
Introduction

History, Memory, and Narrative

Imagine a lifeless body hanging from a noose. This body is a marker not of what Michel Foucault calls the state's power over life and death but, rather, of the power of unsanctioned citizens to "execute" a fellow citizen in the name of justice and order.¹ This is, in other words, a *lynched* body. This book begins with this body and its simultaneous occurrence in two radically different contemporary American contexts. Each of the subsequent chapters in this book seeks to illuminate some aspect of how we have come to understand the significance and meaning of this body through narrative.

The first occurrence is in an image belonging to *Without Sanctuary*—a collection of 101 such images documenting sixty-five different lynchings.² This monumental project (exhibit, website, and book) is centrally concerned with lynching in the Jim Crow South and the significance of this history with respect to the broader history of racial violence in the United States. The body in the image is that of a southern black man whom we necessarily read as the victim of a larger social system of white racial exclusion, hatred, and denigration. This body represents the most familiar aspect of lynching in the American past and is met with rage and horror; the story of southern racial lynching, while no longer necessarily surprising, has appropriately not ceased to be shocking. *Without Sanctuary* documents the murderous and bloodthirsty violence lynch mobs enacted on (predominantly) black southern men.

The second body belongs to a civic celebration in Helena, Montana—the Vigilante Parade.³ It is not a photographed body like those in *Without Sanctuary*; it is a real body—a teenager suspended from a harness and rope in

order to *appear* lifeless. This body is on a float that is in a parade honoring legends of local history and narratives of a heroic frontier past. This is a western white male body made meaningful in this context as the by-product of frontier lawlessness and heroic vigilantism. The body in the parade produces little response at all. Vigilantes and those they targeted are staid images in this context of frontier nostalgia—neither shocking nor surprising. Any recreation of the “Wild West” predictably includes some saloon gals, bonneted ladies, and representations of the rough-and-tumble “hang ’em high” crowd.

The topic and tone of *Without Sanctuary* are familiar. The vast majority of lynching scholarship in the past two decades has focused on lynching in the southern states and on the legacy of this devastating racial violence.⁴ In fact, the treatment of lynching as the exemplar of racial inequality and violence is over a century old. Beginning with Ida B. Wells,⁵ writers have worked to create a context of meaning for the lynching images in *Without Sanctuary*. While quite different, the Vigilante Parade in Montana has a long-standing context as well. In this case the background is also over a century old, though it originates in the nineteenth-century fascination with the American frontier. Though significantly smaller, there is also a body of scholarship focused on frontier vigilantism and on lynching within the larger context of frontier mythology.⁶

In many obvious respects the exhibit and the parade are different. *Without Sanctuary* images depict real lynchings; the bodies in the photographs and postcards in the collection are real historical bodies that endured, in many cases, unimaginable torture and, in all cases, public death. The bodies in the parade are merely simulations—markers of real historical bodies but simulations nonetheless. *Without Sanctuary* is a multimedia, professionally curated collection of artifacts that has drawn a global viewership; the Vigilante Parade is a small-town civic festival produced by high school students for an audience of grade school children and their parents. One is a story primarily concerned with race; the other is not. But while the particulars of each of these present-day engagements with the past are quite different, the bodies depicted in each represent the same violent practice of lynching. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag addresses the function of images of suffering, including those contained in the *Without Sanctuary* collection.⁷ Most relevant here is Sontag’s important distinction between the illusion of “collective memory” and the imperative for “collective instruction.”⁸ Sontag writes, “Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common thoughts, feelings.”⁹ The *Without Sanctuary* images function as Sontag describes, as both image archive and as marker of what Sontag calls a “stipulation” to understand the past contained within the images as significant and specifically meaningful. But this is no less true of the bodies in the

Vigilante Parade. All of these bodies come from the same public historical present, and yet they present—and represent—entirely different stories about the American past.¹⁰ This book seeks to explain this simultaneous difference and sameness through a focus on lynching stories—the narratives that made, and in some sense continue to make, these violent practices legible and meaningful in particular ways.

