

“It’s not a pretty picture”: How Pre-Service History Teachers Make Meaning of America’s Racialized Past through Lynching Imagery

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IN THEIR PREVIOUS YEARS OF SCHOOLING, pre-service history teachers are exposed to a familiar canon: a story of American exceptionalism, linear social progression, and cultural homogeneity—referred to as a “freedom-quest narrative.”¹ Myopic and Eurocentric, this story follows students into their teaching careers; perpetuating a lack of critical understanding and engagement of historical race relations in social studies.² Critical of this approach, history educators propose that learners engage alternative source material and move away from the freedom-quest narrative in order to transform their historical understandings of race and history.³

Photographs, as one such material, offer representations that can simultaneously affirm and complicate our historical understandings, making them ideal alternative pedagogical resources.⁴ Lynching photography, once viewed as symbolic souvenirs of white supremacy, have increasingly been reconstituted by historians and social science researchers as evidence against the false progressivism of race relations in the United States.⁵ While research has documented the use of photography to foster historical understanding,⁶ few studies examine how this instructional medium can be simultaneously incorporated into history teacher education in order to encourage a more complex understanding of race within history.

Six pre-service history teachers enrolled in a graduate-level secondary social studies methods course visited the *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* exhibit. As part of an instrumental case study, participants were asked to interrogate the complexity of our nation's racialized past. The purpose of this case study was to examine how pre-service teachers' exposure and engagement with lynching photography informed pre-service history teachers' understandings of the United States' racialized history and provided opportunities to reconsider the context and purpose of historical meaning making.

Theoretical Framework

The study was undergirded by two overlapping conceptual paradigms: how race is presented in U.S. history teaching and learning, and the use of lynching photography to complicate understandings on race in U.S. society. In the following section, these concepts will be explored further to explain how they helped inform the research project.

Race and the Teaching and Learning of U.S. History

History curricula have consistently avoided unpleasant aspects of our racial history. Curriculum analyses suggest the subject tokenizes the accomplishments of non-whites⁷ and ignores issues of controversy.⁸ In place of a meaningful history education that provides multiple points of entry, a heritage-as-history tradition dominates the curriculum and teaching.⁹ This tradition follows an all too-familiar path of inevitable American progress, offering little room for interpretation or criticism. Textbooks remain familiar culprits of this approach. Analysis of these resources suggests they offer a consistent storyline across publishers and lack any substantial inclusion of race that does not follow the heritage narrative.¹⁰ For example, racial violence, specifically the murder of African Americans post-Reconstruction, is subtly minimized in curricular materials. Brown and Brown, in their review of contemporary U.S. history textbooks, note "that textbooks generally depict acts of violence against African Americans as aberrational, or temporary exceptions."¹¹ The prevailing curricular message obscures the less celebratory moments in our nation's past as historical outliers to the nation-as-progress message. Moreover, white males dominate the political and social history, while issues of race, gender, and class remain in the margins. Consequently, history is on automatic repeat, whereby students get roughly the same version of history in elementary, middle, and high school.

This freedom-quest, heritage narrative that has been passed on from generation to generation as collective memory can have a harmful effect

on how students and future teachers perceive race in the curriculum.¹² For students, the curricular message received largely depends on student identity. The historical positionality of students, how they see themselves within the curriculum, is relative to how inclusive the curriculum is to students’ race and/or class.¹³ In her work examining differences between black and white students’ perceptions of history, Epstein posits that racial identity influences how history curricula are acknowledged.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, for non-white students, history is both boring and lacks credibility. Thus, the traditional curriculum structure fails to provide room for varying perspectives and remains woefully un-democratic.¹⁵ Exposure to history outside the traditional canon is an important step toward challenging the narrative and promoting cultural responsiveness.¹⁶

Lynching Photography as a Means to Counter the Freedom-Quest Narrative

Photographs, as visual representations of our history, are unique and powerful media for interpreting the context of a particular historical period.¹⁷ However, the context of viewing images and how these images are perceived varies greatly from viewer to viewer. Among students, research suggests that learners in later grades tend to articulate more in-depth and higher order interpretations of visual images.¹⁸ Levesque and colleagues noted that students of history and history professors analyzed images in substantially different ways. Not surprisingly, professional historians provided more astute interpretations and fixated on more nuanced historical contextualization than students. Furthermore, studies found that individuals’ cultural identity and relationship to the history they encounter, in school and in the greater community, influences photographic interpretation,¹⁹ allowing for authentic and varying interpretations of the past that challenge the normative curriculum.

Photography can also be used as pedagogical tools for examining and interpreting dark and troubling periods in our nation’s history.²⁰ Lynching photography, a macabre and commonplace pastime of early twentieth-century America, represents a violent and unsettling legacy. These images challenge the common textbook stance that violence against African Americans was abnormal and perpetrated by racist mobs. Historical evidence suggests that lynching was not an infrequent occurrence in the United States.²¹ Following Reconstruction, as Jim Crow laws proliferated and sundown towns became more common, social and political opportunities for African Americans regressed. Often accused of trumped-up and unsubstantiated charges, lynching represented a punishment (and public warning) to any non-white who defied the crumbling social order of the old South.²² Between 1882 and 1962, over 4,700 African Americans were lynched in the United States.²³ Lynching became a form of public

theater for many white communities.²⁴ Men, women, and children would caravan out to lynching sites to witness the event. Often, lynching would include torture, castration, and other forms of public shaming.

