



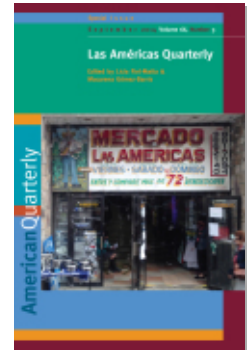
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On Looking: Lynching Photographs and Legacies of Lynching after 9/11

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

On Looking: Lynching Photographs and Legacies of Lynching after 9/11

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Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield. Organized by Andrew Roth, Roth Horowitz Gallery, New York. Jan. 13–Feb. 12, 2000. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.* Curated by James Allen and Julia Hotton, New York Historical Society, New York. Mar. 14–Oct. 1, 2000. *The Without Sanctuary Project.* Curated by James Allen; co-directed by Jessica Arcand and Margery King, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Penn., Sept. 22, 2001–Jan. 2, 2002. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.* Curated by Joseph F. Jordan; Douglas H. Quin, exhibition designer; Frank Catroppa, Saudia Muwakkil, and Melissa English-Rias, MLK Site team. Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, Atlanta, GA., May 1–Dec. 31, 2002.

***Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.* By James Allen (editor), Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, Leon F. Litwack. Sante Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000. 212 pages. \$60.00 (cloth). <http://www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary/main>.**

TODAY WHEN WE LOOK AT LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPHS, WE TRY NOT TO SEE THEM. Looking and seeing become seeming forms of aggression that implicate the viewer, however distressed and sympathetic, in the acts that

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turned human beings into horribly shamed objects. Most of us would prefer not to look. Even when looking, the pictures are hard to see, and they are made all the more so by the presence of death, already difficult to look at but here having occurred so excruciatingly in an atmosphere of self-righteous cruelty and gloating. Discussing another form of horrible death, a type of Chinese execution known as “the death by division into a thousand parts,” James Elkins writes; “According to original Chinese law, the nose, ears, toes, and fingers are to be cut first, and the pain is to be prolonged as much as possible.” This also describes the process of many ritualized spectacle lynchings. Elkins observes: “There is also a nearly unbearable immorality to these images. The crowd of complacent executioners moves aside each time the photographer wants another shot, and the photographer did not protest or run away or intervene.”¹ The immorality resides not only in the execution itself and in the attitude of the participants but also in the role of the photographer, whose ostensibly neutral position is not neutral but appears to sanction the acts he records by declining to oppose them in any way. We, as viewers, are invited to occupy the photographer’s viewing position.

In a series of four photographs of such a Chinese execution, Elkins suggests that death itself is trapped in the sequence, between the frames, that begin with a living woman (accused of adultery) and end with a butchered corpse. Most lynching photographs (with some exceptions) are not produced in sequence from life to lifelessness but are taken after death, with the executioners and spectators still present, or of the corpse by itself, or with later groups of spectators who were not present at the lynching. The horror of death resides in the relationship between the self-confident white killers or voyeuristic spectators who turn to face the camera and the hanging, burned, and/or bullet-riddled black bodies. The contradiction represented here embodies the relationship of power to helplessness, citizen to outsider, privilege to oppression, jubilation to degradation, subjecthood to objecthood, community to outcast, pride to humiliation. The photographer who records the gruesome spectacle is implicated as rendering a service to the lynching community through the taking, reproduction, and sale of lynching postcards as commemorative souvenirs that record the race-color-caste solidarity and lethal “superiority” of the white community. But the passing of time, the changing contexts for the presentation of the photographs, and our own subject positions change

how we perceive the photographs. Most of us reject the complicity implied in assuming the position of the photographer and recognize a much different issue at stake today in this legacy of representation, namely, the responsibility of historical witnessing. The photographer now renders a service to history.

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America

After being hidden away in drawers and albums and dusty corners for decades, a large body of lynching photographs was presented to a broad public for the first time at the beginning of the twenty-first century to electrifying effect. About sixty mostly small-size lynching photographs on postcard stock were first shown in the exhibition *Witness* at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in Manhattan in January 2000. They were taken from the collection of James Allen and John Littlefield, representing lynchings that took place between 1880 and 1960, and were displayed with books, posters, and other historical artifacts dealing with the racist oppression of African Americans in the post-Civil War period. People stood in long lines in the freezing winter weather to visit the tiny one-room gallery, sometimes waiting up to three hours to get inside, then spending hours more looking once there, causing Roth Horowitz to implement a policy of two hundred free tickets a day in order to manage the crowd. Some five thousand people saw the show before it closed.²

James Allen, a white antiques dealer from Atlanta and native of Central Florida, collected the photographs over the course of fifteen years during which he and his partner purchased more than one hundred thirty lynching photographs from dealers and descendants, paying as much as \$30,000 for a panel of three photos. Sometimes the photographs came from “Ku Klux Klan members, the trunk of a prominent Savannah family, from people where the photographs were kept in albums alongside vacation pictures.”³ The photographs and associated materials were deposited for a time with the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University in Atlanta. Twins Palms Press in Sante Fe, a publisher of art and specialty books, published ninety-eight of the photographs in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Containing essays by Georgia Congressman John Lewis, University of California historian Leon Litwack, black author and *New Yorker* staff writer Hilton Als, and an essay by James Allen, who also

annotated each image, the book has sold roughly thirty thousand copies and is due to be reprinted.⁴

