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6

LYNCHING STORIES

Family and community memory in the Mississippi Delta

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In 1996, Mrs Myltree Adams, a native of Coahoma County in the Mississippi Delta, recalled her childhood in an African-American farming family near the small town of Coahoma. Her parents and grandparents told her cautionary stories about the prevalent white supremacy of the South, and the racial segregation that was a fact of life in the 1930s and 1940s. One story Adams remembered 'quite vividly': her father's brother 'was mobbed and killed by white people, and that stayed with us a long time'.[1]

Why had the mob done this?

> My father's brother's wife was a maid, chief cook and bottle washer in [a white] man's house, and somehow or another they started a [sexual] relationship. They [the whites] first told her husband that he had to leave. My uncle and aunt had two children already, and he'd slip back to see them. They conceived another child, and when he came home to see the youngest girl, the whites mobbed him and shot him up. They said there wasn't a place on him big as your hand that didn't have a bullet hole in it. The men were on horses, and they just ran him down and shot him down like a dog.
>
> (Adams 1996)

The shooting was traumatic for Adams' family:

> As a result of that, my father didn't allow white people in our house. He didn't allow no white man near us, and we could not even work for white people. My daddy didn't allow white men to come in our house, in our yard. He didn't like no peddlers, nobody to get around us.
>
> (Ibid.)

Myltree Adams' interview is part of the Delta Oral History Project (DOHP), which tape recorded 116 oral interviews with African-American community leaders in Bolivar, Coahoma, Sunflower, and Washington counties of the Mississippi Delta between 1995 and 1997. These counties had majority black populations for most of their histories, and were developed as cotton planting regions in the late 19th century. All of these counties produced strong civil rights movements in the 1960s, and have also experienced the mechanization of cotton agriculture, a decline in farm tenancy and sharecropping, and massive out-migrations of African-Americans since the 1940s (Cobb 1992).

Myltree Adams' interview contains several themes that are emblematic in the narratives of Delta activists. Her story features a contrast between the brutality of the past, a participation in protest and political activities in the 1960s, and personal achievement in the post-movement years. Adams' story also features an element that was chillingly commonplace in the Delta: white violence could strike any African-American male, it seemed, with suddenness and fury.

Adams' family was fortunate and extremely unusual: her father owned a 200-acre farm, and could remain relatively independent of white people, as sharecroppers and tenant farmers – who worked shares on white planters' lands – could not.[2] Myltree Adams herself finished high school in Coahoma, married, and had three children. After she and her husband divorced, she moved back to her parents' farm to help with the crops, and worked part-time as a cook, seamstress, and hairdresser to support her children. She also became involved with Dr Aaron Henry's historic efforts to organize and sustain a local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Coahoma County. During the 1960s, Henry, Adams, and other black activists organized their communities in an effort to register black voters and to overcome the fear that African-Americans in the Delta felt about challenging white supremacy.

Organizing black voters in Mississippi in these decades was a sometimes fatal effort. Adams' family received death threats, her phone was tapped, and NAACP members escorted her home 'many a night'. The treats and harassment 'kept my daddy and mama and family kind of afraid, and my orher kinfolk, because I kept doing it. You know, somebody had to die.' In fact, a number of black Mississippians did die in terrorist murders and bombings in the 1950s and 1960s. The most famous murders made their way to the national and sometimes international news: Emmett Till in 1955; Medgar Evers in 1963; George Lee of Belzoni in 1955; Vernon Dahmer of Hattiesburg in 1966; and James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in 1964 (Dittmer 1994; Payne 1995). Many other African-Americans had their homes bombed and their livelihoods threatened, or were forced to leave the state for attempting to vote, for participating in demonstrations, or for acquiring too much money or property.

Even though her parents and extended family were frightened of white reprisals for her work, Myltree Adams contended that she:

> was not scared. . . . I guess I thought I could help bring about change, and I wanted to see a change. I knew it couldn't stay that way forever. Nothing remains the same. And you would run across some people who wanted to change, who were willing to change.
>
> (Adams 1996)

Adams continued her NAACP and voter registration activities, became active in the coordinated efforts of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and began working for Project Head Start in Coahoma County in that decade. As a community service worker for the agency, she persuaded parents to register to vote while she recruited toddlers for the educational program. In these efforts, she was supported by Henry and the NAACP, and also by the very few enlightened leaders of the white community, like planter Andrew Carr.

