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The Legacy of American Terrorism: Lynching in America During the Reconstruction Period

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The Legacy of American Terrorism: Lynching in America During the Reconstruction Period

Writing Process

This historiography was a semester long project beginning in Spring of 2019. Because the Reconstruction Era of the United States was briefly skimmed over in my previous history classes in high school, much of my knowledge of the subject was brand new from the very beginning of my research. For background on the Reconstruction Period, I read Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction*. After completing online modules provided by my instructor, I learned how to properly find scholarly sources through the University of Dayton library and JSTOR. It was through these means that I was able to find twelve scholarly sources that were required to begin this project. After swapping out these sources for others and shortening those twelve sources down to eight annotated sources, the task of formulating them into the historiography proved easy. After submitting my draft to Dr. Smith, he provided me with some useful feedback which I then used to enhance my paper. This historiography is the product of months of hard work and scholarly research, and allows for myself and the students of ASI 120 to look back fondly on their accomplishments in their own research.

Course

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Dr. Anthony Smith

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The Legacy of American Terrorism:
The Historical Analysis of Lynching in America During the Reconstruction Period

Grace Gibson

ASI 120: The Development of Western Culture in a Global Context

Dr. Anthony Smith

May 2nd, 2019

Lynching is indubitably one of the darkest stains in the history of the American experiment. The vitriol of racism in the deep American South is still present all over the country with the origins of this dark history reach back 150 years in the past during the Reconstruction period in the United States. The legacy of lynching results directly from the failed Reconstruction project of the mid-19th century. The collapse of slavery and the ostracization of southern politicians in Congress resulted in a sense of extrajudiciality in the south. That is to say that these white southerners managed to reconstruct the old slave system within the confines of their own legal system. An integral part of this extrajudicial system was the practice of lynching. Lynching is very important to the study of Reconstruction because it is the mean by which white society was able to further subjugate and suppress the African American race even after their emancipation from slavery.

The historical sources that follow vary in interpretation of this brutal practice. Authors such as Oliver Cox, Christopher Waldrep and Michael Trotti discuss the definition of lynching itself and offer differentiating definitions. Historians such as George Elliot Howard study the different impacts of lynching on varying sectors of American life like the economy or societal progress itself. The study of lynching in America is distinguished between three various schools of thought which for the sake of this historical analysis will be referred to as the antiquated understanding, the post-war understanding, and the contemporary understanding of lynching and its effects on American consciousness. George Elliot Howard's "The Social Cost of Southern Race Prejudice" exemplifies the characteristics of the antiquated historical analysis of lynching. The historical understanding of lynching shifts to the post-war school of thought with Oliver Cox's 1945 article, "Lynching and the Status Quo," and Edward Williamson's article, "Black Belt Political Crisis: The Savage-James Lynching, 1882". The

post-war interpretation exemplified by both Cox and Williamson emphasizes the structural and institutionalized enablers of violence against African Americans. The contemporary interpretation of the practice of lynching is developed through authors such as Charles Phillips, Christopher Waldrep, Michael Pfeifer, Michael Trotti and William Carrigan. The contemporary analysis and understanding of lynching is defined by the notion that the effects of lynching were not confined to only the southern states where they occurred but reverberated across the nation and still have an impact on race relations today.

The antiquated analysis of lynching begins with George Elliot Howard, who was a professor of history at Stanford in 1917. Howard's understanding of the cause of lynching was the lack of education in both black and white society.¹ In his article, "The Social Cost of Southern Race Prejudice," Howard indicates that "[white people] possess the superior intelligence and the greater wealth which their vastly larger opportunity has yielded. They should be wise leaders in the mighty task of race-adjustment," (Howard 577). This understanding reflects the racism that still crept beneath the surface of white historians studying the practice of lynching as well as the lingering sense of white superiority that was vital to the old southern life. Howard's interpretation, while employing racist tropes in his analysis of lynching, still discusses the notion that because white southerners are obsessed with the race problem, they have ultimately impeded the progress of society as a whole. Howard correlates this race problem to multiple belief systems that the white southerners adhere to. Howard mentions the "false dogma of the inborn 'moral uncleanness'" that the southern whites believe of African Americans (588). Howard claims that belief systems such as this are what perpetrated the violence against African Americans. By viewing these people as savages and animals, Howard indicates, mass violence against Blacks is easily wrought.

