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## Exhibiting Archival Photographs of Racial Violence as a Pedagogy of Witness

If you are a generous person, grant to the photographers the possibility of undeserved grace that their images and craft may be used for nobler causes today.

—Benediction offered by Theophus (Thee) Smith at the opening of the exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, Atlanta, Georgia, May 1, 2002

In a speech at Fisk University, James Allen offered the following reflections on his decision to make available for presentation the collection of lynching photographs and picture postcards he and John Littlefield accumulated over a twenty-year period:

For every victim that lies pasted in some racist family's photo album . . . or stored in a trunk with grandma and grandpa's Klan robe, or still pinned to the wall of a service station in some holdout sorry-ass little town—if we can acquire and place their photos in an accurate, respectful context, identify and record them for the first time, I feel some slight awareness of what is meant by resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

With these extraordinary remarks, Allen puts forth the idea that a rendition of images previously occluded from public view might serve as a quite specific form of remedy and restitution. Through a prudent,

considered presentation of selected photographs in his collection, Allen intimates that the dead might yet be revived, returned, and brought forth into presence. The conditional possibility inherent in this “resurrection” has been widely embraced and understood as not only the rescue of those murdered from the oblivion of forgetting, but also the animation of specters that has the potential to deeply haunt the formation of contemporary consciousness and conscience.<sup>2</sup> There is no simplistic presumption here that the re-presentation of these photographs can compel an altered future. The public rendition of these images gives no guarantee as to their progressive endowment. Nevertheless, in the struggle to redeem a violent malevolent past, the claim is that the images do possess a potential force that might yet unstick the present from its seemingly necessary future, impelling us to see the work that still needs to be done today.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the assumption is that the lynching photographs in the Allen and Littlefield collection carry what Walter Benjamin called “a weak messianic power to which the past has a claim.”<sup>4</sup> The premise that grounds the contextual articulation of this claim is that properly recontextualized and circulated within curated practices of public presentation, the recovery and subsequent formal display of historical photographs of the perpetration of racist brutality and murder has something fundamentally transformative to offer to contemporary America and its future possibilities.

The provocative, viscerally confrontational force of the public rendition of lynching photographs was expressed clearly by Roberta Smith in her review of the very first exhibition in which a selection of images from the Allen and Littlefield collection were put on view. Smith wrote:

These images make the past present. They refute the notion that photographs of charged historical subjects lose their power. . . . These images are not going softly into any artistic realm. Instead they send shock waves through the brain . . . in many ways reaching up to the present. They give one a deeper and far sadder understanding of what it has meant to be white and to be black in America. And what it still means.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Smith still expresses the prospect that “horrific as they are [the] photographs are a kind of gift, the gift of knowledge, the chance for greater consciousness and caring” (para. 15). In rendering the

photographs as a horrific gift, Smith puts forward an all-too-familiar, particular sense of hope. This familiar notion of hope is grounded in the often-expressed anticipation that an awareness and remembrance of past evil will help prevent its reoccurrence. That such a prospect has increasingly been called into question and regarded as naive is really no surprise. Despite the recent willingness of cultural institutions across the globe to substantially take on the challenge of presenting histories related to injustice, violence, loss, and death, hence offering a more complex public history that is both inspiring and despairing, there is little evidence that human-instigated affliction and misery are disappearing from the world. As a way of explaining the seeming inefficacy of public histories of violence and injustice, critics have argued that such a use of memory has done little more than encourage a form of abjection enacted through identification with either victims or those who have sought to prevent or contest victimization. Such identifications result in placing the self at a comfortable, distinguishing distance from those rendered as malefic, malicious perpetrators of injustice, eviscerating the force of memory for rethinking how one might alter the way one lives in the present. No doubt the claim of past generations made through the call to remembrance requires something more than an egoism that predefines remembrance as that which confirms who one is and what one knows. Indeed, skepticism in regard to the progressive prospect of historical memory is both warranted and welcome as long as it is not used to justify an injudicious dismissal of the social and political importance of the public practice of remembrance. If we are to get beyond both the hortatory injunctions to remember that take for granted memory's critical potential and the shallow dismissal of memory as simply self-referential and self-serving, we must begin with the realization that practices of remembrance can be accomplished in different ways with different consequences.

