

BREAKING

THE SILENCE

ON

STATE

SANCTIONED

VIOLENCE

BREAKING THE SILENCE ON VIOLENCE

Violence is as American as apple pie

The United States was born in the barrel of a gun. European invader/colonizers massacred hundreds of thousands of indigenous people and then stole the land from those still living. European and white American slavers kidnaped and chained millions of Africans, then whipped them to work the stolen lands. The U.S. army slaughtered thousands of Mexicans, took half of Mexico as war booty, while the press blessed the war as America's "Manifest Destiny."

"Violence" as Rap Brown once put it, "*is as American as apple pie.*" *

Socially Sanctioned Violence

Violence against peoples of color is socially sanctioned. *Socially sanctioned violence is action perpetrated by individuals, groups and/or institutions which may or may not be lawful, but which is rarely punished because it is approved by a majority of the white population.* Nineteenth century governors proudly displayed Indian scalps as trophies on their office walls. Young white males tested and bragged of their manhood by maiming Black men and raping Black women. Between 1798 and 1965, U.S. armed forces intervened more than 165 times in territories beyond U.S. borders. All but nine of those interventions were on lands inhabited by peoples of color. * *

Lynching

Lynching is a unique form of socially sanctioned violence in the U.S. The function of lynching is to control and terrorize an entire population of people of color by targeting those who exert political or economic leadership within their community. Lynching is the specific form of violence which cemented the sharecropper system in the South, the system which produced the cheap cotton that gave white immigrants – including my ancestors – their preferential treatment in the form of garment industry jobs in New York. Lynching is the foundation of my white privilege.

From 1859 to 1962, more than 5000 African Americans, an unknown number of Mexican Americans and Chinese Americans were hung, burned and often castrated by violent white mobs. But not all the mobs wore white sheets and carried burning crosses. In the Northeast, Midwest and the West, mobs of white workers converted the tools of their trades into lethal weapons, rampaged through communities of color, burning houses to the ground and killing men, women and children.

In the South, white residents transformed lynchings into community festivals. Schools let their students out for these extra-curricular educational events. Railroads sold special excursion tickets to the lynch site. Newspapers advertised the activity for days in advance. Mothers packed tasty picnic lunches so that the family could enjoy its holiday outing together. Lynchings, thus, left a unique legacy of traditional white family values.

Organizing against Lynching

Protesting lynch mob justice was risky business, but some took the risk. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a brilliant, courageous and committed African American journalist, devoted her life to organizing anti-lynching campaigns. She succeeded in mobilizing the resources of the National Association of Colored Women, the NAACP, most African American newspapers at the turn of the century, and the elite of England's liberals.

Most U.S. whites expressed their approval of lynching by refusing to protest the violence, or rationalizing it as punishment for Black males who allegedly raped white women. *Their silence was their consent.* But Jessie Daniel Ames, a Southern white woman, refused to be silent. She understood that Southern white women, in whose name white men justified lynching, were crucial in *breaking the silence on the violence.* From the 1920's to the 1940's, she organized and led the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching which got individuals, officials and community leaders to publicly repudiate lynching, targeted sheriffs to sign public pledges against lynching, and sometimes actually confronted lynch mobs.***

Lynching goes underground

Many observers say that lynching has declined since the 1960's, largely as a result of the concentrated media spotlight on Southern white violence. I disagree. I believe that lynching has simply been taken out of the public eye. White men in blue have replaced white men in white as today's lynch mob. What they used to call "lynching," they now call "justifiable homicide" or "suicide."

Every night, in urban cities throughout the country, and at the borders between the U.S. and Mexico, police and border guards maim and kill Black and Brown people with impunity. The same white mob violence goes on in jails and prisons throughout the country. In Mississippi alone, 68 prisoners have supposedly committed "suicide" since 1987.**** These suicidal folks have put shoelaces and belt buckles around their necks, hung themselves from prison rafters far above their heads, without benefit of chairs to stand on. The media no longer advertises the lynchings. Now, they approve the violence by their silence.

It is time to break the silence on socially sanctioned violence. That is the primary purpose of the following exercises, *"The Burning of Lloyd Clay"* and *"A Night in the City."*

* Rap Brown was the Chairman of SNCC – Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee – in 1967. SNCC was one of the most important African American organizations in the 1960's.

