motivated lynching are there. He had robbed a local store and then killed its proprietor, a woman named Lucille Trim by shooting her four times. In this case, the woman who was white, was dead, but the black man who had committed the murder was free. And this happened in Mississippi no less, a state with the highest incidence of lynching to have occurred in the United States during the early part of the 20th century. If this were a lynching, then the para-judicial circumstance existed, too. A white woman had

been murdered. But, noticeably, to quite a few people, some of the circumstances remain unclear. Did anyone witness the actual hanging of Otis Byrd, whether it was by his own hand or by someone else's? No one is saying. The answer will remain obscure because much of what anyone does is outside the purview of public scrutiny. And even if what had happened were witnessed, there would have been no guarantee that any truth would have come out.

Preliminarily, authorities in Claiborne County, Mississippi have stated publicly that an autopsy performed by FBI medical examiners showed convincing indications that the death of Otis Byrd was caused by suicide. He had died at his own hands. Yet, the crime scene circumstances surrounding Otis Byrd's death don't suggest that. The bed sheet used in his hanging was tied to a tree limb 12 feet above the ground from where his body was found. How then could he have tied the bed sheet to the limb? Otis Byrd's feet were dangling about two feet up off the ground, which meant he could not have jumped to reach the tree limb. There was no evidence or finding either that he had died of asphyxiation. There also was not found nearby any object, ladder or anything else he could have stepped off from that might have pointed to Otis Byrd committing suicide by the more traditional, government sanctioned cause for hanging: to break a person's neck. People who knew him, including his family, state also that Otis Byrd was not the type of person who would have taken his own life. When last seen, he was at the Riverwalk Casino in nearby Vicksburg, presumably there to gamble like the rest of the would-be patrons.

Then there is the 2001 incident involving Clarence Otis Cole that took place in East Texas. Clarence Otis Cole, too, was a black man. His body was found hanging from a pine tree bough with an extension cord knotted around his neck. His official cause of death? Suicide.

His mother asked, how is this possible? He had everything to live for. He was a man with no debt, no history of mental illness. He was the father of an 8-year-old daughter from a previous marriage. And he was set to graduate from a two-year electronics program he had just finished. His holidays had been spent enjoying life with family. By all appearances a bright future lay ahead of him. "That don't even make sense," she says remembering him.

But, in different ways it did make sense when you consider additionally that this hanging took place in Linden, Texas, a place with a reputation of racial hatred, of black men and women telling their children not to go out alone at night; of black men being found hanging from trees and their deaths being ruled suicides; of Confederate flags flying freely throughout the city, and of white women dating black men only to be told afterward that their boyfriend died in a "hunting accident." And incidentally, Clarence Otis Cole did have a white girl friend.

Another incident as recently as late last year, August 29, 2014, took place in North Carolina. This raised the specter again of a possibly racially-motivated hanging. This one involved 17-year old Lennon Lacy. He was found hanging from a swing set with two belts tied around his neck.

The local police authorities ruled it a "suicide." The parents of Lennon Lacy called it "murder."

Dr. Deborah Radisch from the local medical examiner's office pointed out that the shoes that supposedly had been worn by Lennon Lacy when his body was found hanging were several sizes too small for him. His mother claims they were not her son's shoes. This was never really questioned by the State Bureau of Investigation, only taken as "fact," one which had already been explained away. The question of how Lacy was able to hang himself, when the belts appeared to be too short for a man of his stature (he stood 5'9" tall), as the swing set beam was set about 21 inches above his estimated outstretched hand was a logistical problem that was never delved into as a possibility of this alleged suicide having never actually occurred.

So, how could it have been ruled a suicide?

In the first place, the local coroner was forbidden by police from taking photographs, which was unusual. Also, the coroner was advised against performing any autopsy, which is further baffling. And finally, neither the police nor the local coroner had formed a hypothesis on how a "suicide" could have been

committed with the circumstances present. Then could this not be an incident of lynching, or is this, like the other two instances described heretofore, another actual suicide?

As stated beforehand, the acquaintances of Otis Byrd said he would not have been the type to take his own life. Clarence Otis Cole's mother believed her son had everything to live for. And Lennon Lacy's girlfriend, Michele Brimhall, who is white, unsurprisingly, had stated she believes Lennon Lacy was "lynched" because of their relationship. "Neighbors had told me they were against inter-racial relationships and it was *not right* me being with a black guy."

