

# Lynching and the Limits of History: An Essay on Epistemic Uncertainty

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More particulars  
Must justify my knowledge.  
—William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*

And thus a story, which is universally exploded in the place where it was first started, shall pass for certain at a thousand miles distance.  
—David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

IN DECEMBER 1889, several national newspapers published accounts of a quadruple lynching that occurred in rural central Arkansas. One of these reports, under the headline “Four Highwaymen Lynched,” ran in the December 18 issue of the *Indianapolis Journal*:

It is reported that four robbers have been lynched in Maumelle township by a vigilance committee. Saturday evening Henry Wright, a well-to-do farmer, went to Fletcher’s store at Big Maumelle, and, while en route home, four masked men stopped his team, drew their pistols and demanded his money or his life. He assured them that he was unarmed and had no money. They refused to believe him, and he made a desperate fight with his fists, but was knocked out of the rear of the wagon, falling to the ground insensible. Sunday morning Wright was found by neighbors who had gone in search for him, and he, although fatally injured, rallied sufficiently to describe his assailants. A vigilance

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committee was at once organized, and the murderers were caught and lynched.<sup>1</sup>

Although brief, this account has enough detail to warrant a belief that it must be based upon accurate sources. We have the name of the victim of these highwaymen, Henry Wright, as well as his status, that of a well-to-do-farmer, and the date he was attacked, for Saturday would have been December 14. We have the details of his attack—namely, what he was doing when assaulted, how many people carried out this assault, and how Wright managed to sustain his injuries. Moreover, the fact that he was able to communicate to neighbors suggests that the above information was conveyed to authorities and the press by eyewitnesses. Only with the last line does the account suddenly become vague, for it says nothing about the composition of this vigilance committee, how they went about locating the four highwaymen based upon Wright's description, whether there was any struggle to apprehend the men, whether the suspects claimed innocence or acknowledged their guilt, where and when the men were caught, and where, when, and by what means the men were lynched. Perhaps even odder still, the race of the apparent lynching victims goes unsaid, giving the impression that the four highwaymen were likely white, as most newspapers of the era would have happily expanded upon the violence and depravity of African Americans if they had had the opportunity.

Despite the vagaries of this nationally circulated report, it does, nonetheless, appear to recount a lynching that actually took place, with the details at the beginning of the article lending some verisimilitude to the entire narrative. After all, a "vigilance committee" might have had reason to keep the details of its operation secret, especially if they murdered a quartet of white men. Thus have these four unnamed men appeared on many inventories of lynching victims.<sup>2</sup>

However, more local reports seem to contradict much of what circulated nationally. For example, an earlier article, from the December 16, 1889 *Arkansas Democrat*, reads, in its entirety, "It was reported here this afternoon that an attempt had been made by three negroes to rob a reputable citizen in Maumelle township Saturday night, and that the men

<sup>1</sup>"Four Highwaymen Lynched," *Indianapolis Journal*, December 18, 1889, p. 3; see, also, "Four Robbers Lynched," *Evening World* (New York, NY), December 17, 1889, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Buckelew, "Racial Violence in Arkansas: Lynchings and Mob Rule, 1860-1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, 1999), 232. As of this writing, the website *American Lynching* ([americanlynchingdata.com](http://americanlynchingdata.com)), which combines information from the Library of Congress's Chronicling America newspaper project, data from the Tuskegee Institute, and the open-source Project HAL, also lists these four men.

had been captured and hanged by the citizens.”<sup>33</sup> The following day, the *Democrat*, in its “Local Brevities” column, contradicted its earlier report: “It turns out that the four Maumelle robbers were not caught and hanged as reported. The county would have suffered no great loss had the report been true. As it is, however, they are at large.”<sup>34</sup> A blurb in “Local Brevities” two days later followed up on this information: “None of the men who assaulted Henry Wright in Maumelle township a few days ago, with the intention of robbing him, have been caught.”<sup>35</sup>

These discrepancies are very interesting. The initial report in the *Democrat* identified the band of robbers as “three negroes,” rather than four presumably white highwaymen. However, this racial identification is not repeated in subsequent reports, while the number of robbers increases to four, bringing it into line with the nationally circulating stories. The name of Henry Wright is not present until the last report on December 19, and nothing in any of these accounts even hints that he was fatally injured. Indeed, he seems only to have first suffered an attempt to rob him—only with that last article is the word “assaulted” employed.

