

# Black Women, White Terror

The value of discussing racial violence through the  
female African-American perspective

Bachelor Thesis

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## Abstract

In this thesis I explore the particular value of discussing lynching and racial violence through the female African-American perspective. I argue that this perspective is often ignored, but could shed valuable new light on our understanding and discussions of both lynching and contemporary racial violence. After giving a general impression of the history of lynching and the way that it affected the lives of African-American women, I perform a close reading of the script of *A Sunday Morning in the South*. This is a one-act theatrical piece, which illustrates the experience of an unjust lynching through the perspective of an African-American woman. The play was written by Georgia Douglas Johnson, an influential African-American anti-lynching playwright. In my close reading of *A Sunday Morning in the South* I show how Johnson in this play refutes racist stereotypes and challenges the practice and discourse of lynching. I argue that she has applied the female African-American perspective of lynching as a valuable way to illuminate the effects of lynching on African-American women and families, demonstrate the humanity of African-Americans, and appeal to the empathy of the public. Furthermore, I suggest that Johnson's application of the female African-American perspective in *A Sunday Morning in the South* could also be useful in understanding and interpreting contemporary racial violence, by discussing three recent murders on African-American men and exploring the similarities that they share with the particular lynching in *A Sunday Morning in the South*. I then describe how these murders are generally discussed, and suggest that a larger focus on the female African-American experience of racial violence might allow for a more humane understanding of the impact of police killings of African-American men and help to illuminate the grave consequences and complexities of contemporary racial violence.

## Introduction

Georgia Douglas Johnson, who lived from 1877 until 1966, was one of the earliest African-American female playwrights.<sup>1</sup> Along with several other black female writers, she participated in the American theatre's protest against lynching.<sup>2</sup> Lynching, generally considered to mean the extrajudicial murder of a person by a mob,<sup>3</sup> started in the late nineteenth century and continued to afflict African Americans throughout the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Many Americans at that time refused to acknowledge that lynching was a problem and that the common justification for it – that lynching was as a necessary punishment for black men who raped white women – was false.<sup>5</sup> In several of her plays Johnson explored the ways that lynching affected African-American women by drawing from her own experience.<sup>6</sup> Writing (critically) about lynching was controversial, as is evidenced by the fact that, unlike her plays on non-lynching themes, none of Johnson's lynching dramas were published or performed during her lifetime.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, historian Judith Louise Stephens has argued that she was nevertheless an influential and central figure within the anti-lynching movement.<sup>8</sup>

I believe that Georgia Douglas Johnson, as an influential and prolific anti-lynching playwright, merits attention. She has not been given much consideration within academic research on African-American anti-lynching activism, which has primarily focused on activists such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Ida B. Wells, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>9</sup> However, I believe that Johnson's lynching dramas are an interesting and well-written form of anti-lynching protest that deserves further research. Johnson was one of the first and few who paid attention to the position of African-American women within the lynching narrative. Even those authors who

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia Douglas Camp Johnson and Judith Louise Stephens, *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia A. Young, "Acts of Terrorism, or, Violence on A Sunday Morning in the South," *MELUS* 26, no. 4 (2001): 25.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Young, "Acts of Terrorism," 25.

<sup>5</sup> Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: a Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Kathy A. Perkins and Judith Louise Stephens, *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 99.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, 99.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Louise Stephens, "Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson's Lynching Plays," *African American Review* 39, no. 1 (2005): 87-102.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

studied lynching specifically in relation to gender, such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, have failed to consider the female African-American experience of lynching.<sup>10</sup> Lynching research has predominantly focused on African-American men, because they were the primary targets of lynching and constituted the majority of lynching victims.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the stories and position of black women have been continually omitted from the lynching narrative by the academic community.<sup>12</sup> I believe this is problematic, because it distorts our view of lynching and diminishes the importance of female African-American history in general.

In this thesis I want to explore the particular value of discussing lynching and racial violence through the female African-American perspective by looking at how Georgia Douglas Johnson used this perspective in one of her lynching dramas. I believe Johnson's work provides a suitable case study, because she was one of the first and few who applied such an approach in her discussion of lynching and played a significant role within the anti-lynching movement. By doing a close reading of the script of one of her plays, I hope to demonstrate how Johnson usefully applied the female African-American perspective to challenge the practice and discourse of lynching. Furthermore, I want to suggest that Johnson's approach in this drama could offer new insights in discussions about contemporary incidents of racial violence, such as the recent murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, since these murders are (much like lynching were) generally accepted as a reaction to the supposedly violent nature of black men. As the experiences of black women are still usually left out of the discussion of these cases, I argue that Johnson's application of the female African-American perspective could be a valuable approach to help us better understand the complexity and injustice of contemporary racial violence.

