

ESSAY

Racial Violence in the West

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A difficult truth is that racial violence has deep roots in states across the United States. Recently historians have started to uncover the cultures of mob violence that targeted multiple racial and ethnic groups. The field is thriving with scholars that are helping to ask new research questions and in turn are recovering long overlooked histories. While W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South* did not directly seek to expand the study of lynching in this way, his work nevertheless inspired others to do so. The lynching culture in the United States is popularly understood to exist within a white and Black binary, seminal works by William Carrigan, Clive Webb, and Ken Gonzales-Day have now shifted our view to the American southwest. Histories of conquest, colonization, and slavery converged to shape racial violence that targeted racial and ethnic minorities long overlooked in lynching studies. They show that examining racial violence in the west helps to disrupt siloed studies. Multiple racial and ethnic minorities suffered from lynchings where mobs hanged, shot, tortured, beat, and burned victims alive. This essay will explore the work that is to come, following these monumental contributions, namely ongoing recovery efforts and strategies for bringing these histories to public audiences.

In *Lynching in the New South*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage reflected, "Perhaps nothing about the history of mob violence in the United States is more surprising than how quickly an understanding of the full horror of lynchings has receded from the nation's collective historical memory."¹ Twenty-five years after this comment, questions about the role of historians in advancing public understandings of the lynching cultures in the United States still remain. Most historians of mob violence in the United States speak broadly to the urgency for more expansive recovery efforts, but historians have been far less active in outlining strategies for making these histories public. In addition to recovering cases of mob violence and writing scholarly publications, some historians are developing public humanities projects for wider audiences looking for truthful accountings of U.S. history. For historians whose work expands narrow understandings of lynching cultures, this work is all the more challenging.

Lynching in the West

In *Forgotten Dead*, Carrigan and Webb recovered a history of lynchings targeting ethnic Mexicans, American citizens, and Mexican nationals alike, and showed that California,

Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas had pervasive lynching cultures from the mid-nineteenth century well into the twentieth century. Lynch mobs in states like Colorado, Nevada, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Montana also claimed the lives of ethnic Mexicans. To compile an index of 547 known persons of Mexican descent who died at the hands of a lynch mob, the authors sleuthed through a range of sources including U.S. and Mexican diplomatic records (correspondence and investigative reports), Spanish and English language newspapers, files preserved by civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Tuskegee Institute, and the Association of Southern Women for the Preservation of Lynching, and letters of correspondence and memoirs written by miners in California.²

Forgotten Dead made explicit comparisons between the lynching of Mexicans and the lynching of African Americans in the South. Influenced by the work of Brundage and other lynching scholars, they sought to challenge several of the assumptions that underlay the scholarship on lynching. Carrigan and Webb showed that studying the history of anti-Mexican violence requires expanding the time period for lynching studies. While historians of the Deep South primarily examine lynchings as a reconstruction and postbellum South phenomenon, Carrigan and Webb analyze eight decades beginning in 1848 marking the end of the U.S. war of aggression with Mexico, which resulted in the United States acquiring half of Mexico's territory, and ending in 1928 with the last known public lynching of an ethnic Mexican. The scale of the mob violence, they found, is staggering, "far exceeding the violence exacted on any other immigrant group and comparable, at least on a per capita basis, to the mob violence suffered by African Americans."³ *Forgotten Dead* helps to show that histories of mob violence in the United States will remain incomplete until further studies include the lynchings of ethnic Mexicans.

While engaging and challenging the lynching scholarship, Carrigan and Webb also sought to engage with the rich work on violence against ethnic Mexicans found in the work of journalists and historians of the Southwest Borderlands. Well before *Forgotten Dead*, these writers had demonstrated the widespread existence of vigilante violence against ethnic Mexicans. For example, the work of journalists such as Jovita and Clemente Idar, and Emma Tenayuca had brought public attention to the lynchings of Mexicans in a way comparable to that of T. Thomas Fortune and Ida B. Wells. Scholars from a wide variety of disciplines had also shed light on the subject before Carrigan and Webb's book. For example, Américo Paredes, Jovita González, Carey McWilliams, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Arnaldo De León, Julián Samora, David Montejano, James Sandos, Richard Ribb, Benjamin Johnson, Trinidad Gonzales, Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, and many others wrote important works uncovering anti-Mexican mob violence before 2013. These scholars did not focus on "lynching" exclusively. Instead they considered extralegal recovered violence alongside vigilante violence.

