ABSTRACT

MISRECOGNIZED: LOOKING AT IMAGES OF BLACK SUFFERING AND DEATH

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the social, emotional, and ethical implications of looking at the suffering and death of African Americans. Drawing on film theory, visual studies, literary criticism, and semiotics, the study addresses events and images from 1834 to 2000 in which the humanity of the black body was called into question. The events discussed include: a nineteenth-century riot over the abuse of slaves; the mass media depiction of Hurricane Katrina survivors; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s 1935 antilynching art exhibition; James Allen’s 2000 exhibition of lynching photography; the Emmett Till case; and the Spike Lee-directed film *Bamboozled* (2000). The project ultimately argues for a nuanced appreciation of looking relations that takes into account the ethics of the look, especially when that look is directed toward bodies that cannot speak for and in defense of themselves.
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How does one look at images of human suffering? This question calls for at least three distinct interpretations. The first is physiological; the answer is “with our eyes.” The second reading is a moralistic one wherein the question is one of responsibility. In the phrase “how does one look”, “looking” is aligned automatically with action—either an emotional “moving” of the spectator’s psyche or a compulsion to dedicate one’s labor to the elimination of similar scenes of suffering, both of which Linda Williams are potential reactions to the “moving pictures” of racial melodrama, both staged and “real” (L. Williams *Playing the Race Card*, xiii).

The question “How does one look at images of human suffering?” can be translated as “What does one need to do or feel in order to have the right to look at images of human suffering?” The last restatement of the question is also ethically and politically inflected. In fact, this interpretation of the question is not so much about the dynamics of seeing a particular image but is an inquiry into the political positioning of the viewer himself. In this last case, “how does one look?” resounds almost as an accusation—“Tell me: Just how does one look at images of human suffering?” It is a charge to the spectator to account for his look and the politics that looking entails.

The politics of such visual transactions are an essential component to current conceptualizations of intersubjectivity. In particular, the equity of looking relations is called into question, and the look itself is bound up in the problem of mutual recognition. Hegel’s conceptualization of the lord-bondsman dialectic is foundational to this conception of recognition. And although Hegel (at least in translation) states his concern
for the “self-consciousness [that] is faced by another” and “does not [initially] see the
other as an essential being” (Hegel 111, my emphasis), his theory of how looking plays
into the scene of recognition is underdeveloped. For this reason, I turn to Frantz Fanon
who, following Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential writings, takes up Hegel’s encounter in
explicitly racialized and visualized terms. But whereas Fanon can “write back” to the
gaze that seeks to fix him—in the terms of the gaze—with all of the hierarchical and
imperialist implications that that viewing relation implies, the bodies of the dead and
dying human beings I am examining signify in the terms of particular visual discourses—
such as the documentary photograph, the funeral ritual, the exhibition gallery—and, as I
shall argue, prompt us to feel, in our own bodies, the political implications of
participating in a viewing event.

For obvious reasons, death prohibits the mutuality of the looking relation. Also, as
Elaine Scarry has explained, one’s experience of extreme pain is impossible to convey to
another. Yet the many photographs, exhibitions, and even newspaper accounts that I have
discussed testify to the abiding importance of looking upon the image of the dead and the
dying, be it in the photograph or in the flesh. But uneven visual encounters are not only a
consequence of death and suffering (which are perhaps the most extreme cases). As much
feminist and black film scholarship from Laura Mulvey to bell hooks has shown, racial
and gender differences change the shape of looking relations. As Jane Gaines remarks in
her seminal critique of feminist psychoanalytic models of looking relations, we cannot
rely upon a “one-size-fits-all” model of spectatorship (Gaines “White Privilege and
Looking Relations”, 12). Similarly, I argue that the theoretical models of the look that we
have inherited from film studies, documentary studies, and photography studies are
inadequate for discussions of the images I study here—images, including pro-photographic images\(^1\), of dead and dying bodies. In looking at the dead or dying body or at its photographic representation there is no egalitarian reciprocity at play. In semiotic terms, the dead and the nearly-dead are not merely subaltern in the sense proposed by Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, meaning incapable of self-representation through language; rather, they are \textit{antithetical to language itself}. To phrase this differently, it is not that the dead and nearly-dead are beyond the capture of a self-constituting language, but that they are irredeemably cut off from language, forever unable to speak for themselves and about themselves. The images of dead and dying bodies, then, do not work on the spectator by “speaking” back to her as some phenomenological models of looking have offered. Rather, they charge the spectator with the work of making sense, that is, in coming up with a language to account for their non/existence.

In this dissertation, the language I have focused on, the discourse in which the images of dead and dying black bodies are said to signify, is the notion of a common humanity. Though I will address in the following chapter two versions of political thought that refer to the idea of humanity, I note here that what I mean by “the notion of humanity” is the ideology of universal humanity. I invoke ideology in the sense suggested by Louis Althusser, that ideologies are neither inherently good nor inherently

\(^1\) The term “pro-photographic” here is closely aligned with on of the pro-filmic. While the latter has been theorized by Tom Gunning in terms of its relation to narrative, both the pro-filmic and the pro-photographic share three important preconditions, the first of which has been defined by Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis as “the physical material of the scene prior to the act of filming.” Robert Stam \textit{et al.}, \textit{New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism, and Beyond} (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 112. In other words, the pro-photographic is the material object (including the body) that is positioned before the camera. This last turn of phrase—“before the camera”—will resonate doubly in my forthcoming discussion of bodies that were viewed with what one might identify as a probative, photographic eye decades before the invention and proliferation of photography.
evil, but are passed off as truths that underwrite entire systems of thought and, what is more, that effectively (as opposed to actually) symbolize reality. In the instance of ideological humanity, what is passed off and, indeed, operates as reality is the notion of humanity as a universal truth, an idea that in turn underwrites practical social mechanisms such as the legal pursuit of justice, something that amounts to the restoration of a victim’s humanity. Ideological humanity, I maintain, is to be distinguished from what we may call “rhetorical humanity”, a term that I offer to identify the deliberate and restricted deployment of a notion of humanity such as the one fascist philosopher Carl Schmitt engaged to promote his own humanity at the expense of dehumanizing others.

To be sure, the rhetorical wielding of the term “humanity” has not only been mobilized in Nazi Germany. Amongst its many other targets have been peoples of African descent in the United States who have, as part of the project of their dehumanization, have had not only their actual bodies but also the representations of their bodies manipulated, abused, and distorted in the white supremacist endeavor to distance the signification of “human” from the signifier of the black body. In attending to the image of the black body, the present project is in dialog with those authored by African Americanist scholars of film, literature, art, and cultural studies, including Jacqueline Bobo, Jacqueline Goldsby, Coco Fusco, Ed Guerrero, Michelle Wallace, Maurice Wallace, Shawn Michelle Smith, Richard Powell, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Todd Boyd, Philip Brian Harper, and bell hooks as well as many others.

My research distinguishes itself from those scholars’ projects in its argument that a notion of humanity, functioning ideologically, underwrites all representations of the black body, including and especially representations of the black body in distress. It
follows that such a concern with proving humanity via the image should be linked to a visual genre associated with proof and evidence. We can see how those images identified as documentary—a genre that is itself implicated in ideologies of truth and reality—can be perceived as being uniquely capable of representing this ideological notion of humanity. Running parallel to the concern that the image of the dead and dying black body signify in terms of humanity—something that is not guaranteed—is the concern that the documentary image be understood as signifying documentary representation in cultural terms—something that has been overlooked by theories of the documentary image\(^2\) that foreground mediation while either ignoring or downplaying the significance of its work as a social signifier. Indeed, the idea that the photograph signifies according to the logic of linguistic semiotics (especially as described by semiotician and linguist Charles Sanders Pierce) is, at this point in time, a foregone conclusion. As early as 1969, Phillip Rosen tells us, Peter Wollen perceived that “[André] Bazin’s view of the image answers to the description of an indexical sign in … semiotic typology” (Rosen 18). More recently, Bill Nichols puts the matter more plainly, referring to the expectations implicit in the documentary spectator’s viewing position: “One fundamental expectation of documentary is that its sounds and images bear an indexical relation to the historical world. As viewers we expect that what occurred in front of the camera has undergone little or no modification in order to be recorded on film” (Nichols 27). Nichols’s point here opens the door to theories of documentary that acknowledge the mechanics of the media in order to declare all photographic and filmic images documentary because, with few exceptions, they faithfully depict objects that had been placed before the camera’s

\(^2\) I am thinking here of the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Derick Eitzen, to name but two influential theorists of documentary.
lens. The theory behind Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* may in some ways be interpreted as capitalizing on this conceptualization in order to discuss time, indexicality, and death.

Yet while this physical aspect of still and motion picture photography is technically correct, some explorations of the documentary image are in fact hindered by this broadening, a broadening that I would analogize to poststructuralism’s embracing of the term “text” which made all objects and cultural phenomena available to poststructuralist critique. Whereas the concept of the “text” seems to have thoroughly and not altogether detrimentally colonized the planet in the name of poststructuralism, it is my hope that the concept of the “documentary” will not follow suit. We need a nuanced and flexible understanding of the documentary image that can both acknowledge the technical aspects of photographic media and recognize the special work that the documentary image does in the world, including supplying evidence of atrocities.

The political implications of the latter should be clear. The instances discussed in this dissertation in which the image of the suffering or dead black body was offered and even sought out for its political utility as evidence of injustice offer some examples. In her discussion of another atrocious event—the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911—that was punctuated by published photographs, Gaines insists that those widely circulated photographs be acknowledged for what they are—documentary photographs—and for what they do—supply evidence of a crime around which a constituency can and did rally to effectively “participate in a wave of semiosis, signifying the cruelty of the New York sweatshop, the plight of female workers, the misery of families, as well as the rumbling public outrage” (Gaines “Documentary Radicality”, 9). The invocation of Barthesian
semiotics paired with the list of significations in this statement should remind us of the flexibility of the signifier to mean many things without undercutting its ability to signal the gravity of each one of those features. As Gaines explains elsewhere, “Reality effect, aesthetic excess, and social transformation are not mutually exclusive” (Gaines “Melos in Marxist Theory”, 64). The documentary photograph should be able to be recognized as an aesthetic mode and as an ubiquitous technical product of the medium and as visible proof of human existence, including human suffering.

But the photographic image is not only politically and socially significant as a documentary image; it also makes critical interventions by means of allegory. As is the case for the film *Bamboozled* that is discussed in the final chapter, the non-documentary, motion picture image of the human body requires the photographic apparatus and the image of human suffering to secure its meaning. We might say that a film such as *Bamboozled* operates at one remove from the documentary, establishing within its own frame and narrative a real world against which all other images—including stereotypical images—are measured.

In trying to produce a consistent theory of the photographic image, I have, in my analysis, necessarily understood no “truth” to be visually self-evident. Nevertheless, my consideration and, indeed, my interest in these photographic and pro-photographic depictions of black death and suffering are bound up in the experience of political spectatorship that wants to find in these images some indication of a notion of black humanity that may be put in service to the political aims of antiracism. At this point, we return to the question posed at the beginning of this introduction, but with a twist. The issue is not *how* do we look at images of human suffering, but *why*?
It this question that this dissertation seeks to answer by way of exploring fully and firstly the *how*. The scenarios of visual encounter to be discussed in the following chapters approach this issue of the look by expanding what we know about looking. As Hegel and Fanon both indicate, looking does not just affect the other, it also affects the self. It is the profound shifts in the political disposition of the self that are predicated upon visual encounter that I analyze in the following pages. At issue are questions of display, witnessing, exhibition, and the curiously fluctuating positionality of the onlooker.³

It is here that my project on looking merges with another ongoing conversation about the notion of humanity. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explore how this concept has been discussed in terms of vulnerability and death by Judith Butler and Achille Mbembe. Along with Paul Gilroy, these theorists gesture toward reevaluating if not resuscitating the concept of humanity in order precisely to acknowledge the racially-determined inequities of lived experience. These are the inequities that Achille Mbembe refers to in his rereading of Giorgio Agamben’s theory of “bare life” which I have understood as a racialized reassessment of the unequal living and dying conditions of subjects of the sovereign. The situation that both Agamben and Mbembe analyze is one in which the sovereign exploits the vulnerability of subject over whom he has power, an exploitation that sometimes (as in the case of genocide) evolves into a project of *dehumanization* of the other. Paul Gilroy, for his part, has remarked in his recent book *After Empire* upon the degraded status of an ethics of antiracism, in particular, and of the concept of humanity, in general, in the discourses of poststructuralist critical theory.

³ I thank Maurice O. Wallace for pointing out the subtle and useful implications of this turn of phrase.
Gilroy identifies the hostility toward a conception of humanity as a reactionary move on the part of the Left that seems to instinctually recoil from any universal concept (like humanity) propounded by liberal humanism. That move is, furthermore, a consequence of “a failure of political imagination” by a present-day Leftist critical contingent that seems to be terminally haunted by reactionary and exclusionary notions of “humanity”, be they liberal or fascist (Gilroy 20).

On the fascist side of things, Carl Schmitt’s abuse of the term “humanity” in his philosophy, best articulated in his 1932 book *The Concept of the Political*, has undoubtedly delegitimized an unnuanced use of the term (Gilroy 5). For Schmitt, “humanity” was an essential component to the Nazi project of “imperialist expansion” and “economic imperialism” (a project we see reflected in the exclusionary interpretation of “humanity” mobilized by the prejudiced sovereign of Agamben and Mbembe) (Schmitt 54). Despite this ideological precedent or perhaps even *because* of this ideological precedent, a liberation of the concept “humanity” from these connotations is a necessary project for the present-day Left. In moving beyond Schmitt’s paradigm and the paradigm of liberal humanism, Gilroy suggests, we may effectively de-colonize the concept, and allow an inclusive notion of humanity to again take center-stage in the anti-imperialist discourse of the Left.

Here we begin to understand how the visual image can affirm a positive concept of humanity worth salvaging. It is in order to affirm the dignity of all human beings that Gilroy wishes to bring back a notion of humanity. “Humanity” in this instance operates as a tool in the arsenal of a politics “capable of comprehending the universality of our elemental vulnerability” (Gilroy 4). What I argue in the following pages is that by
drawing attention to the way the body operates as an image, specifically when it appears as having endured extreme violence, such as lynching, the concept of the human denoted in visual form can contribute to a Leftist, anti-racist politics.

As I will demonstrate in each of the following chapters, the notion that, in the first instance, the body is not being viewed “accurately” and that, secondly, its appearance as an image eclipses any recourse to the real and authentic body, is not new to black people. Frantz Fanon’s experience at the cinema (where his co-spectators equate his image with the image on the screen) and, indeed, the example of blackface stereotype in _Bamboozled_ demonstrate just this. But the issue is not simply the tired problem of what to do positive and negative stereotypes (more than twenty years ago, in his “New Ethnicities” essay for the _ICA Documents_ special issue, “Black Film, British Cinema”, Stuart Hall, observing shifts in black representation, proposed the futility of that debate). What my study offers is not a challenge to the notion that bodies cannot signify authentically, but an explanation of how the imaged body’s inauthenticity and of the imaged body’s unobtainable relation to the real might be utilized to antiracist ends. As explanation, I offer the tropes of “mis/identification” and “mis/recognition” to conceptualize a positive harnessing of the body’s function as an image so that it may invoke “humanity” by calling directly upon the viewers’ notion of his own, embodied humanity and implicate the spectator directly in the viewing relation, causing him to question his position with respect to the image (see Chapter Four). This is exactly what I interpret as happening in several stages of the Emmett Till and other lynching cases discussed in Chapters Three and Two, respectively. The following chapters trace an evolution from the most basic and essential scenarios wherein the vulnerable black body is recognized as part of a common,
intrinsically vulnerable humanity (Chapter One), to visual transactions (again underwritten by an investment in the notion of humanity) that are mediated by specific environments that are determined by the possibility of being seen seeing (Chapter Two) and by the “mistake” of seeing the self in the body of the deceased other (Chapter Three). Lastly, the final chapter (Chapter Four) arrives at a staged visual encounter in which the seeing self is compelled, again through the trope of recognition, to transgress the boundaries of the fiction-reality divide in order to see himself seeing and, consequently, to evaluate his political position in a visual economy.

The body as image as has been construed in this project frustrates individual viewers who would seek a unified theory of the image. Additionally, in rejecting or, at the very least, displacing the centrality of “authenticity” to the question of how bodies signify, we side-step the problem of “universal [visual] language” that Allan Sekula outlined in his discussion of “The Family of Man” photographic exhibition more than twenty years ago (“The Traffic in Photographs”). The claim, or as Sekula calls it, the “cliché” of universal language, is little more than an advertising ploy promoting the value of photography in universalist terms, the effect of which, Sekula states, is to supply photography with “a commonsensical armor that deflects serious critical questions” about the specifics of circulation and use (Sekula 16). Indeed, what is offered in the following chapters is not a reductive and totalizing theory, but an examination of the viewing positions that can be established and politically mobilized in a racialized and humanized spectatorial relationship. Nevertheless, one might find in this consternation and inconsistency, in the bowed heads and furrowed brows of the viewer, images of black
vulnerability and suffering, proof of humanity’s continued ideological significance (despite the wailings of the poststructuralist purists) and the need to look.
Chapter One: Humanity, Ghosts, Afterimages

Recognition

Recognition (and my own theory of mis/recognition) will have a large role to play in this and in the following chapters to explain the numerous viewing scenarios that all have the black body positioned as the object of the look. Tracking such an integral notion as recognition, in particular when tied to the loaded notion of “humanity”, needs first to be discussed on an elemental level, by which I mean that the simplest and most consequential scenario of recognition needs to be outlined in relation to its most important terms: life and death. The concept of humanity in which recognition is invested is based upon the notion of universal humanity which translates, according to Paul Gilroy to the notion of human beings’ “elemental” vulnerability to exploitation and death by the more powerful sovereign subject (Gilroy 4). This notion of humanity undergirds the politics of this exploration into the telos of suffering. As I shall argue, the visual encounter with the image of the suffering body can provoke the spectator to interrogate the “nature” of “humanity”—meaning both the nature of one’s own humanity (am I as vulnerable as that other?) and the nature of the other’s (is the other as human as I?).

Anti-liberal humanist critiques of humanity-based discourses have failed to properly situate the day-to-day operation of ideological humanity in either historical or social terms. Consequently, they have produced unnuanced disavowals of a unified notion of the human that have made it difficult for scholars concerned with politics affecting human beings’ lives (and deaths) to hinge their analyses of society to ideas of justice, human rights, and bodily integrity to any invocation of humanity. In Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence Judith Butler performs this defensive stance.
by in the book’s first pages by confronting the looming suspicion that her text contains what could be regarded as a reactionary “positing [of] a new basis for humanism” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 42). Yet her primary interest is what she calls the “ethical encounter,” a Hegelian intersubjectivity imbued with ethical concerns and its underlying criteria: that “vulnerability must be perceived and recognized” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 42). Butler’s radical move is to foreground ethics and vulnerability in the face of a Leftist blanket rejection of universality. Butler’s insistence upon vulnerability and ethics has clear implications for my interest in the visual display of the suffering black body and in spectators’ perception of that body as human. If investigating the way that we perceive vulnerability can lead to a politically and theoretically useful acknowledgment of an ideological notion of humanity, then an investigation of how certain vulnerabilities are imaged and racialized can help explain how the recognition of a body as human can be regarded as a social and political act.

In positing vulnerability as an important condition and precursor to human beings’ experience of loss, Butler invokes a critical community that resonates with problematic notions of humanity found in the post-World War II Left and especially in poststructuralist discourses. She does this in order to demonstrate the dire consequences of not taking “humanity” seriously. She observes that, “there is always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the ‘unrecognizable’” (Butler *Precarious Life*, 42–43). Butler proceeds to solidify the mutual contingency of “humanity” and recognition via vulnerability, arguing that, “if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is
fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject” (Butler *Precarious Life*, 43).

I want to draw special attention to her last phrase—“vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject”—as I detect in it a rejoinder to the version of humanity promoted by the humanism critiqued by poststructuralism, a version based largely in fascist political theorist Carl Schmitt’s imperialist and genocidal use of the term.¹ Yet given Butler’s investment in the power of speech acts as subject-constituting events, one must conclude that she is also aware of the discursive violence that Enlightenment-era liberal humanism has wrought upon those bodies determined to be outside humanity and concede that, at least in the system Butler presents, the violence of the term derives from its utterance and not from its ontological status.²

¹ Schmitt writes, “When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one’s own and to deny the same to the enemy.” Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976 [1932]) 54.

² An example of the impact of the performative power of language on the definition of human beings is explicated in Gayatri Spivak’s parsing of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In Kant’s conception, recognition of the rational, cultured man is coterminous with the recognition of his participation in a rational culture, the ultimate evaluation of which belongs to Kant. Gayatri Spivak offers a wry explication of Kant’s critical shortcomings when she alerts us to the contingencies of Kant’s philosophy of “Kultur”. In Kant’s *Critique*, Spivak claims, an exclusive definition of culture overwhelms Kant’s philosophy, especially his use of the term “Anlage, the word often used by Kant and generally translated as ‘tendency,’ [which] carries the sense of a blueprint or program as well.” Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1999) 11. Spivak points out that if “the supplementary production of the concepts of practical reason [are] effects of a structuring, of an Anlage” (Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 21), one that is, by definition, unique to a particular kind of culture, which in turn produces the so-called cultured man, then Kant’s figuration of a particular kind of subject—both “intelligent” and “moral”—is shown to rely upon the image of Man as Northwestern European and Christian: “Only in man, and only in him as subject of morality do we meet with unconditioned legislation in respect of purposes, which therefore makes him alone capable of being an end purpose to which the whole of nature is teleologically subordinated.” Immanuel Kant, *A Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner Press, 1951 [1790]) 286. To return to Butler’s language, the “norm of recognition” offered by Kant goes unproblematically but also characteristically unchallenged. It is
Butler’s interest in the notion of humanity and her questioning of recognition and the “ethical encounter” as they are expressed in *Precarious Life* evince her ongoing interest in Hegelian theories of the subject and intersubjectivity. Beginning with her 1987 book *Subjects of Desire*, Butler has turned to Hegel’s philosophy as an essential touchstone for discussing twentieth century theorists of discourse and subjectivity, especially Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, the other “subjects” of *Subjects of Desire*. In the Preface to that book’s 1999 edition, Butler situates all of her work “within the orbit of a certain set of Hegelian questions: What is the relation between desire and recognition, and how is it that the constitution of the subject entails a radical and constitutive relation to alterity?” (Butler *Subjects of Desire*, xiv). The subject as defined in Hegelian terms (as opposed to psychoanalytic terms) also provides the terms in which looking relations and recognition are discussed in this project. Important to my study is Butler’s attention to the formation of the subject in relation to an Other. Butler fastens upon the requirements of recognition and intersubjective encounter that are indispensable to Hegel’s philosophy of self-consciousness. This Subject of Hegel’s philosophy, Butler argues, is consequently characterized largely by desire—a desire to realize its Self through the recognition of the Other which can be understood as a desire for recognition by the Other which can be distilled further still into a desire for the Other.

The spoken word is one way of bestowing recognition upon an Other (though it is necessary, too, to note that “the word” often fails to complete the task set for it—something that reappears at every confrontation with the sublime violations of human bodies). The verbal acknowledgment of the Other by the Self not only heralds that up to theorists today to redefine the criteria that makes a human being recognizable as such, and vulnerability is the criteria that Butler offers.
recognition has taken place, but constitutes recognition. This is the discursive power known as the speech act, and it identifies another essential formulation in Butler’s writing. In *Precarious Life*, the recognition of vulnerability is a speech act of a specific type: “our utterance enacts the very recognition of vulnerability and so shows the importance of recognition itself for sustaining vulnerability” (Butler *Precarious Life*, 43).

Despite my conviction that in certain circumstances, the speech act is not enough, I believe in Butler’s underlying point regarding the recognition of human vulnerability. I would refine that point still further, however, to say that all humans are vulnerable, or, better, that all human beings may experience vulnerability—at infancy, in infirmity, at the poles of one’s lifespan, and at unpredictable moments in between. But to say that all human beings experience vulnerability is not the same as saying that the vulnerability of all human beings is recognized. The very problem is that human vulnerability is not uniformly recognized, the effect of which is that the most vulnerable lives appear and are treated as less valuable than others. It is recognition, not vulnerability itself, that is the terrain of ethical politics.

What good is it, then, to practice recognition even when we know its use or disuse evinces bias? Butler answers: “We make the claim [that all human beings are sometimes vulnerable], however, precisely because it is not in every instance honored [which is to say recognized]. Vulnerability takes on another meaning at the moment it is recognized, and recognition wields the power to reconstitute vulnerability” (Butler *Precarious Life*, 43). This may sound like hypocrisy to those who would see basing an politics of the self upon recognition bestowed by an other as susceptible to abuse by the sovereign. But to reject recognition altogether as a useful tool is, I think, an exaggeration. Butler herself
seems aware of this as she writes, “We cannot posit this vulnerability prior to recognition without performing the very thesis that we oppose (our positing is itself a form of recognition and so manifests the constitutive power of the discourse)” (Butler Precarious Life, 43). I want to argue, however, that what appears here to be a flagrant violation of anti-universalist principles is more accurately a bracketed but serious—in fact, an ideological—engagement with the concept of humanity. It is not so much that a disingenuous reneging is enacted in the name of politics, but that, in the discourse and theories on humanity, ethical politics is the name of the game. Butler identifies the essential importance of what I have called “bracketing” by calling it a “framework, by which norms of recognition are essential to the constitution of vulnerability as a precondition of the ‘human,’” (as opposed to the non-human) adding that, it “is important precisely for this reason, namely, that we need and want those norms to be in place, that we struggle for their establishment, and that we value their continuing and expanded operation” (Butler Precarious Life, 43, my emphasis).

It is when vulnerability is exclusively or exaggeratedly linked to a particular group that a struggle to be recognized as human emerges. And indeed, I submit, it is no coincidence that “the weaker sex” is amongst the litany of epithets used to describe women. Though that formulation is based upon a desire for control (not only over individual bodies but of patriarchal society as a whole), it has nonetheless been articulated not in terms of patriarchy but in terms of women’s nature. The desire is vulgar and basic, but the mechanism used to satisfy it—exclusion—is elaborately justified, again, by putting the onus of inadequacy and unrecognizability on women themselves.
To restate: the name of the game is politics. Furthermore, the stakes of that game are life and death. Considered in this way, Butler’s use of the words italicized above—which indicate a subjective, and therefore fallible, desire and are signaled in her text by the words “need”, “want”, “struggle for”, and “value”—cannot be interpreted as a mere whim on the same order of, say, a desire for power over another. This is not to say that the latter desire is not significant, but that it pales (as all desires do) in the shadow of the primal desire for life itself, the root of what Butler understands as our human vulnerability.

To begin with vulnerability, Butler’s text suggests, is to alter the terms of the debate over the place of politics in contemporary discourse and theories of the subject. This orientation toward human vulnerability is also an orientation toward (the undesirable threat of) death. Achille Mbembe is also concerned with death and with the influence of the dead on the living. His theory of “necropolitics” involves exploring Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower and demonstrating how the modern state exercises social control by consigning its subjects (not to say citizens) to a “state of exception,” thereby “conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 40). Mbembe argues that when we cease “considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death” (Mbembe 14). Life, in its most basic instantiation, is a “truth of the subject” (Mbembe 13). Mbembe states his opposition to theories of the modern state that reify reason and “normative theories of democracy” (which, as I have argued, as they are founded upon subjective recognition are intrinsically unstable), ignoring the irrational and undemocratic persecution and subjugation of putatively “free and equal men and women” (Mbembe
13). That “These men and women are posited as full subjects capable of self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation” radically—and insultingly—minimizes the brute inequities that will beat out “self-understanding, self-consciousness, and self-representation” every time (Mbembe 13).

Mbembe’s critique here echoes Butler’s assertion that normative theories, what Butler calls “norms of recognition”, are inadequate to account for some oppressions. Mbembe implies the illegitimacy of democracy by pointing out its paradoxical contingency upon a very limited and local concept of reason. What these theories fail to account for is precisely the constituency of most importance to Mbembe: the “living dead”, the subjects who are most vulnerable. Focusing on the figure of the sovereign, “whose central project is … the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations,” Mbembe, following Giorgio Agamben, produces only a spare image of the bodies whose lives are determined by the sovereign (Mbembe 14). Nevertheless, these marginalized, even dehumanized bodies can be identified as the negative image of the sovereign body.

In their consideration of society and politics, both Mbembe and Butler build upon the fact that death haunts all human beings. Death’s eventual manifestation (more palpable to some than others) constitutes human beings’ underlying, ultimate vulnerability. Yet some human beings or constellation of human beings—i.e. the sovereignty—exploit their privilege and “[violate] the taboo” of the Hegelian death struggle (the Self should not kill the Other) by determining others’ deaths, in effect “playing God”, and pretending at immortality and omnipotence (Mbembe 16). The result
is that certain groups are more susceptible to death than are others, whereas others take up the right to kill.

What I wish to draw out here is the notion that imbuing critical discourse with mortality—that is, by making the parameters of theory and the criteria of its success the poles of life and death—not only brings the question of the place of politics to the fore, but forces a fundamental reconceptualization of a proto-Hegelian capital-S Subject. This is also evident in Mbembe’s interpretation of Georges Bataille’s work on sovereignty as a “[displacement] of Hegel’s conception of the linkages between death, sovereignty, and the subject” (Mbembe 15).

For Bataille, sovereignty … has many forms. But ultimately it is the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have the subject respect. …

By treating sovereignty as the violation of prohibitions, Bataille reopens the question of the limits of the political. Politics, in this case, is not the forward dialectical movement of reason. … [P]olitics is the difference put into play by the violation of a taboo (Mbembe 16).

Mbembe’s reading of Bataille identifies the sovereign as actually behaving in violation of the Hegelian death struggle—the logical consequence of the encounter between two consciousnesses.3 In that match, both sides are meant to fear death. It is an equity that mirrors the equity of each side’s capacity for rational thought. Moreover, as Hannah Arendt explains in *The Promise of Politics*, equity is not only foundational to politics, but to the constitution of the human being in politics: “*Man*, as philosophy and theology

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3 In Hegel’s description of the death struggle, neither consciousness can actually be permitted to die as self-consciousness—a necessary realization in the path to human ideality—depends upon the encounter with another consciousness. Though the dominance of one side is possible, for the most part, they must remain in tension with one another.
know him, exists—or is realized—in politics only in the equal rights that those who are most different guarantee for each other” (Arendt Promise of Politics, 94). In battle with the sovereign, however, there is no give-and-take, only a refusal to submit that amounts, in Mbembe’s words, to “a violation.” As a consequence, the competition between subjects—what is called politics—becomes a sham. Politics, therefore, can no longer be said to move everyone forward through the power of reason because some subjects (who also possess the power of reason) are living and dying quite differently than are sovereign subjects, and are living and dying as a consequence of the (in)actions of those sovereign subjects.

Eliminating this injustice requires an identification of the disparity between the sovereign and its Other as a violation of the taboo of the death struggle. This acknowledgment is in turn contingent upon a recognition of human vulnerability. In truth, the term “recognition” as it appears here is somewhat misleading as it does not signal a return to cognition, but to a literal and figurative birth, what Butler terms the “solicit[ation] of a becoming” (Butler Precarious Life, 44):

To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one’s own being, and one’s own persistence in one’s own being, in the struggle for recognition (Butler Precarious Life, 44).

As she puts it, “[t]his [interpretation of recognition] is perhaps a version of Hegel … but it is also a departure, since I will not discover myself as the same as the ‘you’ on which I depend in order to be” (Butler Precarious Life, 44). This investment in recognition is not
a return to what can be characterized as what I would call a “hegemonic humanity,”
which is to say not to the exclusionary and elite humanity of Enlightenment humanism. Here, one need not be recognized as a being essentially identical to he who bestows recognition. One is therefore always already eligible to be recognized as a human because of the essential, primordial state of vulnerability that all humans experience instead of a humanity defined in relation to a Kantian “tendency” (understood in liberal humanist terms as an approximation of bourgeois Western masculinity).4

Butler privileges vulnerability because it precedes the existence of all beings, a fact that renders recognition an extraordinarily powerful act: “The ‘I’ who cannot come into being without a ‘you’ is also fundamentally dependant on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the ‘I’ nor with the ‘you’” (Butler Precarious Life, 45). The assumption that this act will occur points to the pervasiveness of humanity as ideology; it is presumed that a human being will be recognized as such. Every “I” needs a “you”, and that need is so profound that it chooses even destructive and dangerous human attachments over solitude and death: “The bind of radically inadequate care consists of this, namely, that attachment is crucial to survival and that, when attachment takes place, it does so in relation to persons and institutional conditions that may well be violent, impoverishing, and inadequate” (Butler Precarious Life, 45).

One such destructive relationship might be between the individual and the state and has been explored by Michel Foucault. Foucault discusses the relationship between race and the particular vulnerability that is the threat of death or death’s haunting in terms of biopower (which he defines as the modern state’s obsession with policing the body),

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4 Humanity defined in relation to what I would call primary vulnerability precludes any divisive, hegemonic, secondary criteria (e.g. culture) that makes illegitimate claims to universality.
colonization, and genocide. He approaches an acknowledgement of humanity\(^5\) when he answers his own question, “If you are functioning in the biopower mode, how can you justify the need to kill people, to kill populations, and to kill civilizations? By using the themes of evolutionism, by appealing to racism” (Foucault “Society Must Be Defended”, 257). Foucault defines racism as “the basic mechanism of power” under an authoritarian state regime, and “a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (Foucault “Society Must Be Defended”, 254). In light of what I have established from Bulter’s and Mbembe’s acknowledgements of humanity, to the extent that the human being must be recognized as human in order to figuratively and literally live, Foucault’s definition appears tautological. He fixates upon racism as a mechanism that exists as “a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain” (Foucault “Society Must Be Defended”, 255). What Foucault does not really address (what he is not concerned with) is the quality of the racial distinctions exploited and perhaps created by the sovereign power. In order for racism to be exploited, not only does the sovereign have to justify it to himself, but he must also justify that racism to the masses. In his analysis of genocide, psychologist Ervin Staub admits that, while genocide may develop out of one group’s experience of “difficult life conditions” and its subsequent desire for physical safety as well as “a coherent and positive self-concept” (as was arguably the situation of the Rwandan Hutus—an ethnic underclass that rose against

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\(^5\) Whether or not Foucault himself believes in humanity as valid concept is not really relevant as he is discussing the discourse invoked by historical subjects to justify their actions. Those subjects frequently called upon a cultural investment in humanity to explain their race-based programs and to incite the masses.
the Europe-supported Tutsi ruling minority⁶), genocide may also be the ultimate expression in a series of “thoughts, feelings, and actions that do not change real conditions but at least help [the group] cope with [its] psychological consequences. These include devaluing other groups, scapegoating, joining new groups, and adopting ideologies—all of which may give rise to the motivation for, and diminish inhibition against, harming others” (Staub 15, 5).

