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ESSAY

Without Sanctuary: The Symbolic Representation of Lynching in Photography

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One of the great strengths of Fitz Brundage's *Lynching in the New South* is its adamant historicism. He argues that lynchings derived from specific historical conditions, contingent on the social, political, and economic climate of particular places at particular moments in time. His meticulous examination of the rise and decline of lynching practices in two states, as well as in subregions in those states, allows him to do that with a thoroughness that most other studies have not come close to replicating. Brundage is accordingly critical of anthropological approaches that treat lynchings as a monolithic phenomenon, as communal rituals "rife … with symbolic representation," through which white southerners affirmed collective values. These kinds of overly-reductive explanations risk placing "undue emphasis on the unchanging, ritualized, and mass character of mob violence."[1] Although lynchings shared common elements, it was far too varied a practice for easy generalizations. White supremacy itself, he reminded us, was not static, since shifting social, political, and economic circumstances conditioned its shape and force as an ideology.

Although my cultural approach to the study of lynching was quite unlike Brundage's quantitative and sociological method, this aspect of his study, perhaps surprisingly, had the most impact on my own work. Even as I sought to analyze patterns of ritual and their "symbolic representation" across the South, I was mindful of Brundage's caution, not always successfully. I hoped to show that lynching was not simply a "ritualistic affirmation" of an uncontested white supremacy, but served to construct and reconstruct what was actually a relatively unstable racial ideology.[2] And I aimed to root my analysis in the historical conditions of particular lynching sites to avoid the abstraction that many cultural studies can fall into.[3]

Arguably, the most cited component of *Lynching in the New South* has been its taxonomy of lynch mobs: terrorist, private, posse, and mass. These types of mobs differed in size, motivation, and the degree of ritual and torture they exacted. These classifications allowed Brundage to chart distinctions in the size and scope of lynching in different subregions and over time. These differences also mattered very much to white southerners and often determined whether they conferred social legitimacy on the violence or not.[4]

Yet, Brundage himself is at times ambivalent about the usefulness of his taxonomy. "For blacks …," he writes, "it no doubt would have been an exercise in academic

hairsplitting to suggest that it made any difference whether they were lynched by a posse or a mass mob."[5] Certainly, African Americans were more apt to protest "private" or "terrorist" lynchings because these acts often lacked widespread legitimacy, but they were just as likely to be terrorized by them, to be haunted by them, as they were a mass mob lynching.[6] Indeed, anti-lynching activists paid little attention to the various distinctions between types of mobs. What's more, in places, Brundage collapses distinctions between categories, for instance, when he notes that the mass mob that tortured and killed Sam Hose in Newnan, Georgia, in 1899 began as a posse.[7] Nor does he discount that private or terrorist mobs conveyed messages to themselves and others about white superiority and Black inferiority through their violence.[8] Even a perfunctory lynching, seemingly performed without ceremony, still might carry symbolic meaning; its memory might still be "rife … with symbolic representation." What Brundage, rightly, resists is the easy assumption that all lynchings followed the same ritualized script and communicated the same meanings at all times.

The symbolic representation of a lynching might take the form of a photograph. Most photographs we now have access to undoubtedly were the products of mass mob lynchings, at which local professional photographers snapped pictures to sell as cabinet cards or postcards, or at which amateurs in the crowd used their Kodaks to commemorate the event.[9] But a number of images of lynched bodies exist that were taken at the behest of private mobs or posses. The masked men who, in 1906, abducted Bunk Richardson from the county jail in Gadsden, Alabama, in the wee hours of the night and hanged him from a bridge over the Coosa River would qualify as a private mob. Yet, the next day, a local photographer snapped pictures of Richardson's corpse, which he made into cabinet cards to sell out of his studio.[10] In another photograph, date and place unknown, a posse of at least fifteen white men stand in a row, their unnamed victim, shot to death, flung over a horse.[11] In these instances, the violence of mobs who had otherwise killed their victims covertly and without ceremony became public and imbued with representational power.

These images and more are contained in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* published in 2000. They were collected and compiled by an Atlanta-based antiques dealer, James Allen, a self-described "picker," who had begun gathering lynching images some fifteen years earlier, finding them at flea markets and in desk drawers and photo albums of clients' parents and grandparents.[12] In *Without Sanctuary*, Allen reprinted 98 out of a collection of 130 images, a collection that he had financed with his partner John Littlefield. They appear as "plates," accompanied by brief captions and descriptive endnotes, researched by William Carrigan. Former Congressman John Lewis (D-Georgia) wrote a brief forward, and Leon Litwack and the *New Yorker* writer, Hilton Als, provided longer essays.

