

ESSAY

Lynching in the New South, Festival of Violence, and the Synergy of Two Disciplines

Amy Kate Bailey* and Piere E. Washington**

*Corresponding author. University of Illinois at Chicago. E-mail: akbailey@uic.edu

**Corresponding author. University of Illinois at Chicago. E-mail: pwashi5@uic.edu

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Scholars who research lynching—and indeed, all social and historical processes—are often sequestered into disciplinary “camps,” with few opportunities to exchange insights and a dearth of strategies to breach the gap. The intellectual “silos” created by these divisions place a material limitation on the advancement of human knowledge. Barriers to sharing information and accelerating the process of discovery were no less real thirty years ago. One of the major contributions of *Lynching in the New South* is the way it encouraged cross-disciplinary pollination in the study of mob violence—most commonly targeting African Americans—in American history. It is fitting, then, that the first essay in this special issue is written by sociologists. Certainly, Brundage’s seminal book helped to ignite a radical methodological change in research on lynching by historians. It also advanced a more sophisticated understanding, embraced by sociologists and historians alike, of the multiple forms of expression that constituted the systematic campaign of violent suppression waged against Black Americans.¹ The most durable contribution of *Lynching in the New South*, however, may have been the way it built bridges between social historians and historical sociologists. It is no longer possible to be a historical sociologist without consulting the work of social historians, and we hope—not being social historians, ourselves—it is becoming less common to be a social historian without immersing oneself in the scholarship of historical sociologists.

In the late 1980s, both social historians and historical sociologists were pursuing intensive research projects on racist violence in the Jim Crow-era South. Sociologists largely conducted quantitative analyses that employed small amounts of information on a large number of lynchings, interrogating the contextual factors associated with the incidence of lynching using a comparative methodology.² However, historians who focused on lynching at this time tended to use a case-centered approach.³ The small number of historians whose work analyzed larger numbers of southern lynchings tended not to focus on variation in the patterning of mob violence over time or across space.⁴ Scholars from these two disciplinary perspectives were largely divorced from each other’s work, insulated from the kind of synergistic connection that leads to rapid intellectual advances.

Two parallel and contemporaneous projects, martialing evidence from hundreds of lynching incidents across a wide variety of social and economic contexts, helped to bridge

the divide. Each project amassed an impressive array of original sources to build a database of lynchings, identified by date and location. One was a solo endeavor by a historian working in Canada, and the other was a collaboration between two sociology professors in the Deep South. Because of these distinctions, the two projects engaged with different literatures, focused on different disciplinary traditions, and moved to divergent publishing tempos. E.M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay published a series of book chapters and articles in social science journals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while W. Fitzhugh Brundage published papers in historical journals. Brundage's 1993 book, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930*, was the first of the monographs to be published, as Tolnay and Beck were laboring to craft their own book, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930*.⁵ In this essay, we examine the relationship between these two foundational pieces of scholarship, the streams of sociological research they have collectively generated, and the way that this intellectual legacy can inform future research as well as “real life” social justice movements in the United States.

In *Lynching in the New South (LNS)*, Brundage forged new ground in the historical literature, employing two sociological theories—Blalock's power-threat hypothesis and Raper's more implicit understanding of the link between demographics, the local political economy, and violence.⁶ He used these theories to outline explanations for variation in mob violence over time and across space, and cited major sociological works along with scholarship by historians. Brundage's decision to utilize sociological theories marked an important point of departure, and differentiated *LNS* from earlier works by historians. The project was a Herculean effort to compile archival information from myriad original sources across two states for all 546 lynchings that occurred in the industrializing states of Georgia and Virginia between 1880 and 1930. That alone might mark this book as a major contribution. In *LNS*, however, Brundage moves further, incorporating rich historical description of the social and economic organization in regions of the states he examines, along with aggregated descriptive statistics and quantitative measures. His analyses allow him to advance a number of theories about the economic and social drivers of mob violence, with significant impacts on scholarship in at least two disciplines.

A Festival of Violence (FOV) shares with *LNS* a focus on this temporal and spatial variation in the level of mob violence; and a keen interest in how the local social, demographic, and political contexts were connected to lynching intensity. Tolnay and Beck also rely heavily on Blalock and Raper and develop more direct tests of the theoretical implications of these works.⁷ Both *LNS* and *FOV* focused on the most intensive decades of mob violence in our nation's history—1880 (or 1882, for Tolnay and Beck) through 1930. *FOV* amasses a much larger number of cases—2,805—than does *LNS* and covers a broader geographic expanse of ten southern states.⁸ This larger number of cases allows Tolnay and Beck to conduct more sophisticated statistical analyses but inhibits their ability to present the nuanced discussion of local context that Brundage offers.

