Blood at the Root: A Historiographical Commentary on Lynching in America

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Introduction

The descriptive marker at Montgomery, Alabama's *National Memorial for Peace and Justice* is both alarming and unsettling. Upon entering the area where hundreds of large elevated tin steles mark the names of thousands of lynching victims, a number of placards rest on the side of a carefully constructed commemorative wall that tells the stories behind the murders. The very wording on the gray and white sign evokes images of dead and badly battered black bodies dangling from trees at the end of a rope; or worse, ghastly visions of burned corpses forever enshrined in black and white photography while hundreds of white men, women, and children seem to celebrate their deeds with grotesque smiles.[1]

Indeed, the monument, with its stoic eight hundred tin vertical markers, tells a tragic story from America's violent racial history. According to the Equal Justice Initiative's findings published in 2015's *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, there were over 4,400 documented extralegal murders of African Americans between 1877 to 1950.[2] Each of these killings have left a bitter stain on the landscape of the American story. With the opening of the monument in April 2018, Americans were engaging in much needed dialogue about these brutal crimes with a degree of difficulty, but these conversations have helped place these horrific events within the proper framework of history.

Over the years, scholars have attempted to explain this phenomenon, but the discussion has mostly rested among academics who have expressed interest in lynching as a field of research within Africa American history. However, current controversies over race and racial intolerance have thrust the issue to the proverbial front and center. This essay seeks to explain the nature and scope of lynching in America and why it has piqued renewed interest among scholars and the general public alike.

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[1] For a more detailed analysis of the public nature of the lynching of African Americans, see James Cameron, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1982), 52-53; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography of Race, 1868-1919* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1993), 226-227; Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[2] Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (3rd Edition), accessed 22 June, 2020. https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/.

During the period of Reconstruction (1865-1877), former African American slaves were granted some semblance of legal protection from extralegal violence by enacted legislation and the presence of Federal troops. From 1870 to 1871, Congress passed, and President Ulysses S. Grant enacted, three sets of laws aimed at safeguarding the rights and lives of the "freedmen" from vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Derisively titled "The Force Bills" by their detractors, the legislative intent of the acts was to stifle the clandestine violent acts of the Klan, and to enable the newly freed African American citizens to enjoy their Constitutional rights free from intimidation and aggression.[3]

In addition, with the Klan being designated a terrorist organization, their activities were heavily restricted due to the black population having the protection of the United States government. However, the end of Reconstruction in 1877, and the gradual removal of those legal (read: military and political) guarantees, brought back a resurgence of racial violence against blacks, particularly in the American South. This "Second Klan" would not be organized until the early twentieth century, but carefully orchestrated and frequent acts of terror occurred which had the net effect of creating a caste system in American society backed by the force of hateful violence.[4]

The act of lynching took on many forms. From a popular culture point of view, the most commonly understood method was hanging a victim from a tree in front of a crowd of bloodthirsty onlookers; in other instances, the person (either alive or dead) would be burned with kerosene. Sometimes, a condemned man or woman would be dragged behind a horse or an automobile through the streets of a town as mere spectacle. Drowning, stabbing, or beating were also preferred methods.

To add additional amusement, and to send a frightening message to the African American population not to disturb the social status quo, "souvenirs" of the bones, genitals, or ears of the condemned would be sold, or the body would be left to decompose in a public display of viciousness. Moreover, pictures of the event were taken by photographers and reprinted as postcards so that relatives outside the region could participate in the ghoulish nature of the event.[5]

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[3] Everette Swinney, "Enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870-1877," *Journal of Southern History*, XXVIII, (May 1962), 205-213; Wilbert L. Jenkins, *Climbing Up to Glory: A Short History of African Americans During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 2002).

[4] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Stony the Road We Trod: Reconstruction, White Supremacy and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York, NY, Penguin Press Books, 2019).

