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# Silent landscapes, textured memory: Keith Morris Washington's lynching paintings

## ABSTRACT

*Keith Morris Washington's landscape paintings have received surprisingly little scholarly attention, and thus the present article aims to address that lack. Primarily, this article argues that in representing landscapes associated with lynchings, Washington's paintings are a form of cultural memory that helps us apprehend the traumas of the southern past. Rather than presenting us with dead bodies of lynching victims, Washington paints the 'texture' of violence and memory in seemingly innocuous rural landscapes. Through his brushwork, framing and visual motifs, Washington reveals what I am calling the 'after-burn' of lynching: the way in which it circulates as a kind of haunting and memory that disturbs our gaze. While lynching scholarship has expanded in recent years, there is often a focus – as with other contemporary visual theories – on looking at lynching photographs; we are encouraged by a number of critics to apprehend death directly. This article suggests that Washington's artwork provides us with another visual mode of apprehending lynching. In registering the texture of violence and memory, and through intimating the presence of corporeality, Washington enables a form of looking that does not re-victimize the victimized. Rather, his visual ethics allows us to both see and not see the deaths of (primarily) African Americans across the nation and region.*

## KEYWORDS

lynching  
landscape painting  
Keith Morris  
Washington  
visual studies  
cultural memory  
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culture

1. The linking of trees with black bodies could be said to not only naturalize the acts of killing themselves, and the ubiquity with which they occur, but also uphold the dehumanization of blackness. We must be aware of the ways that lynching practice and its imbrication of dead black bodies with the natural world help to enforce and 'naturalize' dominant racist fantasies of an uncivilized and base blackness.
2. I should also note that, in the series, Washington paints lynching sites of attacks not only committed against African Americans, but against other ethnicities and cultural groups too. The focus of these works, however, seems to be on black Americans (even within the larger context).
3. In addition to the texts quoted here, see: Amy Louise Wood (2009), Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith (2007), Philip Dray (2003), Robert W. Thurston (2011) and Crystal N. Feimster (2011).

In Sandy Alexandre's (2008: 98) incisive essay on lynching photographs, 'Out – on a limb', she claims that the 'very punitive function of lynching trees inheres in their location outdoors. Their location is conducive to public spectacle'. The natural world of trees and fields becomes the backdrop to the horrific spectacles of lynching – dead, or dying, bodies, often suspended from tree limbs, mutilated, with a large group of onlookers. Alexandre (2008: 87), further commenting on the natural setting, suggests that 'paradise' is interrupted 'at the very point of the black body's relationship to those ostensibly innocent and beautiful sycamore trees. Lynching troubles our a priori predilection for the beauty of trees'. This article will read recent landscape paintings for the (beautiful) landscape at this disjuncture of racial violence. Finally, Alexandre (2008: 90) interestingly notes that 'local Southern trees (whether oak, cedar, poplar [...]) quickly became known, not for their particular dendritic type, but for the lynching or lynchings which frequently took place on them'. Horrifyingly, the natural southern world becomes codified and knowable through the racist acts that are staged on it.<sup>1</sup> Daniel Martin (2007: 93) calls this the place where 'the traumatic and the pastoral collide'. It is here, at the articulation of a southern landscape suffused (in various ways) with violent racist acts and their memories, that this article will read a selection of landscape paintings – from the series 'Within Our Gates: Site and Memory in the American Landscape' – by African American artist Keith Morris Washington.

The history of lynching (predominantly, though not exclusively, of African American men) has been widely documented in film, art and culture, particularly in recent years; this is concomitant with the rise of lynching scholarship in the humanities. This article will briefly survey these histories to ground Washington's work, which engages with lynching violence and the natural landscapes in which such attacks took place.<sup>2</sup> The article will enquire into the role of Washington's paintings as mediations of the past: works of cultural memory that enlarge and make complex our existing archive of lynching images and documents. The materiality of paint(ing) will be probed for its role in signifying memory and violence and I ask how these quiet canvases offer an ethics of looking which is different from that of lynching photographs. In all, this article will open up Washington's work – which has had surprisingly little commentary, and rarely sits alongside the work of more famous artists such as Kara Walker for instance – to viewers from the South and without, and to apprehend his visual strategies of representing the horrors of lynching in America through the early twentieth century.