As my case study I have chosen Johnson's lynching drama *A Sunday Morning in the South*, written in 1925.<sup>13</sup> This play demonstratively applies the female African-American experience of lynching as a tool to understand and expose the injustice and devastating effects of lynching. It tells the story of an elderly black grandmother, Sue Jones, whose grandson is lynched for supposedly raping a white girl, even though he was innocent of this crime. I have chosen this play because it is Johnson's first and most famous lynching drama and provides

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<sup>10</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Evelyn M. Simien, *Gender and Lynching: The Politics of Memory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Sandy Alexandre, "From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*," *Signs* 36, no. 4 (2011): 915.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson and Stephens, *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, 139-153.

her most tightly structured discussion of lynching.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, *A Sunday Morning in the South* is a one-act theatrical piece that comprises only approximately three written pages, which makes it a suitable case study for a thesis of this scope.

Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* has already received some scholarly attention, for example by George Hutchinson,<sup>15</sup> Judith Louise Stephens<sup>16</sup> and Emmanuel S. Nelson.<sup>17</sup> However, not many authors have focused in detail on *A Sunday Morning in the South*. Their works generally provide a rather short discussion of this drama and relate it to Johnson's other plays or to the work of other playwrights. There are some scholars who have discussed this particular play more thoroughly, such as Patricia A. Young, who has focused on the representation of motherhood,<sup>18</sup> and Judith L. Stephens, who has focused on art, activism, and uncompromising attitude in Johnson's lynching plays.<sup>19</sup> However, not much has been written about the particular value of Johnson's application of the female African-American perspective. I believe this is an interesting and important aspect of *A Sunday Morning in the South* that merits further attention.

The main question I set out to answer in this thesis is *what is the particular value of discussing lynching and racial violence through the female African-American perspective?* I will be answering this question with the help of three sub-questions, (1) What was lynching and how did it affect African-American women? (2) How was the application of the female African-American perspective in *A Sunday Morning in the South* a valuable way for Georgia Douglas Johnson to discuss and protest against lynching? (3) How might Georgia Douglas Johnson's application of the female African-American perspective in *A Sunday Morning in the South* shed new light on contemporary discussions of racial violence? Each of these questions will be answered in separate chapters. Thus, the first chapter will be devoted to a short but adequate history of lynching which focuses in particular on the female African-American position and experience, in order to help the reader understand and identify the issues that are addressed in the following chapters. The second chapter will consist of my close reading of *A Sunday Morning in the South*, focusing in particular on Johnson's use of the female African-American experience. In the third chapter I will be discussing how

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<sup>14</sup> Perkins and Stephens, *Strange Fruit*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> George Hutchinson, *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Judith Louise Stephens, "Anti-Lynch Plays by African American Women: Race, Gender, and Social Protest in American Drama," *African American Review* 26, no. 2 (1992): 329-339.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel S. Nelson, *African American Dramatists: An A-to-Z Guide: An A-to-Z Guide* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Young, "Acts of Terrorism," 25-39.

<sup>19</sup> Stephens, "Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude," 87-102.

Johnson's approach in *A Sunday Morning in the South* could shed new light on discussions of contemporary racial violence. The answer to my main question will be discussed and shortly reflected on in the conclusion.

My method for answering the first sub-question consists of historical research. In the second chapter, comprising my close reading, I will give a description of both the narrative and characters and quote relevant or interesting passages, which I will provide with my own analysis and interpretation. I have chosen to discuss the script in a chronological order, because I believe this will be the best and most logical way to make clear both my argument and the narrative of the play. In the third chapter I will attempt to show that Johnson's discussion of lynching might also be useful in understanding and interpreting contemporary racial violence, by discussing three recent interracial murders, those of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and exploring the similarities that they share with the particular lynching in *A Sunday Morning in the South*. I will then describe how these murders are generally discussed, and suggest how Johnson's approach in *A Sunday Morning in the South* could help shed new light on these discussions. Since the cases I discuss happened such a short while ago, there does not yet exist much academic research on them. Therefore, I have chosen to gather my information from reliable newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. For the rest of my research I will be studying a collection of the leading historical works on lynching. These include texts written by authors such as Ashraf H.A. Rushdy,<sup>20</sup> Amy Louise Wood,<sup>21</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale,<sup>22</sup> and W. Fitzhugh Brundage.<sup>23</sup> I am aware that the sources I will be using are not exhaustive. However, as these are some of the leading works on lynching, I believe that they will provide me with sufficient knowledge to perform my research.

