Panel: “United States As a Work in Progress”

Brittney Pearson Kattau

Title: “Lynching and the Racial Oppression of Black America”
Faculty Advisor: Dr. David Schuster

Brittney Kattau was born and raised in Marion, Indiana, but currently resides in Huntington. She has been a hair stylist for six years and spends her summers as a wine steward at Two-EE’s Winery in Roanoke. She is a Social Studies Education major and is currently completing my student teaching at South Side High School. She was the recipient of the Ron Venderly Education Scholarship for 2015-2016, and will be graduating in May Summa Cum Laude. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, playing with her dogs, and discussing politics.

Abstract

This paper examines the racial oppression of Black Americans through the acts of White lynch mobs. Lynching reached its pinnacle by the early 1890s, during the days of Jim Crow, carried out by the Ku Klux Klan and other White supremacist individuals and groups. It was part of a complex public sphere in which Black people lived constantly with the fear that any arbitrary action or chance encounter with a White man could result in a death sentence. Lynching is one of the most public and physical manifestations of White racism, often attracting crowds of Whites, dressed in their Sunday best, to observe the violent spectacle. More than 700 lynchings happened between 1890 and 1895, not only influencing the culture of that time, assuring the public sphere would always be a dangerous and threatening space for Black people, but also continuing to shape our present reality, both through cultural references and modern manifestations such as mass incarceration and police violence. This paper seeks to highlight the grotesque and haunting nature of lynching - the Black bodies swinging - in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It also seeks to draw cultural and social parallels between the complex public sphere of that time period and that which exists today. At its core it begs the question, “Did overt and physical manifestations of racial oppression end with the days of lynching, or have they simply taken another form in today’s world?” Though lynching was, perhaps, more overt than today’s insidious forms of racial violence and oppression, one is certainly not more damaging to the spirit of Black Americans than the other. One thing is certain, racial oppression did not end in America with the depraved act of lynching or Billie Holiday’s haunting words about the blood on the leaves.

Bibliographical Note

I examined a number of different sources for this paper but my focus was on primary documents. I focused on newspaper articles, pictures, poems and op-eds from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I also incorporated a small number of modern day songs, magazine articles, and various news broadcasts/interviews.