

# Historical insights: teaching North American History using images and material culture



Edited with an introduction by Catherine Armstrong

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## Introduction

This guide will provide university teachers of American History with ways of using images and material culture in the classroom and it will explore some of the benefits and challenges arising from doing so. The essays collected in this volume emerged from a meeting of the North American History Teachers' Network, held at Manchester Metropolitan University in April 2012. The workshop was generously funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and was attended by Discipline Lead, Peter D'Sena, as well as by American History teachers working in a number of United Kingdom (UK) higher education institutions (HEIs). The network was founded in 2010 by Catherine Armstrong with the intention of bringing together university teachers of North American History who often find themselves working in isolation, either surrounded by historians of other geographical regions or by Americanists in the fields of film studies or literature. The network intends to explore methodologies of teaching and encourage the development of a mutual understanding of best practice.

This collection explores images and material culture from two distinct angles. First, by looking at them as representations of a fixed reality in the past, we understand them as primary sources, as alternatives to texts through which students can learn about that past. But second, and more complexly, by probing how today we understand the past, these essays will show how memory and historiography change the meaning of these artefacts over time so that they are not static snapshots of a fixed reality but mutable carriers of cultural capital. The three case studies provided are designed to give the lecturer or seminar leader teaching North American History new ideas about resources and approaches to teaching. However, they also highlight the problematic nature of using images and material culture in the classroom. As all these examples show, the thoughtless or naive use of images can cause confusion and misunderstanding among students.

In the first paper, Beth Southard and Elizabeth Rawitsch demonstrate how they used images to enhance public engagement with American History, specifically the 'wild west', among attendees at a workshop held at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Division Memorial Library in Norwich, UK. Film stills and photographs were used to challenge stereotypical views of 'cowboys' and 'Indians', while the audience enhanced their own learning experience by producing their own visual representations of the 'wild west'. Moving outside the classroom, Sam Edwards discusses the teaching potential of memorials for UK-based university students. This approach is especially valuable for teachers of North American History who want to engage with the built environment, but who have struggled to find suitable venues in the UK. Finally, Lydia Plath explores a very different type of visual source, the lynching postcard. She explains what students might learn from their use in the classroom, and explores some of the ethical issues arising when using such a harrowing body of material.

## The use of visual images to enhance public engagement (Beth Southard and Elizabeth Rawitsch, University of East Anglia)

Public engagement and knowledge transfer are rapidly growing areas of interest and development within the academic sector. With pressure to demonstrate that research in the humanities reaches and benefits a wider audience, scholars are increasingly beginning to employ their teaching skills beyond university walls. In June 2011, one such opportunity came our way when we were approached by the 2nd Air Division Memorial Library, an American-focused wing in Norwich's Millennium Library, to organise a talk for the general public. As two emerging academics who approach American History from different disciplinary perspectives – Beth is a specialist in early American history and Elizabeth is a specialist in film history – we were keen to cross disciplinary boundaries and to stretch beyond the format of a traditional lecture, offering our audience an opportunity to participate in the event. A talk which aimed to stimulate discussion instead of just questions seemed like it would be a better format, and we hoped that the event would be successful enough to generate a subsequent series of talks. What followed forms the basis of a useful case study for thinking about the challenges and rewards of public engagement.

We decided early on that we wanted to speak on a topic which would have wide appeal. While drawing on skills and knowledge from our respective fields it did not necessarily have to relate to our individual research interests. Elizabeth's research interest dictated that our talk would include visual images; it is difficult, although not impossible, to talk about cinema without them. The Memorial Library had recently showcased a book display on the American west that had generated a great deal of interest, and it offered potential for development as a subject of relevance for both history and film. This was narrowed down to focus on the period of the 'wild west' circa 1870-1890. Thus emerged the title for our paper 'Beyond cowboys and Indians: the American west in film, television and history'.

The combination of film and history is popular at the moment, as evidenced by a well-attended series of introduced screenings that runs at one of the local cinemas in Norwich. The structure for those events is a short introduction by a historian followed by a full film viewing. The event tends to place the historian as either a purveyor of 'truth', highlighting flaws and changes to historical record, providing historical context for an event or discussing the significance of the film in question. The historian/presenter then disappears once the film starts and any discussion afterwards is due to audience initiative. With the benefit of a film-history team, we had a unique opportunity to expand this format and offer a more historical approach to the influences and ideas in film. We decided to explore the influences and ideas which inspire both popular media and academic research rather than comparing the two fields. Ultimately, we wanted to encourage audience participation and get them to actively engage with the topics and concepts discussed. To this end we focused heavily on visual images and media in our talk and identified three objectives, to (1) present and provide information about images, (2) stimulate discussion of those images, and (3) encourage audience production and analysis of images.

### Audience and structure

The first thing we needed to think about was the audience and venue for this event. Since the purpose was to reach the community, holding the talk in the city centre was preferable to holding it at the university, located a short drive outside the city. As already noted, our local library has a wing focused on American history and culture, created by a trust of World War II airmen, and this seemed the ideal location. Not only was the library looking to attract a younger clientele, but we could also direct people to literature on the topic if they were interested. However, this would restrict the audience members as we could only accommodate 25-30 in this space. We did discuss using some of the larger conference facilities in the library which would have allowed groups of 50 or more, but since this was the first public talk in what would hopefully become a series, and we wanted to encourage discussion and questions, we thought a smaller venue would be more suitable. Anticipating that it would be a popular talk and wanting to accommodate people with different schedules, we decided to hold two sessions, one around lunchtime and one in the early evening.

We knew that by basing the event in the public library there would be a small group of regulars who we might draw upon for audience. We developed an advertising campaign with posters, social media and word of mouth and focused our print advertising in the library and on the university campus, though

flyers were put up in shops in the city as well. Based upon the normal library clientele, we expected an older group (over 50) with knowledge of films and a basic understanding of the history of the American west. We hoped by focusing on a topic outside of modern military history and by including film and television we might be able to attract a younger audience, looking in particular to draw people in their 30s and 40s. We thus anticipated an audience of around 25 per session, aged between 30 and 60 years old. We expected the daytime session to draw an older audience than the evening session, which we thought would attract people after work. This allowed us to narrow down the focus and content of the talk. As a result, the message of the talk became more focused on the development of the idea of 'the west' in film and history instead of informing people of western films and events. The talk subsequently gained a two-part focus: first, showing how trends in politics and culture influence media and research; and then exploring the popularity of 'myths' about the west in media and how they feed back into politics and culture.

The structure of the talk allowed us to alternatively focus on our own interests and areas of expertise and served to highlight the reciprocal relationship between our two areas of research. The event had to be long enough to make it worthwhile for people attending, but not too long that it was difficult to follow or tedious. We initially composed a short paper of 30 minutes with 30 minutes for discussion and questions. With two speakers, a PowerPoint presentation and film clips to show, it quickly became apparent that this was not enough time. Our talk was extended to 50 minutes with three main sections (origins, expansion of genre/field and re-interpretations), and 20-30 minutes for discussion afterwards. We split the time evenly over the three sections, and allowed time for either one long clip or several short clips.

As the focus of the event was popular ideas about the west, we wanted to gauge the audience members' notions about the west and get them stimulated and engaged even before we began speaking. This was particularly important as this was a weekday evening, many people were coming from work or school and we needed to get them in the right frame of mind for a public lecture. We decided on a two-part exercise which they could complete while settling in. First, audience members were provided with a map of the United States of America, on which they were asked to indicate the area they thought of as the 'west'. Second we asked for images (or words) that came to mind when talking about the American west. While this was supposed to be an exercise to get them thinking at the start, we found it interesting that some audience members amended their notes throughout the course of the lecture.

### **Selection of film and images**

We wanted to start with images of the 'real' American west to provide context to the popular images of the west from film and popular culture. Our initial search was through National Archives database which provided a good starting point, but mostly focused on settlers and immigration for this period (this would be good for a talk about 'the west', but not the 'wild west'). We next moved on to compiling a list of people, places and events which were most important. Since this talk was about the image and idea of the west, the search focused on those people or events which featured in contemporary sources such as dime novels, promotional posters and literature about wild west shows. We wanted to highlight not only the diversity of experience, but also to show some of the popular 'myths' and images forming even while the real 'wild west' occurred. We would then be able to examine how these ideas, myths, and images were used to create modern ideas of the wild west through film and television.

The initial plan was to use series of clips from a wide range of films and television shows to demonstrate how representations of the American west changed over time and in response to both cultural and industrial factors. Initial selections included everything from Gene Autry's archetypal singing cowboy, complete with white hat and trusted steed, to the slow-paced Mexican shootout in the spaghetti western *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). However, as already noted, it quickly became apparent that time was at a premium. While we could still use our slides to highlight film posters and screen captures of everything from the Native Americans of Thomas Edison's *Buffalo Dance* (1894) to the Utah setting of Doctor Who's sixth season premiere (*The Impossible Astronaut*, 2011), there would not be time to include multiple clips. This posed an interesting problem: if you can only use one four-minute excerpt to summarise all of the westerns ever filmed, what do you use?



The better question seemed to be what function did we want the clip to serve? We assumed that our audience members would have preconceived ideas about the wild west, particularly because our target age range would have grown up with westerns in movie theatres and on television. Therefore, our clip did not need to present a stereotypical depiction of the west as we could deliver this through still images. Instead, we wanted the clip to challenge that stereotype, revealing it as a construction. After lengthy discussion, we decided on a clip from the most commercially successful western of the 1970s: Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974). Specifically, we used the scene showing the African American sheriff's arrival in the town of Rock Ridge, from the town's vocal disapproval of his appointment to Sheriff Bart's manipulation of the townfolk's prejudices about black identity by playing both the aggressor and the victim, allowing him to 'kidnap' himself and disappear into the sheriff's office. Because parody relies on the reversal of expectations, we could talk about what the film was subverting and how it was subverting it. Sheriff Bart's arrival in Rock Ridge was a useful way to discuss assumptions about race, gender, and politics in both the wild west and in 1970s America.

We wanted not only to explore the development of this idea in film and television but also to examine how the visual cues and language were adopted and assimilated into a wider American lexicon. This led to a focus on the use of the cowboy image by politicians. This first appeared at the turn of the 20th century with Theodore Roosevelt (one of the early western myth makers), but over course of the century this image was adopted by other presidents. While early in the 20th century, presidential candidates were interested in just association with popular cowboy figures (such as the Lone Ranger or Buck Rogers), from the 1960s onwards the cowboy became a symbol or persona adopted by presidential candidates themselves. This mirrored a shift in the origins of candidates with the election of a president from the south (which had not occurred since the American Civil War) and for the first time candidates came from the west (in particular, Texas and California). This revealed that not only was the cowboy a useful symbol or tool for entertainment, but that it had a deeper cultural resonance with the American public. Further we can see that this was not a static image, but one that changed and adapted to the cultural and political climate of the 20th century.

## Visual images and the audience response

The maps and sketches produced by the audience during our talk suggest that visual images are central to the general public's understanding of the American west. This manifested itself in two ways. Firstly, visual media was a recurring motif in the key words that they produced for us. Among the lists of things that came to mind when our audience thought of the wild west were *Bonanza* (1959–1973), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Dances With Wolves* (1990), *Wild Wild West* (1999), and spaghetti westerns. They repeatedly listed both John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, two movie stars whose roles as cowboys are central to their star personas. Even some of the more general phrases – 'bad guys in black hats', 'shoot out at high noon', 'water trough (the bad guy normally ends up in here)', 'there's gold in them there hills!' and 'expanse of space' – appear to describe images that originated in various forms of visual media. Visual images captured, and continue to capture, the public's imagination and gave them yet another way to engage with history.

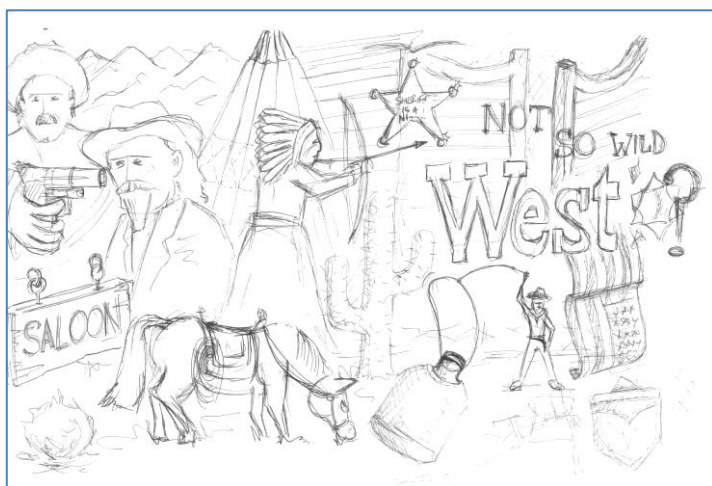


Figure 1: Cowboys

Secondly, the images that our audience drew for us (Figure 1) were often decidedly cinematic: a man in a Stetson and chaps sitting on horseback raising a gun and proclaiming 'yee haw' a saloon with doors mid-swing, and buffalo grazing on the prairie. These images all suggest movement; they are not static. Our favourite image is possibly the simplest (Figure 2): a cowboy rides his horse across a desolate landscape containing one cactus and three tumbleweeds. The horizon line falls in the middle of the page, cutting the scene into half sky, half desert. The framing suggests the dramatic compositions of John Ford's westerns and captures the isolation and hardship of the western lifestyle. It may be cliché to suggest it, but

sometimes a picture really does say a thousand words. The way that the public understands western history is often through visual images – whether they are images that the public produced or that the public consumed – and it only makes sense to incorporate them when teaching the ‘wild west’.

