

# **THE OFFENDER BEHIND THE LENS: ENDURING ETHICAL LEGACY OF LAWRENCE BEITLER'S LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPHY**

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America, at present, is beginning to look and behave more like a parody of itself every day. One of the main reminders of American values used to be perceived is a gauge of social attitudes. Social attitudes are often the slowest and most difficult projections of those mindsets to change. One of the most glaring and persistent examples is racism -- such prejudice is itself the result of psychosocial conditioning that is exercised across multiple spheres: social structures, economic implications, legal frameworks - and even in those last bastions of intimacy and safety, education system and the family unit. During the Jim Crow era of the American South, racism represented a particularly insidious exercise of state sanctioned prejudice codified by laws surrounding housing, employment, and the suppression of voting rights. Worse, however, was the acceptability of murdering African Americans, often without any basis or legal accountability. African Americans during this period were excluded from legal protection, social support systems, and societal recognition of their rights. One such instance is captured on film in the 1930 photograph entitled *Lynching*, by Lawrence Beitler. The photograph has persisted in the American cultural lexicon because of the despicable context of the image: two men who did not deserve to have their lives taken, especially in such a barbaric way, robbed of dignity even in death. Even more astonishing is that the same trend is seen today in America, primarily through the shooting of unarmed African American men by police officers and the mass incarceration and capital punishment sentencing of African American men. Yet images as such must be scrutinized beyond their intended meaning, especially through a lens of modernity. Looking back, it becomes painfully evident that images like these do not simply shed light on a societal ill, but contribute to its normalization, over time inoculating the masses against the outrage that the image is meant to evoke. This is conveyed through the medium in which the photos were distributed, such as postcards and other

memorabilia, the publicity in which men like Beitler received for taking these photos, and the marketing of the photos through music and other mass media.

The photograph depicts the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, two African American men from Marion, Indiana, who were accused of robbery, rape, and murder. They were not given due process by any means of formal trial by peers or even formal legal processing, and so their innocence or guilt will most likely never be proven. Given the sociopolitical climate of the time and era, however, the viewer can assume that they were probably innocent, which is what makes the lynching that much more difficult to understand. Lynching is the hanging of a man/woman by his/her neck with rope from a tree or other structure until dead. It normally is accompanied by some form of grotesque celebration, like dragging the body or leaving it for public display. It became a very popular way to “deal with” African Americans during this particular period of American history. The photograph is iconically tragic because it depicts an event that was published in major outlets as a normalized phenomenon. It inspired the famous song, *Strange Fruit*, by Abel Meeropol in 1937, which was later turned into a timeless protest ballad by the famed African American singer Billie Holiday but stands also as a crowning achievement in the measures of photographic accountability. Even roughly a century after the photograph was taken, one question remains: how did society allow for this moment not only to occur, but also become so celebrated by those who were willing to be photographed conducting this heinous action of prejudice and outright murder? It is clear that even the most brilliant photographs, the ones that linger in the public imagination long after their having been taken, do more than just capture a moment in time; they capture, archive, and lay bare some of the most harmful societal beliefs, stripping away the shock value which incites change.

Within the photograph itself, the dead bodies of Shipp and Smith are quite visible with the nooses around their necks, suspending them from a tall tree. The young African American have blood on their faces and clothing, which is ripped and revealing their bare chests and torsos to the crowd. The corpses are the focus of the photograph but are not centered; instead, they share the frame with an entirely white crowd looking on with little fear, sadness, or shame in their eyes. One

could even argue hints of smugness on the visible parts of the onlookers. The majority of the all-white crowd appear nicely dressed and even at total ease with the scenery, which they obviously regard as “so ordinary, even banal’ few could have imagined the place in history they earned that night by posing for Lawrence Beitler’s camera.” One man points up to the body on the right, almost as if drawing attention to what they had just accomplished. Particularly memorable is the young man towards the lower left corner, wearing a thin tie and smiling, as he appears to be holding hands with an attractive woman who is standing next to another. While the image is a bit less clear at this angle, the next woman appears to be holding food in her hands and eating from it.