Through her work with the NAACP, COFO, Head Start, and other community organizations, Myltree Adams became a power in Democratic Party politics in Coahoma County between the 1970s and 1990s. In 1996, she worked as an administrator in Head Start, maintained personal contact with voters and organizations throughout the county, and considered running for a position on the Coahoma County Board of Supervisors when she retired. Her story, though dramatic, is one that she shares with a number of African-American women community leaders in the Mississippi: a movement from voter registration and civil rights activism to Head Start employment to politics.[3] Yet her narrative also links her journey of change and growth to the dark and bloody history of Mississippi's past – a history written in the blood of lynching victims.

Myltree Adams' narrative links two stories that are prevalent in interviews conducted with African-American activists and community leaders in the Mississippi Delta by researchers from the Delta Oral History Project (DOHP). The first story is a community, and sometimes family, trauma narrative: the lynching story. As an example of the extremity, the arbitrariness, and the violence inherent in the system of racial segregation and white supremacy, the lynching story has achieved a central place in African-American literature, and has come to represent the joined spectres of racist evil and savagery in African-American history and folklore.[4]

Yet this story of terror, humiliation, and destruction – and its communal memory – are most frequently linked by our narrators to life stories that emphasize family resourcefulness, self-sufficiency, sacrifice, and personal agency. The Delta narrators link the narratives of community and family trauma to longer and more comprehensive dramas of family and personal self-assertion and efficacy.[5]

As told by family members or by community elders, the lynching story was a graphic and ghastly warning of what could happen if a black – particularly a black man – was perceived by whites as transgressing his 'place' according to the assumed standards of racial segregation and white supremacy. Such transgressions might include 'sheltering a fugitive, disputing a white man's word, dating a white woman, testifying or defending [oneself) against whites, or just acting "troublesome"' (Zangrado 1980, White 1969). In this role, the lynching ritual served as an effective method of deliberate terrorism and social control of African-Americans in heavily-black counties.[6]

Yet the lynching story also seems to have had contradictory effects in the racial socialization of the women and men who emerged as community activists in the 1950s and 1960s. First, the terror, brutality, and sadism of the white mobs thoroughly discredited the system of white supremacy and the state which maintained it in the eyes of the African-American women and men who matured between the 1930s and 1950s. In doing this, lynching stories reinforced the claims of national NAACP leaders and local and state leaders who pushed for anti-lynching legislation from the 1920s onwards. Continuing brutality against African-Americans in the 'modernizing' South from the 1940s through the 1960s underscored the need for equal rights, voter registration, and equal opportunity under the law.[7] The activists who heard lynching stories as children had absorbed the behavioural warnings that the stories conveyed, while they were simultaneously given a high sense of personal worth by parents who struggled to maintain some independence from white control, by strong teachers in segregated schools and in historically black colleges, and by a religious socialization that stressed righteous action and community service. By the 1950s and 1960s, these women and men were prepared to fuse these diverse influences into civil rights activism (Morris 1984).

As mature community leaders interviewed in the 1990s, the Delta activists appear to have made yet another use of the 'southern horrors' of the past. Telling the lynching story documents a community and sometimes family trauma, as narrators recall the reality of terrorism. The same story also affirms the agency of the victim, as narrators recount his life and actions. These acts of testimony in turn restore agency to the surviving family and community, as narrators portray the process of surviving the culture of violence and segregation as an act of self-assertion, resilience, and courage. Further, testifying involves naming the person or group responsible for the lynching, and holding those individuals – and their social system – responsible for their deeds. Thus the lynching story has become part of the historical memory of generations of Delta blacks.

Narrators link communal survival of terrorism to their own families' survival strategies, and emphases on self-improvement and education. Recollections of family efforts to achieve independence from white control,

and of parents' sacrifices to ensure that their children received an education, are among the stories that link the survival of terrorism in the past to the struggle for civil and political rights in more recent years. The lynching story also links the narrator to the memory of the victim: in telling this tale of trauma and loss, the narrator gives back to the victim his agency, his body, and his history – all of those attributes that were to have been obliterated by the rope, bullets, and/or fires of the mob ritual. This trauma narrative thus becomes a narrative of witnessing and commemoration, a narrative that connects acts of victimization and resistance across decades and worlds (Caruth 1996).