This essay has both academic and social value. It has academic value in that it adds to an understanding of how Georgia Douglas Johnson protested against lynching and highlights her value within the anti-lynching movement. Moreover, it suggests that discussions of past and present racial violence could be enhanced by incorporating the female African-American perspective. Furthermore, it illuminates the ways in which African-American women experienced and protested against lynching, thereby drawing attention to the largely neglected

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<sup>20</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

history of female African Americans. Thus, an analysis of *A Sunday Morning in the South* is both useful and relevant.



## Lynching and its significance for African-American women

For most people, the term lynching brings to mind images of lifeless, mutilated black bodies hanging from a tree and surrounded by a large and eager white crowd.<sup>24</sup> However, the precise definition of lynching has long been contested, due to ambiguity over what kinds of racial violence might or might not be labelled as lynching.<sup>25</sup> In response to this discussion, historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage has offered a definition that attempts identify the common elements in all variations of lynching.

Mobs, on the pretext of punishing an alleged lawbreaker or violator of local customs, summarily executed their victims with little if any regard for proof of guilt or evidence of innocence. Lynchings of blacks had a two-fold nature: not only were they intended to enforce social conformity and to punish an individual, but they also were a means of racial expression. And a degree of community approval and complicity, whether expressed in popular acclaim for the mob's actions or in the failure of law officers to prevent lynchings or to prosecute lynchings, was present in most lynchings.<sup>26</sup>

In this thesis I will be conforming to this definition of lynching, because it is the most comprehensive one I have come across.

Lynching reached a peak between 1880 and 1930, in what is often called the “age of lynching,” and continued to affect African-American lives well into the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> Although lynching was a peculiarly Southern phenomenon, it was commonly practiced throughout the United States.<sup>28</sup> In total, more than 4,700 recorded deaths have been the result of lynching.<sup>29</sup> The actual number of victims is expected to be much higher however, as many lynchings went unreported.<sup>30</sup> Lynching was primarily targeted towards African-American men, although African-American women died at the hands of lynch mobs as well. Historian Crystal Nicole Feimster has shown that at least 130 African-American women were lynched

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<sup>24</sup> Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>25</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Rushdy, *American Lynching*, 58-59.

<sup>28</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, NY: A.A. Knopf, 1941), 43.

<sup>29</sup> John B. Hatch, *Race and Reconciliation: Redressing Wounds of Injustice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 321.

<sup>30</sup> Robert L. Zangrando, “About Lynching,” in *The Reader’s Companion to American History*, ed. Eric Foner and John A. Garraty (New York, NY: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991), 684-686.

between 1880 and 1930.<sup>31</sup> The reasons for their lynchings range from accusations of murder, arson, theft, poisoning, and miscegenation, to being lynched because of their husband's wrongdoings or simply "to be taught a lesson."<sup>32</sup>

Lynching was a particularly disturbing method for the white community to maintain traditional racial and sexual hierarchies. Through violence and terror, lynch mobs attempted to keep the black community in its "rightful" place.<sup>33</sup> Compared to other forms of racial violence towards black people, such as personal assault or rape, lynching was a relatively rare occurrence.<sup>34</sup> However, the symbolic impact of lynching as a form of racial terror caused an overwhelming and widespread fear within the black community.<sup>35</sup> According to historian Amy Louise Wood, the spectacle of lynching, with its ritualized executions and public nature, is what made it such a powerful tool of oppression.<sup>36</sup> Lynching victims were often chased, dragged, tortured, castrated, hung, burned, and repeatedly shot.<sup>37</sup> Lynching events were sometimes announced in newspapers, and white crowds would travel from far to attend these violent spectacles. Afterwards, they might bring home rather macabre souvenirs, such as postcards and photographs of the lynching, or pieces of flesh, fingers, and toes of the dead victim.<sup>38</sup>

The common justification for lynching was that it functioned as a necessary punishment for black men who raped white women.<sup>39</sup> This justification was flawed, since only one third of lynched African-American men were accused of rape, and more often than not these accusations were false.<sup>40</sup> In reality, black men were being lynched for a variety of reasons, ranging from murder and theft, to petty crimes, to simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the rape myth was widely accepted by the American media and

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<sup>31</sup> Cristal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 235-240.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup> Abby L. Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 39.

<sup>34</sup> Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 221.

<sup>38</sup> Evelyn M. Simien, *Gender and Lynching*. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Rushdy, *American Lynching*, 103.

<sup>40</sup> Paula J. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (London: Harper Collins, 2009), 24.

