Without Sanctuary: Bearing Witness, Bearing Whiteness

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And what I am trying to suggest by what one imagines oneself to be able to remember is that terror cannot be remembered. One blots it out. The organism—the human being—blots it out. One invents, or creates, a personality or a persona. Beneath this accumulation (rock of ages!) sleeps or hopes to sleep, that terror which the memory repudiates. [...] History, I contend, is the present—we, with every breath we take, every move we make, are History—and what goes around, comes around.

—James Baldwin

By bringing suffering near, the ties of sentiment are forged. In letter after letter, Rankin strove to create this shared experience of horror in order to transform his slaveholding brother, to whom the letters were addressed, as well as the audience of readers. In this case, pain provides the common language of humanity; it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous.

—Saidiya V. Hartman

Photographs provide our introduction to James Allen’s Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America. The lynching victims occupy the center of the photographs, and they are posed alone or with spectators to symbolize the mob’s successful hunt and killing. In his re-presentation of the lynching photographs, Allen attempts to resist the intent of the original photographers. In the interest of documenting past crimes now forgotten and preventing future ones, Without Sanctuary asks its audience to look at the pictures differently from the way in which the
photographers/participants intended them to be seen. Yet, the bodies of lynched black men remain the central feature of the text. Allen states that his interest is not in looking at the lynched bodies, but at the spectators who gather around them, "the canine-thin faces of the pack, lingering in the woods, circulating after the kill" (204). Yet, how can the act of looking—a position of engendered power—evade "the voyeuristic violence of the white eye" (Pinar 36)?

Beyond the evidence of the act of lynching, what does this exposure of the lynched body yield? What do lynching photographs teach us about the history of lynching in America? How do they teach us? As the audience of the photographs today, are we better equipped to look at instead of with the spectators, or do we just affirm the spectacle of the lynching? When confronted with the history of the event, the spectator gaze within the photograph, the spectator gaze of the photograph, and Allen’s gaze of the collection of photographs, with whose experience do we identify?

In *Without Sanctuary*, Allen republishes nearly one hundred photographs of lynchings, predominantly carried out in the South against African American men from 1880 to 1960. Allen argues that the postcards, once trophies for lynch mobs, now provide "a visual vocabulary of lynching" for a new audience (Pogrebin; National). *Without Sanctuary* sets out to document the memorialization of lynching in American culture, yet the text is itself a memorial of lynching that is prone to committing its own acts of representational violence. It remembers the racism that produced the lynchings by this time directing the audience to focus on the white spectators who gather around the lynched bodies, rather than on the lynched bodies themselves.

On the cover of *Without Sanctuary* is a real photo postcard of the lynching of Lige Daniels. Daniels, an African American male of sixteen, hangs from a tree above a large crowd of white men and boys. The spectators in the photograph look directly into the camera or up at Daniels’ body; many are smiling. The photograph appears again in the middle of the book with the inscription: “This was made in the court yard, In Center Texas, he is a 16 year old Black boy, He killed Earl’s Grandma, She was Florence’s mother. Give this to Bud. From Aunt Myrtle” (184). In both instances the image is enlarged from the original postcard size (5 x 4 ¼”), but on the cover the photograph is clipped, erasing most of the spectators and focusing our attention on Daniels’ body hanging in the center. Although the intent of *Without Sanctuary* is to direct our gaze onto the spectators of the lynchings, the photograph that introduces the
collection is cut to emphasize the lynched body. Although the spectators are still present in this picture, as they are in many of the photographs included in the book, the clipped version of the photograph of Lige Daniels’ lynching sets the tone for the text that follows it; the spectacle of a lynched body is reproduced for a new audience, and the spectacle remains at the center of this project.

The photographs are all real photo postcards, and they primarily record the lynchings of African American men. Most, but not all, of the lynchings occurred in the South. The photographs vary in the number of victims photographed, and whether or not the lynch mobs pose with the victims. The vast majority of the lynching victims are African American, but several are victims who are understood as “white” today but were identified as nonwhite by legal and social standards at the time. The violence that accompanied the lynchings and that is recorded in the photographs varies in degree of mutilation, dismemberment, burning, and other forms of torture, but such acts are almost entirely confined to the bodies of African American men. Some postcards deviate from this pattern, bearing photographs of the lynching site or mob without the body, or portraits of victims (primarily white women and children) of the accused, or of the accused himself. Yet, as the introductory photograph shows, this lynching memorial directs us to look at, and to expect to look at, the bodies of African American men displayed before white spectators. It introduces what Saidiya Hartman refers to as “the spectacular nature of black suffering and, conversely, the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle” (22).

My aim is to examine the argument that is made in this republication of lynching photographs. These historical photographs are the central feature of Allen’s text, but my concern is less with the context and argument of their original publication than with the effect of their publication and circulation today. I suggest that Without Sanctuary raises critical questions about the risks of representation and about how to teach the history and trauma of slavery and racial violence without reproducing trauma. Allen’s stated goal is to prompt viewers to remember and prevent acts of lynching and the racial contexts that produce them. The purpose of my analysis is not to call into question Allen’s motives, but to consider the consequences of his methods. Drawing upon Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical concept of identification, which suggests that identification is founded on division, and does not presume identicality but rather identification with another, I examine the relationship between visual and written rhetorics of trauma and memory, and the ways in which they
reproduce, rather than interrupt, the power relations of (black) lynching victim and (white) lynching spectator.

