Reimagining the Black Body through Portraiture: Interpreting the Functional and Societal Roles of Photography and the Reconstructive Power of Camera Technology and Photographic Images for African American Self Image

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Reimagining the Black Body through Portraiture: Interpreting the Functional and Societal Roles of Photography and the Reconstructive Power of Camera Technology and Photographic Images for African American Self Image

submitted to
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and
Professor James Morrison

by
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Abstract

This thesis addresses the multiple ways in which the medium of photography, and specifically the portrait photograph, enabled African Americans to visually contest degrading portrayals of blackness and reclaim stolen agency in producing depictions of self throughout the media and popular culture. The societal reverberations of camera technology on the emergence of black photographers like Richard Samuel Roberts, James VanDerZee, and Gordon Parks are analyzed, and the images taken by these artists are read against a history of racist stereotypes, reconsidered for their aesthetic contributions to the art world, and interpreted within the tradition of African American photography. A brief historical introduction on the development and perpetuation of myths about blackness is included to contextualize the preexisting visual environment in which photography emerged, outlining the obstacles this new media served to overcome. Since photographs are multidimensional, metaphorically speaking, the portrait is fragmented into its constituent parts and then positioned within selected subgenres of portraiture such as documentary, fashion, and snapshot in order to assess the overall impact of these photographic styles on African American self image. Discussing photography exhibitions based on the technological history of portraiture and its cultural influence on shaping black identities helps resolve lingering uncertainties about the relevancy of images and past methods of exhibiting blackness, especially in historically white spaces such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the International Center of Photography. A conclusion is reached after examining the burden of representation placed on black artists, as defined by Kobena Mercer, and exploring some techniques employed by black photographers and art critics to reposition the black body within a new aesthetic framework. A personal note on the current and future state of black photographic representation is finally and carefully considered.
Keywords: Blackness, Black Body, Black Photography, African American Photography, Portraiture, Fashion Photography, Representation, Photographic Images, Black Art, Snapshots, Visual Culture, Camera Technology
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This thesis was completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Digital Media Studies Program in the Department of Intercollegiate Media Studies at Claremont McKenna College, a member of the Claremont Colleges Consortium. It represents the culmination of four years of study in the subject of media studies, including components of history, theory, and practice. Completing this project in the midst of a pandemic was not a seamless undertaking, yet there were key individuals who made the writing process a bit more bearable and enjoyable.

My thesis readers—James Morisson, Professor of Modern Literature and Film at Claremont McKenna College, and Andrew Long, Professor of Media Studies at Pomona College—are the primary recipients of my gratitude because it is their thoughtful feedback and encouraging words during the semester that guided my research and helped me organize my ideas. I am especially grateful for them accepting my delayed request to serve as readers on my project because I did not originally plan to write a paper. I am extremely happy with my final decision, as this project quickly turned into a labor of love. The knowledge and mentorship Professor Morisson and Professor Long shared with me was invaluable, and I look forward to building on these teachings as I hope to pursue an MFA in Photography in the near future.

I would also like to express appreciation for my mentee and best friend, Alicia Reynaga, who always cheers me up with a warm text or unexpected phone call. Your support does not go unnoticed, and I am so grateful for our bond.

Lastly, I would like to thank Claremont McKenna College for giving me the chance to study abroad. It was during my time studying media in Thessaloniki and photography in Prague when I truly cultivated my curiosity about photographic images and began to shape my identity as a black photographer. I am forever grateful for the opportunity.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the black people who—at one moment or another—struggled or continue to struggle to love all parts of themselves, unconditionally.
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Preface

It happened abruptly, so I never really had the chance to process the world and my college campus shutting down due to the global pandemic. After finishing my courses during the 2020 spring semester from a remote location in Corona, California, I realized that it had been nearly a year since I last visited my home in Little Rock, Arkansas. As I write these words, over two years have now passed since my last visit to Arkansas in 2018.

For me, I always struggled to feel at home in Arkansas. I mean, it never gave me a sense of comfort and acceptance in the ways I know an honest home should. After leaving for college in 2017, I actively avoided traveling back to my hometown. The pandemic actually gave me an excuse to not return home, but it certainly did not make processing my unresolved emotions about community, family, and home any easier.

A few months ago, my dad visited me in Claremont for Thanksgiving and Christmas, a decision I cautioned due to the possibility of spreading and contracting COVID-19, but he insisted. On a side note, we simply must stop celebrating and entertaining holidays connected to cultures of colonization. During his visit, he left me a photo album with pictures of me during my toddler years as well as snapshots of relatives and old family gatherings. The images depict my parents as a happy couple deeply in love. I rarely saw this aspect of their relationship, yet here it was pictured before my eyes. Seeing the three of us together, smiling for the camera as a whole family, warmed my heart but sadly reminded me of how few memories I had of us together, cheerful and not angry or frustrated over whose week it was or other senseless drama.

Sometimes, I wish we could travel backwards in time to happier moments. Unfortunately, this is not a possibility in our world, at least not yet. Instead, we have photographs, our modern way of reconciling the past while freezing and framing significant moments in time for the
opportunity to one day reflect on these images and remind ourselves of the good days, should this rumination on representation be of interest… because the past has not always been fair to everyone’s history. It can be difficult to revisit, but necessary nonetheless.

In reading these chapters, I hope you come to appreciate images and their ability to influence, dictate, and liberate—as I surely have. Representation is a powerful rendering within our society, and it is developed directly by the images we share, approve, and omit from public view. The content presented in this thesis is an introduction to the world of photographic representation and its positive and negative outcomes on the black body depicted throughout popular culture. Much more detail on the subject at hand can be disclosed upon deeper reflections, and the same can be said for any given photograph.
Introduction: The World of Images, Pictured and Performed

Photography not only revolutionized visual representation but made it available to those previously cut off from its more bourgeois expressions in painting and sculpture, and Americans of all stripes were swept up by the democratizing promise of the new technology.

~ Maurice Wallice and Shawn Smith, Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity

Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to reconstruct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye.

~ bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life” in Art on My Mind: Visual Politics

They say a single picture is worth a thousand words. If this is true, then there exists a community of people who were historically silenced from traditional modes of image production.

Prior to the discovery of photography in 1827 when Joseph Nicéphore Niépce captured the oldest surviving photograph of a scene from his balcony in La Gras, France through a technique known as heliography, the world of images emerged through painting and performance. Traditionally, access to create and license to attend these moments of spectacle and artistic expression remained unequal across racial lines, especially during the era of slavery within the United States. In fact, the majority of images published in advertisements and news outlets often mirrored the sentiments of the segregated south whereby “southern paintings by white artists showed African Americans as largely dehumanized caricatures, black stereotypes rather than distinct individuals.”¹ Common portrayals of black features included exaggerated skin as the color of coal, unreasonably large teeth, and oversized lips—which collectively aided

in the effort to justify white denial of black humanity by constructing restrictive, demeaning stereotypes built on myth and visual misrepresentation.\textsuperscript{2} These styles of depiction extended to the performance plane via the minstrel tradition where white actors blackened their faces, painted an excessively broad mouth, and used “a broken English dialect ascribed to black Americans, a language labeled negro dialect” as a way to parody and ridicule the appearance, dress, and vernacular of African Americans.\textsuperscript{3} Ultimately, these illustrations of blackness affirmed the brutal conditions of black life and produced demeaning sketches of personhood, which actively ignored how black people uniquely viewed themselves. One can clearly see how images influence our understanding of society and our relationship with ourselves. They construct our ways of seeing the world and our position within it, especially when the images we consume lead us to believe false narratives about access to space and definitions of beauty.

In his essay “Myth Today” in \textit{Mythologies}, French philosopher Roland Barthes recounts a moment when he observed how representation works to develop alternative truths through methods of mythical speech. In this anecdote, Barthes is shown a copy of \textit{Paris-Match}, a French magazine, which displays on its cover an image of “a young Negro man in a French uniform

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2}James, Alton Everette, “Images of African Americans in Southern Painting, 1840-1940,” 68.
\item \textsuperscript{3}Karen Linn, \textit{The Half- Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture}, (Urbana, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 50.
\end{itemize}
saluting with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed with his eyes on the tricolor.”

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, it is necessary to consider how each signifier in an image is translated into its appropriate concept when deciphering the encoded myth. For example, he observes the set of signs—including a soldier, a uniform, a raised arm, a French flag, and fixated eyes—which collectively amount to concepts that denote meaning: a black soldier is giving the French salute, as explained by Barthes. However, as acknowledged by Bathes and Hall, there is deeper meaning concentrated within the image’s form and presentation, which signifies that “France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.”

The primary danger of myths rests in their ability to replace fact with fiction. By leveraging signs to signal false meaning, myths operate by reaching into the past for previously defined concepts and reaffirming their denotations through visual symbols and erroneous speech. However, the ambiguous act is often subtle, as the mythologist always takes care never to disclose fully the intent to obfuscate reality. Over time, the language deployed through myths results in two consequences for signification, which appear like a notification and a statement of fact, the latter of which is most troubling because it establishes connotations that diverge from

reality.⁷ In the case of the picture on Paris-Match, the black child and the community he symbolizes are deprived of their history as the mythological concepts distort the meaning of their existence.⁸ Barthes concludes the discussion with a promise:

This distortion is not an obliteration: the Negro remains here, the concept needs him; he is half-amputated, he is deprived of memory, not of existence: he is at once stubborn, silently rooted there, and garrulous, a speech wholly at the service of the concept. The concept, literally, deforms, but does not abolish the meaning; a word can perfectly render this contradiction: it alienates it.⁹

Thankfully, what fails to be obliterated can eventually be restored through the presentation of counter narratives and honest histories that subvert mythological meaning. Effectively, myths quietly manipulate our ways of seeing the world through images, constantly shaping the collective conscience with half-truths and false facts.

In his book Ways of Seeing, British art critic John Berger expands the conversation surrounding modes of interpretation by mentioning how “seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”¹⁰ Therefore, the physical realities surrounding us, including the world of images, penetrate our psyche prior to words, which are then used to describe the societies we occupy. These visual realities are ubiquitous, but not necessarily real in the sense of them holding objective impartiality to the objects they represent, as we have already begun to observe mechanisms for exacting control through images. Operating as interpretations of the real and memories of the past, images act as a bridge between past meaning and present

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⁷Ibid, 123.
⁸Ibid, 121.
⁹Ibid.
understanding where the interplay between the two is never fixed, but rather constantly in flux.

