In January 2000, a small photography exhibit opened at the Roth Horowitz Gallery on East Seventieth Street in New York. Called Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen, it assembled and displayed some sixty photographs that Allen, an antiques dealer from Atlanta, had collected over the course of fifteen years. Discovered by Allen in family albums, attic trunks, and flea markets, the photographs showed the victims and occasionally the perpetrators of lynchings from different times and places, from the end of Reconstruction to 1960, and from the Deep South to the Far West. The majority of the photographs, like the majority of lynchings, concerned African American men in the Jim Crow South. The images were mostly black-and-white and small, no more than a few inches long and wide; in fact many were postcards or had been mounted on card stock. They were laid flat on long display tables or assembled in tight groupings and tacked to the light-colored walls. The second-hand quality of the photographs—their images and card stock tattered, faded, or worn (some photographs, in fact, had been written on and used as postcards)—was evident for they had been neither retouched nor restored. Nor were they framed, matted, or extensively captioned. Instead they were offered as artifacts rather than as fine arts objects. That was unusual enough in an Upper East Side commercial gallery. Even more unusual, none were for sale.
The Roth Horowitz Gallery might have seemed the least likely place for such an exhibit. According to one early observer, Allen and his associate Jack Woody had initially approached the large and well-established International Center for Photography (ICP), a logical venue for an exhibition of historical photographs in New York. It had refused them. Unlike the ICP, with its spacious upper and lower galleries in Midtown Manhattan that could accommodate large crowds, and with its experienced security staff, the Roth Horowitz Gallery had a single room, about 25 by 25 feet, where crowd control and security had never been required. Andrew Roth, described as a “slight, bearded man who speaks with the measured care of a scholar,” and his partner, Glenn Horowitz, primarily a rare book dealer, had a long-standing interest in photography and had previously exhibited photographs. “I am photographically literate,” Roth declared to a reporter. But even as the exhibit opened, there was a sense that Witness would tax the resources of the small gallery. “I hope we don’t have crowds here,” Roth said.

They arrived, however, almost immediately. Long lines formed outside the gallery during the exhibition’s brief run, some visitors waiting three hours on the wintry sidewalks for their turn inside. As men and women jostled elbow-to-elbow, overwhelming the small room, Roth and Horowitz issued tickets to manage the throngs and limited the number of visitors to two hundred a day. Enthusiasm grew ever wider. Soon the nation knew of the photographs. CNN sent correspondents and posted videos of their reports on its Web site; the Today Show televised a segment from the gallery; the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer filmed an impassioned report by one of its lead journalists, Roger Rosenblatt; Stevie Wonder and Oprah Winfrey arranged for private (though well-publicized) tours. After the show closed at Roth Horowitz, it reopened almost immediately, in March, at the New-York Historical Society to even larger crowds. Renamed Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, which was also the title of an accompanying book assembled by Allen and published by Woody, the exhibition included not only Allen’s photographs and postcards but also materials from the society’s collection to provide a histori-
cal context for the images missing at Roth Horowitz. The society also organized weekly sessions and symposia so that visitors could discuss their responses to the images. Fifty thousand attended the exhibition in its first four months. A national tour began soon after. The show opened in 2001 at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, in 2002 at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Site in Atlanta, in early 2004 at Jackson State University in Mississippi, and later that same year at the Charles H. Wright Museum in Detroit, and in 2005 at the Chicago Historical Society.

At each new venue, the exhibition added more and more components, some large, some small, the most elaborate organized in Atlanta. There, the exhibition’s curators offered a counterhistory to the gruesome story the photographs suggested. Making use of the large space, carefully arranged glass cases, a video documentary, and mournful spirituals piped into the gallery, they produced an elaborate display of words, images, music, magazines, and posters documenting the efforts of Ida B. Wells, the African American journalist and social reformer; the NAACP; early twentieth-century leftist groups, including the Communist Party of the United States; the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching; and the American Crusade to End Lynching—in effect, a multimedia narrative that traced a persistent antilynching campaign in the Jim Crow South. With these materials they offered a less well-known story of activism and resistance among African Americans, a stark contrast to the history suggested by the helplessness of the victims pictured in the postcards. In a sense, the added materials competed with, or gave a proper sense of gravitas and perspective to, the photographs with their seemingly irresistible power. Perhaps because the Atlanta site had a charged history—Georgia and Mississippi were among the states where the largest number of recorded lynchings had occurred—or perhaps because of the civil rights legacy of the Martin Luther King Jr. site, or perhaps because James Allen ran into countless difficulties in trying to secure a venue in his hometown (“Most of the institutions weren’t even willing to look at the images,” he recalled), CNN, NPR, and the NewsHour, among many
other national news agencies, sent more reporters for another extended round of coverage.³

What began as an exhibition in a small New York gallery—modest, even reticent in its original display; unaccompanied by texts or argument or by informative documentation; its presenters unprepared for, even a bit startled by, such intense local and national interest—became the basis for a serious and strenuous national conversation. These photographs seemed to address the concern among scholars, repeated at each venue, that for too long there had been a collective amnesia about the gruesome yet all-too-common practice of lynching. Here was an antidote to forgetfulness, a challenge to those individuals or communities who preferred to deny these grim chapters in American history. The discussion about lynching and its photographs continues to this day.