Carrigan and Webb's work also importantly efforts for redress that ranged from journalism, public protests, and diplomatic intervention to protect foreign nationals targeted with violence. In doing so, Carrigan and Webb highlighted the work by Spanish language journalists like Francisco P. Ramírez, Rafael Ramírez, Praxedis Gilberto Guerrero, Narciso Idar, and the previously mentioned Jovita Idar who all risked their own lives by printing accounts of lynchings, expressing moral outrage for the brutality of lynching cultures in the west, and organizing anti-lynching campaigns for justice. They provide an account of Texas Rangers who in June 1915 shot dead Carlos Morales Wood, the editor of the Valentine newspaper *La Patria Mexicana*. Rangers later suggested that the editor had resisted arrest on a charge that his writings were inciting a riot. The Rangers were eventually arrested for murder, but a jury acquitted the accused.⁴

Carrigan and Webb called attention to Mexican diplomats that helped pressure the state and federal government to prosecute law enforcement officers that regularly shot prisoners in their custody. Ambassadors like Manuel Téllez, Ignacio Mariscal, Manuel de Zamacona, and Matías Romero also investigated lynchings of Mexican nationals, called for the prosecution of assailants, and pressured members of the U.S. State Department to quell mob violence targeting Mexican nationals living in the United States. In some cases, diplomats successfully lobbied and secured indemnities for widows and children that survived the lynching of their husbands.

Pointing to the underutilized archive of diplomatic records has inspired new research, including my own, that examined the aftermath of violence. Carrigan and Webb, for example, noted that on December 6, 1900, U.S. President McKinley recommended that Congress pay to the government of Mexico \$2,000 for the widowed Nicolasa Suaste for the lynching of her husband in Cotulla, Texas, in October 1895. Examining these individual cases in depth, I found the painfully taxing work by widows and children, like Nicolasa Suaste and her daughters Martina and Concepción, which pursued international avenues for seeking justice. Surviving relatives were pivotal in challenging official reports by local police that often claimed mob participants could not be identified. The efforts by survivors are preserved in these archives. They testified on multiple occasions, described the horrors of lynchings in great detail, identified assailants in public, and pursued justice despite threats of violence. Returning to diplomatic records also allows for gendered studies of mob violence, which expands our understanding of lynching culture beyond male-on-male conflict and shows the impact of racial violence on families and communities living amidst racial terror.⁵

Carrigan and Webb also documented Mexican women lynched by mobs. In July 1851, for example, Juana Loaiza was hanged by a vigilance committee in Downieville, California, for allegedly stabbing an Australian miner named Frederick Cannon in self-defense. Over 2,000 men gathered to witness the hanging. Word of the lynching spread across the country and inspired comment from Frederick Douglass who noted that if Loaiza had been white, she would have been lauded for her acts in self-defense rather than condemned to death.⁶

Recovering cases of mob violence targeting women is an understudied area. Adding to our understanding of the absences, erasures, and inconsistencies in the archive, Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández has theorized the larger problem with developing a fixed set of facts to attribute to each lynching, particularly when studying marginalized subjects in traditional archives. In her analysis of the lynching of a woman referred to both as Josefa and Juanita, Guidotti-Hernández decided intentionally to refer to the subject as Josefa/Juanita “to express the unfixed nature of identity in the numerous accounts that report her lynching ... both names evoke the ambiguous nature of her story and the ambiguity with which the story is retold.” Using both names is also a reminder of the society that reported the lynching but that “did not even care enough about her as a human being to get her name right or to cite her last name.”⁷

With caution and a critical understanding of the limits of the archive, and our own impulses, the recovery work must continue. In addition to shifting the geographic, temporal, racial, and gendered boundaries of lynching studies, Carrigan and Webb provided an invaluable resource for future scholarship. As the historians point out, the early inventories compiled by anti-lynching activists, like Ida B. Wells, and civil rights organizations, like the NAACP, helped to galvanize the sociological and historical research on mob violence suffered by African Americans. By publishing an appendix of the confirmed cases of mob violence, Carrigan and Webb have provided access to years

of research. Their findings provide concrete evidence of the widespread horrors of lynching cultures in the United States. Organized chronologically, the event entries include names, dates, locations, and a brief citation of evidence to propel future research. Knowing that their book would be one crucial step in a longer effort of recovery, Carrigan and Webb also included a second appendix of cases of mob violence that the two historians could not verify before publishing their findings.

