

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE PRACTICES OF CRITICAL BLACK MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

Not too long after photography's grand debut in 1839, physician and inventor Oliver Wendell Holmes described the new technology as a "mirror with a memory." What might this phrase mean for the question of African Americans and their relationship to the vicissitudes of photography and the vagaries of memory in particular? Through readings of works of art and social activism that make use of lynching photographs, this essay considers ways in which photography has functioned as a technology of memory for African Americans, what the essay calls *critical black memory*, and proffers a mode of historical interpretation that both plays upon and questions photography's documentary capacity.

The essay makes two claims specifically. First, the mechanical reproduction of lynching by way of the photograph has been central to the recounting and reconstitution of black political cultures throughout the Jim Crow and post-Civil Rights era. From the usage of lynching photography in pamphlets by early twentieth-century anti-lynching activists, to posters created by mid-century civil rights organizations, to their deployment in contemporary art and popular culture, this archive has been a constitutive element of black visuality more broadly. Second, African American engagements with photography as a "site of memory" suggest a mode of historical interpretation in which African Americans simultaneously critique the "truth-claims" of photography while they mobilize the medium's documentary capacity to intervene in the classification and subjugation of black life.

Keywords: memory, photography, lynching, African Americans

I. "MIRROR WITH A MEMORY"

Not too long after photography's grand debut in 1839, physician and inventor Oliver Wendell Holmes described the new technology as a "mirror with a memory." Holmes's metaphor applied initially to the form of daguerreotypes in which images are exposed directly onto chemically treated and highly polished metal plates. In beholding these small yet weighty objects, viewers might catch their own reflection alongside that of their distant or deceased beloved, entwining their own image with that of a departed husband, wife, or child—daguerreotype's most likely subject—into a circle of domestic intimacy. As the technology developed from daguerreotype to the collodion or wet-plate process, allowing for multiple reproductions, so too did the uses to which photography was put. What endured was the medium's mirroring capacity. Holmes, one of photography's early and most ardent enthusiasts, celebrated photography's "completion [of] the triumph"

of daguerreotypy, through its ability to “assert [the] hidden truth [of the recorded image] in a perfect harmonious affirmation of the realities of Nature.”¹

“Mirror with a memory” is an enormously evocative phrase. It speaks to the camera’s ability to reflect what is placed before it, faithfully and accurately. Indeed, photography’s uniqueness as a medium, and its early and enduring appeal, lay in its ability to *record*, not merely depict, that which exists in the material world. Photography quickly surpassed painting in its imagined capacity to capture history and human experience *as it truly was*, unmediated by human hands. The medium’s magic rested in its capacity to offer an index, a sign of a “truly existing thing.”

To Holmes, photography was the ultimate historical artifact; he happily predicted a coming age “when a man who wishes to see any object, natural or artificial, will go to the Imperial, National, or City Stereographic Library and call for its skin or form, as he would for a book at any common library.”² Holmes thought that photography, as historical artifact, could effectively perform the work of human recall, that is, memory. Memory in this context is best understood as the repository of human experience, a static and objective archive. A mirror with a memory then offers reflection and identification that can be archived and fixed in place. For Holmes, a Harvard-trained doctor and published poet, the phrase would also seem to capture the alchemy of technology and art from which photography was born and the antinomies that have animated its reception since. Science imbued with soulfulness. Wonder captured with technical precision. The index of the truly existing thing, the “that-has-been.”

What might this phrase, “mirror with a memory,” mean for African Americans and their relationship to the vicissitudes of photography and the vagaries of memory in particular? What indeed is the significance of photography for “a watchful people, a people who could not not know: a people of long memory”?³ What is the role of this visual medium for a people who have long held up a mirror to the underbelly of U.S. society, reflecting back a fractured nation?

This essay considers the ways in which African Americans throughout the twentieth century have utilized photography to interpret and critique a dominant history that more often than not excised, degraded, and silenced them. African Americans have engaged in a practice of what I will call *critical black memory*, a mode of historical interpretation and political critique that has functioned as an important resource for framing and mobilizing African American social and political identities and movements. In order to illuminate the practices of critical black memory, I focus here on the archive of lynching photographs. The almost surprising cathexis that quickened around the Allen-Littlefield collection of lynching images and their circulation through the *Without Sanctuary* book, traveling exhibit, and website at the turn of the twenty-first century, has pried open a space in which to consider lynching’s visual longevity, and compelled attention to the deep em-

1. Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph” (*Atlantic Monthly*, June 1859), <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/1859jun/holmes.htm> (accessed September 16, 2009).

2. *Ibid.*

3. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, “Introduction,” *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

beddedness of these images in our present ways of seeing.⁴ Originally produced as testimonies to the inevitability of white supremacy, these photographs soon were employed by African Americans in the emergent anti-lynching movement. From these early uses well into our contemporary moment, lynching imagery, and lynching photography in particular, have appeared in African American newspapers; in social movement literature, including posters, pamphlets, postcards, and the like; in visual and conceptual art; and on t-shirts and album covers. Such visual re-visitations and iconographic re-inscriptions provide an opportunity to consider what we might call a black visual hermeneutics, a practice of historical and aesthetic interpretation by artists and activists that engages the fecund tensions produced by photography as a “mirror with a memory.” Put another way, the archive of lynching photography constitutes a site of struggle over the interpretation of the history of racial violence and black citizenship in the United States.

