



# Confederate monuments and the history of lynching in the American South: An empirical examination

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**The present work interrogates the history of Confederate memorializations by examining the relationship between these memorializations and lynching, an explicitly racist act of violence. We obtained and merged data on Confederate memorializations at the county level and lynching victims, also at the county level. We find that the number of lynching victims in a county is a positive and significant predictor of the number of Confederate memorializations in that county, even after controlling for relevant covariates. This finding provides concrete, quantitative, and historically and geographically situated evidence consistent with the position that Confederate memorializations reflect a racist history, one marred by intentions to terrorize and intimidate Black Americans in response to Black progress.**

Confederate symbols | lynching | racism | backlash | White supremacy

[The Confederate flag] is the banner of racial intimidation and fear . . . a reminder how, for centuries, the oppressive status quo has been undergirded by white supremacist violence with the tacit approval of too many political leaders.

—Bree Newsome, activist

Racial progress has always been met with resistance, intimidation, and terror. The US economy was built on slavery, and although slavery was later abolished it was not without a fight. In fact, the fight over slavery almost destroyed the country and resulted in the bloodiest conflict with the largest death toll in US history. After the end of the Civil War, the 13th and 14th Amendments were passed in 1865 and 1868, respectively, which prohibited slavery and recognized previously enslaved people as citizens of the United States. This shift from enslaving to humanizing Black people was violently rejected by many White Americans, and especially White Southerners. Due to the South's economic dependence on slavery, White Southerners in Confederate states were the main enslavers of Black Americans; 89% of the enslaved population resided in these states (1). Even after the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, the majority of Black people remained in the South as they had few resources or opportunities to move elsewhere. In fact, White Southerners in former Confederate states, desperate to maintain White supremacy, immediately passed laws aimed at reinstating slavery under a different name. These so-called Black codes were restrictive laws intended to limit Black Americans' freedom by infringing on voting rights, requiring Black Americans to sign labor contracts which resembled their treatment as enslaved workers, and enforcing vagrancy laws allowing for those without a labor contract to be jailed and subsequently forced into labor (2). Beyond the legal measures enacted to maintain White supremacy after slavery was abolished, violations of the perceived racial order were also met with extrajudicial violence, namely lynching. In the present work, we consider whether Confederate memorializations and lynching are related. Our thesis is that they

are because, we argue, both represent resistance to Black progress and both share a purpose: to intimidate and terrorize Black Americans and uphold White supremacy. The present work, then, represents a first step where we empirically test whether Confederate memorializations and lynching are linked. More specifically, we test whether counties where lynching was more prevalent are also counties where Confederate monuments are more prevalent. To foreshadow, we find that they are.

## Backlash against Black Progress: The Role of Violent Mobs and Lynching

Lynching, a form of extreme violence wherein mobs viciously execute a person, became a prevalent practice in the South during Reconstruction. In the South these lynchings were acts of mob violence intended to maintain White supremacy, suppress civil rights, instill fear, and terrorize Black people (3–5). While lynchings happened across the country, the overwhelming majority of lynchings of Black people were perpetrated in the Confederate South (~92%; refs. 3 and 6). In fact, the lynching regime in these states where enslaved people lived is differentiated from lynching in other regions because the vast majority of victims were Black people and were subjected to horrific acts of torture (7). Southern White people lynched Black people (and other White people they perceived to support Black suffrage) in extremely violent ways, including mutilation, dismemberment, and burning. As depicted in many photos from the era, some of this torturing happened among groups of people and in public

### Significance

The fight over Confederate monuments has fueled lawsuits, protests, counterprotests, arrests, even terrorism, as we painfully saw in August 2017 in Charlottesville, VA. The fight rests on a debate over whether these monuments represent racism (“hate”) or something ostensibly devoid of racism (“heritage,” “Southern pride”). Herein, we show that Confederate monuments are tied to a history of racial violence. Specifically, we find that the number of lynching victims in a county is a positive and significant predictor of Confederate memorializations in that county, even after controlling for relevant covariates. This finding provides concrete, quantitative, historically and geographically situated evidence consistent with the position that Confederate memorializations reflect a racist history, marred by intentions to terrorize and intimidate Black Americans.