## Conclusion

Our experience with public engagement seems to hold lessons that extend beyond the classroom to the way that we teach history more generally. The emphasis on active rather than passive learning was particularly successful, and the way that we framed the images and clips that we showed empowered our audience. The feedback that we received from the event was overwhelmingly positive, and it indicated that the visual images were what our audience had particularly enjoyed. For example, there were several references in the feedback forms people were asked to complete after the event to the *Blazing Saddles* clip and to the cowboy presidents.

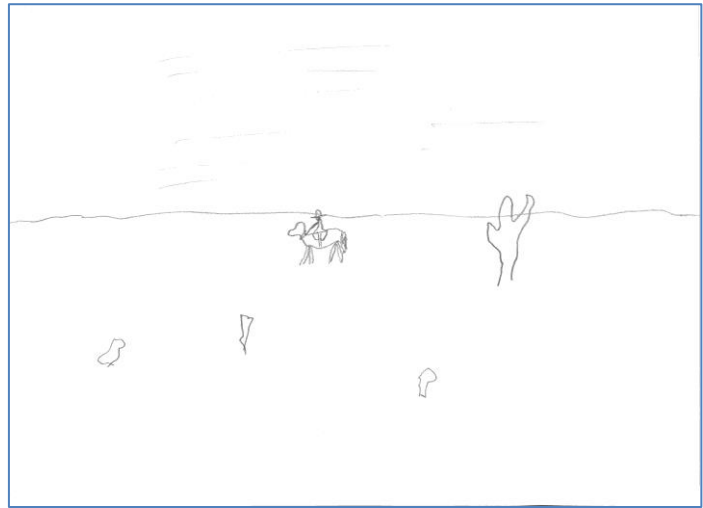


Figure 2: Desolate landscape

The feedback indicated that there were several things that we could have done better: notably, people thought that the way that we set up the room – with rows of chairs facing toward the front – did not necessarily create the best atmosphere for a discussion, since it made it difficult for people in the back to hear comments from those in the front, impeding discussion. If we were to run the event again, we would rearrange the furniture in a circle before beginning the discussion. We would also allow more time for discussion. It was apparent that our audiences were excited to talk about the maps and images that they had produced, and they would have gone on at length had time permitted.

In some ways, however, the most valuable lesson about how we use visual images to engage with public audiences occurred ten months after ‘Beyond cowboys and Indians’. The 2nd Air Division Memorial Library was approached by a group of homeschooled students (aged 7 to 17) who, having seen our initial report of the event online, requested that we re-run the lecture specifically for them. Despite some reservations about how this different audience would respond to the content, we delivered the talk having made only two changes: we substituted the *Blazing Saddles* clip, which had an 18-certificate, with a similar clip from *Back to the Future 3* (1990), which had a PG-certificate, and we cropped one of our photographs of the Wounded Knee massacre so that the casualties of the Indian War appeared at a distance rather than in close-up.

The resulting talk was unsatisfactory. Although the material was age-appropriate, the talk was at a level beyond the audience. This younger audience had not grown up with the wild west in cinemas and on television. None of them were able to name a single western. As a result they did not have a preconceived idea of the ‘wild west’. Not one of them was able to complete the map exercise because they came to our talk without knowing anything about the American west. Consequentially, it became clear during our discussion at the end that they were leaving with the stereotyped image of the west rather than beginning to question that image. When pitched at the wrong audience, the talk accomplished the very opposite of what we hoped that it would. The lesson was hammered home to us: know your audience when working with the public and tailor your pitch accordingly.

In conclusion, our public engagement lecture ‘Beyond cowboys and Indians’ used visual images in three ways: (1) the presentation of still images via PowerPoint, (2) a discussion of the representation of the west via a film clip, and (3) inviting the public to produce their own images. We feel that it was the third use of visual images that made this such a successful event. Our audience became producers of images, not simply passive consumers. When we asked them to think about the images that they produced, they began to realise that all images are constructions, including the ones that we had presented on our PowerPoint and on screen. By inviting the public to question the ideology that images of the west convey, we encouraged them to become a more critical audience, which is a lesson that extends beyond the

cultural geography of the American west to history and media studies more broadly. Visual images allowed our audience to come away from our event with a more critical knowledge of the American west and the tools with which to continue deconstructing it.

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## Online resources

The Internet Archive, [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) (thousands of digital movies in the public domain, including Thomas Edison's footage of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show).

Internet Movie Database, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) (a comprehensive database of films from past to present, including production information, synopses, and movie posters).



## Constructing the ‘special relationship’: Anglo-American heritage as a teaching tool (Sam Edwards, Manchester Metropolitan University)

As Simon Schama suggested in his acclaimed *Landscape and Memory* (1995), the ‘archive of the feet’ is a most valuable historical source.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, we cannot visit the past, but – in Britain and Europe especially – we *can* explore its ruins and remains and, in doing so, further develop our understanding of history. This was a point also implicit in W.G. Hoskins’ much cited *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), a text which drew repeated attention to the wealth of history that a wandering walker or an educated eye might find among the topography of rural England. In the contemporary era of heritage tourism, of course, visiting history – that is, touring historic sites – has emerged as a popular recreational past time. Every weekend, thousands visit those buildings, monuments and landscapes maintained by organisations like English Heritage and the National Trust. Little wonder that a museum visit, a tour of the First World War battlefields, or a trip to a desolate concentration camp, has become almost *de rigeuer* for many History students in British secondary schools and universities. Such visits offer an invaluable means to ‘ground’ understandings of the British and European past in particular geographies.

For those teachers and students interested in American history, however, things are rather more complicated. There are, of course, numerous landscapes of history in the United States – Jamestown, Williamsburg, Gettysburg, the Little Big Horn, Wounded Knee. Indeed, Gettysburg is amongst the most visited tourist attractions outside of Washington, D.C. But a tour of these landscapes is surely beyond the means of most history departments in British schools and universities. Fortunately, however, there are at least a few narratives of American history accessible on the British landscape. This essay draws attention to just one of these narratives, a narrative which has come to be known as the ‘special relationship’.

### Making the ‘special relationship’

As phrase and idea, the ‘special relationship’ is a skilful exercise in transatlantic diplomacy. Its origins have been traced to 1941, but it is of course most commonly associated with the speech delivered by former Prime Minister Winston Churchill at Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946 (the same speech in which Churchill also offered the expression ‘iron curtain’ in order to describe the divisions then emerging between east and west in Europe).<sup>2</sup> Churchill, Anglo-American in parentage and with a keen interest in the history of the United States – as expressed in his later *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1958) – saw in this phrase the opportunity to secure the foreign policy imperatives of the present. His aim, in short, was to suggest to the American political establishment that the bond joining Britain and the US was not, like other alliances, the product of intrigue or negotiation, trade or treaty; rather, this bond was natural, organic, biological, cultural, historical. For Churchill, then, the ‘special relationship’ was not simply a piece of spin, nor was it just good copy for transatlantic editors and columnists. It was an expression of a historical truth: the Anglo-American alliance was, he believed, ‘special’, and this specialness was the result of recent wartime comradeship *and* of four centuries of earlier history.

Some of this sentiment remains today: the idea of a ‘special’ transatlantic connection is still frequently the basis upon which Anglo-American diplomacy is grounded (even if it has become rather more of a cliché), and the historiography of Anglo-American relations is similarly all too often pre-occupied with exploring whether or not these relations are indeed ‘special’. Yet, for all the Churchillian eloquence, the power and resonance of the ‘special relationship’ as an idea actually lies in the extent to which it fuses fact and fiction. To search for its ‘truth’, therefore, is to rather miss the point: the special relationship is a *myth*. Not in the sense of being ‘false’, but in the sense of it being a work of cultural construction framed by the political imperatives of the post-war present and grounded upon a long history of Anglo-American connections. And for Americanists based in Britain the origins, motives and circumstances behind this work of construction can be seen by taking a tour of certain sites and monuments. Here is the ballast of 20th-century Anglo-American relations; the sites which are, at one and the same time, products of a so-called special relationship *and* producers of that relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 24.

<sup>2</sup> A useful survey of the historiography connected to the ‘special relationship’ can be found in David Reynolds, ‘Rethinking Anglo-American Relations’, *International Affairs*, 65, no. 1 (1988-1989), 89-111.

## Lincoln, Washington, and the 'Anglo-Saxon' bond, c. 1900-1930

The origins of the Churchillian 'special relationship' lie in an older transatlantic diplomatic discourse, a discourse grounded upon a set of historical, cultural and racial assumptions characteristic of the early 20th-century Anglo-Saxonism. As an idea, Anglo-Saxonism had first emerged towards the end of the 18th century, particularly in the works of British and American philologists, linguists, historians, and lawyers. Fascinated by understandings of 'liberty', and intrigued by the medieval past, such scholars 'discovered' that the source of those ideas and institutions so important to Enlightenment Englishmen – on both sides of the Atlantic – lay in the ancient Germanic forest. Here, unconquered and uncorrupted by Rome, Germanic warriors had found their unique capacity for self-government, a quality which their descendents took with them on their journeys west, first to the eastern shores of Britain in the fifth century, then to the eastern shores of North America in the 17th century (at least, so went the theory).<sup>3</sup>

As Reginald Horsman has demonstrated, this discourse of *cultural* Anglo-Saxonism was then racialised in the early 19th century, specifically between 1830-1850. This was the era in which the fulfillment of American manifest destiny and aggressive British imperial expansion simultaneously brought Euro-Americans and white Britons into contact, and conflict, with racial 'others': Indians (both North American and South Asian), Africans, Mexicans, Australasians. Under the influence of these encounters, and amidst an intellectual climate in which the science of 'race' was becoming increasingly pervasive, historical Teutonism – and the connected ideology of cultural Anglo-Saxonism – was racialised. By the 1890s, moreover, continued Anglo-American Imperial expansion together with contemporary concerns regarding the 'Irish question' in both countries – connected to immigration in the United States, and to 'home rule' in Britain – duly ensured that this racialised discourse was now ready to be deployed in the diplomacy of Anglo-American relations.<sup>4</sup> In both countries, then, racial Anglo-Saxonism – inspired by an imagined medieval past, inflected by the quasi-scientific theories of social Darwinism, and responsive to the realities of global power politics – was constructed in opposition to a racial 'other', be that foreign or domestic, Asian or Celtic, Indian or Irish. As a result, and as Stuart Anderson succinctly explains, 'Anglo-Saxonism was a mature intellectual doctrine by the mid-1890s, ready to influence the way Britons and Americans looked at each other and the world in the years of the Anglo-American rapprochement'.<sup>5</sup>

This racial Anglo-Saxonism framed the many celebrations of the Anglo-American bond at the turn of the 20th century. Kipling, for instance, would call for the American cousins to help shoulder the 'white man's burden', while figures as different as Andrew Carnegie and Joseph Chamberlain would both call for a racial alliance of the stars and stripes and Union Jack. By 1917, commentators on both sides of the Atlantic would even celebrate American entry into World War I as an expression of fidelity to the kin beyond the sea.

Significantly, however, efforts to construct and celebrate this supposed 'Anglo-Saxon' bond were not just discursive. Indeed, following a century of Victorian civic activism in regard to public architecture, and at the very moment in which Britons were about to embark on the largest programme of memorial building in the nation's history, the Anglo-American racial connection would also be inscribed upon the British landscape. These efforts took several different forms, but the most significant expressions of the biological and blood tie joining Americans and Britons centred on the commemoration of the English origins of two very famous Americans: George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

By the 20th century, George Washington's English ancestry was well known, and several English communities claimed him as 'theirs': Washington, just outside Sunderland, understandably claimed his

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of cultural Anglo-Saxonism see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Exceptionalism* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981) 9-24; Reginald Horsman, 'Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Great Britain before 1850', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37, no. 3 (1976), 388-390; Anna Martellone, 'In the Name of Anglo-Saxondom, For Empire and For Democracy: The Anglo-American Discourse, 1880-1920', in David K. Adams and Cornelius A. Van Minnen (eds.) *Reflections on American Exceptionalism* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994) 84; S.W. Siak, '“The Blood That Is in Our Veins Comes From German Ancestors”': British Historians and the Coming of the First World War', *Albion: Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 30, no. 2 (1998), 227.

<sup>4</sup> L.P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (New York: University of Bridgeport, 1968), 1-16.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations, 1895-1904* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), 61.

name, as well as the origins of the American flag (the Washington family crest is depicted in the local church and does include blocks of red and white). The parish church of Warton in Lancashire similarly claims a connection to the stars and bars of Old Glory (the Washington family held land here for several centuries, and like its County Durham rival the church includes a stained glass representation of the family crest); the village pub which sits immediately adjacent to the village church is called the 'George Washington'. Purleigh in Essex, meanwhile, was the birth-place of John Washington, the man who began the Virginian branch of the Washington family (John's father, Lawrence, was parish curate). Elsewhere, Sulgrave in Northamptonshire has established itself as perhaps the most famous link to the Washington line: a lineal ancestor built the local manor.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, as a member of the revolutionary generation, appropriating Washington as a marker of the longevity of the Anglo-American connection was reasonably straight-forward. After all, he had been born in *British* North America, he had worn a Red Coat in battle, and at the outset of the revolution he still understood himself to be fighting for the rights that every Englishman knew to be inscribed in Magna Carta. To be sure, he then led the fledging United Colonies to victory over the British Empire and, disgusted by British policy in the lead-up to war, declared that he would never set foot on British soil again. But by the 1790s he had already begun to re-establish diplomatic and economic connections to Britain, and there was always much about his character and style that was reminiscent of the English rural gentry. Simply put, it did not require too much effort and imagination (nor too many omissions) to reconstruct the patrician Washington as a distinctly *Anglo-American*. This was the background to the erection in 1920 of a statue of Washington in London. It stands just outside the National Gallery, and it was erected, significantly, on specially imported Virginian soil so that the American Union's first president would, indeed, not be obliged to muddy his feet on British turf.

