Figure 1. Spectators at the lynching of Jesse Washington. May 16, 1916, Waco, Texas
Confronting Terrorism: Teaching the History of Lynching through Photography

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Teaching lynching photography in my ethnic studies and art history courses has allowed me to fulfill a political goal of my pedagogy: to teach difficult chapters of race relations in America; it has helped me bring my research on exhibitions of African American images into the classroom; and it has made a connection for my students between what they perceive to be the ancient history of the curriculum (even if we are studying something created twenty-five years ago) and the contemporary world that we all share. Studying lynching photography has helped sensitize many students to racial tensions today, and it has taught them how to be critical of terrorism and the American “war on terror” that have become an inescapable part of our daily reality. The exhibition Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America serves as the primary visual resource for my pedagogical project. Note that the title of the exhibition has changed since it was first displayed in 2000 as Witness in the Roth Horowitz Gallery, New York (12 January – 13 February). Moreover, the context and some of the content changed as the exhibit moved from one venue to the next; however, the focus of the exhibition in each presentation was the Allen-Littlefield collection. In this essay, reference to the exhibition of the Allen-Littlefield collection will be referred to as Without Sanctuary.

I was intrigued by the popularity of the inaugural exhibition at the Roth Horowitz Gallery of the photographs documenting numerous lynchings in the United States from 1878 to 1960. For weeks, hundreds of visitors stood in line to view the exhibition. After two months, the exhibition moved to the New-York Historical Society (14 March – 1 October 2000) to be viewed in a space large enough to accommodate the unexpected crowds gathered...
daily to view evidence of these astonishing acts of brutality. Over 50,000 visitors viewed the exhibition at the Historical Society in its first four months. Due to popular demand, the exhibition’s scheduled tenure of four months was extended four more months. Without Sanctuary traveled to the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh (22 September – 31 December 2001) and the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta (1 May – 31 December 2002), where interest in the exhibition increased. In 2004 and 2005, the exhibition was hosted at Jackson State University in Mississippi (30 January – 4 July 2004), the Charles A. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit (15 July 2004 – 27 February 2005), and the Chicago Historic Society (4 June – 4 December 2005).

I wanted to know who collected the photographs, who organized the exhibition, and who was going to see it. I wondered what attracted visitors to the exhibition. What were people looking for in their viewing experience, and what were they learning? I wanted to learn more about the exhibit because it seemed like an important teaching tool: my own learning experience mapped onto my pedagogical practice in the classroom. I thought I knew about lynching, yet to teach using the photographs meant going through a learning process that would be challenging for even the most knowledgeable teacher. As I spoke with the collector of the photographs, exhibition curators, educators, gallery guards, and other viewers in my travels to the exhibition venues, my understanding (and ultimately my teaching) of Without Sanctuary became increasingly complex.

The majority of my students learn about lynching for the first time in one of my courses, at a private Jesuit university in California dedicated to social justice as a guiding ideal. They have registered for one of three courses: Introduction to African American Studies, Introduction to the Study of Race and Ethnicity in the United States, or African Americans and Photography. The class is taught by the only African American woman professor in the undergraduate college, and most students have never had an African American professor before. Students expect to find a classroom environment that is different from any other on campus, but they are a bit nervous about what the differences will be.

As a starting point, I describe to my students my experience visiting the exhibit at the King Site. Sharing the experience of seeing the photographs at the King Site is a powerful narrative for mentally transporting the students into that space and emphasizing the power that these photographs have in our contemporary culture. This first-person account becomes part of the pedagogical process. At some points, sharing my experience of seeing the
photographs for the first time shifts our positions as students and educator to the shared position of spectator; at other times my position is as a guide leading them through the gallery of photographs and providing difficult questions to explore.

The King Historic Site installation of Without Sanctuary provided a context in which images of lynching were not used for their original purpose, which was celebration by the lynch mob; instead they hung as evidence of the impact of racism and the horrors that result from the delusion of white supremacy. As contemporary viewers of these photographs, most of us look in opposition to the function of the photographic act. We alter the meaning of the photographs by adding a purpose other than that originally intended. However, the process of looking is more complicated than a final resolve to stand up for peace and against racial violence. Faced with unspeakable images, my students and I discuss our shared inheritance of these photographs and the tradition of racial violence they depict. Together we break down the disturbing process of looking at lynching photography.

