



DEATH OF THE WILLIE LYNCH SPEECH (Part I)

by Prof. Manu Ampim

Since 1995 there has been much attention given to a speech claimed to be delivered by a “William Lynch” in 1712. This speech has been promoted widely throughout African American and Black British circles. It is re-printed on numerous websites, discussed in chat rooms, forwarded as a “did you know” email to friends and family members, assigned as required readings in college and high school courses, promoted at conferences, and there are several books published with the title of “Willie Lynch.”[1] In addition, new terminology called the “Willie Lynch Syndrome” has been devised to explain the psychological problems and the disunity among Black people.

Further, it is naively assumed by a large number of Willie Lynch believers that this single and isolated speech, allegedly given almost 300 years ago, completely explains the internal problems and divisions within the African American community. They assume that the “Willie Lynch Syndrome” explains Black disunity and the psychological trauma of slavery. While some have questioned and even dismissed this speech from the outset, it is fair to say that most African Americans who are aware of the speech have not questioned its authenticity, and assume it to be a legitimate and very crucial historical document which explains what has happened to African Americans.

However, when we examine the details of the “Willie Lynch Speech” and its assumed influence, then it becomes clear that the belief in its authenticity and widespread adoption during the slavery era is nothing more than a modern myth. In this brief examination, I will show that the only known “William Lynch” was born three decades after the alleged speech, that the only known “William Lynch” did not own a plantation in the West Indies, that the “speech” was not mentioned by *anyone* in the 18th or 19th centuries, and that the “speech” itself clearly indicates that it was composed in the late 20th century.

SILENCE ON LYNCH SPEECH

The “Willie Lynch Speech” is not mentioned by *any* 18th or 19th century slavemasters or anti-slavery activists. There is a large body of written materials from the slavery era, yet there is not one reference to a William Lynch speech given in 1712. This is very curious because both free and enslaved African Americans wrote and spoke about the tactics and practices of white slavemasters. Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Olaudah Equino, David Walker, Maria Stewart, Martin Delaney, Henry Highland Garnet, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, Frances Harper, William Wells Brown, and Robert Purvis were African Americans who initiated various efforts to rise up against the slave system, yet none cited the alleged Lynch speech. Also, there is not a single reference to the Lynch speech by any white abolitionists, including John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips. Similarly, there has been no evidence found of slavemasters or pro-slavery advocates referring to (not to mention utilizing) the specific divide and rule information given in the Lynch speech.

Likewise, none of the most credible historians on the enslavement of African Americans have ever mentioned the Lynch speech in *any* of their writings. A reference to the Lynch speech and its alleged divide and rule tactics are completely missing in the works of Benjamin Quarles, John Hope Franklin,

John Henrik Clarke, William E.B. Du Bois, Herbert Aptheker, Kenneth Stampp, John Blassingame, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Darlene Clark-Hine, and Lerone Bennett. These authors have studied the details and dynamics of Black social life and relations during slavery, as well as the “machinery of control” by the slavemasters, yet none made a single reference to a Lynch speech.

Since the Willie Lynch speech was not mentioned by any slavemasters, pro-slavery advocates, abolitionists, or historians studying the slavery era, the question of course is when did it appear?

FIRST REFERENCE TO LYNCH SPEECH

The first reference to the Willie Lynch speech was in a late 1993 on-line listing of sources, posted by Anne Taylor, who was then the reference librarian at the University of Missouri at St. Louis (UMSL). [2] She posted ten sources to the UMSL library database and the Lynch speech was the last item in the listing. Taylor in her 1995 email exchanges with the late Dr. William Pierson (Professor of History, Fisk University) and others interested in the origin of the Lynch speech indicated that she keep the source from where she received the speech anonymous upon request, because he was unable to establish the authenticity of the document. On October 31, 1995, Taylor wrote:

“Enough butt-covering, now it’s time to talk about where I got it. The publisher who gave me this [speech] wanted to remain anonymous...because he couldn’t trace it, either, and until now I’ve honored his wishes. It was printed in a local, widely-distributed, free publication called *The St. Louis Black Pages*, 9th anniversary edition, 1994*, page 8.”

