

Archiving Hate: Lynching Postcards at the Limit of Social Circulation

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To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Subjects of photography, seized by the camera, we are mortified: objectified, thingified, imaged.

Cadava, “Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History”

FREDERICK DOUGLASS BEGINS HIS 1892 ESSAY “Lynch Law in the South” by placing lynching’s practice within an international frame:

The frequent and increasing resort to lynch law in our Southern States, in dealing with alleged offenses by negroes, marked as it is by features of cruelty which might well shock the sensibility of the most benighted savages, will not fail to attract the attention and animadversion of visitors to the World’s Columbian Exposition. (221)

The strategy is brilliant: thus understood, lynch law—the preferred name, since at least the antebellum era, for a concatenation of practices widely held to be distressingly, exceptionally American—constitutes a global scandal inextricable from its regional outrage. Where the organizers of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition strove to promote the event as a sign of u.s. progress, not just the index but the glittering proof of national civilization, in this passage Douglass anticipates the irony, and the crisis, entailed for such an endeavor by lynch law’s horror. Predicting lynching’s repellant attraction for a fully international community of fairgoers, Douglass

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limns a key element of the ritual’s cruel power: its spectacle. The Chicago fair, structured around spectacular displays, will be haunted by the spectacle—lynching—it must fail, in excluding, to exclude. Intimately bound to the ideology of progress in the postbellum U.S., lynching for Douglass constitutes the catastrophic supplement to the national and international celebration of Columbian history.¹

Even more than Douglass—though in collaboration with him—Ida B. Wells worked to broadcast such supplementarity at Chicago’s White City. *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World’s Columbian Exposition*, the pamphlet she edited and in large part wrote, managed to document for a global audience the crippling contradictions at issue in the fair’s appeal to American civilization.² Over six chapters and 81 pages, Wells, Douglass, I. Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett relentlessly exposed and indicted the regional and national, legal and extralegal forms of racism that together conspired to oppress African-Americans. The authors’s analyses turn on a devastating irony: whereas the tremendous accomplishments of black folk since Emancipation should epitomize the meaning and substance of “progress” in the U.S. instance, their exclusion from the Chicago fair—like the violence they face on a daily basis—can only mark the barbarity, not civilization, of American whites. The key sign of such barbarity is, of course, lynching.³

- 1 As Patricia Schechter notes, by publishing the “Lynch Law” essay in the prestigious *North American Review*, Douglass could command “an audience, especially among white readers,” unavailable to other antilynching activists in this period (300). Those reading his piece in 1892 would undoubtedly have recognized the oxymoronic expression “lynch law,” since it had been commonplace for well over 50 years. Webster’s 1848 Dictionary captures its paradox succinctly: “The practice of punishing men for crimes or offenses by private, unauthorized persons, without a legal trial.” The expression’s genealogy is certainly convoluted, as many commentators have shown. For an investigation of that genealogy roughly contemporaneous with Douglass’s essay, see Cutler; for a selective chronology of published nineteenth-century uses of the term, see the definition given by Craigie and Hulbert. The expression’s oxymoronic quality will capture the intimacy not antipathy of legal and extralegal practices under systemic racism. I take up such intimacy in more detail below.
- 2 Unfortunately, tight finances constrained the pamphlet’s potential: where Wells had hoped to publish in English, French, German and Spanish, she had to settle for English, with only the preface translated into French and German. For an incisive analysis of the gendered dynamics of the discourse of civilization in this period—one that includes a wonderful account of Wells’s career—see Baderman.
- 3 On the dynamic interrelations between public and crowd, lawfulness and lawlessness, as evinced in the White City and in lynching’s spectacle, see Esteve.

“Lynch Law,” the pamphlet’s fourth chapter and conceptual centrepiece, anatomizes the full obscenity of the practice for an international readership. Wells’s argument here features the strategy, already prominent in her 1892 polemic, *Southern Horrors*, that would underpin her subsequent antilynching writings: the repetition and recirculation of lynching’s outrages as drawn from reports in Southern newspapers. In so doing, the “Lynch Law” chapter of *The Reason Why* substantiates her activist axiom: “Out of their own mouths shall the murderers be condemned” (quoted in Schechter 294). While denouncing lynch law, though, the pamphlet by no means isolates lynching’s practice; instead, it insists on the inextricability of such extralegal violence from what Wells calls “class legislation” (Chapter 2) and “the convict lease system” (Chapter 3), state-sanctioned forms of discrimination that exemplify the systemic quality of race-hatred in the United States. At stake is a dialectical critique of the fully national dynamics of American white supremacy. As Wells recounts in *Crusade for Justice*, her posthumously-published autobiography, she and Douglass, having produced and published the pamphlet with \$600 raised largely from African-American church congregations, “circulated ten thousand copies ... during the [last] three months of the fair. Every day I was on duty at the Haitian building, where Mr. Douglass gave me a desk[,] and spent the days putting this pamphlet in the hands of foreigners” (117). Thus did perhaps the most countercultural souvenir of the Chicago fair come to materialize, and to circulate.

