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Who Lynches on the Frontier?

Select Jesuit References and the Wild West Paradigm

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Abstract

Contemporary historians of Western lynching point out that the influential frontier justice interpretation has many weaknesses, especially its inattention to the role of race and ethnicity. Selected Jesuit incidental references both reflect the influence of this paradigm and support its contemporary critique by identifying frontier lynching as an Anglo-American practice.

Keywords: Jesuits, lynching, vigilantism, Las Vegas College, frontier

Introduction

On December 9, 1881, Fr. Francis Hillman, SJ, set out from Omaha on a mission trip to Sydney, Nebraska. A report on Jesuit missionary activities in the state, including Hillman's visit to Sydney, later described the town as "the last place of any note" along the tracks of Nebraska's Union Pacific Railway. After outlining the various accomplishments of Hillman's mission, the report's anonymous Jesuit author added: "The people of Sydney think they are making rapid progress in civilization and good manners; for during the preceding year only one man was lynched and only four murders were committed, quite an improvement on former records" (*CDRSI* 14:479; *WL* 1882, 175–76).

The mindsets that the Jesuit writer ascribes to the people of Sydney reflect an influential narrative about American lynching. This trope associated the practice of lynching with the Western frontier, interpreting vigilantism as a regrettable, yet temporary, substitute for

conventional mechanisms of law and order that had yet to be established.¹ Given the prevalence of that explanation, it is not surprising to find traces of its influence in Jesuit accounts of their experiences in the nineteenth-century American West. And yet, if some Jesuit references to lynching reflect the Wild West trope, others support interpretations of Western frontier lynching that emphasize hierarchies of race, class, and ethnicity rather than institutional weakness. Jesuit incidental statements about lynching on the Western frontier, therefore, both confirm the influence of the institutional immaturity trope and anticipate recent interpretations of lynching as a practice that white/Anglo settlers brought with them and exercised by choice rather than necessity.

To understand these Jesuit references, one must set them in historical context, first by considering the trope of frontier lynching, and then, the presence of Jesuits on the Western frontier. This background will illuminate one twentieth-century Jesuit reference that illustrates the influence of the frontier justice paradigm. It will also facilitate analysis of three nineteenth-century Jesuit references to lynching from the Alaska and New Mexico Territories. By associating lynching with whites or “Americans” (i.e., Anglos), these references anticipate contemporary historians’ emphasis upon the role of race and ethnicity in Western frontier vigilantism.

The Western Lynching Trope

In the mid-nineteenth century, the portrayal of lynching as an emergency mechanism of frontier justice attempted to defuse an American public relations problem. Against conservative British claims that US vigilantism revealed the slippery slope leading from democracy to anarchy, apologists responded that vigilantism was necessary where legal remedies were weak (Silkey 2015, 16–17, 23–24; Pfeifer 2011, 64). This excuse treated lynching as a temporary expedient that would disappear as maturing communities developed conventional systems for responding to crime. In addition, depictions of frontier culture often interpreted accounts of lynching as part of “the authentic American experience” – a stereotype portrayed, for example, in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show during its European tour in 1892 (Silkey 2015, 27; Gonzales-Day 2006, 113–14). As a result, reports Sarah Silkey (2015, 28), frontier lynching became an “integral part of transatlantic popular culture.” Ken Gonzalez-Day (2006, 38) emphasizes the influence of this paradigm on everything “from the five-penny novels of the nineteenth century to the great American Westerns of the silver screen in the twentieth.” Such narratives often romanticized lynching as an emergency response to lawlessness.

Despite its influence, the institutional immaturity explanation of Western lynching fails to explain critical features of the historical record, as many recent studies attest. While acknowledging some deficiencies in frontier law and order, Carrigan and Webb (2013) cite the chronological record of Western lynchings of so-called Mexicans to demonstrate this model’s weaknesses.² If lynchings were primarily the product of institutional immaturity, one would

¹ In the discussion that follows, “Western frontier” will refer to current US states west of Missouri (excluding Hawaii) that were still or became US territories after the end of the American Civil War.

² Carrigan and Webb (2013, 57) point out that Anglo-Americans often conflated Mexican nationals with Mexican Americans and other Latin Americans.

expect numbers to crest early, and to decline as communities developed conventional mechanisms of criminal justice. Instead, documented Western lynchings of Mexicans increased in three distinct periods: the 1850s, 1870s, and 1910s. Institutional immaturity cannot explain these saw-toothed statistical trends (Carrigan and Webb 2013, 20–33). Similarly, Ken Gonzales-Day argues that one must not exaggerate the chronological discrepancy between the American West and other parts of the country in creating institutions to control crime. San Francisco and Los Angeles, he points out, began to establish police forces at roughly the same time as New Orleans, Cincinnati, Boston, and Chicago (2006, 76). In addition, while the numerous accounts of lynch mobs extracting or attempting to extract prisoners from jail might indicate distrust of or impatience with the normal administration of justice, they also illustrate that such facilities existed when the crowd acted.³ In such cases, the issue was clearly not the dearth of conventional systems for responding to crime, but the unwillingness to wait for or to respect their results.

The institutional weakness narrative regarding frontier lynching also presumes that lynching communities would have preferred to rely upon conventional mechanisms of criminal justice. However, Michael Pfeifer (2011) argues that alternative views regarding the appropriate response to crime in the American context were competing during the nineteenth century. One approach defended respect for the rights of the accused and for rule of law as foundations of public order, while rejecting public executions as a dangerous to civic virtue (Pfeifer 2011, 4–5, 12–13, 21). The other prioritized local consensus about guilt and defended a community’s right to protect itself with swift and violent punishments (Pfeiffer 2011, 13–15). Lynching, Pfeifer (2011, 21–22, 54, 69–70, 78) believes, emerged from the second approach, and was sometimes chosen as a conscious repudiation of the due process paradigm. In Pfeifer’s (2011, 31, 71) view, settlers who had already embraced the legitimacy of vigilantism brought lynching with them to the Midwestern and Western frontiers. If he is correct, then Western lynching was less a response to frontier conditions than a manifestation of pre-existing attitudes.