So . . . did a lynching occur, and, if so, were the victims white or African American? The national stories give a wealth of detail about Wright and his actions on the day that he was assaulted while being vague regarding the lynching apparently done to avenge his death. The *Arkansas Democrat*, however, while confirming some of these details in its series of reports—the name of Wright, his location in Maumelle Township, and the attempt made to rob him—also takes pains to update its readers about the story, including issuing a correction regarding the claim that a lynching had occurred. The local newspaper would seem to have a greater claim to the facts, yet there is something troubling about the brevity with which it treats this subject. One might, after all, imagine that a newspaper reporting on three or four violent highwaymen at loose in the county would provide to its readers at least a general description of the men in question, especially if Henry Wright were still alive to convey such information. And what was local law enforcement doing to apprehend these men? We simply do not know, for the newspaper record of this event ends here, and, lacking any information on the identities of the three or four originally reported lynching victims, we cannot determine whether they met their deaths at the hands of a mob or not.

The *Democrat*’s contradiction of national reports ought to trouble those historians and sociologists who have long worked to quantify

<sup>33</sup>“Attempted Robbery,” *Arkansas Democrat* (Little Rock), December 16, 1889, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup>“Local Brevities,” *ibid.*, December 17, 1889, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup>“Local Brevities,” *ibid.*, December 19, 1889, p. 4.

lynching events in the United States for purposes of saying something intelligible about the phenomenon in general, at the national, state, and local levels. The potential survival of these four men may not dramatically change the national reckoning, but, if we zoom in closer, we find that it dramatically changes our accounting of lynchings within Pulaski County, Arkansas—and thus dramatically alters the interpretation we might offer regarding how lynching functioned at the local level. Indeed, one hapless historian managed to compose a study of lynching in Pulaski County that took for granted the historicity of the murder of Henry Wright and the deaths of those four apparently white men who perpetrated the deed, and the interpretation he offered—namely, that “the higher rate of lynching in Pulaski County,” when compared to the home counties of other state capitals in the South, “may well speak to its comparatively late arrival on the scene of capitalist transformation”—depended significantly upon the larger cumulative number of victims on offer.<sup>6</sup>

But it is not only those within academic circles who must now worry about being led astray by such contradictions as these. Since the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) released its first report on lynching in America in 2015—and three years later opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which commemorates African American victims of lynching in the United States—there has followed a greater local interest in memorializing the individual victims of racialized violence. In Arkansas, the year 2021 witnessed the first markers being installed to commemorate lynching victims, starting with the May 15, 2021, installation of one dedicated to the 1856 lynching of two slaves, and the execution of a third, in Washington County.<sup>7</sup> This was followed by the June 13, 2021, unveiling of a marker for the 1927 lynching of John Carter in Little Rock.<sup>8</sup> More such markers are in the works, and not even the Arkansas General Assembly’s general distaste for so-called “divisive concepts” threatens to slow down the process of some kind of reckoning with the state’s history of atrocity.

Given the fraught nature of the events in question, one must be especially careful to get the history correct, it would seem, lest a faulty reading of one event be employed to call the whole project in question. Imagine if an organization were to memorialize the lynching of a particular individ-

<sup>6</sup>Guy Lancaster, “Before John Carter: Lynching and Mob Violence in Pulaski County, 1882–1906,” in *Bullets and Fire: Lynching and Authority in Arkansas, 1840–1950*, ed. Guy Lancaster (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2018), 191.

<sup>7</sup>Laura Jo Hightower, “Moment to Remember: Project Memorializes Three Enslaved Men,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (Little Rock), May 14, 2021, accessed July 29, 2021, [www.arkansasonline.com/news/2021/may/14/moment-to-remember-project-memorializes-three/](http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2021/may/14/moment-to-remember-project-memorializes-three/).

<sup>8</sup>Ashton Eley, “Victim of 1927 Lynching Remembered in Little Rock,” *ibid.*, June 14, 2021, accessed July 29, 2021, [www.arkansasonline.com/news/2021/jun/14/victim-of-1927-lynching-remembered/](http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2021/jun/14/victim-of-1927-lynching-remembered/).

ual, only for later research to prove that the person in question was never killed by a mob. EJI's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, has done exactly that. Present at the memorial are some 800 copper monuments engraved with the names of lynching victims in a particular county, and one of those, dedicated to Mississippi County, Arkansas, features the name of Riley Covington and the date "06.24.1877." Covington, an African American man, was certainly reported in some national newspapers as being the victim of a particular brutal lynching. A suspect in the 1876 murder of two other African American men, Covington disappeared from Mississippi County only to resurface in Cairo, Illinois, where he was, in June 1877, arrested and returned to Arkansas. The June 30, 1877, edition of the *Cairo Bulletin* ostensibly records what happened next to that town's former resident:

The story goes that while Covington was walking from the steamer on which he and the marshal took passage from Cairo, to the jail, a mob of white and black citizens surrounded them, and demanded that the marshal should deliver the prisoner to them. The marshal refused, and the crowd set upon him. He was overpowered and the negro seized and taken to the woods at the outskirts of the city, where he was put to the most terrible death. A team of mules was enlisted for the occasion, one of which was hitched to the neck of Covington, with a rope, and the other to his feet, and started in opposite directions. He was literally pulled to pieces.<sup>9</sup>

