

Review of *A Killing in This Town*

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“Earl Thomas was a dead nigger. And he well knew it. . . .

It was ritual in the town of Bullock, Mississippi. On the eve of a boy’s manhood, thirteen, he must become a member. He must go out to a nigger’s house and call him out of it. He’s got to tell the others, abed his horse, to hitch the nigger up to the pulley, hands tied. Feet tied. And drag him, drag the nigger through the woods, until his torso is bloody and his head and body are bloody.

Until he loses an eye.

Hoover Pickens’s boy, Adam, was now coming of age.

He’d have to find him a nigger to drag.”

As the lines above, which open and close the first chapter of Olympia Vernon’s *A Killing in This Town* (2006), suggest, Vernon immediately makes the reader aware of the *what* of this novel—Adam Pickens has come of age; he must find him a nigger to drag; Earl Thomas is that nigger, and he knows it. Yet we are compelled as readers, first by the story, then by the language, to keep reading and to keep thinking about the *why* and the *how* that might at least begin to explain the fictional world that is Vernon’s Bullock, Mississippi.

Inspired, at least in part, by the 1998 dragging death of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper, Texas, by three white men (two well-known white supremacists, who received the death penalty for the murder, and a third man, who was sentenced to life in prison), *A Killing in This Town* is a highly structured investigation into the cycle of racism and violence all too characteristic of the old (and the not-so-old) South. At the center of the novel are the intimately connected black and white families who populate the small town of Bullock. There is Earl Thomas, whose role as the only pastor in the town has ensured that he will be the target of the next dragging; his wife, Emma New, who rejects Earl’s belief that God sent him to “take it”; their widowed friend Sonny Willow, whose husband Curtis was the victim of the last dragging; Gill Mender, the man who “called out” Curtis Willow and who has now returned to Bullock to redeem himself; Adam Pickens, the young boy who is about to come of age and whom Gill intends to save; Adam’s father, Hoover Pickens, and the other white supremacists, most of whom are dying of an unknown lung disease Earl Thomas tries to warn them of; and these men’s wives, who not only support their husbands’ racist agendas but who participate willingly in the ritual. Lenora Bullock, for instance, is not only the Klan seamstress; she is also the reason Curtis Willow is called out.

In a scene that harkens back to Richard Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Curtis encounters Lenora after he has taken a swim in the river. Unlike the river scene in “Big Boy Leaves Home,” however, the scene in this novel narrates, explicitly rather than implicitly, the sexual implications that materialize when a naked black male body encounters a white female body: “he had come from the river—naked and alarming—the emaciated, hungry stream of the Mississippi dripped down the lead of his penis” (166).

Vernon's white female, unlike Wright's, also actively engages the black male: "With her bare hand, Lenora Bullock unbuttoned her blouse, the nipple erect and protruding, and touched him. The Mississippi dripped down her sternum, onto the flesh, and hung on the territory of her nipple." Smelling the "powder of Caucasia," in the same way the speaker in Jean Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia" sees in a white woman's braided hair the coils of a lyncher's rope, Curtis rejects her, and she yells out, "Nigger, you're dead." And in a moment reminiscent of that of Emmett Till's white woman accuser, Lenora runs through the woods and screams, "A nigger, he whistled."

To be sure, Vernon's novel is substantially more than a mere reinterpretation of familiar tropes or a simple act of signifying on antecedent texts. In fact, it redirects both (tropes and texts) by transcending their limits and then by reminding us of the ways in which white masculinity is all too often contingent upon the suppression of black masculinity and, correspondingly, that the preservation of so-called "white female purity" as justification for lynching is as false as the myth of the American Adam, whom Adam Pickens can surely be seen to represent. The only way, then, to confront both issues as myth is to force a coming together of black and white masculinity, which we see by the end of the text when Gill enlists Earl Thomas to ensure that the cycle of violence that is literally eating away at the town (the men who work at the Pauer Plant are all dying slowly and painfully as the unknown lung disease Earl tries to warn them of destroys their bodies) finally comes to an end.

As is the case with Vernon's first two novels—*Eden* (2002) and *Logic* (2004)—*A Killing in This Town* comes to readers straight from Vernon's thoughts and pen. In this way, the novel suffers from a certain randomness of development that is likely to frustrate the reader who expects to find a lucidly outlined and logically progressive, even if modernist, plot. Indeed, most of Vernon's writing could benefit from more narrative discipline. Not so paradoxically, however, is the fact that it is through this rejection of narrative discipline and, conversely, through a commitment to a kind of raw artistry that the novel achieves its authenticity. Thus, even as too many questions go unanswered, and we still know too little about the characters, and despite the fact that the novel forsakes plot for narrative consciousness, ultimately *A Killing in This Town* can be easily situated among the most thoughtful interrogations of just how intricate the relationship between black masculinity and white masculinity really is and how lynching as a violent act and as a literary trope highlights this relationship.

The strength of Vernon's writing rests in her skillful engagement with symbolism and imagery, in the structural innovations her fiction undertakes, and in her uncanny ability to allow language rather than plot to drive her narratives. In this regard, *A Killing in This Town* is no exception. For all the work a reader must do to enter and to reside temporarily in Bullock, Mississippi, she is rewarded with an evolving thoughtfulness about new ways of seeing and being that refuse to sit by idly and allow another killing in that town.