The essay begins by outlining the persistence of lynching and its photographic representations in black political and expressive cultures before turning to an explication of the concept of critical black memory. It then offers close readings of social movement posters and contemporary works of art from the second half of the twentieth century that make use of the archive of lynching photographs, in order to consider the ways in which photography has functioned as a technology or “ritual” of memory for African Americans. Such engagements with photography as a “site of memory” suggest a mode of historical interpretation in which African Americans simultaneously critique the “truth-claims” of photography while they mobilize the medium’s documentary capacity to intervene in the classification and subjugation of black life. Why social movement activists and visual artists have returned to these images over and over, and the particular forms that such referencing and quoting take, demonstrate the necessity of reinterpreting the black body as well as the assertion of themselves as viewing subjects and not merely visual objects.

Finally, in turning attention to visual artists and activists, the essay emphasizes Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s assertion that theories of history “grossly underestimate the size, the relevance, and the complexity of the overlapping sites where history [as a social process] is produced, notably outside of the academy.”⁵ As I hope to demonstrate, critical black memory recognizes the salience of memory to African American life, history, and culture. Critical black memory names, then, an ongo-

4. James Allen *et al.*, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000). The exhibit opened at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York City on January 13, 2000 and was followed by shows at the New-York Historical Society, the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Site in Atlanta, Georgia, and Jackson State University in Mississippi. *Without Sanctuary* has also engendered a plethora of new scholarship. See especially the work of Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line* (Durham, NC: Durham University Press, 2004); Dora Apel and Shawn Smith, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); and Ashraf Rushdy, “The Exquisite Corpse,” *Transition* 9, no. 3 (2000), 70-77.

5. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 19.

ing, engaged practice through which a range of participants speak back to history and assess ongoing crises faced by black subjects.

II. THE PERSISTENCE OF LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPHS

In the lynching epidemic that swept the United States, murdering at least 3,220 African American men, women, and children between 1882 and 1930, and nearly 5,000 people of all races and ethnicities until 1968, primarily in the South, photography emerged as integral to the lynching spectacle.⁶ For those not close enough to the scene, or for those not lucky enough to obtain clothing or body parts, photographs proved the next best things. As postcards, trade cards, and stereographs, lynching images held a strong popular commercial appeal. For professional photographers, lynchings spawned a cottage industry in which picture makers conspired with mob members and even local officials for the best vantage point, constructed portable darkrooms for quick turnaround, and pedaled their product “through newspapers, in drugstores, on the street—even . . . door to door.”⁷ If lynchings helped construct a unified white identity among those whites present and in the surrounding areas, then photographs of lynchings helped extend that community far beyond the town, the county, the state, the South, to include whites nationwide and even internationally. Now all whites, rich or poor, male or female, northern or southern, could imagine themselves to be master. This is true not only of the images made professionally and sold commercially, but also of those amateur photographs taken by everyday folk with cameras readily available through a burgeoning photographic industry.

Lynching spectacles placed their black victims at the center for all to see; in so doing they drew clearly defined ideological and spatial lines around the communities for whom their warnings were intended. As whites were meant to identify with the power of the photograph’s white participants, so too were blacks meant to identify with the abject figure at the center of the image’s frame. The “Dogwood Tree” postcard was made from a photograph taken after a lynching in Sabine County, Texas, June 15, 1908 (Figure 1). The poem beneath the image celebrates the dogwood tree, a Southern icon of rebirth and rejuvenation, whose blossoms resemble bleeding crosses:

This is only the branch of the Dogwood tree;
 An emblem of WHITE SUPREMACY
 A lesson once taught in the Pioneer’s school;
 That this is a land of WHITE MAN’S RULE.
 The Red Man once in an early day
 Was told by the Whites to mend his way.
 The Negro, now by eternal grace,
 Must learn to stay in the negro’s place.
 In the Sunny South, the Land of the Free,

6. Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); and Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*.

7. Text from the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition at the New York Historical Society, May 12, 2000.

Let the White supreme forever be.
 Let this a warning to all Negroes be,
 Or they'll suffer the fate of the DOGWOOD TREE.

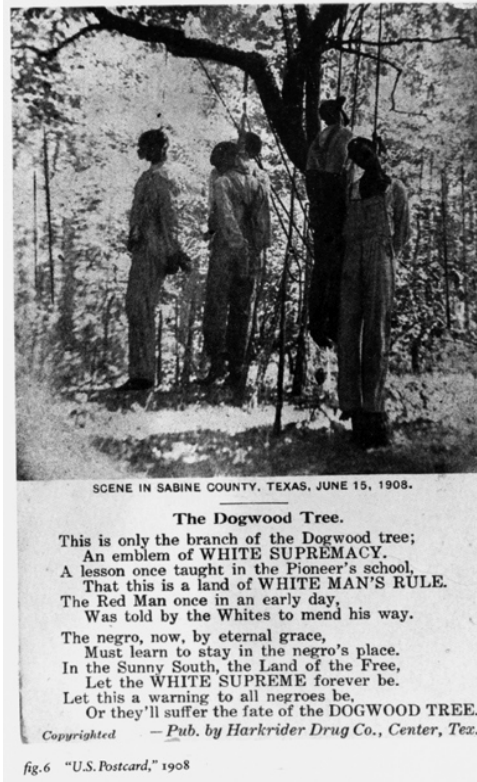


Figure 1. The Dogwood Tree.

