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Koritha Mitchell. *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 272 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03649-1.

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A Violence Outside the Door

In Koritha Mitchellâs *Living with Lynching*, we find a welcome addition to scholarship on one of Americaâs greatest shames. As Mitchell makes clear throughout this study, too often our historical reconstruction of the trauma and violence of lynching has been shaped by the perpetrators of the violence. While the exhibition and subsequent book of lynching photographs, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000), has made real for historians and the general public the grotesque nature of lynching, it has served to reify the lynch act in the mutilated black body. These photographs have come to dominate the discourse on lynching and in doing so have limited our understanding of the effects of lynching on the turn-of-the-century African American community. By moving away from photographs to dramatic interpretations, Mitchellâs book offers a new and essential perspective on lynching: the victimsâ families. Reorienting our perspective away from photographs, which define the victim as powerless and alone, Mitchell opens the door to understanding the broader and in some ways more devastating effect on the victimsâ families. In doing so, *Living with Lynching* provides an emphatic push to change how we understand, write about, and teach the phenomenon of lynching.

Mitchell is not strictly a historian and *Living with Lynching* employs both literary and theater studies to formulate its arguments. Mitchell contends that prior to 1930 âlynching dramaâ formed its own genre of African American theater. These one-act plays were published in major black and white periodicals and performed by amateur theater troupes. More significantly, Mitchell suggests that these plays were performed in black households creating âembodied practices of black belongingâ (p. 14). Lynching dramas emphasized the domestic nature of the victimâs family over the lynch act. In all the plays covered by Mitchell the lynching occurs off-stage or prior to the dramaâs beginning. As audience members, then, we are forced to grapple with the effects of the lynching on the victimâs family. These lynching dramas make clear the ways in which African Americans understood that black household success made them targets for white violence and the ways in which this violence un-

dermined and destroyed the domestic ideal.

Living with Lynching looks at ten plays by five women and two men written between 1914 and 1928. These plays are: Angelina Weld GrimkÃ©, *Rachel* (1914); Alice Dunbar-Nelson, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918); Mary Burrill, *Aftermath* (1919); Georgia Douglas Johnson, *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Blue Blood* (1926), *Safe* (1929), and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930); Myrtle Smith Livingston, *For Unborn Children* (1926); G. D. Lipscomb, *Frances* (1925); and Joseph Mitchell, *Son-Boy* (1928). Divided into two parts, *Living with Lynching* begins with both methodological and historiographical salvos. Chapter 1 challenges historians to think about the ways the archive (printed word) is preferred over repertoire (bodily acts). Mitchell contends that lynching dramas developed alternative public spaces that âencouraged amateur performance in private venuesâ and offered a âtraining manual for black communitiesâ (p. 39). When the one-act plays were performed, often in living rooms, family members embodied the positive roles of soldiers, lawyers, and mothers/wives. Chapter 2 focuses on GrimkÃ©âs path to dramatist, reviews *Rachel*, and suggests the ways domestic space became convention in lynching drama. Mitchell demonstrates how *Rachel* emphasized the effect of a lynching on the black family, particularly the way lynching led to what Mitchell provocatively calls âde-generationâ (p. 71). That is, the ongoing legacy of lynching is the removal of a generation within a family. With an emphasis on home life, Mitchell concludes part 1 by suggesting that historians reappraise the effect of racial terrorism on the articulation of black family life in the pre-World War II era.

Part 2 of *Living with Lynching* examines five stock characters found in lynching dramas: the black soldier, the black lawyer, the mother/wife, the pimp, and the coward. For Mitchell, the black soldier represents the matrix of gender and racial definition. The soldiers and soon-to-be-soldier in Dunbar-Nelsonâs *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and Burrillâs *Aftermath* suggest the complicated nature of black manhood in the South. The soon-to-be solider in *Mine Eyes* seems to recognize, if only unconsciously, that black soldiering would not lead to equal rights and respect. In the case of Burrillâs *Aftermath*, Mitchell makes clear the constrained nature of black manhood: demonstrate your masculinity and manliness by defending your family and face white violence or mask your manhood to save your family from the consequences of your death. By reading and performing these dramas, Mitchell argues, African Americans debated the value of patriotism and the meanings and consequences of black manhood.