Such a detail is arguably more arresting than the man smiling. While racism could prompt individuals to experience a wide variety of reactions to the suffering of the group on the receiving end of the prejudice, the depiction of the woman being able to casually eat next to the scene of a murder provides a strong commentary on how utterly indifferent white people could prove to be towards African-Americans. Reviewing the photograph, one can only wonder how humanity experienced such psychic indifference as to document the murder as though it were a celebratory occasion. Given that lynching during this period was a common occurrence and had been for centuries, this image serves as a reminder of how such occurrences became increasingly normalized based off of human behavior and reactions; Beitler’s photograph is not the only one of its kind, but rather is one of a career-long series. By judging this image critically, and contextualizing it within the entirety of Beitler’s oeuvre, it seems that his images do little to startle and instead tend to create an aura of complacency. Of course, a counterargument might be that this same impact is not received in today’s environment and that people are not inoculated by extreme versions of violence such as lynchings. However, a strong case can be made to suggest that people are still just as desensitized to this extreme form of violence today as they were in the past. Video games and other mass-media have drawn on this basic premise of a lynching and made it commonplace. Moreover, the mass distribution of Beitler’s photo has made it commonplace and, in the act of mass distribution, some of the edge has been taken off of it. Lauren Walker writes, concerning the photos of lynchings “The photos scared me, but on the rare occasion they reappeared in school lessons, my

predominantly White classmates usually said 'ewww,' or laughed. The photos that served as warnings for Black children were used as mementos and retrograde shareable content among White people. Black people were and still can be regarded as things to be taken apart and passed down." In this manner, the impact of the photo has been muted, over time, and in some cases the violence has been reinvented in modern forms of entertainment.

The problem with Beitler's photo of the lynching is that, depending on one's perspective, one might expect a rational person to be horrified by the crowd's nonchalant demeanor. However, this kind of thinking only applies to those who empathize with the plight of African Americans. For others, this tone of (inappropriate) calmness will reassert their beliefs. Today it is easy to make this judgement, but when considering the state of America at the time this picture was taken and disseminated through a lens of historicism, when many Americans were not interested or actively pursuing social justice, the picture undoubtedly supported the unhelpful and archaic style of thinking held by most white Americans. Considering this history is essential to understanding the image.

To begin with, 1930 was an incredibly momentous year in American history. Just one year after the start of the Great Depression, it was marked by increasing white-driven hostilities towards African Americans who were struggling for survival in the Jim Crow era in the Southern United States, who were seen as threatening to what little livelihood was to be had by white men. Julius E. Thompson observes that the rapidly declining economic era provided the thinly veiled excuse that poor whites needed to perpetuate the reign of terror against the vulnerable population of African-Americans, who, because of their skin color and the historical perpetuation of discrimination and marginalization against them in a society that did not legally protect their rights either. Thompson essentially argues that while lynching rates had fallen in the years leading up to the Great Depression, they were resuscitated by economic competition between white and African-American populations. This is made exceedingly clear when Thompson claims that "lynching became briefly more common and more brutal." The increasing frequency and brutality of lynchings was specific to Mississippi, but the results were observed in states across the southern United States of America.

This sociopolitical backdrop of angry whites and vulnerable people of color sets the stage for not only how Shipp and Smith were lynched, but the justification to have the event documented by photographer Lawrence Beitler in the first place. Given that lynching during this period became more common, the public's acceptance of this photograph illustrates that this picture serves as a reminder of how such occurrences became increasingly normalized as society became desensitized to them. After all, Beitler's photograph is not the only one of its kind. Other similar photos were taken and were widely shared. Returning to the unresolved question offered earlier in this paper regarding what role the photographers play in normalizing this phenomenon of violence, sources that opted to publish the photographs such as local newspapers took a tone that "justice had been done, if perhaps precipitously, by the town's upstanding citizens." "Upstanding citizens" here is a cultural signifier meant to euphemistically describe those willing, eager even, to lynch the men for the sake of flawed, biased justice rather than giving them the chance to escape or be acquitted in court. Beitler's own beliefs with regards to 'racial purity' (the belief that races should remain separate and not inter-breed, or the belief that one race is purer than another, and thus superior) are never explored in any scholarly biographical accounts of him. However, it is known that after capturing the famous image, he allegedly stayed up for 110 days straight printing as many images as he could (a hyperbolic exaggeration which highlights Beitler's own disgust with the content of the images and their cultural significance). In a later interview with his daughter, Beitler was remembered as stating "I didn't even want to do it...but taking pictures was my business." Most of the pictured Beitler printed were in postcard format, which he then sold for fifty cents each as a sort of grotesque souvenir of lynchings in the Southern United States. The selling and advertising of this image, however, demonstrates a coldness on Beitler's part. It could be argued that he was not, after all, taking these pictures purely for charity or for the public good and that he had every right to sell them, but this is still a major facet of the problem of normalizing these kinds of image, this kind of racial hierarchy, and this senseless violence.