<sup>41</sup> Amii Larkin Barnard, "The Application of Critical Race Feminism to the Anti-Lynching Movement: Black Women's Fight against Race and Gender Ideology, 1892-1920," *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 3, no. 1 (1993): 7, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1kc308xf>.

public and few sought to question it.<sup>42</sup> Through constant and confident repetition, the image of the “black beast rapist” became ingrained in the American consciousness.<sup>43</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage pointed out that this myth was particularly useful to justify lynchings, since “loose definitions of sexual assault provided a convenient pretext to lynch black men for offensive behaviour that even white southerners could not construe as a sexual threat.”<sup>44</sup> White people did not need to substantiate their accusations, because blacks generally did not receive any legal trial.<sup>45</sup> Even if they were allowed to defend themselves, they were not likely to be acquitted unless a white person vouched for them. Still, legal outcomes usually did nothing to prevent angry white mobs from killing a black man, since they could do so without any legal consequences.<sup>46</sup>

The dominant ideology of white male supremacy during the lynching era placed African-American women at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as they were subjugated because of their race as well as their gender. This ideology rationalized the mistreatment and oppression of the black community, and of black women in particular.<sup>47</sup> This made black women especially vulnerable. While lynching was cloaked in chivalrous notions of protecting women, African-American women had been relegated to a position outside the ideological construction of womanhood.<sup>48</sup> The rape of a black woman was therefore not considered a serious offense and despite the frequency of this crime, no man – black or white – was ever lynched for it.<sup>49</sup> Black women were burdened with a stereotype that painted them as lecherous and immoral creatures who seduced the white men that raped them. Additionally, the rape myth implied that African-American women were essentially accountable for the rape of white women as well, as they failed to provide an image of respectable womanhood for men of their own race and could not keep their black husbands in check.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, the gendered racism of lynching ideology that facilitated the exploitation of black women is often overlooked by the academic community.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Lewis and Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*, 106.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Rushdy, *American Lynching*, 86-87.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> Barnard, “The Application of Critical Race Feminism,” 1-2.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis and Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*, 229.

<sup>49</sup> Angela D. Sims, *Ethical Complications of Lynching: Ida B. Wells's Interrogation of American Terror* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 56.

<sup>50</sup> Ferber, *White Man Falling*, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Barnard, “The Application of Critical Race Feminism,” 3.

The low political and social position of African-American women enabled them to recognize lynching as a system of racial and sexual oppression, as their experience led them to reveal and reject the myths and stereotypes of lynching ideology.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising then, that the pioneer of the American anti-lynching movement, Ida. B. Wells, was an African-American woman. Through personal experience, extensive journalistic research, and powerful rhetoric capabilities, Wells was able to argue a powerful and influential case against lynching.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, black women were prominently involved in associations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which both played an instrumental role in the movement against lynching.<sup>54</sup> Thus, African-American women were not only victims of lynching, their unique position and experience also made them powerful agents within the anti-lynching movement.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>53</sup> Sims, *Ethical Complications of Lynching*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> Brent Campney, "Review," *Contemporary Sociology* 34, no. 5 (2005): 495.

### ***Analysis of A Sunday Morning in the South***

Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* takes place in 1924, in the homely kitchen of a Southern black family. Sue Jones, an elderly black grandmother, is the main character of the play, even though the plot revolves around the lynching of her grandson Tom. She is a caring, matronly, and sturdy lady who "wears a red bandanna handkerchief on her grey head, a big blue gingham apron tied around her waist, and big wide old lady comfort shoes." Sue limps a little because of a sore leg, and uses a stick to help her walk. She spends her time going to church and taking care of her two grandsons, nineteen-year-old Tom and seven-year-old Bossie. She is presented as a hard-working and virtuous old woman, who is both caring and strict towards her grandchildren, hoping to raise them with good moral.

Through the character of Sue, Johnson counters negative stereotypes of black people. Johnson offers a look into the life of an African American woman and her family during a time when lynching was common practice in America and when black men and women were at a constant threat of being abused or even murdered by the white community. The familial environment and the kind character of Sue are juxtaposed against the harsh reality of life under white rule, which serves to underline the humanity of black people. The black characters in *A Sunday Morning in the South* are not portrayed as the brute, uncivilized and sexually immoral people that they were commonly made out to be by white Americans. Instead, they are portrayed as hardworking, charitable citizens and members of a loving and typical black family.

From the opening scene of the play, Sue is presented as a caring and authoritative woman, who has raised the men in her family to be righteous and upstanding. The play starts off with Sue setting the table and calling her two grandsons down for breakfast. Her authoritative and no-nonsense attitude as head of the household becomes apparent when she tells them they "better come on out ef [they] know whut's good for [them]." Tom is an upstanding boy with a good work ethic, as becomes clear through his remark upon hearing the church bells ringing: "I sho meant to git out to meeting this morning but my back still hurts me. Remember I told you last night how I sprained it lifting them heavy boxes for Mr. John?" Tom is apparently not only a decent Christian boy, but also does not mind helping out a friend or neighbour with some heavy work. He was so tired after helping Mr. John that when Sue asked him to run and errand for her at eight o'clock he was already "sleeping like a log of wood." Tom's younger brother Bossie shows that he is not shy of hard work either, when he tells his grandmother that he "gointer be a preacher." The good characters of Tom and Bossie are important to be

mentioned here, because they are testimony to the commendable way that Sue has raised them. She has obviously installed them with good morals, kindness and ambition. Johnson thus shows that black women could be responsible, caring and able heads of households.

