AMERICAN

REGIMES OF TERROR

Jim Crow
Mob Lynching
Origins of Police

Part I
Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, lynched on August 7, 1930 in Marion, Indian.

Left: Unidentified man and two women lynched
Introduction from Course Instructor

It was noted in a previous reading “The Racial Ignorance of White America”—which was handed out as an anonymous excerpt from MLK’s book Chaos or Community—that the commonly accepted history of the civil rights struggle is a sanitized, pre-packaged, strategically structured narrative of “progress,” a little civil rights movement fiction we are told and tell each other about the moral triumph of “love over hate” and the singular role played by peaceful protest, led by King, in creating racial equality under the law.

We say that this is also a strategically structured, state narrative because 1) it functions to legitimize only those protest tactics that are the most harmless, docile, and “respectable” and 2) because it nourishes the myth that today we live in a “post-racial” society: in other words, a society that has successfully overcome institutional racism.

One consequence of this state-sponsored myth of progress is that protesters and activists who say that white supremacy still organizes social life in the U.S. today are denounced as either playing the “race card” or failing to protest “respectfully” enough when they agitate in the streets, shut down events, and disrupt economic flows.\(^1\) Indeed, a common narrative we’ve all heard is: it’s in fact the BLM activists, the black rebels, and the other lefty protesters fighting in the streets who are forgetting the message of Dr.

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\(^1\) Drawing on a falsified civil rights narrative, many white Americans and media pundits contrast protest tactics employed by today’s black protesters with the “respectful and peaceful tactics” of Martin Luther King. Of course, the irony is never noticed that in his day, MLK was despised by the majority white Americans, much like BLM protesters are morally denounced today by the majority of white Americans!
King; they are actually the racist ones (against white people) who keep racism alive by talking about it so much; and they are “dividing the nation” because they preach hate against the United States. If they hate it here, maybe they should move to a new country. —Well, unsurprisingly, this is almost verbatim the sort of “counter-protest” rhetoric that was peddled by Southern Dixiecrats and Northern Republicans against civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s. History, it seems, is not so linear.

What the false narrative of the civil rights movement also erases from our collective memory is just how revolutionary, how radically anti-capitalist, the time period actually was. Erased as well is the fact that black militancy, armed self-defense in black neighborhoods, uncontrollable black rebellion, and, yes, even rioting in majority black cities played a major role in forcing the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to pass civil rights legislation. We haven’t touched on this last point very much, but we will in a future reading.

Yes, quite a bit of civil rights movement reality has been strategically blotted out of the memory of American, social consciousness. And so when it comes to that politically tumultuous period of the 1960s United States, our public education and popular media have misled us with a set of comfortable narratives about our shared past, a set of fallacious shadows of reality. What we must do, however, is confront the unsettling truth about the viciousness of
American racism and the degree of force and rebellion that was required to fight it. Because even more sanitized than the narrative of the civil rights struggle is the narrative we have been led to believe about the nature of the racist world that black rebels (and some white rebels) were struggling against: namely, the white supremacist, racial caste system\(^2\) which had organized social reality in the United States broadly and the Jim Crow South in particular.

Here, most of all, reality has been de-odorized and pre-packaged into a comfortable story that is commonly accepted as “history”—more shadows of the truth. For instance, take a moment to reflect on the images that come to mind when you think of the “Jim Crow South.”

Are they images of mutilated black bodies, or massacres of entire black communities? Are they images of public lynchings, and police torture? Those simply aren’t the realities we are told about in school. More likely, when we think of the “Jim Crow South,” we are conjure images of the “colored only” signs that were put up in public spaces. What has been covered over—erased for most Americans—is the fact that “Jim Crow” consisted of an 80-plus year stretch of systematic oppression, in which black existence in America was thoroughly dominated and controlled by regimes of sadistic violence and white terror.