In other words, the on-the-ground articulation of racism may not be explainable by a focus on practical objectives. As postcolonialist scholar Patrick Wolfe points out, “There is a major problem with accounts of race and racism that try to reduce these pathologies of modernity to a rational calculus of interests” (Wolfe 53). Foucault’s theory of racism is precisely too rational. For the purposes of his poststructuralist argument about the legacy of state power, Foucault plays up the functionalist analysis of racialized violence as it is enacted in accordance with his theory of biopower. But racist violence is not necessarily experienced by its targets nor meted out by the remainder of the populous simply as an enactment of the state’s/sovereign’s desires. Frequently, notes Wolfe, the violence exceeds its supposed objective, amounting to the phenomenon criminologists refer to as “overkill.” Such a monolithic interpretation as the one Foucault offers can, Wolfe notes, lead to seemingly ridiculous assertions such as the theory that “the efflorescence of lynching in the southern states of the USA can be put down to the depression of the 1890s and to White men’s perception that Black men were rivals for their jobs” (Wolfe 53). Wolfe protests that

Whilst this perceived rivalry may well account for all sorts of ruthless tactics to eliminate Black people from the job market, tactics that would no doubt extend to homicide, it signal fails to account for the demonic redundancy involved in the surfeit of public violence and cruelty that lynching suddenly began to involve from early in the 1890s. What kind of rational interest motivates individuals to wrench the teeth, nails and hair, peel the skin, castrate, burn and gouge the eyes from someone who is screaming for mercy? Even harder to explain, how did such practices take place in public, in full daylight, and secure widespread popular endorsement—to the extent that an open trade in souvenired body parts of the victims developed? (Wolfe 54)

In short, the excesses evinced by modern genocidal violence are insufficiently explained by an interest in power, *tout court*. The violence and the violation, in order to be continued, must be somehow carefully codified.

One strategy of codification has been to obfuscate the vulgar interest in power with the more virtuous-seeming interest in humanity, which can, at best, be mobilized as a civilizing mission (assimilation and incorporation) and at worst be translated into a project of purification (excision and extermination). In their research on genocide, historian Frank Chalk and sociologist Kurt Jonassohn distinguish their definition of genocide—the collection of criteria that enable an event to be classified as such—from their understanding of the motivating factors behind genocide—what they call its “preconditions”. They broach the latter issue via a question phrased in moral, as opposed to technical, terms: “How is it possible for people to kill other people on such a massive scale?” (Chalk and Jonassohn 27) Their reply points to genocide’s investment in defining humanity.

The answer seems to be that it is not possible [for people to kill other people on a massive scale], at least not as long as the potential victims are
perceived as people. We have no evidence that a genocide was ever performed on a group of equals. The victims must not only not be equals, but also clearly defined as *something less than human* (Chalk and Jonassohn 27-28, my emphasis).

Implicit in their understanding of genocide is the idea that the dominant group perceives those who are deemed “something less than human” as posing a threat to the status and well-being of the “real humans”.

Moreover, the targeted bodies, the objects of the genocidal campaign, must, in order to survive, reject the legitimacy of this racial hierarchy while recognizing its reality on a day-to-day basis. This simultaneous rejection and acknowledgement of racial inferiority resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness,” an experience he attributed to people of African descent in the United States, which serves as both a boon and a burden. The special and acute historical vulnerability of the black body in the United States that begets double-consciousness is the subject of Karla Holloway’s research on African-American mourning traditions. Holloway’s text will be addressed more elaborately in other chapters, but it seems vital here to cite her explanation of the specific overlapping of race and death in black America. She writes,

Black folk died in mournful collectives and in disconcerting circumstances. We died in riots and rebellions, as victims of lynchings, from executions, murders, police violence, suicides, and untreated or undertreated diseases. In such deaths, being black selected the victim into a macabre fraternity. Certainly, there were innumerable personal stories and discrete situations, both noble and ignoble. But, collectively, the story of how we died shaped a tragic community narrative (Holloway 57).
Furthermore, what each of the above “theorists of death” contribute to the discussion of humanity-based politics is that which is implied in the title of Mbembe’s essay—necropolitics. What Mbembe, Holloway, Wolfe, Chalk and Jonassohn, and Staub indicate is the lingering influence of the no-longer-living polity upon the natural world. In essence, what societies that abide or ignore the death struggle taboo mentioned by Membe above—societies that can be divided as “just” and “unjust”—have to reckon with are ghosts. These are all haunted societies whose deceased threaten to return to avenge the failure of sovereign institutions to recognize them as human.

**Suffering**

Certainly, vulnerability and mortality (or the vulnerability of mortality) are not the only elements to have been cited to define the human as these are arguably also conditions shared by animals and plants. The oft cited justification for the disaggregation of theses species has been that human beings possess the capacity for consciousness and complex thought whereas other living beings do not. My project assumes the same, but not without noting that it has been precisely this point that has historically proven so fraught for subjugated peoples, including peoples of African descent in the Americas. Indeed, the vulnerability of Others has not been enough to halt the violence enacted by sovereign bodies, irregardless of whether those bodies are individual or institutional. Conscious awareness of the mortal body’s vulnerability is treated here as a special feature of human beings. This is the very basis of the discourse on suffering, and is locatable

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7 Martha Nussbaum has demonstrated several times that it is not the possession of complex thought, but the capacity for complex thought that distinguishes human beings. Without this subtle detail, humans of diminished mental and physical capacity would be effectively excluded from the species.
most notably in the analysis of torture provided by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* and the linkage between pain and performance in U.S. slavery offered by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection*.

For both Scarry and Hartman, pain throws consciousness into crisis and, in multiple ways, brings the sufferer closer to a state of non-being in which her very humanity becomes questionable. Scarry’s analysis of pain gives us the root understanding of how pain challenges a subject’s humanity when she suggests that pain “obliterates” consciousness. In addition to death, pain is one of “the most intense forms of negation, the purest expression of the anti-human, of annihilation, of total aversiveness” (Scarry *Body in Pain*, 31). It is the experience of pain, then, that can make a subject feel inhuman. However, Hartman’s analysis of the ideological mechanisms of American slavery demonstrates how the onlooker’s refusal to recognize the subject’s pain can convince the onlooker that the subject is inhuman. “If this pain has been largely unspoken and unrecognized,” Hartman adds in a revision of Scarry, “it is due to the sheer denial of black sentience rather than the inexpressibility of pain” (Hartman 51). Here, Hartman supplements Scarry’s claim that pain is inarticulable because it destroys language (Scarry *Body in Pain*, 4). She does not reject Scarry’s argument; to the contrary, she demonstrates how proponents of slavery could mobilize the phenomenon that Scarry observes to their own, pro-slavery ends. What Hartman adds is a specific racial cast to the relationship between he who inflicts pain and she who endures it. In Hartman’s scenario, what is at stake is not language (as it is in Scarry’s), but sentience and, as a consequence, the recognition of the black subject as human. In the chapters that follow, I take up
Hartman’s project of imbuing an analysis of the image of human beings’ death and suffering with a racial cast.

My argument in the investigation of the visual scenarios that follow is that viewing a body that is suffering or has suffered to death is a viewing position that does not permit ambivalence. Colloquially, people often express an aversion to suffering, even suffering that is not experienced themselves, as in the proffered wish that a dying person not suffer in his or her last moments. Conversely, people will recommend suffering for a person who has committed a heinous crime (think here of crime victims’ family members who express in sentencing hearings or common conversations their desire to see the accused severely punished and/or put to death). Both of these attitudes bespeak the association of suffering with (in)justice. In the latter case, suffering is posited as punishment, usually for inflicting suffering on someone else. The former disposition, by contrast, depends on the notion that the innocent, meaning those whose death or torture has no consequential relationship to their behavior, ought not suffer. To see the innocent suffer or even to imagine such suffering can cause the viewer/imaginer psychic pain.

In my analysis of the two New Orleans-based events that follow, we see, amongst other things, that the recognition of the suffering of a human being is intricately tied to political conviction. Although the two events that form the focus of this chapter occur more than 170 years apart, each engages with the terms essential to this project: the visual recognition of the black body as human and the acknowledgement of black bodies’ capacity for suffering.

The remainder of this chapter consists of a comparison of two historical moments in which the image of the suffering black body caused its viewers to question, sometimes
with violent results, state institutions’ refusals to recognize black bodies as human bodies. The notion of the image that will be discussed in this project emerges in this pairing of a pre-photographic event with an event that came briefly to dominate twenty-first century mass media outlets. I do not deny that there is a significant difference between viewing bodies “in the flesh” and viewing bodies via photographic and televisual media. What I am focused on, however, and what remains a consistent issue is how we perceive both the mediated and the pro-photographic body that signifies, sometimes exclusively, in visual terms. I will discuss later, in my chapter on antilynching exhibitions (Chapter Two), other viewing positions and the theoretical and cultural status of the documentary photograph in direct terms. Here, I emphasize a viewing relationship with two nodes—the self and the other. The bodies on display become documentary images and, the vulnerable, “humanized” black bodies discussed in terms of the image are in neither instance figured as active bodies or alternate selves who possess the ability (or are permitted the right) to influence they ways that their bodies and their suffering might be understood by a viewing constituency. In a sense, the bodies at issue in the first event of 1834 and the photographs of bodies in the later event of 2005 have come to be configured in similar ways—as ghosts—and highlight what Peggy Phelan (following Roland Barthes) calls the “belatedness” of the image (Phelan 995). What viewers of both of the following events are missing, the visual experience that both audiences share, is that they look to the image—the body and/or the photograph—to show them what they did not and cannot see: the source of the suffering. The belated, compensatory “gift” that many of the viewers bestowed upon these abused bodies is the pithy but essential recognition of those bodies as human beings.

31
The Lalaurie Scandal of 1834

An episode in nineteenth century New Orleans demonstrates that even under one of the most violent social and economic systems in United States’ history—slavery—it was possible for white slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike to recognize the suffering of black people. On April 10, 1834, a scandal emerged in New Orleans over an upper-class, white Creole woman, Madame Delphine Lalaurie, who, it was revealed, had been torturing her slaves, not as punishment, but for her own wanton amusement. A fire set by an enslaved woman who was kept chained in the kitchen brought Lalaurie’s sadism quite literally into the light. Upon searching the Lalaurie house at 1140 Royal Street in the Vieux Carré, her white neighbors broke into upper chambers to discover, according to one newspaper account,

Seven poor unfortunate slaves …, some chained to the floor, others with chains around their necks fastened to the ceiling, and one poor old man upwards of sixty years of age chained hand and foot and made fast to the floor in a kneeling position. His head bore the appearance of having been beaten until it was broken, and the worms were actually to be seen making a feast of his brains!! A woman had her back literally cooked (if the expression may be used,) with the lash; the very bones might be seen projecting through the skin! ("Horrible Cruelty to Slaves" 18)

Another contemporaneous article announced that, apart from cook,

two more [slaves] were found chained and in deplorable condition. Upstairs and in the garret, four more were found chained, some so weak as to be unable to walk, and all covered with wounds and sores. One a mulatto boy, declares himself to have been chained for five months, being
fed daily with only a handful of meal, and receiving every morning the most cruel treatment. ("Horrible!" 45)

The discrepancies in these two articles and other reports notwithstanding, all of news reports of the time confirm that these slaves (save, it seems, for the coachman) were the victims of Lalaurie’s sadism.

The exposure of the suffering black bodies precipitated, albeit temporarily, an overthrowing of a logic essential to the maintenance of the slave regime: that slave bodies be recognized not as human, but as property.8 The discovery of Madame Lalaurie’s abuse of her slaves ignited a riot by Lalaurie’s white peers that resulted in the destruction of the Lalauries’ home and furnishings. Looking back critically on this event, we can see in the white rioters’ action and their choice of target—the Lalauries’ household property—that an important and radical distinction between human beings and physical property was being made, with the slaves falling under the category of the human, and the edifice and furnishings on the side of property. The population that assembled before the house did so in the name of a (perhaps unspoken) notion of humanity. They sought justice in the name of it, as we will see, and refused, perhaps unconsciously, to equate Madame Lalaurie’s desecration of human property (as the logic of slavery held it) with their desecration of the edifice and its furnishings.9 In so doing, the white rioters rejected one

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8 It is this confusion between property and humanity that made another sensational nineteenth century American case—the Margaret Garner affair of 1956 (later, the inspiration for Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved (New York: Vintage, 1987)—so compelling for abolitionists and for the legal system. When Margaret Garner fled her slave-owner and killed her own daughter, was she guilty of manslaughter (the murder of a human being) or vandalism (the destruction of property)?

9 The problems and paradoxes of equating human beings with private property has been of interest to scholars and legislators throughout and beyond the countries involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Two significant considerations of the phenomenon are Herbert Aptheker’s American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: Columbia U P, 1943, 1993) which demonstrates how the slaves themselves resisted this classification, and Leslie Howard Owens’s The Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old
of the central tenets and ideologies of slavery: that the black bodies were legally and culturally not to be recognized as human.

The radical distinction between property and humanity made by the white rioters is also evident in contemporary newspapers’ qualified censoring of the riot that hedged, “although the provocation pleads much in favor of the excesses committed, yet we dread the precedent. To say the least, it may be excused, but can’t be justified. Summary justice [such as that enacted upon the Lalauries’ house], the result of popular excitement in a government of laws, can never admit of justification, lest the circumstances be ever so aggravating” ("A Horrible Affair" 46). This condemnation of what essentially amounts to mob justice is remarkable precisely because of its qualifications; that is, the article forbids this execution of unauthorized justice and endorses the protection of the Lalauries’ on the basis of law alone. What I have distinguished above as “culture” was significantly not an accessible censoring agent according to the papers because, it seems, cultural conviction did endorse the Lalauries’ extra-legal prosecution for “crimes against humanity.”

The recognition of slaves as legally human was available though rarely enforced in the era of the riot. However, rumors of the Madame’s torture circulated before the discovery of April 10th, some being so compelling as to convince an American New Orleans lawyer to send his French Creole apprentice to inform the Lalauries (her husband disappears from the reports after the raid) of what New Orleans writer George Washington Cable called “the old Black Code”: “Slaves who shall not be properly fed,

clad, and provided for by their masters, may give information thereof to the attorney-
genral, … or the Superior Council, or to all the other officers of justice of an inferior
jurisdiction, and may put the written exposition of their wrongs into their hands; upon
which information, and even ex officio, should the information come from another
quarter, the attorney-general shall prosecute said masters” (Cable 593).

The “Black Code” that Cable quotes in his 1889 retelling of the Lalaurie scandal
(“The ‘Haunted House’ in Royal Street”) is at odds with the notion of the slave as
absolutely outside of legal discourse. The Black Code grants the slave legal recourse to
the (relative) protection of his bodily integrity. Moreover, the practice of this right bears
directly and heavily upon the lives of legally recognized free human beings. The Lalaurie
case illustrates quite plainly how the mistreatment of slaves, when brought to light, could
altogether alter their mistress’s social standing. Indeed, Lalaurie was compelled to
hurriedly flee the city. Henry C. Castellanos, writing in 1905, explained that her flight
was “Actæon-like” in its swiftness since “she in all probability would have been torn to
pieces” (Castellanos 54).

Yet the existence of laws that could be used on behalf of slaves against their
masters (however ill-applied they were) does not, of course, mean they lived lives in any
way equivalent to their masters. The condition of slavery meant that one’s being was
suspended, in legal terms, between materiality and immateriality. Mbembe remarks that,
in slave society, “the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect figure of a shadow. …
The slave is … kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and
intense cruelty and profanity” (Mbembe 21). Mbembe also terms this state of being as “a

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10 One must assume, given the forgiving tone of the article, that the aggressors were Lalaurie’s white peers.
form of death-in-life” (Mbembe 21). In a purely discursive (that is, not actually realized) sense, the Black Codes express the biopolitics of slavery as a terrain in which the dead can make claims on the living; the slaves have some claim on the living (the free white citizenry) precisely because of their right to legal recourse—it is the legal language that gives the slave his (temporary) substance as human.

In the case of Madame Lalaurie’s slaves, however it was the public visibility of their suffering more than any verbal testimony or written account that condemned their mistress. The newspapers at the time struggle with the inadequacy of written language to depict the image that sparked such outrage. Instead, they settled on recounting the emotions that the sight of the suffering and dying black bodies inspired. Of the victims’ wounds, one newspaper at the time commented, “Language is powerless and inadequate to give a proper conception of the horror which a scene like this must have inspired. We shall not attempt it, but leave it rather to the reader’s imagination to picture what it was!” ("Horrible!" 10) Moreover, it seems, many New Orleanians were not satisfied with the written newspaper reports. Photography not yet being available to the mass media, the public sought firsthand views of the slaves’ mangled bodies. Evidently, at some point during the rescue, it was decided that the slaves should be housed in the city prison, and it was there that they remained, on full display, for at least two days. “The whole of yesterday and the preceding day,” the New Orleans Bee reported, “the police jail was crowded by persons pressing forward to witness the unfortunate wretches who had escaped cruelties that would compare with those of a Domitian, a Nero, or a Caligula! Four thousand persons at least, it is computed, have already visited these victims to convince themselves of their sufferings” (New Orleans Bee as qtd. in "Revolting
A later account adds that, “Numberless instruments of torture, not the least noticeable of which were iron collars, ‘carcans,’ with sharp cutting edges, were spread out upon a long deal table, as evidence of guilt” (Castellanos 54). Witnesses to the imprisoned slaves could be sure that these were no phantom bodies, and—with the tools of torture also on display—could see these were no phantom wounds, either.

More to the point, the visible suffering of the enslaved black bodies that were rescued from the Lalaurie mansion inferno was described, almost obsessively, by contemporary newspapers, both abolitionist and mainstream. The image of these dying and dead black bodies was also narrated in subsequent tales of New Orleans lore. And yet, with the exception of one newspaper account’s description of a child slave describing his ill-treatment, we never have access to the language of the black victims themselves. To be sure, these bodies are long deceased and their language necessarily inaccessible to us; however, the omission of their language even at the time of their rescue suggests that the recognition of their bodies as human did not also entail the recognition of their human capacity for self-consciousness. In short, according to the logic of Hegelian subjectivity, the Lalaurie slaves were only partially admitted into the universal community of man.

But I think it is more than this. It seems as if the recognition of these black bodies as human was contingent upon their silence, a silence guaranteed even at the time by their certain impending deaths.

 Nonetheless, the desire for not only the story but the image of the slaves suffering lives on long after their deaths. Phantoms, or, more precisely, ghosts have come to dominate the Lalaurie narrative in the subsequent years. As early as 1889, authors such as New Orleans’s own George Washington Cable were describing the Lalaurie mansion as a
haunted house, though its reputation as such appears to have begun much earlier. It is clear that the slaves’ persistent spectral bodies are a way to maintain the image of their bloody and broken bodies long after those people have died. The Lalaurie ghosts operate as afterimages: transparent, immaterial visual indexes of actual human bodies no longer present that nevertheless effect a response very similar to that which their bodies effected as public images—in the newspapers and in the flesh—in 1834: the onlookers’ recognition of the wounded bodies of Lalaurie’s slaves as evidence of their vulnerability and, by extension, of their humanness. And yet, the cost of having their suffering acknowledged and of being recognized as human is great, and as we shall shortly see, it is a payment that continues to be demanded.

A New Scandal: New Orleans 2005

In recent years New Orleans has supplied newer, haunting images of black bodies in pain and in death after Hurricane Katrina. In the days, weeks, and months that followed the city’s flooding, the world saw numerous corpses—under a shroud behind the Superdome and floating in the streets-turned-rivers—mostly via the mass media (newspaper, magazine, television, and internet) outlets. Cultural theorist Henry Giroux has paid close attention to the Katrina fallout, including the use of reproducible photographic images, in order to understand how the state and the national popular imagination are made to envision the American underclass. He notes that the emergence

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11 Surprisingly little has been published on the uniqueness of the ghosts of African-American slaves. The most relevant discussions—Gladys Marie Fry’s Night Riders in Black Folk History (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1975) and Elliott J. Gorn’s “Black Spirits: The Ghostlore of Afro-American Slaves (American Quarterly, vol. 36, no. 4 [Autumn 1984]: 549–65)—are more concerned with uses of ghosts stories as social regulation (wherein the fearful supernatural beings approximate terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan) or as evidence of religious syncretism, incorporating Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and African beliefs to produce hybrid ghostlore.
of these images, amidst an otherwise “tightly controlled visual landscape” that included a marked absence of Iraq war dead, a “set of troubling visual representations … emerged that both shocked and shamed the nation” (Giroux 172–73). (Figure 1) Even photographs of the living, “poor people, mostly blacks, some Latinos, many elderly, and a few white people, packed into the New Orleans Superdome and the city’s convention center, stranded on rooftops, or isolated on patches of dry highway without any food, water, or any place to wash, urinate, or to find relief from the scorching sun,” conveyed despair and consequently spawned outrage in many of its viewers (Giroux 173). All but forgotten by the federal and local governments, the people stranded in New Orleans, like the slaves of Madame Lalaurie, were living in a state of exception. Henry Giroux has identified them as victims of “the new biopolitics of disposability” (Giroux 175). In this state, those human beings who were positioned by the state as most vulnerable were forced to fend for themselves. And, to add insult to injury, they were expected to do so “without being seen by the dominant society” (Giroux 175).

The federal government was undoubtedly aware of the power of the image and of the damage that pictures of the post-Katrina disaster would do to their own image as sympathetic rescuers. Giroux notes that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) restricted and even prohibited journalists to “accompany rescue boats as they went out to search for storm victims”, thereby preventing the photographing of corpses by the press (FEMA spokeswoman as qtd. in Giroux 173). The tone of FEMA’s instruction implies that this measure of prohibiting photographs is being taken in order to protect the victims, not the bureau, as though the viewing public seeing those images
would immediately blame the victims for their own suffering—an assumption that may be correct, as I shall show.

What this move by the media indicates is not, I argue, a generous protection of the deceased’s dignity, but a refusal to make the truly radical stand and insist that these bodies be viewed as victims. A similar paternalistic measure that had the effect of blunting the assertion of black humanity was undertaken by the anti-Lalaurie rioters in 1834. When it was suggested that actions on the part of the free white citizenry motivated by a concern for the rescued slaves’ welfare might inspire a general slave revolt, the expression of outrage quickly subsided. One 1838 writer, who claimed a general opposition to the institution of slavery, explained the change in attitude as an issue of public safety:

The crowd at first intended to proceed to the examination of other premises, whose proprietors were under suspicion of cruelty to their slaves; but the shouts of triumph which went up from the whole negro population of the city showed that this would not be safe. Fearing a general rising, the gentlemen organized themselves into a patrol, to watch the city night and day till the commotion should have subsided. They sent circulars to all proprietors suspected of cruelty, warning them that the eyes of the city were upon them. This is the only benefit the negroes have derived from the exposure (Martineau 267).

The paternalistic attitude in operation in both the Lalaurie and the post-Katrina scandals operate as tools of mystification, obscuring the larger forces that condoned the atrocities. In both instances, the unseen and unacknowledged villains are the not unrelated institutions that have historically victimized poor and non-white bodies—slavery and capitalism. Of course, as scholars including Eugene Genovese and Eric
Williams\textsuperscript{12} have shown the two institutions are not unrelated, and some critics have gone so far as to term the current situation of the American underclass “neo-slavery.”\textsuperscript{13} The images of a ravaged New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, evidently confirming the heretofore largely unseen and heretofore unacknowledged neo-slavery phenomenon, precipitated international shock and outrage.

However, unlike the expressions of public outrage articulated during the Lalaurie affair, much of the documented fury was articulated by the victims themselves—a significant difference with, as I shall demonstrate, detrimental consequences. Largely due to the press’s initiative in advance of government response, the world was able to hear and to read how those who had been exiled to the Superdome or stranded on highways or separated from family members understood their own situations. The positive effect of hearing directly from the televised victims themselves, a measure that changes them from mute images, cannot be denied; there is little victory to be achieved in remaining a silent subaltern. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, the self-expression of the victimized bodies would have its negative effects as well.

To be sure, government officials were also speaking to the press corps, delivering their own explanation of events and solutions. Amidst the crisis, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin erupted with his own expression of fury in the now-famous radio broadcast (and later televised) admonition in which he declared, “I don't want to see anybody do


\textsuperscript{13} As the 1970 Black Caucus Report of Soledad Central Prison defined it, “Neoslavery is an economic condition, a small knot of men exercising the property rights of their established economic order, organizing and controlling the life style of the slave as if he were in fact property. Succinctly: an economic condition which manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-determination.” Black Caucus Report, “Treatment of prisoners at California Training Facility at Soledad Central” (Sacramento : s.n., 1970).
anymore goddamn press conferences. Put a moratorium on press conferences. Don't do another press conference until the resources are in this city” (Nagin). Nagin’s language, effectively arguing against the use of mass media as mass management, pointed to government officials’ radical misreading of the viewing public, a public that, after seeing television and internet images of the devastated city and its inhabitants, wanted not platitudes but action.

The absence of riotous revolt in the wake of the Katrina disaster can be explained by a constellation of circumstances, including the evacuation and dispersal of New Orleanians which rendered impossible a centralized, public assembly by those most directly affected. Another is the alibi that the hurricane itself, as a natural event, provided to those whose negligence was really a cause of the disaster. As Michael Eric Dyson notes in referencing the hurricane, state and federal officials appealed to the understanding that “a natural disaster not directly caused by human failure … doesn’t directly implicate us; it was an act of God. Even when human hands get involved, our fingerprints are nowhere to be found” (Dyson 3-4). The justifications of Katrina that point to the consequent disaster as a natural one altogether avoid laying the responsibility or, more aptly, the irresponsibility, on the shoulders of government officials and social institutions. A reticence to identify neglectfulness as criminal14 forecloses the kind of critique of the sovereign body and his relationship to mortality—not his, only Others’—that Mbembe and others have forwarded.

14 The degradation of the Ninth Ward levee had been pointed out as being in need of repair for years. Also, the virtual hurricane Pam revealed the degree of disaster a Category Five hurricane would bring to the Gulf Coast. "Hurricane Pam Exercise Concludes." News Release, Federal Emergency Management Agency (2004).
My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive explanation of the lack of an organized post-Katrina civil rights movement, nor is it to diminish or ignore the responses of the many people—largely students and young people—who were motivated to organize and volunteer in and on behalf of New Orleanians and other Gulf Coast inhabitants. The mobilization of people organizing under the banner of activism and the renewed desire to question social and political institutions is no small triumph. However, what I want to focus on here is how the human beings under duress during the Katrina crisis, like the admittedly much smaller Lalaurie event before, are at risk of being figured into an image of New Orleans that envisions crimes against humanity—and quite specifically, crimes against black humanity—as a commodity, and mortality—specifically black mortality—as an attraction.

Worldwide, scenes of atrocity, even when the devastation has been cleaned up (which is to say, rendered invisible to the present-day spectator) have been packaged for uncritical visual consumption. In the scenario to follow, I will suggest that the post-Katrina New Orleans, unlike the Lalaurie-era New Orleans, has not merely ghosts but photography on its side, as those photographs’ reproducibility and circulatability in newspapers, online, and even in photographic catalogs can be used to thwart the occurrence’s insertion into spectacular supernatural—but not actual—lore. While this may seem an ironic or paradoxical twist given the photograph’s ability to provide a portable commodity in a way that a memory of a space cannot, I argue that the two the spaces’ hauntedness, their indexical relationship to a no-longer-visible past event, are not identical and require a more complicated appreciation of how the look and the object of
the look are implicated in an tourist-based economy premised upon devastation and
destruction.

It is at this point that the physiological phenomenon of residual sight known as
afterimage becomes pertinent. The afterimage is the visible imprint of a just-viewed
object that lingers and is seen even after the viewing subject has looked away or closed
his eyes. The afterimage is a kind of visualized but ephemeral picture-memory of an
earlier visual encounter. In this regard, the afterimage is the elusive trace of the actually
seen. The similarity between the ghost-as-afterimage and the photograph-as-afterimage
should be clear; both document that which is absent. That some people try to photograph
ghosts is evidence of a redundant gesture—the desire to capture a trace of a trace of a
body. The persistence of vision that a psychological interpretation of the afterimage
implies indicates a desire to repeatedly bring the past into the present, to never forget.

But as Peggy Phelan tells us, the act of never forgetting enabled by the
photograph that bespeaks a desire to return to a moment is founded upon our
displacement from the moment that the photograph shows. “Our encounter with the
photograph”, Phelan remarks, “always occurs after the event recorded within it. The
belatedness of photography reminds us of our tendency to arrive too late and perhaps
especially to arrive too late to appreciate the unique drama of our mortality” (Phelan 993–
95). In short, we never forget because we never really saw in the first place. As Roland
Barthes argues, the photographic image can be deceptive and insidious, replacing and
even producing a “memory” of an event and time to which we never bore witness in the
first place: “Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory …, but it actually
blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory” (Barthes Camera Lucida, 91).
Interestingly enough, it is the effect of another “too late” arrival—the delayed response of governmental aid—along with a failure of foresight in levee engineering that characterizes the tragedy that is New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. (It also echoes the “too late” awareness of Madame Lalaurie’s abuse.) The viewer of these scenes is thereby inscribed in a signifying system of melodrama that Linda Williams explains “involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of “too late” and “in the nick of time”” (L. Williams Playing the Race Card, 30). Absent the “action,” the timely rescuing gesture of state or federal agencies, this failure to arrive on time that is marked by the photograph and in the foundering of Gulf Coast citizens is, as Phelan and Williams intimate, imbued with pathos.

In the end, it is space that is shown in the image, by which I mean not just the location where the photograph was taken, but more significantly the space between the onlooker and the object of his look. Indeed, in many ways, space defines the image. Be it a body or a photograph, there must be some spatial remove to enable its recognition as an image, including here the image of human vulnerability, just as the Other must exist at some remove from the Self in order to be perceived as such. This is the basis of alterity. However, another essential element that is equally if not more abstract than space and that makes haunting and the photography of haunting legible as such is time, or, more precisely, temporal displacement. Explaining this centrality of time in photography, Roland Barthes claims that “In the Photograph, Time’s immobilization assumes only an

15 I am thinking here, too, of the Gestalt-ist sense of space articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception (London and New York: Routledge, 1962 [1945]), 284.
excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engorged” (Barthes *Camera Lucida*, 91).

Furthermore, to repeat an earlier observation regarding memory, Barthes contends that the photograph interferes with the individual’s own experience of time, supplanting the viewer’s memory with its own “counter-memory” (Barthes *Camera Lucida*, 91). Indeed, the original event, the ghost’s and the photograph’s referent—the body—may recede infinitely or, strangely enough, proceed indiscriminately, breaching the bounds of the imagination and re-entering reality. This crossing of the boundary between the imagined space (of death) and of the domain of the real (or of the living) is, after all, what underwrites the fear that ghosts and hauntings induce. The problem with which we are presented in the Lalaurie and Katrina cases is how to ensure that the afterimages of those stricken bodies do not fall (again) outside of a notion of humanity.

**The Commercialization of Disaster and the (Short)Selling of Humanity**

Today, the Lalaurie House, as it is called, is a tourist destination, one of the many places to be visited along the New Orleans haunted house trail. Despite its present owner’s insistence that no supernatural activity occurs, it remains a significant object of study to recreational ghost-seekers and professional investigators of the paranormal alike. Recent photographs of the house showing wisps of smoke and odd shadows have been published as evidence of ghostly apparitions and “ectoplasm”. Putatively haunted since the Lalauries’ eviction, the house at 1140 Royal Street has been designated the most haunted house in New Orleans and, as one paranormalist notes, “in many early writings of the city, it has been referred to simply as ‘the haunted house.’” While such a title is more than a little vague, everyone seems to know exactly what house the storyteller is
referring to!” (Taylor 66) Another guide to haunted sites in Louisiana adds, “The only concession to its ranking as the number-one haunted house in New Orleans, a must-see on every haunted tour, is a simple handwritten note posted over the doorbell: Private residence. Not open for tours” (Sillery 144-45).  

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, other parts of New Orleans are also haunted and have become tourist destinations. The irony of the parallel to the Lalaurie House is that, in this case, private residences are marketed specifically as being “open for tours.” Indeed, the aftermath of Katrina is interesting with respect to tourism, precisely because of how it makes parts of New Orleans simultaneously invisible and hypervisible—a paradox that Maurice Wallace and others have noted is familiar to black Americans. It seems ironic that those areas and people who were normally not pictured would come, during the crisis, to be so intensely photographed and scrutinized. To cite the title of anthropologists Rachel Breunlin and Helen A. Regis essay on how to rebuild New Orleans, the flood of Katrina “put the [mostly black and working-class] Lower Ninth Ward on the map” (Breunlin and Regis 744). As fiction author John Updike has remarked, “Katrina, as the disaster is called for short, was a black disaster, exposing the black poverty that, dwelling in the low-lying areas of the metropolis, stayed out of the view of the tourists” (Updike 8). Nevertheless, these areas that were formerly off-limits became primary destinations for both press corps and tourists. Today, a century and a half after the Lalaurie affair produced its morbid exhibition of suffering black bodies, there are other gruesome displays available for spectatorial consumption in New Orleans. One tourism company, Grayline Tours, currently offers on its website a special “Hurricane

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Katrina” tour of New Orleans during which, the company’s website states, “We'll drive past an actual levee that ‘breached’ and see the resulting devastation that displaced hundreds of thousands of U.S. residents”. The website also advertises a “Souvenir Hurricane Katrina book available for purchase at departure point!” (City Tours: Hurricane Katrina Tour)

At both of these destinations—the Lalaurie House and the once-flooded areas of New Orleans—the tourist is directed by guides (human and/or literary) to look at particular spaces that could be described as haunted. The object of these tours is to exhibit locations that have been inscribed with meanings, such as the human cost of slavery’s sadism (the Lalaurie affair) and the failure of the last remaining superpower to protect its citizens (the post-Katrina disaster). The manner in which the sites signify and how they are seen is largely dependant upon the spectator-tourist’s recognition of the victims as human beings who have now become afterimages evacuated of agency, beyond the possibility of self-expression, whose previous suffering continues to haunt the place.

