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Review – Angela D. Sims, *Lynched: The Power of Memory in a Culture of Terror*

C. Vanessa White
Catholic Theological Union

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***Lynched: The Power of Memory in a Culture of Terror.* Angela D. Sims. Baylor University Press, Waco TX, 2016. 197 pp. \$29.95 (hardback). ISBN-13:9781481306072**

"Immersed in memories of lynching African American elders give voice to present realities of life in the United States." (27) With these words, Angela Sims situates her newest book "*Lynched*" in the past as well as the present context of today. This important work is based on the interviews she conducted with fifty African American elders that took place from July 2009 – February 2011. The "Remembering Lynching" oral history project is not only a groundbreaking work by a brilliant scholar but also one that could be seen as a companion to James Cone's classic text "*The Cross and the Lynching Tree.*" Read together they offer a heartbreaking and challenging response to today's current climate of hate and intolerance. As Cone stated in his book, "if America is willing to confront its' history and ongoing legacy of white supremacy, there is hope beyond tragedy."(166)

There is much hope as well as pain to be found in stories of African American elders whose lives were shaped by a culture of lynching. Over the course of two years, Professor Sims, interviewed elders from communities from Virginia, South Carolina, New Jersey, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Louisiana, California, Pennsylvania, Alabama. Her work shows that the culture of lynching was not a "Southern occurrence" but had its roots throughout the United States. For the fifty participants who were a part of this oral history project, it was "an intentional act to decide what to do with suppressed, denied or ignored memory that is couched in violence." (2) To remember was also an opportunity to give eschatological hope that the church, a body of baptized believers who proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the true and living God, will live into its communion of eucharistic promise.

Using the power of story and narrative as a framework for this book, Sims interweaves the personal stories of African American elders who lived through the daily terror of a lynching culture with reflections on what their witness has to teach our society today. In "Echoes of the Past" Sims shares how she came to develop this oral history project, which asks the following questions: a) why people do or do not talk about lynching and what it means, b) how lynching or a culture of lynching shapes their understanding of justice and faith in God, and c)

their concerns and desires for future generations. For the remainder of the book, she attempts to address these questions within the body of her text. Many of the elder participants initially did not recall knowing anything about lynching, or stated that "it was never close around my hometown." (9) For others, there was suppression of these memories; it was something that was not talked about or they didn't want to be reminded of what took place." Finally, there was an environment of silence surrounding the experience of lynching that was based in a fear induced silence, a culture of fear that still remains. Unlike the Jewish Holocaust, which has had international recognition, lynching continues to be associated with shame and denial, as Sims states - "shame embodied by one too many who lived under this regime of terror, and denial by one too many who refute evidence preserved on postcards and other visual depictions." (32)

With great care and compassion, Sims journeyed with these elders to uncover their memories and give testimony to their experience. What emerged was a witness to the power of faith and the sense of self by which they are empowered to give voice to memories that present an alternative depiction of life in the United States. They witness to the fallacy of an "American the Great"; that turned its back on the terror of lynching that was a daily occurrence for black people in this country. The elders also cautioned that we not be too quick to think of lynching as just a part of our past in the United States. Many of the elders interviewed for the "Remembering Lynching" oral history project drew correlations between lynching and the current reality (neo-lynching society) that contributed to the death of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman

One cannot read this book and not be personally affected by the personal stories, faith and courage of the men and women who shared their memories with Sims. For Sims, the process of interviewing and journeying the elders was one of immersion, a symbolic baptism in which she had a moral responsibility to offer guidance and care to the participant elders that would enable them (as well as her) to be submersed but not overwhelmed by the memories that would begin to emerge.

As Cone equated the Cross and the Lynching Tree, Sims sees our current context has created police forces that are symbolic lynching trees. She writes that as a prerequisite for healing in this country we

must acknowledge the terror that was lynching and name it as a national sin.

While the book, is a challenging read, I encourage educators and ministers in the Black community to have the courage to read this important work. As the elders remind us in this book, "never forget the courage, faith and tenacity of our parents and foreparents and also never forget that there were certain human rights that we were denied and they didn't come easy." (114) The stories and the witness in this book are a potential guide for those who today are living in a context that continues to devalue black life and ignores the significance of black lives.

For members of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, this book reinforces the value of our current oral history project as well as the contribution that the witness of our elder members is making to future generations.

While it may be painful reading for some, this book is essential reading for all students and scholars of religion and theology. One will find in Sims, a theologian who writes from a place of deep faith and hope.

C. Vanessa White
Catholic Theological Union