Traditionally, multiregional work on lynching has attempted to explain how one potentially legitimate practice (frontier vigilantism) evolved into another, wholly illegitimate one (southern lynching).¹¹ More recently, scholars have begun to question this regional and temporal bifurcation and to challenge the favorable regard historians have held for vigilantes outside of the post-Reconstruction South. Ken Gonzalez-Day relinks the two fractured histories by foregrounding the centrality of race in western lynching;¹² Christopher Waldrep organizes his broad etymological study around the word, or concept, of lynching itself;¹³ and Michael Pfeifer analyzes lynching, or what he calls “rough justice,” as an evolving conflict between community-based and often ritualized retribution and an emerging, state-sponsored criminal justice system.¹⁴ Like each of these scholars I seek to challenge the conventional bifurcation of lynching history by period and region. There are moments in my own work on vigilantism and lynching violence when I draw on these scholars’ arguments about collective meaning making, racial violence, and disputes over the role of an emerging state. My primary focus, however, is on a unique narrative form and the ways that it functioned to constitute particular practices *as lynching*. My work is most closely aligned with Waldrep’s project in that we are both attentive to the ways in which the meaning, or legitimacy, of lynching was the subject of cultural debate, and we both identify a formal narrative associated with vigilante self-legitimation. But my focus in this project is both more narrow (insofar as I am principally interested in the narratives used by vigilantes themselves, whereas Waldrep works with a much broader range of textual sources) and slightly broader (insofar as I focus on the formal aspects of narratives from an earlier period than Waldrep, who concentrates on the San Francisco vigilantes from the 1850s).¹⁵ Further, whereas Waldrep masterfully draws on a range of narrative practices, from journalism to political rhetoric, I am specifically interested in the *formal* narrative construction that (I argue) was adjacent, if not simultaneous to, violence and that was essential to making the violence meaningful.

I understand my entry into the growing conversation about lynching and vigilantism as one that focuses on neither people nor practices but on the unique way in which narratives function materially to constitute both. So while in some sense this is a book about lynching and vigilantism, I don’t claim

to offer a definitive account of either; rather, I hope to provide an extended and archivally grounded account of the unique and real function of narrative formation and particularly how a set of narrative formations function(ed) to legitimate and or delegitimize forms of violence. The specific narrative form I attend to in this project is arguably historically unique—the archival sources I work with suggest as much. At the same time, I hope to uncover a larger set of conceptual connections that enable us to better understand how central narrative forms are in constituting and legitimating violence and in enabling the violent enforcement of social categories.

I begin by focusing on the ways that vigilantes in the early nineteenth century relied on narratives of justification to make their violent practices recognizable and legitimate to themselves and those around them. I demonstrate the ways that the self-aggrandizing and sometimes inaccurate stories vigilantes told about themselves came to dominate histories of frontier localities and of the larger regional West. I explain the ways that vigilante narratives have been used to illustrate our most idealized democratic aspirations and our darkest, most exclusionary impulses. This is a book about the power of stories—about the ways that narratives make and unmake both our past and our present. This introductory chapter lays out the ways that this project engages with narrative. The next section focuses on three lynching stories by Mark Twain—two drawn from *Roughing It* and one from “The United States of Lyncherdom.” These accounts introduce many of the formal characteristics of lynching stories more generally, including the defining force of region on these narratives.

