

ESSAY

Women's Participation in the Power Struggle over Racial and Sexual Violence

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Published at a time when the study of American mob violence was dominated by social scientists, W. Fitzhugh Brundage's comparative study, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (1993), opened the field of lynching scholarship to a new generation of historians. Scouring archives in the analog world of the early 1990s, Brundage meticulously gathered details of lynching incidents recorded by urban and rural newspapers throughout Virginia and Georgia, categorizing nearly 600 cases into “terrorist,” “private,” “posse,” and “mass” lynchings based on the demographics of participants, alleged causes, locations, and rituals employed. Critiquing the absence of historical contextualization in popular sociological and psychological models, Brundage argues that lynching incidents should be considered within their regional, cultural, geographical, and temporal contexts. His analysis reveals that mob violence served different purposes in specific regions at particular times, whether ensuring a ready supply of cheap agricultural labor in the Georgia Cotton Belt or maintaining racial boundaries during periods of social change in southwestern Virginia.¹ Mob violence clearly played an important role in maintaining white supremacy, but the social, economic, and political landscape influenced community support for lynching on the local level. By emphasizing the importance of historical contextualization in understanding mob violence, Brundage established space for later scholars to conduct critical analyses of the public debates and popular narratives used to define and justify acts of mob violence as “lynching.”

Brundage's subsequent collection of essays, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (1997), calls for more nuanced studies of the evolution of lynching and the influence of race, gender, and popular culture on mob violence.² Traditionally, mob violence has been framed as a masculine enterprise, with mobs formed by men to punish other men for committing infractions against the social order. As Patricia A. Schechter points out in her essay in the collection, while the rhetorical justification provided for lynching rested on chivalric notions of protecting white women from harm, women were generally assumed to have little agency in this process.³ Reflecting the conventional wisdom, *Lynching in the New South* depicts women and children as playing only supporting roles in mob violence, gathering supplies, providing an audience, or collecting souvenirs from the scene. Only the victims of sexual assault or their families were granted

roles of “honor” participating in the mob’s retaliation. Nor were women the direct targets of mob violence. As Brundage reasons, “black women did not pose the same threats to white women that whites believed black men did,” and thus had greater latitude in violating social norms. Consequently, the victims of mob violence “were overwhelmingly male” and only a small number of women accused of violent crimes were lynched alongside their alleged male accomplices.⁴

While participation in mob violence was traditionally consigned to the male realm, anti-lynching activism provided valuable leadership opportunities for women reformers. At a time when African American men felt powerless to address the problem of mob violence due to its close association with the myth of the “black beast” rapist, Ida B. Wells gained prominence in both the United States and Great Britain for her outspoken condemnation of lynching.⁵ Likewise, recognizing that the same mythology restricted white women’s search for gender equality, Jesse Daniel Ames organized white women to openly reject the violence committed in the name of their protection. After all, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explains, “the right of the southern lady to protection presupposed her obligation to obey.”⁶ While they framed their work within traditional feminine roles as moral protectors of the family and community to gain public acceptance for their interventions, such claims masked their radical cultural critiques of American society and gender relations.

With the proliferation of lynching scholarship over the past quarter century, historians have begun to reconsider the variety of roles women assumed, as lynching apologists and opponents, as well as mob victims and participants. In *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (2009), Crystal N. Feimster unravels the complexity of women’s relationship to mob violence, arguing that Black and white southern women “marshaled narratives of rape and lynching for their own political empowerment.”⁷ Impressively researched, this important monograph connects three key subfields of scholarship on lynching and racial violence, exploring the public discourse surrounding mob violence; the race and gender dynamics of lynching; and the social, cultural, and political impact of sexual violence.

Southern Horrors provides a comparative examination of the careers of Ida B. Wells and Rebecca Latimer Felton, perhaps the most famous American opponent and proponent of lynching, respectively. Despite their long and varied reform careers, Wells and Felton rose to historical prominence for their rhetorical interventions in national and international debates on American lynching in the 1890s. Wells became an exile from the South after penning an editorial in 1892 denouncing “the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women” and warning white southerners not to “over-reach themselves” lest public scrutiny reveal patterns of consensual interracial sexual liaisons between white women and Black men.⁸ In 1897, Felton gained attention for her “Woman on the Farm” speech delivered to the Georgia Agricultural Society, in which she declared, “if it needs lynching to protect woman’s dearest possession from human beasts then I say lynch a thousand a week if necessary.”⁹ Feimster contends that, in their most famous rhetoric, Wells and Felton “manifested the same preoccupation with protection against sexual violence” making them “fellow travelers on the path for women’s rights.”¹⁰ By reframing both women as anti-rape activists, Feimster situates Wells’s anti-lynching rhetoric and Felton’s endorsement of lynching within a larger nineteenth-century national discourse on race, gender, and power.