As asserted by Berger,

Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter's way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.\textsuperscript{11}

If perception of an image is determined by societal constructions of seeing, then it is easy to conclude why images are also a function of our beliefs. Furthermore, Berger implies close similarities between photography and painting, but I would argue images, especially photographic images, embody a distinct way of seeing due to the inherent promise made to the viewer by the nature of the medium: an implication that the photograph is supposedly a direct reflection of reality. This difference in essentiality in conjunction with other functional distinctions situates photography as an accessible tool for reconfiguring realities.

With this appreciation, it is essential to address how photography exists apart from painting and other methods of image production. In a series of essays \textit{On Photography}, American philosopher Susan Sontag convincingly advocates for the separation of painting from photography, claiming that photographic images have virtually unlimited authority in modern society, and the scope of this authority stems directly from the properties peculiar to images taken by cameras.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, photographs possess unique characteristics not present in paintings, and Sontag summarizes this thought in the following manner:

First of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of

\textsuperscript{11}John Berger, \textit{Ways of Seeing}, 10.
resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation—a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be.\textsuperscript{13}

At best, paintings can resemble the objects captured in photographs, but they can never replace the images produced by the medium, as the initial joy of photography arose from its widespread accessibility, casually reversing the common practice of gatekeeping who could rightfully contribute to the world of images.

Historically, paintings signaled status and class, as it was a privilege to own a painted portrait of oneself and a luxury to engage in the art of painting. In the context of colonialism, the colonizer was always careful to strip colonized subjects of their agency and humanity by comparing them to animals and classifying them as uncivilized, ultimately leaving oppressed communities defenseless in the face of their stereotyped portrayals.\textsuperscript{14} In describing the situation between colonizer and colonized, Francophone poet Aimé Césaire mentions “relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, the act of colonization and its complementary engagements of enslavement, stereotyping, and mythologizing invariably objectified the colonized body, similar to how the black man positioned on the cover of \textit{Paris Match} was reduced to an object—a thing—dedicated wholly to serve at the pleasure of the colonizer and his political agenda. Under these circumstances, myths about blackness were internalized by society and slowly integrated into daily exchanges between communities as universal facts of life despite their moral illegitimacy. Nevertheless, these social conditions and degrading depictions did not entirely dictate how black people viewed themselves in private life.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13}Susan Sontag, \textit{On Photography}, 120.  \\
\textsuperscript{15}Aimé Césaire, \textit{Discourse on Colonialism}, 42.  \\
\end{flushright}
The invention of photography presented a challenge to popular portrayals of blackness and the social restrictions imposed on image production by democratizing access to camera technology, thereby emancipating space in visual culture for alternative perspectives to surface. It offered a chance to redistribute ownership of image production and distort the notions disseminated through myths, contributing to a predicament described as “the crisis of memory” by historian Richard Terdiman—a moment during the nineteenth century when Europeans of this period experienced deep insecurity about their cultural involvements with imperial conquest in which “the very coherence of time and of subjectivity seemed disarticulated.”

In this context, George Batchen, Professor of Photographic History at Oxford University, explains how photographic images contribute to and arise from the crisis in question where societies manipulate and analyze artifacts of history, including photographs, to develop narratives that replace memories with static images of passion and emotion. He says,

I began by considering the proposition that, contrary to popular opinion, photography does not enhance memory—involuntary, physically embracing and immediate memory—but rather replaces it with images—images that are historical, coherent, informational. To induce the full, sensorial experience of involuntary memory, a photograph must be transformed. Something must be done to the photograph to pull it (and us) out of the past and into the present. The subject of the photograph must be similarly transformed, from somebody merely seen to someone really felt, from an image viewed at a distance on the wall into an emotional exchange transacted in the heart. Thus we have been looking at the efforts of ordinary people to overcome—or at least reduce—the power of photography to replace living, emotive memories with static and historical images. These efforts have included the addition of writing, paint, framing, embroidery, fabric, string, hair, flowers, butterfly wings, and other images to photographs. Whatever the means, in every case attention is drawn to the physical presence of the photograph itself.

Of course, in photography, there are relatively immediate opportunities for addition and subtraction due to the speed at which cameras can produce images. If an image is incomplete or

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fails to be representative, then there exists an opportunity to complete it by reimagining the setting and recapturing it through a new lens. Inevitably, the proliferation of camera technology exposed the shortcomings of painting as a medium suitable for ontological resistance within colonized communities because “paintings invariably sum up; photographs usually do not. Photographic images are pieces of evidence in an ongoing biography or history. And one photograph, unlike one painting, implies that there will be others.”18 The anticipation of subsequent images is a vital component in the quest for visual liberation from racist depictions, especially for African Americans.

The medium of photography lends itself to reproduction, which is useful when engaging in a war of images where the outcome of the “memory crisis” works for and against oppressive forces of caricature, parody, and myth. Definitively, camera technology proposed new ways of visual contestation through a mechanical reproduction of a subjective reality. Moreover, it gave black people an accessible way in which we could participate fully in the production of images.19 Cultural critic bell hooks further explains the importance of cameras in capturing the private, joyous, rarely observed moments of black life:

Though rarely articulated as such, the camera became in black life a political instrument, a way to resist misrepresentation as well as a means by which alternative images could be produced. Photography was more fascinating to masses of black folks than other forms of image making because it offered the possibility of immediate intervention useful in the production of counterhegemonic representations even as it was also an instrument of pleasure. The camera allowed black folks to combine image making, resistance struggle, and pleasure. Taking pictures was fun!20

In an environment where time to think and time to enjoy were luxuries rarely afforded to black people, an excitement for instant production was felt. Overtime, snapshots and portraits emerged as the preferred style for black people to capture and present ourselves in a manner that blinded

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the colonial gaze and enabled us to design new memories disconnected from eurocentric histories.

Lastly, photographs are easily consumed, which make them effective for widespread distribution because they are innately accessible and widely understood even by illiterate communities who were historically denied access to education, namely black people who endured the brutality of slavery and its suppressive outcomes. It takes a single second to view an image, and in this moment, a collective history is built or deconstructed. Through the deconstruction of derogatory definitions of blackness, radical representations of self within African American communities propagated from the possibilities of photography.

In portrait photography, multiple layers intersect to produce the final image. You have the person being photographed who I prefer to acknowledge as a collaborator instead of a subject in common practice due to the history of coerced submission and servitude for documented individuals. You have the environment of objects surrounding the photographed person converging to form a unique setting. You have the spectator who views the final image. You have the photographer who captures an image. And finally, you have the interactions between the final image and the spectator defined by the personal experiences and values of the spectator working to produce a reading of the image rooted in the overlying vision of the image maker.

Additionally, when posing in front of the camera, you are simultaneously the person you think you are, the person you want others to think you are, the person the photographer thinks you are, and the person the photographer uses to make a statement. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Barthes recalls a moment when he posed before a camera, citing how he experienced a micro-version of death during the process and after viewing his portrait on the cover of a pamphlet. He defends

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the idea that in the process of posing for a photo a subject is somehow made dead, but I disagree with this conclusion because in the case of black people posing for a camera operated by black hands, there is a potential for our bodies to be reanimated with new meaning and interpretation.

Nevertheless, there is a possible death to what the subject represents when their image is viewed, ultimately by themselves or an onlooker, where each spectator personally contributes to the meaning of the image in question. Ultimately, images require an audience in order to yield an outcome of death, never to the subject themselves, but possibly to the past notions of what the subject represented. When viewing an image of oneself, your present self meets your past self, who is forever frozen in time by the portrait, where you then interrogate past representations of self and grapple with the outcomes of personal evolution, or devolution, in certain instances. In other words, portraits capture the essence of the portrayed, traps this essence in time, and reflects this essence onto the viewer where a discourse of self commences. It is in this discourse where African Americans, photographers and community members alike, began the journey of reclaiming their identity through photography, frame by frame.
1 Solace and Sadness: Reflections of Self in the American Daguerreotype

Thus, in promoting daguerreotypy as a superior form of representation, early responses to the new medium effectively reversed the aesthetic ideal of an artist’s subjective influence distinguishing art works from more mechanical, but still manual, images so that it more closely matched that of scientific image making, which was coming to value the automatism and objectivity of an actual machine.


As Sojourner Truth emphasizes the constructedness of the image we see she clearly understands that reproduced representations are assembled and therefore can be manipulated. She uses that knowledge to unsettle the authority of writing and print, even as she uses both to claim her own presence—selling the shadow to support the substance—while teaching those of us who are entrenched in a literacy-laden print culture to think outside the book.


When Louis Daguerre finalized his daguerreotype, a device with the capacity to produce a likeness on a miniature metal plate, and unveiled the process in France in January 1839, it provoked excitement across the art world and received high praise for rendering new methods of visual representation. Overwhelmingly, the daguerreotype served as a novel solution for birthing portraits of people, notably portraits of people from underrepresented communities, as “it found its special function in making pictures for the smallest and most private of audiences—the families of uncelebrated men and women.”

1 After Jules Lion, a freeman of color often acknowledged as the first African American photographer, shared the daguerreotype discovery with the city of New Orleans, a development within the African American community materialized in which an urgency to capture life, dignity, and intimate portrayals of self was

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initialized. Due to the continuation of slavery and the perpetuation of offensive caricatures, black photographers sought to combat negative depictions of black Americans by making representative portraits that preserved the appearance and notability of their sitter. These images naturally earned political and historical meaning early on, according to photographic historian Deborah Willis, which marked a point of departure for reimagining the black body through portraiture.

Numerous scholars have evidenced the democratizing effects induced by the daguerreotype. For example, in their recent publication, *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, cultural historians Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith reveal how the “brisk commercialization of the daguerreotype” offered alternatives for people to perform identity and circulate racial knowledge. Collectively, Wallace and Smith assemble a volume of essays that not only report on the trajectory of photographic tradition within black communities but also recover lesser known details about how early African American practitioners and proponents of photography designed radical procedures of resistance through portraiture and theorized its unquestionable role in devising revolutionary representations of race, community, and self. The portrait for African Americans functioned as a destination for reconstructing identity by actively and willfully positioning our bodies as respectable, dignified, and confident in our shared humanity. However, as with most activities operating within cultures of racial oppression, the portrait, and more specifically the daguerreotype, was appropriated for reductive lines of thought wielded against the black body and its effort to reanimate. As stated in the article “The Body and the Archive” by

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American photographer Allan Sekula, the partial blame for this unintended abuse of daguerreotyping rests on the double system of representation inherent to photography:

A system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*. This double operation is most evident in the workings of photographic portraiture. On the one hand, the photographic portrait extends, accelerates, popularizes, and degrades a traditional function. This function, which can be said to have taken its early modern form in the seventeenth century, is that of providing for the ceremonial presentation of the bourgeois self. Photography subverted the privileges inherent in portraiture, but without any more extensive leveling of social relationships, these privileges could be reconstructed on a new basis. That is, photography could be assigned a proper role within a new hierarchy of taste.⁵

As suggested, portrait photography was given the role of surveilling African Americans through bodily documentation and proving the ludicrous suppositions proposed by race scientists throughout the nineteenth century, presenting yet another challenge for overcoming the obstacle of colonial objectification.