Before I show lynching photographs for the first time, I tell students that they will have ten minutes of silence to look at two images projected on the screen. I vary the two images I select but make sure that the images are different enough to immediately educate students on the diverse practices of lynching. For example, I have shown “The barefoot corpse of Laura Nelson. May 25, 1911, Okemah, Oklahoma” (1911; fig. 37 in Allen et al. 2000) because it shows a well-dressed African American woman hung from the bottom of a bridge instead of an image that the students may expect of an African American man hung from a tree. I have also shown “The burning corpse of William Brown. September 28, 1919, Omaha, Nebraska” (1919; fig. 97 in Allen et al.) because of the especially shocking brutality of the lynching and the well-dressed smiling crowd that poses for the photograph behind Brown’s smoldering body.

I ask students to write down what they are thinking about while they look. I tell them that their papers will be collected for my research on lynching photography and ask them not to write their names on their papers. The ten minutes of looking and writing in silence gives students time to think and form questions to discuss with the group. Student responses vary:

*What did he do?*

*What goes through their minds when they witness this? Is it initially horror and then acceptance? Does horror exist the whole time? Is horror present from the beginning?*
Is this real?

Why did no one intervene to stop these lynchings?

Who took the lynching photographs? How long has lynching lasted? Are we really free of this hate? I doubt it. In fact, I know it’s just as bad. What kinds of hate crimes continue today?

With the woman, I’m trying to imagine what she could have possibly done to deserve being lynched — whether she was a mother, wife or daughter.

How long were they left hanging?

How scary it is for me to live in a country that not only accepted this long ago, but holds it subconscious as they look at me and each other when judging.

The responses indicate students’ differing levels of knowledge about lynching and their desire to know more about it. Some students fill their page with questions about what they see or cannot see in the photographs; others use the photographs as a starting point for short essays about the aftermath of lynching in American culture and the hate that continues today. This exercise prepares them to participate in a discussion based on what they see and what they have read.

Regardless of our differences, we discuss our shared desire for accountability for the murders. The most common student comment from the ten-minute written exercise is “What did he do?” Often the excuses given for lynching someone have been lost, and even when the reasons are documented, they do not adequately explain the brutality of the murder. I share with students my experience in the Without Sanctuary gallery at the King Site, when I looked at the labels beside each photograph for information about what the victim did to deserve this treatment. I tell them that even when the label provided information on the alleged crime I was unsatisfied. Shamefully, I asked myself, “What could he or she have done to deserve this treatment?” What was the answer I was looking for? This question leads to thoughtful discussion with students who share this common impulse to grope for justification of the crime.

Instead of allowing myself to have an emotionally debilitating experience as a viewer, I created categorizes to organize the photographs into types: crowd, crowd with lynching victim(s), lynching victim(s) alone, and souvenirs. After discussing the students’ responses from the writing exercise, I explain these categories as I show more lynching photographs. I teach lynching photography through these four categories to help my students analyze its
meaning and historical significance. Organizing them into types also helps us think about what the photographer/participant wanted to preserve and express through each image. I offer these four categories to students not as a resolve to understand the photographs nor to ameliorate their savage content, but to find a way to analyze them in order to be able to look.

We discuss crowd photographs in which most or all of the composition depicts the crowd of lynching participants (fig. 1). Most of the participants’ faces are turned away from the camera; their attention is focused on the lynching. These photographs were often taken at a far enough distance from the black body so that it is not visible or locatable. Students notice that the compositions of crowd photographs suggest that the photographer took the photograph with the camera raised above his or her head to capture an image of the desecrated body. In some cases, the photographer may have sat in the upper branches of a tree to get a better view of the murder.

Crowd photographs are truly snapshots. A contemporary term used to define a quick picture taken by an amateur photographer, “snapshot” was originally a hunting term defined in the nineteenth century as “a quick or hurried shot taken without deliberate aim, esp. one at a rising bird or quickly moving animal” (Oxford English Dictionary). The conflated definitions of the hurried violence of the hunter’s shot used to kill its prey and the quick action of opening and closing the shutter of a handheld camera articulately describes lynching crowd photographs. Crowd snapshots emphasize the photographer’s/participant’s excitement and eagerness to document the lynching even if the victim was too far away to be seen clearly.

