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ESSAY

Anti-Chinese Mob Violence and the Legacy of Lynching Studies

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The lynching of Chinese immigrants in United States history was a complex system of violence rooted in white supremacy, grassroots nativism, globalization, capitalism, and state-sponsored border solidification and control. White mobs lynched hundreds of Chinese laborers in systematic mass murders with victim counts ranging from one to well in the thirties, over a time line spanning from the first Chinese arrivals in California in the early 1850s to the decline of the Chinese population in America after the turn of the twentieth century. Yet anti-Chinese lynching remains marginal in studies of American mob violence, and many familiar with more traditional narratives of lynching might be surprised to learn that Chinese immigrants were lynched in large numbers as well as Blacks, whites, Mexicans, Italians, Native Americans, and others. Furthermore, while many important works have begun to probe the depth and causes of anti-Chinese lynching, the historiography has not yet produced anything claiming to resemble a comprehensive list of Chinese victims similar to what historians in the past have attempted with Black and Mexican victims.[1]

This is the historiographical context of Beth Lew-Williams's *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (2018). Lew-Williams's history of anti-Chinese violence in the U.S. West from the 1850s to the 1880s examines its causes and structures with unprecedented depth and nuance. In doing so, the author pays particular attention to individual moments of violence and rupture within the context of national nativist politics, ultimately arguing that anti-Chinese exclusionary violence, including national exclusion, created the modern conception of "alien" in immigration discourse.[2]

Although Lew-Williams conceptualizes anti-Chinese violence more broadly, the connections of her work to lynching studies is clear. *The Chinese Must Go* and W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930*, though thirty years apart in publication, are undoubtedly subjectively connected. Both works examine systems of historical, racially motivated mob violence in the United States. As is shown in *The Chinese Must Go*, the goal of anti-Chinese violence was the enforcement of white supremacy in a nationalist context through the exclusion and forced removal of Chinese laborers. Lew-Williams's narrative of anti-Chinese violence thus pushes forward on examining white supremacist mob violence broadly, further developing a precedent set by Brundage and other scholars.

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Yet despite their connections, the two works are remarkably separate; anti-Chinese lynching falls outside the scope of Brundage's work, while Lew-Williams is more informed by different bodies of literature than that of historians like Brundage and his intellectual successors. This review essay has three main goals. First, this essay will attempt to connect these two bodies of literature to suggest more future collaboration between historians of lynching and historians of broader systems of white supremacist violence. It is the opinion of this author that historians of these two closely related fields can gain valuable insights from each other, examples of which this essay hopes to demonstrate. Second, this essay will briefly discuss some important implications of Lew-Williams's research for future historical scholarship. Lastly, this essay will conclude with some suggestions for future research in the field.

Anti-Chinese Lynching and the Narrative of *Lynching in the New South*

Brundage's focused study on lynching informs mob violence studies, including those leading up to Lew-Williams's work, in a number of ways. Foremost are the two historians' complementary approaches. Brundage pays attention to both the "broad sweep of mob violence" as well as individual case studies.[3] This parallels Lew-Williams's approach, which she terms "transcalar": the breaking down of historically constructed scales of analysis of anti-Chinese mob violence and examination of their points of origin.[4] While Brundage's approach enables him to construct, for the first time, a comprehensive synthesis of historical mob violence in Georgia and Virginia, Lew-Williams exposes such coherences and returns historical study to its building blocks—the primary sources—albeit with a different subject. Brundage, in his study, probes deeply into the innate causes of mob violence, focusing particularly on the question of why racism turned physically violent, and even goes so far as to consult psychology and questions of human nature itself.[5] Lew-Williams also reflects this sentiment when she argues that anti-Chinese violence is importantly distinct from the anti-Chinese movement as a whole.[6] Historians, then, as the field has shown, must treat racial violence in its own historical right, and not just as a subset of Jim Crow or nativist movements.

