

Between 1880 and 1940, more than 3,000 African Americans were lynched in the United States, in what were often very public displays of torture and suffering. In *Lynching and Spectacle*, Amy Wood explains what it meant for white Americans to perform and witness these violent and sadistic rituals and what they derived from them. Wood argues that lynching, for all its brutality, overlapped with a wide range of cultural practices and performances, both traditional and modern, including public executions, religious rituals, photography, and cinema. The connections between lynching and other practices encouraged the horrific violence committed and gave it social acceptability.

Wood unearths photographs, early films, and local reports and records to explore the critical role lynching spectacles played in establishing and affirming white supremacy in towns and cities experiencing great social instability and change at the turn of the century. Spectacles and visual representations of lynching, she contends, had an activating power that conferred legitimacy on white supremacist belief and gave people an emotional attachment to it.

Wood also shows how the national dissemination of lynching images fueled the momentum of the antilynching movement and ultimately led to the decline of lynching. The most public and sensational images of racial violence became the tools through which lynching opponents could deflate and undo the terror these very images had generated. As

lynching photographs circulated through the black and mainstream press and as Hollywood took up the antilynching cause in the 1930s, spectacles of mutilation and hanging came to provide the visual framework through which many white Americans could denounce lynching. By examining lynching alongside both traditional and modern practices and within both local and national contexts, Wood reconfigures our understanding of its relationship to modern life.

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