

ESSAY

Lynching and the New South and Its Impact on the Historiography of Black Resistance to Lynching

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William Fitzhugh Brundage's scholarship on lynching and on the anti-lynching movement has spanned more than three decades. During his long and productive career, Brundage has engaged with some of the most complex questions related to lynching and racial violence in contemporary scholarship, and in doing so, he has helped initiate and sustain many productive avenues of research. Indeed, my dissertation, as well as my first book, *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching and Black Culture and Memory*, profited immensely from Brundage's pioneering research and writing.¹ As a historian of the Black experience of lynching, my goal in this brief essay is to identify and put into context some of the important interventions and contributions Brundage has made with his book *Lynching in the New South* and related scholarship. With that said, it should be acknowledged that Brundage's impact extends far beyond his published work. His mentorship to numerous PhD candidates and his service to the field as a manuscript reviewer cannot be ignored. At best, my discussion of Brundage's seminal works offers an approximation of his scholarly impact.

W. F. Brundage was one of the first historians of his era to seriously study Black resistance to lynching. He developed an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics that enabled Black resistance to lynching. Brundage's intervention is noteworthy because during the 1980s and early 1990s, most historians assumed terrorized Black Southerners did not protest lynchings, save a few radical voices, such as *Richmond Planet* editor John L. Mitchell and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells.² In Brundage's earliest work on lynching, he helped dispel the assumption that Black Southern protest against lynching did not exist; however, Brundage's initial impetus for analyzing Black resistance had more to do with explaining the regional variation of white lynch mob activity than it did with Black response to white terrorism. Most historians approached differences in Southern lynching rates by examining white attitudes toward lynching or by looking at economic trends (i.e., the rise and fall of cotton prices). Brundage put forward a bold analysis that highlighted Black resistance as an important factor in shaping why some regions were more lynching prone than others.

In Brundage's "The Darien 'Insurrection' of 1899," (1990) he convincingly illustrated how Blacks in Darien, Georgia were able to stymie an anticipated lynching by preventing the local white sheriff from relocating a Black man suspected of raping a white woman to a

nearby jail.³ Brundage suggested that Darien Blacks, as well as other Southern Black communities, were able to offer collective resistance to anticipated or threatened lynchings when Black economic independence, a tradition of political mobilization, strong community bonds, and effective Black leadership were present. In other words, white lynch mobs were less likely to attempt lynchings in communities or regions in which Black communities could—and often would—offer vigorous resistance. This insight suggested that more community-level studies of lynching inclusive of the Black community's response to lynching were needed in order to better understand the complicated factors that enabled and averted white lynch mob violence in the South.

Published in 1993, W. F. Brundage's *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* expanded upon his Darien, Georgia, case study by developing the first comparative state analysis of lynching and anti-lynching activism.⁴ Of the many innovations Brundage made in the book, perhaps the most significant for historians charting the anti-lynching movement, was his rich documentation of Black politics in Virginia and Georgia. Brundage's analysis of anti-lynching activism illustrated that Black-organized protests against lynching typically occurred in cities, whereas spontaneous and informal protests often most often occurred in rural areas. In cities, he explained, Blacks possessed greater economic independence and political influence; in rural areas, Black political influence and economic opportunities were limited. Brundage's attention and insights into the geography of Black protest to lynching convincingly illustrated that organized Black resistance to lynching was a function of a Black community's socioeconomic development.

In compellingly making this case, *Lynching in the New South* inspired future studies to develop more sophisticated theoretical models for understanding the relationship between Black resistance and community development. Most notably, in his article entitled "A Warlike Demonstration" (2000) Sundiata Cha-Jua documented how armed Blacks in Decatur, Illinois, occupied the city's central business district and prevented the lynching of a Black man accused of raping a white woman.⁵ Decatur Blacks utilized armed self-defense because the previous year a white mob removed a Black man from the Decatur jail and lynched him in the public square with no interference from local white authorities. Employing British sociologist Craig Calhoun's theory of community, Cha-Jua illustrated how a Black community's socioeconomic status coupled with substantive social bonds that existed between the community and the potential lynch victim best explains what motivated Black communities to act collectively to prevent/protest a particular lynching. To date, Cha-Jua's "A Warlike Demonstration" remains the most incisive explication of the dynamics that enabled/stymied white lynch mob violence.