The story has sufficient grisly detail to be credible, for why would someone invent such a story? And other national newspapers found it credible enough to reprint the account. But invented the story was, for the following week, the *Cairo Bulletin* published a letter from J. O. Blackwood, identified as an attorney for Riley Covington, who insisted "that there is not one word of truth in the whole story. Covington is alive and in good health. I saw him about two hours ago and he is in fine spirits, etc."<sup>10</sup> And, indeed, Covington appears on the 1880 census as a resident of the Arkansas State Penitentiary, so there is additional proof, beyond this letter, that he was not lynched.<sup>11</sup>

The *Osceola Times* published an editorial in which it was acknowledged that some locals believed the story of the lynching to have been "manufactured for political effect," namely to "serve the republican par-

<sup>9</sup>"Local Brevities," *Cairo Bulletin*, June 30, 1877, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>"Covington Liveth," *ibid.*, July 4, 1877, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Manuscript census returns, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, population schedules, Pulaski County, AR. Covington is listed as a prisoner residing in Big Rock Township.

ty.”<sup>12</sup> So what might today’s opponents of racial equality say about a memorial that inflates the death toll of lynching, even inadvertently? What might they say given that this same organization works to draw parallels between past regimes of racial terror and the present carceral state? These mistakes have consequences.

However, such mistakes are also perfectly understandable. Indeed, they often stem from a reliance upon those lists assembled by our predecessors, organizations like the Tuskegee Institute and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They produced catalogues of lynchings at a time when those events were still taking place, but even these organizations misidentified certain deaths, occasionally conflating death at the hands of a mob with death at the hands of a court. For example, Jim Davis, dubbed in newspaper accounts “Crazy Jim,” was reported in several national publications as lynched on December 9, 1896, a “fact” duplicated in the 1919 NAACP publication *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918*.<sup>13</sup> However, Davis was not lynched but was, instead, captured, put on trial (for the reported crime of murdering his employer’s son), and executed in Pine Bluff on February 25, 1897.<sup>14</sup> A stranger case is the September 5, 1913, execution of Lee Simms in Little Rock. Despite the wide publicity given this first person to die in Arkansas’s electric chair, Simms still somehow ended up being listed as a victim of lynching in the February 1914 issue of *The Crisis*, a listing that has been repeated down the years in other sources, such as Ralph Ginzburg’s 1962 book, *100 Years of Lynchings*.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, sometimes the difference between a lynching and an execution is merely the sum of the formalities attached to the procedure of producing someone’s death.<sup>16</sup> For example, in 1881, Charles Jones, an

<sup>12</sup>[Untitled], *Osceola Times*, July 7, 1877, p. 2. See, also, Nancy Snell Griffith, “Riley Covington (Reported Lynching of),” *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed June 23, 2022, encyclopediaofarkansas.net.

<sup>13</sup>“Crazy Jim Lynched,” *Indianapolis Journal*, December 9, 1896, p. 5; “Reported as Lynched,” *Bryan (TX) Daily Eagle*, December 10, 1896, p. 1; *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889–1918* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919), 49. There is some further confusion in *Thirty Years of Lynching*, for “Crazy Jim” is listed as being lynched on December 9, 1896, in “Milton, Garland Co.” for the crime of murder, while the entry below lists an “Unknown Negro” being lynched on December 7 near Pine Bluff, where Davis met his fate.

<sup>14</sup>“Guilty,” *Pine Bluff Semi-Weekly Graphic*, January 9, 1897, p. 1; “The Law Avenged,” *ibid.*, February 27, 1897, p. 1; Nancy Snell Griffith, “Jim Davis (Trial and Execution of),” *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed July 29, 2021, encyclopediaofarkansas.net.

<sup>15</sup>“Colored Men and Women Lynched without Trial,” *The Crisis* 7 (February 1914), p. 200; Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (1962; repr., Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1988), 256; Nancy Snell Griffith, “Lee Simms (Trial and Execution of),” *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed July 29, 2021, encyclopediaofarkansas.net.