In the first section, I argue that the documentary mode through which Allen addresses the photographs, and through which he addresses his audience, allows the audience to gaze freely and innocently at the lynched bodies under the pretense of learning about and preventing future violence. This "documentary aesthetic" constructs a distanced relationship from the materials for both the archivist and the audience of the archive and predicates the act of looking on an identification of the lynched body as "other." Allen asks his audience to identify with the lynching victims in order to visualize the history of lynching, but these empathetic strategies of identification affect an "obliteration of otherness" (Boyarin, qtd. in Hartman 19). I draw here from Hartman's theory of empathy as "a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other" (19). Empathy becomes repressive (and undermines the intents of identification) when "the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other [occurs] only as we 'feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves.' And as a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead" (Hartman 19-20). Burke suggests that persuasion takes place not through "one particular address, but [through] a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to rhetorical skill" (26; emphasis added). In applying Hartman to Burke, I consider the ways in which racial lines of looking are reinforced in Without Sanctuary in spite of the efforts of its rhetor. What are the consequences of identification through empathy? How do conventions of identification result in reproducing the self and "obliterating the other"? What/can strategies of identification resist this problem?

In the second section I argue that to remember lynching today we must account for who was made the spectacle of violence and whose violence was made (in)visible. Drawing on current lynching scholarship, I examine the ways in which race, class and gender structured not only who was lynched, but how. As part of the lynching ceremony, the photograph sustained the spectacle of the black body, and the equation of the black male body with lynching, even as lynchings with ostensible deviations of this standard took place. I discuss the photographs of two lynching victims, Leo Frank, a Jewish man, and Laura Nelson, an African American woman, to reveal the ways in which Allen's reading of these "exceptions to the rule" actually further normalizes the position of white male spectator and black male lynched body.
In the third section I draw on Holocaust Studies and trauma theory to examine the racial memory of lynching that is both confronted and created in *Without Sanctuary*. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, or memory that is “inherited” by second-generation trauma survivors, provides a model for identifying the ways in which memories are both individual and social, and are formed not just by the experience of an event, but also by the traces of that experience. Postmemory can be used to explain, for instance, the ways in which African Americans who have no direct experience of lynching or knowledge of lynching in their family nonetheless “remember” lynching with skepticism of the legal system and fear of violence by whites. While the collective memory of lynching has been largely erased by mainstream American culture, the act of remembering does not encounter a “blank slate,” but instead must negotiate the ghosts and traces that remain in cultural, political, and historical unconscious. I argue that these ghosts are present in every act of identification or creation of memory with the photographs, and whether we (can) confront these memories determines the argument that the photographs now make.

In her work in journalistic photography from the Holocaust, Barbie Zelizer suggests that “collective memories help us fabricate, rearrange, or omit details from the past as we thought we knew it” (“Reading” 217). In this sense, memory is not only “the construction of social, historical, and cultural circumstances, but a reflection of why one construction has more staying power than its rivals” (“Reading” 217). In the final section, I argue that even as models of collective and postmemory help us to understand processes of learning and experiencing trauma, we must always recognize the relationship of identity to these processes. We must ask, for instance, who may remember and who may forget a traumatic event? Who *chooses* to reckon with the ghosts, and for whom is there no choice?

*Without Sanctuary* makes a powerful argument that America’s lynching past must be remembered. But it also raises equally important questions about how to remember. What do we need to see in order to know what happened? What does it mean to remember lynching through pictures? Whose memory do these pictures confirm? What evidence do they provide? Can we subvert the lynchmob’s gaze and relocate the spectacle from the victims to the spectators? Or do we simply reenact the violence in the photographs?
The Documentary Aesthetic: Making Past Events Present

Archives are not neutral; they embody the power inherent in accumulation, collection and hoarding as well as that power inherent in the command of the lexicon and rules of language [... and] any photographic archive, no matter how small, appeals indirectly to these institutions for its authority.

—A. Sekula

I use the term “documentary aesthetic” to describe the ways in which Without Sanctuary employs an archival methodology that is shared by Allen, the contributors, and the audience of the book. As Ernst van Alphen has suggested in his analysis of the art of Christian Boltanski, archival modes of representation traditionally provide objective, truthful accounts of past reality through the collecting, ordering, and labeling of facts, items, pieces of evidence, and testimonies (46). Linked to and produced in conjunction with the archival mode is the historical mode, which involves the transformation of facts and events into an historical narrative. Where the archival mode implies the presentation of facts, evidence, and so forth, the historical involves the representation of events in a traditional (realist) narrative (47). Their shared task is to “inventory the facts and reconstruct them in a correct place and order. Whatever the differences between the historian’s options in representational modes, they share an orientation by which they pursue making past events objectively present” (46; emphasis added).

Four photographs (including the cover photo) introduce the book, but Allen’s main collection of photographs is reprinted in one section, following a forward and introductory essays. The photographs are numbered, and are accompanied by footnoted descriptions and commentary that is either written by Allen or is an excerpt from a newspaper report of the event. The descriptions of the photographs adopt a traditional documentary rhetoric of neutral information, providing “a date, a place, [and] names” (Sontag 45), when this information is available. However, while each photograph has a corresponding description, the amount and kinds of descriptions accompanying the photographs vary tremendously. Even as the notes assume the documentary mode, they illustrate quite visibly the ways in which the “documentation” or meaning of the photographs, the evidence that they provide, is highly subjective. For example, the corresponding description of a photograph that appears on the book’s half-title page is highly detailed:
The bludgeoned body of an African-American male, propped in a rocking chair, blood-spattered clothes, white and dark paint applied to face, circular disks glued to cheeks, cotton glued to face and head, shadow of man using rod to prop up the victim’s head. Circa 1900, location unknown. Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard. 5 3/8 x 2 7/8" (165)

Even in the detailed and expressive description of this photograph, Allen uses short and choppy language, omitting conjunctions and adverbs, that evokes a documentary aesthetic. In contrast to this description are notes like the one accompanying the third photograph in Allen’s collection, reading simply “Unidentified lynching. Circa 1905, Trenton, Georgia” (166). While the victim in this photograph is also an African-American man, there is no mention of his race or sex. Allen also does not describe his body, his clothing, or his position (hanging from a tree), as he does in the note for the half-title page photograph.