Both Wells and Felton criticized white men as the source of violence and abuse. Wells argued that “black women suffered sexual violence at the hands of white men and black men fell victim to white mob violence for engaging in consensual sexual relationships with

white women.”¹¹ While Felton’s emphasis at the end of the nineteenth century was on protecting white women, her earlier reform efforts demonstrated concern for the protection of Black women, particularly incarcerated women, who became vulnerable to abuse through the convict lease system. Feimster seeks to explain Felton’s seemingly abrupt shift in racial politics by tracing her political development and how Felton’s position fits within the larger set of political logics in which she was immersed. Feimster weaves a surprisingly nuanced portrait of Felton as a passionate advocate for women’s rights and personal safety, who felt let down by the white men expected to provide protection and outraged by the abuses heaped upon vulnerable women. Despite being widely interpreted as an endorsement of lynching, Feimster claims Felton’s “Woman on the Farm” speech was framed as an indictment of the failures of white men to embrace “democratic political practices” and provide “women with protection and basic civil rights.”¹² Although coming from vastly different backgrounds and political directions, debates surrounding lynching informed both women’s arguments for women’s rights and the protection of women from sexual violence.

Feimster paints Felton as an astute campaigner. Although pushed to align with the Democratic Party following the disintegration of the Populist Party, Felton’s decision to embrace the call for lynching in her 1897 speech would have coincided with the solidification of the lynching-for-rape narrative in public discourse. As my research has shown, while Wells worked to separate lynching from rape allegations, American lynching apologists doubled down on the claim, refusing to entertain any discussion of mob violence that did not also address the problem of rape. So passionate was the backlash against Wells’s 1893–1894 transnational anti-lynching campaigns that even progressive southern leaders who had embraced law-and-order campaigns in the early 1890s found it difficult to avoid repeating and reinforcing the lynching-for-rape narrative.¹³ In light of the strong public reaction to her “Woman on the Farm” speech, Felton would have understood the value of embracing this popular trope to gain an audience for her message. Indeed, Feimster asserts that Felton’s inflammatory response to Alexander Manly’s rebuttal of her “Woman on the Farm” speech helped to fuel the 1898 Wilmington, North Carolina race riot and marked a turning point in her career. In accepting the Democratic Party’s ideology of white supremacy, she gained power and influence, including a weekly column in the *Atlanta Journal* to promote her political and social advocacy.¹⁴

By leveling rape accusations and participating in mob violence, Feimster argues, white women of all classes could leverage popular lynching narratives to claim “the gendered privileges of whiteness.” Commonly portrayed as simple bystanders, Feimster urges scholars to reassess white women’s presence at lynchings. Even in the absence of sexual assault allegations, white women wielded the power of life or death by initiating or directing mob action, identifying alleged perpetrators, and participating in the torture and murder of the mob’s victim. By witnessing and participating in lynchings, Feimster concludes, women ultimately claimed “a wider space ... in public and commercial life.”¹⁵ Historians have begun to answer Feimster’s challenge. In *Shrill Hurrahs: Women, Gender, and Racial Violence in South Carolina, 1865–1900* (2013), Kate Côté Gillin reveals similar patterns, asserting that white women leveled accusations of rape to cultivate white men’s protection and reduce public scrutiny by attaching the most widely tolerated justification to local acts of mob violence. “By making white women central to lynching,” Gillin claims, “white men accidentally made them powerful,” allowing white women to indulge “in vengeance and violence” or demand justice.¹⁶ If there may be truth to Wells’s infamous assertion that rape accusations were used to conceal consensual interracial sexual relationships, then the involvement of white women in directing lynchings needs to be examined with even greater scrutiny.¹⁷

Southern Horrors offers an important corrective to our understanding of lynching rhetoric by re-centering the critique of rape within the public discourse surrounding lynching and civil rights. Since the publication of *Southern Horrors*, scholars have expanded our understanding of Black women's assertion of their citizenship rights and resistance to sexual exploitation and violence. Estelle B. Freedman's 2013 study, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, traces the changing definition and politics of rape, revealing how competing factions leveraged the issue to restrict or expand the opportunities available to white and Black women. In *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in Postemancipation America* (2009), Hannah Rosen explores how freedwomen asserted their personal autonomy as newly minted citizens to refuse white men's sexual advances and to demand federal protection against the pervasive sexual violence of Reconstruction. The efforts of freedwomen to demand federal protection in the wake of the Civil War anticipated in many ways the politics of respectability embraced by the National Association of Colored Women at the end of the nineteenth century. By adopting the manners, morals, and appearance of middle-class ladies, these women asserted their rights to protection and undermined myths of Black hypersexuality. However, as LaKisha Michelle Simmons contends in *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (2015), the politics of respectability intertwined with the "politics of silence" surrounding sexual violence in young Black women's lives.¹⁸ To break that silence required bravery, as Kidada E. Williams reveals in *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (2012). Examining the individual and collective testimonies of African American men, women, and children, Williams traces patterns of persistent Black resistance to racial violence, ranging from strategies for avoiding conflict to open rejections of white supremacy and armed self-defense. These strategies for survival and resistance continued into the activism of the 1950s and 1960s alongside community outrage over sexual violence perpetrated against Black women. As Danielle L. McGuire demonstrates in *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (2010), renewed demands for the protection of Black women's bodies sparked the formation of grassroots community organizations that fueled the modern civil rights movement.