<sup>16</sup>As the historian George C. Wright notes regarding trials often dubbed “legal lynchings”: “Some of these cases took less than an hour from start to finish, with the jury not even leaving the courtroom

African American man, was arrested in Fort Smith on charges of having attempted to rape a woman in Spadra. When he was returned to Spadra, “a band of one hundred armed men awaited his arrival,” according to the *Arkansas Gazette*, which added, “Just as the train was leaving a man called to the conductor to wait about twenty minutes and he would see a very dramatic piece of work.” The newspaper went on to report:

Jones was arraigned before an examining court. There was no trouble in selecting a jury. No one pleaded that he belonged to a fire company, and was therefore relieved of jury duty. The trial was very short. The sentence of death was pronounced by the judge and vociferously echoed by the crowd. Jones was taken to a tree and hanged. He begged, but did not, as is usual in such cases, protest his innocence. A loud cheer burst from the crowd when the body of the wretch dangled at the end of the rope.<sup>17</sup>

What happened here had all the formalities of a trial while also exhibiting an atmosphere typical of lynchings, especially if it, in fact, occurred within the allotted twenty minutes. Therefore, it is certainly understandable that this event should appear on many inventories of racialized violence.<sup>18</sup> But it also raises certain questions. What, if anything, differentiates a lynching from an unfair trial and death sentence? How much time has to pass between the purported inciting event and subsequent trial and execution? What conditions for fairness must exist to separate fully a lynching and execution?

Even aside from occasions where a person’s death is listed as a lynching rather than an execution, there are cases aplenty where we run into the typological conundrum of attempting to determine whether or not to reckon a particular event as a lynching. Indeed, the challenge of defining

to deliberate on the fate of the defendant. It is not difficult to imagine what would have happened to the members of the jury if they had returned a verdict of not guilty or had called for leniency. The matter of such ‘legal lynchings’ is often one of definition and is extremely difficult to prove because such activities were carried out ‘by the book’ and had the sanction of law behind them.” George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865–1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 12–13.

<sup>17</sup>“Swift Justice,” *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), November 1, 1881, p. 1; Nancy Snell Griffith, “Charles Jones (Execution of),” *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed July 29, 2021, encyclopediaofarkansas.net.

<sup>18</sup>For example, see Buckelew, “Racial Violence in Arkansas,” 228. As of this writing, the *Alabama Memory* website, a project of the University of Alabama, lists Charles Jones among that state’s inventory of lynching victims; see [alabamamemory.as.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/lynching-data.pdf](http://alabamamemory.as.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/lynching-data.pdf) (accessed March 30, 2023). Confusion among the exact states in which certain people were lynched is another facet of the difficulties of accurately tabulating such occurrences, and one that this article will not address.

a lynching has been part and parcel of the broader effort to study and combat lynching. The present author, for one, has argued in a recent book that lynching constituted:

- a scapegoating form of lethal violence;
- performed by one group of human beings against another group of human beings (or an individual representing said group) assigned lower moral status;
- for purposes regarded as virtuous by its perpetrators, such as punishment and regulation;
- with the effect of maintaining the very structural inequalities that delineate group boundaries and their respective moral statuses.<sup>19</sup>

With the release of their 2015 report, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, the Equal Justice Initiative described lynching as “violent and public acts of torture that traumatized Black people throughout the country,” adding that these acts were “largely tolerated by state and federal officials.”<sup>20</sup> One definition employed by many scholars of the subject was developed in 1940 at a conference attended by the NAACP, the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, and the International Labor Defense. This definition entailed four specific characteristics: “(1) there must be evidence that a person was killed, (2) the person must have met his death illegally, (3) three or more persons must have participated in the killing, [and] (4) the group must have acted under the pretext of service to justice or tradition.”<sup>21</sup> Further back in time, the economist James Cutler, in his 1905 book, *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States*, defined the phenomenon as “an illegal and summary execution at the hands of a mob, or a number of persons, who have in some degree the public opinion of the community behind them.”<sup>22</sup>

However, there has been significant scholarly pushback to the idea that lynching can be so easily codified. For Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, a term like *lynching* is fundamentally problematic for three reasons. First, it is “more evocative than descriptive,” connoting “quite different historical

<sup>19</sup>Guy Lancaster, *American Atrocity: The Types of Violence in Lynching* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2021), 9–10.

<sup>20</sup>*Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd ed. (Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 3, accessed June 22, 2022, [eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/](http://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america/).

<sup>21</sup>Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2.

<sup>22</sup>James Elbert Cutler, *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1905), 276.



acts among the population,” depending upon time and place. Second, “this same term has been used to designate acts that demonstrate a wide range of diverse motives, strategies, technologies, and meanings,” ranging from “acts of rough justice in frontier societies lacking the apparatus of state judiciaries” to “acts of direct defiance of those state judiciaries in more established societies.” Finally, *lynching* “is a politically encumbered term” that can entail ideas of popular sovereignty (the classic “Wild West” lynching) or southern honor (being the more racialized lynching).<sup>23</sup> Likewise, for the historian Christopher Waldrep, “There is no single behavior that can be called ‘lynching.’ Any attempt to impose a definition on such a diverse, subtle, and complex reality will inevitably miss the point.”<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, there are many events that challenge some, if not all, of the definitions given here, in part due to the unclear nature of the killing, and in part due to the contradictory or limited information regarding the event in question. For example, on March 18, 1898, the *Kansas City Journal* reported, under the headline “Arkansas Negro Boy Lynched,” the following:

