

Black Bodies, White Spaces: Understanding the Construction of White Identity through the Objectification and Lynching of Black Bodies

Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South. By Kristina DuRocher. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 248 pp.

Bad Faith and Antiracism. By Lewis R. Gordon. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995. 222 pp.

The question that many fail to ask when observing historical photographs of mobs of angry, drunken white men surrounding the hanging corpses of African-American men, women, and/or children is how much of an effect did America's "hidden pastime" have on the "innocent" white youth of the Jim Crow South? The goal of this essay is to position the physical black body within a conversation between Lewis R. Gordon's philosophy on antiblack racism as a form of Sartrean *bad faith* and Kristina DuRocher's historical examination of the socialization of white children in the Jim Crow South.

In her book, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South*, DuRocher takes the reader on a journey into the shaping of the minds of white children into accepting *white supremacy* and public rituals of racial violence. According to DuRocher:

The role played by white youth in public racial violence has long remained unexplored, as no studies of the Jim Crow South consider this violence as a primary site of the construction of racial identity. Yet white southerners did employ the brutal lynching ritual to construct and maintain southern racial identity, and white children played an active role in the process (3).

In DuRocher's attempt to examine historically "white children's role within the white culture of the Jim Crow South," she shows how pivotal lynching as a ritual was as a means of maintaining "segregation and the white males' position at the top of the southern social hierarchy as a rite of passage for many male youth" (3). She introduces readers to the ritual practice of lynching in the Jim Crow South as a foundation for the construction of *whiteness* by maintaining whiteness from both a biological standpoint and the supremacy of white males. She asserts that in the Jim Crow South there were two things necessary in order for white males to lay claim to the superior title of manhood: "he must be white, and he must be willing to uphold the culture of white masculinity in a public forum" (4). The notion of white masculine identity, as she argues throughout the book, "revolved around the readiness to protect southern white women and white supremacy" (4).

Maintaining white male patriarchy included controlling sexual access to white females, and during Jim Crow, the protection of white female sexuality became central to justifying segregation. The sexual assault of a white female by a black man came to represent the primary racial fear of white southerners, for to preserve racial purity, white women and black men had to remain separate (5).

What is captivating about this particular book is the way DuRocher removes her discussion of lynching from the perspective of the traumatic African-American lived experience,

which has become the norm within the overall literature surrounding the study of lynching in America, particularly the South. Nevertheless, DuRocher's main objective is to stimulate an examination of the indoctrination of white children into a hegemonic world based heavily on antiblack racism. Her book helps the reader to explore white consciousness from a cultural standpoint (particularly during the Jim Crow South) in which the physical black body is objectified. From a philosophical perspective, if we begin to analyze the *black body* with a metaphysical/existential lens, it would exist as an object in which whiteness as identity is constructed. The black body intrinsically becomes an *object* that Sartre would theorize as "the look."

Essentially, the notion of "the look" is how the Other¹ views one as an object, which becomes very distorted in terms of how one of African descent is seen and/or treated in a racially charged society. The objectification of the black body as it relates to the indoctrination of the consciousness of white children in the Jim Crow South is rooted within the lessons of that era. According to DuRocher, the "lessons that shaped young children's identity were primarily racial" (14). The objectives of such lessons were designed to sustain the power that whiteness possessed both biologically and ideologically, and this quest for power "created anxiety about keeping whiteness separated from blackness" (14). The ideology of African-American inferiority lived in the national consciousness and permeated every aspect of life in the Jim Crow South, including the consumer culture of the region. "Images of subservient African Americans resonated strongly with white southerners, as the rise of mass consumer culture occurred at a time when southern whites were reconstructing their heritage through public commemoration" (62).

American images of blacks permeated advertisements for many products in the domestic sphere, including baking products, appliances, food, and cleaning supplies. These advertisements often fetishized the black body.... Images that displayed distorted black bodies for white enjoyment allowed whites to reenact their social power over African Americans.... In the New South, whites were prohibited from owning African American bodies in ways that allowed a form of this practice to continue by displaying African American bodies in ways that allowed gazing white consumers to reaffirm their own superiority on a daily basis (69).

The black body caught in the "white gaze" of the Jim Crow South was seen as *a* problem and/or *the* problem, per se. Southerners felt the urge to control and police the black body. This practice of policing the black body in the Jim Crow South is an essential point of reference when trying to understand racism and its effect on the lived experience of African Americans then and now.

