



CHELSEA PATTERSON



THE POSTMORTEM GAZE AND CONTESTED WAYS OF SEEING: DEATH, RACE, AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The corpse has long been a visually arresting object of display in the postmodern West, a taboo artifact of mystery owing to its increasingly remote and sanitized nature.¹ The deceased body on display, particularly through photographic representation, often functions as a complex amalgamation of education and entertainment, turning the display of the dead into mere spectacle. This macabre interest in the display of the dead from the Renaissance to the twenty-first century is evocative of a certain kind of looking practice that can engender the dead body or its respective parts into spectacle based upon the materiality of its surroundings. Such looking practices can ultimately result in the abjection and destruction of the corpse, according to how we interpret the corporeal being on display in front of us. This essay will address the following questions: What specific looking practices engender spectacle and abjection of the

dead? How do such looking practices offer new insights into the field of visual rhetoric? What do looking practices upon the dead tell us about Western ways of seeing, particularly within the confines of early photographic practices?

We can document the first traces of the spectacular nature of the corpse through the public anatomy theatre of the early modern period of the 1400s-1600s. Such theatres surreptitiously served as a way to represent the burgeoning field of medicine, while feigning interest in the instruction of the masses to the intricacies of the human body.² Since the focus was on representation rather than instruction, *theatra anatomica* functioned as theatrical performance and entertainment.³ In the anatomy theatre the corpse, who was accused of a crime while alive, was the centerpiece, accompanied by a banquet and music upon the arrival of the anatomist(s). There were also often macabre sculptures and other works of art surrounding the hall, including the preserved body parts of animals and humans, accompanied by their rearticulated skeletons. In addition, the anatomy theatre was often the equivalent of a ball or other important social event and the elite often showcased the latest fashion trends.⁴ Thus, the anatomy theatre was to some extent an excuse to gaze at the cadaver of a condemned criminal on display, to rejoice in the spectacle of criminality, death, and the body's defilement.

Anatomy museums also existed alongside the anatomy theatres and provided an additional space for the display of the dead. These museums were often a place of study for medical students and served the same function as the anatomy theatre—to legitimate the profession of medicine, in this case by associating medicine with science through the act of collection.⁵ Such museums were also open to the public, displaying various forms of human remains. During the European Enlightenment, the acquirement and collection of human body parts was an integral facet of consumer society and consumers ranged from medical stu-

dents and anatomists to fairground enthusiasts who wanted their own anatomical oddity to display in their homes. It must be emphasized here that the display of such human remains was a form of showmanship—each piece of a collection was meant to be looked at, touched, smelled, and talked about.⁶ These museums thus fetishized human remains and promoted multisensory investigations into the mysteries of the deceased human body.

In the United States in the nineteenth century, the collection of the dead continued within circus sideshows, with the display of (often purported) mummified remains of infamous outlaws such as John Wilkes Booth.⁷ This criminality of the body, similar to the Renaissance anatomy theatre, provided a particular kind of spectacle, one that was enhanced by the site of the sideshow, which alleged to provide education and entertainment, to inform the masses of the deformity and oddity of mankind while simultaneously providing a venue for the mockery of such oddities. Thus, the criminality of the body on display, in conjunction with the site of the sideshow, provides an opportunity for abjection of the corpse on display, especially if we consider whether or not the audience had the opportunity to touch the corpse (like a petting zoo), how the barker, or announcer, described the corpse, and how the corpse was arranged within the display and what other exhibits were near it. As we will see, all of these rhetorical aspects play a key role in how the corpse on display is interpreted.

These historic examples of the display of the dead for the sake of a particular kind of gaze based upon curiosity, entertainment, and pseudo education (“edutainment”) are still upon us in the twenty-first century. For example, In the United States traveling plastination displays of the dead such as Gunther von Hagens’s *Body Worlds*, which exhibits preserved human bodies, continues to be a popular attraction. The curiosity that such installations engender within patrons demonstrates that a certain gaze continues to be at work within the postmodern era, a gaze that finds pleasure and

excitement upon gazing at the ultimate taboo: human remains.