In general, Tolnay and Beck find strong support for Blalock's theory of racial threat.⁹ Their analyses demonstrate that lynching served to uphold King Cotton's dominant role in the South, and that lynching was also linked to economic fluctuations in the cotton economy, the seasonal need for plantation agricultural labor, and the relative economic fortunes of whites. Political structures also proved to be critical, with a strong positive connection between the level of racist violence and the strength of the Democratic Party. There was little support for the idea that lynching served a popular justice function—a

concept suggesting that communities resorted to mob violence when effective criminal justice structures were absent. There was, however, a reciprocal relationship between local practices of racist violence and the degree of out-migration among African Americans. Those counties with the highest level of racial violence appeared to be those from which Black southerners were most willing to move as the Great Migration began, and counties with the highest levels of Black out-migration witnessed the earliest and most rapid declension in mob violence.¹⁰

Brundage's research provides leverage on multiple conceptual insights not addressed in the Tolnay and Beck monograph. For example, his typology of lynchings represents a major contribution to our understanding of the variation underlying what had previously been conceptualized as a largely uniform practice. By untangling the patterns in the motivations behind lynching and the particularities of their execution, Brundage establishes the intellectual terrain allowing us to better articulate the interlocking strategies and expressions of the regime of racist violence used to suppress African Americans. Historian Brent Campney has quite persuasively argued, for example, that restricting the scholarly gaze to lynching in our quest to better understand the dynamics underlying racist violence, ignores other forms of "sensational" violence and completely obscures the role of "routine" and "threatened" violence.¹¹

In recent years, these twin books have spawned a myriad of inquiries from social historians and historical sociologists. Within historical sociology, research continues to help us understand both local variation in the prevalence of racist mob violence, and to identify the factors associated with variation in the violent strategies employed to intimidate Black southerners. Taking *LNS* forward into the scholarly record, we see the way that its intellectual insights have comingled with those in *FOV* to generate a synthetic body of sociological work.

Emerging directly from the *FOV* trajectory, Tolnay and Bailey built a database using the individual and household census records of roughly 1,000 documented lynch victims. Their analyses (writing alone in 2015, as well as in 2011 with Beck and Laird) compare the characteristics of these victims with those of others living in their local communities, to identify the factors that affected individual vulnerability.¹² They determine that it was not being high- or low-status, per se, that placed Black and mixed-race men at elevated risk of being victimized by mob violence, but rather, having characteristics that were unusual in their local community. We (Bailey and Washington) are currently extending this work, braiding it together with Brundage's ideas about variations in the extent and severity of violence. In collaboration with E.M. Beck, we are constructing a parallel data source using census records for thousands of people who were publicly threatened with lynching, but not ultimately killed. These newly compiled data will enable us to compare the individual-level characteristics of those who were lynched with those who were threatened but not killed, as well as to those who were not—as far as we know—threatened, and allow us to embed variation in risk within local economic, political, and social contexts.

Another body of work directly examines how contextual factors covary with the lethality of mob violence and whether lynchings that were threatened actually occurred. Beck has constructed an inventory of more than 3,000 events in which lynching was threatened—indeed, a conflict between named parties was intense enough that the expectation that a lynching would take place was printed in the paper.¹³ Related research finds that state intervention was more likely in places with greater reliance on manufacturing and a weakened connection to the cotton economy, and that political factors shape both whether mobs formed following the threat of lynching, and if states allowed them to become lethal.¹⁴

Mattias Smangs is the sociologist who most explicitly and effectively combines the insights from *FOV* and *LNS*.¹⁵ He knits these perspectives together to shift our focus away from the terror that mob violence was meant to instill among the Black community, asking how whites may have used these public rituals to communicate with each other. This maneuver enables Smangs to advance theorizing about the role of lynching in constructing whiteness, and the divergent expressive functions that collective killings adhering to different narrative structures may have played. Using data from the Beck-Tolnay inventory and the typology of lynchings created by Brundage, Smangs makes a pivotal theoretical contribution.¹⁶ He suggests ways in which white people served as a key intended audience of lynch mobs and how certain types of mob violence helped to reify the regime of white supremacy. The variation in form associated with public and private lynchings, according to Smangs, stemmed from the different purposes each served as well as their intended audiences. Private lynchings were designed to validate the honor of someone who had been slighted. Public lynchings helped to construct white racial solidarity in the uncertain social terrain that existed after Emancipation.

We would, of course, be remiss if we failed to mention the important ways that scholars from the historical and humanist traditions are advancing the ideas that *LNS* brought to the fore—particularly as we emphasize the important role that this book played in bridging the disciplinary gap. William Carrigan, writing alone and with Clive Webb, has examined waves of vigilante violence against people of Mexican origin in Texas resulting from disputes with whites over access to land and labor.¹⁷ Monica Muñoz Martinez illuminates the need to account for state-sponsored violence in perpetrating racial terror in her investigation of brutality waged against Mexicans in Texas.¹⁸ Kadida E. Williams, Michael Trotti, Crystal Feimster, and Brent M.S. Campney problematize employing the standard scholarly definition of lynching as a stand-in for the myriad forms of violent terror whites used to maintain the racial hierarchy.¹⁹ Michael Pfeifer extends the comparison of the logic of lynching in divergent communities to include regions outside the South.²⁰ We are indebted to, and inspired by, the work of these scholars, and emphasize that our decision to focus on the relationship between *LNS* and the work of sociologists who focus on lynching does not diminish the importance of these more historical contributions.