Howard also analyzes lynchings among the white race as well. He explains that white men were lynched in cases of rape; the rape of African American women. By comparing the practice of lynching against the white race as a response to a crime with the lynching of African Americans, this helps to perpetrate lynching as merely a means of extrajudicial justice rather than a horrible act of ritualistic terrorism against the African Americans in the American south.

Howard also establishes methods by which lynching permeated through the white south. Through a method he describes as “suggestion-imitation,” Howard discusses how before lynching became predominantly exclusive to African Americans, it was first normalized originally through public whippings of Native Americans, African Americans and Whites for misdemeanor crimes. This normalcy of public punishment eventually translated into public murder and execution.

The post-war understanding of lynching begins with Oliver Cox, who was a sociologist and prominent scholar of racism and its relationship to global capitalist trends. Cox published his article “Lynching and the Status Quo,” in 1945.² While Cox’s analysis still primarily discusses the societal influences that led to the widespread lynching in the American south, he uses a formulaic and procedural lens to study how lynching disseminated throughout the Southern states.

Cox offers multiple definitions of the term “lynching” and explains the social connotation that come with these definitions. Cox begins his article by giving the standard definition of lynching, which he describes “...as an act of homicidal aggression committed by one people against another through mob action for the purpose of suppressing either some tendency in the latter to rise from an accommodated position of subordination or for subjugating them further to some lower social status,” (Cox 576). Cox spends much of his article discussing what lynching is

and isn't. He explains the differences of lynching and race riots, indicating that lynching mobs are unopposed and are formed from the belief that the group has the superior knowledge and social standing to inflict punishment on another group.

Cox also makes the important distinction that lynching is often not against one particular individual, but instead against a whole group of people. Cox discusses the symbolic act that lynching is in America, and how this practice is targeted at African Americans. In Cox's historical analysis of lynching in America, he establishes the apparent lynching cycle that takes place across the south. Cox believes the cycle first begins with the belief among a white community that the local black population is gaining too much power and authority. Secondly, the discussion boils in the white community and causes race tensions and animosity towards blacks to rise. Thirdly, rumors of a black individual committing a crime spread through the white community. Cox notes that the most common example is a black man raping a white woman. He also indicates that sometimes if race tensions are high enough, white individuals will provoke a member of the black community. This provokes the white mob and leads to the actual lynching of a black individual. Cox indicates how the person is executed publicly in front of the courthouse and the remains are dragged through the African American section of the city. Cox makes note of the violence that these mobs inflict on the black community as they typically murder other blacks after the lynching as well. Finally, Cox notes that the black community is further subordinated after the lynching occurs. Interestingly, Cox seems critical of the response to the lynching after the fact. He claims that the white community receives its "emotional catharsis" and the "best white people" condemn the practice. The black community realizes the danger in dealing with whites in any capacity and therefore conform to whatever the white community wants. After this, Cox notes, the cycle is complete and is ready to begin again.

This analysis by Cox characterizes lynching as a procedural action. This emphasis his point that these lynchings are not spontaneous as some would believe. Instead they are methodical, and in the south during the post-war era, lynchings were seen as forms of justice. Cox determines that lynching in the south was not even illegal and was often permissible in multiple state statutes across the South. Cox also analyses lynching in terms of legality. He notes that lynching was only seen as a crime if the lynching was aimed to harm the state. Cox's historical interpretation is similar to Howard's in that they both analyze the actual concept of lynching and its place in southern society.

Oliver Cox's analysis represents a clear departure from the antiquated understanding of lynching represented by George Elliot Howard. Notably, Cox does not employ the racist notion of white supremacy in his analysis and does not place the burden of racial cohesion on the white race on the basis of superior intellect. It is also significant to analyze the journals in which these articles by both Howard and Cox were published. George Elliot Howard's article was published in a March 1917 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*, whereas Oliver Cox's article was published in *The Journal of Negro Education* in 1945. The very place of publication of these two articles serves to prove that institutionalized racism is present even in the historical analysis of lynching. Howard's article was published in a journal that was accessible and appealing to primarily white audiences, whereas Cox's article was published in an article that was addressed solely to African Americans. This discrepancy between places of publication illustrates how Howard's analysis was placed more in the mainstream academic journal as opposed to Cox's article which was published in a journal less read and less relevant at the time.