A final example of the twenty-first century infatuation with gazing upon the dead takes a more sinister turn and focuses on the medium of photography and its particular representation and display of the dead. Recently, there has been a proliferation of controversial images that have surfaced within the national media that portray U.S. soldiers defiling the corpses of Afghan insurgents. In January 2012, a video was posted on YouTube by an anonymous U.S. Marine that depicts four American soldiers urinating onto three Taliban corpses, while muttering, “Have a great day, buddy” and “Golden, like a shower.”⁸ A still shot of this image was reproduced and displayed widely across various news media. Similarly, in April 2012, an unidentified U.S. soldier released eighteen photographs taken in 2010 that depict American soldiers posing comically with the deceased bodies of mutilated Afghan insurgents, even posing with their dismembered limbs while smiling or providing the camera with a double “thumbs-up” gesture. The proliferation of such images speaks to the necessity of exploring the relationship between the postmortem body and the gaze and the recognition of viewing practices that can engender the abjection of the dead.

THE GAZE

The rhetorical gaze, as outlined by Wendy S. Hesford and Brenda Jo Brueggemann, refers to ways of looking “that occur both within and around (or at) an image: who is looking, how they are looking, why they are looking, where they are looking, and who/what is being looked at.”⁹ This definition of the gaze, then, relies upon rhetorical strategies and the relationship between viewers and objects of the gaze. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright outline two main trajectories of the gaze, one that is grounded in film theory and art history and focuses on relational looking practices based upon the desire of looking and being looked at, which includes feminist theorists such as Laura

Mulvey and John Berger. The other trajectory is grounded in Foucault’s theories of vision as a network of power and discipline in which the gaze is used to exert control within institutional spaces, such as the panopticon.¹⁰ Likewise, Elkins posits three major discourses within the gaze, including *positional discourse* (how the gaze situates the viewer with respect to figures within a film or picture), *psychoanalytical discourse* (the gaze as a field in which the self defines and redefines itself), and *gender discourse* (the gaze emphasizes the differences between male and female ways of seeing).¹¹

However, other theories of the gaze certainly exist within the spaces of these trajectories, such as Sue Hum’s theory of the racialized gaze, in which images of race and ethnicity are made inconsequential through authenticity and universality.¹² Although all of these theories are certainly relevant and groundbreaking within their respective field, there still is not a theory of the gaze that accounts for ways of looking at the deceased body. Since we are all similarly attracted to and repulsed by death¹³, this viewing practice engenders a specific way of seeing based upon spectacle. This gaze must take into account the fact that desire and repulsion sometimes necessitates abjection and exploitation, that such feelings based upon the premise of desire and power also results in the denigration of the corporeal. However, although the ways of seeing the dead body can be situated amongst these previous theories of the gaze, it still must account for the postmortem, an aspect of the gaze that has not yet been fully accounted for.

In order to fill this gap, I introduce the concept of what I term the *postmortem gaze* in order to invite new ways of envisioning the Western gaze, specifically a way of looking that encompasses death and the corpse. I contend that the postmortem gaze provides an essential way of looking at the lifeless body or its parts, one that accounts for how certain bodies (based on race, ethnicity, class, socioeconomics, disability, or criminality) become spectacle and used for the purposes of preservation, display, and entertain-

ment. Through this intersectionality then, I borrow from Kimberle W. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality as grounded in critical race theory. However, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality accounts for the varying experiences of African American women based on race, gender, and socioeconomic class, whereas I use the interstices of subjectivity to account for the multitude of experiences enacted upon the body that deem the body transgressive. In addition, by contextualizing this gaze within the framework of material rhetoric, I provide a new way of viewing the corpse as embodied rhetoric that takes into account materiality, construction, space, and movement rather than semiotics. By moving away from the sign and "reading" the body as text, I provide a fuller explanation of rhetorical embodiment and how spectators use sense and imagery to mediate the postmortem.

