

Lynching and Dehumanization

Overview

Anti-lynching activist [Ida B. Wells-Barnett](#) recognized lynching as an attack not only against individuals, but as a dehumanizing act of mob violence against the ‘peoplehood’ of African Americans. Thus, whenever possible, Wells named the victims of racist violence and told their stories. In this lesson, students will consider how racial violence, systemic racism, and dehumanization are interwoven. With this framework in mind, they will review [A Red Record](#) with a focus on the individual lives that were impacted, and continue to be impacted, due to the history of lynching.

Essential/Compelling Questions

- In what ways does dehumanization connect to racial violence and systemic racism?
- Despite the difficulty in doing so, why is it imperative to face the hard history of lynching and acknowledge the *individual lives* that were impacted, and continue to be impacted today, because of these actions?

Grades

8-12

Materials

- Excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, optional
- Projector, computers, and internet access

Duration

40+ minutes (varies depending on amount of discussion time provided)

Preparation

- Students should have a foundational understanding regarding the history of lynching. See the Equal Justice Initiative’s teacher’s guide [here](#) for comprehensive units on teaching about lynching, racial terror and the legacy of such. (Download the PDF at the bottom of the page in the “For Educators” section.)
- Ideally, students will have already been introduced to the [A Red Record](#) website prior to this lesson; see “An Introduction to A Red Record”
- While this lesson deals with sensitive topics of race and violence, it is important for students to explore such “hard history” to ensure they understand the implications of our past and are empowered to address the challenges of the present. In order to study such topics effectively and safely, teachers must have established a safe classroom community with clear expectations of respect, open-mindedness, and civil conversation. See [Carolina K-12’s “Activities” section of the Database of K-12 Resources](#) for ways to ensure a classroom environment conducive to the effective exploration of sensitive and controversial issues. Teachers should also consult Carolina K-12’s [“Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom.”](#)

Procedure

The Meanings of Names

1. As a warmup, prompt students to think about their name and what they know about it by jotting down answers to the questions below. Explain that in a moment, they will be getting into small groups and sharing what their name means to them and/or what they know about it.
 - What is your full name and how did you get your name? Do you know who named you?
 - Were you named after anyone? (a famous person, a family member, etc.)

- Does your name have cultural or familial significance? Or is there a story about your name (funny, sentimental, etc.)? Explain.
- In what ways do you identify with your name? What does it mean to you and your identity?
 - **Teacher Note:** It is quite possible that some of your students may not know the origin of their name or who named them. It is important teachers be sensitive to the backgrounds of all students and tailor (or omit) the activity to best suit your particular classroom community. Teachers may want to let students know up front that if they do not know their name's history or any significance to their name, it is alright. They should just think about what their name means to them, if they identify with it or not and why, etc.

2. OPTIONAL: Once students have had ample time to think, review expectations for respectful sharing, divide students into small groups and instruct them to share for 2-3 minutes each about their name and what it means to them. Afterwards, debrief what they learned about one another as a whole-class:

- What kinds of things did you learn about one another's names and backgrounds? (encourage students to be specific; for example, "I learned that Erin is named after her grandmother, who she loves a lot...")
- Did you find that you had any thing in common with anyone in your group, either regarding your feelings towards your name, similarities in your family, cultural connections, etc.? Explain.
- Although names are often the first thing we learn about one another, in what ways might they represent deeper meaning and experiences? In what ways might a name reflect a person's family history or culture?
- Why do you think names are important to so many people?
- How do you feel when someone doesn't call you by your name, pronounces your name wrong, calls you the wrong name, teases your name, etc. and why?

➤ **NOTE:** Teachers with limited time can skip step #2 and instead ask for a few student volunteers to share about their names then discuss their thoughts on the importance of names as a whole class.

3. Discuss with students how names connect us as humans. We all have one, and they usually have some level of meaning to us, often very important meaning. Yet using them in the wrong way, whether weaponizing them (i.e., using a name as an insult or changing someone's name with malice or disregard - or simply writing or pronouncing them incorrectly - can serve to dehumanize a person. Ask students to explain their understanding of dehumanization and other ways people have been/can be dehumanized.