The short answer is that the role the photographers played in the lynching scene was a rather large one. Mark Reinhart argues that one school of thought in

the decades since lynching was a common occurrence, is that photographers were arguably complicit in the violence they documented from behind the lens. Particularly, in the mid-twentieth century, individual photographers were generally sympathetic to the racist views of white supremacists, evident in their ability to document lynchings in the first place. It is worth noting, for example, that the angle of the photograph with relation to the height of the tree means that Beitler most certainly would have had to use a tripod to capture it. Even as the citizens appear unashamed—a subject to be addressed later—the preparedness of the photograph’s setup suggests Beitler had some prior knowledge of the lynching that would take place. If Beitler knew that the lynching was going to occur beforehand, and was sympathetic to the lynch mob himself, that essentially means that the cruelty of the crowd extends beyond the camera lens, that the picture, and not the lynching itself, is a result of this kind of racial violence. It is both the premeditated documentation of an unspeakable act of violence as well as the confession of a violent but ultimately personal act: Beitler’s own complicity in the lynching. And while it would be easy to claim that Beitler had no prior knowledge of the event, he is clearly on congenial terms with the white crowd, as they are interactive with the camera and fine with the idea of this picture being taken by this particular photographer. Mark Reinhardt and Henrik Gustafsson characterize photographers of lynchings as “part of the script,” arguing that they “were, as a rule, taken by those actively joined the mob or by professionals known to be sympathetic to its aims.” Therefore, this allegiance granted them the proximity allowed them to be close enough to document the violence in the first place. Photographs like the image captured by Beitler were common throughout the 20th century, which suggests that these photographs serve as not merely a documentation of racial violence, but praise of it. One of the most haunting photographic relics of the time are postcards which explicitly depict lynchings. These postcards bore grisly images not unlike Beitler’s captured image of Shipp and Smith, which document lynching victims in the moments immediately following their deaths. Most of the postcards involve macabre images of whites, clearly celebrating the death of the young men in the background. The sheer volume of lynching photographs suggests two things: first, that lynching was an acceptable enough social activity to provide an ample supply for a high demand; and second,

that such photographs “served to normalize and make socially acceptable—even aesthetically acceptable—the utter brutality of a lynching.”

In her exhaustive study regarding the process of documenting lynching in film, Amy Louise Wood suggests that the most horrific dimension of lynching lies within the desire on the part of white supremacists to so significantly and thoroughly harm their African-American victims. They are so motivated “to obliterate his human and masculine identity, to make him into the “black beast” that their racial and sexual ideology purported him to be.” The photographer reinforces this narrative of white supremacy, because in capturing the African-American in their reduced, mutilated state, the representation of the deceased is as something less than human. Dehumanizing African-Americans was a key method of obtaining power through such hate crimes. The method of dehumanization is also one that “justifie[s] and incite[s] the violence” inherent in lynchings. Wood also suggests that the frequent exhibition of such images similarly guaranteed that lynching was not only “visually remembered and repeatedly witnessed,” but also that it remained “perpetually alive or in force.” This framework clearly establishes a foundation for the photographer’s responsibility in documenting the lynching photographs. In Wood’s thorough study of the subject, she found that lynching photographs typically fall into one of three categories: “they feature isolated framings of the hanging body or bodies, a group of satisfied white men surrounding the dead, or a larger crowd of white spectators viewed from a distance.” Two of the three categories focus on a clear trend of demonstrating “a sense of purpose and racial solidarity. . .while leaving the dead men isolated and degraded, stripped of dignity”. The stripping did not end with the murder of the men, however; Wood’s research shows that the psychic angle of continuing to devalue the men postmortem was a deliberate and appealing element of documenting their dead forms on film. The continued promotion of the images also helped justify the cause of white supremacy, which in turn, caused more harm and injury to communities of African-Americans, portraying them as savages.