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spaces, often intentionally in predominantly Black areas. The public nature and the location of lynching in places where large numbers of Black people lived is a clear message of the normality of these acts and the intention to instill fear in Black Americans. It is evident that lynching was more than immediate torture and mutilation—it was a form of collective violence wherein more than the direct murderers participated in the terrorizing of Black Americans.

As a further example of how pervasive the culture of lynching was look to the torture, mutilation, and eventual burning of Sam Hose, a Black man who lived in Georgia. Sam Hose's lynching was recounted in detail in an Atlanta, GA, newspaper a day later. It was reported that the excitement over the impending lynching required that the local train station designate "special train[s]" to transport thousands of people to the site of the lynching, and people were so eager to watch the murder that they climbed in through the train windows (8). The newspaper reported at the site of the lynching that "one of the most sickening sights of the day was the eagerness with which people grabbed after souvenirs, and they almost fought over the ashes. ..." This grotesque act of stealing body parts from Black victims to serve as "souvenirs" was not an uncommon practice (9). In fact, people were willing to pay large sums of money to obtain body parts of lynching victims like Sam Hose (4). Again consistent with common trends, no one was charged for any crime related to Sam Hose's murder. In fact, fewer than 1% of lynchings resulted in convictions, speaking to the general acceptance of these extrajudicial acts of violence (4). As evidenced by the actions of White Americans preceding and following the lynching of Sam Hose, not only those who actively committed physically violent acts during a lynching were participants.

Further, lynching was motivated. It happened in the wake of Black progress, against Black people perceived to upset the racial status quo (4, 10). A first clear example of this happened after the passing of the 15th Amendment in 1870 as Black men became heavily involved in politics and held positions at various levels of government. In the 1870s, Black involvement in the political sphere was met with backlash to reinstate White supremacy as lynching during this time was perpetrated against Black people involved in the political sphere (4, 11, 12). Further, in communities where Black males constituted a majority of voters, elections that did not end in favor of White democrats, who at the time were supportive of slavery, often ended in violent massacres (see, for example, the Colfax Massacre, St. Landry Parish Massacre, and the Red Shirts of Mississippi).

Detailing one such instance of politically motivated mob violence from September 1868, with the upcoming presidential election approaching, a White Republican newspaper editor in St. Landry Parish, LA, a predominantly Black parish, wrote a piece deemed unfavorable by Democrats. Subsequently, a group of Democrats violently forced the editor to write a retraction. White southern Democrats then claimed fear of a rebellion by Black Americans and began a 2-wk spree of murders, killing Black families in their homes, chasing innocent Black people down streets in mobs, and executing people in public, leaving bodies displayed for others to see. Around 250 people were murdered, most of them Black. This massacre was a clear form of political intimidation. In the 1868 April elections, just a few months before the massacre, 2,277 Black men in St. Landry Parish voted in favor of a Republican-backed state constitution (13). In the November presidential election a month after the massacre not a single vote in St. Landry Parish was Republican (14).

As another example of resistance, racial progress was again met with violence in 1919 after World War I. After Black veterans returned from World War I, White Americans feared that these veterans would be too resistant to their treatment in the United States after having experienced life outside the country (15). This resulted in what is known as the Red Summer of 1919, wherein almost 100 lynchings were reported in anti-Black riots

across 25 major cities in the country. Over a dozen of those lynched were veterans in uniform, as wearing the uniform was interpreted as an act of defiance by Black males (16).

Collectively, historical records and analysis leave little doubt that lynchings reflected backlash against Black progress. They were intended to promote (and effectually promoted) White supremacy through intimidation and fear. In the present work, we take seriously claims that Confederate memorializations served a similar purpose (16, 17). We examine whether lynchings are associated with Confederate memorializations in the South.