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embody the foregone conclusion of white supremacy. With references to Native American, and ultimately African American, genocide, the poem makes explicit the tale the photograph is meant to convey: one of the inevitability of white supremacy throughout the South as it either reaffirms the onlooker's sense of power or his or her sense of powerlessness.⁸

This use of text mirrors the practice of hanging signs on or near the bodies of lynching victims. A note pinned to the body of Joseph Riley read, "Let this be a warning to you niggers to let white people alone or you will go the same way." "Warning" was written by hand on a lithographed postcard of this lynching. Hanging from the foot of John Bailey was the macabre notice, "Please Do Not Wake Him." Further, the use of text indicates that the photograph does not "speak for itself," but rather has to be contextualized within a discursive narrative of black bestiality. The constant framing of the image with words indicates that the mythology needed to be retold and reinforced repeatedly even as the photographs themselves became shorthand for the proper way blacks and whites were to relate

The poem frames the story of the black male victims who hang silently in the woods. The bodies pictured here may be those of Jerry Evans, William Johnson, William Manuel, "Rabbit Bill" McCoy, Moses Spellman, Frank Williams, Cleveland Williams, or those of two other unidentified African Americans, nine in all, lynched in June 1908. The presence of these men amid the Texas trees is naturalized by the absence of murderers from the confines of the picture's frame. The men are still and no longer threatening. The quality of the image prevents us from seeing the faces of these men, and perhaps even identifying them. However, the composition, particularly the distance between photographer and subjects, makes clear that they are to remain faceless and without identity. They are merely empty black vessels that

8. NAACP Papers, Part 7, The Antilynching Campaign 1912–1955, Series A, Antilynching Investigative File, 1:292. NAACP Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

in the South. Indeed, these photographs reference a familiar narrative of spectacle lynching that was often repeated and reinforced by mainstream newspapers of the time. To tell the story of lynching in this way was meant to hold black communities in their subordinate place, and help imagine and construct a unified white American identity.⁹

For those contemporary audiences whose first encounter with the horrors of lynching was occasioned by the *Without Sanctuary* traveling exhibit and its accompanying book collection of lynching images, it is difficult to imagine the prevalence of these photographs in the early twentieth century. But as cultural historian Jacqueline Goldsby so deftly argues, the various representations of lynching—in words and in images—constitute a “spectacular secret,” one in which lynching’s violence “could command the public’s attention and yet will the nation to a collective silence.”¹⁰ Lynching photographs were consumed both privately—in the form of postcards, stereographs, and cabinet cards—and publicly, in newspapers and as part of nickelodeon displays.

By the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, lynching photographs had fallen out of favor among whites, their primary consumers. But for African Americans, lynching and lynching photographs have constituted a sort of “primal narrative” of the black experience of citizenship. Opposition to lynching was a key site of political organizing following the period of Reconstruction; the black women’s club movement at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Niagara Movement, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) all made anti-lynching activism the centerpieces of their social justice work.¹¹ The NAACP alone helped introduce three of the approximately two hundred proposed federal anti-lynching laws (to this day there is no such legislation). And lynching proved a persistent theme in African American cultural expression.¹² As for lynching photographs, beginning with the pioneering work of activist Ida B. Wells, the first to employ lynching photographs in her 1893 essay “Lynch Law” and her 1895 pamphlet, *A Red Record*, these images appeared in anti-lynching propaganda and pamphlets, as well as in reports of mob violence in the black press. In such contexts, these images reconceived the received narrative of black savagery as one of black vulnerability; white victimization was recast as

9. Allen *et al.*, *Without Sanctuary*, 196.

10. Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 281.

11. Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword among Lions* (New York: Amistad, 2009); Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching*.

12. In addition to Goldsby, Apel, and Apel and Smith, see Margaret Rose Vendryes, “Hanging on Their Walls: An Art Commentary on Lynching, The Forgotten 1935 Art Exhibit” in *Race Consciousness: African-American Studies for the New Century*, ed. J. Jackson Fossett and J. A. Tucker (New York: New York University Press, 1997); *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Abdul JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Phyllis Jackson, “Re-Living Memories: Picturing Death,” *IJELE: Art EJournal of the African World* 5 (2002); Leigh Raiford, “The Consumption of Lynching Images” in *Only Skin Deep*, ed. C. Fusco and B. Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 267–273; and David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001).

white terrorism. Though the actors and the fundamental story of crimes remained the same, in this new forum photography changed the roles and the ultimate moral. Though not the producers of lynching photographs, African Americans were nonetheless implicated as objects and spectators, and as such, many chose to respond through appropriating and re-contextualizing these images.

After the era of “formal” lynching ended, that is with the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, social movement activists and visual artists have employed photographs of lynchings to re-narrate history, to memorialize past racial violence and terror, and also to mobilize against it and what it stands for in their own historical moment. Whether to repair, redress, mourn, or call to action, activists and cultural producers have returned repeatedly to “the sight of a black [person] hanging from a tree,” making of it an icon.¹³ Such visual returns, I believe, indicate the central role of vision and visibility in black social movements. Indeed, it is my contention that black visibility—“how we are able, allowed, or made to see” blackness “and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein”—is inextricable from African American movement efforts to change the conditions of black people’s lives.¹⁴ Not least of that to be transformed is the individual and collective sense of one’s own power, efficacy, and being in the world—of how we see blackness, the meanings we attach to black people, and the value we attach to black life because of this “sight.” The persistent return to these images suggests that the powerful and troubling archive of lynching photography is a constitutive element of black visibility since these images began their intense circulation in the years following the end of Reconstruction.