Current work in visual rhetoric does emphasize the importance of interactive looking practices. For example, Gunther Kress discusses the disjunction between production and reception and the way that social relations are encoded within images;¹⁴ however, his assessment of the interaction between reception and production of rhetoric is limited to the visual. I argue that we need a new term, the postmortem gaze, to account for the looking practices of postmortem corporeality. The postmortem gaze expands the field of visual rhetoric by demonstrating the myriad ways that rhetorics of the body intersect and contextualize our understanding of how the deceased body has been manipulated and exploited within the interstices of its subjectivity. The postmortem gaze occurs, then, when death becomes spectacle through the transgressive nature of the body, the rhetoric that we use to interpret the body, the space in which the body is displayed, the movement of our bodies within the space, and the senses that we use to analyze the gazing process. Thus, an expansion of theories of the body needs to account for this postmortem gaze and provide a more nuanced definition in which to conceptualize the theory and historicity of postmortem abjection. By contesting tra-

ditional meanings of the gaze, we not only posit new ways of imagining the relationship between the body and ways of seeing, but also identify and challenge the ways that abjection occurs in contemporary society and how these occurrences relate to past narratives of violence on the body and how such violence takes place within a historical loop. By expanding the scope of the theories of the gaze, we can attest to the very real occurrences of exploitation to the postmortem body and challenge its limited conception that ultimately fails to account for the interstices of materiality, subjectivity, space, movement, and imagery and how these aspects work together to form the postmortem gaze. However, before we can analyze how the postmortem gaze functions within a heuristic, it is first necessary to examine how the postmortem gaze is grounded within materiality, specifically within a material rhetoric.

MATERIAL RHETORIC

There have been various theories relating to the materiality of rhetoric. Gillian Rose contextualizes materiality by applying it to the artifact of the photograph, defining materiality as "how [the photograph] look[s] and feel[s], [its] shape and volume, weight and texture."¹⁵ In addition, Rose also defines materiality within the context of geographic location and social and cultural context, such as the scholar Nicholas Thomas, who studies the affects of the photograph within India, and contends that it is what is done with an image that is more important than the image itself.¹⁶ This approach, generally referred to as the *anthropological approach*, studies the place-specific practices of the use of photographs amongst indigenous populations and accesses how the value of the photo changes across time, space, and cultural contexts.¹⁷ Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart further define materiality within the context of the photograph, claiming that photographs are material because they exist within physical forms:

Photographs exist materially in the world, as chemical deposits on paper, as images mounted on a multitude of dif-

ferent sized, shaped, coloured and decorated cards, as subject to additions to their surface or as drawing their meanings from presentational forms such as frames and albums.¹⁸

The importance of this contextualization of photographs brings awareness to the physical nature of photographs so that we concentrate not on the message of the image contained within the photograph, but the materiality of the photo itself and how its construction creates meaning. Although this aspect of materiality is an important starting place for a rhetorical analysis of photography, for example, it does not fully account for embodied practices of looking.

Ultimately, I build upon Carol Blair's concept of material rhetoric in order to account for how rhetoric acts on the whole body, not just the mind. Rhetoric, as Blair defines it, is "any partisan, meaningful, consequential text, with the term "text" understood broadly as a legible or readable event or object."¹⁹ Within this definition, Blair relies on semiotics to define rhetoric, yet she also cautions that semiotics is problematic in reducing all rhetoric to the symbolic. Blair argues that in order to provide a fuller understanding of rhetoric, we need to include materiality, to analyze how rhetoric itself is material.

Blair redefines rhetoric by emphasizing that all rhetoric has a material or "real" component, one that calls attention to how the listener, reader, or viewer interacts with it. For example, Blair contends that to read a (paper-bound) book, a reader must physically open it while usually seated, while to listen to a speech requires the physicality of sitting or standing still, facing the speaker, and remaining silent.²⁰ Specifically, Blair uses the example of memorial sites to emphasize the materiality of rhetoric and develops five questions about rhetorical "texts" that arise from their materiality, including the significance of the text's material existence, the durability of the text, the preservation and reproduction of the text, how the text reacts against or with other texts, and how the text acts on people. Through such questions, Blair estab-

lishes a rhetorical practice that focuses on the body rather than pure visual or auditory means of interpreting texts.