### **Backlash against Black Progress: The Role of Confederate Memorializations?**

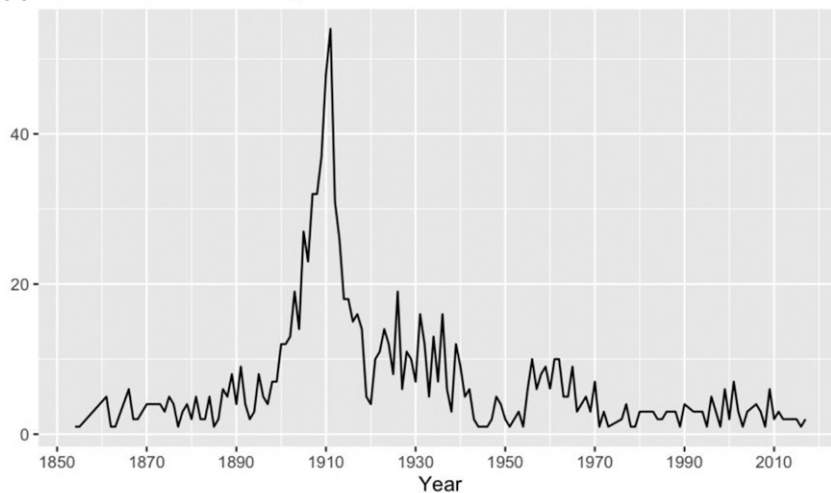
There are over 1,500 Confederate monuments and memorializations in the American South (18). Today, some claim these symbols represent hate, a celebration of White supremacy; others claim these symbols represent pride, a celebration of Southern culture (19). Whatever current attitudes and beliefs may be, however, it is important to look to history and provide a truthful accounting of Confederate memorializations and their role in public spaces. Historically, evidence suggests they were intended to intimidate Black Americans. In fact, in a statement released in 2017 following the White supremacists' rally in Charlottesville, VA, the American Historical Association explicitly states that "memorials to the Confederacy were intended, in part, to obscure the terrorism required to overthrow Reconstruction, and to intimidate African Americans politically and isolate them from the mainstream of public life" (17). This intention of Confederate memorializations to intimidate is clear from commemoration speeches and other historical records. Consider, for example, the commemoration speech for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Silent Sam monument. In the speech, a Confederate veteran informs an audience that the monument honored veterans who fought for the White race after the Civil War ended (20). He plainly asserts the role Confederate veterans had in maintaining the "welfare of the Anglo Saxon race during the four years immediately succeeding the war," further claiming that the veterans "saved the very life of the Anglo Saxon race in the South." He continues his speech by talking about publicly whipping a Black woman shortly after the war's end because she allegedly insulted a White woman.

Consider another example: A former North Carolina Supreme Court judge, Armistead Burwell, addressed a crowd at the unveiling of a Confederate monument in Mecklenburg County, calling on the crowd to "love home and its purity—to protect from taint the Saxon blood that courses in your veins" (21). These are two examples of many. Historian Brian Fennesy examined 30 Confederate dedication speeches given in North Carolina, finding that use of explicit racist language, as exemplified in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Mecklenburg County memorializations, is not uncommon (22). Of the 30 speeches examined, 14 explicitly invoked "our Anglo-Saxon ancestors," "love of race," or "your own race and blood." In other words, almost half of the commemoration speeches invoke explicitly racist language.

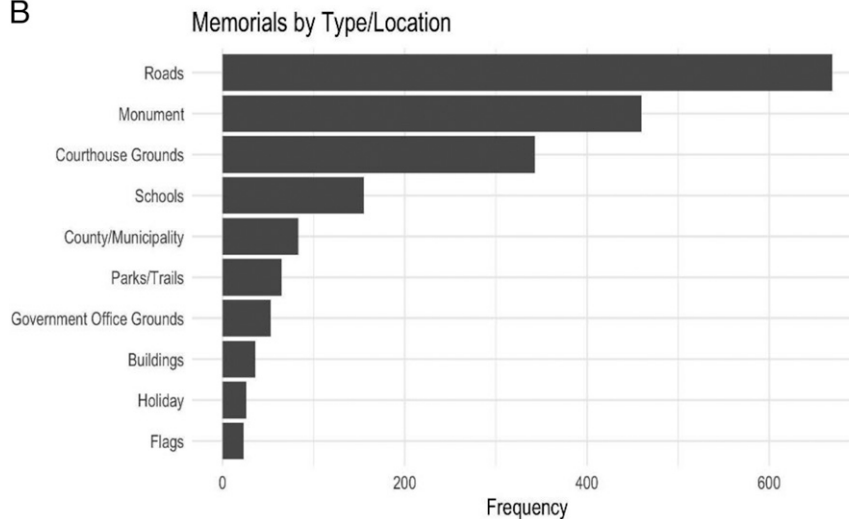
The timing and location of dedications further point to their racist intent. Historians have made clear that Confederate memorializations (flags, monuments, naming of buildings, etc.) often arise in conjunction with potential advancements in civil rights for African Americans. The Southern Poverty Law Center released data documenting the year and frequency Confederate memorializations were made (18). Upon examining the data, many factors are of importance to note. First, very few Confederate memorializations were made immediately after the Civil War. Of the 1,064 dedications with year available in the dataset, 9 were memorializations before the civil war ended and only 17 dedications occurred within 5 y of the war's end (see Fig. 1A and B).