Not at all was the racist horror of Jim Crow limited to the denial of voting rights for black Americans; it was not simply a matter of segregated bathrooms, water fountains,

\(^2\) Caste systems divide society into different social groups. In a racial caste system, a racial group would be locked into an inferior position by law and custom.
and swimming pools (oppressive systems of non-white humiliation in their own right). Jim Crow racism was much, much more. The logic of Jim Crow racism was \textit{genocide}. Black Americans were never meant to be a \textit{part} of the United States, never meant to be considered \textit{people} of the United States. They were never meant to \textit{survive} in the United States.

You and I were not taught this history in high school. So, naturally, there is still a common tendency among many Americans to believe that, while the Jim Crow social order was certainly unfair, calling it “white supremacist” goes too far. Handfuls of students in previous classes have often remarked in homework assignments something to the effect of “yes, the Jim Crow South was bad, but I don’t think it was nearly as bad as some people have made it out to be.”

We have to relearn our shared history, which inevitably shapes our present. Thus, it needs to be emphasized: Jim Crow wasn’t merely the practice of \textit{racial segregation}, as manifested in racially separate schools, restaurants, busses, trains, hotels, hospitals, and drinking fountains. And explaining the social order of Jim Crow by referencing \textit{only} that forms of oppression is exactly how the time period is (mis)taught in our very sanitized presentations of history. This common way of framing matters leads us to believe that the civil rights movement was simply about increasing opportunities for interracial mixing. Yes, Jim Crow was public segregation laws, but it was far \textit{more} than that: Jim Crow was a regime of on non-white \textit{humiliation} and white supremacy, where every public law, every social custom, and every daily practice reminded one of one’s assigned place in the racial hierarchy—whether you were on the top or on the
Jim Crow was a comprehensive regime of state sanctioned racism, what MLK himself described as a police state of white tyranny,\(^3\) maintained not only by law enforcement (police), but by the ever present fear and reality of sadistic, mob violence.

Photographs of lynching violence show us quite clearly that the Jim Crow social order was enforced not only by customs and laws (and law enforcement officials) but by the real threat of extra-institutional mob violence—sadistic rituals of torture that were designed to send a message to all black people: “This is what will become of you if you dare to transgress the racial hierarchy.

The Ethical Significance of Uncovering History

“Let’s not erase our history!” exclaim many American patriots who hate to see our “beautiful”\(^4\) confederate statues removed from state grounds in the South. To be charitable in our interpretation (perhaps too charitable), some of these folks are stumbling to formulate an ethical principle that might be expressed thus: because we can’t change the past, we must remember it; otherwise we are in danger of

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\(^3\) See the Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., Chapter 17: “The Birmingham Campaign.”

\(^4\) One of many “presidential tweets,” President Trump tweeted: “Sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments.” Unfortunately, the south has no monuments to slave revolts, no monuments to antebellum abolitionists, no statues of slaves breaking their chains, and no statues of the many soldiers who deserted the confederate army on moral grounds—all truly beautiful moments of history deserving not simply memorials, but also celebration and emulation.
repeating the moral evils of the past.⁵ Indeed, this is a fine principle. But thinking ethically about the beautiful world, the just world, and the good world that we want to create requires that we not only remember history, but that we uncover the histories of a past world that have been erased. Let’s remember the past, not simply to avoid repeating it, but because we may already be repeating it. The past is rarely past. And understanding the world’s past is necessary for understanding the social complexities of the present world.

Indeed, then, let’s not erase our past. Let’s refuse to let a selective public memory efface our shared history of violence. Let’s remember the reality of mob lynching; let’s remember the murderous terror that was routinely employed against black bodies to keep them in line; let’s remember that Hitler and the Nazis modeled their fascists, genocidal, white ethno-state on American race law; let’s remember the fact that White Supremacy here in the United States provided the blueprint for the racist social structure that emerged in Hitler’s Nazi Germany. The Nuremberg Laws—the centerpiece of the anti-Jewish legislation enacted by the Nazi regime—were crafted in an atmosphere of considerable attention to the precedents that American race law had to offer.⁶ Hitler himself, in Mein Kampf (1925),