A year later, the Washington's ancestral home at Sulgrave Manor, Northamptonshire, was established as a museum to the Washington family and, equally important, as a memorial to the Anglo-American bond. Both monuments to early 20th-century Anglo-American relations can be visited today, and the latter museum continues to celebrate its symbolic role in Anglo-American relations.

Post-World War I, efforts to anchor Anglo-American relations in stone and statuary were even more apparent in the contemporary 'use' made of Abraham Lincoln. In several respects, Lincoln was a more 'difficult' figure to appropriate in this way. During his life he had been reviled by much of the British political establishment for being the chief executive of a racially mongrel mob democracy intent on the destruction of a noble, landed, southern aristocracy. By the end of the 19th century, moreover, he was firmly established in American cultural memory as the first real 'American' president: born on the Frontier of New England *and* from a Virginian family – northern, southern and western all rolled into one. Throughout his life too, Lincoln had revelled in being 'unancestried'. These were hardly good grounds on which to recast him as an 'Anglo-American'.

Yet the circumstances and developments of the early 20th century eased some of these problems. In 1909, for instance, two American genealogists successfully traced his English lineage to a certain Samuel Lincoln, formerly of Hingham, Norfolk, and by 1916 one Briton – Lord Charnwood – would even anglicise Lincoln in a popular and commercially successful biography.<sup>7</sup> British interest in the 'great emancipator' was also roused by the oft-quoted pronouncements of his greatest Welsh disciple – Prime Minister David Lloyd George, raised in a home in which Lincoln had always been revered. Indeed, throughout the war with Germany, Lloyd George (and others) would often use the words of Father Abraham in order to make sense of the contemporary battle for freedom and democracy. It was here, then, as Americans and Britons fought together in the fields of France, and as the ideas of racial Anglo-Saxonism continued to dominate the discourses of transatlantic diplomacy, that Abraham Lincoln – unancestried, self-made, a scion of the 'mongrel' north – was firmly appropriated as an Englishman.

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<sup>6</sup> The best treatment of the Washington family line remains H. Clifford Smith, *Sulgrave Manor and the Washington's* (London: 1933). But a useful survey can be found on the website run by Sulgrave Manor: [http://www.sulgravemanor.org.uk/pages/7/the\\_washingtons\\_at\\_sulgrave\\_manor.asp](http://www.sulgravemanor.org.uk/pages/7/the_washingtons_at_sulgrave_manor.asp) Accessed 24 August 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Henry Lea and J.R. Hutchinson, *The Ancestry of Lincoln* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909). See also Lord Charnwood, *Abraham Lincoln*, (New York: Washington Square, 1939). First published in 1916.

This cultural work took many forms, but the pre-eminent example centred on the erection of a statue of Lincoln just outside the Palace of Westminster. Prior to this initiative, there was only one Lincoln statue in the whole of Britain. Erected on Calton Hill, Edinburgh, in 1893 this monument was actually dedicated to the ‘memory of Scottish-American soldiers’ who had served in the Union Army during the Civil War.<sup>8</sup> But by 1914, as the one hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of Ghent approached – the event that marked the end of the War of 1812 – the ‘American Committee for the Centennial of Peace’ suggested the moment was right for a new Lincoln memorial in the British capital. The outbreak of war then delayed these plans, and they were not re-energised until 1917. What followed was a fascinating and occasionally volatile discussion of exactly which Lincoln should stand in the British Empire’s capital city. Two ‘visions’ of Lincoln dominated this debate: one, a replica of a statue originally erected in Cincinnati, portrayed Lincoln as a ‘man of the people’ – a homespun frontiersman of common stock. The other, a replica of a statue first established in Chicago depicted Lincoln as a thoughtful and dignified statesman – stood before a sculpted chair, hand on lapel, eyes cast downward in solemn contemplation. The vigorous debate which followed between supporters of each statue has already been well-studied and well-discussed.<sup>9</sup> Suffice to say here then that, in the end, both visions of Lincoln were indeed established on the British landscape, and both can still be seen today. Lincoln, the thoughtful ‘Anglo-Saxon’ statesman, stands in the shadow of the Palace of Westminster (nearby are statues of Cromwell and Churchill). Lincoln the ‘common man’, meanwhile, stands in Manchester, the home town of his most strident 19th century radical supporter (John Bright), and the city whose ‘working men’ had famously sent Lincoln their unreserved support in 1863, even despite the poverty and unemployment provoked in Lancashire by the interruption to the cotton trade with the south.



Lincoln monument, London © Sam Edwards



Lincoln monument, Manchester © Sam Edwards

### ‘Over paid and over here’: World War II and the commemoration of the ‘special relationship’

In the interwar period, these efforts to commemorate and celebrate the transatlantic Anglo-Saxon bond then fell by the wayside. This was an era of American political isolationism and, in Europe, emerging fears of encroaching Americanisation. By the 1940s, moreover, the experiences of the Second World War ensured that there was no longer space in Anglo-American diplomatic discourse for celebrations of a

<sup>8</sup> For details see, M. Aidin, ‘American Civil War Memorial, Calton Hill, Edinburgh’, *History Scotland*, March/April 2007, pp. 14-17.

<sup>9</sup> The story of the Lincoln statue erected in London in 1920 has been told several times before. See, for example, S. Edwards, ‘“From Here Lincoln Came”: Anglo-Saxonism, the Special Relationship, and the Anglicization of Abraham Lincoln, c.1860-1970 in N. Wulf (ed.) *Abraham Lincoln in Europe: Political Uses, Popular Images* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, forthcoming in 2013); H.E. Dickson, ‘George Grey Barnard’s Controversial Lincoln’, *Art Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Autumn 1967, 8-15+19+23; Hutchinson, ‘“All the Men of Great Affairs”: The Barnard Statue, Manchester Liberalism, and Lincoln Intellectual History’; Adam I.P. Smith, ‘The ‘Cult’ of Abraham Lincoln and the Strange Survival of Liberal England in the Era of the World Wars’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 21, no. 4 (2010), 486-509.

racial bond with origins in the ancient Germanic forests. Indeed, having fought two global conflicts against Germany and after racial Teutonism had become synonymous with Nazism, Anglo-Saxonism as discourse and idea lost its power and credibility in interwar Anglo-American culture. Nonetheless, on the back of the Anglo-American victory of 1945, and after four years of war during which Britain and the United States had developed an alliance of unprecedented closeness, efforts to mark and memorialise a transatlantic connection returned. But the idea upon which these efforts were now based was the Churchillian 'special relationship'. Gone was the idea of a common Anglo-American bloodline born of Germanic stock; its place was now taken by the shared values of liberty and democracy characteristic of the 'English-speaking' peoples.

Unsurprisingly, given the precedents discussed above, Abraham Lincoln was once again a popular focus of commemorative attention. Indeed, in a coincidence of history, the British region most thoroughly 'Americanised' during the war was East Anglia, the Lincoln ancestral home: half a million American airmen were based in the region by 1944. Lincoln, therefore, was once again well-equipped to meet the transatlantic diplomatic needs of the moment. But it was his values and principles, rather than his racial stock, which now drew the attention of memorial builders. In Great Cransley (Northamptonshire), for instance, an impressive stained-glass memorial window dedicated to the American military was unveiled in 1944. Initiated by a local unit of the American Air Force, but paid for by subscriptions from both Britain and the United States, this window took great care to assimilate the wartime Anglo-American alliance into a long history of common purpose. At the window's centre is a representation of St. George bearing sword and shield; beneath him stand two rather more recent warriors – a British and American soldier, hands clasped in friendship. In a nearby corner is an image of President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, deep in conversation at a wartime conference. The rest of the window then seeks to represent the four centuries of Anglo-American history responsible for the creation of shared transatlantic ideals. In one corner is a detail featuring the Archbishop of Canterbury blessing the 1497 expedition to Newfoundland by John Cabot. Next comes a scene of the pilgrim fathers writing the Mayflower compact, while close by stands 17th-century local Thomas Hooker, founder of the colony of Connecticut, establishing the Hertford Constitution in 1639. Elsewhere, William Penn can be seen treating with an Indian Chief, before the contemporary Anglo-American alliance is then placed on its surest footing of all. Abraham Lincoln, son of East Anglia, stands before a crowd delivering that most eloquent rallying cry for the concept of a people's democracy: the Gettysburg Address.

A similar invocation of the Anglo-American bond was also apparent in the dedication of a memorial window in the small Norfolk village of Quidenham. Dedicated to the dead of the 96th Bomb Group, who flew from a nearby airfield, this window – which took the form of an American airman being welcomed into heaven after having made his sacrifice for democracy – was dedicated by the parish rector with words which drew specific attention to the fact that the villages of rural Norfolk had an especially close link to the United States. After all, this vicar explained, it was precisely this part of East Anglia from which so many 17th-century migrants to the New World had originally departed. Indeed, the vicar – whose words were being broadcast across the Atlantic by the BBC World service – reminded his audience of a salient fact of Anglo-American history: "From here", he explained, "Lincoln came".<sup>10</sup>

But it was not just East Anglian parish churches in which the Anglo-American 'special relationship' was found and celebrated. The British government also took a hand in its commemorative cultivation. In 1958, for example, post-war efforts to establish a national memorial to those Americans killed while based in wartime Britain finally came to fruition with the dedication of an American memorial chapel in St. Paul's Cathedral, London.<sup>11</sup> As we might expect, the aesthetics of this chapel explored the now familiar theme of transatlantic comradeship. The walls were made of English oak, yet engraved into the panelling were distinctly American birds, fruits and flowers. Meanwhile, the three stained glass windows which formed the backdrop to the chapel were 'designed to represent the service, sacrifice and resurrection of the Christian soldier in terms of biblical scenes from the Life of Christ', a familiar, and entirely traditional, commemorative theme. But the twist would be provided by the border which consisted of the insignia of the 48 American states, the four territories, and the US Army and Navy (the air force was a branch of the

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<sup>10</sup> Reverend W.M. Harper-Mitchell. Rector of Quidenham church, speech at service of remembrance, 30 May 1946, PD 97/29, Norfolk Records Office (hereafter 'NRO').

<sup>11</sup> For some details about the chapel, see *The American Memorial Chapel in St. Paul's Cathedral* (London: Pitkin Pictorals Ltd., 1958).



Army throughout the Second World War). Moreover, towards the bottom of the central window was a depiction of a ship designed to represent those wooden vessels 'that sailed westwards 350 years ago and the great armadas which in our recent experience steamed back'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the design of this memorial sought to suggest that the American cousins had returned to the family hearth. Finally, and with a particularly impressive (and somewhat problematic) display of imagination, the altar rails were inscribed with various dates deemed of significance: 607, 1300, 1666 and 1710 were engraved, for these were important years in the life of St. Paul's. But the rails were also marked with the figures 1607 and 1776: the first was the date at which Jamestown was founded, the latter the date of the Declaration of Independence. So St. Paul's Cathedral, the 'Parish Church of the British Commonwealth', was to include a memorial which inscribed the date the American colonies broke free from that commonwealth. Clearly the irony had been lost somewhere along the way.



American Air Museum © Sam Edwards

Commemorative celebrations of the Anglo-American alliance, particularly as forged in the fire of war, continued on and off for the rest of the 20th century. In 1963, for instance, an American Memorial Library dedicated to the dead of a wartime American air force unit was unveiled in Norwich with the reminder that 'bonds of ancestry' connected so many Americans to Norfolk.<sup>13</sup> The 1980s and 1990s then witnessed a plethora of similar commemorative activity as American veterans, now retired and contemplating their youth, returned to

the sites of their wartime past. They left behind a remarkable number of memorials and museums, all of which can still be found among the fields and lanes of rural East Anglia. Once again too, such celebrations of the Anglo-American tie were not the preserve of just veterans and villagers. In 2001, for example, the Imperial War Museum officially opened a special 'American Air Museum' at its facility in Duxford, Cambridgeshire. It houses the IWM's collection of American military aircraft, but it is also a memorial to those Americans who flew to their deaths from wartime East Anglia.<sup>14</sup>

### Sites of memory as teaching tools

The sites of memory briefly discussed above – specifically those connected to 20th-century Anglo-American relations – can be used to shed light on two distinct histories. First, those memorials, monuments and museums built as icons of the Anglo-American connection do indeed offer a glimpse of the long-running history of that connection. That is, invoking the English ancestry of Abraham Lincoln, or celebrating the Norfolk origins of New England puritans, was dependent upon the fact that there was a 'truth' here. Simply put, visiting a British-based statue of Lincoln or a stained glass window featuring the migration of the Pilgrim Fathers might serve as a useful way to engage students with the idea that there is a rich history joining the United States and United Kingdom.