Of course, attacks on Black women's bodies extended beyond sexual assault to mob violence. Although anti-lynching activists highlighted cases of the lynching of women as evidence of the excesses of unchecked mob violence, historians have largely neglected these cases. *Southern Horrors* begins to correct this oversight by analyzing more than 150 cases of the lynching of Black and white women that occurred between 1880 and 1930. Feimster contends that the lynching of Black and white women reinforced "the racial, class, and sexual boundaries of the New South" by punishing those who resisted white supremacy. While the majority of victims were Black women accused of violent crimes, poor white women who engaged in violent behavior or sexual transgressions "refused to live up to the gender and racial expectations of white supremacy" and thus could find themselves targeted by the mob. African American women who attempted to defend their loved ones or protested too strenuously against lynchings also became targets.¹⁹ In 1918, Mary Turner, an African American woman, was brutally murdered and her eight-month-old fetus destroyed at the hands of a Georgia mob after she protested the lynching of her husband. In *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (2011), Julie Buckner Armstrong examines how Turner's lynching was memorialized by artists and activists, became a key symbol in the unsuccessful campaign to pass the Dyer Anti-lynching Bill in 1922, and

continues to hold cultural relevance today. Yet most women killed by mobs did not gain the widespread public attention Turner received, and there remains room for a more comprehensive analysis of female lynching victims. Feimster's appendix of recovered cases, perhaps supplemented by Kerry Segrave's 2010 compendium, *Lynchings of Women in the United States: The Recorded Cases, 1851–1946*, could provide a useful starting point for additional scholarship.

Press reports not only help to recover the events of lynching cases but also reveal the politics of lynching. In the period since Brundage published *Lynching in the New South*, historians have increasingly turned their attention to the discourse surrounding lynching—not only examining anti-lynching rhetoric, but also the language used to report lynching cases. Christopher Waldrep's *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (2002) reframed the application of the term “lynching” as a political act, a label assigned to either defend or condemn acts of mob violence.²⁰ Feimster continues this trend by dissecting press reports of mob violence committed against female victims, demonstrating that the press took pains to justify the necessity of mob violence in these cases. Reporters highlighted the sensational details of these women's alleged crimes, as well as their unrepentant behavior, refusing to pray and showing no remorse for their actions. The women's dangerous and violent behavior contrasted sharply with depictions of the restraint demonstrated by upstanding members of the white mob, revealing that the women were “unworthy” of manly protection and justifying the mob's actions in defending white supremacy.²¹

Arguing that the “vilification of black female victims” demonstrates that at least “some southern whites needed to be convinced by sensational and manipulative journalism,” Feimster confines her analysis to the local ramifications of these press reports without reference to the important role that local newspapers played in the broader national and transnational discourse surrounding lynching.²² Nineteenth-century British and American newspapers frequently reprinted and commented on articles that appeared in other publications. Consequently, newspaper editors needed to convince a much broader audience of the acceptability of mob violence, and their reports followed strategies employed in the mid-nineteenth century to cultivate widespread public tolerance of lynching. As I demonstrated in *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, and Transatlantic Activism* (2015), until international audiences were trained to view lynching as an acceptable form of violence distinct from murder, local reporters took great pains to demonstrate that the actions of the mob were justified in taking a life through extralegal means. The individuals targeted by mobs were accused of horrific or cowardly acts of murder and sometimes attempting to dispose of the evidence of their crimes by setting their victims' bodies alight. Furthermore, they were portrayed as being beyond redemption—sometimes cursing mob participants, refusing to confess their guilt, or refusing to pray for forgiveness. In contrast, mob participants demonstrated restrained behavior by forming an impromptu “lynch court” to hear witness testimony, taking a vote to determine the appropriate form of punishment, or offering the services of a local preacher to pray for the condemned. As audiences became more accustomed to lynching stories, reports shifted. By the 1880s, male victims of mob violence were assumed to be guilty of their alleged offenses, and reporting emphasized the punishments meted out against them.²³ From Feimster's research, it is clear that this normalization process remained unresolved for female victims.²⁴