Among the visitors to the exhibition at Roth Horowitz was Stevie Wonder, the blind musician who wanted to “see” the photographs and was given a private tour and description of the works by James Allen. Asked by Wonder why he collected these photographs, Allen answered that, among other reasons, “I’m a gay man, and the discrimination I’ve known in my life has been from white males. I’m just angry, and this is a way to express my anger.”⁵

The exhibition at the Roth Horowitz gallery was so popular that it was picked up by The New-York Historical Society and co-sponsored by the Community Service Society. Titled *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, it was co-curated by James Allen and Julia Hotton with sixty-five images and augmented with material from the Historical Society’s collections to provide a fuller picture of the anti-lynching movement’s activities in New York. The exhibition drew fifty thousand people in its first four months and was held over for another four months.⁶

Viewers and reviewers alike were struck by the disturbing visual presence of the lynch mobs and the difficulties in looking that the photographs evoked. “It’s a difficult task, this re-viewing of violence, this striving for reflection rather than spectacle, for vision rather than voyeurism, for study rather than exposure,” wrote Patricia Williams for *The Nation*, alluding to the sadistic voyeurism of public spectacle inherent in such photographs.⁷ “One kind of viewing—very different from the kind that these photos originally elicited—is being sanctioned here,” noted another analyst in a *New York Times* editorial. “After all, at this exhibition we are a crowd looking at a crowd looking at a lynching. And we are looking at the lynching too. Again and again, a white mob looks back at us.”⁸ This exchange of looks is potent. For the viewer, it is easier to look at the mob, which evokes outrage, than to look at the lynching victim, which evokes shame and horror. The language used to describe the mob implies a degree of equivalence of agency: “we are a crowd looking at a crowd” and “a white mob looks back at us.” A visitor to the exhibition observed, “Considering the fact that human beings have been executed, for people to smile, to be actually jostling to be in the picture, that’s more stunning than anything else.”⁹ James Allen agrees: “After you get through the shock, what lingers are the images of the perpetrators, and not of the corpses, and that’s where the focus

needs to be.”¹⁰ Why should the focus be here? Is it to stare down the look of the mob with a counter look? To confront the fact that these ordinary people who committed such extraordinary atrocities in the name of community values are part of our history too? To produce another outcome—if not in the past, in the future?

The exhibition traveled to The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 2001, which displayed ninety-eight images, and followed the example of the New-York Historical Society by requiring museum staff members to attend sessions that addressed their own emotions about the exhibition. (They also organized related exhibitions and opening-day ceremonies that included the Reverend Deryck Tines Mitchell leading the Warhol Choir in singing “Amazing Grace” in the lobby of the museum.) One reviewer, Mary Thomas, yielded to a universalist impulse in suggesting “the commonality of the experience” and warned that lynching should not be regarded as a manifestation of racial politics but should be viewed in contemporary global and pluralistic terms: “While the grievous suffering inflicted upon generations of African Americans by these sanctioned odious social rituals should not be denied and should be addressed, mentally categorizing such events as a black problem or even specifically a racial issue is to not only *miss the point*, but also the opportunity to isolate attitudes that continue to support such behavior globally” (emphasis added).¹¹ Certainly one can argue that issues of race hatred and fear manifest themselves in crucially deadly ways around the world today, but to suggest that this larger context overrides the historically specific racial politics of lynching, despite initial caveats calling for the examination of these “odious social rituals,” is, precisely, to miss the point and to vitiate the lessons that can be learned by studying the historic specificity of lynching practice in the U.S., a practice which is, indeed, not a black problem but an American problem.

But one suspects that the reviewer’s plea is also an attempt to overcome polarizing racial responses that potentially reproduce the racial hierarchy of the photographs themselves. For blacks, an awareness of different spectatorial positions, specifically the position of privilege for the “white” viewer whose “look” is therefore different from the “black look,” would make seeing the photographs in public crowds all the more difficult. The lynched figure is clearly the result of a power hierarchy rooted in structures of slavery, when blacks were reduced to objects with no right “to look.” “One mark of oppression,” observes bell hooks:

Was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better, less threatening servants. An effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered around white control of the black gaze. Black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see.¹²

The proud gaze of the white mob in the photographs assumes a white audience that will recognize the virtue of their deed, an audience that regards the lynched blacks, not the white mob, as criminals. As hooks writes, "I think that one fantasy of whiteness is that the threatening Other is always a terrorist. This projection enables many white people to imagine there is no representation of whiteness as terror, as terrorizing. Yet it is this representation of whiteness in the black imagination, first learned in the narrow confines of poor black rural community that is sustained by my travels to many different locations."¹³ Blacks were rarely in attendance at a lynching. Thus Mary Thomas, in reviewing the Pittsburgh exhibition, suggests, "Using this exhibition as an avenue into civic sharing . . . would shift the privilege of witness from the mindlessly violent who were in historic attendance to those attempting to make peace today."¹⁴ To take common possession of the look through "the privilege of witness," to share it publicly between blacks and whites suggests wresting agency from and claiming priority over the "look" of the mob, of the white terror and suppression of black subjectivity that it represents.