At the same time, however, the more interesting – and, perhaps, more challenging – history offered by these pieces of Anglo-American heritage concerns the way in which that the transatlantic connection has been 'found'; the way it has been actively constructed with reference to the political, cultural and racial assumptions of the ever-changing present. British-based Anglo-American heritage, in short, offers an invaluable means through which to explore the 'politics of memory'; the ways in which transatlantic elites have shaped the Anglo-American tie by inscribing it on the very landscape. From the racial Anglo-Saxonism of the post-1918 period, to the 'special relationship' of the post-1945 era, the British landscape carries the marks of repeated attempts to identify and celebrate the terms on which the Anglo-American alliance should be based. And as historians, we are already well-equipped to engage with the physical

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Remarks of the Honorable Lewis G. James, American Minister and Charge d'Affaires, US Embassy given at the opening of the American Memorial Room, Norwich Library, Thursday 13 June 1963, MC 2059/8, 911x7, NRO.

<sup>14</sup> For some details about the museum, see <http://aam.iwm.org.uk/>

legacy of these efforts, for the critical questions to ask of any memorial or monument are, in many respects, those that we direct towards all primary sources:

- Who built it?
- When was it built?
- Why was it built?
- Where was it built?
- What does it look like?

Incorporating a 'site visit' to a piece of Anglo-American heritage thus offers the opportunity to take our teaching out of the classroom, and in doing so excite and engage, while also providing a means to develop and refine our students skills in historical analysis. The archive of the feet is indeed an invaluable resource.

### **Other useful sites of Anglo-American heritage in Britain**

This essay has discussed just a small number of British sites and locations connected to the history of 20th-century Anglo-American relations. But there are many other sites not discussed here, and indeed there are other distinct narratives of Anglo-American history 'accessible' on the British landscape via memorials, monuments and museums. Below is a brief list with details of the sites referred to above, and of others that might be of interest (and please note it is by no means exhaustive).

Statue of George Washington (1920), outside the National Gallery in London.

Sulgrave Manor, ancestral home of the Washington Family and Museum to Anglo-American relations (1921): <http://www.sulgravemanor.org.uk/>

Statue of Abraham Lincoln (1920), Canning Enclosure, near the Palace of Westminster.

Statue of Abraham Lincoln (1919), Lincoln Square, Manchester.

Bust of Abraham Lincoln (1919), Hingham Parish Church, Norfolk.

Memorial window to US Army Air Force (1944), Great Cransley, Northamptonshire.

Memorial window to 96th Bomb Group, US Army Air Force (1944), Quidenham, Norfolk.

American Memorial Chapel, St. Paul's Cathedral, London: <http://www.explore-stpauls.net/oct03/textN/11.htm>

American Military Cemetery Brookwood, Surrey (1917-1918) and Madingley, Cambridgeshire (1941-45): <http://www.abmc.gov/home.php>

The American Museum in Britain, Bath: <http://www.americanmuseum.org/>

The American Air Museum: <http://aam.iwm.org.uk/>

## Looking at lynching: ethical and practical matters faced when using lynching photographs in the classroom (Lydia Plath, Canterbury Christ Church University)

I do not know how to teach about lynching . . .  
It is easier to forget. Easier not to teach. Easier not to think about . . .  
Is screaming in rage and grief a pedagogical method? . . .  
I do not know what my students are feeling.  
It feels cruel to ask. It feels cruel not to ask.  
'Gukira'<sup>15</sup>

In February 2005, the US Senate passed 'S. Res. 39', a resolution 'Apologising to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation.' The bipartisan apology, co-sponsored by Senators Mary L. Landrieu (D-La) and George Allen (R-Va), was primarily a result, according to Landrieu, of her viewing of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* by James Allen. "The impact of the pictures was overwhelming and proved to be a very educational and emotional experience for me," she said, and prompted her to do "something positive."<sup>16</sup> In her speech at the announcement, she explained that *Without Sanctuary*

...tells the story as pictures sometimes can only do. Although books have been written, thousands of words have been spoken, when pictures and photographs are presented they are indisputable evidence of what has occurred.<sup>17</sup>

To underline her point, two highly magnified images of lynchings were on display in the Press Room. One was the image of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana in 1930, and the other was the image of the lynching of Rubin Stacey in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 1935. I only know this because I am familiar with the images. There was no caption on the images themselves. Nor were they referred to during the speeches. Rather, they existed as mere illustrations of the horror of lynching. While I was watching the report, I wondered what the families of lynching victims, some of whom were present, thought of the display of these images, magnified for the television cameras, showing black bodies objectified by a white gaze.

The importance of the images in propelling the Senate to action is clear in the resolution itself:

Whereas the recent publication of "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America" helped bring greater awareness and proper recognition of the victims of lynching.<sup>18</sup>

It is certainly true that the publicity of the book and the exhibition increased public knowledge of lynching. As Senator John Kerry explained:

I thought I was pretty well grounded in the history of our country, but I didn't know anything about lynching, except that they happened. I didn't know what they were, what they really meant, until a few years ago, when the exhibitions started to criss-cross the country.<sup>19</sup>

But this leaves me wondering: if Allen had not been a 'picker,' as he describes himself, would the United States be even less aware of the violent history of white supremacy than it currently is? Probably. Would we still be waiting for an apology from the US Senate for their failure to enact anti-lynching legislation? For Mary Landrieu and the 86 other senators who signed the resolution, it seems, seeing was believing. Without the images, would people be disputing that lynchings took place? What if lynchings had not chosen to document their atrocities through photographs? The consequences of such notions are concerning, particularly for the thousands of men and women who died at the hands of mobs, but whose images are not preserved on film. There is evidence that hundreds of African Americans (and others) were lynched throughout the first half of the 19th century, but these lynchings are rarely acknowledged,

<sup>15</sup> Gukira, 'Teaching on Lynching' (7 February 2012), <http://gukira.wordpress.com/2012/02/07/teaching-on-lynching>

<sup>16</sup> Cited in 'Senate Apologizes to Lynching Victims, Families for Failure to Act,' *Mary Landrieu, U. S. Senator for Louisiana* (13 June 2005), [www.landrieu.senate.gov](http://www.landrieu.senate.gov).

<sup>17</sup> 'Anti-Lynching Apology Resolution,' *C-SPAN Video Library* (13 June 2005), [www.c-spanvideo.org](http://www.c-spanvideo.org).

<sup>18</sup> S. Res. 39: Apologizing to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation' (109<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 7 February 2005).

<sup>19</sup> 'Anti-Lynching Apology Resolution.'

in part because there are no pictures. But by the 20th century, the camera had become a key part of spectacle lynchings; photography was part of the ritual.

These images have been public knowledge for years, but they have received greater attention since January 2000, when a collection of lynching photographs, gathered by Allen from archives, dealers and family photo albums, went on display at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York. Later that year, Allen published most of their pictures in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, and started a website ([www.withoutsanctuary.org](http://www.withoutsanctuary.org)). Over the next few years, the exhibition travelled to six more locations, including to the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, Georgia. Many of these photographs show nameless black men, beaten and bruised, hanging, alone. But others show mobs, ranging from a few to a few thousand, gathered around corpses that were burning on the ground or dangling from trees, suspended in the moonlight. Some in the crowds clutched souvenirs. Some in the crowds were children. Most, but not all, of the victims depicted were black men, and most of the photographs were taken between the 1880s and the 1930s. Many were taken outside of the south. Lynching was an American pastime, and the visual evidence is everywhere.

In part because of the increased public interest in lynching as a result of *Without Sanctuary*, more and more historians, sociologists, art historians and cultural studies professors are covering it in their courses. There is high student demand for American history, particularly the history of race relations, on both sides of the Atlantic. However, since the advent of the internet, Microsoft PowerPoint and Google image search, it has become so easy to use images for teaching that we often do not think further about the ethical implications of using images that were created for racist purposes, that show dead bodies, that show people being victimised, shamed and degraded: images that were created without the consent of those being portrayed. Some insist that we should not be showing these images at all. As Janina Struk explains:

If acts of atrocity are beyond the comprehension of most of us, then little can be achieved by looking at images of them... Whoever [the victims] were.... they had no choice but to be photographed. Now they have no choice but to be viewed by posterity. Didn't they suffer enough the first time around?<sup>20</sup>

Susan Crane has convincingly argued that because Holocaust victims were not “willing subjects,” the “photography should perhaps fall under the same category as the results of Nazi medical experiments, not allowable as scientific evidence, due to the infringement of human subjects’ rights.” While Crane does not necessarily advocate the ‘wholesale destruction’ of the images, she does suggest “removing them from view.”<sup>21</sup> However, I argue that lynching photographs serve an important pedagogical purpose; they illuminate issues of race, violence, gender, class, religion, sexuality, and a whole host of other topics in American history, and they have a great deal to teach us and our students. But we must be very careful about exactly *how* we present these images. There must be discussion, further reading, and context in order to view these images responsibly, along with respect for the people they depict, and respect for our students and their reactions to the photographs.

I gave the students on my course – ‘White Supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan’, in which we spend one week discussing lynching – an optional, anonymous, online survey to complete in order to gauge their responses to my use of lynching photographs in the classroom. I should note that all the students on my course were white, and the majority were female.<sup>22</sup> The survey had three sections, consisting of a total of

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<sup>20</sup> Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 215-216.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Crane, ‘Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography,’ *History and Theory*, 47 (2008), p. 329.

<sup>22</sup> The survey was taken several weeks after the end of the teaching on the course, and after the exam. Of my class of 38 students, exactly half (19) provided responses to the survey. I asked them only for their gender and for a qualitative description of their ‘race/ethnicity.’ The gender spread was essentially equivalent to that of the class as a whole: 63% (12) of the respondents were female, and 37% (7) male, whereas the class was 68% (26) female and 32% (12) male. However, the women were far more likely to provide substantive qualitative answers to the questions, by writing in the optional comment boxes. Indeed, 75% of the women made some form of comment, whereas only 57% of the men did so. The women’s comments also tended to be significantly longer than those of the men. With regards to race, all but two of the respondents described themselves as (some variation of) ‘white.’ Of the final two students, one described herself as ‘African/Caucasian.’ Perhaps because of this background, this student had one of the strongest responses to the lynching photographs. The final student did not respond to the question on race.

six questions, and a space for further comments. The first section asked students: ‘how did seeing the lynching photographs make you feel?’ and the second and third asked them to consider the ways in which I had used the images as learning tools. The responses to this survey inform this essay throughout, but will be discussed in most detail towards the end. First, I will review some of the extant literature on atrocity photographs and violent images in order to help university teachers make an informed decision on whether or not they wish to show these images in their classrooms. Second, I will survey some of the responses to the lynching photographs displayed in the various *Without Sanctuary* exhibitions<sup>23</sup>. Third, I will offer some suggestions as to appropriate (and inappropriate) ways of teaching with lynching photographs, based upon my own experiences, the responses of my students, and on the writings of others who have taught with lynching photographs. While there are serious ethical, practical, and historical problems with using lynching photographs in the classroom, I will conclude that, as one of my students put it, “viewing lynching photographs is essential for studying lynching.”

## Looking at violent images

James Elkins argues that every photograph of a person, regardless of its content, is “a little travesty” because a two-dimensional image is always incomplete: all photographs objectify their subjects. This violence is then intensified immeasurably in photographs that intentionally demean their subjects. In these photographs,

Seeing is aggressive: it distorts what it looks at, and it turns a person into an object in order to let us stare at it without feeling ashamed... seeing is also controlling and objectifying and denigrating... it is an act of violence and it creates pain.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most significant ethical problems faced when looking at lynching photographs is that they were all taken from a white supremacist point of view: we are looking at an objectified victim through the same means used to objectify them. Our perspective is that of the racist. W.E.B. Du Bois argued that the cultural power of spectacle lynchings was in the looking. So how do we look without reviving that power?<sup>25</sup>

The historians who analyse lynching photography argue that it is possible to reclaim the gaze, to subvert the original meaning of the photographs, in order to challenge white supremacy. Dora Apel claims that:

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.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Amy Wood argues that it is possible to:

reappropriate the images, recontextualise them, and make them proof embedded in the image [stand] not as evidence of white superiority, but rather white culpability.<sup>27</sup>

However, the exact process of redirecting the gaze is unclear. While, as one critic put it, “we ask [the photographs] to carry an utterly different meaning than they once did – an outcry against racism rather than a reinforcement of it,” do we actually succeed in making them do so?<sup>28</sup> Wendy Wolters is not convinced:

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With these qualifications in mind, for the sake of simplicity I will refer to the student respondents (and to the students in my class in general) as ‘white.’

<sup>23</sup> As much as we might like them to be, museums are not classrooms, and students will likely react differently on a history course, in an educational setting, than the general public did to an exhibition. However, these varied responses do serve as an indicator of how students from a variety of backgrounds could respond to the photographs

<sup>24</sup> James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Harcourt, 1996), pp. 27-29.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Amy Louise Wood, ‘Lynching photography and the “black beast rapist” in the southern white masculine imagination’ in Peter Lehman (ed.), *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 208.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Death by Lynching’, *Opinion*, *New York Times* (16 March 2000).



