

ESSAY

Violence in the Gilded Ages, Then and Now

Allyson Hobbs*

Stanford University

*Corresponding author. Email: ahobbs@stanford.edu

In 1840, Joseph Mallord William Turner, the English painter, created *Slave Ship: Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On*. The painting has many of Turner's signature elements: sensual imagery, brilliant sunsets, and dramatic landscapes ablaze with color. A closer look haunts the viewer. The scattering of a severed leg, shackles, and chains floating in bloody waters capture the monstrous decision of the captain and crew of the slave ship the *Zong* (originally named *Zorg*, which means, ironically, "Care" in Dutch) to throw 132 enslaved men, women, and children overboard, one by one, through cabin windows.

The unimaginable psychological and physical violence on the ship led ten people to drown themselves. In the court case that followed, the crew argued that their desperate acts were necessary "for the preservation of the rest."¹ But this was not true: there was enough water—420 gallons, in fact—to ensure the crew's survival. When the ship arrived in England, the ship's owners sued the insurers for compensation for the murdered, the "lost cargo."

Almost 180 years have passed since Turner captured the extraordinary loss of human life in the Atlantic. Yet the inhumanity that the painting depicts appears eerily similar to the inhumanity and the multiple forms of violence that we witnessed during the Gilded Age and now, in our own time.

Today's frightening levels of political corruption, economic inequality, racial terror, voter suppression, xenophobia, and misogyny hark back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period was termed the "Gilded Age" by Mark Twain because it glittered on the outside but was riddled by political dishonesty, incompetence, venality, and scandal. Indeed, journalist and political economist Henry George described President Grover Cleveland (who held office between 1885 and 1889 and again between 1893 and 1897) as "more dangerous to the Republic than any of his predecessors."² George's comment echoes the assessments that many have made about the current occupant of the White House.

Historian Richard White, economists Thomas Piketty and Paul Krugman, and many other scholars have written that we are living through a Second Gilded Age as we watch the stunning rise of the "one percent," increasing inequality, stagnant wages, soaring corporate profits, and unprecedented concentrations of wealth. As Piketty writes, "Wealth is so concentrated that a large segment of society is virtually unaware of its existence, so that some people imagine that it belongs to surreal or mysterious entities."³

Now, as then, the inequality was itself unequal: African Americans lost far more of their wealth than whites during the Great Recession. Deputy editor of the *Atlantic*, Gillian B. White observed that in 2013, the net worth of white households was thirteen

times greater than that of black households. By 2031, median black household wealth will have decreased by almost \$100,000 as a result of the Great Recession. These statistics remind us of a saying that is often used to describe the racial divergences in the economy: “When white folks catch a cold, black folks get pneumonia.” In a lecture titled “Where Do We Go From Here?” given in January 2019, Reverend Dr. William J. Barber commented that while some people are nervously anticipating the coming of another recession, there are many Americans who have never known anything but a recession.⁴

During the Gilded Age, political violence intersected with the physical violence that African Americans endured, leaving blacks with few, if any, avenues for redress. The Reconstruction era ambition of extending equal rights to African Americans was not achieved. Instead, it was trampled by racial violence and extinguished by the indifference of the federal government.

In April 1873, violence erupted in the small town of Colfax, Louisiana. The federal government’s Reconstruction era policies compelled Louisiana to rewrite the state constitution to safeguard the rights of African Americans, including the right to vote. Newly enfranchised black voters elected a slate of Republican officials, including 137 black state legislators. Embittered ex-Confederates chafed at the election results and armed themselves to resist the new government. The freedmen in Colfax—some who were ex-soldiers—organized a militia. Radical Republicans occupied the courthouse in the center of town, but they lacked the ammunition to defend themselves against the Confederate veterans who were organized by the Knights of the White Camellia and a group known as the “Old Time Ku Klux Klan.”