**Slave Daguerreotypes**

In an effort to advance his belief in racial difference and the superiority of whiteness, Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz commissioned the services of daguerreotypist Joseph T. Zealy in March 1850 to photograph seven black individuals—Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jen, and Renty—who resided in Columbia, South Carolina in hopes of using the photographs as visual evidence. The exhibition *Photography in Nineteenth Century America* organized by the Amon Carter Museum in 1992 included one of the images from his studio session, particularly an image of Jack who arrived from the Guinea Coast, showcasing the photographic style employed by Zealy in order to fulfil his assignment of documenting the anatomical features of the seven sitters.⁶ Jack and his fellow captives were posed largely in nude, and it is their nudity which alerts the viewer of these photographs that the sitters were compelled to stand before

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Zealy and his camera, ultimately revealing their condition of servitude and bondage. Therefore, the exposed bodies of Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jen, and Renty contributed to their metaphorical immobility purported through the visual even as they existed as people resulting from a period which exploited their physical, interminable movement across the Atlantic.

At the time, Agassiz and other scientists subscribed to the prevailing notion of photography as an objective source for knowledge, wrongfully assuming that photographs invariably reflect the truth. Some critics, and Agassiz himself, have suggested that he specifically relied on the daguerreotype to test his theory of separate creation in order to reach a politically unmotivated conclusion due to the alleged condition of aesthetic honesty ascribed to photographs, but this explanation seems unlikely. In a letter addressed to his mother, he clearly disclosed his biases against people with black skin. He wrote:

All the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species… Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of their palms, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away.

The domestics, he said. Driven by a personal abhorrence of black skin, Agassiz avowedly affirmed that the black body shared absolutely no relation to the white body, declaring the races as well marked and distinct. His findings privileged a false factualness of photography, so it is worth reiterating that a photograph bears at best a resemblance to the subject but fails to fully embody the subject, as corroborated by intellectuals like Barthes and Sontag. Regardless, we

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must never forget that some photographs do a stronger job of resembling their subjects than others, and it is essential to privilege these pictures over others.

Today, we refer to the images commissioned by Agassiz as slave portraits. However, cultural critic Brian Wallis encourages us to reconsider the nature of these daguerreotypes, posing a new way of identifying and sitting with these pictures of people. Wallis strongly distinguishes between the term portrait and type, classifying the images by Zealy as a series of types. According to Wallis, the type discourages style and composition in an attempt to present information plainly and straightforwardly, strengthening the seeming reality of the type by objectifying the individual and using props to accentuate the truth. Moreover, these slave types served solely to document bodily features of black people. No attempt was ever made to consult the sitters on how they wished to be portrayed. Alternatively, the portrait seeks to engage the viewer in a visual recognition of the subject, thus privileging the subject in the outcome of their portrayal like “a caricature that accents the telling features of an individual.” Generally, the photographic portrait of the nineteenth century was intended to underscore an individual right to personhood and signal social class because “few slaves had the luxury of projecting any look at all. That slaves were denied individual identity in the antebellum South is merely underscored by the near total absence of photographs depicting them.”

Therefore, the fate of Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jen, and Renty was sealed when Zealy

11Brian Wallis, “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” 54.
12Ibid, 56.
13Ibid.
made his first exposure, fixing their calm expression of frightened dejection and consequently producing types that did not resemble the sitters in the slightest.

**Frederick Douglass Portrays Himself**

Although rightly criticized by art historian Susanna Gold in her essay “Recovering Identity: Nineteenth Century African American Portraiture” for not engaging in a deeper exploration of the role of portraiture in the construction of self-image for African Americans, the exhibition *Portraits of People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* curated by fellow art historian Gwendolyn Shaw in partnership with the Addison Gallery of American Art in 2006 still managed to catalog an impressive selection of portraits—offering a range of pictures, paintings, and photos historicizing the early instances of African Americans being truly seen and portrayed in some regard. When viewing the installation catalog, one cannot ignore the curatorial attempts to paint a holistic picture of black self-image against the backdrop of whiteness and the prevailing institutions defining how society regarded blackness. From the inclusion of portraits of “white aristocratic sitters depicted with their doting African attendants” to the consistent interaction of black subjects with their white counterparts in images such as the set of ambryotypes depicting Philadelphia abolitionists, it appears as if Shaw does not provide an entirely biased account of African American portrayals of self that
unapologetically prioritize how we exclusively visualized our existence. Recommitting the minor offense made by Guy McElroy in *Facing History* and Marvin Sadik in *The Portrayal of the Negro in American Painting* of overemphasizing derogatory representations, the largely successful exhibition *Portraits of People* fails to persistently divert attention away from these popular portrayals of African Americans espoused by people like Louis Aggasiz—symbolic of the colonial gaze—to an active search for internal declarations of black self-image. Nevertheless, the images in *Portraits of People* successfully showcase the importance of portraiture for African Americans by providing insight into how these sitters viewed themselves and their personal ambitions, successes, and desires. Among these portraits were a selection of daguerreotypes of Frederick Douglas who deftly wielded the politics of photography to fashion himself anew.

Due to his fascination with and excitement for the medium and political possibilities of photography, Frederick Douglass emerged as the most photographed American in the nineteenth century after escaping from slavery in Maryland. Throughout his life, Douglass dedicated much attention to theorizing the implications of photography, especially in regards to the social conditions of African Americans. In order to achieve true social progress, he posited that African Americans needed to first and quite literally picture themselves. In doing so, he felt that the social death experienced by African Americans as a direct result of slavery could be reversed by proposing a positive image of black social life that “rejected common photographic framings of slavery and emancipation promoted by white abolitionists during his lifetime, choosing to instead craft his own image of African American citizenship.”

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experienced by Roland Barthes in Camera Lucica after posing for and viewing an image of himself, Douglass claims that there exists a possibility for the socially dead black person to recover a sense of self and personhood by seeing themselves and their body portrayed, thus prompting an interrogation of self which would then lead to social progress. Perhaps the most striking takeaway from Douglass’ contribution to the tradition of African American photography is how he suggested on numerous occasions in speeches and essays that the white photographer could not possibly muster representative portrayals of black people. In a review essay of a book entitled A Tribute for the Negro by Wilson Armistead, Douglass is quoted saying, “negroes can never have impartial portraits at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likeness of black men, without grossly exaggerating their distinctive features.”

Due to this conviction, Douglass praised Louis Daguere for developing the daguerreotype because he recognized it as a political tool used to forge a new self-image that was made accessible to misrepresented communities who traditionally struggled to engage in the art of portraiture. The daguerreotype was frequently celebrated as the “first democratic form of portraiture because it could be made more cheaply and quickly than painting.” Therefore, the advent of photography partially leveled the restrictive institutions placed on portraiture, and Douglass took full advantage when publishing portrayals of himself.

When viewing daguerreian portraits of Douglass, it is obvious how he wanted to portray an image that would resonate with a white audience. His portraits conveyed “a sense of regality and sophistication that eclipsed the images promoted by his white counterparts” and challenged the common caricatures of African Americans which pervaded popular media.

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to Douglass was an outcome of integration for African Americans who wished to see themselves beyond the negative images and welcomed warmly into American society as whole citizens protected by the same unalienable rights extended to every white person. Attention to posing and apparel remained vital for Douglass when performing stillness in order to capture his portrait, as he frequently returned the gaze of his oppressors by staring directly at the lens and appearing in well tailored suits that resembled the styles worn by his white compatriots in public and in portraits. By positioning his body in the likeness of whiteness, Douglass hoped to imagine an ideal black image that resonated with his former captors and excavate a reality where the black body was no longer dead, but rather perfectly and visibly alive. However, as we will soon begin to notice, there are critical limitations met when placing whiteness central to or even at the periphery of an agenda of promoting self-representation in the tradition of African American photography.

Although Douglass rarely stood behind the camera, he practiced and performed photography, nonetheless. From challenging Barthes to introducing new ways of conceptualizing the impact of images, Douglas was heavily invested in interrogating systems of photographic representation and “putting photos to striking use in his quest for social and political justice, plumbing and expanding the political power of the photograph.”21 Convincingly, his contemplations on body and self set the foundation for how we now understand the

reconstructive power of portraits, making him a relevant figure when inspecting the early days of African American photography and the emergence of black photographic tradition.

**Early African American Photography**

As the only black commercial photographer effectively working in Columbia, South Carolina during the 1920s and 1930s, Richard Samuel Roberts carried the honor and burden of photographing his thriving community and continuing to document its social progress within the Jim Crow South. Born and raised in Fernandina, Florida, Roberts relocated to Columbia—the same city where the Zealy daguerreotypes were captured—in order to pursue photography in a new environment after his wife passed away. Prior to his death in 1936, he spent fifteen years capturing the faces within his community, inviting people to his studio space which he later named Roberts Studio with an encouraging promise to make beautiful photographs of his sitters. In 1926, an advertisement featuring a photo of himself detailed his services and personal philosophy as a photography where he asserted:

> A true likeness of oneself is just as necessary as every other necessity in life. To have one's photograph taken was a duty that one owed relatives and friends: No other gift causes so much real and lasting joy to them as the gift of your photograph. If you are beautiful, we guarantee to make your photographs just like you want them. If you are not beautiful, we guarantee to make you beautiful and yet to retain a true and brilliant likeness of you.\(^\text{22}\)

Roberts centered the needs, wants, and artistic vision of the sitter, highlighting an important trend within African American photography where “the conscious efforts of both the photographer and the photographed to create a different and more honest depiction of the black body to contest the popular, caricatured representations that circulated at the time of the portrait sessions” were prioritized.\(^\text{23}\) He also advertised a policy of satisfaction guaranteed, never charging clients until


they received a perfect portrait which achieved their exact standards. Therefore, his photographic practice illustrated the immense intimacy felt between photographer and sitter as well as their dynamic collaboration which energized the portrait session and encouraged the sitter to pose and perform freely in hopes of creating an authentic image of self that captured the humanity, likeness, and multidimensionality of the portrayed. By the end of his career, Roberts had taken thousands of images rendered as glass plate negatives, which were then left in his family home, later discovered by his children, and carefully archived for future generations to witness his dedication to preserving truth through photographs—a sizable contribution to African American history.