A negro boy whose name cannot be learned was lynched at Marcella, in Stone County, Tuesday night. He was accused of stealing \$20 from the cash drawer of a store. The mob strung him up three times in an effort to make him confess and finally left him on the ground in a dying condition.<sup>25</sup>

The *Arkansas Gazette*, in this instance, contains a much more detailed narrative that, on a few small points, contradicts the nationally circulating report, despite both being datelined “Batesville, March 17.” The *Gazette*, for one, has this action occurring on Saturday, March 12, rather than Tuesday, March 15. It does not specify the amount of money taken, only reporting: “Some days ago the cash drawer in the store of a merchant named Casey was robbed of a small amount of money.” The “negro boy” at the center of this drama remains unnamed, save that he was “employed by Mr. Hess.”

The *Kansas City Journal* describes the affair as a lynching, a word connoting (at this time) a definite lethality, even though its narrative does not have the unnamed boy dead at the end but only “in a dying condition.” However, the *Gazette*, while going into greater detail about the tortures inflicted upon this unnamed boy, would seem to deny it the title of lynching.

<sup>23</sup>Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 6–7.

<sup>24</sup>Waldrep, *Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 182.

<sup>25</sup>“Arkansas Negro Boy Lynched,” *Kansas City Journal*, March 18, 1898, p. 6.

According to the newspaper, on Saturday night, “a band of about twenty-five regulators took the boy into the woods and tried to force him to tell where the money was.” Upon his denial of the theft, “the mob put a halter around his neck and swung him up to a limb.” Before being completely strangled, the mob let him down, but the boy “refused to acknowledge his guilt and the mob swung him up again.” After this second round, he still refused to confess, and so he was subjected to a third around of torture. And, here, the *Gazette* begins to relish in the details:

With the boy’s body dangling in the air, covered with blood which flowed in streams from wounds in his neck caused by the terrible jerking of the rope, the mob pointed their guns at the half dead negro and the leader shouted to him that he would be given just three second to confess and that if a sign were not forthcoming when he counted three every gun in the crowd would be discharged into his body.

After the count of two, the boy “made the sign indicating that he was ready to confess” and was thus let down, upon which he confessed “in an incoherent manner.” The report ends thusly: “The mob, satisfied of the negro’s guilt, decided that he had been punished enough, and dispersed leaving their victim to take care of himself. He will probably recover.”<sup>26</sup>

There were, of course, no follow-up reports on the fate of this boy—whether he lived or died. Both national and state newspapers followed the same general narrative: an apparent theft of money, followed by a torture session that left its victim grievously wounded. But they differed in the ultimate prognosis of the victim, with newspapers like the *Kansas City Journal* describing his condition as “dying” and the affair as a lynching, while the *Arkansas Gazette* uses the headline “Negro Strung Up” as a literal interpretation of what happened but ultimately insisted that the victim was likely to recover from his wounds. If this particular situation is less ambiguous, compared to the 1889 affair in Maumelle township, about the fact that some kind of mob violence had occurred, there nonetheless remains the question of whether an unambiguous murder (and thus a lynching, as most scholars would categorize it) actually happened.<sup>27</sup>

While questions remain about the ultimate fate of this particular person, there are no doubts about the fact that an actual mob perpetrated

<sup>26</sup>“Negro Strung Up,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 18, 1898, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup>This event has also ended up on various inventories of lynching. See Buckelew, “Racial Violence in Arkansas,” 240. As of this writing, the Equal Justice Initiative’s online, interactive lynching map for Arkansas also includes this one Stone County lynching; [lynchinginamerica.eji.org/explore/arkansas](https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/explore/arkansas) (accessed March 30, 2023).

the deed, whether or not it was lethal. What about those cases where we know that someone was, in fact, killed, but the reported facts leave us to speculate about the nature of the perpetrators—and thus the nature of the crime? On March 11, 1894, a group of African Americans were returning to Little Rock from a trip to Marche when “they found the decayed body of a mulatto woman probably about 30 years of age suspended from the limb of a tree.” She appeared to have been dead for several days, and around her neck was a placard bearing the words: “If anybody cuts this body down they will share the same fate.” The lack of information about this crime led the *Gazette* to conclude: “The woman is supposed to have been lynched, but when, by whom, and for what reason no one is able to state.”<sup>28</sup> On August 31, 1897, the body of an African American man was found entangled in a trot line in the Arkansas River near the Jefferson County community of Rob Roy. The brief account notes only that the man had several gashes on his head and that there was a rope around his neck—factors that once again led the newspaper to speculate that the unidentified victim had been lynched.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the definition of “lynching” one favors, the fact that lynchings are perpetrated by groups tends to remain central.<sup>30</sup> But here we have two specific cases that some contemporaries were willing to label as probable lynchings—without any firm determination as to whether or not these murders were perpetrated by the requisite plurality of persons.