I agree that the materiality of rhetoric is integral to any understanding of rhetoric, that all rhetoric is indeed material. I also comply with Blair's concept of embodiment and that it should be considered within a definition of rhetoric; however, I argue that there is still a component missing to Blair's concept of material rhetoric, a component that I address through the incorporation of the five senses, or sensory modalities.²¹ I argue that it is through the senses that an individual interprets material rhetoric, that it is through the senses in particular that one analyzes the context of the corpse on display. Our current preoccupation with occularcentrism removes important elements of examining the world around us so that ultimately we are left with a limited intellectual understanding based upon this emphasis in visuality.²² I thus provide a heuristic of perception for analyzing the display of the corpse, a heuristic that helps to develop what I term the postmortem gaze, a particular way of seeing the corpse based upon an expanded form of material rhetoric that moves beyond the privileging of the visual. The *postmortem* gaze, ultimately, is a way of viewing the corpse that takes into account sensory modalities that often results in spectacle or abjection based upon various intersections at the site of education and entertainment.

METHODOLOGY: THE POSTMORTEM GAZE

I use visual rhetoric as a form of inquiry and methodology in order to provide a critical intervention into previous theories of the gaze. Building upon Blair's concept of material rhetoric, I provide a fuller understanding of the concept of the postmortem gaze, a Western gaze which is an embodied way of looking that often results in the abjection of the corpse within the spectator's view, based upon a heuristic of perception, through which the postmortem gaze materializes. Thus,

the following concepts are necessary to consider when viewing the corpse on display :

1. The materiality of the rhetoric; in this case, the materiality of the corpse (a photograph, a daguerreotype or tintype, a website, a film, a home video, or “in the flesh”). Materiality can also be used to examine the material *context* of rhetoric. For example, if we are attending a funeral and a minister is reciting the Lord’s Prayer next to the cadaver, the material nature of the speech must also be taken into consideration.
2. The subjectivity of the corpse (according to gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, Nationality, or transgression such as criminality or disability)
3. The physical space where the corpse is exhibited, such as a museum, a laboratory, a funeral home, or a circus sideshow. (Within the concept of space, I also use “site” as an umbrella term to include the discipline or genre that the corpse is being displayed, such as the site of science, for example.)
4. Movement of our body and limbs in space, which is necessary for the postmortem gaze because our limitations through movement control what and how we see.
5. Sensory modalities, or the senses. By including the senses within an examination of material rhetoric and the postmortem gaze, we can make sense of how the gaze functions through the visual, olfactory, auditory, gustatory, and tactile. It is also important to consider how these modes interact simultaneously through multimodality or intersensoriality²³ through various environments of display and accompanying discursive constructs. An interaction of these modes, particularly visual modes, can also result in intertextuality, in which meanings intersect based upon the receiver’s ability to recognize visual cues within the environment.

Through an examination of this heuristic, then, we gain a fuller concept of how the postmortem gaze functions, specifically in concert with the corpse on display. For example, the space of the corpse provides the spectator clues as to the purpose of the corpse and thus how to “read” the corpse (as a tool for medical students to learn anatomy, as an American sentimental ritual for the recent death of a loved one, as spectacle for passers-by) and thus controls how spectators interact with the corpse (with reverence, with hatred or indifference, or as a source of entertainment).

Material rhetoric thus provides a contextualization for the postmortem gaze, a way of looking at the deceased body through materiality, subjectivity, space, movement, and sensory modalities that can ultimately results in what I term postmortem abjection. Postmortem abjection is the incorporation of the heuristic of perception that engenders postmortem preservation or display of the body or its parts for the purposes of profit within the site of science, medicine, or entertainment. I build upon the term “abjection” here from Julia Kristeva, who distinguishes it from amorality and likens it to “a terror that disassembles”²⁴ so that when one encounters the abject, we are “repulsed but compelled to integrate [ourselves] with what [we] see as abject in order to disturb and test the boundaries and limits of [our] subjectivity for [ourselves] and within the Symbolic.”²⁵ In other words, through the postmortem gaze, a gaze upon the corpse which is materialized through an embodied perception that results in abjection, the deceased body becomes an object of both terror and fascination which can ultimately results in spectacle and the exploitation of the postmortem body.

