

Ken Gonzales-Day - Scholar Documents California Lynchings, from 1850-1935

by Sylvia Mendoza

The photographs of solitary ages-old oak trees are haunting. The splendid trees sit in eerie silence, as if waiting to tell stories of all they have seen. In Ken Gonzales-Day's historic and moving work, what we learn is this: the trees are not as innocent as they seem. They present disturbing details, hide valuable fragments of history, and figure prominently in the world of racial injustice.

They are California's Hang Trees, where more than 300 lynchings and legal hangings took place from the beginning of statehood in 1850 through the last documented case in 1935.

After more than five years of meticulous research, the facts of lynching haunt Gonzales-Day, associate professor and chair of the department of art at Scripps College in Claremont, Calif. "This has transformed my life, the way I look at California history, and my place in the world today."

Gonzales-Day's research allowed him to create a photographic series, "Searching for California's Hang Trees," and eventually write a book, *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935*. The book addresses racial imagery and documents horrific acts of racism through lynching, legal hangings, and vigilantism that affected Latinos and the way they were perceived.

Lynching in the West resurrects the forgotten and influences people to re-examine what has been buried — an important perspective on California history. At the heart of the book, Gonzales-Day recognizes that of the more than 350 lynchings, most victims were of Mexican-American or Mexican descent. Native Americans and Chinese were also highly targeted, often with no trial by jury, and more often than men of Anglo or European descent.

His revolutionary photographic work has been exhibited worldwide. Photographs, documentation, drawings, and publications unearthed in his research fully document the lynchings. Gonzales-Day, working with photographs of actual hangings, erased the bodies, leaving an image of an angry mob, a solitary tree or telegraph pole, a desolate area, spectators, executioners.

"I didn't want to revictimize the victims. I also wanted to metaphorically show how these people had been erased from history."

His work shows the brutality of the times and the growth of racial injustice from early days of statehood, a fact that shook him to his core. Many people don't want to believe that there could even have been lynchings — especially those motivated by racism and hatred, he says.

His journey in exposing and documenting the atrocities has also been a personal awakening.

The Instigator

Given his background in art history, Gonzales-Day decided to write about Latino portraiture from 1850-1900.

"As I got into my research, I found information on Rodolfo Silvas, a man legally hanged in Los Angeles."

The finding piqued his curiosity. More research led to other portraits, some of which are in the book. "That's when I saw portraiture change to horrific injustice."

Powerhouse institutions such as the Los Angeles Natural History Museum, University of Southern California's special collections, Huntington

Garden and Public Library, University of California-Los Angeles, state archives, California Historical Society, Sacramento Archives Museum and Collection Center, and many other research centers became his second home. He checked microfilm, photo collections, books, texts, newspapers, handwritten accounts, court transcripts, prison logs, journals, and personal notes. He loved finding penny novels and frontier novels of the 19th century. There were no references or footnotes in them, but he was able to follow up and document certain observations made by the writers.

As the documentation reached epic proportions, he took a yearlong sabbatical. Awarded a fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio residency in Italy gave him a chance to start his manuscript. After a few months, he sent a proposal out to university presses. He says he was surprised by the reaction from places, such as the University of California Press, that said there was no real market for such a book.

"Duke University Press was great and knew there was some important information here. I had a case list. The first proposal I sent out had a record 180 lynchings in California."

He thought it was a revolutionary number. Other organizations, such as the NAACP and the California Historical Society, had only about 40-80 documented cases of lynching, says Gonzales-Day. By the time *Lynching in the West* was published, he had close to 400 documented cases. Terms such as "necktie party," "frontier justice," and "kangaroo court" took on deeper significance.

One case concerned a 15-year-old Mexican boy who was stabbed, shot, and dragged down the street before he was hanged for the murder of a female shop owner. He might have been guilty, but there was no trial, no way to know if they got the right person, says Gonzales-Day.

"That's not a civilized society, not how civilized people act," he says. "That's what bothered me most."

Finding three times the number of known lynchings made Gonzales-Day take stock of his research. "I thought, 'this is going to be a radical book.' I had to make it as perfect as possible – air-tight – because I knew it would be scrutinized by historians and professors, government and the public."