With the end of the Great War, the black lawyer replaced the soldier as the âcenterpiece of conversation about identity and citizenshipâ (p. 114). Taking Johnsonâs *A Sunday Morning in the South* and Livingstonâs *For Unborn Children*, Mitchell contends that the figure of the black lawyer made clear the gulf between Americaâs legal ideals and the reality of black life. In both plays, the act of lynching confirms not black criminality but âthe nationâs willingness to reject black testimony and deny black citizenshipâ (p. 122). The lynching of a lawyer and an aspiring one in these dramas demonstrates the power of the black rapist myth to make any African American a criminal no matter their social standing.

In the figure of the mother/wife, Mitchell returns to the matrix of sexuality, gender, race, and citizenship. Johnsonâs remaining dramas create a complex picture of sexual power in the South. Some black women remain silent about white sexual violence in order to preserve the black household; others use their relationships with powerful white men to secure safety for their family members; and in what is the most affecting drama, some mothers choose to destroy their children rather find them in the hands of a lynch mob. As Mitchell rightfully notes, in all these plays âthe black mother/wife registers the words and actions of women who negotiated the trauma of racial violence by trying to minimize its impact on their familiesâ (p. 174).

In the last chapter, Mitchell explores two male dramatistsâ rendering of lynching. In these plays, she argues, two archetypes emerge: the pimp and the coward. While Mitchell does a good job arguing for the dialogic nature of male-authored lynching dramas, her analysis is unsatisfactory. Far from being a âpimp,â the protagonist in Lipscombâs drama is a complicated character and Mitchellâs use of the word âpimpâ distracts from the argument.

Living with Lynching does many things well. Historians will note that Mitchell has joined Davarian Baldwin (*Chicagoâs New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* [2007]) in geographically decentering the Harlem Renaissance. Her emphasis on a cadre of Washington DC playwrights makes clear the national flourishing of black arts and letters in the interwar period. Moreover, Mitchellâs choice to focus on lynching dramas as a product of the black community that reaffirmed its values and goals pushes historical analysis away from a simple interpretation of black cultural production as a âprotest artâ in response to white oppression. Too often black cultural production is viewed

through the lens of repression, in which the cultural product is taken as an automatic form of resistance. However, as Mitchell shows, African Americans chose to focus their artistic energies on the affirmation of their own culture to which *whites* responded. As noted earlier, the focus on the effects of lynching on black families provides a holistic understanding of the lynch act and the ways in which it had an impact on the formation of the black family. Lastly, her discussion and valuation of ârepertoireâ alongside the traditional archive continues the methodological development of the field.

Despite these successes there are a few problems. Mitchell tends to overly foreground the theorists and scholars who have influenced her. Such excessive foregrounding within the text distracts the reader from what is excellent analysis. Moreover, while Mitchell is right to note that these lynching dramas were not simply protest art, she tends to overstate the dramasâ impact on the black community. A number of these plays never made it to print in their initial years, leading one to wonder about the extent of their influence. Lastly, Mitchell argues that the ability for everyday African Americans to perform these one-act dramas helped to formulate embodied practices of black belonging. For instance, she contends that *Blue Blood* âempowered African Americans to question the mainstream insistence that black women existed only as whores and mammiesâ (p. 156). However, most African Americans already knew the fallacy of such stereotypes and did not need a lynching drama to demonstrate it. It is likely that such plays had a greater impact on white audiencesâ perceptions of African Americans. But this would mean reading them as protest art, something Mitchell chooses not to do. *Living with Lynching*, then, like many works that examine cultural artifacts on the margins, struggles with questions of reception.

Living with Lynching is a well-written, well-researched piece of scholarship that will hold great value for historians studying black life in the interwar period, the Harlem Renaissance, and the phenomenon of lynching. It pushes beyond the frozen in time image of the mutilated black body to the impact of lynching on the black household. *Living with Lynching* makes clear how African Americans in this period combated stereotyped images by reinforcing and performing âhow they saw themselvesâ and âwho they believed themselves to beâ (p. 199).

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