To commemorate the event, photographers would take photos of the lynching and sell them for profit.²⁵ The photos—which include the mutilated victims, the murderers, and often numerous spectators—suggest that these acts of violence were a sanctioned, socially acceptable form of public theater.²⁶ Research suggests that these images signify a spectacle to unify whites against African Americans.²⁷ Often turned into postcards, photographs were traded and sold for profit, adding another layer of victimization and exploitation.²⁸ However, in later years, the NAACP co-opted the images to demonstrate African Americans' struggle toward equality and the societal forces in opposition to such progress, thus further contextualizing how these images are accessed and viewed.²⁹ From a curricular standpoint, these pictures challenge the liberal incrementalism doctrine toward race relations perpetuated by the freedom-quest narrative.³⁰ They suggest that movement toward racial equality in the U.S. is not a road of steady progress. Rather, it is pockmarked with resistance to change, engrained institutional racism, and community-sponsored terror. The “spectacular secret” of lynching in America grabs national attention, yet remains hidden from public spotlight, traditional history, and contemporary discourse.³¹ Exposing the “secret” has the potential to challenge individuals' understanding of race in the United States. As described below, *Without Sanctuary* is a museum exhibit that allows individuals the opportunity to engage this horrific yet important part of national history.

Without Sanctuary Exhibit as a Site for Historical Meaning Making

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America is a collection of approximately seventy lynching photographs and postcards collected by James Allen and presented through a traveling, special exhibit in museums across the United States. A self-described “picker,” Allen came upon his first lynching photograph at a flea market. Over time, he has amassed a collection of these images, not for the purpose of selling them, but to remove them from the marketplace of racist and white supremacy memorabilia.³² Since first opening at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York City in 2001, the exhibit has challenged viewers not to gaze solely at the images of the lynched men and women, but instead examine the faces of the crowd—those both explicitly responsible for the violence and those, who by their presence and posturing in the camera, tacitly approve.³³ Over the years, the exhibit has traveled the country and was recently made part of the permanent exhibit at the National Center for Civil and Human

Rights in Atlanta, Georgia. Lynching photographs and postcards are also available on the *Without Sanctuary* website (www.withoutsanctuary.org).

Critics argue that viewing these images outside the context of the South can encourage a morbid exploitation that fails to consider the complexity of race relations in the United States, and exploits the lynched.³⁴ By gazing upon these images disconnected from the scenes of their horrific crimes, they fear that these acts will become ghoulishly exploited. In her review of the exhibit for *The Nation*, Williams addressed the complexity of repurposing the *Without Sanctuary* photographs, noting, “It’s a difficult task, this reviewing of violence, this striving for reflection, rather than spectacle, for vision rather than voyeurism, for study rather than exposure.”³⁵ The overwhelming number of the images, coupled with their graphic content, can have an unintended consequence toward dehumanizing the lynched victim.³⁶ Plath argues that race influences how these images are perceived. She contests that white observers often detach from the white mobs, expressing an anachronistic, moral superiority over individuals from the past.³⁷ Black students are more likely to feel shame, embarrassed by their perceived victimization. Wolters suggests if *Without Sanctuary* is co-opted for exhibition without providing space for discussion and context, it self-perpetuates the psychological horror and the dehumanizing objectification of lynching.³⁸

To counter the spectacle and potential for dehumanization, educators suggest creating spaces for authentic discourse on the lynching images and exhibit material.³⁹ Providing opportunity to openly reflect and discuss the images helps students move past the initial feelings of shock and horror and investigate the social ramifications for lynching and its legacy on race relations. In her analysis of exhibit-goers reactions, Hulser noted, “The meaning of the exhibit was actually forged during the public dialogues which transformed the atrocity photographs from sensational pictures into instruments of a hard-won understanding of the past. The act of telling history in a face-to-face exchange turned viewers into participants.”⁴⁰ Similarly, the Gilder Lehrman of American History as well as Facing History and Ourselves have created teacher resources that include analysis of these lynching photographs and opportunities for students to engage in critical discussion of the nation’s past.⁴¹

While the incorporation of photographs to engage learners in historical thinking is well documented⁴² and the use of lynching photography as a powerful disruption of the traditional, progressive U.S. narrative is firmly established,⁴³ little research has explored the pedagogical potential of these images in helping to shift teachers’ beliefs about the past from the pejorative, freedom-quest narrative to a more complex, critical understanding of race in America. Understanding future teachers’

interpretations of lynching photographs has the potential to inform the history teacher educators on how pre-service teachers make sense of race and history. The current study, situated in an urban community in the southeastern U.S., explored how the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit was experienced by a group of pre-service history teachers. The researchers sought to understand how the photographic exhibit, which was in close proximity to some of the exhibit's lynching evidence, influenced pre-service history teachers' understanding of teaching and learning about the past and how exposure to these violent images fostered new understandings of race relations in U.S. history.