This same narrative contains even another imperative: it provides a historic documentation of the necessity for federal protection from lynching, for movement activism and protest, and for national intervention in the racial practices of Southern states. Over the long history of 'Southern horrors' against African-Americans, the lynching story serves as a powerful moral justification for personal narratives of activism, protest, and community leadership (Schecter 1997).

Yet among these mature community leaders, the lynching story also seems to serve as a reminder of the fragility of the gains of the Civil Rights movement and of black empowerment. For it is a narrative of personal assertion and disaster, of independent action, and horrible retribution. It is a narrative that creates expectations of violence and death, a history that worries its narrators into a constant, edgy vigilance and distrust of their present successes. The lynching story remains a corrosive and bitter memory of pain and fear.

The reality of lynching in Mississippi

Lynching stories have appeared in at least fourteen of the eighty-three interviews conducted by the Delta Oral History Project between August 1995 and July 1996. Many of our narrators have asserted that their families protected them from the knowledge of such brutality, but could readily recall other stories of whites' exploitation and mistreatment of African-Americans. Stories of beatings, tar-and-featherings, evictions, and 'covert lynchings' or 'disappearances' were common, as were stories of men – sometimes family members -who were forced to leave the state temporarily or permanently due to a conflict with whites.

Between 1889 and 1945, 'Mississippi accounted for 476, or nearly 13 per cent, of the nation's 3,786 recorded lynchings', according to historian Neil McMillen (1989: 235). Since lynchings were often not reported, the death toll from this form of vigilante justice was probably much higher. Sunflower and Coahoma Counties counted nine lynchings each in this period; Washington and Bolivar had thirteen each. McMillen asserts that some 70 per cent of lynchings occurred in 'the plantation districts with the greatest

density of black population' (McMillen 1989: 229–30). Part of lynching's terror in African-American communities resulted from the barbaric practices of lynch mobs, which had as their aim not just the execution of black victims, but the torture, mutilation, and obliteration of black bodies. Lynch mobs frequently castrated, flogged, dragged, and burned their victims in addition to shooting and/or hanging them (Turner 1993). According to McMillen, 'Between 1900 and 1940 at least fifteen blacks died in public burnings', which one newspaper described as 'NEGRO BARBECUES' (McMillen 1989: 234). Such cruelty and sadism suggest that the mobs sought to obliterate the very existence of the victim, and hence the possibility of remembrance and mourning. The awful destruction of bodies, and the mobs' explicit and implicit threats to family members frequently prevented relatives from seeking justice, prosecuting the killers, or even honouring the dead with a proper wake, funeral, and burial. The lynching story is thus as much about erasure as it is about violent retribution and terrorism, as much about not knowing, secrecy, and the ultimate control and denial of information as it is about maintaining white supremacy.

Trudier Harris, who views lynchings as the ritualized 'exorcism' of blackness by white communities, contends:

> lynching and burning rituals reflect a belief on the part of whites, in their racial superiority. Simultaneously, such rituals reflect a belief in the inferiority of Blacks as well as denial of anything white, especially white women, or representative of 'whiteness' (education, clothes, social status) to Blacks. To violate the inviolable, as any Black would who touched a white woman or became mayor of a town, is taboo. It upsets the white world view or conception of the universe.
>
> (Harris 1984: 11–15)

While pro-lynching Southern whites commonly defended the practice – well into the 1940s and 1950s – as a necessary defence of white Southern womanhood from the depredations of black rapists, contemporary researchers and later scholars reported that relatively few lynchings – as few as a third, according to anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells – involved even the accusation of rape. Wells believed that lynching was 'an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property' (Carby 1987: 107). McMillen cites NAACP estimates for the years 1889 to 1935 that indicate only '19 per cent of all blacks lynched in the United States – and 12.7 per cent of those lynched in Mississippi – were accused of rape' (McMillen 1989: 235).

Lynching stories as trauma narratives

Among Delta narrators, lynching stories as trauma narratives commonly contain several elements or motifs. The first is a perceived violation of norms,

contractual agreements, or prerogatives of whites by an African-American. Whites – usually a mob – then seek vengeance. The nature of the violation is sometimes shrouded in mystery and secrecy: families are frequently left without real knowledge of the final fate – or manner of death – of a loved one or friend.[8] Narrators sometimes contrast the self-assertion and dignity of the 'offending' African-American male with the viciousness and cowardice of white mobs. Finally, the lynching story juxtaposes the positive example of the victim's self-assertion or insistence on dignity against the craziness and unpredictability of whites.

