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## There Are Just No Words

By Andrew Malekoff

Almost a year ago, Marcelo Lucero, an Ecuadorean immigrant, was murdered allegedly by a group of high school boys on a hate-crime spree. Shortly after the murder I was invited to participate as one of six panelists in an online forum sponsored by *Newsday*.

The panel addressed a number of themes - exposure to prejudice, bigotry and discrimination, the role of the schools and bridging communication gaps. The final theme of the forum was "confronting authority." This was presented by the editors as follows: "...there are growing suspicions that government institutions have played a major role in perpetuating racial tensions. New allegations that have surfaced since Lucero's death suggest that inadequate attention has been given to patterns of hate-driven violence. Add to that the intensifying trend in law enforcement toward criminalizing and cracking down on illegal immigration. How do community members deal with racism and hate crime when law enforcement and other authorities are seen as complicit in the oppression and violence?"

As I considered this, no prescriptive response came to mind. Instead, a troubling image was jarred loose within me. The image is of a black-and-white photograph that appears on the jacket of a book I read entitled *Sons of Mississippi*, by Paul Hendrickson. The book is based on that single photograph. It depicts a close-knit gathering of seven Mississippi sheriffs at the University of Mississippi prior to the admission of its first black student James Meredith in 1962. One of the sheriffs is brandishing an axe handle, to the obvious delight of the others. They are anticipating and evidently preparing to participate in the upheaval to come as James Meredith prepares to integrate the University of Mississippi.

Hendrickson's narrative is culled from interviews, research of documents and literature about the era. Most compelling are his interviews with the sheriffs' sons and grandsons and with Meredith's son, Joe, regarding their experiences with racism.

Thinking about that photograph makes me wonder about how, 40 years from now, the children of the Long Island law enforcement and other government officials that have, in some cases, turned a blind eye to hate-driven violence or even encouraged it, will look back at the November 9, 2008 murder of Marcelo Lucero. Also how will children and grandchildren of Lucero's contemporaries view it.

Near the end of the book Hendrickson offers readers one final perspective on the chilling photo of the sheriffs. He quotes the poet and art critic Mark Strand, who reflects on the paintings of Edward Hopper. Strand says, "The shadow of dark hangs over them, making whatever narratives we construct around them seem sentimental and beside the point." This describes precisely how I feel about the murder of Marcelo Lucero as I visualize a

photograph taken almost one year ago of seven teen-aged boys from Patchogue, New York in white jumpsuits and handcuffs.

Sometimes there are just no words.