Methodology

In this exploratory study, two research questions guided our development of the activity and subsequent research design:

1. How do pre-service history teachers negotiate their preconceived notions of race relations in the United States with the photographic evidence of racially motivated lynching?
2. How do pre-service history teachers perceive using these images in secondary (middle/high school) classrooms?

A qualitative case study methodology was employed in this study. Case studies explicitly recognize the importance of context as a mediator of meaning for the phenomenon.⁴⁴ This study focused on the contemporary phenomenon of pre-service teacher racialized historical meaning making within the context of lynching photography. Specifically, researchers selected an instrumental case study approach, which uses a single case to provide insight into a research question.⁴⁵ An instrumental case study allows for exploration of an issue within the case's context.

Case Selection

A graduate-level secondary (middle/high school) social studies methods class at a mid-size research university in North Carolina served as the case in this study. The university enrolls more than 26,000 students and offers close to 100 graduate programs. It is located in an urban area and has a diverse student body. At this university, history teacher preparation was integrated within social studies methods. However, the state curriculum emphasizes content and skills associated with historical thinking. As such, the majority of course materials pertained to teaching history at the middle and high school level. Research and theory on the teaching of social studies can be categorized into three orientations: content transmission, discipline-specific (historical) inquiry, and progressive/

re-constructivist pedagogy.⁴⁶ While the research and theory bolstering history education often champions inquiry and progressive pedagogy, most classrooms remain dominated by the folk pedagogy of content transmission.⁴⁷ The course instructor and co-researchers sought to “re-orient” students’ preconceived notions of teaching and learning history by focusing on the more dynamic pedagogies of inquiry and progressive/constructivist teaching. Pre-service teachers engaged in readings and activities related to historical inquiry⁴⁸ and historical empathy.⁴⁹ Moreover, students participated in structured discussions on the utility of culturally responsive teaching and critical race theory in a history classroom.⁵⁰ As a part of the re-orienting coursework, participants visited the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit. They engaged in series of museum activities, which included a self-guided tour of the exhibit and a guided question-and-answer session of the exhibit conducted by the museum docents. Following the formalized museum visit, we followed with a reflective discussion,⁵¹ led by two of the investigators, that challenged the students to reflect on their initial reactions to the exhibit, what these the images suggested about race relations in the United States, and how these images can be used to inform their own students in the future.

Given the aforementioned research and theory on providing culturally diverse historical narratives, we hoped that exposure to the photographic exhibit would encourage pre-service history teachers to rethink their understanding of race and history. Moreover, we believed that these future teachers would latch on to these photographs as potential source material to be used in their own teaching. As the subsequent description of the study’s findings indicate, while the pre-service teachers acknowledged the complexity of historic racial violence and made semi-successful efforts to engage in sophisticated perspective taking, they still exhibited a reluctance to consider lynching photography for their own pedagogy. A discussion of these findings will follow.

Participants

Six students were in the class: three female and three male, ranging in age from thirty to sixty. The majority identified as white, and one self-identified as Puerto Rican. All were pursuing their graduate certificate license in teaching. Geographically, the participants were similar, with five being from the South. Because this was a sample of convenience being taught by one of the co-researchers, efforts were made to distance the student-participants from the researcher-instructor. These efforts are described in subsequent sections.

Even though the museum experience was embedded within the course as an activity, each student was given the opportunity to opt out of

participating in the study. All agreed to participate and completed the informed consent. The museum visit and subsequent data collection took place during scheduled class time. Participants were not required to pay for admission to the museum.

Researcher positionality provided an advantageous insider perspective.⁵² The researcher-instructor, an advocate of inquiry-based history teaching, worked alongside two colleagues whose expertise ranged from critical race theory to adult learning theory. This collaboration afforded a multifaceted lens that further complicated analysis and interpretation of findings. Since the voices of all the co-researchers were respected equally, the theme and codes that emerged represent a thorough and complex effort to understand the pedagogical implications for the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit both as a tool for history teacher educators, but also for practitioners themselves.

Data Collection Methods

A hallmark of case studies is the use of multiple methods to collect data. This study used a questionnaire, a focus group, and individual interviews to gather and triangulate data. Data collection took place at key times during the social studies methods course. Prior to the museum visit, the students completed a questionnaire that gathered their perceptions of the appropriateness of violent imagery as material for use in middle and high school classes. Ten images were presented, ranging in theme from the Holocaust to Civil Rights. To encourage the participants to be honest in their responses, the course instructor did not participate in this data collection. The questionnaires were distributed during class by one of the participants and then delivered to the office of one of the co-researchers who de-identified them before distributing them to the research team. The responses were reviewed prior to the focus groups and helped to inform the focus group interview protocol.

Researchers audio recorded the focus group, which was conducted immediately after the viewing and was about sixty minutes in duration. The discussion was composed of semi-structured questions and was later transcribed. The focus group data was used in the structuring of the questions for the individual interviews and primarily concentrated on the reaction of the participants to the museum exhibit. The individual interviews were conducted at the end of the semester and were recorded for later transcription. They were approximately thirty minutes in duration. Each member of the research team conducted two interviews. The individual interviews allowed the researchers to gather more in-depth information from the participants. These interviews focused more on how to use museum experiences, particularly those that depict violence, as pedagogical devices.

