

Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death

Mary Niall Mitchell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Mary Niall (2016) "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.2.16

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss2/15>

Review

Mitchell, Mary Niall

Spring 2016

Baker, Courtney R. *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death*. University of Illinois Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780252039485

Looking for Change: African American Suffering and the Power of Images

Courtney Baker's book *Humane Insight* is a theoretical re-examination of the historical imagery of racial violence in the United States. Baker, an associate professor of English at Connecticut College, has chosen five historical moments—from the nineteenth century to the present—that produced transformative imagery of African American suffering and death. She asks us to set aside earlier theoretical interpretations pertaining to the camera and the violent, invasive, imperial *gaze* it affords (an interpretation most often represented by Susan Sontag, but there are many others in this camp) and instead to pay attention to the power of the photographs themselves and what *looking* at them achieves.

The reader gets the strong sense, in fact, that Baker is frustrated by those earlier interpretations because too often they miss the point. With *Humane Insight* she is hoping to reclaim the radical power that the act of looking can have. "Not all looks are gazes," she writes, the difference between the two being that "looking bears the potential for positive change" (1-2). She introduces the concept of "humane insight," defining it as the kind of looking "in which the onlooker's ethics are addressed by the spectacle of others' embodied suffering." She uses this concept throughout the book to describe the social benefit of looking at images of suffering. In the act of looking, she finds not passive spectatorship but political struggle—specifically the struggles of African Americans to become free from racial oppression using the power of visual imagery in the face of unrelenting white supremacy. This contest—one that is, sadly, ongoing—is what Baker refers to as "power games of the ocular kind" (1).

The book opens with a chapter on the notorious LaLaurie case in 1830s New Orleans. Delphine Lalaurie was a wealthy white woman, of long Creole heritage

in Louisiana, who had a reputation, before the incident that Baker describes, of abusing the enslaved people she and her husband owned. On the basis of the poor health of the enslaved people in the Lalaurie household, neighbors and friends had made efforts to intervene. But nothing prepared the public for the horrific scene that was exposed when the Lalaurie's townhouse caught fire in 1834, quite possibly at the hand of the cook who was chained in the kitchen at the time. Locked on the top floor of the house were seven people still living but in horrible stages of mutilation. They died shortly after their removal from the household of their torturer.

The documentation of the LaLaurie affair came largely from local newspaper accounts of the horrific scene, since documentary photography was not a reality until the Crimean War in the 1850s. Nonetheless, the visual imagery created by reporters became actionable evidence for antislavery activists who were eager to expose the fallacy of southern slaveholder paternalism. The bodies of LaLaurie's victims, like those of many subjects of reform in the nineteenth century, became what Baker describes as "important sites of knowledge and moral virtue" that via news reports brought forth cause for action by the public (28).

The second moment of national reckoning Baker visits—actually, a second and third moment—centered on photographs of the lynched bodies of African Americans from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like the documentation of LaLaurie case, lynching photographs created visual evidence of the brutalization African Americans suffered at the hands of white southerners. But there are two significant differences. For one, most of the lynching photographs were taken with the full participation of the white perpetrators. Lynchings were public, celebratory events that drew white men, women, and children and the photographs reflect this. Second, as Baker argues, the criminalization of lynching victims by local communities made it difficult for anti-lynching activists to challenge the white supremacist narrative. By placing the photographs of lynchings in art galleries, however, as activists did, they highlighted "the spectacle of black suffering" thus addressing "lynching's central dynamic" and inviting viewers to look directly at black people in distress and to do so with "humane insight" centered on the inhumanity of lynching itself (40). Baker's discussion of the photograph of Frank Embree is especially haunting. Embree was a man about to be lynched, stripped bare and already mutilated, whose stare into the camera condemns the photographer as well as Embree's torturers and holds any viewer of his image to account.

The re-emergence of lynching photographs as a genre, with the exhibition *Without Sanctuary* in 2003, brought them into the public eye again but within a changed political context. For modern audiences, they were historical documents that made visitors feel part of a spectacle of violence. The *gaze*, for most of these viewers, was paramount once the political imperative to end lynchings had been eradicated by earlier generations. Yet elderly people with personal connections to people who had been lynched disrupted that gaze in poignant ways and reinforced the power and importance of looking. In fact, one man entered the exhibition in Atlanta *looking* in a very directed way—for evidence of his own father's death—only to be overwhelmed with emotion, unable to remain in the gallery.

The two subsequent chapters address the significance of photographs to the Civil Rights Movement. In the first of these, she tells the photographic history of Emmett Till, the young boy who was murdered in 1955 by three white men in Money, Mississippi for allegedly speaking to a white woman. The revolutionary images of Till's battered face that appeared in *Jet* magazine firmly undergird the author's argument about the power of looking. When Mamie Till insisted that her son's casket be open for the world to see "what they did" to her son and that the images should run in *Jet*, she opened up a new chapter in the struggle to bring change through images of black people's suffering. By making the mourning of Emmett Till "a matter of public concern" Mamie Till did something revolutionary: she began "the process of the radical recuperation of the dead black body from the debilitating logics of black submission and exceptional vulnerability by literally taking the body back from the hands of racist white officials" (81).

In her chapter on images from civil rights protests, Baker challenges "the characterization of the politically effective practice of nonviolent direct action as a passive process" (95). She finds that the activism of civil rights protesters and leaders aimed to confront viewers with images of battered African American bodies, bodies that were injured and assaulted as they peacefully protested segregation. There was, in fact, an awareness among activists that their non-violent acts would produce violence that would serve to promote their cause, but in order to make those sacrifices effective on a national scale, they had to be caught on camera. According to Baker, "the images of the civil rights movement illustrate a black-authored narrative of self-determination and autonomy" that "confounded the conventional mainstream narrative of blackness in America"

(108).

The final chapter returns to New Orleans, with a consideration of what might be called the *limits* of looking. As Baker points out, the mostly poor and black New Orleanians who appeared on the nation's television screens, stranded in the aftermath of the flooding that covered 80% of the city, were the victims of failed environmental policies, shoddy engineering, and irresponsible government. Yet it is difficult to convey those long-term factors in photographs and videos, much less stir the public to action in order to overcome them. "The only people who were allowed unquestionably to claim and to maintain victim status," Baker writes, "were the dead" (112).

Whereas Baker closes her book with a consideration of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the images of black suffering that flickered across America's television screens, she might well have ended with a chapter on Eric Garner, the man whose choking death, in 2014, at the hands of police outside a convenience store on Staten Island—as Garner insisted that he could not breathe—was recorded by someone nearby with a camera phone. The reason Garner's case, like many others of late, resonates with the work Baker has done is that the rough video of a black man being brutalized by police presented us with visual evidence on which we, as a nation, should act. The question, now, is how many Eric Garners must we see before we begin to affect positive change?

Mary Niall Mitchell is Ethel & Herman L. Midlo Endowed Chair in New Orleans Studies, Joseph Tregle Professor in Early American History and Associate Professor at the University of New Orleans. She is the author of Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery (NYU, 2008) and has published essays in the New York Times Disunion blog, Harper's Magazine, The Atlantic, and Common-place.org. Her on-going project, The Slave Girl in the Archive, is a study of race, photography, slavery and memory in the nineteenth century.