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Lisa M. Tillmann Ph.D.
Rollins College, ltillmann@rollins.edu

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**Strange Fruit:
Race, Terror, and the War on Terror¹**

Lisa M. Tillmann
Rollins College Box 2723
Winter Park, FL 32789
Ltillmann@rollins.edu
407-646-1586

Abstract

This poem examines drone warfare as a form of lynching. “Strange Fruit” links the deaths of Pakistani children Zeerak and Maria Khan to the murders of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, documented in the most infamous lynching photograph in U.S. history.

Keywords: poetry, war, war on terror, race, lynching, drone, civilian casualties

For H.L. (Bud) Goodall

Prologue

I began composing “Strange Fruit” in June 2012, two months before my friend Bud Goodall succumbed to pancreatic cancer. As Bud was, I am a progressive academic and a student of war and politics. I consider Bud a key mentor in my development not only as an academic but also as a public intellectual. I believe, as he did, that “every act I undertake as a teacher, writer, speaker, or researcher is either complicit with the *status quo* or engaged in the struggle to change it” (Goodall, 1994, p. 185).

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Act I²

Marion, Indiana, August the seventh, 1930,
 police seize and take into custody
 young Black males, three:
 Thomas (Tom) Shipp, nineteen,
 Abram (Abe) Smith, eighteen,
 and James Cameron, sixteen.

A white man, Claude Deeter, lay dying of gunshot wounds
 as summer winds blew rumors
 of the sexual assault
 of a white woman, Mary Ball.
 Did Tom, Abe, and James,
 prey upon a couple parked at Lovers' Lane?³
 Did they comprise, as some claimed,
with Claude and Mary a "black and tan" robbing hoodlum gang?⁴
 Or, more threatening to the Indiana order,
 were the five companions?
 Friends?⁵

² The most comprehensive accounts of these events are James H. Madison's (2001) *A Lynching in the Heartland* and James Cameron's (1982) *A Time of Terror*.

³ See Madison (2001, p. 5).

⁴ See Madison (2001, p. 68).

⁵ According to Madison (2001, p. 69), newspapers portrayed Mary Ball as Claude Deeter's girlfriend, yet the "Deeter family knew nothing of her prior to Claude's murder." Others in town believed Mary Ball to be the girlfriend of Abe Smith (Madison, 2001, p. 68). Cameron (1982) claims that Shipp and Smith enlisted him to help them commit robbery, but he fled the scene before Deeter was shot.

Claude's bloody shirt hangs outside a City Hall window.⁶
 From the Marion foundry townsfolk procure
 crowbars, rope, and sledgehammers.
 The horde bludgeons through the jailhouse door,
 snatches Tom Shipp and fashions his gallows.
 As many as ten thousand spectators gather:
 a woman in Sunday-best dress, a man in white shirt, striped tie, and fedora,
 the atmosphere somewhere between carnival and carnivore.
 Lawmen, pregnant women, and smiling children look on.
 The sister of Mary Ball screams encouragement⁷
 as neighbors club, beat, and stab Tom,
 hanging him from window bars⁸
 meant to protect the public against the danger
 of prisoner escape.

The mob marches to the jail's third floor
 to abduct Abram Smith from his cell.
 Women stomp upon Abe's chest and head
 along the one-block Third Street gauntlet
 leading to Courthouse Square.
 Someone throws rope over the limb of a maple.⁹

To the jailhouse some men return,
 cutting the body of Tom Shipp down,
 hauling it to the center of town
 so that Abe and Tom may hang in tandem.¹⁰

The throng then drags the boy of sixteen,
 pledging him to their lynching fraternity.
 A man climbs atop a car to decree
 that James neither raped Mary Ball nor shot Claude Deeter.
 Unexpectedly James receives
 an eleventh-hour vigilante reprieve.¹¹
 A boy younger than he
 reels the bodies so the crowd may see
 the faces of Abram and Tommy.

⁶ See Madison (2001, p. 6).

⁷ See Madison (2001, p. 9).