## THE PLACE OF LYNCHING SCHOLARSHIP

Lynching scholarship has grown in recent years, from literary, visual, historical and cultural theorists particularly.<sup>3</sup> Uniting much of this is an interest in both the societal underpinnings of lynching (how and why they rose to prominence, particularly in the years 1890–1920) and in their visual structures (the killings and public display of bodies, the community of onlookers, the photographing of lynchings, and the circulation of these images), both of which, in turn, confront us with lynching memory. In a special issue of *The Journal of American History*, Michael J. Pfeifer outlines the places that historical lynching scholarship has been, and where it is going. Many history scholars, he writes, have focused on the 'thick texture of social relationships and racial oppression that underlay many lynchings' (Pfeifer 2014: 834), which this article will later rethink in relation to the texture or substance of paint in Washington's work. In the future,

Pfeifer says (2014: 841), historians ‘might best focus their efforts by keeping the experiences and responses of victims of racially motivated mob violence [...] at the fore of their inquiry’, by reading such mob violence in ‘comparative, transnational, and global perspectives’, and ‘address[ing] the lingering effects of mob violence in the many American communities where it occurred’. On this last point, Pfeifer (2014: 841) suggests that ‘[i]n the majority of American communities where lynchings occurred, little or no effort has been made to confront this history’ and that it therefore ‘lurks unexamined within communal memory, perpetuating further silences and inequities’. While the notion of ‘communal’ or ‘collective’ memory should give us pause – theorists such as Ann Rigney have suggested how ‘cultural’ memory is a more persuasive and acute piece of terminology (2004) – it is important to take from Pfeifer’s essay the nature in which lynching lies silently in the communities and locations in which the killings took place, and that this history’s silence only but compounds the original bodily traumas. This article argues that Washington’s paintings confront the silence of the landscapes in which lynchings occurred, in addition to the simultaneous haunting presence of this violence.

In being particularly optical (as well as corporeal) forms of violence, lynching has a body of scholarship dedicated to the ethical and political meanings of looking. As bodies were mutilated and hung from trees in front of a crowd, they were also photographed. These photographs in turn became postcards, which were distributed among the community and country. Thus, in addition to the primary audience at the scene, the photographs and their subsequent viewings further aestheticized lynching victims. This visual context has been compounded by an exhibition of lynching photographs in 2000 called *Witness* (later titled *Without Sanctuary*), accompanied by a book. This exhibit initiated much of the recent lynching scholarship, and raised numerous questions about the processes, ethics and affects involved in apprehending these images. At the Ruth Horowitz Gallery in New York City, 60 photographs and postcards of lynchings, collected by James Allen, were displayed. Accumulated together, these images presented some of the most horrific acts of violence committed in the United States that many people had not seen or taken account of. The exhibit was astonishing in unearthing and visualizing racism in a gallery context. Viewers were forced to confront the clear photographic evidence of violence, which we now see echoed in the shocking digital videos of the killings of young black people by police. Yet, as Dora Apel (2004: 7) succinctly writes, ‘[w]hen we look at lynching photographs today, we try not to see them’. Apel touches upon the difficulty in locating ourselves as viewers of these images in a contemporary setting. Whether we see the images in a gallery, or in the subsequent book *Without Sanctuary* (2000) edited by James Allen et al, a viewer of lynching photographs (as with many kinds of documented violence) must grapple with numerous questions: how do we avoid a spectatorial position that re-victimizes the victims? How do we stop the images from becoming flat aesthetic objects? What forms of awareness do we need to sustain our gaze upon the images? What responsibilities, investments, affects and politics are pressed upon us as viewers? These issues arise continuously with lynching photographs, but Washington’s paintings may help viewers through this demanding aesthetic terrain.

Jonathan Markovitz (2004: xxvi) tells us that ‘[l]ynchings were intended to create collective memories of terror and white supremacy’. Their initial potency, then, relates to the memorative affects of the killings. The memory of lynching, however, also lingers into the present moment for different

4. Markovitz's book carefully suggests some of the ways in which lynching lives on in the cultural imagination, and the ways in which it has been politically and historically used.