DATA

In this essay, I specifically focus on photography as a medium and as a material artifact in which to portray death because of its ubiquity in displaying death within the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I will first examine the photographic genre of medical school portraiture and

then lynching photography, situating both genres within the heuristic of perception and the postmortem gaze.

Postmortem photography in general was popular within the genre of memorial photography in the United States and Europe from 1840 to the 1920s and existed within the realm of domesticity and sentimentalism. Nineteenth century mourning photography, the practice of commissioning a professional photographer to capture the image of a deceased family member, was popularized in the early 1840s by the popular slogan of commercial daguerreotypists, “Secure the shadow ere the substance fade,” which served as a reminder of the importance of capturing the image of a loved one before her death.²⁶ Although such imagery seems gruesome and morbid to the twenty-first century eye, these examples of memento mori were abundant in the nineteenth century and could be found hanging on the walls of homes, in the family photo album, and were even mailed to family and friends. Due to the influences of the Romantic Movement in the 1800s, which viewed death as an intimate component of nature and viewed death as an essential struggle that elevated human emotions, Romanticism was linked to sentimentality and thus in an effort to thwart the fear of death, public mourning became an accepted practice. In addition, the 1844 publication of *Record of the Death-Bed of C.M.W.*, the first book to include a postmortem photograph, began an upper-class trend of postmortem memorialization that extended into the 1880s.²⁷

In addition to the Romantic Movement, the general theoretical consensus is that postmortem photography was popular in the nineteenth century due to the direct link between photography and death. Specifically, the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 led to the belief that if a family member was not photographed before her death, then that person never existed. However, Audrey Linkman contests such claims by arguing that families who already had photographs taken of a child, for example, before her death, still com-

missioned postmortem photographs of the child.²⁸ Linkman further contends that postmortem photography, then, served as a way for long-distance relatives to be “present” at the death and/or funeral of a loved one. It also served as symbolism of the funeral itself, particularly in Britain before World War Two, when many deceased infants of parents of lower socioeconomic classes were not afforded funerals or grave sites. Thus, the postmortem photograph as a site of mourning might have served the purpose of the very grave itself.²⁹

The images of children were most often captured within the postmortem photograph due to the high percentage of infant mortality, which ranged from thirty to fifty percent. Due to epidemics such as cholera and yellow fever, a family could lose all of its children within a few days and thus some children were not named until they survived their first year of life.³⁰ Jay Ruby develops three specific conventions of nineteenth century postmortem photography, from 1840 until 1880, that address some of the difficulties that families faced while mourning for their children. The first two conventions, “the last sleep” and “alive, yet dead,” focus on the denial of death, while the third convention, “dead, yet alive” focuses on the acceptance of death.³¹ All three of these conventions reveal the love and reverence that families held for their departed loved ones, a reverence that was captured through the photographic process.

Photography’s role in the depiction of death is perhaps not that surprising and “is not only an appropriate medium with which to depict the spaces of death- in its relationship to time and place, to past and present, to life, death, and memory- it is, perhaps an essential medium.”³² Indeed, the medium of photography extends to the medical field within the nineteenth century and its depiction of the interstices of race and death.

In contrast to memorial photography, the photographic conventions of medical school portraiture were prefaced upon education, entertainment, and the ideology of white supremacy. Medical school portraiture, that is, the posing of medi-

cal students in mid-dissection with a cadaver, was popular in the United States from the 1880s to 1950. A majority of medical school portraiture that reveals students dissecting corpses depicts mostly male and mostly white medical students surrounding African American cadavers, in the genre of class portraits, cartes de viste, postcards, and “humorous” depictions that both defy earlier conventions of postmortem photography. In the latter half of the nineteenth century it was common practice for medical school students in the United States to take group portraits of themselves dissecting the bodies of sometimes illegally procured cadavers. These cadavers were usually stolen from black cemeteries since white communities did not approve of the plundering of white cemeteries for the purposes of dissection for many core reasons: “One reason for outrage related to a lingering sense of something sacred about the remains, a sense that the identity of the deceased could still be associated with the body. Further, it robbed the community of its control of the dead.”³³

