



COLLOQUIUM

Another country? Racial hatred in the time of Trump

A time for historical reckoning

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The contentious confirmation hearings of Trump's pick for US Attorney General, Senator Jeff Sessions, barely opened the can of worms regarding Sessions' indifference toward allegations of summary executions of poor black victims in southwest Alabama during his term of office as federal attorney for Southern Alabama. During his two years Assistant US Attorney for the Southern District of Alabama (1975) and his twelve years as US Attorney for the same district, Sessions was accused of demeaning his black associates, expressing hostility toward civil rights organizations and rights workers, and ignoring complaints by black citizens who had been blocked from voting in their rural counties. Sessions oversaw the executions of mentally and cognitively disabled people, and he supported grossly unequal distribution of public funds, favoring private white schools over predominately black public schools. What has not been addressed, however, are the reports by local civil rights workers and local witnesses of post-civil rights era "lynchings" of black martyrs in southwest Alabama from the late 1960s into the 1980s. The article is based on my and my civil rights colleagues' investigative research work that accidentally and serendipitously led us to three cases of likely death squad-like attacks in southwest Alabama in the late 1970s and 1980s. The article also addresses the stigma of place and its impact on the people who live in communities that are seen as backwater or as lacking in cultural or symbolic capital, such as Trump's early upbringing in Queens, New York City, and Jeff Sessions' upbringing in Camden, Alabama.

Keywords: Alabama, civil rights, racial hatred, Jeff Sessions, lynchings, Trump biography

*If you is white, you's alright,
if you's brown, stick around,
but if you's black, hmm, hmm, brother, get back, get back, get back.*
—Big Bill Broonzy



My essay is a rejoinder to Kira Hall, Donna Goldstein, and Matthew Ingram's (2016) "The hands of Donald Trump," which exposes the devil in Trump's canny use of gestures and caricature in rousing a sleeping giant inside America, a diverse class of people whose anger and resentment is rooted in their own sense of unfairness in a world that seems to have cheated them of their legacy: a bright, white future.

In early February I could hear the angry roar of police helicopters and the muffled cries of Berkeley students and anarchist activists gathering in Sproul Plaza at the University of California, Berkeley, to stop Milo Yiannopoulos, a feckless *Breitbart* editor and alt-right provocateur, from speaking at the student union at the invitation of the Berkeley College Republicans. This white power, trans-phobic misogynist's most odious tactic is his naming, shaming, and outing vulnerable individuals in the audience: undocumented students, transgender people, Muslim refugees, and gay African Americans (while licking his chops about their private parts). Berkeley's already beleaguered Chancellor Nick Dirks, a respected anthropologist who was recruited from Columbia University, released a message to the campus community (Dirks 2017) citing his obligation "to ensure freedom of expression and dialogue that elicits the full spectrum of views held by our varied communities" while recognizing the right of students to exercise their right to protest. However, once the maddening crowds, led by a militant contingent of anarchists armed with sticks and industrial firecrackers, became rowdy and broke into the student union, starting fires and breaking glass, the large reserve of police were ordered to do nothing, and Milo was hastily rushed out of the building protected by police and his private bodyguards. Later that evening, a preening Yiannopoulos declared himself the winner. He didn't have to say a word to get all the publicity he wanted for his soon-to-be released book *Dangerous*, a book that was cancelled due to his loose comments about pedophilia (and the opportunity to humiliate the university administration for its "liberal" and wishy-washy missteps, and to portray the student demonstrators as thugs).

Like Trump, Milo is a malignant narcissist whose goal is a call to arms against the rainbow nation. Insofar as Milo's agenda and his antics are anticonstitutional, anti-American, and laced with race hatred, one can invoke Immanuel Kant's (1999) definition of "radical evil" as a "depravity" and a "perversity of heart," metaphors that suit Milo and his adopted "Papa Trump" and their angry and resentful followers. The Milo affair was a cunning tactic to divert attention from what was actually happening that same week: the confirmation process of Senator Jeff Sessions as the US Attorney General, a man whose political inclinations and history could actually implement the buffoonish hate tactics sowed by Trump and his protégé, Milo Yiannopoulos.