reasons.<sup>4</sup> Amy Louise Wood and Susan V. Donaldson (2008: 7) suggest that 'in order for any clear social memory on lynching to exist, the terrible and messy trauma of it all must be made somehow coherent and legible'. It can be argued, conversely, that trauma does not have to (and perhaps cannot) be coherent and legible to circulate in culture; the inherent difficulty in representing trauma (its resistance to incorporation and intellectualization) characterizes it. Moreover, 'social' memory – like 'communal' or 'collective' – is a less persuasive term than 'cultural' memory, which by its nature is forever in flux and process. What a 'clear' memory might be is thus difficult to imagine when, as Astrid Erll (2011: 11) suggests, '[m]emories do not hold still – on the contrary, they seem to be constituted first of all through movement'. Thus, it is worth rethinking Wood and Donaldson's point, without losing sight of the ethical necessity they are signalling: the importance of remembering lynching, and the political efficacy of this memory. The authors also helpfully tie lynching scholarship to that which focuses on the Holocaust. There is a 'dynamic between remembering and forgetting, of giving voice to and disavowing past wounds that seem to defy both comprehension and articulation' and an 'ethics of responding to and articulating scenes of devastation and pain without succumbing to the lures of sensationalism and objectification' (Wood and Donaldson 2008: 7), which these two historical phenomena share. The commonalities of academic focus speak to this article's interest in the processes of memory that Washington's paintings enable and mediate. There are other specific memorial contexts of lynching, however, that frame my discussion.

In 'Memorialization and its discontents' Dora Apel examines America's first lynching memorial in Duluth, Minnesota. Exploring its meanings and significances, Apel suggests (2008: 225) that the memorial acts, among other things, as an 'emplacement of black memory'. But that emplacement is complex, not least because of the solidifying forms and intentions of monuments and memorials. Memory might just be – as James Young (1993) and Kirk Savage (1999) propose – halted and stymied by the physicality and permanence of monuments. The Minnesota memorial might be said to bear similar features. Further, Apel (2008: 231) argues that '[f]or many, the figurative forms of realism produce an aura of sacralization rather than a more open-ended address to the complex effects of a traumatic history, simplifying what must remain multifaceted, irredeemable and at least partly unimaginable'. Washington's paintings, in relation to this notion, might be considered a memorial form not indebted to the figurations of realism (even as his work points towards very real sites and locales), but to the 'open-ended' nature of trauma. Whether such events are 'unimaginable' (even in part) is beyond the remit of this article, but it is worth considering the important memorial work Washington's paintings can do.

## HISTORY'S AFTER-BURN

Cultural memory, Ann Rigney (2004: 367) tells us, is 'arguably always vicarious in the sense that it involves memories of other people's lives that have been mediated by texts and images'. This mediation should be at the fore of our investigation into the ways in which lynching lives on in the present. While the above scholars are aware of the necessity of remembering lynching, more must be done to theorize the ways in which it circulates in culture as memory. If, to quote Rigney further (2004: 368), 'memories are dependent

on their being recalled in various media by later generations who find them meaningful [...], who may even find it their duty to keep them alive', then it needs to be asked for what purposes Keith Morris Washington keeps alive lynching's potent memories. Moreover, because Washington's work is appreciated in the contemporary art world, but significantly under-theorized in academia, this article attends to its import. A brief example to outline my thinking: *Cordie Cheek: Junction of Route 50 & 50A; Near Columbia, Tennessee* (1999) (Figure 1). This painting represents the site of the lynching of Cordie Cheek in Tennessee. There is much information about this lynching available to scholars and general readers, in books and online, so why does Washington choose to paint *this* place (especially when some of his other paintings are of deaths that are less well known)? On a quiet road junction, a burst of colour saturates a cluster of trees. In a rectangular frame within the main canvas, Washington highlights this area as one of visual, and historical, significance. The remainder of the painting (unlike most of his other works) is dull and greying: colour is leached out of the landscape. This backdrop is quiet and hazy – sketched in with soft brush-strokes. The vibrant central 'panel' is far more energized: the trees are bright, lucid and rippling with fluid strokes. It is in this frame, and with remarkable brightness, that Washington gestures to the spot Cheek was killed. The lynching that took place near Columbia is demarcated, and registered, by the vibrancy of paint and the way it has been layered onto the canvas. Washington mediates the lynching of Cheek not through showing us a body, the rope, the perpetrators, or any blood, but in presenting us with a landscape that is visually and texturally charged. Making the memory of Cheek meaningful involves, here, signalling a space within the frame that deserves attention, a sustained gaze. Again, though, this gaze is not at a lynched body, but rather what this article terms the *after-burn*, or trace, of that body's violent end. Keeping this memory alive involves, for Washington, suffusing the landscape – through paint – with significance and the reverberations of the past. Through paint, Washington conveys – to borrow from James Young's title – the 'texture' of memory.

