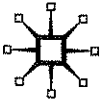


Gender and Lynching

The Politics of Memory

Evelyn M. Simien

palgrave
macmillan



GENDER AND LYNCHING
Copyright © Evelyn M. Simien 2011.

All rights reserved.

First published in 2011 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the World,
this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited,
registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills,
Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above
companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United
States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN: 978-0-230-11270-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gender and lynching : the politics of memory / edited by
Evelyn M. Simien.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-230-11270-4

1. Lynching—Sex differences—United States—History.
 2. African American women—Violence against—United States—History.
 3. Rape—United States—History. 4. Lynching in literature.
 5. Lynching in art. 6. Sexism—United States—History.
 7. Racism—United States—History. I. Simien, Evelyn M., 1974—
II. Title.
- HV6457.G46 2011
364.1'34—dc23
2011016902

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Integra Software Services

First edition: November 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

For my son, Roman Marcellus
I love you very much, unconditionally.

Contents

List of Figures	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Permissions	xiii
Introduction	1
<i>Evelyn M. Simien</i>	
1 Mary Turner, Hidden Memory, and Narrative Possibility <i>Julie Buckner Armstrong</i>	15
2 Sisters in Motherhood(?): The Politics of Race and Gender in Lynching Drama <i>Koritha Mitchell</i>	37
3 The Antislavery Roots of African American Women's Antilynching Literature, 1895–1920 <i>Barbara McCasstill</i>	61
4 “A Woman was Lynched the Other Day”: Memory, Gender, and the Limits of Traumatic Representation <i>Jennifer D. Williams</i>	81
5 The Politics of Sexuality in Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” <i>Fumiko Sakashita</i>	103
6 Gender, Race, and Public Space: Photography and Memory in the Massacre of East Saint Louis and <i>The Crisis Magazine</i> <i>Anne Rice</i>	131
Notes on Contributors	173
Index	175

CHAPTER 2

Sisters in Motherhood(?): The Politics of Race and Gender in Lynching Drama

Koritha Mitchell

The founding of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) was hailed as one of the most significant contributions to antilynching activism. Newspapers across the country commended the group's courage and grace,¹ and Black women (such as activist Nannie Burroughs) were pleased to see white women accept responsibility for changing public sentiment on mob violence. When considering the organization's November 1930 Resolution, it is no wonder that Burroughs later referred to the ASWPL as "the most effective organization now working. . . ."² ASWPL members declared, "Distressed by the recent upsurge of [sic] lynchings, and noting that people still condone such crimes on the grounds that they are necessary to the protection of womanhood, we, a group of white women representing eight southern states, desire publicly to repudiate and condemn such defense of lynching, and to put ourselves definitely on record as opposed to this crime in every form and under all circumstances." They continue, "We are profoundly convinced that lynching is not a defense of womanhood or of anything else; but rather a menace to private and public safety. . . ." ³ Indeed, founder Jessie Daniel Ames reported, "convinced by the consideration of the facts," these women resolved "no longer to remain silent" as the crime of lynching was "done in their name."⁴

In challenging conventional understandings of mob violence, these women built on the foundation laid by Black women activists. As historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall puts it, "For decades black women had filled the front ranks of the fight against lynching. . . . Together with black men, they had long sought the white southern support that . . . the ASWPL belatedly offered. Indeed, years of black struggle against lynching shaped the social and political climate that made the founding of the Anti-Lynching Association possible."⁵ For instance, Ida B. Wells had made it clear in the 1890s that lynching had little to do with the rape of white women and that mobs created the myth of the Black male rapist to paralyze Black men just as they were becoming a political force. Wells argued that this strategy was effective because the charge of rape immediately "placed [African Americans] beyond the pale of human sympathy," making pleas for justice on their behalf seem like "an excuse for their continued wrongs."⁶ Wells had also argued that a code of chivalry protecting white women while allowing for the rape and exploitation of Black women and girls was no chivalry at all. Equally important, she exposed the frequency with which southern men disrespected the white women teachers who had come south to educate freedmen and their children. That is, she identified the discourse of protection as a way of restricting white women's movement and dictating the scope of their activity.

While revising assumptions about what motivated the mob, Black women worked to awaken white women regarding their responsibility to oppose lynching and regarding the benefits of doing so. The ASWPL published pamphlets and otherwise educated the public to recognize that so-called chivalry simply restricted white women's freedom, but these ideas had been first articulated publicly by Black women in the nineteenth century. African American women had long been trying to pull white women into the fight against mob violence.

The ASWPL marked white women's willingness to shoulder the level of responsibility for ending lynching that their Black counterparts had been calling upon them to accept, so the group's efforts were in concert with those of Black women activists. The founding of the ASWPL in 1930 therefore provides an opportunity for thinking about Black and white women's cooperation in anti-lynching activism. Taking this opportunity does not mean that scholars will discover an "interracial" movement in the way modern readers might normally conceive of it, however. That is, it was not an example of Black and white women working side by side in any simple way. Firstly, the ASWPL emerged in 1930—decades after the initial height of mob violence in the 1890s and decades after

Wells and others had been working with a sense of urgency. Secondly, the ASWPL was expressly an organization for white women.⁷ As a result, unique approaches are required for examining the relationship between this important group and the Black women who had long hoped that white women would become their true allies.

Here, I consider the organization's emergence through the lens provided by Black-authored lynching plays. In other work, I have discussed lynching drama as an archive that offers insights not to be gleaned from the sources that scholars typically consult.⁸ If the ASWPL represents white women's willingness to join Black women in opposing lynching, it is significant that it took them decades to do so. Still, it seems that Black women never completely abandoned the hope of a true coalition with their white counterparts, and the unique genre of lynching drama offers a way of understanding the ebb and flow of that undying faith. I focus on two lynching plays by Black women: one that arose from the belief that white women would feel inspired to join the fight against lynching, and one written after white women had so fully accepted responsibility that they had formed an anti-lynching organization.