But the visibility and, in turn, the believability of black suffering is not only questioned by the current spectators who are faced (arguably) with ghosts. While the victim status of Madame Lalaurie’s slaves was rendered clearly legible by the wounds on the bodies, the victim designation conferred upon the hurricane Katrina survivors was often questioned by a mass viewing public in the days of and immediately following the catastrophe. As Cheryl I. Harris and Devon W. Carbado put it, “this victim status proved to be highly unstable”: “In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, the media pointedly criticized the slow pace at which the federal government was responding to the disaster.
But the critical stance was short-lived and quickly gave way to a focus on the breakdown of law and order, a frame that activated a familiar stereotype about black criminality” (Harris and Carbado 97). Unlike Lalaurie’s victims who ultimately died at the moment that their bodies appeared as images of human vulnerability and to whom absolutely no agency was attributed, the victims of Katrina who acted on the part of their own survival were, in the eyes of the mass media and its public, altogether too capable to merit the status of “victim.” If anything, the Katrina survivors were victims of their own industry whose quite logical work toward diminishing their experience and, consequently, their appearance of vulnerability actually mitigated their recognition as victims. In other words, by acting autonomously to rescue themselves from death through acts designated as “looting” by the Associated Press17, the survivors were unwittingly appealing to another racially-coded image—that black people are dangerous and to be feared.

The only people who were allowed unquestionably to claim and to maintain victim status were the dead. It is here, again, that we are confronted with the untenable price of the black body’s recognition as human. As with Lalaurie’s victims, a scenario is arranged wherein the dead black body is more readily identified and discussed in terms of the notion of humanity. Again we see that the criteria for being spoken for as human is that one must only and always be spoken for, incapable in death to speak one’s own suffering. Though the living Katrina victims’ states of abandonment and deprivation explicitly indicated their vulnerability, it was those who were conquered by vulnerability—the dead—who were clearly recognizable as vulnerable, even though they were most certainly not in a position to themselves appreciate this recognition of their

17 For analysis of the Associated Press’s inconsistent use of the terms “looting” and “finding” in photo captions, see Harris and Carbado, op cit.
vulnerability and humanity. The dead of Katrina (and of Lalaurie) were fixed—like the photographic object—in a state of victimhood by their deaths. This fixing made it possible to accept the dead black bodies as non-threatening images. And indeed, neighboring townspeople admitted that they would rather contribute to the post-Katrina effort by hosting dead black people than by housing living black people. Entry into the status of the preferred dead was articulated as a literal welcome by at least one neighboring resident whose town was used to house the Katrina dead; said St. Gabriel resident Theresa Roy, “I'd rather have them here dead than alive. And at least they're not robbing you and you [don’t] have to worry about feeding them” (Zahn).

During the same broadcast in which Roy announced her preference, reporters questioned chief of New Orleans police Eddie Compass about recently obtained photographs showing bodies that had been mutilated posthumously at the Convention Center. Compass characterized the situation as evidence of “a small percentage of people that prey upon our citizens, our good citizens, throughout urban America. It was unfortunate that these good people in our system, these good people in our society, were trapped with these deviants for such a long period of time” (Zahn). Implicit in Compass’s comment is the sense that all of the deceased were “good people” who did not deserve to be “trapped with these deviants” and subjected to post-mortem desecration. By questioning Compass’s statement I do not mean to imply, conversely, that there are definitively “bad people” who do deserve ill treatment. What I want to point out is how Compass’s language is shaped by an artificial distinction between good and bad that actually reflects a distinction between passive and active that returns us to the disturbing price of recognition as “good”—i.e. death. Indeed, according to Compass, the dead are
unquestionably “good” and, insofar as they are undeserving of mutilation, innocent solely because they are passive victims.

This harsh good-bad dichotomy, the need for there to be clearly defined “good guys and bad guys” is consistent with an overall impulse to “Hollywoodize” the Katrina disaster and points to the mass-media and tourist spectators’ desires to look upon discrete images of suffering that had been predigested by the mass media. As one behavioral scientist observes, “For the most part, Katrina was constructed as Hollywood would see it, as a spectacle that divides people into villains and heroes and reveals their true natures” (Markus 5). His comment echoes Susan Sontag’s assertion that “a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation” (Sontag Regarding the Pain of Others, 21). More to the point, Despina Kakoudaki suggests in her essay reflecting upon the disaster film genre in the post-9/11 landscape, the turn to this cinematic genre “stems from an inability to find appropriate language to describe what is going on” (Kakoudaki 256).

Reporters and other commentators are not the only ones to have called upon cinematic tropes to supplement a seemingly inadequate language. Even hurricane survivors themselves default to the Hollywood paradigm to describe the destruction they witnessed in New Orleans. In an article posted on CNN’s website describing the accompanying video of returning residents taking a bus tour of the Lower Ninth Ward, reporter Daniel Sieberg explains that “Even the residents on the bus described it as looking like a movie set. There's just nothing else to compare it to” (Sieberg). The residents are most certainly referring to an abstract conception of the Hollywood disaster film. But the disaster film, unlike reality, has the advantage of coming to a tidy
conclusion. One might also say that the images of the film resist the lingering, disquieting feature of ghosts and afterimages, that the film provides images, indeed manufactures images whose intention it is to quietly and quickly fade from view. Kakoudaki’s assessment of many people’s post-9/11 desire is fitting here: “It would be great if this indeed were a movie; then we would know that underneath it all lies a momentary sense of contained danger, and we would know what to expect” (Kakoudaki 256). In reality, however, the effects of the real destruction “creates frighteningly open ended realms of meaning” that are experienced on a daily basis by people who (still) have no clear view to a positive resolution (Kakoudaki 257).

Just as disaster film audiences are drawn to the experience of witnessing large scale destruction without personal risk or responsibility, so are the new “disaster tourists” drawn to images of large-scale destruction—only now in actual cities and communities—with the same voyeuristic detachment exploited by mainstream Hollywood cinema. A question posed by Tulane University historian Lawrence Powell resonates here: “Will [New Orleans’s] recovery result in one of those ‘lost cities’ that have been restored solely as sites of tourism and myth?” (Powell as qtd. in Dyson xi). A related question is: How can those parts of New Orleans that are marked by the post-Katrina disaster avoid becoming sites of tourism and myth? One essential task is to let the ghosts linger, but to constantly invoke the discourse of human vulnerability and suffering to reinforce a notion of universal humanity that would not only foment empathy with the Katrina dead and displaced, but also outrage for those people and institutions that violated the notion of humanity by privileging their humanity over others’.
Using Hollywood film as a referent to describe an actual disaster indicates the problem facing those of us who would harness the image to accomplish activist ends. We find ourselves asking how to prove the actual stakes of this real life disaster when the landscape itself looks—in photos and in person—wholly unreal. For artist Robert Polidori, whose chromogenic prints of a destroyed New Orleans were displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2006, the answer was to photograph the disaster’s aftermath. In New Orleans, Polidori “found real barges lifted onto real embankments, bayous where streets used to be, insulation like rendered whale blubber in giant mounds on sidewalks, S.U.V.’s propped against houses like flying buttresses and bungalows crumpled like balls of paper,” and exploited these “real” discoveries despite the contemporary art photography impulse “to stage cinematic pictures that look gothic and otherworldly, like Hollywood film stills” (Kimmelman). (Figure 2)

It is by irony and omission that Polidori’s photographs illustrate the human casualties of the Katrina aftermath. As in the ghost photographs of the Lalaurie house, there are, in Polidori’s images, no human bodies to be seen. At best, we see traces of human presence and industry—buildings, balustrades, doorways, and ceiling fans that reference the human beings whose lives they ornamented and served. (Figure 3) Other images focus tightly on abandoned objects like shoes or a light switch plate. (Figure 4) In landscapes so resonant with human touch, the absence of bodies (or, if one wishes to speak of ghosts, the invisibility of bodies) appears eerie and apocalyptic. Here again, the aesthetics made familiar through disaster films can be called upon to describe the scenes: the landscapes on view in Polidori’s New Orleans series are equivalent to the post-apocalyptic cityscapes in horror films like Dawn of the Dead or thrillers such as 28 Days,
both of which are set in locations wherein the majority of inhabitants have been wiped out through plagues of some kind. In the resolutely un-natural, that is, manmade locations like the Lalaurie house exterior and Polidori’s photographs of New Orleans, the resounding absence of bodies depicted in the photographs points to the traumatic events that evacuated these places of human life.

Of course, the absence of life is, in a physiological (as opposed to a spatial) sense, the definition of death. And as Roland Barthes has theorized, photography is always implicitly concerned with death as its obsession with “actuality” presumes mortality (Barthes Camera Lucida, 92). More than any living portrait that, as Barthes has it, “produces Death while trying to preserve life”, these images which depict the absence of life invoke the inhabitants’ mortality (Barthes Camera Lucida, 92). Polidori’s images, then, may be interpreted as death photographs.

But if we consider the manmade elements, what I have called the “unnatural” features of Polidori’s images, as traces of an absent humanity, we can also consider these to be photographs of hauntings. Ultimately, the absence of the inhabitants of the homes Polidori has photographed—irregardless of whether that absence was the product of an exodus or an actual death—renders these spaces haunted, shaped only by the trace of the bodies that were once there, before the photograph and before the flood. The photographs that we are left with operate as both harbingers and talismans of a society’s failure to protect its own, including its most vulnerable.

Polidori’s photographs do portray New Orleans as a ghost town, its buildings and their interior disarray indicating that the residents left suddenly and in the midst of their activities. Of course we know that this was not the case; New Orleanians, particularly
those in the Lower Ninth Ward, foundered for days in attics and on roofs only to be
moved ("evacuated" does not seem the appropriate word) to the Superdome and highway
overpasses and left again to fend for themselves for days on end. This contradiction
points to the lingering but displaced presence of these houses’ missing residents. As far
as we know, in the time that the photograph documents, the residents were surely
somewhere, suffering, dead, or dying, supplying this space and this image with its
spectral referent.

Although the introductory essay to Polidori’s book by curator Jeff L. Rosenheim
states that the “book makes no attempt to excavate what went wrong in New Orleans or
why the state and federal response remains even today predisposed to cronyism, gross
fraud, and corruption; [preferring] instead … [to offer] tribute and quiet testimony to a
city that care forgot,” one detects in the images of manmade structures the unnaturalness
of this “natural” disaster (Rosenheim 10). Rosenheim goes on to note that

It is not surprising that Polidori’s most enduring and distressing
photographs of New Orleans are interiors, all made without the modern
convenience of electricity. Perhaps due to the exceptionally long
exposures—thirty seconds to four minutes each—required for his 5x7”
sheet film negatives, Polidori seems to have been able to record not just
the physical residue of the inhabitants lives, but also something of the air
that generations of anonymous New Orleanians had breathed in and out.
The pictures succeed because, in part, Polidori eschewed nostalgia for
something far more complex—the poignancy of absence. One source of
our lasting attraction to these merciless domestic landscapes is the certain
knowledge that they will soon be gone forever (Rosenheim 11, my
emphasis).

Polidori, too, it seems, is interested in ghosts, and not merely the ghosts produced
in the wake of Katrina. For what the photographs of a destroyed New Orleans illustrate is
the disruption of continuous inhabitation, of generations of living, and the sudden death of a community. Rosenheim’s desire to link photographic exposure time to the visual “capture” of the “breath” of “anonymous New Orleanians” points to the impoverishment of the camera—like the impoverishment of the written word—to have arrived on time in order to make clearly visible that which is so central to these photographs’ meaning: human life.

The displays of the suffering, dying, and dead black bodies in the Lalaurie and the Katrina cases indicate what can happen—both in terms of political agitation and in terms of political disposition—when one looks through the lens of the notion of humanity. The mass mob that formed as an immediate consequence of the exposure of the slave bodies, which also served to expose Delphine Lalaurie’s sadism suggests one consequence of recognizing the other as one whose humanity has been violated. Still, the exhibitions and exposures of post-Katrina New Orleans reinforce the notion that the issue is fraught as the recognition of one’s vulnerability can beneficially forge a connection between the onlooker and the object of his look through the ideology of humanity, but the risk is that such recognition might come too late, at the point when the body being seen has died and in his death has lost any ability to enjoy this gift of his humanity recognized.
Chapter Two: Framed and Shamed Bodies: Lynching Images in the Exhibition Gallery

The model of visual transaction discussed in the preceding chapter focuses on the questionable benefits bestowed upon the visual beheld body who is recognized in his suffering and death as a human being. In alluding to the reactions of the onlookers to the spectacles of victimhood, I also suggest an issue that I wish to further explore in this and in the remaining chapters, namely, that considering the look that is directed at images of human beings’ suffering and death demands a more nuanced and complex understanding of how looking shapes the viewing subject’s political disposition and identity. This chapter in particular is concerned with the way in which the viewing environment and the awareness of being seen seeing shapes the spectator’s sense of self—a shaping that I argue has implications for the character of social interactions and public discourse.

The objects of the look in this chapter are the bodies—white and black—that populate lynching images. At the end of the chapter I will discuss in more detail the particular political and theoretical implications of these looking and looked-at subjects. First, however, I wish to pay special attention to the unique viewing dynamic afforded by the exhibition gallery as it has been one prominent environment in which many of these images have been seen. A public space oriented toward full visual disclosure, the exhibition gallery puts not only the object of the look on display, but also puts on display the look itself.
Looking in the Gallery

To begin this analysis of looking relations in the exhibition space, we must first acknowledge the peculiarities of the gallery environment in which the two antilynching shows were held. Nowhere is the photographed or painted body more privileged as an object-to-be-looked-at than in the art gallery. The design of the modern art gallery appeared at nearly the same time as the artworks it meant to highlight. The “white cube,” as it has come to be called, was thought to usefully minimize distracting elements, and to offer a viewing environment unmarked by symbols of era, culture, and class. Yet as Frederic Jameson has noted, the ostensibly utopian gesture of deleting all signifying elements to create an ideally neutral space is itself mired in its own temporal, cultural, and classist preoccupations (Jameson 59). These white-walled, windowless, minimally ornamented rooms do not, then, offer a neutral ground against which the “real” objects of aesthetic scrutiny can be seen. Even as the utopian architectural ideology “transformed [the gallery] into antiseptic, laboratory-like spaces—enclosed, isolated, artificially illuminated, and apparently neutral environments—where viewers could study works of art which were displayed as so many isolated specimens,” it also “contributed to a new aesthetic of reification, an aesthetic that redefined both the work of art and the viewer, who was prompted to gaze upon the work with something approaching scientific detachment” (Wallach 79).

Consequently, the modern gallery is a remarkable environment in which the visitor is made to feel apart—and, recalling the utopian ideals, perhaps even safe—from the outside world. At least one scholar has posited that “by presenting objects as signifiers within an artificially created institutional frame, museums underline their
irretrievable otherness, their separation from the world of lived experience” (Sherman xii). Indeed, the gallery interiors, with their singular intention of displaying art, are in stark contrast to an external world in which every person on the street inhabits his or her own space that is determined by a unique and discrete motivation (to go to work, to go home, to shop, etc.). Additionally, as I shall demonstrate, the privileging of aesthetic values in those galleries specifically committed to displaying Art runs the risk of further distances its spectators from the external world—an acute risk for politicized art projects such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP’s) 1935 antilynching art show. If the gallery exhibition is already distinguishable from the external world because it so conspicuously orients the visitor’s primary objective of looking, then the gallery exhibition of art is notable for further directing its visitor to look with an eye keenly attuned to aesthetic judgment.

Though they embody ostensibly embody competing impulses, the gallery (a supposedly elite space) and the movie theater (its populist counterpart) parallel one another in significant ways. One element that further distinguishes the gallery from the cinema is the acknowledgment of the passage of time. In the movie theater, the passage of time is clearly marked by the progression of the film being screened and most often by the unwinding of the narrative. In the “unshadowed, white, clean, artificial” space of the modern gallery, on the other hand, the “ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its

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1 For an analysis of the temporal implications of narrative in film, see Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), especially the section of Chapter Two on “Temporal and Spatial Order.” One can also argue that film disregards time as well because, by embracing the film’s invitation to escape, the film spectator ignores the passage of time in the world outside the theater. Yet the art gallery, as what I call a bracketed space, also encourages this.
vicissitudes. Art [here] exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of ‘period’ (late modern), there is no time” (O’Doherty 15).

Another important difference between the gallery and the movie theater is the use of light. Like the movie theater, the gallery is defined by its visitors’ motivation to look; neither the film nor the exhibition objects are viewed accidentally. Also like the movie theater, the exhibition gallery offers the assurance that there are no negative consequences for looking. Indeed, one is invited if not expected to look closely, to scrutinize, and to analyze\(^2\), and, when called for, to do so in the name of aesthetics. However, the shadowless, highly illuminated space of the gallery brings the manner of looking itself into the light. If in the cinema the spectator feels free to gaze\(^3\) at the bodies on-screen largely because of the enveloping and isolating darkness (to say nothing of the fixed seating)\(^4\), in the gallery, by contrast, the fine art spectator is frequently in a


\(^3\) E. Ann Kaplan’s revision of cinematic gaze theory has allowed us to discuss the gaze in terms of power relations and not simply in terms of gender as Laura Mulvey proposed in 1975. E. Ann Kaplan, Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (New York and London: Routledge, 1983), 2.

brilliantly illuminated space wherein shadows are discouraged so that the spectator might view as much of an object as possible. Importantly, unlike the cinema, the gallery also illuminates the visitors themselves as they regard or disregard the objects on display and each other.

The high-key illumination of the gallery interior is one revision of a prior instantiation (now itself under critical scrutiny) that attempted to address the populist desires of curators, directors, and other critical art thinkers who wished to escape the elitist cast of the private residence and the aesthetics of the early modern salon. If the first step in this endeavor was to remove art from the private residence, the next move was to make more work visually available to a larger audience. Nevertheless, the principle that determined this comparatively populist gesture simply defined the “gallery [as] a place with a wall, which is covered with pictures” (O'Doherty 15). The resulting environment treated “masterpieces as wallpaper, each one not … separated out and isolated in space” in the style to which we have now become accustomed. Instead, larger paintings were placed high on the wall; smaller ones near the floor (O'Doherty 16). In Samuel Morse’s 1833 painting Exhibition Gallery at the Louvre, in which paintings are hung four and five high, the Mona Lisa appears at waist level.

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The logic of availability espoused by nineteenth century European curators was superseded in the “high” modern age by a logic of neutrality (masquerading, some might say, as a universality). Works—and not just paintings now—are spaced so that the viewing of one does not “interfere” with the viewing of another. What abides, however, and is in fact even more pronounced through the modernist endorsements of ahistoricism and atemporality, is the authorizing function of the gallery to proffer the mantle of *Art* upon all objects placed therein. “The white cube,” one scholar notes, “became art-in-potency, its enclosed space an alchemical medium. Art became what was deposited therein, removed and regularly replaced” (O'Doherty 87). In this transition, the gallery spectator was seemingly granted more ways (not to mention opportunities) to view what was on display. In actuality, however, the look of the gallery spectator became in at least one sense even more restricted than before; whereas the salon space justified multiple activities, not only looking, the gallery more or less instructed its visitor to look and to look, specifically, at its art. In effect, the gallery “comments on the ‘art’ within, to which it is contextual. And it comments on the wider context—street, city, money, business—that contains it” (O'Doherty 87). Nonetheless, as I shall argue later, the gallery visitor’s look cannot be entirely determined by this prescription of the gallery space. Although technically incidental, the visitor’s ability to look at other visitors engaged in the occupation of looking contributes significantly to defining how the viewing body inhabits the exhibition space.
Although the revisionist emphasis of current museum studies on local context and situatedness\(^6\) provides a good critical lens through which one can usefully critique the mystification of power in the art institution, the modernist gallery’s ideal of total visibility (ultimately an unachievable goal) does reflect revealingly not just upon the architecture of the early modern gallery space, but also upon the hierarchy of scopic regimes that were concealed in that period. Dating from pre-modern art movements onward, the fine art spectator has assumed a superior position with respect to the work of art itself, a position not unlike that of the traditional film spectator who luxuriates in the notion that he can see without being seen.

Edouard Manet’s famous painting *Olympia* (1865) is a fine example of a portrait that denies the spectator invisibility in part by the represented gaze of the painting’s primary subject (*Figure 5*): “It is a gaze which gives nothing away, as the reader attempts to interpret its blatancy; a look direct and yet guarded, poised very precisely between address and resistance. … it is her look, her action on us, her composure, her composition of herself” (Clark 115). In the painting, the prostitute Olympia—wearing shoes, a bracelet, and a ribbon around her neck, and concealing her sex with a strategically placed palm—gazes out at the spectator, effectively returning his gaze (and it is certainly his gaze for, as Griselda Pollock notes, “To recognize the gender specific conditions of [this] painting[‘s] existence one need only imagine a female spectator …”\(^7\) [Pollock 123]).

While several art historians have observed that Olympia’s gaze confronts the spectator…

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\(^7\) Of course, Pollock’s comment here is heteronormative as one need only imagine the desiring female subject or the non-desiring male subject. Nonetheless, Pollock’s point is well-taken in that Olympia’s positioning as a prostitute and an object of sexual desire, seemingly sharing no characteristics with her viewer, is designated an object of the male gaze, overdetermined though that gaze may be.
(invoking, Gerald Needham tells us, a convention of erotic photography common at the time) it can also be claimed, as I wish to here, that Olympia’s gaze indict[s] the male spectator who is either unaccustomed to being the object of a woman’s desiring gaze or would prefer that this expression of desire be kept secret.

What I want to argue here is that it is in fact the prospect of the spectator’s gaze being scrutinized by others that prompts a self-assessment in line with social expectations. The fear of being seen seeing that determines the reaction of some of Olympia’s audience will be important to our understanding of the recent display of lynching photography. Equally important is the evident absence of this anxiety over being seen seeing that enabled the original production of photographs of lynchings.

It is not Olympia’s returned gaze that indict[s] its viewers, or, at least, not that gaze alone, for one can easily think of numerous portraits that also depict a woman looking out from the canvas, including the women depicted in Ingres’s *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) and DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503–07). One significant feature of *Olympia* is that she is not pictured alone. She is attended by a black woman (who many scholars have assumed to be her maid) who appears to offer a bouquet of flowers as she gazes upon Olympia. If the male spectator would prefer to keep the erotic visual exchange invisible and private, that privacy is violated not only by the spectator’s peers but by the presence, albeit painted, of this black woman—a woman who, unlike the spectator’s peers, will always be there, looking at her looking at him. I maintain that it is the black woman in the painting who bears silent witness to the potential erotic encounter. Quite contrary to the defiant power of Olympia, this woman’s power—the power to inspire anger or embarrassment in the male spectator—derives not from her returning the gaze (presumably, she is not...
figured here as an object to be looked at, to be desired), but from her looking at the gaze itself. It is the black woman’s directed gaze that transforms the man’s interested erotic look into a shameful look.

I do not mean to universalize the viewing positions of Olympia’s nineteenth century male spectators and the painted and therefore imaginary black woman in the picture. I offer this analysis simply as an anecdote that demonstrates how the spectator’s gaze becomes visible in social spaces and how that visibility might work to interrupt an otherwise easy consumption of prurient imagery. This is precisely Mieke Bal’s project in critiquing the exhibition of archival imperialist photographs by means of a “game”: “The game is called: you are what you watch: I = Eye. … Granted, this is not a way to make life easier for the museumgoer. This game looks a lot like work: scholarly, critical, analytic work” (Bal 27). What precipitates this game-that-is-work is “imagining what it would be like if suddenly out of one of these images there emerged a soft giggling; the women came to life and pointed laughingly at a part of your body you were so quietly watching and assessing”—in a word, shame (Bal 25–27). It is, in fact, when the viewer discovers that consumption of this imagery might not be easy and pleasurable that the censoring affect known as shame can emerge. As I shall later demonstrate, shame is not only activated by the knowledge of one’s being seen seeing, but also by the awareness of one’s own interest—an interest that verges on pleasure—in the socially unacceptable scene presented to him.

The sections that follow argue for a consideration looking relations that can accommodate the politics involved in viewing images of lynching. Like Bal, I believe that a critical—and, to my mind, preferable—viewing position is one that is touched by
shame. As Elspeth Probyn puts it, “Shame goes to the heart of who we think we are,” affecting both our “self-esteem … and … our value systems” (x, my emphasis). It is, to paraphrase Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conception of “coiling”, an instance in which the viewer and the viewed become a single object, implicated in a single society—“the body sees itself, touches itself seeing” and is grafted into a single “flesh” (Merleau-Ponty The Visible and the Invisible, 146). As in the scenario of shameful viewing, the Self and the look are merged, both end up signifying the same being—the viewer.

The psychoanalytic work on shame, like Probyn’s work cited above, understands shame as a social experience. The insight allows us to consider the public viewing scenarios entailed in the two exhibitions discussed below in terms of being-seen-seeing. As in the theories of shame produced by Probyn, Eve Sedgwick, Adam Frank, and Sylvan Tomkins, this project holds that shame is an important and complex human affect that “compels an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves” (Probyn xii). In reckoning with images of lynching, the critical spectator is forced to confront, visually, the depiction of an act we now (for the most part) consider not only illegal but shameful. Consequently, it is the experience of shame in looking that points to an underlying investment in the notion of shared humanity.

**Spectacular Shame**

The notion of shared humanity, I argue, is what enables the subject who looks at images of death and suffering to imagine the violence being visited upon the other as being visited upon the self. Abolitionist writer John Rankin parlayed this phenomenon into an antislavery strategy when he wrote to his slaveholding brother about an intimate
encounter with horror without actually offering the experience of it. A Presbyterian minister, Rankin was an active abolitionist, involved in the Underground Railroad and occasionally published open letters to his brother on the topic of slavery in the local Ripley, Ohio newspaper. He eventually published these letters in 1826 under the title *Letters on Slavery, addressed to Mr. Thomas Rankin, merchant at Middlebrook, Augusta County, Virginia*. Looking at these letters, African Americanist Saidiya Hartman determines that “By providing the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence, embellished by his own fantasy of slavery’s bloodstained gate, Rankin hoped to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved” (Hartman 18). She goes on to quote from Rankin’s text: “We are naturally too callous to the sufferings of others, and consequently prone to look upon them with cold indifference, until, in imagination we identify ourselves with the sufferers, and make their sufferings our own. … When I bring it near, inspect it closely, and find that it is inflicted on men and women who possess the same nature and feelings with myself, my sensibility is roused” (Rankin as qtd. in Hartman 18). Hartman explains that, in these letters to his brother, Rankin “act[ed] as surrogate witness” to the suffering of enslaved men, women, and children (Hartman 17). In his pronouncement of disgust at the “abominations of slavery”, Rankin appears to hope that his slaveholding brother will eventually share his disgust. Rankin even goes so far in his writing to substitute himself and members of his own family in the word image he produces for his brother’s edification:
My flighty imagination added much to the tumult of passion for persuading me, for the moment, that I myself was a slave, and with my wife and children placed under the reign of terror. I began in reality to feel for myself, my wife, and my children—the thoughts of being whipped at the pleasure of a morose and capricious master, aroused the strongest feelings of resentment … (Rankin as qtd. in Hartman 18).

The impulse behind Rankin’s prose—to forge white identification with black bodies so that the latter may be recognized as humans like the former—bespeaks an argument for the recognition of a common humanity that is in the process of being disregarded. Nevertheless, racial differentiation continues to determine his thinking. Hartman rightly argues that in this passage, “Rankin becomes a proxy and the other’s pain is acknowledged to the degree that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of this substitution the object of identification threatens to disappear” (Hartman 19). She locates in Rankin’s prose a dangerous dismissal, not only of the black bodies’ actual suffering, but of an acknowledgment of black bodies’ ability to suffer as profoundly as white bodies. As a result, the image of the unfeeling black body is preserved and the notion of a shared humanity remains in question.

One might suspect that Rankin, being a white man himself, would have an easier time identifying with another white man. Yet in his prose, these white bodies are conspicuously absent, which is to say that they are depicted as exhibiting a selfhood that is incapable of being represented in terms of his notion of universal humanity. Once Rankin’s experiment in cross-racial identification is underway (an experiment over which, according to Rankin, he has little control), the white master remains exactly as he was—morose and capricious and violent. Rankin is not actually depending upon cross-racial identification to produce his image of humanity-in-violation. The black subjects in
Rankin’s scenario do not take the place of the white subjects (as Hartman observes, they disappear altogether) nor do all of the white subjects take up the position of the black subjects (Rankin and his family do become slaves, but the master remains unchanged). It appears that it is the image of suffering that embodies the humanity that Ranking wishes to invoke—the image, but not the bodies depicted therein. Nonetheless, the notion of humanity is still the issue. He is certain only of his and his family’s humanity, even as he recognizes in the slave-driving scene elements that would inspire suffering in a human being. What he does not really recognize, Hartman notes, is the black body’s ability to suffer as a human being. I want to pursue the reading that Hartman begins here by suggesting that in dismissing the white master, Rankin also fails to recognize sadism as a human capacity.

Something essential blocks Rankin from acknowledging the slave master as someone whose impulses (and, consequently, whose version of humanity) might be accessible to his own. If the slaves’ bodies are rendered invisible through Rankin’s act of identification, the master’s body is, from the outset, never visible at all. What I am arguing here is that identification with the slave master is figured not just as inefficacious in terms of the argument he is establishing for his brother—that there is a universal brotherhood of man—but is altogether impossible. According to Rankin’s conception of humanity, the master is beyond recognition.

And yet, with a little effort, he could be recognized, just as the numerous people who surround the charred and contorted bodies in lynching photographs could be recognized by both a population and a legal system that forbade such acts. Jacquie Jones articulates how the possibility of a refusal to recognize can prove both illuminating and
terrifying. Looking at the photograph of the lynching of Tom Shipp and Abe Smith as a child in the 1970s, Jones comes to terms with the appalling notion that, given the date, the lynchers in the photograph might still be alive.⁸ (Figure 6) It is evidence to her that “a moment … was not quite spent, not quite gone” (Jones 154). Nevertheless, Jones’s discovery is mocked by the photograph’s subtitle—“by party or parties unknown”—a refrain often used to explain the failure to prosecute lynchers⁹. Of course, these parties are known, or were at one time, and some members of the crowd had no qualms about pointing themselves out in the scene.

In one copy of the Shipp-Smith photograph, the words “Bo pointing to his niga” are written on the surrounding matte. Another postcard showing the lynching of Jesse Washington has the words “This is the Barbeque we had last night my picture is to the left with a cross over it your son Joe,” inscribed on the reverse.¹⁰ (Figure 6) These words which confirm, undeniably, the participation of “Bo” and “Joe” put into language the righteous physical posture of the white mob in these and other lynching photographs. New York Times art critic Roberta Smith, in her review of the New York exhibition of “Without Sanctuary”, writes, “What takes the breath away is the sight of all the white people, maskless, milling about, looking straight at the camera as if they had nothing to be ashamed of, often smiling. Sometimes they line up in an orderly fashion, as if they

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⁸ Jones’s realization is a very interesting political reflection on a similar observation made by Roland Barthes: “An anonymous photograph represents a wedding (in England): twenty-five persons of all ages, two little girls, a baby: I read the date and I compute: 1910, so they must all be dead, except perhaps the little girls, the baby (old ladies, an old gentleman now).” Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 84.


were at a class reunion or church picnic. Sometimes they cluster around the victim, hoisting children on their shoulders so that they can see too. … That [the photographs] were made so openly reflects the unquestioning presumption of white supremacy but also preserves that presumption in all its brutality for us to know anew,” (R. Smith “An Ugly Legacy Lives on”, my emphasis). The postures, like the words, imply an audience that approves of lynching, an audience that includes the family members with whom the images were shared as well as others who believed in lynching as an appropriate way to uphold community values and, above all, “nothing to be ashamed of.”

One cannot look at these photographs of lynchings and not think in terms of a notion of humanity, the barometer for which is our own self-identification as human beings. But, I argue these images challenge our notions of humanity as they first signify in terms of the rhetorical and exclusive humanity known as white supremacy. This racist deployment of humanity threatens to overtake a more inclusive and universal investment in the idea of humanity by project its own presumed spectator. “The proud gaze of the white audience in the photographs assumes a white audience that will recognize the virtue of their deed, an audience that regards the lynched blacks, not the white mob, as criminals and terrorists” (Apel 10). We may not only read their assumptions about us off of the image, but we can also decipher the mob’s understanding of itself as righteous. The confident poses and gazes of the mob are enabled by the guarantee that the actors and their actions will be regarded with respect and admiration by similarly-minded people and with fear by their (black) detractors. It must also have been assumed by the white audience being photographed that these two contrary constituencies—the supporters and the opposition—would never see each other on or in equal terms. That is, while they were
undoubtedly aware of a coherent and active oppositional constituency that viewed these pictures with disdain (the black press’s reproduction and circulation of these images is one obvious example), the photographed lynching supporters must also have had tremendous confidence in their behavior, so much so that the idea of turning away from the camera to conceal their identities seemed unthinkable and entirely unnecessary. It is the evident absence of this necessity—an absence we can also call *shamelessness*—that speaks to the power of the lynchers’ gleeful look and of the need for us to reconfigure these images so that, on the one hand, their righteous gazes no longer absolutely dominate and determine the photographs’ reception, while on the other, their gazes are read as signifying the reality the some human beings took pleasure in viewing the lynching of black human beings. The contemporary non-racist viewer who aims to transcode these images so that they signify in opposition to racial violence is compelled to interpret the attitude of the photographed audience not in the valence in which it was originally articulated—pride—but at a significant perceptual and emotional remove. The viewer therefore transcodes the proud attitudes, making them re-signify as socially unacceptable and shameful.

