

Today, I've been asked to tell the story of Bowman Cook and John Morine.

[Pause for approx. 40 secs]

You might notice that I am not talking right now. That is because I am a historian. And historians cannot tell stories that have not been written. When we look back at the historic record and nothing is written, then all we have . . . is silence.

Think about it. That's why the Dark Ages were called the Dark Ages. Not because there was anything light or dark about those particular times. The darkness is not literal darkness. The darkness is the big empty spot you see in the historic record when you look at all the things that were written in Europe after the fall of Rome and before the Enlightenment. The Roman Empire was lit up by all the people writing about it. Same with the Enlightenment (which is why they called it that). But hardly anyone was writing anything during the Dark Ages, so to historians, that place and time was hard to see. In a word, "dark."

As a historian, Bowman Cook and John Morine's lives are dark to me. There was nothing written about them before the accounts of their grisly murders. Just like, for most of us, history will be dark on our lives unless we become noteworthy and people start to write about our lives for some reason. But like most people, John and Bowman were not people of note before they allegedly had a hand in the death of a Jacksonville insurance salesman. They became of note, but only due to the grisly nature of their deaths. And that is the only thing written about them in the historic record.

So imagine this for a second: You spend your whole life trying to do the right thing, trying to grab as much happiness out of your circumstances as you can. You might believe that having a family or helping the poor or having as much fun as you can are what you are supposed to be doing here on this world. But for the most part, those accomplishments are going to be seen as pretty pedestrian because everyone trying to do it. Nothing to write about in the news. But still, a few of us harbor the hope that maybe someday, we will do something great, something of note, to get our names in the paper. But then when it finally happens, it happens not because of something you did -- in fact, it doesn't even happen while you're alive. It happens because the way you died was particularly heinous. Like, THAT'S what gets you in the paper. You've become just another passenger on the Hindenburg. So as a historian, almost all of the aspects of Bowman and John's lives that have been illuminated are not aspects of their lives, but rather aspects of their death. All of the newspaper account about Cook and Morine focused on the ways they were killed.

And I'm not going to talk about that. It would be an insult to Bowman and John's memories to spend one second talking about their attackers if I'm supposed to be telling *their* stories. I want to tell you about John and Bowman. I want to tell you about the successes and failures they had. I want to tell you about the things they learned raising their children. How Bowman was good with his daughters, but John was hopeless. How John married young, but Bowman was a lifelong bachelor. I want to tell you about their efforts to help their communities or families, how Bowman tried to duck certain needy members of his family after coming into money, or how Bowman started a baseball club in his neighborhood because so many of the neighborhood kids had been getting into trouble. Or about the

time John's wife showed up at Bowman's house at 3am after they had a fight, and Bowman spent the whole night talking them out of splitting up. I wanted to tell you of failed ventures, poor decisions, and legally suspect ways they used to stay above water. I want to tell you about the seething rage they felt, upon coming back America after fighting for her, and having her ignorant no-account layabout sons call them "niggers" and ask them to be happy about it. But I can't you any of these things. Because I don't know them to be true. And I don't know if Bowman Cook or John Morine were guilty of the crimes of which they were accused. That's the point. No one will ever know if they were guilty of their crimes -- not the lawyers who would have provided the evidence, the judges who would have passed down the sentences, the jury who would have deliberated on the cases. No one will ever know if they were guilty because the "lynch law," as it was referred to then, robbed them of their due process.

The storytelling tradition is a fundamental piece of the African oral tradition. Historically, African storytellers would not just spin tales of fiction. They were newscasters, historians, balladeers, weavers of myths and legends, the storekeepers and raconteurs of a culture's accumulated knowledge. That is because most traditional African cultures were not written, but oral. So the storytellers utilized mnemonic techniques to remember what could be hours of tale-telling: songs, rhythm, verses, choruses -- today the most common features of popular music.

I want to be a storyteller. I want to relate to you the stories of John Morine and Bowman Cook. But these stories were not passed down to me from an elder storyteller with easy-to-remember lyrics. Because I had ancestors who were brought to Western shores and to western storytelling traditions, I am a historian, with credentials, and training in historiographical methodology. And that training tells me that without written documents, or anyone around to tell me different, I am wandering around in the dark. But I refuse to make something up to look good. I refuse to portray these men as saints, or sinners, or anything in between. Because I simply don't know. These crimes robbed me of the ability to tell their stories faithfully, but, far more importantly, it robbed them of the ability to defend themselves, have their due process, and live their lives in either restitution, rehabilitation or vindication. I see them, now. I feel them, watching me. I can feel their ambivalence, wondering what this group, this speaker, is going to say about them, who has taken 100 years to commemorate this atrocity. I can sense them waiting for me to sensationalize something or to glorify something, or to lapse into some other insincere gesture designed to get your approval, or sympathy. I have decided that I will not do it. I will not tell a story that cannot be told. The only proper way to tell the story of Bowman Cook or John Morine is with silence.

[pause again 40 seconds]

The only newspaper account that does include an account of their actions prior to the deaths, have them answering from a jail cell once the lynch mob breaks in and calls their name. Imagine that for a second. A group of white men who were not the sheriff stormed into the jail and actually called out their names in a cell full of eight other people. And in the newspaper story, both Bowman and John spoke up. When the leader of the lynch mob, ordered them to come along, the account says that they did not protest or fight, but silently walked out with the white men. What does this say about them? Did they

think they were being rescued? Had they already resigned themselves to their fate and saw no point in fighting? Had they been . . . expecting this? I don't know. And we never will.