The 1893 exposition haunted by the spectre of lynch law and politicized by the antilynching activism of Wells and Douglass also introduced many of its visitors to another kind of souvenir: the picture postcard, a mass-produced communications technology that would soon provide one signature for mobility in modernity. While the conjuncture at issue between lynching and postcards may at first seem hard to credit, its significance is considerable, for the cheap paper artefact gave lynch law’s adherents a ready means by which to reproduce and disseminate lynching’s spectacle. In what follows, I address this conjuncture with reference to an unsettling case-study: the *Without Sanctuary* archive, a collection of lynching photos and postcards from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries amassed by James Allen and John Littlefield. Exhibited since 2000 at a number of U.S. galleries, including the New York Historical Society, Pittsburgh’s Warhol Museum, and the Martin Luther King Site in Atlanta, the materials in this archive have also been reproduced in print and online. Their relentless rehearsal of obscene violence is excruciating; they document the power of one of modernity’s most ubiquitous forms to render unspeakable scenes

massively visible. Commodifying the brutalization of black bodies, lynching postcards helped to feed the market for race-hatred, rendering white supremacy's most vicious displays fully promiscuous. And the horror in what these cards could show underscores the volatility of modern mediation—of how and where such things could move.

I first encountered *Without Sanctuary* at the New York Historical Society in July 2000. I was in Manhattan to do research at the New York Public Library for an ongoing project on North American postcard culture in the decades around 1900. Key to my work is the premise that postcard scholars overemphasize imagery, assuming too readily that the meaning of every postcard holds to its front. Inspired by Jonathan Crary to believe that “[s]o much of what seems to constitute a domain of the visual is an *effect* of other kinds of forces and relations of power,” I endeavor in my research to shift the focus, understanding postcard imagery as a necessary but necessarily partial aspect of the material texture of these small souvenirs (3).

Imagine, then, my shock on viewing the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit—one dominated by postcards depicting catastrophic atrocities. How could it be possible to look past these images, so wrenching in their power? Why even try? And how to account for my own critical blindness, my failure to anticipate the historical conjuncture between lynching (a ritual practised with greatest frequency in the decades around 1900) and the postcard culture exploding into its greatest popularity between 1893 and 1917? The essay you read reflects the productive pressure supplied by these questions. In it I concentrate on two moments in the genealogy of lynching's mass mediation: the first around 1908, when the state's vexed relation to lynch law acquired distinctive urgency, and the second in the present, when the recirculation of lynching's souvenirs has become newly charged. For reasons elaborated below, I focus primarily, though not exclusively, on the web-based incarnation of the Allen/Littlefield archive, an incarnation that calls into being a distended, virtual public not unlike the one consolidated through the dissemination of lynch-cards by mail. My hope is to arrest and recast historical rupture for the purposes of critique and, at the same time, to test “the archive” as a concept against the volatile dynamics of the traffic in racist ephemera—those uncollectible collectibles that make up *Without Sanctuary*.

Moment 1: Around 1908

Postcards dominate the *Without Sanctuary* archive, their preponderance among its 130-odd artefacts attesting to the significance of the conjuncture I have been describing. At issue is less the special suitability of the postcard

form for the depiction of atrocity than its ubiquity as an object of exchange in the period in question. By 1900, postcard culture had transfixed people worldwide across all lines of social difference. Having flourished in Europe since the late 1860s, the trade in postcards did not take off in the U.S. until century's end. When it did, though, its impact was staggering: what critics of the day termed the postcard "craze" grew with such intensity that in 1908 the U.S. post office handled 670 million cards, while by 1913, postcard circulation had reached nearly a billion. The numbers help to indicate the significance of the "craze"—not just a popular hobby but indeed a ritualized practice touching every aspect of early-twentieth-century life. Lynching cards, then, seem more conceivable as a kind of mass media when we understand that, at the moment they began to emerge, absolutely everything was postcard-ready.⁴

That said, the materials in *Without Sanctuary* certainly test commonplace understandings of postcard imagery and purpose. These ephemeral curios reflect as they commercialize the immateriality and expendability of black life under white supremacy. They document over and over again the brutal cruelty—the breaking of bones, the rending of flesh, the mutilation and burning of bodies—used to police the color line in the South and sometimes the North. Their images record shocking violence at once savagely purposeful and viciously casual in its application, as if to say: "this one *must* die, though any black would do." At the same time, they also mark the obscenity of the racist gaze that empowers the onlooking mobs, such that "[t]he horror of death," as Dora Apel argues,

resides in the relationship between the self-confident white killers or voyeuristic spectators who turn to face the camera and the hanging, burned, and/or bullet-riddled black bodies. The contradiction represented here embodies the relationship of power to helplessness, citizen to outsider, privilege to oppression, jubilation to degradation, subjecthood to objecthood, community to outcast, pride to humiliation. The photographer who records the gruesome spectacle is implicated as rendering a service to the lynching community through the taking, reproduction, and sale of lynching postcards as commemorative souvenirs that record the race-color-caste solidarity and lethal "superiority" of the white community. (458)

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4 For a more detailed analysis of the postcard "craze," see Woody.

And the violence of the cards bleeds from front to back, ink compounding the horror first etched with light: thus for one sender the 1902 lynching of an unidentified African-American male constitutes “[t]he answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to black brutes who would attack the womanhood of the South,” while for another the 1910 lynching of Allen Brooks in Dallas, Texas becomes simply “a great day we had,” while for still another the 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington in Robinson, Texas gives occasion to celebrate “the barbecue we had last night” (Allen et al. 122, 60, 83). Casting lynching’s spectacle as grim warning or festive sport, such mockeries condemn the monsters and cowards who write them. If in the early decades of the twentieth century the postcard as a form gave its users one way to be modern, in lynch-cards barbarism shot through such modernity and its modes of mass-mediated belonging.