[*Taylor notes: “At risk of talking down to you, it’s not unusual for printed materials to be ‘post-dated’ – the 1994 edition came out in 1993]. [3]

The Lynch speech was distributed in the Black community in 1993 and 1994, and in fact I came across it during this time period, but as an historian trained in Africana Studies and primary research I never took it serious. I simply read it and put it in a file somewhere.

However, the Lynch speech was popularized at the Million Man March (held in Washington, DC) on October 16, 1995, when it was referred to by Min. Louis Farrakhan. He stated:

We, as a people who have been fractured, divided and destroyed because of our division, now must move toward a perfect union. Let's look at a speech, delivered by a white slave holder on the banks of the James River in 1712... Listen to what he said. He said, 'In my bag, I have a foolproof method of controlling Black slaves. I guarantee everyone of you, if installed correctly, it will control the slaves for at least 300 years'...So spoke Willie Lynch 283 years ago.”

The 1995 Million Man March was broadcast live on C-Span television and thus millions of people throughout the U.S. and the world heard about the alleged Willie Lynch speech for the first time. Now, ten years later, the speech has become extremely popular, although many historians and critical thinkers questioned this strange and unique document from the outset.

Full Text of the alleged Willie Lynch Speech, 1712:

"Gentlemen, I greet you here on the bank of the James River in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and twelve. First, I shall thank you, the gentlemen of the Colony of Virginia, for

bringing me here. I am here to help you solve some of your problems with slaves. Your invitation reached me on my modest plantation in the West Indies where I have experimented with some of the newest and still the oldest methods of control of slaves.

Ancient Rome would envy us if my program were implemented. As our boat sailed south on the James River, named for our illustrious King, whose version of the Bible we cherish. I saw enough to know that your problem is not unique. While Rome used cords of woods as crosses for standing human bodies along its highways in great numbers you are here using the tree and the rope on occasion.

I caught the whiff of a dead slave hanging from a tree a couple of miles back. You are not only losing a valuable stock by hangings, you are having uprisings, slaves are running away, your crops are sometimes left in the fields too long for maximum profit, you suffer occasional fires, your animals are killed.

Gentlemen, you know what your problems are: I do not need to elaborate. I am not here to enumerate your problems, I am here to introduce you to a method of solving them. In my bag here, I have a fool proof method for controlling your Black slaves. I guarantee everyone of you that if installed correctly it will control the slaves for at least 300 hundred years [sic]. My method is simple. Any member of your family or your overseer can use it.

I have outlined a number of differences among the slaves: and I take these differences and make them bigger. I use fear, distrust, and envy for control purposes. These methods have worked on my modest plantation in the West Indies and it will work throughout the South. Take this simple little list of differences, and think about them.

On top of my list is 'Age', but it is there only because it starts with an 'A': the second is 'Color' or shade, there is intelligence, size, sex, size of plantations, status on plantation, attitude of owners, whether the slave live in the valley, on hill, East, West, North, South, have fine hair, coarse hair, or is tall or short. Now that you have a list of differences. I shall give you an outline of action-but before that I shall assure you that distrust is stronger than trust and envy is stronger than adulation, respect, or admiration.

The Black slave after receiving this indoctrination shall carry on and will become self re-fueling and self generating for hundreds of years, maybe thousands. Don't forget you must pitch the old Black male vs. the young Black male, and the young Black male against the old Black male. You must use the dark skin slaves vs. the light skin slaves and the light skin slaves vs. the dark skin slaves. You must use the female vs. the male, and the male vs. the female. You must also have your white servants and overseers distrust all Blacks, but it is necessary that your slaves trust and depend on us. They must love, respect and trust only us.

Gentlemen, these kits are your keys to control. Use them. Have your wives and children use them, never miss an opportunity. If used intensely for one year, the slaves themselves will remain perpetually distrustful. Thank you, gentlemen."

WHO WAS WILLIE LYNCH ?

The only known "William Lynch" who could have authorized a 1712 speech in Virginia was born 30 years *after* the alleged speech was given. The only known "William Lynch" lived from 1742-1820 and was from Pittsylvania, Virginia. It is obvious that "William Lynch" could not have authored a document 30 years before he was born! This "William Lynch" never owned a plantation in the West Indies, and he did not own a slave plantation in Virginia.