Brundage makes no mention of lynching photography in *Lynching in the New South*, which is not surprising. In the 1980s and 1990s, lynching photographs were rarely visible. A few existed in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's collection at the Library of Congress and in various state archives around the country. Some had been published in Black newspapers and in anti-lynching pamphlets, as well as a handful of white, mainstream outlets in the early twentieth century. But, with a few notable exceptions, they had largely vanished from public view, paralleling the "disappearance" of lynching rituals that Brundage describes in his epilogue.[13] Before *Without Sanctuary*, no one really knew the scope of these photographs: how many existed, how often they were taken, what had happened to them since.

I first began researching lynching photography in 1995, in graduate school, based on the handful I had found in various archives. I first encountered the images contained in

Without Sanctuary when Allen invited me to his home in Atlanta, where he spread them out on his dining room table. As they do for many others, these images horrified me, not only due to the violence depicted in them, but also because of their material existence. They spurred so many questions: Why would mobs photograph their violence, or allow their violence to be photographed? What did those who obtained these photographs do with them? What meanings did they hold for viewers? And how did anti-lynching activists use these images? Of course, 130 images represent a small fraction of the thousands of lynchings that have taken place in this country, but, from textual evidence that photographs were taken or distributed at lynchings, it is also clear that many photographs have disappeared into the ether of history. As Litwack writes in *Without Sanctuary*, the photographs speak to certain truths about lynching, most notably that lynch mobs, or spectators, were certain of their own righteousness and convinced that their violence was socially acceptable.[14]

For that reason, perhaps above all others, *Without Sanctuary* struck a public nerve. Although by 2000, the scholarship that *Lynching in the New South* had initiated was proliferating, it was largely confined to academic circles. *Without Sanctuary*, arguably more than any other publication about lynching, spurred a public reckoning with the history of lynching. Even before its publication, crowds of spectators queued outside the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York, where sixty images from the Allen-Littlefield collection were exhibited. The gallery could only hold fifteen to twenty people at a time, so viewers waited for several hours in the frigid January cold to get inside. Due to high demand, the exhibit was moved to the New York Historical Society in Spring 2000, where about 50,000 visitors viewed it in its first four months.[15] Exhibitions in other cities in the United States and Europe have since followed. Allen also constructed a website, www.withoutsanctuary.org, to display the images. The website, which is still running, contains a forum, where, to date, over 1,800 viewers have posted messages.[16] In the past eighteen years, there have been a number of movements to memorialize lynching in communities across the county meant to achieve some sort of racial accounting and reconciliation. In 2005, the U.S. senate invited 200 relatives and descendants of lynching victims to the senate chamber and issued a resolution of public apology, with eighty senators in support, for its past refusal to pass federal anti-lynching legislation. The resolution cites the *Without Sanctuary* collection for helping to "bring greater awareness and proper recognition of the victims of lynching."[17]

That is not to say that historical memories, especially one so racially fraught, are so easily and spontaneously prompted. As Brundage argues in his 2005 book on southern memory, historical memories are selective and crafted to meet present-day political and social concerns. The publication of *Without Sanctuary* at another time might have garnered little attention. But memories, Brundage reminds us, also need to be credible to have any cultural authority.[18] In that sense, while many Americans may have been primed for other reasons in the 2000s to remember lynching, the photographs in *Without Sanctuary* had a particular capacity to construct and transmit that memory. Photographs can stabilize what is a muddy and complicated past into a straightforward image. Moreover, unlike other historical documents, photographs appear objective and unmediated, which grants them a singular kind of authority. This authority is compounded in instances of human atrocity, which can seem unfathomable without some discernable, tangible proof.[19] In his forward to *Without Sanctuary*, John Lewis wrote that, although as a child growing up in Alabama, he had heard stories about lynchings, they "seemed nightmarish, unreal—even unbelievable." The photographs, however, "make real the hideous crimes that were committed against humanity."[20] Viewers of the *Without*

Sanctuary collection in various exhibitions across the country and online have recorded similar responses. Of course, lynching photographs do not *at all* provide us with an objective window into the past. Rather, they represent the point of view of the perpetrators of the violence or its sympathetic spectators. That element heightens their sickening horror, a point Hilton Als implies in his introductory essay.