While Brundage's narrative of mob violence has enabled much of the historical study on lynching written since *Lynching in the New South*, it has also left future historians to expand beyond his narrative and develop it further in different ways. The study of anti-Chinese mob violence, the subject of *The Chinese Must Go* and several works that inform it, undoubtedly benefits from Brundage's scholarly legacy. Yet the history of violence against Chinese immigrants exists outside of the scope of Brundage's narrative. One obvious degree of separation is Brundage's geographical span. The author focuses mainly on Georgia and Virginia and notes that the scale of lynchings throughout the South was far greater than that of lynchings throughout the West Coast.[7] Yet anti-Chinese violence was almost entirely rooted in the Far West, a fact partially explained by specific local geographical and social conditions, and partially by population concentration.

Since the publication of *Lynching in the New South*, scholars have expanded mob violence studies geographically to cover the rest of the United States, and have even begun to consider its global ramifications. Stephen J. Leonard's *Lynching in Colorado: 1859-1919* (2002), Ken Gonzales-Day's *Lynching in the West: 1850-1935* (2006), and the essays that comprise Michael J. Pfeifer's *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (2013) have all taken critical studies of lynching and applied them beyond Brundage's seminal work.[8] Other more recent works such as Manfred Berg's *Popular*

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Justice (2011) perform comprehensive studies of lynching on a national scale that include geographical considerations, such as the West Coast, that fall outside of earlier narratives of lynching.[9] Finally, scholars like Michael J. Pfeifer have begun to consider the global connections and consequences of mob violence. Works like *Global Lynching and Collective Violence* (2017) consider the ways in which lynching operated not just transnationally but also internationally and represent the cutting edge of scholarship.[10] This trend toward geographical expansion enables future historical study of anti-Chinese violence, which operated nationally but was localized primarily on the West Coast.

Besides different geographical centers, anti-Chinese mob violence also operated on a slightly different chronological scale than that of Brundage's narrative. *Lynching in the New South* as well as many great subsequent works devote much of their analyses to the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, a period critical to understanding Southern mob violence.[11] Anti-Chinese mob violence, however, is unique in that the bulk of it occurred much earlier; the overwhelming majority of known incidents occurred before 1900. In his 2017 review essay, William D. Carrigan argues the case for more scholarly attention on the mid-nineteenth century, calling it the "most important era" for historians to understand and conceptualize mob violence.[12] This temporal refocusing is especially applicable to anti-Chinese mob violence, which manifested as early as 1850 but had declined considerably by 1900. Thus, while Brundage's narrative encompasses its own critical period, more recent mob violence studies have begun to suggest a different chronological focus necessary for further study of anti-Chinese violence.

Perhaps the most obvious ways that anti-Chinese mob violence studies move beyond Brundage's narrative are the unique causes and motivations of the system of violence that encompassed it. Brundage's work on Southern lynching does not particularly focus on Chinese victims, most of whom were murdered far outside of his geographical scope. Instead, he has left that work to subsequent and future historians. Earlier studies of anti-Chinese violence include the works of David H. Stratton (1983) and Craig Storti (1991), though the field has developed considerably since Brundage's work on lynching.[13] In 2003, journalist Iris Chang's *The Chinese in America* has synthesized existing primary source research and produces an important, comprehensive narrative of anti-Chinese violence in the U.S. West.[14] Since then, scholars like Scott Zesch (2008, 2012), R. Gregory Nokes (2009), and Liping Zhu (2013) have produced important case studies of incidents of anti-Chinese violence, while scholars such as Jean Pfaelzer in *Driven Out* (2008) have begun to uncover and document these incidents in comprehensive lists.[15] In doing so, these scholars have started to conceptualize anti-Chinese violence not as a series of incidents with similar causes, but as a broad, nuanced system that extended throughout the country with roots in white supremacy, national gatekeeping, and border formation. Lew-Williams's work on anti-Chinese mob violence in *The Chinese Must Go* is likewise perhaps the current culmination of scholarly work in the field in that it synthesizes the works of these historians and builds upon them with the next level of research and understanding that future scholarship in the field will undoubtedly begin with.

