

## A Conversation between the Artist and Stephanie Dinkins

On January 19, 2008, I visited Karina Aguilera Skvirsky in her midtown Manhattan studio. The following is an excerpt from our spirited conversation about her new body of work on lynching. Her perspective on this violent, often suppressed, aspect of American history is unique.

**Stephanie Dinkins (SD):** What inspired you to begin a project about lynching?

**Karina Aguilera Skvirsky (KAS):** I met Sherrilyn Iffil at the MacDowell Colony in 2005. She was writing *On the Courthouse Lawn*, which has since been published.<sup>1</sup> The book focuses on a group of lynchings that happened on the Eastern shore of Maryland in the 1930s. I became interested in this history because it dissolved the notion

that lynchings only happened in the deep South and because I summered on the Eastern shore and grew up in Maryland but had no knowledge of this history.

**SD:** How did you begin this project?

**KAS:** The historic newspaper clippings describing the Maryland lynchings were a point of departure. I noticed that depending on which newspaper you read, the accounts of the lynchings were very different. *The Afro-American* and the *Baltimore Sun*, Maryland city papers, and national papers, like *The New York Times*, often reported lynchings differently. At times it was difficult to know if you were reading about the same event. I started thinking about tracking down the places where the lynchings I read about had occurred, the history of these now non-descript places, and the idea of the “loaded site.”

**SD:** Did you talk to anyone who knew about the lynching history of the sites you photographed?

**KAS:** While I was researching the exact locations where the lynchings had occurred, I asked a number of people I saw in the area if they had heard about the lynchings. Many people from the black community seemed to know about the lynchings. Those I met in the white community were often ignorant of the lynchings.

**SD:** Do you think the black community uses lynching stories as a mechanism for keeping control—passing down the history so that their young people understand what was, and still could be, possible for black people in those towns?

**KAS:** I don’t know for sure. But I would think it was both protective and a way to remember. It reminded the black communities in this area, all over the state, what happened historically.

**SD:** Did you discover any ideas about why the white community did not know about the lynchings?

**KAS:** When I asked whites about this history they were often too embarrassed to speak about it. And, we’re talking about places like Chrisfield where over 2,000 people went to visit James Reed’s body the day after and cut off pieces of him as souvenirs. It is so violent. How can that memory not be recorded publicly—memorialized in some way.

**SD:** So, it’s a kind of collective amnesia. People going to see a lynched body after the fact. It was not even blind mob mentality. It was people wanting to be a part of the action and wanting to have something to commemorate their attendance at the big event. — like buying a Superbowl T-shirt.

**KAS:** Yes, like the postcards from *Without Sanctuary*.<sup>2</sup> I was shocked to learn that many of the lynching images were used for postcards or souvenir photographs. People casually sent out postcards with captions describing their participation and enjoyment. at the event.

**SD:** Yes, I was also shaken by the fact that most of the images were postcards. Those images were made to disseminate information in a nonchalant way. Yet as time passed, the shame of the community that carried out the lynching became so great that no one wants to talk about it.

**KAS:** And all of those places are still there. We look at the violence of the lynchings, without thinking “these are places that we walk through every day.” When you think about *Without Sanctuary*, lynching is something that we can say happened a long time ago that doesn’t connect to our lives now. But those places are still there. That’s our country. That’s our history. That is, I feel, the power of place.

**SD:** Place, can be a very powerful influence especially when it carries all that unacknowledged history. Are the lynching sites altered now?

**KAS:** Some are altered. Some are the same.

**SD:** Are the sites marked? The lynchings memorialized?

**KAS:** No! Of course not.

**SD:** So, you are dealing with a very complex history. A lot of larger American issues stem from such suppressed histories. But you can’t just tuck it them away. We need to deal with our entire history.

**KAS:** Yes. But how do you start a dialogue about lynching? Perhaps, you can neutralize it to some

extent by talking about the place where it happened. There has got to be a way we can acknowledge it, without saying, "Your great-grandfather did this."

**SD:** Without pointing a blatant finger at people so that they automatically turn their backs on the whole idea?

**KAS:** Exactly. I mean, not that I wouldn't want to do that. At some level, I do want to do that.

**SD:** There are many people who would say, "We need to point a finger, and that's all there is to it. Make them listen, acknowledge the real toll of lynching, and take responsibility for their actions." The reparations movement is about just that. Is that what you are trying to do with these images? Start a conversation about the unspoken events that still stifle our progress toward becoming a truly consolidated nation?

