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Can't Get Enough: The Logics of Evidence, Anti-Blackness, and American Art History

Alexis L. Boylan

The following essay contains language that readers may find disturbing or otherwise challenging to encounter.

> When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.
>
> —Maya Angelou, 1997

This essay is about enough. Or rather, what is the enough of the archives and the enough of art history? When has a point been made? When does analysis or evidence become compelling—and at what point does it stop being so? When, as scholars or as thinking people generally, do we know why, and when, we have reached enough? Is there a way to move past enough?

The essays in this suite argue against the art-historical narratives that have privileged notions of the "real" when considering the Ashcan Circle.[1] The authors smartly, perceptively, and sensitively refocus the gaze to show how Blackness was edited out, ignored, and fantastically and maliciously rearranged; how Blackness was excised from the "real." This is, on its face, not surprising, for as scholar Shawn Michele Smith reminds us, "In the United States, race has been one of the cultural inscriptions most defined by the dynamic of revelation and obfuscation, or hypervisibility and invisibility."[2] It is all there to talk about, and yet many seem to not want to speak about it at all. Similarly, Ashcan archives, written and visual, overflow with Blackness, most typically articulated in hatred and racism. The archives speak with consistency to Ashcan artists' obsessions with Blackness and their persistent—and insistent—anti-Blackness. So why is this collection the first to examine the topic in a focused and sustained way? Where has this dialogue been in the study of American art? "If colonial America and Americanist art-historical coloniality are to finally meet their end," argues collection coeditor Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw in her recent article about Ashcan artist John Sloan, "we must also engage the challenging and purposefully obfuscated materials in the archive."[3]

Blackness, or more to the point, anti-Blackness, has been all over the archives all along, but scholars, including myself, did not see it. That is not entirely true, however. Of course, I

saw it. I wrote a doctoral dissertation and then an entire book about whiteness and the Ashcan Circle that demanded years of picking though voluminous archives created by artists who would not shut up about themselves and their world. So, did I know that their letters and diaries are filled with the N-word? Yes. Did I know that there are photographs of George Luks in blackface? Totally. Did I mention either in my book about whiteness? Not really, no. Why? Well, to my mind, it was not *enough* to make my case.

Where did I get this toxic idea of enough? When did I decide that this clear, demonstrative, virulent anti-Blackness was not enough in making the case for Ashcan artists' desires to visualize whiteness and, more to the point, to visualize the superiority of whiteness? How did I, as a young scholar—and then as a not-so-young scholar—decide what evidence was or was not enough?

In our contemporary moment, enough has become the logic of white, heteronormative grievance and outrage for diverse streams of the conservative movement and far right that have coalesced into the second Trump presidency. Enough gives energy to popular and policy efforts to stymie and reverse the gains of a plethora of social justice movements for racial equality, public health, and LGBTQ+ rights, including, most recently, the destruction of DEI initiatives and programs. The essence of enough is formulated around a professed conventional wisdom that some ideas, even some good ones, have been pushed too far or reached some dangerous tipping point into, at best, redundancy or, at worst, "American carnage."[4] The spectrum shares the belief that the time has come to say enough is enough. Enough to "woke" theories, enough to those who demand police accountability, enough to those who equate the US carceral system with the plantation, enough to masking children, enough to demands for reparations, enough to birthright citizenship, enough to the 1619 Project, enough to more than two genders. The logic of these decisions and policies all instruct that enough time has passed, enough payment has been made, enough dialogue has been had, enough guilt has been felt, enough discomfort has been survived. And now there must be a correction. What becomes clear is that conceptions of enough are always already racially constructed. Enough is about too much, needing to go back; it is a desire not only to stop time but reverse it; and enough is ultimately about who has power to dictate what constitutes it. Enough is the end of a perceived permissiveness and return to a supposed stable authority. Enough is a unified history. Enough is all of "us" being on one page. Enough, in other words, is an assertion of white supremacy and power grounded in self-righteous entitlement, unmarked structural privilege, and violence.

While these fights around history, evidence, fairness, and enough have massive, far-reaching impacts, I want to argue that the kind of enough we as scholars propagate and police—and specifically scholars of US art history and visual culture—are no less rooted in an anti-Blackness. There is a fundamental paradox at the core of our relationships to archives and ideas about history and truth. Archives reify power dynamics by design through the organization of knowledge, choice in preservation, rules of accessibility, silence, and omission; they simply will not reveal the human accounting, lives, and stories that they were constructed to deny and disappear. As scholar Saidiya Hartman writes, "Every historian of the multitude, the disposed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed the gravity and authority of historical actor."[5]

The paradox lies in the fact that this is not the root of our issue with scholarship about the Ashcan Circle. These artists never stopped narrating themselves when they were alive, and because of their status as culturally prominent white men, most of their musings about themselves and their world are safely stored away in numerous well-funded, accessible archives, while their paintings hang in museums, their perceived value and condition both secure.