One sequence on the *Without Sanctuary* site, showing scenes from the 1909 lynching of Will James in Cairo, Illinois, seems particularly indicative of the range and utility of postcards in reproducing and disseminating lynching’s spectacle. As detailed in notes to the print- and web-based versions of the archive, James, alleged to have killed Anne Pelley, was apprehended by a mob in nearby Belknap and returned to Cairo for execution. On 11 November, his persecutors hanged him from an arch spanning the town’s Commercial Avenue, but the rope broke before he died (see Figure 2). After shooting him repeatedly, the lynchers dragged his body to the site of the alleged crime where, before some 10,000 spectators, they burned his remains.⁵ The online sequence (comprising seven of the fifteen total cards in the Allen/Littlefield archive) will begin to give some sense of the racist desire to broadcast every element in lynching’s complex ritual. While the execution’s event remains central, it is not the only focus: cards depicting lawmen with their hounds, the spot where James, still alive, fell from the arch, and the ashes of his body likewise serve to record and disseminate, as if by inference or proxy, the scope and texture of lynching’s practice. Voyeurism here expands and extends: these cards invite their recipients not just to witness the spectacle of death but, more decisively, to occupy in fantasy a narrative of communal life. Race-hate thus supplies the imaginative conditions of possibility for social confirmation, familiarity, access. Especially telling in this respect is the card entitled “Commercial Avenue, Southeast from 9th Street, Cairo, Ill.”—included in the archive because

5 See Allen et al. 181–4, and the links to images 41–47 on the website (accessed 29 January 2004). The information in the print version is more detailed, a discrepancy I query below.

it has been altered by its sender to indicate where, exactly, James was murdered. “Where they Hung the Coon,” the sender reports, keying his message to an “x” above the pictured arch spanning Commercial Avenue (Figure 3). In personalizing a stock souvenir, such inscription works to suffuse already existing depictions of the town with the meaning and affect of its new-found notoriety. Here, lynching’s afterlife literally supplements modernity’s mass-produced ephemera: lynch law’s monstrous aura grimly enlivens the standardized products of commodity culture.

The most awful images in this sequence of cards arguably come first: a 1907 postcard portrait of Will James alongside a 1909 card depicting his half-burned head on a pole (Figure 4). This diptych shocks with its surprise as well as its horror. Though by this point in the website’s presentation we know all too well the obscene possibilities in lynching’s repertoire, the sight of James’s charred head still beggars anticipation. Yet the other image bears a comparable shock: for from the portrait shot, we learn that Will James himself liked postcards, at least enough to pay what little it would have cost to have one made (a commonplace practice at the height of the postcard “craze”).⁶ As with the view of “Commercial Avenue,” this card has been personalized, bearing an ominous caption—“Will James (alias) Froggie”—conceivably inscribed by some sender or collector in the wake of James’s lynching.⁷ Subject, like so many of his fellow Americans, to the pull of the postcard, James gave his face to the camera, unaware that, two years later, he would endure the frenzied torments of another kind of craze, one primed to symbolic as well as literal defacement in aid of vicious racial discipline.⁸

6 The point is admittedly speculative: no proof exists that James himself had this card produced. The widespread popularity of personal postcard manufacture—one epitomized by Eastman Kodak’s introduction, in 1902, of “postcard size photographic paper on which images could be printed directly from negatives,” and the ensuing development by several film companies of “contact printing paper with preimprinted postcard backs”—makes the speculation not just plausible, however, but compelling (Vanderwood and Samponaro 4). The note in the print *Without Sanctuary* supports my argument: “Will James likely sat for this portrait at a local postcard photographer’s studio, a popular and inexpensive fashion of the times” (181). Woody gives a good historical overview of early postcard production processes.

7 As the notes in the print *Without Sanctuary* indicate, this card, like several others in the James sequence (including the accompanying card in figure 3, and the card in figure 1), was addressed to “Mrs. Jake Petter, 2057 Broad St., Paducah, Ky.”—apparently, then, it was never mailed by James himself, but rather by someone at (or invested in) his lynching (Allen et al. 181).

8 Resonant, here, is Stephen Crane’s 1898 novel *The Monster*, in which saving face

The postcards in the sequence I have been describing—like everything in the *Without Sanctuary* archive—will call into question the use of the “we” by Eduardo Cadava in my essay’s second epigraph (224). The mortification, objectification, thingification suffered by Will James at the hands of his murderers and through the lenses of their cameras can hardly be called universal: indeed, the purpose of such images, as of the violence they record, will be to secure social difference along racial lines (no “we” but rather an “us/them”), to make chemical paper alongside cutaneous pigment decisive in identifying the objectifiable, mortifiable “thing.” In all its awful singularity, James’s murder will nonetheless exemplify lynching’s telltale dynamic, which in Robyn Wiegman’s words “guaranteed the white mob’s privilege of physical and psychic penetration, granted it a definitional authority over social space, and encoded the vigilant and violent system of surveillance that underwrote late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century negotiations over race and cultural power” (95). At stake were what Wiegman calls “tenuous masculine and white racial identities”—though her emphasis on the rape myth misrepresents, to a degree, the capacious convenience of lynching’s justifications, the elasticity of its range of phantom charges, first identified and condemned by Ida B. Wells (98).⁹

As important, however, is the extent to which the details of James’s capture and the souvenirs of his execution foreground another, related dynamic: lynch law incited the frenzied movement of white mobs so as to arrest the new material and social mobility enjoyed (however haltingly) by

and losing face—key pressures under postbellum racist hegemony—overdetermine the corrosive defacement through fire of a black man. For a superb reading of this text, see Brown; for a trenchant theorization of defacement, see Deleuze and Guattari.

