



FIRE: THE FIRST-YEAR INNOVATION & RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

VISUALIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE

What is Justice?: Coping Methods for Families of Lynching Victims

Sadie Storm

University of Maryland FIRE Program, College Park, MD

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jaclyn Bruner

Abstract In 2007, Congress authorized (re)investigations into racially motivated homicides before 1970. While many of these cases would not see "courtroom justice," victims and their families deserve to have their stories heard. This research project examines a case from 1960 in Louisiana, when five black men, Earnest McFarland, Albert Pitts, David Pitts, Alfred Marshall, and Charlie Willis, were shot by their white employer, Robert Fuller. Only Willis survived the attack. In reviewing a range of both archival and contemporary sources, I encountered a narrative from Willie Mae Pitts Sallie, sister to two of the victims, explaining why she forgave Fuller for his criminal actions. In an effort to further explore how relatives of lynched persons cope with intergenerational racial trauma, I engage Sallie's response as an illustrative example of the power of storytelling with regard to the public memory of lynching. Storytelling is widely regarded as an identity-building and constitutive tool; for this project I produced a written anthology of short stories, to promote a broadly accessible retelling of this story, enacting a space to cope with the trauma of this memory, as well bring awareness to the trauma that lynching enacts on a family, community, and region.

How do families of lynching victims cope with an unquantifiable loss?

How can we expand the literature on lynching narratives?

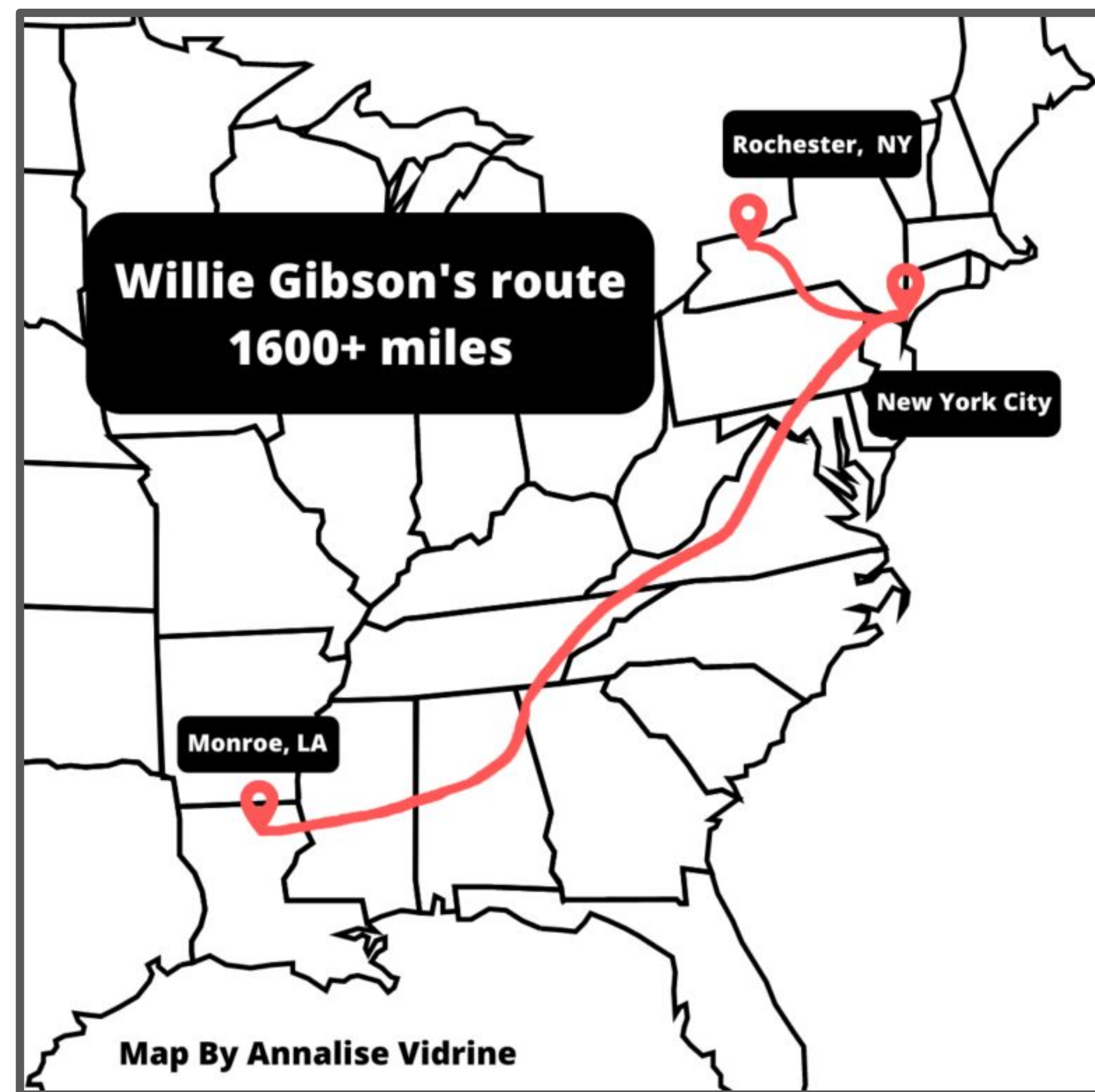
The Power of Storytelling

There is a continued need for accessible black history; a need for stories that humanize and discuss the past injustices with earnesty and dignity.