The topic of lynching is introduced to the audience within this loving family setting. During breakfast a fifty-year-old black woman named Liza drops by on her way to church and is hospitably offered a cup of coffee by her friend Sue. With the sound of “Amazing Grace” being sung in church in the background, Liza starts telling about how she saw the police

trying to run down some po Nigger they say that’s tacked a white woman last night right up here near the Pine Street market. They says as how the white folks is shonuff mad too, and if they ketch him they gointer make short work of him.

This is the first time that the familial atmosphere, enhanced by the singing of the church choir, is disturbed. With this anecdote Johnson shows how lynching was an imminent threat within the black community, which not only affected the black men who were targeted by this form of mob violence, but also the mothers, friends and family members who love them. Furthermore, the singing of “Amazing Grace” deserves to be mentioned. This hymn, which speaks about overcoming injustice and finding peace in heaven, reflects the hardships of the African-American characters and presents them as righteous Christian people.

Liza’s story prompts a discussion about the (in)justice of lynching. Sue comments that she “bleves in meting out punishment to the guilty but they fust ought to fine out who done it tho and then let the law hanel ’em”, showing both righteousness and a (as it turns out, unjustified) belief in the equality of the law. The other characters are more sceptical about the justice of the law system. Liza remarks that sometimes the police “gits the wrong man and goes and strings him up”, since “the white uns been knowed to blackin they faces and make you bleve some po Nigger done it.” Tom adds that “they lynch you bout anything too, not jest women. They say Zeb Brooks was strung up because he and his boss had er argiment.” This dialogue merits attention because it provides an accurate description of the corruption of the law and the unfair, violent, and racist treatment of coloured people during the lynching era.

Through this discussion between the characters, Johnson discusses the problematic fact that lynched blacks were not only often wrongly accused, but that white people were also known to set them up. Moreover, she addresses the fact that the rape myth was a false justification, since black men were being lynched for anything that white people disapproved of, such as an argument with a superior. She has her characters discuss this matter, not with

outrage over the injustice of the legal system, but with a commendable rationality that highlights the characters' civility. Tom has not yet lost hope, and displays ambition and critical thinking when he shares that he means to "go to night school and git a little book learning so as [he] can do something to help — help change the laws . . . make em strong."

In the next scene, Johnson demonstrates how such a false accusation takes place and displays the difficulty for black families to go against the injustice of white supremacy. The family's dialogue is interrupted by a police officer who knocks on the door and then immediately enters the household, demanding to know whether Tom Griggs lives there. Everyone reacts puzzled and amazed, but Sue remains polite when she stammers "yes sir." The officer proceeds to roughly question Tom about his whereabouts the night before, and although everyone testifies that Tom has a solid alibi, the officer dismisses their argument and tells them to "shut up" because their "word's nothing." He proceeds to pull a note out of his pocket and starts reading a description: "Age around twenty, five feet five or six, brown skin..." Then a second officer comes in, supporting a trepid white young woman on his arm whom he asks whether this is the man that raped her. The scared girl hesitatingly affirms, but adds that she is unsure. The officers tell her to "take a good look, Miss. He fits our description perfect. Color, size, age, everything. Pine Street Market ain't no where from here, and he surely did pass that way last night. He was there all right, all right! We got it figgered all out." Sue panics when she realizes what is awaiting her beloved grandson and tells the officers "You can't rest him; he don't know no mo bout that po little white chile than I do — You can't take him!" Her objections are met with insults like "keep quiet, old woman" and "keep cool, Grannie." The officers proceed to arrest Tom, who, "utterly bewildered", tells his grandmother that he will go along with them and explain that he is innocent.

This scene reveals much about the dynamics of lynching. The white officers are intent on finding a "nigger" to arrest, supposedly in order to protect the virtue of white womanhood. They will not see Tom for anything else than a rapist and dismiss all protest by Sue, Liza and Bossie, whose word "is nothing." Apparently, both the lives and words of black people are worthless. Importantly, although it is clear that the white woman is scared and reluctant to accuse Tom, her acquiescence turns her from being just a victim into being a perpetrator. Her actions illuminate how white women were often complicit in the lynching of black men, even if they did not want to be. Sue addresses the white woman's ignorance when she points out that "all Niggers looks alike to her [...] she don't know whut she's saying." Furthermore, Johnson refuses to let Tom become the stereotypical aggressive black men that the officers believe him to be, and instead has him remain compliant and somewhat hopeful. Lastly, Sue's

role as main character functions to compel the reader/audience to sympathize with the rarely mentioned position and experience of African American women, who stand powerless as their loved ones face imminent violence or even death and their families are ripped apart, all the while they are forced to deal with rude treatment and contempt.