America: A failed experiment in liberty and justice

America is at a breaking point. Race and class hatreds have hit rock bottom. The contentious confirmation hearings on Trump's pick for US attorney, Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama, ended in his unimaginable confirmation on February 8, 2017 (see Figure 1). On the night of the Milo demonstrations, I sat in front of my computer writing a short blog, "No to Sessions," that was posted the next day on my UC Berkeley blog spot (Scheper-Hughes 2017). I noted that in 1986 Sessions was the second US judicial nominee in nearly 50 years whose nomination was killed by

the Senate Judiciary Committee on the grounds of his “gross insensitivity” to racial issues. My argument was based on what I knew of Sessions’ record toward black tenant farmers in southwest Alabama, Selma and Wilcox County in particular. Here I will elaborate and clarify my argument, providing the evidence I could not present there. It was not what Sessions had done but rather what he had failed to do, his sins of omission, during the twelve years that he served as federal attorney general for the southern region of Alabama that should have disqualified him. Sessions was born in Selma in 1946 and got his secondary education (1963-1966) at the Wilcox County High School in Camden, Alabama, the county seat of Wilcox County.



Figure 1: Confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions, February 8, 2017.
Reprinted with permission from Getty Images.

These were particularly tense times in Camden, Alabama. 1966 was the first year that newly registered African American voters could elect their own candidates accidentally including sheriff. A black Vietnam veteran named Walter J. Calhoun took up the challenge to run for office in deeply segregated Wilcox County. White officials quickly mobilized to threaten Black tenant farmers from voting, a model that had likely influenced the young Sessions, who was born in Selma in 1946 but got his secondary education at the Wilcox County High School in Camden, Alabama. As a civil rights worker affiliated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Selma and in Wilcox County in 1967–68, followed by brief returns to the field over the past decades, I saw close up what white power looked like (Scheper-Hughes 2003, 2016). Despite the Voting Rights Act of 1965, throughout southwest Alabama black people were harassed for voting. On one occasion, my black SNCC coworker and I were run out of Camden by Alabama police as they waved guns in our faces. In Wilcox County I recorded, transcribed, and published interviews with black tenant farmers whose cotton allotment checks were stolen by plantation

owners, with black women who were denied welfare or healthcare unless they agreed to be “spayed” (the term used by health and welfare officials), with women who were raped by their landlords, and with husbands who were pistol-whipped for protesting (Scheper-Hughes and Hunt 1969). On another occasion, four of us civil rights workers were driven off the road by local Ku Klux Klan members.

Black tenant farmers and their families were hungry and their children undernourished. Our investigation of collusion between the USDA food program and the agricultural industry eventually led to a class action suit in 1968 (*Peoples v. United States Department of Agriculture* 1970). Nonetheless, the Klan remained the ruling party in Wilcox County well into the end of the twentieth century. Jury panels were white. Lynchings continued. This was the code of injustice in south and southwest Alabama during Sessions’ twelve years as federal attorney general for the Southern District. Throughout his career, Sessions displayed his loyalties to the code of white supremacy.

The black belt counties of southwest Alabama were among the worst examples of the violent application of Jim Crow laws enforced by white power, racist plantation owners. The words “violent” and “racist” adequately describe the terrorist climate for black tenant farmers, especially young black males in southwest Alabama. Camden, Alabama has been memorialized in local histories and in a photographic essay book, *Down home: Camden, Alabama*, by the celebrated civil rights photographer Bob Adelman, in which he reflects, “As I photographed the people in the book, I tried to render them as vividly and precisely as possible. Now they seem like characters caught in a dream—part pleasurable fantasy of revered traditions, ante-bellum homes and plantations; and part the nightmare of racism and poverty. . . . The dream begins to dissolve” (1972: xlviii).

During his fourteen years as federal attorney general of Southern Alabama, Sessions demeaned his black associates, expressed hostility toward civil rights organizations and rights workers, and ignored complaints by black citizens who had been blocked from voting in their counties. He oversaw the executions of mentally and cognitively disabled people. He supported grossly unequal distribution of public funds, favoring private white schools over what later became predominately black public schools. These allegations were vetted and carefully covered by the media and in special reports (Baker 2017; Cohn 2017; Lapowsky and Greenberg 2016; Potok 2017; Serwer 2016; Zamost, Devine, and Noel 2016).