Written before and after the founding of the ASWPL, Angelina Weld Grimké's three-act drama *Rachel* and May Miller's one-act script *Nails and Thorns* illuminate Black women's understanding of lynching and their role as artist-activists as well as their assumptions about effective alliances. *Rachel* makes clear that Grimké viewed lynching as much a crime against Black families and households as against Black bodies. Because the homes devastated were so often those of upstanding individuals, not criminals, she seems to have felt a duty to break the silence caused by believing mainstream depictions of the race. As an artist-activist, she refused to be shamed into silence about the race's victimization; she did not accept the notion that opposing lynching was tantamount to excusing criminality. By not only writing the play, but also later publishing a rationale for it, she left archival evidence of the importance she placed on convincing white women to help end lynching. These documents also show that Grimké believed that whites would answer that call if they could see the pain of African Americans who reminded them of themselves.

Composed while the ASWPL was hard at work, *Nails and Thorns* reveals the degree to which Miller understood, as much as Grimké had, that mob violence devastates families and communities long after the physical violence has ended. However, while Grimké refused to let shame silence her, Miller seems to have avoided the silence that might be inspired by gratitude. Given that white women were very publicly

taking responsibility to help end lynching, and were often encountering hate and harassment as they did so, many may have believed that white women who opposed mob violence should be applauded and never criticized. Yet *Nails and Thorns* exposes the limitations of placing too much faith in well-intentioned whites. While *Rachel* depicted the reverberating pain that mobs visited upon Black households, Miller's script is concerned with showing that mob violence can have tragic consequences for whites, not just Blacks. Thus, it seems to have been written with no assumption that white women would identify with African Americans or African Americans' pain.

Black-authored Lynching Drama's Founding Ethos: Grimké's Faith in White Women

Black-authored lynching drama was initiated when Angelina Weld Grimké⁹ set out to convince white women that lynching was a grave injustice because (contrary to accepted rhetoric) even upstanding Black citizens were vulnerable to it. She therefore emphasized her characters' propriety, education, and appreciation for European culture. She also highlighted the far-reaching consequences of racial violence, understanding that the mob's destructive power reverberated long after the victim's death. *Rachel* focuses on 18-year-old Rachel Loving, her mother, Mrs. Loving, and her younger brother Tom. The action occurs in their northern home 10 years after the death of the missing father. The mob targeted the father because he had written an editorial denouncing racial violence. His article had exposed the fact that a group of "respectable people in the town" had lynched a Black man despite knowing that "a white man was guilty." The father was told to retract his words, but the next issue of his newspaper contained an even more searing indictment, so "some dozen masked men" came to the house.¹⁰ His widow, Mrs. Loving, recalls that she and her husband had been in bed but not asleep when whites "broke down the front door and made their way to our bedroom" (41). When the mob had begun dragging her husband down the hall, her 17-year-old son, George, tried to intervene: "it ended in [the mob] dragging them both out" (41).

Upon hearing her mother's testimony, Rachel questions the wisdom of investing in marriage and motherhood, and doubts God's willingness to protect Blacks who do. As a result, though she cares for her suitor, Mr. Strong, and he has prepared a home for them, she rejects his proposal. She cannot bear the thought of bringing children into a racist society (77). In fact, after realizing that all Black males are potential lynch victims,

Rachel reasons: "Why—it would be more merciful—to strangle the little things at birth" (42). Later, she agonizes, "And so this nation—this white Christian nation—has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful—the most holy thing in life—motherhood!" (42). As the action progresses, Rachel is haunted by the sound of children begging not to be born,¹¹ and she promises them that she will not bring them into the world. Feeling forced to abandon her dreams of motherhood, Rachel becomes convinced that she hears God laughing at her pain. As her sanity deteriorates, her anger escalates and she tries to outlaugh God, clearly regarding Him as her worst enemy (76). In tracing this spiritual and psychological decline, Grimké insists that lynching destruction surpasses the physical realm and threatens the soul and psyche of the race. When the head of the Loving household is murdered, his wife and surviving children are forced to start over; then, his wrongful death haunts their new home in the North, continuing to weaken the already diminished family; finally, it prevents Rachel from creating a home with her suitor. Thus, the Black male absence inflicted by the mob does not simply destroy an existing household: it prevents the successful creation of new ones.¹²

This lynching play, which focuses much more on long-term effects than on physical brutality, inaugurated the genre because it helped spark discussion among African Americans about Black identity, racial violence, and about what Black drama should accomplish. The script had been penned by 1914 since Grimké's acquaintances at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were reading the drafts as early as January 1915.¹³ Later that year, W.E.B. Du Bois created a drama committee within the NAACP, and in March 1916, that committee sponsored a semi-professional production of *Rachel* in Washington, D.C. This production made it the first Black-authored, non-musical drama to be executed by Black actors for a broad audience.¹⁴

The initial presentation of *Rachel* ran for just two days,¹⁵ but Grimké's work inspired conversations that led to an increasing investment in Black-authored drama by some of the most important "New Negro" leaders of the day. Grimké circulated her manuscript before Du Bois formed the drama committee, so her work was not a response to his call for Black-authored plays, but more likely an inspiration for it.¹⁶ Then, once the committee decided to sponsor its debut, Grimké's text helped others to identify their own artistic mission. Alain Locke (often called "the architect of the New Negro Movement") and his Howard University colleague Montgomery Gregory objected to the NAACP's "propagandist platform."¹⁷ They therefore vowed to create a space in which "purely artistic" concerns

reigned. The more Locke and Gregory publicized their approach, the more Du Bois refined his articulation of the need for political art.¹⁷

Without question, then, *Rachel* deeply impacted the founders of both the NAACP drama committee and Howard University's theatre department—organizations that would encourage and train Black playwrights throughout the 1920s.¹⁸ Thus, by 1916 and without reaching Broadway, Grimké's work rejuvenated Black drama. To the extent that New Negro Renaissance leaders invested in drama, Grimké set their agenda. Du Bois, Locke, and Gregory often took their disagreement to the pages of periodicals, and many joined them, including authors who entered the debate by simply executing their own vision of what Black drama should accomplish. Some, like Willis Richardson, became playwrights after the premiere of *Rachel* because they were convinced that they could do a better job than Grimké had.¹⁹ Others simply seemed to believe that Grimké's perspective on lynching and Black family life was too important to leave unaddressed. By 1930, at least nine more lynching plays were written by African American authors.²⁰ Whether impressed or disappointed with Grimké's work, Black writers suddenly turned to drama and worked to develop conventions, cultivate themes, and overall perfect the craft.