As the audience of the photographs today, are we better equipped to look *at* instead of *with* the spectators?... The spectacle of a lynched body is reproduced for a new audience, and the spectacle remains at the centre of this project.<sup>29</sup>

Instead of reclaiming the gaze for a different purpose, Wolters finds that:

The documentary mode... allows the audience to gaze freely and innocently at the lynched bodies under the pretence of learning about and preventing future violence.<sup>30</sup>

Apel agrees that “torture images do not inherently produce their own undoing – it depends on us.”<sup>31</sup> Otherwise, the victims of lynching undergo what Wolters calls “a triple dying”: they are murdered by the mob, they are “the object of the violent gaze of the [contemporary] spectators,” and they are “subject to [our] re-violation” as we look again.<sup>32</sup> This is especially the case for lynching photographs, which did not merely document lynchings, but rather were a crucial part of the lynching ritual, “another step in the process of torture.”<sup>33</sup>

So, is it possible to look at these pictures without forcing their subjects to die, repeatedly, under our gaze? In 2006, *Nka*, the *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, published a special issue on lynching, in which the editors noted the problematic nature of using lynching photographs in an art journal, and “tried as much as possible to avoid aestheticising images of lynching and torture.”<sup>34</sup> They note, as Mieke Bal has argued, that “the reproduction... of objectionable images is a gesture of complicity, no matter how critical the text that accompanies them.” Further, Bal argues that:

Not only do... critics repeat the racist gesture of distortion and exploitation in the reproduction of the photographs, but also the images inform the critical text that is alleged to frame them. The stare of the critic is caught, and he cannot help but be entangled in what he had set out to undo. Instead of returning the gaze, the critics occasionally adopt it.

This is a serious concern when it comes to lynching photographs. Can we ever be completely removed from the (white racist) gaze produced by the photographer? However, Bal does not mean that that these images should be ignored, or left aside “in a problematic act of prudishness and censorship,” an act that would be equally complicit with abuse. Instead, she argues that a reading of such images could be possible, if it includes (1) a “sparse use of visual material where every image is provided with an immediately accessible critique that justifies its use with specificity”, (2) more emphasis on “the subject looking at the image and what that subject is exactly doing there” (rather than the represented ‘object’), (3) the involvement of the critic in the analysis by “narrativising the image-viewer interaction”, and (4) “the constant juxtaposition of material representing the other side/sight”. Our political responsibility as scholars is to ensure that we acknowledge “the contagion” of racism, because “an unproblematic emphasis on the difference of the [racist] past is a sure way to keep it alive in an unacknowledged present.”<sup>35</sup> In order to avoid reproducing the white supremacist objectification of black bodies inherent in lynching photography, we need to ensure that we use lynching photographs only when necessary, and that we subject the images to analysis and critique, rather than using them as mere illustrations; this includes paying close attention to the specificity of each image, rather than using one photograph to represent lynching as a whole. We need to emphasise and interrogate the white crowd (whether present or not in the actual image), rather than the black victim. We need to pay close attention to our own gaze: for example, as a white woman, I will almost certainly read these images differently to a black man, and by discussion with students we can ensure that our varied viewing positions are all considered equally worthwhile. We as teachers should not necessarily offer authoritative opinions based upon what we see. And finally, these images should not be the only images of black men and women (or white men and women, for that matter) that we show in our courses. Countering lynching photography with anti-lynching material, which demonstrates African-American agency and changes the focus of representation from white-on-black to black-on-black or black-on-white, would be a simple option. The appropriation of

<sup>29</sup> Wendy Wolters, ‘Without Sanctuary: Bearing Witness, Bearing Whiteness,’ *jac*, 24:2 (2004), p. 400, 401.

<sup>30</sup> Wolters, ‘Without Sanctuary,’ p. 402.

<sup>31</sup> Dora Apel, ‘Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,’ *Art Journal*, 64:2 (2005), pp. 88-100.

<sup>32</sup> Wolters, ‘Without Sanctuary,’ p. 414.

<sup>33</sup> Wood, ‘Lynching Photography and the Black Beast Rapist,’ p. 199. Also see Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, p. 45.

<sup>34</sup> Salah M. Hassan, Brett de Bary, & Cheryl Finley, ‘From the Editors,’ *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 20 (2006), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Mieke Bal, ‘The Politics of Citation,’ *Diacritics*, 21:1 (1991), pp. 25-45 (quotations on p. 39, 27, 41-43, 44).

lynching photographs for anti-lynching purposes is a clear demonstration of how activists have been able to shift the gaze away from blacks-as-victims and towards whites-as-perpetrators.<sup>36</sup>

Lynching photographs have been vitally important in the civil rights struggles of African Americans throughout the 20th century. The most famous example of this is the widespread publication of photographs of Emmett Till's mutilated body in 1955. As Mamie Till Bradley explained:

I knew that I could talk for the rest of my life about what had happened to my baby, I could explain it in great detail, I could describe what I saw laid out there on that slab at A. A. Rayner's, one piece, one inch, one body part, at a time. I could do all of that and people still would not get the full impact. They would not be able to visualise what had happened, unless they were allowed to see the results of what had happened. They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this.<sup>37</sup>

The pictures of Till's body helped to spark a movement, and as such civil rights activists were successful in reappropriating his image in the name of social justice. (Although, of course, the photographs were not produced by his killers, as most lynching photographs were; they were always intended as anti-lynching images.) Ashraf Rushdy points to the photographs of Emmett Till as evidence that it is crucial to show these images to the public, because "a large segment of [the United States] remains incapable of imagining black suffering". He argues that while the public display of Till's body "helped ignite the outcry that followed", the lack of pictures of the death of James Byrd in 1998 prevented "a greater and more productive outrage" from the public. In part due to Byrd's family's requests for privacy (in stark contrast to Mamie Till Bradley), pictures of Byrd's corpse have never been printed; the most graphic image available is that of a blood streak staining the road in Jasper, Texas, along which he was dragged. But in the wake of Byrd's lynching, there were copycat crimes in Louisiana and Illinois, a parody by New York City police officers and firefighters at a Labour Day parade, and a radio DJ in Washington D.C. saw fit to joke, "no wonder people drag them behind trucks", after disliking a song by Lauryn Hill. Rushdy acknowledges that images might wound the Byrd family further and "satisfy the blood lust" of white supremacists, but argues that ultimately, "images of terror – used responsibly – can foster a climate in which terror is no longer tolerated... shock therapy might work for the public at large."<sup>38</sup> Rushdy is not alone in having taken up Mamie Till Bradley's call for us to "bear witness" to the horrors of lynching photographs. Apel explains that:

We... cannot afford to be innocent of these photos. The loss to historical understanding incurred by refusing to see them would only serve to whitewash the crimes of white supremacy.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Kirk Fuoss argues that lynching photographs

... are best not forgotten. Remembering them, analysing them, theorising them does not necessarily mean that lessons will be learned. But forgetting them, avoiding them, ignoring them, almost certainly means that they will not.<sup>40</sup>

But what lessons can we learn from lynching photographs that we cannot learn from other accounts of lynchings? Zvi Oren, of the Ghetto Fighters' House, is opposed to the use of Holocaust atrocity photographs in education, in part because he finds that they alienate students and discourage them from learning more about the Holocaust, but also because "the Holocaust is much more than mass graves".<sup>41</sup> Similarly, lynching was only one part of a broader regime of terror and violence inflicted on those whom powerful whites wished to subdue in the 19th and 20th centuries. For African Americans in the Jim Crow south, where most lynchings took place, discrimination and intimidation were part of daily life, regardless of whether a lynching had occurred or not. Degrading representations of African Americans were not only to be found on lynching postcards; they were everywhere.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Leigh Raiford, 'Lynching, Visuality, and the Un/Making of Blackness,' *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 20 (2006), pp. 22-31.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca, 'Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till,' *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 8:2 (2005), p. 272.

<sup>38</sup> Ashraf Rushdy, 'Exquisite Corpse,' *Transition*, 9:3 (2000), pp. 75-76. Also see Harold and DeLuca, 'Behold the Corpse,' pp. 263-286.

<sup>39</sup> Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Kirk W. Fuoss, 'Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence,' *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19:1 (1999), p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, p. 213.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, the *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia* at Ferris State University, [www.ferris.edu/jimcrow](http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow). Struk notes that the 'constant repetition of low-level harassment' could be harder to look at than the 'more overtly

As well as putting lynching photographs into a broader framework of white supremacist ideology and power in the United States, it is crucial to remember that each individual lynching had its own context. Wood points out that

Lynching has come to exist only as a spectacle, only as an image, uprooted from its context... in detaching images of lynching from local practices and transforming them into icons of oppression, antilynching activists unwittingly succeeded in detaching them from history itself.<sup>43</sup>

Shawn Michelle Smith stresses that we must not see the lynching photograph as representative of the entire event (let alone other lynchings) because it “shows only a glimpse of a longer ordeal”. For example, even the most famous lynching image, that of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, in 1930, obscures more than it reveals about what occurred that night. First, the image gives no hint that there was a third victim that night. A 16-year-old boy called James Cameron was also accused of the murder of Carl Deeter and the rape of Mary Ball, and was beaten alongside his friends, but he survived the lynching after a white man stood on a car and proclaimed his innocence. Second, the photograph does not tell us that Shipp and Smith were not killed side by side. Shipp was beaten and then hung from the bars of the jailhouse; Smith was beaten to death, including by women “stomping” on his head, and then strung up in the courthouse square. Shipp’s body was then moved to join Smith’s in order to “get the picture right”. Third, the image does not show any whites who seemed to disapprove of the violence, but there were reports that several women fainted and a young boy collapsed, vomiting, on the ground. Others apparently prayed and “cried in anguish”. Finally, the image does not show that Mary Ball, the white woman alleged to have been raped, was probably Abe Smith’s girlfriend, although she was known by the police as a prostitute. It seems most likely that Deeter was the victim of a robbery gone wrong by Ball, Shipp, and Smith.<sup>44</sup> These details do not make the photograph any less shocking, or the murder of Shipp and Smith any less horrifying, but they do provide much needed context to a photograph that has come to represent all lynchings, everywhere.

## Responding to lynching photographs

When art critics and journalists were sent to review the *Without Sanctuary* exhibitions, their comments reflected some of the typical public responses to images of lynching, using words such as ‘unthinkable,’ ‘macabre,’ ‘ghost-like,’ ‘horrific’ and ‘savage’ to describe the photographs to their readers. Scott Veale (*New York Times*) found the images “almost unbearably repulsive”, and Sandra Dillard (*Denver Post*) wrote that “the photos turn your stomach, and hurt your heart”. As Robert Snyder explained, “hardened correspondents were unnerved by what they saw”.<sup>45</sup> Patricia J. Williams (*The Nation*) explained that:

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. And beyond the question of how one looks at such pictures, there lies the even more subtle challenge of interpreting what one has seen.<sup>46</sup>

Art critic Mary Thomas (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) clearly conveyed her struggle to deal with the images in her review, remarking that:

One horrific apparition after another makes visceral what one dares not imagine. Comprehension is also elusive when confronted with the limp human forms that hang doll-like in broad daylight in public spaces.<sup>47</sup>

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horrific images’ because ‘images of humiliation show protracted rather than summary cruelty.’ Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, p. 206.

<sup>43</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 269. There is a similar problem with Holocaust photographs, according to Struk, as ‘pictures, often of unrelated events, sometimes taken thousands of miles apart, are placed side by side and give us the impression that there was some continuity in the events they portray.’ See Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, p. 213.

<sup>44</sup> See Shawn Michelle Smith, ‘The Evidence of Lynching Photographs,’ in in Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photographs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 12-15; Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, pp. 20-25.

<sup>45</sup> Robert E. Snyder, ‘Without Sanctuary: An American Holocaust?’ *Southern Quarterly*, 39:3 (2001), p. 162.

<sup>46</sup> Patricia J. Williams, ‘Without Sanctuary,’ *The Nation* (14 February 2000).

<sup>47</sup> Mary Thomas, ‘Art Review: “Without Sanctuary” digs deeply into painful issues of inhumanity’, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (29 September 2001).

Thomas was not alone in her attempt to describe the photographs in seemingly aesthetic terms. Another art critic, Sarah Valdez, for example, was most taken with the photographs' "emotional power", and found that:

The images with visual cues that dramatise the archetypal suffering of the victims are most moving. A black man hangs dead from a tree, for instance, while an angelic sunbeam streams through branches and crosses his face.<sup>48</sup>

The display of the photographs in art galleries entirely reduced their meaning: without context, viewers became voyeurs. Natasha Barnes, however, preferred the initial exhibition of the lynching photographs at the Roth Horowitz Gallery, where the "postcards were hung simply on bare walls, without any of the accoutrements of professional curatorship: they had no sequence, no markers of time and place, no captions of any kind". She proclaimed "the "rightness" of this unembellished first exhibit: where [people] forced themselves to see images unmediated by professionals and historical experts. They allowed themselves to become strangers to the immediacy of the lynching postcards and the multiplicity of their conflicting meanings".<sup>49</sup> However, by looking at the photographs entirely without context or 'mediation' by professional historians, what exactly did these New Yorkers learn? They might have learned something about themselves, but they would have learned very little about lynching.