Johnson goes on to illustrate the brutality of “civilized” white men, which often had a complete disregard and disrespect for black lives. Shortly after the arrest Sue’s friend Matilda, a fifty-year-old African American woman, comes in to warn Sue that she saw Tom and heard the police say that “they want gointer be cheated outen they Nigger this time.” Sue, “tense” and “shaking”, shows resourcefulness in a difficult and horrible situation and suggests that Matilda asks Miss Vilet and her father, the town judge, for help. Sue knows this family because she spent years working for them as a nurse and a maid. This fact might also suggest that her worn out, aged body is the result of years of dedicated work for the benefit of white people. Sue displays her respect for the white family when she says that Miss Vilet is “a good chile” who is sure to save Tom. Sue becomes frantic as Liza tries to calm her down. They both call upon God for help and sing prayers, emphasizing the helplessness and good Christian faith of the women. Their helpless situation evokes sympathy and their prayers oppose the image of black women as immoral and uncivilized beings.

The characters of Liza and Matilda prove themselves to be compassionate and helpful friends. Liza continues to comfort Sue, who is rocking “back and forth in [her] chair, head buried in her apron.” After some time Matilda comes back, “all excited and panting while Bossie follows her crying.” “It want no use”, she tells them, “they — they done lynched him.” Considering the biased legal system of the lynching era, it should be no surprise to the reader/audience that Tom has been murdered. Upon hearing the news, Sue screams “Jesus!”, gasps, and falls limp in her chair. The stage directions indicate that Tom’s lynching occasioned the death of his devoted grandmother as well: “Singing from church begins. Bossie runs to [Sue], crying afresh. Liza puts the camphor bottle to her nose again as Matilda feels her heart; they work over her a few minutes, shake their heads and with drooping shoulders, wring their hands.” As the play comes to an end, a song pours forth from the church: “Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy over me,” suggesting that black people are just as deserving of God’s grace as white people are.

By choosing Sue as the main character of the play, Georgia Douglas Johnson lets the reader/audience experience lynching through the eyes of an African American woman. This is a noteworthy strategy, as the position of African American women is often overlooked in the discussion about lynching. In *A Sunday Morning in the South* Johnson reveals the distinct



struggles that black women experienced during the lynching era in the South. She shows that their experience deserves attention because, although they might not have been the primary targets of lynching, their lives were significantly affected by this phenomenon. They were the victims of racist discourse and treatment and had to fear both for themselves and their loved ones, which they were often unable to save because their words and testimonies were deemed worthless. The reader/audience is compelled to sympathise with Sue, generating both awareness and compassion for the experience of black women.

Furthermore, in *A Sunday Morning in the South* Johnson illuminates and challenges the practice and discourse of lynching. She addresses a number of common themes in lynching practices, such as the rape myth, the false accusations of blacks, and their lack of legal protection. However, she presents lynching not as a celebrated victory of white over black, but as a cruel and barbarous injustice that kills innocent young men and tears apart decent black families. Johnson tells the story of lynching as one where white men are not chivalrous saviours, but corrupt, prejudiced, and bloodthirsty murderers; where white women are not just pitied victims, but complicit lynchers. These unsympathetic white characters are juxtaposed with strong, virtuous, religious, law-abiding, and compassionate black characters that defy any negative black stereotype. Additionally, the use of colloquial language in *A Sunday Morning in the South* merits attention, because it emphasizes Johnson's effort in creating a genuine representation of African Americans and shows that it were ordinary black people who were affected by lynching.

In conclusion, Johnson has applied the female African-American experience in *A Sunday Morning in the South* as a valuable way to discuss and protest against lynching. She countered racist black stereotypes by portraying her black characters as kind, moral and hardworking people. Furthermore, she challenged the practice and discourse of lynching by showing its injustice, barbarity, and false implications. However, I believe that the main value of Johnson's approach in *A Sunday Morning in the South* – showing lynching through the female African-American perspective – is that it allowed her to illuminate the devastating effects of lynching on African-American women and families, highlight the humanity of African-Americans, appeal to the empathy of the public, and add complexity to the lynching narrative.