Public practices of remembrance are most commonly employed to address the problem of maintaining social coherence and cohesion. State-oriented commemorations and ethno-cultural memorialization enact the reiteration of iconic images and narratives that serve to reinforce established frameworks of social cohesiveness and strengthen corporate commitments via the dynamics of recognition, identification, and affirmation. When loss is referenced, as in remembrance of those who died in military service, this loss is typically rendered as a necessary sacrifice for the collective good (e.g., "to preserve our way of

life”). The rites of addressing this loss are designed to structure remembrance as a practice necessary for securing national or group identities and fortifying existing social bonds. The staging of commemorative events has been said to mark the end of a collectively perceived traumatic experience signaling that “we” have moved on beyond the violence of past times.<sup>6</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to reduce every practice of public remembrance of unjust violence and its consequent loss to these terms. Such remembrance practices are far more complex, often being justified on three counts: as medium for the development of historical understanding; as a way of retaining and rearticulating memory over and against the desire and necessity of forgetting; and as a means for instigating contemporary practices of justice, compassion, and tolerance. These three justifications are assumed to complement each other in a synergistic, productive alignment of education, memorialization, and ethics. While in my view, such a framework is a more useful starting point for a consideration of the importance of practices of remembrance, it is only the barest of beginnings. Once we take seriously the study of public memory as a form of cultural praxis, it is immediately evident that the focus of such study must be on the different possibilities for enacting practices of remembrance. If practices of public remembrance are understood to instantiate a serviceable alignment of education, memorialization, and ethics, then the potentiality in any such alignment can be traced in part to how such practices are accomplished. This is why those of us interested in a praxis of public history need to turn our attention to the interlinked problems of formulating a conceptual language within which to explore various differences among practices of remembrance and concretely studying ways specific remembrance practices differently foster their inherent pedagogical and political potential.

This move to a comparative study of pedagogy of remembrance is one way in which we can return and reopen the problem of the relation between remembrance and hope. While a full conceptual discussion of the possibilities of an imaginable, productive coupling of remembrance and hope will have to wait until the last chapter, some preliminary comments are appropriate here. As is evident in Smith’s remarks above, hope understood as both telos and emotion is routinely associated with an anticipation of a future that bears a fresh beginning. Paradoxically, this notion of hope that so often accompanies the justification of the memory of past violence and injustice is always constituted in a deferral

to a desired time yet to come. Of course, such hope is not to be dismissed. Clearly, various practices of remembrance have instantiated the anticipation of a future better time that serves as a motivating force sustaining human efforts to mobilize acts of compassion and justice intended to transform ways of living together. It has long been acknowledged that remembrance of a broken past may carry with it not only a hope for a better tomorrow but also serve as a basis for critical judgment as to the inadequacies of the present and manifest the light emanating from a desired future. Yet there is a need for pause here. Is there another way of conceptualizing what is at stake in the notion of hope that practices of remembrance may sustain? Without mitigating the desire for a better world, can there be an additional way in which practices of remembrance of violence may bear on contemporary life beyond instantiating summary judgments that constitute the present as a form of lack? It is a fundamental premise of this book that the notion of hope embedded in acts of remembrance be rethought as both a desire for a future time different from the past/present *and* as an affectively driven by a force to thought with the potential to generate critical insight into the complex, often contradictory terms and conditions of everyday life.

I will take up this consideration of the potential for hope inherent in the remembrance of violence and loss through an investigation grounded in the concrete, situated realities of particular pedagogical practices of public history. In this respect, my interest is in the various ways one may conceive of and enact a curatorial project. Such a project is comprised of manifold judgments as to what and how aspects of lives lived and events that happened in the past can be brought to public attention so as to inform thought and action. What frames these judgments is a desire to find a way for the past to matter, to structure and inscribe a form of historical consciousness that may yet transform the present and its possible futures. My focus in this book will be on various practices of remembrance enacted through institutionally situated attempts to realize specific curatorial projects. Thus, my concern with the design, development, and presentation of exhibitions held in museums, galleries, and/or other spaces wherein it is possible to encounter a complex interrelated set of objects, images, and texts.<sup>7</sup> As will be evident in the unfolding of my discussion of different exhibitions of lynching photographs from the Allen and Littlefield collection, I view an exhibition as a discursively contextualized event that gathers people

together over a specific duration, giving form to their encounter with not only what has been put on display but also with each other. In this context, I will be attending to how differing curatorial projects create various exhibition *mise-en-scènes*, an idiom I will use throughout this book. While commonplace in discussions of theatre or cinema, I have adapted this term so as to deepen the significance of what is meant by rendering an exhibition as an *event*. Its content or its forms of representation do not solely define the *mise-en-scène* of an exhibition. Rather than referring to the complex totality of the visual spectacle of a particular theatrical scene or film shot, an exhibition *mise-en-scène* is here to be understood as a material social practice that enables (but also can obstruct) various forms of thought and social relationships. In other words, an exhibition *mise-en-scène* is potentially constitutive of subjectivity and sociality. My interest then is in what exhibitions (as events) might do. In particular, I will be concerned with how an exhibition *mise-en-scène* informs the possibility of an advent—an event defined by the arrival of traces of past events with potential to impact on one's present.

