



Original Research Article

"SWIFT VENGEANCE:" BLACK MOBOCRACY IN GEORGIA'S COTTON BELT, 1892

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Abstract

The precepts of the culture of honor in the southern region of the United States promoted violence for retribution, ostensibly for affronts, and the redemption of honor. Typically, the narratives of lynch lawlessness examine the lynching of African American men by Caucasian mobs. More recently, researchers have begun examining intra-racial mob violence, a new field in the study of lynching. This discourse examines the intersection of violence, the culture of honor, and African American intra-racial mobocracy in the Cotton Belt region of Georgia in 1892.

Keywords: Lynching, Mobocracy, Lynch lawlessness, Mob Violence, Intra-racial Lynching

INTRODUCTION

Scholars widely posit that extralegal violence facilitated African American subjugation in the Southern region of the United States from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement. The lynching of African Americans became a frequent and effective social, educational, political, and economic impediment, for which these violent acts resulted in the deaths of 4500 people, and many contemporary researchers relate that the actual number of victims may remain unknown because of the endemic nature of lynch lawlessness.² Historically, most lynching narratives examine the mob activities of Caucasian men that contributed to the deaths of African American men, the most significant percentage of lynching victims. An emerging field of inquiry for extralegal violence references what researchers Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay coin as atypical- Black women and children, Caucasian men and women, and people of Mexican descent.³ Other anomalous victims include fatalities by mobs of their ethnic group. This paper examines the intersection of violence, the culture of honor, and intra-racial lynching in the Cotton Belt region of Georgia in 1892.

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² Equal Justice Initiative, "Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence after the Civil War" (2020).

³ Amy Kate Bailey and Stewart E. Tolnay, *Lynched: The Victims of Southern Mob Violence*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 183-195.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Lynching evokes images of Black men hanging from trees surrounded by a mob of convivial Whites, smiling for a photograph and scrambling for pieces of the cadaver to keep as souvenirs. However, the reality is that lynching was a global phenomenon frequently associated with the American South, and although most lynchings parallel this interracial narrative, intra-racial mobocracy existed in the United States. Specifically, in Georgia's Cotton Belt region, Black lynch mobs assaulted three African American men in 1892. These circumstances were infrequent in comparison to interracial lynchings, and few researchers engaged in the study of these attacks.

Anti-lynching activist Frederick Douglass decried lynching, reflecting that mobocracy continued unabated because the institutions (i.e., newspapers, religious leaders, politicians) that should have condemned the practice either refused to address lynch lawlessness or assumed an apologetic stance. Moreover, Douglass theorized that these entities failed to instill the values of humanity, particularly referencing African Americans.⁴

In his seminal work, *The Crucible of Race*, Joel Williamson argues that the burgeoning of radical racism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries displaced the previous trope of docility, and the stereotype of the docile and loyal Negro morphed into an unpredictable and violent fiend. Hence, the phenomenon incited lynchings to protect Caucasian women deemed vulnerable to the lascivious African American man. Moreover, the radicalism of this era justified the victimization of Blacks while simultaneously vindicating the lawlessness of White mobs.⁵

Whitfield also elucidated this premise, relating that the violence perpetuated on African Americans by Southern Caucasians secured the social hierarchy, allowing Whites to predominate and degrade Blacks. This rhetoric's proliferation endorsed lynching as an effective measure to punish acts of sexual violence against Caucasian women by African American men.⁶ Edward Ayers similarly explored this theory, suggesting a correlation between racist doctrines, hysteria, and mob violence. Furthermore, he proffers that transient Blacks, without local Whites' attestation, were deemed troublemakers and targeted by lynch mobs.⁷

In an analysis of lynching in Georgia and Virginia, W. Fitzhugh Brundage hypothesized that lynching African Americans was both a symbol and an act facilitating social cohesion within the Caucasian community. Lynching endorsed a stringent racial hierarchy from which Whites benefitted. Brundage theorized that lynching proliferated because of the ineffectiveness of social institutions (e.g., educational, religious, and civic) that failed to educate Southerners on the propriety of law and personhood.⁸

