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Writing Process

For this assignment, my class was instructed to choose an aspect of the Reconstruction era in American history to study more thoroughly. I chose to write about the lynching of African Americans. First, I wrote a topic proposal to explain my intended area to study and what I hoped to find in my research. Next, I found eight scholarly sources on the topic of lynching that were published after the year 1900, and I summarized them in an annotated bibliography. Lastly, I used those sources to create a historiography that showcases the changes in the views historians have had on lynching over time. In the process of writing this historiography, I wrote multiple drafts and met with my instructor as well as the Write Place consultants to help strengthen each draft.

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Essential or Evil? Historians' Take on Lynching During Reconstruction

Emily Schmitz

After the Civil War ended and slaves were emancipated, one would assume that African Americans would thrive in their nation full of new possibilities and opportunities. However, this was not the experience most black people had. In addition to the large social and economic adjustments they had to make, they also had to constantly fear for their lives because of the increase in lynchings that took place post-Civil War. Lynching and mob violence were terrifying acts, especially for African Americans, that consisted of murdering or beating people in a public setting. This cruel punishment took place mainly in the South, and it was seen as a form of entertainment for many white people. Families with children would attend the show; they would purchase snacks to consume while they witnessed a lynching. People would send postcards that featured pictures of a murdered black stranger. The act of lynching could have been performed for a number of reasons. In this historiography, I explore how historians' interpretations of the causes of the lynchings of African Americans have changed over time. In looking at scholarly works by multiple historians on their views of the act of lynching African Americans, I noticed three main explanations that historians had for the lynchings that took place. Their explanations range from political reasons to vigilantism to pure racism. Many historians have debated the true cause of lynchings in the South during Reconstruction, but I believe the historians who acknowledged the racist motives were the most effective in their argument because racism is the cause that is the most consistent over time.

Politics

One of the common explanations for lynching is political, which can be seen in Alruthus Ambush Taylor's *The Negro in South Carolina During the*

Reconstruction.¹ In this book, Taylor writes about the new role African Americans played in society once they were considered freedmen in South Carolina. This transition from slave to free was a time of big changes for the black community, and Taylor analyzes all aspects of what life was like for them. He discusses the economic changes, religious impacts, as well as the violence and oppression they faced. An election in 1870 resulted in the Republican candidate being victorious. According to Taylor, the results of this election caused many white people, specifically Democrats, to be furious; they began to target and release their frustrations onto black people. Some African Americans were just thrown in jail while others were murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The motive for these terrorist attacks was to prevent African Americans from voting for Republicans or other black people. In 1871, the KKK planned to force all Republicans out of office just as they did to Justice O'Connell, who was, as Taylor describes, "a highly respected man."² It became common for legislative members to fear returning to their houses because they spoke against the Ku Klux Klan and declared martial law.³ Eventually, some African Americans would form groups to attempt to fight back. One group was referred to as a "Negro Ku Klux Klan."⁴ This group would destroy a significant amount of property when they were unable to fight openly.

Similar to Taylor, Herbert Shapiro also addresses the infamous group that is most well-known for its brutal and violent attacks on African Americans, the Ku Klux Klan, in his article "The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode."⁵ Shapiro explains that this murderous group is politically driven to support the Democratic Party through the use of intimidation and fear. This article describes the ruthless ways in which the KKK attempted to prevent Republicans, especially African Americans, from voting. The Ku Klux Klan strived to "create an atmosphere of terror" so that there would be no black voters, resulting in Democratic victories.⁶ Shapiro reported that some of their methods included beatings, whippings, and even murder. These tactics had an impact on

¹ Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina During the Reconstruction* (New York: AMS Press, 1924).

² Taylor, 199.

³ Taylor, 199-200.

⁴ Taylor, 200.

⁵ Herbert Shapiro, "The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode," *The Journal of Negro History* 49, no. 1 (1964): 34-55, doi:10.2307/2716475.

⁶ Shapiro, 35.

the African Americans, causing the number of black voters to decrease significantly. For instance, at one precinct, only four out of the 156 votes that were cast were from black people.⁷ Although Shapiro discusses both political and racist motives for lynching in his article, he focuses mainly on the political aspects. Because of the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan, the Federal Government had to intervene in an attempt to put an end to the reign of the terrorist group. Taylor's and Shapiro's discussions of politics, while well-reasoned, do not seem to be comprehensive enough to present a full understanding of lynching.