In sum, lynching as a “regime of racial terror” has played a formative role in “configuring modern black political cultures.”¹⁵ And the mechanical reproduction of lynching by way of the photograph has been central to the recounting and reconstitution of black political cultures throughout the Jim Crow and post-Civil Rights era. From the use of lynching photography in pamphlets by early twentieth-century anti-lynching activists, to posters created by mid-century civil rights organizations, to their deployment in contemporary art and popular culture, we can see how this archive has been a constitutive element of black visibility more broadly.

III. CRITICAL BLACK MEMORY: CHARTING THE CONSTELLATION OF HISTORY, MEMORY, AND PHOTOGRAPHY

How do we account for these returns and revisitations? How do we understand the convergences of history, memory, and photography, and their intersection in the lives of African Americans specifically? To return to the concept of the mirror with a memory, Holmes believed that photography, in presenting the skin or

13. Ida B. Wells, “A Red Record” [1895], in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997); Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

14. Hal Foster, “Preface,” in *Vision and Visibility*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), ix.

15. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 118.

form of “any object,” would render the past easily accessible, highly mobile, and, like the hide of an animal after skinning, readily available for viewing. However, rather than conceiving of photography as a mere repository of the past, both individual and collective, we might follow Walter Benjamin’s lead and think of photography as dialectical. In this view, the indexical, reflective function of the photograph is imbued with a living engagement with the past. Or put another way: what the mirror reflects is archived for posterity but in a way that is always available to and for re-viewing, reconsideration, and re-evaluation.

This dialectic is in keeping with notions of memory as an active process by which people recall, lay claim to, understand, and represent the past. As French historian Pierre Nora avers, “Memory is life . . . It remains in permanent evolution.” Individuals and collectives are constantly reshaping memory, renewing and retying, and sometimes undoing, in Nora’s words, our “bond to the eternal present.”¹⁶ Indeed, memory is an active and integral element in the composition of social and political communities. For social movements especially, memory is never an end in itself but rather a tool to make sense of history, declare lineages, clarify allegiances, and mobilize constituents.

We need, then, to consider memory as a mode of criticism “that makes visible what has been obscured, what has been excluded and what has been forgotten.”¹⁷ What we might call a practice of critical black memory is one of many tools New World blacks and African Americans in particular have employed as a response to the dislocation, subjection, and dehumanization that has marked their experience of modernity. I employ the term “critical black memory” to invoke both Walter Benjamin, for whom memory served as an important political resource, and Houston Baker, who emphasizes the critical capacity of a memory attuned to “ethical evaluations of the past” with an eye toward revolution and distinct from “the distraught sentimentality” of nostalgia.¹⁸ Critical black memory implies the negotiation, the *use*, of history for the present. For both Benjamin and Baker memory is an essential site of political and social struggle.

Photography stands at the crossroads of history and memory. This intersection is certainly not uncomplicated or un vexed. As Shirley Wajda has suggested, “Photographs confound historians; history confounds photography.”¹⁹ Such a location alerts us to the ways that we as scholars, particularly historians, engage photographs in our work. We tend to use photographs as illustrations, as evidence, as a mirror that accurately reflects the past. But we do not “apprehend photography as a social practice,” fully exploring the practices of looking or the historicity of the photograph itself. Such an engagement requires a different kind of interpretive act.

16. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*” in Fabre and O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 285.

17. David Scott, “Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory” *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008), vi.

18. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); Houston A. Baker, Jr., “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” in *The Black Public Sphere*, ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7.

19. Shirley Teresa Wajda, “History Writing, With Light” *Reviews in American History* 26, no. 3 (1998), 567.

And indeed it challenges the way we interpret and interrogate other kinds of archival sources. This is certainly the case of African Americans' engagement with photography. Long refused access to honorific depiction, black bodies were confined to the frames of the criminal, the pornographic, ethnographic, the comedic, or to the margins of the sentimental portraits of whites.²⁰ As demonstrated by "photography's other histories," the multitude of photographic practices engaged by subaltern groups, African Americans too have used the technology to reconstruct not merely individual and collective selves, but also racial and national histories.²¹

Critical black memory emerges out of and is motivated by both survival—the continued ability to struggle and the faith that such struggle will secure a brighter future—and failure—the persistence of peril and renewed forms of racial inequity and subjugation. On the one hand, memory offers a space to organize for the future while making critical assessment of the past and present. For African Americans in particular, who have traditionally been denied access to formal historical institutions, memory has been more than a mere repository of experience. Rather, black memory has challenged official stories and given voice to historical silences. It has attempted to suture continuity in the face of rupture and fragmentation. It has proffered futurity woven out of "the ineffable terror" of the past. As a living entity, memory has proven critical to identity-formation and self-creation. In W. Fitzhugh Brundage's keen words, "the rituals of black memory represent a form of cultural resistance."²² And even more, black memory "implies a certain act of redemption."²³

Black memory also describes and carries within it the failures of the past: the failure to produce the desired political transformations, the failure to create or sustain a culture of mourning or to successfully work through that mourning. Black memory has also been a burden: it can turn experiences into icons, force racial and gender conformity, elicit prescribed responses to racial events, and produce an ambivalent myopia when it comes to recognizing political and social inequities endured by other marginalized groups.