But in looking back upon these photographs of unfathomable violence and reprehensible pride, we might notice that something is missing. Specifically, we, like Rankin, are frequently disinclined to view the perpetrators of lynching violence as human beings and to recognize those people as more like ourselves than not. Like the white slaver in Rankin’s tale, the white lynch mob is figured, disingenuously, as unrecognizable, and we are both at risk of committing our own dehumanization—this time, not of the lynched black body, but of the lynching white body.
This loss or refusal to recognize another as human puts society at great danger as it threatens to institute yet another nebulous basis for differentiation, only this time in the name of anti-racism. It is here, in the space where any inkling of human-as-human recognition might slip away, that the danger to the social body lies. As evinced by Rankin’s prose above, it is not so unseemly to identify with the suffering endured by the lynched black body. Public discourse confirms this. (Recall, for instance, Judge Clarence Thomas notoriously calling his supreme court nomination hearing a “high-tech lynching.”) What is infinitely more difficult and distasteful is to identify with the lynchers themselves. And yet, it is the intractability of the photographed lynchers and lynching spectators that is referenced in relation to the ironic and dangerous banality of lynching. As Leon Litwack writes in his essay for the *Without Sanctuary* catalog, “It is far easier to view what is depicted on these pages as so depraved and barbaric as to be beyond the realm of reason. That enables us to dismiss what we see as an aberration, as the work of crazed fiends and psychopaths. But such a dismissal would rest on dubious and dangerous assumptions” (Litwack 33–34). The “dubious and dangerous assumptions” to which Litwack refers are not so difficult to imagine. The danger is based on the mistake of thinking that we are no longer intrigued or even pleased by the spectacle of another’s pain, and that the notion of humanity as universal is real and fixed rather than, as I argue, ideological and therefore unstable. Evidence to the contrary extends from the

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11 Carrie Rentschler offers one theory as to why contemporary American audiences are more likely to forge an identification with the victims of lynching violence: “Some people may be more able to identify as and with victims rather than as or with participants in the perpetration of violence because that is how multiple social institutions in the USA have trained them to identify. Victim identity allows people to claim their own sense of injury—from wherever that sense may come—in a way that forecloses their own accountability for violence they help perpetuate, often unknowingly but not always.” Carrie A. Rentschler, “Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering” (*Media Culture Society* 26.2 [2004]: 296-304).
aphorism about the seductive visual appeal of the car wreck to the ongoing work of photography and film (not to mention classical painting) to represent death and suffering in graphic detail, a project that encompasses the history of each of these media.¹²

While the consumption of images of suffering, violence, and death for personal pleasure is an abiding and troubling phenomenon, I do not believe that we can only understand this mode of looking in terms of pleasure. Like Bal, I also do not believe that an objective viewing position is at all possible since critical looking and scholarship are also implicated in ideological constructs. While these constructs might not be the same as those at work during the image’s production, they are nevertheless engaged with the “problematic nature of knowledge of the other” (Bal 27). This is especially profound when that “other” does not herself have recourse to language (and who has less recourse to language than the dead?). What we need instead is to consider the other responses that these images call for, such as a viewing position that polices itself. As I shall discuss, the affect known as shame can usefully intervene here, providing us with the tools both to acknowledge our intimate relationship with a past we would rather forget and to move productively into a future in which there are fewer atrocious public episodes like slavery and lynching, to name only two.

To accomplish this task, it helps to think of the social body as a self, one that continually questions and corrects itself. Sociologist Thomas Scheff, in his work on

¹² I am thinking here of early photography’s prevalence in criminal investigations, including crime scene photos, as well as Weegee’s arguably more artistic famous crime scene photographs, followed decades later by Andy Warhol’s Death Series. We must also recall Thomas Edison’s early films Execution of Mary Queen of Scots (1895) and Electrocuting an Elephant (1903) which, while it did not depict the death of a human being, did portray Westinghouse’s advertisement of the AC electrical current for use in the forthcoming electric chair. In painting, death and suffering has been a staple of Christian, allegorical, and Neo-Classical representations of such events as the martyrdom of Christ and Holfernes’s beheading by Judith.
shame, nationalism, and war, foregrounds the utility of shame as a social project: “Just as fear automatically signals a threat to the safety of our physical self (our bodies), so shame automatically signals a threat to the safety of our social self, the person that we think we are and expect others to think we are. We need to feel connected because the self is a social product, just as the body is a biological one” (Scheff 51). Scheff’s analyses of shame and of the “social self” are shaped by an investment in well-being—here, the well-being of the social self. I share his motivation, and, although it is by no means the only discourse interested in shame, I turn to psychoanalytic discourse on shame precisely because it is fundamentally concerned with psychic well-being.

In his research on shame as an affect psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins concludes that essential to the experience of shame is the initial experience of “interest”. In the case of the lynching photographs, to recognize that the images depict a dark episode in American national history is also to recognize the interest and even enjoyment that the viewing of lynching can elicit. Shawn Michelle Smith explains these images’ conditions of production in terms of a “fantasy of whiteness”, a whiteness that is marked by its privileged relationship to the law (S. M. Smith Photography on the Color Line, 125). In the photographs, Smith remarks, “White individuals meet the camera boldly and directly, making explicit the ways in which the law privileges them, even as they flamboyantly disregard the law to kill a man, or men, women, or youths. These spectators are confident in their white privilege” (S. M. Smith Photography on the Color Line, 125-26).

Following Smith, I argue that the exhibition of confidence and directness on the part of the lynching mob is evidence of an interest in lynching, and that the crowd’s

13 Other discourses currently engaged with the issue of shame are philosophy and religion. Many of the philosophical discussions draw upon classical texts such as Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics.
comportment toward the camera—posing, smiling or assuming a dignified mien—
effectively solicits our complicity. These are not, after all, the faces of people who are seeking our approval; rather, they assume it. “For the viewer today,” art historian Dora Apel writes, “the horror of death 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” (Apel 7). I would add that the viewer today can also be horrified by the image of the killers’ shamelessness (as Roberta Smith is)—an absence of shame (or, from another angle, a presence of pride) that makes the killers both unrecognizable and too recognizable to the viewer today, and that threatens to dehumanize us both.

These seemingly incommensurate states of unrecognizability and hyper-
recognizability reveal much about how shame both troubles and reconstitutes humanity. Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank, in their resuscitation of Tomkins’s work, cite Tomkins remarkable epiphany: that shame is activated only after interest has been piqued. There must, in other words, be something initially appealing or positive about an object that subsequently elicits a disappointment in the social self after closer scrutiny. “Without positive affect,” Sedgwick and Frank write, “there can be no shame; only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush. Similarly, only something you thought might delight or satisfy can disgust” (Sedgwick and Frank 520). But when and where are the delight and enjoyment in lynching photographs?

In the viewing relation arranged by the twenty-first century “Without Sanctuary” exhibition and book (I will discuss the specific elements of these more fully later in this chapter), marked as they are by the historical displacement of the present-day viewers
from the early twentieth-century events depicted, the delight and enjoyment—interest, for short—is located in the moments represented in the photographs. Evidence of that initial enjoyment is visible on the faces populating the white crowd. But instead of refusing to recognize the mob’s sadistic enjoyment as human (if not humane) pleasure, I insist that we acknowledge the source and the generation of the interest in order to “correct” the picture.

The sight of the mob’s evident pleasure and confidence, now seemingly repugnant because of its source—the lynching—can cause the distant viewer to feel shame on the mob’s behalf. Remarkably, a viewer fifty or more years removed from the event can take up the second stage of the shaming sequence that Tomkins identifies, feeling in his or her own body an essential wrongness, what Probyn calls in her discussion of the body’s “knowledge” of social rules a fundamental “out-of-placeness.”14 (Probyn 50) Probyn explains that “[m]ost experiences of shame make you want to disappear, to hide away and to cover yourself. … It is felt in the rupture when bodies can’t or won’t fit the place—when, seemingly, there is no place to hide” (Probyn 39).

Underwriting this discomfort, however, is the desire to fit in, to enjoy the hominess of what Pierre Bourdieu has called *habitus*, a term he uses to describe a subject’s historicized and embodied disposition. Emotions such as shame are capable of destabilizing the comfort of one’s *habitus*, however, and that destabilizing may prompt a self-reassessment that amounts to “a radical rethinking and a shift in disposition” that has great social impact (Probyn 55–56). This shift need not be a despairing move; we need

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14 Probyn writes “Our bodies seem to know when they are at ease in a situation, when they know the rules and expectations, and conversely they also tell us loudly when we are out of our league, fish out of water.” Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 49.
not, indeed we should not, be paralyzed by shame. To the contrary, the shift in
disposition may herald a necessary and productive, indeed, even a politically progressive
revision of one’s way of being in the world. Addressing the particular affect at hand,
Probyn declares that “Shame, as the body’s reflection on itself, may reorder the
composition of the habitus, which in turn might allow for quite different choices”
(Probyn 56). Looking at lynching photographs, then, might cause the out-of-placeness,
i.e. the political unacceptability, of the lynching act to manifest a discomfort in the
politically engaged viewer.

In addition to habitus, the process of displaced shame is underwritten by at least
one other conceptual investment—nationhood. Like habitus, nationhood is concerned
with belonging. However, unlike habitus, nationhood is historical; that is to say, a subject
of a nation understands him/herself to belong to a community that is geographically and
historically bound. Thus, nationhood, especially when paired with the notion of heritage,
can enable what I call a “mis/identification” that transcends a relatively minor temporal
remove, but is ultimately contained by the boundedness of a national history. This notion
of “mis/identification” (which links up with my theory of mis/recognition to be discussed
in the following chapter) calls attention to the productive “mistake” of perceiving one’s
self to be “just like” the historical subjects with whom one is invited to share a political
and social affiliation. But this “just likeness” is not a genuine conflation of distinct
subjects; to the contrary, it is only a likeness, not a sameness, that identification points to.
However, this reality does not preclude one from feeling an artificial or mistaken
proximity to another subject. In the instance of the lynching photographs, the image of
the white mob becomes a weightier albatross when one finds one’s self tethered to a
distinctive community that can trace its lineage to the (white) faces in the photographs.

Ironically, “the fact that the other identifies sufficiently with others to be ashamed
rather than to show contempt strengthens any social group and its sense of community”
(Sedgwick and Frank 156). The bond of nationhood (and/or race, and/or region, and/or
gender, etc.) foments a looking relation that is, from the perspective of the viewer,
essentially a mis/identification of the persons depicted in the photograph as too identical
to the viewing self and that strengthens a notion of the self as an politically humane
being. Psychoanalysis has, of course, likened the experience of visual self-identification
to the experience of looking at one’s self in the mirror. This recurring “mistake”—that
subjects encounter the graphic or photographic image as though the image were a
mirror—is usually interpreted (in psychoanalysis) in singular, subjective terms; that is,
the viewing subject is understood to recognize his or her singular self in the image’s
depicted subject. By contrast, what we have in the example of viewing historical lynching
images that I discuss here is identification as an ideological consequence that engenders
the recognition of a plural self—in this case, a nation and a race. As such, the theory of
mis/identification articulated here can accommodate an understanding of affects such as
shame as being established and experienced by more than a single self.15

15 My theory of mis/identification is not to be confused with the psychoanalytic notion of misrecognition or
méconnaissance (for the sake of clarity, I shall use the French term to designate the psychoanalytic
concept). According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, méconnaissance is implicated in the stages of human
development, in particular the mirror stage, and signals the formation of the Ego, albeit an Ego that is
premised upon a “misrecognition” of the self as a complete and autonomous being. My term,
mis/recognition, is used here to reference the ideological (as opposed to the psychic) implications of a
spectator’s conscious conflation of his own viewing body with the imaged body before him. This
ideological phenomenon will be followed up in the ensuing chapter in my discussion of mis/recognition
and the mourner’s identification with the dead body.
Silvan Tomkins himself paves the way for such a pluralized appreciation of the dynamics of shame. In a passage on how shame is piqued by a perceived moral transgression, Tomkins writes, “Shame is experienced as guilt when positive affect is attenuated by virtue of moral normative sanctions experienced as conflicting with what is exciting or enjoyable. … In this case the self splits in two, a good self and totally bad self” (Tomkins “Varieties of Shame”, 404, my emphasis). He goes on to add that Feelings of shame or of shame as guilt may be experienced either as coming from without or from within. … I may feel ashamed because you should feel ashamed or guilty but do not. I may feel ashamed or guilty because you feel ashamed or guilty but should not, as in the case of my sanctioning slavery reluctantly. … Thus I may feel shame at being distressed at the plight of the self or the other, as well as shame at not feeling distress at the plight of self or other (Tomkins “Varieties of Shame”, 404–05).

Tomkins understands that the affect of shame frequently manifests itself in the actions of the body; most famously, he writes of the head that is hung in shame (Tomkins qtd. in Sedgwick and Frank 500). These corporeal attunements are also, of course, visual events that can so powerfully convey the shamed subject’s bodily experience of feeling shame that, “the visual appearance of shame in the other can evoke shame [in the viewing subject] through reintegration in which the visual message is unconsciously translated into motor messages which produce an imitation, as a yawn may produce a yawn” (Sedgwick and Frank 154). When the originally shamed subject and the viewer of that subject are both physically present in a single space, according to Sedgwick and Frank, the effect is that, “[t]he feedback of this imitation is then experienced as shame of the self” (Sedgwick and Frank 154). While I am not thoroughly convinced of the strict
mimetic dynamic Tomkins, Sedgwick, and Frank propose (their scenarios seem too simplistic), I am interested in the social aspect they present; namely, the idea that one might adjust his affect in relation to another. Less compelling than the mimetic response is the corrective response—the performance of shame prompted by the other’s refusal or inability to exhibit shame—that speaks directly to the uneven visual encounter fostered in the antilynching exhibitions that I will discuss later.

The intervention of photography—the element that distinguishes the viewing relations of the 2000 lynching exhibition from its 1935 predecessor—into Tomkins’s theory of adaptive affect introduces a provocative corollary to the visual dialectic of shame. As Tomkins notes, “Shame by the other is first of all a barrier to mutuality, to shared excitement and enjoyment,” and, when the other “lowers his eyes or head to me as an object of interest enjoyment [that is, I no longer interest him], then my own positive affect can be sufficiently reduced to evoke my shame” (Sedgwick and Frank 154). In other words, the other’s denial of the gaze, an articulation of his shame at gazing upon me—me, the subject who formerly interested him when my actions/appearance/etc. were pleasing to him—may cause me to reconsider my own experience of enjoyment of my own actions/appearance/etc., and may consequently result in my own feeling of shame.

The corrective power of adaptive shame has enormous implications. On a developmental level, one sees how the child might learn and internalize what constitutes shameful behavior without the prohibition ever being identified verbally. Also evident is how adaptive shame influences community behaviors and mores; it “provides a mechanism for the preservation of social norms among adult members of a community, inasmuch as the evocation of the shame of the other and its evocation of the shame of the
self provide powerful negative sanctions against the transgression of shared social norms” (Sedgwick and Frank 156). The social component of adaptive shame is what works to continuously remind the individual that he is part of a larger community—or even the relatively small community of gallery goers—with shared (although perhaps not unanimously) social norms.

In viewing the photograph and experiencing shame on behalf of the subjects pictured therein, a knowledge of negative sanctions is invoked but is ultimately thwarted by the impenetrable surface of the image. The spectator may lower his head in shame, thus denying the gift of approbation and community that inheres in the direct look. Although other spectator’s might see and even mimic this exhibition of shame, the looking subjects depicted in the photograph do not—indeed, they cannot—drop their gaze or revise their posture and affect. Their violent behavior cannot be corrected; their enjoyment—indicated by the prideful—direct look at the camera is unflinching.

“There is beauty in ruins”\(^{16}\): An Art Commentary on Lynching

In the past seventy years, a handful of gallery exhibitions have used lynching imagery to expose and agitate against the extreme form of racialized violence known as lynching. In 1935 the NAACP curated an exhibition entitled “An Art Commentary on Lynching,” which opened on February 15\(^{th}\) at Arthur U. Newton Galleries in New York City. \(^{17}\) During its two week run, the exhibition featured works by prominent artists of

\(^{16}\) Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Picador, 2003), 76.

many races including Hale Woodruff, Peggy Bacon, and Isamu Noguchi, all on the subject of lynching. By the time of the exhibition, the lynching campaign was epidemic. The Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching’s 1931 publication “Lynching and What They Mean” reports a total of 22 successful and 31 attempted lynchings as having occurred nationwide between January 1928 and December 1929. At the point of the pamphlet’s publication, those statistics had risen to 30 successful and 88 attempted lynchings between January 1930 and October 1931 (“Lynching and What They Mean” 76).

“An Art Commentary on Lynching” was conceived by then-executive secretary of the NAACP, Walter White. In December 1934, White addressed a letter to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney outlining his intentions for an artistic campaign against lynching and in favor of the Costigan-Wagner antilynching bill. He explained that he was inspired by the success of “Mrs. [Pauline] Sabin [founder of the Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform] and her co-workers [who] turned the tide of popular feeling against prohibition,” and believed that “so can the sentiment be roused against lynching” (W.

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18 Photography was not included in the exhibition. This was evidently a late curatorial decision. Nevertheless, photography’s shadow fell on many of the works in the show. Dora Apel argues that it was in reference to photography that “all other images necessarily responded”. Dora Apel, Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 129.

19 White had experienced the terrorism of lynching first hand. In the chapter of his autobiography entitled “I Decline to Be Lynched”, White describes how he narrowly escaped being the victim of a lynching during the Elaine Race Riot in Helena, Arkansas. When it was uncovered that White, who had been reporting on the riot for the Chicago Daily News, was black (he had been passing for white to gain access for his report), White fled for his life by boarding the next train to Little Rock. The conductor, unaware that White was the man being sought, informed him that it was unfortunate that he was leaving “just when the fun [was] going to start” because “[t]here’s a damned yellow nigger passing for white and the boys are going to get him.” Asked what would happen to the man were he caught, the conductor replied, “When they get through with him he won't pass for white no more!” When White reached Memphis later that day, White writes, “the news had been circulated that I had been lynched in Arkansas that afternoon.” Walter White, A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995 [1948]), 51.
White “Letter to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney”). White went on to identify a number of already existing works—Reginald Marsh’s drawing, *This Is Her First Lynching* (1934); John Steuart Curry’s lithograph *The Fugitive* (1935); Julius Bloch’s painting *The Lynching* (1932)—that “caused the idea [of the exhibition] to come into being.” (Figures 7, 8 & 9) White also enclosed a “self-explanatory copy of an investigation of the recent Marianne, Florida, lynching.” He added, somewhat self-consciously, that “This, of course, seems and is morbid. But even a morbid subject can be made popular if a sufficiently distinguished list of patronesses will sponsor the exhibit and the right kind of publicity can be secured for it. . . . I am trying delicately to effect a union of art and propaganda” (W. White “Letter to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney”).

To arts patron Suzanne LaFollette, White put the matter more plainly:

> One of our biggest jobs is that of making opposition to lynching more popular. One of the ways of doing this is to take a leaf from the book written by Mrs. Sabin and her co-workers in getting snooty society girls and others to let it be known that they were opposed to prohibition. My idea is this: to hold an exhibit in one of the better galleries of paintings, lithographs, cartoons and sculpture dealing with the subject of lynching and to have a distinguished list of patronesses for the show (W. White “Letter to Suzanne LaFollette”, my emphasis).

White’s cognizance of the exhibit’s role as propaganda, represented in both letters, and his assertion that the exhibition might “effect a union art of and propaganda” echoes the sentiment of White’s esteemed colleague W.E.B. Du Bois who wrote in his 1926 *Crisis* article, “Criteria of Negro Art”, that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (Du Bois “Criteria of Negro Art”, 22). What is also apparent in White’s prose and becomes evident in at least one of the show’s reviews is an elitism that
equates the popularizing of the antilynching movement through art with an appeal to finer aesthetic principles. As one recent scholar puts it, “the NAACP show intended to use the high-cultural associations of art to draw attention to its legislative campaign” (Langa 12). White’s feminization of the project—his appeal to female patrons (but notably only one woman artist) and his attention to appearance, i.e. the “better galleries” and focus on popularity—betrays an air of dilettantism that fails to mirror the gravity of the subject matter. The organization’s disengagement with the horror of lynching as a reality (as opposed to a theme) is further highlighted by its divergence from an exhibition hosted by Communist organizations that opened only two days after the NAACP exhibition closed\(^\text{20}\). Writing today, art historian Helen Langa has observed that the titles of the two shows demonstrate a marked difference in attitude: “*An Art Commentary on Lynching* evoked respectable and somewhat distanced consideration of the theme, while [the Communist-sponsored show] *Struggle for Negro Rights* sounded both militant and exhortatory” (Langa 12).\(^\text{21}\)

The NAACP exhibition’s political aims and its dedication to art aesthetics raise questions about the how we look at images of violence and how the aesthetics of violent imagery may be discussed. Also to be considered is the degree to which the horror the works aim to represent is affected by the type of media involved—drawings, paintings, and sculpture. As I shall demonstrate, the terms in which the works were received and

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\(^{20}\) This exhibition, called “Struggle for Negro Rights,” opened on March 2nd at the American Contemporary Art Gallery in Greenwich Village, New York and ran until March 16th. It was sponsored by members of the Artists’ Union, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, the Vanguard Group, the John Reed Club, and the International Labor Defense. Apel, p. 84.

discussed were limited by race and aesthetics. Race heavily influenced the reception of lynching as a subject of art as well as the reception of black artists. Perhaps more detrimental, modernist aesthetic principles were one significant viewing lens and evaluative element that blunted the political edge of the exhibition’s stated intent.

Both contemporary and more recent criticism of the 1935 show suggest how the exhibit operated at a significant representational and emotional remove from actual lynchings. Despite their material absence in “An Art Commentary on Lynching”, photographs of lynchings figured in the contributing artists’ processes on a fundamental level. Apel theorizes that the “anti-lynching artworks [featured in “An Art Commentary on Lynching’’] responded to these photos as the benchmarks of racial representation and sought to counter the social and political codes they embodied” (Apel 1). The photographs of lynchings circulated in anti-lynching publications such as Ida B. Wells’s “A Red Record” did not just provide a figurative template for some artists, as they did for Isamu Noguchi, whose sculpture Death (Lynched Figure) (1933) is a literal interpretation of George Hughes’s contorted, lynched body in a photograph from 1930. (Figures 10 & 11) They also bluntly presented the problems implicit in portraying lynching—namely, to depict the act of lynching itself as politically intolerable and to portray the victim as a sympathetic human being.

Some artists strove to accomplish the former task by contrasting the inert body of the lynching victim with the portrayed frenzy of the lynch mob. Indeed, painter and draughtsman Reginald Marsh’s work, This Is Her First Lynching (1934), elects to eliminate the lynched body altogether, focusing instead on the amassed crowd, its attention directed at something beyond the left-hand side of the frame. (Figure 7) Just
right of center of the image, held aloft by a woman with widened eyes and agape mouth, is the little white girl to whom the title of the image refers. The message conveyed by the image and its title is the loss of innocence being experienced by this girl and her induction into the community that finds pleasure in the spectacle of lynching.

Apel points out in her study of the exhibition that depicting the black body in the compromised state engendered by lynching’s ritual of dehumanization potentially presented a problem to antilynching artists who did not wish to reproduce the dehumanization that actual lynchings sought to ensure. According to Apel, in addition to the strategy employed by Marsh (that of leaving out altogether the figure of the black body), artists referred to classical, mainstream aesthetic standards in their work in an attempt to associate the image of lynching victims with the image of an idealized, heroic masculinity (Apel 88). One can therefore interpret the nudity of the lynched figure in George Wesley Bellows’s lithograph *The Law Is Too Slow* (1923) as being in line with the image of the classical heroic figure. *(Figure 12)* What is more, the violation of the figure’s heroism, indicated by the assembled mob’s apparent failure to recognize and appreciate the man’s heroic stature, signals a violation of his aesthetically-signaled humanity. The lynching victim’s image as heroic man is represented as being “undermined by his entrapment like an animal of prey” (Apel 88).

It may be due to this perceived ability of non-photographic representations to more easily reference classical and neo-classical aesthetic tropes that Apel argues that the photograph is too literal to succeed in expressing an antilynching agenda. She states that “While the photographs often show the victim’s body in a destroyed or dehumanized state, with what was desirable about it already effaced, the artworks leave the human
body more intact and therefore more desirable” (Apel 3). The language of desirability here in the context of lynching imagery—be it plastic, graphic, or photographic—is troubling. Whereas one may interpret the aestheticizing of the lynched body as a universalizing or even a religious gesture, there is undoubtedly a danger lurking behind such an “appealing surface”.22

Nevertheless, these were the same evaluative terms often used by 1935 critics of “An Art Commentary on Lynching”. In an extended and thoughtful review of the exhibit published by the New York Post, reporter Archer Winsten considers the contradictions involved in witnessing a collection of works that take lynching as their subject. In so doing, Winsten succinctly covers the range of responses reported by gallery visitors and other reviewers. Before even discussing the works themselves, Winsten reminds his reader that “it is one thing to deplore lynching, as who does not, and quite another to see it on the wall”—a division that I will demonstrate to be in bad faith. He then asks, rhetorically, “But it is another thing to look at the detail of a first class lynching. Can’t we be spared the revolting details?” (Winsten).

Winsten’s question and his use of the phrase “first class” to describe lynching bespeak his fascination with hyperrealism—the “revolting details” are presumably those that appear too real and irrefutably accurate—and the aesthetics, not just of representations of lynching, but of lynching themselves. The very notion that there could exist such a thing as a “first class lynching” suggests that there are certain conventions to

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22 Apel uses this language to describe Noguchi’s sculpture: “By producing the lynched figure at about three-quarter size of an actual human figure, smoothing way the facial features and genitalia, and giving it an appealing surface and compositional shape, [Isamu] Noguchi universalizes the lynched body and makes it more bearable to look at, in effect aestheticizing it even as he conveys the agony of death.” Apel, p.94
be fulfilled in the ritual of lynching; a notion that several researchers, who have identified castration as common in lynchings, have more or less corroborated.23

Winsten is clearly adverse to these elements, real and depicted. The implied prudishness and propriety of his final question is mitigated, however, by Winsten’s citation of a few choice words from Pearl Buck’s speech at the exhibition opening wherein she declared that “if one of these pictures for one moment brings any one a realization that behind every one of these pictures there is a reality—some one did so die at the hands of such a cruel horde—then we cannot spare these pictures” (Buck qtd. in Winsten). Perhaps Winsten was himself swayed by Buck’s estimation that “the pictures could not be too terrible if they portrayed lynching horrors as they really are” (Winsten).

If neither he nor his readers finds Buck’s claim compelling enough to foment the blending of “art and propaganda”, they find at the end of the article yet another, perhaps more palatable, justification for viewing such work: the mantle of high art. In a conversation with the gallery owner, Arthur U. Newton, Winsten is presented with what seems to be Newton’s own aesthetic epiphany. Explaining how he himself stepped in to offer a space for the showing after another gallery backed out under the pressure of protest, Newton says,

‘I thought the exhibition deserved to be shown. I feel it has real artistic merit, showing how many artists tackle the same problem. And then, too, it’s still the crucifixion—the same problem so often treated by the old masters.

‘Late this afternoon I had an inspiration about 3 o’clock. I remembered I had a Van Dyck lynching—“The Martyrdom of Saint

Sebastian.” It parallels these absolutely. I hung it in the other room. Perhaps you’d like to see it’ (Newton qtd. in Winsten, my emphasis).

With that remark, according to the author, Winsten follows Newton “[into] a rear room bathed in gentle light [where there] was the huge Van Dyck, valued at $25,000 and painted three hundred years ago. … The Saint looked inquiringly at you. There was no blood, no fire, no hemp at the neck. No agony” (Winsten, my emphasis). (Figure 13)

This quaint conclusion to the article (mirroring the conclusion of Winsten’s gallery visit) somewhat unsubtly explains to the reader (whose skepticism Winsten immediately assumes) why the artworks in “An Art Commentary on Lynching” are valuable as works of art. By comparing the subject of the Van Dyck painting to the subject of the lynching show artworks, Winsten proclaims lynching an aesthetically viable subject of the plastic and graphic arts. The monetary and historical values associated with Van Dyck’s painting of Saint Sebastian confer the aura of aesthetic value upon the works in “An Art Commentary on Lynching.” But if the Van Dyck can confer value upon these newer works, could these images of lynching also contribute an additional layer of meaning to the Van Dyck? Does the term “lynching”, as it is used by Newton, come to connote an aesthetic and compositional iconography separate from the physical violence of actual lynchings? Put another way, does the universalizing of lynching aesthetics undermine the political impetus behind Walter White’s declared aims of the NAACP show, that is, to mobilize people against lynching?

One possible reply is that aesthetic discourse is only willing to accommodate lynching in historical terms, and that the consequence of this is the failure to acknowledge lynching as an ongoing problem—the first necessary step in agitating
against the practice of lynching. That is, the term “lynching” as Newton uses it is only able to signify in aesthetic discourse by being associated with Saint Sebastian’s third century martyrdom. Perhaps this necessary association indicates an awareness on Newton’s part that to speak of lynching only in aesthetic terms is to trivialize the reality of lynching as murder. Another, more distressing possibility is that whatever value lynching achieves as historically conceived becomes nullified by its perception as historically unresolved (lynchings are too recent and ongoing) and vernacular (they are too common and too abject). Barthes’s theory of how signs are transformed into myth is helpful for understanding this dynamic (Barthes Mythologies, 109-59). Whereas the signifier of lynching in relation to Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom has been elevated in discourse to the level of myth, the everyday lynchings of black men and women, fail to signify in the same way. The lynching of black people, I would argue, still may be understood as myth in the Barthesian sense, but the way that the lynching of black people signifies—as a racial event, a poor people’s event, even a Southern American event (recall Winsten’s rhetorical question, “Who doesn’t [oppose lynching]?”)—does not signify in the same way, is not the same myth as the lynching of Saint Sebastian which is, above all, a sign of Christian martyrdom.

In the review article, Newton unflinchingly identifies Sebastian’s martyrdom as a lynching, even as Wisten observes that there “was no blood, no fire, no hemp at the neck,” and “[n]o agony,” as there are in the works from the “Art Commentary on Lynching” shown in the next room. Consistent with this notable absence of representations of gore and pain, neither Newton nor Wisten seems particularly concerned with the political causes of Sebastian’s persecution and physical trauma.
(namely, his resistance to Roman law in pursuing Christian faith). Newton uses the term “lynching”—in a manner with which Winsten implicitly agrees—to draw attention to a stylistic parity with the nearby works representing the present day persecution of blacks. In Winsten’s transcription of the exchange there is no discussion of Sebastian’s—unmentioned but understood—identity as a Christian nor of the injustice of his condemnation and execution by Roman edict. The unjust cause of Sebastian’s “lynching” and the proof that it provides of a systemic and now deemed illegitimate prejudice against Christians do not figure in the interpretation of Van Dyck’s painting as a representation of a lynching. Newton and, subsequently, Winsten recognize the painting as the representation of a lynching in solely visual and allegorical terms—because it represents a man being made to suffer because of his religious identity and conviction. Newton and Winsten do not, however, make any mention of the illegitimacy of the persecution. In short, there is no invocation in their exchange of humanity as an ideology and is represented here as being violated. However, it is this sentiment that is essential to an appreciation of the political principles behind the organizing of “An Art Commentary on Lynching.”

Newton and Winsten’s desire to return to an apolitical value system is consistent with a strain of critical art discourse circulating at the time. Curiously, despite what I have noted is their avoidance of an underlying notion of humanity, their desire to discuss the works in purely aesthetic terms points to another, depoliticized drive toward universality, this one motivated by a belief that art may achieve universality only if it eschews altogether all reference to the real world, including politics, human beings, and race. In the wake of Impressionism and Cubism, the graphic and plastic arts were still
regrouping after the advent of photography and film—media that changed and refined the meaning of realism in the arts. Conversely, photography, according to Walter Benjamin, found its purpose in the unselfconscious execution of images, thereby distancing itself from the domain known as “art” wherein “the creative principle … is made a fetish” and “a function of its merchandisability more than of its discovery” (W. Benjamin “Short History of Photography”, 50). The work of art, then, is characterized by its awareness of itself as art, an awareness that paves the way for particular art media to contemplate the parameters and possibilities of its own process—a move that leads directly to modern art principles.24

Much high modernist art criticism appreciates the graphic and plastic arts for being able to represent objects, shapes, and ideas that do not exist in the lived world—techniques that are not photography’s strength.25 It is this high modernist philosophy that will eventually lead the preeminent modernist art critic, Clement Greenberg, to declare, “The presence or absence of a recognizable image has no more to do with value in painting or sculpture than the presence or absence of a libretto has to do with value in music” (Greenberg 133). Thinking of the NAACP exhibit as existing in a society in which many arts were moving toward abstraction, it is easier to appreciate that “[r]ealist detail alone was not what disturbed the critics; some were also uncomfortable with the implicit political critique of social art” (Apel 92).

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25 Less capable, but not impossible. The genre known as the photogram bypasses the camera and involves placing objects on photo-sensitive paper and exposing the paper to light. This process, which produces abstract silhouette, was most notably practiced by Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.
Nevertheless, these anti-realist, apolitical modernist impulses were opposed by proponents of social realism and, in photography, social documentary$^{26}$ who believed in the revolutionary possibilities of an art that both represented and was created for the masses. The mantra of *ars gratia artis* rang false with their logic. However, the two viewpoints do not necessarily eclipse one another. While the discourse surrounding the exhibition of “An Art Commentary on Lynching” does not indicate a complete disavowal of the social realist stance, it retains a strong need to attach itself to the lofty rhetoric of Western art criticism.

Indeed, Helen Langa cautions that one must bear in mind the degree of discrimination endured by black artists and art patrons and points out that “very few galleries in New York exhibited works by African Americans in the 1930s” (Langa 16). They and their work were largely ghettoized to the Harlem art gallery world. If patronage was limited and self-selecting, the criticism of African American work that was published in the most respected white journals did nothing to improve the status of black art. Work by black artists was appreciated as an impulsive and primal execution rather than as a successful intellectual exercise. Even well-intentioned endorsers of black artistic endeavor resorted to racial stereotyping. One speaker at the General Conference of the 35$^{th}$ Annual meeting of the American Teachers Association in 1938 went so far as to say that “Negro art has always been attuned to the rhythmic expression of a people deeply sensitive to the poetic values of life”, presumably because black people had a “racial instinct for abstract pattern and simple form” (Thomas C. Parker as qtd. in Harris 257).

This familiar essentialist claim is, of course, a backhanded compliment for it denies black artists’ cognitive proficiency, focusing instead upon what is perceived to be black people’s intuitive artistic natures.

Still, the perception that art and beauty are not themselves raced (even when a particular work features African American figures or themes) was endorsed by many critics, including NAACP founder W.E.B. Du Bois, who extrapolated from Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy to support the claim. Du Bois’s application of Hegelian philosophy to the African American experience is most fully explicated in The Souls of Black Folk, a text in which he asserts that “There are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American Fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African” (Du Bois Souls of Black Folk, 14). My readings of Souls of Black Folk and “Criteria of Negro Art” have detected a strong Hegelian influence in Du Bois’s early theories of race and art. Especially pronounced is his work the principle of the Hegelian dialectic and, although Du Bois admitted the prevalence of race in all facets of American life today (recall his famous assertion that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line”), he also admits to being hopeful that in the future the divisiveness would be overcome so that all of the races in the United States would contribute elements of their cultures to produce a superlative and truly American race (Du Bois Souls of Black Folk, 3). Du Bois’s hope that race as we know it would eventually be superseded extended to his opinion of art as well. The problem facing the Negro American artist was not his inability to create beautiful things: “The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his
people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people” (Du Bois Souls of Black Folk, 10). It was, rather, a problem to be located in the racist society that could not see harmony and beauty when it was created by a black artist. That a future non-racist society would admit to finding pure beauty in black artists’ work is perhaps both utopian and elitist (does not the assertion of a sphere beyond politics, the proper domain of the purely beautiful, imply the classist desire to rise above the fray?). Du Bois would later declare of “Beauty” that “Its variety is infinite, its possibility is endless. In normal life all may have it and have it yet again. The world is full of it; and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly … [because, although] somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right … [,] here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable” (Du Bois “Criteria of Negro Art”, 18–19).

