Violent Microclimates of Racial Meaning: Measuring Historical Trivialization of Black Life and its Enduring Environmental Impacts

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Recent social science research finds that areas distinguished by patterns of historical racial violence (e.g., lynching) remain distinguished in terms of contemporary conflict and inequality, with legacies including elevated homicide rates, greater white supremacist mobilization, and diminished hate crime law enforcement. In essence, environments appear to remain impacted by the racial violence of a seemingly distant past, which reverberates in the attitudes and behaviors of successive generations. These are areas where, historically, black life has been trivialized by lethal and often sadistic violence, typically without protection or remedy through law, compounding the implication that black life does not matter. If measurable, such “hot spots” of racial violence may help to distinguish contemporary environments of extreme racial socialization and contention, or distinct microclimates of racial meaning in a generally racialized social system, with substantive implications for advocacy and public policy.

Drawing on several years of work building a Racial Violence Archive and related research, education, and advocacy effort, this paper reflects on these prospects as well as important challenges and limitations of measuring historical racial violence in specific locales. I conclude with reflection on public policy implications of empirical research to date, revisiting Richard Delgado’s (1985) examination of the case for a “Rotten Social Background” defense - a non-exculpatory defense limiting criminal responsibility due to severe environmental deprivation - and the debate surrounding it. Following Delgado and others (see Clark 1959), I consider how community and legal advocates might employ empirical evidence of sustained racial violence to demand greater police accountability and contest racialized criminalization and incarceration otherwise in such violent microclimates of racial meaning.

References
