

THE PROBLEM

The Spectacle of Suffering: How the Entertainment Industry Commodifies Black Trauma

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Research Question

When does empathy turn into voyeurism?

Thesis

The entertainment industry often commodifies Black trauma, transforming Black suffering into spectacle and contributing to audience desensitization toward systemic racial injustice.

Historical Context

From Public Spectacle to Digital Consumption

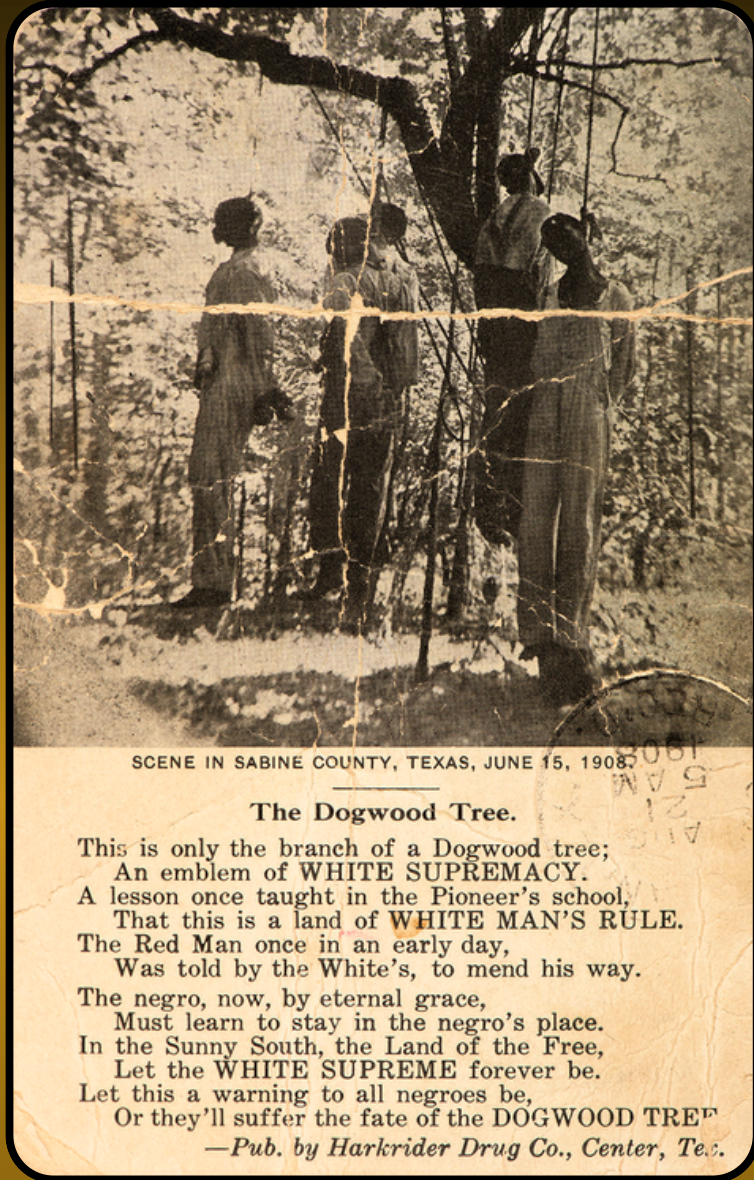
- Black suffering has historically been commodified through slavery, lynching spectacles, and racist entertainment.
- Lynching photographs were often circulated as postcards and public souvenirs.
- Modern media reproduces similar patterns through trauma-centered films and viral videos of Black death.
- This cycle risks normalizing violence while positioning audiences as spectators rather than agents of change.

Key Concept: The Consumptive Gaze

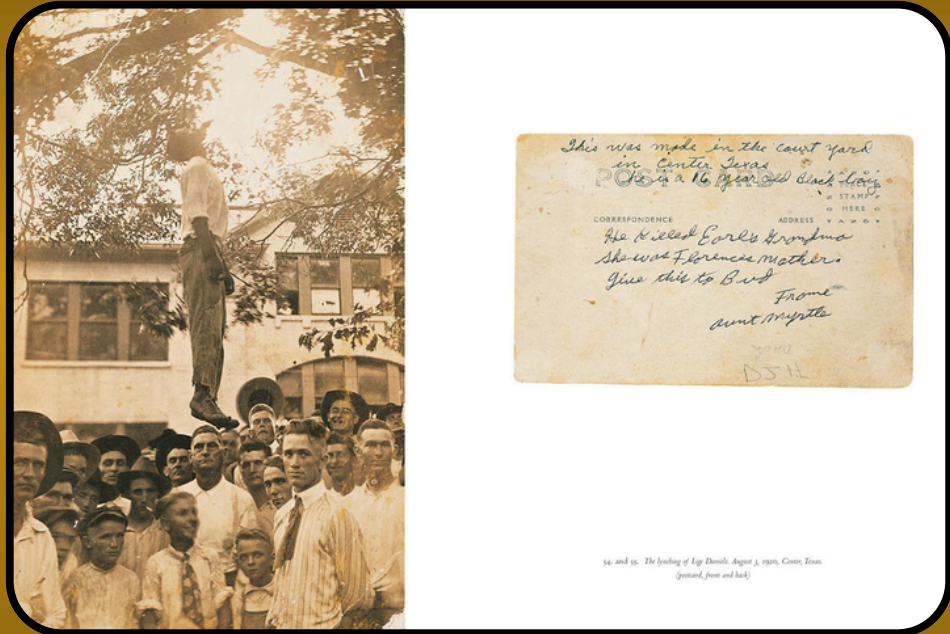
"There's a difference between a display of violence that is in some way responding to or highlighting a particular political moment, and the exhaustive reproduction of pain solely for the consumptive gaze of a (white) audience."