The prevalence of lynching stories and other accounts of the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse of African-Americans in the Delta suggest that the violence that maintained white supremacy produced a pervasive sense of communal trauma among the black population. The Mississippi Delta is a football-shaped region bordered by the Mississippi River on the west, the Yazoo River on the east, and by the cities of Memphis, Tennessee to the north, and Vicksburg, Mississippi to the south. Much of the labour in its cotton fields was performed by black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who laboured for as little as three dollars a day through the mid-1960s. A few wealthy planters and bankers have owned most of the lush black acres that bloom with white cotton bolls in the spring, which has meant that a majority of whites and African-Americans in the Delta were poor farmers until recent years. The land itself has a dark, brooding, dramatic quality: fields stretch into copses of trees on a horizon, streams and swamps line two-lane roads that link towns like Alligator, Shelby, and Ruleville. Thunder storms explode with terrifying force out of a wide, volatile sky. In these counties, where relatively few whites controlled and exploited thousands of African-Americans, fear and fantasy sometimes determined life or death for any targeted black male.

L. C. Dorsey, who grew up in Sunflower County, recalled a widespread fear of the 'mob crew' among African-Americans in the Delta:

> There was a tremendous amount of fear in the community and in almost every house of this faceless group of people who arrived at your home at night, on horses and in cars, to drag you out and kill you for any little infraction of rules you didn't always know about. People worried tremendously about their sons and the menfolk in their families. People worried if a white man looked at a black girl, and they tried to keep them in the background because they couldn't protect them, They couldn't protect their wives and stuff. . . . What you remember about it was the fear, that there was no way to be protected, and this was really driven home with the death of Emmett Till.[9] It was all this fear that these people had of white folk, that they would come and get you

> in the middle of the night and kill you. I understood the fear so strongly that it wouldn't even let them [the adults] talk out loud.
>
> (Dorsey 1996)

Worries for their young sons made many African-Americans very protective towards their children, especially in Mississippi. Preston Holmes, whose father worked as a contractor in the all-black town of Mound Bayou in Bolivar County in the heart of the Delta, recalled that his parents were very strict and kept their children close to the house (Holmes 1996). Roberta Martin of Boyle in Bolivar County told of being shocked and frightened by the murder of young Emmett Till in 1955. Said Martin:

> It was terrible, because I had two sons; one was born in 1956, and one in 1958. I never allowed my boys to go out and walk anywhere. When they'd go to see their friends, we'd always carry them, because white people were bad about seeing you walking – they'd throw [things] at you, or run out the road after you. After they killed that boy, I was afraid for my boys to walk the road.
>
> (Martin 1996)

Pervasive feelings of dread and fear haunted many families. Sollee Williams, who was born in Sunflower County in 1912, remembered a story that her father told:

> There was a man, a black man that had supposedly killed a white fella. And this group [of whites] was out looking for him, and my dad heard them coming. He was so afraid that they would do something to him that he put us [her mother, Sollee and her siblings] into a big box. He was so afraid of what they'd do to him.
>
> (Williams 1995)

The whites did come to the door, questioned her father, and then rode away. 'We just stayed for hours in that box. He was afraid they'd double back. He was just sweating . . . it was just so much tension. You were afraid to do anything that might cause a scene' (ibid.).

Bernice White, also from Sunflower County, recalled some of the stories that her aunt told her:

> whenever there was a killing, like a lynching or a rape scream, she said that everybody would go in, close their doors. In the community, they didn't walk the roads, they didn't sing. Like a lot of people at that time, when they walked a lot, they would sing. [But if African-Americans heard that] something had happened, they would try to take to the back fields and go the back ways, not

> to be seen, because if anyone was caught, especially a black male, that meant he might be accused. If not, he probably would be assaulted some type of way before they would let him go. Usually they [whites] would find someone who they said would have done whatever they thought had happened.
>
> (White 1995).