Without Sanctuary also traveled to the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, where it was co-sponsored by Emory University. The first time such an exhibition had taken place in the South, it drew the most controversy and only went on exhibition after a nearly two-and-a-half-year planning period that included discussions between scholars at Emory University and the King Site and a series of six public forums (three by invitation, three open). James Allen had initially encountered "a mixture of resistance and indifference" from local southern institutions that were concerned over local sensibilities, and he called the search for a site a "painful and bruising" experience. "Most of the institutions weren't even willing to look at the images," said Allen, "They didn't want to even crack the book. They didn't want to discuss it."¹⁵ The initial caution is unsurprising; the memories of the past tread on "graves dug just a while ago," with the last lynching on

record in Georgia taking place in 1965.¹⁶ Once it opened at the King Site, however, more than fifty thousand people went to see it just in the first two months, surpassing the turnouts in New York and Pittsburgh.

The exhibition curator at the King Site, Joseph F. Jordan, and the designer, Douglas Quin, made some distinct changes in the installation that distinguished it from its presentations at the Roth Horowitz Gallery and the Warhol Museum, which provided little commentary, and at the New-York Historical Society, where works were presented with longer wall labels in the atmosphere of a library with a bank of computers at one end of the room for further inquiry. Attempting to create a reverential and respectful space that would make the exhibition both geographically and racially sensitive, palatable to southern audiences who had the most vexed and troubled relationship to the subject matter, the walls of the small room were painted black, a deep red carpet was left in place, and the selection of twenty-nine images arranged on three walls were matted and framed in light Georgia oak.

Nine glass cases were arrayed in the center of the room with antilynching works by black Harlem Renaissance writers, antilynching illustrations in the foreign press, further lynching photographs, and an LP cover for Public Enemy's 1992 "Hazy Shade of Criminal," featuring a lynching photograph. The fourth wall displayed a quote from Ida B. Wells-Barnett's 1895 book, *A Red Record*: "for every lynching humanity asks that America render its account to civilization and itself." Below were three glass cases containing printed matter that represented the most important elements of the antilynching movement. The first section contained commentary and material on the NAACP and Ida B. Wells-Barnett; the second on communist and socialist organizations, with a copy of the *New Masses* and Soviet antilynching postcards and posters; the third discussed Jesse Daniel Ames and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching that she founded, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, and Paul Robeson and the American Crusade to End Lynching, which took place in 1946.

Overall the gallery included forty-two lynching images with additional artifacts, and the material in the cases throughout the gallery provided countervailing voices of interracial political resistance to the culture of victimization, in particular highlighting voices of black resistance by writers such as Wells-Barnett, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. A twelve-minute video documentary on lynching directed by Matt Dibble and produced as a companion piece to the

exhibition in Atlanta provided a moving and historically grounded introduction.

The exhibition's emotional impact in all of its venues sparked heated debate. "It is true that, through this show, viewers were made newly aware of the acute form that racism has taken in the United States," noted Sarah Valdez in *Art in America*. "Many, including myself, left the exhibition stunned, with an immediate impulse to battle the dragon of inequity armed with a big, aimless sense of rage. These photographs make the abomination of lynching appear real in a way that textbook history cannot."¹⁷ But the perceived "aimlessness" of her rage caused Valdez to conclude that a less "high-voltage" and more "subtle" approach might be more productive. Even more ambivalent, Hilton Als writes in his invited essay for the catalog that the "usefulness of this project . . . escapes me." "I felt my neck snap and my heart break while looking at these pictures. . . . But before I can talk about these pictures, . . . before I can talk about any of the 'feelings' they engender in me, I want to get back to the first question I posed: What is the relationship of the white people in these pictures to the white people who ask me and sometimes pay me to be Negro, on the page?"¹⁸ Als is still uneasy about the motives of whites, even those who appear highly sympathetic, although not enough to prevent him from agreeing "to be Negro, on the page" as long as he can voice his doubts. Others also questioned the wisdom of making such photographs available: "To commercialize the suffering of black people is to do the ultimate disservice to black people," asserted Michael Dyson, a black scholar at DePaul University. "To make coffee-table books out of that kind of pain is highly problematic." Even more pointedly, a Tampa journalist, J.R. Moehringer declared, "It's fine to be a scavenger so long as you don't call yourself an avenger."¹⁹

During the community discussions in Atlanta, some opposed the exhibition on the grounds that it would arouse black rage and resentment against whites or bring up an era that has been overcome or is better left forgotten. The admonition to "forget" these things that have already been all too well forgotten is ironic and also akin to the same imperative voiced by Jews who opposed the establishment of a chair in Holocaust studies at Harvard University on the grounds that it would focus too much attention on Jewish victimhood, blocking Jewish achievement.²⁰ "Perhaps nothing about the history of mob violence in the United States is more surprising," observes historian W. Fitzhugh

Brundage, “than how quickly an understanding of the full horror of lynchings has receded from the nation’s collective historical memory.”²¹ Among African Americans who initially opposed the exhibition, one teacher who spoke at a public forum remarked: “When I look at those pictures . . . I don’t just see a lifeless body. I look at those pictures, and I see my son, I see my brother, I see my father. If I’m looking at that lifeless figure long enough, I see myself. Do I want to display this to the world? My initial reaction was no.”²²

The speaker gives voice to the continuing trauma that the picturing of painful events is capable of eliciting. Similarly, it is difficult to invoke examples of racist speech in a way that empties those words of their ability to wound. In a discussion of the pedagogical use of examples of hate speech, critical theorist Judith Butler observes: “Such terms carry connotations that exceed the purposes for which they may be intended and can thus work to afflict and defeat discursive efforts to oppose such speech. Keeping such terms unsaid and unsayable can also work to lock them in place, preserving their power to injure, and arresting the possibility of a reworking that might shift their context and purpose.” Butler concludes: “That such language carries trauma is not a reason to forbid its use. There is no purifying language of its traumatic residue, and no way to work through trauma except through the arduous effort it takes to direct the course of its repetition.”²³ Similarly, directing the course of the repetition of these visual images seems the only way, although painful and arduous, to make visible and work through a central but largely unacknowledged feature of traumatic American history.