However, the most significant flaw in the institutional weakness interpretation is its failure to consider the significance of race, ethnicity, and nationality in determining persons’ relative risk of being lynched in the West, although the role of race in Southern lynching has long been recognized (Carrigan and Webb 2013, xiv, 1–16; Gonzales-Day 2006, 34–35). In fact, before the American Civil War, Pfeifer (2011, 32) argues, “practices of racial lynching became a means for white southerners, midwesterners, and westerners to assert that their regions would constitute a ‘white man’s country’ regardless of the protections due process law might theoretically extend to black, Indian, and Hispanic defendants.” For Gonzales-Day (2006, 10), the image of Western lynching as the fate of “cattle rustlers and stagecoach robbers” obscures the frequent association of vigilantism with racial violence on the frontier. Carrigan and Webb (2013, 5) provide an inventory of 547 Mexicans lynched in the West between 1848 and 1928, while acknowledging that this represents “a fraction of the actual number.” In the West, in fact, lynching was only one form of collective violence against subordinated groups, who were

³ See, for example, *Topeka Daily Capital* 1882; Otero 2018, 232; Segale 2019, 51–54; *LVDG* 1882b.

also subject to massacre and expulsion (Pfeifer 2011, 47–53; Carrigan and Webb 2013, 28, 35–38, 44; Lew-Williams 2018, 1–3).

Background on the Jesuits and Lynching

In an 1874 report for his Neapolitan province, Salvatore Personè, SJ, described the character of the Society of Jesus's new mission field in the Colorado Territory, as it had been when he and his companion first arrived in Conejos in 1871. Four months before the Jesuits took up their new assignment, three men had been found one morning hanging from the limbs of a tree. Personè's letter provides no further details about this lynching; nor does he specify its location. (Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish encompassed more than two dozen mission stations scattered across the San Luis Valley). Instead, Personè mentions this event to illustrate the positive effects of the Jesuits' ministry upon an area previously demoralized by vigilantism. Since Spanish and English-speaking settlers had begun to establish permanent communities in the Valley less than two decades before, Personè's report provides a good example of a Jesuit incidental reference to lynching on the US Western frontier (Stoller and Steele 1982, 177–84, 4, xx-xxiv).

That Jesuits encountered Western frontier lynching is unsurprising because the scope of their activities in the West grew dramatically during the nineteenth century. In the 1840s, Jesuits came as missionaries to the Rocky Mountains, where some dreamed of recreating the Paraguayan Reductions (McKevitt 2007, 93–94). However, ministry among the indigenous people of the continental United States and, later, of Alaska was by no means the Jesuits' only commitment in the American West. The shortage of clergy, especially – but not only – for the Hispanic Catholic populations in territories added to the United States following the Mexican American War, made Jesuits a valuable pastoral as well as educational resource for the frontier Catholic Church, and many Jesuits were fluent in languages other than English (Vollmar 1976, 85–87; Owens 1950, 22–23). One of Hillman's confreres in the Nebraska Jubilee Missions, for example, was a priest from the Austrian Province prepared to preach to the young state's German and Bohemian immigrants (*WL* 1882, 86–87).

The need for Jesuits in the American West coincided with the Society's challenge to resettle members exiled from various parts of Europe. The lifting of the Society's suppression in 1814 did not eliminate the suspicions that it faced on the continent, especially in a century of political unrest. The revolutions of 1848, for example, drove half of the world's Jesuit from their native provinces, at least temporarily (McKevitt 2007, 14–35; McGreevy 2016, 8–25). Many nineteenth-century Jesuits had their own stories of facing mob violence (McKevitt 2007, 14–16, 25–26, 28–29, 33–35; Kertzer 2018, 56, 65, 70–71). Even in the United States, a Know-Nothing crowd in Ellsworth, Maine, tarred and feathered a Swiss Jesuit émigré, John Bapst, who would later become the first president of Boston College (McGreevy 2016, 26–62). Thus, vigilantism could be a matter of personal as well as pastoral and academic concern for Jesuits serving in the United States.

Jesuits addressed lynching in textbooks for their students and in US periodicals such as *Revista Católica* and, in the twentieth century, *America* (Fleming 2020, 46–47).⁴ The Society’s flagship Italian journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, published an important exchange on US lynching in the early 1890s (Fleming 2020). The discussion to follow, however, will concentrate on four English-language references to lynching, all but one taken from the *Woodstock Letters*, an internal Jesuit publication printed at the Maryland theologate from 1872 until 1969. All, like the Colorado example from 1874, are incidental references – in other words, the author mentions lynching to make another point instead of analyzing the practice itself. All concern events on the Western frontier during the 1880s. The first, published in 1947, reflects the extended influence of the frontier justice or institutional immaturity paradigm for interpreting lynching. By contrast, the second, third, and fourth, all published in the nineteenth century, anticipate contemporary lynching studies’ attention to race and ethnicity through references to the identity of the perpetrators. Lynching, suggest these narratives from Alaska and New Mexico, was a practice associated with dominant Anglo-American culture (*WL* 1947; Barnum 1893; Hughes 1880; Deane 1884).

The Influence of the Frontier Lynching Paradigm

The 1947 volume *The Woodstock Letters* includes a striking illustration of the Western lynching trope in an obituary for the long-lived Jesuit John Brown, who during his more than sixty years in the Society had served as president of the College of the Sacred Heart and as Superior of the New Mexico-Colorado Mission (*WL* 1947, 170–76; Stansell 1977, 62–76; McKevitt 2007, 186, 220–21, 304–5). Born in Michigan in 1867, Brown moved with his family to Colorado when he was nine. From there, his parents sent him to a new Jesuit college in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Brown applied to become a Jesuit, and entered the Society on November 13, 1881 (*WL* 1947, 170; *WL* 1878, 40–43; *CLV* 1880-1881, 13; *CDRSI* 24.105).