OPTIONAL: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"

4. Read out loud or provide students with a copy of an excerpt (to be read individually or in reading partners) from the book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. (The excerpt starts with the third paragraph of Chapter 16, "Mrs. Viola Cullinan was a plump woman who lived in a three-bedroom house somewhere behind the post office..." and ends at the end of the chapter.) Set up the excerpt by explaining that the narrator, Marguerite, is a young black woman growing up in the 1940s. She took a job as a housekeeper for an elderly white woman by the name of Mrs. Cullinan. Tell students that you want them to focus on what happens regarding Marguerite's name. Also preface the reading by warning students that there is some strong language in the passage as well as racial slurs. Remind students it disrespectful and considered hate speech to use such words and that they are doing so within class in order to explore and learn from this history. After reading the passage aloud, discuss:

- What did you learn about Marguerite based on this excerpt? What happened regarding her name?
- Why did it upset Marguerite that her name was being pronounced incorrectly? How is this an aspect of dehumanization?
- Based on this situation, how would you describe and characterize Marguerite?
- What periods of history have people's names been disregarded and/or disrespected? (Teachers should lead students in considering periods such as the Holocaust, Slavery, Civil War, Jim Crow, etc.)

- Considering the periods of slavery and Jim Crow, why do you think people purposefully changed, disregarded, or otherwise disrespected the names of Black people?

5. Close the discussion by summarizing what students have hopefully established: that names are important, they are part of one’s identity and humanity, and for some, they connect an individual to their ancestry and/or ground them in relationships, family, culture, etc. Getting someone’s name right is important, a sign of respect, and an aspect of our individual humanity.

Exploring Lynching and Dehumanization with *A Red Record*

6. Reorient students back to the history at hand and let students know that they are going to conduct research on the [A Red Record website](#). (Students should be familiar with the site prior to this activity; see the lesson plan “An Introduction to *A Red Record*.”) Also remind students that as they grapple with this difficult content, they should ask for assistance if they find themselves feeling upset, angry, or having trouble handling the material.) Ideally, teachers will have the site projected as they direct students to the “Name” category in the map’s legend on the left side. Ask a student to remind the class what each of the plotted dots on the map represents (a human life that was taken by lynching). Additionally, ask students to remember what information statistics and primary sources fail to convey about the countless lives impacted by lynching.
7. Ask students to scroll through the names of the victims that appear across the map and to make any observations about anything that stands out to them. It is likely a student will note that there are 20 people whose names are listed as “unidentified.” Have students take around 10 minutes to click on and read some of the primary source news articles about some of both the named and the “Unidentified” victims. Afterwards, discuss as a class:
- What types of things did you learn about the individuals who were lynched? What struck you, stood out, or left you with questions regarding these events? Did you notice any specific examples of dehumanization? (The class might also discuss the concept of dehumanization and news reporting in general.)
 - What does it say about lynchings that such acts could take place without even knowing the victim’s name, and in other cases, that victims’ names are misspelled or incorrect?
 - How is lynching an act of dehumanization, or “otherizing”? In what ways does dehumanization connect to racial violence and systemic racism? (Students should consider what it takes for a violent act to occur – the less an individual is viewed with empathy/sympathy, the less he/she is considered as an individual person, the easier a violent act can be inflicted.)
8. Explain to students that “When acts of lynching were first seared into the consciousness of the nation, [Ida B. Wells-Barnett](#), recognized them as attacks not only against individuals but also against the ‘peoplehood’ of African Americans. The dehumanizing nature of mob violence enabled white majorities to rationalize laws and norms that effectively denied blacks the full rights of citizenship.” ([Source](#))
- “Racial terror lynchings generally took place in communities with functioning criminal courts—viewed as too good for African Americans. Despite its lawlessness and terrifying unpredictability, lynching was sanctioned by law enforcement and elected officials, and the perpetrators acted boldly and with impunity. Victims were sometimes publicly tortured for hours before their brutalized bodies were left out on display to traumatize other black people. Members of the mob frequently documented their atrocities by posing for photographs with a dangling, bloodied, or burnt corpse.” ([Source](#))
- Thus, whenever possible, Wells named the victims of racist violence and told their stories. In her journals, she lamented that her subjects would have otherwise been forgotten by all “save the night wind, no memorial service to bemoan their sad and horrible fate.” ([Source](#))