Emory religion professor Theophus Smith, who chaired the university’s committee on the exhibition, counseled against black resentment: “If you walk away from here hating white people, you’ve been had,” he asserted, “What we’re trying to do is reclaim and humanize these people.”²⁴ Smith’s desire to reclaim and humanize the lynchings might sound like wanting to “reclaim and humanize” the Nazis. But like the Nazis, these were not inhuman “monsters” from another planet. These were ordinary people: community citizens, church-goers, families. What brought them to engage in such barbaric behavior? “In 30 years working in the field of African-American studies,” asserted Randall Burkett, the biographer of African-American studies who oversaw the Allen-Littlefield collection at Emory University, “there’s nothing I’ve encountered that enables white folk to

understand the reality of racism in America in the way these images do.”²⁵ Comparing lynching with Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, or with current world conditions, Allen himself observed: “That’s a problem for Americans because we don’t see ourselves on that same plane. We’re superior, morally, in our eyes. Who would ever think Americans would be capable of doing this?” In a speech at Fisk University Allen told the audience: “For every victim that lies pasted in some racist family’s photo album . . . or stored in a trunk with grandma and grandpa’s Klan robe, or still pinned to the wall of a service station in some holdout sorry-ass little town—if we can acquire and place their photos in an accurate, respectful context, identify and record them for the first time, I feel some slight awareness of what is meant by resurrection.”²⁶ As to the fury the images might provoke, Burkett asserts that people have “the right to anger, the right to rage,” noting that the exhibition’s purpose is not to “look for cheap grace.”²⁷

In his essay for the book *Without Sanctuary*, Leon Litwack also addressed those with doubts about the exhibition: “The need for this grisly photographic display may be disputed for catering to voyeuristic appetites and for perpetuating images of black victimization . . . but the extent and quality of the violence unleashed on black men and women in the name of enforcing black deference and subordination cannot be avoided or minimized. Obviously it is easier to choose the path of collective amnesia, to erase such memories, to sanitize our past. It is far easier to view what is depicted on these pages as so depraved and barbaric as to be beyond the realm of reason. That enables us to dismiss what we see as an aberration, as the work of crazed fiends and psychopaths. But such a dismissal would rest on dubious and dangerous assumptions.”²⁸ Or as Professor of English at Emory University Mark Bauerlein put it, the reasons one might be disinclined to show such photographs “are outweighed by the importance of showing how people who otherwise believed in basic democratic principles turned into self-exonerating murderers.”²⁹

Atlanta exhibition curator Joseph Jordan also responded to doubters: “If we put these photographs back into the trunks, or slide them back into the crumbling envelopes and conceal them in a corner of the drawer, we deny to the victims, once again, the witness they deserve. We deny them the opportunity to demand recognition of their humanity, and for us to bear witness to that humanity. That is exactly what happened in those terrible moments; people who considered them-

selves decent and devout turned their heads and averted their eyes so they wouldn't have to see. And thousands died because they did so."³⁰ Jordan argues that those most in need of reclamation and humanization are not the perpetrators but their victims, who are humanized through the act of "bearing witness," that is, through the act of looking and seeing. Jordan also implies that many of those whites who opposed lynching refused to "look" at the horror of lynching and what it did to their society, a form of tacit complicity that has its counterpart in the contemporary will to historical amnesia.

Acknowledging the complicity of the public, the inevitable verdict of the coroner or coroners' juries following a lynching was, "Death at the hands of persons unknown," even though everyone knew who was present. As Philip Dray suggests, "no *persons* had committed a crime, because the lynching had been an expression of the community's will."³¹ A "civic sharing" grounded in contemporary "looking" produces an equally public acknowledgement of the brutalizing effects of racism, while its opposite, keeping the history of race hatred buried and hidden, forecloses any possibility of reconciliation. That it is a public event raises it to the level of open communal experience, a necessary response to counter the communal pride of the white mob "looking back at us."

Though few photographs record the black victim both before and after death, one such example in the Allen-Littlefield collection is a three-part series on the lynching of Frank Embree in Fayette, Missouri on July 22, 1899. In the first image, a nude Embree stands on a buggy and faces the camera with calm defiance, as if challenging our historical imagination a hundred years later to look and see. His shackled hands are placed to cover his genitals but the deep lacerations and whip marks on his body are plainly visible, as are the satisfied faces of the white men who pose for the camera behind him. A man on the right with a soft-brimmed hat edging into view holds a barely visible buggy whip. More evidence of whipping is displayed in the second photograph. Embree's feet are shackled, his legs and back revealing the deep slashes and gouges of the torture to which he was subjected. In the final image, Embree hangs by a rope from a tree, a rough blanket pinned around his lower body, possibly indicating his castration, with the mob below.