⁸ See Madison (2001, p. 9).

⁹ See Madison (2001, p. 9).

¹⁰ See Madison (2001, p. 9).

¹¹ See Madison (2001, p. 10).

Dozens of collectors cut bark from the tree,
 strands of rope, locks of hair, scraps of clothing.¹²
 The scene, said police, was one of “remarkable good humor” and peace.¹³
 Photographer Lawrence Beitler,
 captures an infamous memento
 of Abe and Tom swaying above townspeople,
 doing “a brisk business” of souvenir copies
 at fifty cents each.¹⁴

Eight indictments came of these August events.
 Juries acquitted Robert Beshire and Charles Lennon,¹⁵
 prompting Attorney General James Ogden
 to drop charges against all remaining Grant County residents--save one.
 The boy who survived execution, James Cameron,
 would be branded an accessory to voluntary manslaughter and sentenced
 to four years in prison.¹⁶
 No one would serve time
 for the murders of Abram and Tom.

¹² See Madison (2001, p. 11).

¹³ See Madison (2001, p. 10).

¹⁴ See Madison (2001, p. 64). The photo, which can be viewed at <http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/BE023717/two-men-are-lynched-in-marion-indiana?popup=1>, likely inspired teacher Abel Meeropol to pen the poem “Strange Fruit,” made famous as a protest song released by Billie Holiday in 1939. Corbis now owns this image and charges \$183.00 to reprint it in a textbook.

¹⁵ See Madison (2001, p. 90).

¹⁶ See Madison (2001, p. 117).

Act II

August 2008, the night sky alights
 behind a missile christened Hellfire
 by its manufacturer:
 Lockheed Martin.¹⁷

The taxpayer offertory has contributed to this mission
 in dollars, sixty-eight thousand,¹⁸
 two hundred seventy-two times the annual per capita income
 of this region of Pakistan.¹⁹

In a mud hut below in Waziristan
 lay sleeping children
 Zeerak and Maria Khan,
 neither of whom will awaken again.²⁰
 Hellfire will sever four-year-old Zeerak's legs
 and leave three-year-old Maria's body scorched.
 Cousin Irfan
 will curl them into his arms,
 draw them to his chest,
 and kiss their faces.

Re-Act I and II

In 1930,
 when two Black males of nineteen and eighteen receive
 no arraignment, trial, judge, or jury
 and instead hang dead from a maple tree
 even the Klan called it
 “lynching.”

¹⁷ Lockheed Martin is part of a vast Drone Industrial Complex. The company employs 97,000 (Who we are, n.d.), and 2016 sales totaled \$47.2 billion (Lockheed Martin reports, 2017, January 24).

¹⁸ Sixty-eight thousand dollars accounts only for the cost of a single Hellfire Missile. According to Benjamin (2012), “At the height of government deficit-reducing cuts in 2012, the US taxpayer was shelling out \$3.9 billion for the procurement of unmanned aircraft, not counting the separate drone budgets for the CIA and the Department of Homeland Security.” Finn (2011, December 23) offers a longer-range view: “Over the next 10 years, the Pentagon plans to purchase more than 700 medium- and large-size drones at a cost of nearly \$40 billion.” In terms of personnel, it requires 168-300 people to keep a single drone aloft for 24 hours (Benjamin, 2012). According to Martin (2010), the U.S. military spent \$250,000 training him to pilot drones.

¹⁹ See Stanford (2012).

²⁰ See Rodriguez and Zucchini (2010, May 2).

In the 21st century,
 when brown children of four and three
 lay dead at the feet of grieving family,
 limbs hanging from limbs of olive trees,
 pilots at Langley
 watch “bugsplat”²¹ on Drone TV;
 Obama wins the Nobel Prize for Peace;
 and so-called “liberal Democrats,”
 some seventy-seven percent,
 deem it
 acceptable
 collateral
 damage.²²
 Strange fruit, indeed.