Selections of Roberts’ photographs can be viewed in the collection entitled A True Likeness: The Black South of Richard Samuel Roberts, 1920-1936 curated by field archivist Thomas Johnson and art historian Phillip C. Dunn who supply a potent series of portraits that paint a captivating snapshot of black familial life as seen through Roberts’ lens. The images convey a sense of ownership of the space occupied in the portrait, emerging as a stylized performance of identity and personality in which pose, fashion, and prop intersect for a unique expression of self transmitted through the sitter’s gaze. The men vary in age and regularly appeared in elegant suits accented by props such as pistols or flags. The women also vary in age and occasionally exude a
sense of excitement at the prospect of posing for an image. The poses aided in the presentation of a controlled environment hidden from white society, as these images do not feel rushed, but in fact, quite the opposite: in these sessions, Roberts and his sitters had the luxury of time to think carefully and strategically about how to capture the perfect likeness. Moreover, cultural critic Harvey Young notes how Robert’s portraits are inherently related to the subjects in Zealy’s daguerreotypes due to the “fact that the individuals lived in the same city, shared a recent history of black captivity, and were separated by, on average, two generations opens up the possibility.”24 Young argues that shared histories of bondage generationally bind these subjects. Nevertheless, the images themselves, their nature and societal impact, are entirely unrelated because Roberts produced portraits of people, not categorical types of blackness. His images safeguard the photographic presence of life and triumph for future generations to follow, representing a “lost world of a people whose identity was lost not only upon the white world but also upon itself.”25

Also making portraits of black southerners was a white photographer named Hugh Mangum who worked as an itinerant portraitist primarily in North Carolina during the early twentieth century. Mangum managed to cultivate a racially and economically diverse clientele in spite of the segregationist laws imposed during the Jim Crow era.26 The exhibition Where We

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24Ibid.
Find Ourselves: The Photographs of Hugh Mangum, 1897-1922 in partnership with the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University recovered his photographs and recontextualized his artistic practice for the modern moment, revealing a hidden world of interactions within the segregated South. According to the curatorial director Margaret Sartor:

His glass plate negatives are not only images, they are objects that have survived a history of their own and exist within a larger political and cultural history. They hint at unexpected relationships and complex lines of connection that refute the racial categories defined by law to separate black and white people. And though Mangum left behind no records to help us identify his sitters, the gaps in our understanding lead us to consider more carefully what we know, or what we think we know, confirming how early photographs have the power to subvert common historical narratives.27

Though racially diverse, his sitters crossed paths and shared space when waiting in his studio for their turn to stand before his lens. Mangum encouraged racial mixing, and he affirmed this culture within his studio and throughout his photographs by having sitters “stand with composed expressions, in crisply laundered clothes from their white neighbors. Racial caricaturing found in newspaper cartoons from the period is entirely absent. Men, women, children, whatever their status, are treated as dignified individuals.”28

Moreover, he produced images of multiple exposure that locked black and white sitters into a single frame, again promoting an outcome of racial mixing, this time photographically. Mangum’s portraits speak to the capacity of white photographers to produce honest portrayals of black individuals, thus challenging the idea that black people cannot gain likeness from white portraitists, as previously stated by Frederick Douglass. However, it must be

defended that no one photographs black people like black people photograph themselves. In choosing to honor his art rather than push an agenda of racial categorization, Mangum delivered sophisticated portraits of individuality, contributed positively to the developing image of African Americans through photographic narratives, and provided solace with daguerian technology.
Distorting Memory, Documenting (Black) Life: A Discussion on Disparate Photographies

Every negro boy and every negro girl born in this country until this present moment undergo the agony of trying to find in the body politic, in the body social, some image of himself or herself which is not demeaning.

~ James Baldwin, 1963

The men and women who tortured, dismembered, and murdered in this fashion understood perfectly well what they were doing and thought of themselves as perfectly normal human beings. Few had any ethical qualms about their actions.

~ Leon F. Litwack, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*

The camera was not always idealized by black people as a tool for reimagining realities. Due to a history of hostile documentation through colonial photographs as a way to evidence the theorized difference between the white and black race and surveil African Americans in order to control their image, the relationship between black communities and the camera was entangled in sentiments of enthusiasm for the possibility of new pictures as well as emotions of fear as a result of the violence that was justified through various photographies. Behind the pixels of these stereotyped images, a community of black people prospered out of sight from the colonial lens. However, these scenes and exchanges—pictured as portraits and snapshots that documented community, family, and friendly gatherings—rarely received attention or publication in popular culture. Instead, they hung quietly on the walls within the community and personal, established lives of African Americans reminding them of how they saw and pictured themselves. It is nonnegotiable for us to meet these images and engage the people and communities they depict in an effort to recover their stolen history and redefine the narrative around their pictured pasts. These stories are told and preserved in their photographs which, as English journalist Johny Pitts
puts it so eloquently, convey a “beauty in black banality” that unequivocally defines this genre of vernacular photography.¹

**African American Vernacular Photography**

In response to the overwhelming desire to interpret how society stereotypically visualized blackness in the past instead of highlighting how black people pictured themselves, the International Center of Photography (ICP) offered an alternative perspective when announcing the illustrious exhibition *African American Vernacular Photography: Selections from the Daniel Cowin Collection* in December 2005. The show featured roughly seventy images ranging from formal studio portraits of black slaves, informal snapshots of cultural events, and spontaneous moments of performance, work, and joy within the everyday lives of African Americans. Organized by ICP Chief Curator Brian Wallis and Deborah Willis, Professor of Photography and Imaging at New York University, the image selection and accompanying catalogue of essays and photographs were a calculated response to derogatory depictions of African Americans by portraying ordinary individuals casually living their lives with quiet dignity, carefully ushering these social exchanges within private black life into the public conscience.² Of course, this did not mark the first attempt to engage the African American photographic image from a curatorial standpoint. However, it did present a captivating series of portraits and snapshots illustrating a cultural appreciation for photography and its role in conjuring intimate expressions of black identity and familial relations within the United States, arguably in a manner not achieved by preceding shows as Wallis and Willis identified their gallery as the first major exhibition of vernacular photographs picturing black cultural life from 1860 to 1930. Thus, it shifted the curatorial focus to internal declarations of black self-image.

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The exhibition sequenced the images chronologically, opening with a shocking image of a black man possibly named Gordon who escaped from slavery in 1863. The picture is difficult to stomach as his wounds and scars symbolize the undeniable reality of his endured captivity and produce a visceral reaction within the viewer when acknowledging the cruel violence he withstood. In fact, the original purpose of this image was to alert the public about the horrors of slavery in order to hasten the abolitionist movement. Again, we see the black body objectified through the photograph as a prop positioned to promote a political agenda, but this time supporting the physical liberation of African Americans in an attempt to translate trauma for a white audience determined to defend the institution of slavery. A message of hope is unintentionally embedded in this painful picture, not directed at white viewers when it initially circulated but rather for future generations of African Americans reflecting on the progress of their community because the portrait photograph steadily became an instrument by which black families and photographers privately recorded memories through our own lens. Progressively, the propagation of photography within black homes imagined altered roles for photographed sitters and produced ordinary images of community and race that reasonably represented the realities faced by African Americans.

The exhibition closed with a colorful portrait of an unidentified woman peacefully grinning while holding a news camera, exchanging glances with her audience. Tanya Sheehan,

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Professor of Art at Colby College, suggests that the woman controls the process of representation by turning the giant lens on us but also asks the question of whether or not this is actually the case: one could easily read the woman as a posed prop advertising a product, Sheehan argues. In light of the expanding gender roles of women throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, it is not unreasonable to view the woman as an active marketer of new technology rather than the target of an objectifying gaze. Nevertheless, how often were women, especially black women, allowed to exist in product campaigns as their authentic selves rather than generic personas of fetishized marketability in the moments preceding 1935 when this image was captured? Of course, the images collected in *African American Vernacular Photography* were trying to convey the newly acquired agency of African Americans depicted through photographs by emphasizing a linear narrative of social progress from the bruises of enslavement to the gift of photography, so it makes sense to imagine the woman as presenting the device responsible for positively transforming her community’s depiction in the media. Therefore, we must not misinterpret her portrayal: this is her image where she determined the methods of representation or at the absolute least consulted with the imagemaker when producing her studio portrait, highlighting how the camera literally and figuratively reframed her identity as well as the portrayal of her community.

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One experiences an intense passage of time when viewing the sequence of images displayed in this exhibition. The stark contrast in bodily positionality between certain pictures and the inescapable signifiers of slavery and segregation evoke a narrative of progress, as noted by Wallis and Willis who argue that vernacular photographs and studio portraits of African Americans offered a controlled means of overcoming racial stereotypes by promoting images that did not represent discrimination or oppression. According to Sheehan, the history of slavery is never divorced from these photographs, as “the enslavement of African Americans was represented as an action or memory in all the images on display—even when one does not see black bodies in shackles.” Ultimately, Sheehan concludes that the exhibit fails to thoroughly answer the question regarding what made the camera a powerful tool in both the oppression of African Americans and their struggle for equality. In 2006, when Sheehan published her gallery review, this curiosity might have remained unanswered, but now there is ample scholarship evidencing how photography is a medium which can positively and negatively influence the political and racialized image of African Americans. Moreover, Sheehan cites the continuous references to slavery as an unfortunate shortcoming of the show, but in fact, the images are deeply contextualized by their historical connections as they simultaneously convey harsh memories and progressive portraits, thus highlighting how African Americans pictured themselves in spite of the horrific history of enslavement—consequently communicating a message of racial empowerment, as intended by ICP.