James Allen notes: "The three photographs depicting the torture and hanging of Frank Embree . . . were at one time laced together with a

twisted purple thread, so as to unfold like a map.”³² Like the photographs of the Chinese execution, death is trapped between the photographs. They document the sense of certainty and pride among those who were present but also something more: the pleasure of the participants in looking at the physical abuse, humiliation, and murder of the muscular, young, and handsome black male. We might regard this pleasure as a distorted form of homoerotic rape, sexual envy, revenge, and desire, pleasures that could be possessed and relived over and over again through the fold-out series of photographs bound by purple thread. The superior “manliness” of the whites is established and reinforced by the psychosexual emasculation of the virile black male, no doubt made all the more satisfying by its triumph over the willful “look” of the black subject.

The act of looking also has dangers for whites, although not equally so, registered in the traumatic memories of adults who witnessed lynchings as children. Primarily, however, the act of looking on the part of the mob and the condition of being looked at on the part of the black subject embodied the structure of racial power relations that obtained in the South during the heyday of lynching, even though some whites were personally shamed or sickened by the look or moved, along with black activists, to resistance and protest. While it was the prerogative of whites to look at blacks, blacks could be punished—and indeed were killed—merely for looking at a white person, especially a white woman. Spectacle lynching depended on the mass looking of the crowd for its power and seduction and for its social and moral legitimacy as the embodiment of communal values of law and order, white masculine affirmation, family honor, and white supremacy. As the actual number of spectacle lynchings declined from their peak in the 1890s, the rituals became increasingly elaborate in the early decades of the twentieth century, turning into ever larger and more widely publicized open-air events that drew huge crowds and transformed often quiet forms of vigilante “justice” into a modern viewing phenomena in which small town folks watched their neighbors torture others or helped to do it themselves.³³ As Du Bois observed, the cultural power of spectacle lynchings was in the looking.³⁴

For potential black spectators, the denial of the look was nonetheless terrifying. As Richard Wright later wrote about his youth in the Deep South during the 1920s: “The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of

them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness. Indeed, the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew.”³⁵ The “lynch carnivals,” as they were described in the 1930s, were captured and detailed in radio reports and the looking was extended privately in photographs and publicly in newspapers and through the display of “relics” both public and private. But it was not necessary to look to be terrorized by the spectacle of lynching; it was enough to know that thousands of others looked and were amused.

The Uses and Abuses of Lynching Memory

Legacies of racial violence have continued to haunt American society over the last decade, returning the issue of lynching to the forefront of American consciousness: in 1998 when James Byrd, a black man, was dragged to death from the back of a pickup truck and decapitated on a road in Jasper, Texas by three white men; in June 2000 when the 17-year-old body of Raynard Johnson was discovered hanging from a pecan tree in the front yard of his Kokomo, Mississippi home; in July 2002, when Stanley Forestal of Elma, New York was found hanged in a barn on his family’s property. Police coroners ruled the latter two cases suicides, which the families have vigorously disputed. Johnson’s family asserted that he was murdered for dating a white girl; Forestal was married to a white woman.³⁶

Less lethal examples of the use and abuse of the memory of lynching have appeared as well, constituting appropriations of lynching narratives for more immediate contemporary political ends. The most public reappearance of lynching mythology in the service of furthering one’s career occurred in 1991 when Clarence Thomas referred to his own “high-tech lynching” in a televised congressional hearing that examined and confirmed his fitness for the country’s highest court after charges of sexual harassment by Anita Hill. More recently Senator Orrin Hatch referred to the “lynching” of a Bush nominee who was not confirmed for office by the Senate.

National news reports also have carried items on racist pantomimes by college students that depend on lynching narratives. In November 2001, it was announced that fraternities at Auburn University in Alabama would be severely disciplined because of actions at Halloween parties. One fraternity was disbanded and banished from campus

after a party at which some members painted their faces black and wore Afro wigs; another fraternity was suspended following a party at which one member was photographed in a Ku Klux Klan costume pretending to hang another member in blackface.³⁷

But the pranks of southern frat boys pale in comparison to the more insidious and pervasive practice of racially harassing blacks in the workplace with nooses. Though little publicized, racial harassment charges lodged with the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) over the last two decades have surged from ten thousand in the 1980s to almost fifty thousand during the 1990s, with the display of a noose considered the most egregious form of harassment. In 2000, the EEOC filed at least twenty noose-related lawsuits, a disproportionately high number for an agency that only files a few hundred lawsuits per year, but thousands of lawsuits are filed between employees and employers each year across the country.

Thirty-two current and former employees of Chicago's Scientific Colors, Inc., for example, settled a discrimination lawsuit in May 2002 for \$1.82 million in which the group charged the company with racist harassment based on epithets, racist graffiti, and displays of hangman's nooses; at the same time, Adelfia Communications in Miami agreed to pay \$1 million to settle a lawsuit claiming a manager subjected black employees to daily harassment with a noose in his office, which he moved to his doorway and called to the attention of a black employee on "Bring Your Child to Work Day"; in Gainesville, Florida, a black employee of Asplundh Tree Expert Co. claims a noose was wrapped around his neck and then pulled; in Charlotte, North Carolina, a Crowder Construction Co. supervisor approached a black employee while holding a noose and said, "This is what we used to do to you"; in San Francisco, a Filipino employee of Northwest Airlines found a noose in his locker after he complained that he had been harassed because of his national origin; in Detroit, a black Northwest Airlines employee found a noose hung in an employee lunchroom. In this, as in other cases, the company argued that the noose was simply a piece of rope and that there was no evidence it was directed against the employee or any member of a minority group; in other cases companies have argued that they were simply jokes, or examples of employees practicing their knotmaking skills. One of the worst offenders is Georgia Power Co. in Atlanta, with a lawsuit describing thirteen hangman's nooses found in the last six years at company facilities. A