The Stories We Are Told

In 1870, Mark Twain was in the midst of writing *Roughing It*, a semiautobiographical account of his travels in the West. Consistent with expectations of the popular genre of western adventure writing, Twain wanted to include a desperado, a larger-than-life frontier “bad guy.” Luckily, Twain had met such a character a decade earlier during his travels on the Overland Express—the infamous desperado J. A. Slade. By many accounts (including Twain’s), Slade was a striking character—famous for carrying in his vest pocket the ear of a man he once murdered. At the same time, Slade was a “conundrum” for Twain—for despite his chilling reputation, Twain had met Slade one day at breakfast during his travels and couldn’t reconcile Slade the man with Slade the legend:

He was so friendly and so gentle-spoken that I warmed to him in spite of his awful history. It was hardly possible to realize that this pleasant

person was the pitiless scourge of the outlaws, the raw-head-bloody-bones the nursing mothers of the mountains terrified their children with.¹⁶

The conundrum of Slade must have grown even more intriguing for Twain when word reached him that Slade had been lynched in a Montana mining community. Had Slade been, to borrow one of Twain's own descriptive phrases, a "humanized fragment of the original devil," or had he been a misunderstood man who fell victim to a murderous mob?¹⁷ Like all lynching stories, Twain's story about Slade in *Roughing It* turns on these very questions.

To write his account, Twain set about researching Slade, writing to his brother and traveling companion, Orion Clemmens: "Torture your memory & write down in minute detail every fact & exploit in the desperado Slade's life that we heard on the Overland—& also describe his appearance & conversation as we saw him at Rocky Ridge station at breakfast."¹⁸ Orion's response could hardly have set Twain's mind at ease. He wrote:

I don't know how he came to leave that road, but he went to Montana, where he was ~~worked up into~~ hanged by a vigilance committee. I believe his offence was belonging to a gang of horse thieves and robbers, with some particular murder laid to his charge. On the scaffold he was unmanned by terror and begged piteously for his life.¹⁹

Not satisfied with his own, or his brother's, recollections, Twain wrote as well to Hezekiah Hosmer, a Montana territorial judge and resident of the town where Slade was lynched: "Four or five years ago a righteous Vigilance Committee in your city hanged a casual acquaintance of mine named Slade. . . . Now I am writing a book . . . and . . . I thought I would rescue my late friend Slade from oblivion & set a sympathetic public to weeping for him."²⁰ Specifically, Twain wanted Hosmer to send him local newspapers from the day Slade was killed. The principal source of Twain's information on Slade, however, ended up being Thomas Dimsdale's *The Vigilantes of Montana or Popular Justice in the Rocky Mountains: Being a Correct and Impartial Narrative of the Chase, Trial, Capture, and Execution of Henry Plummer's Road Agent Band*.²¹ Twain never resolved the conundrum of Slade. His two chapters on Slade's lynching in *Roughing It* offer contradictory accounts of the famous desperado and of his lynching at the hands of the Montana vigilantes.

Twain first offers a story of the legendary outlaw in chapter 10, wherein he acknowledges that Slade will serve in the text as an exemplary prototype: "In order that the Eastern reader may have a clear conception of what a Rocky

Mountain desperado is, in his highest state of development, I will reduce all this mass of overland gossip to one straightforward narrative, and present it in the following shape.”²² Twain’s story of Slade, true to his promise to metonymize the legend of the outlaw, includes Slade’s time as a station agent, train-master, Indian fighter, and “matchless marksman.” The story details many of the worst rumors about Slade’s violent exploits, including his propensity for cutting off his enemies’ ears and his fatal willingness to cheat at gunfights. The colorful account wraps up with Twain’s surprise over the genteel Slade’s appearance at a breakfast table in the passage cited above. Overall, the story serves to offer eastern readers not only a vivid idea of what a frontier desperado might be like, as Twain claims, but a larger impression of frontier lawlessness and violence. In fact, Twain’s description of the Rocky Mountain region where Slade worked as a station agent is as colorful and fanciful as Slade’s own reputation:

It was the very paradise of outlaws and desperadoes. There was absolutely no semblance of law there. Violence was the rule. Force was the only recognized authority. The commonest misunderstandings were settled on the spot with the revolver or the knife. Murders were done in open day, and with sparkling frequency, and nobody thought of inquiring into them.²³

As a lynching narrative, Twain’s story of Slade is familiar both through reference to a hyperbolically dangerous outlaw individual *and* through a narration of a hyperbolically lawless and deadly frontier environment. Ultimately, it is a story about the extraordinary criminality of a region told through the extraordinary criminality of one man.