Brown’s obituary includes a story concerning his early novitiate in the Southwest.⁵ One morning, when he was opening the residence’s shutters, he saw three bodies dangling from ropes outside the window. The victims had been taken from the house next door, which was serving as a jail, and lynched while the Jesuit community was asleep. Brown told his fellow Jesuits that he slammed the shutters closed again and ran back to bed. According to the author of his obituary, Brown “was transferred, at the end of the year, to the more stereotyped noviceship at Florissant, where he finished his probation with no more lynchings” (*WL* 1947, 171).

The Jesuit author of Brown’s obituary clearly invokes the frontier justice lynching trope in describing these events, not only because he uses the term “rope justice” in speaking of the victims’ fate, but also because he emphasizes the stark difference between the present and the “era of Billy the Kid,” when John Brown entered the Society (*WL* 1947, 170–71). For the

⁴ For an example from *Revista Católica* (founded 1875), see *Revista Católica* 1879. I will explore that publication’s approach to lynching in a later article. For *America* (founded 1909), see *America* 1919; Schadewald 2003, 73 n.84. On the change in *America*’s position on anti-lynching legislation, see Southern 1996, 89–93, 195.

⁵ The obituary indicates that this event took place in Las Vegas, but Stansell says that Brown entered the novitiate in Albuquerque (*WL* 1947, 170-71; Stansell, 62). On the foundation and short history of the Jesuit novitiate in Albuquerque, see Owens, 68, and Sorrentino, 69-70.

Jesuit who shared Brown's story, what Brown saw as a novice highlights the challenges of the uncivilized frontier, as distinct from the experience of contemporary Jesuits. And yet, if John Brown's obituary reflects the lingering influence of the frontier justice paradigm, its details also anticipate some of the critiques of that paradigm raised by later historiography. The victims may have been imprisoned in a house, but they had been captured and were awaiting trial. If the institutions of conventional law and order were under development in New Mexico, they were certainly not absent. Thus, Brown's story provides an appropriate introduction to other Jesuit references that anticipate modern historical interpretations of Western frontier lynching. The first, from the Alaskan frontier, casts the identity of potential lynchers into sharp relief, not least because its reference to their whiteness is so nonchalant.

The Murder of Archbishop Seghers

In July 1886, Archbishop Charles Seghers left British Columbia to pursue his longstanding dream of establishing a mission in the Yukon River Valley. Since he had persuaded the Society to take charge of the mission, Jesuit fathers Pascal Tosi and Aloysius Robaut accompanied him. The archbishop also insisted upon inviting Frank Fuller, an off-again, on-again employee of the Rocky Mountain Missions, to join the party, against the advice of the Jesuits, who had noticed his recurrent periods of mental illness. When the group reached the place where they had planned to spend the winter, the archbishop insisted on going further, while the Jesuits stayed behind. As a result, the Jesuits were far away when Fuller shot the archbishop, under the paranoid delusion that the cleric wanted him dead. Fuller brought his victim's body to the trading post at St. Michael's, where he claimed to have killed the archbishop in self-defense. The Jesuits only learned what had happened many months later, when the spring thaw made it possible for them to travel to their scheduled reunion with the archbishop. Fuller was arrested and convicted of manslaughter (McNally 2000, 113–19; Barnum 1893, 437–48; *WL* 1887, 272–74, 281–82; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 1888a).

The murder of Archbishop Seghers became an important international news story. Particularly problematic for the Jesuits were media references to Fuller as a *Jesuit brother*: in fact, Fuller himself made this claim in a statement following his conviction (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 1888b). The archbishop's "unfortunate oversight" in referring to "Brother Fuller" in a letter from the Yukon only compounded the problem (Barnum 1893, 441; McNally 2000, 118; Seghers 1887). Although non-Jesuit sources confirmed that Fuller was not a member of the Society, references to him as "Brother Fuller" spread from British Columbia to Sydney (*Victoria Daily Times* 1887b; *Los Angeles Times* 1887; *Victoria Daily Times* 1887a; *Sydney Morning Herald* 1887).⁶

The general dispatch on Alaska published in the 1887 volume of the *Woodstock Letters* included a brief report about the murder (272–74). However, in 1893, Francis Barnum composed a more extensive account of the event – an account he tells us was edited and approved by Tosi (*WL* 1893, 436–49).⁷ Barnum emphasizes that Fuller was never a Jesuit, that the Jesuits had warned the archbishop against hiring and retaining Fuller because of his

⁶ McNally (2000, 118) mentions that Fuller had briefly been a postulant.

⁷ McNally's analysis (2000, 116–19) draws upon archival sources and includes details missing from the *Woodstock Letters'* accounts.

paranoia, and that Father Tosi's statement was critical in securing Fuller's arrest (*WL* 1893, 440–41, 437–38, 447). The text's reference to lynching appears as part of the story regarding Tosi's statement to the authorities.

Tosi was on his way to San Francisco to report the murder when he was interviewed at Ounalaska by the captain of the US revenue cutter *Bear*, who was investigating a report that a priest had killed the archbishop (Barnum 1893, 447). Before the development of railroads and roads in Alaska, revenue cutters "were the primary federal presence in the territory," with a wide variety of responsibilities, including law enforcement (Thiesen; O'Toole 1997, part 3). Barnum does not name the captain, but he was Michael Healy, brother to James Healy, the bishop of Portland, Maine, and Patrick Healy, SJ, the past president of Georgetown University (O'Toole 1997, part 1; Curran 2010, 274).

Barnum (1893, 447) describes the encounter in this way: "A meeting of the white men was then held in the office of the agent, and Father Tosi made a statement of facts."⁸ As a result, the *Bear* set off the next morning to arrest the real killer. Barnum's account adds one additional detail: "There had been some talk of lynching Fuller, but the scheme failed on account of the small number of whites."