Such terror and dread within a population are symptoms of communal trauma. According to sociologist Kai Erikson, societal trauma can emerge from 'a *persisting condition* as well as from acute events'. Contemporary experiences of societies ravaged by war or terrorized by dictatorial regimes demonstrate that 'damage can be done to a whole people by sustained dread and dislocation'. Communal trauma, writes Erikson, appears in two forms, one of which creates 'social climates, communal moods, that come to dominate a group's spirit'. Especially devastating are those collective traumas 'that have been brought about by other human beings' because these 'not only hurt in special ways but bring in their wake feelings of injury and vulnerability from which it is difficult to recover'. Members of a victimized community or population may come to feel that 'the environment . . . has proved to be brittle and full of caprice', and may develop a 'sense that the universe is regulated not by order and continuity but by chance and a kind of natural malice that lurks everywhere' (Erikson 1994: 228–41). This seems especially the case among groups whom Robert J. Lifton has termed 'designated victims': 'the Jews in Europe, and Blacks in this country' (Caruth 1995: 128–47).

Reports of lynchings and rumours of lynchings and murders haunted the memories of many narrators. Johnny Lewis, who grew up in Simpson County in the south-eastern Mississippi, recalled that he learned early 'how you should act to prevent certain things from happening to you. Particularly, being a black male. You definitely had to know your place.' As a boy, he heard of black men being lynched in adjoining Smith County, which had a notorious white settlement named Sullivan's Hollow. 'Black folk used to say that there was a sign there that said, "Read, Nigger, and Run. If You Can't Read, Run Anyway."' Lewis remembered that as a boy, he heard of the execution of Willie McGee, a black man in Laurel, Mississippi, in 1951.[10] After this, 'we used to play execution . . . and one of us would *be* Willie McGee and try to visualize an execution' (Lewis 1996).

African-American families and communities dealt with this fear by seeking to avoid all contact with whites, and to 'crunch down and lay low and stay in your place, or you left the South and went North, and both things happened regularly', according to L. C. Dorsey (1996). While economic transformation and the mechanization of cotton agriculture spurred much of African-American exodus from the Delta counties since 1940,

discrimination, white violence, and oppression have also been cited by migrants as reasons for leaving the region (Griffin 1995). Blacks who left the Delta 'never came back', said Dorsey:

> They wrote letters and they sent for their relatives to come up there or visit, but they never came back here. They never wanted to live in that environment. It was accepted. The level of killing that went on on plantations, the beatings, [were] all part of life in that situation, and the choices were presented as being quite clear.
>
> (Dorsey 1996)

African-Americans who remained in the Delta, particularly those who were mired in the endless toil and indebtedness of the sharecropping system, were often plagued by an exhaustion and weariness that Dorsey later described a 'just chronic fatigue, where these people worked so hard they were just rundown, and constantly tired and needing sleep. I'm sure some of them were also depressed' (ibid.).

In contradiction to the white segregationist mythology of lynching-as-justifiable-punishment-for-rape, our narrators recalled lynching stories which began as conflicts between whites and blacks over real resources and prerogatives. Both parties tended to view the initial conflict as caused by a racial and/or personal violation. Whites became angry if African-American tenants or sharecroppers did not stay 'in their place', work as they were told to, or resisted white authority in some way, such as keeping their children in school rather than taking them into the cotton fields when quite young. Whites also attacked blacks who were considered to be uppity, or who tried to vote and act politically, or who didn't take a planter's or boss's 'advice': like Myltree Adams' uncle, who returned against 'the man's' orders to visit his wife and children.

African-Americans attributed such conflicts to whites' presumption of total authority and control, which conflicted with the desires and prerogatives of black men and their families. African-American tenants and sharecroppers could expect to be cheated out of their earnings annually by white landowners because 'there was absolutely nothing that the white person who he [a black man] was working for was bound to honour in this whole business of keeping records', according to L. C. Dorsey, who grew up near Drew in Sunflower County. She believed that her father expected to be cheated annually of his profits by the planter he worked for: 'he had lived during the Joe Pullum experience, where Pullum had died standing up for his right not to be cheated out of his labour.' In 1925, Pullum, a World War I veteran, had insisted on his right to the returns on his labour, and had then been attacked by a mob of white men, with whom he fought a gun battle. Pullum managed to kill some thirteen whites before his capture. After the mob killed Pullum, 'they tied him to a car and drug

him through the streets of Drew, cut off his ears, I think, or castrated him . . . and put it in jars in the city (Dorsey 1966, Mills 1993).