I HAVE A DREAM^{viii}

Over the last half century the number of incidents of lynching, what had been called that, which have occurred in the United States has gone down dramatically, statistically. During the 1930s and 40s local media, national legislation, along with vocal support from national groups such as the NAACP and women's groups such as the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching have presumably aided in the decline of so-called lynching. Also, local towns were now being held financially accountable for any damage caused by the individuals involved in the lynching. This in turn caused the local authorities to recoup their losses by billing the individual participants who organized the lynching: It then became economically impracticable. Further also, women who were among the elite in society, began decrying the rationale of lynching as an act of "protecting white woman" from black people, as only a pretext for other social and economic ills befalling the mainly impoverished white populace of the southern states. To an extent then, it seems, this act of horrific racism had apparently become less popular, if not completely eliminated. The facts and numbers as written seem to lead to that conclusion.

In an article written for Forbes.com^{ix} by John McWhorter, a professor at Columbia University, he argues that racism is not as powerful an issue as it was during the Jim Crow era and the period during the Reconstruction. He believes that a racism that exists now, that allows a black man to become president cannot be a racism with any significant power. Furthermore, the issue of the African-American population being held back socially and economically, he believes, can be traced back to the "black pathology" phenomenon or theory that was in vogue during the 1960s. That belief which had gained some credibility during that earlier period was, as clearly illustrated, still in force forty years later in a speech given by public figure, moralist and former comedian, Bill Cosby during his famous "Pound Cake" speech of 2004^x.

"These are people going around stealing Coca-Cola," he states. "People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake! And then we all run out and are outraged, 'The cops shouldn't have shot him.' What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand?" Cosby then brings to light what he believes is the real source of black inequality in our modern society. "...something called parenting said, 'If you get caught with it you're going to embarrass your mother.' Not 'You're going to get your butt kicked.' No. 'You're going to embarrass your family.'"

Black pathology puts the blame squarely on the black race and its tangible culture for all the problems of inequality visited upon them. Poverty, rioting, gang violence, rape, imprisonment, unemployment, fatherlessness, out-of-wedlock births, drug use, welfare fraud and dropping out of high school are all products of bad-upbringing, misguided cultural values and poor parenting. In other words, these are self-inflicted wounds, for which the African-American populace has no one else to blame but themselves.

It is worth noting however, that Bill Cosby, like John McWhorter, is black. Furthermore, both grew up in a culture far removed from any lower middle-class society, either black or white. And both spent more time among the financially secure elite and the cultural academics than unemployment lines and prisons. You might then say both have lived a sheltered and privileged life apart from society at large: from the lowest of the low to the highest of the high.

Life is full, rich, varied, good and bad. Experiences are plentiful, innumerable and vary with so many different shades of uniqueness that no human being can fully appreciate or gain complete insight into its every nuance. To preach and moralize about life's ills are not the sole province of the privileged few.

If this then is the case, does this give license to anyone with a podium to stand on to comment or preach about life in general, when one has only lived one particular, yet advantaged life? And can those thoughts put to words be considered as even valid?

It appears no one is willing to address that question.

Still, at end, I have very few answers, no rebuttals, excuses, but only thoughts about our current state of race in America.

A DAY IN THE LIFE^{xi}

This was a thought I had:

I remember a ride I took with a tow truck driver as he hauled my car home on his flat-bed vehicle. He told me he didn't like going into Oakland, California because there were "too many n----- (you can figure out on your own which word he used) living there." He went on to say that he was glad that I wasn't one of them (I am not black). So, I presumed he felt he did not have to worry. As he continued to rant on about his experiences of being in Oakland dealing with black people to do his job of towing vehicles, the more annoyed and disturbed I became.

I thought, should I stop the comments from continuing, and tell him I feel uncomfortable with this conversation? Or should I say nothing for fear of him pulling over and leaving my car behind? What I ended up doing was, unforgivingly, uncourageously nothing, but listen to what he had to say to try to get a sense of reason for his hatred of black people.

Reason did come. He explained to me that some 13 years ago he was in Oakland, near Eastmont, to tow a car to another location. The person who wanted his car towed was a black person, a "drug dealer (?)," he said. His car started up just fine, but he still wanted it towed "across the street." After the tow truck driver towed the car, the man paid the driver \$98.00 and then made a loud distractive sound as some apparent kind of signal. A couple of other people, who were also black, came in response to the sound from seemingly out of nowhere and attacked the tow truck driver. They took \$1400 from him and he wound up in a hospital, unconscious. This caused him to hate all black people and feel justified in calling them the n-word.