The white men attacked the courthouse and set it on fire on Easter Sunday and slaughtered the black men as they ran out and tried to surrender. A reign of terror ensued: black and white Republicans were intimidated, beaten, shot, and killed. Some were hanged; some had their throats slit. The defenders of the courthouse waited in vain for militia reinforcements to arrive from New Orleans. Even the Seventh Cavalry, sent by President Grant who imposed martial law, could not subdue the ex-Confederates. Only nine perpetrators were put on trial and only three were convicted on the minor charges of conspiracy, not murder.⁵

There is a monument in the Colfax cemetery that was built to honor the three white men who died in the massacre. The “heroes,” the inscription notes, “fell in the Colfax riot fighting for white supremacy.” The monument gets the second part right—they were indeed fighting for white supremacy—but it also fails to note the estimated 70 to 165 black people who were murdered during the fighting.⁶ (An accurate count was impossible as some men were killed outside of the town.) Their deaths have been purposely forgotten. No memorial stands in the Colfax cemetery to honor their lives.

The Colfax massacre was just one of many acts of racist terror during the Gilded Age. A race riot engulfed Vicksburg in December 1874 where disturbing dispatches circulated in an attempt to arouse the dormant sympathies of Northern readers: “There is a reign of terror and bloodshed at present in Mississippi that you up North, accustomed as you are to peace and good order and security of life, could hardly realize unless you were here to see for yourself the actual state of the case. ... It was a fit verification ... that the bad men of the South went gunning for negroes as a Northern hunter went gunning for squirrels.”⁷ In 1898 in Wilmington, North Carolina, a thriving black community was destroyed by a race riot that drove black officials out of office and left twenty-five African Americans dead.⁸ Between the years of 1890 and 1917, two to three black Southerners were lynched each week.⁹

The violent campaigns of the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camelia, and the White League kept blacks away from the ballot box. A critical and recurrent question—"Are we to have soldiers?"—was asked but left frighteningly unanswered in much of the correspondence between black politicians and their constituents.¹⁰ In an 1875 article published in the *New Orleans Times*, a white lawyer described the precarious nature of the public offices held by Republicans and commented that no "Radical could hold an office twenty-four hours in Louisiana but for Grant's bayonets."¹¹ Responding to the circumstances that blacks faced in Louisiana, the African American politician P. B. S. Pinchback offered the gloomy assessment that the "condition of colored people is but little, if any, better than it was before the war." Still, Pinchback believed that the federal government would live up to the Constitution and protect blacks' newly won rights. As he explained, "To let it alone, would be the most fatal blunder that the Nation could make. To let this question alone, would be to turn the lamb over to the Wolf. It would result in a practical destruction of every political right conferred upon the colored people and the utter annihilation of every legal element in that vast section of our country."¹²

Black Republicans in Mississippi wrote to Senator Blanche Bruce in a panic, asking for his help in finding other forms of employment besides patronage positions. "I have been compelled to sleep in the woods and cotton pens night after night in order to save my life, and even now they are loud and deep in their threats as ever," Albert D. Thompson wrote in December 1875, adding that "there are some persons in this county, who the democrats determine must leave, and I am one. ..." Thompson, who "dare[d] not appear on the streets after dark without being fired upon," hoped to secure a position in a government department as a messenger, "or in fact anything to keep soul and body together."¹³ Some had been met by violent white mobs who ordered them to leave town, and many requested that Bruce work "as expeditiously as possible" to find new positions where they might "live away from this at this time Hell on Earth."¹⁴

Mississippi adopted a state constitution in 1890 that included provisions to disenfranchise blacks.¹⁵ Other states quickly followed Mississippi's lead. A wide range of efforts to suppress voting including registration requirements, literacy tests, and poll taxes and led to a dramatic decline in the voting population across the country. Even the "Dean of American Letters," novelist, playwright, and editor at *The Atlantic*, William Dean Howells was not able to vote in the election of 1896 because he missed the registration deadline.¹⁶ These laws were not designed to keep a man of his stature away from the polls, but this was one of the unintended consequences of such far-reaching laws.