These studies of anti-Chinese mob violence move beyond and expand upon Brundage's work in important ways. Like other victims of lynching, early Chinese immigrants occupied unique roles as historical actors, and were a part of and responded to systems of violence importantly distinct from any other. Scholarship on anti-Chinese violence reflects these distinctions. Although it would be impossible to discuss everything that made this system of violence unique in such a short essay, two such aspects were the key role of anti-immigrant nativism in enabling anti-Chinese violence, and the placement of the two together within the larger narrative of national exclusionary politics. According to

Lew-Williams, the "principal intent" of anti-Chinese violence, along with "its method and result" made it distinct.[16] Although the traditional narratives of lynching by Brundage and subsequent scholars emphasize its role in racial subjugation and enslavement, the intent of anti-Chinese violence was "exclusion."[17] For historians of mob violence, the unique role of exclusion is key to understanding how anti-Chinese violence operated differently from other contemporary systems of violence.

Just as exclusion was the principal intent of anti-Chinese violence, its key method was "expulsion."[18] As Lew-Williams and earlier scholars note, systematic expulsions in which nativist vigilantes used physical violence to forcibly remove Chinese immigrants from their homes and communities was widespread throughout the U.S. West. In the majority of these expulsions, the intent was not murder but instead forced removal—an important difference that underlays the distinct causes of anti-Chinese violence in the period.[19] Even though many of these forced expulsions led to Chinese deaths, those that did not produce casualties in the traditionally understood sense are still key to understanding this system of exclusionary violence. Anti-Chinese lynchings, likewise, were an important if relatively uncommon part of this system.

The consequence of anti-Chinese mob violence with the most historiographical weight is the creation of what Lew-Williams calls the "modern American alien."[20] Previous scholarship by historians like Mae M. Ngai (2004) and Adam McKeown (2008) has explored American border formation and its ties to Chinese immigration, as well as the creation of excluded classes along newly defined lines of racial hierarchy and exclusion.[21] Lew-Williams develops this argument further by arguing that the anti-Chinese nativist movement, including the violence of restriction and exclusion, is responsible for the genesis of the "particular legal and social status" of the alien immigrant.[22] Importantly distinct from other examples of contemporary noncitizens, the first "aliens" were Chinese immigrants who were forcibly removed and murdered en masse by both legal and grassroots physical violence that sought to exclude them from American society. Thus, anti-Chinese violence was more than a series of connected, racially and economically motivated expulsions and murders; it was also the formation of a regulated national border as well as, for the first time, an obsessive classification of the existence of certain immigrant classes as "legal" or "illegal" in a way that eventually led to the form of immigration control the United States uses today.

The Implications of Anti-Chinese Lynching

Like any other system of violence, anti-Chinese lynching is important to study in its own right. Historians need not ever question the significance of studying mob violence or any other system in which human lives were purposefully taken. Even so, however, anti-Chinese mob violence poses unique historical implications broader in scope than the individual victims themselves. Future scholars studying anti-Chinese violence or connected histories will thus benefit from considering these implications that further illustrate the field's critical importance.

Questions of American Empire and Border Formation

Because of contemporary immigration debate and widespread nativism so deeply intertwined with anti-Chinese mob violence, this history poses broader questions about the United States in a global framework. Lew-Williams notes that, although the anti-Chinese movement "began almost as soon as the Chinese arrived," the restriction debate was

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complicated by American capital expansion at home and abroad.[23] As the author argues, the "Chinese Question," as contemporaries called it, was not only about race, but also about empire: migration, international trade, diplomacy, and commercial expansion all played contentious roles in the debate over Chinese immigration. Most significant of all were the immigrants themselves who, in their individual and varied stories, each acted as a piece of a broader, global system of migration and commerce.[24] These implications become especially apparent through the growth of violent vigilante border control in the 1880s. As Lew-Williams notes, when federally encouraged anti-Chinese vigilantism became physically violent, the government lost control of what became a new system of state-sanctioned violence it played a large part in creating.[25] Thus, not only was anti-Chinese nativism a reaction to globalization and international migration, but anti-Chinese mob violence and lynching were together the genesis of border control that further developed in the twentieth century.