Many visitors were not really sure what they were seeing, and did not process the lynching photographs in particularly constructive ways. "Look at those guys," one visitor commented, "doesn't even seem like real people."<sup>50</sup> Some parents took small children along to the exhibition in New York. Despite signs warning of the show's difficult content, Valdez saw a six-year-old boy "look up at his first photo, grab his neck with both hands and scream 'Ouch!'"<sup>51</sup> Adults also suffered visceral responses to the images. Valdez found that:

...the rush of adrenaline brought on by viewing the lynching photographs seems to make it impossible to think at all. The images function, in a way, as a catalyst for rage release.

She described the exhibition as "mind-numbing" and "excruciating", and

...left the exhibition stunned, with an immediate impulse to battle the dragon of inequity armed with a big, aimless sense of rage.<sup>52</sup>

But thousands of people flocked to the exhibitions, and many queued for hours. The Roth Horowitz Gallery had to limit ticket sales to 200 per day. Why did so many people want to see these images, and how far removed is this behaviour from that of those who travelled on a special train to see a lynching? (And to what extent will our students choose our courses so that they can see pictures of lynchings?) The emotional and physical reactions of viewers, of rushing adrenaline, anger, and rage, are worryingly close to the responses felt by those who witnessed lynchings first-hand. As Anthony Lee points out, the exhibition-goers

...replicated the crowds that attended the original events, both groups of onlookers brought to the scene because of the spectacle of the lynched body... As they strained for a better view, they felt the warmth and nearness of the person next to them, jostling and angling their bodies this way and that as they moved past images of the victims. They appeared, and possibly felt, like the people in the pictures.<sup>53</sup>

One visitor to the exhibit commented that:

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.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Sarah Valdez, 'American Abject,' *Art in America*, 88:10 (2000), p. 88.

<sup>49</sup> Natasha Barnes, 'On Without Sanctuary,' *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 20 (2006), p. 89.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Williams, 'Without Sanctuary.'

<sup>51</sup> Valdez, 'American Abject,' p. 89.

<sup>52</sup> Valdez, 'American Abject,' pp. 88-89.

<sup>53</sup> Anthony W. Lee, 'Introduction,' in Apel and Smith, *Lynching Photographs*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Fred Mazelis, "'Witness': An important chapter in US History: New York photo exhibit on lynchings" (2 February 2000), *World Socialist Web Site*, [wsws.org](http://wsws.org).

But Anne Rice was

...struck by the way the largely white crowd seemed to be consuming these images – a few with voyeuristic relish, some inattentively chatting of other things, others thronging the collector and asking for his signature on the flyleaf of their books.<sup>55</sup>

One wonders, did the children who were taken to lynchings a century ago also think “ouch”?

Susan Sontag argues that:

All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic... images of the repulsive can also allure.<sup>56</sup>

As many of the young black men are naked in these images, perhaps with a cloth covering their genitals (a cloth that was sometimes soaked in blood, indicating that they had been castrated), there is also a serious concern, as Barnes notes, that the reproduction of these images will “fetishise and eroticise black suffering.” She finds the pictures of Frank Embree “the most compelling” of all the photographs in *Without Sanctuary*, but explains that “the constant demand for its reproduction in the present has disturbing, fetishistic implications.”<sup>57</sup> There are three images of Frank Embree, and in two of them he is still alive. In the first, he is naked, with visible lacerations from a whip, and surrounded by a mob, but he stands tall and stares down the camera; the look in his eyes is impossible to interpret. In the second image, he is facing directly away from the camera; in the third, he is dead. Frank Embree, like many of the other victims of lynching, could be considered a handsome young man. Mieke Bal might comment that Barnes’ response to this image as “the most compelling” says as much about her, as a woman looking at a man, as about the image itself.

This need to “narrativise the image-viewer interaction”, as Bal put it, is especially evident in terms of race. African Americans and white Americans, understandably, can respond to lynching photographs in very different ways. Jacquie Jones, a black woman who first saw a photograph of a lynching as a teenager in high school in the 1970s, and then again at college, explains how the violence of the image “devastated” her:

I remember... the shudder that went through me, that changed the way I looked at everything from that moment on... here was proof, that no matter our diligence, our future could never be guaranteed... They would measure us with a yardstick that said we were always, always, second-rate and then they would place this photograph in our history book as an aside... It was there just to say that lynchings happen, that when hateful crimes are committed against black people, no explanations are warranted. It was there to say that racism is casual and normal... At a reluctantly desegregated high school, the photograph was inflicted on us by a white teacher, like a subliminal lashing. [In college] I felt sick this time. Not amazed, ill... [Before] I had never considered the pervasiveness of the threat this photograph signified for me... Was the image, the recurrence of the image, the proliferation of the image, an inside warning or an outside threat?<sup>58</sup>

Jones is not the only African American to find the lynching photographs personally painful. When the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition went on display at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati in 2010, visitors were able to express their feelings about the photographs in a video booth, and some of these videos are available online. These immediate, unmediated, responses taken just minutes after the visitors had viewed the exhibition, capture the emotional and physical trauma felt by some African Americans on seeing the images: “I mean, for me personally, as a black male, it hurts to see that,” said one man.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, many of the younger visitors, who seemed to be high school or college students, were at a loss to articulate their feelings. A young black girl explained that “going through the lynching

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<sup>55</sup> Anne Rice, ‘How We Remember Lynching,’ *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 20 (2006), p. 34. Also see Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, p. 180, 190.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 85.

<sup>57</sup> Barnes, ‘On Without Sanctuary,’ p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> Jacquie Jones, ‘How Come Nobody Told Me about the Lynching?’ in Deborah Willis (ed.), *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994), pp. 153-157.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction,’ *NURFreedomCenter*, (17 March 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)



part of the museum was really hard for me. I did cry... it was really emotional for me, and really hard.”<sup>60</sup> Another found the whole exhibit “very surreal, it’s just – it was a lot, it was, it was a lot.”<sup>61</sup>

Other African Americans found that the exhibit inspired them to change their lives, or to continue the struggle for civil rights and the improvement of race relations. One young man explained that seeing the exhibition made him “really appreciate the colour of my skin now”, and expressed a desire to become more involved, to “help out... in any kind of way I can.” Although he found it “a hard experience going through it, it hit me in my heart,” he wanted to return in the future: “ten years from now I want to bring my kids up here so I can show the same experience and let them know about the background of being black and being African American.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, a black pastor explained that he wanted to bring his daughter to the museum to “make sure she knows the history which we lived as African American people.” Placing the history of lynching into the long Civil Rights Movement, this man explained that although he was now “more proud” of what African Americans had achieved, he felt that “we still have much to do, as racism is still alive and well... I pray that many will see this and be moved and called to action.”<sup>63</sup> The pastor’s reaction video was in many ways far more coherent than many of the others. He was able to place lynching in a longer history; to link it to an ongoing struggle against racism, and to move beyond his initial reaction of being “appalled” and “moved” to begin to make sense of the photographs. Perhaps due to his work as a minister or his age, he was able to give a fairly mature and cogent response to the images.

However, some found it much harder to express their feelings. As one black man tried to explain:

I have been truly affected by this, it is a life-altering, life changing experience to see... right now I feel – so many different emotions – my heart is full because I know that, that, what – what my ancestors had to endure, my family has had to endure is nothing comparative to what I’ve had to endure in my life... it makes me want to be so much better and so much more so that I can be a reflection on those people who gave their lives... for us, for my child, I’m going to be a better father, I’m going to be a better human being – I don’t want to carry – right now, I’m angry, I’m angry – that people were forced to – just deal with so much humiliation.<sup>64</sup>

Several other African Americans expressed similar levels of guilt and anger in response to the photographs. Like the man above, who seemed to feel ashamed that he had found his own life hard because his problems were “nothing” compared to the violence faced by previous generations, another black man was “saddened” by the images, and said, “I’m sorry that people are still frightened, hurt, abused, and mistreated in these ways – I can only offer my sincerest apologies to those who have been hurt.”<sup>65</sup> These men have seemingly no reason to apologise, or feel guilt, and yet expressed far more shame than many of the white respondents. David Shapiro points out that it is not the torturers, but the tortured, who tend to feel shame. For the victims of torture, “their very helplessness and inability to resist” is the reason for this shame, whereas those responsible for the violence feel that they have nothing to be ashamed of because they feel “anything but weak and helpless themselves.”<sup>66</sup> While (most) Americans of any colour today have no reason to feel shame about lynching, it is far more likely that African Americans will struggle with feelings of shame than their white counterparts. As one former slave put it in 1937: “My folks don’t want me to talk about slavery. They’s shame niggers ever was slaves.”<sup>67</sup>

Elizabeth Alexander, in her analysis of the reception of the Rodney King video among African Americans, explains that ‘traumatised African American viewers have been taught a sorry lesson of their continual

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Young Scholar Reflection,’ *NURFreedomCenter*, (7 April 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>61</sup> ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction 3,’ *NURFreedomCenter*, (25 March 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>62</sup> ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Young Scholar Reflection 2,’ *NURFreedomCenter*, (7 April 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>63</sup> ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction 5,’ *NURFreedomCenter*, (29 March 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>64</sup> ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction 8,’ *NURFreedomCenter*, (23 April 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>65</sup> ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction 6,’ *NURFreedomCenter*, (31 March 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>66</sup> David Shapiro, ‘The Tortured, Not the Torturers, Are Ashamed,’ *Social Research*, 70:4 (2003), p. 1132, 1147.

<sup>67</sup> Cited in Shapiro, ‘The Tortured, Not the Torturers,’ p. 1131.

physical vulnerability... [it] reminded us that there is such a thing as *bottom line blackness*.”<sup>68</sup> Those who saw the video responded in similar ways to those who saw the lynching photographs: with anger, rage, and physical pain:

It was a pain that went from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. It was an empty, hollow feeling. It was a rage inside of me, burning. I wanted to kill. I wanted to kill.

By the time they was done I needed 28 stitches in my head. When I saw the Rodney King video I thought of myself laying on the ground and getting beat. I felt the same way all our people felt when we blew up.

Somebody brought a video to school – the video of Rodney King – and then somebody put it on the television and then everybody just started to break windows and everything – then some people got so mad they broke the television.<sup>69</sup>

The same could be said for viewing lynching photographs: do they serve only as a reminder that black bodies were objects, to be destroyed at whites’ leisure? As one of those who saw the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition put it:

When I look at those pictures... I don’t just see a lifeless body... 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.<sup>70</sup>

African American writer Hilton Als wrote,

I looked at these pictures, and what I saw in them... was the way in which I’m regarded, by any number of people: as a nigger. And it is as one that I felt my neck snap and my heart break... I am not dead, have not been lynched... but I have been looked at, watched, and it’s the experience of being watched, and seeing the harm in people’s eyes – that is the prelude to becoming a dead nigger.<sup>71</sup>

Historian Grace Hale concluded that the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition continued to “present victimisation as the defining characteristic of blackness,” and that a “much more accurate exhibition... would foreground violence as a defining characteristic of whiteness.”<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, while black Americans often have little difficulty imagining themselves victims of lynching, it is much harder for white Americans to imagine themselves as part of the mob. Emory University archivist Randall Burkett comments:

White Americans just cannot imagine that we would do to our fellow citizens the kind of things we have done. We can’t imagine that we could do these things.<sup>73</sup>

Those who can imagine themselves in the images, including Allen, the collector of the photographs, find the consequences deeply troubling. “I tremble with anger at the legacy they left me to claim,” he explained, “I know that, possibly, in another time, it could be my face fixed in the photographer’s chemicals. Gloating so stupidly, gazing out at me now.”<sup>74</sup> However, most white viewers were able to look at the images with some sense of detachment: they were horrible, but nothing to do with *them*. This is in part because many white people today feel a sense of moral superiority to whites in the past. They imagine that if they had lived in a town where a lynching had taken place, they would have been appalled; they would have spoken out against it; they would have joined the anti-lynching crusade. They see the white lynchers in the photographs as “evil”, as “barbaric”, and as “other” to themselves as the black bodies. In reality of course, those who attended lynchings were entirely ordinary people, though as Sontag has noted:

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<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, “Can you be BLACK and Look at This?” Reading the Rodney King Video(s),’ *Public Culture*, 7 (1994), p. 81.

<sup>69</sup> Cited in Alexander, “Can you be BLACK and Look at This?” p. 85.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Hilton Als, ‘GWTW,’ in James Allen et al, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2008), pp. 38-39.

<sup>72</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, ‘Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America: Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield,’ *Journal of American History*, 89:3 (2002), p. 994.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Barnes, ‘On Without Sanctuary,’ p. 91.

<sup>74</sup> James Allen, cited in Snyder, ‘Without Sanctuary,’ p. 169.