These appendixes include dates, names, localities, states, alleged crimes, makeup, size and action of the mob, and known sources. While at first glance including the citations for known cases of racial violence and including a list of unconfirmed cases may seem logical, for historians of racial violence, this is an invaluable resource. These appendixes are an invitation for future scholars to pick up quite literally where the historians left off in researching each case. Carrigan and Webb remind readers not to assume that the numbers tallied by historians equal the actual numbers of ethnic Mexicans killed at the hands of mobs in the United States. While cautioning, "it is impossible to uncover every surviving document related to the lynching of Mexicans in the United States," they nonetheless invite scholars to join in the recovery effort.

This foundational list is inspiring a new generation of historians researching and developing new methods for recovering lynchings in the United States. Annette Rodríguez, for example, recalls the work of Ida B. Wells, who gathered statistical information to unravel alleged criminality as causal for lynchings of African Americans. That work, Rodríguez cautions, has yet to be accomplished. Collecting alleged crimes, for example, a long practice by historians of lynchings, can inadvertently "accept the logic of the lynchers." "As with African American victims of lynching," Rodríguez continues, "we must similarly wrestle with lynching of Mexicans as not tied to criminality. Indeed, by tying lynchings to alleged crimes, we have narratively inverted the criminal ... Lynching, uncoupled from crime and punishment, is the first scholarly leap required of us."⁸

We would also be wise to answer the calls by Ken Gonzales-Day for future recovering efforts. In *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935*, Gonzales-Day likewise shifts our geographic and temporal understanding of a lynching culture in the United States. By focusing on mob violence in California, Gonzales-Day convincingly shows the critical importance of studying how racial terror targeted multiple racial and ethnic groups in the same temporal and geographic locales. The art historian documents what he calls the "transracial" nature of lynchings in California where African Americans, Native Americans, Chinese laborers, and ethnic Mexicans were victims of lynchings. He found that mobs were guided by anti-miscegenation and anti-immigrant sentiments as well as larger frustrations with the state judicial system.⁹

Gonzales-Day found that 352 persons died from lynching or summary executions in California, including 132 identified as Mexican or Latin American; 8 identified as African American; 41 identified as American Indian; 29 identified as Chinese; 120 identified as Anglo-American or person of European descent; and 22 were not identified by race, nationality, or ethnicity.¹⁰ In documenting these cases, he showed the importance of specifying, when possible, the race, ethnicity, and nationality of victims. For example, he found that of the 132 persons of Latin American and Mexican descent, 16 were identified as being born in California or Texas; 11 were identified as being from Sonora, Mexico; 10 were identified as Chilean; 4 were identified as Spanish or Mexican, but in the majority of cases the victims were identified only as "Mexican." Gonzales-Day cautioned researchers that the term "Mexican" and "Anglo-American" washes over difference within these categories. Specificity about the victims is crucially important for future recovery efforts.¹¹

Gonzales-Day also contributed three indexes: a list of lynchings and summary executions, a selected list of legal and military executions, and a list of pardons from 1849–1859. The first two appendixes include the date, name, town, county, alleged crime, and origin of the victim. His inclusion of summary executions and vigilance committees in his study helped dispel the myth that mob violence was a tool for those living in the west where the judicial system was still expanding. His research shows that historians long articulations of “frontier justice” hid a history of summary executions, vigilance committees, and lynch mobs that took place in parts of California that had the greatest law enforcement presence. Gonzales-Day exposed the work of vigilance committees and lynch mobs that responded to alleged capital offenses. Legal trials, he found, were common precursors to vigilante violence that prevented the accused from appealing death sentences or petitioning to governors for a reprieve or pardon.¹²

Forgotten Dead and *Lynching in the West* both call for future histories of racial violence that show that state-sanctioned racial violence in the form of capital punishment must be contextualized within histories of summary executions, vigilance committees, and lynch mobs that worked in concert to create a climate of racial terror. Building on the work of Carrigan, Webb, and Gonzales-Day, I add to that list cases of extralegal violence by law enforcement agents.¹³ My first book, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence*, argues that extralegal violence at the hands of law enforcement has for too long been shielded in a cloak of legal authority. Between 1910 and 1920 mobs and law enforcement enjoyed a culture of impunity and murdered ethnic Mexicans with little threat of prosecution. In an ongoing digital research project *Mapping Violence: Racial Terror in Texas, 1900–1930*, I am working with a research team to document cases of racial violence in Texas. I suggest that exploring how people navigated a world shaped by violence—not lynching exclusively—requires considering the multiple forms of violence that shaped daily life for racial and ethnic minorities. Studying cases of lynchings, police murder, intimidation, rape, mutilation, and physical assault together is in keeping with the long tradition of a broad approach toward violence in Mexican American historiography. A fuller understanding of racial violence also requires examining the multiple racial and ethnic minorities targeted by violence within a region.¹⁴