What conclusions should we draw from this meditation upon the uncertainty underlying many accounts of lynching, especially given that these uncertain accounts could have a cumulative effect and fundamentally shape how activists and scholars interpret the phenomenon of vigilante violence? We know how white southerners at the time made use of this uncertainty—they sought to cast doubt upon the whole project of tallying lynchings. For example, on January 27, 1898, the *Arkansas Democrat*, charging that “a gross wrong had been done to the state,” published an article titled, “The Chicago Tribune’s Statement,” which “undertook to secure the facts from well-known parties” for purposes of “discrediting the Tribune’s figures” for lynching in Arkansas the previous year. The *Tribune* counted eleven in the state, but, of these eleven, the *Democrat* casts particular aspersions on seven, alleging that either no such lynching took place or that the person in question was killed “while resisting arrest” or “by an enemy.” While the *Democrat* is clearly looking to defend the rep-

<sup>28</sup>“A Ghastly Find,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 12, 1894, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup>“Found Dead,” *ibid.*, September 2, 1897, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>F for the centrality of group identity to the nature of lynching, see Lancaster, *American Atrocity*, 13–42.

utation of Arkansas—the article describes one of these reported lynchings as occurring only “in the same way such a thing would have happened in Chicago”—the author has a point when he states, “It is no evidence that a lynching has occurred to show that a body has been found and that a death resulted from foul means.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, one of the cases challenged by the *Democrat* is that very discovery of a body on a trot line near Rob Roy. Another is the murder of James Murray, a constable very likely killed by Grant McBroom, a man whom he had just arrested and was transporting to a local jail; this incident was nonetheless reported in several national sources as a lynching.<sup>32</sup> So while the editorialist is obviously attempting to free the state of Arkansas from the aspersions cast upon it by national outlets, he, nonetheless, is also making a legitimate claim about the epistemic uncertainty underlying any attempt to create a register of lynching events from source material of varying quality in an environment where one’s predisposition to certain political perspectives most certainly shaped how events (and maybe even which events) were broadcast to the broader public.

If the preceding analysis seems exclusively to argue that the inventories of lynchings compiled by historians and activists are too high, well, we also cannot dismiss the possibility the numbers are too low. First, just as not all events reported widely in newspapers were actually lynchings, so were not all lynchings necessarily reported in newspapers. The historian Joshua C. Youngblood published an account of the apparent lynching of one Hugh Johnson in Pulaski County in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, an event that went unreported in the media of the era and is known only from court documents.<sup>33</sup> But these court documents are official records, and so they carry the weight of authority. Some non-governmental sources also testify to similar occurrences of violence. One event that shows up on many registers of lynchings in the United States is the reported mass murder of twenty-four African American men, women, and children outside of Pine Bluff in March 1866. This event, however, is attested to by only a single letter, dated May 28, 1866, from William L. Mallet to Thaddeus Stevens. There are no other sources confirming the historicity of this massacre, despite the hard work of various historians to turn up something, anything, on the matter, but the letter does purport to

<sup>31</sup>“The Chicago Tribune’s Statement,” *Arkansas Democrat*, January 27, 1898, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup>“Killed His Captor,” *Arkansas Gazette*, December 9, 1897, p. 1; Nancy Snell Griffith, “James Murray (Murder of),” *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed July 29, 2021, encyclopediaofarkansas.net.

<sup>33</sup>Joshua C. Youngblood, “‘Broke of sucking eggs’: The Murder of Hugh Johnson, Race, and Law in Post-Civil War Pulaski County, Arkansas,” *Pulaski County Historical Review* 69 (Spring 2021): 2–15.

relay a personal experience.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it is easier to accord this letter the weight of authority when we understand that the violence detailed in it is consistent with other acts of documented violence occurring in the immediate postwar period.<sup>35</sup> There may be sources aplenty out there that speak to the possibility of lynchings that have not yet been included in any inventory, but these documents have yet to come to light.

However, there is also likely plenty of potential evidence simply not accessible to historians. We like to pretend that historians deal with reality, but this is untrue. Historians deal with facts, and facts, as philosophers Kevin Mulligan and Fabrice Correia write, “are the objects of certain mental states and acts, they make truth-bearers true and correspond to truths, they are part of the furniture of the world.”<sup>36</sup> Facts, while grounded in evidence, only exist as the “objects of certain mental states and acts.” If someone is killed in a remote corner of Arkansas, that death is a physical reality. But if this murder does not come to light through any newspaper article, court records, letters, or oral histories provided by those immediately concerned or their descendants, and if the body is never uncovered to provide what forensic evidence it might silently offer, then this killing does not constitute a fact as we understand it—that is, it cannot be the object of certain mental states and acts—and so cannot fall within the purview of the historian. Of course, historians use sources in the attempt to arrive at as accurate a representation of reality as possible, but sometimes, these sources fail to provide significant justification for one belief or another, as exemplified by some of those accounts already explicated herein. And sometimes those sources simply do not exist and, moreover, are not marked by any record of their nonexistence, so that historians are simply left not knowing what it is that they do not know.