Although white communities objected to the pilfering of white cemeteries, the majority of white communities did not object to the very same pillaging of African American cemeteries for use in medical dissection. Accordingly, the use of material productions such as photography for the ideological or social construction of race is supported by hegemony, so that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.”³⁴ Thus, the use of medical school photography is a poignant example of how dominant groups who control the dissemination of knowledge (white medical students) control the material production (photography) and its ideological construction of race.

For the purpose of analyzing late nineteenth century medical school photography, I use John Harley Warner and James M. Edmonson’s text, *Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine* as my source for photographic evidence of such practices as the book is

the first of its kind to document the fraternal nature of such disturbing photographic customs. In order to understand the enduring practice of such photography into the 1930s, I frame such looking practices within Foucault’s theory of the medical gaze, a biomedical perception of the body that emerged in the eighteenth century, a separation of the body and soul, a dehumanizing, pathology-seeking gaze that sought to “travel along a path that had not so far been opened to it: vertically from the symptomatic surface to the tissual surface; in depth, plunging from the manifest to the hidden...”³⁵ In this particular gaze, “the eye that governs”³⁶ was powerful because it was supported by the very institution of medicine, which found the medium of photography a welcome home in the promulgation of its ideology. However, the medical gaze alone does not account for a full analysis of looking practices upon the postmortem gaze and it is precisely through the postmortem gaze that we gain a better understanding of ways of looking upon the corpse.

The postmortem gaze as a way of looking is apparent in the photographs that Warner and Edmonson have collected. A majority of the photographs are taken within the genre of the class photo, with the students surrounding the cadaver of an African American body, always caught in mid-dissection. The students usually always wear a uniform consisting of an operating gown or apron, sometimes bowler hats, and usually stare straight at the camera, adhering to the conventions of the representation and appearance of the medical student. Through the postmortem gaze we analyze the space and space in which the corpses are displayed. The space of the laboratory or dissection room informs the viewer that the corpses are situated within the site of science. Through the site of science viewers see the corpses on display as necessary elements of the education process of burgeoning medical professionals. The photographs, however gruesome, are to be regarded with a certain amount of solemnity.

For these group portraiture, the center of the image is always the cadaver, which is usually

lying on a wooden dissection table. The foci of the dissecting table is a direct reference to the Renaissance anatomy theatres of Italy, whose central staging feature was always the table onto which the cadaver was placed. Indeed, it is the cadaver and the table upon which it is laid upon that is the center of each class photograph because in most of these photographs, the sides of the wooden tables are embellished with text written in white chalk. Some of the text is repeated on different tables, with different students, across different years, such as the iconic, “Know thy self,” a reference to the Renaissance injunction that correlates anatomical knowledge to knowledge of the soul and the divinity of the body, which is proof of strong or dominant convictions. In addition, popular epigraphs such as “Man’s usefulness endeth not in death” refers to anatomy legislation while “He lived for others, He was killed for us” comments on the linkage between the cadaver and the crucified Christ. Warner and Edmonson contend that such inscriptions “offer some of the most vivid verbal commentary that we have about the meanings that students attached to these commemorative photographs.”³⁷ Indeed, at first glance, such writing reflects a noble purpose behind both the dissection of the cadavers themselves and the photographic practice of medical school portraiture.