### **The contemporary value of *A Sunday Morning in the South***

As discussed in the previous chapter, Georgia Douglas Johnson's focus on the female African-American perspective of lynching provided a valuable way for her to discuss and protest against the practice and discourse of lynching. This perspective allowed her to demonstrate the consequences of racial prejudice and violence not only for African-American men, but also for African-American women and their families. Moreover, her approach highlighted the humanity of lynching victims and the black community in general. I believe that Johnson's approach – paying attention to the female African-American experience within the discussion of racial violence – could provide a useful way to understand and discuss recent murders of African-American men. In order to substantiate this statement, I will first examine the main similarities between the play and three infamous contemporary cases that caused widespread commotion and protest: the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Then, I will describe how these murders are generally discussed, and suggest how Johnson's approach in *A Sunday Morning in the South* could help shed new light on these discussions.

Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African-American boy was killed in 2012 by a white policeman named George Zimmerman.<sup>55</sup> Zimmerman thought that Martin looked suspicious and decided to follow him, despite being told not to by his superiors.<sup>56</sup> After a short struggle between the men, Martin, who was unarmed, was shot dead. Zimmerman stated that he acted out of self-defence because he felt threatened.<sup>57</sup> Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old African-American boy, was shot dead by a white policeman in Ferguson in 2014.<sup>58</sup> Officer Darren Wilson arrived after being informed that Brown had stolen several packages of cigarillos from a local store. A struggle ensued between Wilson and Brown, after which the officer shot and killed the unarmed boy.<sup>59</sup> Eric Garner, an adult African-American man, died in 2014 after a white officer named Daniel Pantaleo held him in chokehold, a method that is

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<sup>55</sup> Cynthia Lee, "Making Race Salient: Trayvon Martin and Implicit Bias in a not yet Post-racial Society," *North Carolina Law Review* 91, no. 5 (2013): 103.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 104.

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Capeheart, "'Hands up, don't shoot' was built on a lie," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/03/16/lesson-learned-from-the-shooting-of-michael-brown/>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

prohibited by the New York City Police Department.<sup>60</sup> Garner was approached on suspicion of illicitly selling “loosies” (single cigarettes). Despite telling the police that this was untrue and that he was tired of being harassed, Garner was forcefully put to the ground. After repeatedly saying “I can’t breathe”, Garner lost consciousness and was later found to be dead.<sup>61</sup> None of the policemen that committed these murders faced any charges or legal consequences.<sup>62</sup>

The three murder cases of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner bare striking similarities with the particular lynching described in *A Sunday Morning in the South*. In each case, the supposed threat of innocent black men lead to their execution by a white authoritative figure. Similar to Sue’s grandson, these men were shot because the stereotype of black men as violent, criminal and aggressive made the officers perceive them as a threat. Furthermore, none of the police officers was accused of murder or faced charges by the American law system, even though the innocence of the victims was proven after the fact. Although Johnson does not discuss what happened after Tom was lynched, a short look at the history of lynching in chapter one suggests that the officers in the play were most likely never prosecuted for their actions. Thus, like the lynching of the fictional Tom, the murders of Martin, Brown and Garner are generally accepted by the officers, the American legal court and the public, as a reaction to the supposedly violent and criminal nature of African-American men. Meanwhile, the victims’ families suffer without getting justice for the murders of their loved ones.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Al Baker, J. David Goodman and Benjamin Mueller, “Beyond the Chokehold: The Path to Eric Garner’s Death,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/nyregion/eric-garner-police-chokehold-staten-island.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>62</sup> Monica Davey and Julie Bosman, “Protests Flare After Ferguson Police Officer Is Not Indicted,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/25/us/ferguson-darren-wilson-shooting-michael-brown-grand-jury.html>; Erik Eckholm and Matt Apuzzo, “Darren Wilson Is Cleared of Rights Violations in Ferguson Shooting,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/us/darren-wilson-is-cleared-of-rights-violations-in-ferguson-shooting.html>; J. David Goodman and Al Baker, “Wave of Protests After Grand Jury Doesn’t Indict Officer in Eric Garner Chokehold Case,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/nyregion/grand-jury-said-to-bring-no-charges-in-staten-island-chokehold-death-of-eric-garner.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Berman, “Michael Brown’s family: ‘We are saddened’ by DOJ decision not to charge officer,” *Washington Post*, Marc 4, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/03/04/michael-browns-family-we-are-saddened-by-doj-decision-not-to-charge-officer/>.

The (social) media discussions about these murders typically revolve around the general division of right and wrong in each case.<sup>64</sup> Newspaper reports mainly present the facts of what happened and discuss whether the actions that were undertaken can be considered justifiable or not.<sup>65</sup> In the few appearances that the mothers of Martin, Brown and Garner have made in the media, they conveyed the emotional impact that the murders of their sons have brought about, and argued that these murders were racist and unjustified.<sup>66</sup> Their stories reveal that these incidents have had a significant impact on the victims' mothers and families, but this is still largely left out of the discussion of these murders. I believe that their stories should be given more attention, because the experiences and responses of these mothers could help to create empathy for the devastating impact and human injustice of similar murders in much the same way as Georgia Douglas Johnson used Sue's experience and response to the lynching of Tom in *A Sunday Morning in the South* to protest against lynching.

