The Story of Strange Fruit in America

Strange Fruit: A Poem

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Written in 1940 by Lewis Allen, AKA Abel Meeropol a Jewish schoolteacher from NY.

Part 1: Historical Overview of Topic
Lynching

As James Loewen intonates in his aptly titled book, Lies my teacher told me everything your American History Textbook got Wrong there are significant areas of American history that are either overlooked completely or sanitized in such a way that the true horror is never known. The practice of lynching is among these events. As future leaders of the country, it is important for students to have an understanding of all facets of history including some eras that are reminders of a very painful time in the nation. The fact that many adults and college students do not have any idea of the impact that slavery had on this country is a travesty. This unit is designed to provide an historical view of the practice of lynching as social control over African Americans.
Students and teachers may find some of this material challenging to read, view, and to digest but that is part of the goal of the unit. Often for learning to take place, we need to move outside of our comfort zones. Historically, non-African Americans have also been lynched however, due to the significant increase in lynching of African Americans during the time of Reconstruction the focus will be on African Americans, although at times the experiences of other groups will be explored.

1619-1863 Slavery the Peculiar Institution

The Trans Atlantic slave trade helped to fill that need and approximately 3 million Africans served as slaves in the South. Slavery as an institution helped to establish and institutionalize the notion that people with brown skin were inferior to and less human than those with white skin. This concept of inferiority based on skin color took hold and affected many ethnic and cultural groups, including new immigrants to the United States.

From 1619-1863 millions of Africans were subjected to tyranny, physical and mental abuse, and overall oppression. Slavery was very important to the development of this country. Fortunes were built on the backs of other human beings. When President Lincoln proposed the Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery, he did so as a last resort. He had given the Confederacy an opportunity to come back to the Union and retain slavery. For Lincoln and Congress the most important thing was to have the Union restored. African Americans fought on both sides of the war and when the Confederacy refused to re-join, ending slavery was another way to weaken them. The thought being that if the slaves were freed a majority of them would not be fighting on the side of the Confederacy (Banks, Zinn).
Reconstruction, Black Codes and Lynching as methods of social control

Slavery has been referred to as the “peculiar institution” and at its worst was the dehumanization of Africans allowing for outrageously brutal practices to take hold including branding, whipping, raping, beating and other forms of torture. All of these atrocities were used as a way of maintaining control over the slaves. After slavery was abolished in 1863, and freed slaves were making some gains politically, socially, and economically whites, particularly in the south wanted to maintain social control i.e. keeping blacks in their place. In the south, the Black Codes were enacted which countered the 14th and 15 Amendments and worked to keep newly freed blacks from rising too much.

Lynching was initially not reserved for blacks it was often used by whites on other whites generally, thieves, wife beaters, murders, and gamblers (Kitano 105). The loss to the north and of slavery led many in the south to work to reclaim their positions. Historical data indicate that between 1882 and 1968 almost five thousand people lost their lives to lynching. This figure includes whites as well as blacks however blacks were the majority of victims at over 70%.

Lynching took place for a variety of reasons none of which relate to any form of justice or authentically legal proceedings. In other words, lynching is a form of vigilantism, there is no due process involved and is often carried out by drunken mobs. Reasons for lynching often included raping a white woman, insulting a white person, or some other minor infraction in the mind of the white victim. Most lynching took place in the southern states but northern and Midwestern states were not exempt. There are only four states in the nation that have no recorded lynching, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Vermont.

Lynch mobs often took victims from their homes, the street and jail cells if they were in custody. Death was generally by hanging or shooting followed by being strung up for the residents to view. In many cases death did not come quickly and victims were also tortured in a variety of ways including castration, mutilation, beating with sticks and
stones, being tied to a car bumper and dragged and set on fire while still alive. Much of what we know about lynching is because of the practice of taking photos of the victim and making them into post cards. Lynching were often family events where children were present like it was any regular event.

As the struggle for Civil Rights increased lynching declined as a form of terrorism the last documented case of a mass lynching took place in 1946 the victims, four black people one a pregnant woman were killed. One of the males allegedly stabbed a white man several days prior to the incident. The last documented single lynching took place in 1968 however, many consider James Byrd to be a victim of lynching after he was picked up by several white men and chained to the back of a truck by his neck and dragged to death, this occurred in 1998 (Digital History web site).
Part 2: Suggested Activities

Activity 1 How is lynching a form of social control

Time: 1 class period

- Ask students to discuss what they know about the concept of lynching.
- Play the You Tube song of Billie Holiday singing Strange Fruit
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs) YouTube video of Billie Holiday singing Strange Fruit.
- Distribute a copy of “Lynching Uncle Rye: A Novel Excerpt” have students read the article and discuss the following questions.
- Questions:
  - Why do you think Jack’s father did not go with the other men?
  - Why do you think Jack’s father did not stop him from going?
  - Other than shooting at Cuthbertson what might be some other reasons for Uncle Rye being lynched?
  - What do you think about Jacks’ father-could he have done anything differently?
  - How did lynching serve to control African Americans?

- Students can rewrite the story having Jacks’ father respond differently.
Activity 2 Deconstructing Lynching

Time: 2 class periods

- Break students into groups of 4 or 5
- Assign each group one of the following articles
- Their assignment is to read the article and develop a presentation on the content and themes of the article.

Articles
Armstrong, J. (2008, Winter/Spring2008). The people...took exception to her remarks:
Activity 3 Strange Fruit

Time: 2 class periods

- Have students watch the video Strange Fruit and discuss
- California Newsreel

Activity 4 Lynching: A Thing of the Past

Time: one or two class periods

- Have students view the Ted Koppel video “The Last Lynching in America” discuss the importance of the video.
- Students can also compare and contrast the James Byrd case to determine if that was really the last lynching in America.

Alternate Activity

Have students view the PBS video American Experience: Scottsboro: An American Tragedy and write a reflection paper
Part 3: Bibliography

On-line Resources

http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/main.html -website showing photos of various lynchings. There is also a movie option on the site that provides narration along with the photos.

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lynching/lynching.htm -brief historical overview of lynching.


http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchstats.html web site providing statistics on lynching broken down by states.

http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html entire lesson plan on the history of lynching.

http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0136 can order the video from this site.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs UTube video of Billie Holiday singing Strange Fruit.

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/ textbook on-line with examples of lesson plans on a variety of historical topics with sections on African American and slavery.

http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=482


Williams, L. (2000). *It’s the little things everyday interactions that anger, annoy, and divide the races.* Orlando: Harcourt Inc.