Most telling, however, was Sessions’ role in the federal investigation of a 1981 lynching of a 19-year-old African American man in Montgomery, Michael Donald. The investigation ultimately concluded that members of the Ku Klux Klan had savagely beaten and killed Donald and hung his body from a tree. Thomas Figures, an assistant US attorney in Alabama during the same time period, testified during the congressional hearings that Sessions tried to drop the investigation into the lynching of Mr. Donald (Kornbluth 1987; Serwer 2017). Today Sessions takes credit for the investigation, a political tactic of white washing. Meanwhile, the lynchings continued.

Black martyrs

While there were many reasons why Jeff Sessions should have been disqualified, my objections, based on public records and interviews with families in Selma and

Wilcox County, concern the failure of Sessions and his associates to investigate many other alleged “lynchings”—a term used today to refer to “summary executions,” or lynchings by other means. In the Selma civil rights museum and in the Selma public library are long lists of publicly recognized lynchings, many of which were never investigated, let alone prosecuted. In the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute in Selma, there is a wall memorizing the footsoldier and the black martyrs of the civil rights movement. In the course of our civil rights work and its aftermath, Kathy Veit and I can testify to the existence of three cases, which we encountered through personal relationships and serendipitously.

Ethel Brooks of Camden, Alabama (see Figure 2), died mysteriously when her car crashed on a bridge on a clear day in 1985. She was driving home to Coy from Camden, where she worked at an elementary school, as she did every day. The local police filed the case as a car accident, a story that no one in Coy believed. To this day they say that Brooks was forced into crashing at that bridge railing. I lived in the Brooks household during the summer of 1967 and worked with Ethel and her father, Jesse Brooks, both of whom were prominent local civil leaders in the 1960s. During the first week I spent there, a carload of white boys shot at Ethel and Jesse’s pick up truck, shouting racist epithets and warnings at them, and telling them to quit what they were doing. The bullet grazed Ethel’s head, and I washed and bandaged the wound. She warned that I would have to leave as among the threats to her, some were because she was keeping a “white n*****” in her house.



Figure 2: Ethel Brooks in 1965 Coy High School Yearbook.

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The brutal executions of two young Black men in Selma and Perry counties in 1979 came to Kathy Veit’s attention accidentally. A few years ago she began to look for a group of men who appeared in a compelling group photo she snapped in 1978

at the now defunct Selma Cotton Compression Company (see Figure 3). The men working on the dock of the compress were taking a break and they enjoyed having their photo taken. Veit wanted to know what had happened to these men over the years and how life had treated them since the end of the civil rights period that lasted just twelve years after the famous “Bloody Sunday” march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma in 1965. After many failed attempts, Veit located one of the men in the photo, Willie Shanks (see Figure 4). Shanks was living in a small home just a block away from the old Selma Cotton Compress.



Figure 3: The Selma Cotton Compress in 1978.
Photo by Kathy Veit.



Figure 4: Kathy Veit and Willie Shanks in Selma, Alabama, 2014.
Photo by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

Shanks looked at the 1978 photo with great interest and was able to identify all of his coworkers at the cotton compress where they had been employed. Of the eight men in the photo, the majority was dead, prematurely. He had stories to tell about each of them, but he focused on two of the men in the photo: Sammie Lee Johnson and Willie Nichols. According to Shanks, both men had been “lynched” in May 1979, just one year after the photo was taken. He shared this view with the official civil rights community in Selma (see Figure 5). In the photo, Shanks is the man standing on the left in white clothes. Sammie Lee Johnson is the sturdy man standing in a white tank top. Willie James Nichols is the little guy on the right, a gentle, religious, and hardworking man.

AL Perry Co	JOHNSON	Sammie Lee	1978	Nearly decapitated body found by rural road, after fired at
AL Selma	REEB	Rev. James	1965	Unitarian minister beaten by whites on a Selma Street. He
AL Tuskegee	YOUNGE, JR	Samuel Leamon	1966	Navy Vet, student. & civil rights activist, shot to death after
AS Selma	NICHOLS	Willie James	1978	Body of this gentle religious, hard working man found dead

Figure 5: Excerpt from Selma Library Archive of lynchings in Alabama.