There does exist the possibility that killings we might potentially define as lynchings have failed to manifest themselves in the source materials available to historians. This may be because the killings were concealed and subsequently, across the generations, forgotten. However, this could also be due to two types of epistemic injustice, as explicated by philosopher Miranda Fricker. The first, *testimonial injustice*, “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a

<sup>34</sup>See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 119. A 2015 interview with historian Richard Bucklew on KUAF radio (Fayetteville) goes into greater detail about the limited evidence underlying this particular event and can be found online at [www.kuaf.com/post/unearting-truth](http://www.kuaf.com/post/unearting-truth), accessed July 29, 2021.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, Randy Finley, *From Slavery to Uncertain Freedom: The Freedman's Bureau in Arkansas, 1865–1869* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 144.

<sup>36</sup>Kevin Mulligan and Fabrice Correia, “Facts,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed July 29, 2021, [plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/facts/](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/facts/).

speaker's word."<sup>37</sup> Testimonial injustice, in this context, could mean that the report of a lynching given by an African American testifier is dismissed out of hand or reinterpreted as some other phenomenon—a simple revenge killing, an accident, a private matter—due to the race of the person providing the testimony. Such injustice may also act pre-emptively: “The credibility of such a person on a given subject matter is already sufficiently in prejudicial deficit that their potential testimony is never solicited; so the speaker is silenced by the identity prejudice that undermines her credibility in advance.”<sup>38</sup> Such victims of testimonial injustice, writes Fricker, “are wrongfully excluded from participation in the practice that defines the core of the very concept of knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> They are, as far as we are concerned here, denied the ability to be sources of historical information. After all, the dominant white social world would undermine any attempts to foster a contrary understanding—or even to preserve and disseminate the basic facts—of racialized violence. Consequently, some knowledge of such violence has likely existed through time only within closed epistemic loops. As the philosopher Charles W. Mills has written, “If black testimony could be aprioristically rejected because it was likely to be false, it could also be aprioristically rejected because it was likely to be true. Testimony about white atrocities—lynchings, police killings, race riots—would often have to be passed down through segregated informational channels, black to black, too explosive to be allowed exposure to white cognition.”<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, *hermeneutical injustice* “occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences.”<sup>41</sup> That is, people subject to hermeneutical injustice can be excluded from knowledge about themselves and their own social situation, for our shared social understandings typically reflect “the perspectives of different social groups” so that “the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible.”<sup>42</sup> This means

<sup>37</sup>Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>40</sup>Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 32.

<sup>41</sup>Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

that, for the person in question, there exist “blanks where there should be a name for an experience which it is in the interests of the subject to be able to render communicatively intelligible.”<sup>43</sup> These lacunae thus “create a sense of dissonance between an experience and the various constructions that are ganging up to overpower its nascent proper meaning.”<sup>44</sup> An African American who has been denied the epistemic tools necessary to make proper sense of the larger social environment could well end up accepting the dominant white perspective of inherent black criminality, against his or her own lived experience. We can potentially see this dynamic at work through such acts as the August 18, 1899, resolution passed by the Central District Baptist Association, a black Baptist group, “condemning and discountenancing the crime of rape.” Specifically, the association linked its opposition to rape with its advocacy against lynching: “Resolved, That we compliment and thank the public press for its most effective work against the crime of lynching and that in turn we feel called upon to rally and work just as effectively to reduce and annihilate the rape record in this country.”<sup>45</sup> Granted, this could have been a cynical attempt to appeal to a white public that automatically connected the crime of rape with African Americans, but it could also have represented a more internalized example of the same within at least a subset of the black community, representing the genuine belief that the elimination of lynching depended not upon the elimination of the broader Jim Crow system of oppression, but, instead, the elimination of the ostensible tendency of African American males to commit acts of sexual assault.

It is the nature of oppression to create an environment in which the totality of its record cannot be ascertained. While the *Arkansas Democrat* sought to discount seven of the eleven murders the *Chicago Tribune* had listed as lynchings, there could well have been perpetrated any number of vigilante murders that never showed up on any published list in the first place, murders the commission of which may have been known only to a handful, with the memory of them eventually being lost to time. Or as the historian George C. Wright has written:

it is important to remember that while many lynchings were held in public and carried out in a dramatic fashion, some might have been conducted in secret. This was probably more true during the 1930s and 1940s, but no one can say for certain when this furtiveness actually started. Because of this possibility and, often, the

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 166.