This detail of Barnum's narrative stands in sharp contrast to his account of the aftermath of the crime itself. The archbishop died one day before his group would have reached his destination, a village called Nulato where he had spent the winter on a previous visit (Barnum 1893, 436–37, 440, 442). According to Barnum, when Fuller and the Indigenous guides arrived in the village after the murder, the enraged Nulato people considered shooting Fuller, until a trader convinced them not to retaliate. Thus, Fuller did not face summary justice in the village or at the trading posts where he spent the winter (Barnum 1893, 443–46). It was only after news of the murder reached the authorities that lynching became part of the narrative.

Of course, Tosi had only secondhand knowledge of Fuller's reception in Nulato, and Barnum's information was even more remote. Nevertheless, the events at Ounalaska include a clear implication about lynching: it is an option that white men can choose when they are present in sufficient numbers. Lynching is less a frontier practice than a monopoly available to whites on the frontier.

Barnum's reference to lynching includes no moral argument: it is only a description of events as he has chosen to portray them. However, two young Jesuits teaching at Las Vegas College in New Mexico invoked lynching to contrast Anglo and Nuevomexicano cultures.⁹ This contrast, moreover, depends upon an implicit moral assessment of lynching. To appreciate their arguments, it is helpful to consider the background of the town in which they came to teach.

⁸ Nothing in the account identifies the agent, but this could be a reference to an agent of the Alaska Commercial Company, which fulfilled some governmental functions in Alaska during this period. During the 1870s and 1880s, one of the ACC's largest trading posts was at Unalaska (Lee 1996, 22, 33–34).

⁹ I will follow John M. Nieto-Phillips (2004, 2) in using the term *Nuevomexicanos* for the Spanish-speaking population of New Mexico. See his explanation of the debate over the appropriate term for this group (Nieto-Phillips 2004, 3–9).

Background on Las Vegas, New Mexico

Unlike Santa Fe and Albuquerque, the town of Las Vegas, New Mexico, was not a Spanish settlement. Founded in 1835 by Mexican colonists, and claimed by the United States in 1846, the town became a commercial center that attracted Anglo, German, and French-Canadian settlers eager to profit from trading opportunities on the Santa Fe Trail (Perrigo 2010, 1, 8, 12; Rojas 1998, 21–24, 158–59). The Jesuits, who began teaching in Las Vegas in 1874 and opened Las Vegas College in 1877, settled in a community physically shaped by the Laws of the Indies, which established the standards for town planning in Spanish colonies, including the creation of a central plaza. These conventions remained dominant in northern New Mexico even after Mexican independence (Perrigo 2010, 135–36; Rojas 1998, 30–40).

In July of 1879, however, the arrival of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad line reconfigured the landscape, and to some extent, the culture of Las Vegas. Rather than building its depot in the existing community, the railroad chose a site a mile to the east, on the other side of the Gallinas River. This led to the creation of a second business and residential district in the east, with Anglo-Americans as the primary residents (Rojas 1998, 60–64, 74–75). Attempts to combine the two districts administratively proved controversial, initially rousing opposition from New Town and two years later, from Old Town (Stanley 1951, 169–78; J. M. 1882). Except for a brief period in the 1880s, Old Town and New Town (west and east of the river, respectively) remained separate political entities until both communities approved a referendum on consolidation in 1968 (Stanley 1951, 169–78; Rojas 1998, 67–69, 116–17; Perrigo 2010, 193).

However, if the railroad expanded Las Vegas's businesses and population, this growth also produced an alarming crime wave (Perrigo 2010, 70–71). According to Miguel Otero II (2018, 222), who would eventually become New Mexico's territorial governor, "The coming of the railroad was accompanied . . . by an influx of bad men of all sorts." "During 1879–1880, Las Vegas was the headquarters for all kinds of criminals from every known locality in the United States and Mexico" (Otero 2018, 216). The problem was particularly acute, Otero asserts (2018, 222–23), in New Town, which "fell under the control of as vicious and corrupt a set of scoundrels as could be found anywhere in the West." Their success in obtaining positions in New Town law enforcement compounded the problem. When a visiting friend was shot in his hotel, Otero (2018, 240) called in a justice of the peace from Old Town to take the dying victim's statement, since he believed that the New Town representatives could not be trusted.

Otero's comments are not the prejudices of an Old Town resident disturbed by the transformation of his community. Although descended from a prominent New Mexico family, the younger Miguel Otero had been born in St. Louis, and spent much of his early life in Kansas and Colorado. His father, after an early career in politics and law, became a businessman who promoted railroad interests, and the family settled in Las Vegas only in 1879, in anticipation of the railroad's arrival there. They were also residents of New Town (Otero 2018, 345, 340–43, 8, 187–88, 200). Otero's literary agenda, in fact, is to provide an entertaining Wild West narrative, including stories of Wild West lawlessness. In the process, however, he also attempts to justify the vigilante response to Las Vegas's crime wave. In many ways, Otero's story follows the Western institutional immaturity paradigm.

Otero (2018, 231–33) describes an escalating cycle of violence and community outrage, with special emphasis upon February 7, 1880, when a crowd extracted from jail three men awaiting trial for the murder of a deputy sheriff and took them to the windmill derrick in the Old Town plaza, where they hanged one man and shot all three. A month later, vigilantes planned to lynch Otero’s friend’s killer, until someone warned Otero that gunmen were protecting the jail. Instead, Otero admits, the group eventually facilitated a jailbreak and arranged for the posse to shoot the escaped criminals on sight (2018, 239–40, 242–43). In early April, following another murder, several civic leaders, including Otero’s father, addressed a mass meeting, in which the group decided to blanket the town with notices offering criminals two choices: leave town or die. “The flow of blood MUST and SHALL be stopped . . . and the good citizens of both the old and new towns have determined to stop it, if they have to HANG by the strong arm of FORCE every violator of the law.” The vigilantes backed up the threat with a squad of riflemen. Commenting upon the failure of official law enforcement to ensure public safety, Otero comments, “the only course open was to let the better element take the reins into their own hands and handle the situation in a drastic way” (Otero 2018, 250–51).