The massacres and butchery that ravaged Southern black communities must have accumulated in the minds of African Americans living through the Gilded Age in a similar fashion as the countless killings of unarmed black people have traumatized African Americans in our contemporary moment. The constant repetition of images on social media of black men and women being gunned down—while they are running away from the police in the case of Walter Scott; while asking a homeowner for help in the case of Renisha McBride; while explaining actions that fell squarely within the law in the case of Philando Castile; or while pleading in desperation, "I can't breathe," as Eric Garner did as police officers choked him to death.

The trauma does not end with the killing. There is the aftermath. Michael Brown's body remained where he fell, in the middle of Canfield Drive, for four hours. Parents kept their children away from windows that faced that street.¹⁷ Police officers in

Houston claimed that Sandra Bland died by suicide. Then there are the acquittals of the police officers. The family of Delrawn Small, who died at the hands of police after a traffic dispute, stated that the video was their “hope ... redemption ... justice,” but it proved insufficient when the police officer claimed that he feared for his life and the Brooklyn Supreme Court delivered a not-guilty verdict.¹⁸

The reports of killings across the South would have come more slowly to black citizens during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. There would not have been video from body cameras played over and over on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. There were seventy thousand views of Small’s death on one social media outlet.¹⁹ But the resulting trauma would not have been any less searing. We can only imagine how many times the survivors shared their stories of terror, which would have been passed down to future generations. Parents then as now struggled to shield their children from evidence of the carnage. Newspaper reports, correspondence, court testimony, and the papers of the Freedman’s Bureau revealed gruesome scenes. New Orleans in 1866. Laurens, South Carolina, in 1870. Colfax in 1873. New Orleans again in 1874. Yazoo City, Mississippi, in 1875. Hamburg, South Carolina, in 1876.²⁰

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In our current moment, we have seen with our own eyes black men and women brutalized and murdered by the police. We also have seen efforts to suppress black political participation.

In July 2016, we witnessed three deaths over two days: Delrawn Small was the first. Alton Sterling was shot after being pinned to the ground and Philando Castile was shot while sitting in his car with his girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter in the backseat. No federal charges will be filed against the police officers who killed Alton Sterling. Jeronimo Yanez, the police officer who killed Philando Castile, was acquitted of all charges. Between March 16, 2014, and April 4, 2015, *Mother Jones* counted thirteen fatal police shootings that were caught on video. Most of the victims were black and unarmed.²¹ The “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women” report was first issued in May 2015 to “serve as a resource for the media, organizers, researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders to better understand and address Black women’s experiences of profiling and policing.”²² The report has documented the stories of black women like Charleena Lyles who was shot seven times and killed in front of her children by Seattle police.²³ After use of excessive force, sexual abuse is the second most reported type of police misconduct. In Oklahoma City, a police officer was convicted after he raped and sexually assaulted thirteen black women.²⁴

In *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, historian Carol Anderson writes that stretches of what appears to be black progress trigger a backlash that “wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly” through the legislatures and courts. In response to Barack Obama’s election in 2008 and the increasing numbers of people of color taking part in the political process (Obama brought fifteen million new voters to the polls), there have been hysterical accusations of voter fraud that elected officials, election administrators, and experts from both sides of the political aisle have denied as false. Across the country, state lawmakers have introduced measures to suppress the vote through voter identification laws, the decision to relocate polling places at the last minute, the redrawing of district boundaries, and the removal of names from voter rolls.

The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law notes that since 2010, twenty states have put some form of voting restrictions in effect. Ten states have more limited voter identification laws and six states have strict photo identification

rules. Restrictions on registration have been adopted in seven states while six states limited early voting opportunities, and three states made it more difficult for people with past criminal convictions to vote. The 2016 presidential election was the first time that fourteen states (including Texas, New Hampshire, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin) had more restrictive voting procedures in place.²⁵ It was also the first presidential election in fifty years to be held without the full protections of the Voting Rights Act.