[5] See James Allen, John Lewis, Leon F. Litwack, and Hilton Als, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms, 2000). For a detailed analysis of the brutal 1918 lynching of mentally challenged teenager Jesse Washington, and the role of professional photographer Free Guildersleeve played in promoting the event with a series of photographs, see Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press,

However, the reasons for such violent acts varied. From the period of chattel slavery until the mid-twentieth century, African American men were the frequent targets of extralegal violence based upon false (sometimes-truthful) accusations of sexual harassment or abuse of a white woman. This was (by far) one of the most common rationales. The purity of white womanhood, it was argued, needed to be preserved and systems needed to be put in place to prevent these supposed libidinous black perverts from violating this sexual color bar, thus preventing the ultimate sin of miscegenation. Even if no violence or intimacy occurred, the perception that some alleged illicit or disrespectful contact between black men and white women was enough to arouse public indignation, leading to racially motivated murder.[6]

Other reasons involved black insolence against their "white betters" (e.g. "sassing" or "talking back"). These vocal demands for self-respect and for a just resolution of conflict were seen as cultural insubordination and a violation of the racial code. For example, the brutal April 1899 lynching of Georgia farmer Sam Hose was based upon an argument with a fellow white farmer over a debt. Because Hose dared to assert his humanity in the face of a recalcitrant system of Jim Crow social norms, he was hanged, burned, and his charred remains were divided among delighted onlookers.[7]

Conversely, some lynchings were motivated by economic jealousy on the part of whites who felt that African American economic and social success came at the expense of white people, thus violating an economic caste system buttressed by notions of race-based privilege. This insecurity was fueled by the rise of a distinct land-owning black farmer class that emerged during and after Reconstruction, as African Americans were becoming self-sufficient beyond mere sharecropping.[8]

In addition, the Freedman's Bureau and the burgeoning number of centers of higher education for blacks, led to a distinct number of black professionals and "professional men." Institutions like Washington, DC's Howard University, Nashville, Tennessee's Fisk University, Jackson, Tennessee's Lane College, and Atlanta's Morehouse and Spellman Colleges played a significant part in creating a viable black middle class.

2005), 119-136. Also see Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2003); Cameron, 84.

[6] Cameron, 52; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (Hill and Wang: New York NY, 1993), 44; Nathan Tipton, "Rope and Faggot: The Homoerotics of Lynching in William Faulkner's 'Light in August,'" *The Mississippi Quarterly* 63, no. 3&4 (Summer/Fall 2011): 369-392; Robyn Wiegman, "The Anatomy of a Lynching," *The Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no.3 (January, 1993); Cone, 7.

[7] Levering-Lewis, 226; James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY: 2017—9th Printing), 62, 76, 125, 161; Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and Society, 1874-1974* (Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[8] James R. Irwin, "Farmers and Laborers: A Note on Black Occupations in the Post Bellum South, *Agricultural History* 64, Issue One (Winter 1990): 53, 54; Allen Jones, "The Role of Tuskegee Institute in the Education of Black Farmers," *The Journal of Negro History* 60, no.2 (April 1975): 252-267.

Within higher education, social organizations like the "Divine Nine" grouping of African American fraternities and sororities led to greater social camaraderie among upwardly mobile blacks.[9]

Similarly, community-based institutions like the Black Church were considered safe havens where African Americans, regardless of socio-economic status, could congregate, socialize and become a society of equals. For example, an African American man would be called "boy" or "uncle" by his "betters" in the mostly white workplace, but on Sunday he proudly carried the title of "Reverend" or "Deacon" within the walls of the all Black sanctuary. Conversely, the Black Church was also a gathering place for homileticians to deliver scathing indictments about American society within democratic and prophetic framework.[10]

Moreover, the enlistment of African American men in the United States military during wartime was significant in their social development as it helped to develop a since of machismo, self-respect, and self-confidence. This was especially true during their service in wartime: the Spanish American War and World War I, in particular. Their return to the home front brought out white resentments against these "colored" soldiers who dared strut their uniforms and medals in the towns where they had been a marginalized group. There were a number of instances where black veterans were lynched for simply wearing their nation's cloth in public.[11]

In addition to accusations of violating sexual norms, economic jealousy and perceptions of Black upward mobility proved to be threatening to the white social order in the post Reconstruction period. Allegations of being "uppity" and not knowing one's "place" were often an informal death sentence rendered upon those African Americans who dared project prosperity. As this was the general social pretext upon which the lynchings of African Americans were conducted, it is important to consider the unique regional social factors undergirding this pernicious form of extralegal terror.

