

**Prof. Dr. Jürgen Martschukat**

### **Resonance and Rituals of Whiteness**

In the context of the larger research topic, the case study will revolve around rituals of race and scrutinise how race is shaped as a major divisive and at the same time unifying force (Martschukat 2007). It will explore how resonance theory can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the seemingly contradictory signature of race and power, and, at the same time, how the divisive and unifying forces of race can contribute to our understanding of resonance. Here, the study will focus on rituals of whiteness, with whiteness and race being understood as unfolding religious dimensions in the modern history of the West. Pointing to a religious dimension of whiteness means that from the age of expansion to the 21<sup>st</sup> century whiteness has operated through the Christian tradition (e.g. Weed 2017) and shaped a field of thought, belief, and action human actors find it difficult to escape from (Agamben 2009).

For the age of segregation, between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, 4084 victims of so-called racial terror lynchings in twelve Southern states have been documented (Tolnay and Beck 1992; Equal Justice Initiative 2017). Racial terror lynchings were acts of extra-legal group violence against African Americans (mostly men), conducted by and for a predominantly white crowd in a highly ritualised fashion as public spectacles and celebratory acts of racial control and domination. Lynchings as frontier justice were of minor importance. More importantly, they were meant to reestablish and reaffirm, perform and reiterate the hegemonic power of whiteness in the American South after Reconstruction (Wood 2009; Berg 2011). The project will explore in particular, how participants experienced lynchings as resonant rituals in the name of whiteness and as reiterating white superiority in manifold ways.

The four axes of resonance will guide the analytical access to how this kind of self–world relation was shaped in these violent rituals of whiteness. First, with regard to the *social dimension* of resonance, the project will explore how terror lynchings created resonance among the crowd of participants, often numbering in the hundreds and even thousands. First person narratives and different kinds of reports on specific lynchings will serve as sources. As Grace Hale (1998) has argued in her study on the culture of segregation in the South, it was not the least the media reporting on lynchings that shaped a community in the wake of whiteness and unfolded a performative dimension of racial violence.

Second, with regard to the *material dimension* of resonance, the project may focus on a number of artifacts that played important roles in a lynching. Pieces of the rope, the tree, the makeshift gallows, or the body of the lynching victim were sought-for pieces of a material culture connecting those in possession of them to the power of whiteness and its seeming inevitability. Also, the widely circulating lynching photographs and postcards were part of this specific material culture of whiteness (Allen 2000; Apel 2004; Wood 2009).

Third, in a *transcendent dimension* lynching rituals and the whole lynching culture were meant to reaffirm a higher, encompassing, divinely ordained order of race and whiteness, which was perceived as being severely threatened with the end of slavery and in Reconstruction. It is important to note that after the end of slavery the need for rituals of race and racial hierarchy was perceived as more urgent than ever before among white Southerners. Therefore, these violent rituals produced a particularly powerful racial resonance.

Fourth, the project will explore how participating at lynching rituals contributed to a *self-understanding and subject formation* as white and therefore superior. Here, again, first person narratives of lynchings are most important sources, such as notes on the back of lynching postcards.

Finally, it is important to note that lynching rituals also had the potential to trigger resonant experiences among African Americans, and thus contribute to the shaping of a black 'counter agency'. For instance, the knuckles of lynching victim Sam Hose on display in a grocery store window on Mitchell Street in Atlanta, GA, materialised a shared experience of a subordinate black existence in a white world in the post-Reconstruction South. They energised a shared black self-perception and resistance to racial violence. Another example are how lynching photographs produced a different type of resonance among an African-American readership when reproduced in the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio 2009. 'What Is an Apparatus?' In: Agamben, Giorgio, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*. Stanford, CA. 1-24.
- Allen, James 2000. *Without Sanctuary. Lynching Photography in America*. Santa Fe, NM.
- Berg, Manfred 2011. *Popular Justice. A History of Lynching in America*. Chicago.
- Apel, Dora 2004. *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*. New Brunswick, NJ.
- Dean, Mitchell 2013. *The Signature of Power: Sovereignty, Governmentality and Biopolitics*. London.
- Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America. Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd ed. 2017, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/> (March 30, 2020).
- Hale, Grace E. 1998. *Making Whiteness. The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York.
- Martschukat, Jürgen 2007. "His Chief Sin is Being a Negro. Next He Whipped a White Man. Next He Married a White Woman": Sport, Rassismus und die (In)Stabilität von Grenzziehungen in den USA um 1900', in: *Historische Anthropologie* 15. 259-280.
- Tolnay, Stewart E.; Beck E.M. 1992. *A Festival of Violence. An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*. Urbana, IL.
- Weed, Eric 2017. *The Religion of White Supremacy in the United States*. Lanham, MD.
- Wood, Amy Louise 2009. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*. Chapel Hill, NC.

#