The culture of honor associated with the American South closely aligns with the immigration of Scots-Irish herders to the region during the colonial era. These men ascribed to honor-based norms that endorsed violence for protecting and redeeming personal and familial reputation or property. Moreover, men who refused to combat disrespect with violence often suffered diminished social status. The proliferation of these precepts prompted Cohen et al.'s study, revealing a continuation of aggressive responses by Southerners to insults or affronts. Andreescu et al. studied homicide rates in the Appalachian Mountains, determining a correlation between violence, the stability of the family unit, and adherence to Protestantism as a religion. Hayes and Lee's analysis of the Culture of Honor

⁴ Frederick Douglass, "Lynching Black People Because They Are Black. *The Christian Educator*.

⁵ Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁶ Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

⁷ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South, Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1993).

model revealed that Caucasian males living in rural areas of the South were inclined to support violence to protect their families and counter social and political protests with which they disagreed.⁹

In a multifaceted study of Southern culture and homicide, Lee et al. reveal the interrelationship between culture and evangelicalism that significantly influenced persons of Southern heritage. African Americans living in these regions and exposed to cultural violence resulted in the reference as Black rednecks by Thomas Sowell, a clepe indicative of the enculturation of the cultural norms of violence. Even more than that, homicide rates are higher in communities where people of Southern heritage emigrated, indicating the ingraining of these norms in the fabric of the culture.¹⁰

One of the few researchers to investigate intra-racial Black lynch mobs, Karlos K. Hill's analysis of mobocracy in the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas provides significant insight into the relationship between lynching and status, deeming that these victims were often more vulnerable members of society. Hill's analysis of these lynchings reveals that the victims of African American mobocracy were more likely to be young Black men accused of criminality against vulnerable members of society. Hence, Hill associated the decrease in Black mobocracy in the last decade of the nineteenth century with the public condemnations of mob violence by African Americans seeking to end lynch lawlessness.¹¹

The examination of African American intra-racial mobocracy within the overarching dynamics of interracial interactions by Brent M.S. Campney reveals the influence of Caucasians on various acts of violence in the Black communities in the Midwestern state of Kansas. Campney determines that historical newspaper articles reveal that Caucasians and African Americans engaged in symbiosis in which Blacks maintained agency but acquiesced to Whites, frequently resulting in fewer lynchings.¹²

Black mobs, unlike their White counterparts, did not lynch with impunity. Deborah H. Barnes' study of African American lynch mobs examined the phenomenon from both a historical and literary perspective, determining that lynching was a method of social control in the Black community to create parameters of civility and punishment of miscreants. Moreover, the reporting of violent incidents perpetuated and reported in African American newspapers generally focused on the lowest classes, as turpitude was more likely to be assigned to those of lower strata.¹³

⁹ Dov Cohen, Richard E. Nisbett, Brian Bowdle, and Norbert Schwarz, "Insult, Aggression, and the Southern Culture of Honor: An 'Experimental Ethnography,'" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, no.5 (1996); 945–960. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.5.945>; Viviana Andreescu, John Shutt, and Gennaro Vito, Gennaro, "The Violent South: Culture of Honor, Social Disorganization, and Murder in Appalachia," *Criminal Justice Review*. 36 (2011); 76-103. 10.1177/0734016810382086; Timothy C. Hayes and Matthew R. Lee "The Southern Culture of Honor and Violent Attitudes," *Sociological Spectrum* 25 (2005); 593-617.

¹⁰ Matthew Lee, Shaun A Thomas, Graham C. Ousey, "Southern Culture and Homicide: Examining the Cracker Culture/Black Rednecks Thesis," *Deviant Behavior* (2010); 31.

¹¹ Karlos K. Hill, "Black Vigilantism: The Rise and Decline of African American Lynch Mobs Activity in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1883-1923," *Journal of African American History*, 95, no. 1 (2010); 26–43.

¹² Brent M.S. Campney, "Race Always Mattered: Black-on-Black Mob Violence and Interracial Relations in Kansas," *American Nineteenth Century History*, 16, no.1 (2015).

¹³ Deborah H. Barnes, "... the Furrow of his Brow": the Cultural Logic of Black Lynch Mobs, *Journal of African American Studies*, 20 (2016).