⁵ Of course, removing confederate statues does not necessarily imply that history is being “forgotten.” “Put the statues in museums” is a usual proposal.
⁶ On June 5th 1934, about a year and a half after Hitler became Chancellor of the Reich, the leading lawyers of Nazi Germany gathered at a meeting to plan what would become the Nuremberg Laws. A stenographer took down a verbatim transcript. It reveals a startling fact: the meeting involved lengthy discussions of the laws of the United States of America. At its opening, the Minister of Justice presented a memorandum on US race law and, as the meeting progressed, the participants turned to the US examples repeatedly. They debated
described the U.S. as “the one state” that had made progress toward the creation of a healthy racist society.” We have an ethical responsibility—to ourselves and to one another—to confront our past because it is the *condition* of our present.

![Image](image.png)

Reuben Stacey hangs from a tree in Ft. Lauderdale. Behind him a 7 year old girl. 1935

whether they should bring Jim Crow segregation to the Their Reich. They engaged in detailed discussion of the statues from the 30 U.S. states that criminalized racially mixed marriages. They reviewed how the various US states determined who counted as a “Negro” or a “Mongol” and weighed whether they should adopt US techniques in their own approach to determining who counted as a Jew. Throughout the meeting the most ardent supporters of the U.S. model were the most radical Nazis in the room. The record of that meeting is only one piece of evidence in an unexamined history that is sure to make Americans cringe. Throughout the early 1930s, Nazi policy makers looked to US law for inspiration. After the Nazis seized power in 1933, they continued to cite and ponder US models regularly. See *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* by James Whitman.
73 Years of Lynching
1877–1950

In Phillips County Ark, 237 people were lynched in 1919 during the Elaine race riot.
Part 1 of this text pulls from the works of historians examining the history of racial terror lynching in the South. Widespread lynching in the United States occurred after the emancipation of slaves at the close of the Civil War. These public tortures and murders lasted through the 1960s. The most basic definition of lynching is: “extra-judicial” punishment by an informal group—a mob who acts without legal authority but with social or political sanction—to punish a transgressor or intimidate a group. Here, “extra-judicial” punishment means punishment for an alleged crime that is carried out without legal process or supervision from a court. As you’ll see below, lynching was a celebrated, public, and communal event. Lynching conveyed black powerlessness and the inviolability of white supremacy.

Part 2 of this text describes the evolution of modern day police departments from the slave patrols in the South. The explicit purpose of the patrols was three fold:

1. Control the existence of black slaves by enforcing the slave codes.
2. Hunt down fugitive slaves.
3. Prevent slave rebellions.

Over time, these slave patrols were re-organized into publically funded “city guards,” and eventually into what we know as the modern police department. Throughout the period of Jim Crow, the racist function of policing wasn’t as explicit as it was a generation before, but the police were nevertheless organized to perform this original and primary function: to control that portion of the population that was most likely to rebel against the existing status quo: black Americans and, collaterally, poor white Americans. Thus,
Part 2 of this text examines the close connection between the police and the KKK, from the early 1900s to the 1960s.

Racial Terror Lynching

From the mid 1950s to the late 1960s, black Americans had risen up in rebellion all over the country. It was an unprecedented movement of mass protest and agitation. The rebellion was met by an equally determined white resistance, which was insistent upon protecting a way of life that (whether or not white people realized it) was conferring unequal privilege and opportunity to white people. This resistance to black rebellion is the “white backlash” that Martin Luther King, Jr. diagnosed in our two previous readings: his “NCNP Keynote Address” and the “Racial Ignorance of White America”.

The white supremacist social order of Jim Crow was maintained through both institutional and extra-institutional violence, specifically through the genocidal regime of mob lynching and a regime of racist policing. The excerpts below are just a starting place to help us uncover the history of those regimes and their social function during Jim Crow. If we are to begin to understand the complexities of black rebellion against the criminal justice system in the present day, it is essential that we begin by understanding this history.

Hammer, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.

