

Houses of Law: Modes of Legality and Discourses of Authority in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century American Literature

This study investigated how the Western Dime Novel prefigures the rhetoric of lynching in the post-Reconstruction South.

Findings:

- While Southern lynching was polarizing, even critics cited the Western practice with approval.
- Of 100 Dime Novels, 74 featured a scene of extra-legal justice; all 74 stemmed from a property crime. Of these, 41 also involved a romantic rival or rape threat..
- Of 30 Southern lynching narratives, all 30 foregrounded a crime (or threat of crime) against a white woman. All 30 also involved a crime against property.
- Popular sovereignty, resting on the legitimacy of “pocket law,” underwrites both Western and Southern lynching narratives.



My work calls for further study of race in the Western lynching narrative and continued building of my archive. I plan to apply for grants for more extended study of the Dime Novel collections at the Library of Congress and the Albert Johanssen Collection at Northern Illinois University.

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