At the time of the lynching, no one could understand why Nichols (known as the “Bible Man”) was killed and dumped in the Alabama River. Sammie Lee Johnson (according to Shanks) was kidnapped and murdered on the same day that he had a fight with his white “boss” at the cotton compress. He exchanged angry words and walked away from his shift. He disappeared that very night and his mutilated and virtually decapitated body was found on a country road along the border between Perry and Hale Counties. A death certificate was filed on May 4, 1979 (see Figure 6). It certifies the following: Sammie Lee Johnson died on May 4, 1979. He is a Black Male, 25 years old, who was born on January 7, 1954. He was never married. The Immediate Cause of Death was “Fractured Skull” and “Other internal Injuries.” An autopsy was made but was “not complete” and the cause of death remained “undetermined” (the choices were listed as accident, suicide, homicide). Sherrill N. Kirk, Dallas County Coroner, signed the death certificate. It was registered, without further details, by Doris L. Hughes on August 7, 1979. The funeral director, Elijah Rollins, who prepared Johnson’s mutilated body for viewing and burial, told Veit that Johnson was surely the victim of the local KKK, but he just did his best and never reported the crime. “It would be foolhardy,” he said, to do so.

Around the same time, the body of Willie Nichols, a buddy of Johnson, washed up from the banks of the Alabama River in Selma. His name is listed as a “civil rights martyr” in the Selma civil rights museum archives. But Nichols’ death records could not be found. The helpful Selma library archivist said that it appeared that all of Nichols’ records seemed to have “disappeared.” Relatives registered complaints but neither of the executions was ever investigated, let alone prosecuted, by the Office of the Attorney General for the Southern District of Alabama, despite the claims of relatives. And these three cases, stumbled upon by us—Ethel Brookes, Sammie Lee Johnson, and Willie Nichols—are only the tip of the iceberg, according to civil rights records and local histories of the victims’ families.

THE FRONT OF THIS DOCUMENT IS PINK. THE BACK OF THIS DOCUMENT IS BLUE AND HAS AN ARTIFICIAL WATERMARK. HOLD AT AN ANGLE TO VIEW

ALABAMA

Center for Health Statistics

18550

STATE OF ALABAMA
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

TIME OF DEATH IN PERMANENT TIME

DECLARED

USUAL RESIDENCE WHERE DECLARED LIVES OF DEATH IN PERMANENT TIME

PARENTS

CAUSE

IF NO PHYSICIAN WAS IN ATTENDANCE WHEN CERTIFICATE SHOULD BE COMPLETED BY THE LOCAL HEALTH OFFICER, JUDGE, OR OTHER

CERTIFICATION

INITIAL

THIS IS AN OFFICIAL CERTIFIED COPY OF THE ORIGINAL RECORD FILED IN THE CENTER OF HEALTH STATISTICS, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH, MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA. 2012-215-643-1

April 16, 2012

Catherine Melchan Donald
State Registrar of Vital Statistics

Figure 6: Death Certificate of Sammie Lee Johnson, May 4, 1979.

The stigma of place

Wilcox County to this day suffers the stigma of its history and reputation as a KKK stronghold. Erving Goffman (1963) identified the “stigma of place” as when one describes a Mexican American community as “tortilla flats,” or the inner city as a “hellhole” (as said by Trump), or the rust belt as a place where poor and unemployed rural people have been dumped. Any community can be stigmatized at particular times in its history and for very different reasons.

I suggest that Donald Trump seems to have spent his adult life fighting against his own stigma of place. This observation may explain some of his bravado, his crudity, and his bullying caricatures of people he sees as enemies, as so vividly described in “The hands of Donald Trump.” Although Trump was born and raised in a wealthy neighborhood, Jamaica Estates, it was still in Queens, a place seen in the mid-twentieth century as a cultural wasteland, an outlier borough that had no cachet and no right to be part of Greater New York City. In the PBS *Frontline* documentary *The choice 2016* (Kirk, Wiser, and Bennet 2016), the producers focus on Trump’s early years and on his desire to leave Queens behind and move his real estate business into Manhattan. Marie Brenner, an editor at *Vanity Fair*, comments in the documentary: “The Trump family had a huge house in Queens that they used to refer to as ‘Tara.’ It had nine bedrooms. It had columns. It was quite beautiful, but it was in Queens.” Queens was for losers. It was also where his father located his real estate business. Michael D’Antonio (2016), author of *The truth about Trump*, followed with this statement: “This was a very deep part of the Trump story. The family subscribes to a racehorse theory of human development, that they believe that there are superior people, and that if you put together the genes of a superior woman and a superior man, you get superior offspring” (Kirk, Wiser, and Bennet 2016). The same was true of the Trump brand. In the early 1970s, Donald Trump looked beyond Queens to Manhattan, but as a boorish outsider, he needed help. Tony Schwartz noted on *Frontline* that Trump “always had his eye on what he thought was a glamorous, Hollywood-ish life, and that was the life of Manhattan” (Kirk, Wiser, and Bennet 2016; see also Brown 2017) In the words of the documentary narrator, “During the day, he worked hard to do something his father never did, to break into Manhattan real estate.”