Data Analysis

A team of three researchers, which included the course instructor, inductively analyzed the focus group and individual interview data. Each researcher analyzed the data individually then met as a group to refine the coding and develop themes. The group met three times and utilized a three-level coding approach: open, categorical, and thematic.⁵³ The approach involved multiple readings of the questionnaires and transcripts, identification of keywords, grouping keywords together to form codes (open coding), conceptualizing of related codes to form categories (categorical coding), and subsequent thematic development (thematic coding) that provided cogent explanations of the data.

Findings

Analysis of qualitative data collected in the form of a focus group and individual follow-up interviews suggested the emergence of three major themes in relation to the pre-service teachers’ experience with the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit. First, complicity of the local community—the location of the exhibit in the southern United States and the proximity to the sites of lynching surfaced as a source of tension and personal tumult for participants. Second, pre-service teachers’ responses to the interview questions revealed a struggle toward a development of empathy for participants depicted in photographs and an attempt at historical meaning making. Finally, de/constructing narratives, pre-service teachers provided contradictory recommendations for using exhibits like *Without Sanctuary* in their own instruction.

Complicity of the Local Community

Examining the images, newspapers articles, and other historical artifacts included in the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit, participants were astonished by the amount and type of people who participated in, witnessed, and sanctioned lynching. These “good people” included law enforcement, community leaders, and entire families. The exhibit contradicted their understanding of a historically progressive narrative and disrupted participants’ preconceived beliefs that lynching was only executed by the Ku Klux Klan and racist fringe elements.⁵⁴ Participants noted that the leaders of local community, in taking part in the brutalization, sanctioned lynching. Mitch, a graduate from a small private religious school, remarked:

[T]he community looked for leadership, whether it be the police, or there were religious people involved. . . They were taking part in it and I think when you see people that you respect and you look up to doing a certain thing, you’re more willing to join, so I think that’s something I thought about.

While pre-service teachers identified displays of lynching postcards as being one of the most notorious examples of the lynching conspiracy,⁵⁵ some explained that newspaper articles were also powerful pieces documenting lynching complicity. Margaret, a graduate student in history pursuing her teaching license, found in the newspaper clippings additional evidence of local collusion that she had never previously encountered:

I had heard lynching discussions in like an academic historical sense, looking back at it before. But I had never seen, well you know, I am kind of a nerd for primary source documents and I had never seen newspapers like that, and to see some that were even from [her home state] was really striking because it's different to see a newspaper quoted in a book and to see the article in print on the wall if that kind of makes sense...I think the way the newspaper was so blatantly obvious about this happened. We're condoning it as a community. Because I see a newspaper as kind of a mouth piece for a community and I think the fact that they printed it, like it was news and like it was okay to print it and to tell the truth about it, to me was almost more striking than a personal correspondence where you can say whatever you want because newspapers are sanctioned by the community they're operated by.

Seixas notes, "local events and historical details also become significant when their relationships to larger phenomenon are drawn or made explicit."⁵⁶ The historical proximity of the exhibit to the lives of the students' reinforced the participants' understanding of this racially motivated violence. Acknowledging that many of the images were situated within the same city and region as the exhibit, pre-service teachers demonstrated a connection to the past. As Margaret remarked, "They might be your ancestors or, you know, your friend's ancestors or whatever..." In particular, participants repeatedly commented on a specific lynching account that took place less than five miles from the university campus and close to home to many of the participants. Bob, a retired political campaign organizer seeking a new career, summed it up:

[Y]ou know, probably the most impactful for me was the Old Pine Road,⁵⁷ one and it was it wasn't the ones that were [*sic*] gruesome...the fact that the Old Pine Road is only two or three miles from here kind of brings it home that it could happen and did happen here just as much as other places.

The location of this exhibit, in a Southern urban center, with artifacts chronicling lynching in close proximity to the university and homes (in the "backyard") had a profound impact on participants' understanding of lynching. Moreover, these local examples validated the historical importance and proliferation of racial violence.

Problematizing Historical Empathy and Meaning Making

Images have the potential to evoke strong emotional connections for learners.⁵⁸ Unlike Plath’s assertion that whites are more likely to detach from lynching images, participants in our study connected with the images and the complicit all-white crowd.⁵⁹ These affective connections complement and/or conflict with the cognitive processes necessary for historical understanding.⁶⁰ Previous research on lynching photography has warned against the exploitation and victimization of lynching photographs.⁶¹ Initially, participants viewing the violent images within the local museum context described initial emotions of horror, disgust, and shame:

John: I have awakened my soul to the horrors of humanity and what that means is it’s kind of just in-your-face reality about the capabilities of humanity and what we can do to each other.

Kristy: Yeah, kind of along the same lines. I said “frightening” just to see what people are capable of doing and seeing how horrific their actions can be.