The term “vernacular” as expressed by Wallis and Willis also warrants discussion because it expresses the ubiquity of these photographs within African American communities by

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7 Ibid, 819.
arguing for their characteristic everydayness. According to Wallis, the vernacular photograph is defined as banal and distinctly conventional, as many of these images were frequently captured by the most ordinary studio photographers and often viewed privately in family albums or community spaces. Moreover, vernacular photographs possess an “utter lack of interest in photography’s fine art status. They believe no apparent aesthetic ambition other than to record what passess in front of the camera with reasonable fidelity.” Through these delineations, Wallis and Willis posit that African American vernacular photography was directly responsible for visualizing the authentic realities of black life because these images prioritized racial representation and memorable documentation over artistic aesthetics defined by whiteness. Moderately critiquing these conclusions was Sheehan, as she claimed that Wallis and Willis overstated the term “vernacular” in its ability to fully describe the images displayed in the gallery, citing how:

> Many of the images on display, including that cabinet card, nevertheless challenged the notion that a clean extraction of the artistic from the vernacular is always possible and desirable. Aesthetics, after all, were integral to the social and historical context in which the photographs were made. In the case of studio portraits, artistry was required of the sitter, who conjured up her most pleasing expression, as well as the operator, who manipulated the pose and lighting. (...) It would be misleading to define this theatrical portrait as having no apparent aesthetic ambition, just as it would be to describe all of the photographs in the exhibition as ordinary.

These concerns are reasonably justified, but also they trivialize the intent motivating the show, which was to recover lost histories by first identifying what was stolen. Many of the people pictured throughout the exhibit as well as the black photographers were unidentified or lesser known faces. As an instrument interested in accessing forgotten histories, anonymity is

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9 Ibid.
10 Tanya Sheehan, Kym S. Rice, and Benjamin Filene, “African American Vernacular Photography: Selections from the Daniel Cowin Collection,” 817
particularly relevant for vernacular media because it invites the question as to why something or someone remains unknown:

Vernacular photography is the absent presence which determines its medium’s historical and physical identity; it is that thing which decides what proper photography is not. To truly understand photography and its history, therefore, one must closely attend to what that history has chosen to repress. Moreover, by reminding us of the difference within photography, vernaculars insist that there are many photographies, not just one, indicating a need for an equally variegated array of historical methods and rhetorics. In other words, vernacular photographies demand the invention of suitably vernacular histories.  

Therefore, by incorporating these people in the selected photographs while purposefully omitting written captions and maintaining equal image size across the show, the exhibition *African American Vernacular Photography* conferred importance to hidden people, privileging not a single category but rather an entire community through a series of curatorial decisions.

The images themselves, their physicality, were not ordinary because their existence implies reclaimed agency for black photographers and their sitters. However, the people and scenes portrayed through these images do convey a sense of banality due to them representing a larger community beyond themselves: cultural commonalities are the key unifier in this case. As a result, ICP accomplished its goal, and the methodology utilized by Wallis and Willis to design this gallery reminds us of techniques deployed by black intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century when photography was once again used by African Americans to challenge public perceptions of race.

**Paris is Burning**

In a recent documentary titled *Through a lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People*, celebrated contemporary artist Carrie Mae Weems declares that “we [black people] have a responsibility in our imagemaking capacity, which is where we share the wealth of who we are, a responsibility to widen the path—to open up all those possibilities of

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what blackness can be then, now, and in the time yet to come.”\textsuperscript{12} It is this necessary onus which motivated W. E. B. Du Bois to assemble a series of photographed portraits for the American Negro Exhibit at the Paris Exposition of 1900, fulfilling a request made by Thomas Calloway to construct a display representing the development of African Americans since emancipation in an effort to overcome the misrepresentations of black people that were so common in American society.\textsuperscript{13} In his book \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, Du Bois characterizes the notion of double consciousness as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” whereby the African American visual image had been dictated and mediated by the white gaze, thus influencing how society imaged and understood blackness as well as perpetuating a scenario in which black people struggled to authentically see themselves.\textsuperscript{14} The pictures amassed by Du Bois and his colleagues challenged these stereotypical understandings of blackness maintained by white society by offering counter representations and statistical evidence of “American Negros” that scrutinized the false narratives which defined black people at the time, such as manufactured rates of illiteracy, laziness, and hypersexuality. According to Shawn Smith, the American Negro Exhibit served as competing visual evidence, a

\textsuperscript{12}Thomas Allen Harris, \textit{Through A Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People}, (Harlem, NY: Chimpanzee Productions, 2014), YouTube.


counterarchive, against a long legacy of racist taxonomy that challenged the popularized theories of classification embraced by race scientists.\textsuperscript{15} It is yet another example of how the portrait photograph induced new realities within visual culture for the black body and its social position within the United States and abroad.

The 363 photographs of African Americans—shown in Paris, France and housed in the Palace of Social Economy—were organized into three albums, entitled \textit{Types of American Negros, Georgia, U.S.A.} (volumes 1-3), and \textit{Negro Life in Georgia, U.S.A.}, each showcasing different aspects of African American life, business, and education thoughtfully sampled from Georgia, as this is where Du Bois conducted his research on race as a Professor of Sociology at Atlanta University. Together, these albums visually represented the industry, beauty, and dignity of African Americans, convincingly justified by a barrage of colorful charts, informative

infographics, and salient statistics on black people living in the state of Georgia that ethically reported on community outcomes. According to Aldon Morris, President of the American Sociological Association, the visual art and social science did not clash: they joyfully married and reinforced the comprehensive scientific data chronicling African American progression. It is no coincidence almost seventy percent of the images selected by Du Bois were portraits because this medium lends itself to confrontation, aided by the fact that the display exhibited blackness in a nation guilty of colonizing the very people they were now forced to recognize. Moreover, the photo albums did not provide descriptive text or image captions, which must be read as an attempt to privilege the visual rather than necessitate writing that contextualizes the validity of these pictures. A desire for the photograph to speak for itself, to disrupt eurocentric histories, was welcomed by this tactic and employed by Du Bois. Once again, and not for the last time, we witness the impacts of curatorial choices in revising racist rhetoric leveraged against black people throughout a sustained generational project of reimagining ourselves in visual culture.

Susan Sontag says that “to photograph is to confer importance.” Therefore, to not photograph is to confer unimportance to absent sitters. Furthermore, in the case of Du Bois acting as a curator and visual archivist for the American Negro Exhibit in Paris, to select images

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for public display is to confer importance to the people portrayed through the pictures. In other words, the archive holds critical meaning for the people performing the archival work and for the people who are archived, or not. Much is owed to Smith for her investigative work into photographic meaning and visual documentation, as she shares a cogent summary detailing the significance of Du Bois’ photo albums for African Americans:

With his Georgia Negro albums, Du Bois produces a counterarchive that reconfigures the contours of institutional knowledge, refocusing photographic meaning and visual identification out from the archival margin, shifting the apex of normalcy to rest squarely on an African American middle class. Du Bois’s photograph collection intervenes in dominant ways of knowing and representing race, reenvisioning a culturally authorized visual record’s codification of racial information. Du Bois grounds African American identity in a contestatory archive, offering a place from which a counterhistory can be imagined and narrated, and, as a counterarchive, Du Bois’s Georgia Negro albums underscore the ways in which both identity and history are founded, at least partially, through representation. If one cannot or does not produce an archive, others will dictate the terms by which one will be represented and remembered; one will exist, for the future, in someone else’s archive. Du Bois’s counterarchive specifically highlights the racialized contours of “official” photographic meaning and scientific knowledge, precisely as it challenges such authorized claims to truth.19

In short, Du Bois launched a new archive, one produced for and by African Americans in order to supplant baseless images of stereotypes with our own history of accomplishment and positive self-image. He exhibited blackness in a white space, a worthy milestone to be fair, and illustrated a new image of African Americans that gave our archive new representation. Regrettably, his advancements received pushback from an unforgivable form of documentation, which worked to capitalize on white supremacy and safeguard racial hierarchies by disseminating fear through photographs capturing gruel, heinous accounts of lynching. These particular pictures existed as detestable mementos that were shipped merrily along an underground railroad of images within white communities, encouraging and justifying the murder of black men, women, and children. Apart from these pictures were recouperative images orchestrated by black photographers to

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counter the scenes shown throughout the disgraceful genre of lynching photography, which was designed by white mobs to mortify the black body—physically, socially, and visually.

**In Dying Memory**

On August 28, 1955, while shopping at a grocery story in Money, Mississippi, fourteen year old Emmett Till was kidnapped, beaten, shot in the head, and tossed into the Tallahatchie River by Roy Bryant and his half brother J.W. Milam, claiming that Till whistled at and flirted with Carolyn Bryant, who later revealed how she fabricated the allegations and consequently incited violence against an innocent black child. The savage murder sparked widespread outrage at the continuation of systemic racism in the United States, encouraging tens of thousands of mourners to attend the wake in his hometown of Chicago. His mother, Mamie Till Bradley, decided to hold a public funeral service with an open casket, forcing the world to see what she had seen: the unrecognizable body of her dear, beloved son.  

She allowed David Jackson, a black photographer from Jet Magazine, to photograph Till with her standing in the background, teary eyed yet determined to ensure her son did not die in

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vain. The emotional photograph was printed throughout black owned media outlets such as Ebony and Jet, and it unmasked the violent nature of racism and white supremacy against the selective memory of white society. By choosing to create a public ceremony and publish images from the funeral, Bradley produced a shared historical moment that potently linked the traumatic history of lynching, injustice, and systemic racism to African American communities, using visual imagery—group portraiture in certain instance—to serve as a catalyst for social change. Therefore, the images captured at the ceremony served as crucial pieces in the growing counterarchive of black revitalization, a commitment to restore dignity, innocence, and humanity to lynched black bodies. These images belonged to Bradley, as she orchestrated their production in spite of the unspeakable pain associated with making them. The fact of agency must always be prioritized when proposing readings of the Bradey and Till photographs because they represent a moment when black people clearly expanded the possibilities of what photography could be in order to intervene in a tragic tale of racialized hate, providing a necessary narrative that allowed this moment “to enter history without words.”

In examining the photographs of lynchings presented in the Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America exhibition catalog, one cannot but succumb to a chilling sensation at the degree of spectated violence depicted on the pages. It is a difficult task to confront these images, accept their existence, and debate the horrifying cruelty they document. Nevertheless, American historian Leon Litwak warns us about the dangers of consciously choosing to avoid contact with these images:

The need for this grisly photographic display may be disputed for catering to voyeuristic appetites and for perpetuating images of black victimization. This is not an easy history to assimilate. It is a necessarily painful and ugly story, as it includes some of the bleakest

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examples of violence and dehumanization in the history of humankind. The intention is not to depict blacks only as victims or whites only as victimizers, but the extent and quality of the violence unleashed on black men and women in the name of enforcing black deference and subordination cannot be avoided or minimized. Obviously, it is easier to choose the path of collective amnesia, to erase such memories, to sanitize our past. It is far easier to view what is depicted on these pages as so depraved and barbaric as to be beyond the realm of reason. That enables us to dismiss what we see as an aberration, as the work of crazed fiends and psychopaths. But such a dismissal would rest on dubious and dangerous assumptions.