But lynching narratives are never as simple as Twain’s first chapter suggests; the next chapter, also focused on Slade, is both more troubling and more complicated. This second account is not exclusively Twain’s; the chapter is taken verbatim from Dimsdale’s account—a book Twain describes as a “bloodthirstily interesting little Montana book”—and is distinguished only by Twain’s judicious italicization.²⁴ This second Slade, the one described by Dimsdale, is principally defined by his utter inability to hold liquor, as opposed to more legend-making desperado behavior. In fact, Dimsdale specifically says “[Slade] was never accused, or even suspected, of either murder or robbery, committed in this Territory.” Dimsdale further notes that “J. A. Slade was himself . . . a Vigilante; he openly boasted of it, and said he knew all that they knew.”²⁵ Of course, this was an unfortunate misjudgment on Slade’s behalf, for what he *didn’t* know was that the vigilance committee in Alder Gulch

had grown weary of his drunken exploits and that many of the miners in the community had lost tolerance for his behavior. Slade was locally infamous for drunken pranks: "On many occasions he would ride his horse into stores, break up bars, toss the scales out of doors and use most insulting language to parties present."²⁶ On Slade's last night of drunken carousing, "he and his companions had made the town a perfect Hell." He had ridden into one town store and, upon being asked to leave, had threatened to kill the owner. He had concluded his antics by leading his horse into a saloon and, "buying a bottle of wine, . . . tried to make the animal drink it."²⁷ As these behaviors were "not considered an uncommon performance," it is easy enough to see why the local store owners and saloon keepers had had more than enough of the drunken Slade and his gang of ruffian pals. On the fatal night, one of the vigilantes attempted to arrest Slade, presenting him with the vigilantes' self-authorized warrant, but he "became uncontrollably furious, and seizing the writ, he tore it up, threw it on the ground and stomped on it."²⁸

Twain's second story about Slade is complicated precisely because it turns on this detail of tearing the vigilantes' writ (as recounted by Dimsdale and emphasized by Twain's later italicization). Slade's blatant disregard for the sheriff's authority, according to Dimsdale, left him

the master of the situation and the conqueror of the courts, law and law-makers. This was a declaration of war, and was so accepted. The Vigilance Committee now felt that the question of social order and preponderance of the law of the law-abiding citizens had then and there to be decided.²⁹

In other words, Slade did not become a target of the vigilance committee because he had committed one of the crimes for which vigilantes claimed to target men—robbery or murder—and he did not become a target because he had destroyed local stores, threatened local saloon keepers, or been wildly drunk and disorderly as a point of common practice. He became a target of the vigilantes, the committee of which he himself was a member, because he threatened the capacity of the vigilantes to assume power in, and over, their community. Slade's flagrant (and ultimately deadly) disregard for the vigilantes' authority was further expressed after he was approached by one committee member and ordered to go home.

Still being intoxicated . . . [Slade] seemed to have forgotten the warning that he had received and became again uproarious, shouting the name of a well-known courtesan in company with those of two men who he

considered heads of the [vigilante] committee, as a sort of challenge; perhaps, however, as a simple act of bravado.³⁰

It really didn't matter what Slade's intentions were by this point—for simple bravado or not, he had made the deadly mistake of challenging the self-asserted authority of the vigilantes. The question of authority was particularly complicated in this mining community. There was a state-sanctioned system of law and order, replete with officers, but the local vigilance committee didn't *like* the state-sanctioned system. In fact, they were convinced that many of the officers were members of the criminal gang they sought to control. Slade's disregard for the vigilantes' authority was singularly dangerous in the context of this committee's tenuous but, in their minds, crucial power in the community. In the end, Slade was hanged by his friends and vigilante compatriots because he was defiant.