— Oluwatayo Alewole

Content Warning: The following page contains historical and contemporary images related to racial violence, lynching, and police brutality that some viewers may find disturbing. ⚠️



Lynching post card, 1908

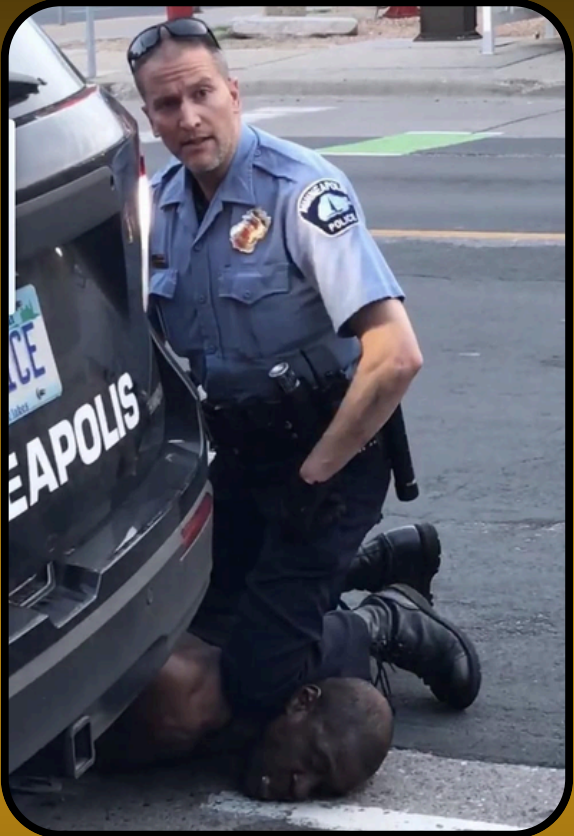


Lynching post card (front & back), 1908

The shooting of Ahmaud Arbery, 2020,



The murder of George Floyd, 2020



The murder of Sonya Massey, 2024



The murder of Michael Brown, 2014



From Lynching Postcards to Viral Videos

THE EVIDENCE

Literary Case Study: Friday Black and "Zimmer Land"

Trauma as Entertainment

- Adjei-Brenyah imagines a dystopian theme park where guests participate in racially violent scenarios under the guise of "conflict resolution."
- The park transforms Black suffering into a commercial attraction. This is reflective of real life and systemic issues.
- Through satire, the story critiques society's consumption of racial violence as entertainment.

Key Quote

"This place is built on the idea that if we just show people enough violence, maybe they will stop being violent" (Adjei-Brenyah).

Main Insight

"Zimmer Land" exposes how repeated exposure to Black suffering can blur the line between empathy and voyeurism.

Key Themes

Satire

Exposes the absurdity of profiting from racial trauma.

Desensitization

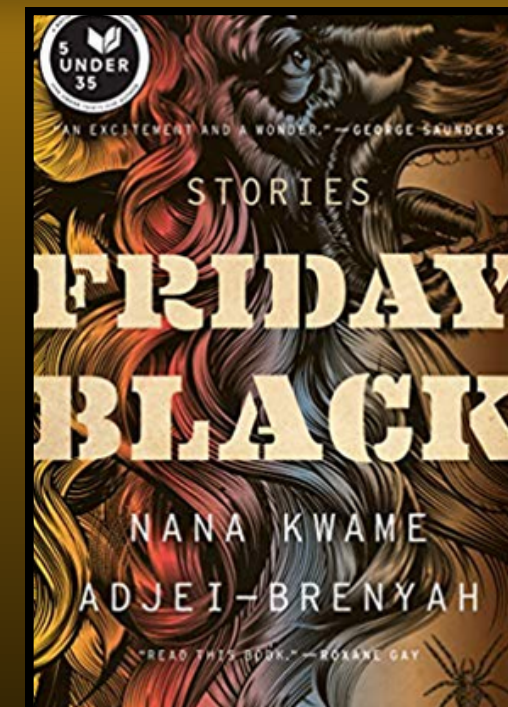
Guests become emotionally detached from violence.

Spectacle

Black suffering is transformed into entertainment.

Voyeurism

Audiences consume trauma without confronting its real-world consequences.



Beyond Trauma: Black Joy and Representation

Industry Examples: Film & Television

Common Trauma Narratives

- 12 Years a Slave
- Slavery narratives
- Police brutality dramas
- Award-season trauma films

Finding: Hollywood often centers Black suffering while underrepresenting Black joy, creativity, imagination, and everyday life.

Contemporary Counter-Narrative:

Sinners

- Addresses racism and historical oppression
- Centers Black culture, music, spirituality, community, and identity
- Demonstrates that Black stories can engage social issues without reducing characters solely to their trauma

Conclusion

While trauma-centered narratives can educate and preserve historical memory, they should not be the dominant form of Black representation. Representation becomes exploitation when Black life is viewed only through the prism of suffering.

Discussion Question

When does representation become exploitation?

Reflection Questions

- Can awareness and exploitation exist at the same time?
- What responsibility do audiences have when consuming traumatic media?
- How can creators tell stories about injustice without reducing Black life to trauma?
- What stories remain untold when suffering dominates representation?

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Thank You

Questions & Discussion