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Where Did This Come From?

Jae Tyler-Wolfe

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The protests that erupted after the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor in the summer of 2020 took the country by storm. The rapid spread of activist organizing was breathtaking to see. Over the span of a few months, no state in the country

was left untouched, and more conversations began to approach acts of racial violence as an institutional problem rather than as a series of isolated incidents. Even six months prior, such widespread activism would have been unimaginable.

What changed? After all, Floyd was not the first Black American to be strangled by the police on camera, since "I Can't Breathe" shirts proliferated in 2014 after New York police murdered Eric Garner. Taylor also was not the first or even the youngest Black girl or woman to be shot in her sleep, since Aiyana Stanley-Jones was seven when a police raid resulted in her death by gunshot in 2010. To begin to understand what has changed, we must return to the nineteenth century and re-examine the institutions that have helped build the environment against which people have been fighting.

The articles I have gathered here highlight racism's endemic nature in American institutions, both public and private. I have selected pieces that provide a broad evidentiary base with which readers can consider how racism has shaped institutional practices, how those practices embedded racial prejudices into the fabric of the country's social and cultural environment, and how the threat of violence sanctioned racism while obstructing efforts to combat or mitigate racial discrimination. Racism, these articles argue, does not exist *despite* U.S. efforts to stop it. Instead, the United States exists as it does *because* of how racial prejudice and violence has shaped the logic and functions of American institutions. Racism, these articles show, is a foundational part of the structure of American governance.

The article by Emily Pope-Obeda considers the role of racial prejudice in legitimating state functions by considering the consolidation and expansion of federal deportation during the First Red Scare and how the Immigration Service used immigrants as physical targets to enforce antiradicalism. Her piece complements Edward Slavishak's examination of media reports of the Homestead strike in 1892, since Slavishak shows how the language about working-class immigrants' bodies turned the ideological threat of labor activism into a physical presence. This helped make the Immigration Service's work more plausible and justifiable twenty-five years later. Both articles show how economic and government leaders used "alien" ethnic peoples as targets to suppress labor unrest.

Paul Kramer's article explores the intersection of political and economic interests through anti-Chinese prejudice and violence's influence on immigration policy by pursuing Chinese exclusion until commercial lobbyists convinced President Roosevelt that protecting U.S. economic interests required letting more "exempt" Chinese people in to maintain good diplomatic relations with China. Kramer's article also fits with the works by Boyd Cothran and Katherine M.B. Osburn in its focus on American empire, though Cothran and Osburn focus on imperial actions against Indigenous Americans. Cothran's discussion of the Modoc War and Osburn's examination of the Choctaw Nation highlight the role of racial prejudice in implementing federal restrictions on Indigenous sovereignty, justifying Indigenous dispossession, and reinforcing racial segregation through the threat and use of violence against Indigenous and African American "savagery."

Theresa Jach's article considers how re-creating a system of forced African American agricultural labor led to the expansion and defense of convict labor against reform efforts in Texas. Her exploration of legislators' and prison leaders' beliefs that African Americans had to be controlled in this way aligns well with Gregory Dorr's article about race and eugenics in medicine. Dorr discusses how science reinforced these assumptions and legitimated them with a veneer of "rational" objectivity. In shaping medical practice during the Progressive Era, racism became essential in structuring intellectual and professional efforts toward social betterment and national integrity through eugenic policies.

The article by Jonathan Coit examines how prejudicial assumptions of African American inferiority and savagery influenced both how the Chicago police interacted with rioters and how they and African American leaders interpreted the violence. By leaning on the image of respectability, African American leaders could frame violent action as an expression of manly resistance against racial discrimination and reject racist assumptions about African Americans' inherent brutality. Coit also shows how police activity exacerbated the violence during the Chicago race riot. This makes his piece a useful point of comparison for understanding how police's prejudices and acts of violence against people of color contributed to this summer's protests.

Racism and racial violence, as demonstrated by the articles in this collection, fundamentally shape how the United States enforces its social order. The present cultural turbulence is an encouraging sign that the United States is ready for a cultural and historical reckoning with the fact that the individual acts that killed Floyd, Arbery, and Taylor are symptoms of institutional problems with racism. I believe that knowing how racial prejudice and violence are endemic to American public and private institutions may help with this reckoning by showing how the inequalities that exist today, while structural and systemic, are not necessary, natural, or inescapable. Indeed, given the recent conviction of Floyd's murderer Derek Chauvin and the ongoing inquiry into Taylor's death by the Department of Justice, transformation may already be happening, and justice closer at hand as a result.

Microsyllabus: Where Did This Come From?

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Michael J. Lansing is Professor of History at Augsburg University. He is the author of *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (Chicago, 2015) as well as articles in the *Western Historical Quarterly*, *Environmental History*, the *Journal of Historical Geography*, the *Middle West Review*, and, most recently, a history of post-World War II policing in Minneapolis in *Minnesota History*. His current project—a history of factory-processed grains and the propagation of a political economy that demarcates the way we understand, make, and eat food—focuses on Minneapolis and is titled *Enriched: Industrial Carbohydrates and the Rise of Nutrition Capitalism*.

Jonathan Cortez is currently the César E. Chávez Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies at Dartmouth College. They are a historian of twentieth-century issues of relational ethnic histories, labor, migration, and encampment. Jonathan's book manuscript, *The Age of Encampment: Race, Migration, Surveillance, and the Power of Spatial Scripts, 1933-1950*, reveals underlying continuities between the presence of threatening bodies and the increasing surveillance of these bodies in camps throughout the United States.

Aaron Jacobs is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at Brown University. His research focuses on the social and cultural history of the United States, with a particular focus on questions of race, violence, and the politics and performance of memory. His dissertation examines the relationship between representations of Reconstruction-era violence in everyday life and popular culture in the Jim Crow era and is entitled "When Lightning Strikes Twice: Race, Memory, Performance, and the Re-Birth of the Ku Klux Klan."

John R. Legg, a Ph.D. student at George Mason University, studies Native American, Public, and Digital History. His dissertation explores spatial movement and the creation of a Dakota diaspora after the U.S.-Dakota War between 1862–1900. It will explicitly address Dakota sovereignty and diplomacy in places beyond the state of Minnesota. Many institutions have recognized and funded John's work, including the Western History Association, the American Society for Ethnohistory, the American Civil War Museum, the Northern Great Plains History Association, and the William Preston Society at Virginia Tech.

Anthony Stamilio is a US History and Public History PhD student at Loyola University Chicago. His research focuses on the influence of celebrity on politics and identity in the nineteenth century with a concentration on Theatre during the Civil War era. Originally from New Orleans, Anthony moved to Chicago to study acting at the Chicago College of Performing Arts after which he performed in dozens of plays in the Midwest. In 2020, he graduated with an MA in Public History before pursuing a PhD, and he is devoted to interpretation, preservation, and production of history.

Jae Tyler-Wolfe is a PhD student studying U.S. history at Kent State University. Their research interests focus on identity negotiation among marginalized communities in the second half of the 1800s. They seek to understand how transformations occurring at the time provided new space for alternative conceptions and self-presentations, considering people's everyday interactions with visual and material culture as one site of such negotiation. They are additionally interested in the ways that the relationship between Indigenous Americans and the state has developed, using the lens of military service as another avenue for exploring available tools for identity negotiation and social repositioning.

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