Why did Grimké's work spark so many revisions that lynching plays proliferated enough to constitute a genre? Above all, Grimké's creative choices were shaped by her belief that showcasing middle-class Blacks was the best way to demonstrate the race's right to citizenship. Part of her goal was to convince whites to identify African Americans not with the image that had been so consistently proffered, but with the Black middle class, whose values, behaviors, hopes and dreams were no different from their own.²¹ Grimké also centered her work on mothers, believing that "if anything can make all women sisters underneath their skins it is motherhood."²² She wrote assuming that witnessing Black women's maternal pain would help white women to "see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons" had on the "souls of the colored mothers everywhere."²³

In operating under the assumption that human recognition across racial lines could end lynching, Grimké was certainly not alone. She did in drama what Black women had done in other forms. For example, in 1904, Mary Church Terrell insisted in the pages of the *North American Review* that white women had a responsibility to use their domestic influence for the greater good. She calls on white women to stand with her against violence, but the nation's history creates skepticism that she refuses

to hide. She explains, "It is too much to expect, perhaps, that the children of women who for generations looked upon the hardships and the degradation of their sisters of a darker hue with few if any protests, should have mercy and compassion upon the children of that oppressed race now. But what a tremendous influence for law and order, and what a mighty foe to mob violence Southern white women might be, if they would arise in the purity and power of their womanhood to implore their fathers, husbands and sons no longer to stain their hands with the black man's blood!"²⁴

The same cautious optimism perhaps gave rise to Grimké's drama. As theatre historian Judith Stephens puts it, "*Rachel* stands as an indictment of white women who subscribed to the dominant ideology of idealized motherhood but who ignored the particular pain of black mothers whose children were born into an environment of racial bigotry and violence."²⁵ Accordingly, the Grimké whom modern scholars often read as conciliatory to white readers may have been working more in the spirit of Charlotte Hawkins Brown.²⁶ In 1920, Brown addressed the Methodist Women's Missionary Council in Tennessee insisting, "The negro woman of the South lays everything that happens to the members of her race at the door of the Southern white woman. Just why I don't know but we all feel that you can control your men. We feel that so far as lynching is concerned that, if the white women would take hold of the situation, that lynching would be stopped. . . ."²⁷ Rather than catering to white women, Brown sought to convict them, and Grimké seems to have written with the same goal in mind.

Indeed, Grimké asserted in 1920: "Since it has been understood that 'Rachel' preaches race suicide, I would emphasize that that was not my intention. To the contrary, the appeal was not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites."²⁸ She continued, "The majority of women, everywhere, although they are beginning to awaken, form one of the most conservative elements of society. They are, therefore, opposed to change. For this reason and for sex reasons the white women of this country are about the worst enemies with which the colored race has to contend."²⁹

Even as she wrote assuming that these "enemies" could be converted, Grimké had no illusions that making Black pain legible would be an easy task. She worked with a keen awareness of the images that threatened to overshadow in everyone's imagination the realities of Black life as she knew it. She explained: "Whenever you say 'colored person' to a white man he immediately [. . .] conjures up in his mind the picture of what he calls 'the darky.' In other words, he believes, or says he does, that all colored people are a grinning, white-toothed, shiftless, carefree set, given

to chicken-stealing, watermelon-eating, always, under all circumstances, properly obsequious to a white skin and always amusing."³⁰

Clearly, Grimké was responding to minstrelsy and the tremendous popularity of stage versions of Uncle Tom,³¹ and she was attuned to the power of multi-layered representation. In her formulation, when one *hears* Blacks mentioned, a specific *picture* comes to mind. Thus, she was concerned not just about the written word, but also about gestures, movements, objects, tones of voice, etcetera. Surely, Grimké was pulled away from poetry and fiction to drama by the possibility of having at her disposal an endless array of meaning-making signs and symbols which dramatic texts ideally put into action. In other words, as she worked to present truths about African Americans that were erased in mainstream discourse, she was especially sensitive to how powerful stage images had become. She therefore adds to the efforts made by Black women in speeches, essays, poems, and fiction by maximizing drama.

In fact, while Grimké's 1920 rationale argues that she wrote primarily for the whites, *Rachel* illuminates her assumptions about her role as an artist-activist and the service that she could provide to Black communities. In an often overlooked passage, *Rachel* articulates fundamental assumptions regarding Blacks' obligation to speak with pride about fallen community members, suggesting Grimké's own belief that drama could be used to affirm Black identity as much as it had been used to denigrate it. Early in Act 1, Rachel says that she feels sorry for mothers whose children grow up to be bad. Her mother, Mrs. Loving asks, "... how do you happen to know all this? Mothers whose babies grow up to be bad don't, as a rule, parade their faults before the world." Rachel responds, "That's just it—that's how you know. They don't talk at all" (33).

Though Rachel and her brother Tom are nearly adults at the beginning of the play, neither of them knows how their father and elder brother died; they have simply noticed their mother's refusal to discuss the past. Mrs. Loving asks, "Did you think—that—perhaps—the reason—I—I—wouldn't talk about them—was—because, because—I was ashamed—of them?" (39). Rachel and Tom fumble for answers, and Mrs. Loving surmises that they have not broached the topic because, assuming that she was ashamed, they were too. Mrs. Loving exclaims, "You evade—both—of you. You have been ashamed. And I never dreamed until today you could take it this way. How blind—how almost criminally blind, I have been" (40). She now knows, she explains, that it is her duty to tell her story, and she describes the night that her husband and son were lynched. She gives her painful testimony.

Like Mrs. Loving, Grimké, the author, realized that she must tell her people's story. Black writers living at the turn of the century could not be content in using fiction, essays, or poetry; the historical moment demanded a dramatic response. While white writers were invested in using the stage to label Black men rapists,³² the simple existence of Black-authored dramas would show that African Americans believed in the integrity of Black manhood. At a time when the stage was being used to cast Black men as buffoons—and, increasingly, as rapists—silence from Black playwrights would be tantamount to their expressing shame and accepting the dominant discourse about the race.