This is not the archival problem Hartman addresses and is, in fact, part of the very structural conditions that create it. Ashcan archival abundance operates in similar ways, however. Why is it that what *is* in the archives, in the paintings, and in all the various kinds of images the Ashcan Circle produced is so often very purposely unseen, particularly representations of Black people? What are the white supremacist ways of seeing that bring some images and text to the foreground and push away or simply gloss over the others? How are these ways crafted, taught, and made institutional? In the economies of the archives, when do we think we know we have seen enough?

Like the culture at large (and of which it is a part), anti-Blackness has defined the parameters of knowing and seeing, so that anti-Blackness and the history of US art and visual culture are one and the same. Hartman and others have shown us paths to the truer pictures, richer stories, and "beautiful experiments" that lie beyond the archives, and they are made by unpacking what was there all along.[6]

They demand the kind of work exemplified by the authors in this collection: the work of exposure and critical publicity. Yet this moment also affords the opportunity for reflection, as it is well past the time to confront, as a field, the problem of what is enough, how we teach when enough is enough, and what we could see and build if we abandoned the logics of enough.

Fig. 1. George Bellows, *Blue Morning*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 34 x 44 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.82

It shook me to learn, as a graduate student in the 1990s, that Robert Henri was a super-racist asshole. This was, in fact, the very first lesson I learned at the archives when I started research for my dissertation (which later became my first book). He was, after all, basically Mr. Wonderful in all the books I read about him, the Ashcan Circle, and the progressive world of New York at the turn of the twentieth century. He was the "good guy" who stood against conservative and elitist art forces, ran around with and promoted a group of fellow rebels (he was friends with Emma Goldman!), and painted the "real" city around him. Henri himself wrote about how wonderful he was and his ideas about humanity, art, and realism. His book *Art Spirit*, which celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary in 2023, remains in print and, surprisingly, is currently clocking a 4.6 rating on Amazon and is ranked thirteenth in the online behemoth's "Art and

Photography Criticism" category.[7] Sure, the canonical narrative bemoans that the Ashcan men missed the boat with modernism and the Armory Show because American art history was, like European art history, a story of progress and forward momentum. Nevertheless, in their moment, Henri and his men were the real deal. This was the basic storyline repeated by most the sources about Henri and the Ashcan Circle before the twenty-first century.[8]

In my research, my first big step after a review of all the secondary sources was to hit the archives. I was psyched. As per the procedure at the time, I had to first write a letter to the Archives of American Art (AAA) in New York to ask for permission to look at the earliest writings and diaries of Henri. This was, technologically speaking, about a hundred million years ago, when some collections that were held in the AAA still were inaccessible unless you had written permission from an estate executor. Who was granted or not granted permission was unclear to me, but I stressed about it *a lot*, wrote my letter, and waited. I was thrilled to be granted permission. I felt part of the inner circle and like a real historian who had been admitted to the special, secret world of the archival cloister. I had been deemed worthy by their mysterious metrics. I took my letter to the AAA office in New York, and they handed me microfilm reels. My journey into the archives had begun.

To say I was distressed when I read the first spate of entries would be an understatement. I do not have the description of the collection from that time, but this is the current AAA description of Henri's journals:

> Reel 1654: Robert Henri diary, May to November 1880. Henri writes about his daily activities as a 15-year-old boy growing up on the Platte River, including entries on family events, playing with his brothers and friends, fishing, celebrating July 4th, bailing hay for his father, a dance and fair, and houses in Cozad, Nebraska (122 pages).[9]

I was expecting something along these lines. Some teenage ramblings, maybe some art talk, likely nothing too noteworthy. What I encountered was not nothing. In just the first few pages, Henri drops the N-word and writes a story about a minstrel with "bones, banjo, tambourine and a fiddle. The 'bones n****r' and the tambourinist [*sic*] are 'cutting shimes' and the others presenting a funny appearance."[10] Later he describes himself as having "entered the dining room with the swagger of a negro wench" (July 16, 1880). This was not the wholesome teenager I had been led to expect. In entries from a few years later, he writes, "Frank [Henri's brother] brought home the stomach (inflated) of the negro he is dissecting on. He has still got some of the black pigmentary skin of his n****r pasted in his scrapbook" (October 28, 1886). Later that same year, he makes a note that when visiting a museum he saw "black faced artists" (November 25, 1886). These quotes are all from the notes I took by hand, because as a grad student I could not afford to photocopy everything. What I did photocopy was Henri retelling a story about how he and his aforementioned medical-student brother argued, along with other students who were "Southerners," that Black students should not be admitted to medical school with the white students (November 17, 19, 1886).