Since the year 2000, there have been seven distinct exhibitions that have presented images from the Allen and Littlefield collection of 140 photographs taken at lynchings that occurred in the United States between 1870 and 1960, an overwhelming number of which targeted African Americans.<sup>8</sup> Not just clandestine acts witnessed in secret by a few, many lynchings were events attended by scores of men, women, and children. Often at these events, commercial photographers would appear and take photographs not only of the person(s) subjected to torture and death, but also the crowd who witnessed the spectacle. The photographs would then be sold as souvenirs, often in the form of picture postcards. Rather than creating a traveling exhibition more or less uniformly presented at different venues, various museums, galleries, and historic sites in the United States have differently drawn from the Allen and Littlefield collection, staging and supplementing the presentation of selected photographs in, at times, quite dissimilar ways. This unusual (though not unique) situation, wherein multiple exhibitions have drawn differently from the same archival source, provides the opportunity to explore how different museums have variously pursued the practice of reframing the presentation of the photographs.<sup>9</sup>

While I will be discussing in detail the extensive differences evident in the contrasting exhibitions of photographs from the Allen

and Littlefield collection held at the Andy Warhol Museum and the Chicago Historical Society, my ambitions are considerably broader. Through this comparative study of the different ways of re-presenting images of the criminal, systemic perpetration of deadly violence, my intent is additionally to offer a conceptual language for considering how and why differences among curatorial projects matter, particularly as these differences shape varying pedagogies of public history. While different pedagogies may be grounded in a conviction that a collective encounter with such images is both necessary and desirable, it is how such encounters are conceived that is a core curatorial concern.

In invoking the notion of a curatorial project, I am writing against the grain of institutional arrangements in museums and galleries that hive off curatorial work from education and marketing departments. Rather, my notion of the range of practices that make up a curatorial project is considerably more expansive. Materialized as the design and development of a *mise-en-scène* into which a person would enter, a curatorial project is enacted through judgments as to: what is to be shown, the placement of such in space, the discursive environment that will inscribe that space and the materials in it (including such texts as object or image labels, brochures, and press releases), and the “programming” initiated to dialectically foster thought and understanding in a manner that might make evident shared concerns and various perspectives held by people visiting a given exhibit. It is axiomatic that such practices are inherently pedagogical and by implication integrally political. Yet as an educational praxis, the terms on which curating operates are very much dependent on the particular decisions that determine a specific exhibition *mise-en-scène*. As I will endeavor to make clear in the rest of this chapter, how one understands what constitutes the very possibilities of education inherent in curatorial practice is integral to how one might enact a cultural pedagogy of remembrance of violence and loss that might yet become truly hopeful.

#### THE CURATION OF DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE

When the photographs taken at lynchings were first circulated by those who purchased them as souvenirs, their viewing was not intended to provoke either guilt, shame, or pity. Neither was their viewing intended to initiate the ameliorative action that would put an end to such

violence. Rather, the production and circulation of these photographs was meant to manifest a dominant racial solidarity, terrorize African Americans, and produce income for the photographers who took the photographs. With this history of the production and circulation of the photographs in mind, contemporary exhibitions of the images from the Allen and Littlefield collection have attempted (though in different ways) to render what were once viewed as tokens of racial dominance and superiority into dreadful yet instructive scenes documenting instances of historical injustice and shameful barbarity. In this respect, these exhibitions have echoed the efforts of the extensive anti-lynching campaigns during the first three decades of the twentieth century. These campaigns also made use of photographs taken at lynchings, publishing them in the context of newspaper articles and pamphlets. These publications endeavored to rewrite the perpetrators' narrative so that the act of a lynching came to represent the savagery and shameless immorality of white mobs rather than a confirmation of white domination and suppression of black depravity.<sup>10</sup> As the history of the journalistic rendition of American racial violence well illustrates, more than one hundred years ago narratives and images of the lynching of African Americans were common content in news and opinion media in the United States. Jacqueline Goldsby has pointed out that "in the periodical press alone there were at least three hundred articles on the topic published between 1882 and 1922."<sup>11</sup> In this context, the problem that anti-lynching activists often confronted was not that lynching was a secret history known only to a few, but rather how they might convey information about the widely known recurrence of lynchings in a manner that would arouse a demand for action that would prevent the repetition of such acts. This is well illustrated by the following remarks of anti-lynching activist Winthrop Sheldon commenting on the problem of the widespread indifference to images of suffering of African Americans offered by the media. In 1906, Sheldon wrote:

The American citizen, as he partakes of his morning roll and coffee and reads in his newspaper the sickening account of the latest lynching tragedy, is moved for the time being with a thrill of horror. He lays his paper aside, goes to his daily work, becomes absorbed in the business of money-making and—that is the end of it. The incident is closed. It is only a few days' sensation and soon forgotten.<sup>12</sup>