Hence, it is necessary to engage these photographs and interrogate their status in the image world, not to somehow understand them because frankly this is simply not possible, but rather to untangle their former representative power and evaluate why they proved central in promoting spectacular moments of white supremacy. The scenes depicted in these photographs exist outside of human imagination, portraying callousness well beyond the scope of slave types or demeaning caricatures of blackness in which the black body, although largely unrecognizable through distorted features, was at least able to appear as if it were not physically dead. Of course, it can be problematic to compare degrees of offense in visual culture, but in the case of lynching photographs that worked to suggest “lynching was and is a reproducible act,” it is essential to distinguish these images from other types of photographies in order to situate them firmly as deplorable pictures.

It is not by chance that Time Magazine included the photograph of Emmett Till and his mother Mamie Bradley on its list of the most influential images of all time. The photograph surely influenced the public sentiment about racial violence and resisted the photographic displays of lynching widely distributed at the time by enabling Till to become not only a symbol for the Civil Rights Movement but also an expression of African American citizenship.

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picturing her slain son as well as the collective display of mourning, Bradley recontextualized the mutilated and lynched black body from its original setting among the white mob to a memorial setting where black and white people could pay tribute to the violated person, and “by staging the photographs in the tradition of memorial photography, rather than lynching photography, Bradley found a way to simultaneously exert agency about the affective utilization of her murdered son” and to store his memory in the collective black conscience as one of dignified personhood rather than powerless victimhood. It is through similar instances of photographic recontextualization that African Americans visually and stylistically distorted the memory of whiteness.

26Ibid, 71.
3 Omitting Blackness: Fashion Photography and the American Art Museum

Difference is, in most cases, the result of the construction of desire. It is also the result of a work of abstraction, classification, division, and exclusion—a work of power that, afterward, is internalized and reproduced in the gestures of daily life, even by the excluded themselves. Often, the desire for difference emerges precisely where people experience intense exclusion. In these conditions, the proclamation of difference is an inverted expression of the desire for recognition and inclusion.

~ Achille Mbembe, “Epilogue: There is Only One World” in *Critique of Black Reason*

Is the art world merely mirroring social changes or can art institutions actually play a role in challenging the conditions of institutional racism in America? Sad to say, with regard to race, art museums have for the most part behaved like many other businesses in this country—they have sought to preserve the narrow interests of their upper-class patrons and clientele. It is this upper-class, mostly white bias that I want to interrogate in order to find out “what’s going on with whiteness” (as the writer bell hooks might say) at one of America’s most racially biased cultural institutions—the art museum.

~ Maurice Berger, “Are Art Museums Racist?” in *Art News*

As children, we often overlook the significance of our daily dress due to the predefined wardrobes possibly imposed by our parents or the lack of agency we might experience when identifying items to cloth our bodies. For me, fashion was a space where I internalized deep insecurity about how I eventually chose to present myself to the world. Fellow classmates said my shorts were too short and my pants were too tight, regularly implying an obscenity that consequently destabilized my relationship with clothing as it appeared on my black skin. Thus, at an early age, fashion helps define our sense of beauty, style, and confidence where racial identities are inextricably linked to these notions. At the intersection of fashion and photography, there exists a path forward where evolved understandings and representations of blackness are beginning to emerge.
For example, in the 125 year history of Vogue Magazine, this major fashion publication failed to hire African American photographers for cover shoots, until recently. In 2018, Beyoncé enlisted the creative services of fashion photographer Tyler Mitchell for her portrait session, making Mitchell the first African American to shoot a Vogue cover. His achievement served as a beacon of hope and empowerment for the black community, which has suffered routinely from visual misrepresentation and denied access, that change is attainable, thus promoting the possibility for black talent to design and cover the pages previously reserved for white audiences. Welcoming a long overdue practice of offering opportunity for black photographers, the September 2018 Vogue cover story marked a turning point within the magazine industry where black people finally held the power to write and capture our own story within a historically white space. The role played by portrait photography in facilitating this milestone must not be overlooked, especially considering the defining role of fashion in shaping personal and cultural identities.
In July of 2020, Vanity Fair followed in Vogue’s footsteps by hiring Dario Calmese as the first black photographer to shoot one of its covers. When asked about his emotions surrounding the accomplishment, Calmese expressed how humbled he felt to make history as the first, but he also emphasized how this moment should not be interpreted as him having more skill or talent than his industry counterparts, arguing that many other black photographers could have easily been in his position if only given the opportunity to share their gifts. According to Calmese, we often “mistake talent for access to opportunities.” In other words, lack of diversity within the magazine industry is an issue of access and erasure, not suggesting that black imagemakers do not exist. Lack of access to influential platforms broadly defining culture for the masses continuously deny opportunities for black artists to share personal interpretations of what it means to be black, as seen through our lens.

The Vanity Fair cover story featured acclaimed actress Viola Davis intentionally posed to emulate the historic portrait of Whipped Peter. Although controversial, the image sparked conversations about the unsettling history of slavery and its lingering implications by offering an alternative depiction, a revisit to the past, one that honored the historical significance and elevated black culture simply by being portrayed on the cover of an influential publication. In short, the context and conditions in which images are produced, distributed, and consumed

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1 André Wheeler, “Dario Calmese: Vanity Fair's first black cover photographer on his 'love letter to black women','’ Guardian, July 2020.
contributes to the degree of impact they have when undoing the ramifications of sustained oppression and false characterization of marginalized communities.

**Harlem on My Mind**

In 1969, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MoMA) broke tradition by exhibiting in its galleries people and cultures it formerly excluded from artistic discussion for the previous ninety nine years, since it was founded in 1870. The exhibition titled *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968* received brutal backlash because the show largely excluded the work of black artists from Harlem and rejected their participation in the curatorial planning efforts.² Moreover, Harlem artists expressed their frustration because Allon Schoener, art historian and lead curator, and Thomas Hoving, former director of MoMA, chose to represent the cultural capital of Harlem solely through photographs, which were not widely accepted as an artform in 1969.³ Instead, photography persisted as a form of visual documentation, a method to mechanically record representations of reality. As a result of their subtle omission from the gallery walls, the artistic communities in Harlem felt insulted and rightly countered the cultural claims asserted throughout the exhibition by pressuring mainstream art museums to make institutional changes, consult black artists when exhibiting black art, and hire black museum professionals—as well as pushing for museums to offer space for black artists to curate their own exhibitions.⁴ The contention around the exhibition highlights a common practice within the art world of selectively prioritizing cultural objects produced by white artists and intentionally hiding others, especially work made by black artists. According to African American artist Fred Wilson, it is prudent to consider how “what [we] see on view is one thing, but what museums

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have in storage can be entirely different. It raises questions about how the public only sees what is curated for them, and those incongruities are smoothed out.” Therefore, the deliberate erasure of black art from museum exhibitions prevents the public from grappling with African American history in its painful entirety, as the history of Harlem was lost and misinterpreted by MoMA in its attempt to increase communication between black and white communities. In spite of these shortcomings, the exhibition still managed to insert pieces of black history into a fine art institution, establishing a precedent for exhibiting blackness in predominantly white spaces—but only after black artists expressed their dismay with the curated selection.

Throughout history, the cultural contributions of black artists have been designated as lowbrow and aesthetically insignificant by elite institutions dictating the golden standards of art,

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beauty, and culture. The determining factor motivating MoMA to pursue *Harlem On My Mind* was Schoener—a white man—who used his privilege as a dignified art representative to produce a sociological account of black people in Harlem from his perspective rather than an art exhibition showcasing the overwhelming ability of black artists in Harlem. In a recent documentary titled *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*, cultural historian Maurice Berger notes how a large survey of American museums concluded that eighty-five percent of the artists in major collections were white, and the remaining fifteen percent reserved less than two percent for black artists. Berger continues to explain why these numbers are deeply problematic for the art world:

> If everyone sitting at the table in a curatorial meeting is white, then you will have a problem. You’re going to have a problem with interpretation. You’re going to have a problem in terms of trying to figure out what you are doing right and wrong. And most importantly, you’re going to have a problem in terms of the work you select. If all of the art critics are white, the same problem exists. Until the institutions become more diverse, and it’s happening because we’re beginning to see young, brilliant curators of color assume pretty important roles in American museums. But until it happens in a widespread way, or until white critics and white curators and white journalists look into themselves, research the worlds around them, and look into the past open and honestly, then it won’t change as fast as it needs to.

Therefore, when museums fail to consult black artists when making decisions on how to display our work and community, curatorial mistakes are inevitable because only communities themselves truly know how they wish to be seen and exhibited. Schoener and Hover made this error when preparing *their* exhibition on Harlem and its community of thriving black artists, ultimately publishing a series of photographic representations that repeated the offense of misrepresenting black people in visual culture. Although their collective effort generated partial representation for the black community in Harlem and at large, it did not rectify the fact that black artists still maintained limited agency in controlling the ways in which they were portrayed.

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6 Sam Pollard, *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*.

7 Ibid.
by the media and influential institutions such as MoMA, Vogue, and Vanity Fair—an undertakings still in progress today.

In terms of impacting the public, it certainly persuaded the initial response by opening the exhibition in MoMA due to its position of privilege as an internationally recognized establishment of fine art and a cultural stronghold of artifacts and artistic knowledge. It also elevated the work of black studio photographers like James VanDerZee by allowing his work to be reviewed on a larger scale and critiqued alongside applauded artwork in MoMA. The inclusion and positive reception of his photographs evidence the importance of carving space for black artists within American art museums, specifically the ones not prioritizing African American art in order to rectify decades of omission.

**Styling Black Identities in James VanDerZee and Gordon Parks’ Photography**

In 1969, the central question in the art world examined the idea of artistic authenticity, essentially debating what qualified as art. Until his debut at MoMA, James VanDerZee received little attention and disparaging critiques classifying him as a commercial photographer who produced an overly stylized and materialistic vision of black identity that closely mimed white gentility. However, his portraits immediately gained new meaning after appearing in and acquiring unneeded affirmation from MoMA. In his biographical essay on VanDerZee and his New Negro vision, Russell White, Professor of Media and Communications at Solent University in Southampton, explains how "VanDerZee challenged prevailing stereotypes of African Americans then in circulation within American popular culture and helped to change the image of African Americans in the United States." Moreover, the desire to appropriately beautify the

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black people who sat for his camera informed his artistic practice as one dedicated to a
whimsical, romanticized representation of African American social progress as experienced by
the black middle class in Harlem. He prioritized subjects who wished to rewrite their bodies
against a remembered history of degradation. Ultimately, his photographic vision was
positively promoted by earning gallery space within MoMA, which indirectly quieted societal
uncertainty about the artistic possibilities of portrait photography. Therefore, the medium in
which photographs are published directly contributes to how they are read by society, as his
images once embodied an unfavorable aesthetic of black life, yet they eventually garnered high
praise from the art community.