The provocation of Als's essay has unfortunately been largely overlooked by the shock of the photographs that dominate the book. Als obliterates any notion that lynching photographs exist purely in the realm of historical memory. For him, the violence, and the pain and oppression, represented in them is ongoing. "I felt my neck snap and my heart break, while looking at these pictures," he writes.[21] His identification with the lynched victims is palpable, even as he resists that identification. He has been "lynched by eyes," for, as a Black man, he is excruciatingly aware that, to many whites, he is viewed first as a threat, as a potential criminal. "It's that experience of being watched and seeing the harm in people's eyes—that is the prelude to becoming a dead nigger," he tells us.[22]

This sense that the photographs represent, not the past, but a continuing terror has led other African Americans to resist looking at them.[23] John Lewis said that his wife refuses to open the book.[24] One African American teacher in Atlanta at first opposed a public exhibition of the collection in that city, saying, "When I look at those pictures … I don't just see a lifeless body. I look at those pictures, and I see my son, I see my brother, I see my father. If I'm looking at that lifeless figure long enough, I see myself. Do I want to display this to the world? My initial reaction was no."[25] After all, this collection appeared only two years after the brutal killing of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, by three white men who dragged him for three miles behind their pickup truck. The images have, in this way, taken on a new kind of representational meaning in the present. Due to that symbolic power, Als admits, with shame, that the victims in these pictures remain anonymous to him, although some details about some of the victims exist in the explanatory notes. Als writes that he "doesn't know because [he] couldn't get past the pictures," which is probably how most readers encountered these images.[26]

The implied connections Als draws between the spectators at a lynching and those whites who look at present-day African Americans with fear and suspicion, and between the white viewers who bought and kept these photographs many years ago and those who gaze upon the photographs in *Without Sanctuary*, are meant to further unsettle viewers of the collection. He begins by questioning the "usefulness of this project" to compile and publish the photographs, a usefulness he says that "escapes" him. He then asks "What is the relationship of the white people in these pictures to the white people who ask me and sometimes pay me to be a Negro, on the page?" He is fully aware that Allen and the white publishers asked him to write the "soundtrack" to these pictures to "authenticate" them and, he suggests, to provide themselves cover.[27] But in doing so, he's further making himself a specimen, an object of another kind of white gaze, to feed "white euphoria," a phrase to describe what might now be called white "virtue-signaling"—a means for white people to "exercising their largesse" by wanting to hear about the suffering, always noble suffering, of Black men like him.[28]

Some critics have echoed Als's ambivalence. The book is formatted like a standard exhibition catalog. The photographs are printed on hard-stock paper, and many are enlarged to spread across the pages. But with its shocking content, that formatting, which Michael Eric Dyson likened to "a coffee-table book," could appear tasteless.[29] Some claimed that *Without Sanctuary* served as a form of torture pornography, packaged and sold for profit. They lamented that the presentation of lynched Black bodies reenacted the loss of dignity and personhood these victims experienced the first time their bodies were

put on display. In addition, as Grace Hale wrote, the images "present victimization as the defining characteristic of blackness." Hale and others considered the contextualization of the photographs lacking, so that readers learn little about the perpetrators and their motivations, and even less about the production of the photographs, their circulation, or preservation. All of that lets white Americans off the hook, so to speak, and allows readers to "escape the hard questions," in Hale's words. In that way, as JoAnn Wypijewski wrote in the *Nation*, *Without Sanctuary* "suppresses thought to elicit pity" and was "concerned with memory only in the most vulgar sense."[30] These very sensibilities led some to suggest that the photographs not be exhibited at all.[31]

This critical reaction may be due to what Als experienced: the emotional shock of the photographs blinds viewers to the explanatory text in the book, to Litwack's essay and the endnotes. Still, the photographs as they appear on pages seem to lack historical specificity. In that sense, they further the very impression that Brundage sought to dispel in *Lynching in the New South.* Despite the various types of photographs in the collection, the rituals of lynching look largely the same, repeated over and over in similar fashion across time and place, largely due to the conventions of photography that structured how a lynching would be represented. The created effect risks producing a sensationalized image of a typical lynching that distorts the historical reality and comes to dominate the public memory of lynching.

