



New Age Lynching: The Effects of Police Brutality on Communities of Color in the United States

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New Age Lynching: The Effects of Police Brutality on Communities of Color in the United States is a primarily student curated, museum style exhibition centered around the problems of policing in American communities of color. This exhibition served the city of Charlotte, North Carolina from September 2013 to September 2019 on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University as well as at the nationally recognized, Levine Museum of the New South. Beginning in Spring of 2019, an extension of New Age Lynching: The Effects of Police Brutality on Communities of Color in the United States has also been on display in Tallahassee, Florida at the campus of Florida A&M University. The complete showcase consists of 40+ individual personal stories of people of color who were killed or severely injured at the hands of police or while in police custody. The aim of this collection is to bring awareness to the misuse of power by authorities, but without the intent of slandering or promoting ideals of being anti-police. Instead, this work primarily seeks to focus on victims by humanizing them through recreating their stories which captures their life both inside and outside of their tragedies. The successfully executed vision around this project has been to inspire open, honest, and safe conversations among the public about police brutality in communities of color. Further, the vision includes encouraging constructive community involvement through activism. This exhibit and the conversations cultivated around it facilitates the act of deconstructing barriers of miscommunication and misunderstanding, particularly between black and brown people and law enforcement.

In the discipline of History, there have been scholarly conversations about how to merge among students the practice of Public History with the application of grassroots activism. As Public Historian Tanya Evans stated, "I am keen to set my students on a path towards employability, but I also want them to value the importance of being able to work well with others and to become active citizens. They need to acknowledge the ways in which ordinary, everyday people might impact individual lives and communities more broadly." In that vein, this article examines the case study of New Age Lynching: The Effects of Police Brutality on Communities of Color in the United States and seeks to demonstrate ways to successfully bridge the gap between the study of grassroots activism among students and how their work impacts those around them. This work will illustrate the transformation of young scholars from being just students to being student-activists.

The examination of the metamorphosis and execution of this exhibition also illuminates how the works of Public History are not isolated from the communities outside of academia. A growing number of history academicians are breaking out of their scholarly insularity and are writing and producing historical work for a 'Mass audience.' This project is a reflection of that and serves as a great vehicle to forge a solid, tangible relationship between the classroom and the public. Public History in collaboration with social justice can be instrumental in bringing academia and various demographics from the community together by collectively and usefully engaging difficult conversations. This includes dialogue around the problems of race, bias, the abuse of authority, and the divide that those variables often create.

1 Tanya Evans, "Love Thy Neighbour: Local and Community History," in *What is Public History Globally?: Working with the Past in the Present*, ed. Alex Trapeznik and Paul Ashton (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) 247.

Eric Arnesen, "Historians and the Public: Premature Obituaries, Abiding Laments," in *Recent Themes on Historians and the Public: Historians in Conversation*, ed. Donald Yerxa (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009) 27.





New Age Lynching: The Effects of Police Brutality on Communities of Color in the United States (Cont.)

In the Fall of 2013, I was hired in Charlotte, North Carolina at Johnson C. Smith University in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences as a residential historian. A part of my responsibilities included the development of a Public History track for the department. I was assigned the Public History course and I envisioned teaching students the application of how Public History exists and works, particularly in the world of museums. Admittedly, I was initially unsure of what the exhibition that we were going to create would entail, but soon that would all change after a fateful night in September of that same year. During the early hours of September 14th, 2013, Jonathan Ferrell, an African American man, was shot at 12 times and hit 10 by white, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD) Officer, Randall Kerrick. Prior to the shooting, Ferrell had left a house party with some friends and co-workers and served as the designated driver for them. He made his drop off in the Charlotte community of Bradfield Farms. Ferrell was headed home when he lost control on a curve in the Toyota Camry he was driving and crashed. Jonathan miraculously survived, but the car was totaled. His car doors were jammed.

