In 2000, a photography exhibit that came to be called “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America,” opened in New York City and began traveling across the nation. The materials, which included lynching photographs and postcards, came from the collection of James Allen, who had collected the images from flea markets, antique shops, and individual purchases and wanted to share his findings with the public. Scholars from across the disciplines hailed the presentation of this exhibit (and the accompanying website and book) because the memorabilia of photographs and postcards as well as the accompanying texts of newspaper reports and placards identifying victims provided “irrefutable proof” of lynching’s existence in the United States. Many of the exhibit’s proponents believed that displaying lynching photography would help the U.S. to achieve a degree of racial reconciliation. Americans and tourists flocked to the exhibitions. Only by examining the comment books from the exhibitions that we can fully apprehend what, if anything, attendees learned from viewing Without Sanctuary. In this talk, Kidada E. Williams will share her research findings from her examination of materials from the Wright Museum’s “Bearing Witness, Baring our Souls” exhibition and consider whether the exhibition lived up to its promise.

Kidada E. Williams is an Associate Professor of History, where she teaches courses on African American and American History. She is the author of a new book titled They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I. She has also blogged about the legacies of racial violence in relation to the Trayvon Martin case and the “discovery” of Michelle Obama’s white ancestors.