Some of the inscriptions on the sides of these tables, however, reflect the very racism that allowed for the procurement of the African American cadavers in front of them. Racial epithets such as “All coons smell alike to us” and “Sliced Nigger” that adorned the sides of the dissecting tables reveals how the black body as the central figure in these photographs is symbolic with meaning that labels it subaltern and abject. The context of these examples of written rhetoric further influences how the viewer will interpret the visual representation of the cadaver within the photograph. For example, racist slurs scrawled along the side of the dissecting table conflict with the supposed dignified nature of the medical profession, which might cause viewers to second guess the relationship between the African American cadaver and the white

medical students. The deceased black body in the United States within the nineteenth century, then, was still enslaved and subjected to physical defilement as well as the defilement of the very soul, as white Protestant communities believed at the time period. It was thus an easy task for such students to abuse the black body as it existed in direct opposition to the subject position not only of the white male student of anatomy, but the collective white consciousness of the United States. According to Robyn Wiegman, Cartesian Perspectivalism, a scopic regime of detached, dispassionate looking, helped to define the category of “blackness” through its emphasis on an ordered classification system that eventually led to racial science,³⁸ particularly in how the black body existed in direct opposition to white Protestant communities and the collective white consciousness of the United States, so that “someone else bears the burden of the national id; someone else (always already) dies first. This parallel between death and (white) subjectivity might provide some rationale for the use of black bodies...it is easier to lay open that which does not have the mark of sameness.”³⁹

This ideology is perhaps why the students in these photos pose callously, provide sly grins, or evoke humorous play with the cadavers in front of them. Thus, although the existence of medical school portraiture is an extension of the Victorian ideal of remembrance and sentimentality, I argue that the purpose of medical school postmortem portraiture was to promote a sense of fraternity and comradeship, through photographic conventions, amongst the collective identity of white males working within the larger institution of medicine. These students were able to exploit the black bodies in front of them because they were supported by the ideology of the medical institution, a collective identity of white males who profited from the racist support of the surrounding white communities and the ideology of the postmortem gaze, which further dehumanized the defiled black bodies on display in front of them.

Through the postmortem gaze, white communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth cen-

ture interpreted the African American body in these medical school photographs through the lens of science and education. Perhaps they viewed the corpses as a necessity for the advancement of medicine. However, since many of these photographs also included scenes of frivolity, such as cadavers posed playing a game of poker, the postmortem gaze also affords an interpretation of spectacle, of African American corpses as mere entertainment for bored medical students. It is also no coincidence that such images bear a striking resemblance to lynching photos in which white mobs smiled against the macabre display of mutilated black bodies.

It is important to mention that medical school portraiture also took the form of postcards. Medical students often sent home postcards of themselves or of their graduating class dissecting corpses and some of these postcards were printed as holiday greeting cards. The materiality of the postcard here is similar to lynching photography and its circulation of postcards as a souvenir of white supremacy. In fact, it was postcards of lynchings that were circulated most widely in the South⁴⁰ and reached a wide audience that included those who were unable to attend the lynching event. The same professional photographers that produced images on site or peddled them from door to door were also the same photographers that immortalized medical students dissecting African American cadavers. There is no doubt that the photographer played an important role in the ideological function of the lynching photograph, in “the framing of white subjectivity against a black corpse—whiteness founded in the spectacle of the dead black other.”⁴¹

The materiality of the photograph and the postcard is one that allows for continuous remembering of the event due to the nature of its presentational forms, which include myriad forms of framing in family photo albums or within a frame on the wall. The proliferation of lynching photography, whether sanctioned by the United States Postal Service, found in white family photo albums, or passed along underground, reveals

that the practice of photographing lynchings was common and that the proliferation of such photography resulted in the domestication of violence,⁴² a further attempt at normalizing violence against the black body. Thus, through the heuristic of perception and the emergence of the postmortem gaze, lynching postcards were viewed by white communities in the south as an integral facet of domesticity. They were seen as souvenirs to be displayed within the home when body parts from the corpse could not be procured. As a souvenir, then, the African American body within these postcards was viewed through the postmortem gaze as something to be collected, fetishized, and repeatedly celebrated within the home and white communities. As part of a collection, the lynching photograph and postcard were treated as a sacred object, a recollection of a fond event, and as a means to bring white communities closer together.

The photograph and the postcard, as a souvenir and a material object in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, were able to be framed and preserved safely behind glass and within the family photo album, providing a particular practice of looking in which events could readily be remembered within the space of the home. The context through which the photograph is viewed is also important because the viewer’s perspective of the events within the photograph are situated differently depending upon what other photographs are displayed next to the lynching photograph, for example. The space in which the photograph is viewed is also important based upon the people that are present when viewing the photo and their comments of the event, which influences how the content of the photograph is interpreted. The subjectivity of the corpse within these photos is also of importance, engendering the postmortem gaze based upon the audience who is viewing the image.