CASE STUDIES

Bill West, a surly and contentious man, had a reputation for menacing behavior, so when his colleagues learned that he had run afoul of the law in Birmingham, AL, a contingency informed their employer, resulting in West's dismissal. As he left the site, an angry West threatened his former colleagues and vowed revenge.

On a pleasant Sunday, April 10, 1892, in Vienna, GA, locals enjoyed a community picnic, but West's arrival quelled the merriment ceased when West arrived. Startling the attendees, he drew his Remington .44 caliber pistol and aimed at Ike Roberts, whom West blamed for his firing. Suddenly, he fired his pistol, and the bullet struck Roberts in the forehead, instantaneously killing him. The mob pursued a fleeing West amid the chaotic commotion, chasing him into a swamp. He took cover behind a pine to keep the mob at bay, but the mob overcame the assailant in the hail of bullets and left his remains in the swamp for Coroner Ammons to conduct an inquest.¹⁴

Another Central Georgia county became an epicenter of intra-racial violence when a mob attacked Anderson Moreland, the leader of a gang leader, in Monroe County. Moreland and his cronies were irritants, frequently engaging in petty criminal acts, issues compounded by disregarding law enforcement, as their victims were Black. Despite his perceived inviolability, Black men in Monroe County formed an impromptu alliance to end his reign of mayhem on June 7, 1892. That Tuesday evening, as sharecroppers on the Brooks and Newton plantation walked home after toiling in the fields all day, Moreland, who spied a youngster walking alone, snatched and dragged her into the underbrush. After sexually assaulting her, Moreland left the teen in the bushes, where another sharecropper found her and helped her home. News of the attack spread quickly throughout the area, enraging locals. A lynch mob of African American men quickly formed, swelling to 100; the mob diligently searched the woods and fields for Moreland, hiding in his relative's cabin to avoid capture. Even so, as the relentless dragnet discovered the attacker, his attempt to elude capture was futile.

Finding their quarry, the men viciously attacked Moreland. After forcing him to strip, the mob trounced the scoundrel, brutally pummeling and whipping him until he was dazed. Once revived, the torturous mob forced Moreland to sit in a tub of heavily salted, scalding water, exacerbating his pain as the searing, briny solution seeped into his wounds. The mob dispersed, leaving Moreland in the care of his relative, gravely injured and believing he would not survive the attack.¹⁵

Unfortunately, this incident was not the only molestation of an African American female in Monroe County by a Black man in 1892. In August, Lula Butler, the local teacher in Forsyth, GA, dismissed her students for the day and prepared to go home as well. As she closed the door, John Jossey, a former courter, startled the educator. Butler, who previously ended their romantic relationship, attempted to remain amicable in her interaction with Jossey. Regardless, her former suitor was dogmatically resolute in refusing to accept the estrangement; shocking the educator with a proposal and an aggressive demand, they immediately find a local minister and marry. Vehemently opposing the suggestion, Butler attempted to elude Jossey, dismissing his folly, angering him into a rage in which he grappled and violated the educator. Her screams attracted several people attending a meeting at an African American church one-half mile away, and a party of men, allegedly led by the

¹⁴ "Telegraphic Tales." *Olympia Tribune*, April 12, 1892; "Georgia Politics," *The Morning News*, April 14, 1892; "Untitled," *Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, April 13, 1892; "Killed His Man," *Piedmont Inquirer*, April 16, 1892; "Untitled," *Fisherman & Farmer*, April 22, 1892.