These two chapters in Twain's *Roughing It* highlight a few different things about the way lynching narratives work. The first chapter, notably, focuses on Slade as a criminal and is mostly shaped by the idea that a lynching story is primarily a story about the criminal being lynched. In this version, we are encouraged to believe that Slade, "the pitiless scourge of the outlaws, the raw-head-bloody-bones the nursing mothers of the mountains terrified their children with," deserves the fate that befalls him. The second story, however, is more about the vigilance committee and suggests that a lynching story primarily expresses the social investments of those doing the lynching. We are left wondering about Slade's actual guilt and/or the legitimacy of his "execution" because Twain's second account reveals that the local vigilantes had a deadly investment in maintaining their control in a community.

Twain's specific conundrum concerning Slade was that the man seemed to embody such oppositional characteristics. He was, Twain wrote, a "bloody, desperate, kindly-mannered, urbane gentleman, who never hesitated to warn his most ruffianly enemies that he would kill them."³¹ But the conundrum he leaves us with about Slade is more interesting. Are lynching stories about criminality, or are lynching stories about the social investments of vigilantes? To a great extent, these two questions have traditionally divided lynching narratives into two distinct strands: the field of western history favoring the former and studies of southern lynching focusing on the latter. Because the two fields have long asked very different questions, until quite recently scholarship on lynching and vigilantism has evolved along two parallel and relatively unrelated lines. Twain gives us back-to-back but quite different accounts of the same lynching, which demonstrates the degree to which narrative produces what we know, or think we know, about lynching in the past.

The question of which of Twain's accounts is more accurate becomes secondary in this context. As revealed through even brief excerpts of Twain's correspondence, and by his use of the hardly neutral account written by Dimsdale, stories about Slade and his lynching were largely produced by rumor and hearsay.

What we know and think about lynching in the past has a great deal to do with what we think and know about lynching in the present. The vigilantes who lynched Slade are the same vigilantes celebrated by the high school students in the present-day Vigilante Parade in Helena, Montana. Within the context of Twain's first story about Slade, the parade makes a certain kind of sense, acting as a celebration of long-dead city fathers who faced down ear-collecting local outlaws on behalf of their upright fellow citizens and families. But a celebration of the vigilantes in the second story seems rather different; *these* vigilantes hanged one of their friends because he wouldn't accede to their self-sanctioned rule over the community. Granted, Slade may have been obnoxious and unruly, but the disproportionate reaction of the vigilantes makes them a more questionable object of historical celebration.

Twain set out to write the account in *Roughing It* to "rescue [his] late friend Slade from oblivion & set a sympathetic public to weeping for him." But in 1901, Twain set out to write about lynching with very different motivations and changed ideas about the function of the lynching narrative. In his essay "The United States of Lyncherdom" he wrote:

A much-talked-of lynching will infallibly produce other lynchings here and there and yonder, and . . . in time these will breed a mania, a fashion; a fashion which will spread wide and wider, year by year, covering state after state, as with an advancing disease.³²

By the time he wrote the essay, the memorial aspirations of his stories about Slade in *Roughing It* had been replaced by a much keener understanding of the extent to which a lynching story—particularly a lynching story that advances the act of lynching as heroic—will invite, encourage, and legitimate other acts of lynching violence. And by the time of this essay, lynching was no longer for Twain the practice of "a righteous vigilance committee," as it had been when he had researched Slade's lynching. Even the ambiguities associated with the two contradictory accounts in *Roughing It* had been replaced by Twain's fervent belief that lynching is an act of cowardice and a source of shame. The essay opens with his anguish about the association of his home state, Missouri, with the practice of lynching. He writes, "And so, Missouri has fallen, that great state! Certain of her children have joined the lynchers, and the smirch is upon the

rest of us.”³³ This characterization of lynching as shameful is markedly different from Twain’s earlier work on the subject in *Roughing It* and introduces part of what is regionally distinct about narratives about southern lynching.³⁴