In 2017, the Supreme Court struck down sweeping attempts by Republicans to reject forms of voter identification that are more commonly used by African Americans including IDs issued to employees, students, and people who receive public assistance. Alabama made a late decision to disallow the use public housing IDs to vote when 71 percent of African Americans live in public housing in the state.²⁶ Alabama also closed many of the Department of Motor Vehicles locations in predominantly black areas of Alabama, making it increasingly difficult for black voters to get a driver's license. A federal court in North Carolina stated that the provisions of a law that restricted the forms of voter identification "target[ed] African Americans with almost surgical precision."²⁷

In Georgia, the secretary of state who was also the Republican candidate for governor, Brian Kemp, purged 10.6 percent of the registered voters during the previous two years, closed 214 polling places (mostly in minority and lower-income neighborhoods) and delayed the processing of 53,000 voter registrations during the election (70 percent were African American registrants). He declared victory, defeating African American Democratic candidate Stacey Abrams whose dogged ground game consisted of knocking on nearly every door in 159 counties. It was the closest race for governor in Georgia in over fifty years.²⁸

Countless assaults on America's most vulnerable populations—travel bans against Muslims, horrifying raids in Latino communities by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, the separation of children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border, the constant threat and the reality of deportations that tear families apart, a ban on transgender service members in the military, frightening increases in hate speech and in anti-Semitic acts, plans for the Department of Justice to challenge affirmative action policies on college campuses—have left many Americans worrying about the future of democracy.

Americans who lived through the Gilded Age had similar fears, but they held fast to a belief that democracy would prevail. As reformer Jane Addams wrote, "democratic government, associated as it is with all the mistakes and shortcomings of the common people, still remains the most valuable contribution America has made to the moral life of the world."²⁹ Our democracy will survive, but we do not know yet how long lasting the damage of this period will be. As poet Claudia Rankine has written, "Just getting along shouldn't be an ambition." But for now, it is.³⁰

Notes

1 Transcript of the 1783 court case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, quoted in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 35.

2 Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 836.

3 Quoted in Paul Krugman, "Why We Are in a New Gilded Age," *New York Review of Books* (May 8, 2014). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/05/08/thomas-piketty-new-gilded-age/>.