In the wake of the more than 3,000 lynchings that occurred in all parts of the country from the late nineteenth and into the first half of the twentieth century, activists have had to ask what narratives do we then produce to put the individual and collective self, fragmented by trauma, back together?²⁴ I argue that photographs of lynching embody the will to survive and the anguish of failure entrenched in critical black memory. Photography has been central to the narration of lynching across the twentieth century, and lynching photography is nearly omnipresent in the narration of black life in this long century as well. The lynching archive func-

20. Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

21. *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

22. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 10.

23. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 58.

24. Maurice Stevens, "Opening Remarks," "Imagining Bodies: Visions of the Nation through Race, Gender and Space," symposium, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, March 16, 2006.

tions as a site of struggle over how to memorialize the dead and how to organize for the future; it also reveals the vagaries of an ossified memory.²⁵

Survival comes in the retelling. Indeed, to be able to tell the tale means one has lived. Likewise, to look at a photograph of the dead means that the viewer is living and breathing. For James Cameron, a black man who survived a lynching that took the lives of his friends Thomas Smith and Abram Shipp in Marion, Indiana in 1930, survival is most clearly articulated in the ability to recount the tale in both written memoir and through engagement with the now well-known photograph of Shipp and Smith hanging lifeless in front of the white Marion, Indiana crowd. "To survive . . . is to immerse oneself in photographic representation," writes David Marriott, to distinguish between the (black) hands that hold the photograph and the (black) body that hangs dead within the photograph's frame. "Re-presentation is what brings the spectacle of injury and death to an end."²⁶ And in Trudier Harris's estimation, keeping these images alive and in circulation demonstrates a retelling of history, "an awareness that has survival at its basis."²⁷

IV. PHOTOGRAPHIC PRAXIS

Black artists, writers, and activists, including those who did not directly experience a lynching, have been motivated to revisit lynching as a primal narrative of Jim Crow. For this group, the lynching photograph "provide[s] an occasion for self-reflection as well as for an exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing and longing."²⁸ It is a way of wresting possession of the past, reclaiming the black body in pain.

For civil rights and black power activists, lynching provided a key referent for the continued terror experienced by African Americans whether in rural enclaves or urban ghettos. Organizations including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party made use of lynching photography in the visual literature of their movements.²⁹

Black Panther Party Minister of Culture and artist, Emory Douglas, used photography to place lynching within a longer historical continuum. In a photo collage that appeared in the November 23, 1972 issue of *The Black Panther*, the organization's newspaper, Douglas cropped the well-known Lawrence Beitler

25. Like other archives of "atrocious photographs," the uses of lynching photographs raise a host of ethical concerns. Work on the circulation of Holocaust photography offers striking and insightful parallels for this project. See, especially, Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003); and Susan A. Crane, "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography" *History and Theory* 47 (October 2008), 309-330.

26. James Cameron, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1982); David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.

27. Harris, *Exorcising Blackness*, 187.

28. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

29. For a discussion of SNCC's employment of lynching imagery, see Leigh Raiford, "'Come Let Us Build a New World Together': SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (December 2007), 1129-1157.

photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, and tinted the original photograph an electric and almost nauseating fuchsia (Figure 2). In the space between Shipp and Smith's corpses, Douglas added an advertisement for the sale of "Virginia and Maryland Negroes" available for purchase, "low for cash or, on time, for good city acceptance," at a New Orleans slave house. As a result, the central figure's pointing finger extends to the space between Smith and the notice, as if he were raising his arm high to place a bid on this "likely slave." In this way Douglas made explicit the connection between the commodification of black bodies during slavery and their re-commodification during Jim Crow through the practice of spectacle lynching. The auction block and the lynching tree are both stages in which abject blackness is performed for and sold "on time" over time to eager whites.

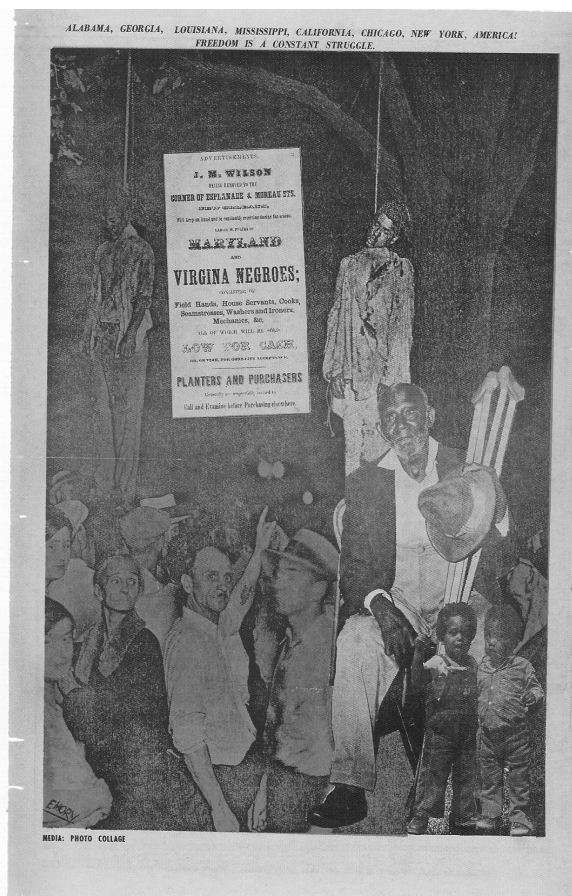


Figure 2. Emory Douglas, "Freedom is a Constant Struggle." © 2009 Emory Douglas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