However, as dialogue in the focus group and interviews progressed, themes surfaced suggesting pre-service teachers experienced a more nuanced and complex relationship with the exhibit. Participants referred to what they described as “empathy” with both victims and lynching perpetrators. Simultaneously (and possibly paradoxically), participants noted the importance of divorcing themselves from their own value judgments, weighing the historical evidence, evaluating historical positions, and contextualizing the events. This epistemological tension is often referred to as historical empathy—the use of perspective taking based upon carefully considered historical interpretation.⁶² While participants uniformly exhibited the necessary care component of historical empathy,⁶³ analyses of participants’ levels of empathy revealed that pre-service teachers were unable to move beyond the Lee, Dickinson, and Ashby categories of “everyday empathy” and “restricted historical empathy.”⁶⁴ John, a basketball coach seeking his teaching license, remarked on the not uncommon practice of before- and after-lynching photographs:

John: What was more real to me was observing the photographs—and not all of them had it—but the before and after, where they had some of the victims posing before they go and torture them and hang them. Just the look in their eyes almost like there soul is like a very observant person. I almost want to say that I connected more, empathized more with the victim before they were killed ’cause you can’t imagine what they were thinking, feeling. And, that is when I saw them the most when they were posing before they actually were just these charred bodies, lifeless hanging.

In his interpretation, John failed to engage in substantive historical empathy. He placed universal values and feelings on the subject of the photo without considering the unique historical context. Lee, Dickinson, and Ashby refer to this version as “everyday empathy.”⁶⁵ While he attempted to connect with (and possibly care for the subject of the photo), he was unable to get past the cruelty of event. Instead, he focused on the mortality of the deceased and his own emotional reactions to the imagery. This complicated attempts to engage in meaningful empathy.⁶⁶ Historical empathy frequently requires making sense of a historical dilemma, otherwise known as contextualization.⁶⁷ Focusing on the victimization of the lynched, John unsuccessfully problematized the historical issues surrounding the crowd of lynching bystanders and perpetrators.

In contrast, other participants attempted to make empathetic connections to the lynching crowd with attention to understanding the historical dilemma of why an individual would participate in and witness such a heinous act. However, these contextualized connections were tenuous, instead drawing parallels to other historical accounts of human devastation—namely, the Holocaust. Pre-service teachers frequently referred back to “Nazis, holocaust, and concentration camps” in focus group discussions and individual interviews:

Margaret: I’ve thought long and hard about this exhibit and its topic and how something like that can happen. Like I said earlier, how can good people do really, really bad things, right? But it happened like it always happens. It’s happening right now in Syria, you know it happened in the Holocaust. It’s happened in so many instances in our history where good people make really bad decisions and it doesn’t make sense and still doesn’t make sense. I think there are like leading historians out there who it still doesn’t make sense to.

Mitch: [T]hey were buying into certain ideas and beliefs in terms of how they saw the African American people and I think that that belief is what drove them and it was so it was so embedded in them that I don’t think they questioned what they were doing. . . You can make definite comparisons to Nazi Germany and how people bought into the system and in a lot of ways didn’t question it.

Bob: [T]here was a tendency for groups of people to do things that not one of them would ordinarily do alone. I think that kind of motivated and it kind of goes and answers to like society’s view of African Americans at the time made this okay for most of the people because most of the people you saw there were White. So you have to also take into consideration that African Americans didn’t have the same rights or weren’t viewed exactly equals as back then. So maybe if they’re brought up that way or taught that way in schools that is just like second nature to them. That it was okay.

Pre-service teachers framed their empathetic connections within an acknowledgment that values and morals are historically subjective. However, they frame this subjectivity in generic terms and do not uniquely attribute the actions of the lynching mob to the specific context of the time period. Though the pre-service teachers made efforts toward historical contextualization, their empathy remained grounded in a “restricted historical empathy” rather than a more nuanced and difficult to attain “contextual historical empathy.”⁶⁸

Researchers also questioned the ability of the pre-service teachers to empathize with the historical context, given their own historical positionalities as predominately white, privileged individuals with varying history content backgrounds.⁶⁹ While participants seemed engaged with the exhibit images and the discussion that followed, the pre-service teachers in this study were overwhelmingly white and middle class. Thus, at times, the researchers noted that pre-service teachers’ claims of empathy resembled a form of white guilt and shame. Participants spoke of a “barrier” to understanding, remarked that they “can’t imagine” being the lynched, and commented on “horrific” examples and “sickening” images. As one acknowledged:

Mitch: I think that there are certain barriers...I think that I may have had a different reaction if I were an African American because there are barriers that you can’t [*pause*]...I was trying to think specifically in that photograph what it would have been like to be in the crowd.

While individuals were able to make tacit connections to the mob-like behavior of the lynching crowds, presentism often influenced their capacity for empathy. Julia, a wife and mother, explains her connection to an image of a lynched family:

Julia: I really connected with the ones that were about family and, you know, you saw entire families being [hanged] and I kept thinking what would I do if [it was] my husband because my husband is a very outspoken person. Would I stand by him? Would I, you know, not being able to put yourself in that situation, like what would I do...?

These affective connections were important in garnering participant interest in the exhibit, but they did not lead to substantive empathetic connections that influence historical meaning making.