The post-war understanding of lynching continues with Edward Williamson's 1967 article, "Black Belt Political Crisis: The Savage-James Lynching, 1882".³ Williamson's

historical study of lynching is narrower than the two sources listed above. Williamson takes a case-study approach to lynching. Williamson focuses on the lynching of two African Americans in Florida in 1889, and how these lynchings reflected the sentiment of whites towards blacks all across the South. Williamson's historical study begins with describing the events that occurred in 1889 in Madison County, Florida. Williamson describes the political environment in the area at the time. In the wake of reconstruction in the United States, the north imposed the ideals of black freedom on the former confederate states. Williamson illustrates how "[t]he Republican majorities were greatly enhanced by political organizers of the Black Belt," (Williamson 402). Despite black suffrage in the state, Republican influence in other counties outside Madison was minimal to nonexistent. However, black voters allowed for Republican candidate Horatio Bisbee, Jr. to remain the sole Republican to hold office in Congress. Williamson describes how the Radical Constitution of 1868 gave the power to the Democratic Florida state governor to appoint important county officials. This allowed for the stuffing of ballot boxes in key elections. After a black supporter of one of the Republican candidates confronted the Democratic opponent for stuffing ballot boxes, a fight broke out and the two were arrested. Given the racial tensions in the south, a fair trial with a white judge was unlikely. Therefore, four close associates of the black man on trial fled the county amid brewing racial tensions. Two of these associates were Charles Savage and Howard James. Due to their associates lack of witnesses in his trial, Savage and James returned to Madison County on his behalf to testify. During the trial, Williamson writes, Savage accused two white Democrats of election fraud. The next day, one of these men confronted Savage which resulted in Savage shooting and killing the man. Savage and James were both arrested, and later when they were being transferred out of Tallahassee, a white mob attacked the cart and shot both men multiple times.

By focusing on a singular, true instance of lynching in the South, Williamson studies the effects that this lynching had across not only the south but the rest of America as well. Unlike the previous two sources, Williamson does not broadly define lynching by what it is and is not, but he instead studies an actual occurrence of the practice which allows for a more in-depth study of the topic. Primarily, this historical analysis of lynching provides a more in-depth understanding of how the lynchings in the south often occurred. Essentially, it is taking the points made by Cox in the previous source and bringing them to life in this real-world example that Williamson recounts.

The historical narrative of lynching begins to take its contemporary form in the research and analyses of Charles David Phillips. Charles David Phillips was an American lawyer and scholar on lynching in North Carolina. Charles David Phillips' 1987 article, "Exploring Relations among Forms of Social Control: The Lynching and Execution of Blacks in North Carolina, 1889-1918," focuses on a different angle in terms of lynching.⁴ Phillips analyses studies the differentiation between judicial and extra-judicial forms of execution, and how each represent a form of social control. Phillips notes that the two notions of unofficial and official forms of social control and execution cannot be substituted for one another. By this, Phillips indicates "that fewer executions should occur when there are more lynchings, and more executions should mean fewer lynchings," which is to say that these two notions of official and unofficial dispensing of justice corroborate a negative relationship. The only similarity between the two, Phillips claims, is that they are both punishing who they deem to be deviant to their system.

This historical interpretation represents the transition into the modern historical understanding of lynching because it expresses how lynching was not an extrajudicial dispensing

of justice, but rather a means of social control to suppress black lives and keep white supremacy strong in the southern United States. While George Elliot Howard touched on this notion, he examined it from a lens of white supremacy by acknowledging the idea that whites had the moral obligation to teach themselves and black people how to behave in ways that would further advance civilization. The historical analyses of Phillips differ in this regard because he acknowledges the outbursts of prejudice that gave rise to lynching, whereas Howard's analyses attributed lynching to a maintaining of social order. While both are true, the modern understanding of lynching primarily focuses on the prejudicial and racial dilemmas that resulted in lynching, rather than it just being a means of maintaining the southern status quo. Phillips is also the first historian of these selected sources to use the term "racist" in his work, indicating the clear historical shift in the way that historians and society as a whole view the practice of lynching.