Trump may have tamed his Queens accent somewhat and taught his son, Barron, how to eat politely, but he retained the uncouth habits and tastes stereotypically associated, fairly or not, with working class Queens. Trump’s lewdness, his penchant for ridicule, cutting people down to size, and humiliating them in public are familiar scenes taken from the 1970s television sitcom *All in the family*. The show centered on Archie Bunker, a crude, ignorant, racist blue-color worker that came to represent everything about Queens that New York liberal elites reviled. Trump’s behaviors testify to a deeply insecure man who may indeed be just another Archie Bunker: love him or hate him, he’ll put on a grotesque freak show as the carnival huckster raising his stature by debasing those who threaten his obsessive but fragile sense of self.

Is Trump also waging a race war in America by his appointment of several cabinet members who, like Sessions, are unfriendly to the spirit and the law enshrined in the US Civil Rights Act of 1968? It certainly appears to be the case. James Baldwin, that wry and brilliant, often weary and sardonic expatriate to Paris, returned to the United States during the stirrings of the civil rights movement, as a witness to a failed society. Unlike his brothers Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Medgar Evers, who were executed for their political passions and dreams, Baldwin (1998) lived to tell the tale as a black witness to white America, forcing the country to face up to the lies we tell ourselves about being a moral leader of the world, a beacon of liberty, creativity, and prosperity. He rejected the idea of black people “getting their civil rights” as if it were a gift of the whites, a national culture that Baldwin saw as

stunted, emotionless, artificial, and phantasmagorical. In his documentary film on Baldwin, *I am not your negro*, Raoul Peck (Peck and Baldwin 2016) quotes a line from Baldwin's unfinished manuscript *Remember this house*. The "American racial problem," Baldwin writes, is "the disease that we must heal, or it will destroy us."

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Un autre pays? La haine raciale à l'ère de Trump: une période de mise à l'épreuve historique

Résumé : La confirmation controversée du choix de Trump pour la position de procureur général des États-Unis, le Sénateur Jeff Sessions, n'a que superficiellement mis en lumière l'indifférence complète de Sessions à l'égard des accusations d'exécutions sommaires de victimes pauvres et noires dans le sud-ouest de l'Alabama, durant son mandat de procureur fédéral de cette région. Durant les quatorze ans de son mandat, Sessions a été accusé d'humilier ses collègues noirs, d'exprimer de l'hostilité à l'égard des organisations pour les droits civiques et le droit des travailleurs, et d'ignorer les plaintes des citoyens noirs que l'on a empêché de voter dans certains comtés ruraux. Sessions fut à l'initiative de l'exécution de plusieurs personnes handicapées mentalement et cognitivement, et se positionna en faveur de la distribution très inégale de fonds publics, favorisant les écoles privées enseignant

à des élèves blancs au détriment d'écoles publiques enseignant à des élèves noirs. De plus, les rapports de militants locaux pour les droits civiques et les témoins de lynchages de martyrs noirs après l'époque de la lutte pour les droits civiques, des années 60 à 80, au sud-ouest de l'Alabama, n'ont fait l'objet d'aucune attention. Cet article s'appuie sur mon travail d'investigation et sur celui de mes collègues travaillant pour les droits civiques, un travail qui nous mena par hasard à trois cas probables d'attaques par des escadrons de la mort dans le sud-ouest de l'Alabama à la fin des années 70 et durant les années 80. Cet article évoque aussi la stigmatisation associée à certains lieux et son impact sur les gens qui vivent dans des communautés perçues comme en retard et dénuées de capital culturel et symbolique, tels que le quartier de Queens à New York où grandit Trump et les jeunes années de Jeff Sessions à Camden, Alabama.

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