
A Pale Reflection of the Violent Truth? Practice and Pedagogy with a Digital Geography of American Lynching

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We propose a discussion of the pedagogical process and representational implications of our digital project, *The Red Record*. *The Red Record* is an open-ended, ongoing project created using [DH Press](#) that situates historic American lynchings, starting with those that took place in North Carolina, on a Cartesian map. In its current state the project offers primary source documentation and scholar-produced context for each of the 112 lynching events, which took the lives of 147 people in the state between 1865 and 1941. The initial project was undertaken by a seminar of first year students at the University of North Carolina, and subsequently amended with the research of two additional undergraduate classes. In the session proposed here, we detail the process of research and the intertwined workflow that simultaneously teaches students primary research skills and forces them to confront the legacies of racial violence inherent in the landscapes they live in. We suggest that the pedagogical model of this project has broader implications for the ways that digital representations might seek to engage diverse populations in understanding and contributing to the knowledge of the places they are from. In the papers here, we consider both the implications of digital representations of lynching, and the possibilities and practical obstacles in extending this project through student and community crowdsourcing.

Until recently, North Carolina has enjoyed a reputation as a less objectionable southern state,

whether as a “vale of humility” between the less commendable Virginia and South Carolina, or as a “business progressive” southern state, concerned enough about outside investment to control its citizens’ worst impulses. The problem of lynching, widely studied in states such as Georgia and Virginia, has received less attention from North Carolina’s scholars: the only monograph on the subject is a summary-study our research found to contain a number of errors. Visual scholarship on the subject is limited. In 2000, *Without Sanctuary*, a gruesome collection of lynching postcards, opened in New York and was soon followed by [a website](#) which still exists but which shows its age. *Without Sanctuary* was and is an important project, one that shocked viewers as to the extent of historical violence. Yet today, as we regularly witness violence against persons of color on social media or television news, we must wonder about troubling side effects of *Without Sanctuary*: that in presenting lynchings as sepia-toned horrors of the past, it appeared to relegate such violence to history and allow for a self-satisfied reassurance that this time had passed.

Such is the challenge for any project addressing historical trauma. Adding to this concern are questions of representation. In uncritically presenting images of lynchings, *Without Sanctuary* risked reproducing the work of those postcards, which traveled the country presenting damaged black bodies that titillated as much as it horrified, and even in their extremity regularized and commodified anti-Black violence. We know that lynchings themselves echoed across generations in Black communities (Wolf, 1992) did *Without Sanctuary* address that trauma or amplify it? Do the victims of lynchings have, in a sense, the right to be forgotten? (Causey, 2015) In pursuing *Locating Lynching*, we remained aware of these risks and encountered still more: how to choose visual anchors for our display, whether or not to publish images of trauma, how to share accounts of lynchings from the white and Black presses without false equivalence, what kinds of information to include about persons who do not deserve to be remembered only as victims. Our panel will address these issues in detail, share our solutions, and explain our next steps as we continue to work.

A key element of our project and our panel is pedagogy, both in terms of engaging undergraduate students with digital, primary-source research and in terms of engaging them with a traumatic subject. It is the rare undergraduate student, particularly in a seminar designed for first-year students, who is well-

equipped to conduct original research. But with the recent digitization of hundreds of thousands of pages of small-town newspapers, of censuses from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and of city directories and historic maps, the hidden histories of lynchings, their victims, and their perpetrators have never been more visible. As historians, we can and have learned stories from the darkened margins: We have learned the story a young man who escaped a lynching attempt and fled the state, ending up, married and with a son, as a doorman in the United Nations building in Manhattan. We have learned the names of the white men who kidnapped from jail an African American man jailed on a rape accusation and hanged him. We know these people's addresses, their occupations, the names of their parents and children. In both these marginal stories, and in the aggregating potential of digital visualizations, we can tell some small part of the abbreviated life stories of these people, albeit in the context of their deaths. Teaching undergraduate students the process whereby they can make these discoveries – as detailed in our nine-page [research guide](#) – can be transformative. We ask our students, who are awash in digital representation and misrepresentation, to carefully consider their choices in saving, commenting on, and presenting past identities.

Bibliography

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