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## The Noose

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## The Noose

Posted By [Timothy Zick](#) On October 23, 2007 @ 3:00 pm In [Race](#) | [6 Comments](#)

That old instrument of death the noose has been much in the news of late. Saddam Hussein and his henchmen have gone to the gallows. Clarence Thomas continues to rail against his "high-tech lynching" at the hands of the Senate Judiciary Committee. And in the past few months, actual nooses have been found hanging in a variety of places — at [high schools](#) <sup>[1]</sup> and [universities](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, in [workplaces](#) <sup>[3]</sup> and [police stations](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, [from the backs of pickup trucks](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, and [near Ground Zero](#) <sup>[6]</sup> in New York City. Many have surmised that the appearance of these nooses is related to the [controversy sparked in Jena, Louisiana](#) <sup>[7]</sup> when white students hung nooses from a tree near a public school. What we have is probably some combination of disgruntled students, cowardly racists, and "copycats." Or perhaps, as Peter Applebome of the New York Times [suggested](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, "maybe it's just the distorting mirror of the never-ending media cavalcade, where any moron with a Sharpie and a length of cord from Home Depot can make a statement heard round the world." [The noose is not the only symbol of hate making a comeback. The swastika has been [showing up with increasing frequency](#) <sup>[9]</sup> in some communities; it has been spotted at synagogues and even [carved into a crop circle](#) <sup>[10]</sup> in New Jersey].



Whatever the case, the seeming resurgence of the noose is a disturbing development. Its *intentional* use as a symbol of racial hatred and terror is of course utterly contemptible. There have always been, and likely always will be, those who will make such cowardly gestures in an effort to intimidate. More disturbing on some level is the fact that there appear to be some (perhaps many) people who are either not aware of the noose's disgraceful history, or who may believe that being forced to acknowledge that experience forces political correctness upon them. Some of the co-workers involved in the incidents noted above seemed to think that hanging a noose was a "joke." Others have suggested that perhaps the media is hyping noose hangings in an effort to shock readers into caring about race. After all, as Alex S. Jones, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard, is quoted in the *New York Times* saying, "This is comparable to name calling" . . . "It's important to look at what it means and also what it doesn't mean."

We certainly ought to consider what hanging a noose signifies. I suggested in [a paper](#) <sup>[11]</sup> that ethnographic methods may be useful in assessing the meaning of symbols like the confederate flag and symbolic acts like cross burning. Anyone who doubts the enduring and powerful hatred and terror associated with this symbol (and who cannot be bothered to read one of many excellent accounts of the Jim Crow South) should at least peruse [Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America](#) <sup>[12]</sup> (2000), a book I stumbled upon years ago and have never forgotten. Of course, the noose, like other symbols, is polysemous. The context of the display matters. There are certain contexts — historical exhibits on Jim Crow violence or the death penalty, tributes to the Wild West, and perhaps even a celebration of Halloween fright — in which the symbol is intended to convey some non-threatening meaning. Even so, hangers of nooses — in particular those who [live in diverse neighborhoods](#) <sup>[13]</sup> or work in diverse environments — ought to understand how this symbol is interpreted by many, if not most, African-Americans. Those noose-hangers who are fully aware of and even embrace the terrorism of the symbol should not count on any First Amendment protection for their "message." Hanging a noose with the specific intent to

intimidate is a true threat. What to do about the deep-seated undercurrent of racism that the noose's resurgence seems to signify is a much more complicated question — and not, as our history demonstrates, one that will be resolved solely by passing hate crimes laws.

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URLs in this post:

[1] high schools: <http://www.newsday.com/news/local/wire/newyork/ny-bc-ny--nycnooses1022oct22,0,5701911.story>

[2] universities: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/11/education/11columbia.html>

[3] workplaces: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/01/05/chernoff.noose/index.html>

[4] police stations: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/nyregion/30noose.html>

[5] from the backs of pickup trucks: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/09/21/car.nooses/>

[6] near Ground Zero:

[http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/11/national/main3356929.shtml?source=RSSattr=U.S.\\_3356929](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/11/national/main3356929.shtml?source=RSSattr=U.S._3356929)

[7] controversy sparked in Jena, Louisiana:

[http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2007/09/thoughts\\_on\\_jen.html](http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2007/09/thoughts_on_jen.html)

[8] suggested: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A06E4D61338F937A25753C1A9619C8B63>

[9] showing up with increasing frequency:

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,303718,00.html>

[10] carved into a crop circle: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B04E5D61539F935A1575BC0A960958260>

[11] a paper: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=535602](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=535602)

[12] Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America: [http://www.amazon.com/Without-Sanctuary-Lynching-Photography-America/dp/0944092691/ref=pd\\_bxgy\\_b\\_text\\_b/103-8285036-7616661](http://www.amazon.com/Without-Sanctuary-Lynching-Photography-America/dp/0944092691/ref=pd_bxgy_b_text_b/103-8285036-7616661)

[13] live in diverse neighborhoods: <http://detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071017/NATION/710170348/1020/NATION>

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