¹⁵ "Vengeance of the Mob," *The Atlanta Journal*, June 8, 1892; "Tortured to Death," *Daily Tobacco Leaf-Chronicle*, June 10, 1892; "Untitled," *The Cincinnati Post*, June 10, 1892; "Georgia and Florida," *The Morning News*, June 10, 1892; "Georgia Colored Men Resent the Crime of One of Their Own Race," *Fall River Daily Evening News*, June 11, 1892; "Negroes Enraged This Time," *The Providence News*, June 10, 1892; "Beaten Into Insensibility," *The Ohio Democrat*, June 18, 1892; "Negroes Lynched Him," *The Guardian-Journal*, June 29, 1892; Georgia Department of Health and Vital Statistics; Atlanta, Georgia.

pastor, ran to her aid armed with weapons. The mob combed the area, looking for Jossey, and after locating the assailant, they summarily trounced him, leaving his corpse in the woods.¹⁶

FINDINGS

A limitation of the study is that newspapers were the sole source utilized to glean data for the case studies. African American newspapers provide substantial data, but repositories of these papers are not as readily available. Conversely, articles from mainstream dailies reflect the bias of the era and have reported inaccuracies, yet local newspapers are generally very beneficial, often providing vital information about these violent assaults. Hence, examining various primary sources ameliorates the problem, as in the reporting of Anderson Moreland's death. Granted, the mob severely injured him, and many people believed he could not survive, but his attending relatives nursed him back to health, and Moreland recovered, dying at 83 years of age in 1932.¹⁷

W. Fitzhugh Brundage's study revealed that most of the mob violence in Georgia occurred in the state's Cotton Belt and Southern regions, with large African American populations.¹⁸ Census documents indicate that the Cotton Belt had substantial populations of Blacks in both Dooly and Monroe counties in the state's central region. In Monroe County, Blacks comprised 77.17% of the population of 16,219, and African Americans comprised 49.2% or 8,914 of Dooly County's population of 18,101.¹⁹

These case studies reveal the effects of enculturation on African Americans, for whom honor-based norms governed personal and communal conduct. In the decades after the era of enslavement, African American men perceived the right to protect as a requisite aspect of manhood. Consequently, similarly to their Caucasian counterparts, "fierce retaliation was therefore mandatory when a daughter, wife or mother had been dishonored."²⁰ Furthermore, this protection extended beyond familial to communal relationships, encompassing females who conducted themselves respectably.

The inefficiency in administrating laws for African Americans created synergy between violence and honor because "in systems such as this where self-protection is essential, a culture of honor will develop [and] where enforcement of the law is inadequate, it becomes important to defend one's reputation for severity to establish that one is not to be trifled with."²¹ So, the mobs sanctioned lynch lawlessness to punish malefactors, believing it to be in their purview to ensure safety. Furthermore, racist rhetoric of the era castigated Blacks, attributing lewd and debased characteristics to the race. Comparatively, "white men ... refused to concede that black men could possess honor... black southerners recognized honor among one another."²² Hence, Blacks embraced the tenets of the culture of honor as a personal and collective ethos, and their participation in mob violence represented their adoption of the tenets of cultural norms of honor.

¹⁶ "Untitled," *The Champaign Daily Gazette*, September 1, 1892, "Untitled." *The Morning News*, September 1, 1892, "Perforated a Brute with Bullets." *The Mitchell Capital*, September 9, 1892.

¹⁷ "Tortured to Death." *Daily Tobacco Leaf-Chronicle* (Clarksville, TN) June 10, 1892; "They Did Not Lynch, but Tortured Their Victim." *The Providence News* (Providence, RI) June 10, 1892; Georgia Department of Health and Vital Statistics; Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁸ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 108.

¹⁹ Steven Manson, Jonathan Schroeder, David Van Riper, Tracy Kugler, and Steven Ruggles. IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 17.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. 2022. <http://doi.org/10.18128/D050.V17.0>

²⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Honor and Violence in the Old South. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, 37.

²¹ Dov Cohen and Richard E. Nisbet, "Self-Protection and the Culture of Honor: Explaining Southern Violence. *Society for Personality and Social Psychology* 20, no. 5 (1994) 552.

²² Edward L. Ayers, *Honor: Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1483.

CONCLUSION

Intra-racial mobocracy is emerging as a new sphere in the domain of lynching. The attacks on West, Moreland, and Jossy in the Cotton Belt region of Georgia in 1892 reflect the premise that African Americans utilized intra-racial mobocracy to punish miscreants for acts of criminality, particularly for grievances against the more vulnerable members of society. Moreover, these violent attacks reveal that African Americans ascribed to the norms of the culture of honor despite mainstream society's refutation, deeming Blacks unworthy of its principles.

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