At times, pre-service teachers’ preoccupation with the gruesomeness of the imagery occluded discussion on how lynching images could be used for historical inquiry. Conversely, other participants noted a particular epistemological tension between using affective understanding as a way to motivate students, while also staying true to historical reasoning and avoiding presentism. This balancing act is best explained by Margaret:

Margaret: [A]s historians, we've been encouraged to take our personal emotions and our personal feelings out of the equation and to take judgment out of the equation so that we can kind of make an impartial statement about what happened in the past. However, when I step into the classroom to teach something called social studies, which encompasses, gosh, disciplines like sociology or psychology where things like emotion are really important and I think dealing with 16- and 17-year-olds, to make it relevant, to make it stick, to make it memorable, emotion is a really important part of what we do. So that's one of the things I've struggled with, is how do I step away from this impartiality. I have to teach the impartiality when it's an appropriate history skill, right, but then also to bring emotion in because I think that's a powerful teaching tool.

Thus, participants responded to the exhibit in a multitude of ways. Some were unable to move beyond everyday empathetic regard and slipped into presentism. Others, while engaging in restricted historical empathy, recognized the challenges of engaging in historical understanding while also considering the emotive capacity of source material.⁷⁰

De/Constructing Narratives

Researchers sought to understand what the pre-service teachers might take away from this activity and incorporate into their own instruction. Participants suggested that the exhibit offered an alternative to the staid instruction of the typical history classroom. Being outside the space of school and university was viewed as a liberating experience by many of the participants. As Margaret noted, "it's physically going there" that offered participants a new vantage point to engage the past. They also recognized that the exhibit itself advocated a specific theme of social justice, which deserves careful scrutiny and deconstruction:

Julia: I think of social justice and awareness. I think of people not keeping silent. I guess silence is a good word. Just so people know about it and what goes on. You know these people may not have had a voice, but hopefully just other people seeing these exhibits will give people without a voice, a voice.

Therefore, it seemed that the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit helped the future history teachers rethink their understanding of freedom-quest narrative, while also challenging their perspective on race in U.S. society. Yet, when specifically questioned on how they could incorporate lynching photography from the exhibit into their own instruction, researchers noted an alarming contradiction among the pre-service teachers. They spoke of being inspired by exhibits such as *Without Sanctuary* to present their future students with different perspectives that challenge the authority of the traditional, historical canon. As Bob and others note, "It's not a

pretty picture.” Participants suggested that “they should know this” and the exhibit makes a “personal connection” with history:

Margaret: I think this exhibit kind of inspired me to remember to teach the tough stuff, because it’s really easy to give a definition of lynching, maybe show a grainy photograph, and then move past it...Or to use that as part of the civil rights movement. Oh by the way, this happened and give a statistic, right? But giving a statistic on how many people were lynched in the South is really different than showing like those powerful photographs or some of the text that people wrote on the postcards or one of those articles in a newspaper or maybe from [home state]. So I guess like a reminder to not skip over hard topics to teach, because this could be a hard topic to teach.

However, participants also suggested restricting exposure to racialized violent imagery as depicted in the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit. In the same interview, when asked about using the lynching imagery in her future classroom, Margaret hesitates, suggesting that parental issues might be a problem. She elaborates, “I think that would also be a logistical issue in terms of getting permission because if you have to get permission to show an R-rated movie, you probably have to get permission to show lynching photographs.” Margaret was not alone. The majority of her cohort used language such as “elective” courses and “permission slips” when discussing how these images could be used in their classes. Interestingly, these same individuals had no reservations when referring to Holocaust imagery as a comparable and instructionally acceptable parallel to the lynching photography.

In closer examination, this discrepancy between the participants’ desire to teach a counter-narrative history and their perceived roadblocks is possibly related to their own fear of talking about race. In her study of an African American studies class, Chikkatur notes that white teachers are often ill-equipped to facilitate substantive instruction on issues of race and racism.⁷¹ Afraid of being labeled a bigot, these teachers circumvent difficult, yet important, aspects of the past. The exhibit and the topic led them to interrogate their own anxiety on discussing race and history:

Kristy: I worry, in the future, about me talking about this topic...and me having, let’s say, African American students and them going home and saying that I said something offensive and when I really didn’t and I don’t...being culturally respectful, I don’t...I just worry that that’s a fine line even to this day.

Thus, participants were reluctant to use lynching imagery in their classes due to institutional concerns, community fallout, or fear of misunderstanding and misrepresenting issues of race and history.

Discussion

Findings from our study suggest that the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit and other photographic representations of racialized violence offer opportunities for history teacher educators and pre-service teachers to reconsider the primacy of the traditional history narrative. Examining violent racial imagery like *Without Sanctuary* challenges pre-service teachers to explore their understandings of our nation's racial history and attempt to make sense of the complex perspectives of lynching perpetrators and victims. Historical positionality (including students' race and content background) influenced both the level of historical empathy that pre-service teachers experienced and their willingness to use counter-narratives with their future students.