And yet, what continues to be missing from recovery projects is a sustained effort to collect information about how a particular event shaped and impacted relatives, witnesses, and communities in the aftermath. Answering calls from historians like Kidada Williams, who asks that we attend to the aftermath of violence, *Mapping Violence* is collecting information about the victims and known survivors, the agents of violence, descriptions of the types of violence, and descriptions of the outcomes that followed. Expanding the information gathered will help to make visible patterns of state-sanctioned violence, histories of loss, and the long efforts for social justice.¹⁵

Memorializing Histories of Racial Violence

Databases and publications are helpful tools for advancing the field, but what are the best practices for bringing histories of racial violence to public audiences? Many historians are encouraged by the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, the opening of the Legacy Museum, and the National Museum for Peace and Justice in Alabama in 2018. Historian Beth Lew-Williams, author of *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America*, aptly reminds us, “this should only be the beginning of the historical reckoning.”¹⁶

In an era when the nation is gripped by debates about what histories to memorialize and what memorials should be removed from public sight, studies of lynching should be prepared to make a claim about how, when, and why public memorials that commemorate mob violence in the United States are needed. In this aspect, Ken Gonzales-Day departs from others in the field. Gonzales-Day argued that with the advent of lynching photographs being widely circulated, the “public” audiences that were spectators of lynchings were far greater than those who attended the actual event. People that bought these images offer evidence of the continued fascination with gazing at the criminalized body condemned to death. “Each of these examples,” he suggests, “can be seen as a part of the wonder gaze, and each required the mandatory presence of the public, as participant, as a spectator, as a consumer of images, or as a paying audience.”¹⁷ Debates and discussions about the use of these photographs for evidence continue, but historians recovering archives of violence should carefully consider what is to be gained from bringing images that depict racial violence back into public circulation? Today depictions of violence over a century later continue to be casually displayed in the most mundane of spaces, even Dairy Queen fast food restaurants.¹⁸

Increasingly, journalists and newspapers rely on photographs of lynchings or graphic depictions of dead victims for their accounts. These images are shared instantly on the Internet and through social media as thumbnail images to entice clicks. Cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman asked of writing narratives of slavery and violence, “What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history, an aspiration that isn’t a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture? ... Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?” With the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, nativism, and white power movements in recent years, Hartman’s questions remain urgent. Most historians, museums, and journalists are still too quick to underestimate the consequences of casually circulating these photographs.¹⁹

Turning to art, Gonzales-Day provides one possibility for looking to the past, shedding light on histories of violence, while avoiding the recirculation of images of the dead. In his series called “Erased Lynchings,” Gonzales-Day reproduces historic lynching photographs but removes the bodies of victims from the image. Instead, he draws the viewers’ attention to the apparatuses used for a lynching, a crowd gathered at the base of a tree, and the mob participants themselves. The absence of the dead is also a useful metaphor for what cannot be recovered and what cannot be known. With his series of photographs “Searching for California’s Hanging Trees,” Gonzales-Day looked for precise locations of hundreds of hanging trees and sites of mob violence. These photographs ask viewers to consider the landscape where memories of these histories are imbedded. These two series are generative for public dialogue and are vital resources in the classroom, where teachers should be intentional about when to show images of racial violence. Ken Gonzales-Day has provided one avenue for transforming “images of terror” into “sites of remembrance.”²⁰

Until recently, in the absence of state and cultural institutions preserving records and memorializing histories of racial violence, local residents have borne the burden of carrying this history. In my research for *The Injustice Never Leaves You*, I found that people lived in a world shaped by violence, and yet, they refused to be consumed by it. In this period of racial terror, grieving relatives utilized various techniques to hold vigilantes, police, the state, and the federal government accountable for an era of state-sanctioned violence. When justice remained out of reach, as was most often the case, the histories of injustice were passed from generation to generation. Some descendants of racial violence

reckoned with loss, in part, by preserving archives of their family histories, writing historical accounts of their own, and working to make these histories public. By writing poetry, biographies, historical essays, recording oral histories, making documentaries, websites, and building archives, descendants dedicated their own time to preserving these histories. The enduring efforts of these vernacular history-makers, as I've referred to residents like Norma Longoria Rodriguez, Benita and Evaristo Albarado, Arlinda Valencia, and Linda Davis, in direct opposition of popular historical accounts, testify to the value of connecting truthfully with the U.S. histories that expose a nation built by racial violence. They continue the long tradition of journalistic and scholarly writing that opposed the erasure of these histories and sought to end practices of racial violence.