Another thought I had:

Recently, a young man, who was white, walked into a church to join the attendant parishioners in a Bible study meeting. The young man did remark afterward that all the people in the church, who were black, had been so nice to him. Sometime later after church, he asked where the church pastor was and right next to the pastor. For over one hour the all kinds of questions to ask the pastor. And the answered. It seemed that the young man's interest overwhelming. Then suddenly, the young man got he was seated and started shooting at nearly attendance. It was horrific, senselessness. When one round of bullets finished, he reloaded his



walking into the when told, sat young man had pastor was up from where everybody in manifest. gun and started

shooting again. He did this five times. The explanation given by the young man when asked why he was killing these people was *"I have to do it. You rape our women and taking over our county. You have to go."*

The Southern Poverty Law Center classified the young man as a "disaffected white supremacist." His car's front license plate was a picture of the Confederate fighting flag. His personal website had been called "thelastrhodesian.com" (Rhodesia had been a white-ruled country that later became Zimbabwe). Some thoughts he held were, "Segregation did not exist to hold back negroes (sic). It existed to protect us from them..." "I chose Charleston because it is most historic city in my state..." (In 1822 The Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston was the first recorded black church burning. It is also the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church) had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites (sic). Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me."

AND THE BEAST WAS GIVEN A MOUTH^{xii}

These thoughts, other people's thoughts as I have described, are not new. They had existed at the turn of the twentieth century and by evidence exist today. These are the same thoughts of black hatred as expressed by white racists that had existed in the 'dark past of our history' as expressed by President Obama. They are still with us today, as though Jim Crow had been lying-in-wait, hiding.

Racism is clearly still at full bloom and perhaps worsening.

And why, such extremeness of dislike of the African-American race, still in this day and age?

It seems that when one gets his or her sense of worth and identity, from nothing else, but his or her own sense of whiteness, then to take away that sense of esteem by proclaiming equality along racial lines, destroys that whole sense of superiority, never mind the belief of unique being that white supremacists hold.

And to further aid the illusion of natural order of superiority held by these very people, there is a type of "hush money" being paid as reparation, however a patronizing false gesture that a "wrong" had been committed – but, to the "white" mind, not really.

For personal gain and history however, this is after all, white history that is considered, whatever has been gained shall not be taken away. Acknowledgment will be given, but no money "will change hands." It is a condescending wink to act as if the past has already been considered and taken care of, and to go on as though the crimes, imagined as they were, had been already paid for. This is most certainly at heart, what is at stake.

To paraphrase the words of renown blogger Julian Abagond^{xiii}: The greatest crimes in American history *"...started when the white man pushed the red man off his land and then brought the black men over the seas in chains to work that land. It is **not what Jesus would have done**, but it is what they did."*

The need for the white race to hold on so tightly to that false entitlement of imagined superiority is what will forever keep the existence of vanquishing racism in our culture from occurring.

The conservative culture may claim, as they will, that racism against a people that has been proscribed by laws exists only to a minor degree, which may be considered a step in the right direction. But the reality of racism in similar and other forms, still exists in full force. Sadly too, all the laws, speeches and song cannot eliminate the racism that exists in the hearts and minds of the very people whose lives and sense of importance are defined by their "white" skin. That racism has lived on from generation to generation. And will live on from this day forward.

That young man, Dylann Roof, who entered the church in South Carolina; who found nothing but kindness and solace from the people there, when all was said and done, repaid that sacred humanity of kindness by shooting and killing as many of these people as he could.

Unfortunately, that racism is alive today.

And we are still the worse for that.

Written by Ted Houben, Shop Steward, Oakland Local APWU

ⁱ The Wall Street Journal was founded July 8, 1889 as a New York based business and economics publication. It is published by Dow Jones and Company.

ⁱⁱ The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was founded May 16, 1929 to annually honor cinematic achievement.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Crime And Punishment" is a novel written by Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky.

^{iv} [Exodus 20:5-6](#) says "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing loving kindness to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and keep My commandments"

^v <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion>

^{vi} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynching>

^{vii} <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/museumttu/a-a.%20teacher's%20manual.pdf>. Charles F. Kellogg, NAACP: A History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967). Rogers M. Smith, The Waco Lynching of 1916 (M.A. thesis, Baylor University, 1971). James M. SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror': The Lynching of Jesse Washington," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 86 (April 1983). Robert L. Zangrando, The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

^{viii} [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) on August 28, 1963.

^{ix} http://www.forbes.com/2008/12/30/end-of-racism-oped-cx_jm_1230mcwhorter.html

^x http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~schochet/101/Cosby_Speech.htm;
annotated: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/adamserwer/bill-cosby-pound-for-pound#.dq33mby0J>

^{xi} "A Day in the Life," song, first two verses written by John Lennon inspired by the death of [Tara Browne](#), the 21-year-old heir to the [Guinness](#) fortune.

^{xii} [Revelation 13:5](#) English Standard Version (ESV) says "And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months."

^{xiii} <https://abagond.wordpress.com/2008/07/05/white-people/>