As both Sandy Alexandre and Rob Nixon (two of the only critics who reflect on Washington's work) point out, each of these paintings has a title that informs us of a person's name, and a location; they are the indicators of the victim and lynching site, often in the South. However, what Washington does not provide are dates for these deaths. Both Nixon and Alexandre



Figure 1: Keith Morris Washington, *Cordie Cheek: Junction of Route 50 & 50A; Near Columbia, Tennessee*, 1999. Oil (and acrylic) on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

attest an a-historicity to the datelessness of Washington's paintings. Nixon (2011: 249–50) suggests that learning of the lynching sites and victims without dates has an effect 'of a violence that feels open ended, ongoing in its deep yet incomplete specificity'. Alexandre (2012: 25–26) similarly states that Washington utilizes this method 'in order to avoid the pitfall of relegating the violence strictly to a bygone era – one ostensibly far removed from or simply irrelevant to present-day modes and settings of terror'. In both arguments, Washington's strategy is to de-historicize lynching; it is to suggest both the lingering effects of this violence and its connection to the present moment, not its distance from it. There should be both reservations and agreements with this line of thought, however. On the one hand, memory studies suggests that the recollection of the past in the present tells us much about the moment of remembrance; thus, the lynchings have profound implications in the present, and should not be historically alienated. On the other hand, to present lynching as 'open-ended' or 'ongoing' or 'incomplete' is to flatten out the phenomenon's particularity into an a-historical mode of subjugation. While, of course, it is important to see lynching in relation to present 'modes and settings of terror' (as Apel does by comparing lynching photographs to those from Abu Ghraib, for instance [2005]), it is dangerous to suggest that it is not far removed from the contemporary moment, or that it is still occurring in this precise way. Washington intervenes in this argument interestingly: he is refusing these deaths a specific date, to signal the way they live on in the present as cultural memory. Yet he is also affirming their particularity, specifying the place of the attack and the name of the victim. Through this subtle move, Washington both fleshes out the victims' circumstances and yet disallows them from being curtailed by history.

As Wood and Donaldson proposed, seeing lynching photographs in relation to scholarship on Holocaust representations is useful to us. In *Spectral Evidence* (2005), Ulrich Baer reads photographs of landscapes connected to the Holocaust, which helps to frame my reading. In two examples, Baer suggests that the classical form of these landscape photographs is important in understanding what they do not show. The photographs rely, he says (Baer 2005: 66), 'on the same artistic conventions of landscape art to find a place for absent memory'. The images Baer discusses (2005: 66) 'refer to the Holocaust only through their titles and the accompanying texts that announce: "These are Holocaust sites"'. Therefore, it is 'as if their significance and merit derived not from our knowledge of context but from intrinsic formal criteria alone' (Baer 2005: 66). Washington's paintings similarly use some of the formal techniques of traditional landscapes to gesture towards an emplacement of memory. We too know the sites' significance in relation to lynching through their titles. Thus, as Alexandre (2012: 25) writes, Washington 'specifically chooses to paint lynching sites void of the typical clues or markers that would identify them as venues of erstwhile lynching violence. Instead, the caption [...] does the work of contextualizing, explaining, and identifying the scene'. It is perhaps the ordinariness of natural sites that is important to Washington's framing and mediating of lynching violence. The title can perhaps shape our understanding of the painting, but this information is not complete or exhaustive: it does not explain or make sense of the ugly horrors that took place at this location. Rather, the titles quietly underline and emplace the already quiet scenes of pastoral beauty.

As Baer (2005: 67) further argues of the Holocaust photographs, they 'silently question the reliance on historical context as an explanatory



framework. They situate us specifically in relation to something that remains off the map of historicist readings'. Similarly, while scholarship has helped to excavate oft-silenced histories and memories of lynching in the United States, the locations of lynchings are rarely marked or memorialized; as Alfred Frankowski (2015: xxi) posits, 'black memorial culture is marked by distinct absences'. Historical context cannot entirely help us make sense of the attacks that took place there; the photographs of lynchings we do have help to fill in this information, but in the absence of images for many deaths Washington's paintings situate us in relation to attacks that remain off the cultural map.