As a commercial portrait photographer, VanDerZee incorporated fashion, props, and
painted backdrops to glamorize his sitters in a way that accentuated their prideful ownership and
routine domesticity of the New Negro identity, which emerged at the onset of the twentieth
century and communicated a confident image of self-worth. Throughout his images, one can
easily see the careful preparation taken to construct scenes prior to making an exposure in which
he intentionally places objects and people within the surrounding environment to convey a
narrative of racial empowerment for the African American community. Mary Schmidt
Campbell’s *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* emphasizes the artistic workflow of
VanDerZee and his photographic portraits:

All of his subjects bear a stylish resemblance. His studio portraits are identifiable by a
few carefully composed sets, which were meant to represent an orderly bourgeois life.
Mr. VanDerZee arranged everything. He coaxed his subjects to sit with their legs crossed,
their backs straight, a hat cocked to the side, a coat collar turned up, all to convey a
studied, almost defiant confidence. Sartorially, his subjects are impeccable. All of them,
men, women, and children, wear the most stylish clothes, made from the luxurious
fabrics and tailored with the most intricate detailing. And if, by chance, a sleeve was
frayed or a button missing, VanDerZee conveniently hand-painted and corrected the

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detail. In fact, he touched up imperfections, straightened teeth, sketched a few extra pieces of jewellery, smoothed out skin color whatever was necessary to make his clients fit the New Negro mould. In scene after scene, a regimented, formalized image recurs, all cut from the same pattern. The image of the Harlem Renaissance, captured by VanDerZee’s photographs, was partially real pride and partially carefully constructed artifice.  

In collaboration with his clients, VanDerZee pictured the New Negro as a resilient character who unapologetically valued their race and community. In fact, his images consistently relied on the exaggerated sentimentality of pictorialism to craft memorable allegories about African American community values such as spirituality and scholarship. Many critics of VanDerZee argue that his work was highly selective and reductive in terms of contextualizing the financial struggles amid urban black life. Even though there is arguable merit to these claims, they do not minimize his creative contributions to the collective effort to photographically offset degrading caricatures of black people with an uplifting image of African American material success. VanDerZee’s legacy is marked by his commitment to using fashion portraiture to shift paradigms about race and remake the image of blackness.

Also responsible for contributing stylized depictions of black life was Gordon Parks, a commercial and documentary photographer who became the first African American to shoot for mainstream publications like Vogue and Life Magazine. During his tenure as a prominent imagemaker, Parks recorded the underappreciated visual history linking consumer culture to racial politics. He frequently attempted to reconcile the contention between race and fashion, noting the close relationship between racial politics and the fashion industry as black people had experienced historical moments where personal style was stolen, appropriated, and

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undervalued. His position as a representative of Vogue and Life Magazine also enhanced the public reception of his work because he received professional validation from media authorities defining art and culture. In his images such as *American Gothic* and an untitled picture of a woman hanging a dress while surrounded by clothing lines, he allows the black women to casually exist within the context of their labor, not as tools in service of capitalism but rather as people pronouncing their personhood through their clothed bodies and propped environments. The American flag behind Ella Watson contrasted against her tattered dress helps signify the social conditions of the wearer. The calmness performed by the unidentified woman highlights how the photographer and subject internalized the societal stakes of making this image and consciously collaborated to produce a fashion story that authentically reflected her daily life. By combining fashion and racial connotations, the eurocentric notions of consumer desire are dissolved throughout his images whereby “a banal disclosure of everyday social reality with the visual language of fashion photography” is successfully achieved. In this sense, fashion is complementing the medium of photography to unveil an omitted

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history, one presenting an internal look at the various lives led by black people within America to challenge the perpetual exclusion faced by this community.

**Symbolic Annihilation in Fashion and Beyond**

In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall describes a picture of Jamaican sprinter Lindford Christie carrying the Union Jack around his shoulders at the Olympics and how this image of a black man representing the United Kingdom produced meaning that contradicted the prevailing notions about what it meant to be British. Hall argues that images are interpreted not only by their visually marked identifiers—in this case, Christies’ black skin, the Union Jack, and his male gender—but also through the unspoken biases and expectations of the viewer. He acknowledges that:

> Somehow this person who isn’t what one thinks of normally as the majority cultural identity and ethnic identity – racial identity of the majority of British people – because the majority of British people, though the word “British” doesn’t carry with it any specific reference at all to questions of race or color, one assumes that the British Olympic team might be full of white British people, and here is somebody who is obviously not. 18

Hence, there are unresolved dilemmas between what the viewer expects to see and what is actually present in the image, which are equally important when establishing meaning and interpretation, according to Hall. However, I am most concerned with how Hall concludes his discussion by stating that “every image we see is being read in part against what isn’t there,” as this understanding provides an effective starting point for interrogating the various readings produced in the absence of positive, black imagery. Is it possible to extract harmful interpretations of blackness from persistent images of white beauty contrasted against black invisibility or narrow representations of melanin? Is it reasonable to think that one can effectively erase a community from existence by preventing them from controlling their

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depiction in the media? The following theories help reach an acceptable conclusion on the matter.

In 1976, George Gerbner coined the term “symbolic annihilation” to describe the absence of representation of particular communities, often based on race, gender, sexuality, or other social identifiers like socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. Initially, Gerbner introduced the idea by analyzing the effects of television dramas, claiming that “[r]epresentation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation.”

Assuming the fictional world also extends to the universes created or captured in photographs, it is easy to draw connections between the impact of absent black figures on-screen and in images because “[c]asting the symbolic world thus has a meaning of its own: the lion’s share of representation goes to the types that dominate the social order.” Therefore, by limiting the number of black people depicted in photographs, this erasure can imply that they are no longer

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viewed as desirable or aspirational, instead characterized as unintelligent, primitive, and undesirable.

In the industry of fashion portraiture, much time is spent casting models, styling looks, completing hair and makeup, designing extravagant sets, and determining suitable locations. Frequently, the final product depicts an unattainable version of reality, even though the commonsensical understanding of photographic images is in terms of their nature to represent the real world. Unfortunately, this is one of the common pitfalls of fashion photography, which contributes to the objectification of its subjects by using them to motivate cultures of desire, lust, and consumption. Nevertheless, it is vital to acknowledge the productive work of styling and presenting the black body. As Carol Tulloch argues, “through articulating the emotions, desires, and differences of individuals, clothing functions as a form of symbolic resistance that enables a sense of self and dignity to be inscribed upon the body.”

Additionally, Tulloch expands her argument by advocating for the term “post-black” as a way to describe individuals of the diaspora who use “style narratives” in order to explore and express what black and blackness mean in the present moment. In spite of the negative implications of fashion, one cannot ignore its capacity to elevate annihilated communities by visually imagining them in positions that were previously inaccessible.

Of course, this method of resistance does not operate without risk. Styling black bodies in luxury brands and promotional accessories can lead to superficial delineations of blackness or an outcome where “fashion becomes fetishized as a point of unattainable aspiration for the spectator.” Using the style and persona of celebrity actor Will Smith to analyze the impact of

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fashion on consumers, Sara Gilligan claims that “the accessorized black body is broken down and fragmented where the focus of desire is displaced from the clothes that accentuate the sexualized body to the asexual extremities through the promotion of sunglasses, trainers, and hats.” In short, she concludes that “accessories function as a quick fix that the spectator can actually possess and thus, through consumption, one’s life can be instantly transformed.”

Furthermore, additional concerns arise when the spectator realizes that no amount of consumption of Smith’s style will ever be rewarded with a newly improved life, or worse yet, that Smith and the spectator are no different—perpetually judged by the skin they embody. Smith’s status as a Hollywood star is loosely held in balance by his ability to “present a fantasy of Black identity that ambivalently challenges the color line through a liberally racial vision of Black masculinity that calms white cultural fears.” In this sense, black style functions as a commodity—as the “antidote to racism,” manufactured by a privileged minority to serve their commercially motivated interests.

Nonetheless, the social gains of presenting an aspirational version of blackness through fashion outweigh the potential harms because at the intersection of clothing, accessories, and the body, Smith and countless black tastemakers offer representations of “new ethnic identities” that “not only engage with notions of difference but also supply more diverse conceptions of ethnicity that are fluid, multiple, and dominated by transformation and performance.” The black experience is deeply nuanced and constantly evolving, so it is beneficial to highlight these novel identities, especially since they often embody empowering characteristics of beauty.

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25 Ibid.
wealth, and opulence—which contradict how black people were portrayed in the past. On the functional level, fashion clothes the body and occasionally serves as a medium of self-expression. On the social level, fashion has the potential to disrupt societal norms, as “clothed identities have the capacity to be both contextually specific and playful, creating subject positions that intersect with and question not only cultural constructions of ethnicity, but also discourses of gender, class, and sexual identities.”

These effects are multiplied when fashion is partnered with the art of photography.

In his book *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses the everyday practice of photography and how it has the power to construct reality. He also expands the theory of symbolic annihilation by describing it as a form of “gentle violence” often imperceptible to even its victims. He notes:

> Symbolic annihilation as a form of subtle violence which disregards the legitimacy of an identity. A society is susceptible to the media it consumes and the social norms as depicted by the media can be instructive to consumers as a model of behavior toward the minority group. Invisibility or negative portrayal of minorities in the media denies their existence in society. The result is that familiarity and behavioral codes are not well established and interaction is characterized by differences between groups.

By leveraging the results of surveys and interviews and analyzing the attitudes of amateur and professional photographers, Bourdieu builds a strong case for the different roles of photography, claiming that some people use it as a means of preserving the present whereas other practitioners use it as an occasion for “aesthetic judgement” in which photographs become a destination for ethnic erasure and cultural tastemaking, often excluding minority communities. Nevertheless, through the active capture and intentional positioning of black bodies, the possibilities for

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redefining the aesthetics, notions, and definitions of blackness on a global scale are promising indeed.