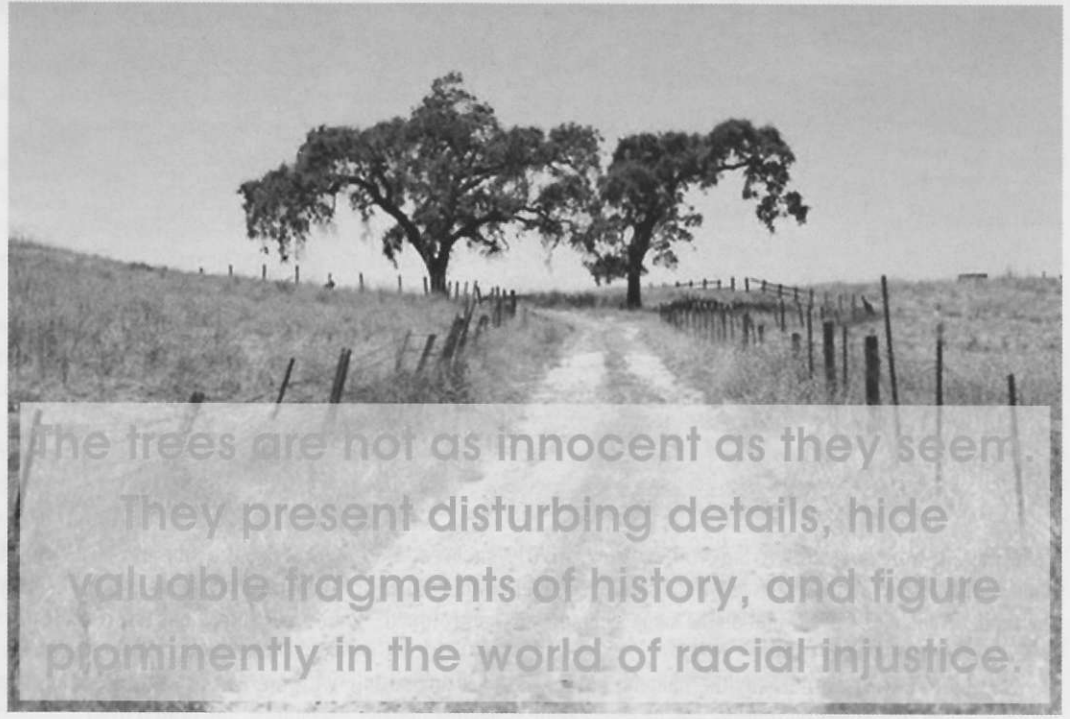
Written in a straight research style, Gonzales-Day presents irrevocable facts, yet conjures up amazement that these facts were never exposed before. Bringing the research to light became his mission.

It was not an easy path. There was no real support in his community network of scholars. "Most people didn't believe me," says Gonzales-Day. "They'd say, 'Oh, yeah. Whatever.'"

Still, for five years, everything revolved around the book. "I didn't have a life. It was a pretty isolating experience."

He took road trips to dozens of counties in California to find the hang trees and face them in person.

"Once I got there, even if the tree might have been gone, I'd find a city hall, an old creek, or some crude remnants, and I knew my work was validated. It was my Day of the Dead. Driving to these locations was something I had to do. It made it real. I've been looking for every single place that had a hang tree mentioned in the book."



Most Disturbing

What was disturbing in his research is that these cases might have been documented – but they were ignored. They were not seen for the important historical significance they had – with roots in racial hatred. "Clearly and consciously, there was a deep hatred for Mexicans and a particular view of Mexicans, Californios, and Mexican-Americans," says Gonzales-Day. "Some of those hanged were guilty of a crime, but not all of them."

Fear caused hatred to rise up, and the lynching of Mexicans became prevalent. It formed a racial imagery of Latinos in the West that persists to this day. "I grew up here, in Los Angeles. You experience racial bias, sure. But with the research, I thought, 'Wow. Roots run deep and live for generations.'"

In the 19th century, lynch law included various forms of vigilante justice. Gonzales-Day's chapters conform to the Tuskegee Institute's definition of lynching so that the California case list could be viewed in a national context. The definition read: "There must be legal evidence that a person was killed. That person must have met with death illegally. A group of three or more persons must have participated in the killing. The group must have acted under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition."