## LANDSCAPES AND MEMORY

This section of the article will offer close readings of a selection of Washington's work to unpack the memorial and artistic potentialities of these paintings. To follow Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (2004: 14), this is 'an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface'. In *James Sanders: Road Side Field; Bolton, Mississippi* (2001) (Figure 2), a tree juts into the left of the frame, gesturing to the wider natural world beyond the limits of the canvas. It also seems to hang ominously in view, even though it is only on the edge of the painting. A dirt road leads from the foreground up to the painting's centre; the road trails out of view, behind a small building, and around a corner, drawing in our gaze. The building and white truck, which are small details in the image, denote a quiet human presence in an otherwise dominantly pastoral scene. The trees are shiveringly impressionistic here; they move and breathe with fluid paint strokes, which evoke both the shimmering summer heat of the South and the movement of violence that lingers in this location. Washington, Alexandre (2012: 25) writes, 'wants the viewer to be drawn into the landscape painting [...] in order to emphasize the ways in which what he calls the "domestic terrorism" of lynching violence can deceive by appearing deceptively bucolic'. The viewer is visually enticed by this image and its arrangement – by its natural beauty, its painterly ease, by the small details of form and object – to underscore how fraught lynching settings are. If, as Brett Ashley Kaplan (2007: 1) argues, 'the unwanted beauty offered by some Holocaust representations transforms Holocaust memory in important, enlivening, and indeed beneficial ways', can we say the same of lynching representation? While Kaplan (2007: 1) suggests 'it may be counter-intuitive to understand some Holocaust representation as beautiful [...] thinking about the role of aesthetic pleasure in



Figure 2: Keith Morris Washington, James Sanders: Road Side Field; Bolton, Mississippi, 2001. Oil (and acrylic) on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

complex and multivalent texts opens this traumatic historical event to deeper understanding'. Indeed, it might be because Washington's paintings are so visually engaging and beautiful – drawing in, and disturbing, our vision – that 'these works entice our reflection, our attention, and our questioning' (Kaplan 2007: 1).

If the lynching of Sanders took place in a 'road side field', as the title indicates, the viewer can easily imagine it being from either of the prominent trees in this painting. On the left perhaps is a willow, or a tree draped in Spanish moss. On the right, the tree is more impressionistic and darker, reaching a height that transcends the painting's bounds. The latter tree seems more likely to be the attack's site. The tree's frantic branches and limbs – black, green, brown – are redolent and evocative of something troubling having taken place here. In addition, like the other paintings in the series, there is a play here with visual 'frames'. One landscape (horizontal) frame intersects two frames behind it, separated by a clear vertical line that runs almost two-thirds of the way across the image. This intersection of frames suggests a certain 'montage' or 'collage' effect – a splicing together of scenes or photographs – in addition to a refocusing, or rethinking, of what is actually *seen* in this *scene*. Nixon (2011: 250) suggests that the 'overlapping rectangular boxes within the view unsettle the perspective. The effect is of a double consciousness – a tranquility simultaneously expressed and exploded through an ongoing history of the present that is violently, inextricably societal and natural'. Aesthetic methods of disturbing our conventional view force us to confront these settings and the events that took place here: the paintings insist upon, and germinate, remembrance.

Another way to see these visual disturbances is as a kind of ghostliness. Haunting, in Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, is that which constitutes modern life, and is also more specifically something that is registered at the edge of our sight. Gordon (2008: 8) writes that 'haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence'. The seething presence – often seen through a 'sign', such as a ghost or an apparition – is 'one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us' (Gordon 2008: 8). In Gordon's language, lynching violence in memory might be that invisible and lost past, which nonetheless acts as a seething presence in contemporary southern life. Washington's paintings, in a sense, attempt to visualize and substantiate that 'seething presence', partly through the ghostly lines and frames that disrupt the canvases. Similarly, Nixon (2011: 250) suggests that 'ripping through his ghost habitats are the hauntings of a double violence – the original lynching and, superimposed on that, the quiet, gradual violence of forgetting, against which the work of art pushes back'. This double violence, or layering of traumatic memory, substantiates itself in the visual disturbances of Washington's paintings. The 'ripping' that Nixon describes, and the saturation of the present with ghostliness as Gordon writes, might just account for the frames and lines that carve up and distort these scenes. The memory work that Washington achieves here is at once a form of memorialization – one that is indirect and subtle – as well as an exercise in registering haunting, ghostliness and memory's traces: the substantiation, through paint, of lynching's after-burn.