9 As Schechter notes, Wells “argued that lynching was both about sex and not about sex,” showing “that even according to whites, the rape charge against black men was neither dominant nor adequately proven in lynching cases” (295)—a recognition that must complicate Wiegman’s still-incisive analysis of the way an increasing reliance on castration as a lynching practice coupled with recourse to the rape myth allowed white men to find “in sexual violence the sexual pleasure necessary to uphold both [their] tenuous masculine and white racial identities” (98). In her antilynching work, Schechter emphasizes, Wells repeatedly “made black women visible in the dynamics of southern lynching and sexualized racism” (296), tirelessly exposing the asymmetrical interimplications of race, class, and gender in lynching’s dynamic. Such emphases mark her foundational contribution to the critical tradition elaborated by Wiegman and others. The importance of Wells to this tradition will only amplify the irony of her near-exclusion from its history. For a succinct account of such erasure, see Giddings. I am indebted to Teresa Zackodnik for her insights on this subject.

many African-Americans following Reconstruction. Here we can begin to discern what elsewhere I have termed the politics of mobility—those conflicted, contestatory processes producing and investing mobility’s power and value. And the struggles over mobility at issue in the lynching of Will James necessarily encompass the postcards that document it. As examples of what Susan Stewart calls “souvenirs of death” (140), lynch-cards achieve the commodification and mass extension of traumatic spectacle, giving their producers, their senders, and especially their recipients a kind of prosthetic access to the “definitional authority” identified by Wiegman at the core of lynching’s ritual. By using the postal system to put such spectacle into motion, lynching’s agents could reproduce or indeed remobilize again and again the fatal immobilization of Will James and others for political and social as well as commercial ends. This recognition gives a way to understand the ephemera collected in the *Without Sanctuary* archive in light of Cray’s argument that much of what we take to be “the visual” is “an effect of other kinds of forces and relations of power”: here the order of the eye emerges in important ways from contests over mobility as a material and social resource.

In 1908, a year before the death of Will James, the U.S. government had sought to disrupt at least a part of lynching’s circuitry by passing an amendment to postal law that prohibited the mailing of “matter of a character tending to incite arson, murder or assassination” (“a law was passed forbidding these to be sent thru the mail,” notes one 1908 lynch-card user) (United States Congress 416; Allen et al. 134).¹⁰ The determination to enact this legislation will indicate by contrast the significance of the postcard’s promiscuity for the reach of lynching’s terror: clearly, the use of such cards played an important part in sustaining and extending lynch law. Yet the legislation had dubious success, serving not so much to stop the exchange of these souvenirs of death as to drive them undercover—enveloping atrocity but not preventing its circulation (and sometimes not even enveloping it, as the stamp and 1910 postmark on the Allen Brooks lynch-card, mentioned above, clearly prove) (Allen et al. 60). What, exactly, motivated the amendment’s passage? Did the legal prohibition veiling these materials and occluding their circulation aim to solve, or only to displace, the crisis in social relations depicted so graphically on lynch-cards? Particularly in view of the federal government’s stubborn refusal to outlaw lynching’s *practice* (a refusal maintained ostensibly in defence of states’s rights, despite ongoing

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¹⁰ For a fuller history of postal legislation and censorship in the U.S., see Fowler, Paul and Schwartz, and Roper.

pressure from many activists and some House representatives), one might conclude that the 1908 legislation policed the mail so as to *retool* the relation between racist belief and feeling, on the one hand, and bourgeois subjectivity on the other.¹¹ For the terms of the amended law effectively rendered the circuit for lynching's souvenirs more properly bourgeois: private not public; decorous not promiscuous; surreptitious, veiled, one-to-one. In this argument the federal will to prohibition and concealment served not at all to refute and resist white supremacy but instead, by obscuring its obscene supplement, to normalize and sustain it. The overdetermined resonance of the envelope is hard to ignore here: forcing lynch-card traders to mail their artefacts under enveloping cover, the 1908 law managed to restore, at least within the postal system, a more predictably tolerable whiteness of surfaces. And though officially-speaking such veiling promised to subdue anarchic racism inspired by images of extralegal violence, one might more cynically suspect its purpose to involve mitigating public outrage over lynching's atrocity as over its mass reproduction and dissemination.