While many commentators have traced the phenomena of indifference to representations of suffering to a contemporary media environment saturated with images of violence, Sheldon's comments clearly exemplify the historical persistence of the pedagogical question of how to present the suffering of others so as to provoke sustained attention, concern, and corrective action. A century later, the present-day exhibitions of lynching photographs share related objectives, though differently in a different context. All recent exhibitions of lynching photographs have put been put forward with the explicit assumption that a collective remembrance of the brutality and outrage of lynching is an integral aspect of American historical memory, a public memory that deeply matters to present and future societal relationships. That such a memory matters, that it can make a difference in how we live our lives, obviously cedes an important pedagogical function to practices of remembrance, and it is precisely the complexity and manifold character of this function that the comparative study of exhibitions of lynching photographs seeks to illuminate.

Even though the contemporary exhibitions of lynching photographs share similar broad objectives with past forms of anti-lynching activism, it is important to recognize that the exhibitions held during the first decade of the twenty-first century were situated in a markedly dissimilar time than the period during which Sheldon wrote his remarks. This is evident in the many comments written by exhibition attendees who expressed a deep sense of surprise, shock, and dismay in learning that Americans had perpetrated with impunity such bestial and horrendous acts of racist violence.<sup>13</sup> One might suspect that the extent of this shock experience would be related to one's position in the long and deeply stratified racial formation of the United States. Certainly, studies such as William Carrigan's investigation of community memories of the 1916 lynching of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, have shown that in certain sites where lynchings have taken place there are vast differences in the overt remembrance and acknowledgment of lynching by members of black and white communities.<sup>14</sup> Yet in regard to the lynching photograph exhibitions, it is not just those marked racially as white that expressed considerable surprise on seeing the images. Many younger African Americans reported being intensely stunned by what they saw, experiencing the images as shocking and unimaginable. The wealth of similar responses across a wide range of visitor groups indicated that even though lynching continues to

be evoked both as a symbol of a racialized threat and injustice, there is little contemporary awareness and discussion of particular circumstances that spawned so many incidents of lynching in the United States. Even more so, there is little knowledge and understanding as to what specifically happened at these events, with what consequences. The reasons for this social amnesia are multiple, a full discussion of which cannot be my concern here. No doubt the attenuation of a well-articulated, contemporary American public memory of lynching attests to the lessening legitimacy of lynching spectacles after World War II and a corresponding tendency to suppress open discussion of terrible events enacted in the past.<sup>15</sup> Likely this lessened legitimacy could be traced, in part, to the success of anti-lynching campaigns that solidified lynching as shameful practice and thus one to be publically disavowed, particularly by a New South trying to integrate fully into American economic and political life. As well, it is likely that the rise of an affirmative ethnic culture in which images of black victimization were seen as dysfunctional for the education of the youth of a new generation also diminished the force of the cultural memory of violence perpetrated during the Jim Crow era.

While such statements can only be an inadequate gesture toward a social history of the public memory of lynching in America, they are intended to underscore the character of the contemporary context in which relatively recent exhibitions of lynching photographs have taken place. In this respect, each of the various exhibitions of photographs from the Allen and Littlefield collection had to address the question of how to return to a public sphere images of lynching that, for many, would be experienced as an unthinkable and deeply disturbing revelation. For this reason, the staff of each of the institutions presenting the photographs felt it necessary to come to grips not only with the question of why they were justified in displaying images of extreme cruelty, degradation, and death, but also how their exhibition plans would take into account that the photographs would appear in a landscape of memory in which the commonplace character of such extreme racist violence was greatly attenuated. In this respect, each exhibition of lynching photographs called for curatorial judgments as to the design of a *mise-en-scène* that would stage a display within which exhibition attendees might encounter and work through the difficult knowledge engendered in this setting. The difficulty inherent in such knowledge is not only constituted in the substance of images and narratives of

violent death and wounding loss, but also in the consequent personal and social aftermath of such that are embodied in and sustained by particular practices of remembrance. In this respect, each of the exhibitions of the lynching photographs was characterized as offering an encounter that would require viewers to bear the burden of negative emotions, that is, the vexing and troublesome feelings of revulsion, grief, anger, and/or shame that histories can produce, particularly if they raise the possibility of the complicity of one's country, culture, or family in systemic racist violence. Compounding this expectation was a further anticipation that exhibitions of the lynching photographs might also evoke a heightened anxiety (and the potential for secondary traumatization) as a result of alternatively dissimilar, yet still troubling, identifications with the victims of violence, the perpetrators of such violence, or those identified as bystanders passively acquiescent in regard to scenes of brutalization to which they were a witness.

