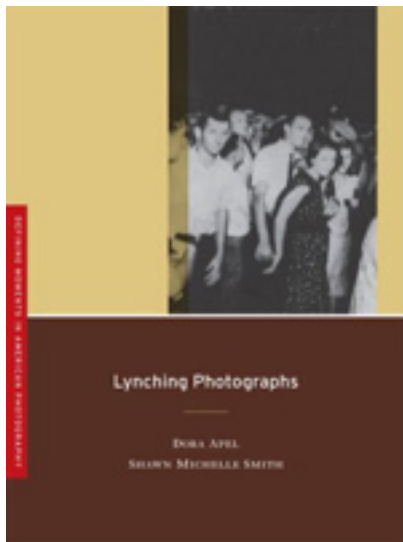


Bearing Witness

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Apel, Dora and Shawn Michelle Smith. *Lynching Photographs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 101 pages. \$55.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Wood, Amy Louise. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 349 pages. \$39.95 paper.

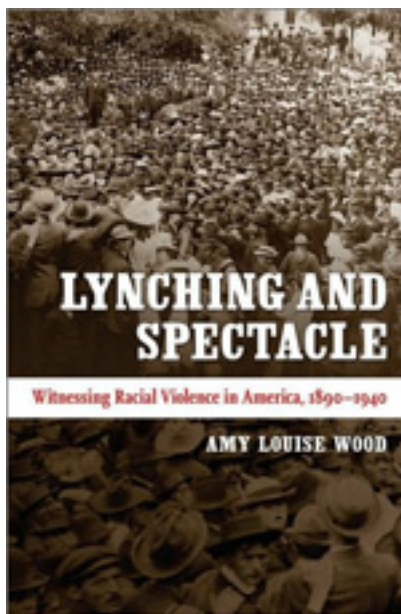


At the end of the 20th and turn of the 21st century, a resurgence in lynching scholarship coincided with a burgeoning interest in trauma and memory studies as well as what W.J.T. Mitchell describes as a “visual turn” in cultural studies. James Allen and John Littlefield’s 2000 exhibition “Witness” (retitled “Without Sanctuary”) signaled this trend, and was followed by Jonathan Markovitz’s *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (2004), Dora Apel’s *Imagery of Lynching* (2004), and Jacqueline Denise Goldsby’s *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (2006), among other impressive criticism. These works interrogate the symbolic power of lynching, the role of lynching photography in constructing racial and national meaning, and lynching’s embeddedness in other technologies of American modernity. Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith’s *Lynching Photographs* (part of the Defining Moments in American Photography series) and Amy Louise Wood’s *Lynching and Spectacle* add to this growing body of complex, lynching scholarship analyses of the instability of visual evidence and the shifting character of looking relationships.

In *Lynching Photographs*, American studies scholar Shawn Michelle Smith’s essay “The Evidence of Lynching Photographs” confirms the malleability of photographic evidence by examining how Lawrence Beitler’s photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram

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Smith has been deployed in various contexts and, as a consequence, has solicited disparate reactions from viewers. Beitler's picture of an infamous 1930 lynching in Marion, Indiana was marshaled by the black press "to unmask white privilege" and by white presses "as a justification of mob murders, appropriate retribution for the crimes of murder and, especially, rape," Smith explains (23). Likewise, the same image could communicate different messages to black and white communities depending on how the photo was framed and circulated, and by whom. White supremacists sent lynching photographs and postcards to leading African Americans as a "warning" to "stay in their place", yet African Americans inverted the meaning of these photographs and used them for anti-lynching campaigns: "In these contexts, lynching photographs no longer function as weapons of fear and intimidation but become rallying cries for civil rights activism" (24). Smith's discussion of contemporary appropriations of Beitler's photograph by artist Kerry James Marshall, hip hop group Public Enemy, and anti-choice group Justice for All further substantiates the political efficacy as well as the potential hazards of photographic evidence.



In the same book, art historian Dora Apel's essay "Lynching Photographs and the Politics of Public Shaming" also argues that how photos are presented and where they are disseminated matter. Apel maps several key moments in lynching photography in order to show how lynching united whites across classes based on shared assumptions of racial superiority and patriarchal control over white women's bodies. She attributes the political sway of lynching photographs to their affective power, arguing that the public display of Emmett Till's violated corpse, for instance, turned acts of looking into a performance of mourning. That collective mourning sparked a movement when "Mamie Till Bradley shifted the emphasis of earlier white supremacist photographs of spectacle lynchings from the shaming of the black subject to a black-controlled 'spectacle funeral' that refused to derealize the horror and grief of racial violence" (62-64). Apel connects the imperative to look and the politics of shame

around lynching photos and postcards to contemporary displays of torture in photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners. Her suggestion that public shame can incite political action speaks to the transformative power of visual evidence throughout history; however, as Amy Louise Wood's detailed and meticulously researched *Lynching and Spectacle* shows, transforming images of terror into tools of antiracist protest entails the nation's reconstruction of its own self-image. Wood breaks new ground in lynching scholarship by focusing the bulk of her analysis on the white crowds who participated in performances of lynching. More than mere spectators, Wood characterizes members of these crowds as "witnesses" who "beheld or experienced [lynching] with active engagement" (11). These acts of witnessing consolidated southern whites as a community. Wood also brings together public executions, religious observances, photography, and moving pictures under the rubric of "witnessing" and organizes her book in accordance with these different and sometimes opposing practices of looking while charting lynching's chronology from the height of mob violence to its decline.

Like Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret*, cited earlier, Wood's book juxtaposes the spectacle of lynching to other types of spectatorship and spectacle at the turn of the 19th century as a way to underscore lynching's relationship to modernity. Wood's emphasis on the "social landscapes" within which lynchings occurred distinguishes her work from most others that treat the subject. The unexpected pairing of public executions and religion in part one of the three-part study details how ideologies of moral and divine justice conjoined for white southern communities and, in their minds, sanctioned their acts of violence. Wood explains that "the public ritual of lynching offered white southerners a certainty of their own grace and a sense of belonging to a virtuous and consecrated white community" (50). The book goes on to trace how southern and northern perceptions of lynching shifted over time and to illustrate the role visual technologies played in this shift. After providing a thoroughgoing reception analysis of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, Wood culminates the book with a discussion of the NAACP's use of lynching images to support national and international antilynching campaigns.

Similar to Apel and Smith's slim text, Wood's extensive cultural history bears out the protean nature of visual evidence. If there is an area of Wood's study that warrants further elaboration, it is the difference between "spectators" and "witnesses." Wood establishes in her introduction that a "spectator or a bystander becomes a witness when his or her spectatorship bears a legal, spiritual, or social consequence; when it can establish the true course or meaning of an event or action; or when it can confer significance or value on an event" (4). Can such a broad theory of witnessing hold true for lynching crowds and film viewers alike, for black and white audiences, and for primary and secondary witnesses? Unpacking the theory of witnessing would have only strengthened Wood's already solid assertion of visuality's power to change cultural attitudes and practices, if not history itself.

Overall, both works make a substantive contribution to students and scholars of

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Southern history, American Studies, and visual culture. By framing lynching through the lens of visual cultures of modernity, Apel, Smith, and Wood refute the purported “backwardness” of mob violence; instead, these authors insist that the success of lynching’s disciplinary tactics rested on modern technologies. In this way, *Lynching Photographs* and *Lynching and Spectacle* provide a broader historical context through which readers can assess the role contemporary forms of visual knowledge play in shaping perceptions of “the nation.”

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