Questions of American Citizenship

Chinese immigration and the reactions against it also provoke peculiar questions about the nature of American citizenship and civic participation. Historians understand that the question of citizenship goes beyond a de jure legal status to include a host of other less-easily quantifiable characteristics. The history of Chinese immigration further complicates this question. Lew-Williams argues that, during the creation of a singular form of national citizenship after the Civil War, Chinese immigrants lingered in an unclear legal status. In addition to ideas of racial inclusion and enfranchisement, new ideas of economic citizenship arose that left notions of Chinese citizenship in the United States up for grabs.[26]

One aspect of this complicated notion of citizenship is the idea of civic participation, the degree to which Chinese immigrants integrated with American society. Historians note that, under contemporary citizenship law, Chinese immigrants were largely ineligible for naturalized citizenship. Yet while contemporary nativists often styled Chinese immigrants as incompatible with white American society, historians acknowledge that they not only created their own social networks, but profoundly integrated with existing connections. For example, Lew-Williams notes that Chinese immigrants drew upon their own connections with white communities to resist anti-Chinese violence and expulsion attempts. The author notes that, although not always successful, Chinese merchants and businessmen drew upon vast quantities of social capital as a form of resistance to nativism that, in the process, proved their deep ties with white American society.[27] Ultimately, it was the creation of the modern American "citizen" after the Civil War that also enabled the creation of the concept of the modern American "alien."[28] Anti-Chinese violence, as Lew-Williams's work has shown, is deeply involved in the creation of both.

Questions of American Capitalism

Lastly, the history of anti-Chinese violence provokes questions about the history of American and global capitalism. Brundage first introduces this problem when he argues that "the combined weight of imperialism, industrial capitalism, and racism pressed Europeans and their descendents … to search for solutions to the vexing 'color problem.'" Lynching, as the author has argued, was a "peculiarly American" solution to that problem.[29] Lew-Williams likewise argues that "economic disparities between workers

and capitalists, a racially divided labor system, and a pervasive belief in white supremacy" all provoked the anti-Chinese movement to turn violent.[30] In fact, labor disputes were the greatest point of tension between white and Chinese laborers in the period.

Furthermore, organized labor leaders such as Denis Kearney and Samuel Gompers were among the most outspoken anti-Chinese agitators. These agitators often incorporated immigrant laborers, especially Chinese laborers, as evidence of capitalist exploitation of white, working-class Americans. The role of organized labor in anti-Chinese violence can perhaps best be illustrated by the Rock Springs Massacre of 1885, in which white organized laborers murdered at least twenty-eight Chinese miners in retaliation to a labor dispute. Populist nativism, which this essay has demonstrated was the key vehicle of anti-Chinese violence, operated in the form of organized labor and rallied white working-class laborers in solidarity against Chinese laborers across the country, but especially in western states like California and Wyoming. Historians have long acknowledged the roles of white organized labor in the anti-Chinese movement, drawing conclusions that this essay has briefly touched upon but will not attempt to fully summarize. Instead, future works on anti-Chinese violence should acknowledge the roles of labor in this system of violence, especially its juxtaposition against the looming growth of capitalism and labor exploitation, and continue to confront uncomfortable questions about the histories of American capitalism and labor these acknowledgments provoke.