Further, many monuments were erected in the wake of major historical moments in the fight for civil rights of Black Americans

## A Memorials Dedicated by Year



## B



**Fig. 1.** (A) The trend of Confederate memorializations by dedication year. (B) The frequency of the most common types of Confederate memorializations. Following roads and monuments, memorializations on courthouse grounds and schools are most common.

(23). For example, there was a stark increase in Confederate memorializations between the 1900s and 1920s, during the Jim Crow era, an era when laws were enacted across the South in response to Black Americans' gaining political power and freedom to engage in previously White systems. Moreover, it is telling that during this time the bulk of Confederate dedications were made on courthouse grounds and other official government office grounds (18, 23). The timing and location of these monuments suggests that an increase in political rights begat an increase in government-sanctioned Confederate symbols at spaces where laws and policies are created and upheld. A similar trend occurred following the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case intended to desegregate schools. Confederate memorializations at schools and colleges peaked soon thereafter, between 1958 and 1965 (18, 23). The timing and location of these monuments suggest that the intention to desegregate schools begat Confederate memorializations at schools. These trends offer a compelling argument that Confederate memorializations are motivated and represent backlash against Black progress.

### The Present Work

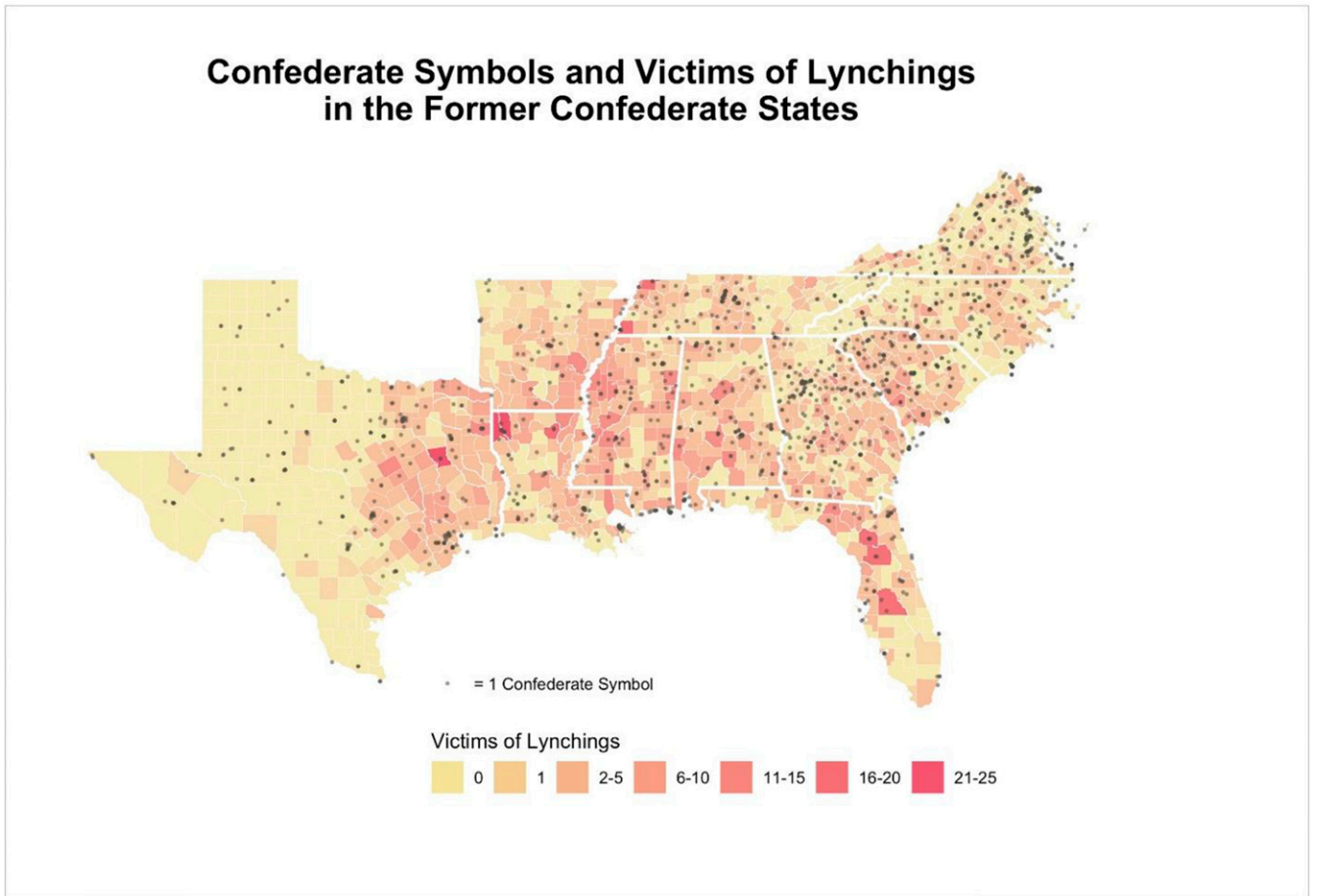
Despite clear parallels in the motivation behind lynching and Confederate memorializations, many Americans remain unsure as to whether these memorials reflect "heritage" or "hate." Our thesis is that these memorials reflect "hate," attempts to intimidate and terrorize Black people. As a first step to investigate evidence for our thesis, in the present work we test whether Confederate memorializations are associated with lynching, an explicitly racist and violent practice meant to intimidate and terrorize Black people. We predict that counties where lynching was more prevalent are also counties where Confederate memorializations are more prevalent.