This contemporary historical interpretation of the lynching of African Americans in the post-war era is continued with Christopher Waldrep's 2000 article, "War of Words: The Controversy over the Definition of Lynching, 1899-1940." in which his research primarily focuses on the definition of lynching throughout history.⁵ The importance of the definition of lynching was briefly touched on in Oliver Cox's analysis, but Waldrep's work offers a more in-depth analysis of the weight that the definition of lynching carries. Waldrep is not timid in identifying the horrible, brutish acts committed against African Americans in the post-war south.

Waldrep brings attention to how lynching was normally defined in newspapers in the American south. He characterizes that definition as "a community's proper response to heinous crimes against neighborhood values," (Waldrep 76). Waldrep describes the important effect this had on white perspectives of southern blacks. Because journalists described the crimes of black

people, excuses for lynching were made and shifted the white perspective to see the African American race as evil.

In Waldrep's historical study of the brutal practice of lynching in the American south, he focuses on the conference that occurred between the NAACP as well as ASWLP (Association for Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching) and the ILD (International Labor Defense) in order to find the accurate definition for lynching that expressed the horrors of the practice. Waldrep's analysis concludes that there is no definition that could accurately and wholly convey the horrors of lynching on the African American community. This historical interpretation marks the beginning of contemporary analysis of lynching because the historian unabashedly explains the horrors of lynching, and surmises that the definitions of the past and even those of the present do not do justice to the brutality that lynching was.

The contemporary historical analysis of lynching in the post-war south continues with the most prominent scholar and historian on lynching, Michael Pfeifer, who is an associate professor of history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Pfeifer's article, "The Northern United States and the Genesis of Racial Lynching: The Lynching of African Americans in the Civil War Era," places importance on the effects of lynching in the post-war era on not just the south, but America as a whole.⁶ By doing so, Pfeifer analyzes the national effects of the horrors of lynching rather than limiting the scope to only the southern states. Notably, Pfeifer discusses lynchings that occurred in northern states as well, including Wisconsin and New York. Pfeifer, in his own words, claims that "[his] argument in [his] essay is that the history of American racial lynching can be most fully understood in both national and transnational terms," (Pfeifer 626). Pfeifer's analysis represents an important change in the study of American racial lynching because the scope of his study is not confined only to the southern states where lynching was most prevalent.

Instead, Pfeifer examines the effects of racial lynching nationally. In the greater picture of the historical narrative of lynching, the inclusion of all of the United States rather than just the South proves that Reconstruction and the consequences of racial lynching fall on the entirety of the country. Pfeifer's focus on lynchings in northern states draws attention to the national racial tension rather than most historians centralizing all of the hatred towards African Americans in the deep south. In doing so, Pfeifer contemplates lynching and racial violence as a central issue in American history, rather than an encased phenomenon confined only to the South.

Michael Ayers Trotti, a professor of history at Ithaca College, continues the development of scholarly understanding and interpretation of lynching and its effects in the contemporary context with his article "What Counts: Trends in Racial Violence in the Postbellum South".⁷ Trotti's research focuses on the methods by which historians effectively count the number of lynchings that occurred in the United States in the post-war era. Trotti's work also covers the issues of scholars attempting to trace trends in racial violence across the south.

Trotti calls into question what has historically been considered lynching, the trends associated with those lynchings, as well as the historical identifiers that distinguish lynchings from other homicides. Similar to several of the other sources previously mentioned, Trotti emphasizes the historical importance of the definition of lynching. Trotti mentions the 1940 meeting that Christopher Waldrep focuses on in his analysis. While that meeting failed to produce an effective definition of lynching, Trotti claims that "what they were able to agree upon has become the standard for the scholarship," (Trotti 378). Trotti also divides the definition into three criteria. Trotti establishes that "the victim must have died; the killing had to be at the hands of 'a group,' often (but not always) defined as more than two people; and the lynching had to be under the "pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition," (378). Trotti's analysis of the

historical trends of lynching add to the general contemporary understanding in that he examines the ways in which historians have quantitatively measured the number of lynchings in America during the post-war era. This study allows for modern historians to accurately gauge the number of victims of lynching and helps to broaden modern historical understanding of the effects that lynching had throughout communities in both the north and south.

