"Witness": An important chapter in US history

New York photo exhibit on lynchings

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In the past few weeks, several thousand people have visited a tiny one-room gallery in Manhattan to view an unusual and riveting photographic exhibit on a part of American history.

"Witness," at the Roth Horowitz Gallery, includes 75 photographs of lynchings, taken from the collection of James Allen and John Littlefield. Allen, an antiques dealer from Atlanta, has gathered these historical documents over the past decade. They consist mostly of small-size photos on postcard stock, and they show grisly scenes from a few score of the thousands of lynchings which took place between 1880 and 1960.

Displayed alongside the photos are some books, posters and other historical artifacts of this period. Among the books, dealing with the racist oppression of blacks in America in the post-Civil War period, are W.E.B. Dubois' classic *Black Reconstruction*; *Twelve Million Black Voices*, by Richard Wright; *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, by Langston Hughes; and *God's Trombones*, by James Weldon Johnson.

Almost all of the lynching victims were African-American, but there were occasionally other victims as well—most notably Leo Frank, the Jew who was imprisoned on murder charges in Atlanta in 1913, and kidnapped from his jail cell and lynched by a mob two years later, after the governor had commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment. A postcard showing Frank's murder is among those on display in the current exhibition.

Lynchings reached a peak between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. A poster in the exhibit, issued in the early 1920s by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and calling for a campaign against these atrocities, gives the figure of 3,436 for the number of lynchings recorded between 1889 and 1922, mostly but not entirely in the former slave states of the South. The actual number is almost certainly higher.

The poster enumerates the official charges against those killed by racist vigilantes: 1,288 victims were accused of murder, 571 of rape, 615 of "crimes against persons" and 333 for "crimes against property." Alongside these figures are given some of the actual causes of the lynchings: "not turning out of the road to make way for a white boy"; "being the relative of a lynching victim"; "jumping a labor contract"; "talking back to a white man."

The small photographs and postcards in the exhibit are understandably chilling and gruesome. The great majority show the bodies of the victims hanging lifelessly from trees or telephone poles. In some of the scenes men are depicted staring at the camera before they are killed, as if pleading for their lives. They essentially bear witness for future generations, testifying to the inhuman killings that were about to take place, in a fashion similar to that of photographs of the Nazi Holocaust.

Most striking about the photos is the presence of participants and bystanders. The lynchings were in most cases a kind of community event in which townspeople participated willingly and even enthusiastically. In some cases postcards depicting the killings were sent to friends and relatives. One card shows a charred body hanging from a pole. On the back is written, "This is the barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left with a cross over it. Your son, Joe."

As one man who visited the exhibit put it, according to a news account, "Considering the fact that human beings have been executed, for people to smile, to be actually jostling to be in the picture, that's more stunning than anything else."

These images are indeed stunning, but that does not mean that they cannot be explained. There were doubtless hundreds of thousands of people, mostly the rural poor, who either carried out or approvingly witnessed these unspeakable acts, and there are social and historical reasons for this behavior.

The general cause is similar in all cases of ethnic warfare and racist and religious pogroms around the world, including contemporary crimes of this nature. Desperate sections of the population are whipped into a frenzy. Scapegoats, usually racial or national minorities, are targeted as a means of channeling the anger of impoverished and backward layers away from the real causes of their misery.

The lynchings which began in the post-Civil War US were rooted in the explosive development of the capitalist system and the savage inequality and social misery it produced. In the post-Reconstruction South, the Jim Crow system of segregation was institutionalized to deny the former slaves and their descendants all democratic rights. Jim Crow was put in place in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, as part of a conscious reaction by the ruling class to the potential of working class unity posed by the rise of populism. Racism was utilized as well in the North, even if in less rigid and usually less virulent forms, although in the North, too, pent-up social tensions sometimes exploded against black minorities in growing centers of industry.

Lynching as it existed in this earlier period has basically disappeared today. The rise of the working class and the industrial union movement in the 1930s had much to do with this. Although racial tensions continued and in some cases flared into violence, many sections of workers, having migrated to the cities to work in the factories, found themselves fighting together against the employers, instead of against one another. As black workers found jobs in industry, in the South as well as the North, they also found greater strength. The mass civil rights movement, itself triggered in part by the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955, put an end to the Jim Crow system and the open racial oppression connected to it.

Any conception that this history can be consigned to the past and ignored today would be dangerously wrong, however. There are cases of racial beatings and murders today, such as the dragging death of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas. Nor is racism the only manifestation of this sickness of society. Matthew Shepard was beaten to death in Wyoming in 1998 because he was gay, and there have been other such cases.

Racism and other forms of bigotry also find other forms, more “respectable” but no less dangerous. The revival of capital punishment, part of the law-and-order crusade in the US which has seen the prison population grow by more than 500 percent in the past generation, is not the same as mob killings, but there are some significant similarities. Hundreds have been executed since the death penalty was once again legalized in 1976. The political establishment, including every major Democratic and Republican politician, uses this form of legally sanctioned state killing to accomplish some of the same ends as the mob killings of an earlier period.

Capital punishment shares with the lynchings its appeal to the basest human feelings of vengeance and a disregard for the rights of minorities, prisoners and criminal defendants. Innocent people have been put to death by the state as well as by racist mobs.

The racial component remains prominent, but not as it was in the past. The class issues are clearer than ever. The majority of those on Death Row are black, but they are there primarily because they are poor. They haven't been singled out by racist mobs, but by a judicial system and police apparatus which operates to defend the status quo in an increasingly polarized society.

The implications and contemporary significance of the lynchings of the past are not directly dealt with in this exhibit, but that is not the purpose of a photographic presentation. The photos show a part of history which is well known but not widely understood. If this exhibit succeeds in provoking thought about these vital issues, it will have accomplished something very important.