I knew in that moment, as I took my notes and photocopied pages, that this was why the diaries had been restricted. This was not the heroic Henri from the art-historical canon. But I remember so clearly the near simultaneous deluge of self-doubt. I knew what I had

read, but I also knew that all of the scholars before me had read it as well—and none of them had mentioned this. His archive demonstrates that Henri was obsessed with Black Americans and deeply engaged in racist and genocidal theories (he had just as many opinions about Native Americans) as a teenager and then a young man in art school. *Everyone knew it.* And now I knew it. But I was sure I had something wrong and must have misunderstood. I am sure I sung to myself that most treacherous white person's tune: "Everyone talked that way back then, he's just a figure of his time." Did I ask my advisors about it, or ask them what to do? No. No way. I worried such questions would out me as not knowing how to do art history and "real" archival research. Instead, I tried to make the logic work in my head. I followed the lead of the scholars before me, the ones who had published and lived the life of the art historian I wanted to be. I assumed their lead was the right one. The violent racism that threaded through Henri's life and development as an artist was clearly not *enough*—so much so that it was not even worth mentioning in all previous scholarship.

This was my formative experience with the archives. I was looking for a dialogue about masculinity but found it entwined with anti-Blackness and white supremacy, so common as to be unremarkable. When I went to look at Sloan's diaries, I saw it again. The N-word was everywhere. But, as Shaw notes, it was not exactly anywhere. In the version of Sloan's diaries that had been published, that word had been excised. But in the archives, Sloan's hateful words were preserved.[11] The originals speak clearly, but scholars, me now included, refused to read them.

All of this editing, trimming, and refusal to believe the words that the artists used had and has significant implications for how US visual culture is understood, taught, and produced. As Shaw reminds us, "[Sloan's] attitudes helped to institutionalize racism in two of the most prominent American art schools in the early-1900s, affecting both his colleagues—including [Everett] Shinn and Henri—and impacting younger artists who studied with him at PAFA [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts] and the Art Students League."[12] Sloan, in other words, cast a wide net in terms of his impact, not to mention that his work is hanging along with his Ashcan peers in countless art museums where he is framed as emblematic of—and instrumental to—US realism. Thus, what Shaw fears is really compounded with each scholar who twisted his words, only further distorting the artist's impact and import, pulling it away from a truth that the archives spoke again and again.

I learned this lesson of silence so well that when I was wrapping up my book a decade later—a project that had expanded to be about race and gender, in which I was willing to speak with more clarity about the racism of this group of artists and the white supremacist, genocidal implications of the way the Ashcan Circle depicted white, male bodies—I still did not think it was really enough. In my final review of Henri's papers (that had by then been donated to Yale University, where I no longer needed written permission to look at them but had to again jump through a lot of hoops to see the materials), I noted his ebullient letter to William Glackens in 1914 about his latest paintings. The correspondence included the line: "I have brought home a tribe of indians a tribe of chinks and a tribe of greasers and I want to show them to you."[13] Henri was older but he was still obsessed with racial domination. He was the same. I, too, was older, and I, too, was the same, editing the artists' archives of their most violent and closely held fantasies of racial domination. All that time and, still, this language, this proof, was somehow not enough or had tipped into being enough's trusty sidekick: "too much."

This essay is not meant to be another cloying confession of white guilt or appeal to absolution, nor is it intended as some justification for my past scholarship or the rehabilitation of it by others. Rather, I offer it as an emblematic story of how anti-Blackness is taught, learned, and then unseen when confronted with its evidence in the archives. I was writing about whiteness, and to be clear, whiteness is not Blackness, nor is it simply or only anti-Blackness. But to leave so much to the side, to unsee—and thus make unseeable for others—this much, bespeaks what I remember fearing was overdetermining my point. I remember worrying that if the Ashcan men were understood as simply and hatefully racist, as simply hating Blacks, then what they said about whiteness would be dismissed. I wanted to speak to the more subtle acts of white supremacy in their project but feared that their complex gendered racial project of visual displacing would be lost if they could be viewed as "simply" racist. This was my enough, but it was also (like my white privilege) my inherited enough. This language had been removed, ignored, and written out before. I had been shown over and over that these words could be detached from their meanings, and so I did that too. To borrow from the Angelou quote, I did not believe what the artists themselves had told me about their art, their ideas, and their relation to the real.