In effect, by proscribing the circulation of lynch-cards while refusing to prohibit lynching itself, the federal state simply occluded one element within the evidentiary archive toward which political resistance might otherwise have gestured, at a moment when a key strategy in antilynching activism held to the picturability of the practice in all its horror. Such picturability, I would stress, had less to do with the *re-use* of lynching images—especially since Wells and other activists remained reluctant to reproduce photos or illustrations of lynching in their polemics (though, interestingly, 1893's *The Reason Why* featured a single lynch-card reproduction)¹²—than

11 As Robert L. Zangrando observes,

Congress has never enacted an antilynching law as such. The closest it had come, before the NAACP began, was in segments of the civil rights statutes of the Reconstruction period, especially in the so-called Enforcement Act of 1870 and Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871. After the Supreme Court nullified portions of these laws, residual parts were incorporated into sections 51 and 52, later 241 and 242, of Title 18 of the United States Code. As interpreted and implemented, however, they proved insufficient for combating lynching. The NAACP secured House passage of an antilynching measure on three occasions, 1922, 1937, and 1940, but each time it was killed in the Senate by a filibuster or the threat of a filibuster. Finally moved by a decade of intense public concern, Congress passed five civil rights measures from 1957 to 1968. The last of these established fines and jail terms for anyone who injured or killed a person seeking to exercise a wide range of federally protected civil rights—the nearest enactment yet to a national antilynching law. (19)

12 According to Linda McMurry, Wells “reprinted a postcard that a proud lynching

with politicized injunctions to witness, to *see* what was right before the eyes (as exemplified by Mark Twain's call to "[p]icture the scene" and deployed again and again by Wells in her tactical recirculation of lynching's press reports) (485). And if public outrage, key to the activist fight for lynching legislation, required picturability for its inspiration, then by veiling the traffic in lynch-cards the nation's government effectively undermined such activism while normalizing and sustaining systemic racism.

The argument I am making gains added force in light of the kinds of postcards that *remained* mailable in 1908 and after. For whatever the fate of lynching's explicit souvenirs, their tacit counterparts could evidently circulate unchecked. Figure 5 shows the front of a postcard mailed in 1908. In service of crass comedy its image encodes a host of lynching's tropes. Here stereotypes integral to the so-called "coon craze" reaching its peak in the first years of the new century help to demean and diminish as they sexualize the black male. The wide eyes and large lips instantly render this figure an object of derision; the sack he carries (coupled with the rural surround) likely intimates chicken-stealing—a staple of coon humor key to the racist ascription of an essentialized black criminality. More telling for my present purpose is the caption: as James Dormon notes in his analysis of the Gilded Age "coon song" phenomenon, "the 'honey' relationship" in coon caricature telegraphed racist common-sense about black sexuality—licentious, lascivious, unrestrained, fleeting, bestial (458). Thus in the idiom of coon humor, to wait for one's honey will constitute a decisive irony, since the romanticized act of waiting implies a constancy, a being-true, inimical to the relentlessly promiscuous, endlessly straying sexuality ascribed to blacks under postbellum white supremacy.¹³ Yet the question of

committee had sent to [the lawyer] Albion Tourgee with a picture of their victim, C. J. Miller. Tourgee had supplied encouragements as well as the postcard, and Wells sent him an inscribed copy of the pamphlet in appreciation" (203). Esteve's reading of this image—as confronting us "not so much with a nation's duplicity or false pretense as with its appallingly unpretentious, unprepossessed public sentiment"; as consolidating in retrospect "the lynchers' crowd-like homogeneity through the presence of the hanging man"; as depicting "a distinctively white collectivity's becoming a law unto itself in both senses of the phrase"—will complement my argument that racist narratives of communal life get reinscribed and recirculated by means of lynch-cards such as those depicting the murder of Will James (141).

13 Though clearly bound up with conventions drawn from the minstrel show, as Henry Wonham argues coon imagery "developed in response to a new set of anxieties, including unprecedented fears about immigration, miscegenation, and 'race suicide' ...[, and] tended to forestall identification with the caricatured subject, offering the embattled bourgeois self renewed confidence by projecting

sexuality in this card is still more complex, since “the ‘honey’ relationship” works not just at the level of depiction but also at the level of circulation, articulated between sender and recipient through the mediating presence of the caricatured coon. In effect, the card (presuming, I would argue, a white audience for its derogations) positions its recipient to become this coon’s “honey,” thereby predicating much of its joke on the scandal of sex across the color line, a prospect always already subtended in this period by the charge of rape.

Caricatured as he is—waiting for one “honey” within the image but for another one beyond it—the card’s figure makes rape’s threat, key to racist common-sense about black masculinity, seem laughable yet legible all the same. The purpose, I venture, is an insidious one: to raise the charge while defusing its threat, to emasculate the figure while, redundantly enough, legitimating lynch law’s standard punishment. The buzzard certainly lends credence to this reading, since it must signal death’s imminent arrival. No surprise, then, that the tree between man and bird so resembles a yardarm, ideal for the use to which, we infer, it will shortly be put. And the lantern’s light hints, however obliquely, at the glow of the flames typically concluding lynching’s spectacle. Thus the caption’s grim triple meaning: understood as the figure’s declaration to an absent lover, it mobilizes well-worn forms of popular coon stereotype; understood as a leering taunt to the card’s recipient, it teases a putatively white audience with the illicit (yet here cartoonish) thrill of interracial sex-as-rape; understood as the buzzard’s utterance to the waiting coon, it mockingly anticipates lynch law’s brutal ritual. Evidently the joke was not lost on the state: in the year it prohibited the mailing of “matter of a character tending to incite arson, murder or assassination,” sly incitements such as these could readily negotiate the postal circuit.¹⁴

The selective and inconsistent ban on the circulation of incendiary artefacts, coupled with the ongoing tolerance of lynching’s practice, will

racial identity as a foundational category of being” (136). Wonham’s essay gives a superlative analysis of what he calls the coon era’s “precarious comic discourse on the nature of race and identity,” showcasing in particular Mark Twain’s ambivalent investments in the figure of the “real coon” (124).