Dorsey's story recounts the violent death, mutilation, and display that marked the most savage lynchings. Other narrators stressed the elements of secrecy and the unknown which shrouded many disappearances and deaths, Daisie Conwell of Winstonville in Bolivar County recalled that she had 'a cousin down there at Belzoni that a white man killed'. She didn't know why the man was murdered, but 'It was a group of them. I don't know whether no group shot him or not, but it was a group of them that was mad with him' (Conwell 1996). Mary Tyler Dotson recalled the murder of her brother in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in 1931 – for unknown reasons: 'White folks'. The brother had been riding the rails home after working in St Louis. He was killed in Jonesboro: 'They claimed he was out there in the [rail] yard playing and ran into the train. He didn't have no scar or nothing but on his cheek. That's what our boss man told.' When Dotson's father tried to borrow a planter's truck to drive to Arkansas and recover his son's body:

> Jimmy Heathman [the plantation boss] said, "No, I'd advise you don't go up there, Frank. I'll advise you, don't go to Arkansas." . . . They was going to kill my daddy if he went up there. Some of them white folks [that] did it.
>
> (Dotson 1995)

Robert Love of Indianola told a family lynching story that stressed a mob's scapegoating, and the long-term mystery of his grandfather's disappearance. Love's grandfather was a carpenter by trade, but in the late nineteenth century, he found himself having to sharecrop in Sugarlock by Meridian in eastern Mississippi. While roofing his house, Love's grandfather was approached by the planter on horseback. The planter told him to come get his wife and children to do some work. The carpenter said he would come after he had finished, but that the planter hadn't hired his wife and children. The planter cursed the grandfather, rode away, and later returned, asking Love's grandfather for a talk. When the carpenter approached the planter's horse, the planter began to beat him with a chain. Following this beating, the grandfather took his shotgun to a store where the men of the community gathered every night. When the planter rode up to the store, the carpenter fired two shots and killed him. Love's grandfather then disappeared. Later the Klan picked up one of the grandfather's friends, castrated him, and lynched him. The grandfather was not heard from until his death in Birmingham, Alabama, many years later (Love 1995). His family – like the families of Daisie Conwell and Mary Dotson – was left without knowledge of his final fate, and any inquiry would have been dangerous to those concerned.

Of all of the traumatic features of the lynching story, surely this absence of knowledge is one of the most devastating, because it denies closure to the

survivors and friends of the victim or the missing man. As critic Cathy Caruth has written, 'Through its very missing [such a story] . . . bears the impact of trauma', because trauma is not simply the effect of destruction, but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival' (Caruth 1995: 40, 68–72). Why does one survive when a loved one has disappeared or been murdered? Why is one left alive – except, perhaps, to tell the tale and bear witness to the loss, including the loss of not knowing what, in fact, occurred.

Lynching stories recount the violence and grief that African-Americans experienced during the age of segregation. These same stories discredit the system of white supremacy by exposing the calculated barbarism of the mobs. As trauma narratives, these stories contained warnings and generated anger and resistance. They gave women and men a moral and psychological imperative to oppose segregation and to demand equal rights in the years following the Second World War.

Robert Love had 'learned to speak up for myself' from his parents: 'my daddy was a quiet man, but he didn't take anything off anybody.' In the 1950s, Love, a Second World War veteran and public schoolteacher, joined the local branch of the NAACP, even though the members were regularly harassed and threatened by the local White Citizens' Council, a segregationist organization devoted to blocking racial integration. Love kept working with the NAACP because:

> when you've made up your mind you're going to do something, you go ahead and do it. We just made up our minds that if it meant getting killed, we were going to try to take some of them with us, too.
>
> (Love 1995: 44–5)

Like many Mississippi blacks of these years, Love and his friends were armed. Many African-American veterans like Love 'felt like "This is my country, I put my life in danger for, and I'm going to get treated the way I should be treated." . . . Most of the men who went into the war returned back, and then started going to school on the GI Bill' (ibid.: 7–9). These men were a determined force in African-American protest and community organizations in the post-war years.