For Douglas, the connection is not merely that between slavery and Jim Crow; it extends into the immediate post-Jim Crow era and into the future. Douglas left Smith's image untinted, keeping its original black and white tone. Smith's right hand seems to touch the head of a seated elderly black man, and at his knee, Douglas pasted an image of two young black toddlers. The diagonal line formed by these four black males projects a patrilineal descent rooted in the enslaved/lynched black man, and routed through the defeated elderly man who holds both hat and crutches in hand. Like Abram Smith, this man has also been rendered physically and socially disabled. The man's free hand grazes the raised

almost-fist (as if in a black power salute) of one of the afro-ed boys. Children, whether hand-drawn or in photographs, have always been prominent in Douglas's artwork. According to Douglas, "The kids were always an inspiration to everyone

in the party. That was the main focus of everything. . . . We always used to use that quote from Mao in the early days, ‘Children make the revolution.’”³⁰ Douglas’s use of the lynching photograph in this collage produces a narrative whose visual and metaphorical arc begins with the lyncher/slave owner, crescendos with the lynched black man, and descends into the powerless aged black man. It is a story of white supremacy’s persistent pursuit and destruction of black masculinity across generations. The narrative attempts to make whole the fractured black male self by ending with two boys at the very beginning of their lives. “Real” black power, embodied in the Black Panther Party specifically, lies in the coming to racial consciousness—the fist in formation—of black boys.

Not concerned just with extending the time of black memory, Douglas expanded its spatial boundaries as well. The caption above the collage reads in capital letters, “Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, California, New York, America! Freedom is a Constant Struggle.” Mapping both the routes of African Americans’ migration and the terror that pursued them across history and region, the poster erects a critical black memory born of failure but with survival as its goal.

As author and critic John Berger tells us: “Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments.”³¹ Visual artists and activists give photographs a living context in part through the practice of intertextuality. Not unlike pioneer activist Ida B. Wells’s placement of a photographic postcard of a Clanton, Alabama lynching within multiple “discourses of truth” in her 1893 essay “Lynch Law,” later uses of a photograph often situate the photograph against, and in conversation with, other representational forms: advertisements, material objects, their own written words, sound (in invoking the civil rights movement song, “Freedom is a Constant Struggle,” Douglas also makes use of sound), as well as other photographs. Such a practice recognizes the historical import of the photograph, that is, its indexicality and its significance as a mode of documentation. But it also comprehends the photograph’s inadequacies, either its failure to adequately represent the lynching death of blacks or its failure to intervene on behalf of its murdered subject. Intertextuality also attempts to compensate for changing scopopic regimes, acknowledging that the practice of how we look must be historically contextualized.

V. THE BOUNDARIES OF CRITICAL BLACK MEMORY

The move to intertextuality forces us to ask: When and how does photography as a site and source of black memory fail? When does memory no longer offer an opportunity for redress but become a burden? What are the costs of, in Hilton Als’s words, “having to drag all those lynchings around?”³²

30. Leigh Raiford, “Emory Douglas Meets CodeZ,” *CodeZ* (Summer 2007), http://codezonline.com/featurearticle/2007/08/emory_douglas_meets_codez.html (accessed July 28, 2009).

31. Berger, *About Looking*, 61.

32. Hilton Als, “GWTW,” in Allen *et al.*, *Without Sanctuary*, 41.

Failure comes in the retelling. Such repetition of the lynching narrative over the course of the twentieth century has both compounded the violence of lynching and has served to anesthetize audiences to black pain and suffering. The public's seeming insatiability for tales of racial violence and transgression has kept the tale of the black male rapist/criminal, at the heart of the lynching narrative, alive and well and circulating in our cultural and political imaginary.

Lynching thus proves perpetually successful as a form of social control, not just as a site of political mobilization. Photographs of lynchings imaged the fragility and vulnerability of black bodies in the United States. Lynching photographs helped discipline black and white communities alike to stay in their racially prescribed places. As part of anti-lynching campaigns, photography instructed black communities always to be reminded of the menace of mob violence. These images became shorthand for a wide range of ideologies and approaches to combat mob violence. Through repeated use and circulation, they emerged as powerful visual icons.³³ The victims imprisoned within the photographs' frames are reified and reinvented as the embodiment of racial ideology.

Icons, by their very nature, mask differences and conflict. The narrative of the black rapist finds its "antithesis" in the image of "the lynched black man," which has emerged and evolved as visual shorthand, as a powerful icon paradigmatic of the suffering of all African Americans and understood only through the abject black male body. The costs of resituating political discourse within or on the black male body specifically not only threatens to "reproduce the hyperembodiedness of the powerless," but it also threatens to preclude difficult conversations about violence against black women that are inextricable from yet submerged in the history of lynching.³⁴ Put another way, does the iconization of the image of Shipp and Smith render the lynching of African American women illegible? The iconicity of the image of the lynched black male alerts us to the ways that black memory is specifically gendered, and to how it shapes the expectations of and for subsequent African American social movements. Indeed, the Black Panther Party poster that I offered as an example of a critical black memory trades on the power of the black male icon, and as a result it may occlude an understanding of contemporary inequities in feminist terms. Douglas's collage contributes to a narrative of racial terror in which black men are the only victims and black boys the only hope. Such a framing is endemic to much black nationalist (and black conservative) rhetoric. The visual imagery of the Black Panther Party both traffics in these representations and struggles against them. However, the Black Power and Civil Rights movements navigate a visual and discursive terrain established in large part by the legacies of the lynching narrative, one significant legacy being that crimes against black men will always take precedence in anti-racist activism.