14 Another card in the same collection, showing a similar (if more obviously menacing) figure and bearing a similar caption but without tree or vulture, bears a postmark from 1911—supporting my inference that such cards were not simply missed but readily tolerable despite the 1908 legislation. Dormon theorizes the work done by coon caricature more generally: “The immense popularity of the ‘coon’ image nationwide merely reflected the ongoing commitment to racist assumptions that underlay the system of American apartheid in which blacks were maintained in subordinate and subservient roles... Blacks were not only the simple-minded comic buffoons of the minstrel tradition; they were also poten-

give one way to reimagine what, exactly, the 1908 federal legislation aimed to keep from public view. Here I would note the capacity of lynching's postal souvenirs to limn, in the signs of lynch law's power, the contours of governmental weakness. What if the nominal cause for legislative concern—that lynch-cards might incite further violence—were in fact a way to cover juridical vulnerability and complicity? The question will recast the problem of lynch-cards for the state: to the extent that by their very existence they tended to insinuate lynch law's *intimacy* with legal rule, they threatened to expose the law's bankruptcy. The spectacle behind the spectacle in lynching's souvenirs, I am suggesting, showed extra-legal violence to be the law's supplement, not its antithesis—a relation necessary yet fatal to law's legitimacy, and so essential, at all costs, to conceal. Hence the urgency of the 1908 legislation: it served to maintain cosmetic (and largely specious) differences between the ostensibly legal and the patently illegal by keeping graphic evidence of their entanglement—the ongoing legal tolerance of lynching's crimes—from widespread picturability. Understood in these terms, the 1908 law comes, despite its superficial aim, to seem like collusion at a systemic level between lynchers and the state against those activists intent on fighting racist violence through legal and political channels.¹⁵

The dynamics I have been describing exemplify for me what Crary has termed the “suspension of perception”: the direction and deployment of some forms of attention coupled with the denial and discouragement of others. Eight decades after the 1908 change in postal law, James Allen and John Littlefield evidently determined to take up and transform such suspended perception, seeking through the recontextualized exhibition of these cards in museums, in print, and online to rewrite the histories of hatred and violence they encode. What will this effort to produce a very public archive from nearly-lost, all-but-forgotten ephemera tell us about the politics of collection, circulation, and commodification today? What forces and relations of power produce the will to retrieve these artefacts

tially dangerous.... They constituted a threat to the American social order. For this reason, they *had to be* controlled and subordinated by what ever means.... [Forms of coon culture] argued, implicitly at least, for coercion, for lynching if necessary, to maintain control and domination of white over black” (465–6). It is worth recalling, in this context, the use of the term “coon” to dehumanize posthumously the murdered Will James in the altered postcard in figure 2.

15 The history of what many call legal lynching supplies a necessary context for my argument here, and a dramatic indication of the intimacy between the supposedly legal and the manifestly extralegal. For a useful analysis, see Wright.

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and make them newly visible? Bearing such questions in mind, in my essay's second moment I turn to consider the online version of *Without Sanctuary* as an archival endeavor in the present.

Moment 2: the Present

In a *New York Times* story from early 2000, James Allen gives users of the *Without Sanctuary* archive a prohibition of his own. "It's important that people don't see these as collectible," he insists. "They really belong to the nation, so that this enters into the vocabulary of the discussion about race" (quoted in Snyder 163). Implicitly, Allen's comment pits collectability against national ownership, private exchange against public property. The fact of belonging to the nation would seem in his view to pull such artefacts off the market, beyond its trafficking claims. Thus understood, the prospect of national possession stands counter to the debased, privatizing acquisition offered through commercial exchange. Is it fair to infer that the space of the nation's belongings is, for Allen, the space of the archive, as opposed to that of the collection?

In its several incarnations, *Without Sanctuary* does important memory work—though not uncontroversially. "Witness," the name given to the exhibit's Manhattan debut, succinctly encapsulates the premise of the Allen/Littlefield project: an ethical and political command to see and testify in service of justice. For some, the injunction and its strategy prove problematic, even counterproductive, precisely because they require the reproduction and recirculation of images that commodify monstrous cruelty and unspeakable suffering. For others, the need to expose and confront the history of lynching's atrocities remains paramount. As Dora Apel contends, "directing the course of the repetition of these visual images seems the only way, although painful and arduous, to make visible and work through a central but largely unacknowledged feature of traumatic American memory" (465). The issue is a vexed one, but I tend to concur with the second position: simply veiling the record of trauma will counteract the work of reckoning.¹⁶

To an extent, the *Without Sanctuary* website (available through the online exhibition space called "Mūsarium") succeeds in directing the course of its images's repetition so as to enable politicized remembrance. Provocatively, Allen has claimed for such memory work the power to raise the dead: as he told an audience at Fisk University, "if we can acquire and place [these] photos in an accurate, respectful context, identify and record them

16 See Apel and Snyder for succinct accounts of these debates.

for the first time, I feel some slight awareness of what is meant by resurrection” (quoted in Apel 466). No surprise, then, that the website’s collation of image and affect evinces what Ann Cvetkovich calls “the determination to ‘never forget’ that gives archives of traumatic history their urgency” (110). At stake (as in the archive’s print- and gallery-based incarnations) is a kind of pedagogy, enacted through photographic display as through the historical notes, the flash movie overview, and the forum devoted to viewer responses. This last is arguably the site’s most striking feature, bringing to life a participatory public sphere in virtual space.