It appears that the artworks of “An Art Commentary on Lynching” fulfilled both the implicit promise and failure of DuBois’s description. The construction and reception of the exhibition overall reveal a tension between aesthetic and political criticism that verges on incompatibility. In the 2000 “Without Sanctuary” photography show, by contrast, this canceling effect is overcome by a harnessing of the documentary promise of photography that seems to guarantee to its spectators that these images are not imagined, but actual, and the events not staged, but real.27

27 Jane Gaines discusses the political and sentimental influence of what she calls “reality’s viewable index” in her essay on the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire and the attendant photographs of its exploited and dead female immigrant workers. Referencing Piercean semiotics, Gaines makes the case for an appreciation
Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America

It would be a mistake to attribute the affective power of photographs of lynching to the medium of photography alone. In her critique of Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others, Sharon Sliwinski points out that the photographic apparatus cannot be blamed exclusively for producing in the viewer the feelings of horror, numbness, and even shame. The error, Sliwinski claims, is in thinking that “the horror somehow lay in the image itself and not in what is depicted. What seems more likely is that our immobilization in the face of an image of atrocity is a secondary effect of atrocity itself, part of the traumatic crisis that is … ‘passed on’ by way of mechanical (and now digital) representations” (Sliwinski 89). Sliwinski clearly privileges photography as a “mechanical” process of representation. And while her point is that the viewer’s affective response derives from the atrocity itself and not from its representation, her invocation of photography as the primary means of “passing on” the atrocity draws upon the discourse of documentary photography—that it strives to pass on unmediated information, to present to the viewer not a representation but the event itself. Minimal mediation is, as we well know, not an actual effect of photography, but an ideological effect of the photographic index. And it is this particular mechanically-induced ideological effect—the truth effect—that shapes our appreciation of photography.

The most significant difference between the photographic and the artistic depiction of lynching lies not in the object (the photograph or the painting) itself, but, as I
have explained, in the aesthetic and ideological discourses in which each medium is discussed. As is outlined explicitly in the Winsten-Newton conversation above, the works displayed in the NAACP show could be and were discussed primarily as aesthetic objects. At that time, a journalist for *Art News* went so far as to criticize one work that offered a literal interpretation of a charred corpse for its “aesthetic opportunism”. 28 (M. M. qtd. in Apel 95) Moreover, a committee was assembled by the NAACP to judge the works and to award the best with a cash prize. (NAACP, *Press Release*) Ranking was decided by the works’ means of encoding—the forms, colors, compositions, materials, etc. visible therein. The denoted—the crime of lynching—figured minimally if at all in the final judgment.

By contrast, the “Without Sanctuary” exhibition, which emphasizes history and witnessing, shifts the viewers focus from the individual visual and aesthetic elements of the photographs (including composition and lighting) and toward the events depicted therein. While the former visual elements remain in the photographs (and are actually interesting to consider), the exhibit’s declared purpose, reinforced by ancillary documentary materials such as newspapers and statistics, directed the look of the exhibition gallery visitor toward the images’ cultural and political functions as representations of criminal events occurring in the American past. The privileging of these photographic objects as documentary objects (a privileging that justified their exhibition here in the first place) is contingent upon their proximity to a precise historical moment. Furthermore, as Susan Sontag has observed, “For the photography of atrocity,

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28 The work was Isamu Noguchi’s sculpture *Death (Lynched Figure)* (1933) which translated into metal the contortions of 1930 lynching victim George Hughes burned body. For a fuller discussion of Noguchi’s piece and its referent, see Apel, pp. 92-95.
people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance”; knowing these photographs are not staged “is essential to the moral authority of these images” (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 26, 57).

“Without Sanctuary”, an exhibition of historical lynching photographs, was first shown in New York, but eventually traveled to other cities, including Atlanta and Amsterdam. In the show’s various installations (initially titled, tellingly, “Witness”), the images, sometimes complemented by publications and other objects such as books and posters related to lynching, were configured to operate as revelatory artifacts. The strategy seemed to work for *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith who lauded the exhibit for “instigat[ing] a deeper, more visceral experience of knowing history” (R. Smith “An Ugly Legacy Lives on”). As a traveling exhibition, the organization of the photographs and, sometimes, of complementary materials such as texts and diagrams, necessarily changed from place to place to conform to the particular demands of each location. Each exhibition curator was up against the potentially paralyzing notion that such images of violence were not amenable to an exhibition setting. Their concern reflects Sontag’s warnings, that “It seems exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people’s pain in an art gallery,” and that “there is no way to guarantee reverential conditions in which to look at these pictures and be fully responsive to them” (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 119, 20). Minimizing exploitation while maximizing reverence seems to have become the essential tasks of each venue’s curators. A look at how individual venues addressed these problems exposes how spaces were designed to determine the onlookers’ gazes.

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At the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, where “Without Sanctuary” was on display from May 1 to December 31 of 2002\textsuperscript{30}, the exhibition curator Joseph R. Jordan and designer Douglas Quin “attempt[ed] to create a reverential and respectful space that would make the exhibition both geographically and racially sensitive” (Apel 11, 12–13). This move seems to have blunted the critique of a significant contingent who initially opposed the exhibition, some arguing that it would only re-open old wounds and harm relations between white and black Atlantans, while others dreaded the potential for re-victimization. In the end, however, the decision was made to host the exhibition and sponsor community discussions on its subject matter. At the King site, “the walls of the small room were painted black, a deep red carpet was left in place, and the twenty-nine images arranged on three walls were matted and framed in light Georgia oak” (Apel 11). Papers from the NAACP’s and Ida B. Well’s antilynching efforts\textsuperscript{31} were displayed alongside antilynching illustrations from foreign newspapers and the cover of the 1992 Public Enemy EP “Hazy Shade of Criminal” that used the image of a lynching. A twelve-minute documentary film produced especially for the Atlanta venue further contextualized the history of lynching in the U.S. The Abel Meeropol poem “Strange Fruit” was printed on the wall, and the musical renditions of the poem by Cassandra Wilson and Billie Holiday were played. The audio soundtrack also included “chirping crickets followed by clips from four grieving black spirituals” (Apel 11).

\textsuperscript{30} For a review of the show with a thorough description of the exhibition hall, see Duane J. Corpis and Ian Christopher Fletcher, “Without Sanctuary” (Radical History Review 85 [2003]: 282-285).

The expected emotional outpouring determined some of the curators’ decisions regarding supplementary spaces and materials, such as constructing a “contemplation room” and, in a singularly empathic gesture, providing a box of tissues (D. White 2003, 123; Lynch). While the careful construction of the room indicates the curators’ attempt to diminish the exploitative nature of the images by creating a respectful environment, that constructedness evidently did not diminish the affective power of the images. One journalist visiting the exhibit at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta reported seeing an elderly man, overcome with tears, rush hurriedly out of the exhibition. The man, who turned out to be from Florida, later explained that when he was only one year old his father had been lynched. In his article, the journalist explained that the man “had come to see if maybe there was a photograph of his father in the exhibit. But he just couldn't bear to stay” (Postel). Similarly, while the images were at the Jackson State University venue in Jackson, Mississippi, a man reportedly “ran from the building, his fist over his mouth, his eyes wet and his shoulders heaving” (Lynch). No explanation for the man’s hasty exit was provided in the article.

These visitors’ emotional responses indicate quite clearly the impact of the act of looking on one’s own, and, according to my notion of adaptive shame, other onlookers’ emotions. While this exhibition, unlike the 1935 antilynching show, did not position itself in an active antilynching campaign, it did figure itself as politically opposed to lynching. Whereas the purported project of the earlier exhibition was to eliminate the phenomenon of lynching, “Without Sanctuary,” historically situated after the lynching epidemic, nonetheless assumed lynching as an issue, but as an abstractly politically issue rather than a politically pragmatic one. On this point, my project necessarily diverges from that of
Jane Gaines’s whose essay on “Documentary Radicality” investigates the political uses to which early twentieth century photographs of one crime against humanity—the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in which one hundred forty-six “ethnic” (i.e. Jewish, Polish and Italian) female immigrant laborers died as a consequence of the factory’s locked doors—were put. Immediately following the fire, Gaines notes, political agitation emerged in response to the tragedy in the form of “a public funeral and march that drew one hundred and twenty thousand workers was organized by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (I.L.G.W.U.) and the Women’s Trade Union League (W.T.U.L.)” (Gaines “Documentary Radicality”, 8). Beyond this, Gaines admits that it is nearly impossible to assess the material impact of those photographs of dead women on the labor movement, and she notes that the caption of the lantern slide of this image—“Viewing the Unfortunates at the Morgue”—“tells us what to do with the photograph: to view it as evidence of the horrific transformation of human life into valueless debris” (Gaines “Documentary Radicality”, 11). However, even though the outraged “us” of 1911 and the “us” of 2006 might share a similar ethical code, we do not share the same means to put our outrage into action. It can be claimed, then, that the historically displaced, twenty-first century viewer has recourse to changing nothing but her own emotional and political disposition.

In “Without Sanctuary”, the exhibition environment influenced the manner of looking and, by extension, the viewer’s emotional disposition. As one reviewer wrote, “One kind of viewing—very different from the kind that these photos originally elicited—is being sanctioned here, as it is in the accompanying book, and it is worth thinking about the meaning of that difference” ("Death by Lynching"). The “kind of
viewing” to which the reviewer refers—in which the demand is on the spectator to look respectfully—is recommended by the stated objectives of the exhibit and by the fact that the viewing, occurring as it does in a public environment, will be available for criticism itself. At the Detroit venue—the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History—a reporter commented on how more than just photographs was on display: “It is a very graphic exhibit, both visually and emotionally. There are many photos, with explanations. There are stories told, and those unspoken. There is even a hole in the wall between the exhibit where you can look through and see others, those like you and those different, who are sharing this experience with you” (Dumas). This last architectural decision, which enables gallery goers to act as both seeing-subjects and seen-subjects, is yet another environmental element that influences the visual consumption of these photographs of lynchings. Ultimately, the awareness of being seen seeing prompts the viewer to contemplate her manner of looking and to perform that by adjusting her emotional disposition.

The Dis/Embodied Black Gaze

For the spectator of the exhibition as well as the “reader” of the “Without Sanctuary” catalog, it is nearly impossible to ignore that there are other looks and dispositions being expressed in the photographs themselves. Now, I want to consider the looks and returned looks of the black people depicted in these images.

Considering the black body as a seeing body rather than a body to be seen is itself a significant move in that looking is frequently aligned with autonomy and embodiment—two modes of subjectivity often denied to black subjects and especially to
the black subjects of lynching. Historically, the black body has been positioned as an object of visual pleasure, incapable of, or disabled from resisting visual scrutiny. The legacy of the “Hottentot Venus”, Saartjie Baartman—the South African woman displayed throughout Europe during the early nineteenth century—continues to haunt black women today. More recently, Lorraine O’Grady confesses that, “in communal showers at public pools around the country, I have witnessed black girls and women of all classes showering and shampooing with their bathing suits on,” an observation that propels her to muse, “Perhaps … [they] feel they must still protect themselves from the centuries-long assault which characterizes them … as ‘immoral, insatiable, perverse; the initiators in all sexual contacts—abusive or otherwise’” (O’Grady 153) Similarly, Maurice Wallace theorizes that black men now have to contend with “the trace of the black male body, its doubly spectral and spectacular perceptibility in the public eye”, and identifies “the monocularistic gaze of Western racialism as the signal menace to the coherence of the black male corporeal ego” (M. O. Wallace 6). In light of this history, to identify the black body as a “bearer of the look”, especially in scenes of lynching, where all eyes are intended to be on the objectified black body, is a radical move.

The most striking appearances of black spectating subjects in lynching photographs belong to the victims of lynching themselves who are photographed while still alive. The few images from the “Without Sanctuary” collection that show soon-to-be-murdered men alive belong to two sets of photographs documenting those particular lynchings. Still, bespeaking the desire for ultimate containment of the photographs’ and

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32 For more on black-white looking relations, see Jane M. Gaines, “White Privilege and Looking Relations” (Screen 29.4 [1988]: 12-27) and bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992).
lynchings’ producers and consumers, each photographic set includes at least one requisite image of the black man when dead. Interestingly, both of the photographic sets—one of Frank Embree, the other of Will James—seem to have been constructed to convey a narrative of the men’s murders or, in the case of the latter, his crime, pursuit and capture, and final execution.

The first photograph of the 15-card Will James set appears to be a formal studio portrait. (Figure 14) It is matched with photographs of

the home of his alleged victim, Miss Anne Pelley; the home of the seven-year-old daughter of Mr. Boren, who found the murdered Miss Pelley in an alley she was crossing on the way to her grandmother’s house; the ‘course the hounds took’ [in pursuit of James]; the trains the mob took over to reach Belknap, Illinois, where James was apprehended, and to return him to Cairo for a public execution (Allen 181).

Several of the images do not even include James, foreshadowing his body’s ultimate obliteration by fire: one image (in two different versions) shows two rows of adolescent boys flanking what the caption explains are “the ashes of Will James.” The living portrait stands apart from the others in the series because of its formalism. There, James is the only subject pictured, and the white background and plain oval frame that crops James at the chest and arms give no indication of the circumstances under which the photograph was taken. Though collector and owner of this image James Allen claims that “Will James likely sat for this portrait at a local postcard photographer’s studio”, it is nevertheless impossible to discern whether the image represents a bourgeois desire to “metaphorically enshrine and quite literally perpetuate the example of [his] own

33 These images are from the lynching of Frank Embree series (catalog numbers 42, 43, and 44) and the lynching of Will James (numbers 45 through 52) in the Without Sanctuary catalog.
identit[y],” as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has suggested of black portraiture, or if it is an example of “a scientific catalogue calling on the photograph as ‘evidence’ of African American inferiority,” as Shawn Michelle Smith has argued with respect to bourgeois nineteenth century African American photographic portraiture (Allen 181; Gates xxix; S. M. Smith 44).

By contrast, other images in the series feature motion blurs and detailed landscapes. In one, the “half-burned head of James” on a spike is set against a peaceful background showing two-story middle-class houses situated amongst sparsely wooded, fenced yards. Such quotidian details—including, also, the motion blurs of restless children and dogs—indicate a dynamism and a situatedness that declares, unabashedly, that “this happened here.”

An arguably even more powerful (and disturbing) set of images is that featuring Frank Embree. (Figure 15) Allen reportedly paid $30,000 for this three-card set of pictures displaying (1) a full-body shot of a naked Embree alive, facing forward, the cuts and blood from his recent whipping abundantly visible; (2) a full-body shot of Embree’s back and wounds; and, lastly, (3) Embree, dead, hanging by his neck in front of a tree, with a cloth wrapped around his waist, and his open eyes trained skyward while the mob mills below. (Goodman) It is in the first photograph of Embree alive that the black gaze most strongly indicts the viewer as complicit in the spectacle of his lynching. Roberta Smith sees in Embree’s eyes the paradigm through which all other lynching photographs should be viewed. She writes,
One exhibit at Roth Horowitz provides a glimmer of what these photographs might mean for the future. It is a photograph of Frank Embree standing on the back of a buggy, naked and chained, shortly before his death in Fayette, Mo., on July 22, 1899. He has been severely whipped and the camera records the deep lacerations up and down his body. But it also records his insuperable dignity and his eyes, which look down at the camera and directly into the lens, oblivious of the leering white men who crowd into the picture (R. Smith “An Ugly Legacy Lives On”).

Considering Hilton Als’s essay in the Without Sanctuary catalog, wherein he contends that “Embree's eyes are dead,” Smith counters that “it seems equally arguable that they know death is coming. Their narrow, exclusive focus gives them a flicker of life. Embree looks into the camera as if into the future, as if he knows that the camera will ultimately betray the men around him and let the world know his fate” (R. Smith “An Ugly Legacy Lives On”). I agree with Smith’s assessment that Embree’s eyes do not seem “dead” as Als claims, yet I am not so sure about the prescience that Smith sees in Embree’s eyes. This last vision seems to say more about Smith’s desire than it does about the image itself. I do, however, notice several other things, including Embree’s mouth (it is turned in what seems to be sneer, conveying a note, even if unintended, of defiance), the composition of the photograph (Embree stands atop a wagon, his whole naked body on display, while the fully clothed white men stand behind the wagon and fill the picture’s ground, their hats shading their eyes), and lastly that Embree is looking directly at the camera, his eyes at that moment focused on the photographer’s camera (his head high, the opposite of the downward tilt that, Silvan Tomkins tells us, often indicates shame). This constellation of details tells
me all too clearly that Embree was aware that his photograph was being taken and that he was aware it was being taken at his torturers’ behest.

Of course, the purpose of taking this photograph was not to give Embree the opportunity offered to the present-day spectator “to stare down the look of the mob with a counter-look”, even if that is the effect of his gaze today (Apel 9). Indeed, it was to preserve the image of Embree’s lynching-in-progress so that the white community members who loathed Embree and his alleged crime, and supported his punishment could imagine or be reminded of their presence at the lynching. In this respect, Embree is the main focus of this image, but only insofar as he solidifies the righteousness of the historical white onlooker. It is equally important that some of the white men who throng the photograph’s ground stare out from the image as well. Significantly, no one in this first photograph of Embree facing the camera is looking at Embree’s body. They instead look, like Embree, directly into the camera lens. Their direct gazes balance Embree’s; no viewer, either historical or current, can identify with or pity Embree without contending with the collective gaze of this righteous mob. In the white supremacist uses of this photograph, Embree’s body is but the means of—and in some respects, the alibi for—the solidification of a community characterized by its belief in the righteousness of (this) lynching. It is through Embree’s body that the gazes of the white men pictured and the gazes of the displaced historical spectators are channeled and intersect, thereby constituting a constituency through a looking exchange.

In the subsequent photograph in the series, Embree’s back faces the camera. *(Figure 16)* A few members of the crowd maintain their focus on the photographer’s lens, but some (about four from my count) appear to be looking directly at Embree, now that
he faces them. This photograph resonates profoundly with Wallace’s assessment of the ideological underpinnings of photographing the black man from behind. The black man whose back faces the camera signals an “uncompromising rejection of the camera” wherein “the visual conditions of indeterminacy preserved by the anonymity of the man … suggest that black men suffer the double jeopardy of a social and representational sort simultaneously, … [and] powerfully demonstrate the photographic ways white people tend to look at black people in racialist societies” (M. O. Wallace 19–20). In the photograph of Embree, by virtue of the white crowd situated behind the platform on which he stands, Embree is quite literally fixed within the sights of the masculinist white supremacist gaze. Given the conditions of the production of the photograph and the original audience of its circulation (in which a white audience is located literally behind and theoretically before him), Embree is always both anonymous (which is to say representing [criminal] black manhood in general) and individual (the visually identified and identifiable subject of racist white scrutiny).

Embree’s positioning between two gazes—that of the mob and that of the photograph’s audience—is ultimately what underwrites the power of his gaze in condemning is for taking interest in the spectacle of his body and of his body’s suffering. A New York Times reviewer contemplated in existential terms the viewing dynamics of the show and this image:

at this exhibition we are a crowd looking at a crowd looking at a lynching. And we are looking at the lynching too. Again and again, a white mob looks back at us. Its members smile or point or prod the corpse, or they merely settle for looking grim and purposeful. In one extraordinary case, a black man about to be lynched—a man named Frank Embree, naked,
bound and whipped until bleeding—looks back at us, beyond us too, challenging our moral imagination across the years ("Death by Lynching").

If the unifying white supremacist gaze of 1899 (the date of the photograph’s production and of the lynching), distinguished by its righteousness, is enabled by the image of Embree’s body as a mediating point, then by the same token, the anti-racist twenty-first century viewer’s gaze is halted by Embree’s gaze, unable (without, I argue, feeling ashamed) to complete the circuit that would acknowledge and affirm the proprietary gaze of the pictured mob. Returning to Apel’s assertion, Embree does, in a manner, stare down the look of the mob—but not, I would argue, by staring at them. Rather, his intent gaze upon the camera lens and upon the photographer extends to the photograph’s imagined viewer who would dare to delight in the image of his suffering.

Tragically, in the final picture in the series, Embree’s gaze is powerfully undone. (Figure 17) He is again at the center of the image, his body higher than that of the mob, only now he hangs by his neck from a tree, obviously dead. His eyes, however, remain open but unfocused in the grip of death. That Embree would keep his eyes open during his execution, would die with a view of his surroundings and his fate, is itself a remarkable demonstration of black male embodiment. And it is embodiment that is, significantly, indexed by the black photographic subject’s gaze.

Other Black Looks

Apart from Embree, James, and the numerous other black victims of lynching, there are other black subjects who populate, albeit sparsely, these photographs of
racialized murder, only they take up the role of spectators standing amidst the overwhelmingly white crowds. The present day viewer’s discovery of a black body in the crowd of onlookers provides a moment of rupture in an otherwise easy equation of whites as bearers of the violent look and blacks as its powerless victims, at best turning a defiant gaze (like Embree’s) until it is tragically undone. As Apel analyzes a photograph of the lynching of Rubin Stacey, she is struck by “the presence of a black woman, to the left of Rubin Stacey, her face obscured by a white girl, but her neck and arm visible” (Apel 42). She speculates that the woman is a domestic or nanny—which provides Apel with a justification for reading the woman’s presence as compulsory, not voluntary. “Perhaps,” Apel writes, “she deliberately turned away from the camera or was addressed by the white man on the other side of the tree whose face is also obscured but turned toward her. Is he her employer, who insisted she come to care for the children as they witnessed this lesson in lynch-law justice?” (Apel 42). Apel’s language indicates a desire to explain this black woman’s contribution to the population of onlookers as an effect of her relative powerlessness. Her turned and concealed face, then, not only represents a minor gesture of refusing to have her presence authorized by the camera’s gaze, but also a refusal to gaze at the other black body in the photograph—the body of the lynched Rubin Stacey.

While Apel’s interpretation of the woman’s posture is, given the paucity of evidence to the contrary, as valid as any other, other images of blacks attending lynchings do not offer the opportunity for such an ambiguous reading. Amidst the photographs in the Will James series is a photo of nine young boys who seem to be between the ages of eight and twelve who are flanking what the text printed on the photograph states are the ashes of James. *(Figure 18)* At least two of these boys are black. The black boys stand
apart—one at the head of each flank—presenting their profiles to the camera. They seem at ease next to their white peers, suggesting a quaint, color-blind innocence of youth. It is worth returning, however, to one of Apel’s comments on the group dynamic evident in the Stacey photograph as it reflects upon the currency of race and racism in the young. Apel concludes her study of the image with the following theory:

… the certainty of the children [evinced by their posture and smiles] assumes more complex dimensions in the context of the black and white adults engaged in the small drama behind the lynching tree and raises questions about the terribly peculiar relationship between white children and their adult black caretakers in which the smallest children knew themselves to be the superiors of their black elders (Apel 42).

This compelling point regarding the triumph of white supremacy over age-based seniority mitigates the assumption of equality and camaraderie superficially evident in the James photograph.

Another photograph depicting the lynching of Jesse Slayton and William Miles on June 1st 1896 in Columbus, Georgia (this image is not part of the Without Sanctuary collection) provokes similar consternation over the presence of the three black subjects—this time adults—amidst a large crowd of about twenty to thirty white onlookers. (Figure 19) Again, the onlookers are positioned in two flanks, creating an alley in the photograph’s center that ends at a tree from which two bodies—Slayton and Miles—hang lifeless. (Figure 20) The crowd is composed predominantly of white adult males, though two young white boys look out from the edge of the right flank. The vast majority of the crowd members, including the three black adults, look directly at the camera. On the left, partially obscured by the cropping of the image and the shoulder of the white man before
her, a black woman (her gender signaled by her cloche-style hat) peers into the camera lens. *(Figure 21)* Only a close examination uncovers that her eyes are opened wide and that her brow is slightly furrowed, thus indicating a note of discomfort, though even this is not certain. To her left, in the front row, stands a black man in loose work pants and a soft laborer’s hat, his right hand resting on what seems to be a long-handed tool like a shovel. *(Figure 22)* His right hand is in his pocket and, though he stands erect, his ill-fitting garments and, most significantly, the contrast between his clothes and the sharp suits, ties and hats of the other white men make him appear comparatively powerless. His semi-relaxed face, forming a stern mien quite similar to that of the white men to his right and left, does not convey the sense of righteousness evinced by the others, however. In another setting, this black man’s posture and facial comportment could signify an intimidating glare.

A similar interpretation may be applied to the lone black man on the right who grimaces at the camera as though trying to deflect the sun’s glare. *(Figure 23)* He, too, betrays no sense of shame or discomfort that one might expect he would feel for being racially aligned with the abstract notion and this specific instance of black criminality. In fact, his leaning into the picture (his head pops out at an acute angle from behind a white man’s shoulder) suggests, not just a fearlessness at being there, but also a desire to be in the moment and to have his presence at this event documented. Clearly, this man does not see his presence in the audience of a lynching as a conflict of interest. Unlike the anonymous black woman at the Stacey lynching, these three black adults—as well as the black children near James’s ashes—convey their right to be present and to be passive witnesses to the lynching of black men. While a white man props up the head of one of
the lynching victims in the background of the Slayton-Miles lynching photo, presumably to make the victim more visible to the camera, these living adults *make themselves* more visible. While they undoubtedly understand (which is absolutely not to say they agree with) their lowly station in relation to the white townsfolk, they do not appear to identify the racialized violence visited upon the two black men hanging from the tree as heralding a risk to their own bodies—at least not at this precise moment. In this last regard, as I shall explain, lawfulness trumps race in the consolidation of a notion of shared humanity.

The black adults’ not looking upon the body of the dead black men signifies a failure to identify with the lynched black bodies in favor of the pleasure of their own embodiment. Numerous theories of identification (and, not insignificantly, disidentification) from José Muñoz to Laura Mulvey to Christian Metz to Jane Gaines may be upon here to attempt to explain why, in this instance, shared racial identity is not enough to forge what is recognizable (to us) as what Elizabeth Alexander has called a racially-determined “collective” that understands the experience of being black as the experience of being a subject of trauma. In fact, Alexander’s linking of blackness and trauma (a connection that I find elsewhere to be very helpful and apt) may be just what explains the evident aversion of these photographed black adults to identifying with the lynched black men. In short, these adults may be very understandably ignoring the prospect of racial identification in order to avoid an identification with the trauma of a consistently exploited vulnerability (see Chapter One). Their presence, the *identification* as lynching onlookers might be explained by a project of self-affirming identification that seeks, as its primary goal, psychic health and, in psychoanalytic terms, wholeness.
Recourse to Lacanian psychoanalysis is useful here. In Lacanian terms, the adult understands his identity to be but one term in a world of objectified images—where identity operates in the register of the symbolic. Entry into the symbolic order is prefaced upon the phenomenon of identification, wherein the ego is project onto an external, but somehow like, object such as the reflection of one’s body in a mirror. This process of identification is itself premised upon a Self that is willing to relinquish an embodied knowledge of itself in favor of a knowledge of itself as image. With respect to the black adults in the Slayton-Miles photograph, their gesture of looking away from an obvious point of identification—the lynched black men—implies a refusal to identify with this particular instantiation of black victimization and, perhaps more to the point, of black criminality, in favor of a commitment to their own embodiment. Moreover, what may well override the black spectators’ identification with the black victims here and in other instances of lynching is the intervening detail of the victims (accurate or contrived) image as criminals.

This last point recommends yet another reading of the photograph as one not ostensibly distinguished by race, but by a hard-and-fast distinction between the law-upholding (the black and white mob) and the lawless (the lynched black men). In this case, it is shame and its associate affect—disgust—and the gestures of overcompensating for these affective attachments that define the relationship between the black spectator and the black victims. Lest one be inclined to remove any racial reading of this image, however, I add that these other terms—lawlessness and lawfulness—are themselves racially coded, a legacy of the de jure criminalizing of blackness that originated in the wake of Emancipation, when African-Americans who “often had nowhere to go … found
themselves designated *trespassers, disturbers of the peace, vagrants, or loiterers*” (Hallett 51, my emphasis).

The last term in the list above—“loiterer”—is also an appropriate designation for the gallery or museum visitor. The loiterer is someone whose aimlessness and timelessness (leisure) are amenable to an unhurried encounter with images and objects. As Sontag explains, the materials on the walls and in the cases at the gallery “are stations along a—usually accompanied—stroll” (Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 121). But unlike Charles Baudelaire’s *flaneur* who passes through the arcade without a serious or extended engagement with the things he passes, the loiterer is first of all distinctly not a bourgeois subject. His looking while dithering is not a consumerist gesture that reinforces the capitalist status quo as is the case for the *flaneur*. Rather, the loiterer’s lingering stasis—this non-consumerist form of looking is not about class aspirations—disrupts the status quo by interrupting the reverie it promotes. Moreover, according to its legal definition, the loiterer is also an illicit subject who, like trespassers and disturbers of the peace, has no right to be there. Yet unlike those two illegal subjects, the loiterer is not figured as an active transgressor of social norms. On the contrary, his (scopic) violations are incidental, perhaps even accidental, and, are, despite all this, nevertheless recognized as criminal.

It is in this configuration of the illicit or, as Avery Gordon says, the “uninvited”

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34 In a reading of the Eastman Johnson painting, *Old Kentucky Home—Life in the South* (1859), in which a well-dressed white woman is depicted sneaking into the slave compound where black people are dancing, singing, and flirting, Gordon observes that the white woman “is coming into their yard uninvited,” and yet, ironically, “It is as if everybody stopped what they were doing to pose for her and then allowed her to think that they had forgotten that she had not been invited.” Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 137, 138.
Lynching” can be located. In the case of the photographs of lynchings, the viewer is well aware that he is not the photographers’ and lynching participants’ ideal viewer and that the gallery does not constitute what the image makers’ envisioned as an ideal viewing environment. The paintings, drawings, and sculptures displayed in the NAACP show, by contrast, are exhibited in their “appropriate” element, which is simply to say that these works of art are shown in the space for which, in the modern era, they were destined—the art gallery. As evinced by the two critics’—Winsten and Newton’s—seamless comparison of lynching imagery to an Old Master depiction of martyrdom and the NAACP director’s decision to make this a juried art show, there is little if any room for the viewer to understand himself as performing political work through an oppositional gaze.

For Susan Sontag, the dissonance created by images of pain housed in a space dedicated to their viewing can only lead to exploitation. And yet, with respect to the lynching photographs, it is the way that the gallery makes the photographs signify as images for public perusal that contradicts and undermines their previous exploitative function as images for the private consumption of white supremacists. In this respect, the presentation of lynching photographs in the “inappropriate” space of the gallery has greater potential to produce “the equivalent of a sacred or meditative space in which to look at” such images (Sontag Regarding the Pain of Others, 119).

A significant choice is made when the viewer declines the invitation to share in the pleasure the lynch mob feels at the spectacle of black suffering and death. The faces of the lynch mob in the photographs greet viewers in this way, assuming a unified
pleasure in the gaze of white power, just as they once greeted the photographer who photographed them. The photographs themselves would never have existed had he—the photographer—not taken up their ideological perspective—a perspective that produced and forever frames the photographs taken—along with his camera\textsuperscript{35}. Dora Apel has noted that “We, as viewers, occupy the photographer’s viewing position, but most of us reject the complicity thereby implied” (Apel 7). The mob, by way of the photographer, invites the viewer to look at the spectacle they created through the act of lynching and their desire to preserve an image of that act through photography—an invitation that “most of us reject”. As has been argued above via the application of a theory of shame as an adaptive affect, we might be moved to feel disappointed that people we would otherwise recognize as human beings—the mob—people presumably holding similar rational and ethical standards, could produce and, through the photographic process, reproduce such an outrageous event. The irony, then, is that an act created to disfigure the black body could make the other bodies—the white bodies that compose the lynch mob and the lynching witnesses—unrecognizable, too.

That said, one would be remiss not to point out that there are other gazes in the lynching photographs that work to oppose the spirit in which they were produced from

\textsuperscript{35} Certainly one must acknowledge, thanks to Deborah Willis (\textit{J.P. Ball: Daguerrean and Studio Photographer}, ed. Deborah Willis [New York: Garland, 1993]), that at least one photographer of lynching scenes was black: J.P. Ball, who on at least one occasion agitated against one black man’s lynching (Goldsby 246). Jacqueline Goldsby, whose recent book looks at the representation of lynching as a public secret in the writing of Ida B. Wells, James Weldon Johnson, and others, explains in her caption to one of Ball’s photographs the distinctness of African American photographers of lynching: “African American photographers did not shy away from making lynching photographs but often did so by fashioning them into framed narratives. Juxtaposing photographs of the murder scene with images of the victim alive or lying in state at his funeral, these series establish ethical boundaries within which looking at the murder becomes a point of interest” (Goldsby 244). This is arguable what happened in the wake of Emmett Till’s funeral which will be discussed in the following chapter. Jacqueline Goldsby, \textit{A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature} (London, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006).
within and that further indict what Tomkins might call the interested look of the lynch mob. Failure to acknowledge and to analyze the gazes of the African American subjects in the lynching photos is tantamount to the omission for which Hartman chastises Rankin—in order to recognize the agency of the black people in these scenes designed, above all others, to dehumanize, one must investigate the disruptive work of their presence and, above all, of their gaze.
Chapter Three: Emmett Till, Justice, and the Task of Recognition

In 1954, one lynching in particular, and the images that accompanied it, provided the impetus for the American Civil Rights Movement (Hudson-Weems 8). The uniting of spectatorship and politics during this episode was overt and conflicted, but always underwritten by the needs of particular spectators to affirm or deny the humanity of a teenage African-American boy named Emmett Till.

This chapter charts the many venues and looks that informed and were informed by the several onlookers’ political dispositions. As was true for the lynching images discussed in the previous chapter, a single theory of “the look” is neither viable nor desirable for my analysis. Instead, by tracing the character of the many looks of the prosecution, the defense, of Till’s mother and uncle, and of a sympathetic mass media audience, I explain how the same image of the dead and tortured black body may signify in multiple ways and be put in service to opposing viewpoints.