So too must we wrestle with the ways that photography can relieve us of the burden of memory: rather than initiating a critical process, photography can do the work for us. In the contemporary context of hypermodernity and hypervisuality, photographs do not necessarily represent and record something unique. Rather, in

33. For more on "the icon," see Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991).

34. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.

a world of constant recording, photography, and its continual circulation through cell phones, Flickr, and MySpace, loses meaning through “incessant acts of personalized repetition.”³⁵ Like a needle stuck in the groove of a record, to use an older technological metaphor, nagging repetition may force us to turn away.



Figure 3. Kerry James Marshall, “Heirlooms and Accessories,” 2002, triptych, inkjet print on paper, edition of 3, 57” x 54 1/4” each.
Courtesy of Koplín Del Rio Gallery, Culver City, CA

Two artists have produced conceptual work that attempts to address this turning away, each by redirecting our attention away from the lynching victim to the violence of whiteness that makes a spectacle of the lynched body. Kerry James Marshall’s *Heirlooms and Accessories* (2002), and Ken Gonzales-Day’s series *Erased Lynching* (2006–2008) each mute or disappear the victims at the center of lynching photographs. Marshall transforms the Beitel image of the 1930 Marion, Indiana lynching into a triptych of three young white women (Figure 3). The photograph is produced three times, at 57-by-54 inches each, and the bodies of Shipp and Smith are faded into the white background three times, their outlines just barely visible, hazy. “Overall,” writes Shawn Michelle Smith, “the whited image underscores the figurative whiteness that lynching and lynching photographs consolidated and made manifest.”³⁶ With each rendering, Marshall has highlighted the face of a white woman in the crowd, always present in the original version but left indistinguishable in the midst of the large crowd and the hanging corpses. Locketts whose gold or silver necklaces loop languorously, ominously, around the muted figures of Shipp and Smith encircle the women’s faces. The necklaces that mark both these women’s wealth and their beauty figure also as the nooses from which black men hang, as the chains that bind them to white supremacy. To underscore the stark contrast between the idealization of white womanhood and the abjection of black manhood, the entire piece is framed in rhinestones. As Marshall himself spoke of *Heirlooms and Accessories*, “This piece was sort of a reminder that these people are accessories to a crime in the first place, and that the heirlooms and the things that their offspring inherited from them were inherited from them because they were engaged in this kind of violence.”³⁷ By extension, these are heirlooms and legacies with which we all must contend.

35. Timothy J. Clark, “Art and Violence,” symposium, UC-Berkeley, January 31, 2007.

36. Shawn Michelle Smith, “The Evidence of Lynching Photographs,” in Apel and Smith, *Lynching Photographs*, 29.

37. Kerry James Marshall, “An Artist’s History,” McNeil Lehrer News Hour, November 28, 2003.

Marshall employs a concise (and precise) visual language that forces us to confront not only the history of lynching, but the modes of photographic representation and scopical regimes that have routinized the ways we see race as well. Marshall's manipulation fades lynching's victims into literal and figurative whiteness. In so doing, the white women are themselves foregrounded and spectacularized in Marshall's framing. And the framing he chooses is, despite its grand size, disturbingly intimate: delicately detailed lockets, not unlike the velvet-lined cases that held daguerreotypes, suggest the preciousness of the beloved one held close, individualizing and sentimentalizing their subjects. Random faces in a crowd are elevated to portraits, a form that, as John Tagg avers, functions as "a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of a social identity; it is also a commodity, a luxury, an adornment, ownership of which itself confers status."³⁸ We as viewers must contend with our own familiarity with lynchings, and particularly with a historical tendency not to implicate white women in the maintenance and perpetuation of white supremacy. In the necklaces' circling of Shipp and Smith, we are also reminded of the intimacy, both real and imagined, between white women and black men that fed lynching's fury. Marshall effects these intimacies through the transformation of the photographic genre, a change of affect disciplined by a different visual register. Yet while the young white women are at once singled out and individualized, the remainder of the scene is repeated as a stage for each. This recalls the repetition of lynching through its mechanical reproduction, that the bodies of the black men were deemed interchangeable for the production of whiteness.

Finally, *Heirlooms and Accessories* speaks to a refusal to look and look and look at lynching victims, at the exquisite corpses that give these photographs their shape and purpose. For some black spectators in particular, the resurgence of the lynching archive has produced a profound ambivalence, a simultaneous desire to redress history and an anxious fear of continuing to make a spectacle out of black suffering. Hilton Als most painfully and bluntly expressed his inability "to determine the usefulness of this [the *Without Sanctuary*] project." For Als, "these pictures are documents of America's obsession with niggers . . . This is what makes me feel nigger-ish, I'm afraid: being watched."³⁹ Als's phrasing is no doubt a deliberate nod to the simultaneous making and fracturing of racial subjectivity under the weight of the white gaze explored by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Marshall's own visual phrasing redirects the gaze, forcing a recognition of white subject-formation. Set against the nearly whited-out scene behind them, the faces of the white women become crisp, distinct, and literally darkened. Marshall reminds us of the relational nature of race, how blackness gives whiteness its form and definition.

Latino artist and scholar Ken Gonzales-Day engages in a project similar to Marshall's, asking what happens when lynched bodies are removed from the lynch-

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec03/marshall_11-28.html (accessed July 28, 2009).

38. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 37.