As Allen contends on the website, the archive he and Littlefield have amassed confirms the fact that “[i]n America everything is for sale, even a national shame.” Though well-worn, this complaint gives a usefully blunt assessment of capitalism as national style, and anticipates Allen’s subsequent condemnation of the material violence done by lynch-cards in turning torture and murder to profit: “[l]ust propelled their commercial reproduction and distribution, facilitating the endless replay of anguish.” Yet how, exactly, does one separate the critique of these facts from the risk of their continuance? For despite the sort of memory work done by *Without Sanctuary* online, it cannot help but to remind us, through the ever-present invitation to purchase its print version at Amazon.com, that in key ways the larger endeavor is resolutely commercial. If for Allen his archive belongs to the nation, in the event of its online display it fails to shake the hold of the market.¹⁷

I would emphasize that, for me, the value of what I am calling the memory work done by the *Without Sanctuary* archive—especially in exhibition and in print—is undeniable. Nevertheless, the problem of commerce will foreground the intimacy, as inescapable as perilous, between Allen’s project and the history of circulatory violence it would counter. Here, the process of commodification is key: for where originally it compounded lynch-card atrocity, now it subtends their critique. Despite shifting conditions of reception and comprehension, these horrific souvenirs still serve to generate profit. And given such commercial continuity—the intimate inextricability,

17 I am not the first to make this point: others have noted the spectre of commerce shadowing the Allen/Littlefield project. Michael Dyson argues the issue this way: “To commercialize the suffering of black people is to do the ultimate disservice to black people.... To make coffee-table books out of that kind of pain is highly problematic” (quoted in Snyder 167–8). My own decision to pay for reproductions from this archive (at \$100 u.s. an image) puts me in perilous (some might say complicit) proximity to the dynamics I analyze—a circumstance that, for me, amplifies the significance of intimacy as a critical concept, and reflexive scrutiny as a critical practice.

within commodification's dynamic, of present archive and past traffic—the website's historical elisions become all the more telling. I do not mean to downplay the affective and educational power of *Without Sanctuary* online (as evinced most immediately by the ongoing debate recorded in its forum). Yet gaps in the presentation of lynch-culture compromise the site's political intervention: Allen's "accurate, respectful context" seems striking not least for what it *fails* to bring into view. Rather than expanding and elaborating the print and gallery versions of *Without Sanctuary*—as web-based technology certainly invites, and as politicized pedagogy conceivably requires—the website undertakes at best a kind of streamlined selection. Its historical notes, while crucial in returning identity, and so some measure of dignity, to the brutalized bodies captured on film, tend (as in the case of Will James) to give less detail than their counterparts in the book version, restricting public knowledge and thereby constraining witness. More troubling still is the absence of broader commentary of the sort found in the print volume's introductory essays, particularly as they anatomize and historicize lynching *along with* its responses (see Leon Litwack's lucid genealogy) and as they query the purpose of the *Without Sanctuary* project itself (see Hilton Als's dissenting critique). The decision to exclude such material from the website—perhaps, for commercial reasons, to establish its difference from the book?—risks reifying the spectacle of lynching at the expense of its less visible, more conflictual histories.

Comparably problematic is what I would call the disarticulation of these artefacts from the heterodox surround in which Allen first came across them. As he declares on the website, he is what Southerners call a "picker," pejorative slang for one who "search[es] out items that some people don't want or need and then sell[s] them to others who do." He has made and continues to make a living sifting through the cast-offs of a culture, trafficking in the refuse of an amnesiac modernity. Yet apart from the inferences one may draw from such autobiographical disclosure, the *Without Sanctuary* site does nothing to illuminate this context for its materials—one pressuring, I would stress, the circumstances of their recovery in the present as well as the circumstances of their production, reproduction, and circulation in the past. And without such insight, we struggle to gauge the intimate implication of lynch-cards within U.S. modernity's emerging mass cultures. Lynching's images, to judge from the website, are singular, separable from other kinds of early 20th-century ephemera: they seem to make most sense in a kind of suspended isolation from the contours and coordinates of mass-produced modernity. At stake, I would suggest, is the artificial sanctity of an American ideal: for by isolating images this way the

website can emphasize their aberrance while avoiding messy questions about the inextricability of lynch law from familiar routines of national life and familiar modes of national belief. Were the *Without Sanctuary* site to situate lynch-cards in relation to postcard culture (even if only in passing, as in my analysis of Figure 5 above) or, more broadly still, to the heterodox field of early-twentieth-century print ephemera, its viewers might manage more readily to confront the unsettling presence of race-hatred at the very core of American modernity—and not just in the past, but also in the present.