Ferrell crawled out the broken rear windshield and went looking for help. He came to the house of resident Sarah McCartney and vigorously knocked on the door. It was about 2:30AM and McCartney opened the door expecting to see her husband returning from a night shift. Instead, she saw a bloodied Jonathan. Startled, McCartney slammed and locked the door, dialed 911 and activated her house alarm system. She relayed to the 911 dispatcher that there was a guy breaking in her front door and that she was there at her home alone with her toddler. After a few minutes of Jonathan pleading with Sarah to open the door, he continued to walk further down in the neighborhood. Soon he was met by officers who were responding to McCartney's call. Three officers showed up to the scene, two African American and one Caucasian. It is unclear if Ferrell was excited to see the authorities or if he was simply disoriented from his car accident, but he ran towards them. The white officer, Randall Kerrick, perceived Jonathan Ferrell as a threat and proceeded to unload 12 bullets with 10 of those shots hitting Ferrell's body, killing him.

Immediately there was an outcry from the local, Charlotte African American community. Although Officer Kerrick claimed he violently acted because he was in fear of his life, many were not convinced and saw this as another example of how racism shows up at the hands of the police. Included in that number of enraged people were students at Johnson C. Smith University in my Public History course. When they showed up to class for the first time after Jonathan Ferrell's death, they were visibly shaken, but knew not how to put a voice or sound to their pain, anger, fear, and grief. Students had been asked during class in prior weeks what they identified as a civil and human rights fight in current society. After the killing of Jonathan Ferrell, they clearly identified police brutality as it and recent statistics support this notion.

In the October 2018 publication by the U.S. Department of Justice, data from the 2015 Police-Public Contact Survey illustrated the disproportionate numbers of contact between police authorities and certain demographics of the public. According to the report, the highest number of contact between the police and the general public is in traffic stops. Blacks had a higher percentage than whites for being pulled over. Further, more than 1 in 6 black residents who were pulled over in a traffic stop had similar interactions with police multiple times over the course of the year. The evidence also yielded that when police initiated an interaction, they were twice as likely to threaten or use force against blacks and Hispanics. Further support of the U.S. Department of Justice was offered even earlier in 2010 concerning populations specifically in New York City (NYC).

Michael Gordon, "Questions Remain A Year After Jonathan Ferrell killed by CMPD Officer," Charlotte Observer, September 13, 2014, <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/crime/article9165083.html>. Ibid.

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In 2010, Black residents in NYC were 8 times more likely to be stopped by the police than whites. They also were 11 times more likely to be frisked than whites. In 2011, NYC police reported using force against blacks in 23% of stops but only during 16% of stops involving whites. So for students in my Public History class in September 2013, Jonathan Ferrell represented what could happen when living in American society while functioning as a person of color. It was in that moment that I had the epiphany to refocus the class and exhibition towards problems of police brutality. Thus, *New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color* was born.

This project has been provocative from its concept, mission, and goals all the way to its title which includes the term, "lynching." "Lynching" has historically had various meanings and representations for different scholars, but it has more commonly been associated with death by hanging. Pioneer activist, Ida B. Wells-Barnett tirelessly dedicated her life to bringing awareness to the atrocities of lynching by documenting the horrors of it and exposing it to the world. Since, scholars have followed her lead and even become intentional about broadening how we understand lynching to include more than just being a dehumanizing death inflicted by a noose. Lynching also can include, for example, being beat or burned without the presence of a rope. Historian Andrew Buckser defines lynching as "an unlawful killing of a supposed criminal by members of community." However, scholars such as Ursula McTaggart forces us to think about lynching as not only a speculative event, but also a figurative one. In other words, lynching can also be symbolic as it relates to an unlawful, dehumanizing fall of one's relationship, occupation, social standing, or person. Lynching in the 21st century, through the lens of my class and I, include people of color being disproportionately and wrongfully targeted and victimized by the police. Although the students and I were aware of the controversy around the term "lynching," we still deemed it appropriate to capture ways in which racism and violence continue to rear its head in a present culture of racism.

As new age, cutting edge and provocative as this project is, it actually remains in alignment with the tried and true black freedom struggle traditions of empowered youth. The push for civil and human rights and grassroots activism was historically spearheaded by college students that pushed the envelope and challenged the masses. That is particularly true during the traditional Civil Rights Movement. This project is an extension of that strategic young activist fervor. Students who have been and continue to be a part of *New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color* have fundamentally been instrumental in creating a virtual memorial that remembers those lost and honors the loved ones left behind to mourn their tragedies. Students were charged with the task of researching people of color who had been victimized by police brutality. As lead researchers on the project, the students had the autonomy to choose men or women in any part of the United States. This enabled students to have better control over their projects and become personally connected to the life of the person they presented in this collective work.