39. Als, "GWTW," 38, 41.



Figure 4. "Erased Lynching." Courtesy of Ken Gonzales-Day and Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles

ing photograph—does it cease to be an image of a lynching? Without the corpse, what then do the remaining subjects signify? Gonzales-Day's series, *Erased Lynching*, emerged initially out of archival research in which he encountered photographs of mob violence in the western United States. Looking for the historical or academic text that would place these images in context, Gonzales-Day found only silence. He set out to fill the void left by this historical lacuna, resulting in the academic book *Lynching in the West* and the conceptual art pieces, *Erased Lynching*. His research revealed that over 800 people were lynched in California alone between 1850 and 1935. Vigilante "justice" was a

form of control in the early years of statehood even before lynching grew in force throughout the U.S. South. The vast majority of those lynched were Mexicans, followed by Chinese and Native Americans; fewer than ten were African American.⁴⁰ Despite the growth in scholarly and artistic work around white-on-black lynching, Gonzales-Day's is one of the first monographs on this subject. Like the book, *Erased Lynching* then speaks to the way that these victims and this history have been overlooked and expunged.

Throughout *Erased Lynching*, Gonzales-Day appropriates historical images of lynchings primarily of Mexican men in the years 1850 to 1935. He has digitally removed almost all traces of the victims and the nooses from which they were hung. What's left are groups of whites, men mostly, arranged around trees and telegraph poles, making awkward gestures toward seemingly empty space. In part of the series Gonzales-Day maintains the original postcard size, preserving the intimacy of images circulated to friends and family (Figure 4). Rather than enlarg-

40. Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West: 1850–1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

ing the photographs, as in Marshall's *Heirlooms and Accessories*, Gonzales-Day individually frames fifteen images in their original size, organized into a loose grid. Viewers then must come close to each, and they are overwhelmed by quantity rather than size.

Erased Lynching also refers to Gonzales-Day's own digital manipulation, a conceptual piece that includes one image enlarged to 10-by-14-by-30 feet and printed on reflective mylar. As visitors enter the exhibit they are confronted with their own distorted reflection amidst those of the lynchers who have lost some of their definition in the amplification. A reference back to the daguerreotype's magical dance between recording/reflecting, Gonzales-Day forces an uneasy encounter with mirrors and memory. In refusing to look at the body of the lynched, the artist suggests that what we need is not further spectacularizing of the Other; rather, what is demanded is a critique of our own ways of seeing, our own visual amplifications and blindspots. The absence of the corpse alerts us to our own investment in images of racialized suffering; like the mob members whose numbers we are enfolded into, we become aware of our own expectations, predilections, and anticipation. *Erased Lynching* works in part for contemporary audiences because it is predicated on a visual familiarity with lynching photography that has the black corpse at its literal and metaphoric center. In 2006, we *know* what a lynching image looks like. Gonzales-Day's series suggests that the lynching archive is a shared one but only unevenly applied: what do we mean when we say "lynching"? What images do we see? Anti-lynching photography, as a site of historical memory and memorialization, has offered for some a shared visual language through which to speak about other photographic spectacles of racialized violence while potentially foreclosing the differences of these histories.⁴¹ Reading history back into the sign, we are in a position "to grasp the image as an icon that conflates the history we repress (lynching) with the history we disavow (torture) . . . all the photos should be read as documents of lynching."⁴²

VI. CONCLUSION

Lynching photography has been fundamental to seeing blackness, constituting a crucial archive in the formation of black visibility and American identity. African American political and cultural engagement with these difficult, horrible, and unforgiving images reveals an ongoing challenge to dominant racialism, to the persistent reconstruction of African Americans as viewing subjects in contexts in which black looking is both unwanted and dangerous, and to a sustained commitment to critical (and not so critical) memory practices. But lynching photography also represents a crisis of representation, an archive whose cultural and political life continues to be an antinomy, at once wholly true and, by its very nature, with-

41. Consider for example, the photographs of torture emerging from the U.S. prison in Abu Ghraib, Iraq. See Hazel Carby, "A Strange and Bitter Crop: the Spectacle of Torture," November 10, 2004 http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-abu_ghraib/article_2149.jsp (accessed July 28, 2009); and Susan Willis, *Portents of the Real: A Primer for Post-9/11 America* (New York: Verso, 2005).

42. Willis, *Portents of the Real*, 120.

out resolve. Why do we keep returning to these photographs? Why do we keep telling ourselves this story with these images?

To offer a conclusion, I return to the space where lynching and photography make their pact, and also the space in which they expose one another. In an October 30, 1915 front-page article, a *Chicago Defender* writer found himself or herself at this crossroads: “We print from the postal card to show you that these things are facts that you can’t deny. . . . This lynching was never recorded, although done three weeks ago: no press, no pulpit, white or black, to speak a word.”⁴³ The photograph reveals the silent indifference of both God and human to the wanton killing of black people. And because we are forced to look both *at* the photograph and *within* it, as both document and social practice, we are confronted with photography’s own silent indifference.

Yet the photograph also occasions an opportunity for anti-racist critique, an opportunity to enter a historical discourse that, as the evidence of the photograph attests, has attempted to eviscerate black humanity, to silence it. Through the practice of critical black memory, as a method of limning and indeed intervening into history, some artists and activists have suggested alternative and politically engaging means of interpreting encounters with this difficult archive.

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43. “Father and Three Sons Assassinated for Raising the First Cotton, News Never Reached World from Texas,” *Chicago Defender* (October 30, 1915), 1.