—Maya Angelou
Southern Reconstruction

While there were also lynchings in the Midwest and Western states—mostly of Asians, Mexicans, and Native Americans—it was in the South that lynching evolved into an official institution of racial terror against blacks. Lynching and generalized white mob violence was necessary for re-establishing white supremacy in the South following the Reconstruction era. Reconstruction refers to that twelve year period after the Civil War, from 1865–1877, when the Federal government aimed to transform the social, political, and economic organization of the former confederacy. A coalition of Radical Republicans had came to congressional power and removed former Confederate soldiers from office, and in early 1866 congress passed the Civil Rights Act, declaring that all persons born in the US were now citizens, without regard to race, color, or previous condition. Relying on the U.S. Army to occupy the South, congress also created the Freedman’s Bureau, which enacted policies that emphasized equality, civil rights, and voting rights for freed slaves.

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7 The 1866 Civil Rights Act superseded the Supreme Court ruling in 1857 (the Dred Scott Case) which held that blacks were not American citizens and therefore had no standing to sue in Federal court.

8 The Freedmen’s Bureau was established in 1865 by Congress to help former black slaves and poor whites in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. Some 4 million slaves gained their freedom as a result of the Union victory which had and destroyed the South’s plantation-based economy, leaving many communities in ruins. The Bureau provided food, housing, and medical aid, established schools and offered legal assistance. It also attempted to settle former slaves on Confederate lands confiscated or abandoned during the war. The Bureau was prevented from fully carrying out its programs due to a shortage of funds and personnel, along with sustained white pushback. In 1872, Congress, in part under pressure from white southerners, shut down the bureau.
Two, abolitionist Radical Republicans: Thaddeus Stephens (left) and John C. Frémont (right).

Southern political cartoon featuring a “carpetbagger.”
Also during reconstruction, thousands of Northerners—called “carpetbaggers” by hostile whites—came south as missionaries, teachers, businessmen and politicians to help transform society and state, helping former slaves adjust to freedom. During the time they were enslaved, most blacks were prohibited from being educated and attaining literacy. Yet after the war, hundreds of Northern white women moved south, many to teach the newly freed black children. Further, President Ulysses Grant, who was elected in 1868, enforced the protection of African Americans in the South, at times instituting martial law and signing the Ku Klux Klan Act, which aimed to halt the rise of white terror activities against freed blacks in the south.

Despite the efforts of the radical faction of the Republican Party, support for Reconstruction waned. The majority of Americans—both Northerners and Southerners—rejected civil and political rights for blacks. Although many people in the North supported abolishing slavery—in order to hasten the end of the war—many whites did not equate black freedom with racial equality. Reconstruction was poised to end; as a consequence, violent white supremacy was poised to replace it as the primary organizing force in the South.

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9 “Carpetbagger” was a Southern expression for Northerners that moved to the South during the Reconstruction era. Many white Southerners denounced them, fearing they would loot and plunder the defeated South and become politically allied with the Radical Republicans. The term was used by Southerners as a pejorative which came to be associated with opportunism and exploitation by outsiders.
“The Freedman’s bureau! An Agency to keep the negro in idleness at the expense of the white man. Twice vetoed by the president, and made law by congress. Support congress and you support the negro. Sustain the president and you support the white man.”

The Bureau helped support schools like this one at James’ Plantation, North Carolina to educate newly freed children.

Freedman's Village was located on what is now Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, VA.
Democrats who strongly opposed Reconstruction regained control of the House of Representatives in 1874, and in 1877, U.S. Army Troops were removed from the South, ending the Reconstruction era and allowing Democrats to return to power in former confederate states. While the South remained a poverty-stricken backwater, white Southerners succeeded in re-establishing legal and political dominance over blacks through violence, intimidation, and discrimination. Historian Eric Foner argues:

What remains certain is that Reconstruction failed, and that for blacks its failure was a disaster whose magnitude cannot be obscured by the genuine accomplishments that did endure.10

Once black men and women were given their “freedom,” after the passage of the 13th amendment, there were many who felt that the freed blacks were allowed too much freedom and needed to be brought under control. With the end of Reconstruction, and with the South once again dominated politically by conservative Democrats, the passage of Jim Crow laws, beginning in the 1890s, completed the revival of white supremacy. Complete social control was established over black existence. In addition to the enforcement of Jim Crow by the police, mob terror and racists lynching were essential to maintaining the racial hierarchy. All across the former Confederacy, blacks who were suspected of crimes against whites—or who committed “offenses” no greater than failing to step aside for a white man's car or protesting a lynching—were tortured, hanged, and burned to death by the thousands.