It is largely believed, within general public discussion, that these killings took place in mostly rural Deep Southern states; however, a few of these killings occurred in many parts of the United States, including portions of the urban North. For example, on June 15, 1920 in Duluth, Minnesota, the spectacle lynching of three black circus workers—Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie—involved many of the same causal elements of extralegal killing that were typical of those murders in the South: allegations of the rape of a white woman, followed by a massive and targeted hunt for the perpetrator, and resulting in

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[9] A.L. Evans, V. Evans, A.M. Evans, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), *Education* 123, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 3-16.

[10] Cone, 12, 16, 17; Brian K. Clardy, "Deconstructing a Theology of Defiance: Black Preaching and the Politics of Racial Identity," *The Journal of Church and State*, 53, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 203-221.

[11] David Davis, "Not Only is War Hell: World War I and African American Lynching Narratives, *African American Review* 42, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 477-491.

a blood ritual that had a carnival atmosphere as the killers celebrated their "victory" with a celebratory photograph.[12]

This killing had profound implications for the state, as it was burned into the collective memory of many of its residents and was sadly referenced in a popular 1965 folk song entitled "Desolation Row" written by a celebrated Minnesotan, Robert Zimmerman (aka "Bob Dylan) The opening lyrics from the song "Desolation Row" are chilling and reference a bitter history: "They're selling postcards from the hanging/they're painting the passports brown/ the beauty parlor is filled with sailors/the circus is in town." This is a direct reference to the Duluth lynchings.[13]

Whether these lynchings occurred, in a medium sized northern city, or in a rural Mississippi Delta hamlet, these barbarous crimes were part of a larger national phenomena steeped in racial hatred and a flagrant disregard for modern societal norms. And like other states, Kentucky (especially the Jackson Purchase region) was not immune to its share of racial violence.

The Legacy of Lynchings in Western Kentucky

From the end of Reconstruction to the mid-twentieth century, the Commonwealth had over 169 documented lynchings, the overwhelming majority taking place in the Western **r**egion of the state as demonstrated in Table 1.1.[14]

The Number of Reported Lynchings in Western Kentucky (1877-1940)

County	**Number of Reported Lynchings**
Ballard	3
Caldwell	2
Carlisle	1
Crittendon	1
Fulton	20
Graves	6
Hickman	1
Hopkins	2
Livingston	1
Logan	12
Marshall	3
McCracken	5
Trigg	3

[12] See Michael Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000).

[13] Bob Dylan, *Highway 51 Revisited.* Columbia Records, 1965.

[14] "Lynching in America: Kentucky," Equal Justice Initiative; Montgomery, Alabama. https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/explore/kentucky. Retrieved: May 28, 2020.

The reasons behind many of these lynchings can be attributed to a number of factors: allegations of rape by a black man against a white woman, murder, theft, or some fallacious breach of the norms of the era's racial social caste. However, during the economic and political fallout from the Black Patch Tobacco Wars (1904-1909), African American farmers were caught in the crossfire of power politics and economic resentment by whites.

The "wars" were based, in large part, on a conflict between struggling tobacco farmers and the American Tobacco Company over prices, thus making the economic situation dire for most farmers. Black field hands and land-owning tobacco farmers found themselves targeted by these ruthless renegades as Blacks were perceived as an economic and social threat to the established Jim Crow order and needed to be "put in their place." From the winter of 1908, until the early part of 1909, violence against African Americans perpetrated by paramilitary Night Riders escalated to near genocidal proportions.