As is evident in these anticipations of difficulty, what is experienced as "difficult knowledge"<sup>16</sup> does not lie inherently within particular artifacts, images, and discourses, or within the histories of those events to which these indexically refer. Rather, the experience of difficulty resides in the problematic but poetic relation between the affects provoked by engaging aspects of the *mise-en-scène* of an exhibition and the sense articulated within one's experience of this exhibit. In other words, at the heart of the matter regarding questions of difficult knowledge is the provocation of affect, and most importantly, affect's relation to the instigation and possibilities of thought. Affect here is not to be taken as simply an equivalent term for emotion. Rather the denotation "affect" is a reference to a nonspecific, immediate sensation not pre-coded by a representational system that settles its substance within specific linguistic markers that offer an understanding of just what it is that one is feeling (e.g., the emotions of sadness, anger, etc.). This notion of affect is not dichotomously opposed to or forestalling thought, but felt as a force that incites and compels thought as to the range of emotions one is feeling, as well as to what in the encounter has provoked these feelings and, consequently, in what ways this encounter might become significant to one's framework for acting in the world.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the emotions we feel are, in part, conditioned by the way in which our conscious and unconscious interpretations of the world encode affect within interpretable sensations. Given this distinction between affect and emotion, at the heart of the matter

regarding questions of the difficult knowledge associated with attending an exhibition of lynching photographs is the way the scene of an exhibition operates as a provocation of affect as well as a way of structuring affect's relation to the possibilities of thought and judgment.<sup>18</sup>

This means that what is particularly difficult about difficult knowledge is what comes to the fore when the affective force of an encounter provokes substantial problems in settling (at least provisionally) on the meaning and significance of the images, objects, and texts encountered within an exhibition. In their explorations of what constitutes difficult knowledge, Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman make it clear that what is difficult in narratives of the experience of others is not only a matter of what histories are presented but also the prospect of "encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge."<sup>19</sup> What Pitt and Britzman are referring to here are those moments when knowledge appears disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self, bringing oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding. On such terms, what is difficult about historical knowledge associated with violence and conflict is not just that the materials exhibited elicit anger, horror, and disgust, and judgments that past actions were shameful and unjust. More to the point, what defines the difficult in the encounters offered by exhibitions addressing violence and conflict is what happens in that moment when one receives "the terrible gift"<sup>20</sup> that an exhibition enacts, when one comes face to face with the task of inheriting the troubling consequences of what Britzman and Pitt term "the otherness of knowledge" (755). Understood on these terms, difficulty happens when one's conceptual frameworks, emotional attachments, and conscious and unconscious desires delimit one's ability to come to terms with the meaning of past events. In such moments one's sense of mastery is undone and correspondingly one may undergo an experience that mixes partial understanding with confusion and disorientation, the certainty of another's fear and suffering with one's own diffuse anxiety and disquiet.

While chapter 4 will provide a detailed, comparative analysis of visitor comments written in regard to the exhibitions at the Chicago Historical Society and the Andy Warhol Museum, to provide a better sense of what is at stake in the notion of the difficult knowledge encountered in these exhibitions consider the following remarks drawn from a sample of comments written by visitors in response to the

exhibition “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America” presented at the Warhol Museum in the Fall of 2001:

I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to do when I leave here today. Things just can’t go back to normal. I feel very sad when I look at the black faces hanging from those trees they look like my family, friends, people I see on the street every day. What makes [me] more upset is to see those white faces, looking at the bodies with pride and accomplishment. Those white faces also look like the people I see on the street. (I’m very confused as what I should feel right now) peace. (Visitor Comment, Andy Warhol Museum)

The notion of “difficulty” introduced above is evident in these remarks. Expressed here is a heightened affective intensity provoked by an encounter with images of violence and death. Read symptomatically, one can sense the spectral presence of the past commingling with the everyday surroundings and conscious (and likely unconscious) psychic life of the comment writer. This seems to result in a loss of previously secured meanings and, concomitantly, a deeply felt set of uncertainties as to how to respond. In her consideration of such moments, Britzman has explored how the affects spawned by aspects of transference lead to a resistance to thought and a narrowing of what might be learned from such encounters.<sup>21</sup> No doubt a disruptive affective force may be provoked by the sight of deadly violence, intensified not only by identifications bolstered by existing sets of social relationships but also as unresolved psychic conflicts in one’s own past. While these considerations are clearly apparent in the comment, there is something else at work, something that points in a rather different direction.

