

HANDOUT TWO: RACIAL TERROR LYNCHING

Excerpted from *Lynching in America: From “Popular Justice” to Racial Terror*

“Southern lynching took on an even more racialized character after the Civil War. The act and threat of lynching became “primarily a technique of enforcing racial exploitation—economic, political, and cultural.”⁸ Characterized by Southern mob violence intended to reestablish white supremacy and suppress black civil rights through political and social terror,⁹ the Reconstruction era was a violent period in which tens of thousands of people were killed in racially- and politically-motivated massacres, murders, and lynchings.¹⁰ White mobs regularly targeted African Americans with deadly violence but rarely aimed lethal attacks at white individuals accused of identical violations of law or custom.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Southern lynching had become a tool of racial control that terrorized and targeted African Americans. The ratio of black lynching victims to white lynching victims was 4 to 1 from 1882 to 1889; increased to more than 6 to 1 between 1890 and 1900; and soared to more than 17 to 1 after 1900. Professor Stewart Tolnay concluded from this data that “lynching in the South became increasingly and exclusively a matter of white mobs murdering African-Americans,”¹¹—a “routine and systematic effort to subjugate the African-American minority.”¹²

The character of the violence also changed as gruesome public spectacle lynchings became much more common. At these often festive community gatherings, large crowds of whites watched and participated in the black victims’ prolonged torture, mutilation, dismemberment, and burning at the stake.¹³ Such brutally violent methods of execution had almost never been applied to whites in America. Indeed, public spectacle lynchings drew from and perpetuated the belief that Africans were subhuman—a myth that had been used to justify centuries of enslavement, and now fueled and purportedly justified terrorism aimed at newly emancipated African American communities. . . .¹⁴

Southern states were equipped with readily-available, fully-functioning criminal justice systems eager to punish African American defendants with hefty fines, imprisonment, terms of forced labor for state profit, and legal execution.¹⁵ Lynching in this era and region was not used as a tool of crime control, but rather as a tool of racial control wielded almost exclusively by white mobs against African American victims. Many lynching victims were not accused of any criminal act, and lynch mobs regularly displayed complete disregard for the legal system. . . .

Through lynching, Southern white communities asserted their racial dominance over the region’s political and economic resources—a dominance first achieved through slavery would now be restored through blood and terror.

African Americans were lynched under varied pretenses. Today, lynching is most commonly remembered as a punishment exacted by white mobs upon black men accused of sexually assaulting white women. During the lynching era, whites’ hypervigilant enforcement of racial hierarchy and social separation, coupled with widespread stereotypes of black men as dangerous, violent, and uncontrollable sexual aggressors, fueled a pervasive fear of black men raping white women.¹⁶ Of the 4084 African American lynching victims EJI documented, nearly 25 percent were accused of sexual assault¹⁷ and nearly 30 percent were accused of murder.¹⁸ Hundreds more black people were lynched based on accusations of far less serious crimes like arson, robbery, non-sexual assault, and vagrancy,¹⁹ many of which were not punishable by death if convicted in a court of law. In addition, African Americans frequently were lynched for non-criminal violations of social customs or racial expectations, such as speaking to white people with less respect or formality than observers believed was due.²⁰ Finally, many African Americans were lynched not because they committed a crime or social infraction, and not even because they were accused of doing so, but simply because they were black and present when the preferred party could not be located.”

⁸ <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/drupal/sites/default/files/2019-08/lynching-in-america-3d-ed-080219.pdf>, p. 27

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29