While resisting mainstream lies for herself, and African Americans more generally, Grimké's work also contributed to the effort among Black women to enlist white women as antilynching allies. Though the ASWPL was founded 14 years after *Rachel's* debut and 10 years after Grimké's rationale, it suggested that Black women had succeeded in touching white women's hearts. Perhaps the experience described by ASWPL officer Carrie Parks Johnson had been the case for many: "... the cry of the mother heart of the Negro race leaped the chasm and found response in the mother heart of the white race."³³ Clearly, Grimké had not been alone in assuming that motherhood would inspire interracial cooperation in the fight to end lynching. As Grimké saw it, "if the white women of this country" were moved to help alleviate the pain of "the colored mothers everywhere" then "a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won."³⁴ The ASWPL seems to have come into existence partly in response to efforts like Grimké's, and the organization had been active for years when May Miller wrote her lynching script. Nevertheless, Miller's 1933 play gives voice to skepticism about the wisdom of putting faith in white women allies.

"Half Won": May Miller's Critique

If the battle would be "half won" when white women joined the fight against mob violence, the founding of the ASWPL was reason to rejoice, indeed. ASWPL members not only repudiated the mob as lawless destroyers of US civilization, but they also insisted that lynching had nothing to do with Black sexual impropriety. Furthermore, they acknowledged that only an unjust double standard could demand that Black men die for intimacy with white women while white men who sexually exploit or coerce Black women do not even lose social standing. As importantly, the white

women of this organization worked to change the minds of the entire nation, not just their fathers, husbands, and sons.

Even as the ASWPL did this important work, May Miller's *Nails and Thorns* emerged to expose the problems of relying on white empathy. Like other lynching dramas written by Black women, the play's focus remains inside the home. A lynching occurs during the dramatic present, but the script depicts only what happens within the domestic space—in this case, a white household. The text makes the reader privy to the conditions within the home before and after the lynching, demonstrating that though the violence occurs outdoors, its consequences reverberate everywhere.

The action begins in the living room of Stewart and Gladys Landers, the town sheriff and his wife. Gladys is anxious and Stewart is trying to ignore her fidgeting by pretending to read the newspaper. Gladys soon interrupts him, declaring, "I do wish you had notified the Governor this afternoon."³⁵ Stewart insists that the governor is busy and cannot be bothered with every "little outburst." Gladys counters, "you ought to understand your own home town well enough to know that a Negro's assault on a white girl is a pretty serious affair" (177). However, Stewart insists, "We don't even know yet that it was a Negro" (177). Because details remain unclear, officers have put Lem, the Black suspect, in jail only for his protection (178). As Stewart tries to lighten Gladys's mood, he shows her a comic that she does not find amusing. Shortly thereafter, Annabel, the Black woman who cares for their infant son, is heard frantically calling from outside. She has run across town because whites have been harassing Blacks in the streets. Most Black residents have locked themselves in their houses.

Annabel reports that Blacks are scared because of "what's happened to po' daffy Lem" (179). Stewart says that her concern is "crazy," so she shares that as a friendly gesture, whites have warned their Black acquaintances to stay off the streets because "they wouldn't lak to hafta burn up all the good cullud folks, too" (179). Stewart is still dismissive, reminding her that nothing happened to her on the way. At this point, Annabel reveals that she had been trying to conceal herself, but a man saw her and yelled at her; she began running and did not stop until she got there (179).

Gladys joins Stewart in trying to get Annabel's mind off what she has reported, but after sending Annabel to attend to the baby, she insists that Stewart at least check on conditions at the jail and in town more generally. Stewart says that "Negroes are excitable," so their reactions do not match the actual threat. He therefore regrets that they were unable to keep Blacks ignorant of Lem's situation. Finally, he leaves despite not believing what

Annabel says. He agrees to look into matters only because it will satisfy his wife.

In pleading with her husband, Gladys has been very clear about why she so desperately wants to prevent violence: there had been a lynching where she grew up, so she knew the damage that such barbarity would do to the entire town (180). Miller uses Gladys to explain her title: "For generations to come the children will be gathering the nails and thorns from the scene of that crucifixion" (180). After Stewart leaves, Annabel tells Gladys what she knows about the lynch plot, and it becomes clear that Stewart will find nothing at the jail; the violent ritual is already underway. Gladys therefore resolves to stop the lynching herself. She insists, "I'll tell that mob how I feel . . . I'll show them my baby—he is this town's tomorrow" (183). Gladys pushes past Annabel to get out of the door, for she maintains, "my son will show them the way" (183).

When Stewart returns home, his wife and baby are gone. Before Stewart can leave to look for them, Gladys returns with the assistance of the town doctor. She is completely hysterical because the mob has crushed her baby underfoot. Finally, Gladys bursts, "He's dead, dead, I tell you, and I'm glad. (*laughing hysterically*) He'll never have to see a lynching" (186). The action ends with a stunned Stewart admitting what he had previously refused to acknowledge about his Black servant: "Annabel's a very good woman—a very, very wise woman" (188).

With its emphasis on a white family's pain, May Miller's script quite eerily anticipates an NAACP advertisement that appears two years later, in 1935. At a time when photographs of lynch victims circulated as evidence of white power, the NAACP used them to create a counter-discourse designed to inspire shame about how whites chose to use their social and political power.³⁶ Reprinting a picture of Rubin Stacy, a Black man lynched in Florida, the advertisement points viewers' attention to the white children who surround the hanging victim (see Figure 2.1).

The reader is instructed by the NAACP's caption:

Do not look at the Negro. His earthly problems are ended. Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle. Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right? Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated? Rubin Stacy, the Negro, who was lynched at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on July 19, 1935, for "threatening and frightening a white woman," suffered PHYSICAL torture for a few short hours. But what psychological havoc is being wrought in the minds of the white children? . . . ³⁷



Figure 2.1 NAACP antilynching advertisement that aims to mobilize readers by emphasizing that mob violence harms whites

To similar effect, Gladys tells her husband, "... I lived in a town once where they lynched a man and I can never forget how the town and the people suffered. It wasn't what they did to the unfortunate man alone. He was out of his misery."³⁸ Appealing to Stewart's sense of responsibility for white residents' quality of life, Gladys continues, "[the real tragedy] was what they did to every soul in that town. They crucified everything that was worthwhile—justice and pride and self-respect" (180). Not unlike the NAACP a couple years later, both Miller and her character Gladys clearly

feel that an antilynching appeal based on the damage done to whites, not Blacks, will be most effective.