Many cases Gonzales-Day came across fit the definition of lynch law.

"I'd have to say the most disturbing case is that of Josefa, the first and only Mexican woman lynched in California."

Josefa stood up to a man who dared call her a prostitute in her own home. She had threatened to kill him if he did. "She admitted to stabbing the Anglo man ... which transformed her into something monstrous before a mob of several hundred men, for whom a Mexican woman with a



knife was no woman at all. ... She was arrested, tried, sentenced, and hung within several hours time. ... When asked if she had anything to say, she replied, 'Nothing; but I would do the same again if I was so provoked.' (*Lynching in the West*, p.137)

"You have to imagine not only the hanging but the reasons behind it and everything that could be done – was probably done – against her by four [hundred] to eight hundred men," says Gonzales-Day. "Try to picture that woman alone in the middle of that mob."

Often, thousands would come to watch a hanging. After the hanging of Rodolfo Silvas was much publicized in the national press, the federal government put some limitations on hangings, such as a rarely enforced age limit on who could watch. An estimated 6,000 to 8,000 spectators, including women and children, came to watch Silva's execution.

Gonzales-Day pushed through the records and archives to bring the lack of justice to the forefront. The documentation of these cases was humbling and heart-wrenching.

Some information was beyond comprehension. For example, he decided not to include Texas in his version of "the West."

"I couldn't. There were so many hangings there, it was mind-boggling."

The Impact

Gonzales-Day wants to acknowledge this part of California history in a bigger way. "In the South, those who died or were violently killed are remembered by historical markers found on so many street corners. So-and-so slept here. Ate here. Lived here."

Even though there was a battle of two cultures, there is some respect for the sacrifices and historical significance of these deaths and events made with the historical markers. He hopes that eventually some of the locations of California's Hang Trees will have similar historical markers.

"My goal is to find all the documented hang trees and acknowledge what went on there."

In the meantime, he started his one-man mission: a walking tour of

more than 40 sites in the Los Angeles area alone where he found documented cases of lynchings and legal hangings (see www.kengonzalesday.com for the guide). "The walking tour allows you to let go and see the city in a different way. You can't forget these people. Just to say 'in 1850, 12 people died here' gives credence to our history."

With many different cultures represented in an area such as Los Angeles, Gonzales-Day understands how his present is connected to past and future. "The project transformed everything about my life, my art, the way I look at my disciplines, the way I teach, and the content I use."

Because it draws on photography, history, art history, cultural studies, visual arts, Chicano studies, literary texts, and critical studies, the book and subject matter can be

introduced to students in an interdisciplinary approach, which can help them position themselves historically, as well. Awareness can enrich all disciplines and ethnicities, he says.

"I want people to see California differently. I want Latinos to see how we were constructed by this history. How we are maneuvered through it, seen by it, and erased from it."

Exhibits and variations of California's Hang Trees are being shown internationally from Vienna to London, to Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and Los Angeles. Gonzales-Day hopes the book gets the discussion going for those struggling with immigration issues and the undercurrent of fear and hate when different cultures interact. He questions whether we have come far at all in the last 100 years.

"I want people to rethink race relations, ethnicity, and justice," he says. "African-Americans were not the only victims of lynching. That same violence was imitated in our communities, thousands of miles away from the South."

He also hopes his own community can gather strength from the book. "The silence in the Latino community has to be broken," he says. "Maybe – ideally – it'll help people open up. We need to have discussions with family and friends. We have to validate the individual experiences of my grandfather, your father – different generations – who experienced racism. Many people don't want to talk because they were embarrassed or humiliated, hurt or angry. Our experiences are not as isolated as we think, and they add up to form history."

Gonzales-Day's devotion to his project remains clear and unwavering. The images of his photographic exposé make an impact on him daily as he teaches, travels, and searches for more answers. He hopes *Lynching in the West* gives people a different perspective of California history, believing that even images of terror can bring about social change.

"Maybe it will give a voice to those who were silenced unjustly. We need to acknowledge all the pain from them and the legacies made possible through these racial injustices."