Historiographical Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Scholarship

Lew-Williams's important new work represents the promising future for anti-Chinese mob violence studies. As this essay has tried to suggest, the next step for historians in this field is to connect literature on anti-Chinese violence with *Lynching in the New South* and more recent literature on lynching. Beginning perhaps with Brundage, scholars over the past three decades have developed their own conceptual frameworks for understanding different but connected systems of white supremacist violence across the country. Though no such framework has yet been developed for understanding anti-Chinese lynching, *The Chinese Must Go* is a clear step in that direction.

Historians of lynching, likewise, can benefit from broader scopes that conceptualize lynching and racial violence more inclusively, in ways that acknowledge the different forms that racial violence can take. It has been many years since historians have stopped conceptualizing lynchings as a series of individual, racially motivated murders, and begun to view them as broad systems of white supremacy. In that time, historians like Brundage and others have acknowledged that the structures of lynchings and the ways they operate differ significantly across place and time. In *Lynching in the New South*, for example, this point is illustrated with the case studies of Georgia and Virginia; in both states, differences in geographical and cultural factors caused lynchings to take on different forms, yet they still shared root causes. Historians of lynching can thus gain from broader conceptions of mob violence, especially against groups of victims like Chinese immigrants, against whom systematic historical violence may not always resemble that of lynching in the South on a surface level.

Ultimately, future scholarship in the field will depend on the continued uncovering and use of Chinese primary sources. Lew-Williams argues that "foregrounding the Chinese perspective," although difficult, is important because it allows historians to fully understand the violence against them and highlight their voices within a sea of other, often louder narratives.[31] Yet Chinese primary sources remain few in both archives and published scholarship. In order to continue to study anti-Chinese violence and the history

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of Chinese America as a whole, historians will need to work to uncover hard-to-find Chinese voices and listen to them more closely.

Notes

1 For examples of scholarly efforts to collect and catalog lynching incidents and their victims, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado,1859–1919* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002); Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836–1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Michael J. Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Michael J. Pfeifer, ed., *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); and William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2 Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 10–11.

3 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 15.

4 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 10.

5 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 9–10.

6 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 19.

7 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 8.

8 See Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado*; Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West*; Pfeifer, *Lynching Beyond Dixie.*

9 See Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011).

10 See Michael J. Pfeifer, ed., *Global Lynching and Collective Violence, Volume 1: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Michael J. Pfeifer, ed., *Global Lynching and Collective Violence, Volume 2: The Americas and Europe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

11 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 7–8. For other examples of scholarly works on lynching that focus on the twentieth century, see Berg, *Popular Justice;* Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West*; Pfeifer, ed., *Global Lynching and Collective Violence*; Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*; Jason Morgan Ward, *Hanging Bridge: Racial Violence and America's Civil Rights Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

12 William D. Carrigan, "The Strange Career of Judge Lynch: Why the Study of Lynching Needs to Be Refocused on the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 7:2 (June 2017): 296.

13 See David H. Stratton, "The Snake River Massacre of Chinese Miners, 1887" in Duane A. Smith, ed., *A Taste of the West: Essays in Honor of Robert G. Athearn* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1983); Craig Storti, *Incident at Bitter Creek: The Story of the Rock Springs Chinese Massacre* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991).

14 Iris Chang: *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003).

15 See Scott Zesch, "Chinese Los Angeles in 1870–1871: The Makings of a Massacre," *Southern California Quarterly* 90:2 (Summer 2008): 109–58; Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); R. Gregory Nokes, *Massacred for Gold: The Chinese in Hells Canyon* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2009); Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Liping Zhu, *The Road to Chinese Exclusion: The Denver Riot, 1880 Election, and Rise of the West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

16 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 5.

17 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 3–5.

18 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 6.

19 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 6–7. Also see Pfaelzer, *Driven Out.*

20 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 7.

21 See Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Mae M. Ngai, "Chinese Gold Miners

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22 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 8.
23 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 20.
24 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 20–24.
25 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 88.
26 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 30–31.
27 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 94–95.
28 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 235–36.
29 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 2–3.
30 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 114–15.
31 Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 93.

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