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THE CONSUMPTION OF LYNCHING IMAGES

Lynching photographs, like the macabre spectacles they depict, have occupied a crucial if unacknowledged place in the "shadow archive" of black representation.[1] Along with images of African Americans as slave caricatures, criminal types, sexual predators, and objects of scientific study, lynching photography has long been engaged in a complex dialectic with portraits of uplift and self-possession. This essay focuses attention on the dark and disquieting corpus of lynching photography and the myriad ways these images have been made to signify and testify from the late nineteenth century into the twenty-first. Only by recognizing post-Civil War lynching as a peculiarly modern phenomenon, reliant on various communication, transportation, and especially media and consumer technologies, rather than as a Southern anachronism, can the cultural work of photography in both the making and unmaking of racial identities and subjectivities be revealed.

In the hands of whites, photographs of lynchings, circulated as postcards in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, served to extend and redefine the boundaries of white community beyond the localities in which lynchings occurred to a larger "imagined community." In the hands of blacks during the same time period, these photographs were recast as a call to arms against a seeming never-ending tide of violent coercion, and transformed into tools for the making of a new African American national identity. Similar, if not the same images of tortured black bodies were used to articulate and assert specifically racialized identities in the Progressive Era, a period marked by the expansion of corporate capitalism, the rise of the middle classes, and the birth of consumer culture.

By uncovering and pulling apart the threads of white supremacy and black resistance embedded in, or perhaps more accurately, read into these photographs, we can begin to understand how lynching photography simultaneously makes and unmakes racial identity. Indeed, the very need to use photographs in campaigns for racial domination or racial justice points to cracks and fissures in these identities. Exposed are the social, sexual, and political anxieties that the framing of these images attempt to deny. The photographs themselves offer up a different sort of evidence of the complexities of racial formation, whether by scrutinizing the disgusted look on the face of a white mob member, or acknowledging the quiet yet visible presence of a black man in the crowd. Because of its "spectacularness," lynching reminded everyone who looked that in the end one was either black or white, either wrong or right. It returned everyone to his or her corporeal essence, to the (racial) truth that is "only skin deep." But in their

1. "Shadow archive" is photographer and critic Allan Sekula's term that describes an all-inclusive corpus of images that situates individuals according to a socially proscribed hierarchy. See Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

Vivian Cherry, *Untitled*, from "The Game of Lynching, Yorkville, East Harlem" series, 1947. Gelatin silver print, 14 3/8 x 11 in. (36.5 x 27.9 cm). International Center of Photography, purchased by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2003.

various contexts and incarnations, we can discern how lynching photographs both create and coerce the image of unified racial identities, black and white, across the clefts of gender and class, location and circumstance.

Spectacles of white supremacy

The history of lynching in the United States is a long and brutal one. At its apex, between 1882 and 1930, this strain of extra-legal violence claimed over three thousand lives, approximately 88 percent of which were African American.[2] White on black lynching, which saw its peak in 1892, can best be understood as the cruel physical manifestations of white patriarchal anxiety over a perceived loss of power in the years following Emancipation; as a communal and ritual act in response to the threat of social, political, economic, and sexual displacement by African Americans, particularly African American men; and a performance of white racial identity that placed black bodies center stage as it attempted to exorcise those bodies, and their perceived threat to the future of white civilization, from white communities. The reality and threat of lynching—lynching as both concrete act and shared narrative—worked to hold African Americans in their (subordinate) place, and help imagine and construct a unified white identity.

