

Research examines the black-and-white issues surrounding executions in the South

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An examination of post-emancipation executions in the South is revealing how race played a significant and under-examined role in executions. Annulla Linders, a University of Cincinnati associate professor of sociology, will present the research on Aug. 21, at the 106th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Las Vegas.

Linders combed through newspaper archives in the [Library of Congress](#) to examine the meanings and understandings about race and justice that were produced in newspaper accounts of legal, public executions of African-American convicts – reports produced by white reporters for white readers.

Previous research has suggested that capital punishment in the South was used against African-Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century to ensure and reinforce white domination, says Linders. However, she writes that, "Partially concealed under the weight of oppression is evidence that the execution also served as a critical site of resistance."

She explains that the executions of black convicts also became black cultural events that evolved into sites of black resistance to oppression. "Thus it is evident, despite many accounts to the contrary, that the white authorities recognized the danger of using capital punishment as a form of racial domination, even as they held on to the belief that the (public) execution of black criminals was an important tool in the control and submission of blacks," writes Linders.

Linders explains that while "white justice" was put on public display, there could be hundreds of African Americans congregating at the site, taking off work and traveling long distances. "It's quite clear that these events posed a potential source of conflict. Thousands of black people are coming to town to see one black person publicly executed.

"So, there are two fundamental ways in which the reporters addressed that conflict," says Linders. "One was to try to reassure readers that the black community also felt the event was a 'just' execution. Also, the portrayal of hostility served different purposes, primarily to justify the oppression. So it was a difficult balancing act for the news writers in downplaying the oppression and legitimizing it at the same time."

Linders adds that the reports of the religious fervor of the audience was another signal that these executions had become sites for black resistance, adding that segregated churches were the sites where the Civil Rights Movement was eventually born. "Taken together, the subversion of executions by black audience members fits into the much larger mobilization of black resistance throughout the late 19th and early 20th century," concludes Linders.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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