Leigh Raiford: The Consumption of Lynching Images

Lynching photographs, like the macabre spectacles they depict, have occupied a crucial if unacknowledged place in the “shadow archive” of black representation. Along with images of African Americans as slave caricatures, criminal types, sexual predators, and objects of scientific study, lynching photography has long been engaged in a complex dialectic with portraits of uplift and self-possession. This essay focuses attention on the dark and disquieting corpus of lynching photography and the myriad ways these images have been made to signify and testify from the late 19th century into the 21st. Only by recognizing post-Civil War lynching as a peculiarly modern phenomenon, reliant on various communication, transportation, and especially media and consumer technologies, rather than as a Southern anachronism, can the cultural work of photography in both the making and unmaking of racial identities and subjectivities be revealed.

In the hands of whites, photographs of lynchings circulated as postcards in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, served to extend and redefine the boundaries of white community beyond the localities in which lynchings occurred to a larger “imagined community.” In the hands of blacks during the same time period, these photographs were recast as a call to arms against a seeming never-ending tide of violent coercion, and transformed into tools for the making of a new African American national identity. Similar, if not the same, images of tortured black bodies were used to articulate and assert specifically racialized identities in the Progressive Era, a period marked by the expansion of corporate capitalism, the rise of the middle classes, and the birth of consumer culture.

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

Spectacles of white supremacy

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

Lynching also needs to be considered a leisure activity deeply embedded in the rise of consumer culture in the South in the late 19th and 20th centuries. As historian Grace Hale has argued, lynchings helped ease white anxiety about a new culture of consumption that exposed holes in the blanket segregation of the New South. This new mass society signaled a “raceless” consumer culture, one in which any person, of any race, gender, or class, could purchase goods in any number of mixed public spaces. Not only did lynchings “reverse the decommodification of black bodies begun with emancipation,” writes Hale, but they enforced a segregated consumer society, a commodity culture in which only whites could experience or consume the “amusement” of lynching, and only blacks could be lynched and consumed, often literally by fire.

Lynching remanded African Americans, cloaked in newly granted post-Emancipation citizenship, back to black bodies, vessels suitable for physical and ideological labor. This is seen most clearly in the post-lynching scramble for fetishistic mementos of the event, such as scraps of victims’ clothing, charred bits of bone, locks of hair. These gruesome trophies, these relics, were sources of pride for those who had participated in the murder, or for those who were able to get to the corpse before it was finally buried. Indeed, a framed photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith contains a tuft of hair attached to the matte board. Such souvenirs could provide a source of income for those who got to the body first. In her report to the NAACP about the 1915 lynching of young Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, investigator Elizabeth Freeman writes, “Some little boys pulled out the teeth and sold them to some men for five dollars apiece. The chain was sold for twenty-five cents a link.” The collection of relics as religious fetishes is a practice that dates back to ancient and medieval times when the devoted would gather, trade, and keep close the remnants of saints’ lives or their bodies. Indeed, in a complex manner, lynchings incorporated elements of ancient traditions and antebellum nostalgia.

Yet lynchings are also a peculiarly modern phenomenon. As the New South grew and industrialized rapidly, lynching made use of some of the most modern technologies available: the telephone and telegraph to announce and advertise the event; print media to carry the message; and cars and trains to carry participants to the designated location. The specificity of lynching’s modernity lies in the prevalence and pervasive of photographers, both amateur and professional. For those not close enough to the scene or for those not lucky enough to obtain clothing or body parts, photographs proved the next best things. As postcards, trade cards, and stereographs, lynching images held a strong popular commercial appeal. For professional photographers, lynchings spawned a cottage industry in which picture makers conspired with mob members and even local officials for the best vantage point, constructed portable darkrooms for quick turnaround, and pedaled their product “through newspapers, in drugstores, on the street—
even…door to door.” If lynching was a return to the slave block, a reinscribing of the black body as commodity, then lynching photographs functioned as the bill of sale and receipt of ownership. If lynchings helped construct a unified white identity among those whites present and in the surrounding areas, then photographs of lynchings helped extend that community far beyond the town, the county, the state, the South, to include whites nationwide and even internationally. Now all whites, rich or poor, male or female, Northern or Southern, could imagine themselves to be master. This is true not only of the images made professionally and sold commercially, but also of those amateur photographs taken by everyday folk with cameras readily available through a burgeoning photographic industry.

**From lynching photography to antilynching photography**

Antilynching activists, beginning with the pioneer Ida B. Wells and continuing with the interracial NAACP, would not always be frightened into submission by either the threat of lynching or the recounting of the tale as framed by lynchers and their proponents or apologists. Antilynching activists chose to tell the story in a different manner, indeed to subvert the common tale of black bestiality resulting in swift white justice that culminated in, and forever echoed through the frozen lynching and served to anesthetize audiences, in turn making people want more and more graphic accounts. The public’s seeming insatiability for tales of racial violence and transgression has kept the tale of the black male rapist/criminal (read O.J. Simpson, racial profiling) alive and well and circulating in our cultural and political imaginary. This narrative finds its “antithesis” in the image of “the lynched black man,” which has emerged and evolved as visual shorthand as a powerful icon paradigmatic of the suffering of all African Americans and understood only through the abject black male body.

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

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

Pat Ward Williams: Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock, 1986
The text of the work reads: “There’s something going on here. I didn’t see it right away. After all, you see one lynched man you’ve seen them all. He looks so helpless. He doesn’t look lynched yet. What is that under his chin? How long has he been locked to that tree? Can you be BLACK and look at this? Life magazine published this picture. Could Hitler show pictures of the Holocaust to keep the JEWS in line? WHO took this picture? Couldn’t he just as easily let the man go? Did he take his camera home and then come back with a blowtorch? Where do you TORTURE someone with a blowtorch? BURN off an ear? Melt an eye? A screaming mouth. How can this photograph exist? WHO took this picture? Oh, God. Life answers—page 141—no credit. Somebody do something.”
Dread Scott: *Historic Corrections*, 1998 (reproduction a photograph of a 1919 lynching—a Black man on fire with a crowd of white onlookers; translucent Duraclear photographs of Black & Latino “urban youth” framed on one side by prison bars. Centered between the mural and these photographs, a full-size replica of an electric chair, around which are positioned four police batons which each strike a cast Fiberglas head every 10 seconds with a loud hard blow. Live, unedited police reports picked up by a police radio accompanies the sound of these headbeatings. Viewers walk through the piece and view it from different perspectives and, given the translucent nature of the Duraclear photographs, see the “urban youth” either as jailed criminals or they can see the artwork “through their eyes” and be on the same side of the bars as these youth.

To see Renee Cox’s work, [click here](#) and go to Flippin the Script in the Gallery section.