

“If the Evidence Were All Published It Would Present One of the Most Cruel and Heartless Episodes of History”: *On Archival Violence, Critical Fabulation, and Speculative History*

Anne Cross, University of Delaware

On July 28, 1866, Harper’s Weekly newspaper published a gruesome image that was intended to demonstrate the cruelty of the former slaveholding Confederacy, and the shocking violence that Black men and women continued to face in Reconstruction. The wood engraved illustration represents a young Black woman seated upon a chair with her dress stripped to her waist. With her back facing the reader, the woman turns to display the marks of abuse that she received at the hands of her former enslaver. Captioned “Marks of Punishment Inflicted Upon a Colored Servant in Richmond, Virginia,” Harper’s textual framing of the image suggests that the woman serves a merely symbolic role by obscuring her identity and locating the subject of the image in the site of her injured body. Echoing the formal composition and circulation of the infamous image of a formerly enslaved man known as both Gordon and Peter – also known as The Scourged Back – the woman’s scarred body is similarly employed as an index of cruelty, oriented in order to characterize the South as barbarous and unworthy of political compromise.

In this paper, I describe my ongoing engagement with the illustration of Martha Ann Banks and the archival violence that has displaced Martha Ann’s personhood from historical memory, while simultaneously confronting the political, ethical, and moral implications of my attempts at historical recovery. Wanting to learn more about the subject of Harper’s illustration, my research has led me to ask questions about what it means to work within an archive of racial subjugation – particularly as a white woman – and both the possibilities and limits of historical narration in recovering the lives of enslaved individuals. Drawing upon the work of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Laura Helton, Martha Hodes, Tina Campt, and Molly Rogers, this paper will examine how archivally-informed speculative history – what Hodes terms “leaps of grounded imagination,” or which Hartman has creatively theorized as “critical fabulation” – can allow historians to read against the violence of the archive, and the potentialities of this approach for a re-reading of photographs of racialized violence and the reimagining of Art History more broadly.

Anne Cross is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Delaware; her dissertation examines the publication of remediated images of atrocity in the Civil War mass press.

In 2017 Anne received a CASVA Predoctoral Fellowship to support her research on the transnational histories of racism and activist photojournalism in South Africa. Anne has also received grants from the Center for Material Culture Studies at the University of Delaware; a 2019 Joan and Stanford Alexander Award from the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and a 2020 Last Fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society. Currently she is serving as a Luce / ACLS Dissertation Fellow in American Art, as supported by the American Council of Learned Societies.

Anne received her Master’s degree in 2013 from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, and her Bachelor’s degree from New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study in 2009. Prior to attending the University of Delaware, she served as the Luce Fellow in American Prints at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.