On April 9, 1908 a small town in Marshall County, Birmingham, had its entire African American population driven out by Night Riders. And in Russellville, a conflict between a black sharecropper named Rufus Browder and a white landowner, James Cunningham, escalated into violence as Browder shot and killed Cunningham in a clear case of self-defense. Browder's Prince Hall Masonic fraternity brothers Joseph Riley, Virgil Jones, Thomas Jones, and Robert Jones (the three Jones men being related) were overheard by a white man voicing support for Browder's actions, as Browder had been arrested for his actions. The men were arrested and incarcerated in the Logan County Jail by sheriff's deputies. On August 1, 1908, Night Riders broke into the jail, apprehended the four men from a compliant jailer and lynched them from the same tree.[15] A photograph of the event was taken where the four men, barely spaced apart, hung lifelessly from a tree; one of the victims had a note pinned to his corpse that read: "Let this be a warning to you niggers to let white people alone or you will go the same way."[16]

Throughout 1908, the African American community in western Kentucky found itself under the proverbial bootheel of racial violence. The events of Birmingham and Russellville, while shocking, were seemingly "normal" given the types of racist violence that took place throughout the South. But they represented the dark underbelly of this region's local history, and how those types of violent attitudes were reflected around the nation during the nadir of race relations in the United States.

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[15] George Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule and "Legal" Lynchings* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University, 1996), 124-125.

[16] The graphic picture of the 1908 Russellville, Kentucky lynchings, credited to local photographer Minor B. Wade, was one example of the cruelty of these extralegal murders and the deterrent effect that lynchings had upon the African American community. See, *Lynching, Russellville, Kentucky* (1908); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, (New York, New York); https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283258. Retrieved: 2 July, 2020.

Postscript

At the time of this writing, the United States was faced with the specter of racial violence. The murder of unarmed blacks in Brunswick, Georgia, Louisville, Kentucky, and Minneapolis, Minnesota caused a massive outpouring of anger and revulsion, the latter killing by a law enforcement officer captured on video. A broad based racially diverse coalition of citizens took to the streets to express non-violent dissent; others resorted to violence towards people and property. The word "lynching" appeared in more opinion-editorial pages, and in public discourse, to describe the sheer horror behind the spate of killings. However, there is a tone of caution that must be applied in the use of this word and analogy. Here, the proper historical context to understand these recent events is essential to placing them in perspective.

One consideration that must be raised as to whether the killings were done by an organized group and/or sanctioned by officials in positions in power to the exclusion of legal due process? Moreover, were the killings conducted by an unorganized mob whose sole intention was to commit an extra-legal murder? Was the killing meant to be the desire to mete out private retribution, or was the act intended to be a spectacle affair aimed at entertaining a popular racist audience and to serve as a deterrent to terrorize the racial minority within the community? Did the killers face justice? Were they placed on trial in a farcical tribunal and released by a "jury of their peers"? Were the killers identified or charged in the first place, or did they escape any legal sanction? How did government officials respond to the killings? Were they legitimately outraged, or were the responses flaccid? Finally, were there a similar pattern of racially motivated killings in the region that had the same motivation and intent?[17]

The answer to all of these questions will be critical as the nation continues to grapple with the nature and scope of its racially violent past. A serious reckoning with the history of lynching must take place in order for scholars and the general public to further these discussions on race, reconciliation, and the essential (sometimes contradictory) nature of American justice.

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[17] Charles Blow, "No More Lynching," *New York Times*, June 3, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/opinion/united-states-protests-lynching.html [Retrieved] June 4, 2020; see also works by Michael Eric Dyson which use the term "lynching" to describe the extralegal murder of African Americans. Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017). The reader may also want to examine Paul Butler, *Chokehold: Policing Black Men* (New York: The New Press, 2017) for more allusions to how the deaths of unarmed African American men at the hands of law enforcement officers were described as "lynching."