Considering the lynchers, instead of the victims, as the subject of crowd photographs forces a series of questions for class discussion: What did people choose to wear to a lynching? What age was appropriate to attend a lynching? Did members of the crowd know the lynched person? Why was this moment in the lynching process chosen to document?

Students often comment that the lynchers in the photographs are well dressed. Women wear nice dresses and jewelry; men wear hats, button-down shirts, and slacks. Schools canceled class so that children could attend lynchings as a family event. Participation in a lynching was a rite of passage for young children, who were given special responsibilities to throw the first stone and gather wood to burn the body (DuRocher 2002). Special train schedules were set so that people who did not live in the community, and probably did not know the victim or the lynching participants, could take part in the celebration of white supremacy (Allen et al. 2000: 8). The moment chosen to take the photograph may have been when the photographer/
participant felt most proud to be part of the large crowd. Perhaps the photograph marks a moment when a particular contortion of the victim’s body caused excitement in the crowd or a member of the lynch mob said something that was remarkable. The personal feeling of the photographer/participant is unknown, but the existence of the photograph tells us that he or she considered the lynching and his or her role in a collective of white supremacists as an occasion to remember.

Photographs in the second category, which show the victim and the participants together, are usually posed to deliberately create a moment for photography (fig. 2). This type of photograph shows the lynchers’ pride in their actions. It is as if the hunters stand beside a fresh kill and document their catch to commemorate their accomplishment. Comments from the students reflect their curiosity about the crowd and the photographers:

*Is that a family watching the event of a man burning? Is it an event that unifies them?*

*Who was the photographer? Did he/she participate? What did the photographer think?*

*The people in these pictures are possibly still alive. Alive to pass their hate on to their children.*

*It’s hard to tell what’s going on. Is he fixing his tie?! It makes the white people look so stupid that they are trying to “look good” for the camera.*

*Where were the family members of those lynched? Were they allowed to be present?*

*Were there certain rules for attire? Why does the woman wear a nice dress?*

*When was this taking place because it appears that the people are dressed in clothes that were worn not so long ago?*

The students articulate their confusion, disbelief, and curiosity about the often surreal combination of the victim and the happy lynchers. Some lynchers smile ecstatically; others have serious expressions communicating their power and dignity as keepers of justice. What is perhaps most striking is the absolute fearlessness expressed in their postures. Not only do most of them look directly at the camera, many stand on tip toe, lean on others’ shoulders, and tilt their bodies toward the camera to ensure that their participation in the lynching is documented. They stand blameless and free of guilt. There is no higher authority to fear. Their consciences are clear.

The photographs of the crowd and victim together are difficult to look at in part because of our heightened awareness that we see the lynched victim through the eyes of the photographer/participant. The lynchers identified
Figure 2. The Lynching of Tom Shipp and Abe Smith at Marion, Indiana, August 7, “By Party or Parties Unknown” (1930)

Figure 3. The Lynchings of Four African Americans. Location unknown (c. 1900)
with the photographer as one of them, and in turn the photographer’s gaze places contemporary viewers at the lynching from his or her point of view. The crowd looks into the lens and smiles. We can choose to identify with the photographer through whose eyes we see, or we can reject this perspective and choose to identify with the lifeless body hanging above or beside or sometimes charred below.

I suggest to the students that one effect of photographs of the lynching victim(s) in the absence of the living is to naturalize the brutality of the murder (fig. 3). This feature uniquely sets the photographs in the third category apart from the others. The depiction of the body alone reinforces the lynchers’ belief that the victim was insignificant and anonymous. To address the common question, “Why were these photographs taken?,” we discuss that one purpose of the photographs was to document the superiority of the white race, not to remember someone’s loved one. The absence of the crowd focuses our attention on its invisibility. Hidden from view, the murderers are unknown and unavailable. Blameless, they show the black body as the problem and death as the resolution. The body becomes the only site of questions and answers. No one else is pictured as the recourse for justification; only the victim is to blame. The photographs of the victim alone, without the lynchers, force us to question the notion of truth in the image. The answer often expected to be found in a “documentary” image — the evidence of objective truth captured by photography — is unacceptable. We discuss what the truths are in these photographs. Although many specific questions about the murders cannot be answered, the students and I agree that the victims were not unworthy and insignificant as their appearance alone and destroyed implies.