### Results

A visual representation of the data is provided in Fig. 2, which displays the location of Confederate memorializations and the number of lynching victims in each county. The Spearman rank correlation coefficient between the number of memorials and the number of lynching victims by county was  $\rho = 0.19$  ( $P < 0.001$ ).

To test whether lynching was a predictor of Confederate memorializations given potential confounds, we estimated a negative binomial regression model including the 1880 population

## Confederate Symbols and Victims of Lynchings in the Former Confederate States



**Fig. 2.** Map displaying county-level number of Confederate memorializations and victims of lynching. Darker colors on the map denote higher numbers of lynching victims. Each dot represents the location of individual Confederate memorializations.

(the initial decade for the lynching data), the rate of population change between 1880 and 1930, the proportion of the population enslaved within the county in 1860, and the area of the county in square miles, along with fixed effects for the state of each county. The model also incorporates spatial lags of the number of lynching victims and the proportion of the population enslaved in 1860 to allow for spillover effects. County boundaries experience notable change over time, underscoring the somewhat arbitrary nature of these geographies. Because we anticipate that the signal sent by lynching may expand beyond a specific county location—moving as people move, not as a strict function of county bounds—we do not expect counties to represent independent observations. State fixed effects account for the statewide shared culture and politics; spatial lags account for the potential effect of lynchings on nearby populations.

With covariates included in the model the number of lynching victims is significant and positively related to the number of Confederate memorializations in a county ( $B = 0.055$ ,  $SE = 0.015$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) (Table 1). To translate the substantive relation between lynching and Confederate memorializations into meaningful values, Fig. 3 shows the predicted number of Confederate markers in a county as the frequency of lynching increases, holding constant the remaining covariates. Among counties with no recorded lynchings the predicted number of Confederate symbols is one; with between 10 and 15 recorded victims, the predicted count increases to two; and with 20 recorded victims the predicted count rises to three distinct memorials. Consistent with our hypotheses, the number of lynching victims is significantly related to the

presence of Confederate memorializations in a county, even with potentially plausible confounds included in the model.

Among additional covariates, the percent of the county's 1860 population that was enslaved is also positively and significantly related to Confederate memorializations ( $B = 0.010$ ,  $SE = 0.005$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Unsurprisingly, the legacy of slavery is connected to memorials and to racial terror, but the later lynchings retain additional predictive power above and beyond this history, further evidence in support of our hypothesis that Confederate memorializations reflect the backlash against Black progress embedded in lynching. County population size in 1880 and the rate of

**Table 1. Negative binomial regression results for the number of Confederate memorials**

	B (SE)
No. of lynchings	0.049*** (0.015)
Lynchings among neighboring counties	-0.063** (0.032)
% Enslaved, 1860	0.010** (0.005)
% Enslaved among neighboring counties	-0.009 (0.006)
Population, 1880 (in 1,000s)	0.058*** (0.004)
Percent Population Change, 1930 (log)	0.142*** (0.032)
Land area (in 100 square miles)	0.001 (0.005)
Observations	1,135
Log likelihood	-1,749.080

State fixed effects are included in the model but are not shown. \*\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.01$ .