Yet almost as soon as the crowds appeared to see the photographs in New York, another set of concerns came to the fore: how does one understand pictures that are ripped from their original places and times and assembled in an almost unrelieved display of murderous violence? What attitude is proper when viewing and making sense of them? What is the basis for our curiosity, or rage, or moral revulsion, or feelings of loss, or demands for righteousness? The title of the original exhibition at Roth Horowitz offered one answer, in that “Witness” might be likened to “bearing witness,” a form of honoring and mourning associated with the attention paid to the victims of the Holocaust. But that association, an effort to link atrocities from different times and places, has struck most observers as ineffectual in helping us understand the real historical meanings of violence and our responses to them.

Perhaps most disconcerting were the photographs themselves, which so often pictured not only the mutilated and dangling bodies of the lynched victims but also, all too frequently, the proud, laughing, self-righteous crowds who attended and participated in the lynchings (figure 1). In an uncomfortable sense, the crowds that gathered at Roth Horowitz and, later, at the other venues replicated the crowds that attended the original events, both groups of onlookers brought to the scene because of the spectacle of the lynch body.
The Atlanta exhibition, whose total number of visitors exceeded that of all the previous venues combined, attracted such numbers, not because of its careful and complex multimedia display of materials associated with the counterhistory of activism and resistance, but because of the horrific images in Allen’s collection. At the Roth Horowitz gallery, the similarities between the crowds in New York and those in the photographs must have been most acute. Because of that gallery’s intimate size, the postcards’ small format, and the modest table and wall display strategies, visitors often huddled together, hunched over the tables, or pushed their faces close to the walls in order to see the pictures more clearly. As they strained for a better view, they felt the warmth and nearness of the person next to them, jostling and angling their bodies this way and that as they moved past images of the victims. They appeared, and possibly felt, like the people in the pictures. “Viewers are left with an exhibit that is too close to the spectacle created by the lynchers themselves,” the historian Grace Hale lamented.

One of the oldest conventions of photography—to include a figure as a surrogate for the viewer, to orchestrate that figure in such a way, pointing, laughing, smiling, gesturing, as to cue our own proper regard of the scene (figure 2)—is seemingly nowhere more disjunctive, nowhere less suitable. We refuse to have surrogates in that picture, if by that we mean giving ourselves up wholly to the irrationality of the mob and its violence. When we focus on the hanged body, we do so for reasons, we declare. And if we gaze with a special intensity, looking scrupulously and insistently at each detail of the lynching, we say that our scrutiny differs in kind from the attention of those who were present. But why do we look, and for what ends? Those are the questions that inform this book.

This volume of Defining Moments of American Photography follows a course different from that of the other volumes in the series. Where those volumes focus on the work of a single photographer or that photographer’s most significant publication of images, this one focuses on pictures from different times and places that often have no known photographers associated with
them. Where other volumes decipher the meanings of photographs during the historical periods in which they were made, this one looks at how the meanings and uses of photographs have shifted through time and, especially, at what those meanings and uses are today.

Two scholars, one from American Studies, another from art history, propose some terms to understand how and why we look and to interpret what we see. Both writers visited the original exhibitions, one waiting with the crowds in the cold outside the Roth Horowitz Gallery, the other traveling to the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Site. They agree that looking at lynching photographs is something not to be shunned. The alternative is not to look—to avert, avoid, deny, and repress. But they take different approaches in formulating frames of reference and offer up different goals. As Shawn Michelle Smith reminds us, we are not the first people to look at these photographs; after all, they were made for contemporaries and sometimes circulated extraordinarily widely. Those people looked too, often with a self-consciousness about familiarity and distance, recognition and misrecognition, like our own today, and their responses sometimes bear striking resemblance to ours. By charting how historical actors across time—the photographers, journalists, and the victims and their families—viewed and used the pictures, we observe how the function of lynching photographs may have been evidentiary, but in the most fluid, malleable, and partisan fashion imaginable. We observe how lynching photographs make manifest the gap between photographic evidence and photographic meaning. Or, to put it another way, we learn how lynching photographs became evidence, how evidence was made into meaning, and how meaning was, and still is, related to political desire. Smith’s essay focuses on one photograph, Lawrence Beitler’s picture of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith (see fig. 2), and follows its rippling effect through time, including its use in recent congressional debates. She presents an object lesson for future activism.

Dora Apel also considers Beitler’s photograph, sees it in relation to other lynching photographs, and draws another conclusion about it. If pictures like
Beitler’s have a political function, as in recent congressional debates, and can be used to oppose their original purposes, that is because they are tied to the workings of shame and the anxieties surrounding sexuality. As she shows, the potential to make the photographs politically unruly can be glimpsed if we chart how they obtained their “shameful” meanings as they moved from private to more public viewing—that is, to the kind of viewing that took place in Witness and Without Sanctuary. Apel places lynching photographs on a continuum with other pictures of torture, comparing them to the recent and extraordinarily controversial images of Rodney King and the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. As she argues, the protocols of power evident in photographs of lynchings continue to structure the making of these images, while the shaming effects of their wide distribution, reinforced by memory and photography, help structure how we view them.

Together, Smith and Apel ask difficult questions about the dynamics and responsibilities of looking. Although they redefine the historical significance of early lynching photographs, as works that powerfully shaped the historical contours of American photography, they also push outward, in different directions, to suggest how these photographs touched and continue to touch the politics of spectatorship. Lynchings are defining moments in American history; how we define photographs of lynchings and measure our response to them will likewise leave an important legacy.