lawsuit alleges a pattern of “reckless indifference” and discrimination on the part of Georgia Power and its parent company, Southern Co., both of which allow the memory of lynching to be used as a form of racial intimidation.³⁸ From California to New Jersey, the display of lynching nooses targets blacks and other minorities, constituting a chilling form of harassment meant to prevent labor protest and to “keep blacks in their place.” The appropriation of the preeminent symbol of race hatred for the harassment of other minorities is clearly based on the premise that they, too, are not “white.”

Another example of the echo of lynching memory occurred after the arrest of John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo following their three-week reign of terror in the Washington, DC region in which they murdered ten victims and wounded three others in a series of sniper attacks. Undone by their own need to brag about a murder/robbery in Montgomery, Alabama, leading to the fingerprint that identified John Lee Malvo, the surviving shooting victim in that incident, Kellie D. Adams, was interviewed by the *New York Times*. Understandably outraged by her horrible ordeal, Adams spoke plainly to the *Times* reporter of the need for accelerated justice for the two black culprits, using language every southerner would understand, including an allusion to the classic justification for lynching based on the notions that “The law is too slow” and blacks are beasts. “They should die,” she said. “And it should happen soon. The justice system is good, but it’s a little slow.” “They are despicable,” she added. “They’re not even human beings.”³⁹

The appropriation of the term *lynching* for increasingly diverse forms of perceived injustice threatens to trivialize the historically specific content of the term. Proliferating references to “the black holocaust” appropriate the term *holocaust* in order to raise the visibility of the tragedy of slavery by investing it with the historical weight of the Jewish Holocaust, which has received far more public attention. Similarly, the appropriation of *lynching* for other causes represents an attempt to create a continuum by which one injustice is figured in terms of another and bears the moral weight of the original referent. This understandably leads to resentment on the part of blacks who feel that their experience of oppression will be obscured by these rival forms of “victimhood.” Thus, for example, a debate over providing health and dental coverage to the live-in partners of gay and lesbian city employees of Durham, North Carolina became fractious when gay activists

suggested that a vote against the measure constituted a form of “lynching.” Although the measure passed, black audience members grew angry, with one Durham resident declaring: “Slavery has nothing to do with homosexuality, and I am sick of white folks saying that.”⁴⁰

In attempting to produce a respectful atmosphere for the viewer of lynching photographs in Atlanta, one that commands the viewer’s attention and contrasts sharply with both the noisy ambiance of the King Site Visitor’s Center and with more conventional museum exhibition practice, curator Joseph Jordan and designer Douglas Quin made some uncommon choices. In the anteroom to the exhibition, the words to Abel Meeropol’s *Strange Fruit* were reproduced on the wall while the song itself was quietly played on a soundtrack sung alternately by Billie Holiday and in a contemporary version by Cassandra Wilson. A map indicated all the areas in the South where lynchings had occurred. The exhibition proper also had a subdued soundscape, with the piped in sounds of chirping crickets followed by clips from four grieving black spirituals, including *Oh Lawdy Me, Oh Lawdy Me* (1934), sung by a male convict group from the State Prison Farm in Milledgeville, Georgia; *Trouble So Hard* (1937) and *Handwriting on the Wall* (1937), by Dock and Henry Reed and Vera Hall from Livingstone, Alabama; and *The New Buryin’ Ground* (1936), by Willie Williams and a group at the State Penitentiary in Richmond, Virginia.⁴¹ The black voices of lament provided a sense of black subjectivity that worked as a counterweight to the largely faceless black corpses and smug white mobs in the photos. While one reviewer described it as “dark and slightly menacing,”⁴² other viewers found that it “invites them to look, to see,”⁴³ providing a muted and reverential atmosphere that allowed a more willing confrontation with the devastating effects of white supremacy, the sorrows of those left behind, and the entanglements of the viewers’ own backgrounds.

The black walls, red carpet, a railing around the room that heightened the feeling of a spiritualized interior, and the sounds of lamentation, however, began to sanctify the photographs with a quasi-religious aura. Although providing a sanctuary in which to view the unspeakable, the sacralization of photographs of racist atrocity poses the potential problem of sacralizing the horror of lynching itself in a manner similar to the sacralization of the Holocaust by many Jews. The effects of sacralization can lead to forms of single issue identity politics with troubling political implications. For those who instrumentalize the

Holocaust in support of the state of Israel, it can mean that any criticism of Israeli or Zionist policies may be read as antisemitic, conflating a lack of support for the politics of the Jewish state with anti-Jewish persecution. For others, a focus on racial discrimination against blacks can lead to an attempt to employ the rhetoric of the “war on terrorism” as a means of pressuring the government to investigate cases with suspicious circumstances domestically, while deflecting the disturbing implications of this language. Conflating anti-racism with a form of backhanded support for U.S. anti-terrorist policy in the wake of September 11, however, produces a strategy that is both politically misleading and morally dubious.