Vigilantism

Another recurring explanation for the cause of lynching is vigilantism, which is the act of groups of people taking it upon themselves to enforce the law and bring about justice. Gilles Vandal is one historian who discusses the lynchings that were performed by vigilante committees in his article entitled "Property Offenses, Social Tension and Racial Antagonism in Post-Civil War Rural Louisiana."⁸ Vandal begins his article by describing a murder that took place in 1873, where two men were killed in their own store by four black people, who were attempting to rob them. Three of the murderers were lynched as a result.⁹ After the war, many people were starving and unemployed. The economic depression during Reconstruction caused many people, especially black people, to struggle financially and become dependent on stealing to make a living. Law enforcement was working hard to punish these criminals, but there were still many who ran free. This was seen as unacceptable by the citizens, so they began forming groups to take the punishments into their own hands. Vigilance committees were brutal and would lynch the allegedly guilty people. Many African Americans were victims of the torturous treatment of these lynch mobs because they were allegedly guilty of stealing. As Vandal explains, "[I]n many instances, [vigilance committees] did not hesitate, particularly if those people accused of robbery had murdered a white, to resort to summary justice and lynch the alledged [sic] guilty party."¹⁰ These vigilance committees used the act of lynching in order to protect the property of white people.

⁷ Shapiro, 38.

⁸ Gilles Vandal, "Property Offenses, Social Tension and Racial Antagonism in Post-Civil War Rural Louisiana," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (1997): 127-153.

⁹ Vandal, 127.

¹⁰ Vandal, 141.

Like Vandal, Michael Pfeifer's article, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching: Collective Violence in Reconstruction Louisiana," also expounds on the vigilante cause for lynchings after the Civil War, focusing on Louisiana.¹¹ Pfeifer claims that Louisiana's lynchings were becoming more "racialized and ritualized."¹² Additionally, he feels that some questions have been left unanswered regarding how lynching began and how white people turned the act into a racialized act of terrorism. When African Americans were freed from the bonds of slavery, white people turned to violence as a means to maintain their authority and superiority. Lynchings became more frequent and a means to maintain social order. In the 1870s, Pfeifer reports, lynching was used by white people to provide more severe punishments for African American criminals. It was widely believed that mob violence and lynchings were more effective in keeping order in society than governmental attempts. Although Vandal and Pfeifer make strong arguments for the vigilante cause of lynchings, vigilantism does not encapsulate the full, accurate motive for the violence that occurred during Reconstruction.

Racism

Lastly, a common explanation for the cause of lynching is racism. W. E. B. Du Bois argues for this motive in his book entitled *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, where he focuses on the role African Americans played in the Reconstruction era.¹³ He analyzes every aspect of the time period, beginning with the different classes in the South: the black worker, the white worker, and the planter. Throughout the book, Du Bois gives a detailed description of what life was like for newly freed African Americans in America after the Civil War. Included in his descriptions was the violence and torture that African Americans endured in the South, even claiming that "probably in no country in the civilized world did human life become so cheap."¹⁴ Du Bois claims that the cause of lynchings in the South was the tensions between the two differing working classes, black laborers and white laborers, and the entertainment it provided for sadistic whites. Even though white laborers were not making much money, they were still treated with respect in society and had the privilege of sending their

¹¹ Michael J. Pfeifer, "The Origins of Postbellum Lynching: Collective Violence in Reconstruction Louisiana," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 50, no. 2 (2009): 189-201.

¹² Pfeifer, 198.

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1935).

¹⁴ Du Bois, 700.

children to white schools. Black laborers received a completely different kind of treatment, which included public humiliation, mob violence, and other forms of degradation.

John Carpenter also addresses the racism prevalent during Reconstruction in his article, "Atrocities in the Reconstruction Period."¹⁵ He begins the article by recognizing that many people claim that the violence against African Americans during the Reconstruction Era was exaggerated. However, Carpenter disagrees because, to him, it makes sense that people who have been treated poorly since their arrival would continue to be treated poorly once they are freed. The Freedmen's Bureau kept detailed records of murdered African Americans; these records sometimes included the cause of the murder, which were mainly trivial reasons, such as not removing his hat to a white man. There were also hundreds of cases of lynchings that consisted of whippings, beatings, and stabbings. When these acts of violence took place, the authorities acted as if they did not notice, and "the persons guilty of these offenses [were not] apprehended."¹⁶ Carpenter states that the treatment of freedmen during Reconstruction in the South was illegal, so the Federal Government eventually had to intervene to provide the protections promised to African Americans in their emancipation. Carpenter concludes his article by describing the actions white people inflicted on black people as "unreasonable hostility."¹⁷