...maybe they were barbarians. Maybe *this* is what barbarians look like. (They look like everybody else.)<sup>75</sup>

The white visitors who recorded their responses on video at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Centre exhibition tended to distance themselves from the images, rather than display personal trauma. One white man did not speak about the images directly at all, instead saying that:

There's a lot of talk all the time about freedom and democracy. Neither one is possible in any meaningful way without justice. Justice has to be the foundation for freedom and democracy to exist and thrive. If you care about freedom you need to see this.<sup>76</sup>

While one might agree with his sentiment, it does not seem that he has allowed himself to engage fully with what he has seen. Another young white man was most struck by the inclusion of children in the photographs, and stressed the need for educating young people about the legacy of lynching "in order to reverse the racism that started this."<sup>77</sup> The most emotional reaction visible from the white visitors was from a young white woman, who was clearly shaken by the images, "I don't really know what to say. I'm just sad – for our history – that this is what has happened to people and their families," she said. "I just want to make sure that no one ever feels so hated - [!] just want to spread love."<sup>78</sup> Although this visitor expressed a more emotional response than the previous two, her emphasis on sympathy for the victim of lynching, rather than engagement with the legacy of whiteness, demonstrates how some white viewers of the lynching photographs were not able to engage with the realities of racism in the United States. While we know the names and stories of the victims of lynching in many cases, we know next to nothing about those in the crowd, those who sent and received the photographs, and those who kept the images for generations – and perhaps this is why it is hard for white viewers to imagine themselves in the photographs.<sup>79</sup>

Of course, this is not true for all white viewers. Some, like Allen, wonder if they would have joined the mob, and feel the guilt that the legacy of white supremacy has left them. For others, seeing a lynching photograph can be deeply personal. Cynthia Carr knew that her grandfather was a member of the Klan in Marion, Indiana, in the early 1930s, and was haunted by the knowledge that he had been present at the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. Studying the photograph almost daily for years, she had taken some comfort in her inability to locate his face amongst the mob. If she could not see him, she could "always go on thinking [she was] not connected to something terrible." But when the photograph was enlarged on the cover of Philip Dray's *At the Hands of Persons Unknown* (2002), she saw her grandfather:

I think it's him, and I never will know for sure. He's way in the back. He's blurry, but I think that's his hat and his nose and the plane of his face.<sup>80</sup>

It is always possible that someone, of any race, viewing photographs of lynching might recognise one of the people in the image as one of their ancestors. But it is more likely that they might imagine that they see themselves.

## Teaching lynching with photographs

Like the general public, our students' responses to lynching photographs can vary by nationality, region, class, gender, and age, as well as by race. But our identities as teachers can also play a role. For example, when a white, Canadian, film historian showed *The Birth of a Nation* to his class as a lesson in racist propaganda, a black woman asked him "why do we have to watch a Klan recruiting film?" As he noted, "as an African American woman living in Chicago, she did not need any lessons in racism, least of all from me."<sup>81</sup> White instructor David Barber, who had been comfortable with "negative" reactions to lynching photographs from white students, was more concerned about showing them to African American

<sup>75</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 83.

<sup>76</sup> 'Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction 9,' *NURFreedomCenter*, (27 April 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>77</sup> 'Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction 4,' *NURFreedomCenter*, (25 March 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>78</sup> 'Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America Exhibition Reaction 10,' *NURFreedomCenter*, (12 May 2010), [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>79</sup> Hale, 'Without Sanctuary,' p. 993.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Rice, 'How We Remember Lynching,' pp. 40-41.

<sup>81</sup> Paul McEwan, 'Racist Film: Teaching *The Birth of a Nation*', *Cinema Journal* 47:1 (2007), p. 99.

students in the south. When he had a black student confirm to him that “the slides ARE terrifying and do have a tremendous emotional, disturbing impact,” he became concerned enough to consult others on whether he should be showing the images at all.<sup>82</sup>

In response to Barber’s query, Roberta Gold, who teaches a variety of students from a range of social, racial, and economic backgrounds, found that “high school and political background, as much as class and colour, affect how students respond to disturbing material.” She argues that while working-class students seemed more “primed to understand that US history wasn’t one beautiful, unblemished tale of justice,” and had generally learned something about lynching before, her students from “the most apple-pie high school history courses” (both white and black) were “set up for the biggest fall.” In a class on the Civil Rights Movement, she found that some white students “wanted to spend all class denouncing lynching” rather than to engage with black responses to white supremacy.<sup>83</sup> Kendra Hamilton agreed that showing lynching photographs to students from “particularly sheltered homes” could have serious results: she had a white student who “ran out of the room retching and didn’t return to the class for nearly half an hour,” and others who seemed “eager and enthusiastic” to begin with, later “nose-dived into major depressive episodes.”<sup>84</sup> Sometimes responses to lynching photographs can be deeply personal, reminding us that our students do not leave their life experiences outside the classroom. “An older... Southern student” admitted to Anita Gonzalez that her “mother had been present at a lynching and had shared her feeling of guilt about the incident... on her death bed.” For this student personally, and for many others more generally, Gonzalez comments, lynching “still lives with people as guilt, fear, shame and perhaps desire in some communities.”<sup>85</sup> Similarly, sociologist Amanda Konradi has noted that when she teaches about sexual assault, survivors of such assaults “reported that it was difficult both to distance themselves enough from their experiences to participate in abstract discussions and to hear the topic discussed with such “apparent” casualness by their peers.”<sup>86</sup>

So if, based on the discussions above, we decide that it is pedagogically useful to show lynching photographs to our students, the way in which we show the images becomes crucial to ensuring engagement and understanding, rather than pain or revulsion. With current technology, we have a few options: we can project images using Microsoft PowerPoint slides (or equivalent), we can give photocopied handouts to students in lectures or seminars, or we can require them to look at *Without Sanctuary* (the book or the website) as their reading. Some teachers have found using slides too problematic because they force the students to look at a magnified image, as one put it, “I too find it hard to just see them as distant documents; I find it hard not to re-present the brutality in a way that is not offensive, even to me... I want my students to have the option to look or not look.” Instead this instructor displayed slides showing the back of the postcards, gave students the written commentary, and pointed them towards the *Without Sanctuary* website.<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, the use of PowerPoint slides, while the easiest way to show lynching photographs, can be the most problematic. In a lecture, the biggest mistake is to include lynching photographs on PowerPoint slides as mere illustrations, without warning students that they are going to see such images, or giving them time to deal with them. For example, in a survey lecture, where one might briefly discuss lynching as part of wider violence towards African Americans, there is unlikely to be time to discuss the meaning and context of a lynching photograph. Therefore the deaths of the victims become merely illustrative, and they are objectified in exactly the way that the perpetrators intended: there is no need for a picture here.

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<sup>82</sup> David Barber, ‘Re: Teaching Lynching—a Question on Pedagogy,’ h-afro-am (20 February, 2006), <http://h-net.msu.edu>

<sup>83</sup> Roberta Gold, ‘Re: Teaching Lynching—a Question on Pedagogy,’ h-afro-am (21 February, 2006), <http://h-net.msu.edu>

<sup>84</sup> Kendra Hamilton, ‘Re: Teaching Lynching—a Question on Pedagogy,’ h-afro-am (21 February, 2006), <http://h-net.msu.edu>

<sup>85</sup> Anita Gonzales, ‘Re: Teaching Lynching—a Question on Pedagogy,’ h-afro-am (28 February, 2006), <http://h-net.msu.edu>

<sup>86</sup> Amanda Konradi, ‘Teaching about Sexual Assault: Problematic Silences and Solutions’, *Teaching Sociology* 21 (1993), p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> jmcgee@bowdoin.edu, ‘Re: Teaching Lynching—a Question on Pedagogy,’ h-afro-am (21 February, 2006), <http://h-net.msu.edu>

Bruce Fehn reminds us that when we construct a PowerPoint slideshow of images, we create a historical narrative that may or may not be clear to the audience, and he emphasises audience participation in constructing the meaning of individual images and connections between them (in his case, photographs of lynchings and Abu Ghraib prisoners), rather than merely using them as illustration of a verbal narrative. By allowing students to “claim authority” over the images presented to them, and by opening a dialogue, we may be able to deepen their understanding of racist imagery, and allow them to make fruitful comparisons over time and space. PowerPoint, he argues, has become a crucial tool for teaching such topics.<sup>88</sup> However, it is clear that there is more than one way to use slideshows, and some may be more effective for learning than others. Fehn showed up to 75 images in rapid succession (two to ten seconds at a time), with no supporting text. While this may work in terms of creating a historical narrative, a seven minute long bombardment of racist images out of context is perhaps unhelpful, even if he then returned to individual images for longer at the audience’s request, and with citations on hand. Fehn admits that because he did not direct discussion, there was no time to consider either the Abu Ghraib photographs, or the historical narrative he had constructed.<sup>89</sup> In a classroom situation, it is not entirely clear what students would have learned.

Bridget Cooks uses a different approach. She gives her students ten minutes of silence to look at two lynching images projected on a screen, and asks them to write down (anonymously) what they are thinking about while they look: questions have included “is this real?”, and “are we really free of this hate?”, but the most common response is “what did he do?”<sup>90</sup> This approach is useful because it gives students time to engage with the images; to process their feelings themselves, before a discussion follows based on the questions and comments they have made. One problem with this approach, however, is that students only see two images, without context. To what extent can just two images represent the history of lynching with any accuracy or depth? It is clear from Cooks’ students’ comments that some of their understanding of lynching is vague at best, and it is vital that if we use this method, we explain to them the history and context of what they were seeing during a follow-up discussion. Another problem might be that the images are imposed upon these students; when a slide is projected it dominates the room, and it becomes nearly impossible to choose not to look. Cooks points out that she does not require students to attend the class on lynching photographs – they are not forced to look – but, she notes, “no student has chosen not to attend.”<sup>91</sup>

I have also used lynching photographs in seminars. By using the image to spark a discussion about race and violence, you can avoid the problems I have just described. However, it takes some time to have a productive, meaningful discussion about a lynching photograph. Usually, the best way to use an image in a seminar is to spring it on the students, to get their first reactions, and then to dig deeper. However, with a lynching image, the first reaction can be emotional. It takes time for students to recover from the shock, and time, to get beyond it far enough to actually discuss the images – by which time, the 50-minute seminar is probably coming to an end. Allowing plenty of time for discussion of these images is central to ensuring not only that students learn what we want them to about lynching, but also that they process any emotional trauma that seeing the photograph evokes. Amina McIntyre stresses the importance of providing a forum in which students can discuss their reactions to such images so that white students do not leave “feeling guilty”, and black students “are able to voice their opinions and let out anger and frustration that would typically be pent up after this discussion. The biggest thing is to get the students to understand that this is a safe forum to talk about these events by rechanneling the energy.”<sup>92</sup> This notion of a “safe forum” is crucial. As the US Holocaust Memorial Museum points out in its guide for educators, “Students are essentially a ‘captive audience’. When you assault them with images of horror for which they are unprepared, you violate a basic trust: the obligation of a teacher to provide a “safe learning

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<sup>88</sup> Bruce Fehn, ‘PowerPoint and Privileging the Visual in Teaching American History: Lynching, Racist Collectibles, and Abu Ghraib Prison Photos,’ *Journal of the Association for History and Computing*, 10:2 (2007).

<sup>89</sup> Fehn, ‘PowerPoint and Privileging the Visual in Teaching American History.’

<sup>90</sup> Bridget Cooks, ‘Confronting Terrorism: Teaching the History of Lynching through Photography,’ *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 20 (2006), p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> Bridget Cooks, ‘Confronting Terrorism,’ p. 17.

<sup>92</sup> Amina McIntyre, ‘Re: Teaching Lynching—a Question on Pedagogy,’ *h-afro-am* (21 February, 2006), , <http://h-net.msu.edu>



environment.”<sup>93</sup> David Walpert agrees, laying out four basic rules for productive discussion of the images: “use images judiciously”, “acknowledge the disturbing nature of the images”, “avoid simple answers to complex issues”, and “strive for balance of perspectives.”<sup>94</sup>

For the past couple of years, I have most successfully taught using lynching photographs in my course on ‘White Supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan,’ in which I dedicate a week (one lecture and one seminar) to lynching. At the beginning of this course, I emphasise to the students, who have all chosen the course, and therefore presumably have some idea of what they are going to encounter, that the material they will be looking at will be deeply unpleasant. I explain to them that it is acceptable to be upset by the material because the material is upsetting. As Eugene Genovese put it at the beginning of *Roll Jordan Roll*, “some of the language in this book may disturb readers; it disturbs me.”<sup>95</sup> I tell them that I have been looking at this material for some time, and that it still bothers me, but that we need to find a way towards objectivity in order to try to understand the mind of the racist, and that mere outrage is not useful. I explain that seminars are safe spaces in which they are welcome to express and discuss how they are affected by the material. On this course, I give my lecture in the morning and have seminars in the afternoon, and I encourage my students to have done their reading before the lecture. I also put my lecture slides online and encourage them to look through and/or print out the slides to bring to the lecture so that they can concentrate on what I am saying. Obviously they do not all do this, but it gives them a chance to view the material beforehand and therefore for the shock to dissipate, at least a little. I note on the link to the lecture slides on lynching that they are disturbing images, and I reiterate at the beginning of the lecture that these are shocking, unpleasant pictures that may well upset them. For their seminar preparation, they are also expected to look at the photographs on the *Without Sanctuary* website, and I also note that these are disturbing images on the link I give to that site. I begin my lecture with a YouTube clip of Billie Holliday singing ‘Strange Fruit’ live; her rendition expresses the pain that lynching caused for African Americans and sets a tone, focusing the students for the lecture. During the lecture, I use lynching photographs as sources that demonstrate some of the key themes of lynching that I want them to take away: the importance of the crowd; economic competition as a cause of lynching; charivari, ritual and costume; lynching as social control; the notion of a spectacle lynching; a lynching postcard; the lynching of non-blacks; the lynching of women; lynching as a way to disenfranchise black men; the collecting of mementos; lynching as a response to civil rights activity (and vice versa); and the question of when lynching ended. This allows me to discuss the images in a little detail, and to allow students to think about the role of photography in lynching itself, about the creation of the image, rather than just as documentation. They then go away and have some time to process this information before we discuss it in the seminar.