I believe that historians have a responsibility to participate in helping to create public projects that can inform wider understandings of the past. As a founding member of Refusing to Forget, an educational nonprofit established in 2013 to commemorate the history of anti-Mexican violence in Texas, I am working with colleagues and partnering with cultural institutions in Texas to develop public projects to reach a wider audience. Working with John Morán González, Trinidad Gonzales, Sonia Hernández, and Benjamin Johnson, we have collaborated with the Bullock Texas State History Museum to develop the exhibit *Life and Death on the Border, 1910–1920* and with the Texas Historical Commission to secure four state historical markers along the Texas-Mexico border.²¹

These efforts required that the members of the team had to develop skills in exhibition, curation, public programing, media relations, web development, and curriculum development. In our current climate, learning new skills and developing methods to reach public audiences is a vital project for historians of racial violence if we hope to inform public understandings of our past to help shape our future. Since the publication of W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South*, the historiography has shifted to recover multiple racial and ethnic groups targeted with mob violence, but decades later historians are just starting to do the important work of memorializing victims of racial violence. In our current climate, this work is more urgent now than ever before.

For historians of racial violence in the west, then, the work that lies ahead is vast. Contributing to the field will include recovering the names of the dead and the names of the aggressors that participated in vigilante and extralegal police violence. Future scholarship must also continue to document the lives of those that lived in the wake of racial terror, those that tended to the remains of the dead, survived a climate of fear, and sought justice. And when the names of the dead are recovered, historians bear an additional responsibility to make sure that those names are not forgotten, and that public audiences learn from the past so that we can intervene and disrupt the patterns of racial violence that continue today.

Notes

1 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). 258.

2 William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

3 Carrigan and Webb, *Forgotten Dead*, 1.

4 Carrigan and Webb, *Forgotten Dead*, 4, 120–22.

5 For more on the Suaste case, see Carrigan and Webb, *Forgotten Dead*, 140–41, 155; Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 139–45.

- 6 Carrigan and Webb, *Forgotten Dead*, 7, 69–74.
- 7 Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping US and Mexican National Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 85–86.
- 8 Annette M. Rodríguez, “Recognition of Social Murder: How Lynching the Invented ‘The Mexican’” (2016). *American Studies Theses and Dissertations*. Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library, 30. <https://doi.org/10.7301/Z0GH9GB8> See also Annette Rodríguez, “Antigone’s Refusal: Mexican Women’s Responses to Lynching in the Southwest,” *The Journal of South Texas*, Spring 2018.
- 9 Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.
- 10 Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West*, 200.
- 11 Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West*, 27–29, 135–36.
- 12 Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West*, 5–6.
- 13 Carrigan and Webb argue that while law enforcement officers in the American South did participate in mob acts, the leadership of the state police in Texas, the Texas Rangers, played such a prominent role in extralegal executions between 1915 and 1919 that the violence was something altogether different. The Rangers were “the blunt instrument of Anglos” in an era that some described as a “race war.” Carrigan and Webb, *Forgotten Dead*, 84–86.
- 14 Monica Muñoz Martínez, “Mapping Segregated Histories of Racial Violence,” *American Quarterly* 70:3 (Sept. 2018): 657–63.
- 15 Kidada E. Williams, “Regarding the Aftermath of Lynchings,” *Journal of American History* 101:3 (2014): 857–58. In his survey of the field of lynching in 2014, Michael J. Pfeifer suggested, “Scholars might best focus their efforts by keeping the experiences and responses of the victims of the racially motivated mob violence (including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans) at the fore of their inquiry, whatever that inquiry’s central concerns.”
- 16 Beth Lew-Williams, “Memorializing African American lynching victims is past due. But it must be only a start.” *Washington Post*, May 13, 2018.
- 17 Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West*, 182.
- 18 Monica Muñoz Martínez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You*, 227–29; 25–63; 272.
- 19 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, June 2008, 4–5.
- 20 Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West*, 204.
- 21 Linda K. Pritchard, “Exhibition Review: ‘Life and Death on the Border, 1910–1920, Bullock Texas State History Museum, Austin, Texas,’” *Journal of American History* 103:3 (2016): 711–15.

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