

THE BAD NOOSE AND THE GOOD NOOSE Si Frumkin

Do you remember the Jena Six? Let me refresh your memory. It refers to the six black high school students, in the small Louisiana town of Jena, who brutally beat a white classmate in December 2006.

The most widely reported version blamed the arrests on racism in Jena and its high school. Supposedly, on August 31, 2006, a group of black students sat under a large oak tree which was a frequent meeting place for white students. The next morning, three nooses were discovered hanging from the tree. Three white students were suspended for the incident. On November 30, 2006, the high school was set on fire and over the next few days, various altercations, including the savage beating of the white student took place. The six black students were arrested in December 2006 and charged with second degree attempted murder.

The story spread nationwide. The defendants were presented as righteously reacting to the racism of the symbolic nooses that were meant to represent the nooses of lynch mobs.

The trial was scheduled for September 20, 2007. On that day, tens of thousands of angry demonstrators from all over the United States came to Jena to express their opposition to the charges. Not surprisingly, Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton were there to pose for the TV cameras. Over \$500,000 was collected to pay for the Jena Six defense. On September 10, 2007, the potential Presidential candidate, Barack Obama, said: "When nooses are being hung in high schools in the 21st century, it's a tragedy. It shows that we still have a lot of work to do as a nation to heal our racial tensions. This isn't just Jena's problem; it's America's problem." He also included Jena in his now famous Philadelphia speech on Reverend Wright and race.

After further investigation that was prompted, in part, by the people of Jena who were outraged over being pictured as racists, the story drastically changed. It seems that the tree was never a meeting point for white students but rather a

gathering place of high school athletes, many of them black. The nooses were placed there not as a reference to lynching or a threat to blacks, but as a reaction to recently lost games and poor performance by the school team. The white student was beaten by a gang of 6 known troublemakers some of whom had previous criminal records. The charges against the six were eventually dropped. And Jackson, Sharpton and Obama, without apologizing for what they had said previously, removed Jena from their teleprompters.

I am very disturbed by the spreading epidemic of identifying more and more words, pictures and objects as symbols of racism, sexism, ageism and all those other -isms. Some are funny – I have heard a professor on a talk show seriously identifying “socialism” as a code word for African-Americans. I know that no one – except for blacks themselves - dares to use the scary “N” word or make jokes about water melons, reasons for muscular physiques of black athletes or rap lyrics.

On the other hand, some symbols are powerful and meaningful. A swastika on a synagogue or a gravestone is repulsive. And so is a noose in a location or situation where its lynching subtext is unmistakable.

And so, I am upset by the lukewarm reaction by the media, law enforcement, community leaders and the quick-to-be-offended elite to the recent noose incident in West Hollywood, a small independent city within Los Angeles. It was not symbolic – it was realistic; a crude representation of an execution of a real woman hanging by a real noose. The identity of the victim was immediately obvious: it was the candidate for the vice-presidency of the United States, Sarah Palin. In addition, on the roof from which Palin’s effigy was hung, there was an effigy of Senator McCain on fire, surrounded by paper flames.

The reaction of spokesmen for various law enforcement organizations, the city of West Hollywood, the ACLU, and various media pundits was, “Well, yes, it was bad taste, but bad taste isn’t a crime – there is nothing we can or should do...”

Now here is what I am sure of. I am sure that if the effigy were one of Barack Obama, all hell would be breaking lose. There would be media interviews with Jackson and Sharpton, demands for justice, congressional hearings, accusations of hate and calls for quick and meaningful prosecution. There would be accusations of incitement to murder, of unforgivable racism and of McCain's campaign support of lynching.

I am still waiting. I am not sure if the definition of hate crime includes only racism and homophobia, or if sexism and ageism are covered as well. Ms. Palin is a woman and McCain is a senior citizen; I think that their pseudo-executions are enough to warrant, at least, detentions for hate crimes, an investigation, a few days or weeks in the pokey before release on bail and a whole lot of money for lawyers from the pockets of the two West Hollywood yahoos.

As I said, I am still waiting but I am not holding my breath.

-----30-----