



“White Heat” in Wilmington:

The Dialogue Between Journalism and Literature in *THE MARROW OF TRADITION*

by Dolen Perkins

The anger of the people was at a white heat. A white woman had been assaulted and murdered by a brutal negro. Neither advanced age, nor high social standing, had been able to protect her from the ferocity of a black savage. Her sex, which should have been her shield and buckler, had made her an easy mark for the villainy of a black brute. To take the time to try him would be a criminal waste of public money. To hang him would be too slight a punishment for so dastardly a crime. An example must be made.
– Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (219)

Much of the history of the nature of physical violence between mobs of blacks and whites in the United States has been based on journalistic accounts. However, as some historiographers are currently asserting, the reliability of these press accounts is often questionable. As a result, other sources are used in establishing the “facts” of historical riots, including the oral stories of survivors as well as other types of nontraditional historical “record.” I would argue that we should also look to creative representations of riots in order to ascertain other valuable information about these historical phenomena. Part of the function of many artists is to act as interpreters of a particular communal experience; thus artistic works can play an important role in the construction of historical narrative.

Jae Roe has examined how literary texts can contribute to the project of collective resistance; that is, Roe is interested in how literary texts advance the cultural and political work of social activists. In this capacity, literary works often become mediators

of public opinion. For example, current events are not only mediated through media such as newspapers; they can also be mediated through works of the imagination. Imaginative works are able to fill in gaps by creating a more complete narrative around events. Although one might argue that oral stories and literature are subject to the melodrama and exaggeration of individual interpretation, journalistic accounts in the late nineteenth century appear to function at the imaginative level as well. The way that press accounts fashion the narratives of lynch mobs and race riots is as melodramatic as any artistic work of the time, occurring so regularly that what is “true” and what is “untrue” becomes highly obfuscated. Thus, while creative re-creations of historical events may not function as an act of resistance in the sense of effecting immediate social change, they can accomplish goals on a deeper cultural level by providing a counter-narrative to “official” records of events. However, these counter-narratives are often not as valued within American culture as historical records or newspaper accounts tend to be.