Over the course of the 1990s, Brundage's research and writing on Black resistance to lynching grew in depth and complexity. Whereas his early work on Black resistance in his seminal article and his book *Lynching in the New South* had been about understanding the dynamics that produced white lynch mob violence, Brundage aimed to understand Black resistance to lynching on its own terms in "Roar on the Other Side of Silence" (1997).⁶ In that essay, Brundage utilized the concept of infrapolitics derived from subaltern studies to explicate the diversity and the scope of Black resistance to white oppression in the rural South. Brundage argued that seemingly insignificant or pre-political acts of defiance such as theft, flight, and arson were primary modes of Black resistance to racial violence, with an emphasis on lynching. He illustrated that these forms of resistance were acts of "veiled resistance" that shielded Black identities and made Black resisters less susceptible to white retaliation. For Brundage, informal or veiled acts of Black resistance were important because they helped sustained a culture of resistance, which in turn, created a foundation

for more overt and more organized acts of Black resistance. Thus, informal acts of resistance were far from insignificant; Brundage urged historians to understand informal acts of resistance, and especially veiled resistance, as the life blood of protest politics.

As one of the first historians of lynching to utilize James C. Scott's infrapolitics theory, Brundage's "The Roar on the Other Side of Silence" inspired future researchers to question and think more deeply about what constitutes Black anti-lynching protest, especially in the rural Jim Crow South. For example, Brundage's pioneering essay helped me to re-situate Black flight from lynch mob violence as an example of both overt and veiled anti-lynching protest. While historians had acknowledged flight from lynching as one of the primary ways Black people responded to threatened/attempted lynchings, very few historians had ventured to explain its significance and what enabled it. My dissertation research on accomplished and attempted lynchings in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta brought to light numerous examples of flight enabled by informal community networks that hid potential lynch victims in their homes until they could be safely secreted out of the area.⁷ Brundage's infrapolitics approach helped me make sense of the informal community networks that enabled flight as a kind of veiled resistance, which sustained a culture of resistance to white terrorist violence without directly confronting it.

Scholarship on Black resistance to lynching has flourished since the appearance of Brundage's *Lynching and the New South* in 1993. While the newest research is varied with regard to topics, themes, and theoretical underpinnings, charting the dynamics that enabled Black anti-lynching protest as modeled by Brundage remains a central theme.⁸ Kidada E. Williams's *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* is representative of this new scholarship in that her work examines the ways in which narrative and storytelling enabled and sustained Black resistance to white terrorist violence during the nadir of Black-white race relations.⁹ Williams powerfully illustrates that Black Southerners were far from silent about lynching; in fact, they frequently told their stories of white terrorist violence in both official and unofficial settings. For Williams, testifying to white terrorist violence through public testimony was the primary way in which victims and witnesses resisted white terrorist violence.

In *They Left Great Marks on Me*, the central question Williams asks is this: What did it mean for Black Southerners to publicly testify and privately testify about white terrorist violence during the ascent of white supremacy in America? In answering this question, Williams keenly focused on narrative and community building (i.e., how telling stories shaped social relations between Black Americans) as well as narrative and movement building (i.e., how stories shaped and created capacity for political mobilization). Within this framework, Williams featured the voices and experiences of ordinary Black people, rather than the voices of more well-known figures such as Ida B. Wells. To bring the ordinary Black lived experience to life, Williams drew largely upon congressional hearings during Reconstruction, as well as the letters and petitions found in the National Association of Colored People's (NAACP) voluminous anti-lynching files. Whether in public dispositions or in private letters, Black Southerners painstakingly cataloged the reign of terrorist violence visited upon them and upon the communities in which they resided. For Williams, Black testimony about white terrorism was about creating a record, but it was chiefly about providing a record of violence as a means of holding the state to account. In this way, Williams aptly and convincingly argued that when Black Southerners employed narratives of white terrorist violence, they did so as a means of claiming power that had been denied them within formal political channels. In doing so, Black Southerners created

witnesses to their trauma who would in turn become potential catalysts for political action.