The final historian that helps to establish the contemporary understanding of lynching in America is William Carrigan. William Carrigan is an associate professor of history at Rowan University. Carrigan's article "The Strange Career of Judge Lynch: Why the Study of Lynching Needs to Be Refocused on the Mid-Nineteenth Century," analyzes modern research on lynching and claims that it should widely be focused on the mid-nineteenth century, particularly after the end of the Civil War during the Reconstruction era.⁸ Carrigan claims that "[h]istorians of the nineteenth-century United States should be the ones leading the exploration of the subject, because the mid-nineteenth century was the key period in the history of mob violence in the United States," (Carrigan 293). Carrigan's claim is that the historians of the mid-nineteenth century offer the most important analysis of lynching rather than contemporary analysis because the mid-1800's defined mob violence against African Americans and is the root of racial violence during the Civil Rights Movement as well as race issues today. Carrigan believes as well that this history of racial violence and lynching should occupy a greater space in the general study of American violence so as to centralize the racial disparity that was prevalent then and is still prevalent today.

Carrigan offers his input on the definition of lynching as well. The definition of lynching is very important to the contemporary understanding of racial violence and lynching because it establishes the means by which a homicide can be classified as a lynching. Carrigan compares

the definitions of lynching by early scholars on the issue to contemporary understandings of the word. For instance, Carrigan explains how there are those today “to describe situations ranging from police shootings of minorities to media criticism of celebrities and public figures,” (295). Carrigan’s acknowledgement of the contemporary use of the term lynching illustrates the new modern understanding of the practice as well as the continuing racial violence that is evident today. To trace the origins of this racial violence, Carrigan claims that historians must re-center their analysis on the mid-nineteenth century, when lynching was at its peak.

These collective historical interpretations of the brutal and horrid practice of lynching represent a shift in study from the antiquated analysis of historians like Howard to the contemporary study of the practice by historians like Pfeifer and Carrigan. The notable difference between the three schools of study isn’t a debate about whether or not the practice was horrid and brutal; that much is clear. The differences lie in the scope of the racial problems in the United States, and how deeply lynching has stained the fabric of the nation. The scope of the study of lynching is limited to the southern United States in places like North Carolina and Mississippi and encases the problem of racial violence to those areas. Contemporary studies of lynching broaden the scope to northern states and make lynching central to the nation rather than just a problem in the South. Contemporary study also draws a correlation between racial violence in the Reconstruction era to racial violence that exists all over America today. Efforts to accurately document lynchings across the country since the Reconstruction era are important to the modern analysis of lynching as well. Historians like Michael Trotti are bringing to light the importance of documenting victims of racially motivated mob violence. This in itself represents a true moral shift in the country as we come to quantify the deaths that resulted from race relations 150 years ago and today. Because this change in the historical understanding of

lynching is relatively recent, it is safe to say that this narrative of the brutish practice of racial lynching is far from over. It is quite possible that in 50 years, the shootings of black children like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown will be studied by historians in the same lens that the lynchings during the American Reconstruction period were. If this historical narrative of study reveals anything, it is that race relations and racial violence are still very much a problem in America; a problem which can be traced back to the dark days of American Reconstruction.

Notes

¹George Elliot Howard, "The Social Cost of Southern Race Prejudice," *American Journal of Sociology* 22, no. 5 (March 1917): 577-593.

²Oliver Cox, "Lynching and the Status Quo," *The Journal of Negro Education* 14, no. 4 (Autumn 1945): 576-588.

³Edward Williamson, "Black Belt Political Crisis: The Savage-James Lynching, 1882," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (April 1967): 402-409.

⁴Charles Phillips, "Exploring Relations among Forms of Social Control: The Lynching and Execution of Blacks in North Carolina, 1889-1918," *Law & Society Review* 21, no. 3 (1987): 361-374.

⁵Christopher Waldrep, "War of Words: The Controversy over the Definition of Lynching, 1899-1940," *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 1 (February 2000): 75-100.

⁶Michael Pfeifer, "The Northern United States and the Genesis of Racial Lynching: The Lynching of African Americans in the Civil War Era," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (December 2010): 621-635.

⁷Michael Trotti, "What Counts: Trends in Racial Violence in the Postbellum South," *The Journal of American History* 100, no. 2 (September 2013): 375-400.

⁸William Carrigan, "The Strange Career of Judge Lynch: Why the Study of Lynching Needs to Be Refocused on the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 7, no. 2 (June 2017): 293-312.

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