While I certainly wish, as I know many scholars do, I could go back and make changes to my work, what is more upsetting to me now is that I did not know to demand my own accounting of enough. Because what is clear—and my notes from that very first visit to the archives sell me out here—I knew this language in Henri's diary was about whiteness and gender, but it was as much about violence and anti-Blackness. I knew it was important, and I knew it was fundamental to understanding this artist, his art, and the subsequent affection for both. I knew it was about hating Black bodies. I went to the archives, and I knew that I had found what I was looking for. And then I unlearned it, and with the quiet guidance of my field became another white scholar acclimated to and perpetrating this violence. Scholar Tanya Sheehan writes that historians of US visual culture have "been traditionally fond of 'smoking gun' scholarship, which resists the process of critical fabulation for which Hartman advocates, but white scholars have also been reluctant to assert themselves into the archive of slavery, imagining its silences as not theirs to fill."[14] I wish the refusal to "assert" was the only missed opportunity, the only crime here. But what my thwarted journey, and indeed all the essays in this collection, suggest as a reparative perspective is that the problem is even more damning than Sheehan suggests. Even when we have the smoking gun, many of us put it back in the archival folder and tell ourselves we already have enough.

Scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us that "the historicity of the human condition also required that the practices of power and domination be renewed. It is that renewal that should concern us most."[15] The renewal is the moment in which we teach each other—in our writings and in the classroom—what enough might be. This means pivoting to the uglier, less polite questions about the implications of this enough and to the anti-Black work that art-historical scholarship has nurtured and renews. If this is the story of obfuscation and the disappearing of Ashcan histories in a very well-tended archive, how do we judge and move forward with all the other well-tended archives and understandings that the very historiography our whole field is rooted in? How do we, in other words, write this history differently, when the very ground is built around the visceral disgust, repulsion, obsession, and desire that white artists and scholars have had

for Black bodies? Trouillot demands we confront the renewal, and this demands not only that we ask how we as a field got here, but where we are going.

Returning to Sheehan, she comes at this issue from a slightly different perspective but with conclusions that suggest a future. Arguing that the field of American art history "has been slow to recognize slavery's shaping of visual production over centuries and has only begun to address historiography's persistent devaluation of Black lives," we need instead to "to understand that slavery defines the very concept of what it means to be American, regardless of one's racial identity. This means that *any object or moment, past or present*, has been touched by slavery."[16] She concludes by demanding that "it is long past time for historians of American art to issue a formal apology for saying so little about the enslavement and racial segregation of African Americans, and it should begin—but not end—by laying bare the entire field and its canon to critical scrutiny."[17]

This idea of "laying bare" can be seen to speak directly to how we think of archives and, more broadly, of evidence. For if we understand and truly and deeply embrace the notion that the archives and evidence we look to are always potential sites of creativity, fiction, violence, and fantasy, we can perhaps reshape what kind of work happens there. Or, to put it another way, we can more openly confront how enough has been the agent of white supremacy and has shaped our past. Then, we can perhaps move past enough into a kind of story and knowledge making that is rooted in new bodies, new dialogues, and new potentials.

Archives have been positioned as the location of this precious evidence, as opposed to being understood as part of the process of alienation and white supremacy. We must constantly remember and come to these places, these lives, these stories with an underlying understanding that historically all this collecting, all these paradigms that created aesthetics and timelines and proof, was in service to the constant renewal of white supremacy. It has always been about silencing Black voices, Black lives, Black stories.

Again, so much about this "In the Round" collection of essays and how the authors have constructed their arguments starts the very hard and necessary work of breaking through this enough. All of the authors have come to the archives refusing to look away, believing what the historical actors wrote and painted *first* and seeing these documents as speaking very much, consistently, and with specific intent to Blackness. Finding a way forward also demands accounting for when, as scholars, we have policed what is and is not enough evidence and assessed what violence can and has done. It also demands listening to those who are challenging enough and learning new ways to think through what histories we might tell.