4 Reverend Dr. William J. Barber, "Where Do We Go From Here?" Stanford University, Jan. 17, 2019.

5 White, *The Republic For Which It Stands*, 279.

- 6 White, *The Republic For Which It Stands*, 280.
- 7 “Mississippi Affairs: The Clinton Riot—The Cruelty of the Whites—Vicksburg Adds to Her Long List of Crimes,” [n.d.]. Box 9-2: General Correspondence, Hichborn to Powers; Folder 70: General Correspondence, Pledfe—Powers. Blanche Bruce Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.
- 8 http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_riot.html.
- 9 Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 284. Also see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1996), 91–118.
- 10 For example, see William M. Hancock to Blanche Bruce, Aug. 8, 1876. Box 9-1: Family Correspondence, General Correspondence, A to Heywood; Folder 29: General Correspondence—Hamilton to Hancock. Blanche Bruce Papers, MSRC. Hancock continues, “With this kind of protection the Democracy will allow the Colored voters to exercise their right of franchise. ... If we are going to have protection we ought to know it *now*, for the Colored voters can not be induced to come out and register unless they know that protection will be afforded them in their right to vote.” Emphasis in the original.
- 11 “The Case Fairly Stated: The Limited Rights of the Colored Race, To Be Protected as Citizens, But Driven from Office,” *New Orleans Times*, Aug. 30, 1875. Box 81-2: P. B. S. Pinchback Papers; Folder 54: Pinchback, P. S., Clippings. Pinchback Papers, MSRC.
- 12 P. B. S. Pinchback, untitled speech [n.d.]. Box 81-2: P. B. S. Pinchback Papers; Folder 45: P. B. S. Pinchback. Speech. On effect of Hayes-Tilden campaign [n.d.]. Pinchback Papers, MSRC. Blanche Bruce’s brother, H. C. Bruce, echoed Pinchback in a letter dated Nov. 14, 1876: “The greatest excitement prevails here among all classes, but more particular among the colored people. They believe that slavery is to be reestablished. They are not alone in this belief. Thousands of Rebels—even up here think the same.” See H. C. Bruce to Blanche Bruce, Nov. 14, 1876. Box 9-1: Family Correspondence, General Correspondence, A to Heywood; Folder 3: H. C. Bruce—Family Correspondence 1876–1877. Blanche Bruce Papers, MSRC.
- 13 Albert D. Thompson to Blanche Bruce, Dec. 8, 1875. Box 9-3: General Correspondence, Randolph—Zimmerman; Folder 93: General Correspondence, Thompson to Tobin. Blanche Bruce Papers, MSRC.
- 14 W. F. Simonton to Blanche Bruce, Dec. 3, 1875. Box 9-3: General Correspondence, Randolph—Zimmerman; Folder 81: Simonton, W. F. Blanche Bruce Papers, MSRC. The complete quotation is this: “P.S. Any place you can obtain for me that will enable me to live away from this at this time Hell on Earth [illegible word], will be acceptable.”
- 15 <http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/103/mississippi-constitution-of-1890>.
- 16 White, *The Republic For Which It Stands*, 848.
- 17 Julie Bosman and Joseph Goldstein, “Timeline for a Body: 4 Hours in the Middle of a Ferguson Street,” *New York Times*, Aug. 23, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/us/michael-brown-a-bodys-timeline-4-hours-on-a-ferguson-street.html> (accessed: Aug. 19, 2019).
- 18 Kia Gregory, “Killing Us Softly: How Videos of Police Brutality Traumatize African Americans and Undermine the Search for Justice,” *The New Republic*, Feb. 13, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153103/videos-police-brutality-traumatize-african-americans-undermine-search-justice> (accessed Aug. 19, 2019).
- 19 Gregory, “Killing Us Softly.”
- 20 <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory2ay/chapter/racial-violence-in-reconstruction-2/>.
- 21 Jaeah Lee and AJ Vicens, “Here Are 13 Killings by Police Captured on Video in the Past Year,” *Mother Jones*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/05/police-shootings-caught-on-tape-video/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2019).
- 22 “#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women,” <http://www.aapf.org/sayhernamereport/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2019).
- 23 Sam Levine, “Seattle Police Shot Charleena Lyles Seven Times, Autopsy Finds,” *The Guardian*, Aug. 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/30/charleena-lyles-seattle-police-shooting> (accessed Aug. 19, 2019).
- 24 Kanya Bennett, “Say Her Name: Recognizing Police Brutality Against Black Women,” June 14, 2018, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/criminal-law-reform/reforming-police-practices/say-her-name-recognizing-police-brutality>.
- 25 <https://www.brennancenter.org/new-voting-restrictions-america>.

- 26 Mike Cason, “Group Complains about Alabama Decision to Disallow Public Housing IDs for Voting,” *AL.com* (Nov. 4, 2014), https://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2014/11/group_complains_about_alabama.html.
- 27 Adam Liptak and Michael Wines, “Strict North Carolina Voter ID Law Thwarted After Supreme Court Rejects Case,” *New York Times* (May 15, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/us/politics/voter-id-laws-supreme-court-north-carolina.html>.
- 28 Greg Bluestein, “Now as Governor-Elect, Kemp Points to Georgia’s Future,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Nov. 17, 2018, <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/now-governor-elect-kemp-points-georgia-future/1AUMopeRIda2i4Ur9MML9I/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2019).
- 29 Quoted in White, *The Republic For Which It Stands*, 860.
- 30 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014), 55.