While Otero’s narrative is a classic appeal to the institutional weakness justification for frontier lynching, some elements of his story (such as the incarceration of the victims) undercut that excuse. In fact, one might reasonably argue that the vigilantes’ influence over jailors, posses, etc., represented the most obvious institutional flaw in Las Vegas law enforcement. For a Jesuit reporter on the same period in Las Vegas history, however, these events illustrated the contrast between two cultures.

Michael Hughes

In September of 1879, a year before John Brown matriculated at Las Vegas College, a Jesuit scholastic named Michael Hughes traveled west on the new railroad line to teach there. Born in Boston in 1855, Hughes, a member of the Maryland-New York Province of the Society of Jesus, was the first American Jesuit to serve on the Las Vegas College faculty. His *Woodstock Letters* account from 1884 offers an explanation for his assignment: the chance to study English was one of the major attractions of the college, and the students’ parents wanted a Jesuit, rather than a lay instructor, to teach this important subject (*CLV* 1879–1880, 10; *CDRSI* 9.365; H. 1884, 42; McKevitt 2007, 221).¹⁰ Presumably, Hughes meant that the school wanted a native English speaker, since four Italian Jesuits had taught English in the school in the previous year (*CLV* 1878–1879, 9).

Six months after his arrival, Hughes wrote a long report about the college and the people with whom the Jesuits were working in and around Las Vegas. His account, published in the *Woodstock Letters* in 1880, ranged from the poverty of the Jesuit mission to the prevalence of static electricity in the area (Hughes 1880, 134–41). Lynching in Las Vegas also plays a role in his narrative.

Hughes devotes much of his letter to the students in the school and to the character/customs of the people living in the area, particularly the “Mexicans.” While Las

¹⁰ The author of the 1884 letter is listed only as *H*, but the details make it clear that Hughes was the author.

Vegas College's students included both Mexican nationals and American citizens of Mexican ancestry, Hugh applies the term "Mexican" without further specification.¹¹ By contrast the word "Americans" within his text refers to the Anglo settlers, especially those who followed the railroad to Las Vegas – the residents of New Town, as opposed to Spanish Old Town. Such usage was common: Nieto-Phillips (2004, 72) reports that both Spanish and English language newspapers used it in the late 1800s, and the Jesuit Giuseppe Sorrentino (1948, 9, 218), who came to Las Vegas in the early twentieth century, says that "American" covered those with neither Indian nor Mexican ancestry, whether or not such persons were US citizens. Clearly, the terms "Mexican" and "American" were functioning as markers of ethnic background rather than citizenship status.

Toward his students' culture, and toward Mexican culture in general, Hughes's reactions are ambivalent. He regrets his students' lack of career ambition, marvels at their taste for chilies, and finds many local customs strange (1880, 135, 137–39). Poverty and ignorance, he believes, explain the general malaise among the local Hispanic population (Hughes 1880, 137). Yet at the same time, he finds much to admire in their piety, and in his students' respect for their elders and obedience in class (Hughes 1880, 137, 139, 135). Moreover, Hughes is outraged by the contempt that the American newcomers direct toward the Mexicans – a contempt he ascribes, in part, to anti-Catholic prejudice (Hughes 2018, 137, 138). "All the Americans that have written about the people of this place have done them grievous injustice," Hughes argues (2018, 137).

Although Hughes does not offer specific illustrations at this point, later in his text he identifies "Rev. Foote" (sic) as the author of an article that had "vilified" the Mexican community. In December 1879, a Kansas newspaper had published a travel report from a local Methodist minister, Rev. J. I. Foot, about what he had seen in Old Town, Las Vegas. This is clearly the article to which Hughes is referring, since he mentions Foot's mistaken identification of the parish church as a Jesuit Catholic church equipped with "gewgaws" (Hughes 1880, 138; Foot 1879). One can also infer how Hughes became aware of the article. In February 1880, the Las Vegas *Eureka* reprinted Foot's article, and wrote to a sister newspaper in Kansas about the controversy that followed. According to the *Eureka*, the "Jesuit brothers" refused to print the paper's March issue, in outrage over Foot's portrayal of their order and of the Catholic Church (cited in *La Cygne Journal* 1880).¹² This must be a reference to the Jesuit press, originally established in Albuquerque, but soon transferred to Las Vegas, to print Spanish language textbooks, devotional materials, and (from January 1875) *Revista Católica* (Owens 1950, 64–70; Vollmar 1976, 88–90). Since the press and the school were housed in the same building, the controversy would have been very close to home for Hughes (Stanley 1951, 244, 258).

With only one passing reference to New Town, Foot (1879) offers his readers an "account of a Mexican town and its people," describing the architecture, geography, and culture of Old

¹¹ After the Mexican-American War, Spanish-speaking former citizens of Mexico who remained in New Mexico became "free white" American citizens (Nieto-Phillips 2004, 47). By 1880, many "Mexicans" in Las Vegas would have had US citizenship from birth!

¹² On the foundation and earlier printing of the monthly *Eureka*, see *LVDG* 1879.

Town Las Vegas. Regarding the culture, Foot has little good to say. The business leaders are “chiefly Jews and wealthy Mexicans,” who dominate the poor “by a system nearly akin to peonage,” since there has been “little wholesome competition” in Las Vegas to regulate prices. The poor plow with a stick, and herd their sheep just as people did in first-century Judaea. After describing their earthen floor homes and meager rations, Foot wonders what “the average Mexican greaser or peon family” would make of a Kansas farmhouse, with its abundant food, furnishings, newspapers, books, and other accoutrements “all pointing unmistakably to more higher culture” (Foot 1879).