The Public History class in the Fall of 2013 at Johnson C. Smith University was the first cohort to develop the exhibition *New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color*. There were four students and each student chose a national victim of police brutality and developed their stories. To illustrate my expertise along with my comradery and compassion for this project, I also decided to choose a story and life impacted by police brutality to develop alongside my students. Each narrative consisted of moving beyond understanding victims as statistics towards understanding these victims as real people who functioned in real time. In short, the goal of students was to “re-humanize” those who had been violently affected at the hands of police. Bringing these stories back to life consisted of students researching about the events surrounding the death of their chosen person, along with examining the victim’s life outside of their traumatic experience with authorities. Research and information gathered and translated for the exhibition includes where the person lived, their occupation, their favorite hobbies, the dynamics of their families and friends, photographs, personal writings, and personal items or replicas. Many students also recreated scenes where the tragedies happened. In some instances, students even included biographical information on the police officers who were involved and expressed interpretations from the media of officer involvement. This strategy was carried out for the purposes of providing as holistic as possible of an interpretation and documentation of individual stories.

In November 2013, *New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color* had its first exhibition debut on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University. The exhibition was installed in a common area located in the Student Union making it easily accessible for students as well as the public. The spotlighted victims were all African American men. They included Jonathan Ferrell, Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Chavis Carter, and Raymond Herisse. Each story was carefully constructed to capture the essence of who they were as individuals. Jonathan Ferrell’s exhibition, for example, included a large image of him in his college football uniform. Beside it was a framed Florida A&M University (FAMU) football jersey to “bring to life” Jonathan’s love for FAMU and football. His fiancé, Cache Heidel, also contributed a stuffed teddy bear that belonged to Ferrell helping to personalize his display. Sean Bell’s section consisted of a real car door replica that had holes drilled in it to emulate the number of times his car door had been shot. Bell and his friends were fired at 50 times in Queens, New York by four, plain clothes New York Police Department officers on November 25, 2006. Sean Bell was scheduled to be married later that day, but succumbed to his injuries. Raymond Herisse was killed in Miami Beach, Florida on Memorial Day 2011 when cops shot into his vehicle a total of 116 times. Herisse had a proud Haitian heritage and the exhibition captured that through the recreation of a vigil that was held in Miami in his honor. A Haitian and American flag were represented at the vigil to represent Herisse’s Haitian roots in America and so was that connection also recreated in the exhibition.

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Chavis Carter was found dead in the back of a police patrol July 2012 in Jonesboro, Arkansas. He was pulled over in a traffic stop and, in his car, a small amount of marijuana was found. Carter was searched, handcuffed behind his back and placed in a police car. Jonesboro Police Department officers claimed to have found a semi-automatic, .380-caliber pistol near his body and argued that he committed suicide, despite officers not finding a weapon during Carter's full body pat down. Carter's display in the exhibition consisted of a blow-up dummy with his hands cuffed behind his back to illustrate the difficulty Chavis Carter would have had attempting to kill his own self. Finally in the initial exhibition was Oscar Grant. Grant was killed New Years Day 2009 by a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Officer who was responding to reports of a fight on the train. Grant was forced to the ground. He was face down with his hands behind his back. Officer Johannes Mehserle drew his pistol and shot Grant in the back and killed him. To capture the outcry around Grant's death, his showing in the exhibition consisted of a re-creation of protest signs and intimate images of Grant with this family.

These five powerful stories commanded response and discussion. In anticipation of having that effect on those who would view the showcase, a companion piece to the exhibition debut was planned that included a panel of scholars, community members and the fiancé of Jonathan Ferrell, Cache Heidel. Students and members of the community were able to discuss the impact of police on communities of color while engaging constructive ways to bridge the gap between the public and authorities. The time during the panel also served as a safe space for the surviving family members and loved ones of those lost to police brutality to express their grief and how life has been moving forward from tragedy. Additionally, it generally provided a space for people of color to freely discuss their own experiences and fears with police.