DIVIDE & RULE

The Lynch speech lists a number of *divide and rule* tactics that were not important concerns to slaveholders in the early 1700s, and they certainly were not adopted. The anonymous writer of the

Lynch speech states, “I have outlined a number of differences among the slaves: and I take these differences and make them bigger.” Here is the list provided in the Lynch speech: age, color, intelligence, fine hair vs. coarse hair, tall vs. short, male vs. female.

However, none of these “tactics” were concerns to slaveholders in the early 1700s in the West Indies or colonial America. No credible historian has indicated that any of the items on the Lynch list were a part of a *divide and rule* strategy in the early 18th century. These are current 20th century divisions and concerns. Here are the Lynch speech tactics versus the real *divide and rule* tactics that were actually used in the early 18th century:

DIVIDE & RULE TACTICS

LYNCH SPEECH vs. HISTORICAL FACTS

Age	Ethnic origin & language
Color (light vs. dark skin)	African born vs. American born
Intelligence	Occupation (house vs. field slave)
Fine hair vs. coarse hair	Reward system for “good” behavior
Tall vs. short	Class status
Male vs. female	Outlawed social gatherings

It is certain that “Willie Lynch” did not use his *divide and rule* tactics on his “modest plantation in the West Indies.”

20th CENTURY TERMS IN LYNCH SPEECH

There are a number of terms in the alleged 1712 Lynch speech that are undoubtedly *anachronisms* (i.e. words that are out of their proper historical time period). Here are a few of the words in the speech that were not used until the 20th century:

Lynch speech: “In my bag here, I have a **fool proof** method for controlling your **Black** slaves.”

Anachronisms: “Fool proof” and “Black” with an upper-case “B” to refer to people of African descent are of 20th century origin. Capitalizing “Black” did not become a standard form of writing until the late 1960s.

Lynch speech: “The Black slave after receiving this indoctrination shall carry on and will become **self re-fueling** and self generating for hundreds of years.”

Anachronism: “Re-fueling” is a 20th century term which refers to transportation.

OTHER STRANGE FEATURES

- William Lynch is invited from the “West Indies” (with no specific country indicated) to give only a short eight-paragraph speech. The cost of such a trip would have been considerable, and for the invited speaker to give only general remarks would have been highly unlikely.

- Lynch never thanked the specific host of his speech, he only thanked “the gentlemen of the Colony of Virginia, for bringing me here.” Here, he is rude and shows a lack of etiquette. Also, no specific *location* for the speech was stated, only that he was speaking “on the bank [sic] of the James River.”
- Lynch claims that on his journey to give the speech he saw “a dead slave hanging from a tree.” This is highly unlikely because lynching African Americans from trees did not become common until the late 19th century.
- Lynch claims that his method of control will work for “at least 300 hundred years [sic].” First, it has gone unnoticed that the modern writer of the “speech” wrote three hundred twice (“300 hundred years”), which makes no grammatical sense. It should be “300 years” or “three hundred years.” Second, the arbitrary choice of 300 years is interesting because it happens to conveniently bring us to the present time.
- Lynch claims that his method of control “will work throughout the *South*.” This statement clearly shows the modern writer’s historical ignorance. In 1712, there was no region in the current-day U.S. identified as the “South.” The geographical region of the “South” did not become distinct until a century after the alleged speech. Before the American Revolutionary War vs. Britain (1775-1783) the 13 original U.S. colonies were *all* slaveholding regions, and most of these colonies were in what later became the North, not the “South.” In fact, the region with the second largest slave population during the time of the alleged William Lynch speech was the *northern* city of New York, where there were a significant number of slave revolts including the rebellion in 1712.
- Lynch fails to give “an outline of action” for control as he promised in his speech. He only gives a “simple little list of differences” among “Black slaves.”
- Lynch lists his differences by alphabetical order, he states: “On top of my list is ‘Age’, but it is there only because it starts with an ‘A’.” “ Yet, after the first two differences (“age” and “color”), Lynch’s list is anything but alphabetical.
- Lynch spells “color” in the American form instead of the British form (“colour”). We are led to believe that Lynch was a British slaveowner in the “West Indies,” yet he does not write in British style.
- Lastly, the name *Willie Lynch* is interesting, as it may be a simple play on words: “Will Lynch,” or “Will he Lynch.” This may be a modern psychological game being played on unsuspecting believers?

WHO WROTE THE LYNCH SPEECH?