The photographs can also appear frozen in time. They are black-and-white or sepia-toned images, sometimes with torn or ragged edges, which situates them firmly in the past, the effect of which can distance the viewer from them. In fact, from responses to exhibition guest books and the online forum, it is clear that many white viewers have not responded as Als did. That is, they have not seen lynching as continuous with the present; rather it exists safely in the past.

Litwack's essay, drawn from his tremendous 1998 book, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, unwittingly contributes to this idea. The "story of lynching," he presents is that of ritual, mass mob lynchings, which varied "only in degrees of torture and brutality"—a story at odds with that told in *Lynching in the New South.*[32] Moreover, to emphasize the systematic oppression of white supremacy, he argues that despite the spectacle surrounding them, lynchings were unexceptional and "routine" events.[33] The existence of these photograph belie that point; people do not take photographs of routine events, or at least they did not in the early twentieth century. His most significant point, however, is that lynching was not evidence of a system of successful and complete subjugation; rather, it "suggested the refusal of black men and women to submit with equanimity" to domination.[34] Those that critiqued the collection for its focus on Black victimization missed this crucial argument.

Like Lewis, Litwack calls for an encounter with the photographs, as disturbing as they are, if we are to comprehend the atrocity of lynching.[35] Most who have viewed the collection have shared this view. There is a moral obligation to not turn away, to bear witness, to pay tribute to the suffering of thousands, to recognize the pervasiveness of white racism in the past and its continuing effects in the present. As Susan Sontag wrote of the collection, "submitting to the ordeal [of looking] should help us understand such atrocities not as acts of 'barbarians' but as the reflection of a belief system, racism, that by defining one people as less than human than another legitimates torture and murder. But maybe they were the barbarians. Maybe this is what most barbarians look like. (They look like everybody else.)"[36] In other words, any ethical encounter with these images must entail a recognition that they do not exist comfortably in the past, but represent something transhistorical: racism and dehumanization. That encounter must also compel white

viewers to not disassociate themselves from the white spectators in the image. In short, any ethical spectatorship must entail some form of ahistoricism. At the same time, to ignore the historical context is render the victims in these images into nameless, symbolic representations.

Patricia Williams, also writing in the *Nation*, was sympathetic to the collection, but questioned how to exhibit them to force this kind of encounter, to elicit "reflection rather than spectacle … vision rather than voyeurism."[37] Subsequent exhibitions of the *Without Sanctuary* collection have since strived to just that by displaying the photographs in their original form, by providing more context, including context about anti-lynching activism, and by engaging viewers with interactive questions and through the exhibit design itself. For instance, the 2002 exhibit at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Site in Atlanta created cut-outs in the walls so that viewers were drawn to watch each other view the photographs in order to compel an unsettling awareness of their own spectatorship.

Scholars, meanwhile, have sought to provide historical framing and analysis of lynching photographs. There has been an abundance of scholarship on lynching photography in the past eighteen years, including my work, but also that of Dora Apel, Leigh Raiford, Shawn Michelle Smith, and Courtney Baker.[38] This work has sought to answer the questions I posed above to understand how these images came to be, what meanings they bore, and how they have been used by various constituencies over time. It has also been attuned to the ways in which, just as the practice of lynching itself, the spectatorship of lynching, in the past and the present, is varied and multidimensional. That spectatorship is contingent not only on the racial identity of the viewer, but the context surrounding the image, that is, the viewer's temporal and spatial positions in relation to the image. In other words, the lessons from Brundage's work have carried into the best scholarship on lynching photography.

In his epilogue to *Lynching in the New South*, Brundage writes, "perhaps nothing about the history of mob violence in the United States is more surprising than how quickly an understanding of the full horror of lynching has receded from the nation's collective historical memory."[39] The emergence of *Without Sanctuary* reminded many white Americans, including many historians of lynching, that there was nothing "collective" about the historical memory of lynching. As noted, for many African Americans, not only had the memory not receded, it was not even a memory, but a living terror. If *Without Sanctuary* awakened many white Americans to a history that they had conveniently forgotten, for many Black Americans, it offered a visual focus for that narrative, to, as John Lewis put it, "make real" their experiences.

