

Title: Lynching and the Storied Violence of Adolescence

Abstract: Author Richard Wright understood lynching through the lens of white hostility and the great sense of threat he felt regularly throughout his life. In *Black Boy* (1945) when he explains, “The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness,” he speaks to the specter of a lynching, its promise of extrajudicial violence and death, and how it acts not just materially upon a body but through stories, the tellings and retellings of this promise, which impact audiences deeply, if not just as violently. This paper contends that not only do these stories, now often digitized, disseminated, and digested in full-color, remain heartbreakingly prevalent, the key audience of these stories is prominently adolescent—especially as the real-life characters-cum-real-life victims remain teens and children themselves. Because lynchings, for surviving observers, communities, and especially young people, have long existed as distinctly public texts of terror and intimidation, it would be a disservice to not employ the tools afforded children’s literary scholarship in hopes of gleaning some potential pathways forward. As part of a larger inquiry, this paper aims to, firstly, put forth a definition of lynching that reconciles its complex textual and narrative features with the activism and political engagement each incident engenders. Secondly, this paper, by use of contemporary literary examples such as Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*, explores how the proposed definition refashions our conversations about adolescence when, as Wright suggests, lynchings are often stories felt at the “deepest layers of consciousness.” What then should we make of the adolescent Black consciousness of today?