



Mitchell's Musings: 12-15-13: History Lesson

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Note: Last week's musing was mistakenly dated 12-23-13, i.e., a week ahead. So I am backdating this one to the missing date of 12-15-13. There was also a misdating of the musing for 12-2-13 as 12-4-13. In keeping with the theme of the musing topic below, however, I won't try to alter history to correct that one.
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During the communist period in Eastern Europe, I remember hearing about a joke told in one country – I can't remember which one – that played off the communist theory or ideology that history would eventually produce some sort of utopian, cooperative society. The joke also played off the tendency to rewrite the past as particular figures - from Stalin on down - went into and out of favor. The joke went something like "the future is fixed; it's the past that keeps changing."

Actually, however, the tendency to change history was not/is not confined to Eastern Europe. It is a virtually universal temptation, particularly when the history involved was unpleasant. There was substantial rewriting of history in the U.S. after the Civil War. You can see it in Hollywood depictions of the south ranging from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) – which glorified the Ku Klux Klan¹ and helped to reestablish it – to *Gone with the Wind* (1939) - with its romantic images of slavery.²

Although the tendency to rewrite history is ubiquitous, at least the practice acknowledges that there is a history to rewrite. Nowadays, however, there is a tendency to pretend that either unpleasant history didn't happen or just to be ignorant of it. Recently, *Inside Higher Ed*, an online journal of events in higher education, ran the following brief article:

Sacramento State Leaders Question Art Based on Lynching

December 17, 2013

Alexander Gonzalez, president of California State University at Sacramento, has asked for a review of policies on the public display of art, following a controversial student artwork on the theme of lynching. In the piece, two white students were suspended from a tree in a way that made it appear they had been lynched. The idea was to present lynching without black victims. In a note to the campus, Gonzalez said that he does not think that the students' intent was to incite people, but that they had upset many. "I think that as members of a very diverse university community, it is our responsibility to always be mindful and respectful of cultural sensitivity in our pursuits and activities," he said.³

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-znj3TTCFM>

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZ7r2OVu1ss>

³ <http://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2013/12/17/sacramento-state-leaders-question-art-based-lynching>

The art project itself – apparently some kind of performance art – can be seen at <http://thecampusculture.com/2013/12/15/artist-lynching-display-on-campus-was-art-meant-to-bring-awareness-to-social-justice-and-racial-inequality/>. The creator of the project responded to President Gonzalez as follows:

I am the artist Christina Edwards, a current senior at Sacramento State University. This is my response to the President's Update letter dated December 14, 2013. On December 4th 2013 on the Sac State campus I created a performance/installation [*sic*] as part of my series entitled Restitution. Although my art was displayed on campus property my self-expression in artistic form is not representative of the beliefs and ideals held by the University as an institution. Additionally the volunteers were chosen solely for artistic purpose.

I followed every procedure that was made known to me and given verbal approval from facility services in order to create this visual installation [*sic*] safely on campus. I took all necessary safety precautions and utilized a professional person to create all props used. Additionally, the ropes and harnesses remained visible at all times to insure the safety of the volunteers and reduce the assumption that there was any real immediate danger. I choose to express my art in a way that resonates with me, but I did not intend to offend anyone in or outside of the project. The purpose of this performance was to bring to light social injustices and the issues of inequality that impact me and my community as a whole. As a young African American Woman, I feel that not enough has changed in society in terms of racial and social equality that allows for true equal opportunities.

The goal of my art was to capture the community's response while witnessing a visual display of the historical fact and tragedy of the process used to murder African American males in the United States of America, by way of lynching...⁴

There are some history lessons here that perhaps President Gonzalez is either not aware of, or not acknowledging. In particular, the use of whites in place of blacks in discussion of lynching goes back to the *Gone with the Wind* era. In the film *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), Hollywood did make an anti-lynching statement. However, the statement was disguised. Rather than place the film in the south, the story makers made it a western.⁵ And the victims are whites (one is Mexican) who are hanged for stealing horses, a crime of which they are in fact innocent. The only hint that the story might have anything to do with the south is that one of the ringleaders in the lynching is a southern Civil War veteran. (When he discovers the hanged men were innocent, he commits suicide.) A political backdrop of the film was southern opposition to various anti-lynching laws in Congress at the time.⁶ You didn't have to be very clever to see through the disguise.

Apart from the ignorance of, or non-acknowledgment of, the artistic history that was revealed at Sacramento State University, there is also ignorance of events in California that occurred not all that far from Sacramento involving the lynching of two white men:

⁴ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1E2V4tZ3DxUhXPtVfq1t87mEbWg7yXzZIFNGaURwNlcw/edit#>

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIDfzCzdjcs>

⁶ In 2005, the U.S. Senate apologized for not passing an anti-lynching law in the earlier era.

*“(T)he people of San Jose, CA decided to take the law into their own hands. Thomas Thurmond and John Holmes were being held in connection with the kidnapping and murder of 22 year old department store heir Brooke Hart. The townsfolk, already enraged by the nature of the crime, whipped themselves into a frenzy when rumor spread that the two men were going to try an insanity defense. On the night of November 26,(1933,) they stormed the jail, broke down the door, and took the two men. The crowd brought them to a nearby park, where they (hanged) each man from a tree. No one was ever prosecuted for the lynching. In fact, **California Governor James Rolph, who had refused the Sheriff's request for National Guard troops to hold off the mob, praised the action and promised to pardon anyone charged with the lynching.**”⁷*

Subsequently, newsreels reported on the event. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLRMfyI5KEI>. But locally, the event was broadcast live on the radio in San Jose. Note that the local undersheriff states in the newsreel that his officers refrained from shooting at the mob because of the presence of women and children in it.⁸ While the art project at Sacramento State may have been disturbing to some, photos of the actual San Jose lynching are far more disturbing. [Caution before you click.]

<http://chewhatyoucallyourpasa.blogspot.com/2012/08/california-lynching.html>

It is often said that the only lesson from history is that we don't learn anything from history. But if we don't even know our history, we don't even have the option of not learning from it.

⁷ <http://armedrobbery.blogspot.com/2010/11/this-day-in-crime-history-november-26.html>

⁸ Note that in the case of a second lynching described in the newsreel which took place of a black in Missouri, the governor in that state was reported to be outraged by the event, in contrast to California's Gov. Rolph.