Allen’s commentary also varies significantly in purpose, length and detail; some commentary describes the crime for which the lynching victim was accused as well as the lynching event itself, whereas other photographs receive a more synecdochical discussion about mob behavior, public reactions to lynching, or Allen’s own reactions to the violence depicted. Some photographs receive no commentary at all. The commentary appears in a different font style (standard instead of italics), and is written in complete sentences to further contrast the descriptions. In the instance of the half-title page photograph mentioned earlier, the accompanying commentary is largely general and seems to establish the tone for how we should be looking at all of the photographs:

This is perhaps the most extreme photographic example extant capturing the costuming of a victim of extralegal evidence. What white racists were unable to accomplish through intimidation, repressive laws, and social codes—namely, to mold the African American male into the myth of the emasculated “good ole darky”—they here accomplished by violence and costuming. (165)

In contrast, there is no commentary for the third photograph of the “Unidentified lynching.” Although both are photographs of unidentified African American men, both are lynched, and both employ a portrait style of photography, Allen responds to them in considerably different ways. The effect of the spectacle that Allen notes in the first photograph is heightened by his own disproportionate attention to it. The variations in the descriptions and commentary are probably due largely to the amount
and kind of information available about each lynching, but they also illustrate the varied documentary strategies by which Allen attempts to reconstruct a history of lynching through photographs; even when little to no information is available about a lynching, the photographs represent the event. Even when accompanied by detailed descriptions and commentary, the photographs remain the primary storytellers.

Through its use of archival materials and methods of documentation, *Without Sanctuary* creates a narrative of lynching history. The opening texts introduce the book’s historical and documentary argument and provide a specific context for viewing the photographs. In his forward, Georgia Congressman John Lewis states that the book “brings to life one of the darkest and sickest periods in American history,” and that the photographs make the crimes of this period “real” (7). The book also includes an essay by historian Leon F. Litwack that provides an overview of lynching history. Much like the photographs that introduce Allen’s book as a whole, Litwack’s essay begins with an extensive description of the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose, a black Georgian, in order to discuss the history of lynching in general. Litwack’s essay therefore reinforces the book’s argument of individual lynching photographs as synecdochal for lynching history. Litwack also includes a discussion of the journalist and activist Ida B. Wells, who was extremely important to the antilynching movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Many of the reviews of *Without Sanctuary* also place the book and Allen directly in the line of antilynching activists, particularly Wells². In this way, the book and the photographs republished inside it present historical evidence and narrative, and align the act of documentation with activism and movements for social change.

*Without Sanctuary*’s historical argument is reinforced by its memorial argument. Congressman Lewis argues that the act of remembering can produce redemption and “inspire us, the living, and as yet unborn generations, to be more compassionate, loving, and caring” and help to “prevent anything like this from ever happening again” (7). In this way, the photographs and texts of *Without Sanctuary* position the audience as witnesses to the lynchings. Looking is remembering. The audience “remembers” lynching by witnessing the events through the pictures and historical information provided, and remembering acknowledges and redeems past violence, prevents future violence, and inspires social change. Certainly, the photographs and written materials provide evidence of lynching. However, *Without Sanctuary* (re)positions the photograph as evidence and thereby constructs a memorial argument that still
privileges looking at (black) lynched bodies as a way of capturing lynching history.

As I will discuss in more detail later, Holocaust rhetoric and photography form a backdrop for Allen’s use of atrocity photographs to remember lynching. In his forward, Congressman Lewis appropriates the term “holocaust” to argue that the photographs “bear witness to the hangings, burnings, castrations, and torture of an American holocaust” (7). As a literal reference, the Holocaust is an historical reminder of mass violence carried out by a government against specific groups of people. But as many scholars in Holocaust studies have argued, Holocaust photographs serve as a referent for the ways in which we look at atrocity photographs now, despite the earlier production of the lynching photographs. In *Remembering to Forget*, Barbie Zelizer argues that

the significance of the Holocaust is that it not only confronted humanity with a previously inconceivable horror, it also marked the beginning of documenting that horror. The images’ display was so unusual that it required a lifting of censorship restrictions, changed expectations about how photography was thought to function in news, and facilitated the photographic depiction of atrocity. (12)

As the images in *Without Sanctuary* suggest, atrocity photographs bring together public practices of looking at and documenting horror, and the multiple motives of looking at and recording atrocity to excite, to intimidate, to prove, and even to profit. Although the majority of the lynching photographs included in *Without Sanctuary* predate Holocaust photographs, picking up the strand of theoretical questions raised by the Holocaust and Holocaust scholars provides insight into the ways in which America’s lynching history has been erased from our cultural memory, and the kind of memory that atrocity photographs (re)construct.

The written materials in *Without Sanctuary* employ various memorial rhetorics to help construct its historical argument, but the most important component of the documentary aesthetic is the photographs themselves. Through these photographs, Allen provides a “visual record of wrongs that cannot be denied” (Parvin). Litwack argues that “the use of the camera to memorialize lynchings testified to their openness and to the self-righteousness that animated the participants. Not only did photographers capture the execution itself, but also the carnival-like atmosphere and the expectant mood of the crowd” (10–11). The photographs can therefore literally re-member the social relations that produced
lynching. Similar arguments have been made by other scholars of lynching and lynching photography. In “Lynching Photography and the ‘Black Beast Rapist’ in the Southern White Masculine Imagination,” Amy Louise Wood argues that lynching photographs not only provide evidence of the violence enacted against the lynching victim, but also evidence of the white spectators and participants in that violence (194). In emphasizing the ways in which the photographs provided a spectacular form of evidence for the lynchers, Wood also privileges the photograph as a mode of representing historical evidence and of producing an historical narrative:

 Unlike even the most detailed verbal account, photographs provide a chilling certainty and verification of the event. A photograph allows the viewer to know that the lynching actually took place, because someone—the photographer, the people in the picture, the victim even—was there to witness it. While today we are more likely to be skeptically attuned to the possibilities of manipulation and deception in photography, to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century viewers [. . .] a photograph presented a simulation of reality, a means to perceive and authenticate a past event that had not existed previously. (205–06)

Wood, as well as Without Sanctuary, assumes that “we” (today) have a different and more sophisticated relationship to photographs in general, and to the lynching photographs in particular, than their original audience. Indeed, in order to participate in the historical narrative that Without Sanctuary seeks to create, one must accept that the documentary meaning of the photographs is not static; photographs that were evidence for the lynch mob now serve as evidence of the lynch mob. However, the “new” evidence that the photographs provide of the lynch mob does not necessarily alter the original social relations embedded in their creation.