Individual Stories

9. As with all history, it is always important to remember that individual lives were involved - but it is even more imperative to face history involving mass violence, such as lynching, and learn about the experiences of individuals while also examining the collective history. In this regard, tell students that they are going to learn about the story of Mr. Lynn Council, an 86-year-old Black man living in Wake County, NC who survived an attempted lynching by Apex police in 1952 when two deputies hanged him from a tree when he wouldn't confess to a robbery that he didn't commit. Students can be introduced to the story via the following online sources:
- <https://www.wral.com/jesus-stepped-in-man-recounts-horror-of-hanging-attempt/18241538/> (6 min. news report)
 - <https://www.wral.com/on-the-record-5-11-students-learn-dark-history-close-to-home/18380714/> (23 min. news report and interview)
 - <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article231440263.html> (article)
10. Discuss:
- What happened to Mr. Council? What impact do you think this had on his and his family's lives? Mr. Council notes that he has a scar on the back of his neck from the attempted lynching. In what other ways might he have been scarred by this violent act beyond the physical mark?
 - Why do you think Mr. Council went so long without talking about what occurred in 1952? Why is his willingness to now speak out about this terrible past so important, brave, and in many ways, an invaluable contribution to society?
 - Despite this being a difficult story to learn about, why is it important we all know and remember such stories and history?
 - *A Red Record* currently visualizes lynchings – what would you predict the map would look like if it also plotted attempted lynchings?
 - Mr. Council experienced extreme injustice and abuse of power, and his attackers were never brought to justice. We also know that this one only one example of the racist leadership and practices of the Wake County police department. What should we do with stories like Mr. Council's that surface today? Is there any way to provide him with a sense of justice today? Why or why not? If so, what might some ideas be?
11. Share the following video with students to show how the community has responded to Mr. Council's sharing of this painful past: <https://www.wral.com/hanging-victim-gets-apology-honor-decades-after-threat/18313940/> (4 minutes.) Afterwards discuss:
- How would you characterize the way law enforcement leaders in Wake County and Apex responded? What do you think this meant to Mr. Council and his family?
 - Why is acknowledging and reconciling with such difficult history as this so important, especially in ways that are honest and constructive, rather than divisive and defensive?
 - What other ways might communities tell, listen to and acknowledge stories such as Mr. Council's and all those noted on *A Red Record*, while also moving us forward to reconciliation and reparation?
 - OPTIONAL: For a specific NC example, teachers can share how middle and high school students in Wake County chose to research and commemorate a lynching that took place near their schools, as part of a broader campaign to "remember all those who have been victims of any injustice." See the article "[A black man was lynched near Rolesville in 1918. Now Wake students are honoring him.](#)"
12. Ask students to again consider how long it took for Mr. Council to talk about his terrifying experience, as well as the bravery it took for him to finally do so. In a time when everything that is connected to race is especially controversial, ensure students understand how speaking out about this, even 70 years later, could still be considered a risk on his part. Yet, he bravely chose to speak out. As a closing reflection, ask students to consider the following two quotes, choose one, and write about how the quote relates to Mr. Council's situation.

- “Telling our stories is not an end in itself, but an attempt to release ourselves from them, to evolve and grow beyond them. We tell our stories *to transform* ourselves; to learn about our history and tell our experiences to transcend them; to use our stories to make a difference in our world; to broaden our perspective *to see* further than normal; *to act* beyond a story that may have imprisoned or enslaved us; *to live* more of our spiritual and earthly potential.” ~Rachel Freed
- “The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.” ~Ida B. Wells

➤ **Teacher Note:** For a more extensive culminating activity, refer to the lesson plan “The Light of Truth:” Acknowledging the Legacy of Lynching,” available on the *A Red Record* curriculum page.