It is clear that the “Willie Lynch Speech” is a late 20th century invention because of the numerous reasons outlined in this essay. I would advance that the likely candidate for such a superficial speech is an African American male in the 20s-30s age range, who probably minored in Black Studies in college. He had a limited knowledge of 18th century America, but unfortunately he fooled many uncritical Black people.

Some people argue that it doesn't matter if the speech is fact or fiction, because white people did use tactics to divide us. Of course tactics were used but what advocates of this argument don't understand is that African people will not solve our problems and address the real issues confronting us by adopting half-baked urban myths. If there are people who know that the Lynch speech is fictional, yet continue to promote it in order to "wake us up," then we should be very suspicious of these people, who lack integrity and will openly violate trust and willingly lie to our community.

Even if the Willie Lynch mythology were true, the speech is focused on *what white slaveholders were doing, and there is no plan, program, or any agenda items for Black people to implement*. It is ludicrous to give god-like powers to one white man who allegedly gave a single speech almost 300 years ago, and claim that this is the main reason why Black people have problems among ourselves today! Unfortunately, too often Black people would rather believe a simple and convenient myth, rather than spend the time studying and understanding a situation. Too many of our people want a one-page, simplified Ripley's Believe It or Not explanation of "what happened."

WILLIE LYNCH DISTRACTION

While we are distracted by the Willie Lynch urban mythology, the real issues go ignored. There are a number of authentic first-hand written accounts by enslaved Africans, who wrote specifically about the slave conditions and the slavemasters' system of control. For example, writers such as Olaudah Equiano, Mahommah Baquaqua, and Frederick Douglass wrote penetrating accounts about the tactics of slave control.

Frederick Douglass, for instance, wrote in his autobiography, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, that one of the most diabolical tactics of the American slaveholders was to force the slave workers during their six days off for the Christmas holiday to drink themselves into a drunken stupor and forget about the pain of slavery. Douglass wrote, "It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas; and he was regarded as lazy indeed, who had not provided himself with the necessary means, during the year, to get whiskey enough to last him through Christmas. From what I know of the effects of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves.... The holidays are part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery." [4]

Also, many nineteenth century Black writers discussed the specific tactics of the white slaveowners and how they used Christianity to teach the enslaved Africans how to be docile and accept their slave status. The problem with African American and Black British revelry during the Christmas holidays and the blind acceptance of the master's version of Christianity are no doubt major issues among Black people today. It is certain that both of these problems were initiated and perpetuated during slavery, and they require our immediate attention.

Many people who embrace the Willie Lynch myth have not studied the period of slavery, and have not read the major works or first-hand documents on this issue of African American slavery. Further, as indicated above, the Lynch hoax is so widespread that this fictional speech is amazingly used as required reading by some college instructors. While we are being misled by this fantasy, the real historical data is being ignored. For example, Kenneth Stampp in his important work on slavery in the American South, *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), uses the historical records to outline the 5 rules for making a slave:

1. Maintain strict discipline.
2. Instill belief of personal inferiority.
3. Develop awe of master's power (instill fear).
4. Accept master's standards of "good conduct."
5. Develop a habit of perfect dependence.[5]

Primary (first-hand) research is the most effective weapon against the distortion of African history and culture. *Primary research* training is the best defense against urban legends and modern myths. It is now time for critical thinkers to bury the decade-old mythology of "William Lynch."

NOTES

1. For example, see: Lawanda Staten, *How to Kill Your Willie Lynch* (1997); Kashif Malik Hassan-el, *The Willie Lynch Letter and the Making of a Slave* (1999); Marc Sims, *Willie Lynch: Why African-Americans Have So Many Issues!* (2002); Alvin Morrow, *Breaking the Curse of Willie Lynch* (2003); and Slave Chronicles, *The Willie Lynch Letter and the Destruction of Black Unity* (2004).
2. See: www.umsl.edu/services/library/blackstudies/narrate.htm
3. For this quote and the general Anne Taylor email exchanges regarding the authenticity of the Willie Lynch speech, see: www.umsl.edu/services/library/blackstudies/winbail.htm
4. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), p. 84.
5. Kenneth Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956), pp. 144-48.

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[DEATH OF THE WILLIE LYNCH SPEECH, PART II](#)