We see these ripples of haunting also in *Cooksey Dallas: Route 91 Viaduct; Johnson City, Tennessee* (2005) (Figure 3). This is a wide painting in which a viaduct stretches across the width of the canvas, even as it only takes up a fraction of the image. The long swipes of a train track cut a curve through the





Figure 3: Keith Morris Washington, Cooksey Dallas: Train Viaduct; Johnson City, Tennessee, 2005. Oil (and acrylic) on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

centre of the image, disappearing around a corner in the middle of the canvas. This geographical movement points us outwards, and beyond the picture (this motif occurs in a few of Washington's works). In essence, the paintings are telling us to look in a particular direction, though the object of our gaze might just be out of sight. The 'ghostly haunt' for Gordon (2008: 15) is that which 'appears to be invisible or in the shadows' announcing itself. The colours are lush here: green and bronze-ochre dominate. There is a strict relation between the green grass and foliage (natural forms) and the ochre bridge and tracks (human-made forms). Different from some of the other paintings, this work utilizes the man-made structures to interrupt the natural landscape along with the visual cues. Perhaps less clear than the other images, Washington directs our gaze towards a site of violence, but also offers other interjections in the landscape.

Three rectangular frames sit in this image; each one has a marginally different tonality, but there is not much difference between them. They highlight, however, processes of the gaze. Particularly, the frames decrease in size (as they move towards the centre of the frame, following the train tracks), further leading the viewer's eyes. The frames are Washington's coded way of telling us that everything is mediated: shaped and selected for our gaze. While this has interesting ramifications with regard to lynching photographs – what are we meant to look at, and what aesthetic pleasure do we get from this? – it is also worth reading this device in the light of landscape art more generally.

Framing the natural world is a long-standing consideration of landscape painting. John Wylie (2007: 1) asks, '[i]s landscape a world we are living *in*, or a scene we are looking *at*, from afar?' (original emphasis). He points to a tension in critical scholarship on landscapes, which he sees in two discrete camps: Wylie approaches Cezanne's paintings as emblematic of this divide. Considering Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne's work might demonstrate how 'observer and observed, self and landscape, are essentially enlaced and intertwined' (Wylie 2007: 3): viewer and landscape are entangled. In light of Raymond Williams, Cezanne's work might show that 'far from being about tactility or proximity, landscapes set us at a distance. They turn us precisely into detached spectators, and the world into distant scenery to be visually observed' (Wylie 2007: 3). While Wylie suggests that this tension is perhaps unresolvable – or, even, a false binary – both senses of the landscape tradition are visible in Washington's paintings, and his 'framing' devices are central to



Figure 4: Keith Morris Washington, R.J. Tyrone: Pine Woods; Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 2002. Oil (and acrylic) on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

this. These lynching paintings, as we have seen, both draw us into their natural settings and hold us at a distance. They are affective and enlacing works, which relate us to their texture, feelings and locales. The paintings also turn us into spectators, viewers seeing these sites from a distance. It can be argued, after Wylie, that Washington's landscape paintings entangle and detach us, pull us in and push us away. This tension is only but compounded – or materialized – by the faint frames that divide and delineate the paintings. The quiet way in which they both focus and unsettle our gaze is perhaps indicative of the complex work Washington's art does to us as landscape viewers.

To flesh out further Washington's aesthetic, I want to consider a painting less typical of the series, but which exemplifies the ways in which Washington uses form and texture to relay the substance and affect of trauma committed at these sites. *R.J. Tyrone: Pine Woods; Hattiesburg, Mississippi* (2002) (Figure 4) is visually frenzied and emotively charged. Viewers are left without any geographical context and plunged straight into the depths of a pine wood. The trees stretch to the height of the painting, reaching skywards; the forest floor is a coarse red blur. The painting impressionistically conveys movement and energy: the trees shimmer with angled brush-strokes that are fluid, not sharp. Violence is connoted by the dominance of red and purple paint (it is surely blood). The darkness of the wood draws the viewer into the scene, gesturing to the lynching that took place here. However, this painting does not (like the others) necessarily offer a major contravention to typical landscape paintings in the American tradition. Considering this, Nixon (2011: 249) asks '[g]iven the force of pastoral and wilderness mythologies, what kinds of aesthetic activism can reinsert violence into the view?'. We might answer by drawing attention not to the 'silence' of the subjects of these landscape paintings but to the violence and memory-work (or after-burn) of their form.