Lynching also needs to be considered a leisure activity deeply embedded in the rise of consumer culture in the South in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As historian Grace Hale has argued, lynchings helped ease white anxiety about a new culture of consumption that exposed holes in the blanket segregation of the New South. This new mass society signaled a "raceless" consumer culture, one in which any person, of any race, gender, or class, could purchase goods in any number of mixed public spaces. Not only did lynchings "reverse the decommodification of black bodies begun with emancipation," writes Hale, but they enforced a segregated consumer society, a commodity culture in which only whites could experience or consume the "amusement" of lynching, and only blacks could be lynched and consumed, often literally by fire.[3]

Lynching remanded African Americans, cloaked in newly granted post-Emancipation citizenship, back to black bodies, vessels suitable for physical and ideological labor. This is seen most clearly in the post-lynching scramble for fetishistic mementos of the event, such as scraps of victims' clothing, charred bits of bone, locks of hair. These gruesome trophies, these relics, were sources of pride for those who had participated in the murder, or for those who were able to get to the corpse before it was finally buried. Indeed, a framed photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith contains a tuft

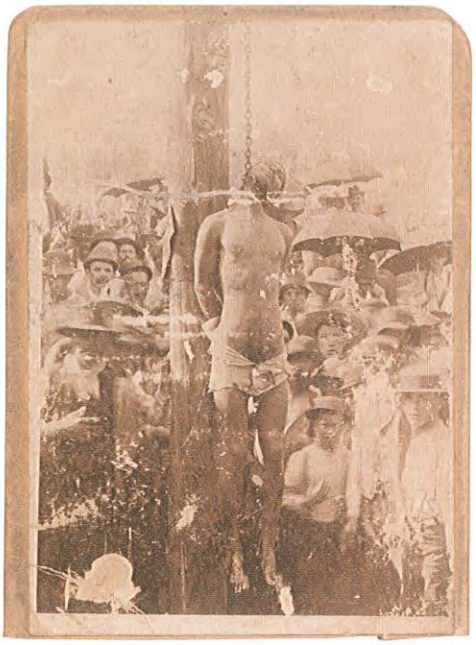
2. Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).
3. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

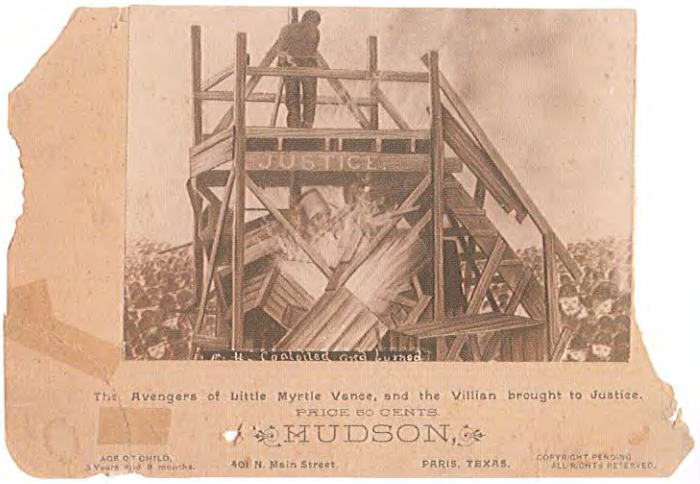
of hair attached to the matte board.[4] Such souvenirs also could provide a source of income for those who got to the body first. In her report to the NAACP about the 1915 lynching of young Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, investigator Elizabeth Freeman writes, "Some little boys pulled out the teeth and sold them to some men for five dollars apiece. The chain was sold for twenty-five cents a link." The collection of relics as religious fetishes is a practice that dates back to ancient and medieval times when the devoted would gather, trade, and keep close the remnants of saints' lives or their bodies. Indeed, in a complex manner, lynchings incorporated elements of ancient traditions and antebellum nostalgia.[5]

Yet lynchings are also a peculiarly modern phenomenon. As the New South grew and industrialized rapidly, lynching made use of some of the most modern technologies available: the telephone and telegraph to announce and advertise the event; print media to carry the message; and cars and trains to carry participants to the designated location. The specificity of lynching's modernity lies in the prevalence and pervasiveness of photographers, both amateur and professional. Indeed, photography emerged as integral to the lynching spectacle. For those not close enough to the scene or for those not lucky enough to obtain clothing or body parts, photographs proved the next best things. As postcards, trade cards, and stereographs, lynching images held a strong popular commercial appeal. For professional photographers, lynchings spawned a cottage industry in which picture makers conspired with mob members and even local officials for the best vantage point, constructed portable darkrooms for quick

4. See James Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).
5. NAACP Anti-Lynching Campaign Files, Series A, Group I, Container C, box 370 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress).