In this investigation of the black body as object of the look I again consider the character of the spectator’s look, but rather than consider the look as itself objectified I discuss here the look that turns back on its viewer and perceives, in the place of a like other, an identical self. I call this phenomenon “mis/recognition”. As I shall demonstrate, recognition was the key term in the Emmett Till case, perhaps more so than for any other object studied here. With respect to the images of Till—in his casket, in a Christmas photo, in the magazine photograph—the task of recognition is not restricted to identifying the dead black body as human; it is also primarily engaged with identifying whose body
is represented—a task that implies the questioning of racial and, as I shall demonstrate, evidentiary visual identification. Echoing the “danger” implied in the previous chapter regarding the paucity of documentary associations with graphic and plastic images, the danger that underwrites this entire project of recognition—that the image of the black body will not be recognized as human—is exacerbated in this situation due to the decomposition of Till’s corpse. The recognition of Till’s particular body is not only a recognition of his body’s humanity, but also a recognition and an acknowledgement of Till’s identity as a son and as a black child—two terms that figure his body in specific ways in the various venues—the morgue, the funeral, the courtroom, and the mass media—that it appeared.

I begin with a précis of the major events leading up to the discovery of the body and its entrance into civil rights rhetoric. Several elements of the story of Till’s murder have been contested, including how many people were involved in the actual abduction and murder (the case has been recently reopened in hopes of solving these questions [USDOJ]); however, the crux of the story is that 14-year-old Emmett Louis Till of Chicago, Illinois, was visiting his great-uncle Moses Wright, a share cropper, and other relatives in Mississippi on a summer vacation. Although the details of the encounter are still debated and ultimately unknown, what is known is that Till had some interaction with a white female shopkeeper, 21-year-old Carolyn Bryant, at her family store in the small town of Money in Leflore County, Mississippi. Three days later, at 2:30 a.m. on Saturday, August 28, 1955, Bryant’s husband, Roy Bryant, 24, brother-in-law, J. W. Milam, 36, and, according to many accounts, one or two others (including, perhaps,
Carolyn Bryant herself) drove to the home of Moses Wright to abduct Till. Till was taken to Milam’s tool shed where he was beaten. The beating was overheard by an 18-year-old black man named Willie Reed who eventually testified at the trial. At some point, Bryant and Milam apparently decided to kill Till. The found a cotton ginning fan, drove to the edge of the Tallahatchie River where they say they shot Till in the head, then secured the fan to his neck with barbed wire and threw his body into the river¹.

The image of Till’s body—in its real and imagined (as in the newspaper narratives) states—gained political significance in the weeks and months that followed its discovery on August 31, 1955. The body was found by a 17-year-old white boy, Robert Hodges, who spotted feet sticking out of the water at Pecan Point in the Tallahatchie River. By that date local Mississippi law enforcement had been made well aware of Till’s abduction and disappearance: Moses Wright and his brother-in-law, Crosby Smith, had notified their local sheriff, George Smith, the morning after the abduction, and Chicago police, contacted by Till’s mother, Mamie Till, 33, alerted Tallahatchie County Sheriff, Harold Clarence Strider. (There are also accounts claiming that Till’s cousin, Curtis Jones, also from Chicago, called Sheriff Strider directly to report the kidnapping.) When the body was retrieved from the river and taken to the undertaker it was so badly decomposed that it could only be identified by a signet ring which bore the initials “L. T.” for Louis Till, Emmett’s father. Ostensibly due to the condition of the body, Strider ordered that Till’s body be buried immediately, but Jones intervened by phoning Mamie Till in Chicago and notifying her of Strider’s order. Mamie Till’s own assessment of the

¹ This précis is culled from the several newspaper accounts, most of which are collected in the anthology *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative*, ed. Christopher Metress (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2002).
situation was that, “the main thing [the police in Tallahatchie wanted] to do was to get that body in the ground so nobody could see it” (Bradley speech [South Bend, IN, 1955] as qtd. in Hudson 300). She insisted that her son’s body be returned to Chicago. It was, but only on the condition set by the sheriff’s office that the casket never be opened. The box containing Emmett Till’s body arrived at the Illinois Central rail terminal in Chicago on Friday, September 2, 1955.

The Mother

As has been argued in other sections, the visual encounter with the pro-photographic body “in the flesh” can prefigure its reception in the photograph, and it is not only possible, but important to consider the two together. This pairing will become especially clear at the funeral viewing where Till’s dead body “in the flesh” is juxtaposed with photographs of him while alive.

Hortense Spillers, in her important essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”, discusses in semiotic terms the overlapping of language and bodies during slavery that have produced “an American grammar” that is now at pains to understand black subjectivities. She therefore calls upon “the flesh” to stand in opposition to a discourse inadequate to account for the experiences of black bodies, specifically black women (Spillers 145). My use of the term “in the flesh” here recalls Spillers’s vital assertion—that the body can be made to make a political intervention. It should be understood, however, that my configuration of the body—even the fleshly body—as an image functions less in opposition to a sign system and more in tandem with it. More simply put, I do not figure the fleshly body as more authentic than the body depicted in
the photograph. I make a distinction between these domains—the flesh and the photograph—to acknowledge a distinction in viewing positions.

Mamie Till’s viewing of her recently deceased son’s body in the flesh instigates the mobilization of its image as a sign of white supremacy’s violation of humanity. The arrival of Emmett Till’s coffin and the subsequent opening of the coffin—in defiance of a contract agreed to by the Chicago funeral director A.A. Raynor and Mississippi officials (Till-Mobley and Benson 131)—marks the beginning of one struggle for recognition of the body—as human and as Till, as universal and as particular—that would carry over, in different ways, into several disparate domains, including the funeral viewing and the courtroom.

Mamie Till’s encounter with her son’s coffin at the railroad station marks the first obstacle to her recognition of the body within as that of her son. In her own words, her need to recognize prompted her to flaunt the Mississippi state edict that the box remain closed and demand that the funeral home director open the coffin.

I was not bending. That box had to come open. I mean, I didn’t even know what we would find inside. There could have been bricks, mud, someone else’s body. I would spend the rest of my life not knowing. Besides, I had heard so many things over the past couple of days, I had to see for myself what they had done to my son (Till-Mobley and Benson 131).

In order for the mourning process to begin, Mamie Till explains, she needs to see for herself that the body—if indeed there was a body—in the coffin was that of her son. Indeed, much had been done, even after the body had been discovered in the river, to ensure that it would never be seen. In addition to locking the box with the seal of the
State of Mississippi, the Mississippi coroner had packed the body in lime to further speed its decomposition (Till-Mobley and Benson 133). In demanding that the box be opened, Mamie Till articulates a logic explained by Jacques Derrida in terms of the responsibility of the living to the dead. I shall elaborate upon this point later, but his caveat bears mention here: “Nothing could be worse,” Derrida writes, “for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one has to know who is buried where” (Derrida 9).

However, as Till’s mother soon discovers, the task of recognizing her son’s body is not easy. In the Chicago funeral home Mamie Till’s visual project of bestowing a particular humanity—her son’s—on this body is influenced by her identity as a mother, an identity which in turn gives the task the great urgency underscored by Derrida. But this task is frustrated by the body’s visual appearance. At a speech given shortly after Till’s murderers’ acquittal, Mamie Till admitted that “What I saw in that box was not like anything I’ve ever seen before in my life” (Hudson-Weems 302). The detailed description of the initial visual encounter that she offers in her memoirs is wrenching:

When I got to his chin, I saw his tongue resting there. It was huge, I never imagined that a human tongue could be that big. …

From the chin I moved up to his right cheek. There was an eyeball hanging down, resting on that cheek. … Right away, I looked to the other eye. But it wasn’t there. … Dear God, there were only two [teeth] now, but they were definitely his. I looked at the bridge of his nose …. It had been chopped …. 

From there, I went to one of his ears. … And that’s when I found out that the right ear had been cut almost in half. … And I don’t know what happened to that part of his ear, but it wasn’t on the back part of his skull. I did check. And when I did, I saw that someone … had taken a hatchet and had cut through the top of his head, from ear to ear. The back of his head was loose from the front part of his face. … I saw a bullet hole slightly back from the temple area. … [I]t was that one bullet hole that finally caused me to speak.
‘Did they have to shoot him?’ I mean, he had to be dead by then (Till-Mobley and Benson 135-36).

Her thorough inventory of body parts represents an attempt to metaphorically reassemble the body into a unified human being. “At a glance,” Till-Mobley explains, “the body didn’t even appear human. I remember thinking it looked like something from outer space, something you might see at one of those Saturday matinees. Or maybe that’s only what I wanted to think so that I wouldn’t have to admit that this was my son” (Till-Mobley and Benson 134). As Norman Bryson tells us in his discussion of “The Gaze and the Glance”, whereas the Gaze implies a durable or long and thorough viewing process, the Glance provides only “limited, local discoveries” (Bryson 120). Mamie Till’s glance, in which seeing and appearing are one and the same, is explained by the temporal non-contingency that Bryson describes as fundamental to the glance. For Bryson as for Mamie Till, the glance does not provide the viewer with sufficient information to constitute knowledge; instead, it piques the viewer’s knowledge, forcing her to situate what is seen in the glance in relation to “the sum of inferences … which has accumulated so far” while postponing “full apprehension … until more information from the work of the Glance will have been admitted” (Bryson 121).

Mamie Till’s invocation of cinematic metaphor recalls Jacques Lacan’s use of the concepts “screen” and “gaze,” concepts which, along with “identification”, continue to prove integral to cinema studies. In the previous chapter I explained, via a definition of my term “mis/identification” the essential, productive “mistake” inherent in perceiving the body of an Other as more like one’s own body than not. Lacan defines identification as “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (Lacan 126).
2), and it is essential to the subject’s graduation into the realm of the Symbolic. It is the screen that offers to the subject the image of himself in visual terms. We might also explain the screen’s power here as enabling the subject’s recognition of himself as a visual object.

Mamie Till’s consternation in the project of recognition ought not be written off as an inevitable consequence of Lacanian méconnaissance. The challenges she faces in recognizing a human body that also happens to be that of her son are real. In this sense, her invocation of the screen is deceptive. A more fitting trope of visually-constituted identity is the love bond.

Although its manifestations have not always been benign, Jessica Benjamin explains, the love bond, especially the version that forms between the mother and the infant, can have the effect of constituting both subjects through what Benjamin calls “mutual recognition” (J. Benjamin 16). In Benjamin’s model, a subject comes to understand herself as an autonomous (if incomplete) being in the world “by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence” (J. Benjamin 21). But the role of recognition in constituting the self does not end here, for as Benjamin tells us, recognition is “reflexive; it includes not only the other’s confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response,” adding that “We recognize ourselves in the other” (J. Benjamin 21).

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2 Benjamin locates evidence of this effect in a close reading of Freud: “In truth, Freud’s understanding of authority is more complex than this choice [between repressive authority and unbridled nature] suggests. He does not take into account what we may call the culture’s ‘erotic’ means of binding individuals in spite of their resistance. Obedience to the laws of civilization is first implied, not by fear or prudence, Freud tells us, but by love, love for those early powerful figures who first demand obedience.” Jessica Benjamin, The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 4-5.
A “mis/recognition” is at work in Mamie Till’s subsequent attempt, after having recognized her son, to understand the suffering experienced by his body. It is precisely this manifestation of recognition that I am calling “mis/recognition”, and it is a “mistake” that appears on two fronts.

In the first instance, the interplay that Benjamin outlines above demonstrates the “reflexive” component of recognition that leads one to effectively “recognize” one’s self in the other. The second instance to which I want to draw attention foregrounds the particular form of misrecognition that can be fostered by the love bond in general, and the maternal love bond in particular. If we return to the Lacanian notion that no subject is ever truly a complete being, we may understand the assertions that Benjamin offers as a first order of subject formation—“I am the doer who does, I am the author of my acts,” (J. Benjamin 21)—as a disingenuous misrecognition of the self’s wholeness. Consequently, we may see in the mother’s affirmation of this subject’s declaration—her “You are, you have done” (J. Benjamin 21)—the mother’s own misrecognition of her child’s wholeness. That Emmett Till’s wholeness was so radically challenged, to put it lightly, illustrates the urgency of Mamie Till’s attempt to reestablish recognition.

Mamie Till’s mis/recognition is based, not on an abstract notion of black boyhood (or, at least, not exclusively)\(^3\), but on her perception of herself and her knowledge of her own body’s potential response to torture. Mamie Till is compelled to think of her own body and her own body’s limits when she takes visual account of her son’s evident torture and murder: “I paused at the knees. They weren’t knobby knees, they were nice,

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\(^3\) It should be obvious that Mamie Till’s image of black boyhood is informed by her own identification as a black woman and the mother of a black male child. Her affective ties of kinship are stronger than any derogatory image of black boyhood (most likely inflected with the myth of sexual aggressiveness) that characterize the hegemonic image held by many Americans.
fat, round knees and rather flat. And they were *my* knees” (Till-Mobley and Benson 134–35, emphasis in original). Unlike the torturer, who Elaine Scarry tells us is “so without any human recognition of or identification with the pain that he is not only able to bear its presence but able to bring it continually into the present, inflict it, sustain it” (Scarry *Body in Pain*, 36, my emphasis), Mamie Till can see herself in the body of the tortured and imagine herself in her son’s place. Perhaps the torture and the pain are themselves too sublime, too incomprehensible for her to take full stock of through a procedure of identification with her son. But she is able to identify with his sense of fear as she discovers, suddenly, that she might be able to see with his eyes. Riding in a taxi on the night of the trial’s conclusion, passing through Mississippi back roads, Mamie Till recounts that she “was terrified and could only imagine the horrors that lay around every turn. And then an even more terrifying thought rushed over me: Was this what Emmett saw, was this what he thought on his last ride in Mississippi in the pitch black of night?” (Till-Mobley and Benson 190). It is by seeing what Emmett most likely saw that she is able to comprehend the depths of his fear.

Recognition and identification, in this episode, are loaded at every step with political significance. Even the decision of when and where to admit to recognizing the disfigured body of Emmett Till as a human body and as that of Till, specifically, bore serious implications in the segregationist South. There are moments when it became essential not to signal to those in power the psychic pain that recognition entailed. Ironically, this act of self-preservation—to conceal the experience of pain and vulnerability—is technically at odds with the political project of making human vulnerability recognizable. Yet the need for this self-preservationist act of refusal is
evident in Emmett Till’s uncle Moses “Mose” Wright’s visit to identify the body at the morgue. Rather than let multiply the white dominance made visible during the lynching and repeat the act of submission-under-duress in another location (the morgue), when called to identify Emmett’s body, Wright revealed no emotion and behaved in accordance with what Mamie Till calls “the code.”

He and every other black person in the Delta knew it and lived by it. Never show emotions. You couldn’t show joy. That would be suppressed. You couldn’t show anger. That would mean defiance. You couldn’t show sorrow. That would mean weakness. I guess as far as Southern whites were concerned, blacks had no feelings. So Mose … dammed up his feelings, as he was so used to doing, holding back until later, until he couldn’t hold back any longer (Till-Mobley and Benson 129).

The emotions that Wright refused to express in the morgue were to become, however, foundational to the political movement that Emmett Till’s death and public funeral portended. It is the radical difference between black emotion in the morgue and black emotion during the funeral service that makes this case so remarkable in terms of the politics of affect and what Jacques Derrida has called “the work of mourning”—a notion to which I will return in my discussion of the funeral. Both sites stage, each in its own way, the importance of recognizing the right body at the right time, in the right way.

**The Mourner**

Mamie Till sought to make universally recognizable and undeniable both her and her son’s pain to a viewing public by holding an open casket funeral for her son. In a speech delivered shortly after the acquittal of Emmett’s murderers, Mamie Till explained
I said, ‘Roy [Mooty, Mamie’s cousin], anybody that wants to look at this, can see it. I’m tired of stuff being covered up. If some of these lids had been pulled off of Mississippi a long time ago, then something like this wouldn’t be happening today. So far as my personal feelings are concerned, they don’t count. ... And if my son had sacrificed his life like that, I didn’t see why I should have to bear the burden of it alone. There was a lesson there for everybody (Bradley speech [South Bend, IN, 1955] as qtd. in Hudson 304).

Emmett’s body lay in state for four days at the Roberts Temple Church of God. The church was thronged, mostly by black Chicagoans, who had followed the reported kidnapping and alleged murder through the black press and the mainstream media outlets. In the foreword to Mamie Till-Mobley’s memoir Jesse Jackson remarks upon the strength of her political convictions which were so intense that she “put the struggle for emancipation and her outrage above personal privacy and pride. She allowed the distorted, water-marked body from the Tallahatchie River to be displayed in an open casket, at that time the largest single civil rights demonstration” (Jackson xii).

Implicitly, it seems, Mamie Till understood the political possibilities of making her son’s body visually available to a public already aware of the ongoing threats against black life in certain parts of the U.S. Her belief was that, in confronting the disfigured body of Emmett Till, “people also had to face themselves. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil” (Till-Mobley and Benson 142). Seeing the brutality enacted upon the body of a young black boy would perhaps make the
country acknowledge just how dire the situation was for African Americans in the American South.

Mamie Till seems to have implicitly understood the power of looking to do what words could not. Her decision to have a public, open-casket funeral and to guarantee that both the funeral and the body were photographed stem from the understanding that people “had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this. … I knew that if they walked by that casket, if people opened the pages of Jet magazine and the Chicago Defender, if other people could see it with their own eyes, then together we might find a way to express what we had seen” (Till-Mobley and Benson 139). It seems that even the transformation of the task of looking into a task of recognition—a task whose terms, as I will explain, are not exclusively expressible in the language of emotion but also in the language of justice—demonstrate the importance of the image in contesting the validity of unrestrained brutality.

Knowing that the viewing public—the mourners—had little if anything to compare to Emmett after his torture and death, Mamie Till provided photographs of Emmett while alive for comparison. The open-casket funeral that was held in Chicago was an orchestrated viewing event, one that relied in part on the juxtaposition of visual objects to make its political and affective points. At the viewing, the painful reality that a young black boy’s body could endure such violence that it became difficult to recognize that body as human let alone as Emmett Till was underscored by photographs taken during Emmett’s last Christmas with his family that were taped to the coffin lid. (Figures 23, 24 & 25)
This juxtaposition of the photographs, which represented Emmett Till alive, and the dead body made an emotional appeal to a sentimental aesthetic more commonly associated with memorial photography of nineteenth century America. At that time, the photograph was a central feature in the mourning process, and in fact these memorial photographs constitute the largest group of nineteenth-century American genre photographs. As Stanley B. Burns, owner of the United States’s largest collection of these images, explains, “Surviving families were proud of these images and hung them in their homes, sent copies to friends and relatives, wore them as lockets or carried them as pocket mirrors” (Burns). The most disturbing images of this genre are also the rarest; they are the pre-mortem (before death) photographs. In the earliest days of photography, when most people did not have their portraits taken, photographers appealed to customers with the slogan *Secure the Shadow ‘Ere the Substance Fade’* which united the unpredictability of death with photography’s technical ability to freeze time, as it were, in the image. After a person had fallen ill, however, death often came too quickly to capture the previously unphotographed subject while still alive. A few photographers and families compensated for this by posing their loved ones in gestures that suggested life (a young girl, eyes open, seated upright in a chair; or the ubiquitous pose of sleep with no symbols of death in view). The one pair of pre- and post-mortem images known to exist illustrates the power of this juxtaposition of life and death. (*Figure 26*) The caption for these images suggests one reason why the formal pairing of Emmett Till’s Christmas portraits and his dead body—a pairing that was repeated in the magazines and newspapers that reported on the funeral and trial—yields such affective power. The
The first, most unusual, image shows a sick boy in bed with a ball, which symbolized the joy of life in which he can no longer participate. … The second image shows the boy after he has died. … The spots on the boy’s forehead indicate the development of a childhood exanthema, perhaps chicken pox or measles (Burns).

Emmett’s Christmas portrait has him posed with an object that represents a similar “joy of life”: the Philco television, which was by 1955 the American home’s central vehicle of entertainment. However, his proprietary pose against the television as well as his stylish new outfit, a Christmas gift from his mother, depict a boy who has no idea that his death is imminent—less than nine months away. As one scholar related to Mamie Till, “That photo would come to define him for everyone. It would become so important in telling his story, starting at his funeral, where it had been on display in his casket. How ironic, she [Clenora Hudson-Weems] noted, that the photo seemed to foreshadow something with such profound historical significance: the role that the media—especially television—would play in covering the civil rights struggle, a struggle that would intensify with the coverage of the murder trial” (Till-Mobley and Benson 159).

The spectacle of Till’s body in the casket—the second image of this pre-/post-mortem visual pairing—like the daguerreotype, shows not only the body but the cause of its death. It is the visibility of not only death itself but also the means of death that compounds the affective power of the visual display. However, the fact that the mark of
death on Till’s body renders him nearly unrecognizable as human grant this generic dynamic much greater gravity.

The emotional power of the *memento mori* pictorial genre is premised upon making mortality both visible and meaningful. The genre originates in the seventeenth century European still life paintings known as *vanitas*. The genre was adapted to the photographic medium in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because the images produced by photography are understood to offer documentary evidence of the physical existence of an actual body, the existential message of the *memento mori*—literally, “remember that you must die”—is explicitly linked to a real body—the subject of the memorial photograph. Barring witness from the actual circumstances of another’s death—for instance, witnessing an act of murder—the spectacle of corporeal remains are understood by the viewer as proof of the cessation of life (death as an event) and as evidence of universal human vulnerability. It is the dead body made visible that unites in the mind of the viewer the abstract concepts of life and death via the notions of a humanity defined as such by its vulnerability.

The memorial photograph, therefore, both is and is not allegorical. As I shall explain, its use of allegory directs its viewer to what I am calling the pedagogical imperative that is death. Its rhetorical strategy relies on a consensual investment in the idea of a universal humanity that is in part defined by mortality. The photographic medium demands that there actually be a body present in order for it to be represented in the memorial photograph. The mourning for or acceptance of one’s own mortality that is the ambition of the *memento mori* is a visually-prompted event. That event is the spectacle of another’s death. The self-conscious act of mourning, figured by the genre as
psychologically productive and cathartic, depends upon a fundamental mis/recognition—that one see the dead body as (potentially) one’s own.

The endurance of the *memento mori* images demonstrates that the imaging of death and/or violence, and the spectator’s mis/recognition of himself in these images are understood as teaching valuable lessons about human vulnerability, including the most important lesson—how (not) to die. In addition to the mourning that these images precipitate, other images evincing the body’s vulnerability “suggest that ‘experience’ [the specific experiences of vulnerability known as pain and death] can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as *knowledge*” (Alexander 97, my emphasis). Such knowledge may include knowing what spaces one can inhabit and transgress, and the limits of one’s behavior in those spaces.

Death, Derrida notes, is a teacher without peer in this respect. He writes, “To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. And yet nothing is more necessary than this wisdom. It is ethics itself to learn to live” (Derrida xviii). The human project is not to learn to live, but to learn *how* to live—a query to which Derrida’s simple reply is “justly.” His reference to justice here echoes the worry articulated by Judith Butler and Achille Mbembe in the first chapter: that human beings’ vulnerabilities are not uniformly nor universally subjected to the same measures of justice. Still contemplating justice, Derrida considers the dead’s palpable influence on the living. What Derrida captures in his notion of ghosts—“To live … not better, but more justly. But *with them* [ghosts]. … And this being-with specters would also be, not
only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Derrida xviii–xix)—is repeated in Mbembe’s vastly more politicized theory of necropolitics.

In her study of black death and funeral culture, Karla F. C. Holloway discusses the practice of black people taking back their bodies; there, however, the bodies being reclaimed are not one’s own in the strictest sense, but—as is indicated by the recurrence of the word “their”—the bodies of one’s kin. Holloway discovers that, in the heyday of the segregation era, Jim Crow regulations in the mortuary industry and the logistical necessity of consulting white undertakers “created an additional psychological burden for African Americans when death occurred in their community.”

White violence, including the vicious practice of lynching, was complicit in too many black deaths, and whites were often as disrespectful to black bodies in death as they were in life. … So, when black men embraced the burial business, they were responding not only to a business opportunity but also to a sense of cultural responsibility and community necessity. Black families knew black morticians—they were our kin, our neighbors, our fellow congregants in Sunday worship service (Holloway 16).

This insistence upon placing the body of a deceased loved one in the care of another who would respect and, in two senses, properly preserve that body indicates, in its own way, a kind of justice through “just treatment”—exactly what that body was denied in life. The practice of reclaiming kin for burial preparation marks not only a final gesture of corporeal control—the body is wrested from those who might disrespect it—but also represents a practical maneuver. Through her many conversations with members of the funeral industry, Holloway discerns a pride in the skill of black undertakers and embalmers who, in their work on black bodies, are not only equipped to meet “the
challenges of the varieties of skin tone among black folk but also … [can manage the]
repair job that masks the residue of violent death” (Holloway 27). These black
undertakers were charged with, and thought to be in a better position to, make the dead
and maimed black body recognizable to the mourners as human and as kin.

Most significant to a discussion of looking and watching is how this racialized
mortuary tradition also enables the mourner to take the visible body back by taking the
body “in” through the act of sight. Much like the witnessing that “consolidate[s] group
affiliations” through the spectacle of brutalized black bodies, this visual gesture of
recognition affirms community and kinship bonds (Alexander 91). This gesture of
“taking in” is aided substantially by the craft of black mortuary, by which I mean that
industry’s training in and objective of facilitating an open-casket funeral by rendering the
body recognizable, as it had in life. This morbid realism enables the “final social
encounter” to produce the empathy that results from the mourner’s recognition of a
shared humanity.

And yet it is precisely this refusal to acquiesce to “retouching” the disfigured
body—what amounts to the aesthetic realism of the mortuary industry—that makes
Emmett Till’s funeral a political event and an activist gesture. I am arguing here that the
funeral and mortuary industries have cultivated a form of realism that demands that one
see the dead body either as it appeared in life or not at all (closed-casket). Visually
beholding and recognizing the body in this way is essential to the mourning process as it

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4 Elizabeth Alexander notes: “The caption of the close-up photograph of Till’s face read: ‘Mutilated face
of victim was left unretouched by mortician at the mother’s request. She said she wanted “all the world” to
witness the atrocity.’” Elizabeth. Alexander, “‘Can You Be Black and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney
King Video(S),” Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art, ed. Thelma
has been codified by a North American funeral industry. By inversion, the Till funeral relies upon the effects of this form of realism by presenting a body that seems not to be what it is said to be.

An important facet to knowing that the body is properly cared for is the essential knowledge that the body has been buried and will stay buried, enduring no further insult and degradation at the hands of its enemies. What I am calling here “further insult” is what forensic pathologists refer to as overkill—the violent physical gestures (repeated stabbings, beatings, post-mortem dismemberment) that visibly and metaphorically ornament the simple act of killing. To call those who defile a corpse “torturers” (recall here Mamie Till’s query: “Did they really need to shoot him? I mean, he must have been dead by then,”) misses the point that the aggression is not about exerting power over a living body, but about performing a ritual demonstrating privilege over the dead body. In such instances the extinguishing of life is not enough; the murder operates to kill not only the person, but the metaphysical bond—humanity—that connects him to his victim.

Ashraf Rushdy explains this desire with respect to lynching, wherein it was understood that “the corpse was an object to be tortured, mutilated, collected, displayed. To snuff out life was rarely enough: more ritual was required” (Rushdy 70). Rushdy adds that “Even a mob that had already hanged, maimed, and burned a man might still feel compelled to exhume his body in order to inflict further indignities” (Rushdy 70, my emphasis). The motivating threat here extends from the body’s potential to signify as human even in death and inspires the ritualized act of stripping the body of its dignity.

In the Till funeral as in any funeral, the mourner’s empathy is presupposed. The difference is that the empathy in the Till funeral was not elicited through a visual
presentation of the body as it appeared in life. On the contrary, it was elicited from
mourners over and over again through the display of a body so unrecognizable that, as we
have seen, even his mother admits to having initially had trouble recognizing it as the
body of her son. Of course, as Butler and Mbembe remind us, a certain amount of risk is
involved in this gesture. A spectator might very well refuse to recognize the body as that
which it is affirmed to be—a human body.

The mechanics of the act of mourning precipitated by visual confrontation is
altogether thrown into question by the Till funeral. Although it can, with some certainty,
be said that the effect of mourning (a product of empathy) is a consequence of the visual
encounter with the actual body—not (only) its representation in photographs—the act of
mourning is really encouraged by the guarantees offered by the funeral rituals themselves
and, in this case, reinforced by mass media sources, including the mass reproduced
photographs, the captions of which declare that the body (re)presented in the coffin at the
church altar is in fact the body that should be mourned.

The Mass Media Mourner

Continuing the discussion of the mourner and before entering a discussion of the
uses of the photograph in the courtroom, however, I want to address the other spectators
who were made mourners via the mass media photograph.

The publication and re-publication of photographs of Till’s body in *Jet* magazine
and *The Chicago Defender* newspaper duplicated the mourning viewing position. The
photograph figured the photograph’s consumer as a spectator whose look was politicized
and empowered, becoming what I designate here as *watching*.
I propose that we not think of the image consumer who watches as passive, but as actively self-restraining. Recalling Moses Wright’s self-restraint, we may understand watching to be motivated by an interest in self-preservation. We can, therefore, through this approach, come to appreciate differently the alternative activist solutions performed predominately by black women, and, specifically, black mothers, including Mamie Till, during the Civil Rights movement. The consequence is to call into question what Robin D. G. Kelley identifies as “the common claim that black mothers and grandmothers in the age of Jim Crow raised their boys to show deference to white people” (Kelley 82). By understanding these women’s instructions as preservationist acts of restraint, we can no longer accuse these women for “‘emasculating’ potential militants,” but appreciate them as “arming their boys with a sophisticated understanding of the political and cultural terrain of struggle” (Kelley 82).

Here, it seems necessary to discuss how the image of Till postmortem “moved” spectators to action. It would seem that Emmett Till’s body’s tenuous relationship to realism and verisimilitude almost made its presence and its visual availability irrelevant for the purposes of public mourning. And yet the mourning for Till’s body is augmented by its visual presentation. It was not newspaper articles and reporter monologues that caused people to faint or to fly into overwhelming expressions of grief. There is, without doubt, a difference between seeing a body and seeing a photograph of a body. Still, it may be that the very unreality of Till’s corpse is what made the consequence of this specific act of mourning—political agitation—as reproducible as the photographic image of the body itself. As is documented in the collections The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative and Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in American


Art, the Till photographs “moved” people. I invoke here the word “moved” in the sense outlined by Jane Gaines in her discussion of the relationship between documentary and activism. “By moved,” she writes, “I mean the mix of affect and action that the double meaning of the word implies. I mean everything from it ‘troubled’ or ‘disturbed’ or ‘shocked,’ to it made you ‘get up and do something’” (Gaines “Radical Attractions”, 109).

As several writers confess in their memoirs, the full range of these sensations was elicited upon seeing the Till photographs. Muhammad Ali describes his encounter thus:

A week after [Emmett Till] was murdered in Sunflower County, Mississippi, I stood on the corner with a gang of boys, looking at pictures of him in the black newspapers and magazines. In one, he was laughing and happy. In the other, his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and his mouth twisted and broken. … I couldn’t get Emmett out of my mind, until one evening I thought of a way to get back at white people for his death. That night I sneaked out of the house and walked down to Ronnie King’s and told him my plan. It was late at night when we reached the old railroad station on Louisville’s West Side. I remember a poster of a thin white man in striped pants and a top hat who pointed at us above the words UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU. We stopped and hurled stones at it, and then broke into the shoeshine boy’s shed and stole two iron shoe rests and took them to the railroad track. We planted them deep on the tracks and waited. When a big blue diesel engine came around the bend, it hit the shoe rests and pushed them nearly thirty feet before one of the wheels locked and sprang from the track. I remember the loud sound of ties ripping up. I broke out running, Ronnie behind me, and then I looked back. I’ll never forget the eyes of the man in the poster, staring at us: UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU (Ali 34–35).

Additionally, the recollections of another athlete, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, indicate a more subtle but similarly profound response to the post-mortem photograph of Till: “I was eight years old when I saw a photo of Emmett’s body in Jet magazine. It made me sick. His face was distorted, gruesomely boated. I had no idea what happened to him, but my
parents discussed it at length; and the Jet photo left an indelible image I could never forget. … The murder shocked me; I began thinking of myself as a black person for the first time, not just a person. … all of a sudden, the color of my skin represented danger” (Abdul-Jabbar 205).

The recollections of Abdul-Jabbar and Ali, not to mention the other authors who cite the Till story in their memoirs, bespeak a strong identification with the body represented in the pictures. The authors’ narrations of their respective responses illustrates how “taking in” the picture of Till’s brutalized body also meant “taking in” that which was not graphically represented in the photograph—a notion of systemic injustice that is determined by America’s abiding racism. Through viewing the photograph, Abdul-Jabbar and Ali also “take back” their racially- and sexually-marked bodies by acknowledging and resisting the social parameters that have been placed on them. Their responses to this sentiment—Ali’s railroad sabotage and Abdul-Jabbar’s self-awareness (which resulted in an altering of relationships with his white peers)—in effect prevent the story of Till’s murder from ending with the image of his tortured body, but with the instructional edge that Derrida claims is integral to the relationship of the living to the dead. Ali and Abdul-Jabbar learn about death, specifically the death of black male youth, and subsequently hold themselves responsible to the image.

The Courtroom Viewers

In Derrida’s view, the image of death is an important instructor for the spectator. The pedagogical imperative of the image of mortality derives from an impulse for social justice, a desire to make death communicable (what Scarry calls “sharable”), and a desire
to make the human being recognizable as a human being. This project of linking justice to a notion of humanity involves imbuing mourning with purpose, and granting the work of mourning a quantifiable goal. The goal—justice—is measured in terms of its responsibility to a notion of humanity that is operating both rhetorically (as bestowing the identity of humanity) and ideologically (as determining the discourse of justice itself). This dual invocation of humanity complicates things, to say the least. In one regard, as Derrida points out, humanity is “that unconditional dignity … that Kant placed higher, precisely …, than any economy, any compared or comparable value, any market price” (Derrida xx). On the other hand, however, it also provides the terms in which human value is discussed. The confused version of humanity to which the pursuit of justice refers is both an item of (theoretical) exchange and the ideological criteria of the economy of exchange itself. The problem with this dually signifying humanity is that it threatens to invalidate the notion of justice altogether. In other words, the aim of justice is to quantify humanity, but the logic of humanity itself maintains that no single person’s humanity is unequal to another’s. Justice, in this case, can only perform two tasks: to serve as a superficial indicator of what is already known about the value of human life (that all lives are valued equally) or, as Butler and Mbembe might argue, to provide a brazen violation of the essential tenets of humanity (that all human beings’ lives are not valued equally in accordance with a notion of universal humanity). These competing definitions of justice and, by extension, of humanity, are what is presented to the modern, state-sanctioned arbiter of value—the courtroom.