<sup>45</sup>“Denounce Rape,” *Arkansas Gazette*, August 20, 1899, p. 3.

absence of newspaper accounts and investigations by coroners, the exact number of lynchings is unknown.<sup>46</sup>

Wright even raises the possibility that our knowledge of past lynchings is racialized in an unexpected manner: "Because Afro-Americans were frequently lynched in a dramatic fashion to warn others, it is possible that much more is known about their deaths than about those of the whites who died at the hands of lynch mobs."<sup>47</sup>

The complex reality of lynching is not reflected in the registers of lynchings assembled by the likes of the Equal Justice Initiative or its predecessors, wherein discrete numbers applied to specific counties, and to specific states, give the sense that instances of lethal racialized violence might be duly enumerated given enough historical research. These numbers belie the vagaries attendant upon determining whether a particular event constituted a "lynching" or not. They also belie the fact that their creation depends not upon the reality of murders but upon sources. They are thus simultaneously somewhat too high (given the dubious nature of many recorded deaths) and far too low (given the likelihood that many lynchings went unrecorded) to capture the reality of people's lived experience in the past.

Scholars who research racialized violence sometimes act as if they could somehow more capably quantify the terror experienced by the African American population at large (or, depending upon the area under study, the Latino population, the Asian population, etc.) by means of determining a more exact number of the lynchings that occurred in the United States. But just as many Americans learned to fear foreign terrorists by watching the collapse of the Twin Towers live on television and through the subsequent days and weeks of news reporting, as well as the spread of rumor and innuendo about possible future terrorist attacks, so, too, did the full psychological impact of lynching exist and persist beyond the individual casualty. The Stone County event mentioned above, for example, may not have been lethal, and so may not rank as a lynching as scholars typically reckon it, but it still stands as an act of terrorism and could well have had the same psychological and cultural impact as an actual murder. As historian Brent M. S. Campney has argued, we need to go beyond the enumerated body count and explore "lynchings in the making," those threatened and prevented lynchings that "generated a level of fear among blacks commensurate with that experienced during completed lynchings because

<sup>46</sup>Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky*, 68.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.



the final outcomes could never be predicted.”<sup>48</sup> And we need better studies of how stories of lynching circulated through the various communities who knew themselves targeted for mob violence, how news or even rumor and unconfirmed or contested reports (like the Rob Roy event mentioned above) might shape these communities and their collective sense of self. Even if stories like the reported lynching of Riley Covington were invented, the fact that it circulated, the fact that it was so plausible, the fact that it paralleled things that did certainly happen, meant that it still had an effect. After all, laying aside the dubious nature of the events mentioned above, there exist copious confirmed incidents of lynching, however one might want to define it, so as to have lent, for the people alive at the time, a certain credence even to uncertain accounts, and false reports, believable as they were, would have been difficult to disprove.

This experience of fear and terror is simply not quantifiable, and understanding it—and, consequently, beginning to approach something of an ontology of lynching—may well lie beyond the bounds of history as a discipline. Or as the philosopher Adi Ophir has written:

The ontological meaning of the catastrophe has to take into account the very best of the scientific research of it—the place, the event, the processes that led to it, the conditions that enabled it, the memory, the sanctification of the name—while keeping in mind that innovations are always to be expected in the area of historical knowledge, opening up space for, inviting, or necessitating new ontological thinking. It is impossible, though, to ground this thinking in historical narratives. It must begin from the place where the historical narrative ends, or from the place where it transcends itself, and turns into an analysis of the kind or kinds of human existence that appeared within, and out of, the catastrophe, those for whose appearance the catastrophe was a necessary condition.<sup>49</sup>

However, we can begin to approach something akin to this “new ontological thinking” if we make room in our historical framework for both those events that exist upon the margins of lynching as we might define it *and* the false reports of mob violence that circulated across the nation. As philosopher John Heil has written, “Vagueness can be tolerated provided

<sup>48</sup>Brent M. S. Campney, *This Is Not Dixie: Racist Violence in Kansas, 1861–1927* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 203.

<sup>49</sup>Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals*, trans. Relä Mazali and Havi Carel (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 527 (section 9.022).

there are enough clear cases to serve as benchmarks.”<sup>50</sup> And there are enough clear cases of lynching in Arkansas—verifiable, documented, irrefutable—that we can tolerate a little vagueness. Moreover, to appreciate fully the reality of a culture in which lynching took place—and not just the act of lynching itself—we need to cultivate an appreciation for the potential impact of even vague and marginal reports. Uncertainty, after all, could sometimes provoke even a greater sense of horror than those clear facts that have typically been the purview of historians.

<sup>50</sup>John Heil, *What Is Metaphysics?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 142.

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