Many Black-authored literary works of the 1920s and 1930s, including lynching plays, offer victimized Black men as Christ figures,³⁹ but here, either abstract ideals or members of the white community are deemed to be crucified. In other words, both Gladys and Miller suggest that the "strange fruit" that will most disturb Americans is not that which later inspired Billie Holiday's famous lament.⁴⁰ Especially given that Gladys's own baby dies, Miller's text reveals her assumption that, even to liberal whites, Black pain is of secondary importance. Accordingly, when Annabel arrives to report to work, she rushes in because it is dangerous for Blacks to be on the streets. In response to her frantic explanation, Stewart is dismissive. While Stewart's response may not be surprising, his liberal wife Gladys is not very sympathetic either: Gladys insists, "All right, Annabel, now you're here safe and sound, and you need not worry any more. You go fix the baby's bottle and take it to him. And try to forget all about Lem and the affair."⁴¹ The concern that the visibly unnerved Annabel expresses for Lem, his family, and the Black community simply does not register as relevant—even to Gladys. Although she immediately begins again to press Stewart to do something about the escalating tension, Gladys's inability to empathize with Annabel is undeniable.

Gladys is not only unable to relate to Annabel, she also proves incapable of truly hearing her. As Gladys convinces herself that she must stop the lynchers, she reasons that they will end the frenzy if she can get them to "forget the poor crazy fellow and look at themselves and the children."⁴² Annabel immediately explains that they have the children with them. Gladys rages, "The children too! They can't do that to our children. They're all we have. They're our promise—our future." To this, Annabel replies, "Yes'm, mah chillun's all I got, too. If'wasn't foh 'em, I wouldn't be a-workin' all the time 'til I's ready to drop" (183). Annabel's loyalty to her children, not to Gladys, is apparent here, as are the labor demands that Gladys places on Annabel without regard for Annabel's family. None of this makes an impression on Gladys, but Annabel continues, "Then come a time lak tonight an' I get to thinkin' that mah sons has gotta grow up in this town, too, an' 'sposin' afah all mah work they ends lak that" (183). As Annabel finishes with "a futile gesture," Gladys continues to insist that her *own* son is "this town's tomorrow" (183). In this scene, Gladys's behavior proves to be on a continuum with that of the lynchers, about whom Annabel says to Gladys, to no avail, "they ain't got no ears now, Ma'm" (183).

It is because Gladys has "no ears" for her dialect-speaking servant that lynching brings so much destruction to her home, so Miller's work reveals that the nation encourages its white citizens to be blind and deaf, seeing and hearing only what supports racial hierarchy. Quite explicitly, Miller's script engages the politics of representation, defined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall as the struggle over "whether a particular regime of representation can be challenged, contested and transformed."⁴³ While Grimké wanted the white middle class to acknowledge the Black middle class, Miller was interested in how both groups' ideas about propriety and criminality often leave racial injustice unaddressed because they do not challenge the assumption that whites are citizens and Blacks are not.

By placing a spotlight on a white family, Miller's work exposes the diffuse way in which power operates, and the text emphasizes the role that mainstream media plays in this distribution of power.⁴⁴ Early on, Miller explores the impact of the media as Stewart tries to calm Gladys by making her laugh. He tells her to sit down and read the newspaper because "the comic will be good for your nerves."⁴⁵ He declares, "I wouldn't miss an evening of 'Desperado Joe' for anything. (*enthusiastically bending over her shoulder*) Look here at the pickle he's in. They've just caught Joe who kidnapped Percy's girl. And look at this. It's a wow. (*laughing*) Here, the gang's got him, and is he scared!" (178). This "comic" plot resonates with the Lem situation currently overraking the town, and the similarity is not lost on Gladys. At one point, she says to Stewart, "... I worry about the kind of world Junior will have to live in... I hate the thought that he'll be reading about gangs and mobs and enjoy them" (180). Ultimately, if whites are citizens and Blacks are not—and white duty sometimes includes keeping Blacks subordinated—then Stewart's status as sheriff matters much less than the fact that average white residents feel empowered to police the neighborhood. Because power can emanate from several locations, Annabel runs through the chaotic streets to get to her employer's house, and Gladys later believes that she can change the mob's behavior by making them face her baby. Both Annabel's fear and Gladys's confidence align with mainstream discourses and practices regarding who should expect protection and who can expect punishment.

In fact, the broad connection that Gladys draws between Lem's predicament and the comic is important precisely because the only thing that Desperado Joe and the mentally impaired Lem have in common is that they will both likely die. As sheriff, Stewart is not convinced of Lem's guilt; he admits that Lem is in jail to prevent the mob from getting him. Nevertheless, Stewart is amused by the pickle that Desperado Joe is in,

he does not seem to doubt that Joe kidnapped Percy's girl, and he claims that he would never miss an evening of this entertaining strip. Even in an officer of the law who acknowledges the likely innocence of his prisoner, there is a strong appetite for tales of "outlaws" and the "heroes" who subdue them.

Thus, Miller's play suggests that the desperado/hero narratives that saturate mainstream media maintain existing hierarchies. Importantly, such tales are linked to founding narratives of American distinctiveness. As Toni Morrison explains in *Playing in the Dark*, early Americans cast themselves as uniquely capable of facing a wide, dark expanse and taming it, and "the Africanist presence" proved to be an element requiring particularly fierce discipline.⁴⁶ Just as May Miller anticipated the NAACP's suggestion that the white children at Rubin Stacy's lynching were victims, she anticipated Morrison's argument. Through her white woman character Gladys, Miller advances her theory that the comic is not "just a funny," as Stewart claims. American realities are created in and through representation.

While acknowledging that representation shapes reality, Miller also insists upon the power of Black community networks and discourses. Annabel is sure that Lem will be kidnapped because she knows that a relative of the girl who was allegedly attacked has keys to the jail. Neither Stewart nor Gladys immediately believe her, so she later explains to Gladys, "I knows mo' bout this town n' you does, Mis' Landers, 'cause mah mammy nursed mos' o' these folks. She say one haf them's related an' those what ain't has got relatives what is."⁴⁷ Thus, Annabel suggests that whites represent themselves in one way, but Blacks know the truth behind the façade. Also, Annabel is better informed than Stewart, the sheriff, because "Ruby role me an' she had it from Josh's Sarah an' Sarah got it from Josh from the store where he works on Main Street" (181).