Since the inception of New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color, the exhibition was on display for a limited period for the next three consecutive years at Johnson C. Smith University. New victims were added each cycle and subsequent students broadened its scope. As a result, the exhibition began including other people of color who were impacted by the abuse of police, including black women and Hispanic populations. Also added was the narrative of a Native American woman. As the exhibition continued to expand, it began to get the attention of those in the community and in the local arenas of Public History. The Levine Museum of the New South, which is an institution committed to building stronger and more equitable communities through the engagement of history and culture, proposed a partnership. That partnership was accelerated and propelled in September 2016 when Charlotte resident Keith Lamont Scott was shot and killed by a CMPD Officer as Scott sat at the bus stop waiting for his son to get off the bus that evening. Scott's killing by the local police added insult to injury as the city was still attempting to wrap its head around the police involved tragedy of Jonathan Ferrell that occurred just three years earlier. Local institutions began to question how they could help facilitate conversations around racial tensions that were rising in the city. The Levine Museum of the New South answered the call by creating a rapid response exhibition entitled, K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace (KJKP). The Levine Museum of the New South was interested in executing this project by igniting as much community response and involvement as possible. As a part of that, the team at the Levine Museum inquired how New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color could contribute to this groundbreaking exhibition planned at their institution. As stated by the Levine's Residential Historian, Dr. Brenda Tindal, "This rapid response exhibit was a testament to the utility of community collaboration and an exercise in the democratization of the curatorial process." Therefore, it was imperative that students had an opportunity to not only inform, but lead, the conversation on how the education they received merged with their personal activism and existence as African Americans functioning in a 21st century, racially sensitive climate. For the purposes of K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace, New Age Lynching was adapted for the Levine's rapid response exhibition.



K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace consisted of three main sections: Charlotte Responds, #BeyondTheHashtags, and The Nation Responds. "Charlotte Responds" was curated by Dr. Brenda Tindal who meticulously researched and presented insight on the historically contentious racial climate in Charlotte through the lens of housing, schools, and politics. The city of Charlotte has done an impressive job concealing any obvious problems of race in the city. "Charlotte Responds" was created with the intention of peeling back the layers of those problems, however. Racism has not always been visible to the naked eye, but has been an undercurrent in the fabric of the city for quite some time. By delving into the racial history of the city, the intention was to help it make sense how a "Jonathan Ferrell" and a "Keith Lamont Scott" could happen in Charlotte and "why" the people in the city responded so emotionally.

"#BeyondTheHashtags" was the portion of the exhibit that reflected the Johnson C. Smith students' work displayed in *New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color*. Although the name changed, the essence of the project was still examined in "#BeyondTheHashtags." Co-curated by myself and students, this work continued to capture the stories of those victimized by police brutality by humanizing them through personal stories and imagery. The idea was to move these victims from statistics to being understood as human beings that functioned in real space, in real time.

The third portion of the exhibition was, "The Nation Responds." Curated by Alvin C. Jacobs, Jr., The Nation Responds was a collection of imagery from around the country of several protests centering police brutality including: Fergusson (Mike Brown), Baltimore (Freddie Gray), Charlotte (Keith Lamont Scott). These images captured the grassroots movement in each of these places and how activists on the ground responded to the killings of black bodies at the hand of the police. More so, this portion of the exhibit was intentional about making it clear how the local story of Charlotte fit the larger narrative of racism exuded through problems policing throughout the United States. Collectively, these sections made K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace both a local and a national showcase and attracted visitors from all over the world. K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace ran from February 2017 to September 2019. In that time, the Levine Museum of the New South sold a ticket quantity of approximately 92,000 and accumulated a net revenue of \$485,000.