The last category of lynching photographs consists of souvenirs made specifically for sale and mass distribution. The souvenir category overlaps with the victim categories, but they serve a specific purpose that gives them a distinct function. Some souvenirs display photography studio markers and information for reordering. Some were made into stereocards for a more “lifelike” 3-D viewing experience. Most were made into postcards (fig. 4). Students are often most disturbed and perplexed by the souvenirs. The colorful presentation of the dead renders the scene surreal. Its aesthetic appeal weakens its authenticity. The unnatural coloration destroys what Roland Barthes (1989) has called the reality effect of photography, in which the mimetic details of the photograph make the image indisputably real and unquestionable. The students ask again if the scenes that the postcards depict are real. They ask how it is possible that these products can exist. The amount of information postcards provide about a lynching varies greatly. Some provide the name of the victim, the crime he
or she was accused of, and the date and place of the lynching. Postcards sent through the mail often disclose the sender’s sense of pride through the brief written message on the reverse.

There are several examples of postcards printed as color and tinted lithographs to aestheticize the images and make them more appealing, suggesting a competitive market for lynching postcards and a demand by consumers. The colored images are exceptional in their presentation as beautiful objects that define lynching photography as something pleasurable to collect and recollect. The printer’s attempt to show lynching as picturesque, artistic, and even dreamy reveals a desire for a nostalgic southern past. Brightly colored images of lynching in yellow, turquoise, and magenta are depicted as lovely natural southern landscapes.

Students find the text from these primary materials as intriguing as the images themselves. Some want to know if the authors can be found today and questioned about their participation. They are shocked by the mix of hatred of the victim expressed in the note and love for the person who will receive the postcard, which often leads to a discussion about how these feelings can coexist.

Still, the photographs of Without Sanctuary are neither loving images of the dead nor documents intended to motivate antiracist activism. Students may respond with disbelief when confronted with the shameless desire to docu-
ment and openly celebrate the destruction of the human body. Most of them are speechless and sobered. Yet the lynching photographs are a catalyst for a complex system of varied responses beyond the immediate paralyzing effect. I believe that most students are faced with the troubling paradox of looking in disbelief while trying to understand what they are seeing. The context in which lynching photographs are presented is an important element in this reception process because it can influence their responses to lynching itself. As educators, we have the power to control this context in the classroom.

The history of lynching and the continued threat of racial violence are by far the most difficult subjects I teach, both emotionally and politically. However, the engagement with this history through lynching imagery and the exhibition history of Without Sanctuary has proven to be an important life experience for me and for my students. The discussions we have as a group motivate critical thinking about issues of cultural and historical representation. They provide a foundation for students to understand the legacy of domestic racist terrorism today and to engage constructively with this legacy from an informed historical perspective.

Notes
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1. Though speaking from the perspective of an art historian and ethnic studies professor, I think that lynching photography can have an important function in English courses. Lynching as a theme can be found in much late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction, plays, poetry, and essays. Students are offered new insight into the significance of lynching in literature and the opportunity to develop their consciousnesses about American history by examining lynching photographs and the questions that these cultural texts raise for them. This interdisciplinary addition can be an important inclusion to discussions of multicultural histories in America and race relations. I recommend Anne P. Rice’s collection Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond (2003) as a resource for American literature about lynching from 1889 to 1935. It includes Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die,” which was reproduced as wall text in the foyer of the exhibition in the King Historic Site. Rice’s collection also includes a brief essay by the remarkable Walter White, a black man who passed for white and traveled to places in the South where lynching occurred to write reports for the NAACP’s The Crisis magazine.
The tragic news about the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was about five hours old when I walked into my afternoon American literature class. Dejected and numb, my students were nevertheless in attendance; most, if not all, expected me to say a few perfunctory words and then dismiss the class, sending them once again to the big screen television in the Student Center where hundreds of people stood motionless, watching the twin towers collapse, over and over again. I didn’t cancel class that afternoon because the text for the day was part 5 of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a choice that was ironically appropriate. It is in part 5 that we see

Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal (ll. 377–80)

as well as a tentative hope for future redemption: “Shantih Shantih Shantih” or, as the poet glosses it himself from the *Upanishads* and Philippians 4:7, “The Peace which passeth understanding.”