J. P. Ball & Son/James Presley Ball, *Portrait of William Biggerstaff seated in a chair with a hand on his face, wearing a flower in his lapel*, 1896; *Photograph of the Execution of William Biggerstaff, hanged for the murder of "Dick" Johnson, flanked by Rev. Victor Day and Henry Jurgens, sheriff*, 1896; *Photograph of William Biggerstaff, former slave, born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1854*, 1896. Cabinet cards, each 6 1/4 x 4 1/2 in. (15.9 x 11.4 cm). Courtesy of the Montana Historical Society, Helena.





turnaround, and pedaled their product "through newspapers, in drugstores, on the street—even...door to door."[6] If lynching was a return to the slave block, a reinscribing of the black body as commodity, then lynching photographs functioned as the bill of sale and receipt of ownership. If lynchings helped construct a unified white identity among those whites present and in the surrounding areas, then photographs of lynchings helped extend that community far beyond the town, the county, the state, the South, to include whites nationwide and even internationally. Now all whites, rich or poor, male or female, Northern or Southern, could imagine themselves to be master. This is true not only of the images made professionally and sold commercially, but also of those amateur photographs taken by everyday folk with cameras readily available through a burgeoning photographic industry.

From lynching photography to antilynching photography

Antilynching activists, beginning with the pioneer Ida B. Wells and continuing with the interracial NAACP, would not always be frightened into submission by either the threat of lynching or the recounting of the tale as framed by lynchers and their proponents or apologists. Antilynching activists chose to tell the story in a different manner, indeed to subvert the common tale of black bestiality resulting in swift white justice that culminated in, and forever echoed through the frozen

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

Unidentified photographer, *Lynching*, ca. 1900. Gelatin silver print on board, 5 3/4 x 4 in. (14.6 x 10.2 cm). International Center of Photography, Daniel Cowin Collection, 1990.

Frank Hudson, *The Avengers of Little Myrtle Vance, and the Villian brought to Justice*, ca. 1900. Gelatin silver print, 6 5/16 x 9 1/4 in. (16.5 x 23.5 cm). International Center of Photography, Daniel Cowin Collection, 1990.

black and white still photograph. Photographs of lynchings appeared in anti-lynching propaganda and pamphlets, Wells's *A Red Record* (1895) being the first, as well as in reports of mob violence in the black press. In such contexts, these images reframed the received narrative of black savagery as one of black vulnerability; white victimization was recast as white terrorization. Though actors and the fundamental story of crimes remained the same, in this new forum photography changed the roles and the ultimate moral.