Portrayals of the personhood of lynched people and their families is a particularly underrepresented aspect of black history. We recover the emotionality and humanity of lynching by constructing robust narratives, treating the people involved as humans with full lives rather than statistics or bodies. Storytelling has the potential to re-humanize those society has vilified and to foment "a culture of respect for human rights throughout society."⁽¹⁾ When survivors share their stories and reveal society's culpability in their trauma, they enact what McGovern describes as a "victim-led resistance."⁽²⁾

Inspired by the case, historical record, and a media interview given by Pitts Sallie later in her life, I wrote an anthology of short stories. By digitally reproducing my work, it becomes accessible: for anyone, of any age, to access at any time.

Markovitz argues that lynching is a metaphor that serves as a lens of understanding past racial interactions, as well as current ones.⁽³⁾ Narrative historiography can be viewed as a healthy symptom of the larger storytelling revival in the previous 30 years, despite reluctance on behalf of academics and practitioners.⁽⁴⁾ By writing this anthology, I hoped to encourage an embrace of storytelling within academic spaces, acting on the discomfort of scholars. When governments move to enact official versions of history and criminalize naysayers, the forum of public memory is diminished. It is the scholar's responsibility to approach traumatic topics such as lynching with respect to the humanity of affected parties. Storytelling centers the victims' lived experiences and while providing a consistently accessible outlet.



Willie Gibson also worked for Fuller but fled before his coworkers were lynched out of fear for his life. His participation in the Great Migration is discussed in the "Let the Leaves Grow" chapter of my anthology of short stories.

Wheat Street Meet Tonite To Aid Lynching Families

(Atlanta Daily World, 1946)

THE CHURCH convention took a collection to buy clothes for the Dupre family. It also voted to pay tuition for the pastor's son, Isaac, 18, who plans to enter school in New Orleans this fall.

Meanwhile, Wilkinson county authorities this week denied charges a would-be lynch mob chased the minister out of Mississippi Aug. 27.

(New Journal and Guide, 1959)

As an ultimate goal the Citizens Defense Committee plans to forming of a statewide organization to build a legal fund to be used to aid in the prosecution of cases involving civil rights violations of Negroes throughout the state. Substantial financial contributions towards the fund were made by members of the citizens committee Tuesday evening.

From an anonymous source \$100 came to the Defense Committee to be used for the relief of the stricken families.

LATE NEWS BRIEFS

Organize To Aid Families Of Lynch Victims

ATLANTA—(ANP)—A mass meeting of Atlanta citizens interested in the welfare of Negroes in Georgia and particularly interested in the relatives of the lynch victims in Walton county was to be held late last week at Wheat Street Baptist Church.

Rev. William Holmes Borders is chairman of the Citizens Defense Committee which was organized last week to raise funds immediately for the welfare of the lynch victims and to supplement rewards already offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of criminals involved.

Truman Endorses Federal Anti-Lynch Act

(New Journal and Guide, 1946)



Willie Mae Pitts Sallie, ~1960, photo (Sharkell)

You can read my anthology of short stories inspired by this case here:



Footnotes

(1) Bill Hackett & Claire Rolston, "The Burden of Memory: Victims, Survivors, Storytelling and Resistance in the North of Ireland," *Memory Studies* 2009, Vol 2(3): 355-376.
(2) McGovern, Theresa M. "Models of Resistance: 'Victims' Lead." *Health and Human Rights* 9, no. 2 (2006): 234-55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4065409>.
(3) Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xvii, 69-70.
(4) Sobol, Joseph Daniel. "Contemporary Storytelling: Revived Traditional Art and Protean Social Agent." *Storytelling, Self, Society* 4, no. 2 (2008): 122-33.

LATE NEWS BRIEFS: ORGANIZE TO AID FAMILIES OF LYNCH VICTIMS. (1946, Aug 10). *New Journal and Guide*, 1946.
Wheat Street Meet Tonite To Aid Lynching Families: Statewide Plans For Funds To Be Launched Tonite Negroes Over Nation Offering Money To Combat Lynch Evil. (1946, Aug 01). *Atlanta Daily World*, United, P. 1. (1959, Sep 19). Baptists Aid Pastor: Minister And Family Escape Lynch Mob. *New Journal and Guide*.
Photo reproduced from: <https://iailluminator.com/2021/08/25/louisiana-was-home-to-one-of-the-most-horrific-killings-of-civil-rights-era-in-1960/>

Additional Acknowledgements:
Shelsea Mehtang