

Maryland conference on lynching finds links to voter suppression, social inequality

By JONATHAN M. PITTS
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In this Oct. 12, 2020, photo, people fill out a preregistration form while waiting in line to vote at the DeKalb County elections office in Decatur, Georgia. (Ben Gray/AP)

Early voting for the U.S. presidential election has begun in many states, and critics of the process say they see signs the minority vote is being suppressed.

Lines have been long and slow-moving in several mostly Black districts in Georgia. The Republican governor of Texas has capped the number of drop boxes for ballots at one per county, a move critics say targets minority voters.

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Several speakers at the third annual Lynching in Maryland conference, which more than a hundred people attended Saturday via videoconference, tied the legacy of lynching to voter suppression of minorities and related social justice issues.

“We’re continuing to see such things manifest themselves throughout the country as more and more people of color and their white allies are taking a stance against [the Trump] administration,” said Charles Chavis, an assistant professor of history and conflict resolution at George Mason University in Fairfax. “It’s nothing new in American history.”

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The [Maryland Lynching Memorial Project](#), a nonprofit organization that organized the symposium, seeks to tell the truth about lynching, a form of racial terror that killed more than 4,000 people in the U.S. in the decades following the Civil War, including at least 44 in Maryland. The vast majority were Black men killed by white mobs.

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Lest anyone think of lynching as a practice that took place “long ago and far away,” [Will Schwarz, a Towson filmmaker](#) who founded and directs the project, says that’s not true. And, he said, the effects endure to this day in voter suppression and other entrenched forms of discrimination.

“Today is the 87th anniversary of the last lynching in Maryland,” he said, referring to a mob killing in Somerset County of African American laborer George Armwood in 1933. “There are still hundreds of thousands of Marylanders who were alive that day. We don’t have the luxury of thinking this is something in the distant past.”

Lynchings are known to have taken place in 18 of Maryland's 24 counties. The conference opened with Marylanders reading aloud the names of those murdered in each.

[Bringing a dark chapter to light: Maryland confronts its lynching legacy »](#)

Schwarz and Chavis were among many speakers at the symposium who sought to make the point that lynching was not simply a means by which a racial majority got rid of minority individuals deemed to have done wrong.

It was also a way for that majority to send the message that Black people should think twice about exercising the freedoms won when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Tragically, they said, that message resonates.

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"Lynching has always been a message crime used as a tool to maintain the racial hierarchy, specifically in cases where African American communities have attempted to exercise economic and political power," said Chavis, the vice chair of the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a panel the General Assembly created to explore the state's history of lynching. "The legacy of lynching is directly connected to voter suppression and attempts to stoke fear in the hearts of Black and brown [people] and allies of every color ... who are casting a vote this November."

The keynote speaker, Michael Pfeifer, the author of several books on lynching, addressed lynching before the Civil War.



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Because enslaved people were still considered property, slave owners had less incentive to kill them, but some did so, said Pfeifer, a history professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. Pfeifer has documented 55 cases.

He said the practice became a “blueprint” for the thousands who committed such killings in later decades.

One panel explored the state of social justice activism, mainly among young people in Maryland, and David Fakunle, a Baltimore educator who chairs the state truth and reconciliation commission, chronicled the progress the group has made since it came into being in 2019.

Fakunle characterized the highly publicized deaths of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minneapolis this year as lynchings and said those and other cases have only affirmed the urgent need for the kind of work the commission is doing.

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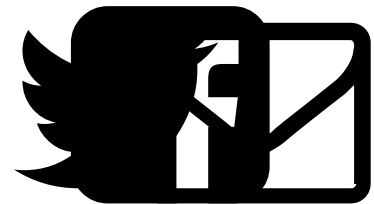
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“We want all forms of oppression to be chronicled, remembered and, hopefully, reconciled,” he said. “We know this is much bigger than us.”



Jonathan M. Pitts



As religion and Maryland enterprise reporter for the Baltimore Sun, Jonathan Pitts covers news developments within faith communities and the many and sundry ways in which Marylanders live. A native of St. Louis, Mo., and a graduate of Haverford College and the University of Missouri School of Journalism, he came to the Baltimore Sun in 1999.