Trofanenko and Segall suggest "specific knowledge to be gained from any exhibit is never guaranteed."⁷² Indeed, the current study suggests pre-service teachers encountered the exhibit in many different ways. Among the pre-service teachers, construction and access to historical narratives was influenced by their affective responses to the images. Research in historical thinking indicates that empathy is a useful, though problematic, tool for reconstructing the past.⁷³ Endacott argues that the affective and cognitive dimensions of empathy can work congruently to inform historical perspective taking.⁷⁴ However, in the current study, participants either confused their own sympathy and visceral emotions with empathy or, at best, engaged in a very superficial form of historical empathy. Findings indicated that initial feelings of shock and sadness overwhelmed teachers' viewing. After prolonged de-briefing and analysis, participants attempted to make better sense of their own emotions and delve deeper into the inferred historical context. Yet, in attempting to empathize with the victims, most participants were unable to move beyond everyday empathy. Trying to understand the emotions and perceptions of an individual being brutalized is not reasonable. The more appropriate historical dilemma centered on the crowd itself—why would a community of citizens conspire, act on, and bear witness to the lynching of another person? When trying to make sense of this perspective of the images, findings revealed that participants did not move beyond a restricted historical empathy. In turn, this inability to make sense of community actions quite possibly influenced how pre-service teachers viewed lynching as a curriculum component. They recognized the horror of lynching and indicated that it is an important part of history. However, responses revealed a cognitive dissonance connecting lynching motivations to institutionally sanctioned racism in participants' own communities. While it was interesting and memorable that lynching occurred in the "backyard," participants were at a loss for

why. The reluctance or inability to delve into this *why* not only hampers empathy, but also restricts the curricular access for their future students.

Thus, our results suggest that the levels of historical inquiry and type of empathetic responses from the students were quite mixed. On retrospect, we should have afforded more opportunity to study the topic prior to engaging the exhibit through readings on post-Reconstruction America. Research suggests that to engage in more complex historical empathy, learners should have exposure to substantial background knowledge.⁷⁵ Providing such a foundation might have improved the empathetic connections made by the pre-service teachers. Yet, as Chikkatur notes, “there is not straightforward, predictable relationship between content and empathy or between empathy and action.”⁷⁶ Therefore, it might be outside the realm of history teacher educators to expect exposure to racially violent images to re-orient the historical narrative the same way for all students. Perhaps, it is even undesirable.

Careful analysis of their reactions to the lynching exhibit offers other important considerations and cautions for history teachers and history teacher educators. The pre-service teachers noted that the exhibit itself was important and students of history should be exposed to it. But, when asked how they would incorporate this particular exhibit into their own teaching, they often balked. Instead, they suggested that the material might be used on a conditional basis, such as in a separate course or first requiring permission slips—hardly the level of advocacy they proposed in describing their own interpretations of *Without Sanctuary*. Evidence suggests two related explanations for this pedagogical reluctance. First, participants were most enthralled by images and artifacts alluding to lynching in their home state. This aspect of the exhibit, as noted above, was most influential in their interpretations. Yet, that same rationale explains why teachers might be less likely to teach about lynching. Research in historical thinking acknowledges that cultural identity has substantial effect on how individuals make sense of the past.⁷⁷ People’s interpretations of the past do not take place in a vacuum. Rather, their lived experiences, their value systems, and their local histories shape these understandings.⁷⁸ Furthermore, because historical analysis is a sociocultural exercise, considering one’s own positionality to the past is necessary.⁷⁹

Findings from the current study imply that how history teachers choose to act as gatekeepers to the curriculum is also determined by their perceived cultural proximity to the history. They worried, perhaps realistically, about community backlash for exposing middle and high school students to these images. While their dialogue was guarded in the language of parental discretion, their decisions reflected a double-standard: it is permissible to show images from the Holocaust, but is problematic to do

the same for lynching. We posit that what made one set of images more accessible to others was not an issue of violence, but rather the cultural proximity of the acts (morally, historically, and geographical) to the lives of the pre-service teachers and their prospective students. Atrocities in a foreign Europe do not challenge the nation-as-progress U.S. historical narrative. However, racial violence in a post-slavery South indicts the cultural norms and customs embedded in the communities (and schools) where many of these future history teachers will work. Their hesitation to include these images in their own teaching is not a reluctance to incorporate this evidence in their interpretation of the past. Rather, it is a perceived fear that discussions and interpretations on these issues will conflict with community values. These are important considerations to consider for history teacher educators who encourage inquiry and want to encourage multiple perspectives from the past.