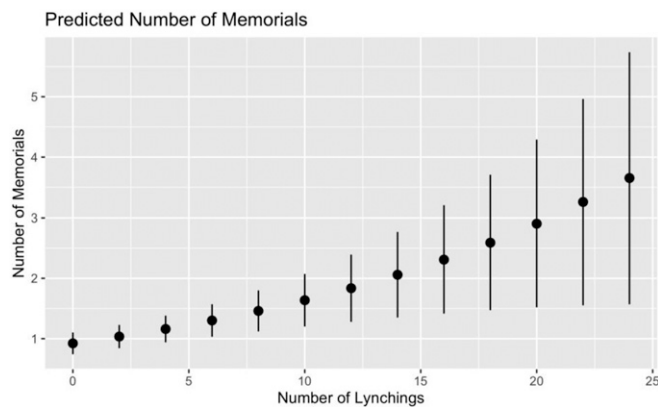


Fig. 3. Predicted number of Confederate memorializations in a county as number of lynching victims increases.

population change during this era are also positively related to Confederate memorializations ( $B = 0.058$ ,  $SE = 0.004$ ,  $P < 0.01$  and  $B = 0.142$ ,  $SE = 0.032$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Finally, the average number of lynching victims among neighboring counties is significantly and negatively related to the number of Confederate memorials within a given county ( $B = -0.063$ ,  $SE = -0.032$ ,  $P = 0.05$ ). While higher instances of lynchings in a county raise the average number of predicted memorializations, higher instances of lynchings in surrounding counties suggest a regional consistency of racial terror that spreads predicted memorializations across the region as opposed to concentrating them within the focal county. In contrast, lower instances of lynchings in surrounding counties predict a concentration of memorializations within the focal county. This negative spillover, or dispersion, could reflect a clustering of like-minded residents within counties, drawing those more inclined toward enacting real and symbolic violence together. Alternatively, it could result from some level of competition between localities or scarcity of memorialization resources (funds and figures). More broadly, it reinforces the idea that these effects are more broadly regional, not limited by a county boundary.

## Discussion

Activists have long argued that Confederate memorializations are hateful, that they represent violence and intimidation, and that they are racist. In 2015, after scaling a flagpole at the South Carolina State House to remove the Confederate flag, activist Bree Newsome wrote in a statement, “It’s the banner of racial intimidation and fear . . . a reminder how, for centuries, the oppressive status quo has been undergirded by white supremacist violence with the tacit approval of too many political leaders” (24). Similarly, activist De’Ivyion Drew, in response to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s making a deal with the Sons of Confederate Veterans to keep a monument on campus, stated, “Not only is UNC actively emboldening white supremacy through giving monetary support to them, but they’re also giving them the power with the statue to harm communities of color in the state” (25). Both Newsome and Drew call to the symbols’ racist and harmful associations, and the current data are consistent with these claims. In the present work, we find that county-level frequency of lynching predicts county-level frequency of Confederate memorializations. Statistically linking lynching, a recognized form of racial oppression intended to maintain White supremacy and suppress civil rights for Black Americans, with Confederate symbols provides compelling evidence that these symbols are associated with hate, and intentionally so.

Limitations of the present work offer important avenues for future work. One major limitation of the present work is that it did not directly measure backlash toward Black progress or

motivations to intimidate and terrorize Black people. Instead, it considered lynching as a proxy for these. Future work, then, might find ways of measuring backlash and motivations to intimidate and consider the role of local racist attitudes. Such work might then test whether backlash is related to both Confederate memorializations and lynching.