Sollee Williams of Sunflower County graduated from Tuskeegee Institute in the 1930s, and worked for many years in Chicago. In the 1960s, she returned home to Indianola and began work in voter registration drives. She became politically active because of 'seeing conditions here, and seeing conditions up there [in Chicago], and seeing that it wasn't fair anywhere. I thought I could help change things' (Williams 1995). Williams, Love, Myltree Adams, and many other Mississippi blacks were convinced that the South's racism was unjustifiable and ripe for change, and took calculated risks to bring about the political transformation of their state.

Mississippi was transformed politically between the 1950s and 1960s, but only with the determined actions of local African-American community leaders, a few daring state-wide leaders, and only tardily-engaged national organizations. A combination of local insurgence, 'outside' organizations like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and the state-wide Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), in concert with a largely unwilling national government, brought basic rights of citizenship to black Mississippians. This political transformation ended the reign of terror and the era of lynching that white supremacy had long imposed on black people. When young civil rights workers from SNCC, CORE, and COFO came into communities in Sunflower, Bolivar, and Coahoma Counties in the early 1960s, they found numerous local citizens and leaders who were ready to launch a full-scale assault on segregation and white supremacy. Local leaders like Amzie Moore of Cleveland, Aaron Henry of Clarksdale, and Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville (in Sunflower County) welcomed the assistance that the young people brought between 1961 and 1966 (Dittmer 1994, McAdam 1988). Women and men like Daisie Conwell, Mary Dotson, Robert Love, Johnny Lewis, Myltree Adams, and L. C. Dorsey transformed the legacy of lynching stories into the agency of social movement activism, which is now recognized as a proactive process of healing and recovery from the devastations of personal and social trauma (Herman 1992).

It is not surprising, then, that narrators like L. C. Dorsey, Sollee Williams, Johnny Lewis, and Robert Love link lynching stories to personal narratives of agency and activism. In telling the lynching story, they bear witness to both a thwarted search for self-assertion and dignity in the past, and to the horror of white violence and mob savagery. These stories provide a sense of continuity and coherence between the successful activism of recent years, and doomed acts of self-assertion by those who perished in the age of segregation. In the long memory of African-American history, lynching stories are acts of testimony and resistance that restore the lives and traumatic deaths of the victims to a tragic history of racial violence and oppression. Narrators were warned by these stories, but were not immobilized by them: the political changes they launched ended the pervasive fear of lynching and terrorism among Mississippi's African-Americans.

Memories of lynchings and other forms of racial violence have, however, left their mark on many narrators' life-stories. If the cumulative story of most of their lives has been that of survival, achievement, and community leadership, it is a story that has been constructed and reconstructed from often painful experiences. Thus, many narrators acknowledge the sometimes corrosive effects of remembering the segregated past, even as they assert that their experiences of fear and dread must be transmitted to younger generations.

Roberta Martin of Boyle, Mississippi, said, 'I don't trust people, white people. No, I don't trust them. I can't.' Martin's own experiences in Bolivar County had generated much of her distrust, but television dramas about slavery and race exacerbated her feelings. She recalled asking her daughter, 'Why do they keep showing those kinds of pictures? They're not helping. . . . They're talking about race relations, trying to do something about race relations, and they keep showing those kinds of pictures, and they don't do nothing but cause hate.' Further, the public furore over the fall 1995 not-guilty verdict in the O. J. Simpson murder trial seemed proof to Martin that white racism had not changed much:

> You look at all the black people that have been murdered, lynched, killed, and in this country, these people [whites] like to have gone crazy because they found O.J. Simpson not guilty. Now, I'm not going to say he was guilty or not guilty, but I'm just thinking about how sick and unfair they are. How do they think we felt about all the killing and stuff that has been done to us? It'll show you, they don't think we're nothing. We don't supposed to care about ours.
>
> (Martin 1996: 36–7)

For Martin, the changes brought by the civil rights movement and federal intervention had not significantly altered white Mississippians' racial attitudes. 'Some of [the whites] have changed because of the federal government making things happen', she said. But Martin believed that most Mississippi whites wanted to 'go back to the way it was' in the days of segregation (ibid.: 50–3).

Myltree Adams attributed the continuing distrust and fear that many African-Americans felt towards whites to their bitter historic experiences. 'A burned child feels fire – regardless. . . . You don't stick your hand on a hot iron if you got burned the last time you put it up there.' Many older blacks in Coahoma County did not pass on their memories to their children and grandchildren. They kept their silence, Adams said, because 'some of them are ashamed, and then some of them are still kind of fearful of what might happen, because we still haven't come from a very, very, very long way . . . We have blocked it out' (Adams 1997: 7, 8).

