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One Time, One Place, p. 117

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"Home Before Dark, Yalobusha County, 1936," *One Time, One Place*, p. 117, with the gracious permission of the Eudora Welty Foundation

- 1 *Home Before Dark*, a haunting "snapshot," as Eudora Welty consistently termed her photographs, of a black family on their way home in a mule-driven wagon, serves as the concluding picture in the 1971 book of 100 photographs published under the title *One Time, One Place* (4). Dating as far back as the early 1930s, the photographs in this collection

are organized into the seemingly simple and straightforward categories of "Workday," "Saturday," "Sunday," and "Portraits," categories that on the face of things seem to reflect Welty's description of the camera in *One Writer's Beginnings* as "a hand-held auxiliary of wanting-to-know" (84). *Home Before Dark* as the last photograph in the collection brings attention to that yearning to know, which Welty also linked implicitly with the originating impulse of her fiction--"imagining yourself into other people's lives," as she noted in her essay *Looking Back at the First Story* (15). But it also raises questions about the success with which that yearning can be fulfilled in a world defined by the rigid barriers and racial obsessions of Jim Crow segregation.

- 2 As the final photograph in this collection, *Home Before Dark* captures an image that had by the Depression become almost iconic of the U.S. South—a black family of three in a mule-drawn wagon set against a broad and empty horizon at twilight. It is an image, though, that seems to be on the verge of eluding the gaze of both the photographer and the viewer of the picture. We are shown the backs of the wagon—and the backs of its three occupants—as the wagon moves toward the vanishing point of the flat Mississippi horizon, and the distance between the wagon itself with its occupants and the photographer/viewer is so pronounced that only the silhouetted outlines of the three figures against the dying light can be detected. Their individual features, under the distinctly different hats they wear, remain undistinguishable, hidden by the darkness of their silhouettes against the sky. It is an unposed moment, capturing a fleeting encounter, the transience that Welty so valued in both her fiction and her photography, but it is also a moment that emphasizes nothing so much as the literal and emotional distance lying between the wagon's occupants and the photographer, and by implication the viewer of the photograph. Only so much can be known and understood, the photograph suggests, in such a chance and distant glimpse, and it is telling that this particular image rounds up the photographs falling under the category of "Portraits." It is a portrait that ultimately both invites and resists the photographer's effort to portray, know, and understand, and here we are reminded that Welty disliked the sort of sentimentalized photographs by Doris Ulmann accompanying the text of Julia Peterkin's image-text *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and resisted the posed photographs characterizing the work of other 1930s photographers like Dorothea Lange (Marrs 42-43; Cole and Srinivasan xix)
- 3 Yet *Home Before Dark* as the concluding photograph in *One Time, One Place* also offers the possibility of connection, exchange, and even kinship in a collection that Welty explicitly described as a "family album" (Phillips 74; Willis 82; *One Time, One Place* 4). Across the length of road separating the photograph's subjects from its photographer, one of the wagon's occupants, the woman on the left, is caught in the fleeting moment of looking back at the photographer, as though to acknowledge her presence and to respond in kind—with interest and something of that same yearning to know. The fact that we cannot see her face is a reminder of the distance between the wagon's occupants and the photographer, but still there is the gesture of turning back that can be discerned in the lines of her body—and more, a brief flickering of acknowledgment and recognition of the unseen ties binding the occupants of the wagon to the photographer despite all the barriers of race, economics, and politics defining life in Depression Mississippi. It is as apt a gesture as any for illustrating Welty's concluding comments in *One Time, One Place* that her yearning to know, captured in her photographs and her fiction, was impelled by a desire to "part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of

indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight"  
(8).

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