The concluding word of the comment is the orthographically marked, strongly underlined word *peace*, a word written under subjection to the force of the exhibition. In this respect, it cannot be read as simply a conventional gesture of closing for a communication. It is offered simultaneously as a relational posture, a plea, a moral injunction, a question, and a hope for oneself. It reads as an overdetermined response that suggests an inability to remain indifferent to what one has just seen. Something must be done, though what it is, is not apparent. Most importantly, the ambivalence of this sign is a semiotic trace

of an embodied situation in which, as a consequence of visiting an exhibition, a person has become charged with an affect that is itself a force to thought, particularly to the extent to which this thought is that which seeks some alteration as a result of the encounter that provoked it. I do not mean that this affect is only an epistemophilic desire to understand or make intelligible (i.e., to master) the violence and brutality one has just seen (although this desire may indeed be operative here as it is in many other similar responses). Differently, I want to suggest that this affect as a force to thought (and possibly action) is the first moment of what Stanley Cavell calls “acknowledgment”<sup>22</sup> of another’s pain and what Emmanuel Levinas has understood as the responsibility inherent in the suffering for the suffering of others.<sup>23</sup> In suggesting this, my intent is to open a conversation regarding curatorial practices that would recognize and work with the potential of a *mise-en-scène* of images, texts, and objects to elicit a force to thought, not simply tied to issues of identification, but to an a priori ethical responsibility rooted in the physical response to the suffering of another. It is in this respect that this book will be most concerned with the question of curatorial judgment and how the potency of a specific *mise-en-scène* constitutes an exhibition as an *event*, framing and channeling the movement of affect and impacting on the new possibilities for thought that any given exhibition potentially enacts.

To grasp the significance of thinking of an exhibition as an event, one has to consider what the notion of an event may entail beyond its reference to an occurrence. A discussion of the philosophical consideration of an event is not my purpose here. However, as my concern is how an exhibition might be conceived as an event, I have found it helpful to consider the implications of current writings that rethink the question of what is at stake in the notion of an image. Clearly, the most commonplace mode of apprehending an image is to consider it as a representation that draws its significance from its always-imperfect relation to that which it purports to represent. This is most evident in the way most people attend to photographs. If one trusts that a photograph has not been intentionally altered, it is usually taken for granted that such images are representations that underwrite the “realness” of a past presence that was there in front of the lens at the time a picture was taken. At the same time, as “only” a representation (and not the thing or person represented), a photograph is always defined by its partiality. In this sense, it “gives itself to thought in terms of that

which it is not, that is, in relation to a more basic kind of entity—an object, a person, a state of affairs—whose presence it re-presents.”<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to apprehending an image as a representation are the various positions that emphasize an image’s agency. While there are substantial differences among these positions, what they share is that rather than focusing on images that can be said to be about the world, they are addressed to the manner in which images are encountered as in the world.<sup>25</sup> This address is in part based on the recognition that images are not self-sufficient objects. How they operate in the world is a contextual matter. Indeed, images are subject to the always already situated character of all representations, which Edward Said referred to as “texts-in-the-world.”<sup>26</sup> While it is certainly important to argue that the meanings of images are never produced in isolation but always as situated within a broader discursive economy of other images and written discourses, limiting one’s understanding of an image to questions regarding its status as a representation (i.e., how it is given to meaning) fails to address how an image might be said to hold a certain force that bears on those who engage it.

While a full discussion of the various ways the force of the image is to be theorized is beyond my purpose here, there a few basic premises that need explicit mention. First of all, given that an image is fundamentally visual, it may be said not only to be perceptible or visible, but specifically as that which offers itself to sight. As Hagi Kenaan puts it, “The image is never just present but always already self-presenting, addressing itself to the eye. The image is a turning toward the eye, a facing of the viewer.”<sup>27</sup> In this respect, images are never just there, present as inert objects, but always “show themselves in a manner that is . . . intricately tied to the condition [and circumstance] of being viewed” (157). This “in-built relational structure” means that an image “is never simply what it is” (157). As Kenaan argues, “Its being-there is a being beyond itself toward the viewer: a facing. As such, an image can never be reduced to a representation, understood as a specific determination of visual content” (157). Rather, “what we face when we look at pictures is never given, but alternatively, a giving” (157). This notion of an image registers not as a *thing* but something predicative, as transitive, and hence a movement that is potentially “an entry, a trespassing into our sphere of the ego” (154). It is in this potential for images to operate as a force that a situated appearance of and encounter with an exhibition may be understood as an event.

