

ESSAY

Closing Reflections

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When I submitted the draft of my book manuscript to August Meier and the University of Illinois Press in 1992 I could not have imagined that a quarter century later there would be either a robust and sophisticated body of scholarship or a community of scholars devoted to the study of lynching. When, following graduate school, I had sought venues in which to share early versions of my work I typically submitted solo proposals because the pool of likely panelists was so short. I was not alone in my interest, of course. George Wright, Howard Smead, Ray Hyser, and Dennis Downey were also exploring the history of lynching. But, other than them, the likelihood of meeting anyone at an Organization of American Historians (OAH) or American Historical Association (AHA) meeting who was familiar with or was researching the topic of lynching was virtually nil.

At the time I gave little thought to the inattention of historians to the topic. Their apparent disinterest must now seem curious to someone who is familiar with the scholarship produced during the past quarter century. But to leaf through widely used United States history survey texts of the 1960s and 1970s is to be reminded of how cursory was the coverage of the phenomenon. It typically warranted only a few sentences, perhaps a short paragraph, as an archaic form of violence fueled by the economic and political crisis of the 1890s. Lynching, then, was an epiphenomenon and as such scholars noted it but focused their attention elsewhere.

That mid-twentieth-century historians paid so little attention to lynching in the United States is almost certainly explained by the formative influence exerted by the mass violence of the era. I do not mean to suggest that historians of the era were inured to violence in the United States. Kenneth Stampp, for example, had a keen appreciation for the centrality of violence to the institution of slavery in *The Peculiar Institution*. But, for generations of scholars who had lived through the death and destruction wrought by two world wars and by totalitarian regimes, the toll of lynching must have seemed in less pressing need of explanation than other systemic forms of violence. Thus, historians set about revising inherited wisdom about slavery and the conquest of North America by Europeans while leaving the subject of lynching unattended.

Another serious challenge to the study of lynching that is easy to overlook in our age of near instantaneous virtual newspaper searches was the difficulty of studying lynching before the existence of comprehensive newspaper archives. Until the 1980s most research on lynching began with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) lynching lists and the Tuskegee lynching files. These two sources were vitally

important in an era when virtually no repositories had any collections related to the phenomenon. But both the NAACP lists and the Tuskegee collections were based on news clipping services that mined major urban dailies for press reports about lynchings. The shortcoming of these press accounts in regional and national dailies are too numerous to summarize here. Suffice to note that with each passing year after 1900 most urban dailies reprinted wire service stories, so that the Tuskegee files are full of duplicate versions of wire service reports. Those same wire service stories were often riddled with errors; some were minor but others were substantial. While it was understandable and appropriate that scholars drew on these sources, they alone were inadequate for any sustained study of lynching. Yet, the only alternative would have entailed costly and time-consuming travel to repositories all across the nation to track down obscure local newspapers. To the extent that anyone did such work it was a handful of graduate students at southern state universities. They produced valuable work, but it remained unpublished and unassimilated into the larger scholarship.

My interest in the topic was wholly independent of such considerations. Nor did I have any direct connection to the topic. While I spent part of my youth in northern Virginia and thought of Loudoun County in that state as “home,” I also had lived outside of the state and the United States for more than half of my youth. None of my ancestors participated in lynchings; I never heard lore about local lynchings; and I was wholly unaware of the scale of lynching prior to graduate school.

Instead, it was the American intervention in the Caribbean Basin during the 1980s that had a profound influence on my interest in American violence. Because I had spent my high school years in Central America I followed the course of American policy there closely. I was puzzled and appalled that most Americans during the 1980s displayed little evident discomfort with their nation’s mining of harbors in Nicaragua, funding of counterrevolutionary mercenary armies, or participation in widespread human rights violations. Moreover, the disjunction between the celebration of the Contras as “freedom fighters” and the reality of the struggle in Central America was an important lesson for me in the capacity of ideology to distort language and reality. Observing the events of that decade, I drew lessons about the capacity of American institutions, extending from the press to the legislative branch, to not only tolerate violence but also condone it.

That I focused on lynching in the postbellum American South was a reflection less of an innate interest in the South than my interest in studying lynching where it was most pervasive, most systemic, and most inextricably woven into the region’s history. Southern historians to date had not given close attention to the topic, but even the most obdurate among them had conceded the prominence of lynching in the region’s modern history. Moreover, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, and Ed Ayers had all produced important books on either side of 1980 that provided a crucial foundation for the subsequent study of lynching.

No work had a more catalytic influence on me than Joel Williamson’s *Crucible of Race*. The book is highly idiosyncratic, but also invariably creative and often brilliantly original. It showed a path out of the receding penumbra of C. Vann Woodward’s oeuvre. And, especially, it foregrounded the violence of the New South, from the rhetorical fury of Tom Watson and Rebecca Latimer Felton to the corporeal violence of lynch mobs and rioting whites. Although Williamson’s gumbo of cultural, social, and intellectual history owed little to the ascendant cultural studies of the era, it also owed little to older social science approaches to American violence. Thus, the sheer originality of Williamson’s work seemed to offer license to sally forth where other scholars had not.

Inspired and provoked by Williamson's work, I set about building an archive of lynching. I initially planned to investigate lynching in five southern states, but quickly came to appreciate the practical challenges involved in doing so. I had picked Virginia without being aware that as late as 1990 there was no central repository for the state's historic newspapers. Some were available in Richmond, some in Charlottesville, and yet many others were literally scattered all across the state in local libraries and holdings. The same was true of newspaper holdings in Tennessee and Louisiana. I planned to focus on Georgia for various eminently reasonable reasons but was wholly unaware of perhaps the best reason; librarians in Georgia, especially at the University of Georgia, had created one of the best unified collections of historic newspapers for any state in the nation. In the absence of that expertly organized and curated collection, without exaggeration, my research on lynching would have been impossible. Thus, I was the unknowing beneficiary of a vast and lengthy project that was only completed shortly before I began conducting my research.

I recount this genealogy of my research of lynching so as to highlight the confluence of circumstances and influences that inspired me. Were I to address the subject today, I would do so from a drastically different vantage point. When I began my dissertation, the Supreme Court had restored the death penalty less than a decade prior. I did not then anticipate that capital punishment would enjoy a "renaissance" during the late 1980s and 1990s. The rampant incarceration of people of color, especially men of color, was gathering speed while I wrote my dissertation but the dominant discourse then was about the need to win the war on crime. I failed to foresee the consequences of that "war." And when I was working on my dissertation, the politics of race and segregation seemed far more intractable in Boston than, say, Charlotte or Macon. Three decades later, it is profoundly depressing to realize that, were I completing my book today, I almost certainly would feel duty bound to reflect on all of these developments and especially the salience of the history of lynching to the murders of Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012, Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia, in 2020, and yet others in our own time.

This important work is now in the hands of many, many gifted scholars and commentators. All of us who have contributed to the scholarship on lynching during the past quarter century should take a measure of pride in our accomplishment. We provided the analysis that enabled audiences to understand the horrific images of the "Without Sanctuary" exhibition; without our research the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, is unlikely to have taken the form that it did; and without our labor the history of lynching might have remained a minor topic of passing curiosity.

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