The postcards that Allen has gathered were probably created by amateur photographers. As Wood notes, the accessibility of amateur photography emerged during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, during the height of racialized lynchings in the South: “In this sense, the intense spectacle enacted in lynching was intricately coupled with the social practice of photography. In the late-nineteenth century, for the first time, these kinds of community rituals, and acts of violence, could be visually documented by the participants themselves” (196). The invention of the Kodak camera allowed amateur photographers to inexpensively create and develop photographs. This provided an array of new ways of participating in the lynching event—as photographer and as
consumer of the photograph—and added to the souvenirs available to commemorate the lynching. At the lynching of Thomas Brooks in Tennessee in 1915,

Hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope. [...] Picture card photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling postcards showing a photograph of the lynched Negro. Women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man. (Crisis, qtd. in Litwack 11)

Because so many of the photographs are anonymous or impossible to trace, we can't know precisely who took them. Wood suggests that "most probably, the hundreds of lynching photographs [...] were taken by the lynchers themselves" (196). We have little way of knowing what other activities or roles the individual photographers undertook at the lynchings. However, we can include the act of photography as integral to the lynching event. The development of amateur photography introduced a new way of labeling the "other," a new technology with which to shape what was remembered. The act of taking the picture, the image that it produced, and the subsequent consumption of that image, all reinforced the spectacular violence for the perpetrators, and the racial and sexual ideologies embedded in the lynching act itself (Wood 195).

The argument of the photograph as documentary shifts the position of looker from one aligned and implicated with the spectators in the picture, to one objectively and innocently looking at the spectators. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Sontag notes, "the display of these pictures makes us spectators, too" (91). Whereas looking before meant identifying with the spectators, looking now results in a safe division from the spectators. In this way, the photographs occupy the contradictory position of providing documentary evidence and making the past argument "real," and of creating a new and different memorial argument.

The act of republishing lynching photographs fundamentally relies on the argument that the discourses of race, gender, and sexuality that accompanied the original production of the photographs and the lynchings themselves can be reversed, in the Foucauldian sense, using the same language or "vocabulary" to make a new argument; yet, the division that Without Sanctuary creates between its audience and the photographs makes such a reversal impossible (Foucault 101). Reversal depends not
only on the photographs themselves, but also on the context in which they are viewed. The distance between the photographs and spectators solidifies the audience's white gaze, and simultaneously allows the archivist to "objectively" look and record without acknowledging the ways in which his own whiteness affects his relation to the materials. In the end, *Without Sanctuary* cannot reverse the discourses of race, gender and sexuality that are tied to the original production of the photographs because it does not fully address the cultural memory that accompanies such a project.

**Invisible Whiteness**

The documentary mode through which Allen comments on the photographs persuades us to identify the act of looking with innocence, objectivity, and redemption. In looking at the photographs, we understand ourselves as different from the lynchers, yet the empathy that constructs our gaze prevents us from identifying with the lynched victims. This site of suffering both invites and precludes identification. Our "good intentions" in looking, our intent to identify with the black suffering body, "increases the difficulty of beholding black suffering since the endeavor to bring pain close exploits the spectacle of the body in pain and oddly confirms the spectral character of suffering and the inability to witness the captive's pain" (Hartman 20). Sites of suffering have been used at various times and in various ways to invite identification. Hartman notes the configuration of pain as transformative in sentimental culture, and the ways in which the public spectacle of punishment structured narratives, fiction, and activist arguments about slavery (18–20). In *Without Sanctuary*, the sites of suffering are intended to produce division from the white spectators, which they achieve through documentary modes of looking, and identification with the primarily black lynched bodies, which they do not. Although the documentary aesthetic produces a division from the white spectators, it does not disrupt the audience’s identification with white access to looking. Despite Allen’s stated intentions, whiteness does not become the object of our gaze or replace the spectacle of the black body, as whiteness is simultaneously erased by his own descriptions and comments on the photographs, and adopted by our gaze at them.

Whiteness is *always already* present in the lynching photographs, spectators or no spectators. Allen, however, limits his discussion of whiteness to the photographs with spectators, and more often than not
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does not even discuss it then. This is an important effect of the interpretation of the photographs as evidence: “spectators” are only mentioned in photographs depicting white people standing around lynched bodies. The fact that Allen does not acknowledge, let alone interrogate, the role of spectator in lynching photographs that do not have white people standing around lynched bodies is a monumental oversight. Obviously there was at least one spectator/participant present to shoot the picture. Furthermore, identification of whiteness is crucial to the act of subverting the original memorialized “lynched black body” from the memorial site, and supplanting it with a new memorial script that acknowledges the absent-presence of whiteness in all lynching photographs.

The same oversights occur around the photographs of white or now-white lynching victims, such as Italian and Jewish immigrants, as well as women victims, whom Allen perceives as aberrations to the general custom of lynching black men. In general, Allen rarely mentions race and gender in either the description or commentary portions of his notes. He does note gender when the photograph includes a woman, either as subject or spectator, but does not analyze the ways in which gender affected positions of lynching spectator or victim. Similarly, Allen rarely mentions the race of the onlookers, and is more likely to note the race of the lynching victim if he is white than if he is black. All of this serves to normalize the positions of white male spectator (both in the photographs and in the audience of the photographs now) and the black male lynched body.