** From "Instances of the Use of U.S. Armed Forces Abroad, 1798 – (1965)," in Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, To Serve the Devil. Vol. 2. NY: Vintage Books, 1971. pp. 338–355.

*** From "Southern White Women who were Anti-Lynching Activists," by Karen Haggerty. She wrote the short paper specially for the Fall 1993 session of this workshop.

**** Information provided by Committee Against Mississippi Jail Lynchings: 415-821-6545.

For more reading on lynching, white mob violence, and anti-lynching campaigns:

(1) Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching. (date and publisher?)

(2) Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Mind that Burns in Each Body: Women, Rape and Racial Violence," in Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, eds, Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992. pp. 397–412.

(3) Ida B. Wells-Barnett, On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans. New Hampshire: Ayer Co., 1991.

(4) Ralph Ginzburg, 100 Years of Lynchings. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1988.

(5) Ida B. Wells, Crusade For Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells. Edited by Alfreda M. Duster. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

(6) Dorothy Sterling, Black Mothers: Three Lives. New York: The Feminist Press, 1988. "Ida B. Wells: Voice of a People." pp. 61–117.

(7) Herbert Shapiro, White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery. Amherst: Univ. of Mass Press, 1988.

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STAND IN SOLIDARITY

A Night in the City**

Introduction:

This exercise is intended to follow immediately after the group reading of The Burning of Lloyd Clay. The purposes of the exercise are to:

- Provide a hypothetical, but common, scenario which offers participants the opportunity to do something concrete to *break the silence on violence*;
- To highlight the direct historical continuity between the function of the lynch mob and of the inner city police department: to control, by violence, African American and Latino populations.

This is a Small Group Exercise of 3 or 4 *Pair 'n Shares*:

Scenario, Part One:

You are leaving this workshop. You are alone. You have neither a tape recorder or a camcorder with you. You see 4 cops with guns trained on two young men, one African American, one Latino. The cops are yelling at the young men. There appears to be a struggle. Both young men fall to the ground, hands clutching their heads.

Exercise, Part One:

- (1) What do you do, and why do you do it?

Scenario, Part Two: (optional, time permitting)

When you get home, you tell your story to your roommate (or friend or partner). S/he supports your action but is very concerned for *your* safety as well as the safety of the young men.

Exercise, Part Two:

- (1) Pair off in your small group and *role play* the discussion between you and your roommate, friend or partner.

- (2) Gather your group's wisdom: (Prioritize these points)
 - What were your feelings during Exercise #1? The Role Play?
 - What did you learn from each part?
 - How can you apply what you learned?
 - Summarize your most important insights for the whole group.

** An alternative exercise might be a real issue of police violence or current-day lynching about which we as a workshop are asked to take some form of *Solidarity* action. Unfortunately, there seems to be no lack of such issues. Socially sanctioned violence against people of color is a daily occurrence in every part of the United States.

NO MORE GENOCIDE

by Holly Near

Why are the history books so full of lies
When no word is spoken of why the Indian dies?
Or that the Chicanos/as love the California land?
Do our books all say that it was discovered by one white man?

(Chorus)

That's just a lie.
One of the many and we've had plenty.
I don't want more of the same.
No more genocide in my name.

Oh, why are the weapons of war so young?
And why are there always rich ones around when it's done?
Why are so many of the soldiers Black or Brown?
Do we think it's because they're good at cutting other
people down?

Chorus:

That's just a lie.
One of the many and we've had plenty.
I don't want more of the same.
No more genocide in my name.

Nazi forces grow again,
Ignorance gives them a place.
The Klan is teaching children to hate the human race.
Where once was a playground, now an MX missile plan.
Do they think it's fun to see just how much we can stand?

People die all around the world from starvation and grief
all the time.
Some folks try to avoid the truth, saying god and gun
will provide.
In Rome, in Capetown and Beirut, San Salvador, Greensboro,
Belfast and Manila, and many more.
It's a crime.
Do we think the fascist right will save the world in time?
They try to tell us so,
But we've got to tell them NO!

(Chorus)

That's just a lie.
One of the many and we've had plenty.
I don't want more of the same.
No more genocide in my name.