Though many people of African descent were victimized by lynching and other acts of violence during the Jim Crow era, DuRocher's basic claim is that the minds of white children were also victimized by the lessons of the Jim Crow South. These lessons, as mentioned above, also revolved around the psychological construction of the indoctrination of objectifying black bodies as "inferior beings." This is to suggest that the black body, which is objectified through the "white gaze," becomes victimized within a space and time that were very antiblack due to the infusion of Jim Crow philosophy and ideology of how black people and blackness should be

¹ The notion of the Other is defined by the *racialized* gaze constructed by the falsification of how people of African descent, who supposedly lack the essentials of what it means to be a well-rounded human being, should be seen, understood, and treated as human beings.

viewed and understood. The construction of black bodies as inferior beings is best understood within Lewis R. Gordon's philosophy on antiblack racism.

In *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, Gordon offers his readers a meticulous existential/phenomenological analysis of what he labels as antiblack racism, a form of Sartrean *bad faith*. Bad faith is an attitude in which human beings attempt to escape the essence of freedom according to the Sartrean philosophy. Antiblack racism as it relates to bad faith deals with the attitude and/or practice of constructing people of African descent as fundamentally inferior and subhuman for the purpose of escaping the responsibility of respecting all humanity. What essentially connects DuRocher's and Gordon's books is their analysis of the construction of identity and consciousness, in which whiteness is understood within antiblack space(s) and time (i.e. the Jim Crow South).

In chapter seven, Gordon argues that "we can regard the body in bad faith as a flight [from] displeasing truths about the body, as freely existing [in] itself, as what it is to [be a] pleasing falsehood about the body, as being unable to exist itself in ways that transcends its immediate way of existing" (29). According to Gordon, the above argument raises the question "of how the body is lived as an effort to evade freedom" (188). This then becomes a question of how the mind and body can exist as a whole in the consciousness of the Other. In a paraphrase of Debra Bergoffen's *Casting Shadows*, according to Gordon, Bergoffen argues, "that our encounter with the Other presents the body as [an] object and bad faith [as] an effort to make the self one with such an alienated object body" (30). What differentiates both Gordon's and Bergoffen's arguments on the body in bad faith is that "Bergoffen examines the body as the source of alienation from the self," whereas Gordon argues that "there is simply alienated consciousness in the flesh" (188).

In her book, DuRocher illustrates how those of European descent, particularly in the Jim Crow South, were groomed to objectify those of African descent as subhuman. According to Gordon, the self of the Other tries to become one with that of the *alienated object/body*. Lynching, as violent as it was, was a process in which those of European descent established their understanding of the value of a black body that they had objectified and dehumanized cognitively and physically.

Metaphysically speaking, lynching, from the perspective of the Other (i.e., the white gaze), is a way in which the lyncher(s) tries to understand the *being* that has been objectified by society. The Other has no experience of this *being*, except through false concepts of the black body being inferior when juxtaposed against white bodies and white cultural values. The *being* (i.e., the Physical Black Body), which the Other has consciously objectified, is *a priori*.² This is to suggest that the black body, as Gordon would agree, is something caught in the Other's bad faith and is understood independent of the Other's experience. Lynching as a ritual not only reinforced white male dominance over black bodies but also over the sexuality of white women. According to DuRocher, "what was most striking in accounts of lynching based on rape accusations in the Jim Crow South is the number of girls and teenagers who accused black men of sexual assault" (132).

Just as the black body becomes the object within the ritual of lynching, so do the sexual organs, specifically, the black male penis. According to Gordon:

² The concept of *a priori* is to be understood as something that can be known and/or understood independent of experience.

The black's supposed sexual prowess is a matter of his biological structure; his penis and his animal passion, for instance. Being a body that desires to be seen, the black body lives on a fine line between Absence and orchestrated Presence. It disciplines itself to be incognito, to blend in with its environment on the one hand, and at other times it grins, dances, leaps, twirls; it exaggerates itself. Its existence is always superfluous. Since its problem is that it exists, its efforts to justify its existence always miss their mark.... And what does antiblack racism demand of the white body? The white body is expected not to be looked at by black bodies. This is because the black body's situation of being-without-a-perspective cannot be maintained if blacks are able to unleash the Look.... There was a period in the American South when, for blacks, looking a white in the eye carried the risk of being lynched (102).

From Gordon's point of view the black body wants to be seen only when it is safe for it to be seen. To be noticed in such a racially charged space and time such as that of the Jim Crow South, particularly when accusations of rape were used as battle cries for white male masculinity, was a death sentence declared upon black bodies, especially black male bodies. The black body has always been the object around which white identity is constructed. To be made an *alienated object*, due to the Other's practice of Sartrean *bad faith*, is a way in which one can understand the construction of whiteness through the destruction of "strange fruit."

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