They Left Great Marks on Me makes a number of key contributions. Perhaps the most noteworthy is Kidada Williams's recovery of the rich record of Black testimony between Reconstruction and World War I. While sharing stories of white terrorist violence through public testimony dates back to the anti-slavery movement of the 1830s, Williams correctly asserted that scholars of American history have given much greater attention to anti-slavery and civil rights movements than they have the campaigns against racial violence between Reconstruction and the anti-lynching movement of the early twentieth century. By bringing Black testimony during from the 1870s to the 1920s to light, Williams accomplished two significant things at once: she filled a void in the history of Black-led anti-violence movements, and most importantly, she reconceptualizes those efforts as a part of a "vernacular history" in which victims and witnesses created their own history of who they were as a people, which helped Black people mobilize to confront racial violence. Conceptualizing the stories of white terrorist violence that Black people have told across time and space as a "vernacular history" illustrates how central narrative and bearing witness to those narratives have been to the task of mobilizing both Black and white Americans in efforts to create race-based reform. For example, although the anti-lynching crusades of the 1910s, '20s, and '30s did not produce federal anti-lynching legislation, Williams briefly outlines in the book's epilogue, how stories of lynching and of racial violence helped the civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s to more effectively convey the need for civil rights reform. Williams's epilogue suggests that future scholars might more deeply analyze the connective tissue between the anti-lynching movement and the civil rights movement.

Williams's *They Left Great Marks on Me* is one of the most important books on lynching and racial violence to be written since the publication of Brundage's *Lynching in the New South* because it brings to lights decades of Black protest against white terrorist violence while simultaneously pointing future scholarship toward productive new avenues of research and analysis. Taking Williams's lead, what if historians understood the campaigns against racial violence during Reconstruction and the anti-lynching movement—of which Black public testimony was crucial—as the foundation upon which the civil rights movement emerged? How might this insight revolutionize the study of both movements?

Before most historians took serious interest in the study of lynching and the anti-lynching movement, Brundage had developed a powerful analytical framework for explaining why lynch mob violence varied in different regions of the South, across time, and how regional variability in lynching rates related to the presence of Black anti-lynching protest. Brundage's later research and writing sparked new questions about the nature, scope, and significance of Black resistance to white oppression. The latest generation of scholars, like Kidada Williams and myself, would never have been able to explore the mechanisms by which Black communities leveraged social, cultural, economic, and political resources to combat anti-Black violence in the ways we have without the solid foundation laid by Brundage's *Lynching in the New South* and related scholarship. Brundage's corpus on lynching and the anti-lynching movement not only indelibly shaped the field, it was foundational to the field's very existence and continued vibrancy.

Notes

1 Karlos K. Hill, *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

- 2 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "The Darien 'Insurrection' of 1899: Black Protest During the Nadir of Race," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78 (1994): 257–80.
- 3 Representative scholars include Robert P. Ingalls, "Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa, 1858–1935," *Journal of Southern History* 53 (1987): 626; John D. Wright Jr., "Lexington's Suppression of the 1920 Will Lockett Lynch Mob," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 84 (1986): 263–79; Walter T. Howard, "Vigilante Justice and National Reaction: The 1937 Tallahassee Double Lynching," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 67 (1988): 64–81; Jack E. Davis, "'Whitewash' in Florida: The Lynching of Jesse Payne and Its Aftermath," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 68 (1990): 277–98; Eric W. Rise, "Race, Rape, Radicalism: The Case of the Martinsville Seven, 1949–1951," *Journal of Southern History* 58 (1992): 461–90; Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado, 1858–1919* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1995).
- 4 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South, Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
- 5 Sundiata Cha-Jua, "'A Warlike Demonstration': Legalism, Violent Self-Help, and Electoral Politics in Decatur, Illinois, 1894–1898," *Journal of Urban History* 26 (2000): 591–629.
- 6 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "The Roar on the Other Side of Violence" in *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 271–91.
- 7 Karlos Hill, "Resisting Lynching: Black Grassroots Responses to Lynching in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1880–1938," (PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, 2009).
- 8 Representative works include Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Koritha Mitchell, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); and Sandy Alexandre, *The Properties of Violence: Claims to Ownership in Representations of Lynching* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).
- 9 Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me*.

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