This active undercurrent of Black information enables African Americans to understand events in ways that are not controlled by whites. (Recall that Stewart wanted the news about Lem withheld from Blacks.) Given the uncritical basis of "Desperado Joe" humor, African Americans would be in dire straits if they had access only to white-authored information. Miller's play is populated by white characters, but it nevertheless highlights the importance of Black voices—not the least of which is Miller's own.

Miller clearly valued the freedom to write about characters who were not Black. Even while exercising that freedom, though, she remains committed to preserving the alternative discourses that enable Blacks

to understand themselves in ways not limited by dominant representations. Miller's play therefore bears witness to the importance of Black perspectives—whether whites have ears to hear them or not. *Nails and Thorns* contributes significantly to the history of lynching and antilynching activism because studying racial violence requires grappling with questions of whose testimonies matter and whose do not. Especially when considered alongside the founding text of Black-authored lynching drama, Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*, Miller's script demands that scholars examine the factors determining which cultural artifacts have demanded attention and which have been allowed to fade into obscurity. With its portrayal of interactions between Gladys and her Black servant, Annabel, *Nails and Thorns* foregrounds questions about what can be heard, and its survival in the archive gestures toward the need to ask similar questions about the history of the ASWPL. As women of this important organization sought to educate the public (not just their husbands and sons), they developed extensive programming. One of the ways they sought to educate young people in particular was to initiate a play-writing competition. May Miller's 1933 one-act drama won third prize when they launched this initiative in 1936, but the most comprehensive work on the ASWPL gives no indication of its existence.⁴⁸

Nails and Thorns is not part of the archive typically consulted by scholars of antilynching activism among American women. The play's absence from histories of the ASWPL in particular seems symptomatic of the very issues that the script highlights about the discourses and practices that most shape our society, even its most well-meaning members. As we have seen, Grimké believed that the barrier between white and Black women would crumble if white women saw Blacks who were not buffoons, rapists, and whores, but whose behavior, values, and tastes mirrored their own. Without question, the emergence of the ASWPL, and the tremendous risks that these white women took by standing against the mob's lies, gave reason to believe not only that lynching would end, but also that a more just society was in the making. If white women were willing to risk their reputations and their safety to oppose lynching, surely human compassion had been mobilized. And it is reasonable to conclude that the bond of motherhood had helped facilitate that change in society's "most conservative element," as Grimké had hoped. Yet, the archival imprint of Grimké's *Rachel* remains easily traceable, largely because of the play's link to the NAACP, not to white women activists. Miller's play was actually acknowledged by the ASWPL, but its importance seems to have quickly disappeared from histories of that organization.

As cultural artifacts of the early twentieth century, Grimké's *Rachel* and Miller's *Nails and Thorns* offer insight into Black women's ideas about their own activism and their alliances with white women. In *Rachel*, Grimké creates a Black mother who says that she had been "criminally blind" by not realizing that her silence would be interpreted as shame. Refusing to allow similar interpretations in real life, Grimké's work ensured that posterity would know that she believed lynch victims to be worthy of dramatic defense. They were not isolated brute rapists with no connection to institutions like marriage; they were often family men whose deaths were mourned by wives, sons, daughters, and entire communities.⁴⁹

As Grimké's literary successor, Miller offers Annabel, who may think highly of her employers because they enable her to provide for her family—and she may appreciate Gladys's passion for wanting to prevent Lem's murder—but she does not let gratitude keep her from speaking the truth about why she works so many hours. Also, despite her relationship to the sheriff, Annabel expresses her fears about her sons' future in that town. Likewise, as an author, Miller gives indications of her doubts about relying on white empathy. Like Gladys, white women allies may mean well and, more importantly, they often accomplish much, but their work can never replace Blacks' efforts on their own behalf. In fact, white activism rarely has, even if mainstream conversations bear little trace of African American contributions.

Angelina Weld Grimké and May Miller would not allow themselves to be silenced by shame or by gratitude. They left evidence that, even in the midst of the most repressive violence, African Americans did not find silence to be acceptable. They affirmed for themselves that they were upstanding citizens and admirable men and women, whether they were servants or not. As they rejected silence, these writers offered their communities texts that bolstered their self-conceptions, enabling them to continue to believe their own truths despite the lies with which the nation bombarded them. Only this self-assurance could equip them to engage in social critique. And it was social criticism—and the cultural productions inspired by it—that allowed Blacks to convince whites to support the reform efforts to which they had been committed for decades. But more than that, what allowed African Americans to keep struggling in these movements, whether whites joined them or not, was that they had been preserving the community's truths all along. Early Black women lynching dramatists did not live to see the battle won, but their work survives to show succeeding generations how we came to have more of a fighting chance.

Notes

1. Newspaper reports on the ASWPL's founding include "Southern Women Attack Lynching," which was carried in the Dalton, Georgia *Citizen* on December 11, 1930 and the Cordele, Georgia *Dispatch* on December 10, 1930. Also see the Macon, Georgia *Telegraph* on November 4, 1930 and January 26, 1931. Other favorable reactions in the white Southern press include: Dallas *Times-Herald*, January 7, 1932 and the Hattiesburg, Mississippi *American*, November 11, 1930 and January 22, 1931. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (Rev. ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 341 n.9 and 10.
2. "Nannie Burroughs Tells 'Why America Has Gone Lynch Mad,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 23, 1933.
3. ASWPL Papers, Microfilm Reel 4, Appendix C of Minutes.
4. Ames quoted in Hall, *Revolt*, 164.
5. Hall, *Revolt*, 165.
6. Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record in Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (1895; New York: Bedford, 1997, 73-157), 78.
7. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explains, the most important feature of the organization's demographic was the women's race. "The decision to create an organization for white women only, which set the ASWPL apart from the interracial movement and shaped its rhetoric and style, flowed from a number of attitudes and perceptions" (180). As founder, Jessie Daniel Ames "stressed again and again that this was 'not an interracial movement, but a movement of Southern white women interested in law observance and law enforcement'" (181). Also, Ames "believed implicitly that social reform would come about not through the efforts of blacks but through the mediation of white interracialists between the black community and the white power structure" (182).
8. My book *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performances, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011) is the first full-length study of the genre. I examine the scripts as access points to both the archive and the repertoire of U.S. culture at the turn into the twentieth century.
9. This is the great-niece of white activist Angelina Grimké Weld, after whom my Grimké is named.
10. Angelina Weld Grimké, *Rachel in Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, ed. Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998, 27-78), 40.
11. Rachel's despair allies her with her biblical namesake: "... Rachel weeping for her children... would not be comforted because they are not" (Matthew 2:18).