10 See Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877.
Formerly enslaved people were beaten and murdered for asserting they were free after the Civil War. Without federal troops, freed black men and women remained subject to violence and intimidation for any act or gesture that showed independence or freedom.

In 1872 during reconstruction, Democratic candidates in Colfax, Louisiana won an election widely recognized as fraudulent. In response, black protestors refused to legitimize the results, peacefully occupying the town courthouse. 140 whites surrounded the courthouse. And in the first week of April 1873, skirmishes with the black militias resulted in several deaths. On Easter Sunday, 300 whites attacked the courthouse. Black protestors surrendered, but the assault continued. Unarmed black men who hid in the courthouse or attempted to flee were shot and killed.

At least Fifty African Americans who survived the assault were taken captive and executed by the white militia. As many as 150 African Americans were massacred in what has described as the bloodiest single act of carnage in all of Reconstruction. The whites who exacted this violence faced no consequences because the United States Supreme Court dismissed all federal charges against them. The local narrative in Colfax continued to praise the cause of white racial violence. In 1921, the town erected a memorial to the three whites who died during the Massacre, memorializing them as “heroes who fell fighting for white supremacy.” In 1950, at the site of the old courthouse, the state erected the monument pictured above. Both markers still stand in Colfax, Louisiana.
There were two kinds of lynchings. At the “orderly” ones, local bankers and lawyers attended to keep the bloodlust in check. What that meant is merely that the victim was hanged without torture. At the wilder scenes, the crowd egged itself into a frenzy beyond imagining. Before Sam Hose was doused with oil and set afire, he had his ears and fingers cut off and the skin stripped from his face. Jesse Washington, a mentally disabled farm worker convicted of killing a white woman, was hung by a chain over a bonfire and repeatedly dipped into the flames.

At their worst, lynchings were episodes of sunlit, municipal sadism. Newspapers announced the time and place of the lynching in advance. Excursion trains were organized to move crowds to the scene. It was the Vicksburg Evening News that reported how Luther Holbert and his wife were burned to death by a crowd in Doddsville, Mississippi in 1904. The couple was tortured with corkscrews that pulled out hunks of their flesh. Their fingers were cut off, one by one, and distributed among the crowd as souvenirs. Mutilated flesh was racism's ultimate trophy.

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11 An excursion train is a chartered train run for a special event or purpose. For instance, a train chartered to shuttle fans to a major sporting event.
Large crowds of white people, often numbering in the thousands, and including elected officials and prominent citizens, gathered to witness pre-planned, heinous killings that featured prolonged torture, mutilation, dismemberment, and often a burning of the victim. White press justified and promoted these carnival-like events, with vendors selling food, and printers producing postcards that featured images of the lynching and the corpse. The victim’s body parts were often collected as souvenirs. In his noted *Times* article "Blood at The Root" Richard Lacayo writes:

Even the Nazis did not stoop to selling souvenirs of Auschwitz, but lynching scenes became a burgeoning sub-department of the postcard industry. By 1908, the trade had grown so large, and the practice of sending postcards featuring the victims of mob murders had become so repugnant, that the U.S. Postmaster General banned the cards from the mails.