Figure 5: Keith Morris Washington, *Norris Bendy: Sardis Church Site; Clinton, South Carolina*, 1999. Oil (and acrylic) on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

This painting, like the last, is also structured through a layering of visual frames. Within the canvas there are three demarcated rectangles, marked not by thick lines but by a subtle shifting of their outlines: a haunting dissection of the image. These frames become smaller as they reach the top of the painting, drawing our attention both up and down. The frames are at once layers (the top being the top layer) and insertions (one slots into, and focuses the next, even while neither is clearer or brighter than the next). The effect of this is a drawing in to the painting and woodland setting. It is also visually disturbing, intersecting the pastoral image as well as shifting our gaze. This painting is an evocative representation of a landscape that has been the backdrop to horrendous racial violence.

The final painting I want to consider is *Norris Bendy: Sardis Church Site; Clinton, South Carolina* (1999) (Figure 5). Gary Ciuba (2007) tells us that the body of Bendy was found on 5 July 1933. Bendy had been arrested for hitting a white man, Marvin Tollis, at an Independence Day celebration; that night, he was taken from the jail by four white men, and killed. He was shot, beaten, bound up, and hung. His body was then cut down from the tree and placed by Sardis Church. Ciuba (2007: 2) writes, 'Bendy was the victim of gradually escalating fury, which spread, like contagion, from Marvin Tollis to the officers of the law and finally to the lynch mob'. While we do not know the exact location of Bendy's hanging – and the church is no longer standing – Washington paints a seemingly definitive arboreal marker, much like those discussed by Alexandre above. A tree trunk sits right at the centre of the canvas, which is again marked with frame lines. Whereas in the other paintings the frames overlap and intersect, here they produce the effect of three canvases joined together. One long vertical canvas (on the right) joins smaller ones (on the left). This placement emphasizes the height of the work, and echoes

the elongation of the tree trunk at the image's centre. In stark grey-white (bark stripped back in places; in others, retaining a bronze exterior), this lopped tree is a visual marker of the lynching. It memorializes the site of Bendy's death, as well as mediating this moment through paint onto a landscape canvas. On a more symbolic or metonymic level, the trunk replicates the corporeal stance of Bendy once alive, and bears in its natural dismemberment and decay the state of Bendy in death. There is a gouge, or v-shaped hole, mid-way up the trunk: this is a wound to the human/arboreal body.

In the background of the painting, trees dominate. There is a layered thicket of foliage and woodland – the hazy trees drift backwards and up, almost blotting out the sky (we see only a little blue). This creates a feeling of claustrophobia in the site; we are brought into proximity with it. Even in describing the painting's substantiation of violence, and its gesturing towards violent death, it is clear that all of Washington's natural paintings feel, in Nixon's (2011: 250) words, 'eerily becalmed'. The works, in their quietness, show 'domestic terrorism domesticated by pastoral convention; by national amnesia; and by the overgrowths of time, vegetation, and rezoning. From these preternaturally ordinary trees hang amnesia's strange fruit' (Nixon 2011: 250). Here Nixon articulates the domestication of lynching violence in the American landscape. Washington's paintings call attention to the quiet and subtle ways in which forgetting saturates these southern locales: at both a local and a national level, through the temporalities of the natural world, and in the mythos attached to pastoral America. These artworks, then, intrude upon such amnesia with a variety of aesthetic strategies and effects.

In the paintings analysed, the natural world seems at some distance from our gaze. However, here we are forced to confront this tree, close-up. It cannot be avoided, as Washington installs it as the central thing to look at (which he rarely does; his gaze is mainly gestural). In light of the visual debates over lynching photographs – gazing at dead or dying bodies; looking with and at the spectators; seeing evidence of horror; apprehending aesthetic products and documents of death – Washington carefully intervenes into this difficult terrain. Rather than confront the viewer with dead bodies themselves (and those voyeuristically watching them, and then producing images of that looking), Washington asks us to look at the natural world. More than this, he represents such landscapes as suffused with something anxious. The trees in this painting – marked with nervous, small brush-strokes – are encroaching on the viewer. And centre-stage is a bright, decaying tree trunk. The viewer cannot but, in light of the painting's title and interest, imagine Bendy's corpse. But because of this work's focus, we do not have to directly see the body: merely its after-burn, its afterlife, its saturation into the place back-dropping Bendy's death.