How teachers promote/construct narratives is also an important aspect to consider in analyzing instructional decision making. In her work, Bell suggests making sense of race and racism at curriculum level through storytelling.⁸⁰ She theorizes four types of stories. *Stock stories* represent the official, dominant narrative that perpetuates majority cultural values, norms, and behaviors, not unlike the freedom-quest narrative in history education.⁸¹ *Concealed stories* provided alternative versions and opinions of the stock stories. Similarly, Epstein, in her research with African American history students, notes that non-majority cultures respond differently to the official narrative found in schools.⁸² *Resistance stories* champion attempts to subvert the authority of the stock story. *Counter stories* are curriculum narratives that directly challenge the dominance of the stock story by providing alternative historical evidence. In social studies, counter and resistance stories relate to attempts by history educators to use critical race theory as challenge to the nation-as-progress framework.⁸³

Findings imply that these pre-service teachers' double-standard for advocating, yet denying, future students' access to the imagery may partially be explained by their own reliance and experience with stock stories and an unwillingness (and perhaps trepidation) to present a counter story. If the violence of lynching imagery was the rationale for exclusion, then why include Holocaust photos? Why fear reprisal from parents and administrators? This contradiction reflects the societal acceptance and hegemony of the stock story (read: freedom-quest narrative) over counter stories. Offering alternatives to the ubiquitous nation-as-progress history both challenges and daunts teachers. Because U.S. schooling often promotes a heritage approach to historical understanding, teachers' own exposure to the past is often concentrated or even contained in the

stock story. Therefore, for many teachers, it is not that they want to avoid counter-narratives, it is more likely that they do not know how to nurture them successfully.

Our study sought to understand how a group of pre-service history teachers might incorporate lynching images in their own instruction. We perhaps naively assumed that the teachers, who all agreed that these images were powerful source material for engaging race in U.S. history, would be enthusiastic about using them in their own teaching. As our study illustrates, there is distinct difference between pre-service teachers’ willingness to engage racially violent imagery on an individual level, and their willingness to incorporate it into their own teaching. We recommend that history teachers and history teacher educators provide support structures for embedding alternative stories within their own historical understandings. Though not the explicit focus of this study, culturally responsive teaching has the potential to promote these alternative narratives.⁸⁴ Encouraging pre-service teachers to interrogate their own understandings of history and how they complement or conflict with those of their potential students can facilitate the development of counter-stories. Perhaps the teachers examined in this case were not yet efficacious in these skills, thereby limiting their ability to encourage alternative historical narratives. Future research is needed to examine how history teachers’ efficacy in working with diverse student populations translates into culturally responsive history teaching and learning.

Conclusions

Instructionally, the findings from the research hold possibilities and problems for history teachers. Undoubtedly, these images remain an excellent instructional resource. For history teacher educators, they offer access to alternative historical perspectives that can challenge, rather than complement, the traditional historical narrative. The *Without Sanctuary* exhibit, currently a permanent fixture at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia, provided respondents an alternative history of race relations in America, questioning the un-erring progress of U.S. racial history. Moreover, the exhibit’s incorporation of local history furthered pre-service teachers’ understanding of how racial violence touched the community.

However, the cultural proximity of lynching to the local community and their exception to the ever-present, national narrative quite possibly contributed to curriculum conditions being preemptively imposed by the pre-service teachers. Because local lynching history did not align with their own stock stories of the past and their historical positionality with

those stories, teaching about race and violence in the community threatened to be difficult. It required a level of counter-story telling that would be uncomfortable for the majority white pre-service participants to engage with their future students. Moreover, while the pictures provided strong emotional responses to issues of race and history, participants revealed only minimal evidence of historical empathy. These findings imply that counter-stories as sources of history can simultaneously inform and restrict pedagogical decision making for teachers. Issues of race and history are particularly subject to the dynamics of the community, while results suggest that engaging in historical empathy is problematized by the contradiction between objective historiography and the conditions of empathetic regard. Understanding the motivations behind historical, racial violence is a challenging endeavor within the parameters of historical empathy. Our findings note that making empathetic connections is highly subjective and contingent upon to whom and how the connections are made. While it might help pre-service teachers re-orient their historical thinking, we also encourage history teacher educators to provide ample background knowledge and time to support this complex activity.

Once ignored in state curricula, historical perspective taking and interpretation is receiving greater emphasis. Recent Common Core standards in English/Language Arts require students to make sense of historical texts and engage in discipline-specific literacy.⁸⁵ We propose that exhibits, such as *Without Sanctuary*, can influence how participants take part in historical meaning making. For pre-service teachers, these exhibits present a unique opportunity not only to adjust their historical positionalities of our nation's racialized past, but also their treatment of it within the curriculum. More research needs to be conducted in the area of developing historical empathy through the use of historical images in pre-service teacher education programs; however, this experience gave us a starting point for engaging future teachers in the challenging practice of thinking beyond the safe, accepted norms of the freedom-quest narrative and offering opportunities for counter narratives in American history classes. As we learned through this research, white teachers may feel guilty or fearful of having these tough conversations, but in order to engage middle and high school students in developing a deep awareness of America's racialized past, we should create opportunities for critical analysis of images and authentic historical understanding.

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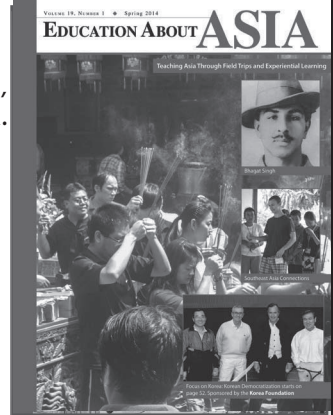
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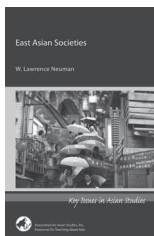
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