



American Mantra: Blame the Black Man

By Leonce Gaiter

LOS ANGELES

The episode made a sweet-voiced old Southern lady I saw on TV more wary of black people. The ordeal of the young mother who claimed that a black man had abducted her children in a carjacking frightened this good woman. And for good reason. After all, you hear constantly what a menace black men are. They do make up more of the U.S. prison population than their per capita share. Books insisting on their genetic inferiority get published and accorded the respect of serious refutation.

But I, a black man, am worried too. I was warned when I was young. I have heard some awful things, seen some ghastly pictures. There was one that chilled my blood: A large group of men and women were standing near a tree. Hanging from that tree was a bloodied corpse. Smiling men, women and children stood at the base of that tree, pointing up at the dead black man as if directing the camera's eye toward the corpse.

These white people beamed. There were great smiles on their faces, as if they took great pride that this bloody black corpse hung from that tree. They had done it, you see. They had killed the man. And they were glad.

I do understand how that white woman on TV felt. I, too, have grown quite wary. I remember the white man in Boston who murdered his wife and claimed that a black man had done it. A manhunt ensued in which all young black men were

suspect. A city pined for the capture and conviction of the murderer, only to find that the husband himself had killed his wife, just as that woman in South Carolina murdered her own children.

Both had blamed black men so that whole cities — the whole country, for God's sake — could pray and hope and grieve. The whole country, that is, save those black men who were then suspect, who were symbols of a lurking evil that would rob a loving white husband of his adoring white wife, a good white Southern woman of her precious white babies.

Grieve, hope, pray and — perhaps — hate just a little bit. Perhaps all that public wailing and hand-wring-

Media lynchings for the 90's.

ing, all that goodness, had a sour note of hatred buried within the cacophony of compassion. Boston, Mass., and Union, S.C. — they are the tree. A crowd still stands beneath the tree and points an accusing, delighted finger. Not at a real body, not yet, just at the suggestion of one — the right one, the right color. Just three words provide enough of a hint to gather a crowd around a tree: "A black man . . ."

In Union, the woman confessed to drowning her children. They buried the bodies the other day. A thousand mourners paid respects. As the woman was taken to court, shouts of "baby killer" and "monster" greeted her. Some called for her public execution. Hatred rolled through the crowd. Once you rile up all that bile, it's hard to swallow down — bitter and foul. You can choke on it. □

Leonce Gaiter is writing a book on black politics since the civil rights movement.