Part of the pedagogical intent of the early-twentieth-century anti-lynching activists in publishing lynching photographs was to employ the force of a photographic image to disrupt prevailing discourses. This was to be done by denaturalizing and contesting codes secured by the dominant racialized class alliance that secured the oppressive and often violent forms of discrimination of a Jim Crow society. Yet given that the force of a visual image is inherently indeterminate, it remains self-evident that one cannot specify in advance if and how any given image will be understood and integrated (or not) with one's existing thoughts, commitments, and desires.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, in the context of photography, it is commonly agreed that there is something in photographic images that resists or eludes efforts to fix their meaning. No doubt this indeterminacy accounts for a degree of the anxiousness associated with curatorial projects that present photographs as traces of past events, particularly those incorporating highly charged aspects of human existence. It is why one can read calls to resist "the pornography of the 'direct' representation of misery" by placing language between the viewer and "visual experience."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, no museum or gallery would present an exhibition of lynching photographs totally unsupervised by words, even if supervisory authority of these words is rendered all but mute at the moment of encounter between a viewer and an image.<sup>30</sup> In attending to the *mise-en-scène* of an exhibition of lynching photographs, rather than simply its discursive contextualization, I am framing my concern at the organization and framing of such encounters, recognizing in the process that any given set of curatorial judgments will inevitably inform the pedagogical limits and possibilities inherent in the "difficult" engagements such encounters afford.

I will have much more to say about the substance of these encounters in subsequent chapters. For the moment it must suffice to state that the "difficulty" referenced here resides in the problematic relation between the material content that defines the subject matter of an exhibition, the affective force provoked in an encounter with this exhibition, and the struggle to make sense of one's experience of this force through the enactment of thought and conversation. Certainly, the contemporary display of the Allen and Littlefield lynching photographs were intended not only to inform museum visitors about particular violent events in U.S. history and to memorialize those victimized, but as well to publicly indict particular acts of murder and the systemic racism that legitimated them. However, the significance of



these photographs does not just rest on what history they signify but also on the consequences of what their contemporary presentation does to those who view them. That the photographs were often colloquially described as “shocking” is an inadequate but still telling indication that the public re-presentation of these difficult images rendered a presence that cast forward a force whose very tactility embodied an indeterminate provocation of affect. It is also an indication that shifting the temporal frame in which the photographs were encountered reconstituted the possibility and trajectory of this affect.<sup>31</sup> While, clearly, curatorial practice can never attempt to fix responses to images present, how different exhibitions were variously designed and developed so as to exert influence upon the movement between affect and thought will become the central concern of much of the chapters that follow.

What is at stake here for any museum or gallery offering visitors encounters with images of suffering and death is suitably illustrated by Mieke Bal in her discussion of the photography exhibition *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, presented at the Williams College Museum of Art in 2006.<sup>32</sup> This exhibition presented a wide range of contemporary photography of various instances of human suffering attempting to explore photography’s “traffic in pain.” At the beginning of her commentary on this exhibition, Bal ruminates on her visceral response to Nicholas Nixon’s “Tom Moran, October 1987,” a photograph of a man looking at his mirror image, showing his body devastated by disease. Reading the young man’s face as “beautiful but skeletal” and his chest as “emaciated,” and noting the date of the photograph, Bal associates the image with the ravages of AIDS (93). This visual encounter provokes a sense of anxiety. Standing before the photograph she feels something that she interprets as “grief, compassion, and anger” (93). But she is also aware that simply rendering her feelings on these terms leaves her with “nowhere to go” (93). As she put it, “Alone, I am not witnessing anyone’s suffering. In all likelihood, the man is long dead, and he will never know that, in 2006, someone unknown to him felt an emotion for him that might approximate grief” (93). It is this diffuse quality of sensation, reflexively coded as grief but without direction, that Bal labels the core problem that the exhibition *Beautiful Suffering* “analyzes and questions and to an extent, inevitably and boldly performs” (93–94). Bal understands quite clearly that this difficulty in the relation of affect and thought is not simply a consequence of particular photographs being viscerally difficult to look

at. Rather, the problem of undirected emotions (and possibly an indifference that might act as a shield to bear their weight) is apprehended as an underlying curatorial problem of the exhibition itself. That is, Bal directs us to the question of the possible ways an exhibition's mise-en-scène might help frame, forge, and support a mode of public vision within which the affective force of images could be directed toward thought regarding one's responsibilities in the face of the felt injunction to bear witness to the scenes of suffering just encountered. As we shall see below, what constitutes such a practice of bearing witness is very much an open question. However, as Bal's comments suggest the question of what constitutes bearing witness to an encounter with the scenes of suffering and death presented in an exhibition at the very least opens a curatorial consideration of the possible relation between affect and thought, a relation (it bears repeating) whose precise content can never be specified in advance.