## ON LOOKING

As suggested, when looking at lynching photographs, the viewer may just re-inscribe the same forms of ocular violence from the time of the attack. Where the gaze is an active, and in a sense aggressive, act, we must be aware, as contemporary viewers, of the possible recapitulations of looking again at dead (black) bodies. Many visual theorists, however, have encouraged observing pictures of atrocity (and I am not disagreeing with them here, but simply offering additional strategies). For instance, on images from the Holocaust, George Didi-Huberman (2008: 3) writes that because they were

produced in spite of the horrors of the genocide ‘we must contemplate them, take them on, and try to comprehend them. Images *in spite of all*: in spite of our own inability to look at them as they deserve’ (original emphasis). Indeed, though talking about photographs in which the subject depicted returns the viewer’s gaze, Margaret Olin (2012: 13) suggests that we can ‘conceive of the gaze as engendering not shame but responsibility’. There is an ethical demand here to look and to acknowledge the obligations of, and on, our observing gaze.

On lynching photographs, in particular, Dora Apel (2003: 466) suggests that ‘the repetition of [looking at] these visual images seems the only way, although painful and arduous, to make visible and work through a central but largely unacknowledged feature of traumatic American history’. Similarly, in his essay ‘Hellhounds’ published in *Without Sanctuary*, Leon Litwack (2000: 34) declares that even though lynching photographs ‘stretch our credulity, even numb our minds and senses to the full extent of the horror, [...] they must be examined’ to understand how such acts even occurred. Indeed, as Frances Guerin (2014: 1) writes on visual culture more generally, ‘[n]ot looking is always a political gesture’. Thus, to refuse to look at lynching photographs might raise more political and ethical questions than ever, especially with regard to an American phenomenon with such limited traction in cultural memory and the national archive. However, perhaps Washington’s paintings offer us a third option: what if, contrary to Apel’s suggestion that looking at lynching pictures ‘seems the only way’, there is *another way* of working through, and visualizing, the troubled memory of racial violence in the South and elsewhere? What if, in gazing at Washington’s large, beautiful and consuming pastoral landscapes, we can remember lynching (and lynching’s victims) without necessarily confronting and re-victimizing those killed? Perhaps these works make the memory available to us – through remediation, through the painterly texture of violence – while refusing the necessity of beholding death itself.

Ariella Azoulay (2001: 4) relatedly asks a series of important optic questions: ‘[w]ho sees? [...] Who is authorized to look? [...] In whose name does one look? What is the structure of the field of vision?’. These questions confront us with the variety of investments and visual structures that attend the gaze. Washington’s paintings, however, provide viewers with ways of simultaneously looking and not looking. We both see lynching violence, and victims’ bodies, and not see it. There is a sense in which this dual process is like the fetish, through which a process of avowal and disavowal takes place: a (lost) object is both affirmed and denied. Susan Suleiman has discussed this duality pertinently in relation to Holocaust literature. In *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, Suleiman (2006: 206) suggests that a split is always present in Holocaust writing: ‘approach and avoidance, affirmation and negation, amnesia and anamnesis’. The rhetorical name she uses for this split – preterition – is perhaps another way of describing the visual work Washington’s paintings accomplish. The ‘defense mechanism’ against loss, Suleiman (2006: 210–11) writes, ‘is a compromise formation, allowing the subject of loss to move forward, to invent, to continue, however haltingly’. Read with Suleiman, the looking and not looking at lynching that Washington’s paintings enable is a method of defending against, but also working through, loss. In this historical context, the fetishistic qualities of the paintings allow us as twenty-first-century observers of lynching representation to move forward from this past, to integrate it into memory and continue the ongoing work of



remembrance (at personal and cultural levels). Washington's ethics of seeing is thus also an ethics of memory.

In an online interview with Basic Black, Washington (2016 in Basic Black 2010) articulates some of the rationales behind his paintings, suggesting that when inhabiting the American landscape – particularly the South – one often does not know of the violence that occurred in it. 'As one's driving down the road', he says, 'you pass by a particular place and have no idea necessarily what happened there, and oftentimes these places are loaded with history' (Washington 2016 in Basic Black 2010). As argued here, Washington paints landscapes that are loaded not just with history but with a particular texture of lynching violence in memory; this texture is literally produced and remediated through paint and the pictures' arrangements. Remembrance is produced through the visual substance of these works, in addition to the substance of haunting that saturates the southern landscape. While we may not know what has happened in certain rural settings, Washington's work attempts to rectify this national and regional amnesia. By confronting us with the after-burn of lynching, and making us look at the effects of this violence in the landscapes themselves, Washington may also help us to *look at* racial violence without re-victimizing those already killed. We may not see dead bodies hanging from trees, but the memory of their deaths continues to reverberate and live on through Washington's landscape paintings.

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