12. In other work, I have called this "de-generation," meaning generation removal and prevention. See my "(Anti-)Lynching Plays: Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and the Evolution of African American Drama" in *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919*, ed. Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 210-30.
13. Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 117-23.
14. Grimké's debut is significant not because she was the first to write serious drama, but because hers was the first Black-authored drama to be executed by Black actors for a broad audience on a semi-professional stage. Before *Rachel*, Black-authored dramas were either not produced or were brought to life by amateurs in churches and schools. Of course, such productions are important. In fact, lynching drama would not have existed without these small shows. Nevertheless, the impact of Grimké's work stemmed from the fact that it was not a musical, but it drew a relatively large interracial audience to formal theatrical productions about African Americans.
15. Production history of *Rachel* is as follows: It premiered in March 1916 at the Myrtille Miner School in Washington, D.C. and then received productions in 1917 at New York City's Neighborhood Playhouse and at Bartle Hall in Cambridge, Massachusetts. See Hull, 119 and James Harch and Errol Hill, *A History of African American Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 220.
16. Most assume that Du Bois motivated Grimké. For example, as he introduces *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, theatre historian William Branch calls *Rachel* "the first produced play to result from Dr. Du Bois's call..." (xv). Samuel Hay's *African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) uses letters between NAACP drama committee members to show that Grimké's play was chosen when the organization wanted to sponsor a theatre production to improve race relations. Indeed, he suggests that Grimké's work may have been chosen because her father was an officer for the Washington, D.C. branch. Though Hay does not insist that the drama was *written* in response to the committee's desire to stage a play for "race propaganda," later scholars have read his work in exactly that way. As a consequence, for example, Lisa Anderson's *Mammies No More* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) and Carol Allen's *Peculiar Passages* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) argue that the play was penned in response to the committee's call, but years earlier, in 1987, Gloria Hull's classic study *Color, Sex, and Poetry* made it clear that Grimké's script was written before Du Bois founded the drama committee, given that a draft was circulating as early as January of 1915 (Hull, 117-23).
17. Locke and Gregory insisted that Black drama must be developed through folk plays, and their Howard University efforts advanced this belief which

Locke had articulated earlier in "Steps to a Negro Theatre" in *Crisis* magazine (December 1922): 66–68. In 1926, W.E.B. Du Bois had published, in *Crisis* magazine, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement" (July 1926): 134–36; "Criteria of Negro Art" (October 1926): 290–97; and "Paying for Plays" (November 1926): 7–8.

18. It is worth noting that Miller not only had Grincké as an English teacher in high school; she also attended Howard University, interacting often with Montgomery Gregory and Locke. Her journals, housed in the Emory University Manuscripts and Rare Books Library, contain many references to both men.

19. Richardson often said in interviews (with James Harch, for example) that he returned from seeing *Rachel* determined to write drama of his own because he felt certain that he could do better. See Christine R. Gray's biography *Willis Richardson, Forgotten Pioneer of African-American Drama* (West Port, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 12–15 and 29.

20. Plays in which lynching is thematized first came from white authors. In 1906, Thomas Dixon, Jr. hired two acting troupes to bring a play version of his novel, *The Clansman*, to life. White-authored plays not expressly written to condone lynching include Edward Sheldon's *The Nigger* (1909) and Ridgely Torrence's *Granny Manner* (1917).

Black-authored plays begin with Grincké's *Rachel*, but quickly begin emerging in the one-act format; this formal shift has everything to do with Grincké's successors not prioritizing integrated audiences via formal productions. One-acts lent themselves to publication in periodicals, which made them available for amateur stagings or dramatic readings, and lynching dramas proliferated in this form: Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918); Mary Burrill's *Afermath* (1919); Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* (1926); and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Blue Blood* (1926), *Safe* (1929), and *Blue-eyed Black Boy* (c. 1930). Black male authors contributed fewer plays before 1930: G.D. Lipscomb's *Frances* (1925) and Joseph Mitchell's *Son-Boy* (1928). Garland Anderson wrote a full-length play *Appearances* (1925), which he tailored for formal production before integrated audiences. Unlike most other plays by Black authors, Anderson's work is *not* as concerned with the consequences of lynching on Black homes. *Appearances* is set in a hotel and insists that Black men can overcome rape charges because transcending racism is simply a matter of controlling one's destiny through adherence to the ideals of Christian Science.

Note that I prefer the term "lynching drama" to "anti-lynching drama," though I have used that term in earlier work. I want to move away from the easy assumption that these plays are reactions to violence—that they are primarily protest art—and toward an understanding that they affirm

African Americans. These scripts preserved truths about Black families and communities—truths that inspired reactions from whites. As Black men were proving to be admirable heads of household, for example, the mob sought to strip them of their success, destroying their homes and then denying that Black men ever cared to create and maintain domestic stability.

21. Even as I say that Grincké hoped to target "white audiences," I realize that she was interested in middle-class white audiences. She was very much immersed in middle-class respectability herself, and these are the people that she would most believe could effect social change. For insight into Grincké's life, social position, and beliefs, see Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought To Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

22. Angelina Weld Grimké, "Rachel" The Play of the Month: Reason and Synopses by the Author" in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. James Harch and Leo Hamalian (1920; repr., Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996, 424–26), 424. [Hereafter, "Reason."].

23. *Ibid.*, 425.

24. Mary Church Terrell, "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View," *North American Review* 178 (June 1904): 853–68, 862.

25. Judith Stephens, "The Anti-Lynch Play: Toward an Interracial Feminist Dialogue in Theatre," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 1 (1990): 59–69, 62. [Hereafter, "Interracial Feminist."].

26. In some ways, this may not forcefully disrupt assumptions about Grincké's tendency to agree with mainstream discourses because Hawkins Brown was known for taking pride in her white ancestry.

27. Charlotte Hawkins Brown in Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (1972; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 470.