In addition to Du Bois and Carpenter, Barry Crouch also discusses the violence white people inflicted on black people in "A Spirit of Lawlessness: White Violence; Texas Blacks, 1865-1868."¹⁸ In this article, he focuses on the African Americans in Texas during Reconstruction. Although Crouch acknowledges that it is difficult to know the exact cause for the violence, he suspects that it was a result of the frustrations white Southerners felt due to their loss in the war. Crouch also stated that the violent acts were used as a means to control African Americans politically, economically, and socially. After black people gained the right to vote, the number of blacks killed by whites doubled. African Americans were beaten for many different reasons, one of which being related to work life. If a black man was too sick to go to work, he would get

¹⁵ John A. Carpenter, "Atrocities in the Reconstruction Period," *The Journal of Negro History* 47, no. 4 (1962): 234-247, doi:10.2307/2716560.

¹⁶ Carpenter, 243.

¹⁷ Carpenter, 247.

¹⁸ Barry A. Crouch, "A Spirit of Lawlessness: White Violence; Texas Blacks, 1865-1868," *Journal of Social History* 18, no. 2 (1984): 217-232.

whipped or beaten in some way. Their social lives were also controlled by white people. If an African American spoke to a white person in a disrespectful manner, he would be lynched. Crouch provided the example of a black man referring to a white friend of his by just his first name and not “master;” this exchange resulted in a public whipping.¹⁹

The interpretation of racism continues with an earlier interpretation from Gilles Vandal, who in 1991, analyzes the violence that took place in Caddo Parish, Louisiana, during the Reconstruction era in his article, “‘Bloody Caddo’: White Violence Against Blacks in a Louisiana Parish, 1865-1876.”²⁰ This parish had the most and worst murders recorded in the state, which is how its nickname “Bloody Caddo” originated. Many historians have tried to explain why there was such a high level of violence against blacks by noting that the parish’s population was 70% black.²¹ However, other areas that had the same number or more African Americans did not have as much violence. In Caddo, black people were considered by whites to make up the majority of criminals. However, this was not accurate. African Americans made up the 85% of the victims of murder during this time period, and whites made up 84% of the killers of black people.²² Vandal explains that the cause of violence during this time was purely racial. White people saw violence as the only way to keep black people submissive and white people superior. Additionally, when analyzing the status and jobs of the white people who were killing black people, it was discovered that the majority of the violent acts was done by upper-class whites, not lower-class blacks, as previously assumed.

The group of historians that I believe explain the cause of lynching in the most effective way was the group who acknowledged the racist motive. While I was researching the topic, I noticed that most of the articles and books that I read explained lynching as an act that was meant to intimidate and threaten African Americans in order to maintain white supremacy. Noticeably and perhaps not surprisingly, half of the sources that I used in this historiography argued for the motive of racism. Additionally, the dates of publication of the sources I used, ranging from 1935 to 1991, proves that this was not a belief of the past but a

¹⁹ Crouch, 224.

²⁰ Gilles Vandal, “‘Bloody Caddo’: White Violence Against Blacks in a Louisiana Parish, 1865-1876,” *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 2 (1991): 373-388.

²¹ Vandal, 376-377.

²² Vandal, 376.

continued interpretation of lynching. All four of the sources I have mentioned interpret lynching as a racist act; they each had different, but effective, ways to support their argument. For instance, Du Bois explained the racism that was apparent in the treatment of blacks and whites in the same class. Carpenter interpreted lynching as racist because African Americans had been treated poorly ever since they came to America because of their race. Lastly, Crouch and Vandal explained lynching as a racist practice that was used to maintain white superiority and control. I believe this group of historians made the strongest and most effective argument for the cause of lynching because it has the most evidence to back it up and it is consistent over time.

Throughout history, African Americans have been treated unfairly; lynching is just one example of the cruel injustice they have endured. Unfortunately, prejudice and violence against African Americans are still prevalent today. Although we have made progress over the years, we still have a long way to go to achieve full equality and peace between white people and African American people. The sources of the violence inflicted on black people during Reconstruction were unofficial groups, such as vigilance committees and mobs. Today, the violence can be seen coming from official groups such as police officers. Recently, there have been many instances of racial profiling and police brutality. It is important to analyze the various causes of lynching in order to recognize what could lead people to treat other human beings with such contempt. Through acknowledging the causes of cruel, violent acts, such as lynching, we can realize what not to do and put a stop to them in order to create a better future for everyone.

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