Adams herself continued her family tradition of not allowing white people inside her home:

> I don't let white people in my house. I usually go outside and talk to them. And I don't allow no salesmen, or insurance people, unless they're black. People I don't know don't come in my house, no white folks hardly at all, because I was raised like that. My daddy did not allow white people in our house, because of his

brother and the way his brother got shot. They shot him up, about his own wife.

(Adams 1997: 18–19)

A long-dead social thinker wrote that 'fear is the memory of pain' More recently, writer Janet Malcolm wrote: 'Time heals all wounds, smooths, cleanses, obliterates; history keeps the wound open, picks at it, makes it raw and bleeding' (Malcolm 1995: 62–3). Both statements can be applied to our Delta narrators' necessary and painful mission of remembering and telling their histories of fear, oppression, and pain. To forget this traumatic past – as at least one Mississippi state official recently urged – would necessitate a wilful abandonment of the record of struggle and loss that has, over generations, enabled our narrators to struggle and achieve. Many of our narrators see their duty to remember as a moral obligation to ancestors, parents, and to the children and grandchildren who will survive them. But these memories have a cost: our narrators cannot relax and fully enjoy the changes they have helped to produce. Like many survivors of collective traumas and disasters, their narrative expectations of the present and future and shaped by a story of suffering, fear, and the random and terrible explosions of terror and violence. And so they view post-movement Mississippi with a wariness and distrust, half-expecting the virus of racism to erupt in new places and in different forms.

Notes

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1 Mrs Myltree Adams, interviewed by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, Clarksdale, Miss., 19 April 1996. This interview was conducted as part of the Delta Oral History Project (DOHP), a collaborative effort of Dickinson and Tougaloo Colleges. This project was funded by the Collaborative Projects programme of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

2 Sharecropping and tenant farming developed after the Civil War (1861–5) between land-rich but often cash-strapped white planters and their landless black and white labourers. In sharecropping, the most dependent tenant arrangement, a planter furnished a farmer with a cabin, land and 'provisions' – seed, foodstuffs, a mule for ploughing – in return for a specified amount of the cotton crop, usually one half. The planter also charged the sharecropper for any provisions he and his family received above the minimum allotment. These charges were levied against the sharecropper's remaining share of his family's crop. Over years and even generations, many sharecroppers fell into debt to the planters. See Cobb 1992: 101–13.

3 Adams' trajectory was shared by many women community leaders in Sunflower,

Bolivar, Washington, and Coahoma Counties between the 1950s and 1990s (see Dittmer 1994, 363–88; Rogers 1996).

4 See Harris 1984; Gunning 1996; Carby 1987; Fry 1991; Griffin 1995.

5 I am grateful to Jerome Bruner for his analysis of agency in the formation of life stories and personal narratives (Bruner 1994: 40–54; see also Bruner and Kalmer 1997).

6 According to W. F. Brundage, 'Lynching was a powerful tool of intimidation that gripped blacks' imagination whether they lived in a mob-prone part of the South or in the relative safety of a border state' (Brundage 1997: 2).

7 Such de-authorization and self-authorization are critical cognitive steps in preparing individuals to engage in mass movement political activism (McAdam 1982).

8 See Harris (1984) for the ways in which such rituals functioned as affirmations for the ideology of white supremacy and the legitimacy of such punishment.

9 Emmett Till, a teenager from Chicago, was visiting an uncle in Money, Mississippi, when he was murdered by two white men in 1955. The men dragged Till from his uncle's house in the night, shot him and dumped his body in a river because he had allegedly whistled at a white woman. Although the Till murder became a national and international example of the tyranny and violence of white supremacy and racial segregation, an all-white Mississippi jury acquitted Till's murderers (Dittmer 1994).

10 Willie McGee was accused of raping a white Laurel housewife in 1945. McGee's initial trial lasted less than a day. The judge sentenced McGee to the electric chair. Three trials followed, and the Mississippi Supreme Court upheld the third conviction – despite testimony from McGee and his wife that he had been having an affair with his accuser for a number of years. McGee was executed in 1951 (Dittmer 1995).

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