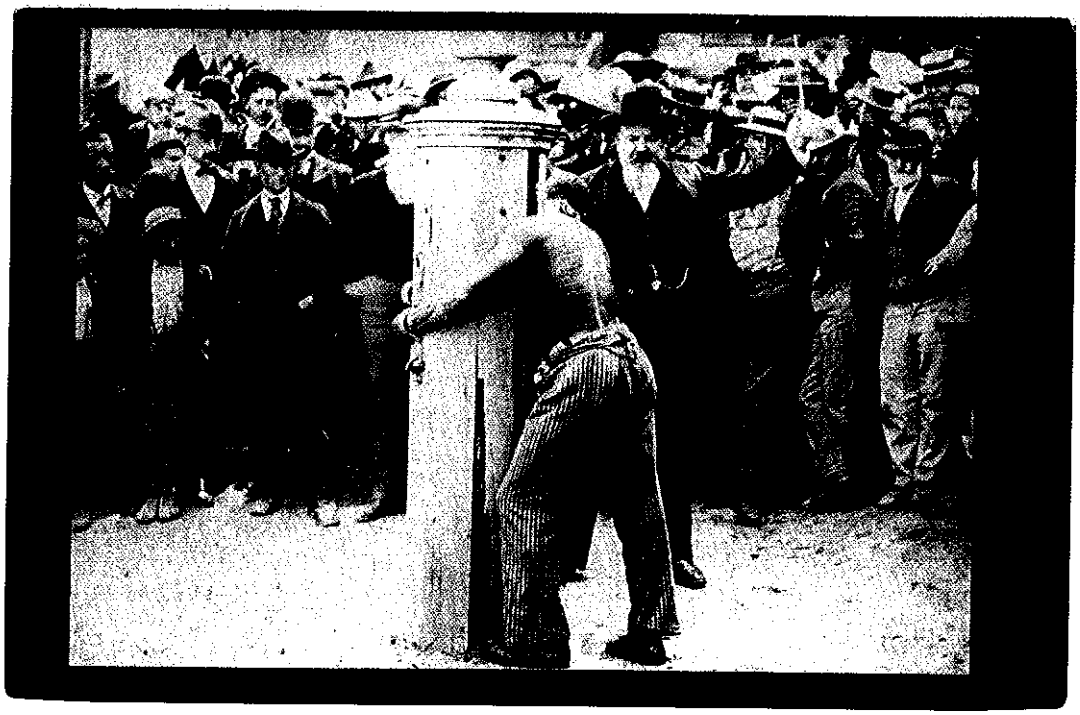
Indeed, we must consider the use of lynching photographs an effort to reverse or subvert the lynching ritual. Trudier Harris notes that African American writers have restaged lynchings in their literature as a political statement regarding the "oppression of a people."[7] Such a tradition serves to keep the past alive as a force that daily shapes the way communities remember and organize for the future. Through literary or performative or, in this case, visual recreations or recontextualizations of the lynching spectacle, political and cultural workers wield power to represent a symbol of degradation as such, or to transform it into an embodiment of the possibilities of freedom.

By entering in and engaging with a space of death framed by the lynching photograph, African American activists recognized these painful images as part of the larger shadow archive of black representation. By claiming them, antilynching crusaders began the work of repossessing lynching victims from their commodified consignment to the black and white photograph previously "owned" by white individuals and communities. These activists effectively entered into a debate about ownership and citizenship that focused on the right to represent, and indeed possess, black bodies. They challenged the enforced segregation and return to the slave block that the circulation of these images signaled within white communities. By "integrating" the consumption of lynching photographs, antilynching activists announced that the shame and terror that lynching wrought would also have to be shared and consumed by white communities. Within this expanded and contested public arena, and imbued with a different set of meanings, lynching photographs reemerged as antilynching photographs. They visually marked an effort to bring an end to the destruction and dispossession of African Americans that occurred outside of the public eye.

The antinomies of antilynching photography

Lynchings were often spectacles, and the retelling of the lynching story, either as written text or by visual image, continues to spectacularize racial violence. Such repetition both compounded the violence of

7. Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

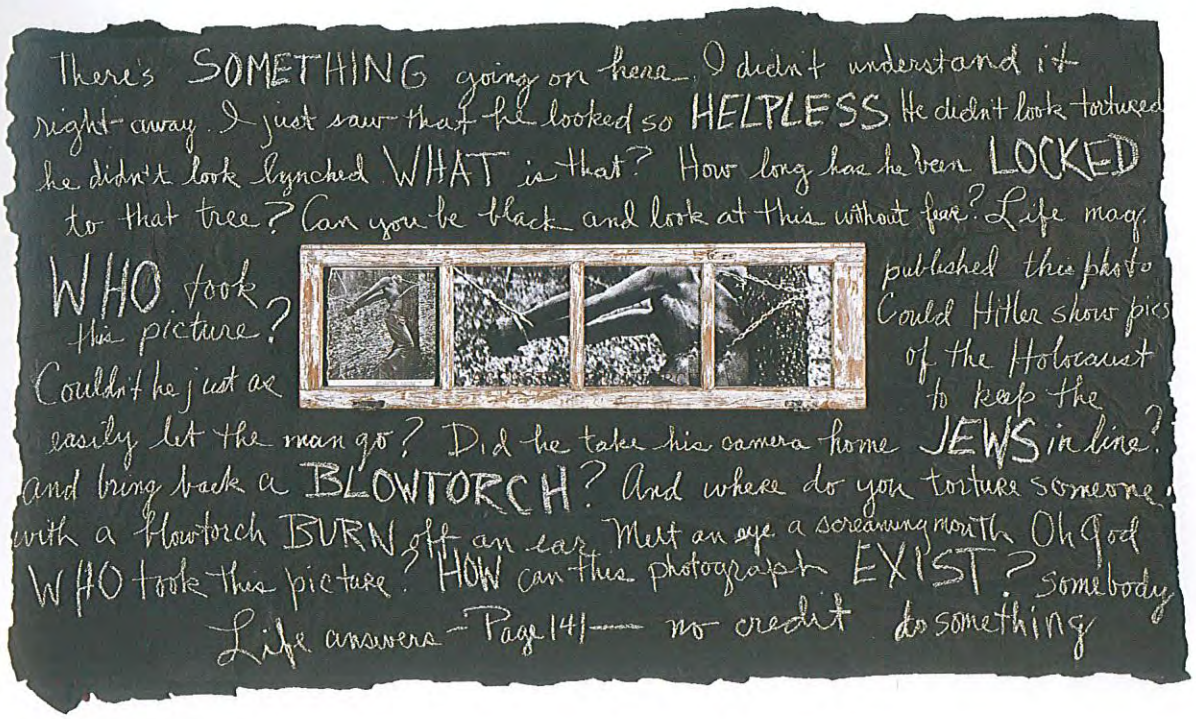


lynching and served to anesthetize audiences, in turn making people want more and more graphic accounts. The public's seeming insatiability for tales of racial violence and transgression has kept the tale of the black male rapist/criminal (read: O. J. Simpson, racial profiling) alive and well and circulating in our cultural and political imaginary. This narrative finds its "antithesis" in the image of "the lynched black man," which has emerged and evolved as visual shorthand, as a powerful icon paradigmatic of the suffering of all African Americans and understood only through the abject black male body.

Moreover, the lynching icon has been made to conjure, figuratively and aesthetically, the Crucifixion. In 1965, SNCC reproduced a lynching photograph by Mississippian O. N. Pruitt, adding the statement and accusation: "MISSISSIPPI" to the original image. Somewhat more ambiguously, one of the images in Vivian Cherry's "The Game of Lynching" series (1948) depicts a young black boy whose arms are forcibly outstretched by the white boys who surround him. Though we cannot be sure of the precise event occurring — are they playing or bullying?— the image is laden with tension, recalling the black body on the auction block, the black body readied for the lynching stage. In both instances, viewers are encouraged to link Christ's sacrifice with a legacy of lynching and racial violence, an offering up of African American males as Eucharist for visual consumption.

R.C. Holmes, *Wilmington, Delaware*, 1900. Gelatin silver print on board, 4 15/16 x 6 9/16 in. (12.5 x 16.7 cm). International Center of Photography, Daniel Cowin Collection, 1990.

Lynching imagery has provided a different sort of capital for more contemporary artists, curators, and activists. Paul Gilroy has argued that slavery and the Middle Passage have aided in "configuring modern black political" and artistic cultures. In the U.S. context, lynching constitutes a third moment of regenerative terror. African American artists have employed lynching photographs as both backdrops and centerpieces for their dialogues with and about mass consumer culture, police brutality, and the politics of looking at the black body. Artists like Pat Ward Williams, Dread Scott, Renee Cox, and Daniel Tisdale use lynching photography to continue to remake, reclaim, and recontextualize lynching's meaning for all who dare or care to look.



Pat Ward Williams, *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock*, 1986. Mixed mediums, 59 1/2 x 107 x 4 1/2 in. (151.1 x 271.8 x 11.4 cm). Whitney Museum of Art, New York, purchased with funds from The Audrey and Sydney Irmas Charitable Foundation.