While Allen comments extensively on his emotions upon acquiring his first lynching photograph, that of Leo Frank, he does not analyze the relevance of Frank’s Jewishness to the whiteness of the spectators. Allen explains in his comments for a different photograph that “the vast majority of lynching victims in the United States belonged to minority groups such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Chinese immigrants, and Italian immigrants” (191). There are no photographs of Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, or Chinese immigrants, at least according to his documentation. He does not comment on why, nor does he comment on the relationship of these identities to the constructions of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality taking place through lynching. The fact that Allen only mentions spectatorship (often without mention of the race of the spectators) when spectators are in the pictures raises the question of why he is even including photographs where the spectators are not in the picture. His inclusion of “non-spectator” photographs, in the context of his assumptions about
spectatorship, further problematizes the project and undermines his purported analysis of whiteness.

William Pinar refutes economic and sociological explanations of lynching to argue that lynching was "a gendered form of racial politics and violence in which white men regressed to their 'negative' oedipal complex, wherein their repressed, racialized homosexual desire expressed itself in the mutilation and sexual torture of thousands of young black men" (11). In his extensive study of historical and contemporary racial and sexual violence, Pinar illustrates the ways in which white heterosexual masculinity structured who the lynchers were, who was lynched, and how the act itself was carried out. While there was no such thing as a "typical" lynching, "lynch mobs seldom tortured or mutilated their white victims; these sexualized acts, performed as public spectacles of mockery, humiliation, and frenzy, were saved for young black men" (52).

Therefore, although Allen does not give much attention to the presence of Leo Frank's Jewishness in his lynching, or the scarcity of photographs of other Jewish, Hispanic, Native American, Chinese, or Italian lynching victims, we know that degree of whiteness not only structured whether one was lynched, but how. In the case of Leo Frank, race, class, gender, religion, nationality and sexuality all helped to draw lines between supporters and opponents of Leo Frank's murder trial in 1913 Georgia (MacLean 159). Although an African American man was also a suspect in the murder of Mary Phagan, "it was as if the death of a black man 'would be poor atonement for the life of this innocent little girl.' But in Frank, 'a Yankee Jew . . . here would be a victim worthy to pay for the crime'" (MacLean, quoting Phagan's minister years later, 158). Allen notes in his commentary that Frank's trial and lynching drew national attention, and MacLean affirms that while the African American press at the time condemned the lynching, it also noted the contrast between white America's outpouring of sympathy for Frank and their ongoing indifference to violence against African Americans:

What proved most decisive in shaping blacks' attitudes toward the case was the strategy of Frank's defense: a virulent racist offense against the only other suspect, the janitor Jim Conley. Many elite supporters of commutation for Frank expressed outrage that a white employer was indicted, rather than a black worker with a criminal record, and shock that their appeals to white supremacy failed to rally the jury or the public. When Frank's attorneys based their case on the most vicious antiblack
stereotypes of the day and on outspoken appeals to white solidarity, blacks rallied around Conley for the same reasons that Jews rallied around Frank. Thus, whereas gentile whites split on class lines in the case, blacks and Jews responded in a cross-class manner to perceived cross-class threats. (164)

Whiteness combined with class, gender and sexuality in Frank’s lynching, as it has in all lynchings, to determine how the victim was punished and who the audience was for that punishment. While lynching crosses racial, gender and class boundaries, as Pinar notes, the spectacle of trophy mutilation and photography has been largely “saved for young black men.”

The pictures in Allen’s archive firmly support this. Leo Frank’s lynching photograph includes a number of white male spectators, but his clothing and body appear to remain intact, in contrast to the mutilation evident in many of the photographs of African American men. Although lynching has not been confined to black men, “the very consciousness of lynching in U.S. culture figures decisively around them” (Wiegman 84). The photograph serves the purpose of the lynching itself: to create and remember the spectacle, and rather than simply note the aberrations of nonblack or nonmale lynching victims, to remember lynching today we must account for who was made a spectacle of violence, and whose violence was made (in)visible.

Allen’s description of and comments on the lynching photographs of Laura Nelson, an African American woman, are particularly detailed, and reveal the ways in which race and gender intersect in Without Sanctuary’s memorial argument. There are two pictures of her: one is a close-up of her hanging from a bridge, and the other is a panoramic photograph that shows Nelson and her son both hanging from the bridge, with white spectators, including men, women and children, lined up and looking down on them from the bridge above. The second photograph takes up two pages in the book. Allen describes the first photograph as “the barefoot corpse of Laura Nelson.” Of course, there are many other barefoot bodies in the photographs that go unnoted. Allen writes,

Grief and a haunting unreality permeate this photo. The corpse of Laura Nelson retains an indissoluble femininity despite the horror inflicted on it. Specterlike, she seems to float—thistledown light and implausibly still. For many African Americans, Oklahoma was a destination of hope, where they could prosper without the laws in southern states that codified racism and repression. What was to be a promised land proved to be a great disillusionment. (178–79)
There is no denying the grief present in all of the photographs, but Allen particularly emphasizes its presence in this one. The "femininity" that he affixes to her body, "despite the horror inflicted on it," is itself horrific. While whiteness and masculinity are not included in his discussion of her, they are imposed through his memorial gaze and in his argument. She is feminine, not only by virtue of being female, but explicitly by being dead. Her race, which would usually work in opposition to traditional constructions of femininity, is simply erased. Also, like many of the photographs, she is synecdochal, standing in for the "many African Americans" who pathetically hoped for freedom in Oklahoma and found disillusionment (a nice word for murder). As is also often the case with Allen's comments, he gives no source for this narrativization of the African American experience.