The book *Without Sanctuary* by James P. Allen catalogues photographs and postcards taken as souvenirs at lynchings throughout the United States. The images collected in *Without Sanctuary* reflect what the historical record indicates: that the majority of victims of lynching were African American men, though it is also important to note that black women and men of other ethnicities (for instance, Irish and Italian immigrants) were also lynched.
Repeated references to “barbecues,” “coon cooking,” and “main fare” often are found in lynching-related correspondence. Postcards often featured an advertising stamp—like “Katy electric studios, temple, Texas”—revealing that, at times, these events were planned in advance, as professional were hired to photograph the event. Photographers would then produce and sell prints (in the hundreds and sometimes even the thousands) as souvenirs. In fact, one reason it was important to advertise lynchings in newspapers prior to the event was to give photographers time to arrive early and prepare their camera equipment. The pictures or postcards could sometimes cost as much as fifty cents each.
Attendees and participants in lynchings would often mail these photographs and postcards throughout the United States Postal Service to friends and family in the same spirit as one might share photographs on Facebook today—that is, as a general update or as a way to share the experience with those who could not attend. On one postcard, for instance, the sender wrote, “All ok and would like to get a post from you, Bill. This was some Raw Bunch.”

On occasion, such images were sent to other possible victims as warnings. Mailing these images meant that the results of lynchings were witnessed not only within the communities in which they occurred, but also were replicated, transmitted, and amplified for viewers who were sorting, transporting, and receiving these pieces of mail, effectively broadening the reach of these events.

“This is the barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left of the cross. Your son, Joe.”
As bad as the pictures of the victims are, those of the faces in the crowd are *worse*. They stare back at you with the expressions of carnal complicity. You hear their voices in the inscriptions that appear on the backs of some of the postcards—words more unnerving, in their sleepy innocence, than curses: “This is the Barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left of the cross. Your son, Joe.”

In the introductory essay to *Without Sanctuary*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Leon F. Litwack writes:

> The photographs stretch our credulity, even numb our minds and senses to the full extent of the horror, but they must be examined if we are to understand how normal men and women could live with, participate in, and defend such atrocities, even reinterpret them so they would not see themselves or be perceived as less than civilized. The men and women who tortured, dismembered, and murdered in this fashion understood perfectly well what they were doing and thought of themselves as perfectly normal human beings. Few had any ethical qualms about their actions. This was not the outburst of crazed men or uncontrolled barbarians but the triumph of a belief system that defined one people as less human than another.

> For the men and women who composed these mobs, as for those who remained silent and indifferent or who provided
scholarly or scientific explanations, this was the highest idealism in the service of their race. One has only to view the self-satisfied expressions on their faces as they posed beneath black people hanging from a rope or next to the charred remains of a Negro who had been burned to death. What is most disturbing about these scenes is the discovery that the perpetrators of the crimes were ordinary people, not so different from ourselves—merchants, farmers, laborers, machine operators, teachers, doctors, lawyers, policemen, students; they were family men and women, good church-going folk who came to believe that keeping black people in their place was nothing less than pest control, a way of combating an epidemic or virus that if not checked would be detrimental to the health and security of the community.

Thousands, and Thousands, and Thousands

Lynching and this era of terror shaped the geography, politics, economics, and social characteristics of being black in America during the 20th century. Many participants in the migration from the south should be thought of as refugees fleeing terror, not people who were simply seeking work. In multiple waves of resistance, tens of thousands of African Americans left the South annually—as refugees escaping a Southern regime of terror—especially from 1910 to 1940, seeking jobs and better lives in industrial cities of the North and Midwest. This movement has been referred to as the “Great Migration.” More than 1.5 million black people went—that is, escaped—north during this phase of the Migration, refusing to live under the rules of segregation and the permanent threat of violence that the Southern United States held over black bodies.
A new list of lynchings compiled by the Equal Justice Initiative (E.J.I.) demonstrates that racial terror lynching was much more prevalent than previously reported. E.J.I. researchers have documented 4,075 racial terror lynchings in twelve Southern states between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and 1950, which is several hundred more lynchings than the number identified in the most comprehensive work done on lynching to date. Factoring in states other than the south and extending the time frame to 1968, newspapers alone reported 4,743 cases of lynching in the United States.