In the trial of Emmett Till’s killers, the prosecution was charged with the task of proving not only Emmett Till’s humanity and his attendant right to justice, but also that
justice was being sought on behalf of the right body. In terms of the image, this meant making the image of Till’s body recognizable on two fronts: as the body of Emmett Till and as the body of a human being. During the trial, Mamie Till’s identification of the body and her assertion of recognition were called into question by the lawyers representing Till’s alleged murderers. The extent of the body’s disfigurement—its unrecognizability as Emmett Till—was the basis for some testimony that no criminal act had been committed against the boy. One strategy in the defense attorneys’ arsenal was to suggest that Till was still alive and well in Chicago and that the body found in the river had been deliberately planted. A newspaper at the time reported this sequence of events:

J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant might … have abducted Emmett Till in the night.
But if they did, the turned him loose three miles down the road at the Bryant store in Money and told him to walk home. Moses Wright had left his cabin, and driven down the road to Money and met Emmett coming home, and taken him to meet a friend from the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People, and the friend had persuaded Moses Wright to plant his nephew’s ring on a ‘rotten, stinking corpse,’ which, when fished out of the river, would be identified by simple people as that of Emmett Till (Kempton 108).

Defense attorney John W. Whitten exploited this scenario and declared during closing arguments that, “There are people … who will go as far as necessary to commit any crime known to man to widen the gap between the white and colored people of the United States. … They would not be above putting a rotting, stinking body in the river in the hope it would be identified as Emmett Till” (Johnson 100).

Since the defendants, Milam and Bryant, did not confess their crime before the court, the state was required to make its case using witness testimony and circumstantial
evidence. And although the two photographs of Till’s corpse that were admitted in the trial offered perhaps the most emotionally compelling testimony, they did not serve as incontrovertible evidence of his murder. The image of the mutilated body that was at the center of civil rights agitation in the public realm was radically stripped of any significance to the pursuit of justice in the Mississippi courtroom when the body depicted therein was decided to be unrecognizable as Till to any legally definitive degree. Paradoxically, the unrecognizability that conveyed such strong claims against racist brutality at the funeral in Chicago and which made it necessary for the spectator to give more than a glance in order to recognize the body as human, was, in the courtroom, the grounds for excluding the image as evidence, for denying it so much as a glance, and for making the body and, by extension, the crime against that body invisible or, worse, not identifiable as a crime at all.

The idea of photograph-as-documentary and the caché of the photograph as unmediated visible proof were delegitimized in the courtroom by the legal requirements to prove the *corpus delicti* (the fact that a crime has been committed). The photographs themselves were not themselves proof of murder. This missing equation—the crime as fact—prohibits the telling of the story of the crime that resulted in a death. It is a body that cannot be accounted for in language; it is an un-narrated body. The pedagogical imperative of the spectacle of death is deflected, and an anxious uncertainty takes its place. The absence of a narrative explaining the cause of death means that there is also no hope of learning how that death might have been avoided. Deprived of a material explanation for death, even an explanation as vague as “he was murdered,” death has no
lesson to teach the living (recall Mamie Till’s conviction that “there was a lesson there for everyone”). The *memento mori* is no longer a reminder; it is an image without affect.

Relying, then, upon the coroner’s determinations and despite the defense team’s objecting to the witnesses drawing “any conclusion about what caused the hole [above Emmett’s right ear]” (proposing instead that “a snag [in the river] might have caused the hole”), it was concluded that the hole was indeed the mortal wound. The judge therefore overruled the defense’s objection “that the state had not proved the corpus delicti [sic]: had not proved that Till died by illegal means”, and the trial was permitted to proceed (Hutto 77, 78, 77). The prosecution was therefore able to treat the case as though the crime that had been committed against Emmett’s was a given, and that their legal responsibility was to convince the court that the two defendants were in fact the perpetrators of the crime.

The prosecution also had to deflect the claims made by a series of witnesses for the defense that the body represented in the photograph was not the body found in the river. Although the body’s extensive disfigurement (which both sides, defense and prosecution, concurred was likely the result of a severe beating) might have helped the prosecution’s case by illustrating the extent of the brutality enacted upon it, it nevertheless had a detrimental effect on the prosecution’s case as it permitted the defense to challenge the prosecution’s claims that the body was indeed that of Emmett Till. More than likely this was the case, for why else would the prosecution insist on entering the post-mortem photographs into evidence at all? The defense capitalized on this point when Sheriff Strider was called to the stand. According to one reporter’s transcript of the trial, Strider admitted that he could not identify the body by race, only that he “could tell it was
a human being” ("Sheriff Strider's Testimony Raises Doubt Body in River Was Till Youth" 98). Then, upon being confronted with the photograph of the body that was “taken after it arrived in Chicago”, Strider responded to defense attorney Whitten’s query as to whether “this picture represents a true likeness of the body that you saw”, with the brief reply, “It doesn’t” ("Sheriff Strider's Testimony Raises Doubt Body in River Was Till Youth" 98–99). According to the reporter, “Strider said that the body in the picture was darker than the body he saw at the river bank”, apparently declaring, “At the time I saw the body, he was as white as I am!”("Sheriff Strider's Testimony Raises Doubt Body in River Was Till Youth" 99).

A deconstructive assessment of how the photograph is ideologically figured here as a conveyer of unmediated truth reveals something which at first appears counterintuitive. In rejecting what the photograph represents—Emmett Till’s body—Strider and other witnesses articulate a wholehearted belief in the photograph’s ability to represent “a true likeness” of a body. But their denial and refusal to recognize the body represented in the photograph as the specific body of Emmett Till, demonstrates the documentary limitations of photography; namely, that the photograph might not be able to represent sufficiently a body that is constantly evolving—aging, moving, dying, decomposing.

This paradox resonates with what art historian E. H. Gombrich has written about the portrait. He emphasizes the different techniques involved in producing an image that might depict a likeness so successfully that the identity of the subject depicted therein would be immediately recognizable to any of the image’s spectators. And it is precisely the medium of photography that in the words of Gombrich “has drawn attention to the paradox of capturing life in a still, of freezing the play of features in an arrested moment
of which we may never be aware in the flux of events” (Gombrich 16). In ordinary circumstances it is the face that a spectator views in order to recognize the body in the photograph. And it is the face, “the living expression” (Gombrich 17) and not the mask, Gombrich specifies, that is the subject of portraiture. Gombrich attempts to account for the problem of representing likeness, i.e. of making recognizable, in a still image by referring to the research on the psychology of perception. That work acknowledges “the decisive role which the continuous flow of information plays in all our commerce with the visible world” (Gombrich 16–17). It appears to Gombrich, therefore, that a visual medium that represents movement over time is the medium that most successfully depicts likeness, “for even if it catches a person blinking or sneezing the sequence explains the resulting grimace which the corresponding snapshot may leave uninterpretable” (Gombrich 17).

While Belá Bálazs deemphasizes the significance of time in the cinematic close-up of the face, he doeslocate in even the most minute shifts in facial expression a sincerity that even “the most observant partner would never observe” (Bálazs 120-21). This is an expression that illuminates the very “bottom of the soul” (Bálazs 122). He is, in this respect, echoed by Gilles Deleuze’s in his take on the close-up. For Deleuze, the cinematic device of the close-up works because the movement of the face is a metonymy of those movements of the entire body that convey meaning and produce effects—emotional and physical. When we, as film spectators, are presented with the close-up of the face on-screen, we find that, “There are two sorts of questions which we can put to a face, depending on the circumstances: what are you thinking about? Or, what is bothering you, what is the matter, what do you sense or feel?” (Deleuze 88). In other words, our
orientation toward the face—especially the face that does not and cannot *directly* answer the questions we pose it—is that of interrogator. This characterization of the spectator as interrogator reaffirms the pedagogical imperative of the visual encounter, and extends the pedagogical impulse to account for other spectacles, not only the spectacle of mortality.

Even if Strider could not recognize the face in the photograph as that of Emmett Till, he could still, with some effort, recognize the face as that of a human being. As has been mentioned, proving Emmett Till’s humanity was a key element to the prosecution’s case as it is to all civil rights cases. Yet throughout the investigation and the trial, the sheriff exhibited an undeniable disregard for black people, exhibited by his insistence on establishing a Jim Crow table for the black reporters and his use of a racial slur as a solution to criticisms he received about his unpleasant demeanor. It might therefore be reasonable and critically useful to claim that at least part of the reason why Strider could not recognize the body in the photograph as the body of Till is because he could not recognize the body of Emmett Till, an African-American boy that was represented in the photograph as the body of a human being in whose name justice could be sought.

That Emmett Till’s existence as a human being was not recognized by a pro-segregationist racist is not in itself surprising. But as my own analysis and other recent critical work on the uses of lynching imagery have shown, the white supremacists’ exhibition and circulation of visual documents of lynching (both photographs and actual body parts) are underwritten by and served (when they were produced) to reinforce a notion of a powerful and just white community. It is not merely incidental, Shawn

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Michelle Smith suggests, that these images were often sent as postcards, a transmission so prevalent that it required legislation prohibiting it. In the final chapter of her book Smith discusses how both actual lynching spectacles and the photographic *cartes-de-visites* that commemorated them worked to constitute whiteness in part by solidifying family bonds. Smith argues that these images operate as souvenirs of the event and are circulated as postcards which “[presume] a return, the return of another card, of a shared sentiment” (S. M. Smith 122). The photographic postcard becomes a means through which a son “perhaps demonstrates to his mother how he participates in upholding the mythology of pure white womanhood,” as well as the fantasy of a great white American nation (S. M. Smith 122). The circulation of the images of lynching thereby made it possible to unite even those absent from the actual lynching event in the unified cause of defending the race, nation, and the honor of both.

The courtroom demands that Emmett Till be recognized as a justice-deserving human being represented a threat to this idealization of whiteness that claimed as a defining feature its special access to justice, which it both received and meted out. Oddly enough, Strider’s own language betrays another oft-cited challenge to racial purity that racial supremacists usually reject. In his admission that the body at the river appeared to him as white, excepting, perhaps, for the “kinky hair” and that, “If one of [his] sons had been missing, [he] couldn’t have told it was him” ("Sheriff Strider's Testimony Raises Doubt Body in River Was Till Youth" 98), Strider spoke one of the truths of American racial heritage: that a history of miscegenation and racial “passing” has totally undermined any assertions of racial purity. Strider’s statement that he has “seen a lot of

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6 Smith notes, “Lynching postcards fell under section 3893 of the Revised Statutes which forbid ‘lewd, obscene, and lascivious’ materials to be sent through the mail.” S. M. Smith, p. 197, n. 30.
white men with kinky hair” (“Sheriff Strider's Testimony Raises Doubt Body in River Was Till Youth” 98) demonstrates not only his myopia in terms of racial critique, but also the parameters of a racially inflected notion of human beings. That the body in the river was human he is certain; but that the body of Emmett Till—which Strider and the defense have, through a series of rhetorical gyrations, practically reasoned out of existence let alone sight—is human in any sense that he understands (i.e. purely white and deserving of justice), he appears to have doubt.

Ultimately, the white jury permitted these doubts to free them from finding the defendants guilty. It took them only sixty-seven minutes to acquit Milam and Bryant and, as one juror famously remarked, it would have taken them less time had the jury reportedly not stopped for a drink on the way back. It appears that the equation of whiteness and justice with the communal ties of race loyalty—both reducible to recognizing the white body exclusively as human and seeing humanity exclusively in whiteness—is an equation that foreclosed the possibility of Till’s body ever being recognized either actually (in the post-mortem photograph or the decomposed body itself) or discursively (in the language of justice). Quite literally over Till’s dead body, the tribal bonds of southern whiteness in the U.S. were strengthened. The acquittal also represented the reinforcement of what Sheriff Strider hoped would be forever preserved when he declared that “we haven’t mixed so far down here and we don’t intend to” (Herbers 46).

7 Their guilt is certain. After the trial Bryant and Milam took advantage of the “double jeopardy” rule that prevented them from being tried again and sold the story of their murder to a reporter who published two articles for Look magazine: William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi" (Look [24 Jan. 1956]: 46–48, 50) and William Bradford Huie, "What's Happened to the Emmett Till Killers?" (Look [22 Jan. 1957]: 63–66, 68).
Nevertheless, from that very moment, the way of life that Strider cherished would find itself strenuously challenged and legally dismantled. Yet in order for Sheriff Strider’s cherished status quo to be preserved, the presumed impotence of the look must not be questioned by the spectator, but unconsciously accepted as a permanent given condition. Without a politicized notion of universal humanity to mediate one’s view of a human corpse, one is ultimately not a mourner, but a voyeur. Neither of these is a particularly proactive position. The jury’s failure to indict, compounded by the defendants’ confessions in 1956—both events that underwent massive public exposure—only further insulted the peripheral onlookers’ (that is, the mourners’ and the voyeurs’) relative impotence in the discursive realm of justice. To those onlookers who never believed in either the logic of segregation or in the logic invoked in the defense’s case, the story’s implausible conclusion—not guilty—mocked the powerlessness of the spectator and, moreover, reinscribed the alleged powerlessness of the look itself.

Instead of corroborating the juridical decision and the spectator’s relative inability to effect narrative resolution, some onlookers of the Till case mobilized their role as onlookers into a political movement: the Civil Rights movement. This public recognized in the trial’s resolution the inadequacy of the court’s contribution to the conclusion of the murder narrative and, in so doing, challenged the privilege attributed to the American justice system and the courtroom in particular to determine a definitive conclusion.
Chapter Four: *Bamboozled, Spectatorship, and the Politics of Representation*

A comprehensive discussion of how the look is affected by its environment ought not be restricted to the photograph. The history of film studies and its concern with the cinematic apparatus offer other analyses of viewing positions. More recently, literary studies have begun to consider how the written word invokes and constructs images.¹ This chapter contributes to those fields’ analyses by supplying a politicized and racialized interpretation of filmic and literary “viewing” positions; in particular, it considers those viewing positions that figure as transgressive in being determined by an antiracist notion of universal humanity. I analyze the visual signifiers that are called upon to render the black body recognizable as a human body. As in this project’s previous sections, this chapter assumes that there are politics at stake in the looking relation. Here, however, I explore how a particular trope—metonymy—facilitates the spectator-reader’s recognition of the black body as belonging to a human being. In the works to be discussed in the following pages I focus on the ability of blood to signify humanity metonymically, paying special attention to two texts—one literary, the other cinematic—to explain how a notion of *black* humanity may be perceived even when the vulnerability of actual black bodies goes unseen.

I have argued throughout that an ideological investment in a notion of humanity influences racialized looking relations, sometimes producing in the viewer an

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oppositional gaze that resists the image’s invitation to participate in an exclusionary notion of humanity. Before entering into this final analysis of literary and cinematic images, I want to cite the spectacular scenario of the oppositional gaze as outlined by Elizabeth Alexander that was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. Alexander writes,

In each of these traumatic instances [the Rodney King, the Hill-Thomas hearings, and the Mike Tyson rape trial], black bodies and their attendant dramas are publicly ‘consumed’ by the larger populace. White men have been the primary stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles I have mentioned, but in one way or another, black people have been looking, too, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked, I believe, at contemporary sites of conflict (Alexander 92–93, my emphasis).

What Alexander announces in this passage are several competing forces: the stagers, the preferred consumer, and the bearers of the unauthorized or transgressive look. The possessors of this last formation—whom I have previously distinguished as “watchers”—are here mobilizing a deconstructive look that simultaneously destroys and constructs the meaning of the spectacles of violence against black people. As I have demonstrated, this look is characterized by its insistence upon seeing the vulnerable black body in terms of a universal humanity.
Alexander’s pairing of the spectacle with the look, much like my linking of the lynching photograph to the viewer’s feelings of shame, enables us to conceive of not only the look, but also of the spectacle itself as a weapon to be mobilized against a white supremacist hegemony. The hegemony of white supremacy is signaled in the above passage by the equivalency of “white men” as both “stagers and consumers”. In making this move, Alexander inverts Guy Debord’s pessimistic view of the modern spectacle as “the locus of illusion and false consciousness” (Debord 12). With the conflict framed in this way—the spectacle versus the ideology of white supremacy—there is room to consider other spectacular subjects, other objects of the look, as doing antiracist political work.

The recent work by Shawn Michelle Smith on W.E.B. DuBois’s “Georgia Negro Albums” exhibit for the 1900 Paris Exposition furthers that claim by contending that the image of the bourgeois black subject could work as a rhetorical trope. Antiracist activist DuBois, aided by photographer Thomas Askew, used photographic images of the African American middle class to counter other, negative images of African Americans. (Figure 27) These negative images included actual black bodies that were housed in “native village” displays and were meant to demonstrate inherent black inferiority (S. M. Smith 15–16). Smith emphasizes the Paris Exposition photographs because there, “the images themselves, without captions or an introductory text, performed recognizable cultural work at the turn of the century” (S. M. Smith 2). She argues that the photographs that Du Bois assembled into an exhibition album constitute a “counter-archive” that was meant to compete against degrading mental images of black people. When Smith considers the specific visual encounters that these portraits would endure—the images meet mostly the
eyes of white and largely European middle- to upper-class spectators—she concludes that the Du Bois-Askew images “encouraged white viewers to see that many of them [the white viewers] were perpetuating a lie that would not hold up to [Askew’s] photographic evidence” (S. M. Smith 76).

To elaborate upon Smith’s observation, I suggest here that Du Bois’s primary concern with representing the bourgeois, leisure facets of middle class African American life to associate black bodies with a notion of humanity relies on civility’s imprint resting on the visible and photographable surfaces of his subjects. To represent photographically a non-elite black person as a human being, it seems, would call for different methods. For Frederick Douglass, who also agitated on behalf of black humanity but in the early, pre-photographic eras, attempted to illustrate (if not prove) black humanness by using the abject body of the slave. This method requires the recruitment of another feature, not necessarily, or, better, not properly visible to index humanity. As with the newspapers that reported in 1834 upon the abuse of slaves in New Orleans, Douglass’s limited access to photography should not nullify an appreciation of him as an activist who like Du Bois understood the political potential of the visual encounter to politically and emotionally move his readers. The requirement that the literary images of black vulnerability would, at his pen’s prompting, have to be imagined or mentally envisioned by his readership reveals an affinity for spectacle not dissimilar to that of the previously discussed white abolitionist John Rankin, another writer of the pre-photographic era, who used written language (namely, published letters to his brother) to compel readers to visualize the scenarios of exploited human vulnerability that he had linguistically orchestrated.
As for the antilynching exhibitions, for Douglass, the imagined point of reference is the systemic fact that actual “traumatic instances” of violence against black bodies were occurring. It is against these actual episodes that the literary invocations of African American vulnerability would compare. The literary construction of exploited black vulnerability in Douglass’s text depends upon a successful illustration of the violation of the human body’s boundaries. This means constructing for the reader both the invitation to and authorization of a penetrating gaze that is at the least impolite and at times illicit.

The tropes of the forbidden look and of the violated black body are invoked by Douglass in his autobiography (a passage also cited by Alexander in her essay from above). In the section of his autobiography that describes his Aunt Hester’s beating by master Captain Anthony, Douglass writes, “It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it” (Douglass 19). Referencing the failure of language in confrontation with violence (a notion that motivated the Emmett Till public funeral as well as Elaine Scarry’s study of the incommunicability of pain), Douglass claims to be unable to transcribe his own feelings. He therefore settles for a description of the scene that incites his feelings.

After rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen anything like it before (Douglass 19).
As Alexander notes, it is indeed curious that Douglass should narrate the scene with such
detail even as he announces himself to be hidden in the closet during the action.
Attending to this detail throws the passage’s verisimilitude into question, for how could
he see what is happening when he has purposely hidden from it? What is more,
Douglass’s look appears forbidden on two counts: first, he is not meant to see his aunt’s
beating as a violation; and second, considering where he is supposedly situated during
this episode—in the closet—he is not supposed to see anything at all. In literary terms,
Douglass’s look spills into the room just as Aunt Hester’s blood spills over onto the floor
despite his attempt to contain it in the closet.

Given the abolitionist intentions of the text as a whole, however, a more pressing
issue than the realism of the prose is at stake in the representation of his aunt’s
vulnerability. Her vulnerability and, relatedly, her recognizability as a human being are
signaled here quite graphically by the description of the blood which flows “warm” and
“red” as it breaches the boundaries of her body. The reader of the passage is meant to
identify with the disembodied look that Douglass nevertheless represents as being his
own, one that apparently recognizes in the bringing forth of blood—accompanied by two
simultaneous aural events: the aunt’s “heart-rending shrieks” and the master’s “horrid
oaths”—the violation (which, in this case, is also an invocation) of his aunt’s humanness.

Despite the physical and psychological barriers before him, Douglass does see
and sees to the point of empathy; he recognizes his aunt’s vulnerability as exploited, and
feels, as he says, “terror” and “horror”. As Douglass surely knows, there is no guarantee
that the reader will recognize the act that he strains to represent here as a violation as
such. The notion of humanity that Douglass strives to make visible is, by dint of its
metaphysical and, for the written word, ontological nature, not visible and, problematically, largely unprovable. Yet to make the point as Douglass wishes, his aunt’s body must be spectacularized, that is, made into an object of the look. The notion of humanity upon which Douglass’s rhetorical aims depend is largely contingent upon the beating scene being represented as the realist image Nancy Armstrong describes in her book *Fiction in the Age of Photography*—both *actual* (“this really happened”) and *conventional* (“this is what it looked like”). In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the image of dripping blood (its “dripping” where it should not—that is, outside her body—indicates her vulnerability) stands in as a metonym for the aunt’s humanness, a trope that depends upon as it reinforces the universalist adage that “all humans bleed.” This adage has its limitations, however, for as I have argued elsewhere, we cannot depend on immediate visibility and recognizability to foment antiracist political outcomes (for the defense lawyers in Emmett Till’s murder trial, for instance, the “proof” that the image supposedly incontrovertibly supplied was made to re-signify as *disproof* on their behalf).

Nonetheless, blood has been and continues to be invoked in literary and cinematic works to signify the transgression of a notion of universal humanity. In the follow analysis I outline how this transgression may be constructed and received as an image in film. Furthermore, I analyze how the viewer’s reception provides evidence as to how the cinematic gaze can construe political subjectivity. Because of this, our look can be said to yield information regarding our own complicity with or resistance to a dominant social order like racism.
The film *Bamboozled* investigates the uniquely fraught issue of African Americans as human by animating (or perhaps anthropomorphizing) stereotypical images of black people—blackface minstrel characters—that have historically been utilized, like the lynching postcard, to deny dehumanize black people. I believe the film uses these terms in order to condemn the entertainment industry for trafficking in racist images and to demonstrate the real-world violence done by those images. Moreover, I maintain, the film makes explicit the role that the audience has as a consumer in the film industry’s economy of looking relations. In so doing, the *Bamboozled* ultimately establishes a space wherein the audience member can become aware of his role as a consumer of the image who is caught between the pleasure of looking and the price of perceiving. In the act of viewing the film, the *Bamboozled* film spectator is effectively confronted with the problems inherent to visual pleasure and, hopefully, reminded of the responsibility of the gaze.

In his introduction to David Levinthal’s catalog of photographs of blackface memorabilia, Manthia Diawara notes the significance of the spectator in the visual economy of racist imagery, asserting that the “point is now to look at stereotypes with different eyes” (Diawara 15). The film *Bamboozled* appears to heed this call quite literally by placing stereotypical icons of African Americans—Sambo, Aunt Jemima, the zip coon—in the twenty-first century mainstream entertainment industry. And while the film does not represent the first attempt in recent years to acknowledge and interrogate the legacy of blackface imagery in general and blackface minstrelsy in particular, it does, however, uniquely use the cinematic medium to put these terms into play. Consequently,
it makes available to critique not just the iconography but the spectacle and the spectators themselves as well.

_Bamboozled_ is fundamentally concerned with the renewed popularization of blackface imagery. The plot is organized around several allegorical character formations, including the corporate black bourgeois professionals (the head television writer Pierre Delacroix [Damon Wayans] and his assistant, Sloan Hopkins [Jada Pinkett-Smith]), the exploited black entertainers Manray [Savion Glover] and Womack [Tommy Davidson] (the dance-comedy pair who become the stars of Delacroix’s “New Millennium Minstrel Show”), the militant Black Nationalists represented by a hip hop group called the Mau-Maus, which includes Sloan’s brother, Big Blak Afrika [Mos Def], and the culturally co-opting white television producer Thomas Dunwitty [Michael Rappaport]. The thrust of the story begins when, in a fairly passive-aggressive move, Delacroix pitches to the producer a modern day variety program that would feature minstrel characters performing in blackface. To Delacroix’s surprise, the show is instantly adopted and quickly becomes a nationwide success. _Bamboozled_ follows the effects that this questionable success has on each of the characters.

_Bamboozled_ is one of many works to have appeared in the past ten years that uses the familiar racial iconography first made familiar in early nineteenth century America. The film’s appearance in theaters yielded many public discussions on the use of stereotypical imagery, adding to the vigorous debate of the issue that had, by that time, proceeded for at least four years. By now, the terms of this debate are well rehearsed. As Michael Harris explains in his gloss on the history of African American visual discourse,
African Americans … have been misrepresented in myriad ways for almost two centuries, both verbally and visually. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries a series of strategies have attempted to neutralize and undermine the harmful representations through resistance, inversion, appropriation for reinvention, and deconstruction (M. Harris 192).

The question that Harris poses to these strategies—“Is it possible to devise a strategy, a cultural guerrilla raid, that incisively moves into the conceptual terrain of the oppositional Other to capture the weapons used against one?”—remains, as I believe it must, largely unanswered (M. Harris 192).

Since the 1960s both the academic and social spheres (if such a division can be claimed) have served as terrain for very high profile debates over the production and consumption of “positive” and “negative” representation of blacks in the fine and entertainment arts. In academic and art institutions in the U.S. and Britain most notably, this debate entered a new phase in the late 1980s when the focus on positive-versus-negative was supplanted by a more complex theorization of the politics of representation. Endeavoring to characterize this shift, British cultural theorist Stuart Hall identifies the bottom line in the debate—stereotype tout court—declaring, “Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily ‘right-on’ by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism” (Hall 28).

While Hall’s proclamation indicates quite clearly the need for artists and cultural critics to move beyond the essentialist and reductive binary of positive versus negative,
the re-emergence of concerns about the use of derogatory stereotypical images in the 1990s demonstrates that the question of what to do with stereotype abides. In June 1997, African-American artist Kara Walker, then only twenty-eight years old, was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant for her artwork which depicted sexual, scatological, and other taboos in an antebellum plantation setting. Very soon thereafter, African-American artist Betye Saar launched a letter-writing campaign intended to prevent exhibitions of Walker’s work on the grounds that it degraded black people and reinforced white supremacy in the art world. Saar, who has herself used images of black stereotypes in her own work (although she declares her use is more critical and liberatory than Walker’s), castigated those who would praise Walker and her art, and justified the campaign by stating that the abundant praise for and displays of Walker’s work represented a “white backlash” and “closet racism”: “It relieves [the arts establishment] of the responsibility to show other artists. … Kara is selling us down the river” (Saar as qtd. in "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes" 4).

In addition to Walker, other contemporary artists who have been criticized for their use of racist caricatures include African-American painter Michael Ray Charles and white American photographer David Levinthal. The works of Walker, Charles, and Levinthal and their implications have been addressed in a number of venues not exclusive to the art world, including *Third Text*; two issues of *The International Review of African American Art*; a Harvard University symposium; and the popular arts journal, *ArtForum*.²

² These venues/texts are Michael D. Harris’s “Memories and Memorabilia, Art and Identity: Is Aunt Jemima Really a Black Woman?” in *Third Text* 44 (Autumn 1998); *The International Review of African American Art* 14.5 (1997) and 15.2 (1998); “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke: A Harvard University Conference on Racist Imagery” held at Harvard in 1998; Manthia Diawara’s “The Blackface Stereotype” in
The philosophies and beliefs articulated in these documents are as varied as the settings themselves. That so great a number of debates on the use of negative stereotypes in visual art (not to mention the number of artworks in which these images appear) should have arisen in the relatively short span of four years—beginning in 1997 with the Walker-Saar controversy and ending with the theatrical release of *Bamboozled* in 2000—suggests the intensity of the struggle over the uses and significance of this iconography.

*Bamboozled* also inspired its own symposia, the subject of which were the reemergence of stereotypical images of blacks in popular visual culture. Discussions of *Bamboozled* were hosted at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, Spelman College, and New York University, as well as in an issue of the film journal *Cineaste*. Participants in these symposia frequently spoke in similar terms and from a similar point of view, so much so that it is possible to classify their comments and to provide a neat inventory.

One recurring phenomenon was the panelists’ reification of writer and director Spike Lee and their figuration of him as an *auteur*. This construction—Lee as *auteur*—effectively attributes exclusive authorship of the film to Lee. This conception of the film as the product of a single author is problematic, to say the least, in light of the many people, including actors, and not to mention editors and technical personnel, required to produce a Hollywood film. The invocation of Lee as *auteur* enabled participants to divert discussions away from the dynamics of the film itself and to replace it with the fairly

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*Blackface* (a catalog of David Levinthal’s photographs) (Santa Fe, NM: Arena Editions, 1999); and *ArtForum* 36.10 (Summer 1998), 37.2 (October 1998), and 37.6 (February 1999).

useless exercise of trying to discern the director’s intentions. Rather than address the elements of the film that inhibited panelists’ acceptance of the narrative’s plausibility, some panelists dismissed the film altogether, declaring it a failure that did not fulfill a predetermined “wish”: “I just wish that Spike Lee had had a writer for this one. I wish he would have researched”; “I wish also that, at the film’s violent end, I had been there to remind him [Lee] of the interlocutor [that the writer had inserted in his own mock-minstrel play]” (Michelle Wallace as qtd. in Landau et al. 18, my emphasis; Saul Landau as qtd. in Landau et al. 12, my emphasis).

The overall tenor of the criticisms continues to exploit the auteur angle by blaming Lee for excessive moralizing: “Spike Lee takes the easy way out, and moralizes it [minstrelsy]”; and narratological sloppiness: “Given the didactic melodrama and badly contrived murder scenes which conclude the film, it’s obvious that Lee had written himself into a box and chose to shoot his way out of it” (Eric Lott as qtd. in Landau et al. 13; Michael Rogin as qtd. in Landau et al. 15).

In a kind of holier-than-thou intellectual pose, several panelists raised only to quickly dismiss the idea that Bamboozled ultimately implicates its audiences—both the diegetic audience represented within the space of the film and the real-world audience viewing the film—as significantly responsible for the film’s circulation of images and meaning. This last notion—that the film accuses its audiences—seems to contradict some of the prior assertions that want to attribute all of the film’s faults to its author, Lee. The reason for doing so is fairly obvious: the panelists, who are also part of the film’s audience, would prefer not to condemn themselves for the film’s “failure.”
These wholesale rejections of the film are based, I argue, on dubious grounds because they are premised upon a hermetic definition of what would constitute this film’s success. In short, the critics want the film to resolve itself without making the more complicated move to incorporate the real-world audience into its ideological solution. By contrast this chapter will assume that the film mobilizes the terms it has inherited—the stereotypical images and the film medium itself—precisely to call into question both the producers and the consumers of racist imagery. The close reading of the film that follows explains how the film’s narrative is concerned with the difficulty of representing the reality of black bodies as human beings, particularly when the film is identified as fictional, the implication of this being that nothing is expected to be understood as real. Quite unlike the documentary, the fiction film, much like the written word, does not have recourse to a discursive tradition in which vulnerability can be signaled visually. In the fiction film, we may continuously tell ourselves that “none of this is real,” that the nightmare or the fantasy will end and leave no imprint on the real world. This film has to implicate the spectator’s look within the racial politics in America. It must, then, like Douglass’s prose, make the spectator’s look transgress seemingly unsurpassable boundaries in order to enable the audience to understand that what is being witnessed in these vignettes of black vulnerability exploited is the urgency and the importance of recognizing black bodies as human bodies.

Stereotypical Realism

The conversation about stereotypical images of African Americans is seemingly never ending. In 2007 the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (a specialized
branch of the New York Public Library system) hosted an exhibition exploring the uses of “stereotypical images” of African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The language used in the title of the exhibition, “Stereotypes vs. Humantypes: Images of Blacks in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” locates this display in the same semantic struggle in which the Du Bois and Askew exhibition mentioned above situated itself more than a century ago. According to the Schomburg Center’s press release for the show, “Stereotypes vs. Humantypes” uses vintage photographs of black people, as well as representational paintings, sculptures and other artworks to challenge these mythological images and present accurate, humanistic depictions of these maligned black folk. It also poses the question of why certain whites in western culture found it necessary to create such stereotypical images of their human forbears (“Schomburg Center Invites Public to View $11 Million Renovation”).

The New York Times characterizes the show’s pairing of derogatory images with “real-life” representations in similar terms: “The propaganda [“sheet music, posters, advertisements and postcards” featuring “caricatured images of blacks”] is contrasted with real-life black images from that period: couples in their wedding finery, 1920s bathing beauties, formal banquets” (F. Lee 25).

The invocation of “the real” in the Times article only reinforces the parallel that I have drawn between the Schomburg exhibition’s discursive mode and that of the Du Bois-Askew project. Both exhibits establish a “counter-archive” (to use Smith’s term) that is heavily characterized by its attachment to the real to compete with and overthrow the dehumanized (and as Bamboozled ultimately argues, dehumanizing) images of
African Americans. It is not, after all, merely a matter of the photographic trumping the graphic; the dehumanized image, irregardless of the medium, can persist in the popular imaginary. This phenomenon is illustrated quite clearly in an anecdote relayed in the opening chapter of Michael D. Harris’s book, *Colored Pictures*. In the chapter’s first few paragraphs Harris recounts a handful of stories in which acquaintances of his and of others “recount stories of resistance to their dehumanization and caricature in the small acts of life, stories that indicate a consciousness of being seen as racial beings rather than as individuals” (M. Harris 14). But the stories—which range from a woman refusing to wear red to escape looking like a “loose woman” to a mother forbidding her children from eating watermelon on their own front steps so as not to appear to white onlookers as “something from their own imaginations”—indicate more than a consciousness of the self as a racial being (M. Harris 14). They also point directly, as Harris (and Jacques Lacan) would concur, to a recognition of the self as an image. The project, then, in which Du Bois, Askew, the Schomburg Center, Douglass, and indeed all of the visual works mentioned in this study participate is about making the image signify in the terms of a notion of humanity.

