

“Not So Far: Anti-Black Violence and the Mainstream Origins of the Far Right.”

Abstract: In the United States, anti-Black violence is anti-democratic violence; and the attack on democracy through Black bodies has a long and brutal history. Those who frame the vigilante mobs of the “Unite the Right” or “Stop the Steal” rallies as outside the mainstream forget that the animus against “the rising tide of color against white world-supremacy,” to quote historian and eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard, was pervasive and powerful throughout the twentieth century. They forget, too, that state actors during the age of Jim Crow and after relied on the extralegal violence engendered by such animus to bolster legal subordination and preserve their power. In contrast to commentators who painted post-2016 resurgent white supremacist violence as aberrational, historians of the Black freedom struggle looked upon the scenes unfolding in Charlottesville in 2017 and Washington, DC in 2021 with shock, to be sure—but also with recognition.

This essay explores the mainstream origins of the Far Right by looking at two places and two periods: 1890s North Carolina, where white supremacist political campaigns led to the Wilmington Coup; and 1980s Southern California, where paramilitary groups took advantage of Cold War militarism to reach into the mainstream. Nine decades and a thousand miles apart, these two sites and moments point to the mobilizing power of anti-Blackness. They point, as well, to the enduring interdependence of political violence and racialized power.