The first difference, of course, is the kind of generality with which the essay opens. Slade, in *Roughing It*, is the metonym for frontier lawlessness and desperado lore more broadly. In the later essay, Twain uses a recent lynching in Pierce City, Missouri, to illustrate the shame and cowardice of lynching itself.³⁵ Consistent with the general differences between frontier and southern lynching stories, this reflects the degree to which the essay focuses, throughout, on the perverse motivations of those who lynched rather than on the crimes or misdeeds of those who were lynched. If the second account of Slade in *Roughing It* raises the possibility that vigilante practice might be related to the social and cultural motivations of lynchers, this possibility is absolute in Twain’s assessment of the South. Twain goes on to argue that people participate in, or fail to stop, lynchings primarily because they are unable to demonstrate the courage or independence to do otherwise.

“The United States of Lyncherdom” not only is interesting because of Twain’s vehement condemnation of lynching; the essay also reveals the ways that lynching stories are shaped by regionally distinct figures and myths. In *Roughing It*, Slade was Twain’s stand-in for a specifically regional figure—the western desperado or outlaw. The lynching events at the center of “The United States of Lyncherdom” rely on a regionally specific idea as well, though Twain seems unaware of his own reliance on mythical figures. In brief, Twain describes “the tragedy” as follows:

On a Sunday afternoon a young white woman who had started alone from church was found murdered. . . . Although it was a region of churches and schools the people rose, lynched three negroes—two of them very aged ones—burned out five negro households, and drove thirty negro families into the woods. . . . [A] thousand provocations are no defense. The Pierce City people had bitter provocation—indeed, as revealed by certain of the particulars, the bitterest of all provocations—but no matter.³⁶

Twain’s account here is a familiar story: A vulnerable southern white woman is sexually assaulted by one or more black men, and an outraged community reacts swiftly and violently to the crime. He refers to this “bitterest provocation” again later in the essay, asking, “Why has lynching, with various barbaric accompaniments, become a favorite regulator in cases of ‘the unusual crime’ in several parts of the country?”³⁷

Twain's assertions notwithstanding, neither the coroner's jury report nor the undertaker in Pierce City documented any evidence of sexual assault—there was no “unusual crime” or “bitterest provocation” associated with the death of the young Gazelle Wild.³⁸ But even at the time of the murder, rumors of rape circulated in conjunction with Wild's death. One of the men lynched for the crime, Will Godley, had been convicted of a prior rape but released from prison after serving only two years of a ten-year sentence. Circulating cultural hysteria about black rapists may have been amplified by perceptions of an anemic response to Godley's past crime.³⁹ Indeed, so sure were community members about Godley's status as a “miscreant” rapist that two other young white women stepped forward after Godley's arrest to accuse him of attempting to rape them as well—charges that were most likely manufactured in response to rising community outrage.⁴⁰ But in terms of narrative significance, it is important to note that while Twain was centrally concerned with decrying both this lynching and lynching more generally, in his attempts to do so, he participated in the very cultural mythology that legitimated and defined the lynching in Pierce City and southern lynching more broadly for the better part of four decades.

In *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching*, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall looks closely at the southern rape myth in her chapter “A Strange and Bitter Fruit.” Her reading of this narrative leads to her frequently cited assertion that “rape and rumors of rape became a kind of acceptable folk pornography in the Bible Belt.”⁴¹ Of course, as Hall points out near the end of her chapter, “Despite its tenacity, this southern ‘rape complex’ was never founded on objective reality. Of the known victims of lynch mobs in the period 1882–1946, only 23 percent were accused of rape or of attempted rape.”⁴² Ida B. Wells first drew attention to the mythological quality of “the unusual crime” as the cause of southern lynching. In 1892, her editorial pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* presented a detailed critique of the allegory, arguing persuasively that one of its central functions was to draw attention away from white men's sexual assaults on black women. She stated the case against southern lynchers even more powerfully two years later in *A Red Record*:

To justify their own barbarism they assume a chivalry which they do not possess. True chivalry respects all womanhood, and no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattos in the South, will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his own race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power.⁴³