Beyond developing a scholarly understanding of lynchings and threatened lynchings as an important feature of United States history, we believe that our nation must continue exploring and understanding this brutal practice. The implications of lynching for contemporary race relations have meaningful and immediate consequences for all Americans today. Scholars who study mob violence often describe the era of lynching as lasting from the withdrawal of federal troops from the South through the onset of the Great Depression, although violence certainly began earlier and continued later than this period. A substantial number of our fellow Americans, working in collaboration with institutions such as the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and local remembrance and reconciliation projects, have attempted to renew our focus on histories of racism. The success of the recently opened National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, stands as evidence that people today care about, need to understand, and want to remember the victims of this heinous era. We believe that understanding this aspect of our country's history is essential to any efforts to heal from our past and move forward as a more united nation.

LNS and FOV provide major steps in the advance of this intellectual project. These monographs, and the subsequent works they inspired, force us to connect the characteristics of local communities and the social and economic underpinnings that supported lynching with the broader American narrative. They also help position us to better understand some of the structural violence that is still disproportionately visited upon African Americans today. By and large African Americans and most other marginalized groups are no longer at risk of being lynched by a mob. However, America has reeled from national media coverage of the killings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Samuel DuBose, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others not named, and not forgotten. People of color, especially Black people and the economically disadvantaged, remain disproportionately at risk of interpersonal, institutional, and structural violence in ways that are often highly visible, public, lethal, and in many ways akin to the era of lynching.

Social movement organizations such as Black Lives Matter have raised visibility and public consciousness around issues of police violence, and high-profile national media outlets have devoted substantial resources and coverage, particularly to lethal racialized violence carried out by police officers. For example, following the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, *The Washington Post* began tracking police-involved shootings, and reports that of the 999 people killed by police in 2019, at least 250 (or 25 percent) were Black.²¹ Roughly 14 percent of the American population is Black. This stark disparity in victimization begs us to consider the ways in which the red thread of racial violence continues to run through American society and its institutions today.

We are emboldened to make several recommendations, some academic and some more action oriented. Researchers of history and violence must continue to share and use knowledge in a collaborative fashion, across artificial boundaries associated with our disciplinary orientations or the status of our institutions. We must also consider the broader implications of our scholarship on lynching beyond the “mere” historical perspective. This work is essential, as it relates to the contemporary moment and the possibilities for moving us into a more socially just future. To activist-oriented individuals and organizations we say, the era of lynching was in many ways different from the contemporary moment, but much can still be learned from this era and its victims for understanding structural violence and enacting change. We push, therefore, to advance Brundage’s ethos beyond merely engaging with scholars of other disciplines. The work on racist violence is far too important to remain isolated within the walls of the academy. We can and we must reimagine the publics with which we wish to engage. In much the same way that Brundage and his work made it necessary for historians and sociologists to collaborate, so must it become necessary for academic researchers to collaborate with journalists, activists, and policy makers. Only through the harmony of this diverse chorus of voices can we hope to form a more perfect union.

Notes

1 We recognize that mob violence is so widespread in the United States that it has victimized people with many racial identities. The overwhelming majority of them, however, were African Americans, and extensive evidence links the widespread practice of lynching with efforts to politically and economically suppress Black people. We therefore frame our discussion to foreground the role that lynching played as a tactic wielded by domestic terrorists focused on advancing white supremacy.

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- 3 Dominic J. Capeci Jr., "The Lynching of Cleo Wright: Federal Protection of Constitutional Rights During World War II," *Journal of American History* 72:4 (1986): 859–87; Dennis B. Downey and Raymond M. Hyser, *No Crooked Death: Coatesville, Pennsylvania and the Lynching of Zachariah Walker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Robert Seitz Frey and Nancy Thompson-Frey, *The Silent and the Damned: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1998); Richard Gambino, *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977); Nancy MacLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism," *Journal of American History* 78:3 (1991): 917–48; James R. McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).
- 4 Edward L. Ayer, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky: Lynchings, Mob Rule and Legal Lynchings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).
- 5 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).
- 6 Hubert M. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1967); Arthur Franklin Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969).
- 7 Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations*; Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*.
- 8 Tolnay and Beck, *Festival of Violence*. The states covered by FOV are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.
- 9 Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations*.
- 10 Tolnay and Beck, *Black Flight*.
- 11 Brent M.S. Campney, *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).
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20 Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

21 Washington Post, “Fatal Force,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/> (accessed Sept. 26, 2020).

Amy Kate Bailey is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research focuses on historical racist violence. Bailey’s work has appeared in top academic journals. Her book, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence*, co-authored with Stewart Tolnay, was published by UNC Press in 2015. With Prof. Tolnay, E.M. Beck, and Piere Washington, Prof. Bailey has constructed in two databases of census records and other archival materials for people targeted by mob violence. Bailey earned her PhD in Sociology at the University of Washington. She regularly involves undergraduates in her research projects.

Piere Washington is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her areas of research include race, ethnicity, and gender. She has served as project manager for a historical study of lynching in the southern United States and is currently completing her dissertation exploring parents’ provisions of racial socialization in Black-white interracial families. Piere holds a Master of Arts in Social and Cultural Foundations in Education from DePaul University and a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice from Loyola University Chicago.