

Anti-Black Racial Violence and Popular Culture in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

Anthony Stamillo, Loyola University Chicago

With #saytheirnames, the 2020 Black Lives Matters movement implores the national public to etch the names of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor into their consciousness. The fight for racial justice is a fight for attention in American popular culture. Activists push for recognition of the right to black life, celebrities attempt to shine their spotlights on justice initiatives, and public figures debate solutions to systemic racism. The immediacy of today's racial violence discourse parallels that of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

The nineteenth century ended with an explosion of anti-black racial violence in the United States. The number of lynchings of African Americans peaked during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era while civil rights declined to their 'nadir.' Ida B. Wells-Barnett's reporting on lynchings helped make visible the violence that many African Americans had seen with their own eyes. Like today's camera-phone footage, the booming new technologies of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era helped disseminate information about racial violence across the nation. New media of the period spread information more rapidly and to wider audiences making it harder to ignore anti-black racial violence.

The following articles from the *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* reflect the history of the racial violence in the period. They are divided into sections relating to a theme in popular culture and race:

The two articles in the "Devaluing Black Life" section each describe tragic events of black bodies reduced to monetary worth. Comparing these events in each of the two articles shows the disregard for black lives changed very little between the time of slavery and the Gilded Age. Allyson Hobbs's article, "Violence in the Gilded Ages, Then and Now," also serves as an introduction comparing racial violence of the period to today.

The articles in the "Black Celebrity and Violence" section pertain to two celebrities, Booker T. Washington and James Benjamin "Big Jim" Parker. The life, work, and mythology of these two men deeply impacted the national discourse on African American acceptance into the political arena during the peak of anti-black racial violence. The "Nostalgia for Slavery" section contains an article about the Fisk University Jubilee Singers and the reception of their national tours by white audiences. The Fisk Jubilee Singers performed African American spirituals to a generation of white Americans whose image of slavery was enmeshed with minstrel depictions. They struck a delicate balance between authenticity of music grounded in the violent conditions of slavery and the levity of Christian anti-slavery resistance.

The articles in the final section, "The Rebirth of the KKK," describe the events surrounding the premier of the D.W. Griffith film, *The Birth of a Nation*. In the early twentieth century, film transformed popular culture making it possible to bring a uniform message to millions of viewers at once. Filmmakers took advantage of the potential to influence larger segments of the American population. Regarded as the first major motion

picture, *The Birth of a Nation* rewrote the history of the American South and inspired the rebirth of the Klu Klux Klan—the film’s *deus ex machina*. Furthermore, *The Birth of a Nation* invented radical new promotion and propaganda strategies that helped make the white supremacist film a national hit. The articles in the section “The Rebirth of the KKK” investigate the reception of the film by audiences, protesters, and presidents. The studies of the protests against *The Birth of a Nation*’s premiere reveal both the nationally coordinated resistance efforts of early civil rights groups and the violent response of urban police departments. One hundred years after the premier of *Birth* and less than a decade after the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement, these articles are as relevant as ever.

Each section also includes media that relate to the articles. These paintings, photos, musical recordings, films, drawings, and speeches are artifacts that archive the national conversation about the racial violence of the period. This media transformed working people into celebrities and helped spark the rebirth of America’s most well-known domestic terrorist organization. Read in tandem, the academic articles below and the accompanying media provide a glimpse of the way popular culture and anti-black racial violence were intertwined.

Devaluing Black Life

Hobbs, Allyson. “Violence in the Gilded Ages, Then and Now.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19.2 (Apr. 2020): 264–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781419000690>.

Media: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, (1840).

Childress, Micah. “Life beyond the Big Top: African American and Female Circusfolk, 1860–1920.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15.2 (Apr. 2016): 176–96. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000250>.

Black Celebrity and Violence

Dagbovie, Pero Gaglo. “Reflections on Conventional Portrayals of the African American Experience during the Progressive Era or ‘the Nadir’ 1.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13.1 (Jan. 2014): 4–27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781413000467>.

Media: Library of Congress. “Address of Booker T. Washington, Principal of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama: Delivered at the Opening of the Cotton States and International Exposition, at Atlanta, Ga., September 18, 1895; with a Letter of Congratulation from the President of the United States.” Image. Accessed August 11, 2020. <https://lccn.loc.gov/90898322>.

Kachun, Mitch. “‘Big Jim’ Parker and the Assassination of William McKinley: Patriotism, Nativism, Anarchism, and the Struggle for African American Citizenship.” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9.1 (Jan. 2010): 93–116. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781400003790>.

Media: Library of Congress. “Assassination of President McKinley.” Image. Accessed August 11, 2020. <https://lccn.loc.gov/96521677>.

Nostalgia for Slavery

Milner, Gabriel. "The Tenor of Belonging: The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Popular Cultures of Postbellum Citizenship." *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15.4 (Oct. 2016): 399–417. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000560>.

Media: "Fisk University Jubilee Singers," *Discography of American Historical Recordings*. Accessed August 12, 2020. <https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/names/102154>.

The Rebirth of the KKK

"Public Commemoration: The Birth of a Nation." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14.4 (Oct. 2015): 596–620. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000390>.

Benbow, Mark E. "Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and 'Like Writing History with Lightning.'" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9, no. 4 (October 2010): 509–33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781400004242>.

Media: D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, Kanopy.com. Accessed August 11, 2020. <https://www.kanopy.com/product/birth-nation-0>.

About the author: Anthony Stamilio is a PhD student in U.S. and public history at Loyola University Chicago. His work focuses on the influence of theater on politics and identity in the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century.