Southern Horrors makes an innovative contribution by connecting such seemingly disparate figures as Wells and Felton within the same larger social and political discourse; yet, like most scholars of lynching, Feimster embraces a conventional American

framework that does not examine the significance of influential transnational debates about race relations, gender roles, and mob violence. The work of these Progressive Era female reformers was built on a long history of transnational women's activism. Yet too frequently, scholars have treated Wells's anti-lynching campaigns in Great Britain as a colorful sojourn, political expedient, or mere publicity stunt, ignoring the tangible value of engaging directly with the vibrant transnational discourses that flourished throughout the nineteenth century. Foreign newspapers regularly reported and commented on American mob violence, and the controversy surrounding Felton's "Woman on the Farm" speech was no exception.²⁵ Recognizing that outside scrutiny influenced local responses in both subtle and dramatic ways, later journalists and activists embraced similar strategies to advance the needs of their communities, including Nicasio and Jovita Idar's outspoken denunciation of lynchings in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands during the Mexican Revolution.²⁶

Moving beyond national boundaries to examine the larger crosscurrents that shaped American public discourse could provide a more nuanced understanding of the work of these women and the problem of lynching more generally. Moreover, although recent scholars have tried to globalize lynching scholarship, historians must not lose sight of the political nature of the term.²⁷ Lynching represents both an action and an idea. Applying the term "lynching" to specific acts of violence defines these incidents as something apart from murder or assault, imbuing participants' actions with a particular meaning. That meaning originated with American proponents of mob violence who were conscious of their national and international audiences. Appreciating the importance of this circulation of ideas, Gema Santamaría's critical analysis of lynching narratives in Mexican press reports and public debates during the 1930s provides a promising model for future scholarship.²⁸ Analyzing the evolving transnational discourses surrounding lynching, including the dissemination of the term and its application to incidents outside the United States, would allow historians to better understand the transnational dimensions of the universal struggle for power inherent in these debates.

Notes

- 1 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 18–19, 137–38, 145–46, 158–59.
- 2 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1–16.
- 3 Patricia A. Schechter, "Unsettled Business: Ida B. Wells against Lynching, or, How Antilynching Got Its Gender" in *Under Sentence of Death*, ed. Brundage, 292, 300–301.
- 4 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 37–38, 41–42, 80–81.
- 5 For analysis of "black beast" mythology, see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- 6 Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 151.
- 7 Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.
- 8 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 90.
- 9 "Made a Sensation: Mrs. Felton's Advocacy of Lynching Attracts Much Attention—What She Said," *Topeka (Kansas) State Journal*, Aug. 16, 1897, 2.
- 10 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 6.
- 11 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 91.
- 12 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 64–70, 85–86, 127.
- 13 Sarah L. Silkey, *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, and Transatlantic Activism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 115–22.
- 14 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 131–35, 187.

- 15 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 142–43, 146–47, 149–50, 155.
- 16 Kate Côté Gillin, *Shrill Hurrahs: Women, Gender, and Racial Violence in South Carolina, 1865–1900* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 114–15, 120–21, 125.
- 17 Ida B. Wells, “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases” in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997), 54–58.
- 18 LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 82.
- 19 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 175–77, 180, 185.
- 20 Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 3–4.
- 21 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 159–67, 180–84.
- 22 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 160.
- 23 Silkey, *Black Woman Reformer*, 18–29.
- 24 Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 159–67, 180–84.
- 25 For example, see “Governor’s Remarkable Declaration,” *Evening Telegraph and Star and Sheffield Daily Times*, Aug. 13, 1897; “Lynching in America,” *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, Aug. 14, 1897; “Life in America,” *Belfast News-Letter*, Aug. 14, 1897.
- 26 Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 48–50; Gabriela González, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19–27; William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848–1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 118–22; Juan González and Joseph Torres, *News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media* (London: Verso, 2011), 220–24.
- 27 Notable transnational and comparative studies include Angelina Snodgrass Godoy, *Popular Injustice: Violence, Community, and Law in Latin America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Ivan Thomas Evans, *Cultures of Violence: Lynching and Racial Killing in South Africa and the American South* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt, eds., *Globalizing Lynching History: Vigilantism and Extralegal Punishment from an International Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Robert W. Thurston, *Lynching: American Mob Murder in Global Perspective* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); William D. Carrigan and Christopher Waldrep, eds., *Swift to Wrath: Lynching in Global Perspective* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013); Michael J. Pfeifer, ed., *Global Lynching and Collective Violence*, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Gema Santamaría and David Carey Jr., eds., *Violence and Crime in Latin America: Representations and Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).
- 28 Gema Santamaría, “Legitimizing Lynching: Public Opinion and Extralegal Violence in Mexico” in *Violence and Crime in Latin America: Representations and Politics*, eds. Gema Santamaría and David Carey Jr. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 44–60.

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