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What is equally important with this New Age Lynching and K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace (#BeyondtheHashtags, specifically) is the impact that this work had on students once the class and exhibition project was over each cycle. Nicholas Bratcher, who was a part of the inaugural class of 2013, stated, "At first this project was just for a grade, but soon the project reflected the reality of what it is to be a black male in the 21st century." Mr. Bratcher went on to volunteer with local schools, became a teacher with the freedom schools, and interned with The Levine Museum of the New South. Upon graduation, he went into education in the inner city of Charlotte, North Carolina. Trabeca Hughes who was also a part of the initial curating class stated, "I did not see the relevance of the project at first until I met Cache' Heidel, Jonathan Ferrell's fiance'. I realized how I was strongly instrumental in bringing awareness to the problem of police violence." She went on to work with inner city youth at the local YMCA in Charlotte. Miss Hughes is currently seeking her graduate degree in History and Political Science. Student Shawn Murray said, "This project really helped me to dig deeper into research and find out more information concerning police brutality." In the spirit of helping to positively impact the system and build bridges with the community, Murray made a difference by becoming a police officer and state trooper for the state of South Carolina.

Although my tenure ended at Johnson C. Smith University in the Fall of 2016, New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color carried on. Its representation continued at the Levine Museum of the New South until Fall 2019, but it remained grounded in the college classroom. In Fall of 2018, my matriculation in academia continued at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU). That following Spring I was responsible for teaching the "African Americans in the 20th Century" course. While the course is not a traditional Public History one, it was still a fitting class to integrate and continue the exhibition because the content directly engaged current struggles for human and civil rights. Police brutality remains a part of that mold and the class at FAMU was just as passionate about bringing attention to the abuses of authorities. Like before at Johnson C. Smith University, students were tasked with choosing a victim of police brutality and humanizing those stories. The FAMU "African Americans in the 20th Century" class consisted of 18 students, which added 18 more victims to the already existing exhibition. The end of the semester project for the class was the exhibition display that was showcased on the campus of Florida A&M University in the Meek-Eaton Black Archives.





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Much like at Johnson C. Smith University, the exhibition at FAMU was accompanied on its opening night by a panel discussion of professors, students, and community members. New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effect on Communities of Color was open to the FAMU campus community as well as the general public and remained on display for three weeks. The exhibition received nearly 200 visitors. Added to this exhibition was a reflection wall where those who came to see it could write their responses to what they saw and any emotions that may have been invoked. The notes written and placed on the reflection wall consisted of students and community members alike who consistently wrote messages about, empowerment, sadness, love, equality, and the power of knowledge. Some read, "Keep Working to Bring Awareness" and "Thanks for Leading these Difficult Conversations." The students had successfully impacted the community through their Public History activism. Their goals of creating a database of those impacted by police brutality all while humanizing those victims was reached. Much like the public, the student curators were equally impacted by their classroom activism. De'Teruis Parker, a graduating political science student from FAMU, said "During this assignment I was reminded of the injustice African Americans face daily. This assignment reassured me of my goals, my purpose, my passion, and love for my people. It also will help my commitment of fighting against the system of white supremacy." Kevin Channey, military veteran and classified senior African American Studies major stated, "This project motivated an increased sense of duty to remain informed. The challenge in this effort is not to condemn police officers as a collective, but to ensure non-threatening behavior as best as possible. This requires specific training and awareness to address these issues while affording police the latitude to safely perform their duties in high stress situations." FAMU student curator Jakaila Scaife captured the experience even more poignantly saying, "As junior Public Historians, we stood on the shoulders of thousands of activists before us who united for social and political change. Our responsibility was to continue this legacy of student activism and pour our hearts into this project....and we did."

Because police brutality is a major civil rights issue in the United States, unfortunately, there will always be a place for New Age Lynching: Police Brutality and Its Effects on Communities of Color. Each Spring for many years going forward, the students in the "African Americans in the 20th Century" class will continue this work by incorporating new names and voices to the project. The future vision is that this work and each co-curator (the students) will continue to have control over their own narratives in informing their views on current civil rights struggles. This work serves as a proactive way for students to keep their own community database ensuring that we will always "Say Their Names." As a result of trailblazing projects like this, Public History, its students and the communities they serve will not be silenced. The discipline of Public History will continue to find its rightful place as an understood leader in grassroots community involvement, engagement and empowerment.



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One of the best examples of college students' grassroots activism is captured in works such as, Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*.

Alexi Jones, "Police Stops are Still Marred by Racial Discrimination New Data Shows," *Prison Policy Initiative*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2018/10/12/policing/>.

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Ida B. Wells-Barnett's groundbreaking book, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases*, best illuminates the atrocities of lynching during the end of the 1800s and early 20th century.

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