Epilogue

The inspiration for this poem came as I edited a film, *Remembering a Cool September* (Tillmann, 2012). I had been pouring over news articles and images of the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks, some of which are now iconic in American culture, and of casualties of the so-called “War on Terror,” most of which never reach U.S. newspapers, televisions, and computer screens. The September 11th attacks killed 2977 victims and 19 perpetrators. Though none of the 9/11 hijackers came from Afghanistan or Iraq, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan less than one month later and Iraq on March 20, 2003. As of 9/26/2017, 6840 U.S. soldiers have died in Iraq and Afghanistan (Faces of the fallen, n.d.). In 2006--11 years ago--a team of American and Iraqi epidemiologists estimated that 655,000 more people died in Iraq alone than would have had the U.S. invasion not occurred (Brown, 2006, October 11).

²¹ “Bugsplat” is in-house slang for human death by drone (Benjamin, 2012).

²² According to a 2012 *Washington Post*-ABC News poll, 83 percent of Americans reported approving of drone policy (begun under Bush, amplified by Obama and Trump), including 77 percent of liberal Democrats (Wilson & Cohen, 2012, February 8).

“Operation Iraqi Freedom”²³ prompted unprecedented anti-war protests in the U.S. and around the world, yet the occupation lasted more than eight years.²⁴ President Obama originally promised complete troop withdrawal from Afghanistan by December 31, 2014. Late that year, he extended the U.S. military’s stay by two years, announcing that, of the 9800 remaining soldiers, half would leave by the end of 2015, the other half by 2016 (Mazzetti & Schmitt, 2014, Nov. 14). Helene Cooper (2017, August 30) reported that in August 2017, 11,000 U.S. troops remained.

Meanwhile, U.S. execution of the “War on Terror” has expanded. Without Congressional declaration of war, the U.S. has conducted conventional air and/or drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, and Syria as well as ground raids in Pakistan. Among those killed in Yemen and Pakistan are four American citizens: Anwar al-Awlaki, a cleric with ties to al-Qaeda targeted by the Obama administration;²⁵ Samir Khan, a propagandist and bomb-making enthusiast traveling with al-Awlaki; Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, Anwar’s 16-year-old son; and Jude Kenan Mohammad, a 23 year old allegedly involved in recruiting militants for al-Qaeda. None had been convicted or even tried; only Mohammad had charges filed against him.

The Bush and Obama administrations claimed that these strikes kill “high-value targets” and result in few civilian casualties. Yet a New America Foundation analysis of the drone campaign found that, between 2004 and 2012, strikes had killed just 49 “militant leaders,” representing *two percent* of drone-related fatalities (see Bergen & Braun, 2012, September 19).

²³ How many of the 655,000 dead Iraqis, of their family members and friends, and of the innumerable war casualties since that 2006 estimate would have chosen the form of “freedom” wrought by “Operation Iraqi Freedom”?

²⁴ The last U.S. combat troops left Iraq in December 2011 (Afghanistan, n.d.).

²⁵ Anwar al-Awlaki allegedly inspired Nidal Malik Hasan, the accused shooter in the Ft. Hood massacre that left 13 people dead, and vetted and arranged training for Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the failed “underwear bomber.”

In addition, neither administration has released a comprehensive record of casualties, and the U.S. classifies *all* military-age males in a strike zone as “combatants” (Becker & Shane, 2012, May 29)—a convenient means of totalizing Arab and Islamic Others and of suppressing the number of civilian deaths.

When I read Rodriguez and Zucchini’s (2010, May 2) account of Zeerak and Maria Khan, I envisioned my own nephew Grant, the same age Maria had been. I pictured his lifeless body, legs severed and perhaps blown across the room or dangling from a tree outside. The phrase “limbs hanging from limbs” came to mind. It was then that I thought of Abel Meeropol’s (1936) poem, “Strange Fruit”: “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

Tracking drone strikes in Pakistan, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (Drone strikes in Pakistan, n.d.) has documented 428 strikes between 2004 and 2017 with casualties numbering 2511-4020, at least 172 of them children. Though Zeerak and Maria Khan died on George W. Bush’s watch, they may have suffered the same fate under Barack Obama. According to Klaidman (2012), “By the time Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2009, he had authorized more drone strikes than George W. Bush had approved during his entire presidency.”