When describing mass in the “Jesuit Catholic church,” Foot again distinguishes the rich, who arrive late in their “rustling silks” from the poor – Mexican, Native American, and mixed-race – who kneel and squat upon the floor, making the effort to look their best in their “patched and mended clothes.” “They are dwindling away, year by year,” Foot argues; “they are weaker and poorer and are ready to perish before the advancing hosts who bring the railroad and a higher civilization” (Foot 1879).

Foot (1879) develops this claim in the article’s final section, which describes the arrival of the railroad and the crowds who turned out to greet it. “The reign of superstition is now to be broken,” he argues. Mexicans may have sung “Ave Marias” and “plowed with a stick for centuries,” but now the “newspaper reading, railroad building, progressive American” is about to build homes, exploit the territories’ mineral resources, and create a new way of life that the Mexican shepherd cannot imagine. Yet Foot does not predict the consequences of these changes for the Mexican community. Will the newcomers improve their lives or simply displace them, as they reshape Las Vegas as an American town?

Hughes ascribes Foot’s exaggerations to anti-Catholicism, although he admits that the minister has said “some true things” (Hughes 1880, 138). Certain Mexican cultural practices will surprise Americans, including their limited diet: they do not have the money to buy more substantial food (Hughes 1880, 139). Earlier in his letter, Hughes had already acknowledged the negative effects of ignorance upon the local community. To refute the claims of Foot and other American writers, therefore, Hughes (1880, 137) juxtaposes Mexican piety and American violence, with lynching as an illustration of the second.

Hughes has no doubts about who is responsible for threats to public order in his community. Disturbances rarely occur in Spanish Old Town. Las Vegas’s seedy reputation for violence comes from the newcomers. No Mexican, Hughes argues, committed any of the fifteen murders perpetrated in the town during the past few months. Similarly, “the horrible lynching affairs whose accounts have reached even secluded Woodstock” were orchestrated almost exclusively by the newcomers (Hughes 1880, 137–38). Hughes is probably referring to the February lynchings, which gained attention from several Eastern newspapers (see, for example, *Baltimore Sun*; *Boston Post*; *New York Sun*).

Thus, for Hughes, lynching reveals the hypocrisy of the American newcomers’ claims to moral superiority. Ironically, the Americans who are regarded as the “go-ahead people” and the “spice of society” are the perpetrators of vigilante violence. They are, Hughes argues, “more degraded” than the people they hold in contempt (137). From this perspective, lynching is not a frontier problem; it is an *American* (i.e., an Anglo) problem.

Inigo Deane

In 1882–1883, Michael Hughes’s last year at Las Vegas College, its faculty welcomed another young Jesuit from the Maryland-New York Province, Inigo Deane, a Fordham graduate who had been born in Dublin in 1860 (*CLV* 1882–1883, 19; Fagan 1892, 87; Stansell 1977, 27; O’Donoghue 1912, 102). Deane spent only two years in Las Vegas before his reassignment as prefect of studies for a new Jesuit college in Morrison, Colorado (Stansell 1977, 27; *CSH* 1885–1886, 12; *CSH* 1886–1887, 10). During his time in Las Vegas, however, he published an article in *The Catholic World* that used lynching to distinguish the American and Mexican cultures of New Mexico (Deane 1884). Although his general thesis is consistent with Hughes’s argument, Deane’s Las Vegas context and the challenges of his literary project distinguish his approach from his confrere’s.

Transition in Las Vegas

The summer before Deane joined the faculty marked a critical transition for official responses to lynching in Las Vegas. On July 1, an attempt to protect a Native American prisoner from lynching by transferring him from the jail in East Las Vegas to the county jail in Old Town had failed, after a mob battered down the door and hanged the victim from a telegraph pole (Stanley 1951, 166–67; *Topeka Daily Capital*).¹³ Less than a week later, the county commissioners considered a response to the armed assault on Old Town facility, including the possibility of referring the matter to the territory’s attorney general (*LVDG* 1882a). Soon afterward, on July 11, a mob converged on the jail for another lynching, but this time the sheriff was ready for them. When the crowd slammed a beam against the jail’s new door for the fourth time, the sheriff’s men opened fire. Three members of the crowd were wounded, including Eddie Brown, a fourteen-year-old boy who died a few days later (*LVDG* 1882b; 1882d). The editor of the *Gazette*, who had defended the earlier lynching, also defended the sheriff’s response to the later attack on the jail, reporting that the sheriff had tried to reason with the leaders of the mob, ordered his men to aim low to avoid injuries, and ensured that the order to disperse was given in English as well as Spanish (*LVDG* 1882a; 1882c).

At the end of August, the *Las Vegas Gazette* published letters from Margarito Romero, one of the leading businessmen and philanthropists of Old Town, and Nepomuceno Segura, the deputy sheriff in charge of the jail at the time of the July 1 lynching (Romero 1882; Segura 1882; Perrigo 2010, 25, 161; Stanley 1951, 318). Following their participation in grand jury proceedings about the case – Romero as a juror, and Segura as a witness – each had received an anonymous letter from 300 “reputable citizens” which threatened to hold him personally responsible for any resulting prosecutions. Romero includes the complete text of the message within his letter to the editor.

Both Romero and Segura assert that they were doing their duty under the law, and each dares the 300 to do their worst. Romero (1882) warns that they will not find him “bound in chains and locked up in jail,” like the Navajo lynching victim. Segura (1882) promises them the “lively reception” he would have given them during that lynching, if most of the jail’s

¹³ Francisco Tafoya, commonly known as Navajo Frank, had lassoed and dragged Howard Hunter, injuring, but not killing him. See *Topeka Daily Capital* (1882), which reprints the report of the *Las Vegas Optic*. The windmill derrick had been dismantled by this time (Wilson 2019, 18).

guards had not deserted. He also insists that the threat's authors come "only and solely from East Las Vegas." This claim was too much for the *Gazette's* editor, who argues that many in Old Town approved of the lynching and that the origins of the anonymous letter are impossible to prove (LVDG 1882e). It is striking, nonetheless, to see the association of lynching with East Las Vegas – an association made by Hughes in 1880 – offered by a deputy sheriff who also had experience as a newspaper publisher! In the decades that followed, Romero and Segura would have distinguished careers in San Miguel County, and both would be chosen as delegates to the state's constitutional convention in 1910 (*Santa Fe New Mexican* 1910; Perrigo 2010, 90). If his involvement with vigilantism did not derail Miguel Otero's political future, neither did standing up to the vigilantes preclude Romero and Segura's future achievements.