Allen's fixation on Laura Nelson extends beyond the notes to her photographs. Hers was the second photograph he acquired, as he mentions in interviews as well as in his afterword. Describing his acquisition of the photograph, he writes,

A trader pulled me aside and in conspiratorial tones offered to sell me a real photo postcard. It was Laura Nelson hanging from a bridge, caught so pitiful and tattered and beyond retrieving—like a paper kite snagged on a utility wire. That image of Laura layered a pall of grief over all my fears. (204)

What is left out of, and yet explicit in all of Allen's comments on Laura Nelson, is the intersection of race and gender. The layers of looking relations implicated in Laura Nelson's photographs, and erased in Allen's comments, demonstrate the "invisible" presence of race and gender in Allen's memorial argument.

Gender is always already present in all of the photographs, but Allen emphasizes it in his description and comments on this one. Nelson's photograph is the only representation of an African American woman in the book, yet Allen does not interrogate the relationship between the feminization that he affixes to her and the emasculanization through lynching that the African American men in the other photographs are subjected to, including her son, whose pants have been removed, likely indicating castration. In this photograph, Laura Nelson undergoes what Marianne Hirsch refers to as "total death," or a triple dying: she is killed by lynchers, she is the object of the violent gaze of the spectators on the bridge, and she is subject to Allen's (and our) re-violation of her as
fetishized, feminized object. In her analysis of Holocaust photography, Hirsch ponders the line between identification and empathy in the viewing of postmemorial pictures. She argues, "unbearably the viewer is positioned in the place identical with the weapon of destruction: our look, like the photographer's, is in the place of the executioner" ("Surviving" 233). The photograph of Laura Nelson's body is not just evidence of her lynching, as Allen argues, but of the rhetorical gaze of the camera. It is not just evidence of the aggression of the camera, but the violence that lingers, that haunts, that is remembered, in every act of reexamination and relooking.

Racial Memory and Ghosts

Hirsch describes this violence, specifically the reexperience of trauma by those who did not directly experience it, as "postmemory." Postmemory is specifically the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents; they "remember" these experiences only as the stories they grew up with, but they are so powerful that they constitute memories in their own right:

"It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as one's own, or, more precisely, as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story [...] an ethical relation to the oppressed or persecuted other for which postmemory can serve as a model. ("Projected" 8–9)"

While Hirsch uses it to address specifically the situation of second-generation Holocaust survivors, postmemory can be used as a model to begin to theorize about the experiences and reexperiences of trauma in the collective memory of lynching, and the particular sentience of this inherited memory for African Americans.

As Trudier Harris notes, violence against African Americans is a "recurring historical phenomenon to which every generation of black writers in this country has been drawn in its attempt to depict the shaping of black lives. Especially compelling has been violence that takes the form of lynching" (ix). Harris examines the ways in which racial violence in America has shaped not only what African American writers have often written about, but why they write: "how much is voluntary, how much is determined; how much is political, how much is the true substance of art; how much is racial memory, how much is personal fear; how much is confrontation, how much is its own form of exorcism" (xiii). While Harris
specifically address the ways in which African American writers have experienced America's lynching history, we might also pose these same questions to audiences of and participants in lynchings (then), and audiences of attempts to remember lynchings today. *Without Sanctuary* brings to the surface the ways in which our racial memories predispose our viewing of lynching photographs. Intentions aside, whether we (can) confront or exorcise these memories determines the argument that the photographs now make.

In attempting to adopt a postmemory of lynching, we reinforce the division—the impossibility—in that identification. As Burke argues, identification is never “pure”:

> In pure identification there would be no strife. Likewise, there would be no strife in absolute separateness, since opponents can join battle only through a mediatory ground that makes their communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary for their interchange of blows. But put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric. (25)

The shared memory that *Without Sanctuary* constructs between the viewer and the “oppressed or persecuted other” simultaneously creates and obliterates identification; even as the photographs provide a visual means of accessing the experiences of the lynching victims, the attempt to access these experiences makes the line between passive empathy and an active account of the history of racial violence indistinguishable. When we enter into conversation with these photographs, “who is to say, once and for all, just where ‘cooperation’ ends and […] ‘exploitation’ of the other begins?” (Burke 25).

Traces of all of the possibilities that Harris considers above emerge in our identifications with the lynching photographs, in any act of identification; our conversation with the photographs is both “voluntary and determined.” “Being historically informed about his or her heritage in blood and violence makes each black writer a member of a club from whose membership he or she cannot be severed” (Harris 185). The postmemory of lynching that *Without Sanctuary* creates is an identification with this “club”; African American experiences of violence, so graphic and yet so suppressed in the original photographs, begin to surface in their republication. Yet, white positions of looking at and of enacting violence are also resurrected. These postmemories and memory
traces emerge together in the hidden and visible violence that haunt the lynching photographs.

Avery Gordon attributes three characteristics to the memories or "ghosts" of trauma that continue to resurface from the past: a quality of strangeness that the ghost imparts, and the ability to unsettle previously fixed lines and boundaries of knowing; an emphasis on what is missing or absent along with what is present or "known" or accepted; and a sense that the ghost is "alive, so to speak," where its effects are present and continual and must be reckoned with "out of a concern for justice" (Gordon 63–64). Gordon uses the figure of the ghost to theorize or at least investigate the ways in which history and subjectivity intersect with constructions of the "real" and presumptions of access and visibility, and the ways in which repressed or resistant memories, subjectivities, experiences, and knowledge arise in spite of or in opposition to traditional or conventional knowledge or configurations of subjectivity. Her work is not unlike the art of Christian Boltanski, who evokes the archival mode through materials that are actually from or depict the Holocaust. Boltanski's object of representation, however, is the archival mode itself, as he undoes the notions and formations of subjectivity traditionally associated with the archive in order to produce new and different formulations of subjectivity in the field of Holocaust representation. Boltanski's art illustrates Gordon's theory of historical memory, and the ways in which a "history of the present" must constantly acknowledge and reckon with repressed and resistant memories and experiences.