#### THE PROBLEMATIC PEDAGOGY OF "BEARING WITNESS"

In a parallel but somewhat different idiom from James Allen's remarks cited at the beginning of this chapter, Joseph Jordan, curator of the exhibition of lynching photographs held at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, noted that "[i]f we put these photographs back into the trunks, or slide them back into the crumbling envelopes and conceal them in a corner of the drawer, we deny to the victims, once again, the witness they deserve. We deny them the opportunity to demand recognition of their humanity, and for us to bear witness to that humanity."<sup>33</sup> For Jordan, the public exhibition of recontextualized, recovered images taken at lynchings was a way of allowing the dead "to speak" and in doing so make claims on those living in the present. In this regard, Jordan put forward the notion that an exhibition of photographs can be a specific mode of enacting visual testimony.<sup>34</sup> However, such assertions only beg the question: In what sense can it be said that an exhibition of photographs "testifies"? If we presume that as an event an exhibition does something, if it can be said to in some specific way "attest," an exhibition of historical photographs can be taken as a practice that affirms something about the past and functions as a call to witness that affirmation. In principle, then, an exhibition as a practice of visual testimony may be understood

as an event that constitutes an encounter with the potential to provoke a consideration of the substance and significance of prior events and experiences (however partial such considerations must be). On these terms, testimony enacted by an exhibition has an inherent pedagogical character that I will refer to here as its pedagogy of witness.

At root, the testamentary character of a photograph exhibition, addressed to those who attend, commands them to see and remember. Jordan most certainly understood this command as a moral injunction, that those murdered (and the loss engendered by these murders) should not be forgotten. For such to be the case, he insisted that we must enact the recognition that the all too untimely death of those murdered remains deeply grievable. This is a demand for recognition that requires more than the visible apprehension of the dead and the public acknowledgment of the crimes perpetrated against them. Something much more is at stake in Jordan's proposition that an exhibition of lynching photographs is a way of initiating a claim on us to "bear witness" to the humanity of the victims of such crimes. The visual testimony of an exhibition of lynching photographs is comprised not only of an attempt to transmit information about the past and to keep specific events before one's eyes; it constitutes as well a force intended to open questions as to the significance of a specific practice of representing the photographs for public viewing. Yet how such viewing is to be accomplished, and what remembrance might mean when mediated through any given exhibition, entails pedagogical, ethical, and epistemological considerations.

Always directed toward another, testimony places the one who receives it under the obligation of response to an embodied singular experience not recognizable as one's own. Amid testimony's tensile mix of gift and demand, there is an underlying entreaty to see, read, and/or hear that which is given over to those of us ready and able to accept the requirements of its encounter. On such terms, testimony (visual or otherwise) has the potential to transform the way in which we understand ourselves in and through our relations with others. If we embrace the premise that subjectivities are fundamentally intersubjective and dialogic, then there is a transformative potency in an act of testimony that depends on one's capacity to inherit it as a bequest. This is a capacity that depends on one's address-ability and response-ability in the face of how it is that testimony gives over its witness. In this respect, witnessing testimony is not something accomplished by merely enduring

the apprehension of demanding images and/or stories; rather, one must work through ways of transporting and translating these beyond their moment of appearance and enunciation. Thus, central to witnessing is the enactment of one's relationship with others in ways that make evident that one's thought and practice has been informed by the living memory of prior testimony. By invoking these obligations as central to witnessing, witnessing is constituted as first and foremost an ethical concept. In other words, witnessing is to be defined through a normative structure of expectations and obligations that sets the conditions of possibility for testimony's participation in a "just remembrance."<sup>35</sup> As Kelly Oliver has indicated, the fundamental question regarding an encounter with testimony is, "How can we witness and bear witness to oppression, domination, subordination, enslavement, and torture in ways that open up the possibility of a more humane and ethical future beyond violence?"<sup>36</sup>

Oliver's question is not simply rhetorical. There is a warranted, acute equivocation regarding the practice of publicly displaying photographs of death and suffering, even when it is done as a call to a witness that would recognize loss, initiate a demand for justice, and warn against as the destructive consequences of racism (or other forms of discrimination and oppression). Clearly, there is long history of the public display of visual imagery depicting violence and violations not only as a demand for justice for past crimes but as well to mobilize transformations in existing and future social relations. A classic instance is Francisco Goya's famous aquatint plates, which subsequent to his death were published and became known as the series *The Disasters of War*.<sup>37</sup> It is generally assumed that Goya intended these graphics as a transformative visual report of the horror, brutality, torture, and the savagery witnessed during the 1808 Spanish nationalist insurrection against Joseph Bonaparte and the subsequent Peninsular War. While graphic artists over the centuries have rendered images of the inhumanity of violence that bear witness to atrocity and injustice, after the invention of photography in 1839 and the rapid advances made in technologies of image reproduction and distribution, the photographic image became the privileged mode of documentation through which barbarism could be made evident to a previously uninformed citizenry. Early important instances of such exhibition practices that continue to draw critical consideration are the Congo Reform Movement's exhibition of atrocity photographs in the context of their human