E.M. Beck, a professor at the University of Georgia who helped write E.J.I.’s report, points out that with racial violence so extensive and carried out in so many different ways, compilers of lists may differ on the question of what constitutes a “lynching.” The new list, as opposed to some previous ones, includes one-time massacres of large numbers of African-Americans, such as what occurred in Arkansas in 1919 and in Louisiana in 1887. “If you’re trying to make a point that the amount of racial violence is underestimated, well then there’s no doubt about it,” Beck remarks, adding that “what people don’t realize here is just how many there were, and how close they were to where they now live. Places that people drive by every day were lynching sites.” Among Beck’s findings were that the number of lynchings did not rise or fall in proportion to the number of state-sanctioned executions, underscoring a crucial point: that these brutal deaths were not about administering justice, but terrorizing a community:

Many of these lynchings were not done to execute people for crimes but to execute people for violating the racial hierarchy, meaning offenses such as bumping up against a white woman or wearing an Army uniform.
Even when a major crime was alleged, the refusal to grant a black man a trial—despite the justice system’s near certain outcome—and the public extravagance of a lynching were clearly intended as a message to other African-Americans. While it’s possible that newspaper reports may not have documented every possible lynching, E.M. Beck doubts the frequency of omissions, simply because lynchings did not occur hidden away from the public. What actually happened was quite the opposite:

To be an effective mechanism for social control, lynchings had to be visible, with the killing being publicly known, especially to the target population.

Terror lynchings in the American South were not isolated hate crimes committed by rogue vigilantes. Lynching was targeted racial violence, that was at the core of a systematic campaign of terror perpetrated in furtherance of an unjust, white supremacist, American social order. Lynchings were rituals of collective violence that served as highly effective tools used to reinforce the institution and philosophy of white racial superiority. Lynch mobs intended to instill fear in all African Americans, to enforce submission and racial subordination, and to emphasize the limits of black freedom. These murders were carried out with impunity, sometimes in broad daylight, often “on the courthouse lawn.” These lynchings were not “frontier justice,” because they generally took place in communities where there was a functioning criminal justice system—a justice system that was deemed “too good” for black Americans. Racial terror lynchings were horrific acts of violence whose perpetrators were never held accountable.
Attempts to Criminalize Lynching

These violent, public acts of torture traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials. However, when attempts were made to pass anti-lynching laws in congress, they were routinely blocked by southern states. These laws would have allowed the Federal Government to prosecute lynchers if the state failed to. In fact, from 1882 to 1968, nearly 200 anti-lynching bills were introduced in Congress, and three passed the House. Seven U.S. presidents between 1890 and 1952 petitioned Congress to pass a federal law. In 1920, the Republican Party promised at its national convention to support passage of such a federal law. And in 1922, when a Federal anti-lynching bill was passed in the House of Representatives, a Senate filibuster by the Southern, white democrat block defeated it; it was again filibustered by a democratic block the following year.

Decades later, during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, attacks and murders of black activists were rampant throughout the South, along with bombings in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1964, three Mississippi civil rights workers were lynched—abducted, shot, and killed by KKK members including Neshoba County police officers. Around the country, there are only a few markers noting the sites of lynchings. In several of those places, like Newnan, Georgia, attempts to erect markers were met with local resistance. But in most places, no one has ever even tried to put up a memorial.
Hitler himself, in *Mein Kampf* described the U.S. as “the one state that had made progress toward the creation of a healthy racist society.”

Terror lynchings in the American South were not isolated hate crimes committed by rogue vigilantes. Lynching was targeted racial violence that was at the core of a systematic campaign of terror perpetrated in furtherance of an unjust, white supremacist, American social order. Lynchings were rituals of collective violence that served as highly effective tools to reinforce the institution and philosophy of white racial superiority.

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**Works Used and Recommended Reading**

This text is a combination of the following essays put together by course instructor:

2. “Blood at The Root” By Richard Lacayo;
4. “Going to Meet the Man” by James Baldwin;
5. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* by Equal Justice Initiative
7. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* by C. Vann Woodward;
8. *History of Lynching in the South Documents Nearly 4,000 Names* by Campbell Robertson;