And what of the histories of resistance? Under lynch law, African-Americans were obviously targets of ferocious discrimination—a fact that the website details vigilantly—but through the interventions of activists like Ida B. Wells and official organizations like the NAACP as through more spontaneous forms of protest, they also led the struggle against lynching's crime. And the very complexity of such struggle, vexed as it was by tensions among competing constituencies, gives all the more reason to take it up.¹⁸ Yet where the exhibitions and the printed volume begin to acknowledge legacies of resistance—notably at the Atlanta show, with its emphasis on antilynching¹⁹—at least at this writing the website suspends such perception for perplexing reasons and to damaging ends (especially as we note with W. Fitzhugh Brundage that “[w]hite southerners urgently wanted to keep the social fact of black resistance out of public sight”) (283).²⁰ *Without Sanctuary* online gives us an archive of outrages—but not one of outrage. Anger, apparently, is an affect only for the present. Despite the virtual public realized in the forum of responses, we gain no access to any record of the *counterpublic* spheres called into being to contest lynch law's brutalizing horrors.²¹ Thus, to remain with my earlier example, no

18 Useful in understanding the complexities and contradictions in antilynching resistance are Giddings and Brundage.

19 As Apel notes, “the material in the cases throughout the gallery provided countervailing voices of interracial political resistance to the culture of victimization, in particular highlighting voices of black resistance by writers such as Wells-Barnett, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen” (463).

20 Two of the editorial notes on the website mention, in passing, the prospect of black response to white violence: #62 identifies Civil Rights groups as among those exploiting the sensationalism of extralegal violence, while #75 invokes Freedom Houses, the havens to African-Americans working to regain the vote (though the context seems to be 1965)—neither especially helpful (with the first actively counterproductive) in comprehending fuller histories of black dissent.

21 I take my cue here from Michael Warner's theorization of the concept of the counterpublic.

one would know from the website that Ida B. Wells played a crucial role in the aftermath of Will James's murder, traveling to Cairo in December 1909 to ensure the enactment of "a 1904 Illinois statute" mandating "the removal of any sheriff whose prisoner was lynched" (Giddings 12). This activist triumph—deemed by one of Wells's allies at the NAACP "the 'most outstanding thing that had been done for the race' that year" (ibid.)—never appears in the website's "accurate, respectful context." Such elision carries real cost, since the absence of any extended information on antilynching activism and resistance will mean that the injunction to witness, elemental to the *Without Sanctuary* critique, betrays its own genesis—one found (as I have already indicated) in those visualizing methods and tactics, the politics of picturability, first deployed by Ida B. Wells and her comrades. Risking a kind of theft, through such neglect the website undermines a political legacy we urgently need to face and see. Imagine if this archive of atrocities honored its critical debts and recirculated its obscene materials in tension with spectacles of counterpower—what affective and commemorative work might be able to occur through the dialectical encounter of racist terror with its resistances?

Soon, perhaps, *Without Sanctuary* online will meet that challenge, using the web's rhizomatic capacity for linkage to illuminate the tensions and fissures in lynching's fraught history as well as the intimate inextricability of lynch law from American mass modernity. Doing so would certainly intensify the force of the project's political critique and might help to clarify the website's significance for another charged archive on the Musarium host site: *America Attacked*, a selection of photographs documenting the events of 11 September 2001 that, for over a year, has appeared immediately alongside *Without Sanctuary*. This proximity, and the interrelation it implies, can hardly be accidental: "terror"—the preferred name for "anti-Americanism" in the contemporary moment—supplies the tacit link between the two sites (one that will diminish the significance of lynch law as a particularly vicious historical manifestation of systemic American racism by insinuating instead its aberrance as a putatively "un-American" activity). Yet especially in light of the state-sponsored, racist common-sense about "terrorism" after 9/11—common-sense working to *suspend* national and international perception about the complex, often contradictory determinations of politicized violence—the discourse of "terror" implicit and inevitable in the proximity I am describing serves to *preempt* inquiry, precisely by taking for granted the self-evidence of the contiguity between lynching's crimes and the 9/11 attacks on Washington and New York. More than merely suspect, such presumption tolerates,

even requires, the failure of critical insight. History's obligation—"to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," in Benjamin's formulation—will demand considerably more (255).²²

The larger point, I would stress, is not really about improved context at all. By means of the foregoing critique of *Without Sanctuary's* online event, I aim instead to mark the tremendous difficulty of recontextualization as a method of redress. For how could first contexts be recovered, restored, resolved?²³ To me, this question is key to history as a political project. The promise of full—or what James Allen terms "authentic"—contextual recovery banks historical repair on the fiction of distance, in which the present, having eclipsed the past, can correct historical wrongs. Against such understanding (and the ideology of historical progress it presupposes) I see history as rupture and, rejecting the ruse of historicist accuracy, strive to confront another order of picturability—what Benjamin calls "a past charged with the time of the now ... blasted out of the continuum of history" (261). Riven with fissures and contradictions, lynching's historical crisis exceeds any response that aims to mourn or condemn past crimes without confronting their uncanny powers of return—that settles for static remembrance not dialectical reckoning. The disturbing power in lynch law is intimate, not remote, indicating that (to paraphrase Benjamin) the state of emergency on which we reflect is not the exception but the rule. In answer, a critique that serves justice must arrest the memory of lynching in order to face and know its present spectres.

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22 Writing more generally about the public reception of the *Without Sanctuary* project, Apel makes a similar point: "[c]onflating anti-racism with a form of backhanded support for u.s. anti-terrorist policy in the wake of September 11 ... produces a strategy that is both politically misleading and morally dubious" (473). For me, the sort of proximity found on the Musarium site does not entail the "secret heliotropism" invoked by Benjamin, producing mere *association*, not genuine *constellation*, from past to present (255).

23 I am indebted to Pauline Wakeham for her careful theorization of historical constellation and her incisive critique of recontextualization as a supposedly postcolonial practice. See her PhD thesis, "Second Skins: Semiotic Readings in Taxidermic Reconstruction" (University of Alberta, in progress).

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