**KAS:** I am really interested in that. Sherrilyn Iffil and I had many conversations about how to address the history of lynching. Photographing sites and making them public is a way of memorializing them. There has been a lot of work that responds to the horrors of lynching. I didn't want my work to be impersonal. I wanted to explore my connection to these lynching sites.

**SD:** Artists often present horrific images in a blatant way, which frightens many people. Connecting the imagery to personal experience is interesting. It allows viewers to investigate a history that is embedded in the sites—but not shared on a cultural, visible, or educational level—in a way that invites consideration. Is that what you are trying to do, carve a space of information that allows people to come to a place of knowledge and draw their own conclusions?

**KAS:** That is what I am hoping for. I am trying to put it in the context of where I grew up, more or less: my backyard.

**KAS:** The second part of my project is photographs of the Mason-Dixon Line. It originally had nothing to do with the Civil War. It was established because of a territorial dispute between two families, the Calvert's of Maryland and the Penn's of Pennsylvania, which occurred during the pre-Revolutionary period. The stones that mark the Mason-Dixon Line are from the 1700's.

**SD:** Are the markers still actually there?

**KAS:** Many of them are. Some are publicly identified; some are gated off and protected while others depend on the good will of the property owners. But most people are unaware of the history behind them except that they are dividing North and South. It's interesting that this border dispute between two families became the line of demarcation for a much larger American story.

**SD:** Lynching and slavery happened on both sides of that line. How does this knowledge feed your perception of yourself as a Southerner?

**KAS:** I grew up in Washington, D.C. People say D.C. is in the South but I think, no way, D.C. is not south, Virginia is south. It's a weird safety thing. You think, I'm not from the South. That history doesn't pertain to me, or my family

**SD:** Right, it's a way of insulating oneself from the history around you. A way of saying I am not a like them; don't count me in that.

**KAS:** And that is what is so funny, Maryland is not that different from Virginia. There are a lot of commonalities when you scratch the surface and look at the record; lynchings happened in Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia, and ... Maine.

**SD:** I read Robert S. Mattison's essay about your work. He comments on the character of historical reconstruction as it relates to the visual image, place, and narrative. What is your view on the character of historical reconstruction in your work.

**KAS:** My work is concerned with historical deconstruction. I want to examine and analyze history. When you show landscape photographs without any context, they can be romanticized. I want to be very specific about the research I used—by actually showing it. The black-and-white photographs are the third element of my project. I photographed the lynching articles in a dilapidated, circa 1970s, institutional looking space.

**SD:** To show that the work stems from an evolving public discourse with multiple points of view?

**KAS:** Yes. I'm interested in that discourse—that it's available. We think of history as a linear pattern, and not a discourse. But there was a discourse. History chooses a point of view. I show that there were divergent viewpoints in different communities, by bringing in my research materials together. I am interested in visually showing my footnotes. The source material can be understood as evidence or proof.

**SD:** It brings up the idea of photograph as truth. But you have come to the idea that -- there was the printed word, and I'm going to photograph it. There is no full truth in this instance, so it becomes a proof of multiple things—not only that these things happened...

**KAS:** ...But that they were thought about and discussed in different ways. Rather than the photograph

being the evidence, it's the sum of its parts, and so the evidence shifts depending on which account you were reading at the time...

**SD:** ...which text you ascribe to. In a way, you're using truth as a base material and creating fictions around it to make it visible...again.

Stephanie Dinkins is an interdisciplinary artist whose work explores value and visibility through an image-based art practice and Associate Professor of Art at Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, New York. She lives and works in New York.

Notes

1 Ifill is professor of law, University of Maryland School of Law. The book is *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Books, 2007).

2 *Witness*, an exhibition of postcards and souvenir photographs of lynchings in the south from 1890 and 1930, opened at Roth Horowitz Gallery in Manhattan [Jan. 13–Feb. 12, 2000] simultaneous with the publication of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. This illustrated 209-page exhibition catalogue of photographs from the James Allen and John Littlefield collection, essays by James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack, was published by Twin Palms Publishers. The exhibition, re-titled *Without Sanctuary*, opened several months later at the New-York Historical Society (March 14 – Oct. 1).