Some of the “savage” imagery is strangely present with Beitler’s work. Numerous authors have pointed out that a white sheet has been wrapped around the body of Smith. Not only does the sheet replace the pants that were likely

ripped from his body, the sheet resembles a loincloth. In more modern interpretations, the draping of the loincloth is interpreted as a Christ-like image, but at the time of the lynching, it most likely served as a confirmation of the “wild man” narrative, as loincloths were considered to be “primitive” clothing options. Dovetailing on the work of Reinhardt and Wood, Ellen Armour’s findings reveal that the photographer bears responsibility for the photograph’s intentions and impacts. Reinhardt counters that the pictures were “sexualized fury.” Sexuality often played a large part in the poor treatment, stereotyping, and lynching of young African American men. As slaves, they were often seen as “black bucks,” meant to please the white mistresses or, conversely, capable of rape. This same narrative continued well into the early 20th century, with African American men being associated with insatiable sexual appetites and sexual crimes. The “sexualized fury” could be interpreted as a kind of retribution: a blow against black masculinity because of closely-held white inferiority, jealousy, or contempt based off of these untrue stereotypes.

Attempting to discern the ultimate responsibility for the person behind the camera is not a new area of study specific to photography. Susan Sontag grappled with these questions in her groundbreaking work, *On Photography*, initially published in 1977. Sontag argued that “there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera”—a way of asserting how photography cannot only reveal, but even revel in the violence perpetrated against vulnerable people. Sarah Parsons interprets that the motivation behind Sontag’s work was largely to warn the public about the power and possibility of photography to “anesthetize its viewers.” The anesthetization of the viewer is exactly what allowed lynching photographs to exist, circulate, and accumulate profit as novelty items. In Sontag’s assessment, the emotional reactions one experiences upon viewing photographs can reveal a good deal about the assessment and judgment values a viewer ultimately makes. However, much of those ideas are driven by narrative. With respect to the historical issues of lynching, the narrative that drove many of those photographs was one of white supremacy and white racial superiority to the suffering of African-American communities. Such messages were unquestionably reinforced by the economic disparity, as numerous studies of history find that no one population suffered during the Great Depression as significantly as African-Americans. Reinhardt

argues that lynching photography “enacted humiliation and degradation; the circulation of the pictures extended it.” The motivation to terrorize African-Americans; the need to humiliate and dominate them, could only come about through the determined evaluation that the men were less than human.

To conclude, it is clear that the right photograph can exercise a profound influence upon human society. Seeing is often equated to believing, and anyone who has been moved emotionally by a movie or other visual medium can readily understand that there is an unspoken power in art. Beitler’s photograph, *Lynching*, for instance, did not simply document a bloodthirsty mob in the aftermath of several brutal murders. On the contrary, it provided a telling and concise encapsulation of the racial divide present in 1930s United States, which caused a racial divide so great that many whites were eager to brag about taking part in such horrific displays of prejudice. The Civil Rights movement, which fully took form in the 1950s, was an arduous struggle, and photographs such as Beitler’s *Lynching* basically forced the privileged (and mostly white) portion of society to confront the fact that the Civil War and ensuing Reconstruction period had not solved the country’s racial problems. Even now, photographs such as the infamous image from August 2016 depicting a bloodied Syrian child sitting in a hospital chair works against humanity’s impulse to sweep the effects of unpleasant conflicts under the rug. In the end, the fact that images can move us from deep-seated apathy and ignorance is a potent testament to photography’s profound effect on the human psyche. This impact must be recognized today because it has modern-day ramifications. Specifically, lynching has taken on modern-forms and is readily seen today in America. For instance, there is a high number of shootings of unarmed African American men by police officers and African American men are at an increased risk of receiving capital punishment. The lessons of the past have to be applied to the present and future, and it is incredibly dangerous when cultures become desensitized to such horrific images and happenings.

## FIGURES



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