Conclusively, the murders of Martin, Brown and Garner bare important similarities with the particular lynching in *A Sunday Morning in the South*, which suggests that the discussion of lynching in this play could provide a useful way to interpret contemporary cases of murders on African-American men. Furthermore, instead of focussing on the general division of right and wrong in these situations, a larger focus on the female African-American experience of racial violence might allow for a more humane understanding of the impacts of police killings of African-American men and help to illuminate the grave consequences of complexities of contemporary racial violence.

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<sup>64</sup> Sandhya Somashekhar and Kimbriell Kelly, "Was Michael Brown surrendering or advancing to attack Officer Darren Wilson?" *Washington Post*, November 29, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2014/11/29/b99ef7a8-75d3-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2014/11/29/b99ef7a8-75d3-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b_story.html); Rachel Quigly, "This case is not about race, it's about right and wrong," *Daily Mail Online*, July 12, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2361931/George-Zimmerman-trial-Defense-begin-closing-arguments.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Larry Buchanan e.a., "What Happened in Ferguson?" *New York Times*, November 25, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Gwen Carr, "Mother of Eric Garner: The Recurring Nightmare of My Son's Death," (blog), posted April 18, 2015, accessed June 17, 2015, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/speak-freely/mother-eric-garner-recurring-nightmare-my-sons-death>; Brent McDonald, "Michael Brown's Mother, Stepfather React," *New York Times*, November 25, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000003254183/michael-browns-mother-reacts.html>; Jonathan Capehart, "Trayvon Martin's mother: My baby," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2013/02/25/trayvon-martins-mother-you-cant-justify-it/>.

## Conclusion

African-American women were affected by lynching in a significant way. Essentially, lynching was a particularly horrendous tool for the white community to oppress African Americans and keep traditional racial and sexual hierarchies in place. Lynching discourse placed black women at the bottom of the social hierarchy because of their race and gender, which made them especially vulnerable to violence and sexual abuse. Their low political and social position enabled African-American women to recognize lynching as a system of racial and sexual oppression, as their experience led them to reveal and reject racist myths and stereotypes.

Georgia Douglas Johnson used the female African-American experience of lynching as a valuable and effective way to protest against lynching. In her lynching drama *A Sunday Morning in the South* she illustrates the experience of a unjust lynching through the perspective of an African-American woman in order to refute racist stereotypes, challenge the practice and discourse of lynching, and demand attention for the effects of lynching on African-American women and their families. The impact of racial violence on African-American women thus becomes a way to demonstrate the humanity of African-Americans and appeal to the empathy of the public. As such, Johnson demonstrates how a focus on the female African-American experience of lynching can shed new light on our understanding of racial violence in the United States.

As I have argued in the third chapter, Johnson's particular approach to her protest against lynching could therefore offer a valuable framework to interpret and discuss contemporary racial violence as well. The particular lynching in *A Sunday Morning in the South* bears important similarities to recent murders of African-American men, such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner. These cases are often still accepted to be a reaction to the supposedly aggressive nature of black men. The discussion of these murders mainly focuses on blame and responsibility, while the impact of these murders on African-American women and the victims' families is largely left out. However, like Johnson demonstrated in *A Sunday Morning in the South*, a larger focus on the experience of the victims' mothers and families could help to emphasize the devastating impact of such murders and appeal to the empathy of the public, thereby shedding new light on the effects and complexities of contemporary racial violence.

To answer my main question, discussing lynching and contemporary racial violence through the female African-American perspective is valuable because it sheds new light on our understanding of racial violence. The female African-American perspective highlights the humanity of African-American men and women and reveals the impact of racial murders on the victims' families and the black community at large. In this way, the unique stories and experiences of African-American women might add to contemporary discussions about and protests against racial violence.

Due to the relatively small scope of this thesis, many of the points and arguments that I have made could be further elaborated. I especially want to suggest further research on the similarities between lynching and recent cases of racial violence. This has already been picked up by a small number of authors, but definitely requires more academic investigation.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, my suggestion that the application of the female African-American perspective could provide a useful approach in discussing and protesting racial violence remains in this thesis largely a suggestion. Whether this approach actually proves to be effective requires both time and further academic research.

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<sup>67</sup> Kevin Alexander Gray, Jeffrey St. Clair and JoAnn Wypijewski (ed.) *Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence* (Petrolia: Counterpunch, 2014); Sherrilyn A. Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

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