How do we read our first biracial president--a man who can see himself in lynching victims as no other U.S. president could have--personally managing the “kill list” that marks for death those he and his advisors define as “terrorists” (Becker & Shane, 2012, May 29) and that results in the collateral deaths of brown-skinned innocents? How do we feel in light of reports of primary strikes on “militant” targets followed by secondary strikes *on the mourners and rescuers who attempt to collect the bodies and aid the injured* (Sanford, 2012)? What is our call to action

when we learn from Foust (2011, December 30) that in some private targeting programs “staffers have review quotas,” meaning that these contractors’ continued employment depends on their making life-or-death decisions about “a certain number of possible targets per given length of time.”

I ask these questions of no one more than myself. I twice contributed to President Obama’s campaign, twice voted and canvassed for him. Sure, I engage issues of war, politics, and ethics in the classroom and in my academic and public scholarship (see Tillmann, 2012, 2008; Tillmann-Healy, 2004), but is it enough? How much more often, more eloquently, more forcefully could I have made—can I still make—my protests heard?

I believe, as Bud Goodall (2010) did, that we protect ourselves and those about whom we care when we bear in mind that for every civilian casualty we inflict, we directly contribute to the appeal and spread of violent extremism. According to Becker and Shane (2012, May 29), “Drones have replaced Guantánamo as the recruiting tool of choice for militants”; in his 2010 guilty plea, Faisal Shahzad, the failed Times Square car bomber, “justified targeting civilians by telling the judge, ‘When the drones hit, they don’t see children.’”

American drones flying over foreign soil already have killed non-American “militants” and civilians as well as at least one American target (Anwar al-Awlaki) and at least five other Americans, including at least two U.S. soldiers.²⁶ How long before American drones conduct “personality”/“high-value individual” strikes²⁷ or even signature strikes²⁸ *on U.S. soil*? How long

²⁶ According to Benjamin (2012), U.S. Marine “Jeremy Smith, 26, and Navy Hospitalman Benjamin D. Rast, 23, were killed by a Predator drone after Marine commanders mistook them for Taliban.”

²⁷ A “high-value individual strike” refers to an operation targeting a specific person believed to have engaged in terrorism or to support terrorist activity (Klaidman, 2012).

before foreign militaries and armed groups use drones--abroad and/or on the streets of U.S. hometowns--to target American civilians and/or those they define as “militants”? If we believe that assassinating Osama bin Laden, along with his 23-year-old son, Khalid, and three other associates—conducting an unauthorized ground raid in a country with which we are not at war—is permissible under domestic and international law (or if we simply do not care whether it is or isn’t), is it difficult to imagine a foreign military or armed group planning a parallel raid on the Bush, Obama, or Trump family compound?

On principled grounds, Americans ought to ask whether our cherished beliefs in life and liberty are universal or whether they apply only to other Americans. Is an American life worth more than a Pakistani’s? Consider the disparity in public attention and soul-searching between the 20 children murdered in Newtown, Connecticut and the at least 172 Pakistani children killed by U.S. drone strikes between 2004 and 2017. What of *American* teenager Abdulrahman al-Awlaki? Is he less worthy of empathy and dialogue because of his father’s actions? His brown skin? His Muslim faith?

It is too late for Abdulrahman, for Tom Shipp and Abe Smith, for Zeerak and Maria Khan. But there are many more James Camerons—children, women, and men with ropes around their neck but not yet hanged. Who will I be—who will you and your family members, friends, colleagues, and students be—in their historical record?

Postscript

I sent an earlier version of this piece to President Obama in 2013. I received no response.

²⁸ According to Klaidman (2012), a “signature strike” is “the targeting of groups of men who bear certain signatures, or defining characteristics associated with terrorist activity, but whose identities aren’t necessarily known.”

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