28. Grimké, "Reason," 424.

29. *Ibid.*, 425.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Stage productions inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) were notoriously spectacular, borrowing from her famous characters but not her noble intentions. What became known as "Tom Shows" drew crowds as late as the 1920s, with several companies touring. As Alain Locke put it in 1940, "A plague of low-gene interest multiplied the superficial types of uncles, aunts, and pickaninnies almost endlessly, echoing even today in the minstrel and vaudeville stereotypes of a Negro half-crown, half-troubadour. The extreme popularity of these types held all the arts in so strong a grip that, after 70 or more years of vogue, it was still difficult in the last two decades to break through this cotton-patch and cabin-quarters formula." See *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968).

32. At the last turn of the century, the mainstream American stage often cooperated with the mob, sometimes by explicitly legitimating racial violence. The most explicit example would be Thomas Dixon Jr.'s plays, which began touring the country in 1906, defining lynching as a patriotic duty. However, other media dehumanized Blacks, and those forms were more prominent than the country's still emerging (non-musical) mainstream drama. Therefore, when drama joins these forces, much of its strength comes from acting in unison with forerunners such as newspaper stories and comic strips in literary magazines. See Rayford Logans *Betrayal of the Negro* (1965; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1997) as well as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s commentary on Black images in his seminal essay "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1998): 129–51.
33. Quoted in Hall, *Revolt*, 105.
34. Gimké, "Reason," 425.
35. May Miller, *Nails and Thorns in Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, ed. Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens (1933; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998, 177–88), 177.
36. See Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) and Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
37. NAACP advertisement quoted in Markovitz, 25–26.
38. Miller, *Nails*, 180.
39. The literature that casts lynch victims as Christ figures is plentiful. Examples include W.E.B. Du Bois, "Jesus Christ in Georgia" (1911 short story); Countee Cullen, "Christ Crucified" (1922 poem) and "The Black Christ" (1929 poem); and Langston Hughes, "Christ in Alabama" (1931 poem).
40. The famous ballad "Strange Fruit" began as a poem written by Lewis Allan (Abel Meeropol) that his wife sang publicly, but it was made famous when Billie Holiday lent her voice to it in 1939. For more, see David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York: Ecco Press, 2001). Holiday's influence has inspired numerous renditions, including Nina Simone's in 1965, Cassandra Wilson's in 1995, and Dwayne Wiggins' revision about police brutality, "What's Really Going On? (Strange Fruit)," released in 1999. See Margolick's appendix for a more complete list.
41. Miller, *Nails*, 179–80.
42. *Ibid.*, 183.
43. Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 8.
44. Here, of course, I am suggesting that Miller also anticipates the theories of Jacques Derrida on how power is less likely to operate from some centralized authority base than in contingent, diffuse ways.

45. Miller, *Nails*, 178.
46. See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).
47. Miller, *Nails*, 182.
48. From reading *Revolt Against Chinlody*, the seminal history of the ASWPL and its founder, Jessie Daniel Ames, which has been updated and reprinted, one has no idea that May Miller's play won recognition in this context. It is easy to understand how the play fell out of the historical record of the ASWPL because that organization's papers make little mention of it. However, there is much detail about the plans to launch the play contest and many letters between organizers and the playwright judges that they recruited, especially University of North Carolina professor Frederick Koch. Plans dated January 30, 1936 indicate that the goal is to encourage one-acts on the subject of lynching; the "desire thereof to make active presentation of the problem to people of simple culture, without polemics or other blights upon artistic worth, which would ban the play from trained amateur groups." Also, plays should be "30 to 40 minutes" and "\$100 [will be paid] for all rights."
- To encourage contest entries that fulfilled its goals, the ASWPL office sent educational material, including books on the history of lynching, to judges and other contacts who could generate plays. This material helped ensure that students and other amateur writers would have plenty of quality sources. (I could not help but notice, though, that the organization generously sent such materials to white contacts and told African Americans, such as Anne Cook at Spelman College, "We do not have an extra copy of [Author Rapert's *The Tragedy of Lynching*] in the office but feel sure you may obtain a copy from the library of Atlanta University" [letter dated February 6, 1936 by Jessie Daniel Ames's secretary, ASWPL Papers].)
- Ultimately, it was in the May Miller papers at Emory University that I found the letter in which Miller was told "Your play was awarded third place; 'Country Sunday' by Walter Spearman of the University of North Carolina, took first place; and 'Lawd, Does Yo' Undahstan?' by Ann Seymour of Strawn, Texas won second place" (May Miller Papers, Emory University, Box 7, Item 15).
- As first- and second-place winners, Spearman's and Seymour's plays were published by the ASWPL while Miller's fell off the radar. What is striking, though, is that there is much discussion about the need for artistic merit and realism if young people are to be moved to stage these plays, yet Seymour's script is so predicated on racist assumptions that it is hard to imagine that it would be viewed as realistic, even in 1936. Black characters have ridiculous names, such as "Fruit Cake," which is designated among characters as a real name, not a nickname (194). Also, according to stage directions, when one character is singing, "the other darkies join in" (194). See Seymour's play in

the anthology *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, edited by Perkins and Stephens.

49. Black-authored lynching plays generally focus on Black male victims, even though the playwrights clearly understood that Black women were lynched. In fact, Alice Dunbar-Nelson was part of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, a group of Black women who helped pay for the *Shame of America* advertisement that insisted that lynching could not possibly be about rape, given that many women (including white women) had been lynched. See Markovitz and Mitchell, "(Anti-) Lynching Plays."

The Antislavery Roots of African American Women's Antilynching Literature, 1895–1920

Barbara McCaskill

CHAPTER 3

Are the candidates for lynching always found
among the men?

No, the fiends of human torture lynch a woman
now and then.

—Lizelia Augusta Jenkins Moorer¹

Reflecting on the lynching scourge in 1900, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859–1930), one-time editor of the influential *Colored American Magazine* (1900–1904), added a sense of urgency to the campaign against it in the preface to her *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900). “Let us compare,” she wrote, “the happenings of one hundred—two hundred—years ago, with those of today. The difference between then and now, if any there be, is so slight as to be scarcely worth mentioning. The atrocity of the acts committed one hundred years ago are duplicated today, when slavery is supposed to no longer exist.”² As passionately as Hopkins argued for calling out lynching’s sad history, the absence of a key chapter in the serialized novel *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911), where the female protagonist may have been lynched,³ indicates a tension in African American literature between remembering and forgetting such brutal forms of vigilante justice. The installment describing the death of Minnie, an African American woman teaching school and bringing love