At a conference on *Lynching and Racial Violence in America: Histories and Legacies* at Emory University in Atlanta in October 2002, held in conjunction with the exhibition *Without Sanctuary*, opposition to a possible recent lynching led to an uncritical approach to the language of “the war on terrorism” presented by the current Bush administration. An emergency plenary session called on the last day of the conference invited some two hundred attendees from one hundred twenty one universities and institutions to sign a letter to U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft demanding an investigation into the suspicious hanging death of Leonard Gakinya, a young black man, from a radio tower in downtown Springfield, Missouri on Wednesday, October 2, 2002. The death was quickly ruled a suicide by local police, a verdict that was openly disputed by Gakinya’s family, which felt there were too many unexplained circumstances surrounding the death, including an apparent injury to the body and the public nature of the hanging itself.⁴⁴

The letter, the conference as a whole, and the exhibition of lynching photographs implicitly raise and intersect the larger question of how to define lynching today. The recently released film *Strange Fruit* (2002) by Joel Katz, shown in conjunction with the exhibition, ends with shots of posters deploring the homophobic murder of Matthew Shepherd in Wyoming, the execution of Amadou Diallo by New York City police, and a racist sign calling for the killing of Arabs in America in the wake of September 11: it explicitly maps the legacy of lynching onto gay bashing, police brutality, and anti-Arab persecution. Broadly defined as extralegal execution, the legacy of race hatred extended to gays and immigrants is understandable and might well be justified. Yet police brutality against African Americans existed even during the height of the lynching era. Is it productive to blur the distinctions between the

two?⁴⁵ Similarly, the numerous attacks on gays and transgendered individuals speak to other kinds of fears and hatreds of difference. Given that lynching has taken on the distinct historic connotation of race hatred, to subsume homophobic and anti-Arab murder under this category produces a “flattening out” of the meaning of lynching when the particularities of these forms of intolerance should instead be more carefully analyzed and contextualized within their own past and present histories.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the proliferating forms of sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious violence place those practices increasingly in dialog with narratives of lynching and their contemporary use and abuse. “I want this exhibit . . . to trouble the waters, so to speak,” asserted curator Joseph Jordan, “so that the virulent and growing racism, nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment of today will be understood to be a dangerous vestige of the recent past.”⁴⁷ Given the current climate of anti-Arab discrimination, however, it was troubling to find in the language of the conference letter to Attorney General Ashcroft this appeal: “The U.S. government has recently made an enormous commitment to the investigation of international terrorism; nonetheless, numerous instances of domestic terrorism continue to go ignored and uninvestigated. This conference and this young man’s death have compelled us to demand that our government examine the practice of domestic terrorism.” While this formulation was meant to suggest hypocrisy on the part of the U.S. Attorney General, to “turn the language of the oppressor” back upon itself, this strategy nonetheless uncritically accepts the “investigation of international terrorism” as a program of supportable policy worthy of emulation on the domestic front, which, the letter implies, had not yet been activated. But Ashcroft, on the contrary, has lost no time in vigorously pursuing “domestic terrorism” as defined by the Bush administration. Muslims and Arab Americans have been subjected to arrest, secret hearings, and indefinite detention while denied democratic rights ordinarily accorded to U.S. citizens, or, for those held in detention camps outside the U.S. mainland, denied the rights of prisoners of war according to international protocols. In the wake of the Bush administration’s alarming abuse of the tragic events of 9/11 for a campaign of increasing attacks on domestic democratic rights and a concomitant increase in the power of the government to intervene in the lives of U.S. citizens and non-citizens, a strategy of protest that employs the rhetoric of the “war on terrorism” is highly

problematic. While the lynching photographs today constitute a form of protest and resistance against the history of lynching and its contemporary effects, Bush and Ashcroft's rhetoric of terrorism only reinforces the ideology of white supremacy and further, American nationalism, which is still inherently defined as white, male, Christian and heterosexual. The language of "domestic terrorism," moreover, has historically been used against the left, not the right. The laws forbidding public covering of the face, for example, were used against Iranians in the U.S. who protested the rise of clerical reactionary Khomeini in Iran in the late 1970s, not against the Ku Klux Klan who burned crosses at the homes of black families. The deployment of White House rhetoric makes clear an important conflict in academia today, one that is reflected in society at large: the willingness to subordinate broader principles in favor of supporting more narrowly defined single issue protests.

However, the conference letter reminds us that it is useful to remember what the exhibition *Without Sanctuary* does not address: the deliberate refusal of the federal government to intervene and the continuing effects of these policies in the racist state today. Discussing lynching in the South, Earl Ofari Hutchinson observes: "The real blame for seven decades of lynching lies with the federal government. And the hidden history of the way federal officials looked away from the scourge of lynching—even after NAACP leaders and other blacks documented the abuse—needs to come to light, because it colors the current debate over the federal role in prosecuting hate crimes and police violence. . . . Attorneys general usually will not authorize investigations and prosecutions of police violence or racist terror acts unless civil disturbances occur in cities or following mass national protests." Citing the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police and the torture of Abner Louima by New York police, Hutchinson points out, "It took riots and mass outrage for federal officials to prosecute the cops."⁴⁸ In defending black civil rights, as did the conference on *Lynching and Racial Violence in America* and the various exhibitions of *Without Sanctuary*, the question is how to resist acts of racial persecution today without sowing illusions or being drawn into the rhetoric of a racist and undemocratic system.