When a new county jail building opened in December 1885, the *Gazette* reported that Navajo Frank's case was the "last successful attempt to lynch prisoners" in the sheriff's custody (LVDG 1885). In fact, during Deane's years in Las Vegas, the *Gazette* mentions only two local cases in which there was talk of lynching, neither of which resulted in an actual lynching (LVDG 1882f; 1884f).

This does not mean that lynching, including frontier lynching, disappeared from the paper: the *Gazette* offered its readers a stream of reports about lynchings, expected lynchings, threatened lynchings and thwarted lynchings across the United States (see for example, LVDG 1884g; 1884e; 1883a; 1884d; 1883b).¹⁴ In addition, during Deane's last semester at Las Vegas College, the *Gazette's* editor defended lynchings at Socorro and Ouray, Colorado, attacked an anti-lynching statement from the *Denver Republican*, and reprinted a sermon offered by Las Vegas Presbyterian minister James Fraser, which included a long quotation about lynching as a vindication of justice (LVDG 1884b; 1884a; 1884c; Fraser 1884; on Fraser, see LVDG 1883c). Justification of lynching was very much present in Las Vegas culture while Deane was there, but it manifested itself in print rather than in application.¹⁵

Deane's Project and Argument

If Deane's Las Vegas context differed from Hughes's, so did his audience. Hughes wrote for fellow Jesuits. Deane, who had begun to publish poetry as a Jesuit, wrote his article for the public audience of *The Catholic World* (Deane 1884; 1885; 1887; 1888; 1890a; 1890b; 1891; 1892a; 1892b; 1895; Russell 1898, 32, 97; O'Donoghue 1912, 102; *Lincoln Daily State Democrat* 1887).¹⁶ This prose piece was a description and analysis of a lay spiritual movement he had encountered in the New Mexico countryside. Complete with classical allusions and Greek,

¹⁴ On newspaper coverage of lynching in general, see Waldrep 2009, 7.

¹⁵ In June of 1882, a few months before Deane began teaching at the college, an article in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* had cited the admission of the editor of the East Las Vegas newspaper, *The Las Vegas Daily Optic*, that he had participated in nine lynchings during his two-and-a-half years in the community (J. M. 1882).

¹⁶ There is no record of Deane in the *CRDSI* and some posthumous citations of his poetry, including one from a Jesuit editor, identify him only as *Inigo Deane* (O'Donoghue 1912, 102; Russell 1898, 32, 97). In 1891, he sent a short note to *WL* from the French scholasticate for Toulouse, located at that time in Spain (Uclés), which indicates that he was still a Jesuit at that time. (*WL* 1891, 307).

Latin, and German vocabulary, “The New Flagellants: A Phase in New Mexican Life” attempts to place the group commonly known as the Penitentes in historical context.¹⁷

Dean (1884, 302) tells us that he became curious about the Penitentes when he passed a *morada* (lodge building) on an isolated mountain road. Later he witnessed their Good Friday procession, an event culminating in the voluntary crucifixion of a member of the group.¹⁸ Deane (1884, 307–10) describes the scourging and other penitential practices carried out within the procession in vivid detail. Several times, he emphasizes the New Mexico clergy’s opposition to the brotherhood and its practices, which he believes developed through the lack of pastoral oversight.¹⁹ Soon, he predicts, the group will fade away of its own accord. But Deane (1884, 307, 311) is also anxious to distinguish any excesses of some members of the group from the virtues of Spanish civilization that have survived in Mexican Catholic culture. That concern seems responsible for Deane’s surprising references to lynching in an article focused on a very different topic.

Although Deane never mentions the issue directly, the brotherhood’s practices had often been cited to demonstrate the primitive character of New Mexican Catholic culture. In 1876, the Minority Report of the House Committee on the Territories had included material on the group and the Catholic clergy’s failure to eliminate it as evidence that New Mexico was not yet ready for statehood (US Congress 1876, 12–13). When discussing the superstitious practices of New Mexico, Foot (1879) also mentioned the local reverence for the Penitentes. In the same year that Foot visited the territory, a long article in the *New York Times* ascribed the lack of development in New Mexico to the inhabitants’ excessive religious practices, including their sabbath observances and acceptance of scourging (*NYT* 1879). The Jesuits understood, therefore, that the Penitentes’ sensational public observances could fan anti-Catholic and anti-Mexican prejudices (McKevitt 2007, 198).

Probably to avoid such a response, Deane (1884, 301) is careful to emphasize Catholic Church disapproval of the group while highlighting the virtues of Nuevomexicano culture: strong faith, respect for parents, and “a certain spiritual way of viewing things” that contrasts favorably with the common American emphasis on profit and loss. Thus Deane, like Hughes, argues that both Mexican and American cultures have strengths and weaknesses. What sets Deane’s approach apart is his appeal to the Middle Ages in interpreting both cultures in New Mexico.

As his title suggests, Deane compares the Penitentes to the flagellants, members of an extreme penitential movement from the Late Middle Ages. However, Deane (1884, 301) extends the analogy, arguing that, in contemporary New Mexico, the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries exist side by side. Deane develops this claim in terms of social roles. If the Penitentes are the new flagellants, the wealthy “sheep-lords” and “cattle-lords” are the new

¹⁷ For background on the group, see Espinosa 1993.

¹⁸ The person representing Christ was tied rather than nailed to the cross.