While viewing postmortem photography, sensory modalities are relevant, although their capacity for influence is not as overt as the modalities that are available through a museum exhibition, for example, where the senses are often care-

fully crafted in order to create a specific visitor experience. Within photography, our vital sense is that of the visual, but senses such as touch also play a key role in how we interpret imagery. If the photograph is not framed behind glass or behind the plastic of a photo album, we must hold it within our hands in order to process the image. We might run our fingers over the image, touching the faces of the individuals within the photo in a gesture of sentimentalism. By simply holding the paper within our grasp, we literally get a feel for the photo's age based upon the kind of paper it was printed on and might run our fingers along its edges or imagine who else might have once touched the very photo that we now hold within our hands. Through the tactile sense, visual rhetoric becomes embodied as we are more aware of how our own body moves and functions within space, reacting both with the images within on the page and the very paper itself.

It must be noted that although the postmortem gaze can ultimately result in abjection and exploitation of the corpse on display through spectacle, the communities to which the deceased belonged were not mere victims because of the gaze. In fact, the gaze can be a powerful tool for resistance. For example, Ida B. Wells famously reframed lynching photography for use in anti-lynching campaigns in order to reveal the cruelty of lynching practices within the South. Such gazes of dissent were apparent throughout African American communities. bell hooks defines such defiant looking practices as oppositional gazing, a way of seeing as a means of political resistance, a way of looking back and contesting controlling images.⁴³ This oppositional gaze was also used by the memorial photographer James Van Der Zee. Van Der Zee, an African American photographer in 1920s Harlem, also helped to reframe the violent imagery of lynching photography by reviving Victorian-era memorial photography within Harlem. Van Der Zee's images portrayed the Harlem community as an upper-class, socially mobile group of individuals who cared and respected for their dead, and by extension, the Harlem commu-

nity as a whole. Van Der Zee's photographs, published in the 1978 *Harlem Book of the Dead*, included romantic Victorian portrayals of memorial photography at a time period when such photography was losing favor with Americans. His images of the dead included a large amount of flowers and often included religious iconography that was superimposed onto the photographs. He also hand painted cheeks, lips, or articles of clothing in order to accentuate a woman's features.⁴⁴ Through such care and personal attention to detail within these photographs, the Harlem community was able to look back and contest the images of violence to the black body that were represented within lynching photography through the reclamation of their dead.

In conclusion, through an analysis of the heuristic of perception, we can move beyond the privileging of the visual in order to develop the postmortem gaze, a gaze that ultimately determines how the corpse is seen and should be treated. The postmortem gaze functions according to the scopic regime of a particular historical period and culture and can result in abjection; however, the postmortem gaze can work in conjunction with the oppositional gaze in order to contest a particular historicity of violence against the corpse. The postmortem gaze, as a looking practice, provides an embodied rhetorical tool for analyzing the visual through an emphasis in sensory modalities, movement, space, subjectivity, and materiality, all of which aid in the construction of the visual. Ultimately, through the postmortem gaze we can analyze how material rhetoric functions to influence how we think about a culture's values and belief systems through the display of their dead. After all, how we treat the dead is often a direct correlation to how we treat the living.

Notes

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Chelsey Patterson is currently a doctoral student within the English department at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Her research examines rhetorical looking practices and the corpse on display, particularly within the space of the museum. Her essay, "The Double-Faced Woman and the Tattooed Mestiza: The Rhetoric of the Sideshow as Site of Resistance in the Writing of Gloria Anzaldúa" was published in 2010 by Aunt Lute Books in *El Mundo Zurdo 2: Selected Works From the 2010 Meeting of the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa*. Her scholarly interests include visual rhetoric, the circus sideshow, death and dying studies, and postmortem photography. She currently teaches *Literary Criticism and Analysis* at The University of Texas at San Antonio.