Another limitation is that the present work focused on the former Confederate states. Former Confederate states have a unique geographic and historical context that has shaped and continues to shape the culture in these states. The South’s economy was built on the enslavement of Black people. Slavery also shaped other facets of life including Southern institutions and cultures. Also, even though slavery was abolished the culture of White supremacy in these states was not. White Southerners in the former Confederate states fought to maintain White supremacy by terrorizing Black Americans. This historical and cultural backdrop underlies our argument that lynchings and Confederate memorializations represent means through which White Southerners attempted to maintain White supremacy in the face of Black progress, especially in former Confederate states. It is true that outside of the South there are still manifestations of White supremacy. However, because of the geographic, historical, and cultural context of the South—with the majority of lynchings occurring in these states—there is a clear reason to suspect that lynchings and Confederate memorializations in these states are associated. While we suspect that Confederate memorializations across the country are manifestations of White supremacy and backlash against Black progress, it will be important to identify proxies of White supremacy and backlash to Black progress that are regionally relevant to test this notion.

## Final Remarks

The fight over Confederate monuments has fueled lawsuits, protests, counterprotests, arrests, and even terrorism, as we painfully saw in August 2017 in Charlottesville, VA. The fight rests on a debate over whether these monuments represent racism (“hate”) or something ostensibly devoid of racism (“heritage” or “Southern pride”). The present work contributes to this debate by providing compelling evidence that Confederate memorials are associated with lynching, a practice explicitly linked with hate.

## Materials and Methods

**Analysis Population.** Our unit of analysis was county-level geographies defined in 1930. Specifically, we included a county in our analysis if it existed in one of the 11 former Confederate states (Virginia, Texas, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, Arkansas, and Alabama) in 1930. We used IPUMS’ National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS) to create an authoritative list of 1,135 counties meeting our criteria for inclusion (26). We restricted our analysis to former Confederate states because of the prevalent history of racial violence.

**Data.** We obtained data on county-level counts of lynchings from two primary sources: 1) the Bailey and Tolnay (27) dataset on lynchings collected from nine southern states (Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, Arkansas, and Alabama) between the years 1832 and 1930 and 2) the county-level lynching registry maintained by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) documenting lynchings between 1877 and 1950 (6). From the EJI dataset we added data on Texas and Virginia counties to obtain our full set of 11 states. We obtained data on county-level counts of Confederate memorializations from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) “Whose Heritage” Project documenting Confederate memorializations across the United States (retrieved 8 September 2020;  $n = 1,744$ ). Using the SPLC recorded latitude and longitude points, we joined the Confederate symbols to 1930s county geometries. Memorializations both for symbols that continue to exist and for symbols that have been removed were included in our county totals.

We included four additional covariates for our analysis. The percent of the population within a county composed of enslaved people in 1860 is included as a key control for the dependency of a county on slavery and a proxy for investment in the Confederacy. County population (in thousands) in 1880, at the onset period of the lynching data, was used as population size increases

the number of both potential victims and instigators of lynching. The percent change in population (logged) between 1880 and 1930, the final period of the lynching data, accounts for the rapid growth and decline of some counties during this period. Finally, the area of a county (in 100 square miles) was added as a control. All records were obtained from IPUMS NHGIS (26).

**Analytic Approach.** Because the number of Confederate memorializations is a count, we estimate a negative binomial model appropriate for count data. The counts are aggregated by county boundaries which are both changing over time and somewhat arbitrary as an area to which the impact of memorialization and lynchings are contained. Consequently, we incorporate spatial structure into the modeling. Count models incorporate a logarithmic link function between observations and regressors, complicating translation of standard spatial linear models (e.g., inclusion of an endogenous spatial lag into the exponential function can generate a nonstationary, or explosive, process). As we theorize that the spatial structure is carried through county histories like slavery or behaviors like lynching—not as a diffusion of memorialization activity—we adopted a spatial lagged-covariate approach.

Spatial lags are created using a contiguity weight matrix, so spillover effects are local, restricted to a county's neighbors.

Counties are, of course, nested within states. Within-state counties share sometimes distinctive political histories, cultures, and policies, adding an additional source of nonindependence among our primary units. We included fixed effects for states to capture this potential shared variance. Because we restricted our analysis to the Confederate states, we cannot reasonably treat this as a sample of states as assumed by a random-intercept or mixed-effects approach. *SI Appendix* provides more detail on dataset creation and modeling procedure.

**Data Availability.** The full code, documentation, and instructions for accessing the data to reproduce the analysis have been deposited in Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/afqhx/>) (28).

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