When I asked my students how seeing the photographs had made them feel, I gave them ten options: upset, horrified, disturbed, sick, amused, pleased, excited, interested, fascinated, or bored, and asked them to rate each feeling as ‘not at all,’ ‘a little,’ ‘quite,’ or ‘very,’ and gave them the opportunity to comment on their response for each.<sup>96</sup> Unsurprisingly, the majority of the students answered that they were either quite or very ‘upset’ (58%), ‘horrified’ (74%), and/or ‘disturbed’ (68%) by the images. Another 53% felt either a little or quite ‘sick.’ Taking these four negative options as a whole, it should be noted that the female students were far more likely to express that they had been strongly affected by the images, with 35% answering ‘very’ for these four options as opposed to only 7% of the male students. Further, only 6% of the female students answered ‘not at all’ to these four options, compared to 29% of the male students.

That most found these images of murder and torture unpleasant to look at is to be expected, but some of the students’ comments regarding these feelings are particularly revealing. One student commented that

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<sup>93</sup> ‘Teaching about the Holocaust: A Resource Guide for Educators,’ (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001), cited in David Walpert, ‘Teaching with disturbing images,’ *Learn NC* (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006), [www.learnnc.org](http://www.learnnc.org)

<sup>94</sup> Walpert, ‘Teaching with disturbing images.’

<sup>95</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. xvii.

<sup>96</sup> It was not easy to choose a range of emotions that would be suitable for this survey. Most (upset, horrified, disturbed, sick, interested, fascinated) are based on the types of comments students generally make at the time of the lecture and seminar on lynching, and the others—arguably more positive emotions—were meant to provide some balance, on the understanding that not all people would necessarily be repulsed by these images (as much as we might want them to be). Several students qualified their choices using the comment boxes, and it is clear that their interpretations of these feelings were not always the same as mine.

“the ultimate feeling was sadness” rather than horror or upset. Another agreed, explaining that she felt “more sad than upset, it is quite depressing to see them, but I didn’t necessarily feel upset in terms of feeling physically emotional.” Others disagreed, with one explaining that she was upset “for obvious reasons, the images represent some of the most disgusting human behaviour,” and that she “definitely felt quite a strong response to the images.” One student, who self-identified as “African/Caucasian”, and who was the only one to answer ‘very’ to all of the three options ‘upset,’ ‘horrified,’ and ‘disturbed,’ was also the only student to answer that she was ‘quite excited’ by the photographs, commenting that she meant “in an agitated and angry manner!” Clearly, this student had a significant emotional response to the images. At the other end of the spectrum, one of the students seemed to have difficulty processing his response to the images, writing “It’s a very strange thing to look at.” He did not claim to be particularly bothered by the images, although he did note that they are “a bit gory”, answering that he was ‘not at all’ upset or sick, and ‘a little’ horrified or disturbed. He was one of only two students who answered that he was a little ‘amused’ by the photographs, and of his amusement he commented that “In a grotesque way, some of the pictures are utterly bizarre.” This student’s apparent detachment from the images is in some ways as worrying a response as the emotional anger of the African/Caucasian student. Neither appeared to have been able to process the images sufficiently to study them, which would have been a significant barrier to their understanding.

Another impediment to students’ learning was a physical response to the images. One student commented that:

I did not really take the photographs in during class but when I studied lynching in a lot more detail for the exam I was surprised how taken aback I was at the photos. It was almost nauseating having to look at these raw historical artefacts.

This delayed response is also a concern; after students leave class, it is impossible to know how the images may continue to affect them. While there is an opportunity for students to discuss their feelings about the photographs in a structured way in a seminar, there is no formal outlet during the revision period. This was not the only student to describe a physical response to the images; as another commented, the photographs were “horrifying and not easy to stomach.” For others, the visual images were not what they found the most troubling. ‘Some of the more graphic images did make me feel a little nauseous,’ one wrote, “but I found that reading [the] descriptions made me feel more queasy.”

Several students explained that the hanging bodies depicted in these photographs were not what bothered them. Like many of the visitors to the *Without Sanctuary* exhibitions, they found the crowds more disturbing than the corpses. As one put it:

The images of isolated bodies hanging aren’t actually as disturbing as the ones with other spectators in them, or the images which show the bodies being humiliated. Also, some of the images aren’t very clear and so it is the caption underneath which describes the details of the lynching that [is] shocking.

Another agreed, pointing out that “they were pretty horrific and the most upsetting part was seeing the people in the background seemingly unaffected by the presence of a lynched person and their charred/lifeless body.” Rather than the depiction of dead bodies, it was the description of torture and the images of spectators that these students struggled with. This raises the question of whether it is necessary to show the violated bodies of the victims at all: would a reading of the description, or images of the crowd alone, be sufficient? It was the spectacle nature of the lynchings depicted in the photographs that caught students’ attention, rather than the display of dead bodies. One student was “fascinated by the size and make up of the crowds often present in the lynching photographs,” and another noted that she was “particularly interested when looking at the other people in the photos or the positioning/location rather than the victim.” That lynching was a recreational activity for so many people in the early part of the 20th century, that it was a place for couples to court, that children were taken to these events, that people posed for the cameras: these are the aspects of lynching that seem most alien to modern students. As one student put it, “the photo with the young couple smiling near the front was amusing if you detached yourself from the wider situation and examined how people barely 80 years ago had an entirely different view of acceptability and normality, in life and on first dates.”

Shawn Michelle Smith has pointed to one of the most worrying uses of lynching photography in teaching: in a French textbook meant for teenagers learning English. In a chapter on racial issues, the photograph of the Marion lynching is cropped to focus on the mob, and students are asked questions including “what

type of party could these people be attending?” They are also given the lyrics to Billie Holliday’s ‘Strange Fruit,’ and asked, “Do you begin to understand what a “Necktie Party” consists of?” As Smith explains:

The photograph is thus presented as a coded message for the students to unravel, and the process of discovery and discernment is orchestrated to shock and surprise... It subtly encourages French students to overlook their own nation’s “racial issues” by drawing attention to another country’s racist madness.

Not only does this method attempt to shock students (who do not necessarily have any background in American history) with the photographs, but it misleads them with regards to the actual history of lynching, not to mention the global reach of racism. It is crucial to prepare students for what they are going to see. Kendra Hamilton warns that we as teachers, whether we deal with these images frequently in our research, or only by teaching them year on year, could “by degrees become hardened to the impact of what [we are] reading and seeing,” and she stresses the need to prepare students for what they are seeing, rather than to “just spring” it on them. As well as ensuring that students understand the “graphic, violent, and upsetting” nature of the images beforehand, she argues, it is crucial that we also follow up with those showing distress afterwards.<sup>97</sup>

Most of my students felt that the warnings I had given them before the lecture were adequate to prepare them for viewing the images:

I felt that the preparation you gave was more than adequate – I was aware that you were going to be showing the pictures in advance of the class, and during the class you made us feel as comfortable as it is possible to be during the viewing of the pictures.

However, several thought that there was little that could be done to fully prepare them for what they would see. As one student explained:

From the very beginning of the course we were told that we would be faced with distressing images. I feel we were adequately prepared but I think anyone would find the pictures shocking and not be fully prepared for what they are about to see the first time they are faced with the photos.

One went further, saying that there was “nothing” I could have done to prepare her for seeing the photographs, and another agreed, saying, “I just don’t think anyone can be “well prepared” to see such images if they’ve never looked at those sorts of images before, particularly since there were so many [on the website].” One student seemed ambivalent about my attempts to prepare him for seeing the photographs, claiming that “if people are not well enough prepared to deal with such images by the age of 18 and over, they have led a very sheltered life.” Despite implying that the images were not so disturbing that they needed an advisory warning, the student continued by explaining that “the very nature of lynching should ensure that no amount of prior preparation should in anyway dull the reaction to the photographs.”

Several students also commented that they found the assignment of relevant reading and viewing the images online first helped to prepare them for the lecture:

I was aware that what I was going to see was going to be unpleasant. It was not easy to see, but being able to look at them on my own on the website meant that I could take in as much as I could.

Suggesting that students look at the images on the *Without Sanctuary* website perhaps serves the same function as Cooks’ ten-minute exercise: it gives students some time alone to look at the images, and think about their meaning, allowing any initial shock to dissipate. Then, in the lecture, it is possible to use the time to explain what they have seen, and to give further context, leading to a more fruitful seminar discussion.

## Conclusion

As well as ethical and practical issues with using lynching photographs, there are also historical issues. One of the problems with using lynching photographs to illuminate the practice of lynching is that the vast majority of lynching photographs that are available were taken of black victims, whereas recent research has demonstrated that African Americans were not the only targets of lynching. Mexicans, Asians, Jews, and Catholics all also suffered “at the hands of persons unknown.” The other problem with using lynching photographs is that the use of photography to record lynchings, the growth of spectacle lynchings, and the

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<sup>97</sup> Kendra Hamilton, ‘Re: Teaching Lynching.’

distribution of the images as postcards, all took place in a relatively narrow time period. The bulk of the available photographs are from the early 20th century, while historians have recently turned their attention to lynching's much longer history, particularly in the antebellum period. Using photography because it is so accessible distorts the history of lynching, and we must be careful to correct this impression.

This discussion about lynching photographs could also be extended to other material that we use to teach. American lynchers were not the only group to document the torture of others through photography in the 20th century. The Holocaust is the obvious example, but photographs of the Chinese "execution by division into a thousand parts" are also in many ways similar to those of lynching, although the sequential nature of the images focus more on the process of death than on its end result, as most lynching photographs do (the victim is still alive, and still in pain, while the photographer snaps away; this is not a crowd posing with a corpse). Elkins comments that the sequence is "right at the edge of what is bearable in an image," and the pain depicted in them "is enough to cause physical changes" in his body. This has not prevented him showing them to students, however, who he sees "wince, rub their arms, and blanch," and who afterwards "complain of the continuing shock of thinking of those images."<sup>98</sup> We could also extend this discussion to much more recent phenomena – how to teach using the degrading images of Abu Ghraib, for example – especially while their victims are still alive.

It would be better not to use these photographs at all than to use them insensitively or incorrectly, and for that reason I do not devote a week to lynching in my course on African American history. (I don't ignore lynching, but it comes in the context of Jim Crow violence, and the focus is on the anti-lynching campaigns, not on the lynchings themselves.) There is a public perception that lynching is part of black history, but in terms of giving historical actors some agency, it is important to recognise the basic point that lynching was (almost all of the time) perpetrated by white people. My students comment that their eyes are drawn to the mob, not to the hanging body, and this is why lynching photographs are so powerful, and so important to teaching. Lynching was not a black problem, it is an American problem. As Alexander Byrd explains, studying lynching "illuminates at once the basest traditions of American life alongside the nation's highest aspirations."<sup>99</sup> Further, Cooks argues that we need to use lynching photographs to teach because the images force students "to take an active role in making social justice a reality... it can develop their political consciousness and encourage them to take on a personal responsibility to become involved in social change."<sup>100</sup>

While there are serious ethical and practical issues to consider when thinking about using lynching photographs in the classroom, and these are not images that should be used lightly, I think it can and should be done. Most simply, using lynching photographs in the classroom helps our students to learn about lynching. All of my students answered that they would have learned less if they had not seen the pictures, despite how hard it was to look. "The images hit home that it was real, they make it more real," was a feeling shared by many; 'the photographs were very distressing to see but they really opened your eyes to how horrific the lynchings were.' In particular, seeing the images of the large crowds gathered to witness the lynching allowed students to gain a "fuller understanding" of what had happened, as "it would have been difficult to fully comprehend the crowds of people who went to watch the lynchings, or how normal they seemed to many people at the time." For one, the images provide evidence of "exactly how far people were prepared to go to intimidate and terrorise people," a sentiment that echoes Sontag, who argues that "the images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget."<sup>101</sup> The challenges and the benefits of using lynching photographs in the classroom, though, were summed up by one of my students, as he explained:

The images show a darker side to a country that presents itself as a place of freedom and virtue so in that respect they are very important to look at. Perhaps though they made it difficult to be objective in

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<sup>98</sup> James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, discussion on pp. 108-116; quotations on p. 110. Elkins notes that he has deliberately tried to find the most difficult images to look at for his book because he wants his readers to consider what is 'hard to see' and what 'we cannot see' (p. 116).

<sup>99</sup> Alexander X. Byrd, 'Studying Lynching in the Jim Crow South,' *OAH Magazine of History* (Jan 2004), p. 31.

<sup>100</sup> Cooks, 'Confronting Terrorism', p. 16, 20. Also see Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, 'With/Out Sanctuary: Teaching Race, Trauma, and Collective Memory through Photography in a Graduate Humanities Course,' *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice*, 10 (2005).

<sup>101</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 102.

the study of lynching... the end result may make it harder to objectively analyse and study the reasons why these people thought lynching was necessary in the first place. It is easy as a class in 2012 to look at some of these photos and decry the racist nature of white Americans of the past but lynching was... accepted. Understanding... is perhaps more difficult when we have such emotive images in front of us. Overall though I do still think they helped.

### Further reading

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## Contact us

**The Higher Education Academy**  
**Innovation Way**  
**York Science Park**  
**Heslington**  
**York**  
**YO10 5BR**

**+44 (0)1904 717500**  
**enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk**

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