In April 2018, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened in Montgomery, Alabama, to commemorate the 4,400 black men and women lynched in the United States between 1877 and 1950. Although lynching is the focus, the memorial, created by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), is dedicated also to enslaved African Americans, as well as those who suffered under Jim Crow oppression and today's regimes of mass incarceration and police brutality. The memorial in that way stresses continuity over time, just as many viewers of *Without Sanctuary* have done. Over 100,000 people visited the memorial in its first three months.[40] At the center of the site is a large, semi-enclosed square containing 800 steel slabs, each representing 800 counties in which lynchings were committed. They are suspended from the ceiling frame, as if to resemble hanged bodies. Elsewhere on the six-acre lot, replicas of the slabs are laid on the ground, lined up in rows, appearing like coffins. The effect is haunting. Significantly, the memorial includes no lynching photographs—an intentional omission. EJI executive director, Bryan Stevenson, told the *Montgomery Advertiser*, "I think for some people 'Without Sanctuary' created this optic

that was shocking, and we were less interested in shocking optics." Instead of focusing on the suffering of the victims, the EJI wanted to emphasize the communities in which this violence took place.[41] Yet, would the memorial be as evocative and powerful as it is if viewers did not already know what a lynching looked like? It could be that *Without Sanctuary* made the abstraction of the lynching memorial possible.

Notes

1 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 17.
2 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 19.
3 Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
4 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 26–28, 31–32.
5 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 45.
6 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 45–46.
7 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 34.
8 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 18.
9 Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 77.
10 See James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000), plates 86 and 87; *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1906, 4; *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 12, 1906, 5.
11 Allen, *Without Sanctuary*, plate 15.
12 Allen, *Without Sanctuary*, 203–204; Richard Lacayo, "Blood at the Root," *Time* (Apr. 10, 2000): 122–23.
13 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 252.
14 Leon Litwack, "Hellhounds" in *Without Sanctuary*, plate 11.
15 Robert E. Snyder, "*Without Sanctuary*: An American Holocaust?," *Southern Quarterly* 39:3 (Spring 2001): 162; Dora Apel, "On Looking: Lynching Photographs and the Legacies of Lynching after 9/11," *American Quarterly* 55 (2003): 459–60.
16 www.withoutsanctuary.org (accessed Dec. 28, 2018).
17 *New York Times*, June 14, 2005, A15; Senate Resolution 39, 109 Cong. (2005), https://www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/senate-resolution/39/text (accessed Dec 28, 2018).
18 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4.
19 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 4–5; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76–80; Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8–10.
20 John Lewis, "Forward" in *Without Sanctuary*, 7.
21 Hilton Als, "GWTW" in *Without Sanctuary*, 38.
22 Hilton Als, "GWTW" in *Without Sanctuary*, 39.
23 With the exception of several photographs of white lynching victims, of various ethnicities, the vast majority of images in *Without Sanctuary* depict African American victims and white mobs. Public commentary on the book and the exhibitions have thus focused on Black and white viewers' responses.
24 "Emory Asks Public to Help Decide Fate of Controversial Exhibit," *Creative Loafing (Atlanta, GA)*, Dec. 9, 2000, 41.
25 Quoted in Apel, "On Looking," 465.
26 Als, "GWTW" in *Without Sanctuary*, 43.
27 Als, "GWTW" in *Without Sanctuary*, 39.
28 Als, "GWTW" in *Without Sanctuary*, 40.
29 Dyson quoted in Apel, "On Looking," 464.
30 Grace Hale, "Exhibition Review", *Journal of American History* 89:3 (2002), 993-94; JoAnn Wypijewski, "Executioners' Songs," *The Nation*, Mar. 27, 2000, 30, 34.
31 For an overview of this point of view, see Apel, "On Looking," 464–66.
32 Litwack, "Hellhounds" 10, 14.
33 Litwack, "Hellhounds," 18.

34 Litwack, "Hellhounds," 18.
35 Litwack, "Hellhounds," 34.
36 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 92.
37 Patricia Williams, "Without Sanctuary," *The Nation*, Feb. 14, 2000, 9.
38 Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Lynching Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Courtney Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).
39 Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 258–59.
40 *Montgomery Advertiser*, Aug. 2, 2018 https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2018/08/02/100-000-people-visit-eji-lynching-memorial-montgomery/879716002/ (accessed Dec. 30, 2018).
41 *Montgomery Advertiser*, Apr. 25, 2018, https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2018/04/25/without-sanctuary-and-how-we-remember-lynching/499641002/ (accessed Dec 30, 2018); on this point, see also Jason Morgan Ward, Museum Review, "The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration; The National Memorial for Peace and Justice," *American Historical Review* 123:4 (Oct. 2018): 1272.

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