Even though Allen does not discuss memory and haunting in the same ways as Gordon and Hirsch, the presence of ghosts in his text is evident, perhaps most clearly in the photographs and commentary of Laura Nelson. Allen's description of her as "specterlike" immediately evokes haunting imagery. In his description of the African-American dream of Oklahoma, Allen alludes to the extent to which racism and repression reached beyond the southern states. Nelson's lynching, it seems, is evidence of the ways in which racialized violence reappeared in purportedly "safe" spaces, haunting the places that conventional knowledge suggested were safer. He at once illuminates the reach of racialized violence and haunting, and at the same time participates in the repression by dismissing the power of the "hauntological" as an experience of "disillusionment," and by not recognizing the ghosts in his own representation of Laura Nelson's violence. Her experience of the violence is all but erased—again.
Bearing Witness, Bearing Whiteness

Hirsch and Gordon both provide us with the theoretical tools necessary to attempt to conceptualize new ways of relating to memory and history, but by themselves these theories cannot fully articulate the material relationship of history and memory to identity. Even as we begin to recognize the ghosts, we must also recognize who is haunted and how. Who chooses to reckon with the ghosts and for whom is there no choice? Allen is clearly “haunted” by his own relationship to these photographs, as is probably anyone who looks at them. Allen states in his afterword that the photographs provoke a “strong sense of denial” in him, and eventually an understanding that “these portraits, torn from other family albums, [were] portraits of [his] own family and [himself]” (205). It is unclear whether he is referring to the white spectators or the black lynched victims, which illustrates his unproblematized identification. As he identifies with the subjects of the photographs, either white or black, he simultaneously projects these subjects away from himself and onto other bodies.

And the faces of the living and the faces of the dead recur in me and in my daily life. I’ve seen John Richards [a black man whose lynching is depicted in the photographs, along with the white spectators to his murder] alone on a remote county road, rocking along in hobbyhorse strides, head low, eyes to the ground, spotting coins or rocks or roots. And I’ve encountered Laura Nelson in a small, sturdy woman who answered my knock on a back-porch door. In her deep-set eyes I watched a silent crowd parade across a shiny steel bride, looking down. And on Christmas Lane, just blocks from our home, I’ve observed another Leo [Frank], a small-framed boy with his shirttail out and skullcap off center, as he made his way to Sabbath prayers. With each encounter, I can’t help thinking of these photos, and the march of time, and the cold steel trigger in the human heart. (205)

While faces of the living and the dead “recur” in his daily life, it is the faces of the dead that haunt Allen. It is the faces of the dead that he projects seamlessly onto living people, securing again the focus on the lynched victims over the lynchers and again collapsing blackness and Jewishness, not whiteness, with death. The lynched bodies depicted in the photographs are without sanctuary, but so are, it would seem, the individuals that are currently the objects of Allen’s gaze. Laura Nelson, projected on the body of a “small, sturdy woman,” still is given no voice, and simultaneously the “small, sturdy woman” is subjected to the ghost and
silence of Laura Nelson. John Richards’ head is still down, and his gaze is still averted in the presence of Allen’s gaze. Allen is obviously haunted by the ghosts, but his identification with the pictures is about his experience of trauma in looking, not the trauma experienced by the lynching victims. He seems to suggest that he has no choice in his haunting, that his relationship to the photographs has forced their haunting recurrence in his life. I don’t doubt it, nor do I want to underestimate the effect these photographs have on anyone who views them. The complexity and breadth of their haunting effect, in fact, is what I want to emphasize. However, there is a violence present in the ways in which Laura Nelson and the other photographed victims, as well as those people that Allen recuperates in the above passage, experience and must reckon with the ghosts that Allen does not share or perhaps even recognize.

The violence of empathetic identification that Allen experiences in his reflections on the photographs is similar to the violence that Hartman identifies in the letters of John Rankin. The humanity that Rankin extends to the slaves in his abolitionist letters “inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery” (19). In other words, the violence in Rankin’s identification is as much due to his good intentions as it is to the accessibility of the slave body. This violence is visible in Allen’s description of his simultaneous denial of and identification with the photographs. Identification with the subjects in the photograph is predicated on the projection of these subjects away from ourselves. We are left with images of white lynchers that we can separate ourselves from, images of black victims that remain a spectacle, and a collective racial memory that plays like a soundtrack for our viewing position.

The ghosts, and the collective memory (as well as collective erasure) of lynching are present before ‘we’ even look at the photographs. The collective memory “thrives on remaking the residue of past decades into material with contemporary resonance; it is ‘filled with reused and reusable material’ that at heart offers resources for making sense of the past” (Zelizer, “Reading” 217). Zelizer argues that the inundation of Holocaust atrocity photographs in the collective American memory served to construct World War II as synonymous with suffering Jewish bodies, and suffering Jewish bodies as the reason for (remembering) World War II. Atrocity photos become both the memory of and the reason for the memorialization of the Holocaust. The act of “bearing witness” constitutes a “specific form of collective remembering that interprets an event as significant and deserving of critical attention. It suggests
assuming responsibility for the events, which are often perceived as ‘aberrations or ruptures in the cultural continuum [that] demand retelling’” (Zelizer, Remembering 10). The act of bearing witness implies that there is no “best” way of describing or representing atrocity, and privileges instead the importance of the act of collectively witnessing. In other words, it assumes that testifying about atrocity is testifying against atrocity. Without distinguishing this difference, and the ways in which identity structures the act of bearing witness, we risk reinscribing the victim and reterrorizing the audience.

