

[Skip to Main Content](#)

[Help](#)

[View Gale Resources](#)

[Return to Library](#)

Select Interface Language:

GALE BUSINESS INSIGHTS: ESSENTIALS

[Print](#)

[Print Preview](#)

[Exit Print](#)

[Preview](#)

Memorializing African-American lynching victims is past due, but it must be only a start

[The Washington Post](#)

Byline: Beth Lew-Williams

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which just opened in Montgomery, Alabama, forces America to reckon with the lynching of more than 4,000 African-Americans. But this should only be the beginning of the historical reckoning.

Over the past two centuries, racial violence has also targeted Native Americans, Mexicans and Chinese. Recognizing other histories of racial violence will not detract from the memorial's urgent work. Rather it will help us to better understand what it is that we must mourn. The mass lynching of African-Americans was more than a tragic national mistake: It was central to how a nation built on racial violence and white supremacy functioned.

As the memorial exposes, African-Americans faced lynching on an unprecedented scale. In an effort to maintain white supremacy and subordinate black labor, vigilantes made the hanging of black men and women into spectacularly gruesome public events. By making an example of a few, the mob hoped to terrorize the masses into submission.

Vigilantes also targeted Native Americans, but with the primary goal of erasing them from their land. Historians have so far documented 137 Native American

victims of lynching between 1835 and 1964. This statistic, however, fails to capture the full violence against native peoples. The first governor of California, Peter H. Burnett, described the nature of this violence in no uncertain terms. "A war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races," he declared, "until the Indian race becomes extinct."

State agents often instigated the lynching of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as a tactic to police the border. Historian Monica Munoz Martinez has shown that vigilantes and Texas Rangers, under the guise of policing banditry between 1910 and 1920, murdered thousands of ethnic Mexicans without due process of law. While the killings often occurred in remote areas away from prying eyes, corpses were left behind for all to see. The dead served as a reminder of who controlled borderlands.

In my own work, I tell the history of violence against the Chinese in the U.S. West. A notable example of lynching is the case of Hong Di, a domestic servant accused of murdering his employer and slandering her good name. He was dragged out of jail and strung up by a mob in Colusa, California, in 1887. A photograph of his hanging, once marketed as a souvenir, shows the 16-year-old adolescent dangling from a railroad turntable, chained and shoeless. The image was a mere curiosity for collectors, but for the Chinese, it was a warning to mind the color line.

Lynchings of Chinese immigrants were relatively rare. More common were expulsions. Mobs used arson, assault and harassment to round up and drive out tens of thousands of Chinese in the 1880s. Under the banner "the Chinese must go," vigilantes demanded that the federal government forever bar these "inassimilable aliens."

While remembering the lynching of black men and women as a unique and horrific episode in American history, we must not pretend it was an aberration. Recognizing these other narratives of violence does not lessen the brutality of Jim Crow, nor does it mean that all people of color share a uniform history. What it does suggest is that the lynching of African-Americans is just one example of America's systematic use of racial violence to construct the nation.

The new memorial and museum in Alabama makes powerful connections between the past lynching of African-Americans and the present-day practice of

police brutality. And this is only a glimpse of how racial violence continues to haunt our landscape. Murders of ethnic Mexicans in the early 20th century sowed the seeds for our militarized southern border and the clamoring for a wall. Campaigns to exterminate Native Americans foretold confrontations over oil pipelines and land rights at Standing Rock. And expulsions of Chinese immigrants fostered the federal policies that permit mass deportation today.

Acknowledging our many histories of racial violence is the first step in dismantling the biased systems of policing and border control they helped to erect.

Lew-Williams is assistant professor of history at Princeton University and author of "The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America."

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2018 The Washington Post.

Source Citation:

Lew-Williams, Beth. "Memorializing African-American lynching victims is past due, but it must be only a start." *Washington Post* 13 May 2018. *Business Insights: Essentials*. Web. 4 Dec. 2019.

URL

http://bi.gale.com.libproxy2.usc.edu/essentials/article/GALE%7CA538426737?u=usocal_main

Document Number:

GALE|A538426737