As the *New York Times*’s article’s use of term “real-life” implies, the photographic images that have been used as a counterpoint to derogatory images work because of their perceived realism. Again, as Nancy Armstrong explains, after the invention and proliferation of photography, realism and the real are not even theoretically dissimilar. “Counter to the argument that mass-reproduced images created an artificial barrier between observers and a reality that antedated and even now lingers behind those
images,” Armstrong argues, “such images are and have told us what is real for more than a century now” (Armstrong 3, emphasis in original).

This last claim of Armstrong’s makes explicit the obstacles Du Bois and Askew faced when compiling and mounting the “Georgia Negro Albums” at the 1900 Paris Exposition—obstacles that abide as evinced in the Schomburg exhibit and in the film *Bamboozled*. Returning to Smith, Du Bois and Askew’s collection of photographs was meant to compete against the “image” of people of African descent as it was represented in the display of the supposedly “native villages” that were populated with actual living black bodies (S. M. Smith 14–16). Du Bois and Askew’s use of photographs to mitigate the authority of actual “African”⁴ bodies bespeaks a sophisticated understanding of how the body is visually consumed as an image.

Significantly, in their positioning as producers of the albums, Du Bois and Askew stand strangely outside of the looking relations they so carefully orchestrate. Despite Smith’s assertion that “Du Bois is himself on display as a kind of embodied evidence [of the black elite] in Paris, as a walking, talking ‘American Negro Exhibit’ of one”, one suspects that Du Bois himself did not view his own body as an impotent object of the white, predominantly European gaze for which his exhibit was designed (S. M. Smith 18). *(Figure 28)* There is (as there often is in Du Bois’s many racial projects) the whiff of authorial exceptionalism that denies Du Bois’s own body from inclusion in the general visual assessment of the state of the race.

⁴ The authenticity implied by this term must be questioned when we are discussing a turn-of-the-twentieth-century European exposition in which black bodies were expected to perform and embody an “Africanness” that has no knowledge of nor any interest in the plethora of cultures, languages, and societies that exist on that continent.
One writer who departs dramatically from this exceptionalist stance is Frantz Fanon. In the concluding paragraphs of “The Fact of Blackness” chapter in Black Skin, White Masks, after having contemplated the image of the black man in literature, Fanon considers his own relationship to the visual image of the black man (Fanon 140). He describes it as a relationship of anticipation and troubled desire. Sitting in a movie theater, Fanon awaits the appearance of his racial and gendered likeness—a Negro groom—on the cinema screen. He writes:

I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear (Fanon 140).

Several important things occur in this brief passage that deserve unpacking here. First, in describing his anticipation, Fanon establishes the pre-existence of the image, an image that his own body—both for himself and for the other (presumably white) spectators—submits to, like it or not. The image’s a priori status here functions similarly to the image in the Lacanian symbolic; in order to be legible as a body in the world, Fanon’s body must first be regarded as an image. To his detriment, the image to which Fanon’s body is applied in this scenario, the figure through which his body is rendered comprehensible, is that of the Negro groom, whom Fanon describes as “a toy in the white man’s hands” (Fanon 140). In other words, Fanon’s body—or, more to the point, Fanon’s visible body—exists not only in relation to, but because of the image of the Negro groom. Indeed, the film that Fanon attends could not exist as such without the pre-existence of the Negro groom, which is to say that the film, insofar as it is composed of recognizable
images—*realist* images, no less—must draw upon commonly recognized themes, objects, and images, *including stereotypical images*.

Furthermore, Fanon demonstrates Jean Baudrillard’s main point about the modern simulacrum—that the image *is* the real, that it is “the map that precedes the territory” (Baudrillard 1). The real, Baudrillard explains, “no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. … In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore” (Baudrillard 2). The image-spectator relationships that occur in film spectatorship, like the image-reader relationships that occur between the reader and the literary text, are marked by their competition for the body’s authenticity. Fanon indicates the parity between his actual body and the imaged body of the Negro groom by referring to the anticipation of his (white) co-spectators: they, too, are waiting, but for *him*, Fanon. What Fanon narrates, then, is a fundamental confusion on his co-spectators’ part between his own actual body—the one seated beside them in the theater—and the known-but-yet-to-be-seen image of the Negro groom’s “body” (this body has, after all, no substance in the cinema; it is only a trace of a body reproduced on the screen as patterns of light). The audience members’ conflation of body and image is not to be taken lightly, nor is it even to be characterized as a mistake, per se. This, after all, is Fanon’s chapter on the *fact* of blackness. It is best described as the negative instantiation of what I have called mis/recognition—a conflation of subjectivities sparked by a perceived visual affinity that goes unquestioned and is taken to constitute the real; in this last sense, it effectively *is* the real thing. This final cinematic episode bookends another racialized visual encounter from the chapter’s opening in which (white) spectators of Fanon’s actual body
interpellate him as a “Negro”, a “dirty nigger”, and a “frighten[ing]” Negro (Fanon 109, 11–12). To all of these epithets, Fanon declares “It was true. It amused me” (Fanon 111).

The “proof” that these image do not just operate as, but are facts (and we must bear in mind here that such “proof”—as in the case of humanity—is purely relative) comes from the interior of Fanon’s body, that is, from his affective response to the superimposition of the image upon his body. In the theater, Fanon’s profound (but conspicuously non-visible, i.e. unexpressed) reaction is, “My heart makes my head swim” (Fanon 140). What he acknowledges here is the connection fostered by the cinematic environment between what is scripted and shown and what is lived and felt.

In *Cinema and Spectatorship* Judith Mayne provides a critique of film theory that reinforces Fanon’s point—that the film image has some purchase on the bodies that view it. As she attempts to encapsulate the various models of spectatorship that have emerged throughout the history of film criticism, Mayne remarks that “The concept of spectatorship shares with those of the apparatus, the gaze, and suture an affinity with theories of the subject” (Mayne 32). She goes on to challenge the reductive and essentialist tendencies that have characterized cinematic theories of spectatorship up to this point. Her identification of theories of the subject as the philosophical bedrock of cinematic spectatorship theory is well-taken. I wish to add to Mayne’s sharp critique by noting that the root of the problem is that much of spectatorship theory depends upon a subject-object binary wherein the cinematic elements—the film, the star, the female body on screen—are always positioned as intractable objects. Despite the profusion of criticism that has identified powerful ideological messages in a number of film forms, mainstream narrative film is often characterized as an insidious evil, an unchallenged
ideologue that is able to wield power over the spectator even as it presents itself as an object available for universal consumption. Theories of mainstream realist cinema usually offer as evidence of film’s power the willingness on the part of the spectator to suspend belief for the duration of the film, to “give him- or herself over” to the power of the image. In the instance of film, the sense of inertia that defines existential notions of the object—that the seeing subject cannot perceive the agency of the seen object—operates here as a kind of Trojan horse, permitting the film’s powerful hold over the spectator to enter into full effect only after the film has presented itself as an insignificant object. In this model, oddly enough (which is to say, despite its well-noted powers of persuasion), film’s influence over the spectator is contingent upon its classification as an object.

In an attempt to move beyond an oversimplified subject-object model of the cinema, Mayne is driven by what she identifies as “the need to find a method ‘in between’ the claims of domination and resistance” (Mayne 79). In situating this current need in relation to a history of film theory and in particular the theories that dominated the field in the 1970s, Mayne queries two fundamental assumptions that have led spectatorship theory awry. These two theoretical touchstones—the notion of “the presumably ‘ideal’ spectator structured into the text” and text-based film criticism itself—have, ironically enough, succumbed to the hierarchical polarization that undermined the subject-object model of film spectatorship; but in this situation, it is criticism-as-subject that holds power over the unwitting and anonymous spectator who is the object of critique (Mayne 79).
To counter the hidden, paternalist presumptions of the film critic, the first intervention that Mayne makes into spectatorship theories is to problematize the historically essentialized spectator. This move requires that yet another distinction be made between “cinematic address and cinematic reception” (Mayne 79). Mayne characterizes cinematic address as “refer[ing] to the ways in which a text assumes certain responses, which may or may not be operative in different reception conditions” (Mayne 79). The ambivalence expressed in this definition—the “may or may not” condition that invalidates a unique theory of spectatorship—forces the focus of the critical investigation to turn back to the text (the film), but this time without the option of assuming the guaranteed influence and power that the film-as-object once had. By insisting upon the ambiguity ofspectatorial conditions and the plurality of spectators, Mayne reconceptualizes film as itself an ambiguous entity that no longer simply acts upon its audiences, but reacts.

This notion of a film that speaks back to the spectator is exactly what distinguishes Vivian Sobchack’s embodied cinema. Sobchack asserts that the film returns the spectator’s look and possesses a body of its own. As in a conversation between equals, the film “addresses us [the spectators] as the expressed perception of an anonymous, yet present, ‘other,’” and, in turn, “we speak back to the cinematic expression before us” (Sobchack 9). This view of film as expressive subject demands an analysis of film’s own agency. With respect to this phenomenological interpretation of film, the critic is forced to acknowledge that perhaps it is not just the spectator who interprets the text (or, for that matter, the critic who interprets the spectator), but also the
film that, in bearing a history and language of its own, only makes sense because of a
dialectical interaction with a spectator.

*Bamboozled* is a good example of Sobchack and Mayne’s versions of film as
approachable and articulate even as its stereotypical characters are not. These characters,
after all, are locked into a mode of visual and verbal discourse that limits their ability to
signify in opposition to stereotype. However, the film overall invites the audience to see
behind the curtain, as it were, to view just how that discourse is maintained and
performed. *Bamboozled* makes the politics of racist imagery available for critique by
foregrounding the role that the audience-as-consumer has in film’s economy of images.
This critique hinges upon linking the position of the on-screen audience to that of the
real-world audience. This project entails fostering a strategic mis/recognition on the part
of the real-world audience. The effect is to make the realized threat represented within
the film-world visible to the real-world film spectator as a latent, potential threat within
the real world. In *Bamboozled* the threat can be identified as genocide; what unfolds at
the film’s denouement is an unchecked chain of violence that may appear chaotic and
undetermined, but, when viewed through the politicized lens of black human
vulnerability, proves to be singularly determined by the questionable logic of racism.

This threat of uncontained violence is what has made *Bamboozled* come across as
a “scary movie” to some viewers. In the *Cineaste*-published transcripts of the “Race,
Media, and Money: A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*” conference at
New York University held less than one month after the film’s release, film scholar
Clyde Taylor, referring to popular reviews of the film, points out that “several people,
including [Village Voice journalist] Amy Taubin, called the movie a ‘scary’ movie. One
person called it a horror movie” (Taylor as qtd. in Landau et al. 16). According to Noël Carroll, the horror film can be identified by its paradoxical appeal, its ability to appeal to audiences “by means of trafficking in the very sorts of things that cause disquiet, distress, and displeasure” (Carroll 159). Although Taylor concedes in his subsequent remarks that there was no consensus as to what constituted its scariness, it would seem that considering *Bamboozled* as a scary movie in the terms offered by Carroll—disquieting, distressing, and displeasing—nevertheless yields some interesting information regarding the film audience.

In addition to its ability to produce in its audience the affective responses that Carroll mentions, *Bamboozled* also stages what Barbara Creed calls “a confrontation with the abject”—figured in *Bamboozled* as unrepentant and unacknowledged racism—“in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human” (Creed 14). Creed’s use of the term “non-human” refers specifically to the monster who, in both Creed’s and Carroll’s work, figures prominently in the horror film genre. I believe, however, given Creed’s overt and Carroll’s implicit understanding of the genre’s ideological investments (indicated in Creed’s text by her recourse to Julie Kristeva’s work on the symbolic order), that we can interpret “non-human” and “human” in broader social terms. As Creed notes, the horror film performs a kind of exorcism on a symbolic level, what she calls “a form of modern defilement rite” in which “the horror film attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability” (Creed 14). In the hegemonic, patriarchal films that comprise her cinematic objects of study, the non-human threat is represented as a feminine incursion into the male-dominated social order. *Bamboozled* is also a film that sets out to critique and invalidate
the pervasive social order, but it understands and represents that order as primarily racist. The film works precisely by configuring those characters in positions of power who represent the racist majority as the non-human faction that needs to be purged so that the actual humans—i.e., the African-American characters—can persevere. To reiterate: in both Creed’s example and in *Bamboozled*, the terms “human” and “non-human” are operating symbolically. There is no victory to be claimed in the name of a progressive politics when “the human” is employed to denote exclusivity. As I shall illustrate in my reading of the film’s final sequences, rather than claim the victory Creed sees in the rhetorical reinforcement of boundaries, *Bamboozled* makes its argument by compounding the insults already visited upon its black characters. To put it in Creed’s terms, *Bamboozled*’s “human” characters are only at best martyrs, not victors or survivors, whose deaths are meant to illustrate the extent and severity of racial corruption in America, that it is so bad that the black human cannot survive.

My digression into the composition of the horror film sets up the following analysis of spectatorial identification and transgressive looking in relation to what I will call the film’s “horror effect”—its presentation of social boundaries under threat. At the symposium wherein Taylor makes the observation that *Bamboozled* was sometimes experienced as a horror film and scary movie, scholar Eric Lott contributes his own experience of the film’s scariness and offers a personalized explanation. Lott states, “I thought the movie was really scary because all the white people on screen seem exactly like me. And I think that’s important. I don’t know who the hell it’s for” (Lott as qtd. in Landau et al. 19). As I shall explain, Lott’s interpretation here depends upon some
fundamental aspects of spectatorship that are crucial to the theories of mis/recognition and mis/identification as they are being discussed in this chapter.

The first aspect to attend to is that the experience (which, it must be noted, is in this moment identical to the interpretation) of the film as a horror film is contingent upon the spectator understanding that the film implicates him in its economy of signifiers. This model of viewing relations is not the same as psychoanalytic film criticism’s theory of identification. That relation, being based on the mirror phase of Lacanian childhood development, demands that the viewing subject link visual parity with subjectivity (‘I look like that so I must be that’) and deny any complex or prior understanding of his own subjectivity. If the spectator does not subscribe to this formulation, he is compelled to forfeit his experience of voyeuristic pleasure (scopophilia). The tendency for theories of identification to reduce the film screen to a mirror at the expense of the film spectator’s viewing agency is perhaps most famously cautioned against by French film theorist Christian Metz in his essay, “The Imaginary Signifier.”

Following a lengthy elaboration of psychoanalytic film theory in which cinema is interpreted through Freudian dream analysis, Kleinian object-relations theory as well as the Lacanian mirror stage, Metz makes sure to point out the different physical properties of the mirror and the film screen with the goal of keeping the subtle discontinuities of the comparison available for critique. He accomplishes the latter by drawing attention to the semantic difference between the signifiers “like” and “is.”

Thus film is like the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be
projected, there is one thing, and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body (Metz 48).

Metz’s observation has implications for the hierarchy of critic over spectator critiqued earlier in this chapter and challenged by Judith Mayne. Rather than be seduced into a state of infantile consciousness, “the spectator” for Metz (and for Mayne and many other spectatorship theorists since) “know[s] [sic] that objects exist, that he himself exists as a subject, that he becomes an object for others: he knows himself and he knows his like: it is no longer necessary that this similarity be literally depicted for him on the screen, as it was in the mirror of his childhood” (Metz 49).

The visible limits of one’s “like” in cinema—i.e. the limits of racial and sexual identification—call into question the problem of verisimilitude implicit to theories of identification. The possibility for trans-racial and trans-gendered identification is addressed by Jane Gaines in her analysis of James Baldwin’s narration of his own cinematic spectatorship. She calls this problem the “politics of mirroring”, and identifies it as an historical effect of the paucity of images of blacks and women on screen (Gaines Fire & Desire, 25). Gaines reads African-American writer James Baldwin’s “misidentification” with the white female starlets of classic Hollywood cinema (specifically, Joan Crawford and Bette Davis) as a vastly more intricate mode of identification than has been previously articulated in film theory. Following queer theory and the work of José Muñoz in particular, Gaines admits that “identification is not about denying the differences between the self and the other, that mirror moment that produces normalcy; it may be more about using differences, about accumulating possible selves, a process that is more accretive than anything, and a process that is a direct challenge to the
one identity per body rule” (Gaines Fire & Desire, 34). What is important to note here is Gaines’s refusal to reject the viewing relation proposed by Baldwin, as she prefers instead to recommend a more in-depth study of viewing relations, one that necessarily eschews the visual indexicality that the model of film-as-mirror assumes.

Returning to Lott’s statement and addressing a second basic component of spectatorship, I turn to the last sentence in his comment—“I don’t know who the hell it’s for,” where “it” means the film. This confession is in some sense a vernacular recitation of Gaines’s observation: Lott does not, in the end, know who the film is for despite his mis/recognition of himself in it. That Lott cannot identify the film’s rightful audience despite his mis/recognition of himself—that is, of his subject position as it is represented by the members of his racial community on-screen—means that the film’s ideological orientation is not so transparent and unified that the film can produce (or that it even wants) a passive spectator. This viewing relation is far more complicated that the passive, escapist model championed by classical film theory. Instead, this viewing relation represents what I am calling “neurotic narcissism”: a desire to see similar bodies—one’s kin, as it were—that is nevertheless tempered by the worry that those bodies will be positioned by the film in an unflattering or even reprehensible way (as non-human). It is a fear of the too-recognizable image, one that is not so distorted that it becomes impossible to associate it with some subjectivity in the real world and yet is disparaged to the limits of its existence.

Neurotic narcissism leads ultimately to a rejection of the narcissistic impulse. This bad-faith mindset is resolvable either through assigning communal penance or through blaming the specific object with which one is confronted. The neurotic narcissism Lott
verbalizes (and which is absolutely not reducible to Lott’s unique viewing practices) actually stands in the way of the more complex model of spectatorship that the film presupposes and is being pursued in this chapter. Lott himself seems to suspect that maintaining this position is intellectually unsatisfying. The least concrete of Lott’s comments in that passage—“I think that’s important”—betrays the critical compulsion to move out of a pathological spectatorship and into one that is critically useful and productive. Rather than rely on the pathological viewing relation, it makes more sense to think that this film, Bamboozled, presents itself to another essential subject position, one that is central to the film’s plot but is not usually mentioned when considering the audience’s identity—the film spectator itself.

One reason that the film spectator is usually not considered by film theory to be a subjectivity in itself is its radical instability. This instability and the contingent quality of spectatorship have already been pointed out by Judith Mayne and are reiterated in the early part of this chapter. However, as Gaines’s work indicates, that instability is not reason enough to sidestep all studies of audience reception. On the contrary, this is the ideal instance for reconceiving film in phenomenological terms so that one can really get at the political implications of a film’s mode of address and an understanding of how the practice of looking produces identities. In the case of Bamboozled, the identities that emerge are bound to the racial politics involved in the combination of narrative and visual pleasure. The audience of Bamboozled is thus made aware of his position, caught between the pleasure of looking and the price of perceiving. In the act of looking, he is confronted by the problems of visual pleasure and reminded of the responsibility and potential power of the look.
Bamboozled: Positioning the Spectator

Bamboozled uses its self-reflexivity to create an uneasy viewing position for its spectator, specifically by calling into question its own authenticity. In one of the film’s earliest sequences, the film announces itself to be a satire, thus destabilizing the real-world audience’s orientation toward the film. It is the second voice-over of the film (and the first to use one of the film’s main characters) that plainly declares that what follows is a satire. The voice that makes the announcement is one that spectators will come to recognize as that of the protagonist, Pierre Delacroix. His voice is heard after a recording of a Malcolm X speech (“You've been hoodwinked. You've been had. You've been took. ... You've been bamboozled!”) and the appearance of the film’s title screen. The film fades in to the interior of what the film audience quickly realizes is Delacroix’s apartment. In voice over, the Webster’s Dictionary definition of the word “satire” is heard.

Satire. 1a. A literary work in which human vice or folly is ridiculed or attacked scornfully. B. The branch of literature that composes such work. 2. Irony, derision or caustic wit used to attack or expose folly, vice or stupidity.

This definition, coming as it does from an authoritative text—the Webster’s Dictionary—situates the film spectator in a paradoxical relation to the film; on the one hand, he is subservient to the authority of two texts—the dictionary and the film itself; on the other hand, the spectator, now instructed at the outset that this film will deliver its narrative subversively, likely using irony to expose the folly of blackface stereotype, is compelled
to be an active reader, determining for himself what “truths” are being revealed. But it also changes the joke, as it were, by not explicitly indicating precisely what is here being labeled a satire. Through its strategic ambiguity, the film alludes to yet another irony—that in the period in which minstrelsy was established as a theatrical genre (the nineteenth century), blackface performance was itself considered a valid vehicle of satire because, as Eric Lott has explained in the chapter of *Love & Theft* entitled “The Social Unconscious of Blackface,” it allowed white men to exploit the supposed follies and vices of African-Americans for their own purposes (Lott 45).

The issue that the film ostensibly satirizes is the persistence of racist visual entertainment in U.S. popular culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To fully accomplish this critique, the film, itself a product of the U.S. film industry, must show some of its own tricks of the trade. The story therefore draws on many of the self-reflexive elements that characterize the backstage film genre, and *Bamboozled* necessarily implicates itself in the very ideological system—racism—that it sets out to critique.

The ideological implications of this revelation are an effective decolonizing of the cinematic apparatus that conceals the backstage mechanics and, by extension, the ideologies that motivate them. It is through formal techniques equivalent to seeing evidence of the photographer’s body in the final photographic image that supplies the point of entry for a deconstructionist critique. Semiotician and art historian Mieke Bal discusses the implications of the photographer’s shadow in Malek Alloula’s catalog of early twentieth century photographs of Algerian women entitled *The Colonial Harem*. In one of these images, Bal locates a “technical failure”—“the shadow of the photographer”
(Bal 42)—that, in her opinion, cracks just slightly the imperial patriarch’s armor. With
the shadow, Bal argues, “the voyeur has not named but betrayed himself. He is unable to
sustain the anonymous, safe position; he is drawn in and thus provided with semantic
content” (Bal 42). The fantasy of omniscience is undone, suggesting that the white man’s
voyeuristic dominance may soon follow. Similarly, I argue that the shadow’s equivalent
in *Bamboozled* is, in fact, the image of the on-screen television audience that “reflects”
the viewing position of the film audience. *(Figure 29)* Recalling Eric Lott’s aversive
identification examined earlier in this chapter, we see the potentially unsettling effect of
identifying with, of mis/recognizing, the viewing position of the racist visual consumers
on-screen as like one’s own.

Despite the on-screen presence of the television audience⁵ throughout the
*Bamboozled*, the degree of the film audience’s status in the economy of racist images in
not clear until the film’s conclusion. As I shall demonstrate, at *Bamboozled’s*
denouement—the sequence of murders that begins with the execution of Manray and
concludes with the killing of Delacroix—the film invites its audience to assume an active
viewing position. It enables and even technically forces its identification with a gaze
internal to the film. This identification with the diegetic gaze is similar to that offered by
Douglass in the passage at the beginning of this chapter as, again, black people’s blood
flows, warm and red, seemingly insisting that we film spectators recognize these
stereotyped simulacra as human beings. Instead of illustrating the evils of slavery as
Douglass attempts, *Bamboozled* raises awareness of the racial politics of the cinematic

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⁵ For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the on-screen audience that figures in the film diegesis as “the
television audience” and call the audience outside the film, the audience of *Bamboozled*, the “film
audience.”
and televisual apparatuses and of their lethal consequences. The political work\(^6\) of *Bamboozled* refers to the materiality and the reality of the image and, most importantly, identifies the history of concealments and exposures, of recognition and misrecognition, that facilitate the comprehension and consumption of the film and the racist images it presents.

Not only does *Bamboozled* make the link between the two audiences explicit by fostering the film audience’s mis/recognition of the television audience’s viewing position as its own through such techniques as coincidental framing (the frame of the on-screen television set coincides with the frame of the film screen), it also demonstrates the social consequences of this viewing position that consumes derisory images of black bodies for its own pleasure. Whereas the former effect is accomplished by formal conventions—those of the backstage genre which narratologically justify the presence of an audience on-screen—the indictment of the film audience is accomplished by the recurring spectacle of breached boundaries which constantly place the safe division between the film-object and the spectator-subject under threat of collapse. To recall Bal’s language, it is the audience’s shadow image on-screen that indicts the film audience by destabilizing the conventional viewing position which is characterized by looking without consequences.

The film ends in a blood bath; the only characters left standing are one half of the minstrel pair, Womack, and the writer’s assistant, Sloan. The star of the minstrel show, Manray, is shot to death in a warehouse by the nationalist Mau-Maus as he performs a *danse macabre* for live, televised transmission. Upon leaving the

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\(^6\) I use the term “political work” here broadly to indicate something as subtle and simple as changing one’s critical position.
warehouse, all of the Mau-Maus, except for the lone white member, are shot dead by
the police. In the film’s final moments, Sloan forces her boss, Delacroix, to watch a
video montage of historical blackface performances and, finally, shoots him.

This last scene, in which Delacroix’s death throes are intercut with Sloan’s
video montage, makes use of a formal device—editing—to make an explicit connection
between the mortality of the flesh and the violence of the image. In this final scene,
Sloan enters Delacroix’s darkened office after she realizes that her brother, Big Blak
Afrika, and her lover, Manray, have been killed. With her gun unsteadily aimed, she
forces Delacroix to play the videotape she has assembled. A mentally defeated
Delacroix acquiesces. As Delacroix attempts to talk Sloan down, the gun goes off (it is
unclear if this is accidental), and Sloan, apologizing while Delacroix mutters, “It’s
okay,” exits. As he lies on the floor, Delacroix’s voice-over narration—an element that
has appeared periodically throughout the film—returns. He recites:

As I bled to death, as my very life blood oozed out of me, all I could
think of was something the great Negro James Baldwin had written:
“People pay for what they do, and still more for what they have
allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it very simply; by the
lives they lead.”

After the Baldwin quote, he adds, stranger still, “Now it was time for me to buy
the farm, to meet my maker. Goodbye, cousins. Please tune in next week for the best of
Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show.” The film then cuts from Delacroix,
writhing on the floor of his office, to the images on the television screen, presumably

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7 This quotation is from Baldwin’s 1956 collection of essays, Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a
Native Son (New York: Dell, 1956).
the video that Sloan forced Delacroix to play. Through this edit, the frame of the
television coincides with the frame of the film screen, and the montage of blackface
performances that were once addressed directly to Delacroix are now addressed directly
to the film audience.

Delacroix’s strange narration at the moment of his death can be interpreted as
simply another magical realist moment in the film, similar to an earlier scene in which
one of Delacroix’s black memorabilia self-animates. It is important to add, too, that the
convention of a character’s posthumous voiceover is not new, nor is it necessarily
confusing in terms of mainstream narrative film; one thinks most notably of the famous
opening sequence of 1950’s *Sunset Boulevard* in which the narrator’s drowned corpse
is viewed from below while his voice begins to tell the story leading up to his death.
But Delacroix’s posthumous voiceover comes at the end of the film and in the very
moment of his dying. Why he speaks as well as what he says, have special significance,
but before explaining this significance, it is important to outline the stakes involved in
the spectator’s acceptance of the film’s preferred reading.

In an article on blacks in film, K. Anthony Appiah states that, “changes in the
representation of blacks do not ipso facto lead to changes in their treatment” (Appiah
77). In so stating he echoes more than just Stuart Hall’s observation that “Films are not
necessarily good because black people make them” (Hall 28). Appiah’s statement also
argues that the appearance of either good or bad stereotyped characters in film does not
detrimentally or positively impact race relations in the real world. Nevertheless, Appiah
identifies visual culture as suitable terrain for critical intervention into the politics of
representation. He concludes his essay by stating, “In the battle over signifiers, let’s
remember that there is politics to be conducted in the world of what is signified” (Appiah 89). It would seem that *Bamboozled* intends this and more. The blackface characters are not to be roundly booed as “bad” images, but considered as visible bodies and as complex human beings; these are images that bleed. Moreover, the representation of these characters off- and backstage invites what Appiah evidently wants—a more nuanced and thoughtful investigation of how stereotype works, and not simply another explanation of what is wrong with stereotype.

Appiah’s argument against the demonizing of cinematic stereotypes does not stand in the way of *Bamboozled*’s narrative resolution—murder. The chain of killings provokes the film spectator to be or to become consciously aware of the visual discourse in which these racial stereotypes operate. It is not even that the image leads *immediately* to death, the film and Appiah seem to say, but that these images are bound to a logic of racial seeing, of not recognizing the black body as human. This is not (simply) about morality, it is about reality.

As a result of this revelation, the film spectator’s decision whether or not to believe that death is the logical conclusion to *Bamboozled*’s narrative ends up bearing some political significance. To reject the conclusion as implausible or inconsistent, it can be argued, indicates a resistance to the narrative trajectory and a limited recognition of the characters as merely images—two-dimensional, immortal, and with no index of humanness (such as vulnerability) in sight. However, an answer in the affirmative—‘yes, the characters really can and do die’—means that one must reckon with the ambivalence contained in the final scene in the film: the scene of Delacroix’s dying.
As I have shown, because the decision to believe or to resist the narrative trajectory is now understood in ideological terms and because Delacroix’s voice-over splits the image of Delacroix’s body into parts (he says “As I lay bleeding to death”—when does/can he say this? where is his body? where is his voice?), a passive acceptance of the film’s final narrative twist is made impossible. Upon closer inspection, a viewer can make the critical move from imbuing either position with a certain and specific political meaning to an appreciation of that moment of choice that the film offers as the essential political moment. It should be clear by this point that it is not the specific response that I am interested in so much as the opportunity the film offers to the spectator to recognize his own viewing position. It is through this act, when the film spectator acknowledges his material relationship to the cinematic image of the black body, that the political implications of that viewing position are realized.

While it is crucial to consider the multiple authorizing agents embedded in *Bamboozled* (i.e. the director, the narrative trajectory, the dictionary, etc.), it is ultimately the critical spectatorship of the film spectator that plays the essential role in authorizing and interpreting the film. *Bamboozled* would make little to no sense if its spectator was unable to translate the symbols of U.S. white supremacy—including the blackface minstrel characters—into an historical continuum. In the final analysis, it is always the film’s spectator who organizes narrative film’s components into a coherent whole. In the complicated instance of viewing a racial stereotype, the spectator is confronted with the problem of whether or not to believe that some humanness might be recognized there. Moreover, the work of critical spectatorship is not to be cursorily executed, nor is it apolitical; the onus is on the critically engaged spectator to explicitly
situate and to foreground his political investments. It is the mobilization of the look that can permit a critically viable method of studying and encountering racist objects and images rather than merely censoring them.

The final move in *Bamboozled*—to “give life” to its stereotyped characters by showing it being taken away, brutally—thus undermines the ontology of stereotype that Homi Bhabha has characterized as “a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 23). Bhabha’s stereotype pairs up provocatively with Baudrillard’s simulacrum, and the pathos entailed in both finds its voice in the words of Fanon who, when pressed to accept his “color” and thereby forfeit his self-knowledge as a human being, responds, “with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation” (Fanon 140). “I am a master,” he continues, “and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple. … straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep” (Fanon 140).

The fragmentation, the partitioning of the self imposed upon black bodies by a racist viewing position that cannot recognize in the spilling of black blood a violation of the notion of humanity, requires a politicized spectatorship that is willing to acknowledge the materiality of the look by making a spectacle of the look itself.
Figures

Figure 1. “Dianne Wallace (L) Alexis Fisher 14, Dejon Fisher, 8, and her mother Cavel Fisher Clay, 33, wait in a hostile line for buses to take them to the Houston Astrodome on September 1, 2005, days after Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans.” © Michael Ainsworth /Dallas Morning News/Corbis

Figure 2. Robert Polidori, 2600 Block of Munster Boulevard, New Orleans, 2006 © Robert Polidori 2006
Figure 3. Robert Polidori, *Unknown location on 800 block of North Robertson Street, New Orleans*, 2006 © Robert Polidori 2006

Figure 4. Robert Polidori, *6552 Louis XIV Street, New Orleans*, 2006 © Robert Polidori 2006
Figure 5. Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1865 © The Gallery Collection/Corbis

Figure 6. Shipp-Smith lynching, August 9, 1930. “After being accused of murdering Claude Deeter, 23 and assaulting his girlfriend Mary Ball, 19 two young African-American men are taken from the Grand County Jail and lynched in the public square.” © Bettmann/CORBIS
Figure 7. Reginald Marsh, *This Is Her First Lynching*, 1934, drawing. © Estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Photographic Services, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

Figure 8. John Steuart Curry, *The Fugitive*, 1935
Figure 9. Julius Bloch, *The Lynching*, 1933
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase

Figure 10. Isamu Noguchi, *Death (Lynched Figure)*, 1933
© Bernice Abbott/Commerce Graphics Ltd.
Figure 11. Charred remains of George Hughes, 1930, Sherman, Texas © Bettman/CORBIS

Figure 12. George Wesley Bellows, *The Law Is Too Slow* (1923)
The George F. Porter Collection, 1925.1567. Reproduction, The Art Institute of Chicago
Figure 13. Anton Van Dyck, *St. Sebastian bound for martyrdom*, c. 1615–1616. Canvas. (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh)

Figure 15. Unknown, *Lynching of Frank Embree*. Embree on buggy, facing camera, c. 1900. Courtesy of the Allen-Littlefield Collection.

Figure 16. Unknown, *Lynching of Frank Embree*. Embree on buggy, back to camera, c. 1900. Courtesy of the Allen-Littlefield Collection.
Figure 17. Unknown, *Lynching of Frank Embree*. Embree hanging, wrapped in coarse blanket, c. 1900
Courtesy of the Allen-Littlefield Collection.

Figure 18. Unknown, *Lynching of Will James*. Group of young boys standing around ashes of Will James, 11 November 1909
Courtesy of the Allen-Littlefield Collection.
Figure 19. Jesse Slayton and William Miles lynching, June 1, 1896, Columbus, Georgia

Figure 20. Slayton-Miles lynching detail
Figure 23. Mamie Till at Emmett Till’s coffin
Chicago-Sun Times Archives.

Figure 24. Christmas portrait of Emmett Till that was affixed to coffin lid
© Estate of Mamie Till-Mobley

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Figure 25. Corpse of Emmett Till in funeral dress
© Chicago Defender

Figure 26. Premortem Daguerreotype of Boy Lying in Bed With a Ball and Postmortem Daguerreotype of the Same Boy Lying in Bed; Anonymous; Daguerreotype; circa 1848
© Stanley A. Burns Archive

Figure 28. W.E.B. DuBois at the Paris Exposition, 1900 © Special Collections and University Archives, UMASS Amherst
Figure 29. Still from *Bamboozled*  
© New Line Cinemas
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Biography

Courtney R. Baker received her B.A. in Women’s Studies from Harvard University in 1996. She graduated cum laude. She completed her Ph.D. in Literature at Duke University in 2008. She has been an instructor of visual studies and African American literature in the English Department at Connecticut College since 2005.