NOTES

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1. James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (London: Harcourt, Inc., 1996), 108–15.

2. Robert E. Snyder, “Without Sanctuary: An American Holocaust?” *Southern Quarterly* 39 (spring 2001).

3. *Ibid.* As of this writing, James Allen is searching for a repository willing to pay one million dollars for the collection.

4. *Ibid.* James Allen is working on a new introduction for the reprint, announced at the conference on *Lynching and Racial Violence in America*, Oct. 3, 2002, Emory University, Atlanta.

5. Snyder, “An American Holocaust?”

6. Jim Auchmutey, “Lynching Exhibit Confronts South’s Ugly Past,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Apr. 28, 2002. Available online: <http://www.accessatlanta.com/ajc/metro/0402/28lynch.html>; Exhibition press releases, The New-York Historical Society. Available online: <http://www.nyhistory.org/prelease.html> [20 July 2002]

7. Patricia J. Williams, “Without Sanctuary,” *The Nation* 270 (Feb. 14, 2000).

8. Editorial, “Death by Lynching,” *New York Times*, Mar. 16, 2000.

9. Fred Mazelis, “‘Witness’: An Important Chapter in U.S. History,” World Socialist Web Site. Feb. 2, 2000. Available online: http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/feb2000/lync-f02_prn.shtml.

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11. Mary Thomas, “Art Review: ‘Without Sanctuary’ Digs Deeply into Painful Issues of Humanity,” *Post-Gazette*. Sept. 29, 2001. Available online: <http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/20010929thomas0929fnp5.asp>.

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13. *Ibid.*, 174.

14. Thomas, “Art Review: ‘Without Sanctuary.’”

15. Thurston Hatcher, “New South Confronts Old Lynching Images,” CNN.com. May 11, 2002. Available online: <http://www.cnn.com/2002/US/05/10/lynching.exhibit>.

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17. Sarah Valdez, “American Abject,” *Art in America* 88 (Oct. 2000): 89.

18. Hilton Als, “GWTW” in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America* (Sante Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms Press, 2000), 38–39.

19. Cited in Snyder, “Without Sanctuary: An American Holocaust?”

20. See Dora Apel, “Is Holocaust Studies Legitimate? The Harvard Controversy” in *Apel, Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2002), 22–32.

21. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993), 258.

22. Auburn Avenue Research Library Open Forum, Dec. 6, 2000, vol. 13, Emory Archives, University Activities, Lynching Photography Exhibit, Public Forums 2000

Nov.–Dec., transcripts, etc., at the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Special Collections Department, Emory Univ.

23. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 38.

24. Auchmutey, “Lynching Exhibit Confronts South’s Ugly Past.”

25. Cited in *ibid.*

26. Cited in *ibid.*

27. Randall Burkett, conversation with author, October 2, 2002, Atlanta.

28. Leon F. Litwack, “Hellhounds” in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Sante Fe: Twin Palms Publisher, 2000), 33–34.

29. Mark Bauerlein, “History, Horror, Healing: Faculty Deliberations on Lynching Photography Examine Racial and Historical Understanding,” *The Academic Exchange: A Place for Scholarly Conversation at Emory* (Apr./May 2001): 5.

30. Joseph F. Jordan, “‘Truth as a Way to Reconciliation,’” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. April 28, 2002. Available online: http://www.accessatlanta.com/ajc/opinion/0402/28lynching_jordan.html.

31. Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), ix.

32. James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary*, 181.

33. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 201.

34. *Ibid.*, 221.

35. Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1966, quoted in *Brundage, Lynching in the New South*, 139.

36. On Johnson, see “Hanging of Black Teen Conjures Up Dark Memories in Mississippi,” CNN.com. July 18, 2000. Available online: <http://www.cnn.com/2000/US/07/18/mississippi.hanging.ap/> July 25, 2002; on Forestal, see David M. Herszenhorn, “Police Say It Was Suicide; His Family Calls It Murder,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2002.

37. “Fraternity Members in Blackface,” *New York Times*, Nov. 14, 2001.

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39. David M. Halbfinger, “Alabama Shooting Is Studied for Clues to a Lethal Debut,” *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2002.

40. *Raleigh* [N.C.] *News and Observer*, Oct. 12, 2002.

41. Songs were used with permission from the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

42. Auchmutey, “Lynching Exhibit Confronts South’s Ugly Past.”

43. Jody Usher, special projects assistant to the president of Emory University, telephone conversation with author, July 19, 2002.

44. A conference participant from Springfield was also troubled by the fact that the hanging recalled a triple lynching from a city-owned tower in 1906, and Springfield is the home of at least one virulent white supremacist group.

45. The issue was debated in the 1930s when the Communist Party argued that such killings should be counted, while the Tuskegee Institute and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at first resisted. It became difficult to make the distinction, however, when police officers and sheriff's deputies led or participated in lynch mobs. See Christopher Waltrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

46. I take the phrase from W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Plenary address, conference on *Lynching and Racial Violence in America*, Oct. 4, 2002, Atlanta.

47. Joseph F. Jordan, "Truth as a Way to Reconciliation," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 28, 2002. Available online: http://www.accessatlanta.com/ajc/opinion/0402/28lynching_jordan.html.

48. Earl Ofari Hutchinson, "The Politics of Lynching," Aug. 31, 2000. Available online: <http://dir.salon.com/news/feature/2000/08/31/lynching/index.html>.