¹⁹ McKevitt (2007, 196–99) argues that the Jesuit reaction to the group varied, and that Jesuits were more tolerant toward the brotherhood than the French clergy. See the *Conejos Diary* (1982, xxv–xxvii) for the Jesuits’ approach in Colorado. Deane (1884, 307) himself observes that the members include “some people of excellent private character.”

barons, and the cowboys are the new “Free Companions,” i.e., the mercenaries available for hire by medieval princes. Linking cowboys together with lynchers, Deane makes two additional claims about them: they have replaced “the dispossessed Apaches and Navajos,” and they are almost always Americans rather than Mexicans (1884, 301).

This last observation undergirds Deane’s claim that both American and Nuevomexicano cultures have their flaws. If Mexican culture produced the Penitentes, American culture has given rise to “Knownothingism and Spiritism and Oneida Communities” (Deane 1884, 311). There are excesses on both sides. If some of the territory’s citizens lack economic drive or respect for the lives of others, there are also persons “whose primitive disregard for forms of law strongly recalls medieval ways of meting out justice” (Deane 1884, 301). For Deane, lynching parties – whose members he insists are almost always Americans – are another medieval throwback. Thus, the archaisms that an educated person can expect to encounter in New Mexico are associated with Anglo as well as Mexican culture.

The Significance of Hughes’ and Deane’s Claim

To counter claims of Anglo-American superiority, Hughes and Deane defended Nuevomexicano culture by associating vigilantism with the former rather than the latter. One should note that they were neither the first nor the last to make this claim. More than a year before Hughes arrived in New Mexico, the *Las Vegas Gazette* (1878) admitted, “peace and order more generally reigns” in territorial counties with predominately Mexican rather than American populations. Noting the prevalence of violence and “mob spirit” in the latter, the paper urged the American settlers, “for the good name of their race,” to insist upon “the strict enforcement of the laws,” since lynching invariably leads to injustice. Twenty-one years later, long-time Methodist missionary Emily Harwood also claimed that *Americans* rather than *Mexicans* were responsible for the territory’s lynchings – and train robberies (Harwood 1899, 1916). Clearly, the assumption that lynching was an Anglo practice rejected by Nuevomexicanos was not peculiar to the Las Vegas Jesuits.

One may reasonably ask whether this assumption was accurate. According to Carrigan and Webb (2013, 89–90, 93–94), Mexican-Americans were involved in lynchings, especially in New Mexico, where the Anglo population remained in the minority until the twentieth century. As Christopher Waldrep (2009, xvii, 8–9) points out, however, “virtually everything we know about lynching comes through popular culture,” and the defenders of lynching had every reason to claim that they enjoyed widespread community support. This would have been no less true in Las Vegas than elsewhere. Certainly the *Daily Gazette* (LV DG 1882a) took pains to insist men from both East and West Las Vegas took part in the Tafoya lynching – against Deputy Segura’s indictment of the vigilantes from New Town. However, the significance of Hughes and Deane’s assertion extends beyond its literal accuracy. In fact, their claim rests upon an implicit moral assessment of lynching and (indirectly) reverses the traditional frontier justice paradigm.

First, the young Jesuits mention lynching to counter the stereotype of Nuevomexicanos as backward, in comparison with the Anglo newcomers. To avoid reinforcing that stereotype when discussing the Penitentes, Deane brings in lynching as a countervailing “American” weakness. Hughes invokes Anglo vigilantism to undermine Foot’s patronizing description of Nuevomexicano culture. In each case, lynching highlights the flaws of the supposedly superior

“American” culture. Although they agree that New Mexico needs progress, Hughes and Deane argue that true progress will not emerge from the wholesale replacement of Nuevomexicano with Anglo values. Each culture, they believe, has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Second, Hughes and Deane’s argument depends upon the judgment that lynching is wrong. Without that assessment, lynching could not serve as a counterweight to what the Jesuits identify as the weaknesses of Nuevomexicano culture, such as ignorance for Hughes, or Penitente excesses for Deane. To function within the Jesuits’ argument, therefore, lynching must be both wrong and an Anglo practice.

Third, the Jesuits’ approach implicitly contradicts the institutional immaturity explanation for Western frontier lynching. That model views lynching as a temporary expedient that will fade away as frontier communities mature. Hughes and Deane’s argument treats lynching as an imported aberration that compares unfavorably with communal standards already in place. From that perspective, Western frontier lynching became a symptom of decline rather than immaturity.

Finally, the question of who lynches (or at least who is perceived as lynching) is as critical for the New Mexico references as it is for Barnum’s story of law enforcement in Alaska. That case explicitly associates lynching with white men, while the New Mexico texts ascribe it to *Americans* (i.e., Anglos). In all three narratives, lynching reveals the comparative social power of the newcomers. Their imported practice manifests immunity cloaked in appeals to necessity.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship about lynching in the American West has emphasized both the influence of the frontier justice paradigm and the failure of that model to acknowledge the significance of race and ethnicity for Western vigilantism. Selected Jesuit incidental references for lynching illustrate both points. While John Brown’s obituary mentions lynching to highlight the Wild West conditions within which the Society of Jesus once operated, earlier texts from Barnum, Hughes, and Deane characterize lynching as a white or *American* practice. Although none of these earlier texts addresses the identity of the victim, their statements regarding the identity of the perpetrators support contemporary attention to the role of race and ethnicity for Western lynching.

Abbreviations

CDRSI	<i>Catalogue defunctorum in renata Societate Iesu ab a. 1814 ad a. 1970.</i> See under Mendizábal.
CLV	<i>Catalogue of Las Vegas College.</i>
CSH	<i>College of the Sacred Heart [Catalogue].</i>
LVG	<i>Las Vegas Gazette.</i>
LVDG	<i>Las Vegas Daily Gazette.</i>
NYT	<i>New York Times.</i>
WL	<i>Woodstock Letters.</i>

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