I will conclude with some thoughts inspired by this collection about how we can, as a field, begin again. There needs to be more work and consideration to the historiographies and present practices of archives: the history of permissions and restrictions, the awareness of whispered insights, and the practices of collection management. One of the very interesting elements of Shaw's discussion of Sloan, for example, is what individual archivists pointed her to, what they told her to look for when she hit the archives. Every scholar has these experiences, or their inverse: of being led away from or discouraged from viewing documents and objects or prohibited from following certain leads. The role

of archivists and their often very difficult work amid complex institutions that are not invested in any storytelling that is not by their measure 100 percent positive needs to be more seriously discussed. Archivists are not properly compensated and experience a great deal of job insecurity, all the more so in our current political climate. Yet they are frontline workers, so to speak, and within the academy they are, whether they want to be or not, effectively gatekeepers. More bright light, more dialogue, more collaboration, and more documentation of the history of collections are crucial steps toward both empowering and demystifying these locations.

This goes for museums, too, which have long used institutional structures to slow or even stymie research and the interrogation of images that do not fit neatly into triumphant narratives about the history of art and the artist. Equally worrisome is the recent trend by several museums, most notably the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, to close exhibition halls under the auspices of following amended regulations of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). While objects in these halls have long been contested and need immediate removal and return or recontextualization, closing them down entirely is the ultimate flex of an institution calling enough on critical engagement and dialogue. To simply take away these spaces, rather than to confront the process in an open manner, suggests that exhibition spaces, art, science, and knowledge can only be evaluated by experts and then delivered from on high as definitive statements. The AMNH seems to demand we accept *their* look. Yet this defense posturing repeats and renews the very same problematic relationships of evidence, object, audience, authority, and education. We need to demand that museums see the value and their worth in destabilizing their collections and objects to tell more stories, even the ugly ones about the institutions themselves.

Finally, as Sheehan and others have suggested, we must speak not only to the history and legacies of slavery but also to the very same violent origin story that has consistently used visual culture to renew the notion that the Black body is to be disappeared. We need a more considered and united dialogue about what we teach about framing knowledge creation. The fear, of course, is that if we tell students and ourselves that the ground we walk is contested, hateful, duplicitous, or fictive, some will cry, "Enough!" Indeed, our colleagues working at Florida universities and colleges are living with very real threat to their jobs when they speak against enough and teach the history of the United States as the history of slavery and anti-Blackness. Yet, to not stand against enough is a disservice to our field and our students in imagining that they do not, or cannot, see multiple perspectives and shifting terrain and in presuming that protecting the sensibilities of some is worth leaving unseen the history, experience, *and presence* of others. We can no longer be silent to the violence of this white obliteration of Black and other non-white lives and histories. The time has come to find more, to see the pain and the potential beautiful fullness of what lies beyond enough.

Alexis L. Boylan is professor of art history and Africana studies at the University of Connecticut.

Notes

[1] As I argue in my book, while many refer to this group as the "Ashcan School," I refer to it as the "Ashcan Circle." Both terms suggest the traditional art-historical linguistic manipulations in which artistic collaboration is retroactively given the aura of institutionalization, professionalization, and authority. Yet, particularly for this group of friends, the idea of a "school" places too many constructs of teacher/student hierarchies on these men and diminishes the intimate friendships and alliances—artistic and otherwise—that they shared. If they were anything, they were a circle. See Alexis L. Boylan, *Ashcan Art, Whiteness, and the Unspectacular Man* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 12–16.

[2] Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Duke University Press, 2013), 14.

[3] Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "The Decolonization of John Sloan," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12714.

[4] President Donald J. Trump, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2017, accessed May 20, 2025, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address.

[5] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (W. W. Norton, 2019), xiii.

[6] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xx.

[7] Product page for Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, 85th anniversary edition, *amazon*, accessed January 27, 2025 https://www.amazon.com/Art-Spirit-Robert-Henri/dp/0465002633.

[8] In earlier work, I do cite my sources. See Alexis L. Boylan, *Ashcan Art, Whiteness, and the Unspectacular Man* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 14–16.

[9] See "Robert Henri papers, 1870–1954," Archives of American Art, accessed January 27, 2025, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/robert-henri-papers-7731.

[10] Robert Henri, diary entry, July 16, 1880, Robert Henri papers, 1870–1954, reel 1654, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Subsequent diary references in parentheses.

[11] See Shaw, "Decolonization of John Sloan," esp. nn. 3–5.

[12] Shaw, "Decolonization of John Sloan."

[13] Henri to William Glackens, October 24, 1914, Yale Collection of American Literature MS 100, box 4, folder 91, Robert Henri Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT. See also https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/514706.

[14] Tanya Sheehan, "American Art Historiography, Slavery, and Its Aftermath," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 53 (November 2023): 10.

[15] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon: 1995), 151.

[16] Sheehan, "American Art Historiography," 9, 13.

[17] Sheehan, "American Art Historiography," 14.