In order to fashion new frameworks for visualizing progressive identities of blackness and undoing the damage caused by the sustained absence of black artists, it is paramount to offer consistent depictions of beauty, love, and joy from within the African American community. More importantly, these images must be disseminated through media that was historically regarded as a legitimate source of art in order to effectively exact increased visibility for black artists and community members. For example, if the portrait of Viola Davis by Dario Calmese was published on the cover of Ebony, a magazine known for its history of championing black culture, it would have achieved less success in deconstructing the systemic racism within the art world because past standards outlining how we exhibit blackness would remain unchallenged. Moreover, the fact that this image represents an unprecedented milestone is also noteworthy because these moments are always impactful for black people because they signal a departure from the antiquated ways of seeing and representing our race. For Tyler Mitchell, fashion photography is an opportunity to visualize black people as free, expressive, and effortless by materializing his dreams about black fun and exploring what a black utopia could be.\[^{34}\] In an essay outlining dilemmas in fashion narratives within the African Diaspora, Van D. Lewis, Professor of Anthropology at Yale University, constructively summarizes fashion as a way to design utopic experiences:

> The expediencies of recent Diaspora revolts and uprisings are fundamental to the continuity of socialization because the originating context is collectively stored in the object for as long as the social collective is able to invoke the original events. In adopting objects of the past, present-day Diaspora individuals are able to reuse the objects from real-world experiences in their synthesized world as a means to develop cathartic and self-expressive perspectives.\[^{35}\]


Hence, fashion is freedom—the freedom to explore, experiment, and envision identities anew, especially when pictured in photographs to narrate social progress via styled depictions of self and community.
Conclusion: In Pursuit of a New Black Aesthetic

I really don’t think we think about white people when making stuff, honestly. I feel like now we realize our value is not putting white people into consideration when making things. (...) I could make my black friends look like they were in Renaissance paintings. I just felt powerful. (...) Looking at life like a nature show can feel abrasive to people outside the circle. I don’t think of it as black art. I think of it as not having to dilute where I’m coming from, but understanding in certain spaces it will be attractive and more shareable.

~ Ibra Akre, *Suited Magazine*, Issue 5

Photography can still be used to champion activism and change. I believe this, even while standing in the cool winds of postmodernism… Postmodernism looked radical, but it wasn’t. As a movement, it was profoundly liberal and became a victim of itself. Precisely at this historical moment, when multicultural democracy is the order of the day, photography can be used as a powerful weapon toward instituting political and cultural change. I for one will continue to work toward this end.

~ Carrie Mae Weems

As a black photographer, it excites me to witness emerging and established black imagemakers begin and continue to visualize the global black experience, build sustainable careers with their work, and expand the cultural conversation around what it means to exist in this world or identify as black. I recently welcomed the idea that people can not only exist as black as a consequence of their skin color but also confidently identify as black when prevailing concepts of race and colorism might suggest them as nonblack or racially ambiguous. In the past, I did not view black as an identity someone could potentially opt into: you were either black or nonblack, objectively speaking. However, I now realize how systems of white supremacy are responsible for this binary explanation of blackness and perpetuate a black experience that is heavily divided. By not giving individuals the freedom to personally identify as black when their assumed race or ethnicity as well as notions of colorism might imply otherwise, we rob them of the opportunity to positively affirm blackness as an empowering experience and deny ourselves access to fresh
perspectives on how blackness operates nationally and internationally. Of course, there are limits to this inclusion which must be monitored because the black community has suffered routinely from instances of blackfishing and cultural appropriation committed by individuals who wish to profit from our culture. In this vein, it is necessary to check our personal biases on how we perceive blackness and constantly challenge societal expectations around what being black can possibly mean in order to prepare a space where we happily invite nuanced, unobserved expressions of black identity. Ultimately, blackness is an experience: one primarily predicated on skin color but also influenced by the environment in which antiblackness might have negatively impacted personal perceptions of self. In other words, even if someone is objectively nonblack but endured antiblack rhetoric directed at them or—on the other hand—received positive affirmation around their supposed blackness, then it is not unreasonable to imagine an individual who might identify as black under these conditions. Instead of questioning the identity, we should interrogate the social conditions defining the black experience and the societal structures of capitalism, colorism, and consumerism challenging and upholding them. The fusion of art, fashion and photography defines an avenue by which we can disrupt these hegemonic systems entangled in white supremacy through various modes of visual protest that unapologetically center a representative image of intersectional, multidimensional blackness.

In a noteworthy essay titled “Black Art and the Burden of Representation” by British cultural historian Kobena Mercer, the circumstances surrounding the production and reception of black art are delineated. Mercer explains how “black artists positioned in the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production are burdened with the impossible role of speaking as representatives in the sense that they are expected to speak for the black communities from which they come.”¹ Due to an unpleasant history of marginalization, black artists experience an

urgency to say as much as possible about the black experience when given the chance to present their work because opportunities to exhibit can be difficult to find. However, this burden presents the risk of saying absolutely nothing at all, highlighting the “historical underdevelopment of a viable framework for black cultural criticism” whereby “black artists have not had their work taken seriously because the space for critical dialogue is constrained and limited precisely as an effect of marginality.”

As a natural response, black artists seek to address the exclusion of their work with restorative images that contextualize why their historically marginalized access to traditional modes of cultural production resulted in a burden to produce representative art and act as large scale community representatives. Consequently, black art is pigeonholed into a restricted viewpoint where it predominantly gains relevance by either addressing the white audience through a revelatory admittance of wrongdoing or prioritizing the black working class audience, causing the level of its rhetorical expression to conceal more than it reveals about the structural predicament that circumscribes the cultural production and reception of black art—therefore repeating the same binarisms it sets out to displace.

Dismantling the binary paradigm of race within the United States has been a central undertaking of black photography. In an attempt to convey the rich diversity across the black experience, African American photographers have pursued a black image that seeks to expand beyond the confines of portrayals solely situated by racial histories. According to Thelma Golden, Chief Curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and contemporary African American artist Glenn Ligon, this sentiment was captured when they coined the term “post-black” in the late 1990s as a way to capture the evolving conceptualization of black art and “framework the young generation of African American artists who recognized and valued their black heritage

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3Ibid, 65.
4Ibid.
across various cultural and historical fronts, but also wanted the freedom to exist without categorization” while also noting how “artists were moving beyond a place in history to a present moment.” In the present moment, black photographers are collectively crafting a global black aesthetic that speaks to the diversity within our community as well as our international presence and varied histories as a consequence of the African Diaspora.

Imagemakers such as Joshua Kissi are using their artistic practice to address “the history of how the technology of photography was made against representing black skin in the right light—so when you are a black photographer you have to figure out a way to move around that technology.” In working around oppressive technologies and negative images, black photographers have repurposed the camera from a device once weaponized against the black body through systems of surveillance and colonial documentation to a key tool for reconfiguring the representational frameworks visualizing blackness and its multiplicities. Anne McClintock, Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University, asserts that race never functions in total isolation:

Race, gender, and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they simply be yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Instead they come into existence in and through relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways. (...) Yet the processes of subjectivity and identification are such that even to limit one's analysis to such intersecting categories and ignore the differences and spaces between them potentially renders invisible social, historical, political contexts, and such categories as national identity, age, education, values, and beliefs, amongst many others.  

The same logic can be attributed to the black figure when imagining the infinitely intersectional identities across blackness. Thus, it is critical to consider how blackness is communicated around

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7 Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 5-12.
the world in order to develop a comprehensive visual language around black identity that ebbs and flows as we continue to reimagine our collective existence through art, fashion, and photography.

One contributor to this vision of blackness is art critic Antwaun Sargent who is using a curatorial practice to schedule public interventions with expressive photographies. In 2020, Sargent organized an exhibition titled *Just Pictures* in partnership with projects+gallery which centralized a selection of portraits that played at the intersection of commercial and conceptual imagery by creating worlds entirely their own. During an interview with Kissi for AnOther Magazine, Sargent stated the importance of pondering the message of an image for determining its role in the history of photography and positioning it in a larger project of defining a black future:

> What do the images say? You’re not just shooting images to shoot them. Some of the younger photographers are just shooting images. You have to ask, if the camera is control, what are you shooting for? Doing this show, *Just Pictures*, I want to make sure the differences between the work of everyone featured is considered and grappled with. These are not just Black photographers talking about Blackness. That’s not the only concern in these photos. If that’s the only takeaway from their work, you’re not really holding the weight of the artistry as a viewer. This show is about directing folks to the ways your work holds these other equally important aspects that make the images the images.

Ultimately, this work is about striking a balance between remembering where we come from while never losing sight of where we are going. Through photography, especially portraiture, our narrative is preserved. The slight irony of *Just Pictures* is subversive. These images and photographs collectively taken by black photographers are so much more than *just pictures*. They are infallible declarations of our existence.

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8 *Just Pictures*, Curated by Antwaun Sargent. 12 Sep.-21 Nov. 2020, project+gallery, Saint Louis, MO.
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*Where We Find Ourselves: The Photographs of Hugh Mangum, 1897-1922*. Curated by Alex Harris and Margaret Sartor. 19 Jan.-01 Sep. 2019, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC.


Appendix A: Figure Captions

**Figure 1**: Bull Durham Smoking Tobacco Advertising Poster ............................................. 2

Product Advertisement for Genuine Bull Durham Smoking Tobacco published in 1859. Two black men pictured as cartoon caricatures illustrating the techniques and styles depicting blackness in the nineteenth century.

**Figure 2**: Paris Match Magazine Cover .......................................................... 3

A young black soldier pictured on the cover of Paris Match making a saluting hand gesture. Published in 1955. Image courtesy of Paris Match.

**Figure 3**: Joseph T. Zealy’s Slave Daguerreotype of Jack .......................................... 15


**Figure 4**: Ambrotypes of Seven Members of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee .......... 16


**Figure 5**: Daguerreotype of Frederick Douglass ......................................................... 19


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Laura Goode (d. 1985), ca. 1920s, silver gelatin print. Photography by Richard Samuel Roberts. Laura was the daughter of James H. Goode. She wrote short stories which appeared in black media outlets in Columbia, South Carolina.

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**Figure 8:** Portrait of Cornelius C. Roberts ................................................................. 22

Cornelius C. Roberts (b. 1913), ca. 1925. Cornelius is the youngest son of Richard Samuel Roberts. He has a plateholder in his hand while standing in a well tailored suit staring casually at the lens.

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Photography by Hugh Mangum. Photographs courtesy of Margaret Sartor and Alex Harris and David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University, Durham, NC.

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