The implications of identity and subjectivity for collective remembering are iterated in Without Sanctuary’s attempt to bear witness to the history of lynching. Hilton Als argues that in writing an essay to accompany lynching photographs he has become a “cliche, another colored person writing about a nigger’s life”:

So doing, I’m feeding, somewhat, into what the essayist George W.S. Trow has called “white euphoria,” which is defined by white people exercising their largesse in my face as they say, Tell me about yourself, meaning, Tell me how you’ve suffered. Isn’t that what you people do? Suffer nobly, poetically sometimes even? Doesn’t suffering define you? . . . This is my farewell. I mean to be courtly and grand. No gold watch is necessary, as I bow out of the nigger business. (40)

The naturalization of Jewish suffering in Holocaust photography that Zelizer describes parallels the naturalization of black suffering, black victimization, black emasculation and black fetishization that characterize the lynching photographs, and in the collective memory of lynching as synonymous with blackness. The material presence of the ghosts of the collective memory are evident in Als’ descriptions of experiences of “mistaken identity,” where he was stopped by police, guns pointed to his head, because he “looked just like someone else” (41). The experience of being watched as a black man, argues Als, is the experience of becoming what the white “collective imagination says you are: big and black—niggerish—and so therefore what? Whatever. As long as it can be lynched, eventually” (41).

To understand how the act of bearing witness is integral to Without Sanctuary’s memorial argument, we must also ask, because the text does not, who can bear witness and when can they bear witness? More precisely, who can bear whiteness and when can they bear whiteness? Without Sanctuary involves layers of witnessing. We are witnesses to the
photographs. We are witnesses to the spectators in the photographs witnessing the event. We are witnesses to the spectators not witnessing the event. We are witnesses to Allen's witnessing of the photographs, often through direct accounts of his reactions to them. We witness the other contributors' witnessing of the photographs. We read original newspaper accounts, included in some of the comment portions, bearing witness to the lynchings. We witness the comments on the back of postcards written by witnesses of the event. While complex and fraught with issues of identification, our position of witness remains constant throughout the text. Aligned with the gaze of the camera/gun, "we" are the bearers of w(h)itness.

**Shifting Our Gaze**

Rather than accepting this position of w(h)itness, and its memorializing effect, Allen asks us to shift our gaze and look past the spectacularized black lynched bodies to the (white) spectators present in (some of) the photographs. Allen himself is not successful in this task. How could he be? He adopts a position of distanced invisibility: invisible methodology, invisible Allen, invisible w(h)itness. Allen refers to himself as a picker, but he does not interrogate the role his whiteness played in his ability to obtain the photographs, the kinds of photographs his whiteness helped him to acquire, or his method in placing and commenting on them. In the archival mode, Allen is "invisible" in terms of his assumed objectivity. Allen's whiteness is also invisible; Allen avoids any mention of his whiteness, even though the other contributors all acknowledge and reckon with the relationship of their identities as African Americans to looking at and commenting on the lynching photographs. For someone concerned with highlighting the whiteness of the spectators of the photographs, this seems a grave oversight. Disclosure of race on Allen's part would not change the ways in which these pictures are received; it would not disrupt the ghosts present in our acts of looking. Yet, the fact that his whiteness is not mentioned, that whiteness and masculinity frequently go unnoted, reveals the extent to which the spectators to lynching still remain invisible; even when they line up in front of the camera, a black lynched body remains at the center.

*Without Sanctuary* confronts the rhetorical division between intention and effect in identification. Burke argues that "however 'pure' one's motives may be actually, the impurities of identification lurking about the edges of such situations introduce a typical Rhetorical wrangle of the sort that can never be settled once and for all, but belongs in the field of moral
controversy where men properly seek to ‘prove opposites’” (26). In other words, identification does not offer any easy way of understanding another; because division is always preserved, there is no way of identifying where the motive to identify ends and the effect of division begins. What becomes crucially important, then, in determining the effect of an act, is the means by which the act is carried out. All “means are necessarily ‘impure,’ from the standpoint of any one purpose, since they have a nature of their own” (Burke 155). Uses of archival photography, the documentary mode, or rhetorics of memory are neither “all good” or “all bad”; however, their range of combined and individual effects can produce a profound identification with and also a profound division from the history of lynching. The photographs alone do not determine the lynching argument that they make, and I agree with Allen and his contributors that they are important resources for reconstructing lynching history and must, somehow, be seen. Allen’s project offers perhaps one of the best opportunities to study the effects of different means of looking at these pictures, in that he has published them in a book, published them on a website, and shown them in exhibits at Emory University and elsewhere.

It is beyond the scope of this article to engage in detail all three of these scenes. However, I believe that a closer, comparative study would begin to reveal the ways in which not only the scene and means of an act determine the argument that is made, but how identification is affected by distance from the object of scrutiny, and by the (presence or absence of) disciplinary and identificatory public gazes. In other words, how do the different settings of a website, a book, and an exhibit persuade us to look at these pictures differently? Why? How much are these ways of looking imposed by the rhetor or the scene, and how much do we impose upon ourselves from our collective lynching memories? Without Sanctuary shows us how what we see informs our perception of what happened; lynching photographs are an important component to the history of lynching, but they also come with their own ghosts, particular to their form and composition, that confirm the black spectacular body and the violence of the white gaze.

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Notes

1. See López, who explains that courts relied on both “scientific evidence” and “common knowledge” to justify various racial divisions in the nineteenth and
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twentieth centuries to construct immigration laws and standards, and to determine who belonged to the "white" race. Immigration laws that restricted Asian, Irish and Italian Catholic, Jewish and many other ethnic groups continually redefined whiteness throughout this period, accepting many groups at various stages as "common knowledge" racial standards changed and immigration standards of whiteness were reconstructed.

2. See Smith, Lockard, Pogebrin, Parvin; and National.

3. The photographs collected by Allen have also been displayed in an exhibit at Emory University and on a website that accompanies the book. I argue elsewhere that these three different contexts can produce very different effects. In the exhibit at Emory University, the actual postcards were displayed, forcing spectators to stand up-close to the postcards and close together in order to see them. The exhibit also included other visual materials representing the antilynching movement. The inclusion of opposing visual materials, and public nature of looking at the images in an exhibit and in their original size and form, disrupts the innocent and disconnected position of the spectator that the book and website do not. The exhibit demands that the spectator actively commit to looking and makes it almost impossible to passively or innocently consume the images.

4. See Scarry, Gilman, Brown, and so on.

5. See Van Alphen

Works Cited


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